

Panchamahabhuta and Climate Fiction: *Elemental Epistemology in Indian Knowledge Systems and the Cli-fi Novel*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to read climate fiction through the lens of Panchamahabhuta, the five-element cosmology that runs through several major schools of Indian thought, including Ayurveda, Samkhya, Vaisheshika, and Nyaya. Most critical work on climate fiction leans heavily on the Western Anthropocene framework, and while that framework has genuine value, it rests on an assumption that Indian Knowledge Systems do not share: that human beings and the natural world are separate categories. Panchamahabhuta, by contrast, holds that the human body and the environment are made of the same five substances, namely *prithvi* (earth), *jal* (water), *agni* (fire), *vayu* (wind and breath), and *akasha* (space or ether). When any of these elements is disturbed, the disturbance appears at once in the landscape, in the body, and in social life. Reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, along with Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, through this framework shows that these novels do something that Western ecocriticism has not yet found language for. The paper introduces the term "elemental epistemology" to describe this mode of reading, and suggests it as a modest corrective to the dominant Eurocentric approaches to cli-fi criticism.

Keywords: *Panchamahabhuta, elemental epistemology, Indian Knowledge Systems, climate fiction, Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh, ecocriticism, postcolonial literature*

INTRODUCTION

Climate fiction has grown into a significant subgenre over the past two decades, and literary criticism has followed with considerable energy. Yet if one surveys the theoretical frameworks most commonly brought to bear on cli-fi texts, a pattern becomes clear: they are almost exclusively drawn from Western intellectual traditions. The Anthropocene, as a

concept, comes from atmospheric chemistry and was developed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. Its literary-critical applications, as worked out by scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rob Nixon, and Timothy Clark, are sophisticated and important. But they all work within a particular understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, one in which these are, at least initially, separate categories that have come into catastrophic contact.

This is not a universal assumption. It is not, for instance, the assumption that underlies Ayurveda, or the Samkhya philosophical system, or the Vaisheshika school's account of matter. All of these traditions share the doctrine of Panchamahabhuta: the view that everything in existence, including the human body, is composed of five elements. A person's bones and the soil outside are both expressions of *prithvi*. A person's blood and the river are both expressions of *jal*. If the river is poisoned, the body is not simply affected by an outside event. In a meaningful sense, something that the body is made of has been corrupted. The ecological and the physiological are not just connected. They are, in this framework, the same thing at different scales.

This paper takes that doctrine seriously as a critical tool. It proposes the term "elemental epistemology" to describe the practice of reading climate fiction with Panchamahabhuta in mind: attending to which elements are disturbed in a given narrative, how that disturbance registers simultaneously in the environment, in the bodies of characters, and in social and moral life, and what kind of recovery or restoration the text imagines. The argument is not that the authors discussed here consciously drew on Ayurvedic or Vaisheshika sources. The argument is that reading their work through this framework produces interpretations that are both textually grounded and critically illuminating in ways that available Western frameworks are not.

Three texts form the primary basis for this study: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007). Ghosh also appears as a critic in his own right, through *The Great Derangement* (2016), which functions here as both a primary text and a theoretical interlocutor. These works are chosen because they are among the most discussed Indian-origin contributions to cli-fi, and because the elemental readings they invite are, to this author's knowledge, largely unexplored in existing scholarship.

PANCHAMAHABHUTA: WHAT THE FIVE-ELEMENT DOCTRINE ACTUALLY CLAIMS

Before applying Panchamahabhuta to literary texts, it is worth being clear about what the doctrine involves and where it appears in the IKS tradition. The five elements, or *mahabhutas*, are not a myth or a loose metaphor. They are a precise and operational account of the constitution of matter, with well-defined properties assigned to each element. Earth (*prithvi*) is associated with the quality of solidity and structure. Water (*jal*) with fluidity, cohesion, and the capacity to take form. Fire (*agni*) with transformation, heat, and digestion in the broadest sense. Wind (*vayu*) with movement, breath, and transmission. And ether or space (*akasha*) with the medium in which the other four exist and interact, the substrate of sound and of all communication across distance.

