

Sacred Water and Cultures of Worship: Some Observations on the River in India

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Abstract:

The belief that the divine is embedded in nature is part of the spiritual discourse of the religions of antiquity. Nature has been worshipped in one form or the other in different cultures of the world. In India, rivers are considered sacred, purifying, life-giving, and redeeming. The corporeality of the rivers is subsumed and often modified by its metaphorical, mystical, and transcendental associations. The Ganga (Ganges), the Yamuna, the Sarasvatī, the Narmada, and other major and minor rivers of India are narrativized within a sacred discourse. The myths, rituals, and belief systems surrounding river worship in India are woven into the syncretic and composite cultural mosaic. However, the contemporary realities of globalization and environmental crises raise quite a few questions regarding the paradoxical nature of this sacred discourse. This essay explores the cultures of river worship in India in its scriptural as well as quotidian forms and attempts to understand the tangible and intangible issues contributing to its continuance and to locate the interface between religious discourse and environmental ethics.

Keywords: Religious ecology, Sacred geography, River worship, Environmental ethics, Ecological prudence

Introduction

Religious ecology is predicated upon the founding principle that the natural world is part of the divine. The belief that gods dwell in nature can be traced back to the beginnings of any civilization. The mysterious, unknown, and often unknowable phenomenal world, held with awe, reverence, and gratitude led to the early deification of the natural elements. Nature has been worshipped in one form or the other, especially by the religions of antiquity. Veneration of nature and natural objects, assigning divinity to them, might have emerged from the belief that god and nature are indivisible; the belief in the sacrality of nature stems from the conviction that nature is the dwelling place of the divine, while in some belief structures nature is perceived as the embodiment of the divine. This interchangeability, according to religious iconography, makes it possible for the human to be aware of the omnipresence of the divine and be in intimate contact with it. Chris C. Park (1994) refers to

the idea of ‘conceptual relevance’ in underpinning the uniqueness of sacred spaces. He suggests that through sacred spaces human beings try to inscribe the unknown world into the known world; sacred space symbolizes and sometimes embodies the “gateway to the unknown” (246). In many cultures, different aspects of the natural world – mountains, lakes, springs, and rivers – are venerated as sacred spaces, providing tangible expressions of religious ecology. The distinction of the ‘sacred’ from the ‘profane’ is also inevitably central to any kind of religious geography. Richard H. Jackson and Roger Henrie (1983) underscore this dualism by distinguishing the sacred space as “that portion of the earth’s surface which is recognised by individuals or groups as worthy of devotion, loyalty or esteem. Space is sharply discriminated from the non-sacred or profane world around it. Sacred space does not exist naturally, but is assigned sanctity as man defines, limits and characterises it through his culture, experience and goals” (94). The sacred space is animated with a separateness and otherworldliness distinct from the trite and quotidian, standing apart from the commonplace, otherworldly, apart yet wholesome. The spiritual epistemology of some religions, especially religions of antiquity, emerges from the engagement of human beings with the earth’s living systems. The ‘premodern’ religious structures provide an organic or holistic world view that asserts an interconnectedness and integration of the human agency with nature and its elements; they are not outside nature, but inscribed within it. What is interesting, however, is the resilience and persistence with which these belief systems survive and are in practice in different parts of the world. The scepticism and anxiety that the ‘project of modernity’ ushered in with its emphasis on the principles of rationality might have countermanded unquestioning belief in the mysterious and the transcendental, but the continuation of rituals and practices as part of popular religion indicates a plurality of discourses.

Throughout human history, rivers have nurtured civilizations and have also caused death and devastation. This dual aspect of the river, as the destroyer and the preserver, is represented in myths, rituals, and religious practices in different cultures. The fact that rivers flow or it is what may be perceived as ‘live water,’ as opposed to static water, makes it suitable for purification purposes or for rituals of cleansing (Dowden 2002, 7). Rivers feature prominently in accounts of Paradise in Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic traditions. According to the story of Genesis, a single unnamed river flows out of Eden to water the garden, from where it emerges to feed four rivers. These four rivers were Tigris, Euphrates, Gihon, and Pison. While the Tigris and the Euphrates were known rivers, there were several conjectures regarding the identity of the latter two. Pison was identified as the Ganga, the Indus, and the Danube while the Gihon was considered to be the Nile. The sacred geography of the rivers thus spanned the earth. In the Islamic description of Paradise, rivers too play a significant role. The iterability of the stories of flood in the creation myths of different cultures underscores the centrality of rivers as embedded codes. Nick Middleton, in *Rivers: A Very Short Introduction*, suggests: “The great flood has considerable symbolic significance, involving an obvious cleansing element as well as being a vehicle for rebirth, marking a clean break between the antediluvial and postdiluvial worlds” (Middleton 2012, 34).

