



The Trip Down the River

The twins, Usha and Leela, belonged to a village called Shantapuram in Tamil Nadu, on the banks of river Mythili. The villagers consider the river sacred and would take great care to keep it clean. The girls were very proud of their village and the river. Last summer, they happened to hear about river Yamuna in Delhi from their cousin Gopu who lived there. On his last visit to Shantapuram, he had kept badgering about Delhi's wide roads, shopping malls, Appu Ghar and other interesting features

of the capital city. Usha and Leela had since been very keen to go to Delhi.

So they were very happy when, on the first day of the Deepavali holidays, their mother announced: "You girls will be happy to know that we're going to Delhi to celebrate Deepavali with your *Maamaji* and cousin Gopu." This was a big surprise for the twins. "Yippee!" screamed the girls. "This vacation is really going to be different."

Their uncle had planned the girls' stay in Delhi in such a way that each day they were visiting a new place. For them each day had a surprise in store for them. The museums, the gardens, historical monuments, shopping complexes, Appu Ghar, so on and so forth.

"Leela! Usha!" their *Maama* called as he and Gopu entered their room. "Today I'm going to take you to a new place. I'm sure you will enjoy it." Both sisters looked at each other and said in a chorus, "Where, *Maamaji*?"

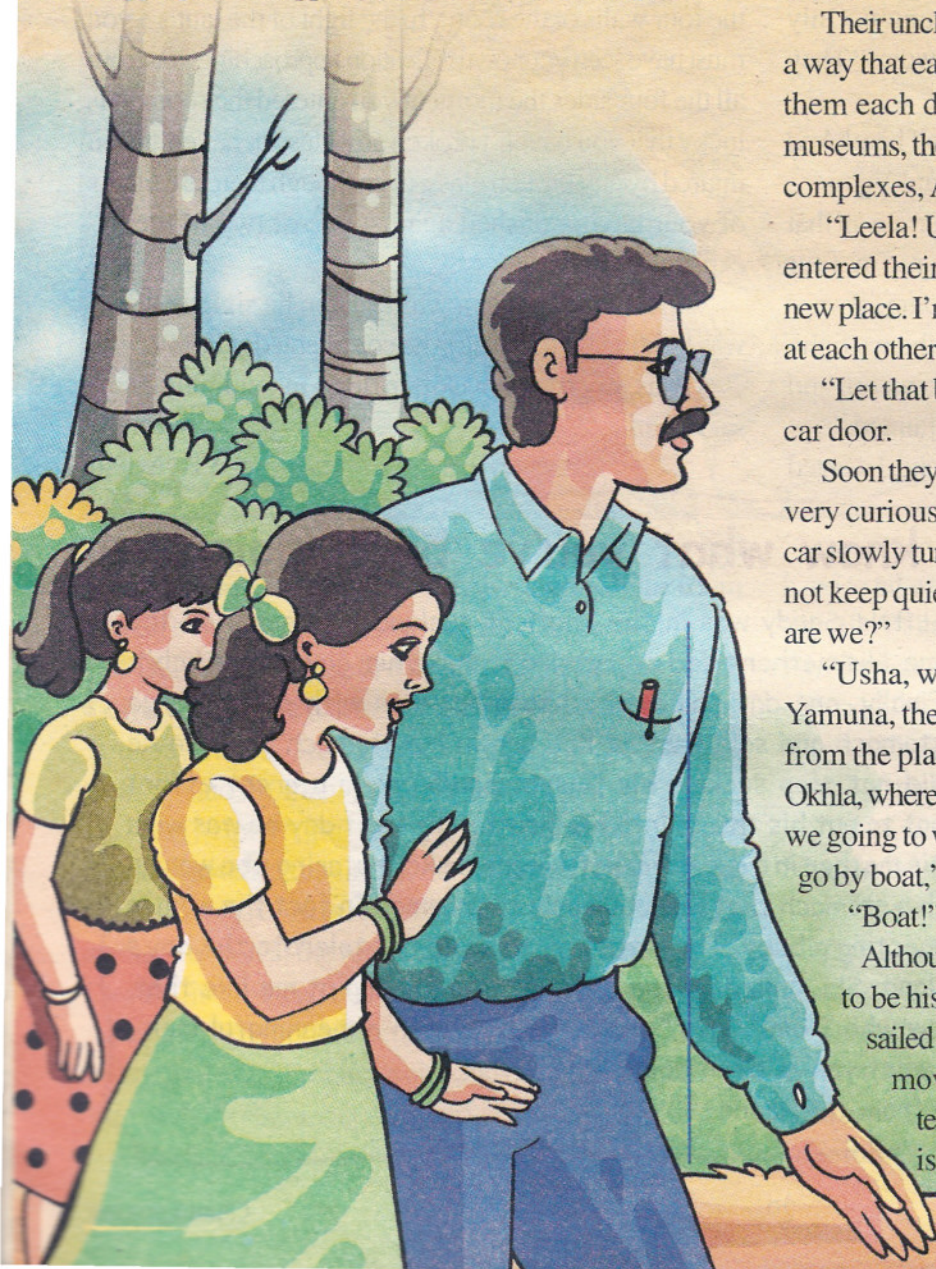
"Let that be a surprise," said their uncle opening the car door.

