



River-House, River-Home

by Flore Lafaye de Micheaux

Introduction: Rivers, Feelings and Emotions

“The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India’s age long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.”

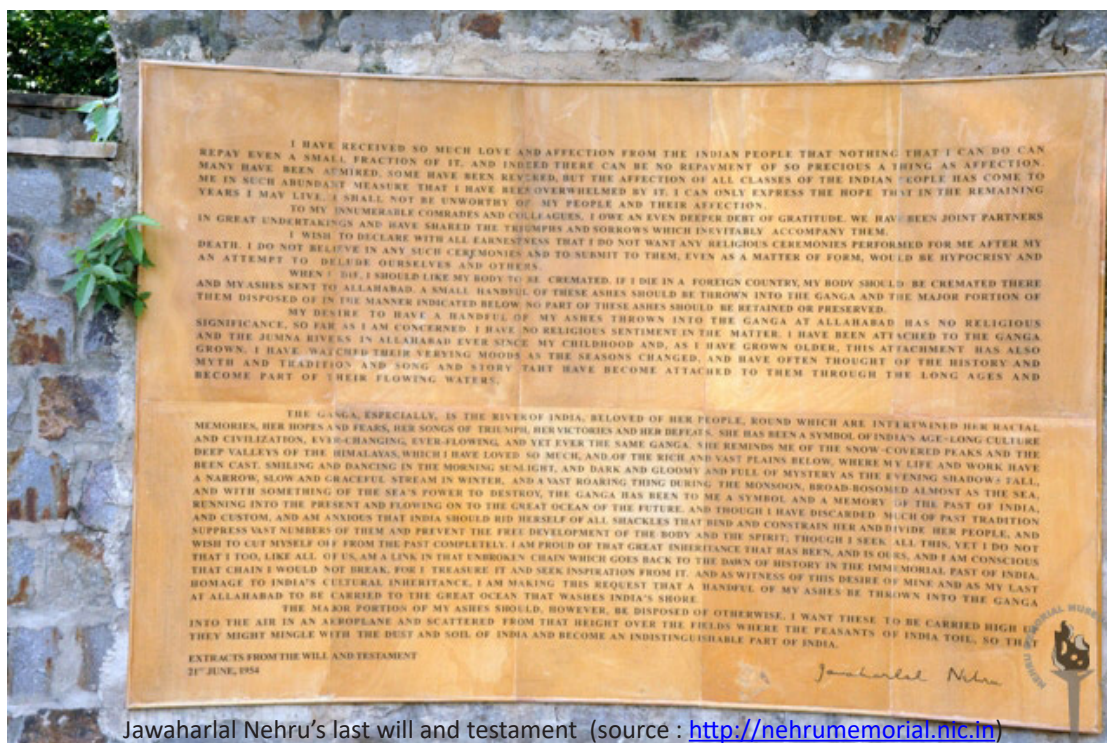
Jawaharlal Nehru, Will and Testament, 1956

The Ganges is more than a river for Hindu believers; it’s a deity. Indian myths and traditions abundantly refer to the Ganga divinity, named Ma Ganga, or Mother Ganges, by its devotees. Other rivers are also revered in India. Key rituals are thus performed next to rivers, particularly cremations and offerings.



Phouffarkashi, Uttarakhand, India. Photo by the author.

Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of independent India. He was not a Hindu-religious person, as he himself put it. Secularism was an important concept for him, and he steadily worked at incorporating it into laws and institutions throughout his tenure. However, he requested that his body's ashes, or a small handful of them, be thrown into the Ganges at Allahabad, as written in his published will at Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum.



Jawaharlal Nehru's last will and testament (source : <http://nehru memorial.nic.in>)

Strong emotional attachments to the Ganges are still very much alive. I understood this in Benares, next to a woman from Mumbai, suddenly sobbing during an evening Aarti ceremony performed on the riverbank. She explained to me her deep attachment to the river and the extraordinary feeling that came to her during the ceremony. At a distance from the river, young Indian fellows repeatedly mentioned to me the warmth in their hearts when they heard the name Ganga. In those discussions, I was looking for the image that would arise in their minds when they heard the name of the river. However, it was not so much an image in the mind as a feeling within the body that they expressed.

Jawaharlal Nehru himself referred to his attachment to the river Ganges to justify his request. Interestingly, he expressly rooted this attachment in his childhood and in the Ganges-related “history and myth and tradition and song and story” (1956). In a similar way, a friend reported to me that her feelings towards Ganga could be phrased as a “feeling of connection”, a connection with her childhood as well as with the strong and long-lasting traditional reverence to the river, which gave her a sense of an immutable strength.

All this has elicited in me two ideas that I will develop in this theoretical essay. First, the reality of a river encompasses much more than flowing water – in particular emotions, attachment and symbols. In this regard, I will elaborate on a perspective that considers the meanings of “river-house” and “river-home”. Second, human–river relations should be considered through the concept of the milieu, as described by the French geo-philosopher Augustin Berque (2014). This approach emphasizes the deep entanglements of human beings and rivers. Some photos taken at various points during my field visits in India will alternate with these thoughts in order to illustrate them.



