



THE GANGA NARRATIVES: A CRITICAL READING OF SELECTED POEMS OF KEKI DARUWALLA

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Abstract: The river Ganga is often referred to as the lifeline of India as it holds immense social, cultural, religious, and poetic significance. This research paper aims to analyse and explore the rich tradition of poetry inspired by the River Ganga, particularly in the city of Banaras. By exploring the historical and cultural context of Banaras and its deep connection with the Ganga, we will analyze the themes, motifs, and poetic expressions in selected poems on Ganga by eminent poet Keki Daruwalla that have emerged from this relationship between the city and the sacred river Ganga.

Keywords: Ganga, poetry, Banaras, space

The city of Banaras is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. It has been regarded as a center of spiritual and intellectual pursuits for centuries. Banaras is situated on the banks of the river Ganga and has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the birth of different religions, and the convergence of diverse Indian cultures. The city's association with the river Ganga has shaped its identity and culture and also has inspired various writers and poets to express their emotions and experiences through their writings.

There are some recurring themes and motifs that can be found in the poetry based on the River Ganga in India and specifically in Banaras. One such common theme is the divine nature of Ganga and its sacred and holy role as a purifier of sins. Indian writers often depict the river Ganga as a goddess, emphasising her sacred character and the holy belief that a dip in her waters can cleanse one's soul. Another prominent motif is the river's eternal flow which in turn symbolises the continuity of life and death and the transient and ever flowing nature of human existence.

There have been many renowned poets and writers who have contributed to the rich and vast poetic tradition centered around the river Ganga in Banaras. The 15th-century mystic poet, Kabir is one such prominent example whose verses often reflect and show his deep spiritual connection with the Ganga. "Kabir Bijak," is a work by Kabir which contains profound insights into the nature of existence and the significance of the holy river Ganga in his own spiritual journey. Another famous Indian poet is Tulsidas, who composed the famous epic "Ramcharitmanas" in Banaras, incorporating the river Ganga as a motif throughout the whole narrative. The Indian river Ganga has been a prominent subject of the poets in Sanskrit, Hindi, and many regional languages. There are numerous Indian poets and writers who have written in English and have been fascinated with this holy river. Among many such are Shoshee Chunder Dutt's "Address to the Ganges" (1878), Joteendro Mohun Tagore's "Moonlight on the River" (1881), Chandrashekhar

Kambar's "A Pond Named Ganga" (1994), R S Sharma's "Ganga" (1998), Jayant Mahapatra's "On the Banks of the Ganges" (1976), I K Sharma's "To the Ganga Maiya" (2010), Tikuli's "At the River Ganges" (2015), and Aabha Vatsa Midha's "Ganga, A Cry" (2015). Keki Daruwalla's *Crossing of Rivers* contains his several poems on the sacred river Ganga.

In his "Boat-ride Along the Ganga" Daruwalla chronicles and portrays own his experiences on the banks of the Ganges at Banaras. This poem can be seen to depict a kind of "self-discovery" and "spiritual escapism" when Punita Jha comments, "Boat Ride along the Ganga" is the self-discovery. The Ghat is not just a river side accoutrement but a part of poet's spiritual in-escape" (119). In the evening time while roaming around along the waters upstream on the boat the Ghat only emerges in sight. In this sight, the Ganga ghat looks like a grand amphitheatre, palm-leaf parasols can be seen on the platform that is close to the river. The panda (pandits) narrates the legend concerning the famous Dasasvamedh Ghat and the folk tales related to it. The scene is described as such that the sail river boats are on anchor. There are some poles scattered on the river to provide for birds to perch on. As the poet continues and ponders he feels confused seeing corpse-fire and cooking fire burning side by side. He feels that Dante would have been confused here too.

The following famous lines describe his confusion:

Where would he place this city
 In Paradise or Purgatory, or lower down
 Where fires smoulder beyond the reach of pity?
 The concept of the goddess baffles you –
 Ganga as mother, daughter, bride.
 What plane of destiny have I arrived at
 Where corpse-fires and cooking-fires
 Burn side by side ? ("Boat-ride Along the Ganga" 42-50)

Daruwalla feels dejected and helpless to understand the range of religious depth and the associated cultural heritage that is a prominent feature of the Ganga Ghat in Banaras. As we can see, on one hand every devout Hindu pilgrim hopes to visit the city at least once in a lifetime, take a holy dip in the river at the famous ghats of the Ganga, if the supreme Almighty God allows, ultimately die here in old age. On the contrary, Daruwalla himself confesses: "... one could not close one's eyes to the filth at the ghats of Banaras and the seeming chaos, the miasma of funeral pyres going up in flames a few yards from unconcerned pilgrims bathing in the river, offering obeisance to the rising sun. I accepted the notion that its swirling waters cleansed one of his sins. But I could not shut my eyes to what was happening in front of me. ... One saw squalor and chaos for what they were. They registered themselves on the cornea. No alibis are needed here." (archive.thedailystar.net)

