

GAṄGĀ - THE STREAM OF LIFE

Dr. B. S. Mehta

सकल कलुष भंगे, स्वर्ग सोपान संगे,
तरल तर तरंगे, देवि गंगे प्रसीद।

(Destroyer of all the sins, forms steps to heaven, with most liquified waves - Goddess Gaṅgā! grant us your benevolence)

All the rivers that flow to merge in the ocean are Gaṅgā, so when we talk of Gaṅgā we include all the rivers of this earth. In fact, when an Indian takes his bath he remembers all the rivers - Yamunā, Godāvārī, Kāverī, Narmadā, Sarasvatī and Sindhu. It is believed that Gaṅgā-water even kept for years, does not become stale. The great grammarian Jayāditya-Vāmana in his Kāśikā Vṛtti on Pāṇini talks about a great fair Gaṅgāmaha. For thousands of years the people of India have taken a dip in Gaṅgā especially in *Kārttika* (Oct. - Nov.). All the events of Hindu life (*saṃskāras*) are associated with Gaṅgā. There is a strong belief that even if you walk a hundred steps repeating the name of Gaṅgā you are absolved of all the sins and you achieve the coveted salvation. Here we can mention that in West there is a belief of 'Original Sin' and this probably has lead to large number of mental diseases and against this the belief that one Gaṅgā-dip washes away all sins can be seen in lower percentage of mental diseases.

The Descent of Gaṅgā : The famous Sanskrit poet Jagannātha in his famous work 'Gaṅgā Laharī' has said "Mother Gaṅgā you came down from heaven so that sinners like me can ascend up." There are a number of stories about the descent of Gaṅgā. In prehistoric times the Himalayan mountains were not born and there was a sea, north of Vindhyas. There rose the Great Mountain range and a fertile land Āryāvarta was born. West side was irrigated by Sindhu and its tributaries, East end had the great river Brahmanada, but the central part, the *Antarvedi* was dry. Somebody rightly remarked, if Gaṅgā had not come, instead of devotees, there would have been camels roaming in the great desert. Again the oceans had dried up and needed water to fill them up. As the stories go, the ashes of sixty thousand sons of King Sagara were lying in *pātāla* (the base of the sea) Bhagīratha's penance succeeded. He brought Gaṅgā on earth, made the central land fertile and filled the seas and got salvation for his forefathers. Like the famous idiom 'Labours of Hercules' we have the saying 'The Efforts of Bhagīratha' meaning accomplishment of impossible tasks.

Sons of Sagara are symbolic of humanity and to bring for them the eternal life, Bhagīratha brought Gaṅgā on earth; 'bhaga' is the solar energy and 'īran' means the inspirer of existence. 'ratha' is the symbol of movement and time is the wheels of the solar chariot. Solar energy heats the sea water, lifts it up as clouds and this Gaṅgā from heaven descends on earth as rain. The trees with myriads of leaves, like Śiva's *jaṭā*, bear the brunt of

the fall. They save the erosion of the soil. So this 'Descent of Gaṅgā' continues all the time. One must understand the warning - 'No trees - there will be erosion - floods and droughts - resulting in the destruction of humanity'.

Symbolic Gaṅgā : Gaṅgā is India and India is Gaṅgā. Gaṅgā is *dharma* (the ethical and moral conduct of man) which certainly does not mean the ways of worship and therefore it is erroneous to translate it in religion. This universe is Gaṅgā, it has the creator Brahmā - symbolised as the *kamaṇḍalu* (the plot), the maintainer Viṣṇu - symbolised as 'origin from feet' and the destroyer Śiva - symbolised as the *jata* in which Gaṅgā is lost. It goes to all the three worlds-Heaven-Earth-Underworld (*pātāla*) and is therefore called *tripathagā*. Gaṅgā is the life line of universe because life is a movement and Gaṅgā means the eternal flow-*gam-gam-move on, move on*. The life-stream emerges from movement, uninterrupted movement and eternal movement. Bhagīratha is *prajāpati* - or the ruler of man - He has to work hard (*tapa*). In the chariot of Bhagīratha, all the gods are sitting - the chariot moves on and on. Therefore, energy (*teja*) of the chariot is Bhagīratha and it comes from Sun, Agni and Indra. Every living being's life force is his penance. This descent of *Prāṇa* Gaṅgā (the river of life) is the '*gaṅgā-avaraṇa*'. This body is Kāśī and knowledge is Gaṅgā so the invisible *Prāṇa* becomes (visible) *vyakta* through the *pañcabhūta* (five elements) *śarīra* (body). Indian culture is symbolised through Gaṅgā, Gāyatrī, Gītā and Gau; where Gaṅgā is purity, Gāyatrī is energy, Gītā is action (*karma*) and cow is economy. Thus, Indian culture is indebted to Gaṅgā in many ways.

