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## Gradation of sacred rivers of India and glory of river

**Dr. N Venkatesha Rao Ganga and Sri Vadiraja**

### Abstract

In our Indian culture rivers are not just considered as storages of water. They are respected and worshipped by all with great reverence. Starting from respecting of small amount of water in a vessel as kalasha, even pools, rivers and seas are respected. The term “nadimata” (नदीमाता) refers to its nature of nourishing all irrespective of caste, creed and gender. It quenches our thirst and facilitates cultivation. Relevant mantras are uttered to pass on from generation to generation. Our study is confined to gradation of sacred rivers and glory of river Ganga as seen in a stotra done by Raghavendra tirtha and in Tirthaprabandha composed by saint poet Vadiraja.

**Key words:** Tirtha prabandha, Importance of rivers, characteristics of big rivers, gradation of rivers with respect to its purification time, by its volume of propitiation, origin

### Introduction

Sri Raghavendra Thirtha (1595-1671) was a great scholar, theologian and saint. He was also known as Sudha parimalacharya. Among 25 commentaries written on Nyayasudha his commentary stands unique and it earned him the title “Tippanyaacharyachakravarti”. His mastery in Mimamsa earned great honors from kings and the royal scholars of that time. His mastery on Grammar made his preceptor Sudhindratirtha to give him the title “Mahabhashyam Venkatanatacharya”. His works include commentaries on the works of Madhva, Jayateertha, and Vyasaateertha, interpretation on main upanishads, and a treatise on poorvamimamsa. He served as the pontiff of monastery from-1624 to 1671. His commentary on tatparyachandrika of Vyasaaraja named “Prakasha” proves his excellence on writing treatise on Vedanta. He has authored more than 50 works. we are referring to his verses titled “Naditaratamya Stotram”. Here gradation of rivers are well depicted and sourced from Brahmanda purana. In Brahmanda purana’s third volume we come across several chapters on the description of rivers.

Sri Vadiraja was born in 1480 AD in Hoovinakere near kumbhashi in South Canara of Kundapur district of Karnataka state. He lived up to the ripe age of 120 years. He was ordained to an ascetic order and became pontiff of Sri Krishna Matha in Udupi at the tender age of 8 years. His preceptor was Vaagishatirtha. Vadiraja led the life of a saint for hundred twelve years which is a record of sorts in world history. He was a great devotional poet, a prolific writer in Sanskrit, Kannada and Tulu languages. He has authored more than hundred works., His works display a combination of fine poetry, sharp wit and humor, a combination of rhythmic verses and philosophical deliberations. His literary works comprise of kavaya, khandana, mandana, teeka, tippani, gadya, padya, etc. He visited several pilgrimage centers and composed Tirthaprabandha. It comprises of 235 shlokas with four prabandhas in all four directions clockwise. They give us valid information on Pauranic and historical back grounds of the pilgrim centers he visited.

Vadiraja’s compositions are noted for forcible expression, irony, subtle humor, ornate poetic style, unshakable devotion towards lord Vishnu. He refuted other schools of thought with unrivalled mastery of logic. His razor like straight forwardness, sword thrust like logic, penetrating perceptions have earned him title Vadiraja. Each one of his opponents without exception faced defeat in metaphysical encounter with him.

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## The Characteristics of great rivers. (Mahanadi)

उद्भूत्वा भूधराब्धिं प्रविशत्यम्बुसन्ततिः।  
या सा महानदी ज्ञाया सर्वपापप्रणाशिनी॥  
शतयोजनमागत्य शैलाद्विशति सागरम्॥  
याम्बुसन्ततिरेके तां प्रवदन्ति महानदीम्॥<sup>1</sup>

Five characteristics of a Mahanadi are described in the above shloka.

1. The river should originate from a mountain.
2. It should have capacity to wash of sins.
3. It should flow for at-least hundred yojanas.( thousand kilometers.)
4. Finally it should flow into an ocean,
5. Water should be perennial.