Anthropomorphizing the river in the form of a goddess is common to many cultures. Rivers Shannon and Boyne (Ireland), Nile (Egypt), and Biren (Ghana) have iconic manifestations as river deities. In Hinduism, rivers Ganga (Ganges), Sarasvatī, Godavari, Narmada, and Kaveri (Cauvery) have symbolic values; not just the rivers themselves, but many places along their courses are marked as sacred. The source, mouth, and confluences of these rivers embody divine principles. There are several river creatures that are venerated in association with the rivers – the South Asian river dolphin, often likened to Ganga's vehicle or *vahana*, 'makara,'¹ is a notable instance. Rivers as sacred spaces form part of religious mythology as well as everyday existence.

Water is perhaps the most sacred symbol of spirituality in India, at once the purifier and the miracle of life. It is the source of mystery and embodiment of the generative principle of life. The sanctity that is assigned to water in Indian ethos and spiritual traditions can be traced back to the Indus valley civilization, whose influence remains unabated even in the present times. In *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, water symbolizes the *mūla-prakṛti*, "the aspect of supreme being that remains even after the universe is dissolved into the source. In iconography it is represented by the milk-ocean upon which Lord Viṣṇu floats reclining upon the serpent named the remnant of infinity – Anant Sesa" (45).² In the Indian tradition water is perceived as a substance without a shape, a reminder of the *pralaya*,⁴ the potential that all things possess before they assume a shape and form that is unalterable. Water bodies, the rivers, in particular, are regarded as the source of life in tangible and mythical senses. The *Nadi-stuti Sūkta*³ (praise of rivers) of the Ṛg Veda eulogises the rivers Sindhu, Satudru, Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvatī, among other rivers. The names of the rivers might have changed, but the divinity invested in them persists. Rivers provide a valence for the embodied forces of purification and regeneration as they have obvious associations with nourishment and vegetation.

This essay intends to explore the cultures of worshipping the river in the Indian context, tracing the trajectory from the ancient belief systems to their present manifestations. The attempt is to locate and understand the patterns of continuity, forms of disruption, paradoxes, exigencies, and essentialisms, as well as the variegated possibilities embedded in these practices. The scope of the study has been limited to the major rivers of the land, but it also looks at the less-known practices and narratives which bring the negotiations, debates, and tensions between sacred geography, environmental ethics, crises of modernity, and religious ecology to the centre of discussion.

Ganges: The Redeemer

River Ganga is an eternal presence in the collective consciousness of the Indian subcontinent in the form of myths, legends, and fables. It is the holiest of the holy rivers and is believed to possess purificatory qualities. Ganga water is held sacred; a dip anywhere in the river cleanses one of all sins and assures *mokṣa* (salvation) from the karmic cycle of life. The ritual purity of the river is manifest in its uses in almost every aspect of Hindu life. Commenting on the significance of the Ganga in the religious consciousness of India, Diana L. Eck (2015) states:

The Ganga as goddess is more than a single river. She functions in India as the archetype of sacred waters. Other rivers are said to be like the Ganga, other rivers are said even to be the Ganga [such as the River Kaveri, the ‘Ganga’ of South India]. But the Ganga remains the paradigmatic sacred river to which they are likened. The River Ganga is not confined to the course she takes across the plains of North India but participates in that spatial transposition that is so typical of Hindu sacred topography, pervading the sacred waters of all India’s great rivers. (234)

In Hindu mythology, River Ganga is the purest form of Lord Viṣṇu; she is also the consort of Lord Śiva. It is the river incarnate, occupying the central place in the culture and civilization of the Indian subcontinent. The entire length of the river is marked by sites of pilgrimage or *tirtha* manifesting the quintessence of the sacred. The beliefs associated with the river are given shape through practices/rituals reinforcing the ‘performance’ or embodiment of a ‘lived religion.’ Sudipta Sen (2019) makes an interesting observation regarding the intersection of the mortal and the divine in the deification of rivers with particular reference to the Ganga: “The relationship between anthropomorphic and naturalistic conception of the Ganga ... has deep roots in Indian culture” (6). In the Hindu Tantric tradition, this anthropomorphising of the river is seen in various rituals and bodily practices. In the Yogic conception of the human body the three channels (*Nāḍī* s) of life force correspond to the three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati – the solar *piṅgala* is Yamuna, the lunar *iḍā* is Ganga and the fiery *suṣūmṇā* is Saraswati. (7)

In India, rivers are predominantly worshipped as maternal presences and as female deities. The philosophical rubric of renewal and rebirth organic to the Hindu way of living is seen to be ritualistically ‘performed’ in/by rivers. Ablution in the sacred water of river Ganga, *pitr tarpaṇa*,⁴ the invocation of River Ganga in the rituals related to *upanayana*,⁵ and *śrāddha*⁶ reflect man’s attempts to grasp the intangible through a tangible object – in the case of the Ganga, a river which has been embedded in the psyche of the civilization that grew around it, to be the ever-flowing nurturer and redeemer. Ādi Śaṅkarācārya prays in *Ganga Stotram* [Praise of Ganga]:

rogam śokam tāpam pāpam hara me bhagavati kumati-kalāpam
tribhuvana-sāre vasudhābhāre tvam asi gatirmama khalu saṁsāre

O Bhagavati! Purge me of diseases, sorrows, impediments, sins and ill-intentions.

