

**(IM)PURIFYING GANGA: ECOSPIRITUAL READING OF RAJ
KAPOOR'S RAM TERI GANGA MAILI**

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Human beings have always displayed close affinity with nature through their religion, ritual, myths, festivals and culture. Nature became the indivisible part of their living ideology and philosophy. All the festivals in Hindu religion are in accordance with the cycle of nature. Rivers, trees, mountains and glaciers have great significance in religious and culture life of Indian people. *Kailash Parvat* is considered as the abode of Lord Shiva. Banyan Tree is considered holy as it is related to the story of Satyawati & Savitri. Hindu women in India worship this tree on the occasion of *Vatsavitri Purnima*. Ganga-Jamni culture represents the Hindu-Muslim harmony in the subcontinent. In this way nature has become the significant part of religion, mythology and culture.

All the great civilizations started and flourished on the banks of rivers i.e. Egyptian Civilization on the banks of Nile, Indus Civilization on the banks of *Sindhu* etc. Thus Rivers became the subject matter, symbols, and metaphors in folklores, mythology and literature i.e. *Rahul Sanskrutiayan's From Ganga to Volga*, *Maitryi Pushpa's Betwa Bahati Rahi*, *Gulzar's Ravi Ke Paar*, *Manohar Malgaonkar's Bend in the Ganges*.

This paper is an attempt to study the parallel drawn between the river and woman. It aims to analyze *Raj Kapoor* directed *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) from *Ecofeminist* point of view. It traces the journey of Ganga from *Gangotri* to *Gangasagar* in parallel to the story of female protagonist Ganga, an innocent girl from hilly area and her journey from innocence to maturity through brutal confrontations to the realities of the male dominated society. It traces how Ganga, a pure and pious, is polluted on its way to *Gangasagar*. It brings forward the spiritual corruption and pollution of Indian society, politics and patriarchy that controls the norms of purity, piety, religious sanctity, rights and wrongs moral code of conduct etc....

[II]

Raj Kapoor the showman of Hindi film industry had always shown great concern to the social problems in his movies. *Jagte Raho* (1956) highlights the dichotomy and increasing drift between rural innocence and urban experiences. *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Baheti Hai* (1960) brings forward the issue of assimilation of marginal, branded criminal, dacoit's community into the mainstream of social life. *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978) deals with the concept of truth and beauty of a woman. It underscores the idea that an ugly but chaste, morally upright and faithful woman is more beautiful or a woman who is an adulterous, physically beautiful but with immoral character is more beautiful. It focuses how man perceives these truth and beauty in a

woman. *Premrog* (1982) pleads the case for the necessity of widow remarriage to provide the social and personal dignity for the widows. *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985) draws attention to the environmentalist as well as philosophers for its poignant appeals to 'Save Ganga, Save India' and need of spiritual cleansing of Indian people as well as cleaning and purifying Ganga River to save environment. In 2014, Indian Government has officially taken the task of cleaning and purifying Ganga.

King Bhagirath worshipped for years together to bring the holy river Ganga on the earth so that his ancestors can be brought to life from death caused by the curse. Mythical story behind Ganga's arrival on this planet signifies her role as purifier that wipes out the sins and purifies human beings, endowing new life. Even the water from the holy river is one of the major attractions for the pilgrims. Holy water is given as last sips to the dying person. So this holiness of the water, socio-religious sanctity to the purity and piety of Ganga is undaunted in Hindu religion. '*Ganga-snan*' (to bathe in Ganga water) is essential ritual on Kumbh Parva or on eclipse days signifying the eradication of evils and sins from the soul and body of the concerned person.

Ganga is referred as Gangamaiya, the river is symbolized as a mother and a woman. So Ganga as a mother becomes the agency of redemption for children seeking for the *moksha*. She is purifier and benevolent who absorbs all the sins, misdeeds, evils in her water and cleans her children opening the doors onto heaven. Thus Ganga is most sacred, religious and spiritual entity in lives of Hindus. Oaths are taken to prove the truth, to perform the impossible. Simultaneously, people are also responsible to pollute, corrupt and impure Ganga on its way to Gangasagar, technological advancement produced the chemical waste that is drawn into Ganga, religious belief and cremation, and other rights performed on the bank of Ganga increased its pollution.

[III]

Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1985) received great appreciation from both classes and masses for its spiritual and environmental appeal. It opens with political campaign that makes appeal for votes by religious cause of cleaning and purification of Ganga River. It also cautions the public to be with those who gave their blood to preserve the purity and piety of Ganga at the cost of their families. Another politician makes it spiritual issue and appeals that if Ganga should be kept clean and pure, our souls must be cleansed and purified. It sets the tone of the film and initiates audience into serious attention.

