

Rivers Unbound – Rights, Personhood and the Currents of Ecocentric Law

Rivers Unbound: Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow. By **Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui, and Gnana Sanga Mithra S** [Routledge, 2025, ISBN: 9781041123484, Hardback, 292 pp.]

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1. Introduction

Rivers have historically shaped human societies and served as a source of life, commerce, and spiritual significance.¹ With evolution of time, they have also become a focal point of legal innovation and ethical debate centering around *inter alia* State boundaries, climate change and indigenous rights etc. *Rivers Unbound: Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* is a timely edited volume emerging from the International Conference on Rivers 2024, compiling 40 chapters that captures this transformation while traversing themes from community water initiatives to high politics of transboundary treaties.² At its core, the book grapples with a pressing question: how should and can law recognise and protect the multifaceted values of rivers in an era of ecological crisis? This review focuses on the volume's treatment of rights of rivers, legal personhood, and ecocentric jurisprudence, assessing how its contributions advance (or complicate) these debates. It also critically examines the book's comparative breadth and structure – including its geographic and doctrinal scope, interdisciplinary balance, and relevance to transboundary river governance under climate change crisis. The reviewer writes from a position of disclosed interest, being a contributor to the volume, yet aims to provide an objective scholarly appraisal.

The recognition of rivers as having legal rights or “personhood” has moved in recent years from imaginative theory to tangible (if controversial) reality. From the Colombian Constitutional Court's landmark *Atrato River* decision in 2016 recognising that river as a “subject of rights”,³ to New Zealand's pioneering grant of legal personhood to the *Whanganui*

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¹ Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds). *Rivers Unbound: Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) Preface.

² *ibid.*

³ *The Atrato River case (Center for Social Justice Studies et al v. Presidency of the Republic et al.)* [2016] Constitutional Court of Colombia T-622/16 <https://climatecasechart.com/wp-content/uploads/non-us-case-documents/2016/20161125_T-62216_judgment.pdf> accessed 13 September 2025. para. 9.32.

River in 2017,⁴ to Bangladesh Supreme Court's revolutionary judgement of 2020 in *Turag River Case* to appoint the National River Commission as the legal guardian of rivers,⁵ to experiments in India's courts, the rights of rivers paradigm challenges traditional anthropocentric legal frameworks. *Rivers Unbound* situates itself squarely in this emerging discourse with several chapters explicitly addressing the move from treating rivers as objects of human use to acknowledging them as bearers of rights and interests. The volume thereby offers an illuminating snapshot of global and regional currents in ecocentric law – even as it raises questions about how far these currents have carried us toward a paradigm shift.

2. Rights of Rivers: Legal Personhood from New Zealand to South Asia

The idea that a river could hold legal rights – once a radical proposal by Christopher Stone in 1972⁶ – has now gained traction through key legal milestones. The book's contributors chronicle and analyse these milestones, providing both celebration and critique. In Chapter 36, “*Debating Legal Rights of Rivers*,” Siddiqui, Dash, and Beg survey the global landscape of the Rights of Nature movement and its application to rivers. They recount how Ecuador's 2008 Constitution first enshrined rights of nature, followed by Bolivia's 2010 “Mother Earth” law, and how New Zealand's Parliament in 2017 passed the *Te Awa Tupua Act*, granting the *Whanganui River* legal personhood.⁷ This statute, rooted in a settlement with the *Māori iwi*, made the *Whanganui* a legal entity with “all the rights, duties and liabilities” of a person.⁸ It exemplifies an ecocentric legal ethos, recognising the river as valuable in its own right and not merely for its use to humans.

The New Zealand example is placed in comparative relief with developments in South Asia and Latin America. The volume gives due regard to Colombia's Constitutional Court decision on the *Atrato River Case*, which took an unprecedented ecocentric approach.⁹ That

⁴ Najeed Naved Siddiqui, Amisha Dash and Mirza Shaaaz Beg ‘Debating Legal Rights of Rivers’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound: Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 239.

