

Linking of Rivers in India: Myths and Realities

P. V. Krishnan

New Delhi, India

Hindu Invocation

Water is everything;

*Elements of the world is Water, air is Water,
Living beings are Water, food is Water,
Nectar is water...*

*Good form is Water, evil form is Water,
Own form is Water, moon is Water,
Sun is Water, planets are Water,
Truth is Water, all Gods are Water...*

Water is Life (*Jeevanam*)

Rivers... Holy flows of water

- Veda's considered Water to be Life. This belief is echoed in its reverence to Rivers
- River Saraswati is mentioned 14 times in Rig Veda, the world's oldest scripture
- Rivers are considered Holy in Hindu philosophy, so much so, that any act that defiles or impure river was considered sin

Vedic Beliefs

- As Vedic Aryans spread out more into Indian mainland, their outlook towards everything broadened.
- Other rivers came into prominence. Ganges, Jamuna, Kauveri, Narmada... The scriptures talk about seven holy rivers
- Is it not surprising that all major rivers are women, except Brahmaputra – the odd man out there!
- Rivers were deitified...

Aryan Thoughts...

- Myths and fables, religious books and epics speak a lot about rivers
- Ganga becomes the most talked about river, Saraswati vanishes...
- The holy books say that Ganga, a wild and carefree river, lived with Gods. When earth was in tatters, she was sent to regenerate this land. Lord Shiva arrested her descend by tying her in his holy locks and mellowed her nature.
- The epic Mahabharata says that Ganga was mother of Bhishma, the greatest warrior of those times

Rivers, personanified

- Ganga... wild and glorious
- Saraswati... a chain of lakes and ponds
- Godavari... pebbles and stones
- Krishna... dark and glowing

Though river Saraswati, the mightiest of the early rivers has vanished, it is thought to have left behind a series of water bodies

Popular Belief...

- India is blessed with a river network, acting as arteries to the civilization
- Rivers are revered, as manifestation of Gods. Natural union of rivers, particularly during floods are considered river marriages, an occasion of auspice
- Floods were welcomed... Floods brought prosperity. People lived with floods.

2,000 B. C.

- Mahabharata (the greatest epic) and Bhagavata (story of Lord Krishna) talks a lot about rivers, in different contexts.
- Krishna's childhood and all his romances flourished along river Jamuna
- The first ever river purification is done by Lord Krishnan when he drove away the evil Kalindi serpent from the river

Kalidasa to Tagore...

- The Indian civilization along river Ganges flourished (Guptas and Mauryas)
- Kalidasa, the great romance poet mentions the beauty and mysticism of rivers
- From then onwards, till today, rivers have been a major source of inspiration to creative minds
- Some of the greatest works of Tagore were written as he sat watching the river Subarnarekha (Golden Strip)

...and to Ghosh and others

- The miniature paintings in forts and palaces depicts rivers in its best
- Rivers have witnessed everything... wars, birth and deaths. But for artists, they always represent beauty, love and hope
- From Kalidasa to Tagore to Amitava Ghosh (modern master, author of Hungry Tide), rivers have been a source of inspiration

Impressions

- Many films have been inspired by rivers. *Ram Teri Ganga Maali*, a classic of 70s by *Raj Kapur* personified Ganga as a pure, virgin girl who is polluted as she descends to the city
- No wonder, celebrated artists like Arundhati Roy (Booker Prize winner) and many others actively support measures that do not mutilate rivers or its flows
- Painters and photographers have immortalized rivers and its flows

Today...

- There is gross violation of rivers and its enchanting flows
- The organic relation between rivers and life is being neglected
- Rivers cannot be treated as commodities, they are much more
- Networking of rivers is the latest fad in India. It is being taken up as we take up plumbing at home

Before it is too late!

- Can't we live with rivers the way are? Instead of changing rivers and its flows, why don't we change ourselves?
- There is a cosmic influence in the way things are, including why rivers flow the way they are. It is based on too many complex factors that we cannot fathom
- The origin of life started with floods. Scriptures say that the end too will!



THANK YOU!

P. V. Krishnan
pvkkrish@gmail.com