Jeeva Sahay questions the protest over cleaning Ganga and political motif behind it. Bhagwat Chaudhary answers, "*Yeh politics ka niyam hai Jeeva Babu ki har tod-fod aur aagjani ke piche karan pavitra hona chahiye*"

He also adds that by giving money to the victims of the protest his sins will be cleaned and "*Ganga thodi aur maili ho Jayegi*"

College students present the pure and polluted water of Ganga and express the plan to study reasons behind Ganga's pollution by visiting its origin at Gangotri.

Narendra, Jeeva Sahay's son, wanted to visit Gangotri to witness the purity and life spirit of Ganga with added motif to bring Ganga (holy water) for his paternal grandma in her last days. It is his spiritual quest. On his way, Narendra comes across a beautiful and innocent girl, Ganga, who saves his life. She is a kind of personification of Ganga, the river. He also saves her from molestation at the hands of fellow student. Here Ganga highlights the urban and rural difference:

Ganga: Tum Kapdo se shahri ho sahib man se nahi, ... varna Ganga mein itna vishwas nahi karte. Ganga naam ki pahadan ke liye marpit kyon karte? ...jo tum ganga ko itna pujte ho...

It denotes the values and ethics associated to rural and urban ecology as well as spiritual bending of a person from its appearance and its behavior. He reveals his motif to visit Gangotri for his grandma. Ganga promises him to guide the way to Gangotri. Paradoxically, Ganga takes him to reach the holy and pure water of Ganga at its origin, but she herself gets lost on the way. The journey captures the beautiful landscape, pure and healthy air, greenery, beautiful gardens, meadows, mountains and glaciers, clean blue sky, bright sunlight, the white milky water of Ganga. It represents the utopian ecological frame. Ganga, the girl as an innocent, beautiful and bubbly complements to the background natural landscape.

At Gangotri Ganga innocently inquires why he has come for Ganga water here only as Ganga is in Calcutta. Narendra gives subtle and philosophical answer that is related to Indian psyche and Ganga:

Kyon ki Dadi ma ne Ganga ke is pavitra roop ko nahi dekha, agar dekhti to hamesha ke liye apne sath le jati, aur ye sawal sirf lutiya bhar jal ka nahi hai, us vishwas ka hai jo dhara banker Ganga me behati hai aur ek boond banker aurat ke dil me bas jati hai. Isi boond ko to prem kahete hai Ganga. Ganga me bas jaata hai, Ganga me sama jata hai, ganga ka ho jata hai.

Ganga wanted to believe what Narendar believes in and requests him to take his Ganga with him.

Narendra and Ganga get married by oath. Their relation is based on trust and promise that will be kept irrespective of life. He leaves for Calcutta taking Ganga, holy water, to home and leaving Ganga, his wife, behind. Ganga requests him to come back as she would wait for him whether he come or not. She has offered him everything, her honor and her body. She requests him that, "*Teri Ganga chithdo mein jee legi, bas apni Ganga ko maili mat hone dena.*" It hints at her, Ganga as a woman and as a river, pollution and impurity as she has experienced the (hu)man who has visited her and leaving behind him. On the other hand, he is taking Ganga, the holy water to Calcutta that becomes polluted and impure on its way from Himalya, Haridwar, Varanasi to Calcutta and seeks refuge in Gangasagar. Ganga too, moves from Himalays to Calcutta in search of Narendra to give a better life to her and Narendra's son.

Vishal Agrawal comments on the subject matter and its treatment of the film as:

Ganga travelling from Gangotri to Calcutta, represents river Ganga which starts from Himalayas and through northern plains reaches Calcutta and merges into Bay of Bengal. River Ganga is revered by Indians as god from ancient times. River Ganga polluted on its way and the first bank which pollutes river Ganga is Haridwar and so Ganga (the protagonist) tastes her stint with fate in Haridwar. By the time she reaches Varanasi Ganga loses its purity. River Ganga flows almost like sewer water after that's what happens to the protagonist. She is sold bought raped and beaten by the time she reaches Calcutta. I find this film extremely romantic and spiritual. It talks about the fate of millions of innocent girls sold in India and

the medium it uses is mind blowing. This film always reminds me of Bicycle thief. Sica used bicycle to expose post world war Italy and Raj Kapoor has used a river to expose the double standards of Indian culture. [9 June 2006]

Ganga is misled and sold to a man for fifty rupees. She escapes and takes refuge at funeral house. The man wonders that, *'Ganga Kinare Shamshan hote hai, Ye Shamshan mein Ganga Kahan se Aai'*. He asks her to take care of herself. She answers philosophically on the basis of her experiences that, *'Jinda Insano se darr lagata hai baba, murdo se kaisa dar'*.

