Newsletter Archives

Tales of Ganga, The River Goddess
Ganga, the river or the goddess, or the river-goddess, a divine emergence: bounty of gods, or a mere geological phenomenon: result of a series of physical disturbances in Himalayan region, timed or the timeless, is now for ages core of faith of millions of Indians, north and south and east and west, and beyond. They have sought in gods the means of salvation but as much, or rather more often, mere fulfillment of worldly desires, in Ganga they have always found an inexhaustible source of their spiritual energy and a ladder to salvation accomplishing with a few drops of her water what long years of penance fail to do. She evokes desires and fulfills them but mundane hardly ever though abundant food and water are her generous bounties she bestows on all, unsought and sans demand. Ganga is now for ages a river, a physical entity, but the moment the term 'Ganga' enters into one's ears the image that appears in the mind is certainly not one of a river. Ganga is a river beyond, and a spiritual realisation within - truer and more convincing.

Immense is Ganga's mystique and sanctifying power. A dip in her waters is believed to accomplish what a journey to all Tirthas - holy shrines, does not do. The renowned art-historian C. Sivaramamurti has rightly recorded his ecstatic experience after he had a dip, the ever first in his life, in the holy river at Varanasi: 'Everything looked so transformed, that I had the illusion I was transported to heaven and was actually bathing in the celestial stream'.

This mystic power of Ganga is not confined to transforming merely a routine act into a divine experience, a drop of her water intermingled with any quantity of water, even the ocean, infuses into it the same power to transport from this realm to another as Ganga herself has. As texts have it, streaming from Shiva's coiffure to where the ashes of Bhagiratha's ancestors lay, Ganga, when attempting at sweeping away the hermitage of sage Jahnu, was sipped by the enraged sage. Later, on Bhagiratha's prayer, sage Jahnu released her from his ear. Though just incidentally, Ganga thus transmitted to human ears the sanctity of the place of her origin - wherefrom she emerged, so much so that ever since touching one's ears before performing a rite or commemorating a deity is believed to have same sanctity as doing it after bathing in the holy waters of Ganga.
By her strange mystic powers Ganga makes every Indian feel her presence in his ears, something he believes without knowing its mythicism - Ganga's ear-association or whatever, the same as blood runs in his veins without letting him realize or feel its volume, pace, or even its presence. In any event of a miraculous escape from a wrong, harm, catastrophe, or a mishap, the astonished hands instinctively rise to ears and touch them with reverence - a wordless pious expression of one's gratitude to the Supreme, Ganga becoming his medium. Holding ears when apologizing for a wrong or ill - an ages old practice prevalent in India's every part and every section of society, literate or illiterate, is the same as swearing by Ganga as to the genuineness of such apology.

Not merely as river that stretches across the entire subcontinent covering a distance of over 2500 kilometers - 2510 to be exact, Ganga, or whatever relates to her, has strange width - geographical, and on the scale of time. Ganga is contended to have been brought to the earth for a limited purpose: absolving Sagara's sixty thousand sons of their sin. However, Ganga assumed this redeemer's role for ever and for every one, and now for ages immersing material remains of the dead into her waters is believed to absolve him of all his sins and redeem him from the cycle of birth and death. The epithet 'Tarini' - one who redeems or absolves of sins, is exclusively Ganga's.

Besides her power to redeem, sanctity is Ganga's other exclusive domain. A deity, even one of the Great Trinity, acquires competence to preside over a Yajna, or any rite, only after he or she has been consecrated by 'abhisheka' - bathed with Ganga's water, even symbolically: the first step in all sacrificial rites; and, the holy priest, as also the devotee hosting the 'yajna', will first purify their physical beings by rinsing their hands with Ganga's water, and the intrinsic beings, by sipping a few drops of it, for it is only after the body and the soul have been purified that the offering they make is accepted. Whatever the symbolic stretch of the Sagara's myth, lifeless ashes of his sixty thousand sons lying scattered over the bosom of an empty ocean and Ganga absolving them of their sins, or of reviving the ocean back to life with her waters, these are by the waters of Ganga, representing all rivers, that the life sustains in the ocean's hard alkaline waters and under the layers of its unfathomable darkness, and volume and level of its fill are maintained.

