

The likeable river monsters

A trip to the banks of the River Cauvery leads to the haunt of the 'Neer Nai'

By Nisarg Prakash

Summer vacations meant all play and no 'homework'. We were a gang of five, and I was the leader on most of our raids on neighbouring mango and guava orchards! There's nothing like gorging on raw mangoes and guavas under the shade of a massive Arjuna tree by the river. This was our favourite spot along the river. Frankly, this was the only place with clear water and deep enough for our games. Games you too would have played if you grew up

along the river. This was a particularly nasty summer and the mighty Cauvery was just a series of pools.

It was one such scorching summer day. Our pockets stuffed with mangoes, struggling to hold them in place we reached our favourite tree by the river. After promptly hiding our loot, we climbed a fairly large rock in the river, to dive into the clear cool blue water.

Large crocodile

There is an island mid-river near our pool which is visible only in the summer months. The island is mostly covered with tall grass, which people from our village sometimes use to make mats and brooms. This is also the stretch of river with the mythical river monster that everybody talks about, the one that makes weird sounds but is never to be seen. There also was a fairly large crocodile near our village that quietly slipped into the river whenever there were people around.

My grandfather, who is a fisherman, had told me that



this particular crocodile had never harmed anybody and has been around for a long time, and considers it a good omen for fishing! Just as we were about to leap into the river, we

heard a series of piercing whistles and yelps from the direction of the island and with the river monster constantly in our thoughts, we lost no time in bolting to the safety of the old Arjuna tree.

Grassy island

We were frightened, and had left all our clothes behind, on the exposed rock. As we stood behind the tree waiting for the monster to show up, we saw six strange-looking animals emerge from the grassy island. They had a funny gait and stood up on their hind legs every few feet to look around, all the while emitting those weird sounds. They seemed to have only play on their mind as they chased each other, running around in circles. Were these the monsters that people spoke about in hushed whispers?

These mysterious animals had quietened down now, and were just rolling around and yawning a lot. One large animal slipped into the river and disappeared from our view, to suddenly re-appear a few moments later closer to our diving

“WE COULD SEE THE GRASS BEING SHAKEN BY SOME INVISIBLE FORCE AND HEAR AN OCCASIONAL YELP



Otters, watching people. PHOTO: KALYAN VARMA

rock. It had caught a large fish which was still struggling and trying to break free. One loud crunch after holding the fish with its front paws silenced it forever. Enamoured by these inquisitive animals we had moved from behind the tree and were now seated in the front.

I had to stop my friend from pelting the animal with a small rock. He told me later that he wanted the fish because it was

a particularly tasty variety! Sensing some disturbance, the animal left the rock and swam back towards the island with the fish in its mouth. It was suddenly surrounded by the others, all begging and fighting for the fish. A tug-of-war ensued and they eventually disappeared behind the tall grass. All we could see was the grass being shaken by some invisible force and hear an occasional yelp.

A spell

All this had lasted about 20 minutes, and these mysterious animals had cast their spell on us. After waiting for a little longer, we ran back to the village to relate our encounter with the river monsters. We had left behind our loot of raw mangoes, but that did not matter anymore. Only later, when I narrated this incident to my grandfather did he tell me that these animals are known as "Neer Nai" or Otters (as we learnt later

in school). He also told me that we were extremely lucky to have seen them as they had disappeared from this stretch of river more than 20 years ago. This was the start of my long friendship with this likeable family of river monsters.

(The author loves watching otters along the River Cauvery. The series is coordinated by Kalpavriksh.)