



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Jalam Adhyātman Cha: The Symbolic Role Of Water In Raja Ravi Varma's Selected Paintings

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### Abstract:

Raja Ravi Varma, a pioneering Indian painter of the 19th century, skillfully incorporated the element of water into his exceptional artworks, establishing a deep link between artistic representation and psychology. Within Varma's body of work, water is more than just a visual element; it represents a powerful and dynamic force that signifies purification, rejuvenation, and the cyclical essence of existence. The artist's precise depictions of bodies of water, be it tranquil lakes, meandering rivers, or tumultuous waves, demonstrate his astute scrutiny of the natural world.

Varma's utilisation of water surpasses its literal depiction, surpassing its tangible characteristics to evoke a feeling of transcendence and divine interconnectedness. The artist's paintings frequently portray mythological stories in which divine beings and human beings come together at the boundary of water, highlighting the profound spiritual importance of these watery domains.

The research article will analyse Madhav and Radha, Sri Rama Vanquishing the Sea, Menaka the Nymph Tempting the Yogi and Dhruv Narayan in light of blue humanities. Varma's expertise lies in his capacity to imbue spirituality into the dynamic nature of water, thereby converting it into a symbol representing the perpetual process of birth, death, and rejuvenation in Hindu philosophy.

**Keywords:** Blue humanities, Water Symbolism, Hindu Spirituality, Mythological Depictions, Interconnected Realms

*पृथ्वी संतरणात् संतु नः पुन्या पुन्येन वातः ।  
पुन्येन अध्युष्ट पुन्या पृथ्वी पुन्येन संतु नः ॥*

The blue humanities emphasise the importance of water in sustaining life and its connection to the natural world. This verse highlights water's spiritual and ecological significance, aligning with the blue humanities' interdisciplinary approach. It emphasises the interconnectedness of natural elements and encourages

actions to protect the environment. Preserving earth, water, and air is crucial for our well-being and the well-being of future generations.

Blue Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that examines the complex relationships between human culture and water bodies (inland water, lakes, rivers, seas and oceans). It emerges from the broader environmental humanities and reflects a growing recognition of the ocean's significance in shaping human history, culture, and imagination. The American professor Steve Mentz coined the term in 2009 (Mentz). This field delves into how bodies of water influence literature, art, history, and societal development. Scholars in blue humanities explore marine literature, oceanic history, and the cultural significance of the sea, aiming to understand how the ocean has impacted human life and thought. They study how seascapes and marine environments are represented in artistic works and how these representations affect our understanding of the natural world and our place within it.

The term "blue humanities" was coined to draw attention to the often overlooked watery spaces that cover most of the planet (Blum 670). Unlike traditional humanities, which primarily focus on land-based human experiences, blue humanities emphasise the fluid, dynamic nature of the ocean and its central role in global processes and narratives. This approach encourages a rethinking of human history from a maritime perspective, considering the sea as a backdrop and an active participant in human affairs.

Central to blue humanities is the idea that the ocean is a source of inspiration, cultural exchange, and a critical element of the planet's ecological system. It highlights the interconnectedness of human and oceanic life, promoting a holistic view that integrates ecological, economic, and cultural dimensions.

In recent years, blue humanities has become a crucial area of study in response to contemporary environmental challenges. As climate change impacts marine environments, scholars emphasise the importance of understanding historical and cultural connections to the sea to foster more sustainable interactions with our oceans.

The Blue Humanities framework encourages us to explore the narratives, histories, and artistic expressions encompassing the marine experience, investigating the profound connections between water and its symbolic importance in mythological stories. This article explores the cultural and spiritual dimensions of water bodies depicted in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, which hold significant importance in our shared maritime heritage.

Raja Ravi Varma, an esteemed figure in Indian art during the 19th century, was a catalyst for change in the visual milieu and a bridge between conventional and contemporary artistic expressions through his brushwork. Varma's unique creative approach amalgamated the vibrancy of Indian aesthetics with the precision of European academic realism, resulting in a masterpiece that made an enduring impact on the annals of Indian art (Agarwal).

