

A RIVER'S NAME

A robust young man bathing in the river is swept away by the tides. Such an incident anywhere in peninsular India is forgotten even before the rains are over. But the old woman remembers the loss of her man to the river decades later:

It happened years ago, in the month of Midhunam. Father had gone to bathe in the overflowing river at the peak of the monsoon fury. Amma had warned him many times, but to no avail. He had only smiled and said that he had known the river like the back of his hand since childhood. The river, even when in spate, could not trick him.

But it did. The boatmen said that the river was sharp, flowing with a rare rage that day. Father's friends swam to the bank and escaped. But the river snatched Father from us. Only days later did the bloated body float out on the beach.

In the distant voice of the narrator, the man's son, the tragedy comes alive in all its poignancy and atmosphere. The fatedness of coastal life has rarely been portrayed with such finesse. A leading writer in Malayalam, Sethu's mastery in drawing a slice of life with a whole lot of cultural nuances is evident in 'Her Corner of Earth,' included in his latest collection of short fiction, *A Guest for Arundhathi and Other Stories*. The river here is like a capricious, vengeful goddess, snatching away not just a man, but a woman's happiness as well.

Perhaps no other geographic feature fascinates us as much as a river. A river can be calmly and part of everyday life and at times solemn as well. The sea is always remote, starting off where human territory ends. In India, more than anywhere else, the river is the flow of faith. The Ganga is perhaps the most revered river in the world. In the hymn to rivers, *nadistuti* (Rig Veda 10.75), it figures: "Your ancient home, your auspicious friendship, O Heroes, your wealth is on the banks of the Jahnavi." Jahnavi, according to tradition, is another name for the Ganga. For an agrarian society, the river is renewal, the source of bounty, reason for a good harvest.

Because of its close interaction with the human world, the river at times responds to situations on its banks like a dispenser of justice, even an upholder of the moral order. The Meenachal, mostly a lean river even children can swim across, seeks to settle score with an adulterous woman by striking a blow to her family:

'Sophie Mol?' she whispered to the rushing river. 'We're here! Here! Near the Illimba tree.'

Nothing.

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There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the Meenachal. No shark supervised the tragedy.

Just a quiet handing over ceremony. A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering. One small life. A brief sunbeam. With a silver thimble clenched for luck in its little fist.

Sophie, daughter of the family head's estranged English wife, had come to spend Christmas in Kottayam. The quiet river takes on the character of a primordial deity, whimsical in its ways. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the river is not just the backdrop to the narrative but one of its characters too.

One profoundly disquieting experience in the world of fiction is the Congo River that Polish writer Joseph Conrad traveled up in 1890 and later wrote about in *Heart of Darkness*, considered one of the 100 best novels in English in the 20th century. To suggest that the so-called civilized world is not very different from the *dark continent*, Marlow, the protagonist and Conrad's alter ego, tells his friends about his voyage along the Congo River, aboard a boat anchored on the Thames near London. Marlow's ominous journey into wilderness to meet Kurtz, the sinister ivory trader, gives the reader a glimpse of evil. The imagery in Marlow's narration conjures up the unforgiving, primeval *heart of darkness*: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings."

When I look at the thin book – only 30,000 words – bought more than a quarter century ago, what surprises me now is its unbelievably low price. For less than half the price of a weekly magazine now, I bought one of the greatest books – brand new. This novel does not entertain you but offers a dystopian journey to a region that witnessed the worst form of savagery perpetrated by the Europeans on a people who were too close to nature to wake up to the danger of colonialism.

Well, the Ganga, as it runs across the northern plains, acquires a whole lot of cultural and political connotations too. Towards the end of the eighties, Allahabad once again became the political nerve centre of Uttar Pradesh, or for that matter the heartland. Journalists from all over the country were going to that city for special stories. That was the time before the Internet, before mobile telephony. My kit for such a visit consisted of a Brother portable, spiral notebooks, and a paperback. On the day of my return from one such trip, I found my work was over by the afternoon and the train to Delhi late in the night. The hotel receptionist suggested I visit the Sangam before going to the railway station.

At the river ghat, below the ramparts of a Mughal fort, I was accosted by both boatmen and the priests – offering a ride to the point where the three rivers merge and helping me perform the ritual. I was interested in none. To keep the persisting boatman away, I quoted a ridiculously low price I would pay for the trip. He went away, but before starting the boat, called me out. "Pay that much only."

Sitting cynically among God-fearing rural folk, I, the meat-eating nonbeliever, really did not look forward to anything. The meeting point of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythic Sarasvati meant nothing to me. Perhaps I wondered about the river pollution. But the moment we got there, and those sitting around me got off the boat onto a platform for a dip, I noticed a strange spectacle. A woman, strong, earthy, sitting without an expression so long, was suddenly crying, shivering at the first touch of cool water, as if an electric current had just passed through her body. I realized the role of faith in Indian life.

Back at the ghat, I took one last look at the river before leaving. I did not know a few years later I would come back here to witness the final journey of a young leader, his body blown to bits by a terrorist bomb, his family, friends, followers looking on, his ashes being carried in an urn to the Sangam. Hours later, though it was a bright sunny afternoon, it rained briefly all over Allahabad.

The rivers were nostalgia for the Bengali writers who had migrated from East Bengal after Partition. Struggling to adjust to the harsh life in Calcutta, they looked back on the riverine delta across the international border, and their acute sense of loss found expression in some of the finest literary works. The murmur of the rivers and soft cadence of rural life in East Bengal were captured most poignantly by Jibanananda Das, perhaps the greatest poet of his generation. In fiction, Prafulla Roy chronicled the love and longing for the land crisscrossed by rivers left behind forever. But one poet who freed the river from the trappings of nostalgia and turned it into a symbol of life ahead was Subhash Mukhopadhyay. He was one of the two most outstanding poets produced by the left literary movement – the other being Kaifi Azmi.

One morning, a schoolmate called me from the street outside. “If you want to meet your favourite poet, come with me,” he was shouting excitedly. Those days, the left activists in Bengal attending a political conference would stay with sympathizers in town.

A head full of unkempt grey hair, Subhash Mukhopadhyay was sipping black tea in the front room of my friend’s house. A corner of his white kurta pocket was smudged by careless ink. Disarmingly simple, he listened patiently to my inadequate appreciation of his work. Foolishly, I compared him with another poet, who later I learnt, was really no match for him. But he did not mind at all.

This genial man I spent a little time with, wrote fiery poetry of protest in keeping with the tone of his time. Hailed by his followers as the *Infantryman*, Subhash Mukhopadhyay’s poems turned into the graffiti of protests on the walls of college union rooms. That he later fell out with the left and fought them is another story. With the change of time and mood in society, much of his bonfire poetry has been forgotten. What is still remembered is his celebration of life:

How far I go
With me goes
A wave-laced river’s name
How far I go

Over my eyelids are painted
Rows of a goddess’s little feet
Across a neatly mopped courtyard
How far I go ■

Bhaskar Roy