

## On the Face of the Waters and Below: The Significance of India's Rivers in the Fiction of Flora Annie Steel

Robert Jenkins

### Introduction

In 1898, Flora Annie Steel, the popular British-Indian fiction writer,<sup>1</sup> was in Benares for the Magh Mela, an annual Hindu festival that was especially auspicious that year due to a total eclipse of the sun. Steel witnessed the event on a river boat at Benares and she gives a brief account of it in her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930). It was not the eclipse that fascinated Steel, however, but the “sight of something close on three million sinners waiting to wash away their sins at the auspicious moment” (238-39). Steel relates that a “vast, vague expectancy” had lain over “all Hindustan” for weeks and now the moment was at hand even she was so spellbound with anticipation that the “temple pigeons” taking flight unexpectedly “thrilled [her] to the marrow” (239). In the face of that undirected expectancy, Steel says there were six or so “white-faces” who were “responsible for keeping those millions of dark ones from sudden fear, sudden emotion, sudden turmoil” (239). The central figure of Steel’s anecdote is a “young policeman” standing on a plinth across from her spot on the river steamer. As the sky grows greyer and greyer, the young officer says, “Patience, patience,” several times, making it known that the “mad rush for the waters of salvation was not necessary” (238-39). That “quiet cry” for patience could be found above a “struggling mass of humanity” that stretched out for “miles and miles.” Then, as the “grey gave way to the coming light” the officer’s cry merged, in Steel’s memories, to a “cheerful request” for “another beer” (239). The handful of “white-faces” had successfully kept the “dark ones” from panicking – or, even worse, rising in anger against the British Raj.

Two years later, Steel’s *The Hosts of the Lord* was published by William Heinemann. The events of that novel revolve around millions of pilgrims congregating to an otherwise quiet province of British India for the Magh Mela. The pilgrims have come to wash themselves in sacred waters and are easily manipulated by the many holy men who are also present. Ultimately, it is a handful of British men – and one woman – who keep the masses placated and thereby prevent an uprising. It is more than likely that Steel’s experience at Benares influenced her while composing *Hosts*, but it was not the first time she featured rivers in her Indian fiction as something more than a geographical commonality. In fact, her first piece of fiction, “Lal,” which was published in 1891, is set at a riverside village, the life of which is governed by British law and the whims of the annual flood. Despite the blasé imperialism of her eclipse anecdote, Steel understood that the rivers of India were sacred sites for millions of people. In her fiction, rivers become sites where British culture and imperial sentiments meet with the ancient ways of Hinduism and, like oil and water, the two will not mix.

Most British-Indian fiction writers employ a river as nothing more than a physical body of flowing water that either allows or obstructs movement across the land. One notable

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, British-Indian fiction is any fiction written by a British writer set in India. Most scholarship refers to such fiction as Anglo-Indian as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the British living in India referred to themselves as such. I am changing the name to avoid confusion with the later use of Anglo-Indian to refer to people with mixed British and Indian heritage.

exception is Rudyard Kipling who features flooding rivers in several stories, including “The Bridge Builders” in which the Ganges is personified as the goddess Mother Gunga. Kipling’s story is often read as a paean to “the work ethic of the British imperialists” and their “sense of moral purpose” (Trivedi 37). Others argue that the story reflects the impermanence of human effort and that, as India is modernised and awakens from its ancient, superstitious past, it will shed itself of British rule without divine aid, which it will also no longer need or recognise (A. Parry 21; Sullivan 26). In any reading, Mother Gunga and her raging waters are symbolic of the forces of history and tradition that challenge the progress of human endeavour. Steel’s fictional rivers also include an undercurrent of ancient tradition, but these traditions are intractable and Steel’s rivers suggest a more ambiguous relationship between Britain and its subjects.

In this article I examine how Steel employs rivers in her Indian fiction in a way that not only acknowledges their cultural importance, but also demonstrates her understanding of the Raj’s relationship to the people it claimed to govern. I begin with a brief overview of Steel’s experience in British India and how that informed her writing and distinguished her from others. I then outline the cultural and political importance of India’s rivers, especially regarding British occupation, and how that importance was typically ignored or glossed over in most British-Indian fiction. Finally, I analyse “Lal” and *The Hosts of the Lord* to demonstrate how, in Steel’s fiction, India’s rivers become a symbol for the country itself.

### **The Outspoken Memsahib**

Steel moved to India with her husband on their honeymoon and they lived there for 21 years (till 1889), almost three times longer than Kipling. Her experience in India was not typical for a memsahib, as European wives were called. Most British women lived in cantonments and saw little of India or its people beyond their walls. Steel’s husband was often stationed in remote stations where the two of them might be the only Europeans for many miles. To avoid boredom and depression, Steel maintained an active lifestyle which encompassed all aspects of station life, including involving herself in local issues and providing what medical care she could to the local people. Later she was integral in developing an education system for Indian women.