⁵ Fahim Abrar Abid, ‘When ‘National Interest’ leads to Ecocide: The Unseen Constitutional Violation of Environmental Laws in Bangladesh’ (Oxford Human Rights Hub, 10 October 2024). <<https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/when-national-interest-leads-to-ecocide-the-unseen-constitutional-violation-of-environmental-laws-in-bangladesh/>> accessed 20 September 2025.

⁶ Visa A.J. Kurki, ‘Can Nature Hold Rights? It's Not as Easy as You Think’ (2023) 11(3) TEL 525, 528.

⁷ *ibid* 242.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ ‘River Atrato First River in Colombia to be Awarded Rights’ (*ABColumbia*), <<https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/constitutional-court-sets-global-precedent/>> accessed 23 August 2025.

court declared the Atrato River to be a rights-bearing entity and appointed the state and ethnic communities as guardians to act on the river's behalf.¹⁰ By invoking indigenous cosmologies and the precautionary principle amid grave pollution from mining, the *Atrato* judgment sought to secure the river's protection in conjunction with the rights of local communities.¹¹ *Rivers Unbound* highlights this case (and others in Latin America, South Asia and Africa) as part of a "Global South" turn towards recognising rivers as subjects of rights.¹² Indeed, Chapter 12 by Bandopadhyay and Im – pointedly titled "*From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: The Legal Journey of the Asia-Pacific Region and Indian Judiciary's Tryst with Rights of Rivers*" – explicitly frames the rights of rivers movement as a culturally grounded global phenomenon, noting that countries like Bangladesh and Colombia have already granted legal personhood to rivers, from which India might draw inspiration.¹³

The Indian experience with rights of rivers is critiqued and analysed at length. Several chapters recount the landmark decisions in 2017 by the High Court of Uttarakhand, which declared the sacred *Ganga* and *Yamuna* rivers to be legal persons with corresponding rights.¹⁴ India's Supreme Court stayed those orders, but they ignited a vigorous discussion on the practical and doctrinal implications of personifying nature. While the Uttarakhand orders were *symbolically significant*, they also exposed "troubling gaps" in execution and enforcement.¹⁵ Who, for instance, would bear liability on behalf of a river-person for harms like flooding? How would conflicting human and riverine interests be adjudicated? These questions are taken up by the contributors with a critical eye. Siddiqui observed that Indian courts, in attempting to "recontextualise" environmental law through rights-based orders, almost did not consider the new institutional and legal frameworks that will be required to manage the rights and responsibilities they have conferred.¹⁶ Notably, the Punjab & Haryana High Court's 2020

¹⁰ *The Atrato River case* (n 3).

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Siddiqui, Dash and Beg (n 4) 242.

¹³ Somabha Bandopadhyay and Jina Im, 'From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: The Legal Journey of the Asia-Pacific Region and Indian Judiciary's Tryst with Rights of Rivers' in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 73.

¹⁴ *Salim v. State of Uttarakhand*, Writ Petition [2017] Writ Petition (PIL) No.126 of 2014.

¹⁵ Amrita Pankaj Satija, 'Legal personhood to sacred rivers: The ruling gave symbolism, not solutions' (*Policy Circle*, 27 April 2025) <<https://www.policycircle.org/opinion/legal-personhood-to-ganga-river/>> accessed in 23 August 2025.

¹⁶ Siddiqui, Dash and Beg (n 4) 242.

decision declaring a northern Indian lake (Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh) a legal entity¹⁷ – an order issued by the same Justice who had decided the Uttarakhand river case is also discussed.¹⁸ Such judicial moves, while well-intentioned, remain judicial decrees that may lack follow-through. The volume’s contributors seem to concur that rights of nature must be buttressed by clear frameworks for guardianship, accountability, and community involvement if they are to move from paper to practice.

