

The Yamuna River

The Yamuna River is a major tributary in northern India which flows through many major Indian provinces into the Ganges. This river has become an important cultural symbol in the Hindu tradition, representing the goddess Yami and the powers attributed to her. The culture that has evolved around this river have become threatened in the past century due to the effects of pollution. Yet, even with the present turmoil surrounding this natural wonder, her importance and relevance in modern culture still survives.

Water is the life blood for the best part of all creatures in existence. This simple, yet vitally important substance has an understandably special place in all cultures, and the Hindu tradition is no different. Bathing, prayer, and death ceremonies are but a few practices from a vast number in which water has a significant role in India. Crops for food and livestock depend upon water as a necessity of life. Understanding the magnitude to which water affects their lives, Hindus who depended on waterways saw water as a gift from the gods. In the *Rg Veda*, there are several hymns dedicated to celebrating the water's life-giving qualities. Thus water itself is seen to be of a divine nature, sometimes having gods themselves identified as waterways. The Yamuna River is among seven rivers in India which has the blessedness of the deity Ganga (Hawley and Wulff 137) ascribed to it, who is the goddess of all sacred water. Although the goddess Ganga is the embodiment of all sacred water, and is present in the Yamuna River, the goddess Yami is said also to be the main deity embodied. Yami is the goddess of love, and like the other goddesses of water, is quite often referred to as mother (because of water's ability to nurture like that of a mother).

Physical traits of the goddess Yami have become affiliated with the Yamuna River. Yami is the twin sister of Yama and is the daughter to the god of the sun, Surya and his wife Samjna. In religious mythology, Samjna' could not look Surya in the eyes while making love because of his brightness (Hawley and Wulff 137). Samjna became like the shadow, Chhaya, and her children were to be alike. This attribute of Samjna's dark side, Chhaya, is present in Yama, who becomes the god of death, and Yami is claimed to be dark skinned. This theme of dark characteristics of Yami is true of the Yamuna River, water which has a dark color.

Beyond the physical trait, the religiously important ethereal traits of gods are often attributed to the material world. Although Yami's brother Yama is the god of death, he is considered to be one of the most dharmic entities, becoming also known as the "King of Righteousness" (Haberman 137). Yami, on the other hand, is an allegorical antonym to Yama; being passionate, blindly lustful, and representing all which is love (Haberman 138). These characteristics of Yami are said to be present in the Yamuna River. Performing ritual baths in the river allows for the essence of the goddess and her qualities to be absorbed. Another reason many bathe in the Yamuna is because of the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. Yami is closely related to Krsna, who in the epic is an avatar of the great god Visnu. It is said Krsna made love to Yami and a drop of precipitation from his body fell to make wave of bliss (Nelson 239). The act between Krsna and Yami is seen as the perfect union, and the act of love making often draws couples to the Yamuna to help with fertility.

Mythology and traditions pertaining to the Yamuna River are immense and many are still in practice. Some of India's largest cities lie on the river, including New Delhi and Agra, which have a together have a population approximately fourteen million. Many religious and historical sites (such as the Taj Mahal) are close to the river. Water from the river is taken by people and

temples to perform multiple *pujas*, or acts of worship (Haberman 96). Rituals are common with Yamuna River water which is an integral part of too many people's daily routine.

Unfortunately the Yamuna River in modern times is not just used for religious practices, bathing, drinking, transportation, etc. Rather it is used to dispose of hazardous material and raw human waste. Slums downstream from main urban settings use this toxic water, creating open sores on the body, which only grow larger with more contact. The Yamuna River it seems is now the unwelcome home of irony. Bathing, in Hinduism, is a way of purifying one's body, ironically, if done in the Yamuna today, more contamination will be added to the body than was on it before., Three thousand two hundred ninety-six million litres of raw sewage is add to the river daily [see Yamuna Action Plan]. The all loving nature of the goddess Yami is jeopardized by the severally polluted river in which she is now embodied

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Haberman, David L. (2005) *River of Love in an age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Baartmans, Frans (2000) *The Holy Waters: A primordial symbol in Hindu Myths*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

Hawley, John S. and Wulff, Donna M. (1996) *Devi: goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nelson, Lance E. (1998) *Purifying the earthly body of god: religion and ecology in Hindu India*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://yap.nic.in/index.asp>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamuna>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yami>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>

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