People throughout the world are now becoming conscious of their heritages. And heritage includes a large number of varied things. It may be a special dialect, a dance, a musical tradition or even a hill, a forest, a river. A community’s history can be intertwined with a small local river; a river may represent a country’s tradition. There is no Vedic India without the river Saraswati or a later India without the Ganga. There is no Kalidasa without the Shipra river, no Bhatiali song without the river Padma. Similarly Bengal’s history is linked with Adi Ganga.

As Ganga represents a spiritual, cultural and historical continuity for this country, Adi (Old) Ganga evokes similar feeling for the southern parts of Bengal. People still call it Adi Ganga, the old Ganga River though the official name is Tolly’s Nullah. The river branches out from the Hugli River, the present main course of Ganga flowing on the western side of the city of Calcutta. Kalighat, the city’s religious hub and one of the most important pilgrimage centres in the country, stands on the bank of Adi Ganga. Kalighat predates the city of Calcutta. It had been the main stream of the Ganga flowing towards the Bay of Bengal. The present course of Hugli river was then a part of now defunct Saraswati river (not the vedic one). Adi Ganga flowed southwards to meet Bay of Bengal through the middle of today’s south Twenty Parganas district. In a number of old historical text, a large civilisation near confluence of Ganga had been reported. Gangaridai civilisation has been reported in first century Greek travelogues. In relatively recent times, there were a number of rich towns and religious places on the banks of Adi Ganga. Shri Chaitanya Dev, one of the major religious preachers of eastern India, travelled from north to Orissa through this way. The lower tract of Saraswati was connected (or probably re excavated) with Ganga near Calcutta nearly three centuries ago, to ease the upstream journey of the European merchant ships. This seems to be a major reason of dying of the Adi Ganga stream.

It was revitalised in 1772 by a British Major named William Tolly. He excavated the course to open up the river route connection of Calcutta with the districts of East Bengal. He therefore excavated the old channel towards east to connect it with the Bidyadhari-Matla river system. The channel acted as a major navigation route for next hundred and fifty years. The neglect of waterways in general and other factors like population pressure and unplanned urbanisation etc. caused the silting of Tolly’s Nullah. It ultimately turned into a sewer channel for the southwestern part of Calcutta. The channel which once had a number of bathing ghats, temples, sacred cremation grounds on its banks has now turned into a stinking sewer and source of all kinds of water borne diseases. Unauthorised shanties have been built on both the banks as the city spread southwards. A number of small factories, eateries and residences all dispose their waste of all kinds in to the channel. The waterway is already gasping for life with the human usurpation of its flowing course. At some places the course has totally dried up.

The river has seen many ups and downs in its hundreds years of life but now it is certain of an ignominious death. Metro Rail, city’s new agent for modern transport, has decided to kill it permanently as a river. Metro Rail, the city’s underground railway system, is one of the few institutions of which Calcuttans still can be proud of. It has connected north and south end of the city through a fast rail network. Metro stations are probably the last clean outdoor places in this city. Punctuality, a long forgotten word in the near-socialistic government establishments in this state, has become the hallmark of Metro Rail. So expansion of Metro link has been one of the most popular demand of the people of Calcutta.
And the dream is going to be fulfilled as Metro Rail authority has decided to extend the existing route by another 8.5 kilometer further southeastwards to Garia Station.

The major difference for this new 8.5 kilometer extension will be a totally overground stretch running on an elevated track, quite contrary to the existing underground one. The Tollygunge- Garia section will run over the Tolly’s Nullah. It has been reported that the railway track will be laid over a row of concrete pillars on the bed of Tolly's Nullah. Six out of the seven stations on this new stretch will be elevated stations. This will save Metro Rail from the difficult task of evacuating the squatters and paying compensation. The project will be completed in a shorter time, without much hassles. But this will exterminate the river, robbing its role as a navigable river for good.

Adi Ganga or Tolly’s Nullah has recently become the focus of a number of community environmental initiatives. Shri Rebati Ranjan Bhattacharya has been campaigning for a decade to clean up this river and its banks. He has been a resident along its bank for decades and has witnessed the transformation of a river into a sewer. Tollygunge Development Council, a local welfare organisation, has also raised the issue of cleaning the channel. Considering a letter written by Shri Bhattacharya as a Writ Petition, a case was started in the Green Bench of Calcutta High Court in 1996. The High Court ordered the government to clean the channel and evacuate the squatters along its bank so that the river can be kept clean. It made a powerful committee headed by Chief Secretary of the State for expediting the work. Other members of that committee are the Chief Engineer of Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority, the Commissioner of Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the Secretary of Irrigation and Waterways Department, and people like them.

While the community initiatives to clean this waterway was on, a report “Management of East Calcutta Wetland and Canal Systems” was prepared in March, 1997 under Calcutta Environmental Management Strategy Action Plan (CEMSAP). CEMSAP was a multi-crore environmental planning project of Government of West Bengal, funded by British donor agencies. This report was prepared by some eminent experts in ecology, geography and irrigation engineering. To improve the capacities of existing canals, the report suggested connecting Tolly’s Nullah with the decaying Piyali River as well as the moribund southern part of Bidyadhari River. This will permit controlled release of flushing dose of water from Hugli River into these rivers with a view to improving their cross-sections as well as that of down stream course of Matla River. This means a rejuvenated Tolly’s Nullah can help to make alive the decaying river systems of southern Bengal.

