RIVER CHANTS

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ABSTRACT

River Chants is an artistic, transdisciplinary research project that aims to understand how women's chants are intertwined with rivers, climate change, and non-migration. It originates from the immersive art installation *Sot Glas,* developed for the 18th Architecture Biennale of Venice by the artist Giuditta Vendrame and the film director Ana Shametaj. Following the rivers' songs and flows, *River Chants* marks a new chapter in their research, where I contribute as a social scientist. In *River Chants*, we are drawn toward a figurative river mouth tracing a backward migration route to the Bengal Delta and to the homes of those who do not migrate, reflecting on the memories of cyclones and the emotions arising from these deep listening sessions.

RIVER CHANTS

> To develop an artwork, you need to begin with an emotion. It is only once you have found the emotion you want to convey that the work will start to unfold.

These words by Ana have stayed with me since that Saturday afternoon in July. We were visiting the Rivoli Castel, a contemporary art center just outside Turin, Italy. We were looking at the work by Roni Horn, *Still Water (The River Thames, for Example).* Horn portrayed the deep and obscure waters of the Thames River, transforming them into a longing cartography mapped through little white numbered footnotes, where poetic stories told by the Thames River itself let the emotional turmoil of its waters surface. Dark stories on suicides, drowning, and corpses emerged from these imprescriptible portraits of the river waters: a stream of consciousness on the shadows of the fears we all feel, the feeling of being lost, alone, without purpose, and so easily to be forgotten in this continuous flux of obscure flowing waters.

> The river moves quickly and things get lost easily. It's possible to disappear for good—never even come back up. It's been known to happen. Getting lost—the night is only for now says one of the footnotes.

The river talks, it touches the deepest fears we might feel by looking at its restless flowing, where water, over water, over water moves, taking away with it what we prefer to forget.

> You need to begin with an emotion.

These words keep staying with me. What is the emotion of the story I want to tell contributing to this project?

River Chants is an artistic, transdisciplinary research project that aims to understand how women's chants are intertwined with rivers, climate change, and non-migration. *River Chants* originates from the immersive art installation *Sot Glas,* developed for the 18th Architecture Biennale of Venice by the artist Giuditta Vendrame and the film director Ana Shametaj. *Sot Glas* examined the Italian-Slovenian border through the lens of folk songs. Among cross-border songs mixing Italian and Slovenian languages and words, Giuditta and Ana, in their research, encountered chants also from the Pashtun community and from immigrants from the Bengal Delta who now live and work in the naval industry area of Monfalcone, near Trieste, the largest Italian city after the Slovenian border. Trieste is also sadly known for being the end of the Balkan migration route, the walking migratory path that migrants who decide to reach Europe on foot follow. It is traveled by climate migrants, among others.

Following the rivers' songs and flows, *River Chants* marks a new chapter in the research by Giuditta and Ana, which I was invited to join as a social scientist. With *River Chants*, Giuditta, Ana, and I are brought toward a figurative river mouth tracing a backwards migration route to the Bengal Delta, to the homes of those who do not migrate. Although media and some scientific narratives seem to posit it otherwise, as Carol Farbotko (2022) suggests, the specter of mass climate migration is based on flawed models and is significantly less than it might appear. Indeed, most people, often the most vulnerable, do not migrate. The writer Amitav Gosh, in his essay *Uncanny and Improbable Events* provides an explanation for this phenomenon with these words:

> …most of us as individuals, to leave the places that are linked to our memories and attachments, to abandon the homes that have given our lives roots, stability, and meaning, is nothing short of unthinkable (2021, p. 62).

Indeed, land could fall under the ocean waves, be cracked by droughts, or be submerged by floods or wiped away by cyclones, but most people will not leave it, as it is home to them. And one of the areas of the world facing some of the highest impacts of climate change today is the Bengal Delta, where the slow rise of ocean waters is salinizing the land, rendering it increasingly sterile. As Reazul Ahsan and colleagues (2014) have shown, within climate-

induced migration in Bangladesh's Bengal Delta, only a small percentage of people are willing to leave their dear ones, their homes, and their land to escape these unfavorable conditions and build a new life in a faraway country. Internal migration, or migration within the same country, is much more common, although, also within internal migration, some categories of people are left behind. This is how we came into contact with the social scientist Biswajit Mallick, who is now one of the scientific consultants of the project. He, together with his research group FeStay (Why Females Stay Despite Environmental Risk), studies the reasons that deter females, especially, from migrating (Mallick & Van Den Berg, 2025).

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These words keep staying with me. What is the emotion of the story I want to tell contributing to this project?

Who are these people, these women left behind? How are they dealing with the trouble they find themselves in? How do they feel? How do they feel in seeing their land becoming sterile, a distant, a cold mother? What songs do they sing about this?

Maybe the emotion I want to bring to this project is a feeling I experience every time something does not go quite right. The images of fires, of floods… Los Angeles, Valencia, Taiwan… everywhere. This sense of displacement, mixed with this feeling of being trapped. Of being in the wrong place. Of not knowing what to do, how to adapt to this changing climate. Of not knowing how to stay with the trouble. Of not being able to stay where I'm supposed to, to do this research project. If the water starts to rise, where do I go? If the cyclone arrives, where do I go?