You pervade all the three worlds, you adorn the earth like a necklace. In your flow I find solace and comfort!⁷

Etymologically, the word *Ganga* is derived from *gam*, which means ‘to go’ – in this sense, the river represents the flux and fluidity of human life. There are several myths tracing the descent or *avataraṇa* of Ganga. According to the Vaishnava version, Ganga is called *Vishnupādi* or one who emanates from the foot of Vishnu (also spelt as Viṣṇu). In another version of the myth, Ganga agrees to descend on earth to revive the sixty thousand sons of King Sagara, who were

turned to ash by the ire of the Sage Kapila when they disrupted his meditation. Bhagīratha, the descendent of King Sagara pleased the gods by his dedicated and rigorous asceticism, and as a reward Ganga agreed to follow him to earth. But the descent of Ganga on earth unchecked would have caused a deluge, which was avoided when Lord Śiva permitted her to descend on his head. Ganga lost her way in the entangled locks of Śiva until she finally made her way to the plains of Northern India. Bhagīratha guided her to the sea in the Sagara island of West Bengal; there she flowed into the underworld to redeem Bhagīratha's ancestors and eventually joined the ocean. Ganga confers benediction, even in the underworld; the river had pointed the way to paradise. This juxtaposition of a religious-mythical vision and the cartography of the river from its source in the Himalayas to its flowing into the Bay of Bengal underscores the relationship between human beings, their religious practices, and the earth's living system. This brings us to Mircea Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane. Eliade insists that some ordinary spaces could be assigned sacrality by virtue of the spiritual characteristics associated with both the physical features as well as the sublime implications that demarcate a particular space as symbolic (1959, 20-24).⁸

The *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa* is celebrated as *Ganga Dussehra* on the *daśami* (the tenth day) of *śukla pakṣa* (the waxing moon cycle) in the month of *Jyestho* (summer month) in the Hindu calendar in the states through which the river flows. Bathing in the river on this auspicious day is believed to cleanse the sins of ten lifetimes. The onset of the monsoon is celebrated as *Ganga Dussehra*, marking a time for cleansing one's sins and heralding new beginnings. While the monsoon provides the occasion, the festival celebrates the descent of Ganga from the heaven. In *The Ganges in Myth and History*, Steven G. Darian (1978) observes: "The correspondence at once reveals the primal role of Ganga as both source and symbol of plenitude. Since Vedic times, from 1000 BC, Indian thought has provided the elements with a human counterpart. This personification, in the form of myth, allows humans some recourse from the otherwise malevolent forces of nature. People pray not to water but to the life within the water" (17).

The *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa* myth celebrates the journey of the celestial river tumbling from heaven to nourish humanity and connects the river with the great gods of the Hindu Trinity. The primordial relationship that the river shares with Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva manifests the interlocking aspects of the sacred embedded in the Hindu belief system: "... he (Śiva) as lord, she as mother and child of the mountain; he as the organ of generation (lingam), she as the liquid essence of life; he as the mystery, she as the door to the mystery; he as the tomb, she as the waters of life" (Darian 1978, 30–31). The image of *Ganga Mātā*, 'Mother Ganga,' bringing life in the form of water, resonates through history. Several tales are spawned which emphasize her generative powers – she gives birth, restores life, and confers immortality. The sacred associations of the river are not restricted to the Hindu world view alone. Abul Fazl, in *Aini-Akbari*, records the habits of the Mughal Emperor Akbar: "His majesty calls this source of life the water of immortality. ... Both at home and on his travels he drinks Ganges water"

(qtd. in Darian 1978, 11). Another interesting instance of syncretism is Zafar Khan Gazi, also known as Darap Khan Gazi, a self-proclaimed warrior of Islam, who conquered and plundered the upper deltaic regions of Bengal during the first major Islamic expansion in Bengal in the thirteenth century. He is credited with a *Ganga Stotra* composed in Sanskrit, which has remained an integral part of the oral tradition in Bengal, eulogising the river with a remarkable poignancy:

O River, daughter of Sage Janhu, you redeem the virtuous
But they are redeemed by their own good deeds –
Where's your marvel there?
If you can give salvation – I, a hopeless sinner – then would say
That is your greatness, your true greatness
Those who have been abandoned by their own mothers,
Those that friends and relatives will not even touch
Those whose very sight makes a passerby gasp and take the name of the Lord
You take such living dead in your own arm
O Bhagirathi, you are the most compassionate mother of all. (qtd. in Sen 2019, 19)

