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# This beautiful book turns India's relationship with its rivers into a work of art and activism

'Water Memories' by the Moonray Collective is a bridge between art, ecology, and community.



May 21, 2025 | by Isha Maniar



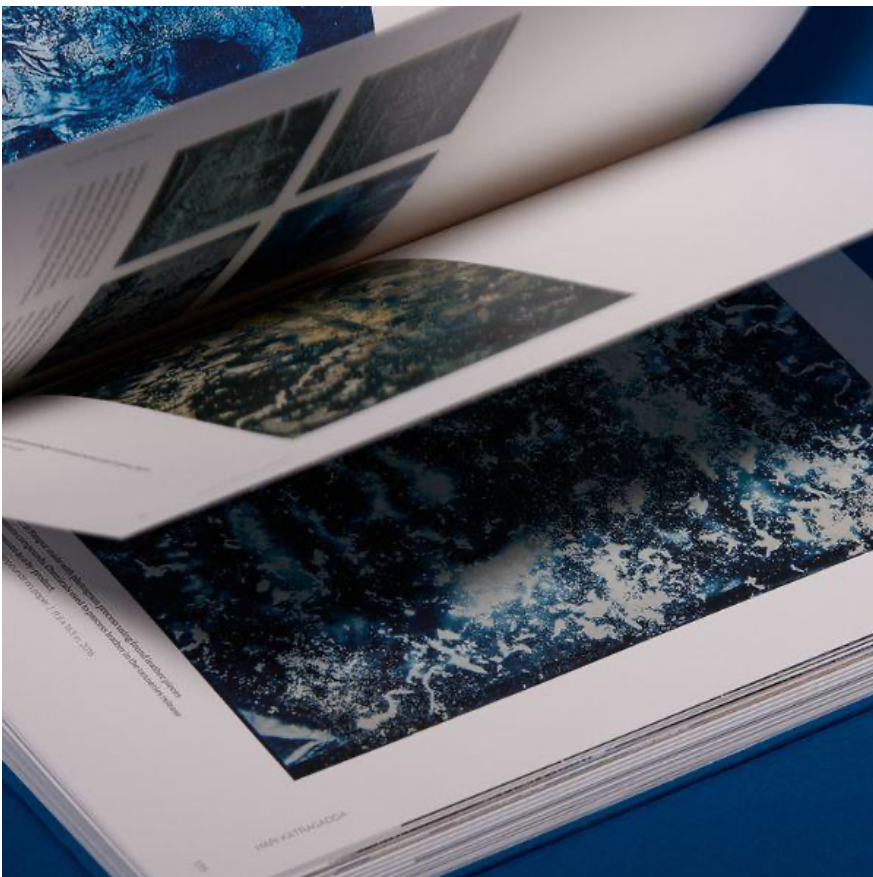
There are books that sit quietly on coffee tables, beautiful and self-contained, and then there are books that flow outward, art themselves. *Water Memories* by the Moonray Collective, led by Karishma Swali, belongs firmly to the latter category. An artistic meditation on India's water bodies—as mythic lifelines, ecological anchors, and living, breathing archives—the book brings together a constellation of the works of celebrated artists, including Manu Parekh, Reena Saini Kallat, Deshna Mehta, Hari Katragadda, and Rithika Merchant in an urgent, collaborative act of remembering. Through their eyes, water becomes a keeper of our history, a bearer of our spirit, a call to our conscience. The project doesn't stop at beauty alone; its proceeds support the Paani Foundation's community-led efforts in restoring traditional water systems across Maharashtra. In our conversation with Swali, we explore the making of a book that is as much about reflection as it is about responsibility.

**HARPER'S BAZAAR:** Let's start from the beginning —*Water Memories* is deeply rooted in environmental and cultural consciousness, exploring India's water bodies as spiritual and ecological lifelines. Can you share a personal experience or memory that inspired this work about our connection to water?

**KARISHMA SWALI:** I've always believed that beyond their ecological role in irrigation, agriculture,

or power, rivers hold a quieter significance. They sustain us in ways that are often harder to name—emotional, spiritual, even symbolic. Growing up, I remember moments of stillness near water—the quiet rhythm of it, the way it made you feel both grounded and open. That feeling has stayed with me. *Water Memories* began with that quiet recognition. A longing to honour water as a living archive of the environment, spirit, culture, and connection.