Inspired by the scholarly customs of the Royal Court of Travancore, Varma obtained formal instruction in the field of art. Building upon this foundation, he adeptly integrated Western methodologies throughout his subsequent academic pursuits in Madras and encounters with European masters. His artistic development culminated in an original synthesis that displayed vibrant hues, meticulous attention to detail, and a profound admiration for the human form.

Mythological motifs reverberate throughout Varma's work, demonstrating his captivation with Indian epics and Puranas (Parimoo). The artist's adept interpretations of mythological narratives, which frequently incorporate deities, goddesses, and legendary figures, surpass the realm of mere visual depiction. During a time of cultural transition, Varma's depictions of mythological subjects served as vehicles for cultural preservation and the dissemination of ancient tales to a broader audience.

Raja Ravi Varma, an artist who pioneered the convergence of tradition and modernity, remains renowned for his technical prowess, profound cultural impact, and lasting influence on Indian artistic manifestation. His enduring legacy is a testament to the timeless narratives he skillfully transcribed onto canvas, immortalising the artist while transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. (Sivakumar 12)

Let us analyse his paintings given Blue Humanities:



**Madhav and Radha (1890):** Raja Ravi Varma's painting beautifully captures the essence of the divine love between Lord Krishna (Madhav) and Radha. The painting typically shows Krishna and Radha in a natural setting, surrounded by lush greenery, indicative of Vrindavan. The background includes trees, foliage, and elements like a river or a temple, which create a serene and idyllic environment.

The painting is interpreted as the soul's yearning for union with the divine. This theme is central to Bhakti traditions in Hinduism, emphasising a personal and emotional connection with the deity. Varma's depiction of Krishna and Radha reflects the cultural and religious sentiments of the time, serving as a visual representation of the stories and emotions that are an integral part of Indian mythology and literature.

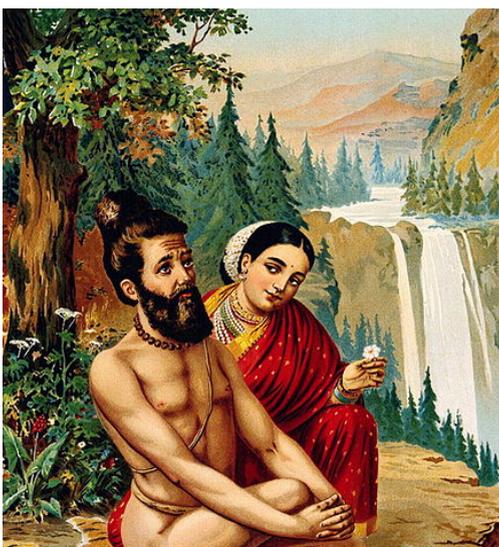
The painting also serves as a context in blue humanities, exploring water's cultural, ecological, and philosophical significance in human life. The lush natural setting highlights the connection between the divine and nature, suggesting an environmental harmony central to many interpretations of blue humanities. The water is calm, quiet and serene. It could be seen as a symbol of water's spiritual and life-giving properties, emphasising its role in sustaining life and spirituality.

Thus, "Madhav and Radha" is a beautiful artwork and a rich tapestry of cultural, spiritual, and ecological themes, making it a significant piece for art enthusiasts and scholars. The scene portrays the romantic relationship between Lord Krishna and Radha, with Radha being regarded as Krishna's equal.



**Sri Rama Vanquishing the Sea (1880):** The painting portrays Varuna, the deity of the ocean, calming Sri Rama. Ram and his army of vanaras encounter turbulent waters while en route to Lanka. Although he invokes Varuna to appease the waters, there is no response. Filled with anger, Ram aims an arrow towards the vast expanse of the ocean. However, Varuna appears before he can release it and humbly requests forgiveness.

The painting is a powerful exploration of the intricate ties between human narratives and the ocean. Drawing from the Ramayana, the painting highlights the cultural and spiritual significance of the sea in Indian mythology, aligning with the Blue Humanities' interest in how water bodies shape cultural narratives and collective memories. The colour and the strokes used in the painting complement angered Shriram. The interconnectedness of land and sea is evident, with Rama's actions affecting the sea, highlighting the ecological perspective that human activities have direct consequences on marine environments. The turbulent waves and Rama's commanding posture convey a sense of power and control, reflecting historical views of the sea as a formidable force that requires mastery.



