

# GAṄGĀVATĀRA IN THE TEMPLES OF RĀMA

## Abstract:-

The Gaṅga, Rāma and the Indian epics are inseparable. The Descent of Gaṅgā from the celestial world to the earth is a celebrated episode in the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. The theme was brought under the head of śilpaśāstra in course of time and was famous as Śiva-Gaṅgadharamūrti [1].



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## Keywords:

Gaṅgāvatāra , Temples  
of Rāma , pitāmaha-Bhīṣma ,  
metaphorical equitation .



## INTRODUCTION

Iconographic representations of the theme appear in the arts of the Pallavas of Kāñci, Calukyas of Badāmī, Pāññas of Maturai and the Rāññakūñs of Manyakhed. An elaborate version of the mythology is told in the Mahābhārata, which says the pitāmaha-Bhīñma was the son of GaṄgā born to Santanu of the Candravañśa (the Lunar Race). The present article traces the history of GaṄgā. She is the mother of rivers in India as viewed from the Great Indian epics, and presents a glimpse of its reflection in the early medieval art of South India. The GaṄgā, Sindhū and Brahmaputra are the sacred rivers of the subcontinent that finds their source of origin in the high Himālayas and cater to the needs of South Asian countries, including China. This event appearing in the Rāmāyaṇa and linked with the myth of Rāma was inducted in the temples of Rāma during the early and later medieval periods in South India, particularly Tamilnadu (e.g. Bhagiratha's Penance in Māmallapuram).

## GAṄĀ IN THE EPICS

The story of GaṄgā is elaborated by sage Viśvāmītra to Rāma on their way to the Siddhāśrama. The brahmaññ with the permission of Daśaratha takes the princes of Ayodhyā to the forest in order to do away the demonic pest, Tādākā et alii. Sage Viśvāmītra with the princes of the Solar Family reaches the River Sona and then the GaṄgā. This perhaps is the first sight of the GaṄgā that Rāma enjoys. Having rested during the previous night, Viśvāmītra finds Rāma sleeping and requests him to get up[2]:

Suprabhātā niśā Rāma pūrvā sandhyā pravartate/  
Uttiññotiññha bhadrāñ te gamanāyābhirocaya//[3]

They complete the early morning calls, and the sage tells the story of the GaṄgā to scions of the race of Raghu, Rāghava-Rāma[4]. Viśvāmītra says GaṄgā and Umā were the daughters of Himavān (the Himālayas) and Menā (daughter of Meru). Both were married to Śiva. GaṄgā has three courses of celestial and earthly movement; viz,

- i) Moving toward the sky, Ākāśa-GaṄgā
- ii) Moving toward the heaven, Mandākinī (equated with the Milky Way)
- iii) Earthly stream, the GaṄgā that removes all sins on earth.

Perhaps these three are the metaphorical equitation of the GaṄgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī meeting at Prayāga[5].

The important myth from the Rāmāyaṇa point of view is that GaṄgā came to be associated with kings of the Solar Race. Following Ikñvāku generations later a king called Satyavrata or Triśāñku ruled the earth. Nine generations after him came Sāgara and two generations later Dilīpa and Bhāgīratha. Sixteen generations later came Raghu > Aja > Daśaratha > Rāma > Kuśa. The Solar

Race continued for twenty-nine generations more[6]. King Sāgara undertook an aśvamedha-yāga. Due to the curse of sage Kapila the 60,000 sons of Sāgara were burnt down by his fiery eyes.

The Rāmāyaṇa begins the story of GaṄgā with the birth of Kārttikeya (Bālakāññ, Sargas 36-37). Umā, the Earth (Bhū), Agni, GaṄgā and the six

Kñtikās are associated with the incarnation of Kārttikeya, the fire-born and nursed by the Kñtikā Mothers. The events in order go as follows:

- i) Śiva's sexual play on the Himālayas with Umā that leads to erection in orgasm,
- ii) Śiva's seed is deposited on earth, and gets solidified (leading to the formation of mines of gold, silver, copper, tin and so on),
- iii) Agni carries the virulent seed and deposits in the GaṄgā, the child is born, GaṄgā is the cosmic womb, Hirañyagarbha[7],
- iv) The Kñtikās nurse the child.