Zafar Khan's tomb, part of the mosque built by him over the ruins of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist monuments, still stands overlooking the Hindu pilgrimage site on Tribeni, a small town in Hugli in West Bengal on the bank of River Bhāgīrathī, as Ganga is known here. It is a sacred place, according to the myths of antiquity, where Ganga branched off into three streams: the Sarasvatī river, which flowed south west; the Jamuna river, which flowed south east; and Bhāgīrathī, which flowed towards Kolkata (Calcutta). It must be kept in mind that both Sarasvatī and Jamuna, in this context, are distinct from the rivers with the same name in Northern India and East Bengal. In popular imagination, this branching off is conceived as unbraiding the knot, *muktabeni* (*beni* being a vernacular term for a braid), whereas *juktobeni* would imply braiding of the rivers, as seen at Prayag in Uttar Pradesh at the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvatī.

The Kumbh Melas, held in a cycle of twelve years, is hailed as the largest pilgrimage in the world and mentioned in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Kumbh Melas take place in four places: Hardwar, Allahabad, Trimbak-Nasik, and Nasik along the banks of rivers Ganga; the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati; Godavari; and Shipra, respectively. These fairs derive their name from the mythical *Kumbha* or the pot which held Amrita or divine nectar that is believed to have been spilled in these four sites. Taking a dip in the waters of these rivers during the Kumbh Mela is considered to be most sacred. The *Ganga Sāgara* mela held every year in Swagardip, West Bengal, at the confluence of river Ganges (here known as Hugli) and Bay of Bengal on *Makar Sankrānti* (14th January) witnesses millions of pilgrims from all across the country bathing in the holy waters to

rid themselves of sin, before visiting the temple dedicated to the mythical sage Kapila. The ubiquity of the mythical iconography of the river overlapping with performative ritualism transforms the Ganga into an inclusive symbol of absolution. The worship of the river goddess often goes beyond the scripturally sanctioned structures. One such instance is the festival of *Ganga Pūjā* celebrated by the *Rajbanghsis*, a tribe in Tripura, to ward off epidemics and pray for the well-being of pregnant women. The devotees build a temporary temple made of bamboo in the midstream and offer sacrifices to the river. The fishermen and boatmen in various parts of the country also have their own sets of rituals to worship the rivers which provide them with livelihood.

India remains a culture abounding in myths, folktales, fables, and proverbs which create links between the mutable and the immutable, the immanent and the transcendent, the human and the divine. These connections facilitate reconfiguration and retelling of the same stories adding nuanced interpretative dimensions. The Ganga story is present in the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, with several variations. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the sage Vālmīki narrates the story of the river to Rama and Lakshman, the princes of Ayodhya. According to this story, Ganga is the daughter of Himalaya and the sister of Lord Śiva's consort, Uma. She is a captivating beauty who entices Śiva out of his meditation. In the *Mahābhārata*, Ganga is a goddess as well as a capricious beauty who enthralls King Santanu. She becomes his wife and then proceeds to drown her seven children begotten from this marriage in the river until she is prevented by Santanu from doing the same to the eighth child, who grows up to become Bhishma, the patriarch of the *Kuru* dynasty. Ganga, in this story, is an instrument of fate; the seven drowned babies are reincarnations of the *Saptarṣi* or the mythical seven sages who could only be released by Ganga's intervention. The river is thus conceived as a goddess, a woman of beguiling beauty, a nurturer, a redeemer, straddling the three worlds and deeply enmeshed in the commonplace practices as well as the profound epistemologies of the Indian consciousness.

Sarasvatī: The Transformational Deity

River Sarasvatī is a transformational deity: she is referred to as a mighty river in the Ṛg Veda, but in the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Purāṇas* she is the goddess of speech, knowledge, art, and culture (Prasad 2017). The Sarasvatī assumes different roles in the Vedic as well as the post-Vedic period; the transference of valence conflates both the physical and the celestial aspects of the river. She is deified as the nurturer, protector, healer, and harbinger of fertility in several hymns of the Ṛg Veda, Yajur Veda, and Sāma Veda.⁹ But the Sarasvatī, unlike the other rivers of India which are worshipped as goddesses, exist more as an idea rather than as a physical presence. There are several theories about the 'disappearance' of River Sarasvatī,¹⁰ but the river as the embodiment of knowledge and speech remains an abiding presence in the popular imagination. Apart from Hinduism, the Sarasvatī cult is also present in the tantric traditions of Buddhism and Jainism. In fact, the figure of Manjusri, one of the *bodhisattvas*,¹¹ and Sutra Devi in Jainism are likened to the figure of Sarasvatī as symbolic of knowledge and wisdom. In the Vedic literature, the banks

of River Sarasvatī were deemed sacred for sacrificial and funerary rituals, but in later Hinduism, with the receding of the physical presence of the river, the importance of the spiritual associations of the river as the embodiment of knowledge and truth gained ascendancy. The presence of several pilgrimage sites along what was once the course of River Sarasvatī indicates the significance of the river in the Hindu cosmology. But the shift in the iconography of the river marked an extension of the value of the river beyond the material sense. In the R̥g Veda, Sarasvatī is eulogised as follows:

She, the inspirer of true intuitions, the awakener in
Consciousness to right thoughts, Sarasvatī, upholds our sacrifice.

