

# Purity and Pollution

## What is happening to our 'holy rivers'?

**When an object considered 'holy' does not mirror the divine in its qualitative form, a revisit to its holiness seems urgent**



BY DR M.D. THOMAS

**G**rowing up in a theistic atmosphere in God's own country, Kerala, in the early fifties of the 20th century, I innocently entertained the idea that the term 'holy' carries a sense of 'sacred', in an awe-inspiring and elevating way. I suppose, this is what is meant by the phrase 'mysterium tremendum' (tremendous mystery), which I gathered later from the classical philosophy of God in Latin.

Having made North India my 'home away from home' since the seventies, I gradually got exposed to too many things that are believed to be 'holy', even things that are normally not to be considered holy. As I observed those realities more closely, over a period of decades, I realized that 'holy' is not all holy, in actual fact. In other words, 'holy', as it is popularly understood, requires being taken with a pinch of salt.

My memory goes back to my native land, to a river that flows in my home town. It flows through the neighbourhoods of people who have affiliations of diverse creed, caste, class and culture. The river does not have the brand name 'holy', but its water is so clean and pure that one would feel like drinking the entire lot. Its water is used for irrigating the land. People enjoy being at its shore and take bath in it; I too do it, as and when I am around, but definitely not for the declared holy purposes.

But, in North India, in South India also to some extent, people consider several rivers 'holy' in a definitive way. But, as a matter of fact, those rivers are perhaps the dirtiest rivers in the country or the world, ironically so. They collect dead bodies or remains of cremated dead bodies, along with the waste of the city or town and the filth of the industrial firms. Devotees, very much blindly so, are seen happily having a holy dip in the filthy water of those holy rivers.



All the same, it is natural for any thinking person to wonder what is really holy about these rivers.

From the notional point of view, that which is 'holy' has to awaken in the devotees a sense of reverence as well as has to represent a sense of the sacred. The spirit of holiness or sacredness is in the inner power of the thing that is deemed to represent God. That is the logic of associating a sense of divine to a river or a similar object, as well. So far so good, but when the considered object does not mirror the divine in its qualitative form, I suppose, a revisit to its holiness seems urgent. That would simply mean that the idea of holiness of the rivers requires an honest and serious scrutiny.

On the other hand, it also needs to be explored as to what makes something unholy or loathsome. Profaning the natural water in the river, which is by nature destined to be clean and pure, is unnatural, ungodly and harmful. Clean water is also the basic right of human and other beings. Polluting the water in the rivers, under whatever pretext, is irrational. It violates all logic of the sacred and is in fact a crime against humanity. How could habits that are ungodly and defy human rights be considered 'holy' is a major question.

After all, why has a river to be believed to be 'holy' at all? Is it a device of making people have bath, who otherwise are not inclined to do so? Has not the Creator distributed a natural holiness to all things of the world? Are not air, earth, sky, water, flower, etc. inherently sacred and holy? Why should an 'artificial holiness' be imposed upon certain items of life, like river? Recognizing the sacred present and reflected in the natural and the secular, I firmly think, is the real spirit of holiness. Whatever that contradicts the natural holiness intended by the Creator is unholy, to the core.

Further, it is too obvious that millions and billions of rupees have been spent for cleaning up

the so called holy rivers of the country, especially of North India, for several decades. What is the outcome? Have those rivers become cleaner in water and surroundings and thus radiate a better sense of the sacred? The irony of the fact is that hardly any positive result is seen in the respective rivers, except that the funds are benefitting in some way or other those who run the project of clean river and those associated to them.

Moreover, a scheme of 'Swachh Bharat' is underway, since a few years. It is a commendable and timely idea, too. It promotes clean surroundings, advocates making toilets and argues against open defecation sweepingly. Even

the Hindi film 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha' is making headway into the consciousness of the general public. A lot of conferences also discuss the issue of 'clean river'. More importantly, there is also a Ministry constituted in the central government to address the issue. At the end of the day, one would have to still ask, 'what is happening to our holy rivers'?

Well, if you allow me to express my honest critique on the matter, there is something wrong in the way we have perceived the holy or the

sacred. Imposed holiness, even though backed by myths and stories, only discriminates the items of life. It cannot make anything holy, in the real sense of the term. There is a natural sense of holiness or sacredness or sense of the divine native to all items of the creation, like the river in my home town.

When the humans grow towards recognizing that 'natural and divine holiness' all over the creation and then proceed to keep all things and places clean, I hope, holiness will really make sense. Our country needs to evolve towards such a better tomorrow. I am an optimist and I do hope that the 21st century will certainly do that job.

*(The writer is Founder Director of Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies, New Delhi, and is a scholar deeply committed to interfaith relations, ethical values, national solidarity and social harmony. He can be reached at 'mdthomas53@gmail.com'.)*

