

The Descent of the Ganges

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Keywords

Hinduism; Practices and Traditions: pilgrimage, cremation in the Ganges

Notes for teachers

For Hindus the River Ganges, known in local languages as Ganga, is a goddess. Bathing in the Ganges is believed to purify people of their sins, and even enable them to attain liberation. Pilgrimage to the river is therefore a common practice, and Hindus will make offerings to the water and utter prayers. Many Hindus also wish to be cremated on the Ganges or at the very least to have their ashes scattered in her waters, as this is believed to bring them closer to liberation.

Because of these beliefs, the shores of the Ganges are peppered with bathing places (known as tirthas – pronounced *teer-tas*) and burning ghats. The holy city of Varanasi (previously known as Benares in English) is built upon these practices. Communal bathing by large groups of pilgrims occurs on certain holy days, most famously culminating in the Kumbh Mela.

But how did a goddess come to earth? This story provides the answer. She is said to have been entreated by a human king who wished to purify the ashes of his dead ancestors. Because her descent could have destroyed the whole earth, the god Shiva agrees to catch her in his matted locks (a sign of his ascetic nature). Thus we learn about her primary role – purification of ashes of the dead – and her sacred nature, as well as her relationship to other important deities of the Hindu pantheon. We also see that humans can make requests of gods, especially if they have first performed austerities or ascetic practices such as fasting, standing in the sun, etc. Asceticism is also practised by the gods (especially Shiva) and can provide seers with enough powers to incinerate 60,000 men in one glance!

Unfortunately, because of her sacred nature, the Ganges is hugely polluted, causing serious problems for all those people who rely on her waters for their everyday needs, not to mention for any wildlife that still survives. Recent attempts by the Indian government to launch a clean-up have not made much progress.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

- Why did King Sagara perform austerities? What are “austerities”?
- Why did King Sagara send his sons after the horse?
- Why did Kapila incinerate all of Sagara’s 60,000 sons but not Anshumat?
- Why did Bhagiratha want Ganga to come to earth?
- Why did Ganga agree to come to earth?
- What did Shiva do to help and why?

Application to other contexts

- The Ganges river is very polluted. Why do you think that is?
- Should Hindus stop scattering ashes in the river?
- Who has the right to use the river and its waters? Who has the responsibility to keep it clean?

Reflecting on wider Hindu issues

- What does this story tell us about the river Ganges?
- Does the story explain why Hindus worship the Ganges as a goddess?
- What sort of activities do Hindus carry out in – or on the shores of – the Ganges?
- Why do they do this?
- What do we learn about Shiva?
- What is the relationship between humans and gods?
- What sort of power can you get by becoming an ascetic or performing austerities?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from *Mahabharata* book 3. For further information about the *Mahabharata* see separate sheet on

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A powerpoint file containing a selection of useful images is provided separately. You can find lots of other images and further information relating to the Ganges and her significance for Hindus online.

The Descent of the Ganges

A long time ago there was a mighty king called Sagara. Despite having two wives, he had no sons. He decided to get the help of the gods, and so he set about practicing austerities. Soon he attracted the attention of the god Shiva, who promised him that one of his wives would bear 60,000 sons and the other wife a single son. The 60,000 sons, Shiva foretold, would all die, while the single son would be Sagara's heir.

It all happened as Shiva had said it would: both of Sagara's wives became pregnant. His first wife gave birth to a gourd fruit. Sagara heard a voice telling him to place each of its 60,000 seeds in a pot of ghee, and did so. Each of these seeds matured into a human son. Meanwhile Sagara's other wife gave birth to a single son, but he was unruly and so he was sent away, where he himself had a son, named Anshumat.

Some time later King Sagara decided to perform a horse sacrifice. According to the rites laid out in the Vedas, a horse is set free to wander for a year, accompanied by warriors, and every place that the horse wanders to becomes the king's territory, by force if necessary. At the end of the year the horse is sacrificed and this establishes the king as the supreme ruler. The horse in this case was accompanied by Sagara's 60,000 sons, but it disappeared into the empty ocean. Sagara's sons followed it, digging out the ocean and causing all sorts of destruction. Eventually they found the horse, in the company of the famous ascetic named Kapila. As the sons of Sagara took hold of the horse, Kapila incinerated them all to ashes with a single glance.

Hearing of his sons' fate, Sagara sent for his grandson Anshumat. Anshumat entered the ocean and approached Kapila with great reverence. Kapila was pleased with him and granted him boons. Anshumat chose first the horse, and then water to purify his dead uncles. Kapila granted him the horse, and told him that his grandson would bring the goddess Ganga from heaven to purify the sons of Sagara. Sagara concluded his sacrifice, and in time he passed away, to be succeeded by his grandson Anshumat. Anshumat was succeeded by his son Dilipa, and he by his son Bhagiratha.

Bhagiratha performed great austerities in the Himalayas until the goddess Ganga approached and offered him a boon. He asked that she descend to the earth, bringing her sacred water to purify the dead sons of Sagara. She agreed, but pointed out that the force of her descent could destroy the earth. Bhagiratha then approached the god Shiva to ask for his help, and he agreed to break Ganga's fall. Thus Ganga came to earth and filled the ocean, purifying the sons of Sagara.