The purity principle

Why people have such an emotional connect with the Ganga

JACOB KOSHY

Among the earliest policy initiatives announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when he came to power on May 2014, was a ‘clean up’ of the river Ganga. He proclaimed that he was only answering a ‘call by Ma Ganga’ and this was the prelude to an ambitious ₹20,000 programme, called the National Mission for Clean Ganga, to various power centres of India.

While political action to cleanse the Ganga predates the NDA government – Rajiv Gandhi had first initiated a Ganga Action Plan – what is less known is that the Ganga is far from being among India’s most polluted rivers.

Several other stretches of rivers such as the Mithi and Godavari in Maharashtra, the Sabarmati in Gujarat and the Hindon in Uttar Pradesh are far more polluted, according to assessments by the Central Pollution Control Board last year. The Ganga, according to the Board’s own assessment, is only a ‘moderately polluted’ river.

Multiple myths

Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River by Sudipta Sen, historian at the University of California, Davis, is a magisterial treatise into the myths and history of the 2,500-km long river and contains within the locks of Shiva or the stories surrounding the ‘purity’ of the Ganga – attested to even by early European trading missions and Victorian-era scientific investigations.

Sen explores multiple accounts with finesse.

Many like the Ganga branches into tributaries and streams that meet and digress and meet again, Sen zooms into intricate exegesis of the archaeological links to descriptions of kingdoms in the Ramayana and Mahabharata and from here on to the civilisational history of the Ganga plains. The advent of settled agriculture, the mining and smelting of metals, urbanisation and the fading away of the Vedic world-view and the rise of Jainism and Buddhism. Insightful as these are, it’s unclear why all of this is relevant to the history of the Ganga.

Sen doesn’t explain when and where the idea took root in the minds of the Indian public – or at least become a useful political tool – that the Ganga was in need of ‘saving’. He presents some statistics – dated to 2006 at the latest – to suggest the high levels of chemical pollution in the river from the various industries and projects – the Tehri dam and the Farraka barrage in West Bengal – at extremities of the Ganga are symbolic of the Indian state’s century-old attempt to rely on technology to solve problems of poverty and agrarian distress.

The rise of kingdoms

In subsequent chapters on the political geography of the Ganga plain, we have histories on the rise of the kingdoms – the Kosala, Magadh and Mauryan – but these aren’t quite connected to the narrative of the river and mentions of the Ganga seem forced and tangential to the waxing and waning of Buddhism and accounts of Greek invasions.

Sen evocatively narrates the emergence of the Sultanate rule, the advent of the Mughals and the colonial conquest particularly the coming of steam ships and the development of the canals by which the British sought to expand to unprecedented levels the conveyance of grain and goods. Again, the quibble remains that this would have still been an eminently readable history without necessarily framing it in the context of the Ganga.

In the closing chapters of the book, Sen dwells on the most puzzling aspect of the Ganga – capable of cleansing the most impure, but now viewed as a body laden with toxicity and requiring human intervention to clean it. Two major water storage projects – the Tehri dam and the Farraka barrage in West Bengal – at extremities of the Ganga are symbolic of the Indian state’s century-old attempt to rely on technology to solve problems of poverty and agrarian distress.

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