These properties are not merely philosophical. In Ayurvedic medicine, the *mahabhutas* underlie the theory of the three *doshas*: *vata* (governed by air and space), *pitta* (governed by fire and water), and *kapha* (governed by earth and water). Health is understood as the balanced functioning of these three *doshas*; disease is their imbalance. Charaka Samhita is explicit that this balance is not purely internal to the body: “The entire universe is composed of these five Mahabhutas, and so is the body of the living beings” (Sharma 78). An environmental disturbance is therefore always potentially a bodily disturbance. If the air quality of a region deteriorates, *vata* disorders become more prevalent in the population living there. If the water supply is corrupted, *kapha* and *pitta* disorders follow. This is not analogy. It is a causal account, operating through the shared elemental constitution of body and environment.

The Vaisheshika school, in Kanada’s sutras, provides the philosophical underpinning for this medical claim. Kanada classifies all substances (*dravyas*) into nine categories, four of which are the physical elements. The point of the classification is precisely to show that the same elemental substance underlies entities that appear very different, including the human body and the external environment (Kanada 2.1.5-12). Samkhya philosophy approaches the same conclusion from a different direction: the *tanmatras*, or subtle essences, which evolve into the gross *mahabhutas*, are common to both internal and external existence. No school in this tradition posits a fundamental boundary between the stuff of persons and the stuff of the world. What does this mean for reading fiction about ecological crisis? It means, at minimum, three things. First, when a text presents environmental destruction, it should be

read as simultaneously presenting bodily and social destruction, not merely as an analogous or consequential event but as the same event at different scales. Second, the specific element being disturbed matters: a text organised around contaminated water is operating with different elemental logic than one organised around wildfire or atmospheric disruption. Third, whatever recovery or resolution a text imagines should be read in terms of elemental restoration, rather than through the Anthropocene's typical remedies of technological management or institutional reform. These are the reading principles that the following sections put to use.

VAYU, BREATH, AND THE UNSTEADY IMAGINATION: AMITAV GHOSH'S SUNDARBANS

Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* opens with a memory. As a young man in Delhi, he was nearly struck by a tornado, an event so improbable in that season and that location that no meteorological model of the time could account for it. He uses this memory to frame a larger argument: that the modern literary novel is structurally unable to represent climate change, because the novel as a form is built around individual human agency operating within a stable, predictable nature. Extreme weather, by its nature, resists this structure. Ghosh's point is sharp and has generated considerable response.

What has not been noticed is that this argument, at its core, is a diagnosis of a *vayu* disorder. In Ayurvedic physiology, *vayu* governs not only breath and atmospheric movement but also cognitive processes: attention, the capacity to hold a train of thought, the ability to remain oriented. The excess of *vata* dosha, which results from disturbance of the *vayu* element, produces precisely the symptoms Ghosh describes in the modern literary imagination: an inability to hold still, a scatter of attention away from the slow and the enormous, a preference for the small and manageable. The literary imagination's failure to reckon with climate change is, in elemental terms, a failure of *prana*: the vital breath that sustains sustained attention. When Ghosh asks why novelists cannot write about the climate, the Panchamahabhuta answer is that the atmosphere in which those novelists live and work has been so disturbed that the *vayu* element no longer supports steady cognition (Wujastyk 49).

This reading sheds new light on *The Hungry Tide* as well. The Sundarbans, where the novel is set, is a landscape in which the *vayu* element is at its most unstable. The tidal patterns of the delta, the seasonal cyclones, the unpredictable weather systems that move through the mangroves: all of these are expressions of *vayu* in chronic excess. When Piya, the marine

biologist visiting the Sundarbans for the first time, tries to take her bearings, she finds the usual categories do not hold. “The land here was not land and the water was not quite water” (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 6). This is often read as lyrical description of an unusual ecology. But it is more precise than that. It is a description of a place where the elemental boundaries that ordinarily allow human orientation are in constant flux, where *prithvi* and *jal* and *vayu* refuse the stable proportions that make it possible to know where one is. The novel’s persistent theme of miscommunication, missed connection, and the failure of characters from different worlds to understand each other, is not only a social or linguistic problem. It is a *vayu* problem: the element that governs transmission and communication is perpetually unsettled.