According to the Mahābhārata ('Ādi Parva', Chaps. 98, 100) King Santanu falls in love with GaṄgā. Bhīñma was born to them. He vowed to follow celibacy and so another river-woman called Satyavati gets married to Santanu and propagates the Candravañśa. To this lineage belong the Pāññavas and Gauravas.

Coming back to the Rāmāyaṇa (Bālakāññ, Sargas 38-44), King Sāgara undertook an aśvamedha-yajña. Sāgara was "jewel among men", Puruññabha (ibid. Sarga 38, v. 7), whose two wives were Keśinī (daughter of Vidarbha), and Sumati (Garuñña's sister). Sumati gave birth to 60,000 sons. They conducted the sacrificial horse of Sāgara. Indra secretly transported the horse to the netherworld where sage Kapila was doing penance. The sons of Sāgara mistook Kapila for stealing the horse and took him to task.

The enraged Kapila burnt them to ashes; the Rāmāyaṇa says the sage uttered hūm in anger that reduced all the 60,000 to ashes. The ashes of the forefathers of Bhagīratha lay in the netherworld, having offered no pitṅkarma or funeral rites. Having known this curse on their family, Bhagīratha undertook a severe austerity to bring Gaṅgā to the earth in order to purify the cursed souls. The custom of immersing the asti of pitṅ is a time immemorial custom for which codes of conduct (śrāddha) are prescribed in the gṅhyasūtras. Pleased with his austerities, Gaṅgā agreed to flow on earth. Śiva contained her in his matted locks. Gaṅgā was permitted to flow from the tiara of Śiva, called Bindusarovara that branches into seven streams to flow on earth. The waters drenched the netherworlds and thus brought mokṅ to the sons of Sāgara[8].

The myth of Gaṅgā and the art history of India are interwoven like warp and woof. The great dynasties of the subcontinent were found on the banks of the Gaṅgā and great battles were fought; e.g. Pṅhvīrāja Cauhan (1192 CE, see Hutchinson's History of the Nations, I, fig. facing p. 147). The Gaṅgā is unforgettable. A touching event that took place in yester days was that Narendra Modi after election in the Vārāṅsī constituency paid his respects to the Gaṅgā, the Mother of Hindusthān. The present article is not concerned with the political overture of the River Gaṅgā and wants to consider the religious Mother Gaṅgā reflected in the visual arts during the early medieval period (c. 550-850 CE). Gaṅgā is associated with the Trimurti in Hindu tradition, i.e. Brahmā, Śiva and Viṅṅu[9]. However, in iconographical themes Gaṅgā is associated with Śiva either as his consort or paramour.

### GAṄĀVATĀRA IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ART

Not less than eighteen specimens on the subject have been reported in early medieval art[10]; Upper Deccan 5, Lower Deccan 1 and the Far South 12. Among these the most copious is the open air bas relief, called Bhagīratha's Penance or Arjuna's Penance, and two-in-one[11].

The outstanding among the Gaṅgāvātāra sculptures is from Māmallapuram, the open air bas relief close to Kṅṅa-maṅṅa. It should have been a center of the Rāma and Kṅṅa cult in those times. This bas relief is a masterpiece that purports to illustrate Bhagīratha's Penance and the Birth of Gaṅgā as told in the Rāmāyaṇa. Viśvāmitra tells this story to Rāma on their way to the Siddhāśrama where Tāṅkā had to be tackled (Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa, Sarga 35). Its replica is present in the Virūpākṅ temple at Pattadakal (cf. Kalidos 2006: Vol. I, pl. LXV; Vol. II, pl. LXVI-LXVII). Māmallapuram and the nearby Tiruviṅṅtai were the early centers of Rāma cult as the venue came to be called Ardha-Setu from where Rāma is said to have meditated building a causeway to Laṅkā.