Throughout *River Chants*, with Giuditta, we encountered some ethnomusicologists to explore the *repertoire* and traditions of the Bengal area's chants. We found the fascinating research of Priyanka Basu and Radha Kapuria, who are also scientific consultants of the project and who recently curated the volume *'Performing' Nature: Ecology and the Arts in South Asia* (2025), where they collected a series of studies tracing nature and climate change in the musical and performative tradition of the area. Radha, in her research, *Singing the Rivers in Punjab*, shows how rivers are sung as living metaphors of the land. Priyanka instead presented us with the performative tradition of scroll paintings, how singers are incorporating stories about climate change into their practices, and how these are lived and narrated in the folk and oral traditions nowadays. Among these narratives, one that appears to be very common in the Bengal Delta is the *Manasamangal*. The *Manasamangal* is an epic story whose protagonist is a goddess, Manasa Devi, the snake goddess. As with every epic tale, thousands of variants of it exist.

In summary, the epic is about a merchant who refuses to worship Manasa Devi as his goddess; therefore, the goddess follows him all over the world, putting him in front of losses, difficulties, and risky trials, eventually making him one of her worshippers. The merchant risks losing

everything he has before he submits to Manasa. Within this larger story frame, another story unfolds: the youngest and only surviving son of the merchant falls in love with Bheula, and his father, fearing Manasa, decides to protect them by arranging their wedding in a castle where no holes could let snakes in. Nevertheless, one version of the story says that during the wedding night, a snake manages to sneak into their castle, biting the merchant's son with a fatal bite. Bheula, knowing this death is caused only by her husband's father's pride, decides then to travel to the world of the dead to beg Manasa Devi to save her beloved husband. She therefore sails with her husband's dead body through the river, crying mercy to the goddess passing from village to village, in one version of the story, until the body of her husband gets rotten in the river waters. She eventually reaches Manasa, who sees her pure love and intentions, and eventually brings her husband back to life. Many other stories and songs surround this legend. And this epic, far from being a lifeless story, keeps being re-narrated by both rock bands, such as the Bangladeshi band Shunno, or, again, also by famous novelists like Gosh, who, in his novel *The Gun Island*, re-reads this myth from an eco-critical perspective. Following Astrida Neimanis words, I wonder: what do these stories do?

> What can they change, and how can they illuminate and produce more ethical accounts of living well together? (Neimanis, 2017, p. 64).

River Chants. The stories I have the privilege to attend are not only human stories. There are the rivers. Many rivers. The border region of the Bengal Delta, across India and Bangladesh, is crossed by hundreds of rivers.

John Charles Ryan, in a recent interdisciplinary study on rivers, has introduced the new concepts of rivercentrism and hydropoetics. In his words, he is detaching from anthropocentrism to *rivercentrism* as *"a river-focused worldview as well as a physical identification with rivers as bodies in themselves*" where "*river is a phenomenon in process, a being that is perpetually in-becoming, and a non-human radically distributed across space and time*" (Ryan, 2022, p. 487). Within this framework, he continues saying that

> the concept of poiesis is helpful to understanding rivers and human–river interactions. Poiesis calls our attention to the generative potential pulsing in all that exists. The term signifies the idea of "bringing forth"—the lively potential of things, including rivers, to change, adapt, intermingle, decouple, intensify, and diminish (Ryan, 2022, p. 487),

and in rivers, hydropoetics flows naturally.

What do rivers and songs share? They both flow, fascinating and mesmerizing the sights of those listening to them, taking them somewhere else, while remaining in the same place. Changing constantly, the physical metaphor of transformation. What stories do the waters flowing in these rivers tell?

What story are they telling me?

Like a river crossed by countless waters, so are the emotions that flow through me. When you listen to them, they flow through your soul, taking you where they flow. A continuous transformation.

Among the people we met in our research journey, a meaningful encounter was with the singer and researcher Moushumi Bhowmik. Moushumi has been helping us by guiding us through her archival project, *The Travelling Archive*, "*a shared space for listening to field recordings of songs, stories and other sounds from Bengal, including the diaspora*" (www.thetravellingarchive.org). Moreover, she introduced us to her approach of deep listening. We organized a symposium at the end of June this year, and we invited Moushumi as a keynote speaker. She began her moving talk by inviting us to participate in a collective deep listening exercise, during which she shared with us a recording of Cyclone Amphan that struck Kolkata in May 2020, an experience she had firsthand. That sound brought me back to the emotional world. It was the sound of fear. That profound ancestral fear of being small compared to the large unknown. That recoding brought me back to my fieldwork during my PhD research when I first encountered and experienced a cyclone. With my indigenous interpreter and friend, Manhakani Nongrum, we were staying in a traditional Khasi homestay in the village of Khonthong, Meghalaya, India, on the border with Bangladesh. The village, known as the Whistling Village, is situated at the summit of a hill within a canyon. Listening to Amphan, I got brought back to the most vivid memory I had about the cyclone, the wind. The wind howled. It howled, entering the canyon surrounding the village, it howled as a snake-shaped monster would come to bite and shake our house off. Manhakani and I were frozen with fear, trying to sleep next to one another, hearing and feeling the fear filling the air: the wild dogs crying below the homestay and the mice squeaking just beside the bamboo walls dividing us from the outside. Also animals felt the fear. Electricity had already gone off the day before, and we only had a feeble torch with us. The howling wind, after screaming down the canyon, shook the roof covered with palm leaves, again and again. My biggest fear was that the wind would blow the roof away, leaving us there, in the dark, under the pouring rain, with the scared mice and dogs near us.