Soon they were off to their destination. The girls were very curious to know where they were heading. Their car slowly turned near a bridge and stopped. Usha could not keep quiet any longer and asked: "*Maamaji*, where are we?"

"Usha, we are in Wazirabad, on the banks of river Yamuna, the lifeline of Delhi. We'll go down the river from the place where the Yamuna enters Delhi and to Okhla, where she leaves Delhi," informed their uncle. "Are we going to walk all the way?" asked Leela. "No, we'll go by boat," replied Uncle.

"Boat!" said an excited Usha and Leela in a chorus.

Although Gopu had been in Delhi for long, this was to be his first trip down the Yamuna. The girls had sailed down their own Mythili many times. As they moved down the Yamuna, their uncle started telling them the story of the river. "The Yamuna is one of the ancient rivers of north India. It



The Yamuna catchment area of Delhi is one per cent of the river's total catchment area but it generates more than 50% of the pollutants found in the Yamuna. Delhi receives relatively clean water and converts it into a deadly mixture of disease-bearing waste. Delhi alone generates 3,000 MLD of wastewater, which makes the bacteriological count dangerously high. Moreover, micro-organisms with the help of dissolved oxygen in the river break down into complex organic pollutants. This results in depletion of oxygen and hence acute deficiency of oxygen for other riverine organisms such as fish. In other words, no or less oxygen means very little aquatic life in the Yamuna, making it a dead river.

Source: TERI Website

has almost a north-south course in Delhi and during the monsoon it expands considerably in width; at some places to several kilometres.

"Usha, can you see those temples and steps on the river bank? They are called *ghats*. Like the Mythili, the Yamuna is also considered sacred. Rivers in India are just not a source of water but part of people's life."

As they were going down the river, they came across another boat laden with green vegetables. "Wow! Leela, look at those vegetables, they are so green and fresh," said Usha. "*Maamaji*! Are these vegetables grown on the banks of the river?" asked Leela.

Before Uncle could answer, the other boat had come closer and the person on the boat replied, "Yes, all these vegetables are grown on the riverbank. My name is Majnu and I'm a farmer," he continued. "The Yamuna is our mother. Without her we won't survive." Saying that he paddled away.

As they went along, there was a distinct change in the surroundings. They could see *ghats* where people were not just offering prayers, but were busy cleaning vehicles and bathing animals. Soon they reached a point where the children had to close their nose as the stench was unbearable. "Gosh! The river smells like a drain," said the children.

"Yes, Leela, it is because of pollution," said Uncle as he pointed to the large sewage outlets from the housing societies, offices and factories on the banks of the river.

Usha and Leela had never seen such a sight on the banks of Mythili. Back in their village, people never

sullied by throwing garbage into the river. "When the river Yamuna enters Wazirabad," Uncle explained, "it is quite clean, but as she passes through Delhi, dirty and polluted water and wastes from factories, homes and other places are dumped into it, making it a polluted river."

