



Writing the Padma

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KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

The first experience of the great river Padma is nothing less than overwhelming, and slightly terrifying. I first came to face the mighty river as a young lad in my teens sometime in April of the momentous year of 1971. My first sighting came with two terrors. My father was fleeing Dhaka with the family with the hope of crossing the river to escape the brutal onslaught of the Pakistan army. Arriving at the banks, there was the Padma (Padma) before us with its glorious panorama. It seemed like an oceanic river, with no sight of the other side, and the frightening prospect of crossing it.

Flowing gloriously and indifferently, the river appeared to have a mythic scale against which I felt terribly puny. What I could not articulate then, and what I think now, was the simultaneous presence of the beautiful and the sublime, in the now classic sense of how the writer

traders, boatmen, artisans – with the rhythm of the rivers. We cannot know whether environmental degradation and water conflicts will eventually diminish a river as powerful as the Padma, but we know that our future is entangled with our rivers, and nothing more intimately as the epic Padma.

Now, many years later, after that experience in 1971, I came to face the immensity of the Padma again when my colleagues and I at Bengal Institute dared to consider a book on the river. It was a dare because there has been no book of substance on Padma river. We faced more fundamental questions: How can we know rivers? How can we talk about them? What is the language of rivers?

It's not that one writes about a river as one would compose the biography of a famous person, or the histology of a subject. There are of course glimpses into the river in folk songs, stories, legends, and modern novels. But for a river as shifting and pulsating as the Padma, one that is constantly in a mode of deletion and accretion, there is more to what is known and what can be known.

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Not all waters are alike in human imagination. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard distinguished between terrestrial water and marine water. To him, seawater is an inhuman water that “fails in the first duty of every revered element, which is to serve humans directly.” On the other hand, fresh water or river water generates the most intimate form of material imagination and life mythologies for humans. Reading Rabindranath's “Chinnapatraboli,” I was captivated by his perceptive observations of



A topographic map of the Delta. Image Bengal Institute.

much to say on the Padma. We wanted to present a panoramic narrative befitting the epic nature of the Padma.

“The Great Padma: The Epic River That Made the Bengal Delta,” Zachary Lamb writes in a review, “is a new volume that introduces the power, complexity, and cultural richness of the Padma to a global audience.... The Great Padma explores and illuminates Bangladesh and the eastern Bengal Delta, a region that has long been ignored or presented as a domain of poverty, vulnerability, and developmentalist intervention. The book, with 400 pages of visual and narrative material from dozens of contributors, depicts the complexity of the Padma in all of its culture-defining, landscape-molding, and devastation-wreaking power.”

In his preface to the book, the renowned writer Amitav Ghosh notes that the Padma has many avatars. We discover it in the many

about its ever changing nature, its flux and fluctuations. Even if the Padma is not considered sacred as the Ganga, it has always been seen in terms of, what colonial chroniclers have written, a distinctive ‘grandeur and enchantment.’ More importantly, while most of the stories about the Ganges are more about its origins (consider the narrative of “Gangavatarana”), the Padma describes the operatic termination of the Ganges.

Second, the termination of the Ganga translates into the unleashing of a furious hydro-geological phenomenon: the churning of water, sand and silt, and the fracturing into multiple channels and rivulets – the stuff of the Bengal Delta. As a part of that phenomenon, the Ganga bifurcates into two major channels: the Hooghly-Bhagirothi and the Padma itself (we argue that the Padma is not a channel of the Ganga, it is the main flow of it). I have described those two channels as two distinctive ecological axes contending for the soul or identity of Bengal. In his memoir, Amartya Sen describes that as the two charisms of Bengal, or one could say two river-generated chauvinism. With the Hooghly-Bhagirothi claimed as the Ganga from a Nadia-Kolkata-centric perspective, we have a riverine antagonism between Hooghly-Bhagirothi and the Padma.