GANGA BEFORE HER DESCENT

A river, or a goddess, accounts widely vary in regard to Ganga's person, temperament and relationships, when she was in Vaikuntha. Mahabharata, the earliest text in which Ganga emerges with a decisive role, alludes to her as a
goddess in anthropomorphic form, careless and vain. In the Mahabharata Ganga's role as river is also as much significant, though even as river in her interaction with others - gods or human beings, Ganga has been conceived as having an anthropomorphic form.

The Mahabharata attributes Ganga's descent from Vaikuntha to her carelessness. Once when in Vaikuntha, casually clad Ganga passes across or comes to where sat Brahma with other gods and royal sages, a gust of wind blows off her clothes exposing her figure to the embarrassment of Brahma and others. All in the assembly turn their eyes away from her except Mahabhisha, a prince of Ikshvaku dynasty elevated to Vaikuntha for his illustrious deeds. Mahabhisha keeps gazing at her. Displeased by her carelessness Brahma ordains Ganga's expulsion from Vaikuntha and descent on the earth to be the wife of Mahabhisha who for impertinently gazing at Ganga's figure, too, was to revert back to the earth and be re-born as a human being. Well acquainted with Ganga's wilful nature Brahma provides that Ganga shall do things that will displease Mahabhisha but he shall bear them to an extent though finally when it becomes unbearable he shall break and chastise Ganga and with this he shall be absolved of his curse. With no chance of rectification Mahabhisha decides that he shall be born as the son of Pratipa, an illustrious king in the Lunar Dynasty.

Later texts have given to this simple version of the myth a dramatic twist. As such texts have it, once Lakshmi, Saraswati and Ganga, Mahavishnu's three consorts, were sitting around chatting with him. Of all three Ganga, his wife with an unsteady nature, was casting on Vishnu sidelong glances to which he was secretly responding. Saraswati noticed it and when it became unbearable, she got up and began berating Ganga. Lest the things worsened, Lakshmi tried to intervene, though Lakshmi's such intervention only further enraged Saraswati and she cursed Lakshmi to be born on the earth. Ganga chided Saraswati for cursing the well-meaning innocent Lakshmi and cursed her to descend on the earth as a river. Saraswati cursed her alike and also that as the river on the earth she would take upon her the sins of all born ones. A neutral spectator, Vishnu, witnessing the entire drama with absolute composure, tells that whatever has happened was pre-scheduled. Lakshmi shall go to the earth as the daughter of Dharmadvaja though not born of any of his women. He foretells her role on the earth, the forms she shall manifest with, and finally, restoration of her prior status as his consort in Vaikuntha. As for Saraswati, Vishnu ordains that she shall be a river on the earth, though in due course with her divine form she shall return to Satyaloka and then she shall be Brahma's consort. He tells Ganga that she shall go to the earth as a holy river that shall wash off the sins of all human beings. As scheduled, Bhagiratha, a prince of Ikshvaku Dynasty, shall lead her to the earth, which will give her a new name Bhagirathi. On the earth she shall be the wife of king Shantanu, one endowed with the ocean's depth and quiescence; and, though her physical form shall remain on the earth, her divine form shall return to Mount Kailash as the consort of Shiva.

When disappointed and tired Ganga plods back, she meets Ashtavasus, alike tired and disappointed. Deluded by his wife one of them, named Dyau, in connivance with others had stolen Nandini, the holy cow of sage Vashishtha. For their misdeed the holy sage had cursed them to be born as human beings. Their efforts to appease the holy sage prevailed and the curse was modified to the effect that seven of them would die soon after their birth and return to Vaikuntha but the eighth, Dyau, who actually stole the cow would live his full tenure but will not have any offspring. When entreated, Ganga assured them that she shall bear them in her womb when she descends on the earth and marries Shantanu. Texts do not elaborate Ganga's story in Vaikuntha any further till Bhagiratha by his rigorous penance persuades her to descend on the earth for absolving the sin of his ancestors.
These myths, as also a few others, perceive Ganga, when in Vaikuntha, as a goddess on par with Lakshmi and Saraswati, the two goddesses to whom the Rig-Veda has devoted a number of Suktas. The Rig-Veda is silent in regard to Ganga though two terms ‘Jahnavi’ and ‘Bhagiratha’ that have strong Ganga-contexts occurring in the Rig-Veda suggest the prior or at least contemporaneous presence of the two sages. As these myths have it, like Lakshmi and Saraswati, Ganga too does not appear to have emerged or been born at any point of time. Like them she too seems to have been ever present. However, another set of myths, two of them being major, times Ganga’s origin or birth and links it to Vishnu. One of these myths contends Ganga’s emergence from Brahma’s ‘Kamandala’, a widely believed proposition. Pleased by Bhagiratha’s rigorous penance Brahma agrees to send the celestial stream to the earth. To effect it, he pours some water from his ‘Kamandala’ on the feet of Vishnu. By the touch of Vishnu’s feet it expands into a huge stream. When this stream descends on the earth, Shiva bears it on his ‘Jata’ - coiffure. The myth is thus quite specific in regard to the source of Ganga’s emergence as also its time, though more than anything its object seems to emphasise Trinity’s unity for the myth represents Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva working as one unit in Ganga’s emergence on the earth.