As we began working on the project, that instinct was met with a shared awareness of how urgent this relationship has become. India is home to 18 per cent of the world's population but only four per cent of its freshwater resources. With each passing year, climate change, urban sprawl, and the fading of traditional knowledge continue to place pressure on something that has always been central to life here. So many of our rivers, once sacred, celebrated, and deeply woven into community life, are now invisible, endangered, or forgotten. *Water Memories* became our way of responding. A cultural offering that allows for both reflection and action. It's a visual journey that flows through ecology, myth, and imagination. It invites us to remember what sustains us—not just physically, but spiritually and creatively.



**HB:** The book features works by artists like Manu Parekh, Reena Saini Kallat, and Rithika Merchant. How did you curate this art to weave a cohesive narrative around water and its significance in Indian culture?

**KS:** The making of *Water Memories* was a collective act shaped by many hands and conversations. We worked closely with Studio Anugraha, a wonderful design studio based in Mumbai, to craft a visual and conceptual rhythm for the book. When we began curating *Water Memories*, the intention was to bring together artists whose practices could hold the complexity of water: its stillness and its movement, its presence in ritual, memory, and resistance. We wanted the river to be felt as a witness and collaborator. Each artist included offered a different but deeply resonant perspective.

Manu Parekh's work, for instance, has long drawn from the spiritual energy of Banaras. His expressionist interpretations of the Ganga and the city's ghats hold a sacred tension between vitality and mortality, celebration and stillness. Reena Saini Kallat, on the other hand, uses water as a metaphor to challenge fixed borders and inherited divisions. Her work speaks to the fluidity of identity and belonging, reimagining cartographic lines as something more permeable, more human. With Rithika Merchant, we see another layer—her visual language draws from myth, migration, and memory. Her paintings suggest that water is a carrier of stories and personal histories.

Alongside these, the book features contributions from nine other artists, as well as selected works from the private collection of Nalini and Haridas Swali. What emerged was a poetic and layered reflection rooted in a shared purpose.

**HB:** Many perceive coffee-table books as merely decorative. What intentional choices did you make in *Water Memories* to ensure it serves as a catalyst for dialogue and action on sustainability?

**KS:** It was important to us that *Water Memories* be more than something beautiful to look at, and hopefully, spark something deeper. Every choice we made in the book—from the artists we invited to the materials we used—was guided by the desire to create not just a visual experience, but a space for reflection and dialogue. At its core, the project is rooted in Moonray's ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship. It was conceived as a fundraising initiative to support the restoration of traditional water systems and regenerative, community-led practices. Proceeds from the book, along with the accompanying artworks, will go directly toward supporting the Paani Foundation's transformative work in drought-prone regions of Maharashtra. Their work empowers over 500 farmers per taluka with tools, training, and infrastructure for sustainable water conservation.



**HB:** Tell me a bit about the most rewarding part of the process of creating the book for you now that it's out in the world, from conceptualisation to publishing. Was there anything that surprised you?

**KS:** The journey of *Water Memories* has been deeply humbling. What began as a quiet reflection on our connection to water gradually revealed itself as something more urgent—a call to pay attention, to respond with care. Through the research and conversations that shaped this project, the scale of India’s water crisis became clearer, and so did the need to not only honour, but to act. What’s been most meaningful is how the project evolved into a collective expression of purpose. From the artists and gallerists to the Paani Foundation, every collaborator brought a spirit of generosity and intention. When we reached out, the responses were so open and willing. It felt like everyone was moving in the same direction, led by a shared sense of purpose. The net proceeds from this book will go toward supporting community-led water conservation efforts across drought-affected regions of Maharashtra. By helping villages restore ecosystems and build long-term water security, we hope this project can contribute, in some small way, to a larger movement of care and stewardship.