**Menaka the Nymph Tempting the Yogi (1900):** Indra, the sovereign deity, sent Menaka, a divine nymph, to entice Vishwamitra, a highly respected sage. Menaka's exquisite beauty and unwavering dedication resulted in their profound affection, culminating in the birth of their offspring, Shakuntala. Vishwamitra, a sage, displayed perplexity and deliberately averted his eyes, exemplifying the narrative of an exquisite celestial woman and a sage who dared to question the authority of the deities.

The painting, which depicts a Hindu mythological figure, is a prime example of this connection. It depicts a moment of transformation and distraction, where Menaka's beauty disrupts

the yogi Vishwamitra's spiritual focus, a metaphor for the fluid nature of human desires and the dynamic qualities of water. This transformation is beautifully captured by the river, which has been flowing calmly but, with a sudden fall, shows the imbalance in the thought, and a transformation begins.

The painting also symbolises the symbolic presence of water, symbolising both life-giving properties and seductive danger. Menaka represents the intersection of celestial and earthly elements as a divine nymph, akin to the sea representing the boundary between terrestrial and otherworldly in blue humanities. This interplay highlights the tension between the mundane and sacred, akin to the ocean's site of human activity and mysterious depths.

The painting also serves as a cautionary tale about losing focus on spiritual and environmental stewardship due to immediate desires and temptations. By examining "Menaka the Nymph Tempting the Yogi" through the lens of blue humanities, we can gain deeper insights into the fluid nature of human experience, the symbolic presence of water, and the environmental consciousness embedded in cultural narratives.



**Dhruv Narayan (1890):** Dhruva, a young boy born to King Uttanapada and Suniti, is intensely determined to seek Lord Vishnu's blessings through penance. Despite being criticised by his second wife, Suruchi, Dhruva goes to the forest at age five to seek the lord's blessings. His determination is unwavering, and he recites the sacred mantra "Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya" repeatedly. The lord, pleased with Dhruva's austerity, grants him a boon, a simple one that he will forever remember.

The painting reflects the interconnectedness of human life, nature, and spirituality. The serene background and Dhruv's meditative state in the painting symbolise the transformative power of water, reflecting the interconnectedness of human life, nature, and spirituality. The painting also reflects the cultural narratives that Blue Humanities aims to explore, with Dhruv's story being steeped in mythology, where the natural world plays a crucial role. His eventual transformation into the pole star (Dhruv Tara) symbolises the ultimate merging of human life with the celestial, echoing the blue humanities' focus on understanding and representing human cultures' relationship with the cosmos and natural world.

The serene blue tones in the background emphasise tranquillity and depth, symbolising water's vast and mysterious nature. The calm blue hues in the painting evoke water's peaceful yet profound influence, reinforcing the painting's spiritual ambience. In conclusion, "Dhruv Narayan" by Raja Ravi Varma highlights the interplay between human spirituality, nature, and the transformative power of water, reflecting the broader themes of interconnectedness and cultural significance central to this interdisciplinary field.

The analysis of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings within the framework of Blue Humanities sheds light on the profound cultural and spiritual dimensions of water bodies depicted in his artwork. Varma's vibrant portrayal of mythological narratives, particularly in "Madhav and Radha," offers valuable insights into the enduring significance of the ocean in shaping human history, culture, and imagination. His unique artistic fusion of Indian aesthetics with European academic realism captures his time's cultural and religious sentiments. It enriches our understanding of the ocean's symbolic importance in mythological stories. Varma's masterpieces serve as powerful instruments for the cultural preservation and dissemination of ancient tales, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries.

By delving into Varma's paintings, we deepen our appreciation of the interconnectedness of human and water body life, reinforcing the field's emphasis on the ocean's central role in global narratives. We are encouraged to delve into the profound spirituality inherent in water. The artist's profound understanding of water's cultural and religious importance in Indian traditions enhances his paintings, offering a visual experience beyond the canvas and encouraging reflection on the interdependence between the earthly and the divine. This exploration emphasises the timeless relevance of Varma's artwork and its significant contribution to our shared maritime heritage.

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