Chapter I

Sources

The Ganges and the Yamuna occupied a very important place in the history of this country. They have been considered as the life-giving rivers ever since the dawn of civilization. It was in their valley that one of the earliest civilizations of the world sprang up, and that some of the highest ideas of human civilization were preached and practised. Indian culture as developed in the Valleys of the Ganges and Yamuna came to be regarded as the highest and the best in India. As such, Indian culture came to be symbolised by these two rivers.

Both rivers came to be regarded as divine. They have been described both in river as well as in human forms in Sanskrit literature. Many mythological stories were invented to bring about their significance. In fact, these stories should not be regarded as pure fiction. They preserved in them veiled references to the circumstances in which the Ganges came into existence as well as its subsequent course of history.

The vast mass of Sanskrit literature containing allusions to the origin and history of the twin rivers can be classified under two categories:

1. Religious literature
2. Secular literature
Religious literature.

Veda.

In Vedic literature the stories regarding the origin of the Gaṅgā are not found. In the tenth mandala of the Rāyeda, the Nādi-Sūkta contains mention of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. At another place the word 'Gaṅgyā' has been used as an adjective of the Urukaksha.

In later Vedic literature, however, the mention of the Gaṅgā, BhagIratha, Kayila, Jahnu, Sāntanu and Gautama, etc., is found.

Rāmāvana.

In the Vālmiki Rāmāvana the birth of Kārtikeya and the descent of Gaṅgā from the heaven on the earth by the efforts of BhagIratha are described. Ṛshi Visvāmitra is said to have told these stories to Rāma and Lakshman. The first story is found before the second one as a background. The Vālmiki Rāmāvana also deposes that while crossing the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā on her way to the forest, Sītā promised to propitiate both the river goddess with numerous gifts, should they ensure her safe return along with Rāma and Lakshman to Ayodhyā.
In this work the origin of the Gaṅgā by the efforts of Bhagîratha is mentioned in a different way. The story regarding the origin of the Gaṅgā is described by Vasishṭha at the request of Rāma. In the Rāmāyana, however, the story is told by Viśvāmitra.

**Mahābhārata.**

The stories regarding the Gaṅgā are found in the Mahābhārata also. According to the first story the Gaṅgā came on the earth as the result of the curse of Brahmā and there she got married to Sāntanu. Gaṅgā gave birth to Bhīṣma. She helped Bhīṣma in his fight against Parasurāma and cursed Ambā. Again when Bhīṣma was lying on the arrows after his final battle with the Pāndavās, she sent munis to see him in the guise of rese. She cried bitterly on the death of Bhīṣma. according to the second story of the Mahābhārata, the Gaṅgā came here on the earth for the welfare of the people due to Bhagîratha's penance. The deity-cum-river form of the Gaṅgā is represented in this story. The representation of the Gaṅgā as a river is also depicted in Anuśāsana Parva. The seven streams of the Gaṅgā are mentioned in the Bhīṣma Parva.
The birth story of Kārtikeya is mentioned at three places. At the first place the story is related to the origin of gold and at the second place in the context of the death of Tārakāsura. At the third place the event regarding the birth of Kārtikeya is mentioned by the Gaṅgā.

Purāṇas.

The commentator of the Vishnu Purāṇa Śrīdhara Svāmī has expressed his view that this Purāṇa is the oldest of all the Purāṇas. According to this Purāṇa other Purāṇas are mentioned in the following chronological order: Brahma, Padma, Vishnu, Śaiva, Bhāgavata, Nārada, Nāraka, Agni, Bhavishya, Brahma-Vaivarta, Līlā, Varāha and Skanda. Except Devibhaṅgavata, the Brahma, Padma, Bhāgavata and Nārada Purāṇas, among some others, have given the same order of the Purāṇas in a chronological sequence as Brahma, Padma, Vishnu and Śaiva etc. Jwalaprasad Misra, Dr. Rama Shankar Bhattacharya and Śrīkrṣṇa Kani Tripathi have accepted the same chronology of the Purāṇas. The Hari-varṇa Purāṇa is considered to be the gist of the Mahābhārata. So it is placed first of all.

In the Purāṇas vivid accounts of the origin of the Gaṅgā are found. In the Hari-varṇa purāṇa the
The Bhagiratha-story is mentioned, in the context of the description of the character of king Sagarā. Here the story is more brief than that in the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata.

In the Brahma Purāṇa the Bhagiratha story is narrated at two places. The first story simply alludes to the origin of the Gaṅgā, while the second story gives a detailed description. The gods arranged the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī so that the son born of them might kill Tāraka who had made the life of the gods miserable. The birth of Kārtikeya was also sought for the purification of Brahmā. Brahmā with the water received from Śiva washed the second step of Vishnu, reaching the Brahmaloka (heaven) at the time of the Bali episode. The story goes that at the time of the washing of the foot, a stream of water flowed down from the toe of Vishnu, and went into the matted hair of Śiva. A portion of the stream was brought down on the earth by Gautama and another by Bhagiratha. Chapter 188 of this Purāṇa mentions the story of Kārtikeya, but it contains no reference to the Gaṅgā. Later, Chapter 192 of the same work contains a description of the reception of Gaṅgā by Samudra and her entering into it. After that there is a short description of the Gautami-Gaṅgā. This Purāṇa describes the birth of Ādvinī Kumāra as well.
The origin of the Ganga on earth has been described almost in all Puranas with slight variations. The Devi Bhāratīya Purāṇa describes Gaṅga as the wife of Māraṇa, thus placing her in the company of Lakṣmi and Sarasvatī. The same source informs us that as the result of a quarrel among these three co-wives, they cursed each other and consequently had to leave heaven and descend on earth. Almost similar story is found in Brahma-Vaivarta Purāṇa. Other Purāṇas like Vāyu, Nātysa, Ekaṇārādīya Purāṇa, etc., also contain allusions to the Gaṅga and sometimes also to the Yamunā.

