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GANGES IN INDIAN SCULPTURE AND LITERATURE: MYTHOLOGY AND PERSONIFICATION

Nalini Rao, Soka University

Abstract:

The river Ganges is a symbol of wealth, purity and eternity, and its sacred waters have inspired sages, philosophers, and artists in India who have immortalized its divine imagery. However, it has rarely been understood from a historical point of view, as to how it became so sacred and to view it from a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary perspective with an accumulation of layers of historical thought and practices, provides a rationale for the living practices around the river. The paper explores the evolution of the concept of sacredness and eternity of River Ganges through art-historical and archaeological evidence. It investigates into its multiple identities and complex personifications in Hindu mythology, elaborations in Sanskrit literature and portrayals in stone sculpture.

Key Words: Ganges, Myth, Sculpture, Sanskrit Literature, Goddess

Introduction

The river Ganges (Ganga) has been sacred form past 4000 years in India and immortalized in literature, art and ritual. A symbol of wealth, purity and eternity, its sacred waters have inspired spiritual seekers, sages, philosophers, and artists in India who have immortalized its divine image in the collective mentality of the people. According to Hindu beliefs, water is credited to possess several valuable properties, including “producing, regenerating, perpetuating, and protecting life.”¹ While bestowing wisdom, wealth, offspring, granting prayers, and protecting against demons and powers of darkness, water also contains *amrita*, or the elixir of life. The importance and sacredness of water has long been embedded in the mythology and history of Hinduism, and therefore plays a vital role in modern Hindu religious and cultural practices. We know that water is the drink of life, but Ganges water is the drink of eternal life. In 1896, the British physician E. Hanbury Hankin reported in the French journal *Annales de l’Institut Pasteur* that cholera microbes died within three hours in Ganga water but continued to thrive in distilled water even after 48 hours.² Every Hindu wants to die on the banks of the Ganga, but if he cannot, then a drop of Ganga water is put in the mouth of the dying person. Every home keeps a small, sealed bottle of water called *ganga jal* which is essential for every major Hindu ceremony.

¹ Boscho, 59-60

² Corliss, 1994

Geographical Dimension

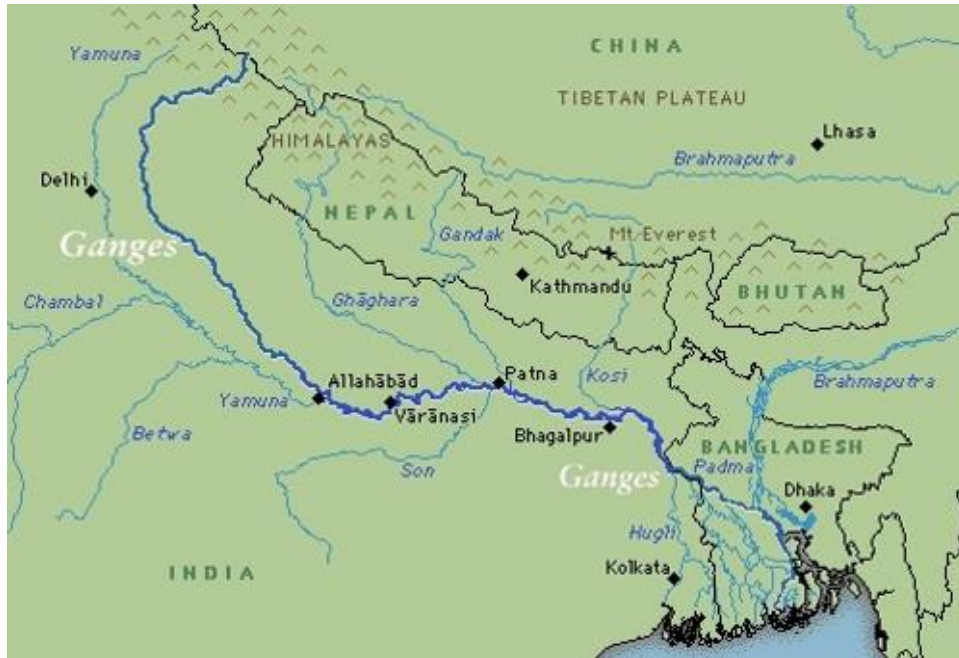


Figure 1: Map, River Ganga

The river flows from the Himalayan mountains to the Bay of Bengal. It is about 1560 miles (2510 kilometers long from its source to the Bay of Bengal). It is distinguished by the largest concentration of people, drains an area of 407 million square miles. It is not just one river, but is joined by seven major rivers, Yamuna, Gandak, Ghaggar, Gomati, from South Chambal, Brahmaputra from east. It begins from Gaumukh (the nearby town is Gangotri) where it is 20 miles long from about 21-24,000 feet, three miles wide. Then it comes down and is called Bhagirathi and meets Alkananda. The confluence of Alkananda and Bhagirathi is at Devaprayag and it is from now on that it comes to be known as Ganga. Where it enters the plains is the sacred site of Haridwara called *mokshadvara*, door of freedom, Mayapura, city of illusion, Gangadvara where Arjuna and Bhisma performed penance. Here it descends to the plains, meeting its sister River, Yamuna or Jamuna, at Prayag, winding down reaches Varanasi, the famous pilgrimage site and ultimately reaches the Bay of Bengal at Gangasagar.