The cyclone that haunts the novel’s background is not mere plot event. It is the moment when *vayu* excess reaches its catastrophic expression: the element that had been chronic and low-grade becomes acute and overwhelming. Ghosh does not resolve this. The novel ends in suspension, not restoration. The Sundarbans continues. The tide continues. The imbalance is structural, not episodic, and the novel knows it.

PRITHVI AND JAL: THE POISONED EARTH AND WATER OF *ANIMAL’S PEOPLE*

Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is set in Khaufpur, a thin fictional cover for Bhopal, in the long aftermath of the Union Carbide gas disaster. The novel is narrated by a young man called Animal, whose spine was deformed by the disaster as an infant, and who walks on all fours. The title and the narrator’s name have attracted readings focused on the human-animal boundary, drawing on Deleuze and Haraway. These are legitimate readings. But they leave something unaccounted for.

The Panchamahabhuta reading of *Animal’s People* begins with the simple observation that the novel is structured around the vitiation of two elements: *prithvi* and *jal*. The soil of Khaufpur is contaminated. The groundwater is contaminated. These are the two elements, in Ayurvedic medicine, that are associated with bodily structure (*prithvi*, the earth principle, governs bone, tissue, and physical form) and with bodily fluidity (*jal*, the water principle, governs blood, lymph, all the moving fluids of the body). Animal’s twisted spine is a *prithvi* disorder: the element of structure has been vitiated, and his body has lost its proper form. The community’s collective illness, the cancers and organ failures and reproductive damage that run through Khaufpur, are *jal* disorders: the fluid processes through which the body sustains itself have been corrupted at their elemental source.

This is not simply a way of relabelling what the novel describes. It changes what we notice. In the Panchamahabhuta framework, the contamination of Khaufpur's soil and water is not an event that happened to the people of Khaufpur. It is an event that happened to the same substance of which those people are partly made. Animal's refusal of the human-animal distinction takes on a different quality here. He is not asserting that humans and animals are equivalent. He is, in elemental terms, correct: there is no categorical ontological boundary between his body and the earth he crawls on. Both are *prithvi*. The corporation's chemicals did not cross a border between the natural world and the human world. There is no such border in this cosmology. The chemicals disrupted an element, and the disruption manifested wherever that element was present, which included both the soil of Khaufpur and the bodies of its residents.

Sinha's prose supports this reading in ways that might otherwise seem incidental. Animal moves with the earth, not above it. He describes textures of ground with a precision that other characters do not share. His relationship to *prithvi* is more intimate and more direct than those who walk upright. His mode of existence enacts the elemental identity that Panchamahabhuta posits theoretically. He knows, in a physical sense that the novel consistently privileges, that he and the ground are made of the same thing, and that what was done to the ground was done to him.

AGNI AND AKASHA: BURNING AND CONNECTIVITY IN *GUN ISLAND*

Of the three texts discussed here, *Gun Island* is the most explicitly concerned with global climate crisis rather than a local ecological disaster. The novel moves from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles to Venice, threading a plot through wildfires, Mediterranean migration, and a Bengali myth about a merchant fleeing a curse. What connects these very different settings, in elemental terms, is *agni*. The element of fire, in Ayurvedic thought, governs not only heat and combustion but transformation of all kinds, including digestion, metabolism, and the processing of information and emotion. Its excess, which produces *pitta* imbalance, is characterised by inflammation: the burning of what should be preserved, the inability to regulate heat, the acceleration of processes beyond the point of sustainability.