Third, as with any river, and certainly with the Padma, the phenomenon is not merely about a channel or stream of water. Rain falls, water collects, water spills, overflows and wets the land in a gradation of wetness. A big aspect of the book is trying to understand the reach of the Padma, or what we named it as its “ecological horizon.” The waters of the Padma combine with that of the Jamuna and eventually the Meghna, flow through innumerable channels all the way to the sea, generating the Sundarbans and everything in between that describe a living, moving nature. It is one of the most dynamic natural forces on earth, or what can be described as a “geography in action.” Writing in the book, historian Iltikhar Iqbal calls this phenomenon the Padma Process, and geographers Arfar Razi and Sanjoy Roy describe it as the Padma Dynamic.

Four, the literal meaning of *ganga*, *any ganga*, is flow. As Manik Kubera in *Padma Nodir Majhi*: “the only obsession is to flow and float on.” Padma is not only a flow of water but also of silt and sediment, the wondrous matter of *poli*. Water and silt, flow and overflow, and accretion and erosion are decisive in the

chhanda of Bangladesh.

We need to rethink the power of *poli*. An English writer calculated that as a monumental theater of nature, the flow of the Padma moves 400 billion cubic feet of silt every year which is equivalent to 300 pyramids! Imagine 300 pyramids, each the size of Giza, flowing down the Padma into the Bay of Bengal. It is almost one pyramid for each day!

Originating with rolling stones from up in the Himalayan mountains, the gradual pulverisation into *poli*, and the continuous immersion of natural and human debris from Central India flow and float through the Padma to become the substance of Bengal. Writing in the book, the landscape architect Anthony Acciavatti describes the dynamic as the Himalayas crumbling and rolling into the plains of Bengal, providing the silt and soil that nurtures the land but also becomes transformed into bricks and eventually our cities and buildings. If you think about it, Dhaka city is but a reincarnation of the Himalayas. The flow of *poli* and its dynamic deposition and dematerialisation, and rearrangement, is fundamental to the geography and life-world of Bangladesh. Agriculture, farming, fishing, the nature of settlements and the livelihoods of people are totally dependent on this flow. I wrote earlier in an article, referring to Prof Razzaq, that we need to be more vigilant about and plan around those two gifts of nature – water and silt.

The combined impact of the Padma-Jamuna-Meghna does not conclude with where the land surface of Bangladesh ends. The inexorable flow of silt does not end at the edge of the coast either: it continues underwater and into the belly of the Bay of Bengal, creating a submarine landmass that is known to geographers as the Bengal Fan. The size of the underwater mass is immense. It is larger than two Bengals put together, and in its relentless flow, it reaches almost the Equator. We do not know yet what kind of impact the Fan has on suboceanic currents, and possibly the global oceanic environment.

When we faced the Padma in 1971, the reason was to go over to the other side. Crossing the Padma is a powerful experience under any circumstance. Any of us who have crossed the river in a ferry or boat at an earlier time, and even now on the Padma Bridge-way, cannot but be overwhelmed by the crossing. It's a symbolically and phenomenologically potent event layered with the thickness of history. Since the silt pushed the sea away from the Rajmahal area and Ganga became the Padma, thousands and thousands have crossed the Padma, from majhi-mallas to raja-badshahs, and from Raja Rampal to the poet Bhusuku, to go over to the other side.

I want to conclude with a Charyapada poem written by the poet Bhusuku from around the eleventh century. The poem-song is the earliest literary reference to the Padma and an event of crossing it. Bhusuku apparently came from the south, crossed the Padma, settled in the Barendra area by marrying someone he calls a Chandal woman. On settling there, Bhusuku declares at the end, “I have now become a Bangali.” Hesitating in suggesting a nationalist notion, I still see in crossing the Padma a traversal of Bengal's history, both social and geological. The book, “The Great Padma,” is such a crossing.

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Rajshahi city by the Padma.

