

## **Ganga: Goddess & Sacred River**

The goddess of the river Ganges is known as Ganga, and she and the river are worshipped as one. The river plays an integral role in the lives of the millions of Hindus in India. Ganga's myths, forms of worship, usage in daily rituals, and faith in her power all have an extremely important place in Hinduism today.

Many myths describe Ganga as having heavenly origins, and illustrate her descent (*avatarana*) to earth in various ways, all involving association with the important male gods Brahma, Visnu, and Siva. In one account, Ganga descends to earth using Siva to break her fall. As she falls through his hair, she becomes divided into many streams, each flowing to a different part of the earth. She does this in order to wash over the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of King Sagara, in order to purify and free their souls. His sons had deeply offended the great sage Kapila, who, in anger, burned them to ash. Eventually, Bhagiratha, a descendent of Sagara, takes upon himself to free the souls of his ancestors by doing many austerities. After centuries of doing this, Ganga appears and grants his wish and goes to earth. Another variety of the myth describes that the god Brahma, who, holding Ganga in his water pot, pours her onto Visnu's foot when it stretches into the heavens (Kinsley 188-189). The three parts of the Ganges have their own names. The section remaining in heaven is known as Mandakini. The earthly portion is known as Ganga, and the part that goes to the final region is called Bhagirathi (Singh 48). All accounts of the myth stress the importance of Ganga's heavenly, divine nature, and of being made sacred by coming into contact with Visnu and Siva. Due to Ganga's descent from heaven to earth, she becomes a continuous link between the earthly and heavenly realms (Kinsley 192). It is because of this link that the Ganges is so revered as a way to be in closer contact with the divine.

Ganga is related in the myths to various deities, but it is the relationship between Ganga and Siva that is the most emphasized. Both are dependent on each other. It is only Ganga who can cool the *lingam* of Siva; otherwise he would always be as a burning *linga* of fire, and it only with Siva's help that Ganga does not flood the earth. Both are vehicles for each other. This relationship is demonstrated through the daily ritual of pouring water over the Siva *linga* (Eck 148).

When depicted in different art forms, Ganga is shown as a fair complexioned woman, wearing a white crown and sitting on a crocodile. Many deities are depicted holding special objects, and Ganga is no exception. When shown with two hands, she holds a water lily and a lute. If having four hands, she carries a water lily, a water pot, a rosary, and one hand is held in a protective position (Singh 47). Poet seers of the Vedas started the tradition of praising Ganga for her blessings and power centuries ago. Many praises (*mahatmyas*) of Ganga can be read in various Sanskrit epics and Puranas, and there are also numerous hymns devoted to the goddess, one of which is known as Jagannatha's "*Ganga Lahari*." These praises and hymns emphasize her greatness, glory, and life giving waters. Different levels of protection and help is also said to be achieved through certain actions involving Ganga. For example, chanting Ganga's name alone is believed to reduce poverty or get rid of bad dreams. Bathing in Ganga's waters or being cremated on her banks can even result in liberation (*moksa*) (Eck 138-144).

Since the river is such a major physical feature and is so important in Hindu mythology, it is only natural that it has major significance in people's daily lives and rituals. One such role is that played in death rituals. Many Hindus want their ashes or bones put into the Ganges, because they believe that in doing so, they are guaranteed a safe journey to the ancestral realm. It is believed that one can receive liberation immediately through contact with the Ganges. This can

occur either by dying in the Ganges, or simply having its water put on the lips right before death. The link that Ganga provides to the heavens from earth is once again observed in the belief that when one's ashes touch the waters, they are rejuvenated and strengthened enough to make the journey to heaven (Kinsley 193 -194). If one is particularly devout, he or she will try to spend their last days on the banks of the river. They do this according to the belief that one who dies there will be delivered from all sins. These actions strongly support the belief that the Ganges has the power to provide deep spiritual cleansing (Singh 83). Varanasi, which is India's holiest city, sees the journey of millions of Hindus each year, who come to cremate their dead and wash in the waters (Hammer 80). At the cremation ceremony, the funeral pyre is usually lit by the eldest son. As it burns, a priest will chant Vedic verses. The following day, the ashes are gathered up and taken to Haridwar, a holy city and the place of the headwaters of the Ganga. The ashes are then placed into the holy water (Singh 84). Haridwar is also known as Gangadvara, or "Door of the Ganges", and is a place of pilgrimage (Eck 137). People want to be cremated on the banks of the Ganges so that they are in her care.