There is no river like Ganga, at times roaring between the gorges, calm and vast like an ocean. In fact, all rivers in India take their name as Ganga for a part of their flow there is the Kaveri Ganga, Godavari Ganga, which are considered as Ganga. The river has captured the heart of India and the imagination of poets, philosophers and artists for over 2500 years. Both in art and literature it has been personified as Mother Ganga, as beloved of Siva, and its descent has been personified in narrative panels. However, the question is how and why did it become so sacred? Why does it have these multiple identities at different

stages— are they intertwined with physical realities or historical events? Furthermore, how have the primordial values of rejuvenation, sacredness and eternity of its waters kept alive by myth, personification in literature and art. I don't think I can answer any one of these questions in entirety but will briefly touch upon them.

In Indian mythology, Ganga is personified as the child of Brahma, wife of Shiva, metaphysical product of Vishnu, mother to the Vasus and Karttikeya. According to Hindu mythology, Anshuman, in an attempt to erase the sins of the King's sons, coaxed the river goddess Ganga from heaven. God Siva allowed Ganga to flow from heaven on the locks of his hair, erasing the sins of King Sagara's sons.³ This story of Ganga's descent from heaven is still celebrated annually, during the first ten days of Jetha (May-June). During this time, people from all over India gather at locations along the Ganges to honor the goddess while they bathe and wash away their sins in the river.

Visual imagery of goddess Ganga appears on the architecture of temples only from the Gupta period (4-6th CE), such as the one from Ahichhatra (fig 2).



Figure 2: Woman, Ahichhatra

³ Rinehart, 140-41

The terracotta image of a woman carrying a pot of water, or *kumbha* and standing on a *makara* or crocodile distinguishes Ganga, and the water pot personifies the waters. The image can be compared to the *yakshi* or woman and tree motif from Bharhut, 2nd BCE, where a girl is carrying food (fig. 3) that displays a transference of motif to a river goddess, particularly goddess Ganga.