Yet the tone of the book is not cynical about rights of rivers. It is cautiously optimistic, delineating how these legal ideas *expand the imaginative horizons* of environmental law. Several chapters highlight the benefits of the Rights of Nature approach, such as easing procedural hurdles for environmental litigation by allowing suits *in the name of the river* itself.¹⁹ The personhood model, it is argued, could facilitate “defense of the environment in courts” by shifting standing doctrines and compelling judges to consider ecological harms more directly.²⁰ Through case studies and legal analysis, *Rivers Unbound* advances the conversation by acknowledging these advantages while also probing the challenges. For example, the risk that such rights are merely symbolic; declaring a river a legal person is ultimately a legal fiction: since a river cannot act or bear duties itself, any “personhood” inevitably operates through human representatives and thus might collapse into an *indirect* protection mechanism.²¹ The book engages with this critique by examining how different jurisdictions structure the guardianship of river-entities. In New Zealand, for instance, the *Whanganui River*’s interests are represented by official guardians (one appointed by the Crown, one by *Māori*) under the *Te Awa Tupua* framework – a co-governance model deeply informed by indigenous values.²² By contrast, the Indian court experiments lacked such clear guardian’s *ex ante*, leading to uncertainty. Through such comparisons, the volume contributes nuanced insights into the design of legal personality for nature. Rather than treating “rights for rivers” as a monolith, the chapters emphasise context: cultural, political, and ecological. A recurring

¹⁷ *Court on its own motion v. Chandigarh Administration*, CWP No. 18253 of 2009 & other connected petitions (P&H H.C).

¹⁸ Bandopadhyay and Im (n 13) 75.

¹⁹ Siddiqui, Dash and Beg (n 4) 243.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kurki (n 5).

²² Miriama Cribb, Elizabeth Macpherson and Axel Borchgrevink, ‘Beyond legal personhood for the Whanganui River: collaboration and pluralism in implementing the Te Awa Tupua Act’ (2024) *TIJHR* <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2024.2314532#abstract>> accessed 18 September 2025.

theme is that legal rights for rivers must connect with local social currents – including indigenous worldviews and community stewardship – to be effective.

3. Ecocentrism and Legal Pluralism: Indigenous Currents in Law

Moving beyond formal rights and personhood, *Rivers Unbound* delves into the broader shift towards *ecocentric jurisprudence*. Ecocentrism calls for placing ecosystems, rather than human interests, at the center of legal reasoning.²³ In practice, this shift often entails revitalising non-Western or indigenous understandings of human–nature relationships within law. Several contributions explore how indigenous epistemologies and rights-of-nature intersect, especially in the South Asian context. Chapter 6, “Indigenous Voices in River Conservation: Legal Barriers and Pathways in India” by Kasturi Bhagat, examines how India’s legal and policy framework has historically failed to both utilise the knowledge and uphold the rights of tribal communities in river governance.²⁴ The chapter chronicles, for example, how large dam projects like the Narmada and the Northeastern hydropower schemes proceeded with scant regard for the spiritual and livelihood connections that Adivasi (indigenous) groups have with rivers.²⁵ Bhagat’s analysis underscores a form of legal pluralism: alongside state law’s dominance, there exist customary and cultural norms in indigenous communities that treat rivers as sacred kin or ancestors. However, these norms rarely inform state decision-making. Environmental laws and water policies in India, the author finds, often prioritise state-led development over indigenous rights, leading to displacement and loss of traditional stewardship. By reviewing constitutional provisions (such as Schedule V and VI protections for tribal lands) and key court rulings, the chapter argues for an integrated approach – one that would reconcile indigenous governance systems with environmental regulation, thereby marrying human rights with ecocentric values.²⁶ The proposal is essentially to weave indigenous perspectives (which inherently value rivers as living entities) into formal law, achieving a more “equitable and sustainable future for Indigenous peoples and river ecosystems”.

²³ Sairam Bhat and Lianne D’Souza, ‘Eco-Centrism and the Right to Development: Bridging the Dichotomy’ (2022) CULJ 11(1) 43.

²⁴ Kasturi Bhagat, ‘Indigenous Voices in River Conservation: Legal Barriers and Pathways in India’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025).

²⁵ *ibid* 34.

²⁶ *Ibid* 32.