## Ranking of the rivers by its capacity of purification by time,

सद्यःपुनाति गंगाम्भः त्रिभिःसारस्वतं जलम्।  
स्नायात्सर्वेषु तीर्थेषु सर्वदेवद्विजन्मनाम्।  
नदिमहा  
नदीषूक्तं फलं स्यान्नात्रसंशयः॥<sup>2</sup>

Shastras prescribe that a clean body should be accompanied by pure mind. One should think positively and avoid negative thoughts. Time needed by rivers for purification has been mentioned.

Just a dip in Ganga and Narmada river purifies a person. The river Saraswati takes three days to purify a person where as the river Yamuna takes five days. The above observation places river Ganga and Narmada on high pedestal.

## Ranking of the rivers by its capacity for purification

अब्धौपवासफलदा स्मृता सुरतरंगिणी।  
मन्दाकिन्यर्धफलदा स्मृता गोदावरी शुभा॥  
सरस्वती सूर्यसुता जहनुकन्या च नर्मदा  
एताश्चतुर्महानद्यो महानद्युत्तमोत्तमाः॥<sup>3</sup>  
(स्मृ,मु—1,3)

Whatever one gets benefit of fasting for a year, Ganga grants it by a single dip in her river. The river Godavari gifts half of the same benefit of the river Ganga who take bath in her river. In this sense Ganga ranks first and Godavari ranks second. Among all the rivers, Saraswati, Yamuna, Ganga, and Narmada are considered as Mahanadis.

“षण्मासफलदागोदावत्सरस्यतुजाह्वी”<sup>4</sup>

## Ranking of the river according to its origin:

The river Ganga originated from the feet of Vishnu during his Trivikramavatar.

तत्रभगवतःसाक्षात्पञ्चलिंगस्यविष्णोः विक्रमतो  
वामपादाङ्गुष्ठनिर्भिन्नोर्ध्वान्दकटहविवरेणान्तःप्र  
विष्टा या बाह्यजलधारा<sup>5</sup>

Shiva restricted its flow on his head before it entered into earth. On these two considerations Ganga has been graded first. Godavari river which granted rebirth to a dead cow to remove curse on sage Goutama is ranked second. Sri Raghavedrartirtha in his “Naditaratamyastotra” has pronounced

विष्णुपादाब्जसंभूता गंगा सर्वार्थिका मता।  
ततो गोदावरी न्यूना कृष्णवेणी ततोऽधमा॥<sup>6</sup>

Ganga is superior to all rivers. Then Godavari comes as second. Krishnaveniriver flowing near Srishailakshetra born from Sahyadri mountain comes third.

In the work “स्मृतिमाणिक्यसंग्रहः”, author Anantatirthasunu mentioned as below. )

हरिपादाब्जसंभूता गंगा सर्वार्थदायिनी।  
सा हि श्रेष्ठा नदीनां वै ततो गोदावरी वरा।  
गोदावरी तु गंगायाःपञ्चाशद्गुणनीचगा।  
कृष्णवेणी ततो नीचा सहस्रगुणनीचगा॥  
सरस्वती ततो नीचा कृष्णवेण्याः शताधमा॥<sup>7</sup>

Ganga born from Hari’s feet is greatest. Standing closer to her in supremacy is Godavari. She is fifty times lesser to ganga in merits. Later comes Krishnaveni which is thousand units lesser in merits compared to Ganga. Thus Sarasvati river is inferior to Krishnaveni by hundred units. Thus, supremacy of Ganga is established.

Surprisingly all these divisions would not clash with each other. In all these aspects Ganga stands first among all rivers.

## Ranking of the rivers by its final destination

त्रिरात्रफलदानद्योयाःकाश्चिदसमुद्रगाः।  
समुद्रगास्तुपक्षस्यमासस्यसरितांपतिः॥<sup>8</sup>  
(स्मृ,मु-shloka6),

Rivers are ranked according to the place where it finally reaches. If river reaches another river, but not ocean ultimately, a dip in that river grants the merit of performing the sacrifice for three days. When river reaches an ocean, it grants the benefit of observing sacrifice for a fortnight. A dip in an ocean grants the benefit of performing sacrifice for a month.