Another Vishnu-related myth links Ganga's origin to Vishnu's Yamana incarnation. It is said that for spanning three worlds in three strides when Vishnu expanded his form and raised his left leg, hit by its nails the sky burst open and with a roaring sound a huge stream stormed the entire celestial region. Considering the sky - the entire celestial region, nothing but the expanse of Vishnu foot, texts prefer calling it as Vishnu-pada, and consequently Ganga emerging from it, as Vishnupadi - born of Vishnu-pada. For many eons Ganga streamed in the celestial region known as Dhruvamandala, astronomically the region around Polar Star, otherwise the seat of Dhruva, the son of king Uttanapada, where he sits fixed into penance. The Dhruvamandala was incessantly frequented by Sapta-rishis - seven stars representing Seven Sages who as frequently bathed in Ganga.
Ganga, after she emits Vishnu-pada, first comes to 'Devayana' - galaxy of crores of glittering stars known as Akasha-Ganga - Milky Way, and then to Chandramandala - the moon-region. With her objective to purify the whole world, not any specific region, from Chandramandala onwards Ganga bifurcates into four streams: Sita, Chakshus, Alakananda, and Bhadra, Sita falling on Mount Meru, Chakshus, on Malyavan, Bhadra, on Mount Shringavana, and Alakananda, on Mount Hemakuta. Sita drains Gandhamadana and through Bhadrashva falls into the eastern sea; Chakshus flows through Ketumala and falls into the western sea; Alakananda flows through Bharata Varsha and falls into the southern sea; and, Bhadra streams through Uttarakuru and falls into the northern sea.

**GANGA: THE RIVER IN THE MYTH AND ON THE EARTH**

This mythical Ganga reveals strange similarity with the river Ganga as she flows on the earth. As in the myth, Alakananda, with at least six significant tributaries, the confluence of which constitutes Ganga, joining her, Dhauliganga at Vishnu Prayaga, Pindar at Karna Prayaga, Nandakini at Nanda Prayaga, Mandakini at Rudra Prayaga and Bhagirathi at Deva Prayaga, appears to be the Ganga's principal stream, though with Bhagiratha-myth being more deeply rooted into popular mind the status of the main stream is more often attributed to Bhagirathi. Bhagirathi is formed of snow-melt mainly at 7756 meters high Gangotri glaciers, to which other glaciers, especially those at peaks like Nanda Devi and Kamet, substantially contribute. Bhagirathi begins descending down at Gomukha, a place some 18 kilometers ahead of Gangotri. The river gets its name as Ganga after Deva Prayaga. At Deva Prayaga Alakananda, with six main streams being her tributaries, and Bhagirathi, the longest stream, join each other rendering it difficult to assign to either of the two status of the principal stream.

