Introduction

Jagannatha Pandita who lived during the reign of emperor Shahajehan (1592-1666) in Delhi for several years under his patronage was a Telugu Brahmin whose father Perubhatta was an erudite scholar. Jagannatha, endowed with sharp intellect, acquired deep knowledge in various fields of learning under the tutelage of his father. It is said that he first went to Tanjore to establish himself. But failing in his effort he moved North ultimately landing in Delhi where Shahjehan recognized his merit and offered him his patronage. His fame spread far and wide.

A story goes that young Jagannatha fell in love with a Muslim girl – emperor’s daughter- and married her. He has authored a number of well known works, the most famous of which is “Rasagangadhara” - a treatise on poetics. He was also a contemporary of Appayaadikshita, author of “Kuvalayanananda”- again an authoritative work on Figures of speech. Appayyadikshita was Jagannatha Pandita’s literary rival and he severely criticized Appayyadikshita in his work.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, connecting these two great authors. Jagannatha who was old then was sleeping on the banks of Ganga with his Muslim wife when Appayyadikshita came there for a bath. Inadvertently Appayyadikshita stepped on Jagannatha and exclaimed “किं निश्शांकं शेषं शेषेवयसि त्वमागते मृत्यों”

“Why are you sleeping without any care when Death is knocking at your doors?”
Quickly he recognized Jagannatha and said

“अथवा सुखं शरीथा: निकटे जागरि जाह्वी भवतः”

“Or do sleep comfortably. Ganga is awake by your side.”

Jagannatha wrote “Gangalahari” eulogizing Ganga perhaps to expiate for his sin of marrying a Muslim woman. It has 52 verses and it is said that as he recited verse after verse Ganga rose up steadily one step for a verse and on the 52nd verse Ganga touched Jagannatha washing away his sins.

Now let us get to know this fine piece of poetry. I have taken guidance from the Sanskrit commentary on Gangalahari authored by Late. K N Varadaraja Iyengar.

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You are the complete fortune of the whole world. You are that un-describable wealth of Siva who playfully created the world. You are the sum and substance of the Vedas. You are the good fortune and personified beauty of ambrosia for the divine beings. May your waters destroy our sins.

If the pitiable state and sin of the wretched, whose heart is full of past sinful actions receives your glances even once, they get removed at once. May your water-current which is the anointed preceptor for quickly uprooting right up to the tree of avidya (illusion) provide us unlimited prosperity.
When Parvati, mother of Ganesha cast her glance, which imitated the glow of the rising sun, at Ganga who was (caught) in the locks of Siva’s head, Ganga’s turmoil took the form of high waves emanating from the head of Siva. May those waves destroy your sinful world.

(When Bhagiratha wanted to bring Ganga to the world to sanctify the ashes of his forefathers, Ganga fell on the locks of hair of Siva and could not get out of it. The poet imagines that Parvati jealous of Ganga looked at her with anger and the turmoil of Ganga that ensued has caused the high waves of Ganga.)

Mother Ganga, based on your support, becoming very haughty I neglected all other divine beings. Now if you show detachment towards me, I am support-less. Tell me in front of whom shall I cry?

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If you are remembered even by those who have not done any good deeds, you dispel their internal lassitude like the ray of sun dispels darkness. May this form of yours whose waters are resorted to by all the divine beings take away the triads of my internal agony and my sins.

( The triads of agony –taapatraya-are aadhyaatmika, aadhidaivika and aadhibhautika. They refer to agonies attributable to one’s own internal state, to divine wrath and to external physical causes respectively.)

Mother, the happiness of those persons who relinquish great kingdoms considering them (worthless) like grass and take shelter on your banks, where bamboo-grass sways and drink your waters till satiated is sweeter than ambrosia and mocks the state of salvation.

Mother, when the musk-fragrance applied to the breasts of royal women-folk mingles with your waters while they take
bath, the musk deer, (whose musk the women had applied) enter care free the celestial garden of Indra surrounded by hundreds of plane-going divine beings!
(The poet’s imagination seems to run riot here. Simply because fragrance applied by women mingles with Ganga waters, musk deer from where the fragrance originates become eligible for the world of Indra!)