This theme is echoed in other contributions that highlight *legal pluralism* and the role of indigenous or local knowledge. For instance, chapter 14 sheds light on the plight of the Jumma peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.²⁷ The Kaptai hydroelectric dam, built in the 1960s, submerged vast areas of indigenous land, creating what the authors poignantly call a “Lake of Tears.” While not explicitly about granting personhood to nature, the narrative lays bare the human rights tragedy of ignoring indigenous voices – a cautionary tale that effective river governance cannot be achieved by technocratic means alone. The implication, tying back to the rights of nature discourse, is that recognising a river’s legal rights in isolation is insufficient if the rights and worldviews of riverine communities are ignored. One might draw a comparison to the Whanganui model, where the Maori tribe’s cosmology underpins the river’s personhood – essentially a legal transplant of an indigenous worldview into statute. *Rivers Unbound* invites readers to consider similar synergies in South Asia: could, for example, the legal personality of the Ganga or Brahmaputra be grounded in the cultural reverence those rivers command, thereby empowering local custodians as part of the governance structure?

Bandopadhyay and Im’s Chapter 12 directly tackles the *dichotomy within Indian jurisprudence* on ecocentrism.²⁸ They observe that India’s higher judiciary has, in some rulings, endorsed ecocentric principles – moving away from a strictly human-centered approach – but this evolution has been halting and sporadic. The authors trace the lineage of ecocentrism in Indian case law back to the Supreme Court’s *T.N. Godavarman (1996)* judgement which advanced forest conservation via expansive “public interest” directives.²⁹ Siddiqui also credits the visionary judgment in *Animal Welfare Board of India v. Nagaraja*³⁰ for articulating the moral standing of animals and nature in constitutional terms.³¹ Despite these strides, the chapter notes that Indian jurisprudence remains largely anthropocentric at the ground level – with ecocentrism embraced mainly in *obiter dicta* or in a few High Court experiments.³² In explaining why India has not gone as far down the ecocentric path as, say, New Zealand or Colombia, the authors point to institutional and cultural factors. On one hand, India lacks explicit statutory recognition of nature’s rights (Parliament has not yet codified such concepts),

²⁷ Fahim Abrar Abid and Mahbuba Kamal ‘Kaptai Dam as the Lake of Tears: An Injustice to the *Jummas*’ Rights’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 86-92.

²⁸ Bandopadhyay (n 13).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *Animal Welfare Board of India vs A. Nagaraja & Ors* [2017] Civil Appeal No. 5387 of 2014.

³¹ Siddiqui, Dash and Beg (n 4) 243.

³² *ibid.*

leaving the heavy lifting to judges. On the other hand, they argue that India's development imperatives and bureaucratic inertia have tempered radical judicial impulses. Tellingly, Justice P.S. Narasimha of the Supreme Court recently remarked that India was “the first country...to shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric approach” in jurisprudence,³³ citing the Court's acceptance of ecocentric submissions in environmental cases as a watershed. *Rivers Unbound* provides a nuanced view of this claim: yes, the language of ecocentrism is making inroads (as seen in National Green Tribunal conferences and judicial speeches, but the practice of environmental governance in India is still catching up. The volume thereby complicates any simple celebratory narrative – illuminating the gap between *rhetoric and reality* in ecocentric jurisprudence.

Importantly, the book situates these legal developments in a broader ethical context. The move toward rights-of-nature is shown to intersect with discourses on environmental ethics, intergenerational justice, and the revival of *Earth jurisprudence*. Several chapters implicitly draw on the idea that Western legal systems need a paradigm shift akin to a new Copernican revolution, where human beings are no longer the sole center of legal concern. This aligns with the writings of scholars like Cormac Cullinan and Thomas Berry, who have long advocated for law to acknowledge the intrinsic value of Earth's communities.³⁴ While the volume itself is an edited collection of conference papers (and thus does not offer a singular theoretical treatise), its diverse contributions collectively endorse an ecocentric reorientation of law – tempered by pragmatic considerations of implementation. The presence of chapters examining gender fluidity and “trans-ecology” (Ch. 11) or analysing literature about riverine lives (Ch. 15), adds further layers, reminding the reader that cultural narratives and identities are also part of this pluralistic legal-ecological tapestry. By drawing in these interdisciplinary insights, *Rivers Unbound* strengthens the case that a purely positivist, one-dimensional approach to river governance is inadequate. Law must engage with culture, ecology, and multiple knowledge systems.