As the Ganga of the myth descends on Vishnu's feet from Brahma's Kamandala, Alakananda pours down at Badrinatha, which is Vishnu's manifest body. It is only after the divine touch of his feet - foot of the cliff at Badrinatha, that the stream begins expanding and transforms into the massive form of Ganga. The Alakananda of the myth that drains Bharata Varsha has been perceived as falling into the southern sea. The river Ganga flows eastwards, though suddenly before she falls into the sea she takes a southward curve and falls in the Bay of Bengal on south. Both, the celestial stream of Chandramandala and Ganga on the earth, have strange similarity in regard to distributing themselves for covering larger areas with their benevolence, more so when moving from one region to other. When descending down from Chandramandala and entering the earth the celestial stream bifurcates into four streams. Similarly, when close to submerging into the sea, Ganga begins
distributing herself giving birth to such mighty and useful streams as the rivers Hooghly and Padma. By her willful attrition she spreads over a delta not less than three hundred fifty kilometers in width. Proceeding ahead of her origin she gives refuge to many rivers; in the same way, when Ganga reaches close to her merger with the sea, she gives refuge in her bosom to several streams including Jamuna, a major tributary of Brahmaputra, and the great river Meghna. Ganga moves from the Himalayas and terminates her journey into the sea spanning the height of one and the depth of the other.

**GANGAVATARANA: DESCENT OF GANGA**

Whatever the later texts contend, as regards Ganga's descent on the earth the legend of Bhagiratha is the earliest, logically elaborated and most widely accepted. Sagara, a king of Ikshvaku dynasty, was blessed with 60 thousand sons. On their strength Sagara performed Ashvamedha yajna. He deployed them to follow and protect the horse of the yajna. The horse moved round from one end of the world to another. However, when around the sea it disappeared. When matter was reported to king Sagara, he commanded his sons to search the animal everywhere. His sons dug the earth and reached the nether world where they found sage Kapila engaged in penance. Grown arrogant by their collective strength, they charged the sage of stealing the horse. The annoyed sage burnt them all save five by his great spiritual power. When entreated, the sage modified his curse to the effect that the waters of Ganga shall absolve them if the holy river descends on the earth from heaven. Sagara's successors, Raja Dilip and others, did severe penance but with no result. When king Dilip was succeeded by his son Bhagiratha, he too resorted to rigorous penance lauding Ganga for her benevolence. Cursed by Brahma for her indecent manners Ganga was destined to descend on the earth. Hence, she conceded Bhagiratha's prayers and persuasions and agreed to descend on the earth.

However, vain as she was, as also seeking to exploit the occasion for satiating her affection for Lord Shiva, she told Bhagiratha that the world would be washed off if her current fell direct on the earth and asked him to persuade Shiva to hold her upon his head when she descended from Vaikuntha. Bhagiratha again undertook rigorous penance and persuaded Shiva for it. 'Kutila' - crooked as Ganga is sometimes called, she designed to abduct Shiva by sweeping him with her current. However, defeating her designs Shiva plucked one of his hair and bore Ganga on it. Some texts say that annoyed Shiva arrested Ganga in his coiffure when she descended from heaven and it was only after fresh penance by Bhagiratha to appease him that Shiva discharged Ganga through one of his locks - alaka, which gave her Alakananda name.
Ganga created for Bhagiratha a fresh problem when attempting at sweeping the hermitage of sage Jahnu on her way to where lay the ashes of Bhagiratha's ancestors she annoyed the holy sage who arrested her in his Kamandala and gulped her. It was only after a lot of persuasions by Bhagiratha that he was reconciled and released Ganga from one of his ears. Bhagiratha then led her to the nether world where his ancestors were burnt into ashes by sage Kapila. Ganga absolved them of their sin with her holy waters. After his ancestors have been absolved Bhagiratha conducted Ganga to sea which, lying empty for long, was filled with waters.

GANGA: WIFE ON EARTH

After Ganga emerged on the earth, her banks were penance-doers' most favoured resort. Pratipa, a king of Lunar Dynasty, was childless. As advised by holy men for a son he immersed in deep rigorous penance on Ganga's bank. He had on his face exceptional glow which had not diminished even after his long penance. One day Ganga saw him and fell in love with him. A young maiden with rare beauty, Ganga emerged from her waves, came to where king Pratipa was seated and sat on his right, asking him to accept her as his wife. Fixed into 'Dharma' - righteousness, the king declined her proposal. He told that she chose his right thigh, a children's place, not wife's; the wife's place was left thigh. He, however, accepted her for his son who would marry her after he was born. Ganga then disclosed her identity and agreed to marry his son but on the condition that she would do whatever she liked and his son would not say a word against it, as also that the moment he opposed her for anything, she would desert him. Pratipa accepted her condition.

