

QUESTIONS FROM THE YAMUNA RIVER

PUT INTO WORDS BY TIM INGOLD

You have asked me many questions. I want to ask some questions in return. But I have a different way of asking them. When you ask questions of me, you treat me as though I were another person. Not just any person, mind you. I'm a goddess, you say, the daughter of the sun. I can work miracles, cleanse you of sin, give you everlasting life. But still, you speak to me as you would to others of your kind, in words. But I don't do words. When you speak, I hear only the echo of your voices, for your language is as mysterious to me as the pattern of my waters is mysterious to you. What, I wonder, are you trying to tell me?

The way we rivers ask questions is by testing with our waters. We send out rivulets to investigate every inch of our embankments. We feel the mud and stone over which we flow. We get to know the land beyond the banks by flooding it every year, when we're swollen by monsoon rains. We examine the bodies that come to bathe in us, and study all the floating and swimming things we carry along. We're curious to know where they're from and what they're made of. And when a rivulet trickles down your throat, it asks: what kind of being are you? What creatures do you host? Did you know that every time you stop by to take a drink, we are actually interrogating you?

If we only knew what you are trying to tell us! We don't understand. Is it about death? We knew nothing of death before

you came along. All we knew was life, ever-replenished from mountain springs. And we would eagerly bring this life to you, irrigating your fields and slaking your thirst. But your life doesn't flow like ours. On the contrary, in order to live you have to capture the flow, to hold it up, to congeal it into solid things like bodies, foods and artefacts. For you to live, it seems, we must die. And vice versa, when you die you leave what remains of your existence – your cremated bodies and your used-up things – to us. To you, we are rivers not of life but of death.

And now there are so many of you! Your life has exploded, but for us the stench of death is everywhere. It is as though our bodies were bled dry by a swarm of leeches sucking on every pore. But the stench we feel is not the one that fills your nostrils. You complain about the rubbish and the sewage. You say we're polluted, yet you still take our waters for your fields and to drink. But we are not bothered when you return the effluent of your lives to us. After all, it augments the flow and nurtures growth. But if our waters cease to flow, if they stagnate, then we will die. Our greatest fear is not pollution but stagnation – when the flow is reduced to a trickle.

What have you done to us? Why have you built all these barrages, pumping stations, and canals? Is it not enough that we bring the waters of life to you, that you have forcibly to take them from us? And why, when you grudgingly return your effluent, do you do so not as a gift but as a discard, hoping thereby to wash your hands of it?

We're puzzled by the contradiction. On the one hand, you venerate us, you want to mingle your bodies with our waters, and eventually to escape the torment of death by dissolving into them. Yet on the other hand, your engineers want to treat us as part of the plumbing, integrated into an infrastructure of pipes, taps, sinks and drains.

Are you, perhaps, trying to talk to us about purity? Until you taught us about death, we never gave any thought to purity. The idea would have meant nothing to us. For your purification is our mixture. Our waters have always been fecund because, in them, everything is mixed up. It makes no difference to us whether you drink them, bathe in them, or defecate in them. That's what other animals do, and it does them no harm. Life's all in the flow, we say! But recently you have changed your tune. For now, instead of asking us to purify you, it is you who insist on purifying us. You poison the life that's in us, and put us in bottles of moulded plastic. 'Drink this', you say.

There's a world of difference, however, between drinking from a bottle and taking our waters into your mouths. To drink directly from us is an act of prayer or supplication, a gracious receipt of the gift of life. But bottled water is not just purified; it is contained. In the bottle, you have made of water a commodity. Having bought it, it is yours to consume. When you drink, we are no longer there to question you, nor do you think of us. The bond of curiosity and care that once united us is broken. What happens, then, when you

return to us to be purified? You get sick! Your bodies, unaccustomed to mixture, are overwhelmed by our vitality. They desire only to run with us.

What has broken the bond that once made it possible for us to carry on our lives together? Why have you turned your back on us? For thousands of years, in the rains, we would flood the land, covering it with waterborne silt that fertilised your fields and brought you abundant crops. But now you treat the flood as a disaster. It engulfs roads and buildings, bringing ordinary life to a stop. Your engineers, having built their barrages, canals and pumps, are put to work again, this time to erect ever higher flood defences. Human society, they maintain, can only be founded on dry land. The job of the river, in their view, is not to bring water to the land but to drain it away.

But as long as you turn your backs, we'll never be able to live together again. Remember that we were already running long before any of you arrived, and may still be running long after you are gone. We've made it possible for you to live and farm, and to build. Yet now you would drive us out like vermin. Why pump us dry and clog us so we can no longer flow? We don't mind wastes that dissolve; we've always carried these, whatever their origin. But now you're filling us with stuff that doesn't dissolve at all, but clumps into a suffocating mass. We've seen nothing like it before. And much of it is made up of the same bottles in which we had earlier been incarcerated.

Perhaps it is all a question of time. For us, time future lies downstream, where

the eternal ocean awaits us. We follow the waters that have gone before, and will be followed, in turn, by those coming after. But when you turn your backs on us, you also turn your backs on our time. To face the future, for you, means looking upstream, whilst our future looks to you like a discarded past. Your overriding concern is to stake a claim to the present by holding up or diverting the flow coming towards you, so that you can catch and congeal it, even bottle it, into things. The result is a pile-up. And as one pile-up gives way to another, you say, time passes and history is made.

I, Yamuna, hereby implore you to turn around again. Be like us, and follow your forerunners into the future, rather than casting them into the past. Think of time as we do, as running from the mountains to the sea. Allow us to spread upon the land, instead of putting up barriers to keep us out, or confining us to canals and pipes. Understand that our business is not to drain the land but to enrich it. By all means bathe in us, but stop poisoning us with your chemicals and putting us in bottles. Learn to welcome our wetness into your hearts, and to build on saturated ground. Live with us, and when you die, we'll bear your ashes. Care for us, and we'll care for you!