Nirmal char, Murshidabad district, West Bengal, India
(photo by the author)

River-House and River-Home

In American culture, as Daniel Ingersoll (1998) writes, the house/home distinction is important. “Americans learn the difference between house and home at an early age. House: a cold space enclosed by walls. Home: a warm place animated by family and friends” (Ingersoll, 1998 cited by Moberg, 2013, 277). Ingersoll further develops the notions in relating houses to the “profane realm of law and market economics, natural right, and profit” while relating homes to “intangible wealth which can not be bought or sold”, as they “belong to the sacred world of fellowship, love and nurture” (1998, 6). He also opposes material (house) and social (home) artifacts, and finally observes that Americans “dwell simultaneously in physical houses and symbolic homes” (1998, 6).

This distinction is of great help to better explain diverging understandings of a given reality, like that of a river. The perspective on a river may be restricted to the water that flows, the sediments it carries or the aquatic species it shelters. Those components and their dynamics are what sciences (hydrology, hydro-geomorphology, ecology, etc.) study. They are also the resources economics deal with. Activities such as hydroelectricity production, irrigation, navigation, sand mining or fishing are the prism that economists use to look at rivers. Here, we could say that the word river only carries the meaning of “river-house”, referring to the “cold” realm of economics and materiality.



Maneri Bhalu dam, Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand, India (photo by the author)

However, rivers encompass symbols and human attachments too. The previous quotes about the Ganges illustrate this, but examples are not restricted to such a sacred river. In many instances, the literature reports human feelings towards rivers. A French author, Michel-André Tracol, expresses for example his bitterness at the “dead” Rhône river, now tamed by embankments and dams, in contrast to the fascinating, fiery river that he and other “Rhodaniens” used to love (Tracol, 1980, 5-7). In social sciences, notably in Political Ecology, some authors have shown how much rivers are lived realities with emotions and interpretations attached to them that either reinforce or oppose dominant perspectives (Baviskar, 2005; Alley, 2002; Drew, 2017). In these texts, the word river obviously carries the meaning of “river-home”, or the “warm” realm of feelings and attachments.

In a conflict about hydropower in the upper Ganges, around the Eco-Sensitive Zone of Gaumukh-Uttarkashi, opponents and proponents of hydroelectricity express contradictory interpretations of what a river is. In the first group, the sacredness of the river is invoked and some people even consider the river to be “who we are” (field interview, 2016); for the latter, the river is a resource to be tapped for the sake of local and national economic development. The opposition between considerations of “river-house” and “river-home” here appears to be the origin of an intractable conflict.



Near the source of the Ganges (Bhagirathi stretch), Gaumukh, Uttarakhand, India
(photo by the author)

The Milieu, or the Emphasis on Human–River Relations

As noted above, Ingersoll (1998) observes that the distinction between house and home does not prevent people from “dwell[ing] simultaneously” in houses and homes. People seem to “naturally” overcome the contradiction between the two perspectives. What about the distinction between “river-house” and “river-home”? One answer could be to move beyond the question of what a river is (a “river-house” or a “river-home”). We may instead consider the human–river relationship that is present in both perspectives.

Science and economics are human interpretations of reality. Traditionally considered as purely rational, “cold”, or devoid of any emotions, science and knowledge production may sometimes be loaded with interests or even passion, as science studies has illustrated (notably the works of Callon & Latour). In addition, the frontier between object and subject has been blurred with the emergence of the Actor-Network theory. Hence, we argue that a distinction between “river-house” and “river-home” as an opposition between the “material” and the “social”, the “physical” and the “symbolic”, is not relevant. Both perspectives encounter physical, emotional and ideal human–river interactions; they both belong to the realm of a full human–river relationship.



Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India (photo by the author)

Geo-philosopher Berque provides interesting insights about such a human-environment relationship, or what he names the milieu. In his “mésologie”, he explains that the given environment, once interpreted (through senses, thoughts and actions) by a human society, is no longer an external thing. It becomes a trajectory reality (an historicized construction, in a back-and-forth move), neither entirely objective, nor entirely subjective, i.e. the milieu, which incorporates the human dimension (Berque, 2014, 2016). The milieu is thus simultaneously the given environment and the human interpretation of it. Material and social realms are here reconciled, as in the hydrosocial cycle framework developed within the political ecology of water (Linton & Budds, 2014).

Conversely, Berque argues that a human being is constituted by an “animal body” and a “medial body”. The latter incorporates the “social body”, which includes language for example, but also the milieu (with its historicity) itself (Berque, 2014). Thus, if one brings transformation to the milieu through any “eco-techno-symbolic processes” (Berque, 2016), such as physical interventions, this necessarily has consequences for human beings too.

In this perspective, the human–river relationship is a two-way, reciprocal one. This understanding of human–river relations goes beyond the incorporation of symbols, interpretations and attachments to rivers. It encompasses the agency of rivers, and the historicity of the relationship, and gives space for more human–river interactions than traditionally considered. In our view, this vision significantly renews the way one could assess the impacts of any river-related infrastructure or river valley transformation. For example, what and who change, if a river fish population decreases due to pollution or lack of fresh water?



Hamidpur char, Malda district, West Bengal, India (photo by the author)

Conclusion

In this essay, we have shown how the distinction between “river-house” and “river-home” helps to distinguish between two conceptions of a river: 1) a “cold” reality assessed by science or “market economics”; and 2) the recognition of the “sacred realm” of attachments and symbols related to it (Ingersoll, 1998). We have also demonstrated how Berque’s concept of the milieu advances this understanding in bringing the reciprocal human–river relationship to the core of the analysis. Further empirical research could explore how the materiality of the river, in all its dimensions (water, sediments, biota, floodplains, etc.) precisely plays its role within the human–river relationship.



Nirmal char, Murshidabad district, West Bengal, India (photo by the author)

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