

tutions, is myopic and high-risk. The disastrous consequences of confining a mighty river between walls, along with "riverfront development" in a Himalayan region with moderate-to-high seismic features, have long been evident. Environmental scientists such as Mishra, Himanshu Thakkar, convenor of the New Delhi-based South Asia Network on Dams, River and People, and Subrata Sinha, ex-deputy director-general of the Geological Survey of India, are sceptical of the KRRP.

India's Left parties, ranging from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, consider the Kosi river problem as just one among many. Their election manifestoes for the recent 15th parliamentary polls hardly mentioned the Kosi threat. Unlike activists of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the Indian Maoists tend to circumvent the 400-odd villages in the Kosi-affected regions of Bihar.

Not that there was a dearth of oratory by the official Left after the Kosi disaster; however, by the time the Lok Sabha poll campaigns started rolling in the flood-affected districts, they had muted the volume. A flood itself is not a disaster per se, wrote Mark Schuller in his 'Deconstructing the Disaster after the Disaster: Conceptualizing Disaster Capitalism': "it is political events that make a disaster out of natural phenomena."

In a catastrophe, there are as many actors to hold responsible as there are alibis in defence of major mistakes. For the most part, the state and Central governments and NGOs adopt a fire brigade approach to disasters. The only politician who is remembered – with some reverence – is the late Bhogendra Jha, CPI MP from the region for several decades, who

stood by the people during their riparian miseries.

Thousands of hectares of fertile lands have become arid due to siltation since the mid-1960s. But abject poverty and destitution became the norm only after the embankments were built along the Kosi disregarding warnings from many earth scientists and environmental engineers. Today, Birpur in Supaul district and many parts of Saharsa district resemble deserts, with almost endless silt covering farmlands that grew three crops a year with very little irrigation and without chemicals.

Embankments are no mitigation to the high frequency of floods

along the Kosi basin and its surroundings. All they do is help vested interests build coffers. The Central and state governments and political parties should evolve a participatory and democratic process to ameliorate the disastrous effects of Kosi inundations. Tradition, as ever, remains a pool of knowledge and resources that is hardly exploited. Engineers, contractors and bureaucrats disdain the conclusions of the World Conference on Dams, in which several Indian NGOs have taken part. The tragedy is that while decommissioning of dams is a common agenda abroad, we persevere towards exactly the opposite.

-Sankar Ray

A Dark Mirror

Yesterday's villains are today's heroes

Consider these two characters, from the realm of popular fiction. One is a villain from a 1920s expressionist film. He has elongated hands, with tapering fingernails, and pale, hairless skin. Long, pointed ears extend from either side of his skeletal face. He skulks throughout the film, a predatory glint in his eyes, on the lookout for potential victims. The message is hard to miss – to look at Nosferatu is to look at pure evil.

The other character is of a more recent vintage. His skin, too, is preternaturally pale – but his face and body remind you of the perfection of a Greek *Kouros*. Although he has the looks and vitality of a 17-year-old, he possesses the wisdom and maturity of someone much older.

The differences between these two figures are striking, but there are similarities too. Both Edward Cullen (*Twilight*, 2008) and Nosferatu (*Nosferatu: A*

Symphony of Horror, 1922) prefer darkness to the light, share a taste for blood and are near immortal. They are both vampires. But one is clearly a villain and the other a hero.

The figure of the vampire has evolved since its appearance in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. No longer are vampires an expression of evil and perversity; in numerous works of fiction they are becoming creatures of charm and sophistication with attractive human failings – intriguing figures. They are easy to fall in love with – from Anne Rice's *Lestat* to the Cullen family in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* Series. Now, vampires are rife in popular culture and are turning up in unexpected places – in the children's section of most bookshops, one can expect to find an entire shelf dedicated to Darren Shan's *Cirque Du Freak* series, recounting the trials of a young boy-vampire. In the chick-lit section, one may chance upon the girly, pink covers of the

Undead books: detailing the serial adventures of a pretty, petite, blonde vampire with a penchant for Jimmy Choos.

