



WHY IS THE GANGA HOLY?

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Ganga

People bathe in the Ganga to wash away their sins. Why is the Ganga considered so pure?

Hindus believe that the Ganga used to flow in Swarga where Amrita is found, and Amrita is said to have come to Bhu-loka in the form of Ganga. So the belief is that you will be absolved of your sins or achieve moksha if you bathe in her waters. Unless you consign the asthi, ashes, of the dead to the Ganga, they won't be able to travel across the Vaitarni river to Pitr-loka and be reborn. The Vaitarni separates Bhu-loka, the land of the living, from Pitr-loka, the land of the dead. Thus, the dead will remain stuck in Bhu-loka, as ghosts, and will suffer, achieving neither rebirth nor moksha.

Do the Vedas describe the Ganga?

Two rivers—Saraswati and Jahnavi—have been described in the Vedas, but the Saraswati appears to be important and is mentioned more frequently. Some historians believe that what's been written about in the Vedas is the Saraswati sabhyata, the civilization in India's north-west, from where people gradually moved towards the Ganga in north India. That was where Puranic Hinduism was born. This indicates a shift from the Vedas to the Puranas.

What does Ganga look like?

Ganga received a lot of attention during the Puranic period. You will see her idols at the doors of nearly every temple and beside city gates. She is described as a very beautiful woman, voluptuous and fecund, carrying a water pot, ghada, in one hand. She is also depicted in the symbol of Makara rashi, Capricorn. The makara, a sea creature with the tail of a fish and the head of an elephant, is her vehicle. Rationalists say the creature is probably the indigenous dolphin found in the Ganga, which is now an endangered species. There is confusion among some people between makara and magar, crocodile, so some folk images depict Ganga sitting on a crocodile.

Shiva and Ganga are supposed to have a very interesting relationship. Shiva is also known as Gangadhara, and Ganga is said to flow from his locks. Is Ganga Shiva's river then?

This is a contentious debate. Shaivas believe Ganga is their river and Vaishnavas believe she's theirs, because she is also called Vishnupadi, one who emerges from the feet of Vishnu. There is a story in which Vishnu, in his Vamana avatar, dwarf form, goes to Bali, the king of asuras, and asks for a boon allowing him to claim whatever land he can cover in three footsteps. Once the boon is granted, the Vamana becomes a giant, claiming Bhu-loka with one step and Swarga-loka with the next. When his foot extends into outer space, it happens to touch the Milky Way—what we call Akash Ganga—and the Ganga comes down to the earth with his foot. In another version of the story, when Vishnu raises his foot in space, Brahma is overcome with emotion. He pours water from his kamandal on to Vishnu's feet, which flows to earth as Ganga.

Shiva is Gangadhara because Ganga flows from his head and tresses, and Ganga is Vishnupadi because she is flowing from Vishnu's feet. These are the versions recounted in different traditions. A bit of the politics that happened during medieval times can be discerned here.

There is another fascinating story about Ganga. Shiva is known for his singing, although he rarely opens his mouth since he's a vairagi. Once, Shiva is singing and it's so beautiful that Vishnu literally melts and turns into water. Brahma collects this water in his kamandal, which is the Ganga.

It is said the Ganga is Shiva's wife—is that true?

There are some stories where Shiva has two wives, Gauri, or Parvati, and Ganga. They both are daughter of Parvat, the mountain. Folk tales say the two quarrel because one sits on Shiva's head and the other in his lap. In one story, Parvati, who is upset with Shiva, accuses him of keeping Ganga on his head and keeping her away. In response, Shiva embraces Parvati so tightly that they merge into one body and become Ardhanareshwara, the half-man, half-woman god. There are many such romantic stories about Shiva, Ganga and Gauri!

How did Ganga get her other name, Jahnavi? And also Bhagirathi?

When Ganga was descending to Bhu-loka, she was dancing gleefully and making a lot of noise. Rishi Jahanu got annoyed and drank the whole river up. Some say Jahanu was Shiva himself. Ganga then apologized for making so much noise and he released her through his ear. So she is also called Jahnavi, Jahanu's daughter.

Ganga's tributary is Bhagirathi. To try hard for something is to make a 'Bhagirath prayas', an oft-used phrase. Bhagirath was a Suryavanshi king whose ancestors had been cursed by Kapila Muni and turned into ash for disturbing his tapasya, meditation. Saddened by their fate, Bhagirath wondered if there was a chance that they might live again, be reborn, attain moksha, and so on. Kapila Muni told him they could be reborn only if their ashes were poured in the Ganga. For that, the Ganga would have to descend from heaven to earth. Bhagirath did tapasya and pleaded with the Ganga to come to earth. At long last Ganga agreed, but she said that the force of her fall would end up destroying the earth. Bhagirath then approached Shiva and requested him to hold the Ganga on his head. Shiva contained the force

of the Ganga in his locks; Bhagirath was able to immerse the ashes of his ancestors in the river and they were reborn. The concept of rebirth is connected to getting another chance, because we aren't able to fulfil all our wishes in a single lifetime. Rebirth makes that second chance possible.