When Pratipa was close to old age, a son was born to him. The son was no other than Mahabhisha whom Brahma had expelled from Vaikuntha for his impertinence providing that he would marry Ganga when she descended on the earth. Born of penance the child had strange quiescence enshrining his face. Hence, the child was named Shantanu - one who is calm and composed. When Shantanu was young, Pratipa crowned him as the heir-apparent. Before he retired to forest, he called Shantanu and told him that a celestial maid would come to him with the proposal of marriage. He should marry her. He also told that she would do things that he would not like but he should not object to any. One day, after Pratipa had retired to forest and Shantanu became the king, he went to Ganga's banks for hunting. Suddenly a young woman with exceptional beauty came to him and wished to marry him. As commanded by his father Shantanu married her.

Ganga had married Shantanu for a purpose. As promised, she had to absolve Ashtavasus of their curse. Within a year she bore seven sons, one by one, and threw each one into her waters. These were seven of the Ashtavasus she had promised to absolve by ending their lives soon after they were born. When the eighth child was born and Ganga set forth for throwing him into the river, Shantanu broke his pledge, censored Ganga and insisted to give him the child. As ordained, on his breaking the pledge Ganga deserted him and disappeared with the child. After thirty-six years Shantanu was one day hunting around the Ganga's banks. He felt that Ganga did not have the usual sound that her mighty flow produced. He went close to the river and was amazed to see that by his arrows a boy had stopped the river's entire stream and downwards she stood completely dry. When yet to collect himself, a celestial woman appeared. She was no other than Ganga. She disclosed that the boy was his own son she had brought up with the help of sage Vashishtha who had taught him archery. With this Ganga gave the boy to Shantanu along with all divine weapons that he had mastered and disappeared. The boy was named Devavrata, popularly known by the name of Bhishma, the great hero of the Mahabharata and the grandpa of both, Pandavas or Kauravas.
GANGA, THE MOTHER OF BRAVE AND MIGHTY SONS

A detached Ganga had given birth to Devavrata for keeping her words she had given to Ashtavasus but in thirty-six years' time when he was with her Ganga had developed great affection for him. It was further deepened by her son's noble deeds: his pledge not to ever marry for his father's happiness, forego his claim to throne, his adherence to righteousness, his loyalty to the throne of Hastinapur beyond his personal feelings, and much more. Hence a loving mother, Ganga was always protective to her son and watched his life with a mother's concern. For plotting against him she even fought with Amba, the daughter of the king of Kashi, frustrated in love for the failure of which she considered Bhishma responsible.

Towards the end of his life, when hit by Arjuna’s arrows Bhishma lay on the bed of arrows awaiting the sun to move to Uttarayana - auspicious period for relinquishing ‘prana’ - life, Ganga sent to Bhishma sages doing penance on her banks, in their transform as geese, for blessing him in her behalf. Ganga herself appeared to quench her son's thirst when he asked for water and Arjuna pierced the earth by his arrow for draining it. With 'Bana' - arrow, being the source of her emergence, texts name this transform of Ganga as Banaganga.

Bhishma was bound to the throne of Hastinapur and thereby to Kauravas but in his heart he loved Pandavas, Arjuna in particular. As reveals in a number of episodes in the Mahabharata, the son's inclination was also the mother's. This reflects in Ganga's protective treatment of Pandavas to which those inhabiting her, Nagas - her essential components in particular, were also a part. During his exile one day when Arjuna went to Ganga for a bath, Ulupi, a Naga-kanya - mermaid, fell in love with him. Before Arjuna left, after staying with her in Ganga's bottom - Ulupi's abode, for a night, Ulupi pronounced that no aquatic creature would ever harm him and all those born of water would be under him. With designs to kill Bhima, the mighty Pandava, Kaurava prince Duryodhana invited Pandavas to a garden on Ganga’s banks under the pretext of water-sports. When with the effect of drug administered to them Pandavas swooned, Duryodhana got Bhima's hands and legs roped and threw him into Ganga. But instead of killing him Ganga conducted him to her bottom which Vasuki, the king of Nagas - serpents, inhabited with his Nagas. Vasuki not only recognized Bhima but also welcomed him and gave him ambrosia to drink which redeemed him of his swoon and gave him timeless youth.
For giving birth to a mighty son like Bhishma, and for being instrumental in the birth of Karttikeya, the Commander-in-Chief of gods, Ganga is often revered as Vira-mata, the mother of brave and mighty sons. A strange coincidence, one of her two sons Bhishma chose death when lying on the bed of Sharas - arrows, while the other, Karttikeya chose the bed of Sharas - grove of reeds, to be born on. Texts have called Ganga Nadi-matrika, the river-mother, for not a mere stream, with her bounties Ganga feeds many crores of people covering about one-third of the Indian subcontinent irrigating around one million kilometers of area. In many early sculptures dating back to the second century A.D., of Satavahanas from Amaravati and of Kushanas from Mathura, Ganga has been represented mostly as Nadi-matrika. Whatever her personality as a goddess, or wife, if the great river were a woman, as she essentially was and is, bounteous Ganga, the giver of food, water and refuge to every self, is the motherhood incarnate, the most accomplished aspect of womanhood.