Let us examine a few more symbols in the story of the descent of Gaṅgā. Sagara's 60,000 sons are cruel and tyrants, another son Asamañja is a failure, he represents lawlessness and disorganisation. Sagara hands over his kingdom to his grandson Aṃśumāna - he has two tasks to perform - to bring back the sacrificial horse and to arrange for the salvation of his uncles. His son Dilīpa and grandson Bhagīratha carried on the task and finally the success goes to Bhagīratha. Brahmā is represented by Kapila, Viṣṇu by Aṃśumāna and Bhagīratha is Śiva. Thus, Gaṅgā is the true spiritual truth.

Varanasi and Gaṅgā : Varanasi means Gaṅgā, Viśvanātha, Kāśī and *mukti* salvation. Here every ritual begins with Gaṅgā and ends in Gaṅgā. There is a popular saying, "*Gaṅgā nahāye*" (I have had a bath in Gaṅgā), meaning I have finally done my duty and in return I ask for nothing.

A festival, a *saṃskāra*, an important event all mean a bath in Gaṅgā. Interestingly enough Gaṅgā is worshipped with *gaṅgājala* (Gaṅgā water) only.

For a *Banarasi* - Gaṅgā is mother, she is his life. She speaks to him, she sings for him, she awakes for him, she sleeps after he sleeps and when he is in pain or worry, she affectionately takes him in her lap. She enchants wearing the *piyārī* (yellow cloth) but when angry

she becomes Mahākālī (the Goddess of destruction).

It is a firm belief that one who dies in Kāśī his total salvation is assured. This is due to greatness of Gaṅgā and people do not say 'He is dead' but announce that he has '*Gaṅgālābha*' (Grace of Gaṅgā). It is said if one dies in other *tīrthas* (holy places), he is born in Kāśī and then achieves *mokṣa*.

Banarasi has a peculiar philosophy of holistic satisfaction. He has decreased his needs to one fistful of rice and gram, a cup of Gaṅgā water and a permit to stay in the court of the Lord Viśvanātha. 'Bedhaba' the humour-poet, writes - "Never forsake the city of Viśvanātha, for when alive you get *laṅgarā* mango and Gaṅgā after death". Kāśī enlightens you. Kāśī is the *guru*. As we said Gaṅgā washes the sins and there hangs a tale. When Viṣṇu told Gaṅgā to go to earth and wash the sins, she wept and said - 'Do not punish me, the sins will pollute me.' but Viṣṇu assured her that when saints and *ṛṣis* will take bath those sins will be cleansed and you will become pure. Today the Gaṅgā has become polluted because holy people have disappeared. Death in Varanasi is celebrated as *maṅgala*. Here the soul is not destroyed but gets released from the shackles of physical world. Another virtue of Gaṅgā is that a drop of Gaṅgā in any water, it becomes Gaṅgā. In Varanasi, after bath you go up the stairs of *ghat*, which means your mortal existence is lifted up. At the end of stairs there are temples, where resides the Lord - Śiva - the bestower of welfare and if he is pleased you will reach *ānandaloka* (the land of bliss).

