

They travelled on Me. Said Ganga

By

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A few years ago, I was on the banks of the holy river. Ganga, that you call the Ganges. When I woke up after a night on her healing sands, dawn had not yet broken over the river. Ganga, she was still asleep, gently snoring by my side, her bosom pulsating beneath a blueish black sheet of water. I got up, and decided to take a short stroll. I couldn't have walked much when I ran into a man sitting cross-legged on the bank who in the morning mist, strangely resembled a puff of dense, white smoke. He looked at me smiled through the mist, and introduced himself as Nishant. Ironically, at the end of a gangetic night: one couldn't have come across a better name, for his name precisely meant that "the end of night". What was peculiar about Nishant though, was his unusually scholarly posture: a notebook on his lap, a pen in his hand and an open ink-bottle by his side. "What are you doing here?" I asked him a shade inquisitively. "Waiting for the sun to rise, and start writing", he answered with a fragrant smile. Without waiting for my following question, he spouted forth, "I am a Gangeotic, you see. I am writing Gangaji's autobiography." Unable to fathom who a Gangeotic was or what exactly he was doing. I kept quiet, hoping that the ignorance of my silence might be mistaken as a sign of my wisdom. "Do you know who a Gangeotic is?" asked Nishant with a laughter so pleasant that the sun unveiled its face over the eastern horizon. "A Gangeotic is one who is possessed by the spirit of the Goddess Ganga. He is in direct communication with Ganga". A few years ago, Nishant then revealed, he was chosen by the holy river as her scribe, and since, he has been assiduously taking down a dictation of Ganga's autobiography, her account of those who visited her waters, and of what they learnt and what they did not.

Here is an extract that Nishant read out from Ganga's autobiography.

To the whole world, I am known as the holy Indian river, but you'd be surprised to learn that in the beginning I wasn't a river at all. I was, in fact, a woman – tall, beautiful, vivacious, and if I may add, overwhelmingly narcissistic and coquettish. Yes, there was another gift in me – my touch was holy, it could purify everything on which it fell. But to tell you the truth, I was never the kind to devote myself to a life of holiness and solitude. On the contrary, I loved the small pleasures of life – fun, laughter, flirtation, the company of men.

One day, my father, the ruler of the celestial Kingdom, was approached by the sages. The begged he to send me down to the earth, for the earth at this time was so devastated by the demons that the only thing that could save it was my touch. I protested against my father's decision to send me away from the heavens, but in vain. And so when I was sent down to the earth in the form of torrential downpour against my wishes, leaving innumerable admirers behind, I was so angry and full of revolt that I wanted to sweep the earth away with my tumultuous waves. It was then that lord Shiva figured out my evil intentions and trapped me in his long and wavy, black tresses. He kept me locked up until the day he released me, little by little, in cascades, brooks, and streams, to make me into a river that was named Ganga, with my head in a mysterious Himalayan glacier and my feet dangling over the rippling waves of the Bay of Bengal. I have laid here since, a river in form, a woman at heart, a privileged witness to the emergence of a whole civilization.

But let me now tell about what I saw on my banks. I am not sure if I remember it all well, it was a long time ago. Labyrinths of time fog my memory, and my mind may draw well the invisible line that separates dream from reality, but any way, let me at least try.

The first outsiders to visit me were the Aryans. In contrast to the dark people who dwelled on my banks prior to their arrival, they were fairer, a little taller, and spoke a peculiar dialect called the Aryen. When they first arrived on my banks three thousand five years ago, I noticed to my great wonderment that they were absolutely ecstatic to encounter me. "Why is that?" I asked their leopard-skin Chief. He explained that they had travelled a long way down from the Caspian Sea and the Russian Steppes, through Bacteria, the North Iranian plateau and the Hindukush and Sukiman mountains, but never before had they chanced upon such a beautiful and hospitable river. "Your waters have quenched the thirst of an infant, Our Holy Goddess," eulogized the Chief. "Your valleys have fed our empty stomachs, your forests have given birth to our houses, and your gentle flow is the dance of dream before reality." Pleased with the tribal Chief's answer, I offered his men and women shelter on my banks, but not before I had asked him one question which had intrigued me since their arrival. I had noticed that the Aryans were very fidgety and restless people, prancing around from one hamlet to another like a grass-hopper. "Why are you such nervous-wrecks?" I enquired irritated. "Because we have been half-nomads, Our Goddess, all we have known for our livelihood until now is hunt and cows." answered the Chief timidly, conscious of my irksome humor. And then added, "But if it disturbs you, I promise you now we won't move. With your bounty, we will start settled agriculture.

