

Call for Papers

Water as Matter, Matters of Water: South Asian Political, Historical, and Literary Flows

**26th Annual South Asian Literary Association (SALA) Online Conference
March 13-14, 2027**

Water, while a fundamental stratum of existence, has become an increasingly visible element of cultural, critical, and literary discourse relatively recently. Part of the reason is the rise of Ecocriticism in the 1990s and Blue Humanities in the late 2010s, both fuelled by the recognition (and stout denial by several powerful political figures around the world) of climate change and aided by poststructuralism and post-humanism that interrogate the validity of the human/nature binary and the centrality of the human in it.

Steve Mentz states that the mandate of the Blue Humanities is to examine how water shapes the (human, non-human, material) world and how we shape water in our discourse (poetics, theory, literature, art, media). While the Blue Humanities often focuses on oceans and seas, water as a medium itself requires critical attention. Water — in the form of oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, ponds, oases, estuaries, monsoons, glaciers, and deltas — and as the primary constituent of animal and plant bodies, unsettles the boundaries between the human and the more-/other-than-human, thereby reshaping our ethical stance towards the latter.

Since civilizations have been shaped along bodies of water, human history and water are inextricably tied to each other. Issues of embodiment, health, displacement, migration, and ecological precarity are inseparable from the distribution, contamination, and governance of water. In other words, human and water histories are mutually imbricated and affected and this relationship needs to be critically understood. For instance, Dilip M. Menon urges a reconsideration of human history beyond the paradigm of “nation state” and “terrestrial imagination” and towards “interstitial” histories that nevertheless do not succumb to the lure of eternal or nativist inclinations at the expense of modernity, globalization, and awareness of current crises (2-4). Ananya Jahanara Kabir argues for an “archipelagic imagination” that emphasizes connectivity, and shifts the focus from disconnected land masses to “a sea of islands”. *Literally and figuratively*, then, water questions our preference for stability, fixity, and boundaries over flow, flux, and intermixing.

The (non)existence of water shaped the earliest migrations and settlements. Oceanic routes were pathways for new (hybrid) communities to be formed, flora, fauna, and microbes to be transmitted, and in more recent history, also significant in the spread of colonialism, transoceanic slavery, and indentured labour. Water bodies often serve as markers of political boundaries, but also, especially in the case of South Asia, caste boundaries. The availability of—and access to—water is not a simple matter but a deeply political one: whether it is upper-caste communities barring Dalit families from using local fresh-water sources like wells and ponds; women in rural areas bearing the burden of transporting water for domestic use; governments and capitalist firms damming up rivers to aid industry and depriving indigenous, Adivasi, and tribal populations of their lands and livelihoods; or nations dividing up water resources and using restrictions on water as bargaining chips. Additionally, climate change and extreme events incessantly impact coastal and riverside communities who depend heavily on such water bodies. And finally, increasing instances of water scarcity in metropolises around the

globe point to how fragile our hydro-ecosystems are. All of these geologic and socio-political circumstances point to old and new forms of crises, vulnerability, and precarity and demand engagement at multiple levels: individual, local, collective, and global.

Simultaneously, water has long provided literary imagination with much figurative richness and grounding, as evidenced in both ecocritical and hydrocritical studies. “Watery” forms and figures, and processes of flowing and overflowing, liquidity and condensing, circulation and confluence, inundation and drought, eddies and falls, seepage and leak, currents and stillness, carrying and submerging, shape our articulation and imagination of the world in deeply affective metaphoric and metonymic formulations.

With this context in mind, SALA 2027 invites participants to explore **“water” broadly construed, in its many material and figurative forms** — as substance, infrastructure, memory, vulnerability, routes of migration and community, theory, poetics, aesthetics, and allusion — in the ecological, political, sociocultural and literary imaginaries of **South Asia** and its diasporas.

Possible topics include (but are not limited to):

- Theorizing Ecocriticism and Blue Humanities
- Indian Ocean trade and diasporic circulations
- Migratory currents in the Global South
- Hydro-colonialism and maritime establishments
- Water affinities and vulnerabilities
- Climate crises, the Anthropocene, and precarity
- Labour and communities around water
- Class, caste, gender and water
- Watery “forms” in figurative language
- Water in indigenous poetics
- Water and/as affect

References

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara, Michael Rothberg, and Vijaya Teelock. “On Archipelagic Memory: A Conversation.” *Interventions*, 2024.

Menon, Dilip M., Zaidi, Nishat, Malhotra, Simi, and Jappie, Saarah. *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime*. Routledge, 2022.

Mentz, Steve. *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. Routledge, 2024.

Please submit a 200-250-word abstract along with a 150-word bio-note by December 10, 2026, via the portal on the South Asian Literary Association’s webpage accessible here:

<https://southasianliteraryassociation.org/2027-sala-annual-conference-paper-and-panel-proposal-forms/>

If you have any conference-related questions, please email the conference co-chairs at salaconf2027@gmail.com. Please do not email your abstracts to this email ID. Instead, please use the web portal to submit your abstracts.

For membership and other details, please visit the [SALA website](#). Please note that those who submit abstracts for consideration to the SALA conference must become members at the time of acceptance of the proposed submission. The anticipated date of informing acceptance is December 21, 2026.

Conference Co-Chairs:

Pooja Sancheti, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Literary Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Department at IISER Pune, India. Her research focuses on contemporary South Asian Anglophone fiction, women's writing, postcolonialism, and affect studies. Her research has appeared in journals such as *ARIEL*, the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, and the *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies*. She is also a published Hindi-English translator. She can be reached at pooja.sancheti@gmail.com.

Dheebika P received her PhD from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. She is currently a PDEF Fellow at IIT Madras. Her academic interests include violence, memory, and South Asian studies. Her works are published in *South Asian Review* and *Asian Ethnicity*. She can be reached at dheepikap99@gmail.com.

Badusha Peer Masthan is a PhD graduate student and Graduate Instructor in the Department of English at Texas Tech University. His research interests are contemporary Indian English literature, Dalit literature, Dalit Muslim literature, and Urdu feminist poetry. He has published in *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* and *South India Journal of Social Sciences*. He can be reached at badushapm77@gmail.com.