Even if it is remembered once it provides peace to the inner self. If it is sung it immediately removes the worldly torment and sin. May this word “Ganga” which is indeed pleasant to hear shine in my lotus-like mouth at the very end of my breath.

(Even) Crows playing amidst you being full of extreme joy do not crave (even) for the city of Indra. Your banks remove the distresses associated with birth and death from the residences of people. May your banks be capable of relieving our tiredness.
O divine river, you are not to be determined by even the Vedas with all their variations removed. You are beyond the grasp of mind and speech of the living. You are that entity which is shapeless, eternal, pure and dispeller of darkness by virtue of its glory. Therefore you are not a worldly object.

(The poet virtually identifies Ganga with Brahman.)

You grant in a very normal way the abode of Vishnu, which is beyond thought and which is not obtainable through large charities, varied sacrifices, and severe series of pure penances. Tell us, with whom can you be equated!

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You are auspicious and you remove the fears of worldly life even for those who look at you. Who in this world could extol your glory? Lord Siva not bothering to appease Parvati who had become pale because of anger carries you on his head permanently.

*(Parvati is angry with Siva because of the attention Ganga is getting from Siva and Siva does not seem to care!)*

You remove the sins of innumerable people: sins, which are worthy of being despised even by the intoxicated, which are to be atoned for even by the fallen, which are unmentionables even to the outcastes, which are to be cast off with horripilation even by slanderers. Yet never getting tired you alone are triumphant in this world.

Mother, while falling from the divine world for removing the distress of this world you were held up by Siva in his locks of hair. Your good qualities which induced greed
even in the minds of those otherwise devoid of greed turned out to be a blemish!

(*Siva who is otherwise totally devoid of greed was tempted to withhold you in his locks of hair because of your great qualities. So imagines the poet.*)

Mother, you are the ultimate medicine to protect people who are dull headed, who are blind, lame, deaf, dumb and those affected by planetary states and those for whom courses to cross over all their sins have vanished and who have been rejected by the Gods and who are falling into hell.

Mother, the indescribable and unlimited glory of your waters which are pure and cool by nature is resplendent in this world. Sons of Sagara bearing unblemished lustre and having reached heaven joyfully sing your glory even now with their hairs bristling with thrill.
Mother, in this world, there are many holy rivers to redeem those who have committed a minor sin and have quickly become regretful. There is no one like you in redeeming those whose sins are beyond redemption. (literally you are only like yourself.)

You are the indescribable abode of all dharma’s. You are a means of new happiness. You are the most important of holy waters. You are, as it were, a pure raiment for all the three worlds. You are the solace for the mind. You are the dispeller of bad thoughts. You are the receptacle of wealth. May your body (waters) remove our distress. (Please note the lilting repetition in निधानम्, विधानम्, प्रधानम्, परिधानम्, समाधानम्, तिरोधानम्, आधानम्.)

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ममैवायं मन्तु: स्वहितशतहन्तुर्जडत्थियो
वियोगस्तेमात: यदिः करुणात: क्षणमणि || १९ ||

Mother, my separation even for a minute from your compassion is my fault only. Striding in front of kings whose eyes are rolling due to the intoxication of wealth I have a multitude of varied weaknesses. Being a dull headed person, I myself am the hindrance of my welfare.

(मन्तुः=fault)

मरुललिललललहरिलुलिलितामभोजपतली-
स्खलत्यंसुवातचुरंविसरत्कौंकुमरुचि ||
सुरस्वीक्षीक्षाकंडगरुजम्बालजतिर
जलं ते जम्बालं मम जननजालं जयतं || २० ||

Your waters have the hue of saffron on account of the (floating) pollen of lotuses swinging merrily due to the wind. They are thick with the moss-like *agaru* dripping from the breasts of divine damsels. May such waters clear in me the morass (of sin) of the web of birth. (Reference is to divine damsels taking bath in Ganga as a result of which the fragrance of pastes applied on their bodies mingles with water)

समुत्पति: पद्मारमणपादपमालमलखः
निवासः कन्दरप्रतिभजटावृतीभवने ||
अथायं व्यासइङ्गो हंपतिनिनिस्तारणविद्धो
न कस्मादुत्कर्षस्तव जनमिः जागर्तु जगत: || २१ ||
Mother, you originated from the faultless nail of the lotus-like feet of Vishnu. Your residence is that of Siva who was the enemy of cupid. You are devoted to the act of raising the fallen and the oppressed. How can not your excellence (in the act of saving the fallen and oppressed) wake up the worlds?