³³ ‘Indian Supreme Court first to shift from human-centric to eco-centric approach, says judge’ (*The Economic Times*, 30 March 2025) <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/indian-supreme-court-first-to-shift-from-human-centric-to-eco-centric-approach-says-judge/articleshow/119761896.cms?from=mdr>> accessed 18 September 2025.

³⁴ Jess Tyrrell, ‘Earth Jurisprudence, Wild Law, and the Global Movement for Rights of Nature’ (*Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 23 January 2025) <<https://www.boell.de/en/2025/01/23/earth-jurisprudence-wild-law-and-global-movement-rights-nature>> accessed 18 September 2025.

4. Transboundary Currents: Rivers Unbound or Bound by Politics?

Beyond rights-of-nature, a substantial portion of *Rivers Unbound* addresses the hard realities of transboundary river governance in South Asia. Several chapters examine India's river disputes and cooperative frameworks with neighboring countries, providing a critical test of whether lofty ecocentric principles can influence interstate water management. Chapter 19, for example, scrutinises the protracted diplomacy (or lack thereof) over the *Teesta River* between India and Bangladesh.³⁵ The Teesta, crucial for Bangladesh's agriculture, remains without a final water-sharing treaty due to political deadlock – notably opposition from a key Indian state. The authors outline the challenges and opportunities in breaking this impasse, implicitly questioning whether emerging norms like the human right to water or ecological flow requirements might offer new entry points for negotiation. While not overtly framed as a rights-of-nature issue, the underlying theme is similar: moving beyond zero-sum, state-centric mindsets to more holistic, equitable outcomes.

In Chapter 23, attention shifts to the iconic *Ganges Water Treaty* of 1996 between India and Bangladesh, now at a crossroads after nearly three decades.³⁶ Salekin and Khatun call for reconsidering classical international water law principles (like absolute territorial sovereignty versus community of interests) in light of new hydrological realities. This resonates with the ecocentric approach: rather than viewing the Ganges simply as a resource to be divided, the authors suggest that cooperative management should prioritise the *river's health* as a basis for sustaining both nations' needs. Such a perspective finds some support in global law (e.g., the UNECE Water Convention's emphasis on ecosystem protection), but South Asian treaties have traditionally lacked explicit environmental flow guarantees. The volume's analysis here is a welcome interdisciplinary blend – combining legal doctrine with hydrology and climate science to critique existing treaties. It underscores that the rights-of-rivers conversation is not only about domestic law or indigenous cosmologies, but also about reimagining international agreements to be more ecologically attuned.

³⁵ Vijeta Verma, Tanvi Sharma, Aryan Clement, Aiswarya Sai and Christos Aidan Samuel 'Teesta River Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities in Transboundary Water Governance Between India and Bangladesh' in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 123-128.

³⁶ Masrur Salekin and Mst. Nila Khatun 'The Ganges Treaty at a Crossroads: Reconsidering International Water Law Principles for Future Cooperation' in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 155-160.

Perhaps the most geostrategic of the cases studied is the Indus Waters Treaty, examined in Chapter 32 (“Transboundary Waters Under Pressure: Climate Risks and the Indus Water Treaty” by Renuka and Wani).³⁷ The Indus Treaty of 1960 between India and Pakistan, often lauded as a model of resilience (surviving wars and hostilities), is revealed to be increasingly strained under climate stress. Glacial melt in the Himalayas, shifting river flows, and growing water demand are testing the treaty’s allocation scheme. The authors argue that while the Indus treaty has robust dispute resolution mechanisms, it is fundamentally a product of the mid-20th century mindset, with no mention of climate change or environmental protection.³⁸ As the river’s patterns “unbind” themselves from historical averages, the risk of discord grows. The chapter proposes political cooperation between the two countries and international organisations to establish adaptive management mechanisms to inject long-term ecological considerations into treaty governance.³⁹

