

EVERYTHING in Hindu Society is sacred: oceans, mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, fields, birds and animals, the country and its people. What does it all mean? Are they archaic notions to be discarded in the face of scientific advancement and technological wizardry? Doesn't modernity mock at ghosts in trees, fire in water, frog processions for rains, celestial rivers and their worship? Such infantile fantasies! Is it not better to grow out of them?

All through our history, nature, in all its forms, has been actively worshipped, subject to colourful (sometimes unpleasant) rituals, with a vivid mythic imagination growing around it like those surprising mushrooms. The very country, Bharat Varsha, surrounded by oceans, the Himalayas, the rivers from Ganga to Kaveri. The innumerable plants and animals: the Vilva, the Tulsi, the Dhruva, the monkey, the mouse, the snake, the crow..... have all been deified and worshipped through various rituals. Since nature is considered a manifestation of divinity, each God has a special affinity to one or the other aspect: Indra with rain; Agni with fire; Shiva with snakes, Ganga, moon, and the bull; Rama with monkey; Krishna with cows, and so on. The myths and their variants which accompany the pantheon are so innumerable that the corpus often gets unwieldy, bewildering and, even tiresome!

Let us take water. Water is regarded as one of the five elements - (earth, water, fire, wind, and sky/emptiness) - the stuff of which the universe is said to be constituted. Sometimes it is elevated to an even higher status:

*Apova Idam Sarvam, Sarvo
Bhutanyapah
Sarve devata apo bhurbhuv-
assuvarapa Om.*

Fire in Water

The Sacred in Indian Society

Uma Shankari

“Everything is water; all life is water; all deities, the earth, the other worlds, are all water. Om.”

Water figures prominently in creation myths. One of them goes as follows:

“In the beginning there was only water; then Brahma (*Prajapathi*) appeared in Lotus leaf; He wanted to create; He willed and shook his body and various *rishis* came out of His flesh, nails, hair, etc.; the semen became a tortoise. He said to the

tortoise: ‘You were created by my skin and flesh,’ ‘No, I was here before you,’ said the tortoise: He was the Parama Purusha He came out with a thousand hands, eyes and legs. Prajapathi said, ‘You were here before me; Please create the world.’ Parama Purusha folded his hands and poured water in the east saying, ‘Surya, rise!’ and the Sun rose. He poured water in the South saying, ‘Fire, rise!’ and the fire rose; to the north, he said, ‘Indra, rise!’ Indra rose. He poured water in



the middle and said, 'Pusha, rise!' Pusha rose; He then poured water above for *devas*, men, ancestors, Gandharvas, Apsaras, all to rise. Wherever water scattered and fell, from them came Asuras, Rakshasas, Pisachas, etc."

Water on earth is replenished by rain; scores of hymns praise the rain God, Indra, who carries the lightning/thunder for his weapons, who is assisted by the God of rain-bearing clouds and winds - Maruts, Parjanya. The bloody duels between Indra and Vrtra are described in the Vedas. Vrtra, who imprisons/binds the waters, is killed, and the water released, flowing into thousands of channels, rivers, bringing plenty and prosperity.

Rivers have not only spurred the poetic, mythic imagination of the people into a rich lore but have made them bow their heads in deep reverence and worship. Practically, every river, big and small, is associated with worshipful attitudes and rituals: e.g. *Kumbh Melas* at the Ganga, *Aadi Perukku* at the Kaveri. The archetype of the sacred river is the Ganges. The Ganga is not just a river, she is the very sacred principle in water and as such she is revered in every home, village, and used in rituals on every sacred occasion. Hindu homes keep Ganga water for use on special occasions like birth, marriage and death. One of the village Goddesses in southern Andhra is Gangamma, worshipped in the month of *Vaikasi* (May-June) just before the onset of monsoon, for rains and prosperity and also to ward off smallpox which used to strike most in the peak of summer. The *pujari* in the Gangamma worship is the washerman; the man who stands in water the whole day removing the



pollution from people's clothes. No worship can begin unless the pot of water for conducting the rituals is itself purified by the presence of the seven holy rivers:

*Gangaicha Yamunaichaiva
Godavari Saraswati
Narmade Sindhy Kaveri Jalesmin
sannidhim kuru*

"O Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri, please grace your presence in this water."

