

Om Śrī Gaṅgāyai Namah

By

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Abstract

Rivers are considered holy in India. They are revered as a divine goddess, and are considered living symbols of history, sustenance, culture, and tradition. There are more than 400 rivers in India (including their tributaries), but River Ganga, the longest river in India, is the most widely worshipped, as it is believed to be a purifier of sins and a divine force that enables our spiritual liberation.

This article details the mythological, religious, and spiritual significance of this transboundary sacred river of Asia, which flows through India and Bangladesh and is called Ganga or Ganges in India and Padma in Bangladesh.

Keywords

Ganga, Ganges, Bhagirathi, Mokshadham, Ganga Jayanti or Ganga Saptami, Ganga Stotram

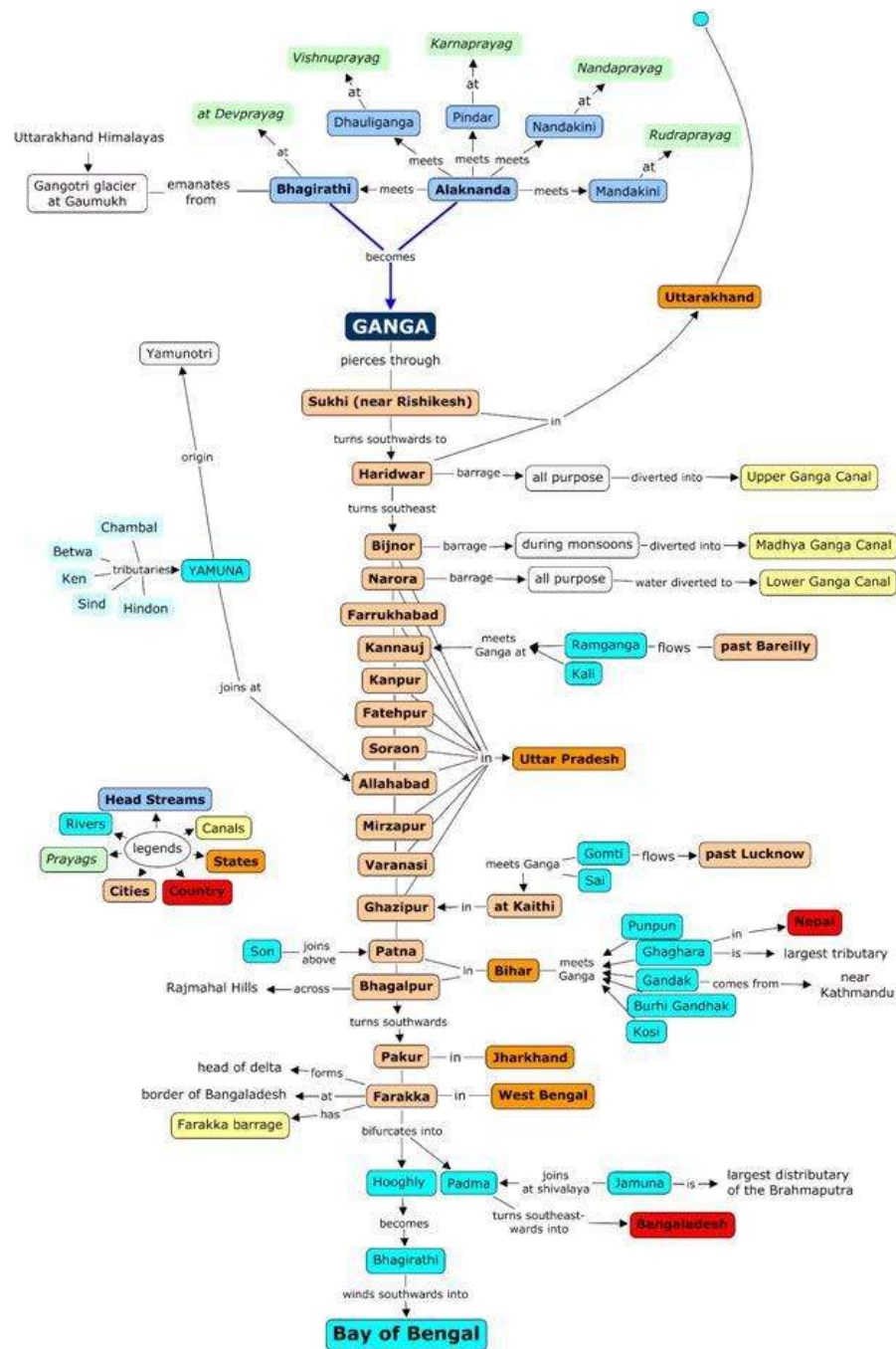
Introduction & Origin

“The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, around which are intertwined her memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.” – Jawaharlal Nehru