The world of *Gun Island* is a *pitta* world. Wildfires consume California. Fevers break out. Inflammatory political rhetoric drives migration policy. The characters move through a world that is too hot, too fast, and too volatile, consuming itself in ways that parallel the Ayurvedic description of excess *agni* at the systemic level: "The body afflicted by excess fire cannot

hold its own substance; it burns from within” (Sharma 201). Ghosh’s novel is not using fire as a symbol for social conflict. In elemental terms, the wildfires of California and the inflammatory politics of Europe are the same event: the same element in excess at different scales and in different materials.

Against this, Ghosh places *akasha*. The fifth element is unlike the other four. It is not a substance but a medium: the space within which all substances exist, and the substrate of *shabda*, or sound, which in the Vaisheshika account is the quality uniquely associated with *akasha*. Sound, in this system, is transmission: the capacity to carry meaning across distance through the medium of space (Kanada 2.1.27). *Akasha* is, in effect, the element of connection.

Gun Island is organised around improbable connections. Deen, the antique dealer narrator, finds that his Bengali family’s myth is linked to the fates of Syrian and Bangladeshi refugees in the Mediterranean. A dolphin appears at key moments in both Bengal and Italy. Fire and water and the movements of displaced people and animals all thread together across vast distances. This is not magical realism in the Western sense. It is *akasha* epistemology: the recognition that the medium of space permits and sustains connection across apparent distances. The novel’s ethical argument is not that we must manage climate change more effectively, or that institutions must be reformed. It is that the world is already connected at an elemental level, and that the recovery of the capacity to perceive that connection is what is needed. The restoration of *akasha*, of the medium through which transmission and solidarity become possible, is the novel’s answer to the burning world.

CONCLUSION

The readings offered in this paper are necessarily selective, and they are offered as a beginning rather than a conclusion. The aim has been to show that Panchamahabhuta can do genuine critical work on climate fiction: that it generates readings that are textually supported, that differ meaningfully from what Western ecocritical frameworks produce, and that are not available through those frameworks. *Animal’s People’s* elemental identity of body and contaminated soil, the *vayu* crisis that runs through Ghosh’s *Sundarbans*, and the *akasha* ethics of *Gun Island*: none of these readings can be generated by Nixon’s slow violence, or Alaimo’s bodily natures, or Heise’s planetary risk frameworks. The texts are doing something those frameworks were not designed to see. A word about what this paper is not claiming. It is not claiming that Ghosh or Sinha consciously drew on Ayurvedic or Vaisheshika sources.

It is not claiming that Indian writing is inherently “elemental” in a way that Western writing is not. And it is not suggesting that the Anthropocene framework should be abandoned. The argument is narrower: that a significant body of Indian-origin climate fiction is being read through frameworks that were developed elsewhere and for different purposes, and that IKS traditions offer critical tools that are both historically grounded and interpretively productive for this literature.

The concept of elemental epistemology is proposed here as a working term for this critical practice. It is deliberately modest in scope. Further work might develop it in relation to Tamil Sangam poetry, where the five landscape types (*tinai*) correlate with emotional states in ways that rhyme interestingly with Panchamahabhuta’s elemental-emotional correspondences. Or in relation to Dalit ecological writing, where the contamination of Dalit bodies by ritual pollution has a structural parallel with *prithvi* and *jai* vitiation. Or in vernacular Hindi and Bangla cli-fi, which has grown considerably in the last decade but remains largely unread in Anglophone criticism. Any of these would extend the framework in ways this paper has not attempted.

What seems clear, at least from the readings attempted here, is that the critical vocabulary for Indian-origin climate fiction needs to be enlarged. Not simply by adding more texts to an existing framework, but by taking seriously the possibility that some of those texts are operating from within a different epistemological tradition altogether: one that has precise and well-developed things to say about the relationship between ecological disorder and bodily life, and that has been saying them, in various forms, for over two thousand years.

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