That was my encounter with Cyclone Hamoon, which later, fortunately, weakened as a severe tropical storm, causing "only" five casualties in Bangladesh. Bangladesh lies just below the Meghalaya highlands, where we were staying. In the village the next day, people had to clean the leaves and repair some metal sheet roofs that the wind had blown away—ours had resisted.

Is this the voice of the weather? Of this changing climate?

These memories, these emotions, surfaced just listening to the Cyclone Amphan recording and made me think about the centrality of water in all these confused emotions I'm bringing

you forward. Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, in her book *The Hydrocene: Eco-Aesthetics in the Age of Water,* highlights this centrality with these words:

> With the acceleration of the climate crisis, water has now become a central material and metaphor for the times. When viewed through the prism of water, the climate crisis is a story of extreme loss and transformation (2024, p. 1).

Extreme loss and transformation. Observing the darkness. Returning to the still waters of the Thames, listening to its voice, its story, and finding ourselves lost, swept away by the powerful force of myth, of storytelling, of stories of goddesses, snakes, and cyclones, feeling emotions that remained unknown until then. Becoming the river.

> Sometimes you just need to embrace the void and be open, Giuditta once told me.

Here I am, writing-with and getting lost-with the Kemijoki River waters in Rovaniemi, thinking of *River Chants,* wandering in the mist, in the *sumu.*

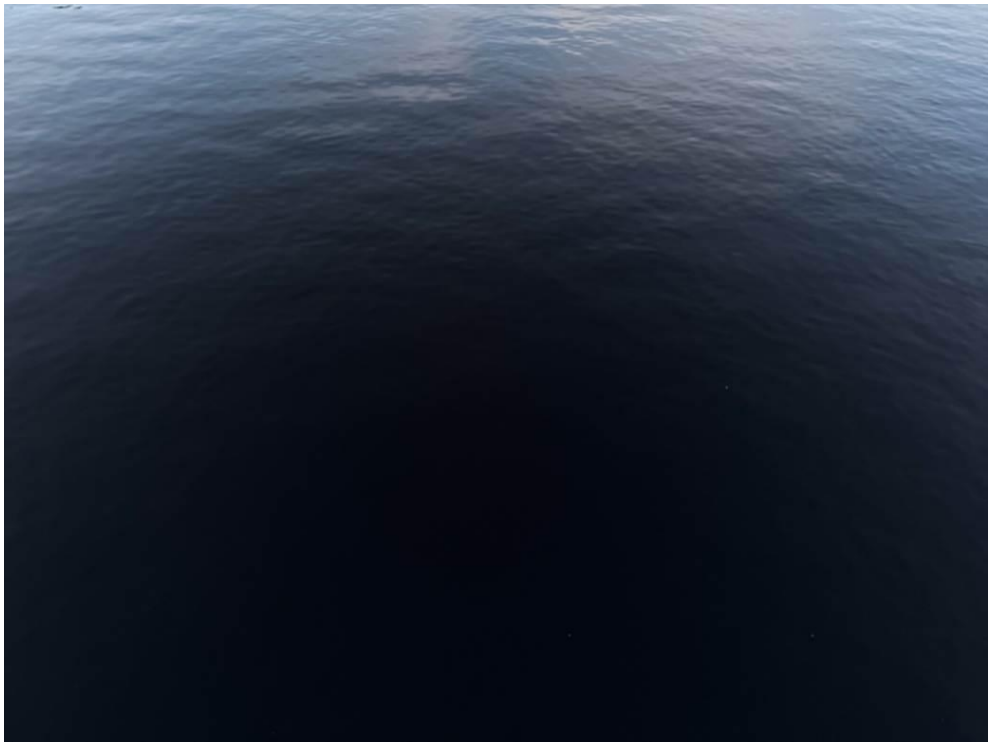

Figure 1

Portrait of the Kemijoki River in Rovaniemi, September 24th, 2025

Final note. The geopolitical tensions that emerged after the July Revolution in Bangladesh in 2024 have limited our travel possibilities to this point. As we have had to adapt our initial research plan multiple times, Giuditta conducted our first fieldwork at the end of October 2025, traveling to Bangladesh. We hope to travel together to the Indian side of the Bengal Delta at the start of 2026.

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