नगेभ्यो यान्तीनां कथय तत्तिनीनां कतमया
पुराणां संहत्तुः सुधुनि कपर्दौसिधिरुस्ते ।
कया च श्रीभत्तुः पदकमलमक्षालि सलिलेः
तुलालेशो यस्यां तव जननि दीयेत कविभि: ॥ २२ ॥
O River of the Divine Beings! Which one among the rivers that flow from mountains has mounted the matted locks of Siva, the slayer of the (three) cities? By which river have the lotus-like feet of Vishnu been washed? Could poets compare any such river with even a small part of you?

विधवतां निःशंकं निरवधिमाधि विधिरहो
मुखं शेरे शेतां हरिरविरं नुल्यतु हर: ।
कृतं प्रायश्चितंङ्गमथ तपोदानयजनेः
सवित्री कामानं यदि जगति जागर्ति भवती ॥ २३ ॥
If in this world, you being the fulfiller of desires, are alert then let Brahma enter into eternal meditation without any care; let Vishnu happily sleep on Adisesha; let Siva dance continuously; there is no need for rites of atonement; There is no need for meditation, charity and sacrifice.
I have no protector and you are moist (soft) with love; I have strayed from the path and you provide the pious state; I am fallen and you hold aloft the universe; I am stricken with disease and you are the proven doctor; I am thirsty due to greed and you are an ocean of ambrosia; I am a child and you are the mother; I have come to you here and now and you do as you deem it proper.

O the auspicious! Right up to the extent your story reached the earth, the din in the city of Yama has died down; (Yama’s) messengers have gone to distant places searching for the dead. Groups of air-planes are jostling in the streets of (the city) of the Divine beings. (Pandita Jagannatha who would have been well versed in praising royals having been a court poet uses hyperbole effortlessly in praising Ganga. Those who have heard of Ganga become eligible to reach heaven and there is no rush in Hell and the messengers of Yama are reaching distant places to look for
people fit for hell. On the contrary, groups of aircraft carrying those who have been blessed by Ganga have crowded in Heaven!

Divine river, may your streams of moving water drops, coming in waves due to the pleasant wind remove daily the indescribable heat of us whose bodies are burnt by the shining flames of severe fever generated by desire and anger.

Mother, may the collection of your waters which got entangled in the matted locks spread out by Siva and whose waves encircled the whole of brahmanda as if it was a tinduka fruit remove our distress. (It is not clear what this tinduka fruit is and what its name is in English.)
O kindhearted mother, by purifying me, to redeem whom the various holy places quickly feel ashamed and divinities like Siva put their palms against their ears, you are tearing apart the vanity of all in the task of destroying sins.

I am the repository of the whole group of sins which are avoided even by hordes of the dog eating class disturbed by endless doubts. You are preparing yourself to redeem me. How will I, an animal in the form of man, be capable of praising you?

Mother, you have been having this desire for a long time, “From times immemorial can a person be found by redeeming whom the whole world would be amazed?” Now I have come to you as the first person to fulfill your desire.
I led the life of a dog. All the time I chatted nonsense. I indulged in meaningless discussions. I spent my time slandering others. Except you who else would like to look at me even for a moment after having heard of my qualities?

Mother, of what use are the eyes which have not tasted (experienced) your most beautiful form? Fie be to the human ears into which has not entered the murmur of the play of your waves.
Mother, it is only in the places where you, who destroy easily all the sins of persons, are not there that there are these two divisions: Those who have led a pure life travel to the city of Indra at their will and sinners quickly fall into the bowels of hell. (As Ganga redeems everyone such a disparity does not exist in places where she flows.)