Across these transboundary analyses, *Rivers Unbound* demonstrates an admirable breadth of doctrinal coverage. Public international law principles, such as equitable and reasonable utilisation and the no harm rule, are discussed alongside national water policies and local realities. The interdisciplinary balance is evident: legal argument is bolstered with political context and environmental data. However, a critical reader will notice that the comparative scope of the book, despite the ambitious preface invoking “*Indus to Amazon, Nile to Ganges*,” is heavily weighted toward South Asia. The Nile and Amazon themselves receive only passing reference in the introductory blurb; the volume contains no dedicated case study from Africa or South America beyond mention of Colombia. This is perhaps unsurprising given the conference origins and the editors’ regional expertise, but it does point to a limitation on the book’s global reach. Scholars looking for extensive treatment of, say, the recent rights-of-nature constitutional litigation in Ecuador’s courts, the emerging rights-of-the-Amazon River initiatives, or the Australian *Yarra River Protection Act 2017* (which, while not granting personhood, created a voice for the *Yarra* based on Aboriginal inclusion) will not find those here. The focus is firmly on South Asia with selective excursions to New Zealand and Latin America for comparison. As a result, the volume’s comparative analysis sometimes relies on secondary summaries rather than original case experience from those regions – for example, the discussion of the *Whanganui* and *Atrato* cases is illuminating but relatively brief. A deeper

³⁷ Renuka and Showkat Ahmad Wani ‘Transboundary Waters Under Pressure: Climate Risks and the Indus Water Treaty’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 216-221.

³⁸ *ibid* 217.

³⁹ *ibid* 220.

engagement with voices from those jurisdictions might have enriched the discussion of how transferable these models are across cultures and legal systems.

5. Structure and Scholarship: A Critical Appraisal

As an edited compilation, *Rivers Unbound* inevitably presents a mosaic of perspectives. The 40 chapters range from 5 to 12 pages in length – concise contributions that often read like policy briefs or case notes. On the one hand, this allows the book to touch an impressive array of topics, from *Jal Saheli* women’s water conservation groups (Chapter 1) to the use of artificial intelligence in river monitoring (Chapter 25). On the other hand, the brevity of chapters means some analyses feel underdeveloped. The reader occasionally yearns for a more robust engagement with theory: for instance, the normative foundation of according legal rights to rivers is asserted by some authors but could have been probed with reference to counterarguments (such as the concern that human responsibilities might be obscured by shifting focus to nature’s rights). To its credit, the volume’s Chapter 39 by Tiina Paloniitty – “*Negotiating Rivers, Law and Boundaries: Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of River Management for the Sustainability Era*” – attempts a synthesis. In just a few pages, Paloniitty (a scholar outside the South Asian context) reflects on the overarching theme that emerges when considering law’s treatment of rivers across jurisdictions.⁴⁰ She emphasises that *boundaries* (be they territorial, disciplinary, or conceptual) often hinder sustainable river governance. By advocating a breaking down of boundaries, e.g., between ecology and law, or between state-centric and community-centric governance – this closing chapter aptly echoes the book’s title: “Rivers Unbound.” It suggests that truly *unbinding* rivers mean freeing our legal and policy thinking from old silos and embracing more integrative, ecocentric approaches.

From a doctrinal standpoint, the book’s center of gravity is environmental law and water law, but it effectively incorporates constitutional law (fundamental rights to water and healthy environment in India, human rights (as seen in the Atrato case discussion linking river rights to the rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and even private law analogies (the use of corporate personhood as an analogy for environmental personhood, though this is contested). The interdisciplinary balance is generally strong: legal analysis is frequently grounded in history, sociology, and science. For example, the chapters on gender

⁴⁰ Tiina Paloniitty ‘Negotiating Rivers, Law and Boundaries: Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of River Management for the Sustainability Era’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (Taylor & Francis 2024) 258-262.

and rivers (Ch. 11 and Ch. 38) bring in social science research on how water scarcity and pollution disproportionately affect women – reinforcing the book’s message that river governance is as much about social currents as legal tides. The inclusion of literary and cultural analysis (the “third-space theory” reading of a river novel in Ch. 15) might surprise a law journal audience, but it enriches the tapestry by illustrating how rivers figure in the human imagination and identity.

