

Gaṅgā - As Follows In Mahābhārata

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The gods of nature dominating in the Vedic period gradually lost their position and by the time of the **Mahābhārata**, they were humanized to a considerable extent. The new divinities emerged and became stronger and popular than the Vedic gods. The phenomenon applies to Gaṅgā also and her descent from heaven to the earth symbolizes a fall in her rank. She suffered not only from the man-created physical pollution, but also became a victim of several vices as a result of strange legends associated with her. The perusal of the Great Epic **Mahābhārata** unfolds a large number of abnormalities and the river flows rather obliquely.

The Gaṅgā appears in different forms in the **Mahābhārata**, viz. as a sacred river, as a divine nymph or *apsarā*, as a queen and housewife, as a mother, as a teacher and also a cruel folk deity killing her own offsprings. What a contrast in the nature between one form and the other! It appears that several characters have combined into one and these seen integrated at one place and disintegrated at other site. The names of Gaṅgā, as met with in the great work (**Mahābhārata**) are - Gaṅgā, Ākāśagaṅgā, Bhagīrathasutā, Jāhnavī, Bhāgīrathī, Devanadī, Śailarājasutā, Śailasutā, Samudramahiṣī, Tripathagā, Tripathagāminī, etc.

Gaṅgā as River

Being pleased with the long and austere penance of Bhagīratha, the great river Gaṅgā appeared before him in the form of an image.

संवत्सर सहस्रे तु गते दिव्ये महानदी।
दर्शयामास तं गङ्गा तदामूर्तिमती स्वयम्॥

Vanaparva 108.14

Till then, Gaṅgā as river flowed only in sky and she appeared before king Bhagīratha on the Himālaya in form of an image only (*mūrtimatī*). She acceded to his request to descend from the heaven for the benevolence of sixty thousand sons of his grandfather Sagara. Śiva agreed to bear the pressure of the gushing stream of the Devanadī.

धारयिष्ये महाभाग गगनात् प्रच्युतां शिवाम्।
दिव्यां देवनदीं पुण्यां त्वत्कृते नृपसत्तम॥

Vanaparva 109.2

Then descending Gaṅgā was full of fish and crocodiles and became divided into three streams.

The section of Pilgrimage of *Vanaparva* contains several verses in praise of Gaṅgā.

यत्र गङ्गा महाराज स देशस्तत्तपोवनम्।
सिद्धिक्षेत्रं च तज्ज्ञेयं गङ्गातीरसमाश्रितम्॥

Vanaparva 85.97

O King! That region (country) is a centre of penance (*tapovana*) where the Gaṅgā flows and places situated on its bank are to be known wish-fulfilling (*siddhikṣetra*).

‘न गङ्गा सदृशं तीर्थं न देवः केशवात् परः’

Vanaparva 85.96

There is no pilgrim place like Gaṅgā and no god like Kṛṣṇa.

पुनाति कीर्त्तिता पापं दृष्ट्वा भद्रं प्रयच्छति।
अवगाढाच पीता च पुनात्यासप्तमं कुलम् ॥

Vanaparva 85.93

The tribute or praise to Gaṅgā kills sin, the glance at her brings auspiciousness, the bath and drinking her water gives merit of purifying seven generations.

यावदस्थि मनुष्यस्य गङ्गायाः स्पृशते जलम्।
तावत्स पुरुषो राजन् स्वर्गलोके महीयते॥

Vanaparva 85.94

A (dead) person is glorified in the heaven till his bones continue to touch Gaṅgā water. The tradition of immersion of bones or ashes which continues till date marks the beginning of pollution of the pure and sacred water of Gaṅgā.

An interesting description of Gaṅgā is to be seen in the *Bhīṣmaparva*. Accordingly, the river falls from the Meru Mountain with great force in the Candrakunḍa, which was created by Gaṅgā herself (due to the force of the fall); and earlier, she remained confined to the matted hair of Śiva for one lac years (*Bhīṣmaparva* 6.29-31). To the north of Kailāsa is the Maināka Mountain and to the farther northern direction is Hiraṇyaśṛṅga where Bhagīratha practised austerity and Gaṅgā appeared before him in the Bindusarovara (*Ibid.* 43-44). From this pond, the divine Tripathagā diversified herself in seven streams.

वस्वोकसारा, नलिनी, पावनी च सरस्वती।
जम्बूनदी च सीता च गङ्गा सिन्धुश्च सप्तमी॥

Ibid. 48

Some important places associated with Gaṅgā command high esteem and these are Gaṅgādvāra or Haridvāra, Kanakhala, Prayāga and Gaṅgāsāgara (*Vanaparva* 84.35-38 and 85.4).

The merit of bathing and living near Gaṅgā has been elaborately projected in the *Anuśāsanaparva* during the course of conversation of two saints.

