

SKĀNDAPURĀṆA - A TĪRTHA SAMHITHA

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The importance of *Tīrtha*-s and their legacy on Indian life, culture, art and thought has not been paid a deserving attention by scholars. Being a democratic country, India welcomes all kinds of religions, customs and beliefs. *Tīrtha*-s, temple and Tapovana-s have played a crucial role through out the life of Indians. Hence, the motif of *Tīrtha*-s co-occupy an eminent position even on the expansion of Indian culture outside India.

The *Skāndapurāṇa* is a monumental work of this kind. It begins with the glorification of *Kedārakhaṇḍa* (1.2) focusing on the spiritual and intellectual light on the famous *kṣetra*-s of *Badarī* (2.3), *Mathurā* (2.4), *Ayodhyā* (2.8), *Puruṣṭtamakṣetra* (Utkala or Orissa, *Jagannāthapurī*) and so on. Thus it can be stated that the *Skāndapurāṇa* considers the entire *Bhārata-kṣetra* as a *Tīrtha*.

This theory has also been agreed by *Brahmapurāṇa*. The famous *śloka* from the *Brahmapurāṇa* proves this:-

Jāmbave bhāratam varṣam tīrtham trailokyaviśrutam /

Karmabhūmir tatah putra tasmāt tīrtham taducyate // (Brahmapurāṇa, 1).

Thus as according to the pattern of *Skāndapurāṇa*, the entire *Bhāratākṣetra* is a *Tīrtha* and the *Purāṇa* itself is known as '*Tīrtha Samhita*'. Thus the *Skāndapurāṇa* defined *Tīrtha* as a means or a device like boat or ship, by means of which one can across this vast ocean of *Samsāra*.

Samsarābdher apārasya tarāṇe tīrthamiṣyate (Jain, Ādipurāṇa, p.48(ii)).

Skāndapurāṇa discusses different types of *tīrtha*-s the forests, the sacred places, the sacred temples, the sacred *liṅga* etc.

In *Skāndapurāṇa* many topics has been referred as *Tirthas*. Among the most salient one is Rivers, more than 50 rivers has been considered as holy water bodies as per *Skāndapurāṇa* from these rivers we are going to allude on 10 most important rivers.

Rivers as *Tirthās*

The rivers of India play an important role in Indian cultural life. The river system provides irrigation, portable water, cheap transportation, source of electricity and are the livelihoods of a large number of people and animals all over the country. All the major cities of ancient India were located on the banks of rivers. The rivers have an important role in all the religions.

Indian rivers possess beautiful scenery and cool breeze and have created a sense of holiness about them in the minds of people which itself is the reason for the worship. Most of the work in Indian literature gives a vivid description of the river systems. Among the *Purāṇa-s Skāndapurāṇa* is a typical example.

Among the most distinctive features of India are its Rivers, which hold a highly religious importance among its people. Covering the vast geographical area of 329 million hectares. Indian rivers have been an important reason for the rural prosperity of India. Carrying a wider importance in cultural, economical, geographical as well as religious development. The rivers in India are considered as Gods and Goddesses and are even worshipped among the Hindus. They provide tourists a wonderful insight into the historical, cultural, and traditional aspects of India. Some of the most prominent rivers in India include *Gaṅgā*, *Yamunā*, *Godāvarī*, *Narmadā* and *Kāverī*. The following rivers are described as *Tirtha-s* in *Skāndapurāṇa*.

1. *Sarasvatī* : While glorifying *Tirtha-s* pilgrimage, the purāṇa describes river *Sarasvatī* from its source to the Western ocean near *Prabhāsa*, where it joins the sea.¹ River *Sarasvatī* issuing from the water pot of Brahma ² started on its downward course of *palākṣa*³ Himavat, and praising through Kedara, from when it hims westward (*Paścimābhimukhi*).⁴ *Sarasvatī* flows through western cause *Paścimadeśa*, then she flows through *Mārkaṇḍeyāśrama*, *Arbudāraṇya*, *Vaṭavana*, *Kāka-tirtha*, *Puṇḍarika*, *Matyatirtha*, *Kotīśvara* and *Siddheśvara*. The *Sarasvatī* river is believed to have drained the

north northwest region of India in ancient times supporting over 16000 settlements. The river does not exist today. But there are numerous references to it in the ancient Indian literature of Veda and post Veda period. Rigvedic hymns also describe the life and times of people residing in the Sarasvatī valley. The sacred books reckon *Sarasvatī* as the seventh river of the Sindhu- *Sarasvatī* river system.

History and Mythology: During the Vedic period, *Sarasvatī* was recognized as the greatest of the rivers that nurtured the people living on its banks like a loving mother, and supported a number of learning centres and their resident scholars, ascetics, sages and seers like a benevolent deity. Vedic literature was itself written on the banks of the river. By nurturing such a pursuit of divine knowledge. *Sarasvatī* approximately assumes the status of the goddess of language, learning, arts and sciences- the best of the goddesses. *Mahābharāta* give reference to the drying up river *Sarasvatī*. *Mahābharāta* describes Balarama's pilgrimage from *Dvāraka* to *Mathurā* along the bed of this river is described in the *Mahābharāta*. Later, during the middle age, there are references to fissures and faults in the ground on the dry bed of river *Sarasvatī*.

