

GANGA RIVER, GANGA LAKE, FOLKTALES AND POETRY: THE FIVE OF US

G. Mend-Ooyo*

EDITOR'S NOTE

Gombojavyn Mend-Ooyo is a living legend of contemporary times. He is one of the most influential surviving poets of the world. Mend-Ooyo is the force behind revival of almost lost Mongolian script. His works reflect an alternative to the global capitalism. His writings bring the nomadic tradition alive. Mend-Ooyo's rhapsody of nomadism with a powerful melody enlivens the longing for the stage of In-Between, the Sunyata(Emptiness) . His works prepare ground work for 'another' thinking, fluid and void. Ooyo compares his verses with the music of Mongolia's national music instrument Morin Khurr. He expresses in this essay the quest for the Holy land of India in Mongolian imagination. India is indeed connected with the turquoise sky and green pastures of Mongolia.

Keywords: Bodhisattva, Dariganga, Eight jewels, Ganga, Mongolia,

Everything I listened to as a kid, were folktales. All folktales turned out to be true. One of the stories narrated about the snowy Himalayas as the columns of the Heavens. The story described the Ganga River as , "descending from these celestial peaks, as the holy water from the Heaven. If somebody manages to sip even a drop of the holy water of the Ganga , all his sins would be purified. If you manage to fetch some for your mother, it is the best service you can do for your mother to pay back everything she has done for you."

Once my mother told me another story, "Ages ago, my father's brother named Aagaa set out from Dariganga (the author's native region) on foot to go on a pilgrimage to the lands of Buddha. But when he returned 20 years later, nothing changed in appearance. He was wearing the same filthy rag. People were quick to gossip and complain about how he could not even bring a single gilt Buddha figure. What a waste of life! What a waste of all those 20 years! Little did they know the vast treasure of intellect and knowledge that he brought in his mind. Next 20 years witnessed 20 volumes of books, inscribed in golden letters and written by the Aagaa the Aranjamba , which was placed in the sacred space of a monastery. That is how one brought wisdom instead of gold and jewel from the lands of India, lying on the banks of the River Ganges.'

There is another legend my father told, "Once upon a time, a man who came back after many years of study from India brought a vessel of the Ganges water and sprinkled at the spot where the Ganga Lake is now located. That is how the Ganga Lake originated ". I was yet to realize that these stories were feeding the headwaters of my future poem.

***G.Mend-Ooyo** is the President of the Mongolian Academy of Culture and Poetry. He was born into a herding family in Dariganga, Mongolia, in 1952. He grew up riding horses and tending sheep, moving over the steppe by camel caravan. In 1980, he published his first book of poetry, *Birds of Thought (Bodliin Shuvuu)*, and has since published over 40 books of poetry, novels, children's books, fiction, criticism and essays. His ongoing work of poetic fiction, *Altan Ovoo (Golden Hill)* (first published in 1993), has become one of the most influential pieces of contemporary Mongol literature. He received the title of Poet Laureate from World Academy of Arts and Culture /USA/ in 2009.

Sensing these special ties between the Ganges River of India and the Ganga lake of Dariganga country, the juvenile mind of mine wandered across the green fields and blue sky to reach the celestial columns of the Himalayas and sip the nectar from the holy river of the Ganges.

The famous Dariganga region of Mongolia took its name from two of its iconic landmarks -the Dara Mountain and Ganga Lake. The inhabitants, known as *Darigangians*, created a peculiar nomadic culture in the southeastern Mongolia. In this region, a large collection of ancient Indian stories, called the *Ulgeriin Dalai* (Ocean of Stories) is frequently heard. The collection is also placed on top a chest in the northern section of gers of some elders. The collection has a chapter about "*Ganga and Dara, two sons of the heavens*", reminding me of the river or lake names in my homeland and in India. The Indian Ganga duplicates and multiplies in my own homeland of Mongolia.

When you lookout from top of the Dara Mountain, or better known as the *Golden Hill*, you have a beautiful view of sand dunes edging the foot of the mountain, red willow growing on the lake shores and thousands of birds flying in, as if it was the legendary land of Shambala. The lake is fed by twenty-one springs. The numbers also symbolize something special. Mother Tara has twenty one manifestations.

Us, the children of nomads, would be very homesick living in the dorms of the *soum* secondary school, located south of the Golden Hill. We used to discreetly stare at the horizons, hoping somebody from our homes might come riding around the Golden Hill. My homesickness worsened in the spring of my sixth grade year after I learnt my mother was ill. Not to mention the poor lodging and inadequate nourishment of the school dorm.

One day I borrowed a horse from a family I used to help in chores and headed to the Ganga lake, accompanied by my classmate Moononshar. I could not stop thinking about a legend about the curative properties of the Ganga lake which I had often heard. According to the legend, water from the lake could cure my mother's illness. That is at least what I believed. School was soon to be over. Almost time to go home.

