



INTERVIEW

Stirring the Waters to Reclaim the Flow — In Conversation with Vaishali Shroff

by Preeti Kathuria



With over 300 stories to her name, Vaishali Shroff's writing is a blend of rich storytelling along with the purpose of exploring biodiversity, culture, and identity. Her recently published nonfiction book *Submerged Worlds and Other Amazing Stories of India's Mighty Rivers* (India Penguin, 2025) is a compendium of narratives around the rivers of India. There was something significant about reading this book beside the Donau and then stumbling upon a line that informs that the Danube flows between 19 countries, making me think of it as a natural restoring thread of unity in a largely divided world.

Preeti Kathuria: What according to you is your recent book *Submerged Worlds* about?

Vaishali Shroff: *Submerged Worlds* celebrates the world of rivers through a humanitarian lens. There are stories about literal worlds that are submerged under the river waters — populations and villages, forests and wildlife, endangered aquatic life, exploited riverbeds, and the invisible stories of illegal sandmining, gender roles, river rights, floodplain encroachment, and so on. The stories in the book flow from source to sea and are an attempt to make the reader look at rivers with compassion, affection, and respect. Rivers in our country are rich with myths and legends and the effort with every story has been to take the reader on a journey along the river, weaving in bits of history, mythology, never losing sight of the true, bigger picture. While every story is different, they all underline the fact that, though the job of any river is to flow, it never flows in isolation. It carries with it the life it supports, the riparian communities that depend on it, the mountains and valleys that sing its songs, and all these are intertwined together. It's time to look closely at rivers and their ecosystems, listen intently to their voices and understand them as living entities with stories that run deeper than their waters.



"Submerged Worlds" by Vaishali Shroff (c) Vaishali Shroff

Preeti: You describe yourself as a "medium" conveying stories from the rivers to the readers. How does this medium cultivate its own understanding?

Vaishali: I'm not an expert on rivers. Just like many others, I'm a concerned citizen seeking the truth behind the flowing waters or the waters that have ceased to flow. Since the book is

targeted towards young readers, it was important that the stories fascinate them while touching upon realities that they may not be aware of.

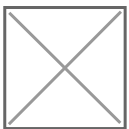
There are stories based on personal experiences — whether it's "Leopards, Shepherds and a River" about the Jawai and Dahisar rivers, "Have you seen Saraswati?" that discusses the various theories and hypotheses about the existence of the Saraswati, or "944mm, 24 hours" about the 2005 floods that ravaged Mumbai, and stories that are based on questions I wanted answers for. I don't claim to know every river in our country or the stories and science behind them, but I wanted to write stories that touched a chord, which resonated with me.

I tried to understand not just some of our major rivers, but even rivulets and small tributaries because they all play an equal role in supporting fluvial ecosystems. I read official reports, books, sought knowledge and wisdom from historians, ecologists, naturalists, geologists, glaciologists, urban planners, artists, writers, and river revival groups. I interviewed affected people — farmers, tribal people, potters. I explored the rivers from ecological, economic, cultural, traditional, and political perspectives.

Preeti: How do you interpret the idea of being "lost in translation" when it comes to faith and gratitude toward our life-giving rivers? And how would you respond to the question posed in your book: "Will she / should she — forgive us?"

Vaishali: The heavy pollution in our rivers is clearly visible to the naked eye. One can smell the decay from dead rivers. One cannot listen to the magical sound of many rivers that have ceased to flow but one can hear the voice of pain. How can one not feel their pain? Nothing makes sense when you see swathes of people wading through toxic foams in rivers to perform religious rituals. When you see people throw religious offerings, which include plastic, flowers, incense, diyas, ashes from funerals, mindlessly in the waters. When you see people dip newborns in waters where nothing can survive anymore.

"Aartis" (prayers) and "pujas" (rituals) are not the only ways of expressing our gratitude towards the rivers. We can show our love and gratitude by keeping them clean. After disposing of our waste into them, using and abusing them to feed our selfish interests, we expect the rivers to forgive us when we bathe in the waters to cleanse ourselves of our bad karma? This bad karma itself needs to end.



(c) Vaishali Shroff

Preeti: The book carries a story of one good dam — the Jawai Bandh, Rajasthan against the several bad examples such as Tilaiya Dam, Bengal, Hirakud Dam, Chattisgarh, Salaulim Dam, Goa, and the Sardar Sarovar Dam, Gujarat — how does the book establish that the construction of dams is devastating and a threat to biodiversity?

Vaishali: Dams are unnatural constructions on a river and are not benevolent in any way. Anything unnatural introduced to the environment cannot be good for it. Even though dams may offer some obvious benefits such as irrigation water, hydroelectric power, it does not do so without altering the flow and course of the river, adversely affecting the forests and aquatic life. Many large dams have destroyed cultures and traditions of the *Adivasis* and the indigenous people whose lives depend on the lives of the rivers — the farmers, fisherfolk, artisans, among others. The book explores the stories behind the dams — whether it's the title story, "Submerged Worlds," that introduces young readers to the history of dams in our country and what happens when a dam is constructed — something that is not explained in textbooks, or the story "Dammed but Not Drowned" that puts the spotlight on the Narmada Bachao Andolan that has done phenomenal and inspiring work to rehabilitate and resettle affected communities.

Preeti: According to the book, "River Ganga alone supports over 600 million people of India across eleven states." Yet, most stories repeatedly emphasize the need to leave the rivers alone, so they can flow freely. Can you suggest how this could be realized?

Vaishali: When the book says we need to leave the rivers alone, it means that we must not interfere with its natural flow. We don't need to dredge rivers to make them deeper, build tunnels to divert them, clear forests and submerge villages to construct dams. We don't need to dump our untreated domestic and industrial waste in the rivers, pollute it with religious offerings. We don't need to break their flow, divert them or interconnect them. The floods that are rocking the world today are not an overnight phenomenon. They are a result of years and years of abuse and neglect.

We need to understand that while we cannot survive without rivers, all our needs can be met while being mindful, thoughtful and respectful towards them. A good starting point would be to acknowledge that these problems exist and we need to care more. We need to be more perceptive, ask questions — why has the river stopped flowing, where has the forest gone, why do we need a dam here, what is going to happen to all the people, the birds and the animals? Because when we raise difficult questions, the inconvenient truths emerge, compelling us to take the necessary steps.

Let's sing songs by the rivers, share stories and legends about rivers. Let's talk about rivers through art, literature and theatre. Let's join groups that work towards protecting rivers — as environmentalists, activists, educators, writers, clean-up volunteers.

Preeti: Does the book foment an uprising of hope? Besides educating the reader in its wonderfully simple narration, is it a call to mobilize action?

Vaishali: Absolutely. The intent of the book is to make difficult stories visible and widely understood. To not talk down to children. Alongside stories of abuse, to share stories of resilience, perseverance and, above all, hope. Because hope is a beautiful thing. As common citizens, we may not be able to bring down dams or bring back the lost fish. But we can hope for it to happen, to manifest the change and be a part of it.

On a recent visit to a school, I met some children who had written poems about rivers. A group of girls showed me a prototype of a river-cleaning machine they had built using 3D printing. Poetry is as important as the machine. The rivers may originate from glaciers, lakes, or from other rivers. They may be joined by many big and small tributaries, and they may end in oceans, seas and other rivers. Hope flows like a river — sometimes it takes just one to tango and then many join the journey till it becomes an unstoppable force to reckon with.