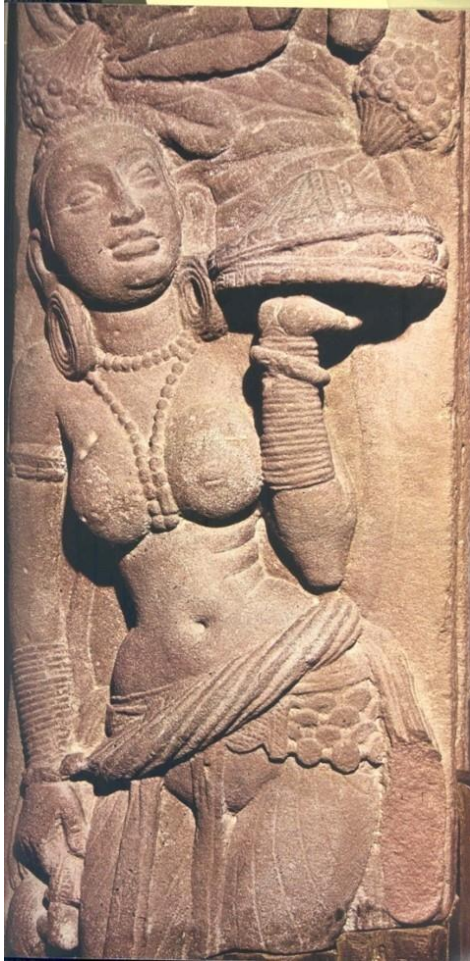


Figure 3: Woman with food, Bharhut

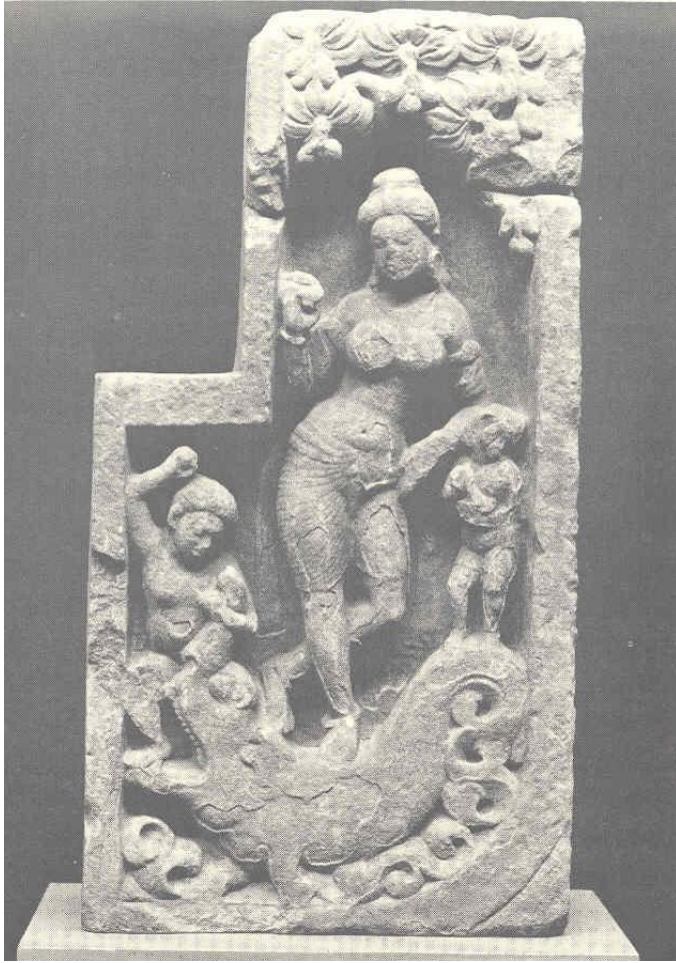


Figure 4: Ganga, Besnagar

In the stone sculpture from Besnagara, (fig. 4), 5th CE the *kumbha* gains sacredness due to its placement in a temple context. Due to the large number of crocodiles in the river, her vehicle is the *makara* which is also the vehicle of Varuna (god of waters/ darkness in Vedic literature). In addition, she represents the vegetal substratum of life (seen in the incorporation of the elaborate vine) while *makara* was a creature of the sea, an object of fear. On the tail of the *makara* is a child and bird signifying perhaps that children being prone to its attacks, symbolize the helplessness of life. Emerging from its mouth is a *gana* or a dwarf human figure, that has life affirming role, while the *makara* has a holding back quality. Thus, Ganga symbolizes the dichotomy of life affirming and life-threatening qualities, placed on each end.⁴

At Pali Sagar, Ganga appears with a *chatra* (umbrella); the vegetation that has a lotus like quality evolves as a Lotus Chatra, which develops into the *makara torana* in Eastern Chalukyan and later arts. At Mukhalinga (fig.5, Orissa) Ganga is under a *chatra* (royal umbrella)

⁴ Darian, 114



Figure 5: Ganga, Mukhalinga, Orissa

and holds an elaborate *kumbha* which has now evolved from the pot and signifies the generative powers of water. *Kumbha* also represents a womb, and birth. We may recall the birth of Sagara's 60,000 sons from the gourd, that personified Ganga. Similarly, the epic warrior Drona is born from a pot. The full vessel was also an expression of the formless *Brahman*, as water takes the shape of the vessel. In the *Brihararanyaka Upanishad* (5.15.1) the face of god Brahma is said to be hidden in a golden vessel. During the royal consecration of Rama, Ganga water is brought in golden jars. In the *Mahabharata* it is considered as amrita or nectar of human beings. Sacredness becomes substantiated in ritual bath, and the *kumbha*, also known as *purnaghata*, with its waters is symbolic of initiation, strength, youth, and immortality and worshipped in Hindu homes. While the philosophical meaning is embedded in the Upanishad, mythology substantiated the regenerative powers and ritual practices assured its continuity.

By the 5th century of the common era, Ganga's distinctive sculptural feature becomes obligatory in temple architecture. She is seen as a door guardian as in Deogarh (fig.6), where she is with a vase and

chatra.⁵ One of the main reasons for the importance attributed to Ganga in art during the Gupta period was that its adjacent areas, as well as the Doab was the heartland of its kingdom. The Gupta rulers proclaimed themselves to have rescued the Earth Goddess from deluge. Historical events, such as kings suffering from incurable diseases and drowning themselves in its waters made the Ganga more sacred. In addition, many of the institutions of learning were centered around the river, both Hindu and Buddhist. The Gupta period was a prosperous, peaceful time when numerous treatises of drama, theater, and dance were written, when temples began to be built in official *sastric* form. Symbolic meanings attributed to Ganga, such as purity, life, death, resurgence, goddess can be found in the imagery on the doorframes of Gupta temples, that continued later in Indian art.