Sarasvatī by the perception awakens in consciousness the great
Flood and illumines entirely all the thoughts (qtd. in Danino 2010, 294).

Sarasvatī is worshipped in the Purāṇas as a source of benediction and forgiveness; she is the source of the three Vedas and a repository of supreme knowledge. Sarasvatī has been invested with a particular form in which she is eulogised; she is white in complexion, adorning a lotus, holding a *vīna* and a book, with a goose as a *vāhana*. In some representations she has a rosary and a water vessel (*kalash*) hinting at her riverine origin. Prasad (2017) suggests that “the *Vina* (harp) symbolizes her as a stirrer of finer sensibilities; the book symbolizes learning and knowledge both in their acquisition and application and the symbol of water vessel shows her as a river goddess. A rosary that Sarasvatī wears symbolizes meditative process which contributes in the pursuit of truth and acquisition of knowledge” (91).

Sarasvatī continues to be part of the popular religious rituals in different parts of the country. The fifth day or *panchami* of the lunar month of *māgha* is the *vasant panchami*, the day Goddess Sarasvatī is worshipped among the Hindus, especially by students and artists. *Śāradā Tilaka Tantram* by Lakshmanadesikendra is believed to have provided some of the ways of worshipping Sarasvatī along with other deities such as Śiva and Viṣṇu. In Bengal Krishnananda Agamvaghisha’s *Tantrasāra* is considered to be a source of many of the rituals and mantras associated with the goddess worship. Apart from these sources, there exists innumerable *ślokas* and *pranām mantrās* dedicated to Sarasvatī, some with valid genealogies, some apocryphal. For example, the common Sarasvatī mantra “*Jaya jaya devi/ characharo share/ kucho jogo shobhito/ mukta hare/ vina ranjito/ pushtaka haste/ bhagwati bharati/ devi mamaste*”¹² cannot claim any definite source but is deeply embedded in the psycho-religious cultural patterns and is in currency as a transgenerational aspect of the goddess worship. The early symbolism of Sarasvatī in the Vedic literature refers to her river origins as well as to her divinity; she is the ‘best of rivers,’ ‘the best of goddesses,’ the goddess of speech, and a source of illumination and inspiration. Among the *Saptasindhus* referred to in the Vedas, it is only Sarasvatī who has been invested with these attributes. Could this be explained by the fact that the river was considered in the

Vedic literature to be the ‘inspirer of hymns,’ thereby making the connection between the river and the speech more tangible? However, the worship of the goddess in the present times hardly acknowledges its riverine origin, focussing on her anthropomorphized form instead. The river is now conceived as *antasaleela*, the submerged, invisible one, flowing with Ganga and Yamuna forming a sacred triad of the river goddesses. Danino (2010) points out rightly: “The Sarasvatī has been pulled down to the earth from the realm of legend. The river was ‘lost,’ but not forgotten. And even as she dried up, she grew in vigour as an incarnation of Speech and Inspiration. Her last waters gurgling to a stop, the goddess took up her dwelling at the source of every thought and word – a source unlikely to ever run dry” (294).

Yamuna: The River of Love

The Yamuna is the largest tributary of Ganga and is worshipped alongside her. In Hindu mythology, Yamuna is the daughter of the sun god, Surya, and sister of Yama, god of death. It is believed that a dip in the holy waters of the Yamuna liberates one from the torments of death. Unlike the Ganga, whose water is mythically held to be clear and sparkling, Yamuna is dark, likened to the melancholy lover forgotten by the beloved. Yamunotri (the origin of the river), Mathurā, and Bateshwar are among the many places that are held sacred or are pilgrimage sites along the course of the river. The river is inseparable from the myths and legends surrounding Lord Kṛṣṇa (also spelt as Krishna). In *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the river Yamuna is an iterative motif in the life of the Lord. It is related to the story of Kṛṣṇa’s birth, when the river parts to make way for Vasudeva (Kṛṣṇa’s father) to carry the baby Kṛṣṇa to safety. The river is also a witness to the Lord’s childhood pranks in Vrindāvan, the clandestine yet eternal love between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, and other adventures. Yamuna is closely connected to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. According to the *Puṣṭimārg* sect founded by Sri Vallabhacarya, Yamuna is worshipped as the fourth consort (*chaturth patrani*) of Kṛṣṇa. The river is also known as *Kālindi* in later texts, where she is represented as one of the wives of Kṛṣṇa. Yamuna holds more appeal than Ganga among the Vaishnavas.¹³ It is the river of love, the love-lorn *gopi* (milk-maid) in the poet Jayadev’s imagination in *Gīta Govinda*,¹⁴ which enjoins Rādhā to hasten and meet Kṛṣṇa, who is waiting on the windswept shores of River Yamuna: *dhīra-samīre yamunā-tīre vasati vane vanamālī*. The river Yamuna forms one of the triads of the sacred rivers of the holy confluence, or *sangam*, which continue to form an important spiritual discourse as much as it is a manifestation of the abiding trope of popular religion.

The advent of the river is also celebrated on the sixth day of the waxing moon phase of the Hindu month of *Chaitra* as *Yamuna Chatt* or *Yamuna Jayanti* in Vrindavan, Mathura, and other parts of Northern India. The anthropomorphizing of the river deity takes on another significant dimension in the popular ritual of *Bhai dooj*, which is celebrated as *Bhau-deej*, *Bhatri ditwiya*, or *Bhai-phonta* in different parts of the country. It takes place in the autumn months following the festival of lights or *Deepavali* and commemorates the bond between

brothers and sisters. Among other legends and stories surrounding this popular festival, the narrative of the mythical twins Yama and Yami (or Yamuna) is of special interest. The rituals of the festival suggest a continuity; Yama and Yamuna are the prototypes of the generations of brothers and sisters celebrating their loyalty and love. The sister recites the same chant every year, wishing for long life and happiness for the brother (“As Yamuna draws a vermilion mark on the forehead of Yama/ So do I/ Let my brother be immortal like Yama”). The river is a shape-shifter – river, goddess, lover, and sister.

The cult of Ganga and Yamuna became so popular that it permeated even heterodox religions in one way or the other. Ganga and Yamuna are included among the five important rivers of Buddhist iconography. The *Majjhima Nikāya*, however, speaks of seven rivers, namely Bahuka, Adhikka, Gaya (Phalgu), Sundarika, Sarasvatī, Prayaga (Ganga and Yamuna), and Bahumati. This explains the presence of the twin rivers sculpted on the doorways of Buddhist monuments. Jains also regarded Ganga and Yamuna as sacred. A number of *Tīrthaṅkaras* had chosen to take birth in holy towns on the banks of these rivers. River Narmada figures prominently in the *Śaiva* sect; the *Matsya*, *Padma*, and *Kūrma Purāṇas* elaborately deals with the greatness of the river. It is considered to even excel Ganga in the power of sanctifying agency. According to the *Mahā Purāṇa*, Ganga comes to the Narmada in the form of a jet-black cow but returns quite white, free from all sins. *Matsya Purāṇa* insists that Narmada is holy everywhere, whether in a village or in a forest. *Agni Purāṇa* suggests that whatever virtue is obtained by a holy dip in the Ganga can be easily accrued by the mere sight of the Narmada. The *pradakṣina* of Narmada – the circumambulation of the river from its mouth at Bhrigukaccha to its source at Amarkantaka on the one side and return by the other side – is considered an act of highest religious merit. The river is also called *Śaṅkari*, one who has emerged from the body of *Śaṅkara* or *Śiva*. There are a number of myths surrounding the *banalīṅgas* found in the river Narmada. These *līṅgas* are considered to be *Śiva* himself. According to popular belief, all the stones in the river are *Śivalīṅgas* or the manifestation of *Śiva*. To confirm this belief, all the pebbles collected from the river are sold as *banalīṅgas* at the nearby pilgrim cities. The ecological importance of these mythological facts is manifest in the survival of the essential belief system of the religions, orthodox as well as heterodox in nature, in their perpetuating patterns of rituals and practices. The contradictions or paradoxes that emerge from the intersections of the lived experiences and the realities of contemporary society with its set of ideologies and imperatives are undeniable.

The ‘Minor’ Narratives

The iterative presence of the rivers as goddesses in the ancient texts suggests their importance in the Hindu cosmology. However, not all the rivers of the Indian subcontinent are equally venerated according to scriptural rituals. The myths and legends generated from the living presence of the rivers are often orally transmitted, especially among the indigenous