The main reasons contributing to the drying up of the river appear to be the loss of its important tributaries due to changes in river course. Climate changes like periods of drought and water seepage through earth faults, and fissures combined with the obstruction of river flow by shifting of sand due to high winds. The whole of northwest India, upto the Rann Kutch, was subject to earthquake activity, resulting in raising of the ground, creation of earth faults that contributed to the loss of water of the river.

Skāndapurāṇa states that it also flows through the *Dharmāraṇya* ⁵ also. *Dharmāraṇya* is a sacred region to the east of *Mahisāgara*. It was called *Prācī Sarasvatī* ⁶ The tributary of this river is *Dr̥ṣadvatī*. The *Bhuvanakośa* section of the *Skāndapurāṇa* give a detailed description about this river. ⁷

1. Kāveri ⁸: River *Kāveri* originates in the Brahmagiri hills in Kodagu, in a place called *Tālakaverī*. It starts its journey from the small pond called as *Kuṇḍike* pond, later the two tributaries known as Kanake and Sujyoti joins it. All these three rivers meet at the point called *Bhāgamaṇḍala*. It lies at an altitude of 1350 metres and generally flows from the

south to the eastward direction. The river is approximately 760 km long. It flows in the state of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and merges into Bay of Bengal. The principle tributaries of the river *Kāverī* include Shimsha river, *Hemavatī* river, *Akravatī*, Honnuhole, *Lakṣmaṇa tirtha*, *Kabani*, *Bhavānī*, *Lokapāvanī* and the *Amarāvati* rivers. One of the popular stories regarding the origination of the river *Kāverī* is that – *Ṛṣi* Agastya went to mount *Kailāsa* and filled his pot with the snow water and went back. He started searching for the right place and handed his pot to the small boy who was playing there. That little boy was actually Lord *Gaṇeśa* who selected the place to start the river and slowly put the pot down and disappeared. After sometime, Agastya called out for the boy. He got no answer. Soon he noticed a crow spilled the pot of snow water on to the ground. After sometime Lord *Gaṇeśa* appeared with the smiling face. He said I have done nothing wrong but have helped you in finding the right place to start the river. Sage Agastya smiled and *Gaṇeśa* disappeared. This is how sage Agastya brought river *Kāverī* to South India from the *Himālaya*.

Religious Importance

The river *Kāverī* is the sacred river of India and holds special religious importance. People in India consider river *Kāverī* Goddess and worship her. She has been referred to as the Goddesses *Kāverī Amma*. According to the legends she purifies our karman-s and washes away all our sufferings. She is the universal mother and is believed to give us peace.

The river *Kāverī* has been supporting a large amount of wildlife. Millions of people in south India depend on its water, especially the tribal population. Its water is widely used for the purpose of irrigation and for the power supply. The hydroelectric plant built on the left *Śivanasamudra* falls on the *Kāverī*, was the first hydro electric plant in Karnataka.

1. ***Koṭi-tirtha***⁹ : It represents a *Līga* shrine called *Kotiśvara*. It was famous for the performance of *Prāṇatyāga*. Located in the south-east of *Mahābāleśvara* temple. *Koṭitirtha* is a sacred tank which is believed to contain waters of one crore (*Koṭi*) sacred springs (*Tirtha*). On the southern edge of the tank is the *Varadeśvara liṅga*, which was

installed by sage Agastya. People consider it auspicious to bath in the tank and perform rituals for departed souls. Many devotees can be seen doing this near the tank bund where there are sheltered stone structures for the purpose.

तत्र तीर्थे तु यः स्नात्वा भोजयेद् ब्राह्मणाच्छुचिः ।

एकस्मिन्भोजिते विप्रे कोटिर्भवति भोजिता ॥

तत्र तीर्थे तु यः स्नात्वा पूजयेत्पितृदेवताः ।

पूजिते तु महादेवो वाजपेयफलं लभेत् ॥^{१०}

4. **River Ganges** : Starting from the foot of *Viṣṇu*, it has been described as one of the most auspicious and sacred rivers of India. The *Gaṅgā* reckoned as the foremost *Tirtha*.*

The river known as the Ganges is officially and popularly known by its Hindu name, *Gaṅgā*. The river Ganges is very sacred to the Hindus. The River has its sources in the *Himālaya*, at Gaumukh in the southern *Himālaya* on the Indian side of the Tibetan border. It is 1560 miles (2510km) and flows through China, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The *Gaṅgā* river basin is one of the most fertile and densely populated river basins in the world. The river flows through 29 cities with a population over 100000, 23 cities with population between 50000 and 100000 and about 48 towns.

Pious Cities Enroute the *Gaṅgā*

- a) **Varanasi** : The holy city of Varanasi on the bank of *Gaṅgā* is one of the most important pilgrim centres for Hindus and Buddhists. At Varanasi the *Gaṅgā* river flows from the South to North.
- b) **Haridvār** : *Haridvār* is considered as one of the seven holiest places. According to legends, the Gods left their footprints on the land of *Haridvār*. Its geographical location stands as the gateway to the four pilgrim centres of *Uttarākha*..