Figure 6: Ganga, Deogarh

Numerous temples portray the two rivers as symbols of purification. Before entering 7th century the sacred space of the

⁵ Darian, 128

Rameshwaram at Ellora, one passes Ganga at the entrance of the cave on one side with Yamuna on a tortoise on the other side (cave 21).⁶



Figure 7: Ramesvaram Cave, Ellora

From the Gupta period onwards, Ganga and Yamuna remain a permanent feature of Indian Temple architecture. In order to understand its spread and prolific occurrence in art, we have to turn to Kalidasa who describes the rivers in anthropomorphic form, as images flanking the *garbhagriha*, (seen in Gupta, Vakataka, Chalukyan periods). He writes in a picturesque manner. “*Murte cha ganayamune tadanim sachamare devam asevishatam.*” (*Kumarasambhava* 7, 42).⁷ Kalidasa describes in the *Raghuvamsa* 13, 54-58:

⁶<https://twitter.com/kamlesm/status/1235910793469681665>

⁷ In the (*Meghaduta* 51, it is like the dark clouds at the top of the mountains look like dark elephants bathing in the Ganges. Other references to Ganga include, *Meghaduta*, 45, 65; *Vikramorvasi* I -7 ,II 15, III-6, V-22, *Kumarasambhava* I-30, 54; VI 38, 57, 70; VII-41, 42;VIII-16; *Raghuvamsa* Ragu. II-26,IV 32, 36, 73,V 48, X 37, 63;XIII 20,54 to 57; XII-66;XIV-3, 52;XVI 33,34, 71;XVII 14 <https://tamilandvedas.com/2012/02/20/ganges-in-kalidasa-sangam-tamil-literature/>

Here Ganga flows with her silvery stream broken by the bluish wavelets of Yamuna...appearing here like a necklace of pearls interspersed with lustrous sapphires, there a garland of white lotuses with blue lilies woven into it at intervals, sometimes like a row of birds fond of the Manasa lake (white stream) touching the dark swans, elsewhere like decorative creeper patterns painted in dark paste on sandal background for the earth, somewhere like the moonlight mottled by dark patches of shade here and there, elsewhere like a line of spotless autumn clouds with the sky seen through the interspace, somewhere like the body of Siva's ear with ashes and decorated with black serpents.

Kalidasa concludes the glorious picture in works by assuming that those purified by a bath at its confluence of the two consorts of the ocean have no more after death any further bondage in mortal coin even though they may not have realized that truth of the eternal one.⁸ Perhaps the philosophical reason for the representation of both Ganga and Yamuna together might be that Yamuna stands for *pravritti* motive force, and Ganga for *nivritti*, cessation of all desires and activities.⁹ However, in terms of practice the river Ganga is considered more sacred than Yamuna. The answer might be not merely in its geography, transference from River Saraswati, but also to some historical events that took place.

⁸ Tamil literature uses Ganges as a simile for the generosity and philanthropy of kings and chieftains. Post Sangam works: Silappadikaram mentions Ganges in 15 places; Manimegalai -4 places <https://tamilandvedas.com/2012/02/20/ganges-in-kalidasa-sangam-tamil-literature/>