The other important observation of the report was to integrate eco-tourism and economy. It found significant scope of developing the canals for transshipment of both goods and passengers and suggested Tolly’s Nullah to be developed for this purpose. Calcutta has a near circular canal system encircling the city and its neighbourhood. Keshtopur canal on the north which meets Bangar Kata Khal and flows towards east can be connected with the eastern extension of Tolly’s Nullah by just excavating 11 kilometer of new canal. A girdle canal of 42 kilometer long can be created which can be used both for transport and tourism.

In September 11, 1997, American President has issued an executive order for federal support of community efforts along American Heritage Rivers. The new programme called American Heritage River Initiative has the objective to support community based efforts to restore and protect the environmental, economic, cultural and historic value of the rivers. 14 rivers in United States have already been designated as Heritage Rivers based on the community effort and other criteria.

Adi Ganga meets all the criteria for being a Heritage River. It has a historical past linked with local culture and tradition. People still revere it as the original river. There is a strong community effort to rejuvenate the river. The experts have specific plans for its economic and environmental future. But all these may go in vain.

It is now time to raise voice to save the remaining portion of Adi Ganga. If the river can be rejuvenated with Ganga water, this can save the river system of South Bengal also.

Throughout the last decade the authorities in Calcutta have ignored the environmental considerations in the name of developing this city. Eastern part of Calcutta has been opened to unplanned rampant development, brushing aside their own experts' recommendations. After the destruction of the wetlands and open spaces now it is the turn of a river to face the music. Metro Rail authorities seem to follow the same path of bartering the future for a myopic solution of some present problems. And what a river! The Heritage River of the city will be made into a pillar-riddled sewer.

Should culture-savvy Calcuttans silently accept the death of their heritage river?

(Courtesy : Vasudhara Foundation)
A REPORT OF ADIGANGA

At Prayag in Allahabad, the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati (exists only in name) form a braid. Thereafter, the Ganga flows though Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and down Rajmahal in Bengal until it reaches Tribeni. From Tribeni, the Ganga flows in three strands — towards the east in Bangladesh as Yamuna, to the right as Saraswati and midways as Adi Ganga. Past Fort William, Adi Ganga wends its way in the south-easterly direction past Kalighat and Tollygunge and the ancient temple of Karunamayee (rebuilt in recent times) and then turns towards the south. Near Tollygunge is Tolly’s Nullah, which links with Vidyadhar river. Thereafter, Adi Ganga reaches Baishnabghata and then Boral and southwards to Mahamayatala. Leaving Mahamayatala behind, it hits Narendrapur, and the Rajpur, Harinavi, Kodalia, and Changeripota (now Subhasgram) and flows to Mahinagar and Baruipur, and gradually reaches Joynagar and Majilpur. Ultimately, Adi Ganga flows into the Bay of Bengal, and on Sagar island is located the shrine of the sage Kapil.

Years ago, two old maps had been discovered from National Library. The earliest one by the Portuguese, Jao de-Barros, dated back to 1550, and the other by the Dutchman, Van Den Brock was of 1562 vintage. In both maps Adi Ganga was about 3 km wide, and Portuguese pirates used this route to plunder and pillage south Bengal. Pratapadiya held sway over this region. His general, Madan Malla, used to confront these pirates.

The strand of Adi Ganga was known as Jangal and it was down this path that Sri Chaitanya along with four companions trudged from Nabawip to Puri. According to Chaitanya Bhagabat, when he reached Atisara village (now Baruipur) he spent the night (14th Falgun, 1510) singing kirtan in the hut of Sadhu Anantaram. This tradition of singing kirtan continues in Baruipur for 500 years. A temple has come up on this spot.

Thereafter, Chaitanya went southwards and with the help of the fouzdar, Ramchandra Khan (Ghosh) crossed Satamukhi river and reached Puri via Midnapore.

Boral, where a 7th century ironstone (kashtipathar) image of Narayana and a 12th century image of Triprursundari Debi were found; the 13th century Kali temple of Mahamayatala; Madan Malla’s Anandamoyee temple in Rajpur where Bibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyaya had written his Chander Pahar; Nabin Ghosh’s Durga temple in Harinavi; the home of Netaji’s ancestors in Kodalia, which was also the birthplace of M.N. Roy; and Changeripota (Subhasgram) where Netaji’s ancestor, Purandar Khan, had excavated a huge water body in early 16th century.

By 1771, however, Adi Ganga had shrunk and in the surveyor Ranell’s map it is only a faint line. Although the river has dried up, it has left behind several water bodies along its course that still serve as Ganga surrogates. The water of these ponds does not turn putrid for a year. There is no scientific explanation for this.