The Aryan-chief might have promised me a million things, but the moment I allowed his men to settle, they completely took over my banks and forgot about me, almost like a needy tenant who turns his back on his landlord. Far from giving me calm as their Chief had promised, they ran amuck on my shores, burning forests, shaping tools, tilling and irrigating soil, learning the art of a new luxurious life-style. Then after a while, the Aryans discovered sailing on my waters, and with that the whole civilization suddenly blossomed. My waters made them discover other hidden riches of my land, and they began to trade artifacts, and set up cities like Champa, Rajagriha, Kaushambi-Allahabad and Kasi-Benars. Prosperity brought in greed for more richness, and they started using my waters to move upstream towards Taxila in Afghanistan, and from there to the West. (The lovely pieces in the museums of the West you see, would never have reached there had it not been for my waters).

But my waters did not only offer the Aryans the chance to raise a new civilization they also bestowed on them the calm and leisure to fulfil spiritual and artistic needs. The tranquility which I offered gave birth to inner harmony, and that to sadhus and saints and yogis, and it was then that the Aryans suddenly recalled the enormous debt they owed me. The scholars that honoured my shores by writing the four great Vedas and the two great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The sages restored me back to my rightful place in the Aryan civilization and I re-became their Goddess, and such praise was showed over my body that was more beautiful than the rain. The men of ideas called me, Vishnu-padabja-sambhuta, khandendu-krta-sekhara, she who is adorned with a crescent moon, the mystics saw in me the triloka-pathat-gamini, she who flows through the three worlds, the musicians called me, sugosha, a musician, and the nestling lovers on my banks called me, sarac-candra-nibhanana, one resembles the autumn moon...

“How do you find it?” asked Nishant, the pre-dawn scribe, slapping his book shut. I noticed tears were welling in his eyes. “How do you find her autobiography?” he persisted asking again, fishing ostensibly for a compliment. “Not bad, frankly, a bit too historical and boring for my taste”.

“What? Boring? Never! But that’s because you are not a Gangeotic. Those in love with Ganga would burst into tears listening to such poetry”.

“But what happened to her account of foreign travellers that you had promised?”

“Patience, patience, my brother, I am coming to that. None when the fame of Gangetic Vedas and empires reached far and wide, the world became curious about the river-Goddess and flocked to her banks. But that’s in another chapter.”

Nishant shuffled the pages of his notebook around, and then began reading another extract from the autobiography.

So many foreign travellers have visited my shores over the last three millennia that it would need several life-times to recount my encounters with them. I shall, therefore, limit myself to telling about such meetings that I found useful and interesting.

A few years ago, I think it was around the time when the Vietnam War ended. I received a request for an appointment from an Italian called Federico Fellini – I am obviously not meaning the great film-maker. I was sun-bathing on my golden sands one day, when from a distance, I saw someone approach me – short, unshaved, softy, podgy, carrying a truck-sack on his back and an unlit cigarette in his hand.

“You are a rather overfed hippy for these parts of the world”, I remarked, without meaning offence.

He didn’t appreciate my humor, and without caring to answer me, he stated in a matter-of-fact tone:

“I have an appointment with Ganga”.

“You are talking to Ganga”. I replied, wallowing on sand.

“But you are a woman”, said the young man, ogling at my wet bosom on which twinkled particles of mica.

“Yes, indeed I am a woman. And I am Ganga”. I said flirtatiously, dropping the loose tunic to half-expose my bosom.

