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## Book Review

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Victor Mallet, *River of Life, River of Death: The Ganges and India's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. xxi + 316 pp., £20, ISBN: 978-0-19-878617-7.

This book is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Ganges that I have read in recent years, written in a candid manner, which offers an insight into the state of the river and the failures in India across the people, its rulers, and bureaucrats. Mallet writes with command of the data that he collected, collated, and analyzed from not only ordinary conversations with people of all sorts—pilgrims, priests, pundits, politicians, bureaucrats, activists, artists, merchants, boatmen, fishermen, and a host of specialists—but also from highly reliable academic scholarship in both sciences and humanities, and distills all of it in a language that is easily comprehensible to the ordinary reader. The argument of the book, that the Ganges is a gift of the gods but so sullied by humans that it requires the extraordinary commitment of all stakeholders both local, national, and international, runs through every single chapter without making it either overbearing or pedantic.

Within the confines of the review, it is not possible to offer a full summation of the book, but rather I shall select some key issues and assess them for the reader. In the book, Mallet highlights the significance of the Ganges in the religio-cultural, social, political, and economic life of India. While pointing out the religious significance of the Ganges and the city of Varanasi, he profiles the contradictions between the religiosity of people and their lack of care in protecting the river from all forms of pollution and filth. People that he interviewed poignantly pointed out to him the contradictions—‘unworried marriage of religious purity and physical filth’ (p. 58), ‘inspirational as well as appalling’, ‘astonishing beauty and harrowing ugliness’ (p. 61). While the banks of the Ganges have been used by Hindus for cremating the dead, Mallet sees an uncomfortable link between the burning of corpses and the deforestation in Madhya Pradesh for the supply of wood, and notes how the river is ‘woven into the fabric of life and death for Hindus’ (p. 71). Interestingly, even Hindu religious organizations, such as Shri Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living Foundation, were accused of deforestation to host a religious festival, for which they were fined 18 million dollars, and may be complicit in the crisis of the Ganges (p. 81).

One delicate and politically sensitive issue in this context is the complicity of factories and tanneries on the banks of the Ganges. Much blame is placed on the Muslim owned tanneries, but in turn the Muslims blame the textile industry, which releases sodium cyanide into the river (pp. 85-88). This is further compounded by decaying infrastructure in sewage treatment plants, public defecation by people, and

the use of manual scavengers instead of flushing toilets and effective sewage systems. The cumulative effect is that the waters of the Ganges contain not only industrial toxins, but harmful bacteria that is more ominous (p. 95). Mallet debunks the long-held belief by Hindus that the Ganges waters have self-purifying qualities and hence it will never be impure. He offers a detailed discussion on the extensive prevalence of bacteria called New Delhi metallo-beta-lactamase (NDM-I) in the Ganges waters. Even the upper reaches of the Ganges are not free of the bacteria, says Mallet (p. 101). Despite the denials from India's political and medical establishments, Mallet points out that scientists are convinced that poor sanitation and abuse of antibiotics makes India an ideal place for the spread of antibiotic resistance (p. 103). He notes that the presence of antibacterial properties in the Ganges has to do with 'bacteriophages' (bacteria-eaters) that are found in the waters of the Ganges, as attested by scientists, and they are there because of the thriving bacteria in the waters (p. 113).

Mallet examines the issue of Ganges pollution comparatively from within the Indian context and around the world. He notes with some interest that the Chambal River—reasonably near Delhi—is still clean unlike the Ganges. As the owner of a safari lodge comments, there are 'no temples, no people and the habitat is still very pristine', because it was 'cursed' by holy men—Draupadi in the Mahabharata—or became the hideout for bandits (p. 127). Bad conservation practices have negatively impacted the habitats of animals that once thrived both in the river and on its banks (pp. 115-30). Inadequate provision of clean water has led to an ongoing water crisis (pp. 151-58). The major causes of this crisis are the dams and barrages that do not ensure minimum 'environmental flow' in the river (p. 172).

Mallet notes that the Ganges has fascinated foreign travelers, diplomats, explorers, writers, and philosophers over millennia (p. 196). But he bemoans the fact that many waterways of India, once busy with cargo transport, have disappeared, and many new projects cannot get off the drawing board (p. 209). He doubts the politicians' attempts to revive these waterways. But Mallet is not totally pessimistic about the prospects of restoring the Ganges; he notes the work done in the case of the Thames and the Rhine, which were once badly polluted but were restored through commitment and collaboration. He agrees with the World Bank director for India that 'lack of planning, inconsistency and shortage of capacity to implement projects' as well as 'religious devotion to the river' need to be overcome (pp. 238-39).

Although the book is not written as an academic exercise, it does offer academics the opportunity to revisit some theoretical issues based on Mallet's discussion on the Ganges. Both implicitly as well as explicitly, Mallet exposes the antithesis between religious devotion and properly caring for the Ganga by the very people who consider it sacred. In this regard Louis Dumont's separation of the realms of purity and pollution in theorizing Indian society is a suggestion that could be addressed again. Some of the Indian intellectuals themselves think, as does Mohit Ray, an environmental consultant, that India is not communal but rather individual and inward looking (p. 251). This could prompt us to reconsider Max Weber's overwhelming attention to capitalism, and instead focus on understanding the seeming absence of social and civic responsibilities in Indian society.

The book, to the extent that it combines scholarly and scientific research with ethnographic conversations with ordinary people, is highly recommended for both scholars and lay readers. It should be required reading for any course on religion, environment, and ecology in academic institutions. Politicians and bureaucrats also would benefit immensely from reading it.

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