



Newsletter Archives

**Ganga The River Goddess
Tales in Art and Mythology**

The material contained in this newsletter/article is owned by ExoticIndiaArt Pvt Ltd.
Reproduction of any part of the contents of this document, by any means, needs the prior permission of the owners.

Copyright © 2003, ExoticIndiaArt

Ganga The River Goddess Tales in Art and Mythology

Article of the Month - August 2003

In India of the seventeenth century, a Brahmin poet named Jagannatha transcended the restrictions of his caste and fell in love with a Muslim girl. The incensed elders of his lineage immediately expelled him from the hallowed circles of his social environment. Jagannatha, being a devout Hindu, tried his best to explain and convince his elders of the supreme sacredness of the emotion of love, which he stressed was beyond all man made divisions. He went up to Banaras, Hinduism's most sacred city, and attempted to restore his status among his brethren. Coming up against a rigid wall of rejection, he mused upon the river Ganges (Ganga), and called upon her to validate the purity and righteousness of his bearing. The dejected bard went to the banks of the Ganges and sat atop the fifty-two steps of the stairs bordering the river. Gaining from his majestic perch a splendid view of the mighty river, he was moved enough to compose fifty-two soul-stirring lyrics directed to the river. Legend has it that with each verse he composed, the river rose a step, consuming him at the end of his last hymn.

Jagannatha's collection of poems is entitled 'Ganga-Lahiri', or The Waves of Ganga. In his verses, the poet addresses the river as a mother, comforter, and supporter. A typical hymn runs as follows:

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, 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.

A river that inspires such outstanding and pious creative devotion must be some river indeed. Truly Ganga is a river that has been at the core of sacred Hindu lore and tradition since time immemorial. The esteem in which she is held and her consequent deification as a full-blown woman echoes the timeless ethos of Hindu wisdom.

Here we will attempt to understand the wonder that is Ganga within the following contexts:

- 1). Ganga and the Purifying Waters of Heaven
- 2). Ganga's Descent to the Earth from Heaven
- 3). Ganga as a Mother
- 4). Iconography of Ganga
- 5). Ganga and the Hindu Temple

Ganga and the Purifying Waters of Heaven:

In the Hindu tradition, reverence is shown to almost every river of the Indian subcontinent. This devotion extends all the way back to the Rig Veda, the world's earliest text, where all earthly rivers are said to have their origin in heaven. In the cosmology of the Rig Veda, the creation of the world or the process of making the world habitable is associated with the freeing of the heavenly waters by Indra, the king of gods. A demon is said to have withheld these waters, thus inhibiting creation. When Indra defeated this demon, the waters rushed onto the earth, like a mother cow eager to suckle her young (Rig Veda 10.9). The rivers of earth are therefore seen as being necessary to creation and as having a heavenly origin.

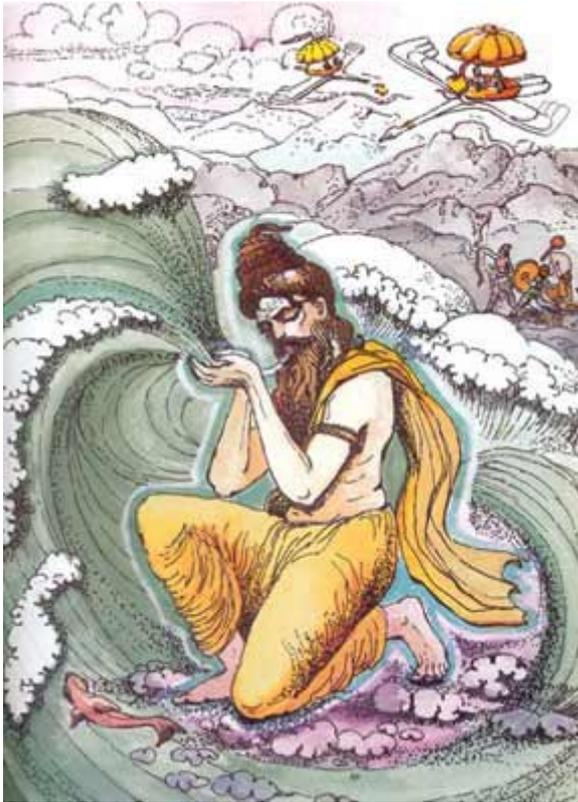
Another important aspect in the veneration for rivers is the purifying quality of running water in general. The purity-conscious Hindu social system, in which pollution is inevitably accumulated in the course of a normal day, prescribes a bath as the simplest way to rid oneself of impurities. This act simply consists of pouring a handful of cold water over one's head and letting it run down one's body. Moving, flowing, or falling water is believed to have a great cleansing power. This last is specifically exemplified in the act of sprinkling of water over one's head, or dipping into a running stream, these mere actions being thought of as sufficient enough to remove most kinds of daily pollution accumulated throughout the ordinary course of human existence.