Originating from the Gangotri Glacier at Gaumukh in Uttarakhand, at an elevation of 12,770 feet, the river Ganga flows for 2,525 km in India before entering the Bay of Bengal.

The river Ganga is officially formed at the confluence of Bhagirathi (the upper stream in the Himalayas, named after King Bhagiratha, who is believed to have brought the river down to Earth) and Alaknanda at Devprayag.

The illustration explains the course of Ganga with vivid details:



PC: <https://nmcg.nic.in/> (a government website)

Mythological Tales

इयं चिद्रूपापि प्रकटजडरूपा भगवती यदीयाम्मोबिन्दुर्वितरति हि शंभोरपि पदम्

Meaning: *This divine river, though she appears as flowing water, is supreme consciousness itself. A single drop of her water grants the exalted state of liberation, sanctifying even Lord Shiva.*

Ganga carries with it endless stories of time, courage and devotion, and has found a place in many mythological tales of Hinduism. Various tales of Ganga's birth are found in Hindu scriptures, which consider it the embodiment of sacred waters.

It has been worshipped by Hindus as the “*Goddess of purification and forgiveness*” for centuries, and has references in the Vedas, Puranas, and religious scriptures Ramayana and Mahabharata. It has therefore been referred to by many names, some of which I have detailed with specific reference to the origin of the name.

- **Bhagirathi:**

The story about Ganga's descent on earth through the efforts of Bhagiratha, a descendant of King Sagara, is narrated in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various Puranas.

King Sagara performed a ritual known as Ashvamedha, where a horse was left to wander for one year. However, Lord Indra stole the horse to prevent the ritual from being successful. When the King found out that the horse had disappeared, he sent his sixty thousand sons to look for it. After searching the entire earth, they eventually found the horse at the ashrama of Sage Kapila, in the underworld (*Patal Lok*). Thinking that Sage Kapila had stolen the horse, the sons interrupted him while he was in a deep meditation. This infuriated Kapila, and with his ascetic gaze, he burned all sixty thousand sons to ashes.

Upon request, he advised that only the water of the Ganges, which flowed from heaven, could liberate them. Bhagiratha, the descendant of King Sagara, worshipped Brahma and Shiva. Brahma then allowed Ganga to descend on earth, while Shiva broke Ganga's fall in the coils of his hair, so that her immense celestial energy would not shatter the earth. When Ganga descended, Bhagiratha led her to the sea. From there, the river reached the netherworld, and liberated the souls of sixty thousand sons of King Sagara.

Because of Bhagiratha's efforts, the river is also known as Bhagirathi.

- **Jahnvi:** Symbolically meaning “the daughter of Jahnu”.

This has reference in the legend of Sage Jahnu. When King Bhagiratha brought the celestial Ganga down to earth to save his ancestors, she flooded the peaceful grounds of Sage Jahnu's ashram. The blessed Sage became furious at the disruption to his deep meditation and used his mystic power to drink all of Ganga's waters in a single sip. The distressed King prayed to Sage Jahnu, who then relented and allowed the river to emerge from his ear. From that moment, Ganga was affectionately called Jahnvi, “the daughter of Jahnu.”

To celebrate the rebirth of Ganga, **Ganga Jayanti or Ganga Saptami** is celebrated on the seventh day of the bright half of the month of Vaishakh.