communities whose religious practices are based on animistic principles. Lloyd Burton (2002), while analyzing the importance of the sacred space in the Native American practices in *Worship and Wilderness*, observes: “indigenous spiritual traditions are *of* the environment rather than separable from it” (33). One such interesting instance is the Lepchas, who were considered to be the first inhabitants of Sikkim, of which, Kalimpong district used to be a part. The entire complex of Lepcha myths, legends, fables, and fairy tales transmitted orally throughout the centuries is known as *lungten sung*, ‘mythology, legends.’ Heleen Plaisier (2005), in “A Brief Introduction to Lepcha Orthography and Literature,” mentions that the traditional Lepcha narratives contain views and statements on fundamental matters of life and are aimed at the survival of the traditional values of the Lepcha community that they reflect. Doma Yishey, in the book *Legends of Lepcha* (2010), records an interesting story about the race between Teesta and Rongeeet, the two rivers that originate in Sikkim Himalayas and meet at a confluence in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Rongeeet and Rongnyu (as Teesta was previously known) were the river spirits revered as Itbu-moo’s¹⁵ creations all across Mayel Lang¹⁶ for their grace, beauty, and their love for each other. According to this myth, the two river spirits in a light-hearted banter as befits lovers, decided to race each other. Since they were venturing outside their familiar region, both decided to have guides to help them in their journey to the plains. Rongeeet, the male spirit, chose *totfu*, the mountain bird, while Rongnyu, the mild and gentle-mannered female spirit, chose *parilbu*, the snake, as her guide. Ironically, the bird that should have been the swifter guide was distracted by the sights and sounds in the journey, thereby delaying Rongeeet. On the other hand, Rongnyu, guided by the steadfast snake, reaches the plains earlier. Rongeeet, seeing Rongnyu already there, cried out “Thi- see-tha (when did you arrive)?” His pride was hurt, and in anger he started retreating towards the mountains ignoring the entreaties of Rongnyu. The destruction that was caused by the rising waters of the two rivers reminded the people of their neglect of the Mother Creator or Itbu-moo. The people took shelter on the top of the mountain Tundong Lho in South Sikkim, the only place that was not submerged by the deluge. They offered sacrifices and oblations to the sacred deities, the deluge receded, and the lovers were reconciled and met on the plains at a confluence, never to be separated. The confluence of the rivers Rongeeet and Rongnyu, now called Teesta, is considered a sacred place by the Lepchas. It is a ritual among the Lepchas to take the newlyweds to the confluence of the river gods to offer prayers, to seek blessings from the eternal lovers for a long and blissful married life. Every year, in the month of December or January, the Lepchas celebrate the feast of the river gods commemorating the sacred space. It is interesting to note that in recent years attempts at damming Teesta and construction of hydro-electric projects along the course of Teesta have faced strong resistance from the indigenous Lepcha population. In this context, the intersections of popular religious beliefs, rituals, and the implications of the sacred space especially for the indigenous population and environmental ethics generate a discursive minefield. Kerry Little (2013), in her thesis “Stories of the Lepcha Narratives from a Contested Land,” makes

an ethnographic survey of the resistance movements of the Lepcha youth against development projects on the rivers. They believe that these projects will cause environmental devastation, jeopardise their sacred spaces, and endanger their identity. Little makes a cogent point on this interlinking of the sacred discourse with the agency of activism: “The sacred space from the elders’ time became protest narratives when the activists referred to their mythology to prove their ownership of the land” (15).

India is criss-crossed by several rivers with myriad narratives and diverse forms of worship according to their geographical and cultural uniqueness. The Shilabati river in Purulia district of West Bengal presents a curious case. Not all the rivers of the district are inscribed as sacred; in fact, Shilabati is the only river that has been deified in the indigenous and popular imagination. Here is a myth without rituals, transmitted through oral tradition. According to the local legend, Shilabati was a young maiden working as a menial labourer in the house of Joy Ponda, a prosperous and devout Brahmin. Once, when Ponda intended to go on a pilgrimage to take a dip in the holy Ganges, Shilabati requested him to immerse a few things packed in a bundle on her behalf. Ponda had almost forgotten about Shilabati’s request, but when he did remember to cast the bundle in the Ganges he was confounded to witness a miraculous event. It is so transmitted in oral narratives of the myth that the Goddess Ganges herself emerged from the water to accept Shilabati’s bundle. Joy Ponda realized that it was no ordinary maiden toiling in his household – but a divine being. He rushed back to his village and called out to her. Shilabati, who was at that moment bringing back water in a *kalshi* (pot), realized that she had been discovered, and disappeared, leaving the upturned pot on the ground with water gushing out of it. This abandoned pot of Shilabati is believed to be the origin of the river in popular imagination. A temple, one of its kind, stands near the source of the river; the presiding deity is Shilabati, the river goddess with the myth of the maiden and the Brahmin depicted on the murals. A week-long fair is held every year near the temple during the *Pous Sankrānti*. This is an instance of an indigenous myth anthropomorphizing a natural element suggesting a primitive innocence borne out of an organic link between man and nature.

Conclusion

Bron Taylor, in the introduction to *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), raises a few pertinent issues that are of considerable importance here. Though Taylor primarily uses Western epistemological models in his enunciation of ‘nature religion,’ he puts forth a series of questions which are relevant to our understanding of the paradoxical nature of the sacred discourse assigned to the rivers of India, especially in the contemporary context of globalization and environmental crises. The questions can be summarized as follows:

1. How have the ecosystems influenced the culture or religious practices of people, if at all?
2. What are the attitudes reflected in religious practices of people towards earth’s living systems?
3. Are there inherent environmental ethics in the religious practices of India?

