

Hindu Perspective on Water - Case Study of River Ganga

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Introduction:

“The World is the River of God
Flowing from him and flowing back to him”
Shvetashvatara Upanishad

‘Water has the power to move millions of people – let it move us in the direction of peace’.

(Mikhail Gorbachev, President, Green Cross International).

Water is not only essential to our body but also it has an intimate relationship to our mind. In other words, water is the mirror to reflect our mind. Sustainable water resources development and management are major challenges of the immediate and long-term future. History has shown that the most important feature of freshwater provides a powerful natural incentive for cooperation. Water is religion of Life in Sanskrit also termed as ‘*Jalam Jeevana Dharma*’ in Hindi.

Conflicts over water could be looked upon as consisting of three key spheres: hydrosphere, economic, and political. There is a strong potential conflict between the ecosystem’s needs for water and human needs. Even within the context of human needs, conflicts over water are often affected by problems in the economic and political spheres as much as those generated within the water sphere itself.

Without water there is no life, yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. We are at the mercy of water just as we are at the mercy of our God. The significance of water manifests itself differently in different religions and beliefs but it is these two qualities of water that underlie its place in our cultures and faiths.

A. Water Worship:

Water has been worshipped not only in India but in many European and other Asian countries. Water washes away evil, disease and old age, from where arose the idea that there was somewhere a fountain of youth or of immortality. Water cleanses us morally. It is a belief that strength returns after the bath. In India water is taken in hand while uttering a prayer and the same water is believed to be very powerful, the hands are washed before accepting a present. Since water

is one of the essential factors in the preservation of the life and the growth of the crops, it naturally plays an important role in man's life. Similarly agriculture and then commerce would lend an additional importance to water as a means of irrigation and transportation, which again would find a reason for water-worship.

In the *Puranas*, we find the most elaborate form of worship of water. Here waters are considered as the most miraculous, holy, super natural and divine. They have various Gods as their presiding deities. They are blessed with many powers and attributes by the Gods and Sages. Many of them are said to have divine origin, or are attributed with super natural virtues and thus are regarded sacred and worshipped.

According to *Rigveda*, Aryans were nature worshipers. Whatever they feared they started worship of that object. The strength and activities of the natural powers like Fire, Water, Wind, Sun, Rain and Rivers are beyond the imagination of the then people. So they started worshipping these powers as objects of veneration. Among these, water is one of the most important powers. Later on water was also associated with the worship of Vedic God Varuna. The successors of Aryans still continue this nature worship. The Rigvedic seers called the waters Goddesses as they quenched the thirst of their cattle. Rigveda praises water as Apsaras (the anthropomorphic form of water). The waters bestow long life, wealth and immortality. It cleans and purifies the worshipper, even from moral sins such as telling lies, cursing and violence.

B. Hinduism

Water in Hinduism has a special place because it is believed to have spiritually cleansing powers. To Hindus all water is sacred, especially rivers. The seven sacred rivers are the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Although Hinduism encompasses so many different beliefs, among those that most Hindus do share is- the importance of striving to attain purity and avoiding pollution. This relates to both physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being.

C. Case Study of River Ganga

'The Ganges has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.'

Jawaharlal Nehru, born in Allahabad on the Ganges.

Reference of Ganga is available in the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. Ganga is the path to heaven of those that have bathed in her current. The Ganga or Ganges River is a major river of the Indian subcontinent. It is associated with mythology, as well

as, reality with the people of India. In Hinduism it is personified as a Goddess & it is an integral part of Hindu religion.

i. Geographical Overview:

The river known as the “Ganges” is officially and popularly known by its Hindu name, Ganga. The river Ganges is very sacred to the Hindus. The river has its source in the Himalayas, at Gaumukh in the southern Himalayas on the Indian side of the Tibetan border. It is 1,560 miles (2,510 km) long and flows through China, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The Ganges river basin is one of the most fertile and densely populated in the world and covers an area of 4,00,000 sq miles (10,00,000 sq km). The headwaters of the Ganges and Brahmaputra originate in the Tibetan China area of the Himalayan mountain range. The Ganges River flows South-West into India, turns South-East joining with many major tributaries (covering 29 cities with population over 1,00,000; 23 cities with a population between 50,000 and 100,000, and about 48 towns.) After flowing into Bangladesh, the Ganges joins the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers to flow into the Bay of Bengal as the Meghna (Padma) river.

