

'The River That knowledge is'

Prof. B.N.Goswamy

Just a few weeks back, I found myself again in Benares - Varanasi now - and came face to face with that extraordinary mix of excitement, confusion, layering, spiritual quest and environmental squalor, which that most ancient of cities has become. I met men and women to whom little else mattered except the pursuit of learning, drove through streets that appeared as if they were last cleaned when Kabira lived here, found areas of the most wonderful quiet, saw traffic blocked for hours by screaming and dancing men who were taking an image for ritual immersion in the Gaṅgā. It is an exasperating city, but I think I have found my way to deal with it: I see it now as a city of islands, each a world unto itself, connected only by the vast flow of humanity, and history, that surrounds them.

One such island is an institution named Jñāna Pravāha, a 'Centre for Cultural Studies' as it is officially designated. I had heard of the place long before. I went to Benares this time, and words spoken in praise of it by well-regarded friends had stayed with me. I was being put up on the premises, and was looking forward to delivering a lecture in honour of Alice Boner, that great friend of India, who, coming from Switzerland, had made Benares her home till nearly her last days. But the long, unending ride to the place from the airport - it is tucked away in a corner on the very bank of the Gaṅgā but far away from the Ghāṭs - and the rattling sights and sounds that I heard and passed through on the way had bruised my enthusiasm somewhat. I was tired and on the point of becoming downcast by the time I arrived. Just entering the Jñāna Pravāha complex, however, revived me. Candidly, I was not prepared, despite all that I had heard about the place, for what I saw. On lush, undulating grounds that descended all the way to the Gaṅgā, in the midst of comforting greenery, stood two buildings, slightly distanced as if to give each other breathing space: one a comfortable old-style residential complex, and the other a relatively new structure housing a museum, library, a conference hall, and the inevitable offices. The harsh sounds of the city were completely drowned in the quiet that seemed to prevail here. One could just stand and take in the wonderful sight of the garden and the manicured lawns, while glimpsing the Gaṅgā that flows majestically by it; or one could enter the museum and become part of another world.

Jñāna Pravāha, I was to discover, is a very Benares institution. It is not easy to describe that, but at least two things - sights and sounds - come quickly to my mind. I had yet to

get into the museum, and the lecture was on the day following my arrival: I was therefore taken around the place first. At one end of the expansive lawns, stood a small open pavilion - a thatched-looking structure -, and as we neared it, with a question rising to my lips, my guide to the premises simply said: "This is a *yajña-śālā*". It was completely unoccupied at this time: a few low platforms lay about; the ground was unpaved; and in one corner, from under a small rock, rose a thin wisp of smoke: the sacrificial fire of the *yajñas* that are performed here from time to time, I was told, is never allowed to go out. It keeps smouldering here, year long, till it is time to light from it the fire for the next *yajña* to be performed. Come that evening, the dust settling in, I sensed some unfamiliar activity around the place, and inquired about it. "It is time for the *Gaṅgā āraṭi*". I was quietly told. A priest had arrived to perform *pūjā* off the sacred river, and, with due permission, I followed him. Standing at the edge of the enormous paved verandah at one level of this residential building, the priest went through his preparation, lit a lamp with several flames, sat down to recite from a text, and then got up, blew upon a conch, and began to wave the lamp with wonderfully rhythmic movements of the hand, all the while chanting a *stotra*-hymn. The sacred river was being offered homage. This goes on here every single day, all the year round, I was told.

But these - whether *yajña* or *āraṭi* - were 'private' events, instituted for themselves by the Poddar family that runs *Jñāna Pravāha*. No one else it, at least needs to be, involved in them. For everyone else, there are all the formal, public activities that the institution funds, runs, and manages. In the gleaming new building designed by B.V. Doshi and named *Pratīchī*, are held seminars and study courses that follow one upon another in quick succession - ranging in theme from Early and Obscure Scripts and Indian Terracottas, to Symbols in Art and Early Mughal Painting -, organized sometimes on its own by the institution, at others in collaboration with other national organizations; a Research Unit manages research projects, one of the more recent ones being the building of a database of sculptures that lie about in the city of Benares, many in private hands, most of them uncared for on street corners; an archival room houses slides and photographs; a bulletin is published with great regularity. For me, personally, it was the new museum/art gallery that held the greatest interest, for in it is now housed part of the Suresh Neotia collection of paintings, and there they all were; Jaina monks holding forth to assemblies, *nāyikās* languishing on moonlit terraces, rulers out hawking with hunting dogs in tow, *Rādhā* turning her face away from *Kṛṣṇa* in simulated anger. There also were old and beautiful terracottas that go back some two thousand years and come

from the region, and designs for wall paintings that still adorn some of the *hāvelīs* of Benares. Unlike the institution which is involved in far too many things perhaps - won't some of them lose focus; research and publication, charities and homeopathic dispensaries, symposia and outreach programmes, all at the same time? - the museum has a manageable collection, not over-ambitious, but focused and inviting. One could spend a great, great deal of time there.

A Lingering Touch

As I was going around the gardens of Jñāna Pravāha, we stopped in front of a tree that was still relatively small. "Do you know what this is?" my guide, the caretaker asked. I didn't. "It is a *darcīnī* tree", he told me; cinnamon, in other words. I had never seen one. Then he took a few leaves, crushed them between his hands, and asked me to smell: the most wonderful fragrance - truly *darcīnī* - came out. Some of that fragrance lingers with me still.

29.1.2004

Courtesy : BNG's columnn "Art & Soul" in **Daily Tribune**, Chandigarh, March 7, 2004