- **Tripathaga** (त्रिपथगा):

A Sanskrit word made from “Tri” = Three; “Patha” = Path or way; “Ga” = to go, so *Tripathaga* means “she who flows in three paths” or “the river of the three worlds”. According to Hindu epics and Puranas, the Ganga does not belong only to the mortal plane, but it flows in the three worlds (*Trilok*). In **Heaven (Swarga)**, she flows as *Mandakini*; on Earth (**Prithvi**), she flows as *Bhagirathi*, and in the **Underworld (Patala / Netherworld)**, she flows as *Bhogavati*.

As the Ganges had descended from heaven to earth in the Hindu tradition, she is also considered the vehicle of *ascent*, from earth to heaven.

- **Vishnupadi:** Literally meaning "emanating from the foot of Lord Vishnu".

According to the *Bhagavata Purana*, in his incarnation as Vamana, Lord Vishnu extended his left foot to the end of the universe, and pierced a hole with the nail of his big toe. Through the hole, the pure water of the ocean entered this universe as the Ganges river. Since the Ganges directly touched the lotus feet of Lord Vishnu, it is known as *Bhagavat-Padi* or *Vishnupadi*, which means *emanating from the feet of Bhagvan (God)*, the word “padi” meaning feet in Sanskrit.

- **Gange / Shubhra / Sapteshwari / Nikita:** These are some more classical names found in traditional texts.

Ganga Stotram

Apart from the scriptures, the great philosopher Adi Shankaracharya wrote a 14-verse hymn in devotion to Ganga. The hymn praises the sacred river as a divine goddess who washes away sins, heals sorrow, and helps attain Moksha. Requesting the river to take away all bad Karma, it describes the river flowing from the feet of Lord Vishnu and resting on the head of Lord Shiva.

Ganga Aarti

Ganga Aarti is an evening ritual to seek the blessings of Goddess Ganga and offer her gratitude for giving life and washing away the sins of her devotees. Ganga Aarti is a unique divine experience in which the priests offer lighted lamps, incense and diyas while chanting mantras along the Ghat of the Ganga. The chants, the flowers, the fire, the water, and the sunset together create such a spectacular aura that deeply connects one to nature and the Universe, instilling calm, hope, belief and renewal.

Ganga Aarti is performed daily at sunset at Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi, at Har Ki Paudi in Haridwar and at Triveni Ghat in Rishikesh.



PC: www.exoticindiaart.com

Ganga as Mokshadayini

The term “*Moksha*” means “liberation from the cycle of birth and death,” and thereby “*Mokshadayini*” means “the one who liberates.” As per Hindu mythology, a holy dip with full faith and devotion in the sacred waters of the river Ganga opens the door to heaven and liberates one from the cycle of earthly births (*Samsara*). The origin of Ganga from Gangotri, her transformation as she moves across terrains, and finally her release into the ocean is akin to the cycle of our birth, our growth through life’s challenges and finally our surrender to death. Her journey teaches us the spiritual path of purification, transformation, and surrender.

Hindus immerse the ashes (*asthis*) of their loved ones in its holy waters so that their souls attain salvation. Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat in Varanasi are the mokshadham ghats for cremation, while Gangasagar in West Bengal is the one where a holy dip is considered to bring absolute salvation.



Ghats in Varanasi. PC: Wikimedia

My Experience with Ganga

A river never stops – NEVER.

Ganga has taught me that the journey is more important than the destination. When I see it flowing undeterred, manoeuvring all hurdles with such ease, gently pushing through without losing its essence, its strength despite wind, rain, and Sun, I am amazed at the way nature teaches us resilience, patience, flow, acceptance and surrender.

No matter what it encounters on its way, it keeps flowing relentlessly, taking everything in its embrace, making its way through rocks, mountains, and valleys. It changes its form and becomes a waterfall, or a narrow stream, but it remains the Holy Ganga.



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It leaves on its banks whatever it can't take along, teaching us to let go of whatever doesn't serve us on our path. It doesn't complain to the wind for blowing too hard. It adapts to its pace and starts flowing faster. It welcomes the rain in its embrace and makes it a part of its waters, as if adopting it as its own identity.



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And still it appears calm, peaceful, serene, teaching us to keep flowing every moment without resistance and to find our way through.

Ganga instills faith, hope and light in me, as if connecting me to the voice of the Universe.

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About the Author

Ms. Vandana Bhasin is a banker turned writer, editor, artist, and Life Coach based in Gurugram.

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