Her life, then, provided Steel with far more knowledge and experience of India and its people – primarily in the Punjab – than most British-Indian writers. She did not rest on her laurels, however, and continued to research and investigate matters pertaining to her fiction even after her return to Britain. Most notably, when she began work on her magnum opus, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), Steel returned to India alone and spent a few weeks living on the rooftop of an Indian household in her husband’s old district to see her “old friends, make new ones, hear all their rights and wrongs and generally get the experience [she] wanted for [her] ‘muckle bookie’” (Steel *Garden* 204-08). Steel’s wealth of lived experience is reflected in her fiction, which stands out from that of most British-Indian writers for including Indian characters who are more than tokens or stock types. She was not, then, as even the scathingly dismissive Benita Parry notes, another of the Anglo-Indian “lady romancers” (6).

While Steel’s fiction is not autobiographical, it is shaped heavily, and often directly, from her experiences, as my Introduction suggests. Steel also admits as much in her actual autobiography when she relates that her fiction writing began when a friend suggested that some of her “experiences might prove acceptable to the minor magazines” (*Garden* 193). “Lal” was the initial story born from that idea, although it was rejected by all the “minor

magazines,” and was only published when Steel sent it to a “major” title, *Macmillan’s Magazine*. “Lal” is not a true-life story, but it does draw heavily on Steel’s life, as I discuss below. What is significant to note here, is that “Lal” is set far away from any British settlement and the story revolves around the narrator’s experiences with the villagers and his attempts to understand them. He is ultimately unsuccessful, as are the British characters in *Hosts*, but the tension behind Steel’s text in these narratives and others is hinged on the confluence of the two cultures.

Other British-Indian women writers, like Bithia Mary Croker and Alice Perrin, produced works that give a “faithful representation” of the life of a memsahib in the “‘heat and dust’ of the tropical subcontinent” (Roye 12). These works exemplify the fact that the main interest for readers of British-Indian fiction was in the lives of the British in India (Sencourt 454) and present an “Indian-less India” (Teo 4). Steel’s stories, on the other hand, are involved in the lives of the British and Indians and frequently in issues around the relationships between the two. Most especially, Steel’s fiction often provides commentary on the management of India and its people and reflects her attitudes to the Raj and the Indian government. The role of rivers in her fiction is tied to this strand of commentary within Steel’s works and demonstrates her views on India’s people and the British officials who governed them. Given the cultural importance of rivers in India and their strategic value in general, Steel’s use of them is more than apt. That more British writers did not utilise the cultural and spiritual significance of India’s rivers is an absence that speaks to the dismissive attitude encouraged by New Imperialism and Western hubris.

### **Rivers of India**

India is a land of rivers. Govindasamy Agoramoorthy estimates that 395 cubic miles of water flow through India every year, which works out to approximately 1.6 trillion litres (1080). When the rivers of Pakistan and Bangladesh are added to represent the extent of the British Raj, the sheer quantity of water is mind-boggling. Louis Tracy, a late-Victorian writer of British-Indian fiction, gives a sense of the vastness of India’s rivers in the opening passage of “What Happened on the Indus,” published in *Pall Mall Magazine* in February 1894. To give his readers an idea of “the extent and peculiarities of an Indian river,” Tracy relates the experience of a passenger travelling north from Lahore on the Calcutta Mail. About midnight, he says, the train comes to a “standstill” and the “unwonted silence” awakens the passenger whose “first impulse” is to open the window to investigate. On doing so, they discover they are on a “bridge, beneath which there is the sound of rushing, tumbling, foaming water, stretching away into the darkness like an angry sea.” The train stays motionless for “a few anxious moments” before it begins to move “slowly forward,” then about a mile down the track, just as the passenger is beginning to settle back to sleep, the whole experience is repeated. After that second “awe-inspiring pause” the novice traveller “generally seeks the solace of a whisky-and-soda, eked out by a cigar, before he retires to rest for the third time.” That “startling incident” is simply the train crossing the Jhelum River “by a bridge some two miles in length;” and the Jhelum is, Tracy reminds readers, “but one of five that constitute the mighty Indus” (581). Tracy’s description of the “black water” that stretches away in “darkness,” unseen but heard as the “sound of rushing, tumbling, foaming water” which is more “like an angry sea” than a river, must have impressed metropolitan British readers accustomed to tamer rivers like the Thames.

While Tracy does offer a sublime vision of India’s rivers, he stops short of anthropomorphising the Jhelum. In Hinduism, however, “large rivers are considered sacred”

and are “personified as deities” (Agoramoorthy 1081). There is a general belief in Hinduism that “bathing in sacred rivers” is a way to be “cleansed of sins,” especially in the Ganges, in which, legend says, the other rivers themselves would bathe to “wash away” the “moral dirt” left by “millions of pilgrims” (1081). Sudipta Sen contends that the “practice of mass pilgrimage to sacred sites” along the Ganges “defied everyday strictures of status and caste” and that “no regime could afford to disregard the deeper imprints of cosmology, myth, and metaphysics” connected to the “river goddess and her waters” (8). Even the reigns of the Mughals and the British, for whom “irrigation and the redistribution of water became a significant priority of statecraft,” could not erase the “vivid” imagery of “the virtuous river and its pilgrim landscape” from the “popular imagination” (8). How much the British officials and officers who invaded and colonised the Indian subcontinent appreciated the cultural and religious significance of the rivers is a matter for a different discussion; however, they did clearly comprehend the strategic value of controlling them.