The Harivarṣa Purāṇa may be assigned to the close of the fourth century A.D. Since the Vāyu Purāṇa has been referred to in Harivarṣa Purāṇa, the former may be placed earlier than the latter. Roughly speaking, both the Vāyu and Nātysa Purāṇas may be placed about the end of the third century or little later. The Bhāratīya Purāṇa may be put around 500 A.D. The Ekaṇārādīya Purāṇa is one of the late Purāṇas and may roughly be assigned to the ninth century A.D.

The minor cults like those of Śūrya, Ganeśa and Gaṅga do not figure as popular cults in the Harivarṣa Purāṇa. These are the products of the later periods and have been allude to in the later Purāṇas. However, the
Later Purāṇas betray enormous popularity enjoyed by the Gaṅgā-cult. The Gaṅgā has always been described by the Purāṇas as a divine river, capable of emancipating the people from sin. According to the Bṛhaddevata, Gaṅgā was even worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu and Śiva. The Bṛhannāladiva gives a vivid account of the Bhakti cult around Gaṅgā.

Even the secular literature of our country contains profuse references to the Gaṅgā and the Yaumā. In this regard, works of Kālidāśa, Viṣeṣhadatta, Bīrnāgāchārya, Phoja, Bhavabhiṣṭi, Jayadeva and Khalana deserve special mention. They were written at different times between the fifth and the twelfth centuries.

We have not included Buddhist and Jaina works in our sources of study for the simple reason that, as a general rule, they do not describe the Gaṅgā and the Yaumā either as divine rivers or as deities in their pantheon, for obvious reasons. Yet we find that a few of these works have referred to the sacred and divine character of these rivers under the impact of Hinduism. The Buddhist Majjhima-Nikāya and Jaina Mahāprāna provide typical examples of such works.

Ancient Indian inscriptions contain useful material for the study of our subject. The Allahabad pillar inscription of Sāmudrakumāra refers to the Gaṅgā as having
descended from the locks of Śiva. Similar story is preserved in the Mândasar inscription. The story of how Bhirāratha, as a result of his great penances, made Ganga descend on earth is contained in the Kanyākumārī inscription of Rajendra Chola. The Udaipur inscription, the Kondedda grant of Dharmaśāla, the Ablur inscription of Vikramaśīla VI and the Nalanda copper plate of Divapīlādeva, to mention only a few, speak of Ganga along with Śiva. On the other hand, the Nandurup plate of Rajendra Chola describes Ganga as having originated from the foot of Viṣṇu.

The inscriptions describe the important towns situated on the banks of the Ganga, made sacred by the waters of that divine river. Such towns were Hardwar, Vārāṇasī, Prayāga, Gāhā Sāvara and many others. Even some Jaina inscriptions, for the instance, the Ḥunasi-Madarali inscription, allude to the holy character of the twin rivers and of the towns like Prayāga and Vārāṇasī, situated either on their confluence or on the banks of either of them.

A dip in the Ganga followed by religious gift had come to be regarded as meritorious. This is brought out by a number of inscriptions, such as Arasibidi inscription of the reign of Somesvara I, Allahabad Museum Plate of
The practice of committing religious suicide in the Gaṅgā has also been alluded to in the inscriptions. According to the Anhsad inscription, Kumāragupta had burnt himself to death at holy Prayāga. Daruvā and Dhānya had committed suicide at Prayāga by drowning themselves in the Gaṅgā. Kālachuri Gāṅgeyadeva Vikramaditya did the same thing along with his 100 wives. The Asankhali plate of Nārasiṃha II describes a religious gift made by the king in the Gaṅgā temple at Bhairavapur, Orissa.

The importance of Gaṅgā did not escape the attention even of the foreign visitors. Megasthenes describes Gaṅgā as a holy river. Curtius Rufus Quintus has also alluded to the origin of the Gaṅgā. Strabo has included the Gaṅgā among the popular deities, who were worshipped by Indians. Pseudo Kallethanes has referred to the descend of Gaṅgā from heaven. Yuan Chwang has described Gaṅgā as a holy river and has referred to the practice of committing suicide at Prayāga. I-Sting has said the same thing. Alberuni was familiar with the practice of committing religious suicide in this holy river.

With the establishment of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā
as divine rivers in the popular thought, it was but natural that they came to occupy a prominent place in the idiom of art. Right from the Indus Valley Civilization unto 1200 A.D. Indian artists, Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina alike, vied with each other in sculpturing the figures of Ganga and Yamuna in different moods and shapes on the doorways of their temples. The earliest sculptural representation of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā is provided by the Mohenjodaro seal. The Bharhut and Sāñchi stūpas representing the Śunga art herald the advent of the figures of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā in Indian art. The Gaṅgā-Yamunā motif was immediately adopted by the artists of Mathurā and Amaravati. With the Purānic religions gaining unprecedented importance from the Gupta period onward the figures of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā started appearing on the doorways of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina temples. The artists started narrating on stone the mythological stories regarding the descend of the Gaṅgā on earth. Such sculptural narrations are encountered to name a few, at Udayaṇi, Pajasanā, Elephantā, Tiruchirāpalli, Mahābalipuram, Patṭaḍakala, Ellorā and Gaṅgaikondacholapuram.

By the time of the Gupta period the popularity of Gaṅgā increased so much that she was given a place of honour even on some coins. In this regard, the coins of the Bhāraśīva Nāgas and the Vākātakas as well as of Samudra-gupta I are among the important sources of our study.