A commentary on sadacharasmruti also mentions this in the following way.

नद्यां समुद्रगामिन्यामतःशतगुणं स्मृतम्-<sup>9</sup>

“If river reaches the ocean then the auspicious merits gifted by river will be hundred times more than other rivers” says a commentary as told by Lord Varaha to Dharani.

विष्णुपादाब्जसंभूता गंगा सर्वार्थिकामता।  
ततो गोदावरी न्यूना कृष्णवेणी ततोऽधमा॥<sup>1</sup>  
स्वामिचन्द्रपुष्करिण्यौ मानसं च सरोवरम्।  
कृष्णवेण्याःसमास्ताभ्यः कावेरी च सरस्वती॥<sup>2</sup>

हीनोऽन्योन्यसमेताभ्यामूना च सरयू तथा।  
 तुंगभद्रासमा तस्याःकालिन्द्यूना ततोऽधमा ॥३॥  
 नर्मदासिन्धुसरितौ तत्समा भवनशिनी।  
 ततःकुमुद्वती नीचा ततो नीचा मलापहा ॥४॥  
 ताम्रपर्णी भीमरथी वन्जुला च पिनाकिनी।  
 पृथग्सागरगमिन्यो नद्यो भीमरथीसमाः ॥५॥  
 ततोऽन्यासरितो नीचास्तटाकश्च ततोऽधमाः।  
 ततो नीचाः पुष्करिण्यो देवखाताश्च तत्समाः ॥६॥  
 ततोवाप्योऽधमास्ताभ्यः कूपाःसर्वधमाःस्मृताः।  
 स्वोत्तमार्घ्यं प्रदातव्यमवरासु नचान्यथा ॥७॥  
 राघवेन्द्रेणयतिना ब्रह्मण्डाख्यपुराणगः।  
 इत्युद्धृतःसारभागो नदीनीचोच्चसूचकः ॥८-<sup>10</sup>

The gradation of rivers is as follows according to the above verse.

1. Ganga river
2. Godavari
3. Krishnaveni(Swamipushkarani and chadrapushakarini areEqual to this river)
4. Kaveri and sarasvati
5. Sarayu(Tungabhadra is equal to this river)
6. Yamuna
7. Narmada and Sindhu(Bhavanashini is equal to both rivers.Bhavanashini river is nearer to Ahobila pilgrimage centre)
8. kumudvati
9. Malapaha( Another branch of river ganga)
10. Tamraparni,Bhimarathi,manjula,pinakini)
11. All rivers directly joining the oceans are equal to Bhimarati)
12. Minor Rivers
13. Pushakarini(Pools)
14. pools at temples or bath ghats.
15. Vapi (Bathing reservoirs enabling to bath with steps to alight into it.
16. Wells are lower than all water storages in gifting auspicious merits.

Arghya (offering holy water with a mantra to the river with respect)

Should be given to great rivers if one is taking bath in them. While taking bath in high ranking rivers arghya should not be given to low ranking rivers.

Raghavendrathirtha has composed this stotra giving information about the ranking of rivers. The source for this is Brahmandapurana. This is a collection of the theme spread out in various chapters.

A commentary on Sacarasmruti titled “Dipika” composed by Vaishvanatha Narayana pandita tells the same topic with minor variations.

