

History

The [Late Harappan](#) period, about 1900–1300 BCE, saw the spread of Harappan settlement eastward from the [Indus River](#) basin to the Ganges-Yamuna [doab](#), although none crossed the Ganges to settle its eastern bank. The disintegration of the Harappan civilization, in the early [2nd millennium BC](#), marks the point when the center of Indian civilization shifted from the Indus basin to the Ganges basin.^[41] There may be links between the Late Harappan settlement of the Ganges basin and the [archaeological culture](#) known as "[Cemetery H](#)", the [Indo-Aryan people](#), and the [Vedic period](#). This river is the longest in India. During the early [Vedic Age](#) of the [Rigveda](#), the Indus and the [Sarasvati River](#) were the major sacred rivers, not the Ganges. But the later three [Vedas](#) give much more importance to the Ganges.^[42] The Gangetic Plain became the cradle of successive civilizations, from the [Maurya Empire](#) to the [Mughal Empire](#).^{[18][43]} The first European traveler to mention the Ganges was [Megasthenes](#) (ca. 350–290 BCE). He did so several times in his work [Indica](#): "India, again, possesses many rivers both large and navigable, which, having their sources in the mountains which stretch along the northern frontier, traverse the level country, and not a few of these, after uniting with each other, fall into the river called the Ganges. Now this river, which at its source is 30 stadia broad, flows from north to south, and empties its waters into the ocean forming the eastern boundary of the [Gangaridai](#), a nation which possesses a vast force of the largest-sized elephants." (Diodorus II.37)^[44] In the rainy season of 1809, the [lower channel of the Bhagirathi](#), leading to Kolkata, had been entirely shut; but in the following year it opened again, and was nearly of the same size with the upper channel; both however suffered a considerable diminution, owing probably to the new communication opened below the Jalanggi. On the upper channel. In 1951 a [water sharing dispute](#) arose between India and Bangladesh (then [East Pakistan](#)), after India declared its intention to build the [Farakka Barrage](#). The original purpose of the barrage, which was completed in 1975, was to divert up to 40,000 cu ft/s (1,100 m³/s) of water from the Ganges to the Bhagirathi-Hooghly distributary in order to restore navigability at the [Port of Kolkata](#). It was assumed that during the worst dry season the Ganges flow would be around 50,000 to 55,000 cu ft/s (1,400 to 1,600 m³/s), thus leaving 10,000 to 15,000 cu ft/s (280 to 420 m³/s) for East Pakistan.^[36] East Pakistan objected and a protracted dispute ensued. In 1996 a 30-year treaty was signed. The terms of the agreement are complicated, but in essence they state that if the Ganges flow at Farakka was less than 70,000 cu ft/s (2,000 m³/s) then India and Bangladesh would each receive 50% of the water, with each receiving at least 35,000 cu ft/s (990 m³/s) for alternating ten day periods. However, within a year the flow at Farakka fell to levels far below the historic average, making it impossible to implement the guaranteed sharing of water. In March 1997, flow of the Ganges in Bangladesh dropped to its lowest ever, 6,500 cu ft/s (180 m³/s). Dry season flows returned to normal levels in the years following, but efforts were made to address the problem. One plan is for another barrage to be built in Bangladesh at [Pangsha](#), west of [Dhaka](#). This barrage would help Bangladesh better utilize its share of the waters of the Ganges.^{[36][45]}

Religious and cultural significance Main article: [Ganges in Hinduism](#) **Embodiment of sacredness** Chromolithograph, "Indian woman floating lamps on the Ganges," by William Simpson, 1867. The Ganges is a sacred river along every fragment of her length. All along her course, Hindus bathe in her waters.^[46] All along her course, they pay homage to their ancestors and to their gods by cupping her water in their hands, lifting it and letting it fall back into her; they offer flowers and rose petals and float shallow clay dishes filled with oil and lit with wicks.^[46] On the journey back home from the Ganges, they carry small quantities of her water with them for use in rituals.^[47] When a loved one dies, they return to the Ganges to consign the ashes to her custody.^[47] The Ganges is the embodiment of all sacred waters in [Hindu mythology](#).^[48] Local rivers are said to be *like* the Ganges, and are sometimes called the local Ganges (Ganga).^[48] The [Kaveri river](#) of [Karnataka](#) and [Tamil Nadu](#) in Southern India is called the Ganges of the South; the [Godavari](#), is the Ganges that was led by the sage [Gautama](#) to flow through Central India.^[48] The Ganges is invoked whenever water is used in Hindu ritual, and is therefore present in all sacred waters.^[48] In spite of this, nothing is more stirring for a Hindu than a dip in the actual river, especially at one of the famous [tirthas](#) such as [Gangotri](#), [Haridwar](#), [Prayag](#), or [Varanasi](#).^[48] The symbolic and religious importance of the Ganges is one of the few things that Hindu India, even its skeptics, are agreed upon.^[49] Jawaharlal Nehru, a religious iconoclast himself, asked for a handful of his ashes to be thrown into the Ganges.^[49] "The Ganga," he wrote in his will, "is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs o