British manipulation of India’s waterways started in Calcutta in the eighteenth century. The British East India Company, commonly referred to simply as the Company, began to build a trading settlement in the late seventeenth century in the Bengal Delta, which is where the Hooghly River, a tributary of the Ganges, flows into the Bay of Bengal. The Hooghly had been “a central highway of the British Empire” since the early seventeenth century, and the settlement, Calcutta, as the “emporium” through which goods “flowed from east to west,” steadily grew into the “second capital of the British Empire” (Bhattacharyya 1-2). In 1743, the inhabitants of Calcutta were granted permission by the Mughals to dig an entrenchment around its northern and eastern edges, ostensibly as a defensive moat due to the threat of the Maratha invasion. Recent research by J. Ehrlich reveals that the trench, known as the “Maratha Ditch,” was less a fortification, however, than it was a political boundary that aided the Company “to delimit and hence lay greater claim to Calcutta” (174). The Ditch became an official boundary after the Battle of Plassey cemented the Company’s power over Bengal in 1757. So, while the first trench the British dug may not have had a major effect on the river, it dramatically altered the political and cultural landscape of India.

After Plassey, British manipulations of Indian rivers became a matter of course. Legal disputes in the eighteenth century redefined the distinction between land and water in terms of property claims, which led to parts of the delta being drained so that individuals could “fix” the land as a permanent part of their holdings (Bhattacharyya 7). These practices continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and were reflected by similar practices throughout British India. Rivers were dammed, channels dug, deltas drained, and, most especially, the waterways were continually mapped and measured so the Raj could police property boundaries and the resultant taxes owed to the government. Managing and policing India’s rivers, then, were standard elements in Britain’s colonial practices and fundamental in founding and maintaining British India as an imperial possession. Despite this, British-Indian fiction rarely acknowledges rivers as anything more than waterways to cross or travel down. After Tracy’s opening anecdote about the sublime size of the Jhelum in “What Happened on the Indus,” the story turns to its heroine, Sybil Etherington, the Commissioner’s daughter who chooses to row on the Jhelum even though it is in flood (583). Her recreation is ruined when she leaves the calm waters near the boat-house and her oar breaks in the swift current of the swollen river (584). Tracy blames the boat-house’s “native attendant” for the accident because when he realises he gave Sybil a fractured oar he does not call out to her to replace it, and when he sees her caught in the main stream without a paddle he does not attempt to rescue her – as “an Englishman” would – but decides to move to Calcutta to avoid the Commissioner’s ire (585). Tracy again describes the river in terms of

the dark sublime when Sybil's father, with ten sepoy, launches a search mission that night. Once before, Tracy relates, the Commissioner had stared into the "Valley of the Shadow" as his wife was dying of fever, and now his daughter was "gone from him to be engulfed in the noisy, whirling, gruesome chaos beyond" (585-86). Here, the Jhelum, with its "murky darkness," is confused and entangled with the "dread depths" of despair and death. Compounding the terror of the river that night, the boat hits a rock, smashes into the bank, is caught again by the river, then overturned. Eleven men "struggle for life" but four do not make it to the shore. Tracy ends the passage with the statement, "The crocodiles of the Jhelum are of a very large species and require feeding: otherwise they would die" (586). Tracy combines his opening anecdote with this brief incident of despair and death to drive home the point that India's rivers – like the region itself – are wild and dangerous. Any British man or woman who braves life in the Raj, Tracy seems to say, is walking through the "Valley of the Shadow" and must face death in the face as stoically as possible.

After that, the river is barely mentioned in the story. Sybil is found washed ashore two hundred miles downstream by Frank Denison, a young political officer in the Indian Government, who then attends to her recovery, escorts her home, and inevitably marries her (586-92). For all the Jhelum's vast size and the chaotic rushing of its waters, its main role in Tracy's story is as a vehicle for the fate of two young lovers to meet by accident. It is a theme Tracy returns to in later works such as *The Wings of the Morning* (1903) where a shipwreck strands a man and a woman on a remote island and the ensuing adventures overcome the social distance between them. Travelling on water gives fate and true love a chance to act in Tracy's fiction. Nevertheless, his depiction of the Jhelum does offer an insight into the nature of India in the eyes of some of its British residents. The political and cultural values of India's rivers are completely absent from the text, however, and in that respect, "What Happened on the Indus" matches most British-Indian fiction. Steel's outspoken and confident nature shines through in her fiction, which therefore engages with the political and cultural issues of British India on a much deeper level than that of her contemporaries.

### "Lal"

As I mentioned, "Lal" was Steel's first short story published in Britain,<sup>2</sup> appearing anonymously in *Macmillan's* in April 1891. The story's nameless narrator is a government officer who travels around his district to determine questions of revenue. Steel's husband fulfilled a similar role in his early career in India and spent the "cold weather mostly in camp" as he was an "old-fashioned believer in seeing as much of his district as possible" (*Garden* 56). Steel accompanied her husband on these trips and maintains in her autobiography, written decades later, that "more knowledge was gained in the old-time camping than in the modern rushes out by motor and subsequent tabulating of returns" (*Garden* 56-57). These travels certainly gave Steel more knowledge of the country than most other memsahibs and many British-Indian men. That experience is reflected in "Lal," as the narrator travels from village to village on horseback on his annual inspection of the fields.

