



# Dirty, Sacred Rivers: Confronting South Asia's Water Crisis

*Cheryl Colopy*

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*Dirty, Sacred Rivers* explores South Asia's increasingly urgent water crisis, taking readers on a journey through North India, Nepal and Bangladesh, from the Himalaya to the Bay of Bengal. The book shows how rivers, traditionally revered by the people of the Indian subcontinent, have in recent decades deteriorated dramatically due to economic progress and gross mismanagement. Dams and ill-advised embankments strangle the Ganges and its sacred tributaries. Rivers have become sewage channels for a burgeoning population.

To tell the story of this enormous river basin, environmental journalist Cheryl Colopy treks to high mountain glaciers with hydrologists; bumps around the rough embankments of India's poorest state in a jeep with social workers; and takes a boat excursion through the Sundarbans, the mangrove forests at the end of the Ganges watershed.

She lingers in key places and hot spots in the debate over water: the megacity Delhi, a paradigm of water mismanagement; Bihar, India's poorest, most crime-ridden state, thanks largely to the blunders of engineers who tried to tame powerful Himalayan rivers with embankments but instead created annual floods; and Kathmandu, the home of one of the most elegant and ancient traditional water systems on the subcontinent, now the site of a water-development boondoggle.

Colopy's vivid first-person narrative brings exotic places and complex issues to life, introducing the reader to a memorable cast of characters, ranging from the most humble members of South Asian society to engineers and former ministers. Here we find real-life heroes, bucking current trends, trying to find rational ways to manage rivers and water. They are reviving ingenious methods of water management that thrived for centuries in South Asia and may point the way to water sustainability and healthy rivers.

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