However, the most realistic picture is obtained in the Rāvaṅapaṅi cave temple in Aihole. This rock-cut temple on a small outcrop of a hillock in the Aihole village faces southwest[12]. It seems the cave is incomplete or dilapidated as the excavation on the right side (opposite the classical Naṅśa and dancing Mātṅkas) would suggest. An image of Gaṅgāvātāra appears in the cave, which has no parallel thematically when compared with other monuments of the age. Śiva is found in the middle with Gaṅgā as tripathāka descending on his matted locks. Śiva is samapāda-sthānaka with the left arm in ūruhasta mode.

Umā stands to his left in dvibhaṅga mode. Bhagīratha is to the right lifting the right leg in ūrdhvajānu and hands lifted up and engaged in an arduous penance. The faces of Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī are shown above the head of Śiva who presumably descend on Śiva seeking shelter in the Bindusarovara as said in the Rāmāyaṇa[13].

The other conspicuous images of the type appear in the Ādivarāha-Viṅṅu-gṅha in Māmallapuram, called Ardha-Setu (equal of Rāmeśvaram), the Tiruccirāppaṅ Upper Cave, Tirukōkarṅam[14] cave and so on. The Tiruccirāppaṅ image thematically deviates from Aihole. Gaṅgā is fitted on the right parahasta. She is in añjalibandha mode. The Tirukōkarṅam image finds Gaṅgā on the left side of Śiva's head[15]. Gaṅgā is in añjalibandha and seeking shelter on the Bindusarovara. Later Medieval Reflections

The theme got popularized in the later medieval art of South India of which a systematic survey may have to be undertaken. The Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham (Kalidos 1989: 309) reports eight rare images. It is interesting to find that Umā is always by the side of Śiva. Śiva permits Gaṅgā to descend on him without the knowledge of Umā. The Lord is enamoured of the beauty of Gaṅgā. Few illustrations show Śiva lifts up one of the rear arms and inserts it into the yoni of Gaṅgā. Thus a ray of eroticism peeps into the iconography of Gaṅgādhara in later medieval art (Kalidos 1986: 79-80, fig. 1).

Gaṅgāvātāra is not merely a literary motif. It has inspired seers, sages, poets, emperors and kings for several thousands of years. Men may come and men may go, the Gaṅgā goes on forever.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The iconography of this form is enumerated in the Sakaladhikāra (Chap. 10, v. 11) of Agastya, Sārasvatīyacitrakarmasāstra (Chap. 29, vv. 2-5) and Kasyapaśilpāsāstra (Paṅṅam 69, vv. 6-7). See also Raju Kalidos, 'Tantric Interaction with the Development of Hindu Iconography in Tamilnadu', Tamil Civilization, Vol. 4: 1-2 (1986), pp. 77-85.

2. Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa, Bālakāṇḍa (Gita Press: Gorakhpur 2001) Sarga 35, v. 2.  
 3. This śloka provides the starting point for the Suprabhātam of Veṅkaṇeśvara recited endlessly in the Tirumala hills:

Kausalyāsuprajā Rāma pūrva sandhyā pravartate/  
 Uttiṇṇa naraṇḍūla kartavyaṇ daivamāhnikam//

This verse occurs in the Rāmāyaṇa (Bālakāṇḍa, Sarga 23, v. 2). The Kulacēkara Āṇār's Perumāṇ Tirumoṇi (v. 1) begins with a similar intonation in the hymn:

Mannupukaṅkōcalai tan maṇivayiṇi vāyttavanē...  
 Ennuṇiya innamutē Rākavanē tālēḷō.

4. Gaṅgā twice appears in the Rgveda (Dowson 1998: 108). Sarasvatī (“watery”, “elegant”) was most sacred to the early Āryans. She was identified with Vach/Vākdevī (Goddess of Speech) in the Brāhmaṇas and Mahābhārata (Ibid. 284-85). See note 5. Dr S. Rajaram (QJMS, 105:1, 1914, p. 1) finds the origins of Indian civilization on the banks of River Sarasvatī c. 5000 BCE, anterior to the Indic/Indus urban culture. Interestingly, Rāma's birth is dated in 4342 BCE (Vasiṇṇa 5701, Viśvāmitra 5601) by D.S. Trivedi 1956: 75-84. N.Mahalingam ed. 1996: 1 dates Rama in 4439 BCE. Prof. Rajarajan told me in an interview at least in Indian textbooks these dates should be inserted by way of comparison of a contrast.