Not only rivers, every form of water, water in ponds, lakes, wells, drinking water pots, are all to be revered. To construct a tank was considered a highly meritorious act, one of the *sapta santanas* "seven heirs" (the others being: procreation of a son, composition of a poem, guarding of a treasure, the planting of a grove, the marriage of a girl to a Brahmin, the construction of a temple). To refuse water to the thirsty was considered as in: in the parched deserts of Rajasthan, a trough was built by the community well and kept with water for thirsty travellers.

Water is considered the cleansing, purifying, and healing substance *par excellence*. Ritual bathing in rivers, oceans and other bodies of water is very common; so common that the daily bath itself is gone through like a ritual for the well

being of the body and mind. Water is such a pure/purifying substance that it is never to be polluted: "Do not spit, urinate, defecate in water; do not bathe naked in water; do not avoid release of semen); for otherwise the in-visible fire in water will de-stroy" (*Aaruna Ketuka Chayanam*).

To delineate something as sacred is to elevate it to a special status, above the mundane, the ordinary. When the seven rivers are invoked into the pot of water,

it is no ordinary water, it is imbued with special powers. It is a way of remembering, recalling, recollecting the unique nature of the substance, its special place in the universe. When the crow is worshipped along with Saturn or when one waits anxiously for it to eat the offerings at the ancestral ceremonies as an embodiment of the ancestral soul, not only Saturn and the ancestor, but also the lowly crow is remembered. The crow as a thief, as a scavenger is momentarily forgotten; its place and role as one of the manifestations of divinity is remembered. When the snake is worshipped it is momentarily forgotten that they are poisonous creatures. People feel so loving and caring that they feed the snakes with milk, an ideal nourishing substance, even though they know that snakes like rats and frogs and not milk!

The Hindu, through a myriad of such symbols and icons, myths and rituals, manages to ritually recollect many many forms of nature and their special irreplaceable place as he courses through his life. Concepts like ecological chain are often articulated casually even by the unlettered. Recently while visiting a village tucked in a nook of the Chittor district in Andhra Pradesh, I saw a number of monkeys prancing about and asked

about them from an elderly villager He remarked that they are a regular nuisance, there is nothing they don't steal, but "it seems we are not supposed to do them any harm, so nobody dares to do anything about it!" Sure enough there was a small temple dedicated to Sri Rama in the middle of the village.

Elevating something to the level of sacred does not prevent people from actively utilising it as resource, for otherwise, would not life come to a standstill? Rivers and streams are extensively channelised into canals for irrigation; rain water is stored in innumerable tanks and ponds; bullocks are castrated and harnessed to work. Nor does it prevent people from destruction; snakes are ordinarily seen as man's enemies and people do not hesitate to kill them. There are always ironical exceptions: people hesitate to kill the cobra, the deadliest of all snakes!

Ritualised remembrance has thus an important function: it re-restrains/contains the overuse / misuse/ abuse of nature. In fact, the famous Upanishad verse is quite explicit: *Isavasyamidam sarvan yat kincha jagatyam jagat*

tena tyaktena bhunjetha magridhah kasyaswiddanam ?

"All things of the world are His, are pervaded by the Lord; Enjoy only what is your share, for whose wealth is it?"

By living austere man ensures plenty for others!

The containment function of the sacred is to be found in all spheres of Hindu society. The Bania, who accumulates liquid wealth is required to live in the most austere fashion: he is expected to give away his wealth generously for charity during special occasions. The farmer is expected to feed everyone who comes to his

house; at the time of harvest he is expected to give grain to whoever asks for it. The Brahmin and the medicine man are expected to never charge a fee for their knowledge and services, they are expected to take whatever is given. Even the renouncer's special status is contained. The exalted renunciant ignores hunger and does not beg for alms; he eats only when he is given food. A containment principle prevails widely with regard to nature too: where I live, if some people do not eat from banyan leaves. Some others are not supposed to grow pumpkins! The Banyan tree is neither to be planted nor cut by man. All bulls are not castrated and put to work; temple bulls and breeding bulls are left free to roam wherever they like. The Tulsi is treated like any other weed in the fields and plucked out, but it is revered in the homestead and specially cultivated.