The narrator makes these inspections because the flow of the river and the effects of its annual flood alter the size of individuals' fields and therefore the amount of revenue they had to pay. It is a practice that recalls Bhattacharyya's observations on how the British Empire

---

<sup>2</sup> In India, Steel wrote a collection of folktales, *Wide-Awake Stories* (1884), and co-wrote *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) with Grace Gardiner. "Lal," however, was her first published piece of fiction and the beginning of her literary career within metropolitan British print culture.

manipulated rivers and geography itself to dominate its subjects. Steel recognises this aspect of the governmental exercise early in the story, when she has the narrator state:

Year after year, armed by the majesty of law and bucklered by foot-rules and maps, the Government of India, in the person of one of its officers, came gravely and altered the proportion of land and water on the surface of the globe, while the river gurgled and dimpled as if it were laughing in its sleeve. (156)

Steel's language suggests that the government officers had an almost military role. They were "armed" and "bucklered," and their "grave" duty is enacted upon the whole "surface of the globe." The law, maps, and measurements are used to effectively subjugate the people whose lands are now formalised and allotted and come with obligations to the empire that recognises their ownership of portions of land that are under its dominion. The act of continually updating maps and figures demonstrates a considerable amount of imperial power, yet the river is "laughing in its sleeve." The floods change the banks each year, regardless of how often they are measured and allotted.

Later in the story the narrator reiterates the relationship between the Raj and India's rivers:

The fitful river had chosen to desert its eastern bank altogether, and concentrate its force upon the western; so while yard after yard of ancestral land was giving way before the fierce stream, amidst much wringing of hands on the one side, there was joy on the other over long rich stretches ready for the plough and the red tape of measurement. (167-68)

The narrator stresses here that whatever the river chooses to do, there will be arable land left in its wake, and wherever farmers can work, the Raj can apply its measurements and rules to extract revenue. The farmers may be at the mercy of the river's fickle nature, but the flow of revenue is assured. In that respect, the Raj could be said to have managed the river and its people, but only so long as someone applies the "red tape of measurement" year after year. The Raj can adjust to the river's changes but does not control it, nor does it comprehend its nature, otherwise its effects on the land could be predicted.

This lack of understanding is mirrored and extrapolated on in the story. The focus of the narrative is the figure of Lal, who owns one of the fields the narrator measures. At least, the villagers tell him that the field is Lal's, the narrator never meets him, and ultimately concludes that he does not know if Lal ever existed. Lal, representing the villagers, is an unsolvable mystery to British officialdom. He can be listed in tables, revenue can be claimed under his name, but, as with the river, it he cannot be said the Raj controlled or understood him.

Steel's story, then, lies in stark contrast with Kipling's "The Bridge Builders." The hero of that story is Findlayson, the chief engineer of a bridge across the Ganges. The bridge is almost complete when it faces the threat of the Ganges in full flood. Findlayson and Peroo, the head of the labourers, end up seeing a vision of Hindu deities – including Mother Gunga who caused the flood to try to throw off the bridge – accepting the yoke of British rule. As Jan Montefiore argues, "The Bridge Builders" shows how British engineering and the imperial might to construct bridges and dams of that magnitude, tame not only the rivers of India, but the people and their religion too. She points out that in the story Peroo is last seen imagining how he is going to flog the guru who has kept him and his workers under the spell



of superstition, which Peroo “sheds” so he can “to enter Findlayson’s own realm of materialism and technological mastery” (62-63).

For Kipling, the industrial might of British engineering has tamed India’s rivers and the more practical Indians, like Peroo, will see how in doing so, the British have brought a modern view of the world that dispels the illusions of superstition. For Steel there was more to the connection between India’s rivers, its gods, and its people than British engineering could fathom. While Lal’s river is only measured, Steel introduces British construction in her novels, but her engineers and officials never experience the exultant triumph that Kipling’s Findlayson does. In fact, some of them do not even survive.

In Steel’s first novel, *Miss Stuart’s Legacy*, the character John Raby attempts to redirect the course of a river to enhance the value of his factory. Raby marries the novel’s central character, the young memsahib Belle Stuart, early in the story, but it is an unhappy and loveless marriage. Raby only married Belle for her father’s inheritance – the legacy of the title – and is shown as selfish character throughout. He arranges and oversees the construction of a dam, but doing so enrages the local populace. Eventually the locals take arms against the dam builders and Raby is killed before Philip Marsden, the hero of the novel, puts down the short-lived insurrection. There is little question in this case that the dam was ill-advised, Raby’s dealings badly done, and the outcome all but inevitable. In the end, however, the trouble caused by a greedy and unethical businessman is rectified by the Raj, through the character of Marsden. Sometimes, Steel suggests, it is best to leave India the way it is, but still under British supervision and control.

### **The Vaisakh Festival in *Hosts***

The importance of controlling India’s waterways is made even more apparent in *Hosts*, where the flow of the river Hari is central to the plot. In the novel, British control of the river is threatened as part of an attempted mutiny. Success for either side is ultimately contingent on the influence they hold over two indigenous fishermen whose lives depend upon the river. Although the British are guaranteed success from the outset due to generic expectations and Steel’s own belief in the imperial project, the narrative undermines the totality of that success and leaves the river and its people an inexplicable mystery to the Western mind.