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."^[49] **Avatarana or Descent of the Ganges** *Ganga Dashahara* in 2005 brought throngs of bathers to the riverfront in [Haridwar](#). In late May or early June every year, Hindus celebrate the *avatarana* or descent of the Ganges from heaven to earth.^[50] The day of the celebration, *Ganga Dashahara*, the *dashami* (tenth day) of the [waxing moon](#) of the [Hindu calendar](#) month [Jyestha](#), brings throngs of bathers to the banks of the river.^[50] A soak in the Ganges on this day is said to rid the bather of ten sins (*dasha* = Sanskrit "ten"; *hara* = to destroy) or alternatively, ten lifetimes of sins.^[50] Those who cannot journey to the river, however, can achieve the same results by bathing in any nearby body of water, which, for the true believer, in the Hindu tradition, takes on all the attributes of the Ganges.^[50] The *avatarana* is an old theme in Hinduism with a number of different versions of the story.^[50] In the [Vedic](#) version, [Indra](#), the Lord of [Svarga \(Heaven\)](#) slays the celestial serpent, [Vritra](#), releasing the celestial liquid, the *soma*, or the nectar of the gods which then plunges to the earth and waters it with sustenance.^[50] In the [Vaishnava](#) version of the myth, Indra has been replaced by his former helper [Vishnu](#).^[50] The heavenly waters are now a river called *Vishnupadi* (*padi*: Skt. "from the foot of").^[50] As he completes his celebrated three strides—of earth, sky, and heaven—Vishnu as [Vamana](#) stubs his toe on the vault of heaven, punches open a hole, and releases the *Vishnupadi*, which until now had been circling around the cosmic egg within.^[51] Flowing out of the vault, she plummets down to Indra's heaven, where she is received by [Dhruva](#), the once steadfast worshipper of Vishnu, now fixed in the sky as the [polestar](#).^[51] Next, she streams across the sky forming the [Milky Way](#) and arrives on the moon.^[51] She then flows down earthwards to [Brahma](#)'s realm, a divine lotus atop [Mount Meru](#), whose petals form the earthly continents.^[51] There, the divine waters break up, with one stream, the [Alaknanda](#), flowing down one petal into Bharatvarsha (India) as the Ganges.^[51] It is [Shiva](#), however, among the major deities of the Hindu pantheon, who appears in the most widely known version of the *avatarana* story.^[52] Told and retold in the [Ramayana](#), the [Mahabharata](#) and several [Puranas](#), the story begins with a sage, [Kapila](#), whose intense meditation has been disturbed by the sixty thousand sons of King [Sagara](#). Livid at being disturbed, Kapila sears them with his angry gaze, reduces them to ashes, and dispatches them to the netherworld. Only the waters of the Ganga, then in heaven, can bring the dead sons their salvation. A descendant of these sons, King [Bhagiratha](#), anxious to restore his ancestors, undertakes rigorous penance and is eventually granted the prize of Ganga's descent from heaven. However, since her turbulent force will also shatter the earth, Bhagiratha persuades Shiva in his abode on [Mount Kailash](#) to receive Ganga in the coils of his tangled hair and break her fall. Ganga descends, is tamed in Shiva's locks, and arrives in the Himalayas. She is then led by the waiting Bhagiratha down into the plains at Haridwar, across the plains first to the confluence with the [Yamuna](#) at Prayag and then to Varanasi, and eventually to [Ganga Sagar](#), where she meets the ocean, sinks to the netherworld, and saves the sons of Sagar.^[52] In honour of Bhagirath's pivotal role in the *avatarana*, the source stream of the Ganges in the Himalayas is named [Bhagirathi](#), (Sanskrit, "of Bhagiratha").^[52] **Redemption of the Dead** Preparations for cremations on the banks of the Ganges in [Varanasi](#), 1903. The dead are being bathed, wrapped in cloth and covered with wood. The photograph has caption, "Who dies in the waters of the Ganges obtains heaven." Since Ganga had descended from heaven to earth, she is also the vehicle of *ascent*, from earth to heaven.^[53] As the *Triloka-patha-gamini*, (Skt. *triloka*= "three worlds", *patha* = "road", *gamini* = "one who travels") of the Hindu tradition, she flows in [heaven](#), [earth](#), and the [netherworld](#), and, consequently, is a "tirtha," or crossing point of all beings, the living as well as the dead.^[53] It is for this reason that the story of the *avatarana* is told at [Shraddha](#) ceremonies for the deceased in Hinduism, and Ganges water is used in [Vedic rituals after death](#).^[53] Among all hymns devoted to the Ganges, there are none more popular than the ones expressing the worshipers wish to breathe his last surrounded by her waters.^[53] The *Gangashtakam* expresses this longing fervently.^[53]