Religious Significance:

Hindus regards *Gaṅgā* as the holiest river. It was named after *Gaṅgā*, the daughter of the Himalaya. Pilgrimage sites are particularly significant along this river. At the confluence of the *Gaṅgā* and the *Yamunā* tributary near Allahabad a bathing festival in January and February attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. Almost all the *Purāṇa*-s speak of this holy river. *Skāndapurāṇa* refers to it in the *Bhuvanakośa* section especially in the *Gaṅgā*-Yamuna group.¹¹

5. ***Mahī***: This sacred river¹² was created by Indradyumna.¹³ It has eighteen names which are to be recited for the religious merits.¹⁴ Sage Kapila asserted that the river *Mahī* is full of *Tīrtha*-s and it is protected by *Śiva*.¹⁵ It is a stream in western India. Its total length is 500 km and its estimated drainage area 40,000. It is one of only three major rivers in peninsular India that runs from east to west along with the Tapti River and the *Narmadā* River. Book 1- *Svargakhaṇḍa*, Section II – *Kumārika khaṇḍa*, chapter 3 and the *śloka*s 22-24 *Bhṛgu* says about the importance of *Mahī*. He says there is a splendid holy river named *Mahī*. This is the most important river in this *khaṇḍa*. It originates in the *Pāriyātra* mountain (in *Mālva*) and joins the gulf of Cambay (Khambhat or Khambayat). It consists of all *Tīrtha*-s. It is divine and charming, gentle and destructive of all great sins. There is no doubt about it that the earth itself is present there in the form of the river.

6. ***Mokṣeśvara***. It was called *Mokṣa* – *tīrtha*.¹⁶ It was in *Mahisāgara* with a well nearby. If one who visit in this *Tīrtha*, he will never be a ghost in his family. By the power of this holy *Tīrtha* all the ghosts obtained liberation. Book 1, *Māheśvarakhaṇḍa*, section II *Kumārikakhaṇḍa*, chapter 56, *Avantikhaṇḍa* chapter 160 is also mentioned about the *Mokṣatīrtha*.

ततो गच्छेत्पाण्डुपुत्र मोक्षतीर्थमनुत्तमम् ।

सेवितं देवगन्धर्वमुनिभिश्च तपोधनैः ॥

बहवस्तत्र जानन्ति विष्णुमायाविमोहितः ।

यत्र सिद्धा महाभागा ऋषयः स तपोधनाः ॥

पुलस्त्यः पुलहो विद्वान्क्रन्तुंश्चैव महामतिः ।

तत्र प्रवाहमध्ये तु पतितां तमहा नदी ॥

तत्र तत्संगमं तीर्थं सर्वपापाक्षयंकरम् ।

(पञ्चमे आवनयखण्डे रेवाखण्डे मोक्षतीर्थमाहात्म्यवर्णनं नाम षष्ट्युत्तरशततमोऽध्यायः)

7. **Mahisāgarasaṅgamam** : it is the river near *Mahī* where it joins the sea and it is famous for its sanctity and for sacred bath.¹⁷ It is a holy *Tīrtha*.

8. **Siddhakūpa**: It lays near by the shrine of *Siddheśvara*.¹⁸

9. **Chidreśvara** : *Pātālagarīgā* lays adjacent to it and is praised for sacred bath.¹⁹

10. **Brāhmya tīrtha**: Viṣṇu took bath in this pond and worshipped the lord *Aruṅagiri*.²⁰ Due to a holy dip in this *Tīrtha* even Brahmaṇa can dispel his sin immediately (*Sloka* - 108). In the month of *Margasīrṣa* devotees come here from various regions, takes bath every day in the *Tīrtha* and worship Lord *Aruṅācala*.

Rivers are the backbone of human civilization. They provide us with fresh water which is helpful for various purposes such as drinking, cleaning etc. The *Skāndapurāṇa* provides a deep insight into the basic necessities of human beings.

Endnotes

1. Skāndapurāṇa, VII.I, Ch. 35

2. Ibid., I.ii. 56.13; III.i. 25.1-7, 10-16.

3. Ibid., VII.i.33.40-41

4. Ibid., VII.i.35.25, 26

5. Ibid., VII.ii.25.10

6. Ibid., V.i.57.31
7. Ibid., VII, i.35.32-51a.
8. Ibid., I.i.19.15-16
9. Ibid., I.ii.3.82; I.ii.3.45.46
10. Ibid., I.ii.7.3; I.ii.58.27-28
11. Ibid., I.i.17.691; I.ii.58.8; I.iii.p.6.98
12. Ibid., I.ii.13.125-127
13. Ibid., I.ii.30.19
14. Ibid., I.ii.52.12-14
15. Ibid., I.ii.52.43-44
16. Ibid., I.ii.56.11-15
17. Ibid., I.ii.33.60
18. Ibid., I.ii.36.2
19. Ibid., I.ii.33.60
20. Ibid., I.ii.56.7-10