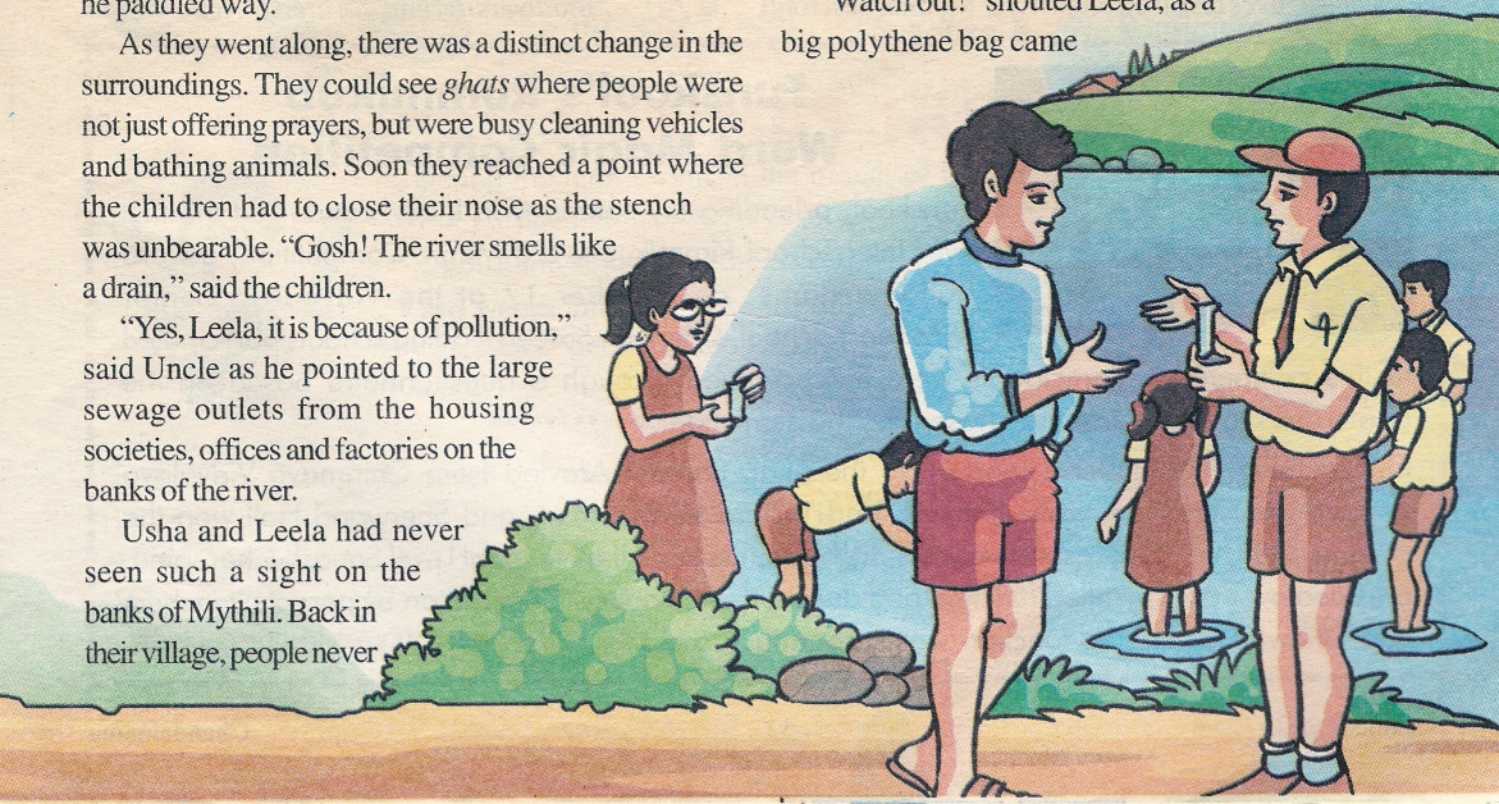
"But, Dad, can't we clean the dirty water and put it to use again?" asked Gopu.

"Gopu, treating polluted water is an expensive exercise and unfortunately the polluters only look at their profits and are not ready to spend money to keep the Yamuna clean," replied his father.

"You mean that nothing is being done to stop them?" asked Leela.

"No, Leela. Recently, the Supreme Court has ordered the Delhi Government to clean up the river. The Government has now launched the Yamuna Action Plan, but much needs to be done," said her uncle.

"Watch out!" shouted Leela, as a big polythene bag came



sailing towards them from the top of a bridge. They all ducked in time. “Gosh! That almost hit me. What was that, Dad?” asked Gopu.

“This is another form of pollution. Since the Yamuna is considered sacred, people throw flowers and other things into the river. Many times, these things are put in a plastic bag, tied and thrown into the river. But in doing so, they do not realise that they are actually suffocating the river,” said his father. “Although flowers are biodegradable, polythene is not and it just floats in the river,” he added.

“What is the solution to the problem, *Maamaji*?” asked Usha.

“We need to create more awareness among the people. If we want the Yamuna to be a clean river, then we all must take the responsibility of keeping her clean,” said Uncle grimly.

By this time, they had come a long way down the river and were slowly reaching Okhla. Suddenly, Usha was excited to see a large number of birds. “Leela, look at those birds. They are so beautiful!”

“The Yamuna is a habitat for a large number of birds. During winters, one can see thousands of birds,” Uncle told her. Gopu had kept quiet all this while. For him this trip was an eye-opener. For the first time he could connect people’s life with a river. Back at Shantapuram, the villagers’ lives revolved round river Mythili, be it for

irrigation, fishing, daily chores or transportation. And for the same reasons, the villagers also took the utmost care of the river. Gopu wished that the same could be true for the Yamuna. He wanted to do something for the river.

“Children, we are at the Okhla barrage. Time to get down,” said their uncle, as their boat docked on the bank. As they were alighting, Gopu saw a group of children with an elderly person, doing something in the water. He ran towards the group and asked one of the boys, “Hi! What’re you all doing?”

“Hello! I’m Ramesh and we are a group of school children who come here every month to check the quality of water in the Yamuna at various points along the river. On weekends, we also go round various localities to create awareness among the people to keep the Yamuna clean,” replied the boy.

Gopu realised that here was an opportunity to do something for Yamuna. “Can I be part of your group?” asked Gopu.

“Of course, anyone is welcome to join the group. Let me introduce you to the others,” replied Ramesh.

Gopu’s father knew that his son and other children have started a new beginning and this earth is in safe hands.

- By Radha Kamat

Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan