

# ALL ABOUT GANGA

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## Preface

The Gita, the Ganga and the Gayatri are the three legs of the tripod upon which Hinduism stands. They represent our systems of philosophy, rituals and spiritual disciplines.

Ganga can be called the Mother River or the National River of India. To take a bath in it has been a lifetime's ambition with an average Hindu even from the ancient days. A person on the verge of death dies peacefully if a few drops of the Ganga water are introduced into his mouth. Even an unclean place is made fit for a holy act when sprinkled with the water of Ganga. This is how Ganga has been revered by us over the last few millenniums.

This booklet purports to give in a nutshell all the essential information about this holy river of hoary antiquity. It should also rouse, it is hoped, our conscience to keep it and its surroundings clean!

May the Mother Ganga bless us all!

- Swami Harshananda

## Grandeur of the Ganga

He who drinks thy water, O Mother Ganga, will verily attain the highest abode (of the Lord). Yama, the god of death, dare not even look at him who is thy devotee!

- Sri Sankaracarya

# GANGA

## Introduction

The rivers of a country are its lifeline. Hindu India has always looked upon its rivers, not as just physical or natural objects but as divinities, goddesses of prosperity.

Of all the rivers of India, no river has captivated the minds and the hearts of the people more than the river Ganga. For many a Hindu, a bath in it is a life-time's ambition. No religious act can be ceremonially complete without its water being used in some form or the other. A few drops of its water poured into the mouth of a dying person will remove all the sins. Immersion of the ashes of a dead person's body in it will give him liberation.

## **Ganga, in the Scriptures**

Though the river Ganga has been mentioned in the Rgveda only once (vide Nadistuti 10.75.5 and 6), it is the first in the list. There are references to it in other places also such as the Rgveda (6.45.31), the Satapatha Brahmana (13.5.4.11 and 13) as also the Aitareya Brahmana (39.9). The Ramayana, the Mahabharata (Anusasanaparva) and many puranas such as the Padma, the Naradiya, the agni and the Matsya contain hundreds of verses eulogizing the greatness and the sanctifying power of the Ganga river. In the Bhagavadgita (10.31) Sri Krsna identifies himself with it among all the rivers.

## **Ganga, the Goddess**

Almost all the well-known rivers of (undivided) India have a dual form and have been described in the mythological literature as deities or goddesses. Iconographical works even ascribe to them specific forms and give detailed descriptions. For instance the river goddess Ganga is pictured as a beautiful lady of white complexion riding a crocodile and holding a pot and a lotus in her two hands. If shown with four hands, she may be exhibiting the abhaya (protection) and the varada (boon-giving) mudras also. Pasa (noose) and ankusa (goad) are also shown sometimes, instead of the pot and the lotus.

As per the account in the Mahabharata (Adiparva 96-98) Ganga, the river-goddess was cursed to be born as a human being in this world. The king Mahabhisa who had attained heaven was also cursed similarly. He was reborn as the king Santanu. Santanu married Ganga. Bhisma of the Mahabharata fame was their last son.

## **Ganga, the Celestial River**

The river Ganga is said to have been born out of the left foot of Visnu in his incarnation as Vamana-Trivik-rama. (Hence the name 'Visnupadi.')

It was then confined to the celestial region only.

When the 60,000 sons of the king Sagara of Ayodhya were reduced to ashes by the curse of the sage Kapila, a way had to be found to redeem them from their sins. Bringing the celestial river Ganga to this earth and making it flow on their ashes was the solution. King Bhagiratha a descendant of Sagara, achieved this stupendous task by pleasing Siva through severe austerities. Thus she came to be known as 'Bhagirathi'. Siva captured the celestial river that started to jump down with a terrific speed, in his matted locks and then allowed her to stream out. While flowing through the hermitage of the sage Jahnu, she flooded it, thereby provoking him to swallow it up. At the earnest entreaties of Bhagiratha she was allowed to emerge from the ear of the sage. (Hence the name 'Jahnavi'.) She finally flowed over the ashes of Sagara's sons thereby liberating them.

## **Ganga, the river as we know it**

Geographically speaking, the river Ganga takes its birth near Gangotri in the Tehri Garhwal district of Uttar Pradesh. It is then known as Bhagirathi. Alakananda is the second rivulet born near the Tibetan border which joins the former near Devaprayaga about 64 kms. (40 miles) from the well known place of pilgrimage, Haridvara. At this place it enters the plains, and is called 'Ganga' hereafter. The various tributaries that join the Ganga over its long course are: Mandakini, Yamuna, Ghagra (Sarayu), Sone, Damodar, Gandak and Kosi. Near the sea – the Bay of Bengal – another mighty river, the Brahmaputra, joins it.