क्रमाद्दशगुणं पुण्यमेषु स्नानात्लभेत्रः।  
 नद्यां समुद्रगामिन्यामतःशतगुणं स्मृतम्।  
 कावेरी नर्मदा कृष्णा तापी भीमरथी नदी  
 यमुना कौशिकी सिन्धुःतुन्गा वैतरणी मही॥  
 ----एताःपुण्यतमाःप्रोक्ताःस्नानदानतपस्सु च।  
 ऐताभ्योऽभ्यधिका कृष्णसन्निधौ गोमती नदी।  
 ततःपुण्यतमा प्रोक्ता गौतमी पापनाशिनी॥

ततःपुण्यतमा गंगा जाह्नवी सर्वपूजिता ॥<sup>11</sup>

Some rivers coming in contact with the presence of Ganga on some occasion of the year may enhance its status at that time.

#### Timely restriction for bath in ocean,

Bath in an ocean is restricted to only certain days like parvakala ie, last days of fortnights, samkramanaday of the month or during eclipse day. But bath is allowed in river Ganga during any time of the year. A commentary on sadacharasmruti further mentions that, Bath in ocean is not recommended on Tuesdays and Fridays.

पर्वणि स्नपनं श्रेष्ठं सर्वेषां लवणाम्बुधौ।<sup>12</sup> स्मृ.मु (9)  
 समुद्रे पर्वसु स्नायादमायां तु विशेषतः।  
 भृगौ भौमदिने स्नानं समुद्रे परिवर्जयेत्।<sup>13</sup>

#### Twelve names of Ganga

नन्दिनी नलिनी सीता मालती च मलापहा।  
 विष्णुपदाब्जसंभूता गंगा त्रिपथगामिनी॥  
 भागीरथी भोगवती जाह्नवी त्रिदशेश्वरी।  
 द्वादशैतानिनामानि यत्र यत्र जलाशये॥  
 स्नानोदयुक्तःपठेन्नित्यं तत्र तत्र वसाम्यहम्॥<sup>14</sup>

Vedavyasa declares in Bhagavata that even the names of rivers and a dip in them purifies the people.This can happen only when names are meaningful and powerful.

एतासामापोभारतीयप्रजानामभिरेव  
 पुनन्तीनामात्मना चोपपृशन्ति।<sup>15</sup>

While bathing in them, people should contemplate all the names of Ganga mentioned below.

Nandini, Nalini, Sita, Malati, Malapaha, Vishnupadabjasambhoota, Ganga, Tripathagamini, Bhagirathi. Bhogavati, Jahnvi, Tridasheshawari,

#### The lord's form to be remembered while bathing in Ganga

नदीषु मे वद ब्रह्मन् स्मर्तव्या मूर्तयो हरेः।  
 का ध्येया विस्तरेणैव कृपया मयि भो गुरो॥  
 वशिष्ठः-गंगायां माधवो देवः शंखचक्रगदाधरः।-  
 लसत्पद्मधरोध्येयःतत्र स्नायी नरेश्वर॥<sup>16</sup>

Dilipa appealed to sage Vasishta, to guide on forms of lord to be remembered while bathing in rivers.

For this, Vashishta replied,” oh king, while bathing InGanga one should remember lord Madhava who is bearing conch, disc, mace and the shining lotus”.

Decsription of river Ganga by Vadiraja in Tirthaprabhandha.) Ganga, you are enhancer of our virtues

गंगे त्वं शुभसंचयस्य जयदा दोषात्मनां नत्विति।  
 ज्ञातं यत्क्रतुकोटिलभ्यसुकृतस्याभ्युन्नतिं यच्छसि।

दुष्कर्मण्यमितानि दूरयसि यत्त्वद्देयतोयेक्षया।  
पानेनाप्यवगाहनेन मनसा ध्यानेन गायेन वा ॥<sup>17</sup>

Oh Ganga, I learnt that you are favorable to good souls but not for others. Whatever merits await persons performing one crore sacrifices same benefits you pass on to your pious devotees and keep the wrong doers away. When people look at your flow with devotion, drink water from river, taking holy bath in the river, meditating on you in their mind, singing devotional songs in your honor you make them purified and prosperous.