**GANGA AND 'THREE'**

'Tri' - 'three', has strange co-relation with Ganga. As river, from the north she flows southwards, then she takes an eastward turn, and finally before joining the sea, turns again to south - a 'Tri-bhanga' or three-curved form. Mythically she has her origin in Vaikuntha, then through celestial region falls on the earth and then proceeds to nether world where the ashes of Bhagiratha's ancestors lay. Thus, traversing all three worlds she is 'Tripathaga'. With a touch of Vishnu's feet simple water of Brahma's 'kamandala' expands into a mighty stream which Shiva bears on his head when it descends and then releases. Later, sage Jahn does the same. Thus born of three sources, Vishnu's feet, Shiva's coiffure and sage Jahn's ear, Ganga is said to be 'Trisrota'. At Allahabad, she is joined by Yamuna and the unmanifest Saraswati and becomes known as Triveni - confluence of three rivers.

**GANGA'S PRESENCE IN LITERATURE, ART AND INDIAN LIFE**

Ganga, the river or the goddess, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of mighty empires, great kings, proud cities, venerated institutions, industry and trade, and adventures and endeavours of man. She does not have any significant presence in the Rig-Veda or rather in texts prior to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, though the role and the decisive personality that she has in the epics suggest that Ganga might have taken a considerable period of time to attain such mythical status, in hierarchy and in mythical geography. Significantly, once she makes a debut, her presence floods all creative domains - literature, architecture, sculpture and coins. The renowned second century Sanskrit poet Kalidasa has lauded Ganga in almost all his works, Raghuvansha, Meghaduta and Kumarasambhava in special. In sculptures also, she begins appearing from second century. A number of Satavahana and Kushana sculptures, both from the second century A.D., are found representing Ganga in her Nadi-matrika manifestations.
Ganga's crocodile-riding reliefs on door-jambs had become an essential component of temple-architecture from fourth-fifth century itself. This status of Ganga as the guardian deity was ever since unsurpassed. Temples built by all major building dynasties, the great Guptas, early and late Western and Eastern Chalukyas, Gurjara-Pratihara, Pallava, Pala, Sena, Vakataka, Rashtrakuta, Pandya, Hoyshala, Chola among others covering, besides India, also Nepal, Java and Bangladesh, have on their doorjams statues of Ganga and Yamuna as their guardian deities. The Chola king Rajendra not only have images of Ganga on the doorjambs of his Shiva temple named Gangaikondacholapuram but also built a tank named Cholaganga and fetched a lot of Ganga-water for filling it. He is known to have invaded subcontinent's northern part and the defeated kings were required to pay him the tribute only in the form of Ganga-water to fill Cholaganga.

FOR FURTHER READING:

- Ramayana
- Mahabharata
- Bhagavata Purana
- Devi Bhagavata
- Agni Purana
- Vaikuntha Purana
- Puranic Encyclopedia
- Prachina Chritra Kosha
- Kalidasa: Kumarasambhava; Raghuvansha; and Meghaduta
- C. Sivaramamurti: Ganga
- Balasubrahmaniam: Early Chola Temples
- Barret, Douglas E.: Sculptures from Amaravati in the British Museum, London
- Hopkins, E. W.: Epic Mythology
- Saraswati, S. K.: A Survey of Indian Sculptures

This Article by Prof. P.C. Jain and Dr. Daljeet.

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to feedback@exoticindia.com.

Copyright © 2011 ExoticIndiaArt