The events of the novel take place in the town of Eshwara during the Vaisakh festival when a multitude of Hindu pilgrims come to the town to visit the Pool of Immortality (Steel *Hosts* 3). The pool, which is in a cave, only fills with water during the festival period, a coincidence that is seen as a miracle, and thousands of pilgrims enter the pool to daub themselves with the “clay of immortality,” a type of white clay that can be found in the cave after the river rises. Once anointed with the clay, the pilgrims are ready for the final leg of their journey, an arduous climb to a shrine high on a mountain. Steel does not specify which deity the shrine is for; her point is not to criticise a specific aspect of Hinduism, but superstition and the machinations of religious hucksters more broadly. That said, Vaisakhi, or Baisakhi, is a real Hindu festival held around April 13 every year, the same date Steel gives it. The festival has many regional variations and, in some areas, it does involve ritual bathing in a river (Bhalla 8), but there the connection between the novel’s pilgrims and real-life Hindus and Sikhs ends. In fact, the Pool of Immortality, Eshwara province, and the Hari River – as it is presented in the novel – are entirely fictional. Steel possibly chose the festival because its regional differences allowed her to invent her own version.

On the other hand, as I discussed in the Introduction, Steel witnessed a similar pilgrimage two years prior to the publication of *Hosts*. In her description of that event, Steel glosses over why the millions of pilgrims had congregated. She mentions that she went to Benares to see the eclipse and the “Magh Mela” but never explains what that means. Anyone not familiar with Hindu traditions is, therefore, left with the impression that the millions of people she witnesses have gathered at the river primarily because they hold the total eclipse of the sun in superstitious awe. Magh Mela, however, is an annual celebration of an “auspicious astrological constellation” that lasts for much of the month of Magha in the Hindu calendar, which is around January-February (Maclean 11). During the mela, pilgrims gain merit by bathing in the “confluence of the Gunga, the Yamuna, and the invisible Saraswati rivers” (11). That point is close to Allahabad, modern-day Prayagraj, which is upstream from Benares where Steel was, but the total eclipse occurring during Magha likely made the site of the totality an especially auspicious place to bathe that year. Hindu pilgrims in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were potentially doing much more than observing religious rites, however, as the practice has been tied to anti-colonial sentiments.

Kama Maclean explains that during the nineteenth century the Magh Mela, and the associated Kumbh Mela that is held every twelve years, “morphed from being dominated by elites to a more popular form of pious expression” (11). The transition was a consequence of British occupation and can be traced back to the eighteenth century and political actions of the East India Company. Even the Company knew it was dangerous to interfere with religion, so its administrators “realized that facilitating pilgrimages” was a good way to “keep India’s traditional rulers contented” (11-12). At that time, attending a mela was mostly a way for “noble and princely families” to show off their wealth through their “expensive journey to holy cities” (12). By the time Steel was observing the Magh Mela, pilgrimages were events for the masses, and the British authorities were concerned. One of the chief concerns was the presence of the priests and other holy men who were revered by the people and had “a history of rebellion against the British” (12). The holy man spreading sedition is almost a stock character in British-Indian fiction, but in this instance the racist stereotype does have some parallel in historical record. Steel includes an especially cynical version of that stereotype in *Hosts*, whom she calls “miracle mongers” as they do not believe in the miracle of the Pool but use it to trick pilgrims out of their money (158).

So, while Steel may not have been targeting a particular Hindu tradition or local variation thereof, she was commenting on the cultural phenomenon of melas and religious pilgrimages. The risk to British security caused by these events was also very real. Maclean explains how melas “in all probability contributed to the spread of [Indian] nationalism” because they played a “vital role in the ‘information order’” (13). Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, Steel appears to overlook that aspect of pilgrimages as her focus in *Hosts* is the pilgrims’ gullibility in the face of manufactured miracles and the potential for them to riot if upset. Both these points are present in her description of the Magh Mela, where the British authorities must contain the masses from overexcitement and the pilgrims’ expectations for the event are “vague” and prone to shift (*Garden* 239). Nevertheless, the leader of the rebellion in *Hosts* is a Muslim character, the risaldar Roshan Khan, who mutinies against his officers largely due to the emotional manipulations of his mother and jealousy of his commanding officer, Vincent Dering, over the affections of Miss Laila Bonaventura. The contest over the river, however, is largely due to a Hindu holy man who spreads potentially seditious rumours among the pilgrims, although the other “miracle mongers” strive to counter his influence to protect their profits (*Hosts* 183-84). Even without being directly seditious, the growing number of pilgrims is one of the central causes of tension in the story, throughout which they



remain a faceless mass of humanity and are treated in the text as an object to be manipulated or contained by the agents of the story.

### **The Benefit of Not Understanding**

Steel opens *Hosts* in the middle of a conversation, launching the reader into an impromptu lecture about why it is not only natural that the British in India do not understand the Indian people, it is preferable. “So long as we don’t understand them,” he explains, “and they don’t understand us, we jog along the same path amicably” (Steel, *Hosts* 1). Before any of the characters present are identified, Steel presents that proposition, which the speaker illustrates with the pilgrims who follow the same route as the “telegraph-posts to the Adjutant General’s office.” Further, the speaker challenges his listeners to “cram more space than that between two earthly poles,” to highlight how distinct the modern, scientific world of telegraphs and British civilisation is from superstition and ancient tradition (1).

