

SAGA OF A LOST RIVER IN THE HEART OF THE CITY

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Abstract: *Kolkata has a hidden history of the old stream of Ganges known as Adi Ganga which used to flow from the present Tollygunge area up to the south following the current metro rail line. It was the main flog of river Hooghly in between 15th to 17th century. In the course of time there was a shift of the channel and with negligence, pollution and different Anthropogenic activities it was dried up up gradually. The study tries to explore the historical- environmental and social significance of the old channel of the Ganga, its contribution in the life of the people in Calcutta and the causes of its death. The study also focuses on the resume plans taken by the authority to revive the surrounding landscape and to regenerate the cultural history in the City.*

Key words: *Channel, historical, degradation, river pollution, urban landscape, rejuvenation.*

INTRODUCTION

The history of an ancient river is hidden in the heart of Kolkata city. The history of the original Ganges River in Kolkata is as amazing as it is from its Discovery. The issue of lost and recovery is no less interesting. The location of the Adi Ganga is between 22°27'08" to 22°33'03" north latitude and 88°18'59" to 88°24'10" east longitude. Located across 28.26 Sq km area it is the, old stream in the flat plane region of the present Ganges situated in the lower Delta Valley of the Bhagirathi Hooghly river system. After the partition of India in 1947, a large number of refugees needed to settle in Kolkata and they started settling mainly along the river .It was then that the southern part of Kolkata which actually began to develop. Among the people living here not only from Bangladesh but also from neighbouring States such as Bihar, Jharkhand ,Orissa etc. many people migrated and started living along the river. Thus, as a result of the Year settlement, parts of the river bank where restored, and their temporary houses built with bamboo et cetera on the banks of the river. As a result of this gradually contaminated water entered the former sector of the Ganges known as the Adi Ganga and gradually this stream ceased to exist and people living in the vicinity are also directly or indirectly affected by different water borne diseases.

History of the flow of the Adi Ganga river

Adi Ganga which is also known as ‘Tali Nala’ or ‘Govindpur creek’ or ‘Sarman’s Nala’ .It flows through Kolkata and south 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. To know the history and evolution of the small river one has to go back to the 15th century AD. Before the 16th century the main stream of the Ganga flood into the Saraswati river. Since 16 century it flows into the present river Ganga and the Saraswati river dry up gradually. Then the present channel of Ganga or Hooghly river leaves the Adi Ganga and then joins the Bay of Bengal along with the lower flow of Saraswati river the history of these Adi Ganga or the early Ganga channel is also found in Hindu mythology of ‘Manasamangal’. Because in the description of Chand Saudagar journey Chitpur-Betar-Kalighat-Churaghat-Baruipur-Chhatrabhog-Chaumukhi-Satamukhi and Sagar Sangam (Sagardwip) are mentioned. Again the description of Bipradas Piplai's ‘Manasamangal’ poem, There is also a similarity to the map of the original Ganges painted by Van den Brooke drawn in 1660.

Because from the 15th to the 17th century, it was the main stream of the Hooghly River. But later this part became slower and degraded. Bhagirathi, the old channel of the river Ganga, which flows in the area, is not the same as it is now. In ancient times, it has been seen that this Ganges situated in the lower course of Bhagirathi river flowed over different parts of the Chotanagpur plateau on the western side of West Bengal and fell directly south into the Bay of Bengal. This flow was not very long. On the southern most boundary of this Bhagirathi, there was historical ‘Tamralipto’ port at Tamruk in present-day Medinipur district. But later, the Ganges gradually moved eastwards. As a result, this port was gradually abandoned and lost its importance. Later, when the river flowed south from Farakka and split, the former port was thus marooned, and a new port emerged at the Saptagram region. At that time, the Jamuna river flowed in the south-east and the Hooghly river was in the middle part. The place where the Hooghly river used to take its course near the city of Kolkata was the area adjacent to Shibpur, just opposite the present Garden reach area. After this the river flows through the places like Kalighat, Baruipur, Mogra, Gocharan, Joynagar, South Bishnupur, etc. and enters Sagardwip and meets in the Bay of Bengal. This old channel of river Ganga was called Adi Ganga. According to some historians and scholars, in the past, as the stream of the original Ganges dried up, it was connected to the lower flow of Saraswati with the help of artificial canals so that sea-going ships could reach the Bay of Bengal along the river.

Adi Ganga in folklore

It is said that Nawab Alivardi Khan of Bengal knew about this river. According to another view, where the Adi Ganga is separated from the Ganges, there was a creek nourished by tidal water near the mouth of the Ganges and Saraswati. Dutch merchants divided the creek to facilitate shipping. In the 18th century, this river demarcated the southern boundary of the village Gobindapur in Kolkata and hence named Gobindapur Creek. Edward Sarman then carried out excavations and renovated it, so it became named Sarman's Nala. In 1773, British Colonel William Tolly dug the canal more deeply and connected it to the Circular canal. Since then, it has been called Tolly Nala. In 1775, Colonel Tolly connected the Adi Ganga with the Bidyadhari River and after the renovation of the Tolly Drain, Adi Ganga became navigable again. However, gradually the tendency of people to use waterways decreased later. With this, Kolkata was rapidly urbanized and due to the convenience of other mode of transportation, the importance of waterways was no longer the same and the depth of the Adi Ganga decreased. Eventually, it became a sewage drain in south-west Kolkata and some parts continued to dry up. It also became highly polluted.