अपि छन्नतो विप्रानविरतमुषबतो गुरुसति:।
पिबल्न्तो मैयेयं पुनरपि हरत्तथ्य कनकम्।
विहाय त्वरयतते तनुभतुनुदानाधवजुणाम्।
उपर्यम्ब्र क्रिड़न्त्यखिलसुरसंभावितपदा: || ३४ ||

Mother, persons who in the end leave their bodies in you even after killing Brahmins, lusting for women of elders, drinking liquor and stealing Gold reach a status respected by all the divine beings and play( enjoy in Svarga) above those who have rendered charity and sacrifices. (Even a person who has lived a life of decadence attains liberation if he leaves his body on the banks of Ganga.)

अलब्ध्यं सौरभ्यं हरति सत्तं यः सुमनसाम
क्षणादेव प्राणानिपि विरहशस्त्रक्षतभृताम्।
त्वदीयानां लीलायकलितलहरीणां व्यतिकरात्।
पुनर्वः सोपि द्रागहह पवमानसि। ब्रह्मवै ||

Ah, even the wind which continuously carries the fragrance of flowers, which is otherwise not obtainable and which also carries away the life-breath of those who are wounded by pangs of separation and wounded by sword, quickly
becomes capable of purifying all the three worlds by its contact with your waves which move playfully.

Mother, how many are there who are bent on doing good to the common folk? How many pure souls are there who are pining for attaining the other world? Due to your kindness this Lord of the worlds (Jagannatha) rests perpetually having placed the burden of all the three worlds on you.

(Lord of the worlds is rid of his worries after transferring all his responsibilities of saving the fallen to Ganga. The poet plays a pun on his own name, implying that he sleeps peacefully having transferred all his burden on Mother Ganga.)

Just as you cannot but love to uplift those who are outcastes, the lowest, the fallen and the heretic, I cannot but love evil ways. Mother, after all in this world no one can go against nature.
May the waves of Ganga which are performing a *tandava* dance remove my distress. When Siva dances at nightfall his locks of hair swing and Ganga caught in the locks comes out shaking as if in a *tandava* dance. Water streams around the center of (Siva’s) throat sound as if a *damaru* is being played.

Mother, I have always placed on you the burden of worrying about my welfare. If you neglect me at this difficult time then Trust will decline in the three worlds and unconditional kindness becomes unsupported.
When your waves spilled out from the matted hairs of Siva, whose half of the body was that of his beloved, Parvati who was your rival warded them off with her tender hands while her looks showed annoyance. Mother, may those waves flourish. [Siva was अर्धनारीश्वर  and therefore waves of Ganga affected Parvati too, who considered Ganga her rival]

प्रपन्नते लोकः कति न भवतीमत्रभवतीः
उपाथिस्तत्राय सुपरति यदभीष्टं वितरसि ।
अये तुभ्यं मातर्मम् तु पुनरात्मा सुरधुः
स्वभावादेव त्वय्यमितमनुरागं विधृतवान् ॥ ॥

Mother, Divine River, what a large number of people take refuge in you! It appears that the reason is that you fulfill their desires. As for me, my mind is by nature deeply attached to you.

ललाटे या लोकैरिह खलु सलीलं तिलकिता
तमो हन्तुं धते तरुणतर्मार्षण्डुनां
विलुम्पन्ती सत्यो विधिलिखितदुर्बर्णसरणिः
त्वदीया सा मृत्स्ना मम हरतु कृत्स्नामपि शुचम् ॥ ॥

Your clay which is put on the forehead as a mark by people to destroy the darkness looks like the early morning sun. May that clay which immediately removes the series of bad luck written by fate remove all my sorrow.
The trees on the banks of Ganga, the divine river, with their bunches of blossoms seem to be laughing merrily at the foolish people who are engrossed in their own world. May the trees with their fragrance which all the time sanctify the bees which are ever black be our friends. [A naughty thought! Did the poet suffer a temporary lack of ideas?]

Some seek Gods, others seek difficult services, others sacrifices, yet others indulge in observance of penance and meditation. But, O Divine river, I like the comfort of mentally repeating your name. Mother, I treat this web of worldly life as worthless as straw.
There are any number of the blessed and the learned who do good to those who are tirelessly earning virtuous acts right from their birth. But I do not see anyone in this world other than you who could benefit those who are devoid of support and who have not done any virtuous act.