The speaker is Dr George Dillon, who oversees a gaol near Eshwara, whose inmates performed the physical labour of constructing a new canal. Dillon’s listeners, and guests, are Captain Vincent Dering and Lieutenant Lance Carlyon who have just arrived in the town of Eshwara at the head of a “troop of native cavalry and some Sikh pioneers” in preparation for the arrival of the Viceroy, who is coming to open the canal (Steel, *Hosts* 3). Dillon complicates his own position shortly after this proclamation, when he calls the government official who arranged for the Viceroy to arrive during the Vaisakh festival an “ass” for not considering the influx of pilgrims. The distinction, for Dillon at least, is that the festival and the multitude of pilgrims it brings are “facts” to be known, not “feelings” to be understood.

The amicability of the mutual lack of understanding is demonstrated in the status quo that the events of the novel disrupt. The British know the pilgrims are coming and what they do when they get there but are not interested in why. The pilgrims know the British are there and ruling in place of the old aristocracy, and so long as they can continue in their ways they do not trouble to question what the British are doing or why – a point demonstrative of Steel’s negligence towards the political aspects of melas and the general discontent of the Indian populace. The “miracle mongers,” similarly, do not trouble themselves about understanding the British, but take care to monitor and direct the pilgrims to maintain the status quo and, therefore, their profits.

The status quo is undermined very early in the novel, but through a seemingly minor event. After Dillon’s impromptu lesson, Dering, Carlyon, and Roshan arrive at a courtyard between the fort they are to occupy and the old palace, which is now the residence of a Portuguese priest and his ward, Laila. In the centre of the courtyard is an old cannon that has become something of a shrine. It bears a religious inscription and Roshan informs his officers that the “idolaters” worship the cannon when they come to the river and “give alms to the saint when he is inside” (10). Dering declares that he will not have his “guns worshipped,” a statement Roshan assents to “joyfully,” then they move on. The “saint” is the “jogi” Gorakh-nâth, who has lived inside the cannon for many years, blessing the pilgrims when they leave him alms before bathing in the river (10). Dering’s prohibition is discussed and debated by Gorakh-nâth and two other Hindu gentlemen who suggest the ban has no legal basis, but when Roshan is drawn into the debate, he denies any chance of the ban being lifted (46-49).

The dialogue between the Hindu gentlemen and Roshan illustrates Steel’s attitudes to Hinduism and Islam. The Hindus are divided as two of them belong to “antagonistic sects”

(46). The third is a former classmate of Roshan's, who reminds him that he called himself "the Agnostic" in his student days, a memory that disquiets the man and unbalances his arguments (47). Roshan is disdainful of the Hindus and disappoints himself by being overly forthright with them as it goes against the "tolerance of the Huzoors" he thought he had learned. (48). As a Muslim, Roshan is, in Steel's account, free of the superstitious traditionalism of the Hindus. His rebellion is born of ambition and thwarted passion and is an active and planned revolt. The trouble created by Gorakh-nâth is whispered rumours and discontent. It is only effective when enhanced by Roshan's scheme. A final comparison is made in the scene. After Roshan leaves the trio of Hindus, he encounters Father Narayan, the Portuguese priest, who thereafter finds himself face to face with Gorakh-nâth. Steel describes that moment as a meeting between "representatives of the two great supernaturalisms of the world; the one which has held the West, the one which has held the East" (49). The comparison of Roman Catholicism to Hinduism is far from unique, but I note it here to observe that Steel's open disdain for "miracle mongers" and their use, or abuse, of traditions and superstition is not limited to Hinduism or even Indian culture. That said, it is the ancient and Oriental traditions of Hindus that Dillon and the rest of the British in *Hosts* cannot – and will not – understand.

Thwarted by Dering's prohibition, Gorakh-nâth starts a rumour among the pilgrims that the canal will stop the waters rising in the Pool of Immortality with the suggestion that the Viceroy, or "Lord-Sahib" as he is also known, intended that to happen (69). The rumour causes a fair amount of consternation among the pilgrims, although the "miracle mongers" do their best to counter its spread and effect.

The miracle of the pool is the result of a secret series of tunnels where a stone conduit can be turned to divert some of the flow of the river into the pool. Gorakh-nâth knows of the mechanism, but it can only be reached by the indigenous locals who have remarkably good skills in swimming and navigating the river's currents. I discuss the two main indigenous characters below: for now it is enough to know that one of them sides with Gorakh-nâth. Consequently, on the day that the pool is supposed to fill, there is no water. The British authorities manage to block access to the pool for a day but there are thousands of pilgrims so there is much doubt that they can held back if the water does not appear the next day (202). Roshan's mutiny attempt takes place that night. It centres on releasing the convict labourers from Dillon's gaol, then using that success to stir the pilgrims to revolt when the miracle still has not happened. There is no need to detail the events of the mutiny here other than to note that it is already on the backfoot when Carlyon discovers and opens the "clumsy closed stone conduit" that was holding the water back (305). The final hopes of the conspirators fade away with the dawn as they hear the pilgrims' shouts of delight as the pool began to fill, and most of them flee for their lives (316).