There is a simple reason to understand this kind of reaction by Daruwalla as his upbringing is from a different culture. In his family, both his parents were Zoroastrians and even though he was born in Lahore before the partition of India. Keki Daruwalla studied for a post-graduate degree in English and is evident from his acquaintance with the great European literature that makes him think of Dante's "Divine Comedy" while writing about the Ganga Ghat at Banaras. Though Venkatachari refers to him as an autochthon who "plays a 'documentary' role in striving to project the stark reality of Indian landscape – a home that is at once generative and regenerative in Indian sensibility" (72) yet Daruwalla gives the impression of feeling out of place from the place that he describes:

...It is as I feared;
 hygiene is a part of my conscience and I curse it
 and curse my upbringing which makes me queazy here. ("Boat-ride Along the Ganga" 13-15)

Venkatachari further explains that Daruwalla's "exasperation at human debasement and degradation, reminiscent of V S Naipaul's indictment of India in his works *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *An Area of Darkness* as well as an awareness of the need to awaken the Indian to the disgrace of his condition" (74). We can say that the second part of Venkatachari's analysis does not hold true at least in the specific context of Daruwalla's poems on Ganga and Banaras as in the next poem "Nightscape" he records his observations on the Ganga ghat at night time. Even in this poem, Daruwalla's bewilderment overpowers him once again:

Is this a ridge
 black with pine
 rising out of mists
 or a city of the dead
 brooding over a ghostscape? ("Nightscape" 17-21)

His sort of blurry vision can be seen in the next poem 'Dawn'.

a silhouette lost in prayer
 develops feet,
 a frayed anchorite walks like a fossil saint
 who has crawled out
 from the sediments of time
 dawns on the Ganga
 Like a bizarre illusion. ("Dawn" 15-20, 29-30)

Then the morning sun fierce with its intense heat and humidity makes Daruwalla feel like a "cat on a hot tin roof". As M.K. Naik remarks, "Daruwalla's mind is continually busy in establishing meaningful relationships between Nature and Man, in various ways and in different contexts and it is on the working out of these relationships that the success and failure of these poems would appear to hinge" (Naik 65).

Similarly, as another critic Vilas Sarang says, "Daruwalla is at his best when he works with selective image and metaphor, as in ... 'Vignette I'" (Sarang 22). In "Vignette – I" Daruwalla evocatively shows his feelings of angst. The opening lines of the poem describe the sun.

The sun comes up
 like the outer husk
 of sure fiery despair. ('Vignette – I', 1-3)

Then the next poem follows Keki Daruwalla's take on lepers, a dwarf, monkeys and the blind persons as observed and heard on the Ganga Ghat:

Lepers dhuddle along the causeways like shunted shrubs
 black with frost burns
 A thin dwarf, smeared blue with ash, spiked with a beard

forested with matted hair
cavorts ape-like. Overhead the monkeys gibber. (5-11)

At that time a group of women, having taken their bath, walk on the path
dropping coins in the coconut shells held by the beggars: Crisp from their river-baths, women
Drop coins in coconut shells
But no avarice flickers
In the eyes of the palsied. (12-15)

The last snapshot is about a sail:
A sail is hoisted,
the colour of musk-melon,
the colour of daggered flesh,
Beggars hoist their deformities
As boatmen hoist their sails. (19-23)

The intense scorching sun is presented here as a metaphor of “outer husk”, that is, just like the sun with the similar dry outer covering of a seed. It can be observed to be likened with the explosion of “some fiery despair”. The poem has a tone describing the things that he sees and detests.

In the next line of the poem “The Ganga flows swollen with hymns” is full of picturesque compressed images. But the satirical voice and tone of the poet becomes too obvious. The lepers have been compared to “stunted shrubs black with frost burns”. This kind of metaphor can be compared to the metaphor about the sun imagery “like the outer husk of some fiery despair” as used in the beginning of the poem. In both the cases, the poet aims to make his intentions clear since the purpose in his mind, it seems, has nothing to do with anything that enliven but to show extreme poverty and misery in such a holy place of pilgrimage in which he does in describes sadhus as a thin dwarf who has skin full with blue coloured ash, having a grey beard and hair over his head giving the appearance of a sadhu as well as a monkey as he moves and jumps in a noisy manner from one place to another. The poet expands this one idea clearly in the follow-up imagery. The way the poet describes how some women are seen dropping some coins or money in coconut shells of the blinds who can be seen begging indicates that he does not really approve of such practices. In his description of the sight of a sail in his poem, Daruwalla shows his poetic technique of imagism. The images in the poem can be seen to compare and contrast with each other to sustain a particular theme. The poet proves his ability to observe very clearly and vividly in order to strike a kind of an artistic balance between image and statement. In these vignettes in his poetry, Daruwalla can be seen to keep his focus on the stark misery of the human life as presented on the banks of the Ganga and in doing so he not only shows his own despair and disorientation, but also his incapacity and helplessness to belong to the life and culture of India. As Bruce King says: “Daruwalla seldom appears at ease among passivity, fatalism and rituals of Hindu culture.” (127) Daruwalla's constantly disapproves the rituals that happen at the Ganga Ghat as shown in the vignettes that follow:

All is spider-thread ritual here
sandal-paste and mantra
Chanting of the gayatri
shaved head and the pinddan. (“Vignette – II” 16-19)

Though “Vignette – III” was actually written after the 1975 coup in Dhaka, yet here also that same despair returns to Daruwalla.

Perhaps they come to Varanasi
 the unloved, the hungry
 looking for their souls like
 the blind looking for their lost children. In the street of the Lord
 the sepia teeth of pandas.
 In the street of virginity
 The raucous laughter of whores. (“Vignette – III” 17-24)

In 'Death Vignette' Daruwalla lampoons about the death rites as seen and performed on the Ganga Ghat in Banaras.

They walk in time
 outside time
 walking with death on
 their copper-shoulders....

They turn mindless with
 the rhythm of their feet
 till licked by their wet tongue
 of the river wind
 they wake up reassured
 to find it is not their own death
 they are carrying. (“Death Vignette” 55-59, 64-70)

The whole image becomes liven with the movement of the bearers and their sweating glowy bodies shining in the glow and beauty of the setting sun, and standing out against the bland lifeless sky. This imagery speaks about the intensity of the main emotion feeling of the poem.

One of the next poems to explore and analyse is “The Dip”. This poem holds the spirit of poet's strange and unusual experiences at the ghat when he takes a dip in the holy river Ganga:

I shoo away my thoughts like goats over a cliff
 and plunge into the waters, temperature of blood.
 I who came to feel her frozen paws
 find myself in her warm, dark heart. (“The Dip” 23-26)

Indeed, here comes a deep profound change in Daruwalla's attitude towards the Ganga as a result of which he shuns off all his earlier disillusionment and disregard for the Ganga that he had developed in his mind before.

Sleeping on your banks
 as you flow by
 I find you flowing within my body (“Mother” 30-32)

This sort of change that can be seen within his own poetic-self, somehow rewriting his blurred perception about the Ganga that he had formed in his mind, gets closer to atonement in his next poem “Beads”:

“The river is a vibration; it is the spine of the Goddess.” (“Beads” 6)

The last long poem “Crossing the River” sums up Daruwalla's ultimate transformed attitude towards the holy river in a similar meditative manner of prayer. He renders his submissions here to the Ganga:

Accept my oblations!

Favour my undertakings!

And remain now and forever with me! (“Crossing the River” II:38-40)

However, the poem “Crossing of River” describes the pitfalls about the life story of a girl who comes from the hills and gets corrupted as she goes along from Haridwar to the city of Varanasi. It is allegorical about the river Ganga as Ganga also comes from the bhabar which is a forest area around the foothills of the Himalayas through the whole trajectory of the river Ganga flows.

It can be emphasised upon that Daruwalla is not really an expressionist who is putting together some blurred impressions about Ganga. He worked and moved around the city of Banaras and the river Ganga many a times during his life. His oneness and unity with the river is noticeable though his skeptical attitude initially and then changed perception later. King remarks: “Daruwalla's poems may seem like a kind of American writing in their concentration on the physical, but the descriptions themselves have neither transcendence nor the denial of transcendence (and affirmation of the physical as all) which are often the kinds of consciousness expressed in American poetry” (124).

The poetry based on the River Ganga in Banaras has had a profound impact on Indian heritage, literature, and culture. It has not only shaped the literary landscape but also influenced the social, religious practices and rituals associated with the holy river Ganga. The writings celebrating the river's beauty, divinity, and spiritual significance have been preserved and passed down from one to the next generations, which has been fostering a deep reverence and respect for the river Ganga among the people in the whole of the country.

The poetry inspired by the River Ganga in Banaras truly and fascinatingly serves as a testament to the deep and profound connection between spirituality, and human nature. Through their writings and verses, poets have tried to capture the essence of the holy river Ganga's sacredness, its role in the city's history, and its important significance in human lives. This research paper has explored the historical and cultural context of Banaras, analysed the common themes and recurring motifs in the Ganga-inspired poetry, highlighted prominent poets and their works, and discussed the impact of this poetic tradition. The poetry based on the River Ganga in Banaras continues to inspire us all and evoke a sense of awe and reverence for the eternal flow of life.

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