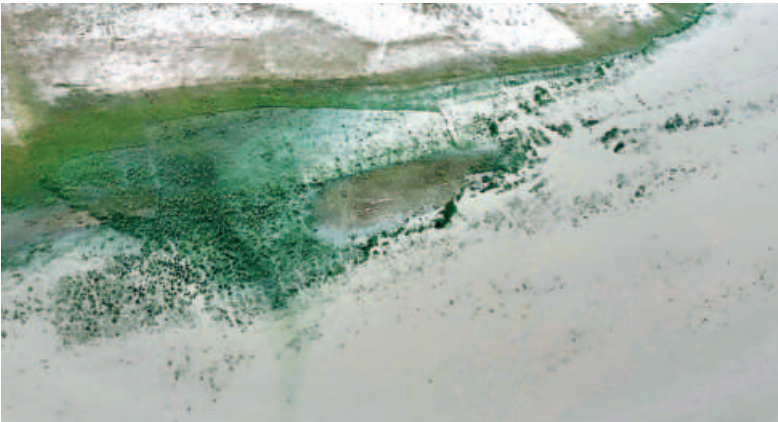
PHOTO: MOHAMAD TAUHEED

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Edmund Burke described the sublime as something that could be terrifying. Even more ominously, the German poet Rilke: “Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror...” There, in the immediacy of the beautiful, was also the silent presence of a palpable dread. Now I know that the magnificent Padma could easily transform into a *kirtinasha*, destroyer of human artifacts, or even *shorbonasha*, destroyer of everything.

Since that first experience, the Padma settled and remained in my mind as something larger than life. It's not the same for other rivers of Bangladesh. The Padma represents the depth of history and the stretch of time, both geological and human, for it is this river that has literally gifted the ground on which the Bengali peoples built their life-worlds. Some 35 million years ago, in the geological time called Eocene, when the sea lapped the edge of the Rajmahal Hills and Bengal was only a watery realm, the slow cascade of silt pushed the sea to form new lands and the path for a mighty river.

Cutting across the sweep of Bangladesh diagonally, the Padma remains the spiritual and vital spine of the land. Recalling the words of Prof. Abdur Razzaq: “The character of Bangladesh and its people is dominated today, as it has always been, by the river system and the water it carries. The shifts and turns of the river have been momentous facts for the people, greater than political and governmental upheavals.” Writers like Manik Bandhopadhyay, Amarendra Ghosh, Humayun Kabir and Advaita Malla Barman have crafted literary masterpieces that weave the lives of the people – fishermen, farmers,



Aerial view of the Padma, near Rajshahi.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD TAUHEED

life and landscape along the Padma. Rabindranath himself distinguished between a river and a “beel” (a form of wetland). One is flowing water and another is still water – in musical analogy, he described the first as *chhanda* or rhythm and the other as *boba pani* or mute water.

Wrestling with the imagination of water, we approached the Padma as perhaps a poet and a cartographer would. The book we worked on ultimately became the sumptuous production, *The Great Padma: The Epic River that made the Bengal Delta*, published by ORO Editions (San Francisco) and Bengal Institute in 2022. Why the book at all? We realised that for a river so decisive in the life of a people and a nation, there is no major book on it. There are a couple of Bangla books but they fall short in comprehending and narrating the epic nature of the river. On the other hand, there are so many books on the river Ganges, by historians, writers, photographers, but they have nothing

names of the river found in literature and hearsays – Paddaboti, Padma, Ganga, Mahaganga, Mahasindhu, Kirtinasha, and the more troubling, Shorbonasha. To capture and represent the many-hued nature of the Padma, a multi-voiced narrative was needed. Geographers, historians, anthropologists, architects, food historians, bridge designers, photographers, and researchers from many fields contributed in enriching the content of the book, and advancing some key topics.

First, the Padma is the Ganga, and it is not. Both are true. The life and flow of the Padma is integral to the Ganga, the mighty river that flows through and nurtures the heart of central India. When the waters of the Ganga become the Padma, a new ecology emerges that eventually defines a distinctive life-world that is Bengal/Bangladesh.

While the Ganga presents a powerful mythical imagery in Indian imagination, the Padma is more