

SHORT STORY



Photo by Ashish Kothari.

The River Speaks

As told to Shrishtee Bajpai

Before you delve into this piece of short fiction, here is a note from the author, Shrishtee Bajpai:

This short story was inspired by a walk organised alongside the Indus river in order to raise awareness and help the youth of Ladakh reconnect with the river and her ecosystem. The Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, along with Kalpavriksh, Pune, helped facilitate the walk, which began in Upshi and ended in Phey Village in July 2023. Over the course of six days, 30 Ladakhi students and other river enthusiasts covered around 90 kms together. I participated in the walk and felt called to imagine what the Indus might be thinking, feeling, and wanting to articulate about the humans who inhabited her banks. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Ashish Kothari for seeding the idea for this piece. This story is intended to encourage all of us to transcend our anthropocentrism and find more points of connection with the more-than-human.

Sunlight falls across the wildflowers on my banks, making the dewdrops glisten, tenderly touching the earth surrounding me. The hills look molten after two days of unusually heavy rains in Ladakh. In a cold desert, unstoppable rain can be dangerous. For me and for the humans and other beings who dwell here too. I could flood in a flash. It's like being fed twice as much, gorging on more than I need. I am muddy with silt and sand. In the summer months, I swell up, my waters released from the icy embrace of winter.

In the distance, I can hear the cheers of humans from Upshi, a village on my banks, close to the buzzing city of Leh. This is unusual. I'm intrigued. Humans are celebrating: I can hear humming, drumming, and loud laughter. As the chatter grows louder, their words become clearer, "walking and singing along Singee Khabubs." That's one of the names humans have for me. Some call me Singee Tsangpo or Khabubs, which means 'from the mouth of a lion'. Others know me as 'Indus'.

I start my journey on Kang Rimpoche, or Mount Kailash, like my sisters: Tachok Khabub, mouth of a horse (Brahmaputra); Langchen Khabub, mouth of an elephant (Sutlej); and Macha Khabub, mouth of a peacock (Karnali). From the peak, the four of us journey in different directions, nurturing life in all its forms. We are joined by many other sisters along the way, tumbling forwards until we reach the open sea.

The humans' chatter continues. I can only make out some of the conversations, but my rosefinch friend, who lives by my banks, can swoop much closer. She hears everything while feeding on juniper berries. She tells me, in her melodious voice, that some young people would be travelling alongside me for five days. They plan to walk from Upshi to Phey, another village nearby. It might be a long walk for the children. I look forward to the company as I pass through these villages, shrinking, swelling, and deepening.

Later, I see humans at the Upshi market bridge, wearing gloves and masks and carrying big bags. They have been picking up many plastic packets that litter my banks. I'm grateful for their thoughtfulness. There's so much debris thrown along my banks, and so much inside me as well. I have found so many fish dying after ingesting plastic, and plants being choked by garbage. I can sense the hopelessness of the humans on my banks, it mirrors my own. Cleaning helps, but humans, who are dependent on my waters for drinking, farming, and sustenance, continue to desecrate me. I wonder what makes them so short-sighted.

I'm impressed by the spirit of these young humans. They have stopped many vehicles on the highway that borders me, and spoken to other humans who live by my banks about my plight. A boy stood on a platform and spoke about how pollution is killing fish, birds, and other beings that live in and beside me. Fish often die, gasping for breath, as the oxygen levels in my waters reduce. I have the capacity to clean the pollution in me only to a certain level. I can't fix everything that humans are carelessly destroying. After that, a girl told the local army regiment to build a sewage treatment

plant to process waste from their toilet facilities before it reaches me. I would've added my voice to theirs, but that would've really scared them! I love meandering, sometimes I stray far from my usual course. But not today, perhaps on another occasion.

It's a new day, and I see humans walking along my banks, often stopping to look through something to find birds. I hear them calling it 'binoculars.' Humans are strange creatures and I don't always understand them. They spot a citrine wagtail that has dipped into my shallow waters, splashing around merrily, and see the chiffchaffs, robin accentors, martins, swifts, finches, and many others playing on my banks. There are some raptors nearby too, a hobby falcon and a black eagle, but the humans find it hard to identify them. The humans are also looking at the vegetation, and searching for medicinal plants like sea buckthorn. They talk about the importance of birds in seed dispersal. I often see my feathered friends delighting in fruits and then discarding the seeds along my shores. I notice that the smooth-coated otters who call my banks home are hiding. These humans would enjoy seeing them, but the destruction of their habitat has made the otters wary. They stay away.



Great Cormorant spotted by the river. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai.