With modernity, the sacred disappears and the rituals are dropped. I once heard a story. A villager said to another villager: "Nowadays, one does not hear much of ghosts." The other replies, "brother, it is all these electric lines, they have driven them away!" With the loss of ritual, the remembrance of the special place of each of the forms of life, the chain of life, also goes. Nature is seen merely as a resource, to be utilised, to

be commoditised, whereas the sacred (and superstitious) saw it as non-negotiable, irreplaceable. In the long run perhaps the loss of ritual may eventually lead to extinction of some of the things in nature.

One may argue that, if there is enlightenment and if one is rational, there is no greed, no abuse. But traditional societies did not expect everyone to be rational, enlightened and wise; they saw greed and abuse as part of life and clamped a ritual, a set of taboos, to contain it instead. Even a ritualistic remembrance would do when enlightenment is lacking; and continued observance of ritual, it was hoped, led to realisation of the true meaning/purpose, when the symbol/ritual and its meaning would become inseparable.

The taboo against polluting water, even if it did not apply to every body of water, was at least enforced strictly about drinking from water ponds, sacred rivers, temple ponds and, of course, water meant for rituals. On the other hand, the earth (land, soil) is eulogised as a mother, of infinite patience, who bore the pollution of her children willingly, just as the human mother does. The modern sewerage system and the industrialisation process has been violating this taboo in the most callous manner, with utter disregard for "the fire in water". What has

happened to the fire in water? Has it also disappeared, like the ghosts? Or is it waiting? When thousands of people bathe in the Ganges on ritual occasions, they do not seem to even notice the huge sewage pipes out of which filthy water gushes out into the Ganga. They seem helpless when their dear "Ganga Mai" is discoloured, choked by industrial pollution. They do not seem to connect them at all: the sacred-ness of the river, the taboo against polluting



water, the industrial waste and sewerage pollution. People seem to compartmentalise. Is it that the process of ritualisation itself promotes compartmentalisation? Once the ritual is performed, its meaning is forgotten? When we go on damming the rivers, are not we depriving the ocean king from the embrace of his wives? When we go on mining ground water for more profit, should we not ask ourselves, "whose wealth is it?"

Both industrialisation with its inevitable pollution, and city life with its sewerage system are relatively new to us. Even today houses in small towns, leave alone in the villages, do not have modern latrines and septic tanks. People still use the fields. But our cities have already started facing the consequences and we ought to take the cue and prevent further deterioration. We need to devise sewerage systems which do not pollute water bodies; we need more stringent laws against the overutilisation of ground water; we need more people's movements against big dams. But perhaps it is also time to reinvokethe sacred; to revive old taboos and rituals, to invent new ones. In the recent years three persons in public life have characteristically responded to the water crisis: Rajiv Gandhi, Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna. Rajiv sought an administrative/technical solution, true to his role as the head of the State. Medha has argued against pitting man against nature and his brothers in development. Sunderlal has sought to reinvokethe sacred and is prepared to give up his life for it. The Hindutva advocates may do well to follow them, to launch a movement to resacralise the rivers and forests, rather than to de-sacralise sacred places. □

Uma Shankari is an active member of Patriotic People's Science and Technology group.

Jugnu

Brown and quiet

With her strange sharp glare

And her silence full of questions.

Why not a school like the rest of you?

Why a pavement to sleep

Without a shawl to cover my face?

Is it because there is not a house

That could serve as a roof?

Why is that I work week day long

And yet there is never enough to eat?

Why can't I wear shades of evening-spring?

I would love to smell of lavender Love the touch of big

blue ear-rings With a matching ring.

I want to be a lady attractive and intelligent.

I want to write to amma and to let her know

Of the city ways. Also there's a world

And worlds so different from Santia-village of my birth

Why is it so? Why?

This and much more she has ben wanting to ask.

I read her questions. Lest she prolong the stare

Smile at her and strike a note

Jugnu once again you are late.

The floor is to be mopped, the dishes are dirty,

Dust the furniture, arrange the flowers.

Orders flow in succession.

She works. Brown and quiet.

It has come to stay. That strange sharp glare

And her silence full of questions.

Ranu Uniyal