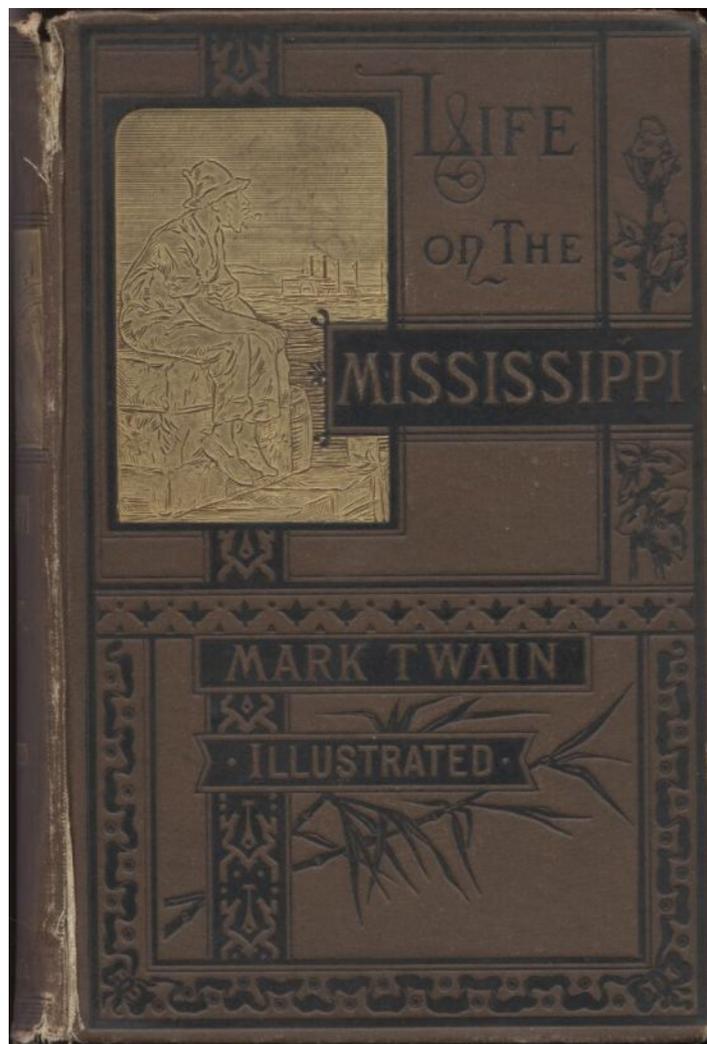


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

“The Site of Memory”: Some Riverine Thoughts from India

By K. Narayana Chandran



Mid-June last year, we woke up to the mind-numbing news of a series of disasters that struck Kedarnath, an Indian temple town situated on the banks of the Mandakini River, in the northern state called Uttarakhand. The same week, my American Literature seminar in Hyderabad found itself entertaining assorted thoughts about the rivers and memory. What began as a student-paper on *Life on the Mississippi* led us further on to other riverine thoughts— T. S. Eliot’s “The river is within us, the sea all about us...” (205). Some lines in “The Dry Salvages” such as “Time the destroyer is time the preserver,/ Like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops,... /And the ragged rock in the restless waters / ... but in the somber season / Or the sudden fury, is what it always was...” (209) made immediate sense to us. Strangely, it was now a flash-flood of allusions for us: Mark Twain-Eliot-the Kedarnath mishap involving thousands of people, cattle, vegetation, roads and bridges, and acres of arable land.

But surely we had heard earlier in our classes about rivers and memory? One of us recalled Langston Hughes’s poem that seemingly alluded to Twain but anticipated Eliot’s “dead negroes.” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a classic that deploys the uses of generational memory: how our souls ought to grow deep like the rivers, and why. Rivers are (and do *have*) memories. As the fury of torrential rains, landslides, and floods abated in Kedarnath, the Indian media debated what we ought to have remembered— mainly that places adjoining the Mandakini comprise an eco-sensitive zone in perpetual neglect owing to industrial pollution; the unregulated annual influx of tourists in thousands; poorly constructed buildings and roads; and, worse, the absolutely indifferent disaster-management systems in place. Lured by easy economic options and abetted by corrupt governmental agencies flouting environmental safeguards, the human interventions in these regions were asking for trouble.

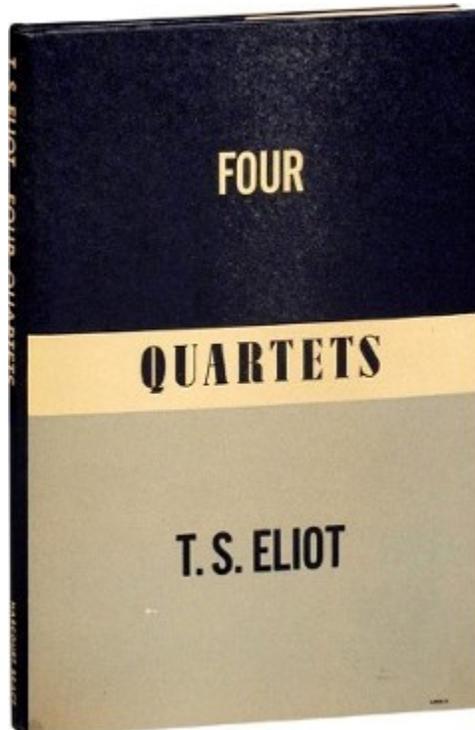
In a region comprising 14 river valleys where more than 200 power and mining projects have been operationally live through the last few decades, where rivers are being tunneled for these projects, where the forest-cover has been progressively shorn for urban-industrial works and warehousing, many thought that there was no way a tragedy of this proportion could have been averted. The politics involved in declaring all this as “natural calamity,” however, angered the whole nation because the successive governments by the ruling and opposition parties of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, both claiming pan-Indian political bases, heeded no warning by the environmental activists and scientists while they

illegally sanctioned mining and construction rights in the region. The rapid construction of hydroelectric dams, the laying of infrastructure for pilgrims and tourists, and the unplanned clustering of hotels and shops on river beds could hardly be the work of nature. There was further the politics of blame when things go terribly wrong by adverting to decisions of “earlier” or “former” regimes or sheer bureaucratic apathy for which no one in particular could be blamed. “Guided by short-term profit,” observes a scientist-conservationist who wrote on the Uttarakhand floods, “human interventions in the Himalaya that ignore ... eco-systemic limitations will make humans more vulnerable to extreme processes of nature leading to greater losses in the long term” (Bandyopadhyay 20).

The class read a score of such articles and viewed videos that covered the disaster through several weeks. That was also an occasion for us to recall Michel Foucault’s “Governmentality,” where he reminds us that those who

govern ought to think beyond just territories and be concerned about people, especially “in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; [people] in their relation to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of thinking and acting, etc.; lastly [people] in relationship to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunes such as famines, epidemics, and death, etc.” (93). Perhaps it needs to be added that in times of such extremities, governments tend to forget why on earth they exist at all.

When no government remembers, rivers do. And that was precisely the message that we wanted to hear that day, discussing “The Site of Memory.” And wasn’t Toni Morrison speaking so sagely about floods; rather, how the floods straighten out our crooked lives and redraw the geographies of imagination? She was, but she was also speaking about much the same Mississippi of Twain and Eliot, and the rivers all about us:



You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and forever trying to get back to where it was (305).

Allusions, I remind the class, are exactly what *happen* like the floods: “Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like.... And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding’ ” (305).

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