The great saint-poet Tulasi says-"Welfare of one and all is the nature of *Surasari* (Gaṅgā)". One may enquire how many Gaṅgās are there in Varanasi. We tried to enumerate some and these are *pañca gaṅgā*, *sapta gaṅgā*, *gūhaṅga gaṅga*; then there are *jñāna-gaṅgā*, *kāvya bhāgīrathī*, *kāla gaṅgā*, *dharma gaṅgā*, *tīrtha gaṅgā*, *kalā jāhnavī*, *utsava gaṅgā*, *bāna gaṅgā*, *saṅgīt surasari*, *mauja-masti kī gaṅgā*, *hāsya gaṅgā*, *seti kī gaṅgā* (Gaṅga free for all) and of course the municipal *kalāvati gaṅgā*.

Gaṅgā in Vedas, Tantra and Vāk : The Vedas do mention Gaṅgā but the most sacred river there is Sarasvatī. That great river dried up but secretly appeared in Prayaga-forming the *Triveṇī Saṅgama* (confluence of three rivers). Thus Gaṅgā in Kāśī has Sarasvatī, the holiest, in it. The Sarasvatī was called *mahārṇava*, life-line, *yajñadhārā*, *Jñānamātā* and inspiring power. Of course this Sarasvatī is nothing but Gaṅgā. The three streams flow through *manas* (mind), life and material. Gaṅgā is the liquid *jñāna* (so it is called *Brahma drava*). They say that there is a *Brahmasara* (cosmic pond) in the mind and from here emerge the three streams - Sarasvatī, Sāvitrī and Gāyatrī. Thus Gaṅgā is the water element of *Soma* and the life stream emerging from the '*jaṭā jūṭa*' of Śiva.

Indian *jñāna* is famous for its '*tantra vidyā*' in which Gaṅgā is the '*Idā nadī*'. Gaṅgā is also called '*vāk*' (the speech). In the *vāk-loka* of Viṣṇu it was *parā-vāk* (the speech of soul),

in the *kamaṇḍalu* of Brahmā it was *paśyantī* (the speech of mind), there on the head of *Yogī Śiva* it became *madhyamā* (the speech of heart) and finally as it emerges from *Gomukha*, it becomes *vaikhari* (oral speech).

The Holy Gaṅgā : On the map Nile, Missisipi, Amazon are called great rivers. May be bigger, but Gaṅgā which travels only 1500 miles, passes through three heavily populated states of India-U.P., Bihar and Bengal. And this belt is thickly populated (thickest in the world). As compared to other big rivers, large number of big cities are situated on the banks of Gaṅgā. Today, Gaṅgā can boast of being the mother of a billion (one *araba*) people. Thus, it is the greatest river on the earth. Many civilizations grew in the river vallies like Nile, Dazla-pharat, and they all vanished but the Gangetic Valley civilization still survives. The secret of this immortality is that we believe that *dharma* is one with many streams. Humanity is one (family of man), Earth is our Mother and through every living being flows a divine stream of consciousness. For Bharatiya it is the '*asmitā*'-the concept of being.

The faith in Gaṅgā is deep and even secular people like Jawahar Lal Nehru have expressed deep faith in this holy river. Bankim the Cometist, the author of *Vandemātaram* got his inspiration from a song of the boatman which says - I think with the power from Durgā, I will quit my Gaṅgā like life.

India had seven Gaṅgās - Gaṅgā, Godāvāri, Yamunā, Narmadā, Sarasvatī, Sindhu and Kāveri. The great river as it descends from the mountains has so many tributaries, many of which are called Gaṅgā and thier confluences are called Prayaga. The main three branches are Bhāgīrathī, Alakānandā and Mandākinī. A fancy name attracts the literary minds and that is Nūpura Gaṅgā - as Viṣṇu lifted his leg towards the sky-Brahmā washed this feet and with these the anklets-the water from the anklets came on earth as Nūpura-Gaṅgā.

There is no end to the story of Gaṅgā, except that today Gaṅgā is in pain. It has beome dirty and polluted, it has become thin and shallow. It is losing its divine curing powers and also the charm in the dark, chemically polluted earth and sky. She needs a cleansing bath but who will do it ?

Mother, you are sick but do accept the obeisance of your son '*Gaṅgu*' (resident of the Gaṅgā Valley).