5. Otherwise called Ilāhābād (ila or illa[i] in Malayāṇṇm and Tamil means “no”, “not existing”), it is the meeting place of sādhus in tens of thousands during the 'Kuṇṇ bhamela' festivals. Called Triveṇiśaṅgama, the Gaṅgā and Yamuna meet at the venue, and Sarasvatī joins them flowing underground. It is an enchanting sight to view the huge concourse of sacred water at Triveṇiśaṅgama. Cf. S. Srinivas, 'Need to set right Historical Fallacies', The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society, Vol. 105: 1 (2014), pp. 1-12) recalls the glories of the forgotten Sarasvatī culture.

6. John Dowson, A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology & Religion (Rupa: Calcutta 1998), p. 313. Vettam Mani (Purāṇic Encyclopaedia, New Delhi 1996, pp. 113-14) gives a different genealogy and includes Hariścandra. See F.E. Pargiter, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition (Motilal Banarsidass: Delhi 1972 [1922]), passim.

7. The Devīśahasranāma (Epithets 111-124) invokes the following River Goddesses:

Mandākinī, Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Godāvarī, Vipāśā, Kāverī (Kāviri), Śatahradā, Śarayū, Candrabhāgā, Kauśakī, Gaṅṅakī, Śivā, Narmadā and so on. Vaikai and Tāmpiraparani are there on the southern extremity. Vaiyai is the subject matter of invocation in not less than twelve Paripāṇi poems, dated in the early century of the CE. Vaiyai is acclaimed the Gaṅgā of the south (Paripāṇi-tiraṇi 3, ll. 93-96):

“The water sport (jalakṛiṇa) of the incestuous maids and young-men resembled the sport of Indra with his maids in the Gaṅgā”.

Gaṅgā in this note is called Antaravāni (Ākāśa-Veṇi).

8. The mythology occurs in the Mahābhārata ('Droṇa Parva', Chap. 60; 'Anuśāsana Parva', Chap. 4 and 'Vana Parva', Chap. 109); Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa (Chap. 97), and Devī Purāṇa ('Dvitiya Skandha'). Vide, Vettam Mani, Purāṇic Encyclopaedia, p. 277.

9. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Skandha 5, Chap. 17) would say Gaṅgā was born in the toe of Tirivikrama when his striding foot raised above breaking open the shell of Cosmic aṇṇa. This theme is better illustrated in the 'Varāhamaṇṇapa' of Māmallapuram where we find Brahmā offering puṇṇāṇjali to the raised foot, leading to Gaṅgāvatāra. Vide, Raju Kalidos, Encyclopaedia of Hindu Iconography: Early Medieval, Vol. I Viṇṇu, p. 195, pl. LXIII.2.

- 10 Ibid., Vol. II Śiva, p. 257.

- 11 Raju Kalidos, Book Review: 'The Great Penance at Māmallapuram...', Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies, Vol. XXII: 2, (2005), pp. 151-54. “Two-in-one” is a theme that could be either this or that; e.g. Gajasaṇhāra- or Anadhakāśura- Saṇhāramūrti in the Elephanta and Ellora caves of the Calukya-Rāṇṇakūṇ phase. A good example is Cave XVI in Ellora, called Gajsaṇhāramūrti or Andhakāri. Vide, K.V. Soundararajan, Cave Temples of the Deccan (ASI: Delhi 1981), pl. LV.B; Raju Kalidos, Encyclopaedia...II, pl. XXII. For a discussion on the two-in-one representations in South Indian art see R.K.K. Rajarajam, 'Animal Motifs in the Later Medieval Art of Tamilnadu', Annali dell' Università dei Napoli “L'Orientale”, Vol. 69 (2009), pp. 167-74, pls. I-VI a-b.

- 12 S. Rajasekhara, Early Chālukya Temples at Aiholā (Vikas: New Delhi 1985), figs. 25-26; Raju Kalidos, op.cit., pls. LI.3, LXVII.