Water absorbs pollution, but when it is running, like in a river, it carries pollution away as well. Correspondingly, the word 'Ganga' is derived from the etymological root 'gam,' meaning to "to go." Indeed, Ganga is the "Swift-Goer," and the running, flowing, and energetic movement of her waters is constantly mentioned as one of the major reasons behind her purifying attributes.

How the river Ganga descended from the sacred realms to the earth is narrated next.

Ganga's Descent to the Earth from Heaven:

In the eternal struggle between good (gods) and bad (demons), the latter once got the upper hand. Employing an ingenious strategy, the demons hid in the ocean during daytime, and attacked only in the night. The harassed gods in desperation, appealed to the celebrated saint Agastya, who solved the problem by gobbling up the entire ocean in one go. Exposed, the demons were then easily vanquished.



Agastya Drinks Up the Ocean

Their mission accomplished, the gods then requested Agastya to release the ocean. His reply astounded them. Taking a deep burp, he informed them that having partaken of the ocean, he had now digested it, and thus some other means would have to be found to fill up the ocean bed again. The gods and people of the world were aghast. Perplexed, they approached Lord Vishnu, the savior of the world, who gave them some good news. Vishnu asked them not to worry since it was destined that Ganga, the heavenly river, would flow on earth, quenching the thirst (both physical and spiritual) of its inhabitants, and also fill up the dried ocean. On enquiring when this would happen, the Great Lord informed them that this would take place in a happy confluence of auspicious circumstances, the process towards which had already begun.

Indeed, in a far corner of the world, a mighty king named Sagara was performing a great sacrificial ritual, which would herald him as the undisputed ruler over all earth. Little did he know that he was destined to be the instrument for fulfilling the cosmic drama being enacted elsewhere.

The ritual consisted of letting loose a white horse, who would be free to wander anywhere upon earth. Following it would be the mighty army of Sagara. Wherever the horse ventured, the king of that domain would have to give him free way, and accept the suzerainty of Sagara, presenting him with material gifts of supplication. In the event of this not happening, Sagara's army was free to challenge the errant ruler in question. Not surprisingly, given king Sagara's prestige and power, no ruler on the way dared hold up the horse.

The news of the impending victory of Sagara reached the ears of Indra, the king of gods. Fearing a challenge to his own throne, Indra disguised himself as a human being, went to the earth and laid his hands on the sacrificial horse. Taking it by the rein, he hid it in the hermitage of sage Kapila. This sage was an extremely accomplished yogi, his inner being made extremely potent by long spells of extreme asceticism.

It was not long before the army of king Sagara, led by his sons (legend puts their number at sixty-thousand), traced the horse to the ascetic's retreat. Incensed at the sage's perceived temerity, the haughty princes rushed towards him in a fit of anger, calling him a thief. The sage, who had hitherto sat unperturbed and unaware throughout the entire proceedings taking place behind his back, was roused from his meditations. Opening his eyes, he had merely gazed at the princes with trepidation, than they

were reduced to ashes.

