

Passage 1

Water

- 1 Even in earliest times, people understood the importance of water, and these nomadic people set up temporary shelters near streams, recognising the link between drinking water and life. When they began to live in settled communities, they chose to do so near running water for the same reason. Great civilisations, such as those of Mesopotamia and Egypt, flourished around waterways. Mesopotamia, the so-called cradle of civilisation, was situated between the great Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and used them to irrigate its crops, thus becoming rich through agriculture. Egypt used the Nile to transport huge varieties of goods for trade with other countries, and used to its advantage the fact that the river flooded its banks every year, ensuring fertile agricultural land without the expense of irrigation. In modern times, people created great trading ports – for example Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo – by building them on rivers. 5
- 2 Water featured in the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, who considered it as one of the four elements used to create every living thing, along with fire, air and earth. Water is seen as a purifier in many religions, with ritual washing being incorporated into Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; moreover, stories of floods feature in several religions, where a god or gods used water as a punishment for human misbehaviour or immorality. Water is also integral to various recreational activities, such as swimming, surfing and boating, and many people find that even the sound and appearance of flowing water is relaxing. 15
- 3 Electricity can be generated by water: hydro-electricity, as it is called, has the advantage of being a low-cost, non-polluting energy source, an example of which is the Three Gorges Dam, completed in 2008, which spans the Yangtse river and is the world's largest power station. And of course water is vital for everyday washing and cleaning purposes: how often are morning showers and washing machines taken for granted – yet these consume millions of gallons of water globally each day. 20
- 4 But not everyone is so lucky, and the availability and distribution of water throughout the world is a major social and economic concern. In some parts of the world people do not have access to safe water; drinking contaminated water, or preparing food in it, may lead to illness or even death. Even where safe water exists, it often has to be transported long distances from wells, usually by women or by children. Some countries are particularly susceptible to flooding, which causes homelessness and disease, whereas other countries suffer the opposite problem, a lack of water, or drought, which brings about starvation, misery and displacement of entire communities. Very often the world looks on helplessly as these tragedies unfold, powerless to stop them. As the global population continues to increase from its current seven billion to a forecast nine billion in 2050, the demand for food, and thus for the water needed to produce it, is set to rise proportionally. 30 35
- 5 Steps are being taken to solve these worrying problems. In 2003, the leaders of the world's affluent countries, the G8, made it their policy to halve, by 2015, the number of people worldwide with no access to safe water. The World Health Organisation is working to reduce waterborne diseases in affected countries, and predicts that this policy could prevent the deaths of more than a million children annually. More safe drinking water can be produced by removing salt from sea water; this process, called desalination, is under way in, for example, the United Arab Emirates and Australia. It is expensive because of the huge amounts of energy and specialised machinery required, but it is nevertheless viewed with optimism by many scientists who have made it their goal to provide safe water for every person on the planet. Other countries which are not self-sufficient in water buy it from their more water-rich neighbours, examples of this being Singapore, which buys water from Malaysia, and South Africa, which buys water from Lesotho, provided through the ambitious Lesotho Highlands Water Project. 40 45

Passage 2

A Devoted Son

- 1 When the examination results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them, before taking the good news to his father, Varma, and bowing down to touch his feet. 'I'm at the top of the list, Papa,' Rakesh murmured, after this mark of respect. 'First in the country.'
- 2 Bedlam broke loose then. All day, visitors streamed into the small yellow house to congratulate the parents of this wonderful son, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colours of a festival. There were gifts – clothes, garlands, enough fountain pens to last years, even a few watches – all in a multicoloured whirl of pride and of shining vistas newly opened. So much had been sacrificed to send Rakesh to school, and at last the fruits of the sacrifices had arrived. When the neighbours heard that Rakesh had bowed down to touch his father's feet when he got the results, they shook their heads in wonder and approval at such exemplary filial behaviour. But some said, 'Do you think Varma is giving himself airs? He himself has never even seen the inside of a school.'
- 3 That was only the beginning of Rakesh's success. He won a scholarship, went to university, became a doctor in the most prestigious of hospitals, and even returned occasionally to the small yellow house, where the first thing he did was to bow and touch his father's feet. Rakesh eventually established his own clinic, which he took his parents to see in his new limousine. His mother gloated over the strange fact that he did not marry a foreign girl, but one from his own village, a girl so placid that she settled into the household like a charm, apparently too good-natured to want Rakesh to set up home independent of his parents, as any other girl might have done.
- 4 However, none of this was accomplished in the wink of an eye: it was the achievement of a lifetime. His mother died contented: was it not her own son who looked after her in her last illness? Rakesh's father retired from work and grew old; he developed such mysterious diseases that even Rakesh could not decide when it was something of significance and when it was merely a figment of his father's imagination. Varma had an exasperating habit of stretching out very suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, weeping and wailing, and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, as if to mock their mistaken belief.
- 5 After a while, no-one paid much notice, all except, of course, Rakesh. It was Rakesh who brought Varma his tea in the morning, and who persuaded him to take the evening air out in the garden. All of this was very gratifying for the old man, but then dramatic events ensued. When his son started to supervise Varma's diet – 'Nothing rich, like oil, butter or cream, Papa,' – he stared at Rakesh with a disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? He complained in a martyred tone to his old neighbour: 'That is what it has come to.' If Varma asked for another helping, in a voice which cracked theatrically, Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head. Although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see the cruel smiles she was trying to hide. Varma soon became a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach, but became a regular part of his diet – became his diet, complained Varma with melancholy triumph. Sometimes the hypocritical daughter-in-law would pile up the pillows under his head in a way that made his back ache.
- 6 One evening the limousine drove smartly into the yard and the great doctor stepped out. Ever the devoted son, he went first to the garden where his father sat, stricken, gazing at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air. He did not turn his head to look at his son. 'Papa,' his son said tenderly, reaching out to touch his feet. Old Varma tucked his feet under him, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the evening air.

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