This characteristic of being caring points to another major faith in Ganga, which is her portrayal of being motherly and loving. She is commonly known as Mother Ganges. As Mother, she has the powers of compassion and comfort, and is a provider of blessings to her children (Kinsley 193). Her motherly care can lead to a place that is free from sorrow, fear, old age and death. The goddess is also said to be aware of everyone's deepest fears and desires. Ganga takes these feelings upon herself, leaving the individual purified and strengthened. Everyday, millions bathe in and drink from the river, and pray on its banks. Using the water for washing, bathing, and cooking is a way to make sure one can receive Ganga's blessings and grace (King 155-161). Ganga's waters are understood to be the life giving, immortal liquid (*amrta*) of mother's milk

(Eck137). The waters are life giving, both physically and spiritually. Physically, the river gives life to the land, making it fertile. The Ganges can create and support life, and is often appealed to in order to ensure healthy crops. Spiritually, the water can purify and cleanse one of pollution. Flowing water has cleansing capabilities, and the power to get rid of one's daily impurities. This can be done by simply pouring water over one's head, or taking a ritual bath. These methods are often approved as a way to remove pollution (Kinsley 189-194). In these ways, Ganga fulfills the role of universal mother, protector, and purifier.

Pilgrim journeys are a major way of life for many Hindus. Different festivals, the customs and castes of an individual's community, and one's life crisis's and rituals all dictate how and when a pilgrimage may take place. Millions of pilgrims travel to the Ganges each year. For many, the natural beauty of the river and the Himalayas is very calming, and can be a way to express emotion towards the gods. Pilgrims come to the Ganges seeking healing, and to be rid of any pain or suffering. Hindus from all over the world travel to Haridwar to pour the ashes of loved ones into the river and to make offerings (Kinsley 160-163). Many come to not only appeal to Ganga, but also to touch, see, and bathe in the river itself. The physical river is worshipped as one may worship the image of a deity. Garlands of flowers are often placed around the neck of the image; in this case, garlands are strung out across the river (Kinsley 196). Flower offerings are common, as each day, thousands of pilgrims will drop bags filled with flowers into the river, as offerings to Ganga (Hammer 79). The *mahatmyas* (praises) say that every part of the Ganga is a *tirtha*, which is a spiritual ford and a place of pilgrimage (Eck 142).

A certain special event in the endless worship of Ganga is the day known as Ganga Dasahara. It is recognized as the birthday of the Ganga. The banks of the river are filled with bathers, and it is said that by going into the water at this time, ten lifetimes of sins are destroyed.

This day celebrates Ganga's descent (*avatarana*) from heaven to earth, and is done in expectation of the eventual monsoon rains (Eck 144). Another extremely important Hindu festival is Kumbha Mela. This festival is often considered the most extravagant and impressive, for at any given time there can be more than twenty million people present. It celebrates the glory of Ganga, and all her richness and power. It reenacts a cosmic event when, at a certain astrological union, the Ganga waters became nectar. The main purpose is to have a ritual bath in the river, and millions of pilgrims make the journey to participate in this festival and wash away their sins. There are many processions with elephants, dancing, music, and the general feeling of happiness and joy. These feelings are often increased by the closeness and presence of the Ganges (King 171-172). Gifts to the Ganges are very common, and pilgrims will give many different kinds. Milk, fruit, saris, jewelry, and coins, and many others are all presented as gifts to Ganga. Various offerings are also done, especially in cases of appealing for future prosperity and health. Newly married couples will bathe in the river after marriage and after the birth of their child. Women will wash in the river for fertility and to give birth to a son, and some will contribute a basket filled with clothing or cosmetics (*suhagpitari*) to Ganga. The gift is believed to ensure the long life and prosperity of their husbands and family (King 177).

The Ganges River can be viewed as an embodiment of life, purity, and power. From its use in daily tasks to more spiritual applications, the Ganges maintains its place as a dominant entity in Hinduism. In recent years, pilgrimage to the Ganga has become more popular. The Ganga is a very powerful force, and she is the link between nature, humans, and divinity (King 187). Respect and adoration for physical nature is reflected in the spiritual importance given to the sacred river and the general landscape. The Ganga is proclaimed to be the most supreme river of all, and all agree that her power is unending and divine (Eck 137-138).

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