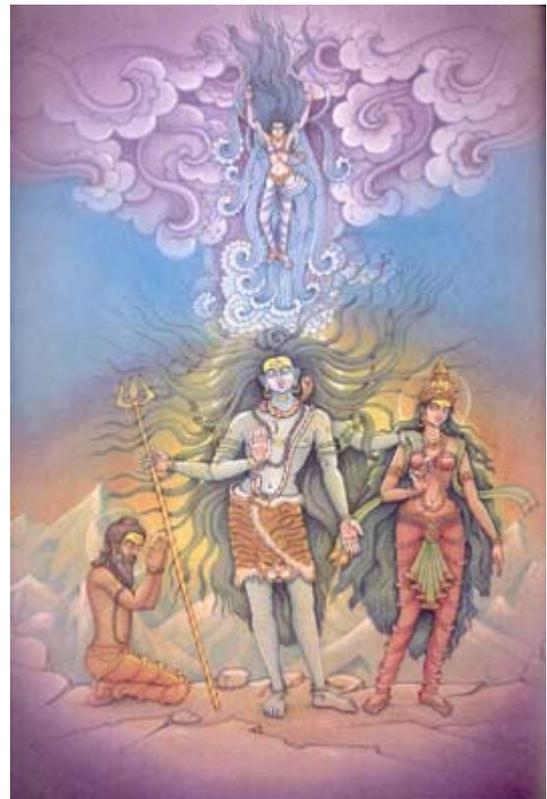
The news of the unfortunate demise of his sons soon reached king Sagara. Now the traditional Indian belief is that if someone dies an untimely death, he or she remains a ghost and is not liberated until something is done to purify the soul from the residue of its accumulated sins. Sagara too, was extremely desirous of ridding the souls of his sons from the after-effects of curse of the wise sage Kapila. On asking, the latter informed the monarch that it was only Ganga, having the auspicious nature of purifying anybody and everybody who crossed her path, who was capable of liberating his sixty thousand sons, and wash away their ashes in her overwhelming flow.

Hearing this, king Sagara immediately handed over the throne to his surviving grandson and went to the Himalayas to perform austerities to Brahma, the Supreme Creator, attempting to convince him to ask Ganga to flow to the earth. Though he tried hard and sincerely, Sagara died before accomplishing his goal. After him his grandson tried to call upon Brahma, but he too was unsuccessful. In this manner, generation after generation of Sagara tried to woo and please Brahma to no avail. It was only the seventh descendant of Sagara, a just and noble king named Bhagiratha who could manage enough austerities to make Brahma appear before him. Happy with Bhagiratha's conduct and also that of his preceding ancestors, Brahma asked Bhagiratha for any boon he wished. Naturally enough, he asked Brahma to request Ganga to flow to the earth from her current abode in heaven. Brahma acquiesced, but also informed the prince that since Ganga flowed with a massive torrential force, if she coursed directly to the terrestrial world the earth would be helpless against her overwhelming current, and all life would be washed away in its flood. The only recourse open was to pray to Lord Shiva, whose matted hair held sufficient power to withstand the onslaught of Ganga's forceful fall.

Thus the prince began another severe penance, this time directed towards Lord Shiva, who appeared soon before him and agreed to soften Ganga's fall in his matted hair locks. Having tied up all loose ends, and acquiring the grace of both Brahma and Shiva, Bhagiratha now felt secure about accomplishing his objective. But there were still hiccups on his path, before all issues could be successfully resolved.

Ganga is visualized in Indian thought as a virtuous, but mischievous and restless maiden, just as many young lasses are. She followed Brahma's diktat to descend to earth, but couldn't playfully resist the unwarranted and undeserved feeling that she could sweep away even the mighty Shiva in her forceful current. Shiva, gauging her thoughts, decided to teach her a lesson. Spreading open his serpentine coils of hair, he covered the entire sky, and collected all the waves of Ganga in his outspread locks.

Then with a mighty swoop, he collected his hair, tied into a neat and tight bun, and captured Ganga in the infinite swirls and whirls of his hair. Ganga still flowed with tremendous force, but could not escape, and remained imprisoned and confined inside Shiva's hair.



*Painting by Harish Johari
and Pieter Weltevrede*

Bhagiratha, perplexed at the happenings, appealed to Shiva to release Ganga, so that she could wash

away the sins of his ancestors, symbolized in their mortal remains. Shiva relented, and in any case Ganga had learnt her lesson. Thus Ganga again followed Bhagiratha, who showed her the way. But there were still more adventures to come.

Just near their ultimate destination lay the hermitage of another accomplished sage, known as Jahnu. Ganga, ever the playful maiden, hurried over to what she perceived was a new and curious place. And lo, barely had she entered upon the precincts of the ashram (hermitage), that it became flooded, and all sacrificial fires were extinguished. The ritual utensils and tools were washed away, and the inhabitants of the sanctuary became frightened and anxious. The leader of the ashram, sage Jahnu, became livid at Ganga's intrusion. He then chanted a mantra, and took a sip of the water flowing all around his hermitage. With the power of his mantra, he swallowed away Ganga with all her waters. All traces of Ganga were gone. Bhagiratha was in a fix. No sooner had he overcome one hurdle, than another was created, mostly due to the impulsiveness and restlessness of Ganga. He hurried over to Jahnu, and explained to him the magnitude and significance of the task he was out to accomplish. Jahnu gave him a sympathetic hearing and appreciated his hard work in bringing Ganga to the earthly realm. Consoling Bhagiratha, he said: " For you, I will release Ganga immediately," and saying this, he made a cut in his left thigh, and the waters of Ganga flew out like a fountain. Hence did Ganga come to be known as Jahnvi, the daughter of sage Jahnu.

Thankfully, the rest of the way was without any further adventures, and Bhagiratha successfully showed Ganga the way to the ashes of his ancestors. As soon as Ganga touched the ashes, the ancestors arose, glowing forth in their astral bodies, and ascended towards heaven. Carrying away their mortal remains, Ganga merged into the ocean, which hitherto had been dry. From that day onwards, the ocean came to be known as 'Sagara,' in honor of the king who started it all in the first place. The place where Ganga merged in the ocean, came to be known as Ganga-Sagar, and to this day, a great festival is held here every year, to celebrate Ganga's birthday, or the day when she came to earth. This occasion is known as Ganga Dassehra.

This legend makes amply clear that Ganga's purity and auspiciousness springs in no small measure from her proximity to various important divinities and holy sages. Falling onto Shiva's head, where she meanders through his tangled locks, the mighty Ganga appears in this world after having been made more sacred by her direct contact with Shiva, and also the accomplished ascetic Jahnu. The river then spreads the divine potency of these hallowed personalities into the world, when she flows into the terrestrial realm.

Ganga's fall from heaven is replicated daily in the millions of Hindu temples where the water of the Ganga river is poured over the sacred Shiva Linga. Here it is important to note that the linga of Shiva is often thought of as incandescent pillar of fire. By cooling the linga with her soothing waters, Ganga is in a sense saving the world from Shiva's fiery linga, whose extreme heat could destroy all life on earth. Bearing her on his head, Shiva becomes the facilitator for Ganga's smooth fall to the earth. But if Shiva saves the world from the power and force of Ganga's torrent, it is also Ganga, who in a similar manner, saves us from Shiva's scorching powers of destruction.



Sage Narada

Another legend associates Ganga with all the three deities of the Indian triumvirate, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It begins with the celestial sage Narada, who is distinguishable by his veena, a sitar like musical instrument which constantly hangs from his shoulders.

A loud singer, he loved to sing sacred psalms during his sojourns across the heavens. One day, he came upon a group of extraordinary beings in a forest, writhing with uncontrollable agony. Both concerned and curious, the sage approached them and made enquiries regarding the cause of their suffering. Their replies completely floored him. Apparently, these creatures in distress were the personifications of the various ragas (musical modes). Narada, through his inept rendition, was tormenting their souls and spirits, and hence their agony. Narada's sympathetic heart was stirred enough to make him promise that he would not sing or play music until he had mastered its finer points. Of more pressing concern however, was the present state of the ragas, which required immediate succor.

There was only one way out. There needed to be organized, without any further loss of time, a concert by a perfect musician, whose soulful and skilful rendition would seep through the ragas, curing them in the process. Such a perfect musician could only be Lord Shiva. Shiva of course had no reservations about giving an impromptu concert, but for his perfect music, he needed a perfect listener too, who could appreciate and grasp the subtle nuances of his delightful renderings. Thus he requested Brahma and Vishnu to be his audience. They readily agreed. Who wouldn't?