Common Mergansers spotted flying over the river. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

The humans tell stories about their earliest civilisation, their voices echoing over my gurgles and whooshes. I knew the Indus Valley Civilisation, or the Harappan civilisation, when it flourished on my banks. For centuries I connected old routes, and humans navigated my waters to exchange their goods, languages, and ways of life. Ladakh was a crucial trading hub and the crossroads for cultural exchange. I have seen empires rise and fall. I have seen civilisations take root and be wiped out. I wish I could tell these humans my versions of these stories.

Some human communities are named after me. One such community, the Sindhis, who were once known as Daryahi, were a river worshipping community. They emerged on my banks during the course of the Indus Valley civilisation. In ancient times, I was home to a saint called Jule Lal or Zinda Pir (the living saint) of Indus¹. Many humans visit my banks and perform their rituals. I can't make out the differences between them, but my friend, the golden eagle, tells me that humans have different faiths, and there are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians among my visitors.

I enjoy the songs that the humans are singing. I remember snatches of a song I heard once. My friend, a falcon, is mentioned in it too. "Oh you falcon-like saint, riding on the Palla fish also called Hilsa, protect us and help us cross this mighty river." I don't know why they needed protection from me, but sometimes I feel like I need to be protected from human destruction. I can be destructive too. These days, I rage, flooding off course, trying to find a free path.

Humans aren't the only ones who have changed. I have too. Once I was whole, flowing strong and free towards the ocean, but humans have long since divided me, and fight over my waters.

Sometimes my waters are unruly and difficult to navigate. But those were different times. Now, my waters don't even reach the sea. And sadly, it seems like more dams are planned, cutting away my path.

I used to rejoice in glimpses of the glistening silver palla fish, arriving in large numbers from the Arabian sea, intermingling and breeding in my waters. They danced between my powerful currents, my waters flowing unimpeded. Now, in many parts of my journey, the water levels are so low that humans can simply walk through me. At other times, I overflow, heavy with monsoon rains. The palla fish are gone, their migratory routes blocked by the dams. Others are fast disappearing. The climate continues to change in erratic ways. My delta is dying, and so are the beings that rely on me.



The Indus river in the upper reaches of Ladakh. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai.

The humans are amazed by these stories, but tired from walking. They slowly but steadily cross difficult passages, and find a spot to relax. Some dip their feet into my waters, and sleep in the moist grass along my banks. I wind my way through their toes, lapping up the soil that they trod on. Their feet are hot, warmed by the earth and sun, and my waters are cold. I think they find some measure of peace. Some play the flute, while others sing melodious Ladakhi songs. In that moment, their songs and mine merge, and we are the same. But it doesn't last long, it never does.

Over the next few days, as the humans clean my banks, they learn about the flora and fauna around me, and continue to talk to other humans living alongside me. One human teaches young ones how

to navigate my banks, especially when they come to me to drink my waters.

The humans aren't the only ones learning. An argali teaches its babies how to survive on my banks, especially when stopping for a drink of water. But humans are slow to learn. They fail to teach their young how to care for me. Why else would they pollute, dam and divert me?

Whenever my friend, a snow leopard, makes his way down from the rugged mountains to me, he asks about my suffering, and tells me how humans are polluting his home too. They litter the mountain tops as they climb, and drive cars through animal habitats. Sometimes we wonder how humans fail to see our suffering. A black kite tells me that my sisters Yamuna and Ganga are even more polluted in their lower reaches.

I have heard that the Ladakhis believe that they are brave because they drink water from me. But now that I am polluted, do they still drink my waters? And if not, are they still considered brave?



As the river runs through Leh. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai.

The humans are still talking about me. They speak about my right to live, to flow, to meander, to reach the sea. In the past, people respected me, and I went where I pleased. But these new humans seem to have forgotten. Can they change? Will I be free again one day? Maybe. These young humans give me hope. They seem to have many ideas. I would like for them to keep cleaning my

banks. The growing encroachment on my banks and in areas where rain and snowfall replenish my waters, fuelled by the unbridled greed of development is slowly choking me.

I hope these humans become a voice for me, and for my other sisters who are also being polluted, dammed, divided, and diverted. Not so long ago, I was a free-flowing river with nothing in my path. Borders are a human invention that we rivers don't understand or recognise. In the meantime, I will continue to flow where I can. I will keep trying to reach the sea, and sustain the creatures that have relied on me for a millenia. After all, what can a river do but flow?

¹The Indus Valley civilisation flourished between 2600 BCE and 1900 BCE, and spanned parts of modern day India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

About the author

Shrishtee Bajpai is a researcher-writer working at the intersections of environmental justice, social justice, more-than human governance, and systemic transformations. She is a member of Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, Global Tapestry of Alternatives and serves on the executive committee of Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. You can often find her looking at birds, insects, bees and all things small, and shamelessly photographing them. She can also be found trying to sing, scribbling thoughts, and collecting books to read.