Catching a glimpse of my contours. Fellini suddenly developed a ferocious squint, and his eyes now began to resemble a pair of open hedge-clippers. He devoured my body with his glances for a while, and then turning serious, he blurted out, “Oh! They are awful! They are not serious!”.

“Who are awful and not serious?” I asked, puzzled.

“We Latins! We have always assumed that Ganga was a tall, handsome, muscular man”.

Fellini slipped the ruck-sack off his shoulder, and came and sat beside me.

“Do you mind if A smoke?” he asked.

“But that’s not a cigarette. That’s hashish joint”

“Uh! Do you mind?” he uttered, school boyishly embarrassed.

“Well, it’s not good for your mind. But go head – A am more than the other Gods in this universe.”

Blowing out a cloud of smoke into my eyes. Fellini added: “Do you know the seventeenth century Italian Sculptor, Gianlorenzo Bernani? I think he is to be blamed”.

“What for?”

“For this ridiculous misconception that you are a man. Because he is obviously the person at the root of this misunderstanding. You see, in the middle of Piazza Navano in Rome, Bernini put up a grandiose fountain representing four rivers, and in that, he showed Ganga as a gigantic, sinewy, macho male. That’s why in most Latin languages you are referred to as male. How awful! Really, how frivolous can famous men at times get!”.

Frederico Fellini might have had a funny manner, but he sounded a learned man. He later disclosed that prior to turning a hippy, he had actually done a Ph. D thesis on “Foreign travellers on the Ganges” at the famous Instituto d’Antonio Gramsci. Eager to find someone who was teaching me things about myself, I asked:

“What else do they think of me in the West, Federico?”

“Oh! How lovely to hear you call me by my first name, Ganga”, he said, giggling, his gaze now slowly slipping down from my bosom flattery my legs. He continued, with a tinge of ill-concealed flattery. “You obviously know you are a celebrity in the West”.

“Am I?”

“You surely know what great Dante said of you?”

“No, I don’t”

“Oh! You haven’t read The Divine Comedy. In that, he names you the Oriental Sapphire. He speaks of your noon-scorched waves, and of a night encircling him, which had issued forth from the mouth of the Ganges. Do you know the 1st century B.C. Roman poet. Virgil?”

“I am sorry to disappoint you again, I don’t”.

“In the Aeneid, he creates a simile which goes. Like Ganges with his seven calm proudly rising through the silence.”

“Oh! I like this one more than Dante’s line, “I said, interrupting, “But I notice that even Virgil refers to me in the masculine gender. So your analysis that Bernini was the first to have called me male is obviously wrong.”

“Oh yes! Quite true, quite true,” remarked the researcher sheepishly. “I must have mixed up the dates somewhere”.

“By why do Latins think of rivers in masculine gender in your country?” I enquired.

“Huh! Interesting question”, chortled Fellini. “Never thought of that really. Quite a tricky question of genders and sexes.

Only a semiotician could answer that. Well, I guess Latins think in genders because Saxons don’t”.

Fellini lit another cigarette, dragged himself closer so that our legs were touching, and then said;

“Then there have been other accounts of your travels. You obviously know the François Bernier – the French physician and traveller”.

“Yes, I do. He wrote extensively about life in my valley during the Mughal Empire. He also said something about the unique qualities of my holy waters that were carried for the Emperor three hundred leagues away. But I noticed that he was more of a gastronomer than anything else.”

“Quite true, quite true” said Fellini, confirming my impression. “And that Jean-Baptiste Tavernier!” O that knave! Do you know him?”

“No, I don’t”.

“Oh! He ruined your reputation. He had such unkind words to say of you”.

“Why? What did he say?”

“He said all this business about your waters being holy and unperishable was rubbish, for when he drank your waters, he immediately fell victim to incurable dysentery, and which is the main reason why he had to cut short his trip to India”

Pulling out an exercise book from his ruck-sack. Fellini then said. “But now it is my turn to ask a few questions for a book I am planning to do. What really transpired when you and Megasthenes, he was first westerner to visit you?