As soon as Shiva struck his first note, the ragas began to heal. It had a visual affect on his divine listeners too. Identifying totally with the soft and melting notes of Shiva's symphony, Vishnu actually started melting himself. Noticing this, Brahma scooped whatever liquid dripped from Vishnu and deposited it in his water pot (kamandalu). Later, he fashioned a beautiful and charming girl out of this liquid. This maiden, because of the auspicious circumstances of her birth, was especially refined herself, and also purified everything that came into contact with her. She was Ganga.

Ganga as a Mother:

A particularly inspired motif is the visualization of Ganga as a mother, which is made explicit in the epithet 'Ma Ganga' (Ma meaning mother), and which undoubtedly is the most popular and endearing term used to address her. As a mother, Ganga is tangible, approachable, and all accepting. To put it in the immortal words of David Kinsley, "She is the distilled essence of compassion in liquid form." No one is denied her blessing.

Ganga's maternal aspect is seen especially in her nourishing qualities. As a mother, she nourishes the land through which she flows, making it fertile. Historically, the land along the banks of the Ganga has been intensely cultivated. It is particularly fertile because of the sediment periodically deposited by the floodwaters of the river. A parallel is often drawn here with the menstrual flow in women, which renders

a woman fertile, and capable of generation.

An evocative example of Ganga's mothering capacity is provided in the myth describing the birth of Shiva's second son, Karttikeya. The story goes that a powerful demon once wreaked havoc on the world and the oppressed victims came to the conclusion that only a son born to the powerful Shiva could redeem them. Hence, they prayed to Shiva. He agreed, and first released his seed to Agni (god of fire). But even Agni found Shiva's seed too hot to handle, and cast it into the river Ganga, where it developed into a foetus. Thus Karttikeya is also called Gangaputra, the son of Ganga.

And finally, there is the stark truth staring us. No child is too dirty to be embraced or cleansed by its mother. Mother Ganga indiscriminately purifies her devotees, whether they be virtuous or sinful. She is non judgmental, and all her children are equal in her eyes.

The Iconography of Ganga:



In the canons of Indian art, Ganga is visualized as all other major Indian goddesses are, voluptuous and beautiful. Their ample breasts and, sturdy, child bearing hips, giving adequate testimony to their fecundating powers.

In addition, there are two other significant motifs adorning the image of Ganga. The first is the full pot she holds in her hands. This is a symbol of the sustaining womb, holding within itself the force of life. A woman is like this vessel, carrying in her the vital and throbbing life essence. The overflowing pot is the grace of nature in abundance. Indeed, the figure of a woman is herself based on the rounded form of the pot - her globular breasts being symbols of her nourishing powers. In Indian aesthetics, wherever the pot appears, it conveys the idea of abundant life and fertility, which nourishes and sustains the universe.





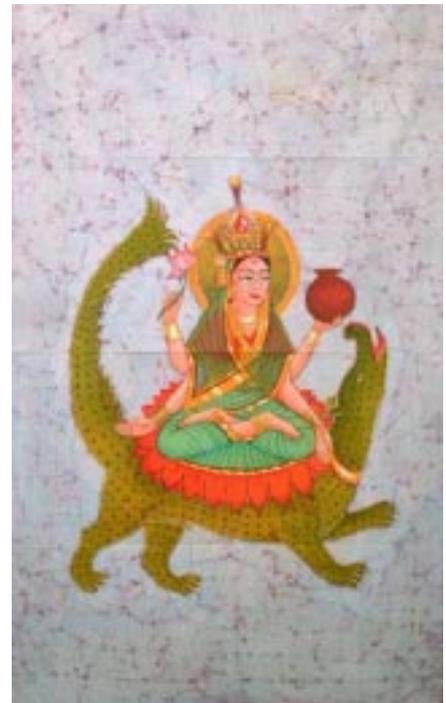
The second distinguishing aspect of Ganga's iconography is her animal mount, which is often shown serving as a pedestal for her.

This is the makara, a hybrid creature having the body of a crocodile and the tail of a fish. The makara in Hindu thought corresponds to the star sign of Capricorn in western astrology.