Approximately a quarter of India lies within the Ganges river basin India holds power within the Ganges and Brahmaputra River basins due to its important geographic positioning (upstream), large contribution of flow to the Ganges River and prior use stake hold. India reduces flow within the Ganges through two water diversions at Haridwar and Farakkar. The diversion at Haridwar, into the Upper Ganges Canal, was constructed for irrigation. The Farakka barrage is another major water diversion located immediately upstream of the Bangladesh boundary. The Farakka barrage diverts water from the Ganges River to the Bhagirathi River via the Hugli Canal during the dry season.

According to the *Puranas*, there are three tributaries of the Ganga and they are Swarg Ganga (Mandakini), Bhoo Ganga (Bhagirathi) and Patal Ganga (Bhagvati).

ii. Significance:

As Amrit (drink that confers immortality) is to the deities, a Swadha (oblation offered to Pitris during sacred fire ceremony) is to the Pitris, as Sudha is to the Nagas, even so is Ganga water to human beings. The merit that one earns by bathing in Ganga, is such that the like of it is incapable of being earned through the acquisition of sons or wealth or the performance of meritorious acts. The man of righteous conduct who,

with rapt soul, thinks of Ganga at the time when his life-breaths are about to leave his body, succeeds in attaining to the highest end. Ganga is regarded as competent to rescue every creature from sin and lead him to the felicity of heaven.

iii. Ganga as per Hindu Myth:

*“pavanah pavatam asmi
ramah shastra-bhrtam aham
jhasanam makaras chasmi
srotasam asmi jahnavi”*

(Shrimad Bhagwat Gita: (X : iii)

Meaning:

“Sri Krishna said to Arjuna: Of all the purifiers I am the wind; of the wielders of weapons I am Rama; of fishes I am the shark; and of all the flowing rivers I am the River Ganges. Lord Krishna himself declares that among all the rivers, God himself is there as “River Ganga” on this earth. So it is a form of a living Goddess.

Rudra Vaisnava Sampradaya:

Of purifiers Lord Krishna’s *vibhuti* or divine, transcendental opulence is the wind. Amongst all the rivers, Lord Krishna’s *vibhuti* is ‘*jahnavi*’ - a name of the holy Ganga.

Rigveda:

The earliest and theoretically the holiest of the Hindu scriptures mentions Ganga in the nadistuti (Rigveda 10.75), which lists the holy rivers from East to West.

iv. Origin of Ganga:

Ganga is said to have originated on the tenth day of *Shukl Paksh* of *Jyestha* month (third month of Hindu calendar). This day is also known as *Ganga Dussehara*. The *Puranas* state that Ganga is the daughter of the Himalayas and Sumeru’s daughter Menaka is the mother of Ganga. The river is believed to flow from the toe of Vishnu to be spread into the world through the hairs of Shiva.

According to *Vayupuran*, before coming to the earth, Ganga lived in the heaven.

According to *Bhagvat Puran* descendents of King Sagar brought the Ganga to the earth from heaven after performing a lot of rituals.

According to *Hindu mythology*, Ganga flowed in the heavens but then was ordered to go down to earth. Fearing that her forceful descent might wash away the earth, the Gods sought the help of Shiva. Shiva broke the fall of Ganga-Ganges by capturing her in his mighty locks. Since then, Ganga-Ganges resides on top of Shiva's head as his second wife (the first being Parvati).

It is also said that due to Bhagiratha's efforts Ganga descended on to earth and hence the river is also known as Bhagirathi, and the term "*Bhagirath prayatna*" is used to describe a most important achievement.

v. Beliefs of Visit:

- According to *Skandpuran*, a person who takes a bath in the holy Ganga on Ganga *Dashmi*, is blessed and goes to heaven.
- As mentioned in the *Vishnu Puran*, people get rid of their sins, by taking the name of Ganga, remembering her, while taking a bath in the Ganga or drinking its water. Three places are most prominent for taking a bath in the Ganga: Haridwar, Prayag and Gangasagar near Kolkata
- As per a *Sanskrit hymn*:
*"Jyeshtha mase site pakshe dashamya budh hastiyoh
 Dashehara jayate vyas ganga janm par shuchi"*

Meaning: It is believed that if in *Jyestha* month, *Shukla Paksh*, '*Dashmi Tithi*', Wednesday, *Hast Nakshatra*, Moon of Virgo sign, Sun of Taurus sign falls on Ganga *Dashmi* and a person worships Ganga on this day and takes a holy dip in Haridwar, Prayag or Gangasagar, he is exonerated from all his sins and becomes pure.

- *Shaivite* philosopher and Acharya Adi Shankar emphasized the importance of rivers and organized by their banks assemblies of sages, saints and yogis who came together to deliberate on and disseminate their faith. Thus, the tradition of Kumbh was born. Four rivers in four directions of the country became sacred bathing sites. Consequently,

the Ganga and her contiguous cities in North India became principal centre of spiritual and cultural congregations.

It is believed that those who bathe in the Ganges and leaves some part of their body (hair or bone) on the left bank will attain *Swarg* (the paradise of Indra). Ganga waters are used in worship and a sip of this water is generally given to a dying person.

vi. **Spiritual Experience at the Ganga**

Pilgrimage is very important to Hindus. Holy places are usually located on the banks of rivers, coasts, seashores and mountains. Sites of convergence, between land and river/s carry special significance and are sacred. In the Ganges the pure are made even more pure and the impure have their pollution removed if only temporarily. *Kumbha Mela* is a pilgrimage of Hindu devotees and is held every three years at four different places in turn - Hardwar, Nasik, Prayag and Ujjain. These places are believed to be where drops of *Amrit* (the nectar of immortality) – which fell to earth during a heavenly conflict.

The river, personified as a goddess, is worshipped by Hindus, who believe that bathing in the river causes the remission of sins and facilitates liberation from the cycle of life and death. Pilgrims travel long distances to immerse the ashes of their kin in the waters of the Ganga, so that their loved ones will pass on to heaven.

Several places sacred to Hindus lie along the banks of the river Ganga, and includes Gangotri, Haridwar, Allahabad and Varanasi.

vii. **Why do people visit the Ganga river?**

Pilgrims visit the Ganga river to perform the important rituals of their spiritual rebirth involving the use of Ganga water. Such rituals normally take place at Haridwar, Varanasi (Kashi or Banaras) and Allahabad.

The *Abhishek Puja*: Every child born to Hindu parents is given an ‘*abhishek*’, bath in milk and the holy waters of the Ganges. The child is ‘purified’ per se from the sins of its last life for a fresh beginning in this life.

The Holy Bath before Marriage: Marriage in Hindu philosophy is like being born again as a as a soul that has two bodies. So it becomes important that any individual about to enter holy matrimony must be purged of all impurities of the soul.

The *Asthi Visarjan*: This is a ritual deeply associated with the concept of rebirth in Hinduism. *Asthi Visarjan* is a part of the last rites of a human being. After the cremation of the dead body, the left over ashes are supposed to be disposed off into any of the holy river waters by the Hindus. This sort of death in the spiritual water will ensure that soul of the dead a favourable rebirth.

The *Visarjan of Idols*: This is an universal custom in Hinduism that the idols of deities made for special festive occasions like *Ganesh Chaturthi* and *Durga Puja* have to be immersed in a water body. So the use of water in religion is not just limited to living beings but also extends to the Gods themselves. The Gods are supposed to visit the mortals during these festivals are put forth for the journey to their heavenly abode by immersing them in water by Hindus. This is done so that they can come back the next year.

The *Ardh Kumbh*: In Haridwar, a recent study showed that during the *Kumbh Mela* thousands of people took a holy dip in the river Ganga, which is worshipped as '*Mokshdayini*' (enabling people to attain salvation).

Research: Visitors also include scientists from around the world, as the Ganga water has always been a major source of study for research on issues like its sacredness, resources available, medicinal implications on living beings and pollution.

Tourists: The Ganga also provides an attraction for tourists to give them a historical, cultural and traditional insight into India.

Conclusion:

As the Ganga travelled to the nether-worlds, it created a different stream to remain on Earth to help purify unfortunate souls here. It is the only river to follow from all the three worlds - *Swarga* (heaven), *Prithvi* (earth) and *Patala* (hell). Thus it is called "*Tripathagâ*" (one who travels the three worlds) in Sanskrit.

Rivers have been an important reason for the rural prosperity of India. Carrying a wider importance in cultural, economical, geographical as well as religious development, the numerous rivers of India are of great value to us. Some of the most prominent rivers in India include Ganga, Yamuna, Krishna, Godavari, Narmada and Kaveri.

It is believed by all the Hindus that bathing in the Ganges generally or on certain occasions causes the remission of sins and facilitates the attainment of salvation (Moksha). So Hindus travel from distant places to take a holy dip in Ganga

waters. Hindus also immerse the ashes of their kin in the sacred waters of the Ganges.

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