⁹ In the *Padma Purana* -V.60. 39)its purity is described in detail

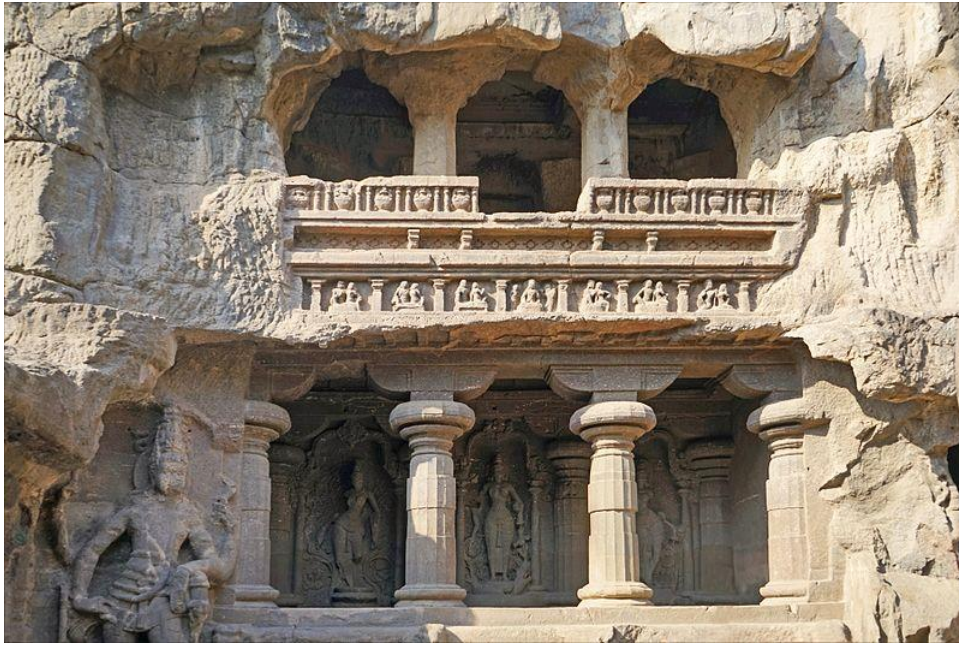


Figure 8: Kailasa Cave Temple, Ellora

At Ellora, in Kailasanatha Cave 16, of the 8-9th CE the rivers Ganga (on the right), Yamuna (on the left) and Saraswati in the center are represented. Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge. The name of the river is mentioned as early as in the *Rig Veda* in Nadistuti (*Rig Veda* 10.75), which lists the rivers from east to west and Ganga is mentioned. Even before Ganga was considered eternal or sacred, those around the river Saraswati River considered it as sacred and praised the river beyond limits. Reference to the river occurs 30 times; it is described as Naditame, Ambitame and Devitame, the best of rivers, best of mothers, best of goddesses respectively.¹⁰ The tectonic disturbances around Saraswati (1900 BCE) led to a substantial migration over time to the Ganga Plain. The Saraswati River does not exist today, but we know from satellite images that the major part is subterranean, but part of it still flows above ground and called as Ghagar in the north. Geographically when Saraswati's head waters were disturbed, part of its waters flowed towards Yamuna which joined the Ganga; hence the meeting place of Ganga and Yamuna and is known is considered as the confluence of three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati – called *Triveni Sangam*.

Returning to the association of sacredness with the Ganga and Saraswati Rivers, the former is expressed in multiple ways, including praise in the epics, accounts of royal events, references in Sanskrit literature, and depictions in public sculpture. The stories of the divine Ganga together with its tributaries the Yamuna and the subterranean Saraswati became more complex and colorful culminating in the Hindu

¹⁰ Bajpai, 188-219

belief in the river as the giver of final liberation, *moksha*. Lore about the river Ganga grew to be at the heart of Indian history. She takes great significance in the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In fact, Bhishma is called Gangeya, as Ganga was married to his father, Shantanu. Through Bhishma's birth, Ganga is transformed symbolically into Mother Ganga.

River Sarasvati is the goddess of speech, poetry and music. Ganga is related to life as well as death itself. Ganga and its large adjacent areas are very fertile, and it supports the livelihood of millions of people. Its waters have said to possess curative powers, and it is believed to have the power to cleanse sins. While upper Ganga is related to life giving properties, and its waters are said to be purifying, and have medical benefits. lower Ganga is known as Kali, the Goddess of death, due to its annual floods, and the presence of crocodiles. In addition, Siva was also the Lord of Death, destruction, and restoration, who annihilated Daksha.¹¹ Death rituals particularly the *asthivisarjana* (immersion of ashes) was considered as granting the dead the final release. The funeral customs are conservative in India and help in the healing process of bereavement. The ritual of immersion is a symbolic substantiation of regeneration and integration of oneself. The restorative quality of Siva is also substantiated in the ritual of celebration after the mourning period. Chidananda Saraswati rightly commented, that if Ganga dies, India dies; if Ganga thrives, India thrives.¹²

While Sarasvati is the consort of Brahma, Ganga is the consort of many gods. She travels as Brahma's companion in his brass water pot. She is said to flow originally from the foot of Vishnu in the highest heaven, magnified in her role as consort of Siva in Elephanta.

¹¹ *Skanda Purana*, 1.1.3. 22-23, Lochtefeld: 25

¹² Mallet, 1



Figure 9: Varaha, Udayagiri



Figure 10: Detail of Varaha Panel, Udayagiri

Historical Reasons for the Sacredness of the Ganga

If we examine the image from Udayagiri Cave 5 (near Bhopal, figs. 9,10), one finds a different explanation. The imagery of Varaha *avatara* holds the Earth Goddess Prithvi while Nagaraja or serpent king in *anjali mudra* refers to his cosmic form. This magnanimous panel contains some allegorical elements on the sides which do not pertain to the story of Varaha as narrated in the *Vishnu Purana*. The panel is close to the ceiling and covers the entire wall; rows of gods, sages and liberated humans are extolling Varaha. The ground of the wall around Vishnu is incised with the wavy marks of an ocean, referring to the cosmic ocean where this event has occurred. But at the other end of the wall, we see two small female figures, standing on a tortoise and a *makara* respectively, with a flying angel (*vidyadhara*) and flowing waters streaming from above them and into the expanse of ocean waves. Nearby in the ocean, stands a crowned male figure with a pitcher in his hands and a little further, a second crowned figure gazing at the first with his hands lifted as if to receive the pitcher.¹³

Candraguta II (375- 415 CE) who carved the cave, was the successor of Samudragupta (who had conquered the region between the two rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, called the doab from the Naga tribes who had ended the rule of the Kushana kings and performed the *aswamedha* sacrifice). Candragupta had conquered western India from the Scythians or Sakas and united the subcontinent. (a matrimonial alliance and probably made Prayag his capital). He was now a *cakravartin* or world emperor and imagining himself to be like God Varaha rescuing the earth from the waters—as his father, Samudragupta had done, who is praised in the Allahbad inscription composed by Harishena. It draws attention to the historical conquest of the Indian heartland between the two sacred rivers Ganga and Yamuna by Samudragupta and his passing on of the fertile legacy (the pitcher of immortality) to his successor, Chandragupta II.¹⁴ The Hindu cave site of Udayagiri provided a dramatic context, utilizing water as a binding motif for bringing to life the integrated mythology and sacredness. In a series of articles, Michael Willis has shown how this “hill of dawn” *udagiri* was a site of ancient and continuous sun worship and selected by the Guptas at least partly for its sacred connotations. (Willis, 15-27) Vishnu as an ancient form of Vedic Surya is relevant in understanding this continuity. Willis shows how a cistern at the top of the hill would fill up with the waters of the monsoon and flow down the path filling the cavern of the sleeping Vishnu and collecting at the bottom of the Varaha panel. Such a designed spectacle was probably made use of in some ritual manner, related to the *abhiseka* of the *chakravartins*, either symbolically or in embodied form.

¹³ Darain, 126

¹⁴ Williams, Joanna

The flow of water from above reiterates the ancient Vedic metaphor of the union of the upper and lower waters, heaven and earth, repeated in many Vedic hymns and echoed in the Puranic idea of the *avatar* (literally “descent”), the legend of the descent of the Ganga and the *rajyabhiseka* ritual performed during the emperor’s coronation and repeated annually and on special occasions before representatives of the entire imperial polity to reconstitute the dynamic order of the cosmos. Thus, the panel equating divinity of waters, kingship, establishment of dharma, creativity, spirituality and popular socio-political agency with the material wealth brought by the two descending rivers fertilizing the wide territory in-between.

Another explanation is the hydraulic aspect. The Sudarsan Lake was said to have been destroyed during this period. It was the largest irrigation tank (on the river Suvanasikata and Palasine) created by Candagupta Maurya through his governor Pushyugupta and Asoka through his governor Yavan Tshaspa who had created a chain of channels. During the Gupta period, there was the unprecedented storm and downpour flooding the whole area, converting it almost into a sea. Rudradaman is said to have repaired and strengthened it, and during the period of Skandagupta there was flooding. The concept of descent of the waters can be particularly seen here as when the water collects above the cave, it literally descends signifying the Vedic metaphor of descent of Ganga and descent of *avatara*.

In South India the Pallavas helped to consolidate a Hindu empire which stretched northwards into the Deccan. Narasimhavarman I (630-668 CE) was an inheritor and emperor of this imperial formation, who patronized cave excavations in the eastern coastal town of Mamallapuram. Most spectacular of these excavations is the large panoramic presentation of what many scholars have thought of as a visual pun – a conflated myth of Arjuna’s Penance and the Descent of the Ganges (figs. 11, 12). This presentation utilized water in ways similar to that at Udaygiri, to bind a message of imperial glory, divine intervention, prosperity, fertility, and sacredness.



Figure 11: Mamallapuram



Figure 12: Detail, Mamallapuram

The panel reminds us of the story of king Sagara who retires to Mt. Kailasa with his two wives Keshini and Sumati. After austere practices, sage Bhrigu grants his wish. Keshini has 60 000 sons. King Sagara performed the horse sacrifice, but the gods become fearful of his fame, and steal the horse, Sagara requested his sons to find the horse who come upon Sage Kapila and accused him of stealing. The ascetic

was so furious that he reduced the 60,000 sons to ashes but said that they would attain heaven if Ganges waters descended. Sage Bhagiratha performs austerities for years to call down the celestial river Ganga to the earth, so that her waters may purify the sins of his ancestors and bring fulfillment to the earth. Pleased with his devotion Goddess Ganga decided to descend to the earth but warns Bhagiratha that her force of descent would be so great, that it would shatter the earth. Bhagiratha then prays to Lord Shiva, who agrees to interrupt Ganga's fall in the coiled locks of his hair, so that her impact on the earth would be lessened. Out of kindness to Bhagiratha he released the river which entered Lake Manasarovara and the ashes of the sons were drenched.