The total length of the river is 2500 kms. (1557 miles). It breaks into a number of branches near the sea. Hoogly and Padma are the major branches.

A good number of pilgrim centres are situated on the banks of the Ganga. They are: Devaprayaga, Rudraprayaga, Karnaprayaga, Badarinatha, Kedarnatha, Hrsikesa, Haridvara, Prayaga and Kasi (Varanasi). To this list may be added Gangotri and Gangasagara, where it joins the sea, the Bay of Bengal.

## **Gangasnana or Ritual bath in the Ganga**

A bath in any river cleanses the body. But a bath in the holy river Ganga, that too when the proper procedure prescribed in the religious treatises is followed, purifies the mind too.

The following are the various steps given in such works (vide Matsyapurana 102), to be followed by an earnest pilgrim who wishes to take a ritual bath in the holy river:

Sankalpa (pious resolve indicating the desire to destroy one's sins and acquire religious merit), selecting a suitable spot in the river for taking bath uttering the famous astaksari-mantra (Om namo narayanaya), acamana (ceremonial sipping of water), ahvana (invitation to the river goddess to be present at that particular spot by uttering her various name such as Daksa, Prthvi, Vihaga, Amrta, Siva, Ksema, Jahnavi, Santa and so on), proksana (sprinkling the river water on one's head), mrttikalepana (applying clay taken from the bottom of the river, with appropriate mantras), snana (bath), acamana, wearing of clean white clothes, tarpana (satiating the manes and other beings in all the three worlds), arghya to Surya (offering of water taken in the joined palms of the hand) and visiting a temple of Visnu and returning home.

For the benefit of those who have cherished a strong desire to take a bath in the Ganga river, but are unable to do so due to reasons like serious illness, old-age or poverty, the puranas and the dharmasastras have suggested an ingenious method, the 'pratinidhi' system. On the request made to a pilgrim who is actually going to take the bath, this pilgrim can make a small effigy of kusa grass and give it a bath with appropriate mantras that include the name of the solicitor. The latter then gets one-eighth of the religious merit he would have got if he had actually taken the bath himself.

Taking bath in the river Ganga on certain special days is supposed to give infinitely great religious merit. Some of these are: amavasya (new-moon day); sankranti (days of the apparent passage of the sun from one zodiacal sign to the next); days of lunar and solar eclipses; days of puskara (the day on which the planet Brhaspati or Jupiter enters the zodiacal sign assigned to the river Ganga viz., Mesa, or Aries). The puskara day for any river comes once in twelve years and the auspicious moment for a few minutes only.

### **Festivals related to the Ganga**

An important day on which a festival called 'Dasahara' is celebrated in North India, falls on Jyestha sula dasami (the 10<sup>th</sup> day in the bright fortnight of the month of Jyestha, usually in May). It is said to be the day on which the river Ganga descended to this earth. Since a bath in the river on this day, especially at the Dasasvamedha-ghat of Kasi (Banaras), destroys ten types of sins it is christened 'dasahara' (dasa=ten; hara=destroyer).

The biggest bathing festival connected with the river Ganga is the Kumbhamela and the Ardhakumbha-mela, held respectively once in twelve years and six years at Haridvara (Hardwar) and at Prayaga (modern Allahabad), both in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Millions of people take bath in the river on these occasions.

### **Death, Last-rites and the Ganga**

With a rare insight into the human problem of suffering, the dharmasastras have permitted religious suicide in certain cases such as decrepitude brought by old-age, incurable diseases with great pain or as voluntary punishment for moral sins. This has to be normally done by drowning oneself in the sacred river Ganga, especially at the Triveni-sangama of Prayaga (Allahabad).

Ceremonial immersion of either the body or the ashes after cremation is another practice in vogue that is said to bring great religious merit to the soul of the dead person.

### **Conclusion**

Thus it is seen that the Ganga has been one of the major aspects of Hindu religion and culture that has helped it to be not only alive but also vigorously active. That is why a popular saying has identified it with one of the three legs of the tripod upon which Hinduism stands the other two being the Gita and the Gayatri.