B) You are compassionate towards the distressed:

त्वं दीनेषु दयावतीति विदिता यद्ब्रह्महस्ताश्रयं।  
प्राप्ता ऽथाच्युतपादसंगमहिता पश्चाच्च नाकं  
गता ॥  
सौवर्णाचलश्रृंगमेत्य मुदिता शम्भोःशिरःस्संगता ॥  
प्यास्माक्षितिमण्डले त्रिपथगे तुष्टास्यभीष्टप्रदा ॥<sup>18</sup>

Oh, Ganga. Now we have learnt that you are compassionate towards unfortunates. Because, to begin with, you took shelter in four faced Bramha's hand. Then contact with Sri Hari's feet made you gain much respect. Then you flowed in heaven for a while, before your sojourn at golden Meru mountain. You Stayed in kailasa on Rudra's head before you headed towards earth to fulfill our intentions.

c) You are the beloved daughter of lord Narayana:

श्रीनारायणरामगोपतिहृषीकेशादिरूपोऽक्षमा।  
त्वां हातुं हरिसूकरकृतिरथ श्रीदेवहूत्यात्मजः ॥  
वेणीमाधवबिन्दुतनुस्तीरे व्यधत् स्थितिं।  
गंगे किं बहुना पुनाति वसति त्वद्भर्तृगेहेऽप्यसौ<sup>19</sup>

Oh, Ganga, your father Narayana does not tolerate separation from his daughter. That is why there are so many temples of shri Hari on banks your river. He is as Narayana in Badarikashrama, as Rama in Prayaga, as Gopalakrishna in Alakabhagirathi confluence, as Govinda in Hastinapura, as sri Vedavyasa in vyasashrama, as Hari in Haridwara, as Shvetavaraha in Sookaraksherta, as Venimadhava in Prayaga, as Bindumadhava in Varanasi. Not this much. Hari has his permanent abode in your husband's residence too. (Sea)

अनेन बदरिकाश्रममारभ्य समुद्रपर्यन्तं गंगातीरे  
विष्णुमूर्तयः तिष्ठन्तित्युक्तं भवति।<sup>20</sup>

Though it is natural, poet has used this with utpreksha-alankara and beautifully highlighted the theme. Thus, a rthalamkara is seen in this description. Vishnu rests in ocean is the theme which is proved in Vedas and puranas.

मम योनिरप्सु अन्तःसमुद्रे-<sup>21</sup>

Poet questioning delay in arrival of Ganga to the mind

आरभ्याब्जलोकमाक्षितितलादायातया किम्वया  
मच्चित्तं बहुदूरमित्यबलया त्यक्तं भिया जान्हवी।  
अक्षय्याचलतुंगशृंगनिकरान्निर्भिध्य यान्ती मम

स्वल्पं किं बहुमन्यसेऽशुभकुलं गंगेऽन्तरगे  
चलम् ॥<sup>22</sup>

Oh Ganga, you have travelled from satyaloka till our Earth. The path is almost 25 crore yojanas. While it cannot be considered as distant, and how can my mind which is nearer to you becomes a distant place.? You have cut across impregnable mountains and reached this earth. When Rudra who controls the mind is nearer to you, do you think my mind is so impregnable that cannot be reached. It is not at all difficult. Then why you have not come? Oh, Ganga, you are my antaranga .i.e. inner faith. Have you considered my sins as huge or are you afraid of any other reason? If not for these reasons, then why you have not come nearer to me? Instead of pleading her directly to enter our mind and remove sins the poet used paryaya(deviation) path and presented his pleadings. Thus, by use of paryayaalankara poet has said she has no way to escape from purifying the devotees.

Just a prayer or pleading to make us sinless looks not attractive either for a devotee or for the God. Divine entities like Vishnu, Shiva and Ganga are benefactors of knowledge. They bestow knowledge to true devotees.