On the face of that, it seems that the British heroes, especially Lance, have saved Eshwara by maintaining control of the river and directing its waters. As such, Steel appears to demonstrate that the Raj is justified and noble, and that the light of reason continues to shine on the superstitious ways of uncivilised India. Just as Kipling's bridge builders supersede Mother Gunga and bring modern civilisation to India, so Lance's success in redirecting the river pacifies the multitudes, while the new canal brings modernity and the advantages of British civilisation to the country. Even a cursory look beneath that façade, however, reveals that Steel has shown no such thing. Lance's victory in finding and opening the conduit that sends the water to the Pool of Immortality continues the tradition of the miracle, thereby reinforcing the superstitious belief in the pool's powers. Moreover, Lance only finds the

conduit by chance, and only survives because he is rescued by one of the most problematic characters in all of Steel's fiction, the indigenous fisherman Am-ma.

### **People of the River: Steel's Indigenous Indians**

Am-ma is one of two indigenous Indian characters in *Hosts*. The other is Gu-gu, who Steel introduces as a "survival of an aboriginal race," whose name is "as primitive as his appearance, since it is the first effort of infant tongues" (29). Gu-gu and Am-ma live beside and in the river and possess almost superhuman swimming abilities with which they make their living by catching fish with their bare hands and by helping to keep driftwood away from boats. When Gu-gu is introduced, Steel notes that contact with missionaries has given him "a civilised eye for business" and "a civilised notion of supply and demand" and these qualities, along with his abilities, have made him the most successful of his people (29). Recently, however, Gu-gu has been struggling to maintain his livelihood because the river's currents, which he could follow with innate ease, have changed since the opening of the new canal. Exacerbating his business woes is the fact that his main competitor, Am-ma, adapts to the new currents and continues to thrive, at least comparatively. Steel's point is rather overt – some Indians will adapt to the improved civilisation the British are foisting upon them, and those that do not are simply inferior to begin with. Notably, Gu-gu is griping and greedy from the outset, while Am-ma is shown as more respectful of the British.

Respectful Indian characters are common in British-Indian fiction and are usually said to have seen the superiority of British civilisation and its modern methods. Am-ma's respect, however, is mostly due to a sense of gratitude and even of being beholden to Erda, Lance's love interest and a missionary. Am-ma was childless because all his wife's babies had died at birth or, as Am-ma believes, had their life stolen by a demon (110). So, when Erda delivers his first living child, she proves to him that the British are the "light-bringers, the life-bringers," and are therefore worthy of his trust and loyalty (111-12). In the world of Steel's novel, these two indigenous fishermen, then, are so primitive they cannot even achieve the level of enlightened gratitude other Indian characters possess. Nevertheless, the success of the mutiny or its suppression is entirely in their hands.

Everyone who knows the miracle is contrived, knows that Gu-gu and Am-ma are the only people who could possibly know where the tap is and be able to turn it (200). Neither can be found when the miracle is late, but only Am-ma has an alibi. So, when Lance stumbles across Gu-gu in the night, he realises Gu-gu is responsible for the lack of water in the pool and, armed only with a knife, takes the fisherman prisoner (300). Lance had been heading to the police camp to raise the alarm about the mutiny, so they continue that way together. Gu-gu tricks Lance into following him on a short-cut that involves swimming through underground passages. Doing so requires Lance to entrust himself to Gu-gu as only he knows the way. Unsurprisingly, Gu-gu then steals Lance's knife and abandons him in a cave (301-04). The novel's central hero is outwitted by the most primitive and superstitious of his supposed inferiors. The cave Gu-gu strands Lance in happens to be the location of the miracle's tap, which Lance turns in blind hope that it is the right one (305). Fate, then, may be said to have smiled on the hero and turned the treachery of Gu-gu against him and the conspirators who employ him. Except that Lance cannot find a way out of the cave, which begins to flood once he turns the tap. With all hope lost, Lance blows out his torch so he cannot see the rising water that will inevitably drown him (307).

Lance is the novel's hero, however, and Steel does not break generic conventions so far as to let him die alone in the dark. Concerned at Lance's absence, Erda finds Am-ma and convinces him to find Lance as soon as possible. Am-ma agrees because he thinks that Erda will allow the evil spirits to return and claim his son if he does not (331). While searching, Am-ma comes across Gu-gu, who is holding Lance's knife. The business rivals fight, Gu-gu dies, Am-ma guesses where Lance must be, and rescues him (332-33). Instead of reinforcing British superiority then, Lance's victorious discovery and turning of the tap to the miracle is due to Gu-gu's cunning and Am-ma's superstitious beliefs. Lance just happens to be there. The river, the people, and their religion continue as ever, ancient and timeless, and always just beyond the comprehension of the British.

In the denouement Dillon discusses the events with the Commissioner as they try to determine what exactly happened and how to report it. The Commissioner remarks that "miracles are like drams, ye can't stop them once you begin" as at least one Roman Catholic missionary is claiming the whole thing started with a miracle and the pilgrims all believe their miracle came on schedule (329). Dillon's response is an echo of his declaration from the first page of the novel, "We shouldn't understand. And that's our position now. You can't, in fact. It's better you shouldn't; in India, at any rate." He and the Commissioner then agree to conceal most of the truth in the Commissioner's report, which is to them, after all, "the usual official routine" (329). Maintaining the air of mystery over the Indian people and their culture becomes a part of colonial governance. Dillon and the Commissioner know the facts of the matter, but refuse to even try to understand the feelings and motives behind them.