The imagery portrays the mythological and historical event. It utilizes a natural feature of the hill, a cleft or fissure running through the rock, as a semblance of the descending river. At the top and to the left of this cleft is Bhagiratha who is standing in a yogic pose. To his left is Shiva, with his spear, waiting to accept the falling river. To left and right are the gliding beings of the celestial realms and the animals and *ganas* who inhabit Kailash, Shiva's mountain abode in the Himalayas. Up the cleft rise the king and queen of the *nagas*, denizens of the ocean worlds reaching up to receive the Ganga. At the bottom are the banks of the river where yogis worship beside a temple to Vishnu and young ascetics wash themselves and perform austerities in the holy river. At the bottom from the right, great elephants, the kings of the forest, come for their pilgrimage to the river goddess. Interestingly, the *nagas* in this panel become indispensable. Bhagirath at the top of the mountain, in his *vrikshasana* pose, is in fact himself the symbol of the integration of physical (*hatha*), mental (*dhyana*) and devotional (*bhakti*, invocation of the Ganga/Shiva) processes. But the cleft representing the descent of the celestial river, up which the *naga-nagini* couple glide with hands in *anjali mudra* and down which the rainwater flowed in the rainy season, carries the literal message of the meeting of the "two waters", the descending consciousness, symbol of divine intervention and Grace and the ascending *kudalini shakti*. Here, the *nagas* are not merely in affirmative response to the descending power, but are in dynamic ascent, streaming upward to meet the conscious force from above. The cleft reveals itself in this sub-textual reading to be the *shusumna*, the inner channel through the spine along which the upper and lower currents surge, and the mountain where the event is etched is conceivable as Mount Meru, the mountain of the cosmic manifestation with its spine, *meru-danda*. During the monsoon season, the first rains would fill a cistern at the top of the rock and overflowing, rush down the cleft. This would thus constitute symbolically the annual royal anointment *rajya abhisekha* of the emperor but echoing here the reception of the powerful holy river in his locks by the divine Shiva. And was not this descent of the Ganga also perhaps the metaphor for the extension of the mighty power of the Guptas from the north to the south of India –and Pallavas as bearers of the historical continuity of the Guptas. During their reign,

extensive irrigation systems made up of tanks, lakes and connecting channels spread throughout the kingdom, bringing the same kind of fertility enjoyed by the people under the Guptas in the land between the Ganga and the Jamuna and the Pallavas with their network on the Palar River. Both were builders of immense irrigation systems, the barays and representatives of Vishnu and Shiva on earth, perhaps the Angkor kings inherited from here their status among their subjects of being the cosmic magicians of water. However, what adds to the complexity is that the visual narrative has also been read as a depiction of the story of Arjuna's penance from the *Mahabharata*, which is however less compelling). The Descent of the Ganga represents a political pun, the southern establishment of the northern Gangetic Hindu imperial model.¹⁵



Figure 13: Kasivisvesvara Temple, Pattadakal

The story of Bhagirtha releasing the waters of Ganga can be found in the temple of Kasivisveswar, in Pattadakal (fig. 13) and in other styles, such as Orissa.

¹⁵ Darain, 21



Figure 14: Cave 1, Elephanta

At Elephanta, Ganga is depicted in the matted locks of Siva in the panel of marriage of Siva and Parvati, fig.14, and in the Nataraja panel during the Chola period (fig. 15) as well as on the Linga. It is Shiva however, whose relationship with Ganga is most intimate. Having caught the river as she fell to earth, he tamed her in the tangles of his hair before releasing her to flow out smoothly upon the earth. She is referred to as the co-wife of Parvati, and the latter is often jealous of the goddess Ganga's close contact with Siva. Such a dichotomous relation between the two represents primordial concept between the lord, mother, and child, he is the organ of generation (as *linga*), she is the liquid essence of life, he is the mystery, she is at the door of mystery, his locks are matter and she is spirit.

