

FROM THE EDITOR

THE RIVERS: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

We wonder if there are rivers elsewhere in the world bearing such beautiful names and carrying such significant legends behind them — as they do in India. Legends may be born of some real events of a remote past, or they may have their source in the subtle experience of seers. Even if we are to take them as symbolic, not related to historical facts, the symbolism charms us for their loftiness and sheer excellence.

The Ganga was brought down to earth from the heavens in order to breathe life into those who had been reduced to ashes by a curse. Thus the Ganga is the symbol of Grace.

Narmada sprang out of the serene grandeur Lord Siva radiated during one of his trances. Thus she is the personification of meditative bliss.

And Kaveri — she is the very symbol of integration. That is what her genesis suggests. Long long ago, there was drought in one part of our country and the distraught king of the region, Thondaman, appealed to Sage Agastya for help. The great sage, who had spent some time in the Sahyadri hills and knew through his meditation that a new river was about to be born, led Thondaman to the king of Coorg, Kavera. With the latter's approval, the course of the river, as soon as she emerged from the hills, was directed towards the drought-stricken land. Thus, the river, called Kaveri after king Kavera, flows as the reminder of love and empathy between two regions of India.

But we have reduced the same river to a synonym of quarrel and controversy.

The other day, on the eve of Elections in Tamil Nadu, a certain party promised to secure for the state the necessary quantity of water. The party in question did not succeed in the Elections. Now the members of the same party belonging to a neighbouring state, Karnataka, are protesting against the Government of Karnataka (run by another party, of course) deciding to let Tamil Nadu have the necessary water from the Kaveri. Must politicians prove themselves so small? Shouldn't such questions be decided according to the extent of real needs of different regions — remembering that India is one country and that the bounty of Nature is meant for all? Must the politicians of today expose themselves as pitiable pygmies before the stature of Kavera and Thondaman of a bygone era?

Not long ago Mahakavi Subramanyam Bharati dreamt of Ganga and Kaveri uniting, signifying the unity of the country. We seem to be bent upon using the rivers for exactly the opposite purpose. Perhaps we won't mind even dispensing with the rivers if that helps us gain money or power.

If politics is damaging the glory of our rivers, assault on forests and mountains by merchants and contractors, pollution of their waters by factories, are damaging them physically.

There is a ray of hope in the efforts currently on for cleaning the Ganga. If an area of the great river could be kept reasonably pollution-free for a brief period during the Kumbha Mela, there is no reason in principle why it cannot be kept clean entirely and for all times. For that what is necessary is just not enough funds for the project, but greater public awareness of the issue. Respect for the rivers must be restored and their value properly understood. For that to be possible, politicians must stop cashing in on them and the erring factories must be penalised. Ecologists must work harder. (See articles in this issue.)

The Indian concept of the river is that of the Mother. A mother does not distinguish between her children while nourishing them. Let the politicians remember this while deciding on the waters of our rivers.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

WHAT IS TRUTH AND WHAT IS NOT

A friend narrated this incident the other day. I need not name the place of occurrence, for it might have happened anywhere.

Pratima sent her little son, let us call him Vijay, to the school, as usual in the morning. Another little boy from the neighbourhood, Mintoo, younger than Vijay, accompanied him. Mintoo had just been admitted to the posh institution whereas Vijay had already been there for a year or two.

"Vijay, you'll look after Mintoo, won't you? He is your little brother!" the mother exhorted her son while waving to them as the school bus resumed its onward journey. An hour later Pratima's telephone rang. "Why do you teach your son to speak lies?" demanded a rude voice. It was the principal of the school.

Pratima was shocked. "I don't understand you. I don't remember having ever asked Vijay to speak a lie. Will you kindly elaborate?"

What the principal said and what Pratima later gathered from Vijay came to this: a big boy, a sort of bully (let us call him Yum), began ragging Mintoo. The little one was in tears. Vijay at once rose to the occasion and spanked the bully. There was an uproar. The three boys involved in the fracas were led to the principal's office.

"Why did you beat up Yum?" the principal demanded of Vijay. "Because he beat Mintoo." "That was not your concern!" "It was. Mintoo is my little brother."

"What nonsense do you speak! You are Sethia and he is Singh. You are Hindu and he is Sikh. How can he be your brother?"

"He is my brother! My mother said he is!" "I will ask your mother why she teaches such lies to you!"

And you know the rest. Vijay returned from the school 'educated' enough to know who are not brothers, although his experience may throw you once again back into the whirlpool of confusion — what is truth and what is not!