The crocodile is a unique animal in that it can live on both land and sea. It thus denotes the wisdom of both the earth and waters.

The fish meanwhile is a universal symbol of fecundity and of the life-giving properties of water. It represents life in the depths, and deep water is recognized in Indian philosophy as the intangible and infinite consciousness, the source of all creative instinct. Interestingly, when represented in this manner, the tail of the hybrid animal is often shown transformed into patterns of swirling vegetation, further implying Ganga's association with vegetative growth and fertility.

The makara is also the vehicle of the Vedic god of waters, Varuna, thus establishing firmly Ganga's Vedic roots.



Ganga and the Hindu Temple:

It is not unusual to encounter an image of Ganga flanking the doorway of a Hindu temple. There is a profound reason behind this positioning. Ganga's heavenly origin and descent to the earth makes her an effective intermediary between the two worlds, a continuous, ever flowing link between the two realms. Her location at the threshold of a temple is appropriate in that she connects the worlds of men and gods, and represents a transition between the two. Ganga's icon at the doorway also implies her status as a remover of pollution. Before entering the sacred realm of gods, which a temple signifies, devotees should first cleanse themselves of worldly impurities. Often Ganga is accompanied by Yamuna (a tributary of Ganga) at the



Flanking images of River Goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, circa 9th Century

gateway. Entering a temple flanked by the images of these goddesses is believed to symbolically cleanse the devotees in the purificatory waters of these two rivers. In a delightful display of artistic license, the current and ripples of their flowing waters are amply reflected in their swaying body stances. Indeed, to look at them is equal in effect to a ritual bath in their waters.

Conclusion:

The intense devotion and love which her devotees feel for Ganga is no small measure due to the fact that she is the only accessible physical entity that flows both in the heavens and on the earth. Ganga is indeed divine grace flowing on to our material world, as is visible in the prosperity of the fertile and rich crop-yielding regions adjacent to her banks. The consequent deification of Ganga, as both a nourishing mother, and also as a guardian of the Hindu temple, is but a natural evolution, when from the depths of the human mind springs a natural ode to her benign nature, manifesting itself in all realms of artistic expression.

References and Further Reading

- Andrews, Tamra. *A Dictionary of Nature Myths*: Oxford, 2000.
- Bhattacharji, Sukumari. *Legends of Devi*: Hyderabad, 1995.
- Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*: London, 1999.
- Darian, Steven G. *The Ganges in Myth and History*: Delhi, 2001.
- Dasa, Jaya Vijaya. *Our Merciful Mother Ganga*: Noida, 2000.
- Eck, Diana L. *Banaras City of Light*: London, 1984.
- Fontana, David. *The Secret Language of Symbols*: London, 1997.
- Hawley, John Stratton., and Wulff, Donna Marie. *Devi Goddesses of India*: Delhi, 1998.
- Johari, Harish. *The Birth of the Ganga*: Mumbai, 1998.
- Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses*: Delhi, 1998.
- Kramrisch, Stella. *The Hindu Temple (2 Vols.)*: Delhi, 2002.
- Majupuria, Trilok Chandra. *Sacred Animals of Nepal and India*: Kathmandu, 2000.
- Pal, Pratapaditya. *A Collecting Odyssey (Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian Art)*: Chicago, 1997.
- Rice, Edward. *The Ganges A Personal Encounter*: New York, 1974.
- Sahi, Jyoti. *The Child and the Serpent (Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols)*: London, 1990.
- Seshadri, Lakshmi. *Ganga (Comic Book)*: Mumbai, 2002.
- Biswas, T.K., and Tandon, O.P. *Ganga in Indian Art (Exhibition Catalogue)*: Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, 1986.
- Tresidder, Jack. *The Hutchinson Dictionary of Symbols*: Oxford, 1997.
- Walker, Benjamin. *Hindu World*: New Delhi, 1983.
- Wilkins, W.J. *Hindu Mythology*: Calcutta, 1986.
- Zimmer, Heinrich. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*: Delhi, 1990.

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments or feedback that you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to feedback@exoticindia.com.

This article by Nitin Kumar
Editor
<http://www.exoticindia.com>

Copyright © 2003, **ExoticIndiaArt**