Mother, having drunk your milk (water) I quickly went away with dull headed friends and I did not get rest anywhere. Kind-hearted mother, please take me for ever who has woken up after a long time on to your lap which is cool due to the movement of soft wind.

Divine river, forthwith gird up your loins made beautiful by their firmness. Restrain the crescent moon on your crown with the help of snakes. Do not take it easy thinking of ordinary persons. Time has come now to rescue this Jagannatha. (As Ganga resides in the locks of Siva, the crescent moon adores her crown too. So are the snakes around neck of Siva available to her to do her bidding. So
imagines Jagannatha. Perhaps as Ganga girds up her loins to rescue Jagannatha, the crescent moon is disturbed and he requests her to restrain the moon by binding him with snakes. The poet is no ordinary sinner and Ganga has to take special efforts to raise him up!

शरच्चन्द्रश्चेतां शशिशकलशोभालमुकुटाः
करैः कुम्भाक्रम्बोजे वरभयनिरासौ विदधतीम् ।
सुधासाराकाराभरणवसनां शुभ्रमकः
स्थितां त्वां ध्यायन्त्युदयति न तेषां परिभवः ॥ ॥

You are as white as the moon in autumn. Your crown is resplendent with the crescent moon. You carry two pot-like lotuses and two abhayamudras in your hands. Your garments and ornaments are as white as the essence of ambrosia. You are on a white makara. One who contemplates on your form does not face defeat. (The poet visualizes Ganga in a human form. She has four hands [करैः is plural]. Two hands convey abhayamudra [वरभयिनरा सौ]. Two hands carry two large lotuses [कुम्भाक्रम्बोजे]. Note: It is possible that I have not grasped the purport of the poet, although I have tried my best to decipher what he wants to convey. Is there any specific human form traditionally given to Ganga? Why is Ganga on a makara? The Sanskrit commentary has not been of much help. Help from readers is welcome. What exactly is
मकर is not clear, although it is a fairly common word. Is it crocodile or shark or some other animal? )

दरस्मितसमुल्लसहदनकालितपूर्मतैः
भवज्ञवलनभरजिताननिशमूर्जयती नरान्
विवेकमयचन्द्रिकाचयचमत्कृतिं तन्वती
तनोतु मम शं तनो: सपदि शन्तनोरङ्गना ||

Giving life to those who are constantly fried by the fire of worldly affairs with the ambrosia of the flood of lustre of her smiling face, may Ganga, consort of Santanu, provide solace to my body by the charm of moonlight-like true knowledge.

मंगैर्मालितमौषध्यमुकुलितं त्रस्तं सुराणां गणेः
स्त्रस्तं सान्त्रसुधारसैविदलितं गारुत्मतैग्राहः ||
वीचिक्षालितकालियाहितपदे स्वर्लोककल्लोलिनि
त्वं तत्रलिमोद्धारै त्वा त्यालवलीढातमन: ||

O Divine river, your feet has been felt by Kaliya who was washed by your waves. Now remove the distress of my soul which has been bitten(tasted) by the serpent of worldly indulgence which has not been amenable to chants, medicines, assemblies of divinities, dense ambrosia and stone-charms of Garutman. (Translation conveys the gist only. Literal translation is not likely to be helpful.)
Mother, while Siva and Parvati played with dice, Siva having lost as wager the snake, his elephant hide, his retinue of pramathas, the bull, the moon and all, wanted to place himself as wager and your manly dance disorderly, joyful and bouncing resembling that of a dancer with a pot on his head was seen feelingly by a smiling Parvati. May that dance sanctify us. [Ganga must have felt elated that Siva did not place her also as wager and hence her joyful dance as she ensconced herself in the matted locks of Siva!]

May Ganga, who adorns the head of Siva, who destroys the diseases of many persons and whose high dancing waves are delightful make my parts of the body pure. [Perhaps the poet took a dip in the Ganga as he recited this last stanza. Does the repetitive syllable ग sound like the bubbles as he took the dip? ]

THE END