I followed the golden shores of the lake until I came across a small spring, flowing into the lake. It was a marvelous scene with water boiling out from the ground and overflowing out to the lake from its tiny rock crater. Geysering out right from below! "*Is it not true that it started from the source of Ganges River and continued to flow underground until it gushes out here?*" That is how a young boy found connection between the Ganges River and the Ganga Lake and brought for his mother a bottle of holy water. My mother recovered well, thanks to the doctors, but I am sure my holy water from the lake did help.

Twenty years later, I had the opportunity to go to India and bring back real Ganges water for my aged mother. Thus I continued my naive childhood belief and fulfilled the dreams of ancestors in the legends.

That fall in 1987, after having participated in the Young Writer's Conference from Asia & Africa in New Delhi, I wrote a series of poems called "*Bodi modni navch*" (Leaves of the Bodhisattva Tree) which were published in the *Utga Zolhio* *Urlag*, the prime literature newspaper at the time. Among the poems were "The Waters of Ganges". I clearly remember the series created quite a sensation. That was the first time I heard positive and encouraging comments about my verses from many people.

Ten years after that, I and my closest friend, the Great Poet of the East, Nyamsuren Danzan spent a full moon night singing by the bank of the Ganga lake. The lake surface riffled with almost unnoticeable white waves, the whooping of the swans never ceased and sometimes a splash would sound as if one of the stars in the sky has fallen. I wrote my first poem "The Ganga Lake" when I was in the 6th grade. My literature mentor, poet and translator Gombojav Dorj got it published in a newspaper. Later in my twenties, I wrote "*Gangiin naiman*

sondor" (Eight Jewels of the Ganga) and one of the lines were " *The white twilight of the moon is the house, I write my poetry in*" which is proudly cited by my friend and famous poet Dashbalbar on many occasions. The poem I recited that night before my friend Nyamsuren and the mysterious, esoteric Ganga Lake was "The Waters of Ganges"

THE WATER OF THE GANGES

*Only a very few fortunate men, they say,
Travel the Buddha's land.
Far from what is desirable, they walk on,
They follow the path of their desires.
A certain Mongolian fellow
Completed the study of the Dharma of unique wisdom,
Whose perfect qualities illumine everything
And returned after twenty years.
He brought the pure water of the Ganges
For his grey-haired mother to taste.*

*One day, he struggled home
From India.
He crossed the Himalayas with ease
He strode over the salty plains just fine.
But ten days in the waterless desert,
And his mouth was tired and exhausted.
He had no choice but to drink the waters of the Ganges,
He inevitably swallowed its power.
His body regained strength,
Soaked in the water of the Ganges.
His fading pulse grew strong,
Swallowed in the water of the Ganges.
He dragged his feet,
He managed to move forward.*

*The sand dunes were like hot ashes,
And again he felt dizzy.*

*The sun glowed, like glass in a fire,
The world turned red.
The feet of the shattered man grew slack,
His exhausted body tumbles to the earth.
In a flash, he comes to his senses,
He thinks over and over about his world.
He has drunk the last few drops
Which he had put aside for his mother
He stood and looked to the horizon.
He saw his homeland, tinged in blue.*

*At the very end of the dusty road,
In the distance, he could see familiar hill.
This gave him the will to continue walking,
He strode over the threshold of his birthplace.
He crept upon his hands and knees,
He came to the lake of silken blue.
He treated his wound with the sandy earth,
He sucked upon the roots of the green grass,
He swam like a goose in the water.
The young man stood up, revived.
There is no pure water which,
Having saved his life, would save his mother,
He railed at himself; he was a useless creature,
The pit of his stomach grieved.*

*The lake is secretly crying,
Its tears as though coaxed from the waves.
It gleamed with the color of beryl,
Manifesting the eight qualities.
This best of water soothed the feet of Heaven.
He knelt upon the ground,*

And filled the silver bowl with the water of the lake.

He whispers, "Let this become magic water."

He walked over the threshold of his brown ger.

He met his mother, she was desperately ill

He gave her the silver bowl of pure water,

And pretty soon his mother was up and healthy.

He searched for magic water from the pure Ganges,

But it was shimmering beneath his feet, in his homeland.

That wonderful magic water he had sought

Was actually the water of the Lake Ganga.

Right at that moment, a breeze brought the waves in, wetting our feet and washed away. We felt the lake was expressing its gratitude.

Now my mother is no more. My Ganga Lake is beyond thousands of mountains. There is no water of eternity. There is nothing eternal in this world except the meanings of stories and legends. The Ganges River originated from the Heavens and the Ganga Lake originated from the Ganges River. All the waters of the world are miraculously interconnected through cosmo-telluric veins which gave way to legends. Legends and stories also flow along the longitudes of time, feeding the lives of humans.

Now I sense that I am flowing into the future, following the same channel as the Ganga River, Ganga Lake, poetry and the legends.

Verbal translation done by S.Soyolbold