One structural critique is that the book could have benefited from sectional divisions or an editorial conclusion. Without explicit parts, the reader must discern thematic groupings on their own. Rights-of-rivers and ecocentric jurisprudence, the focus of this review, are threaded through a handful of key chapters (notably 12, 36, and a few others). Other chapters address hydro-diplomacy and transboundary issues (e.g., 4, 7, 19, 23, 32, 33) or community-level governance and human rights (e.g., 1, 6, 8, 9, 14, 30). An introductory roadmap or concluding synthesis by the editors might have drawn these threads together, highlighting complementarities and tensions among the contributions. For instance, there is an implicit tension between the *rights of nature* approach and the *human right to water* approach: the former centers nature’s interests, the latter human needs. Both appear in the volume (Chapter 8 discusses the fundamental human right to clean water in India),⁴¹ but a reader might wonder how they converge or conflict in practice. A more explicit comparative evaluation of these paradigms would have been valuable. Similarly, while some chapters extol legal personhood for rivers, others focus on community management and say little about rights – the relationship between granting rights to rivers and empowering communities is an area ripe for exploration, and one that the book touches on tangentially (for example, in chapters on participatory democracy in river management, Ch. 29, or the role of self-help groups, Ch. 9) but does not systematically analyse. These critiques, however, are perhaps asking for a different kind of book. As a conference volume, *Rivers Unbound* succeeds in providing a platform for a multitude of voice and case studies, leaving the reader with ample material for reflection and further research.

6. Conclusion

In style and substance, *Rivers Unbound* mirrors the rivers it discusses – at times meandering, at times forceful, rich in local color yet part of a global current. For scholars, lawyers, and

⁴¹ Tilak Raj Sharma and Vikash Sharma ‘Clean Water as a Fundamental Human Right in India: Challenges and Solutions’ in Ananth Padmanabhan, Nabeela Siddiqui and Gnana Sanga Mithra S (eds), *Rivers Unbound Exploring Social Currents, Legal Tides, and Stories of Flow* (1st ed., Routledge 2025) 43-48.

activists interested in the evolving concept of river rights and ecocentric law, the book offers a compendium of contemporary developments, particularly in the Indian subcontinent. Its greatest contribution lies in foregrounding the *thematic triad* of rights-of-rivers, legal personhood, and ecocentrism, and demonstrating how these ideas are taking shape on the ground through litigation, legislation, and community action. The comparative references to New Zealand's *Whanganui River* and Colombia's *Atrato River* – alongside discussions of India's own journey – help situate South Asian jurisprudence in the wider movement recognising that *nature, too, can be a rights holder*. The book's engagement with indigenous perspectives and cultural narratives adds depth to the legal analysis, underscoring that rivers are not only units of ecology or economy but also entities of sacred and social significance.

As debates on environmental personhood and rights-of-nature proliferate in academic journals and courtrooms alike, this volume's practical case studies and doctrinal critiques make a timely contribution. It will especially resonate with readers of the *Journal of Environmental Law* attuned to the complexities of translating ecocentric philosophy into legal practice. If there is a cautionary takeaway, it is that recognising the "rights" of a river is not a panacea, such rights must be operationalised through institutions, guardians, and a supportive societal ethos. In one sense, *Rivers Unbound* leaves us with a paradox: to truly protect rivers, we may need to both elevate their status in law *and* ground our legal approaches in the lived realities of those who know the rivers best (local communities, indigenous peoples, and the rivers' own ecological rhythms). The book's multidisciplinary insights reinforce this point, making a compelling case that the future of river governance lies in breaking silos and embracing a more holistic, ecocentric paradigm.

In sum, *Rivers Unbound* is a valuable and thought-provoking assemblage. It advances the discussion on river rights by documenting how far the idea has come, from the bold legislative act in New Zealand, to judicial experiments in South Asia, to academic debates across the Global South. At the same time, it acknowledges how much work remains in reconciling these novel legal currents with on the ground governance and transboundary complexities. For a field in flux, this book offers both inspiration and prudent reflection. It invites us to imagine rivers not as bounded resources over which we quarrel, but as living threads of the biosphere – threads that legal systems must learn to weave into their very fabric, across jurisdictions and cultures, if we are to navigate toward a more just and sustainable future.