Ironically, Ganga, the river becomes the dumping yard of the dead ones, their ashes; dead bodies are drowned into it. A pundit also attempts to rape her. Fortunately she is saved. Police officer helps her to get on Calcutta train. On the way, she steps down for water as a lady travelling with her denies water to her because *'yeh Gangajal hai, aakhri waqt ke liye liya hai, Sadha paani rehta to de deti'*. Ganga misses her train Calcutta and loses her way. Manilal, a pimp, takes her to brothel, Kotha. Ganga resists to follow the life of sins, impurity but

Rajeshwaribai, the head mistress of the Kotha, explains her situation:

Aurat Shauk se nahi thokar khakar Kothe mein Aati hai. Kothe se ek sidi utrogi to Chkla milga. Janti ho Chkla kya hota hai, Jahan Aurat ke badan ki rui se bhi badtar dhulai ki jaati hai. Shayad is bacche ke baap ka pata hoga tuze par wahan kis ke beej se kya janegi.. wah to swaym bhagwan bhi nahi bata sakta.

Rajeshwari Bai explains that how outer world is full of sin, lust and would deprive her of her honor and easy life. It can be said that brothel is more secure place for women like Ganga than the outer so called civilized society. She says, *'Har Choukhat pe baitha insane tuze nochne daudega. Yeh jagah bas naam se badnam hai, yahan paap nahi hota, yahan tan ka vyapaar nahi hota'*

As Ganga has already tasted the brutality and cruelty of civilized society, she agrees to stay on in the Kotha. Manilal says, *'Ganga ab isi Gharane mein rahegi.'*

Next, She is sold to Bhagwat Chaudhary. He plans to keep her as a mistress for himself and his friend Jeeva Sahay. Ironically, Ganga doesn't know that Jeeva Sahay is Narendra's father and Bhagwat Sahay is Narendra's would be father-in-law. Bhagwat Sahay shows her to Jeeva Sahay and says, *'Mil batkar Khayenge, aur Phir yeh to Ghar ki Ganga hai Jab ji Chahega Dubki Lagayenge'*

Meantime, Kunj is searching for a courtesan to perform at Narendra's wedding and comes across Manilal. He inquires about his profession and Manilal says, *'Aurat ko Gumrah karate karte main khud rah par aaya hun'*. From Manilal, KunjBihari comes to know about Ganga. Manilal brings him to Ganga who tells him that, *'Mar to main us din hi gai, jis din bazaar mein jakar baithi thi, apni lash ko iss liye dho rahi hun ki apne bete ko uske baap tak pahucha saku'*.

On listening her story, Kunj reacts, *'Tune to kadi AgniPariksha di hai Bahu, Ab agnipariksha tere Ram ko deni hai'*

Jeeva Sahay reveals Ganga's identity to Bhagwat Chaoudari who order Manilal to send Ganga back to Varanasi. But how Ganga could go back to Varanasi once she came to Calcutta as Kunj says, *'Ganga Calcuttese laut ke Banaras na gai hai, na hi jayegi.'* It would continue her journey to Sagar. Ganga dances in Narendra's wedding. Narendra comes to know about the dancer, Ganga. Kunj reveals the background to the present situation of Ganga and who are

responsible. Radha condemns her father for keeping a married woman who is of his daughter's age. Narendra with Ganga and their son decides to setup his family where the sacred Ganga is worshipped as a goddess, "*Hum apna ghar wahi basayenge jahan Ganga ka Dham hai.*"

Ganga considers herself as impure and leaves her home. At the end Narendra and Ganga are merged together as Kunj says, "*Narendra tu Sagar hai aur Ganga tu dhara, aur ganga ka Milan gangasagar mein hota hai, wahi uska sangam hai wahi uski mukti hai.*"

Songs of the film are highly spiritual and connotative going parallel to the story of Ganga and narrative of Ganga, the river. All the songs express the inner anxiety of the protagonist Ganga and purity and pollution of *Ganga River* with its mythological context and present degradations.

Thus, Ganga and Narendra leave for *Gangasagar* where Ganga the river merges into the Bay of Bengal.

References:

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