ते देशास्ते जनपदास्तेऽऽश्रमास्ते च पर्वताः।
येषां भागीरथी गङ्गा मध्येनैति सरिद्वरा॥

Anuśāsanaparva 26.26

Only those countries, provinces, āśramas, mountains are worthy of mention through which the Gaṅgā flows.

स्पृष्टानि येषां गाङ्गेयैस्तोयैर्गात्राणि देहिनाम्।
न्यस्तानि न पुनस्तेषां त्यागः स्वर्गाद् विधीयते॥

Ibid. 28

Those persons whose bodies get wet in or whose bones are immersed in the Gaṅgā water, they do not fall down from the heaven.

अपहत्य तमस्तीव्रं यथा भात्युदये रविः।
तथापहत्य पाप्मानं भाति गङ्गाजलोक्षितः॥

Ibid. 33

As the sun subdues the dark images in the morning; similarly, one emerges glorified after a dip in the Gaṅgā.

अग्रौ प्रास्तं प्रधूयेत यथा तूलं द्विजोत्तम।
तथा गङ्गावगाढस्य सर्वं पापं प्रधूयते॥

Ibid. 42

As cotton is immediately reduced to ash when thrown in fire; similarly, all sins are instantaneously destroyed after a dip in the Gaṅgā.

अप्रतिष्ठाश्च ये केचिदधर्मशरणाश्च ये।
तेषां प्रतिष्ठा गङ्गेह शरणं शर्म वर्म च॥

Ibid. 45

Even those who have no base or religion are protected by Gaṅgā as under armour.

यथा सुराणाममृतं पितृणां च यथा स्वधा।
सुधा यथाच नागानां तथा गङ्गाजलं नृणाम्॥

Ibid. 49

As the gods long for nectar, ancestors long for oblation and the *nāgas* aspire for *sudhā*; the same significance is of Gaṅgā water for the people on earth.

स्वायम्भुवं यथा स्थानं सर्वेषां श्रेष्ठमुच्यते।
स्नातानां सरितां श्रेष्ठा गङ्गा तद्वदिहोच्यते॥

Ibid. 51

As the *Brahmaloka* excels all the regions; similarly, Gaṅgā surmounts all the rivers for bath.

जाह्नवीतीरसम्भूतां मृदं मूर्ध्ना बिभर्ति यः।
बिभर्ति रूपं सोऽर्कस्य तमोनाशाय निर्मलम्॥

Ibid.55

One, who puts the clay from Gaṅgā on his forehead, dispels all darkness like the sun and becomes pure.

न सा प्रीतिर्दिविष्टस्य सर्वकामानुपाशनतः।
सम्भवेद् या पराप्रीतिर्गङ्गायाः पुलिने नृणाम्॥

Ibid. 60

The joy and bliss, which one gets while living on the Gaṅgā bank, are not obtained in the heaven although enjoying all pleasures.

There are seventy-seven verses in the praise of Gaṅgā in the 26th chapter of *Anuśāsanaparva (Dānadharmaparva)* and only a few have been cited here.

Gaṅgā as Nymph

Gaṅgā has been projected as a nymph who behaved rather indecently in the assembly of Brahmā and her action is criticized by all except Mahābhiṣa. Both of them were cursed by Brahmā to fall from grace and be born on earth. Curiously enough, although Gaṅgā behaves like an *apsarā*, yet she is mentioned as river. This indicates that both natural and anthropomorphic characters were being combined.

अथ गङ्गा सरिच्छ्रेष्ठा समुपायात् पितामहम्।
तस्या वासः समुद्भूतं मारुतेन शशिप्रभम्॥

Ādīparva 96.4

The noble river Gaṅgā came to Brahmā and her moonlight like white garment slipped upward.

ततोऽभवन् सुरगणाः सहसावाङ्मुखास्तदा।
महाभिषस्तु राजर्षिरशङ्को दृष्टवान्नदीम्॥

Ādīparva 96.5

All the gods present immediately turned their face but Rājarsi Mahābhiṣa continued to see the divine river rather passionately.

Naturally, this incurred the curse of the Prajāpati and she came down on the earth. The eight Vasus, who were also cursed by sage Vasiṣṭha (as a result of stealing the cow Nandinī) to be born on the earth, requested Gaṅgā to be their mother.

Gaṅgā as Queen or Lady

Falling on earth she saw king Pratīpa, who was meditating at Gaṅgādvāra (Haridvāra), and assuming the form of a beautiful lady, sat on his right thigh with the

inclination of marriage with him. This strange gesture was not appreciated by the great king. He, however, advised her to be her daughter-in-law as the right thigh is reserved for son, daughter and daughter-in-law. Only the left thigh is to be used by the wife (*kāminī* (*Ādīparva* 97.1-10)). She then had to wait for the birth of his son Śāntanu and married him with certain conditions.