“Nothing much. One day, Emperor Chandragupta Maurya came to me – I think it was 322 years before your era – and requested that I lend a hearing to a man called Megasthenes. At first, I was unwilling, but then the emperor pressed the Greek visitor’s case, saying that Megasthenes was an ambassador of Seleucus, the Greek ruler of Persia, and that he was a perfect diplomat – polite, forever smiling, never quarrelsome, a pathological listener. When the emperor found that I was still not keen, he persisted, saying that Megasthenes had written volumes on the political and social systems of our land. Finally, I consented to receive him. Megasthenes arrived at my banks, doffed his hat and exclaimed like a true, soulless diplomat:

“What a great river you are!”:

“You are not the first one to say that”, I replied, unhumoured by his comment.

“But I really have never seen a river as beautiful and large as you.”

“Many have said that before. Do you have anything new to say?”

Insulted, Megasthenes lost his diplomatic calm, and snorted, “But that’s undiplomatic language. That’s no way of treating foreign diplomats”.

“Goddess Ganga receives only mystics and soul-searchers”. I retorted, bursting into a fit of mocking laughter. “She is not a diplomat”.

Megasthenes immediately got up, and muttered under his breath: “It’s because Alexander the Great died that you can afford to be rude to the Greeks...” And then he left, and we never saw each other again.”

“Ah! You’ve at last solved the mystery for me”, exclaimed Fellini, “That’s why Megasthenes wrote so much about India, but never about you.”

“And what did you think of Hiuen Tsang?”

“Ah! The Master of Law! I must admit I have a soft corner for that fellow. He was probably one of the greatest travellers to visit my waters. What I really liked about him was that he was not a rationalist. He was a true idea on another civilization. That’s why his descriptions of the rites and rituals on the Ganga could teach the posterity so much about me”.

“And who was the best visitor, or a pilgrim, to reach your waters?”.

“It was a few years ago, An African saint from Senegal.”

He came and left anonymously, like a true pilgrim. Let one read to you what he said about me. Ganga is a healer, magical and immaculate. Where she heals, no one shall ever know and how she heals, no one shall ever know. She just heals, making you drink an unknown liquid from her eyes, which the more you consume, the more you find yourself transported beyond the problems of a mortal pain. For forget not the passing pilgrim of my waters, says Ganga, your wounds are mortal and my touch immortal. Immortal has she been and immortal she will be...

Ganga heals only when her seeker has become a part of her, and she of him. It is not the silence of her waters that heals, or its rhythm, nor the lapping of her waves. She weaves around her pilgrim a spectacle of purity, she offers him a feel of the glass-heavens where she belongs, and the seeker must for bear the penance to experience this spectacle. Her limitless kies, the plopping sound of her dolphins, the chirping of swallows, the demented laws of her geometry, the contrasts in her liquid eyes, her cliffs, her sand, her colours, create that spectacle of purity which alone can inspire an inner silence or light, a lit-up interiority, where transcendence of the mortal becomes possible. The proverbial dip in Ganga therefore is not a bath to heal wounds or to wash sins but just one milestone of a long journey of self-realisation which could dissolve wounds or make moksha possible. Ganga is the blue-name of a mirror, which the more honestly you face, the more it reflects, and the more dishonestly you hold, the more it distorts. “My mirror smashed, like a burst of laughter”, - said Apollinaire, strolling on the eye-lashes of Ganga...”

“Your pilgrim was quite poetic and mystical, wasn’t he? Commented Fellini unsavouringly, and then coming down to his own business of research. He asked:

“ And Marco Polo? Did he ever visit you?”

“Ah! That man from the beautiful of mirrors and rivers that is Venice” signed Ganga, then adding reflectingly, “I wonder if he ever came here. Let’s see, I have just commissioned a symposium on “Literature if Travel, and Travel of Literature” at four the Fondazione Cini in Venice. May be the experts can tell us if he ever visited my waters.”

Leaving Federico Fellini to his scholarly muse, I got up to bathe in the river. Bewitched to see my naked body stand up before his eyes, Fellini’s senses began to water, and he muttered:

“If you don’t mind, can I have a swim with you in the river, Ganga”.

“Sure you can, but you won’t see me. When I touch the waters, I turn into a river.”