O Mother! ... Necklace adorning the worlds!
Banner rising to heaven!
I ask that I may leave of this body on your banks,
Drinking your water, rolling in your waves,
Remembering your name, bestowing my gaze upon you.^[54]

No place along her banks is more longed for at the moment of death by Hindus than Varanasi, the Great Cremation Ground, or [Mahashmshana](#).^[53] Those who are lucky enough to die in Varanasi, are cremated on the banks of the Ganges, and are granted instant salvation.^[55] If the death has occurred elsewhere, salvation can be achieved by immersing the ashes in the Ganges.^[55] If the ashes have been immersed in another body of water, a relative can still gain salvation for the deceased by journeying to the Ganges, if possible during the lunar "fortnight of the ancestors" in the Hindu calendar month of [Ashwin](#) (September or October), and performing the *Shraddha* rites.^[55] Hindus also perform *pinda pradana*, a rite for the dead, in which balls of rice and sesame seed are offered to the Ganges while the names of the deceased relatives are recited.^[56] Every sesame seed in every ball thus offered, according to one story, assures a thousand years of heavenly salvation for the each relative.^[56] Indeed, the Ganges is so important in the rituals after death that the *Mahabharata*, in one of its popular *ślokas*, says, "If only (one) bone of a (deceased) person should touch the water of the Ganges, that person shall dwell honoured in heaven."^[57] As if to illustrate this truism, the *Kashi Khanda* (Varanasi Chapter) of the [Skanda Purana](#) recounts the remarkable story of *Vahika*, a profligate and unrepentant sinner, who is killed by a tiger in the forest. His soul arrives before [Yama](#), the Lord of Death, to be judged for the hereafter. Having no compensating virtue, Vahika's soul is at once dispatched to [hell](#). While this is happening, his body on earth, however, is being picked at by vultures, one of whom flies away with a foot bone. Another bird comes after the vulture, and in fighting him off, the vulture accidentally drops the bone into the Ganges below. Blessed by this happenstance, Vahika, on his way to hell, is rescued by a celestial chariot which takes him instead to heaven.^[58]

The purifying Ganges Women and children at a bathing [ghat](#) on the Ganges in Banares (Varanasi), 1885. Hindus consider the waters of the Ganges to be both pure and purifying.^[59] Nothing reclaims order from disorder more than the waters of the Ganges.^[60] Moving water, as in a river, is considered purifying in Hindu culture because it is thought to both absorb impurities and take them away.^[60] The swiftly moving Ganges, especially in its upper reaches, where a bather has to grasp an anchored chain in order to not be carried away, is considered especially purifying.^[60] What the Ganges removes, however, is not necessarily physical dirt, but symbolic dirt; it wipes away the sins of the bather, not just of the present, but of a lifetime.^[60] A popular paen to the Ganges is the *Ganga Lahiri* composed by a seventeenth century poet Jagannatha who, legend has it, was turned out of his Hindu [Brahmin](#) caste for carrying on an affair with a Muslim woman. Having attempted futilely to be rehabilitated within the Hindu fold, the poet finally appeals to Ganga, the hope of the hopeless, and the comforter of last resort. Along with his beloved, Jagannatha sits at the top of the flight of steps leading to the water at the famous *Panchganga Ghat* in Varanasi. As he recites each verse of the poem, the water of the Ganges rises up one step, until in the end it envelops the lovers and carry them away.^[60] "I come to you as a child to his mother," begins the *Ganga Lahiri*.^[61]

I come as an orphan to you, moist with love.