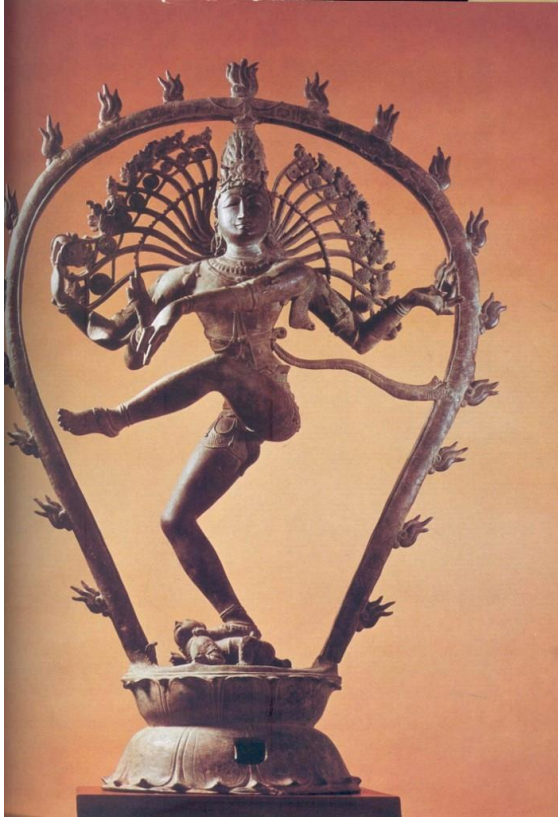


Figure 15: Nataraja

Historical Events on the Ganga

Other connotations for the significance of the river stems from historical events that took place. In the Sanskrit work, *Vikramaankadevacharita* (4, 66, 68) by Bilhana (11th CE), the Chalukyan king Vikramadeva, is said to have developed such an unbearable fever beyond endurance that he felt his end approaching and desired to go to the Tungabhadra, Ganges of the South, where he entered the river till the water reached his neck, and in the midst of waves and the sound of musical instruments, he drowned himself. Drowning of oneself like is not considered suicide, particularly in the confluence of Ganga and Sarayu. Kalidasa here specifically praises the efficacy of the *tirtha* of Ganga-Sarayu confluence as granting immortality.¹⁶

King Somesvara had an illness, and his sense of approaching death prevented his waiting event to greet his victorious son, who was approaching to meet his father. It left him no option but to choose the next best after Ganga, which was Dakhsinaganga. Even in early inscriptions, it is said that those with illnesses immersed themselves, such as the Usha vadata, son in law of Nahapana just as the great saints or Jain Tirthankaras do, where they could drown quickly. Jain

¹⁶ *Tirtha toyavyantikarabhava jahnukanyasarayyvo dehatyagad amaragananalekhyam aasahya sadyan, Raghumvamsa* 8, 85

sallekhana was not considered suicide and might have had a Jain influence as well.

Gangeyadeva with his queens is said to await his end under the holy banyan tree. Isanavarman immolated himself and Kumaralia Bhatta is supposed to have chosen to give up his body in the presence of the Adi Sankaracharya. Thus at Prayag, place of confluence of the two rivers Ganga and Yamuna, married Hindu women symbolically cut their hair and gift it to the two rivers (*venidana*) for attainment of remaining married forever. Symbolically, Prayag means confluence of opposites, as knowledge of material world, *apara*, symbolized by Yamuna and *para vidya* symbolized by Ganges. Metaphysically, it meant giving up of desires, and Ganges is said to extinguish the desires of pilgrims. It is interesting to find that while the waters of the Yamuna made the Gopis desire for Krishna, the sages desired the Ganga. This signifies enjoyment and renunciation.

Hope is the name of this river, whose water is Desire, And
Thirst the waves thereof.
Passion is the crocodile living in that water,
Vain resolves are the birds that reside
In the tree of virtue on the shores and kill it. But there are the
whirlpools of Delusion
And Despondence, the high banks.
The great Yogis are blissful because they,
With their pure minds, never crossed this river.

Bhartrihari, *Vairagya Sataka*, verse 10¹⁷

Jagannath 17th CE poet who was patronized by the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan (and Dara Shiko), was excommunicated from the Brahman caste for loving a Muslim woman. In order to wash away his sins, he went to Varanasi (Kasi, Banaras), and on the Panchaganga Ghat sitting on top of each step, he composed fifty-two verses composed (one for each of the 52 steps) till he finished composing, till the waters of the Ganga actually touched his feet saying that he was forgiven, and cleansed. He addresses the river as mother, comforter and supporter.

*I come to you as a child to his mother
I come as an orphan to you, moist with love
I come without refuge to you, give of sacred rest. I come a fallen
man to you, uplifter of all.
I come undone by disease to you, the perfect physician.
I come, my heart dry with thirst, to you, ocean of sweet wine.
Do with me whatever you will.*¹⁸

¹⁷ <https://www.swamivivekananda.guru/2020/04/03/bhartriharis-verses-on-renunciation/>

¹⁸ https://sanskritdocuments.org/doc_devii/gangAlaharI.pdf

Conclusion

The multiple identities of river Ganga can be related to its environmental aspects, mythical accounts, and socio-political realities. Its symbol of wealth, purity and eternity was a result of gradual transformation through time from about 1500 BCE to 12th ACE, when its multidimensional aspect was an accumulation of layers of philosophical, concepts and practices. Artistic imagery in the form of sculptures on rocks and temples, their placement and iconographical meaning provide a detailed understanding of the evolution of its sacredness, while mythology, personifications and Sanskrit literature provide the context for its significance. Rituals of life and death and pilgrimage substantiate beliefs for all Hindu communities, and tribes. Philosophically speaking, without death there is no regeneration. Ganga water is celestial water, and with that water one is integrated into cosmic consciousness. The evolution of the sacredness and multiple layered meaning of the symbolic water of Ganga is clearly gathered from mythological stories, literature and Indian imagery and attests its undying nature in the minds of people.

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