Seven sons were born and they were immediately thrown into the water one by one. These were the seven Vasus who longed for quick relief from the curse of Vasiṣṭha. Śāntanu aspired for a son to be the heir and was much perturbed to watch the strange action of Gaṅgā, drowning the sons in her own water. But he was not supposed to oppose as per the terms of the marriage. This action of Gaṅgā projects her as a cruel folk water deity, although the background of curse is very much there. He lost patience when the eighth child was to be born and expressed his grief. Gaṅgā agreed to nourish the babe, but announced her disassociation with the king as per the marriage contract. The last son was Bhīṣma, also known as Gaṅgādatta, Gaṅgāputra or Devavrata (*Ādīparva* Ch. 98-99).

Gaṅgā herself confesses that she was the most befitting person to be the mother of eight Vasus and no other.

मद्विधा मानुषी धात्री लोके नास्तीह काचन।

Ādīparva 98.20

Bhīṣma was not only given birth by Gaṅgā, but she took great pains in shaping him as the most talented, learned and the greatest warrior of the age (*Ādīparva* 100.34-39). After handing over the illustrious boy to Śāntanu, she disappeared. Bhīṣma often goes to her to seek counsel in distress and she expresses her displeasure, when he waged a battle with Paraśurāma (*Udyogaparva* 178.86-88). When Bhīṣma was lying on the bed of arrows, she advised seers to go to him and listen to his discourses and he did so explaining different aspects of polity, social order, religion and spirituality (*Bhīṣmaparva* 119.97-98).

The human character of Gaṅgā is further indicated, as she is known as the daughter of Jahnu, i.e. Jāhnavī.

तस्य पुत्रो महानासीज्जह्नुर्नाम नरेश्वरः।
दुहितृत्वमनुप्राप्ता गङ्गा यस्य महात्मनः॥

Anuśāsanaparva 4.3

This episode is much earlier than that of Śāntanu as Jamadagni and Viśvāmitra were also later born in the same family. In the *Ādīparva* (99.4), Gaṅgā is mentioned as the daughter of Jahnu (Jāhnavī) but no further details have been furnished. There is a big span of time between the two episodes and the association of one with other is difficult to assess; but for one reason or the other, the two characters seem to be amalgamated.

This appears to be a literary adulteration at certain stage, which gained footing in the times to come, particularly due to Puranic convention of textual narration.

Gaṅgā had to face the problem of pollution for the birth of Skanda, Kārttikeya or Kumāra as a strategy to kill the demon Tāraka. She sustained the semen of Śiva on the request of Agni. In this drama, she behaved just like a conceived woman and was much frightened to hear the horrible sound produced by a demon (*Anuśāsanaparva* 85.56-59). Ultimately, some sort of abortion took place.

सा वह्निना वार्यमाणा देवैरपि सरिद्धरा।
समुत्ससर्ज तं गर्भं मेरौ गिरिवरे तदा॥

Ibid. 68

Although she was being persuaded by the gods to sustain that conception, yet she released it on the mountain Meru.

When Kumāra was born, all the gods presented some gift and Gaṅga presented a water vessel (*Śalyaparva* 46.50).

On the death of Bhīṣma, Gaṅgā expressed her deep grief.

अश्म सारमयं नूनं हृदयं मम पार्थिवाः॥

Anuśāsanaparva 168.25

अपश्यन्त्याः प्रियं पुत्रं यत्र दीर्यति मेऽद्य वै॥

Anuśāsanaparva 168.26

My heart is really made of stone and iron that it is not broken even after seeing the dead body of my dear son. Both Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa consoled her at length (*Anuśāsanaparva* 168.30-35). She then retired into the water (*Ibid.* 36).

When the Vasus came to know about the passing away of Bhīṣma, they assembled at the bank of Gaṅgā to curse Arjuna, who was the cause of his death. Gaṅgā consented with their determination (*Āśvamedhikaparva* 81.13-15).

To conclude, Gaṅgā manifests herself in multiple forms in the **Mahābhārata**. It certainly flows as the most important and sacred stream emerging from the Himālaya and terminating her journey in the Gaṅgāsāgara. At the same time, she plays the role of a deity, a nymph behaving somewhat abnormally, a cruel folk mother-goddess dipping her own children in the water and a brilliant and kind mother of Bhīṣma. She faces some odds and carries the womb rather unwillingly and later releases it. The pollution of Gaṅgā, which has reached the stage of the national catastrophe at present, is seen reflected in microform in the Great Epic. Gaṅgā stream has so many currents and crosscurrents and longing for a deep dip, one feels sometimes amidst a whirlpool.