

The myths of the Ravi's treasures

By Majid Sheikh

ONE of the great mystery stories in Lahore is about the River Ravi, which, legend has it, is a treasure trove of unparalleled dimensions, and the secret underground tunnel from the Lahore Fort to the river. Every time a Lahori leaves the city, he relaxes only once he has seen the river. It remains an unprompted response even today.

You might be wondering why the Ravi is "a treasure trove of unparalleled dimensions", a rather colourful description of what has today become merely a small polluted stream in which buffaloes wallow. Instead of the mighty river, there exists an empty dusty desert. Merely looking at it is soul wrenching, and all we do is blame the sins of man for the revenge of nature. The fact is that we have managed our water affairs very badly. The Ravi is a trickle because the Indians have taken our water away... or more accurately, we have agreed that they take our water away. Only when the rivers swell in the monsoons do they let the Ravi rage our way. We only see the rage, not the love, of our lifeline.

The story of the Ravi and its treasures started in the Vedas almost 5,000 years ago, when Ram and Sita, while sitting on the edge of the river at Lahore, described it as the retainer of the largest treasure known to man. That planted the seeds of a belief that exists even today. Since then our forefathers have believed that below the riverbed lie gold and silver, left over the ages by rulers and rich people, fleeing conquerors and invaders. Every time there was a turmoil, rumours of treasures being thrown in the Ravi surfaced. This gave rise to even more fanciful stories, which are even today believed as they are passed on from generation to generation.

The story about a tunnel originating from inside the Lahore Fort going all the way to Jehangir's Tomb, is a wilder version of this tale. Some people still believe that the tunnel went all the way to Delhi. Along this imagined route, it is believed, went most of the treasures when members of the Royal families fled when they were attacked or threatened. During the days of Akbar the Great, descriptions of those days tell us, gold coins were actually recovered from the river. Akbar's father hid them there when he fled Sher Shah Suri. That fired the imagination of the people to such an

extent that during Akbar's days, people actually used to search the dry bed of the river before the monsoon swell.

But another two reasons have added to a renewed interest in searching the dry bed of the Ravi for treasures which, one never knows, might lie there. It is said that in the 1950s, a British company offered to line the sides of the Ravi from the Indian border to ten miles downstream. The idea was the brainchild of the late Mr Zafarul Ahsan. It was supported by a dream to make the river the centre of Lahore, have a massive embankment on both sides and to develop the city in a planned manner.

The company, and documents testify to it, wanted the right to own anything found in the river. This fired the imagination of the bureaucrats who started believing that some treasures existed there. The contract was dropped and with the departure of the late Mr Ahsan, the ancient city of Lahore developed the way it did.

Of late, there have been a lot of people seen digging up the riverbed. Most of them are contracted people selling sand. But one newspaper report says that treasure hunters have started working on the bed. There is one occult 'master' in Mozang who claims he can assist people find such treasures. Suffice it to say many a fool falls for such a scheme. All of which adds to the myth.

But the one about the tunnel right up to Delhi is the best one. We asked the Department of Archaeology for its comments. They said: "A tunnel exists no doubt, but it ends in one corner of the Fort. Having one right up to the river, or even Delhi, is pure fiction. It never existed in history". That was cold water over a beautiful myth. In my youth I asked my father about the tunnel, and he gave me an answer which cannot be reproduced here.

But scientific reality does not seem to matter in such affairs. With time the myths acquire the shape of a 'reality' that one does not feel like challenging. That is the fun of myths. They add to the beauty of life. But there is still hope for those who believe in the tunnel to Delhi theory. The beginning of the tunnel is from somewhere where a really dingy dungeon actually exists. It is a dungeon that needs to be developed into a major tourist attraction. That will certainly add to the myth, to the joy of living in Lahore.