It is heard that even a few years ago, there was a system of crossing the river in the Adi Ganga. In that boat, the people of Chetla used to get up and reach Savitri Ghat in Kalighat. But the boat didn't move. A fisherman would buy the ghat with a tender or tender for a year. And on that pier, the owner used to arrange three or four boats in a row and the exchange of only 50 paise on the boat standing like a bridge used to cross the Adi Ganga. But now that too has become a story. Bansdroni is now a rising area adjacent to the Adi Ganga which is becoming congested with mushrooming multi-storied. But once bash boats were bought and sold in the market, so from there the name Bansdroni has been derived because the word 'Droni' means boat or boat. People used to come from far away to buy the boat from the boat traders. But in the course of time, pollution and negligence, the Adi Ganga gradually became a drain. So from the river to the drain and from the drain, the existence of the river is finally lost. So where the boat used to run, today one metro rail after another runs. It was said that Kalighat was on one side of the Adi Ganga and on the other side was Chetla hat. This 'Chetla hat' or local market was famous for selling various fishing nets and mosquito nets. Not only that, but it was famous for spears, chips, net sticks, etc. From here, fishermen used to buy fishing nets and take them to different places and next door, clay pitchers of Patua para of Kalighat were famous, which people used to buy from far and wide. So not only the river, the

Adi Ganga lives in the legend. This Adi Ganga was the way from the trade route of Chand Saudagar to heaven by raft of Behula. It is said in history that 'Than Puja' was a popular folk culture prevalent along the banks of Ganga. That is, there were 'Thans' of gods and goddesses in different places along the ghats of the Ganges, such as Garia, Baishnavghata, where people used to worship and worship regularly. Such as Mansar Than, Sheetala's Than, Ola Baba's Than, etc. The customs of people of all religions were combined on the banks of the Ganges by boat.

Adi Ganga or the current location and status of the Tolly Nala

Now the Adi Ganga channel is spread through Tollygunge in Kolkata through AzadGarh, Ranikuthi, Alipore, Netaji Nagar, Bashdroni, Naktala, Rathtala, Vaishnavghata, Garia, Mahamayatala, Narendrapur up to Subhashgram. In Kolkata, when the work of metro rail started in the late 1980s from Dum Dum to Tollygunge and extended 8.5 km railway line from Tollygunge to Garia in the south, it was entirely built on the channel of Adi Ganga. Five out of six metro rail stations have been built by constructing one pillar after another on the Adi Ganga. Here, about 300 pillars of the metro rail have been built twenty meters apart without any environmental clearance report. Not only that, but with siltation, waste disposal, water pollution, the river gradually becomes a canal and a canal to drain. Therefore, according to environmentalists, the metro rail construction has allowed the last nail buried on the grave of Adi Ganga to dry up and dead finally.

Plan for the revival of the Adi Ganga

Among the rivers of South Asia, Adi Ganga of Kolkata in West Bengal, India, was chosen for central financial assistance in the plan of a pollution-free river. Since this was the old actual channel of our holy river Ganga. Therefore, through the National Mission for Clean Ganga, Rs 650 crore was allocated for the restoration of this walled river sector and to relieve its pollution. The revival project must be completed by September 30, 2025 and the National Grill Tribunal had also directed the West Bengal government in this regard. For this reason, the Adi Ganga was selected among all the polluted rivers among all south Asian countries in Sylhet, Bangladesh, at the International Seminar on Water. In 1998, the Government of West Bengal filed a case in the Calcutta High Court stating that 7,851 illegal constructions were carried out on the Adi Ganga, mainly in Kolkata and adjoining areas, including 40,000 inhabitants, 90 temples, 69 warehouses, 12 animal storage sites and some others within the

15-km river bed. Within a month, the Calcutta High Court ordered the removal of all these illegal constructions. But later another report revealed that two decades after the first order was issued, many illegal constructions continued to remain in force. However, according to the government, the cow sheds have been removed from there. But this illegal occupation could not be removed due to socio-political issues. Nor could the river bed be restored. But for the rejuvenation of the stream further about Rs 7 Crore was recommended to allocate by the Kolkata municipality, so that in three phases from ‘Doi Ghat’ to ‘Sahid Khudiram’ metro station restoration work can be done as earlier as possible.

Therefore, there is enough justification for the revival plan of the area around the Adi Ganga for the present and future generations. If through Adi Ganga the surrounding cultural landscape is regenerated in a proper planned way, then the present and future generation easily identify the history and rich culture of this place. It can be done through various ways like urban morphological landscape planning, for example restoring and decorating the colonial memorials and the burning ghats of Hindu or Christians Cemeteries and interestingly present it for a ‘Heritage walk’ to the Indian and International travellers in Kolkata, the a lost river will be able to narrate its story to all. Not only that this can lead to rebuild a historical city in a new way in front of the world. Because the tradition of a colonial old town remains in its heritage, not in development only. So, various plans can be adopted to restore the civilization around the old stream track. A new bio-ecological way can be also found in this regard. Along with this, a bio-ecological way can be planned for which the work of creating green-belt along the river, preventing soil erosion, planting various types of trees, reducing water pollution and even planting mangrove trees on an experimental basis on the banks of the Ganges can also be successful because it has been found that some mangrove trees have the ability to absorb water contaminants. At the same time, some native or local trees such as Sal, Shisham, Karanja, Neem trees can be planted to create a layer of greenery along the river.

Adi Ganga is a traditional historical river of Kolkata whose contribution was priceless in social cultural and environmental respect. But the river has lost its existence in course of time and for anthropogenic activities. At the same time, the river is flowing in other directions in a natural way. But to revive history, it is very important to keep these eco-cultural traditions alive, especially for the reconstruction of the city landscape because Kolkata’s heritage lies in its past and the history of this river.

Flow of ‘Adi Ganga’ and surrounding Planned Landscape The present day ‘Adi Ganga’



Source: Paul, Bardhan (2020)

Source: Baneerjee & Bhattacharya

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