Poet questioning Ganga, for not purifying him

अस्थिस्पर्शनमात्रतः तव किल श्रेयःप्रदत्तं गतम्।  
विस्तीर्णा न किमच्युतस्य नगरी  
मन्मात्रदेशोज्झिता।  
तद्वर्त्मापि सकण्टकं किमु सतां सन्तानजोऽहं न  
किम्।  
कस्मादम्ब न मे प्रदास्यसि पदं  
गंगेऽखिलार्थप्रदम् ॥<sup>23</sup>

Hey Ganga why have you rejected me? You have travelled from far off satyaloka till our earth. That can be considered as distant but not my mind which is nearer. You have cut across impregnable mountains and reached this earth. Wicked thoughts of my mind shiver when they hear your name. Do you think my mind is so impregnable that you cannot penetrate? hey Ganga, just your touch was enough to sanctify Sagara's sons. Have you lost that power now since you touched their ashes? Does Vaikuntha not have enough space? Is the road to Vaikunta is not good enough and full of obstacles? Do you think my birth has not taken place in noble person's clan? Oh mother, you are capable of fulfilling wishes of everybody. Why don't to you fulfill my wish of gaining entry to Vaikunta?

Thus, poet says a procedural dip in Ganga not only washes our sins and grants heaven, it may lead to grant the liberation, the final Purushartha.

Demanding the explanation from Ganga for being rejected.

अज्ञानाद्यदिसज्जनेषु रचितद्रोहान्मयिस्वर्धुनि।

स्वस्पूर्त्या सुजनेषु दूषणगणारोपादवज्ञा तव ॥  
तर्हि त्वां सगरात्मजास्थिनिकरा जानन्ति किं  
तैःप्रभो।  
द्रोहःकिं न कृतःकिमम्ब न हरावारोपिता चोरता  
? ॥<sup>24</sup>



Hey river from heaven, why are you indifferent towards me? Is it because my knowledge is inadequate or have I hurt the good or with my false notion have, I made baseless allegations on noble persons? Not the first reason. Did remnants of Sagaras sixty thousand sons knew off your existence before? Not the second reason. Did not Sagaras sons insult Hari during his Kapila incarnation. Not the third reason. Did not Sagaras sons falsely implicate Kapila for theft? Hey Ganga just like you are you are considerate towards Sagara's sons please forgive our sins.

### Conclusion

With the observation of the above facts we must be aware of the divine nature of rivers. They are not insentient and they are goddesses. Their compassion and love for knowledge should be put into practice by us at all times. Their sanctity should be protected by us always. While recognizing river, their origin, their greatness should be borne in mind. Thus, the river basins can be taken care of to maintain the cleanliness

### Foot notes

1. Smrutimuktavali-Jjalashabhedabhaga shloka 4
2. Smrutimuktavali.nadisnanaphalabhaga,shloka4-5 .
3. Smrutimuktavali.nadisnanaphala-1-3
4. Smrutimuktavali.,Tirthamahima--shloka,2
5. Bhagavata-05-17-10.
6. NadItaratamya stotra-shloka.1
7. Smrutimanikya sangraha-137,138.
8. Smrutimauktavali .shoka 6
9. Sadacharasmruti 5<sup>th</sup> shloka's vyshv. Smrutimauktavali anatachrya vyakhyana
10. Raghavendratirtha's Naditaratamya stotra.
11. Sadacharasmruti 5<sup>th</sup> shkoka's vyshvanatachrya vyakhyana
12. Smrutimauktavali –shloka 9
13. Sadacharasmruti 5<sup>th</sup> shloka's vyshvanatachrya vyakhyana Bhagavata-05-17-01
14. Sadacharasmrutivyakhyana -Translation-gurusarvabhoma-Nov- 1973-page31
15. Bhagavata-05-19-17
16. Smrutimauktavali –shloka 2,3.(Snalale murtiroopa)
17. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka 22,
18. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka 15
19. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka 21
20. commentary of Narayanacharya .
21. Ambhruni sookta.Rigveda-x mandala-125 sookts - 07shloka
22. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka-18
23. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka-19
24. Tirthaprabandha-uttaraprabandha- shloka-17.

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