Yesterday's villains are today's heroes. In the film *Shrek* (2001), Shrek, the ogre, is the hero. Instead of ravaging a beautiful princess, as Ogres are wont to do, he falls in love with her and vice-versa. Her kiss does not transform him into a handsome prince, but rather, changes her into an ugly ogre.

The eccentric, eclectic cast of the *Harry Potter* series offers another example of the same trend. In many respects, *Harry Potter* conforms to the structure of an epic tale. But Rowling's departure from traditional tropes is significant and is responsible for the unparalleled popularity of her series. Many of her heroic characters are the pariahs of yesteryear: mediocre students, irritating know-it-alls, werewolves, ogres and eccentrics. Surprisingly, Rowling's readers empathise with these pariahs.

Today's children seem fed up with princes and princesses. One could argue that the easy access to information, combined with exposure to a variety of different cultural influences and entertainment options has made them a discerning, critical audience. They don't want a formulaic tale; they don't want an ending that can be anticipated. They want a story that transcends all expectations.

But, perhaps there is another reason as well. Today's children and young adults are a product of a post-modern culture. They are confronted by a bewildering variety of choices. They no longer view the world in terms of poles and dualities, black and white. Moreover, in an era where we often look to psychology for answers, children want to understand their heroes and their villains. Simple, moralistic, pedantic tales no longer hold interest. The younger genera-

tion wants complex characters and stories that reflect the uncertainties of growing up in a post-modern, global world that accommodates multiple, conflicting perspectives. Many children – third-culture kids, the offspring of migrants and mixed marriages – are forced to negotiate complex identities and divided loyalties, often finding themselves stranded between multiple cultures, languages, countries and conflicting value systems.

The recent *Star Trek* reboot (*Star Trek*, 2009) offers an interesting case in point. In the original series, the blue-eyed, all-American hero, James T Kirk, captaining a multi-cultural crew composed of the half-alien Spock, the Swahili-speaking Uhura, Russian Chekhov and the Pan-Asian Sulu, emphasised the importance of 'democratic' values and international cooperation in a post-World War II world, shaped by American dominance and the Truman doctrine.

But in the recent film, the focus shifts from the clean-cut Captain Kirk to the saturnine, brooding half-human, half-Vulcan Spock, a role essayed by the Irish-Italian-American Actor Zachary Quinto (himself a child of three different cultural traditions). Spock – torn between cultures, parents, different identities; fighting to control conflicting impulses and pressures – is a figure the children of mixed marriages and migrants can identify with.

But Spock, like Edward Cullen and Shrek, isn't the typical hero. Neither is another hero aimed at an older audience – Ian Rankin's immensely popular detective John Rebus. Rankin's novels reveal the other side to the post-modern world: a world ruled by profits, where businessmen make a nation's economy collapse at the flick of a switch.

Rebus is an archetypal loner: ageing, alcoholic, a divorcee, his

career at a dead end. But, on account of his refusal to accept defeat, he becomes a heroic rebel. Each of Rankin's novels features Rebus attempting to solve seemingly unrelated cases. As the narrative moves along, Rebus, by working his cases in tandem, encounters crime and corruption at the highest level, and exposes an international nexus of criminals, big businesses and politicians.

Rankin's novels are realistic – Rebus' triumphs, at the end of the day, don't measure with the scale of crime and corruption he encounters. But Rebus himself is an appealing figure to those who decry the unfairness of a system governed by the interests of international conglomerates and big businesses, with gangsters and politicians as middlemen. Rebus embodies the frustration and anger of the neglected, the small man lost in the larger scheme of things.

From *Harry Potter* to *Edward Cullen* to *John Rebus*, the world portrayed is experiencing dark, grim times. Times of difficult choices, where truth and reality are hard to discern, where appearances are not what they seem. A time that calls for introspection, demands decisions. A time when voices go unheard, men and women disappear, loves are lost and lives ended. Yet, in the courage and self-knowledge of these heroes, we encounter an image of ourselves, as we want to be. But whether it be horror, chick lit, science-fi, fantasy or thriller; whether the audience intended is adult or child; all these contemporary works reflect, in the different worlds envisioned, similar concerns and issues of identity.

Is this the face in the mirror? Or is it the imagined face seen in dreams and nightmares? The question remains.

-Samhita Arni