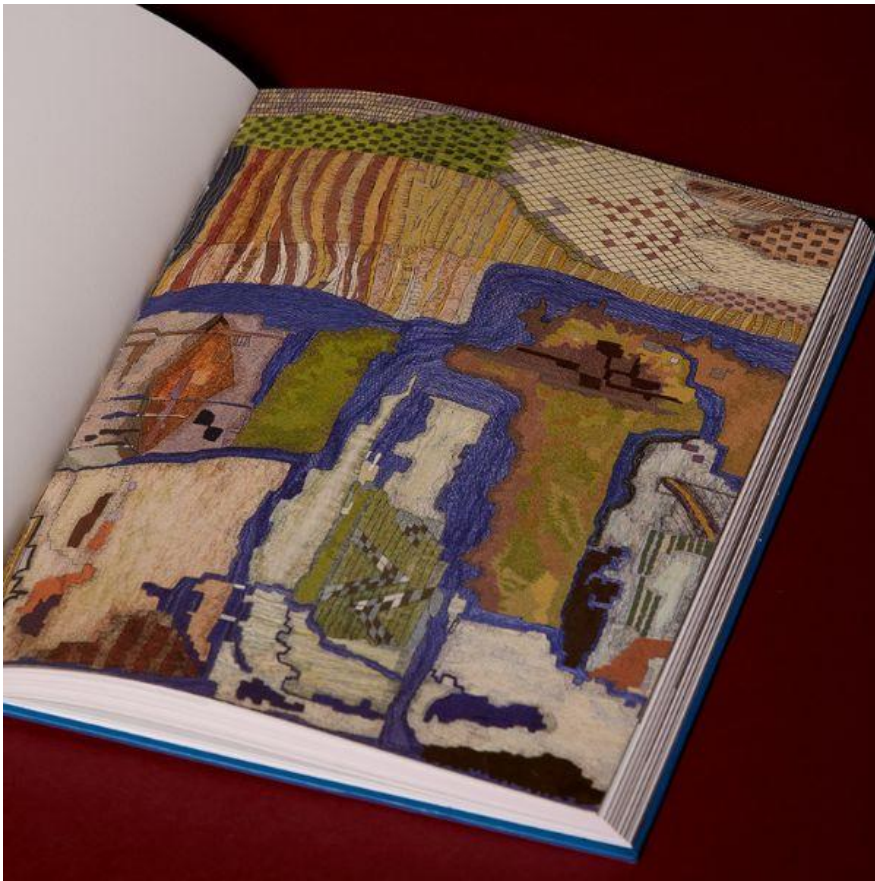
**HB:** Co-founding Moonray with your daughter Avantika introduces a generational dialogue. How does this dynamic influence your approach to projects like *Water Memories*, especially in bridging traditional crafts with contemporary relevance?

**KS:** Working with my daughter and establishing Moonray has been one of the most meaningful parts of my journey. Creating something together has brought new energy, fresh ideas, and a deep sense of connection. Her generation holds a natural awareness, both about the planet and about the importance of individuality. It’s been incredibly inspiring to see how effortlessly she brings those values into the way she designs and makes decisions. While we share the same belief in thoughtful, responsible innovation, she brings a modern point of view and a confidence that both challenges and enriches mine. It’s a beautiful balance—one that continues to teach me every day. *Water Memories* becomes a living expression of our collaboration, where generations converge not only through vision, but through values.



**HB:** At its core, the point of the book is about survival—of rivers, rituals, and relationships. What has the journey taught you about your relationship with time, legacy, and nature?

**KS:** *Water Memories* reminded me that time doesn't move in a straight line—it gathers, flows, circles back. Much like water, it carries memory, rhythm, and meaning all at once. Working on this project deepened my awareness of how closely nature, culture, and community are intertwined, and how one cannot be sustained without the others. It also shifted how I think about legacy. Now, I think of it as something we build together, through the choices we make and the care we offer.



**HB:** If you want readers to take away one thing from *Water Memories*, what would it be, and why?

**KS:** *Water Memories* is a quiet reminder that we are all connected by rivers, and with that connection comes a responsibility to care and nurture. If the book can spark even a small shift in awareness or action, then it has done what it set out to do. I also hope readers take the time to engage with the incredible works of the artists. In their expressions, the river becomes a subject, a witness and a collaborator.

**HB:** Your work has taken you everywhere—from the Vatican to the Venice Biennale. But I’m sure there’s still plenty left for you to explore. If you could choose to focus your energies on one thing to the exclusion of everything else right now, what specific project would you take up?

**KS:** It’s a difficult question to answer, because every project brings with it its own rhythm, its own kind of growth. But if I had to focus on just one thing right now, it would be building on the work we’ve started with *Water Memories*. It’s opened up a space that holds art, ecology, and community in the same breath.

I’m also drawn to the idea of creating immersive art experiences for children—spaces where mythology, craft, and storytelling come together. I’m curious about how we can bring cultural memory into young minds in ways that are tactile, playful, and rooted in feeling. It’s something I’d love to explore more deeply.

In parallel, we’ve also been thinking about how Mumbai’s landmarks might come into conversation through large-scale artistic interventions. The hope is to reflect on history, identity, and belonging using a contemporary visual language that invites people to pause and feel more connected to where they are. Both are long, slow ideas, but feel close to the heart.

All photographs: Moonray Collective