Does Ganga have siblings, family?

Ganga's sister is Yamuna. In many temples, Ganga and Yamuna are depicted beside each other. In images, Ganga is seated on a dolphin and Yamuna on a turtle. The dolphin is a leaping, fast-moving fish, whereas the turtle is slow. Similarly, the Ganga is fast, lively, full of cascades, while the Yamuna is slow and sluggish. Where Ganga is fair, almost white, like rapids, Yamuna is dark, and is thus also called Kalindi.

There are differences in their personalities as well. Ganga is restless, active, bubbly, even a bit manipulative; Yamuna is cheerless, fatigued and falls behind. Ganga is associated with Shiva, Yamuna with Vishnu, Krishna. One of Krishna's eight wives is Kalindi.

Yamuna is worshipped widely. The Srinathji temple in Rajasthan has a symbol of Yamuna in it, a ghada. Ganga and Yamuna never meet except at Prayag with an unseen river, the Saraswati. This sangam, the meeting place of the sisters, is the venue for the Kumbh Mela.

What is Dakshina Ganga?

India is called Jambudweep, a diamond-shaped land mass that appears like the jambul fruit. It is divided by the Vindhya mountains; the northern part is called Uttara-patha, and the southern, Dakshina-patha. The general understanding is that the Vedic tradition, with its beliefs and rituals, travelled from north to south. When the rishis travelled southwards, they needed a Ganga there too, thus the concept of Dakshina Ganga, or Ganga of the south.

The Kaveri river is often known as the Dakshina Ganga. One story is that when Rishi Agastya was travelling to the south, he carried Ganga water in his kamandal. While he was doing his tapasya, he kept the kamandal on a

stone. Ganesha, in the form of a crow, came and tipped it over. The Kaveri river started to flow from the spot where the kamandal fell.

In another story, the Godavari river is Dakshina Ganga. This is a family-related story in the Godavari Mahatmya. Gauri or Parvati is unhappy with Ganga sitting on Shiva's head and wants to get rid of her. Once, Ganesha visits Rishi Gautama's ashram in the south in the form of a cow, and is wandering in his field of rice. The rishi throws a stone at the animal and Ganesha pretends to die. The rishi feels he has committed a sin, and must do penance. Ganesha reappears in his real form and, for his mother Parvati's happiness, tells the rishi to ask Shiva to send Ganga away from Kailasa. So, on Gautama's request Shiva sends Ganga there as Godavari.

In some stories, Ganga is Shiva's wife, in others she is Vishnu's wife, in yet others, she is unmarried. Can you clear this confusion?

This is a tough question to resolve. Ganga is an apsara, where aps is pani, water, which makes her the daughter of water. Ganga does not have a nath, that is, husband or lord. A river cannot be controlled. This is an important philosophical concept.

In stories, she is sometimes coupled with Shiva. In the Mahabharata, she is married to Shantanu. Shantanu happens to see her one day, falls in love with her beauty and proposes marriage. Ganga agrees to marry him on the condition that he will not restrict her freedom in any way. He agrees. In time, their first child is born, but Ganga drowns the newborn immediately. She does so with their next six children as well. When she is about to drown their eighth-born, Shantanu tries to stop her. She warns him that their marriage will be over if he goes back on his promise and questions her. Still, Shantanu demands an explanation. She tells him that their sons were the Vasu who had resided in heaven in their previous birth. They had stolen Rishi Vasishtha's cow and he had cursed them, causing them to lose their place in heaven. Their atonement was to take birth on earth and be sent to Mrityu-loka, the land of the dead.

Ganga explains that she is drowning the children to secure the Vasu's release. Shantanu refuses to let her kill this child. Ganga says he'd be pushing the child into the painful cycle of birth and death. When Shantanu persists, she agrees to keep the infant alive and return him to his father later. She then disappears with the child.

In this unfortunate story, the child who survives is Bhishma, who ends up leading a rather tragic life. He doesn't get married, doesn't have children, doesn't even get to be king, and dies in a lot of pain. In his last moments, when Bhishma is lying on a bed of arrows, Ganga is grief-stricken even though she knows that is Bhishma's fate. She's aware of the facts of life and death, but as a mother she's overcome by emotion, and curses Arjuna, saying that his son will kill him the same way he has killed Bhishma, his foster father. Arjuna is a rare person who is cursed by Ganga—a passionate, impulsive goddess!

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