I come without refuge to you, giver 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.^[61] **Consort, Shakti, and Mother** Ganga is a consort to all three major male deities of Hinduism.^[62] As [Brahma](#)'s partner she always travels with him in the form of water in his [kamandalu](#) (water-pot).^[62] She is also [Vishnu](#)'s consort.^[62] Not only does she emanate from his foot as *Vishnupadi* in the *avatarana* story, but is also, with [Sarasvati](#) and [Lakshmi](#), one of his co-wives.^[62] In one popular story, envious of being outdone by each other, the co-wives begin to quarrel. While Lakshmi attempts to mediate the quarrel, Ganga and Sarasvati, heap misfortune on each other. They curse each other to become rivers, and to carry within them, by washing, the sins of their human worshippers. Soon their husband, Vishnu, arrives and decides to calm the situation by separating the goddesses. He orders Sarasvati to become the wife of Brahma, Ganga to become the wife of Shiva, and Lakshmi, as the blameless conciliator, to remain as his own wife. Ganga and Sarasvati, however, are so distraught at this dispensation, and wail so loudly, that Vishnu is forced to take back his words. Consequently, in their lives as rivers they are still thought to be with him.^[63] [Shiva](#), as *Gangadhara*, bearing the Descent of the [Ganges](#), as the goddess [Parvati](#), the sage [Bhagiratha](#), and the bull [Nandi](#) look on (circa 1740). It is [Shiva](#)'s relationship with Ganga, that is the best-known in Ganges mythology.^[64] Her descent

the *avatarana* is not a one time event, but a continuously occurring one in which she is forever falling from heaven into his locks and being forever tamed.^[64] Shiva, is depicted in Hindu iconography as *Gangadhara*, the "Bearer of the Ganga," with Ganga, shown as spout of water, rising from his hair.^[64] The Shiva-Ganga relationship is both perpetual and intimate.^[64] Shiva is sometimes called *Uma-Ganga-Patiswara* ("Husband and Lord of Uma (Parvati) and Ganga"), and Ganga often arouses the jealousy of Shiva's better-known consort.^[64] Ganga is the *shakti* or the moving, restless, rolling energy in the form of which the otherwise recluse and unapproachable Shiva appears on earth.^[62] As water, this moving energy can be felt, tasted, and absorbed.^[62] The war-god *Skanda* addresses the sage *Agastya* in the *Kashi Khand* of the *Skanda Purana* in these words:^[62] One should not be amazed ... that this Ganges is really Power, for is she not the Supreme Shakti of the Eternal Shiva, taken in the form of water?

This Ganges, filled with the sweet wine of compassion, was sent out for the salvation of the world by Shiva, the Lord of the Lords. Good people should not think this Triple-Pathed River to be like the thousand other earthly rivers, filled with water.^[62] The Ganges is also the mother, the *Ganga Mata* (*mata*="mother") of Hindu worship and culture, accepting all and forgiving all.^[61] Unlike other goddesses, she has no destructive or fearsome aspect, destructive though she might be as a river in nature.^[61] She is also a mother to other gods.^[65] She accepts Shiva's incandescent seed from the fire-god *Agni*, which is too hot for this world, and cools it in her waters.^[65] This union produces Skanda, or Kartikeya, the god of war.^[65] In the *Mahabharata*, she is the wife of *Shantanu*, and the mother of heroic warrior-patriarch, *Bhishma*.^[65] When Bhishma is mortally wounded in battle, Ganga comes out of the water in human form and weeps uncontrollably over his body.^[65] The Ganges is the distilled lifeblood of the Hindu tradition, of its divinities, holy books, and enlightenment.^[62] As such, her worship does not require the usual rites of invocation (*avahana*) at the beginning and dismissal (*visarjana*) at the end, required in the worship of other gods.^[62] Her divinity is immediate and everlasting.^[62]