### Conclusion

In the introduction to *On the Face of the Waters*, her novel based on the Indian Mutiny of 1857, Steel explains why she chose that title. It was "because when you ask an uneducated native of India why the Great Rebellion came to pass, he will, in nine cases out of ten, reply, 'God knows! He sent a Breath into the World.' From this to a Spirit moving on the face of the Waters is not far" (vi). It may not have seemed far to Steel, but she in effect connects? a declaration that the god the uneducated Indians are referring to – be that Allah or a Hindu deity – moved the people ineffably, to a verse from the first chapter of Genesis. The whole verse reads: "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (*KJV* Gen. 1.2) The waters in question, therefore, are the formless and chaotic waters that the Spirit of God passed over and gave shape and meaning. Intentionally or otherwise, Steel's title suggests that India was a land of chaos, until the coming of the British Raj in the wake of the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

In Steel's fiction, the rivers of India continue to embody something of the primordial chaos of the waters from Genesis that forever eludes the reason of British minds. The river of Lal mocks British bureaucracy, and the river of the Pool of Immortality flows on regardless of their interfering, as do the ancient traditions of the multitudes. Steel does not suggest that the fields should not be measured after floods, or that it is not vital for the Raj to maintain control of the waterways. Through these two stories, however, she does suggest that there is an immutability to India. The British measure and divide, they channel, and they govern, but the waters continue to flow, and the people continue to hold to their traditions.

The multitude of pilgrims in *Hosts* is a singular mass of humanity that Steel describes in ways that echo descriptions of rivers. The crowd sometimes "bursts out" with a cry, "followed by a

faint rush,” just as water might burst over a fall into rapids, and at other times “the great mass stood silent,” as rivers do when they reach the plains (201). One character describes the crowd as an object, “*That* does not reason. It feels. Show it another miracle, and it will worship. Give it a cause, and it will espouse it. Give it a lead, and it will follow, but words – never!” (201, original emphasis). That crowd that flows where it is directed without thought or reason, is elsewhere referred to directly as the “Hosts of the Lord” from the title in a way that, through Steel’s explanation of the title *On the Face of the Waters*, relates them back to the 1857 Rebellion. During the night of the attempted mutiny, the still peaceful waiting of the pilgrims is reflected upon and Steel writes: “The Hosts of the Lord had not yet risen to battle. The Spirit had not moved; the Word had not been made manifest” (236). The mass of “uneducated Indians” Steel mentions in the introduction to *On the Face of the Waters*, and then represents as an unthinking multitude in *Hosts*, are the formless waters of chaos, waiting for enlightenment, but beyond the reach of rationality. For Steel, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet, because India is a river – it can be mapped and measured, dammed and redirected, but never fully tamed.

### Works Cited

- Agoramoorthy, Govindasamy. “Sacred Rivers: Their Spiritual Significance in Hindu Religion.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 54.3 (2015): 1080-90.
- Bhalla, Kartar Singh. *Let’s Know: Festivals of India*. New Delhi: Star Publications, 2007.
- Bhattacharyya, Debjani. *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Ehrlich, J. “The Meanings of a Port City Boundary: Calcutta’s Maratha Ditch, c.1700-1950.” *Past and Present*, 257.1 (2022): 168-208.
- Kipling, Rudyard. *The Day’s Work*. New York: Doubleday, 1898.
- Maclean, Kama. *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Montefiore, Janet. *In Time’s Eye*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013.
- Parry, Ann. “Imperialism in ‘The Bridge-Builders:’ Metaphor or Reality?” *The Kipling Journal*, 60.237 (March 1986): 12-21.
- Parry, Benita. *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination 1880-1930*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin P, 1972.
- Roye, Susmita. Introduction. *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional Memsahib*. Ed. Roye. Alberta: U of Alberta P, 2017.
- Sencourt, Robert. *India in English Literature*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1923.
- Steel, Flora Annie. *The Flower of Forgiveness*, vol. 2. London: Macmillan, 1894.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Garden of Fidelity: Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel 1847-1929*. London: Macmillan, 1930.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Hosts of the Lord*. New York: Macmillan, 1900.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Miss Stuart's Legacy*. London: Macmillan, 1894.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny*. London: William Heinemann, 1897.
- Sullivan, Zohreh T. *Narratives of Empire: The Fictions of Rudyard Kipling*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Teo, Hsu-Ming. "Imperial Affairs: The British Empire and the Romantic Novel, 1890-1939." *New Directions in Popular Fiction: Genre, Reproduction, Distribution*. Ed. Ken Gelder. Melbourne: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. 87-110.
- Tracy, Louis. "What Happened on the Indus." *Pall Mall Magazine*, 2.10 (1894): 581-92.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Wings of the Morning*. Grosset & Dunlap, 1903.
- Trivedi, Harish. "Of Beasts and Gods in India: Lockwood Kipling's *Beast And Man* and Rudyard Kipling's 'The Bridge-Builders.'" *The Kipling Journal* 92.373 (May 2018): 31-45.
- Wright, Rita P. *The Ancient Indus: Urbanism, Economy, and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.