4. Does globalization complicate, or is incompatible with, the different forms of nature worship that have survived in India?

The list is not exhaustive since the phenomenon of deifying the rivers not only as scripturally validated convention but as a part of everyday practice behoves reorientation of interpretative tools. On the one hand, it is conceded that the formidable, awe-inspiring, or benevolent nature was anthropomorphized and worshipped in the premodern age as a way of controlling, yielding to, or negotiating with the unknown and mysterious. But the acceleration of the project of modernity, nurtured by the principles of rationality and scepticism, inevitably led to the decline of those practices which were predicated upon the interconnectedness of man and nature. What is perplexing in this context is the survival and continuation of the age-old practices in the contemporary age, which are incongruent and often contradictory to the predominant discourses of globalization and progress. Does this establish the thesis proposed by Lynn White, Jr., in his influential and controversial article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological crisis” (1967), that the Asian religions are more environmentally conscious than their occidental counterparts where the human/non-human dichotomy is more pronounced? Would it therefore follow that the mythologization of some religious systems is more valid than that of others? Emma Tomalin refers to Banwari (Banwari in *Pancavati: The Indian Approach to the Environment* suggests that certain religious traditions are ‘environment-friendly’) in her article “Bio-Divinity and Bio-Diversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India” (2004) to introduce the debates on this issue:

We have never thought of nature as inanimate and never did we make the mistake of exploiting it for our benefits. Be it our religious scriptures or literature, everywhere we have been made to realize that nature is something divine. That is why an average Indian has always had an inclination to worship everything in nature. We generally believe that all things in nature need to be preserved and we use them only when we feel that their use is essential for the continuity and preservation of our life. (qtd. in Tomalin 2004, 266)

But this assertion of environmental ethicality evinced in religious practices of India is countermanded by the realities of apathy and irresponsibility towards those elements of nature that are worshipped. In the case of the rivers of India, the pollution of the Ganga and the other major and minor rivers are incongruent with the rituals and practices that assign divinity to them (Shiva 2002, 2012; Guha and Gadgil 1995). The rivers of India are believed to foster physical, spiritual, and ritual purity in the devotee and are considered to be self-purifying. The realities of environmental degradation, industrial pollution, and other human activities however present a paradox to the nature of sacred purity of the rivers. The resolution of the paradoxes and contradictions lies in reviewing the ideas of nature worship vis-à-vis sustainability, conservation, and utilization of biodiversity. Madhav Gadgil (1985) refers to the practice of “ecological prudence” while discussing aspects of the preservation of sacred groves in India. This can be a significant strategy for the reassessment of the value of river worship in

India. The indigenous, place-centric practices of river worship should be popularized rather than the disjointed randomness of institutional practices which are neither connected to the living ecosystem nor are aware of their dependence on it.

Endnotes:

1. Makara or the crocodile is an emblem of the water, the plants, the vegetal substratum of life. It has a dual significance underlining the dual nature of the river goddess. While she has been represented as benevolent in myth and literature, one cannot overlook the devastation that she causes, destroying countless settlements along its bank. The vehicle or the *vāhana* embodies this paradoxical nature of the deity.
2. http://www.srimatham.com/uploads/5/5/4/9/5549439/katha_upanishad.pdf, (accessed on 8.7.2019).
3. See Hymn 10.75 of *Ṛg Veda*. Griffith, Ralph T.H. (Trans), 1896. *The Hymns of the Rigveda*. <http://www.sanskritweb.net/rigveda/griffith-p.pdf>, accessed on 29.9.2020.
4. The term *pitr tarpaṇa* means offering to the deceased ancestor, usually sesame seeds, on prescribed auspicious days.
5. *Upanayana* is the traditional Hindu rite of passage of induction or initiation marked by accepting a sacred thread across the body. It is usually restricted to the Brahmin or upper caste Hindu male.
6. The term *śrāddha* denotes funeral rituals.
7. <http://mychinmaya.org/sitebackup/bv/bvresources/gangastotram.pdf>, accessed on 22.9.2020.
8. Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion*. Willard R. Trask. Trans. New York, N. Y: Harcourt, Brace, & World.
9. For a detailed discussion of the occurrence of the river/goddess Sarasvatī in scriptural literature, see Prasad 2017.
10. Michel Danino, in *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvatī* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2010), offers a fascinating narrative of the ‘disappearance’ of Sarasvatī.
11. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, bodhisattva is one who is dedicated to the path of Buddhahood through suffering and compassion.
12. May Goddess Saraswati,
who is fair like the jasmine-coloured moon,
and whose pure white garland is like frosty dew drops;
who is adorned in radiant white attire,
on whose beautiful arm rests the veena,
and whose throne is a white lotus;
who is surrounded and respected by the Gods, protect me.
May you fully remove my lethargy, sluggishness, and ignorance.
Source:
<http://www.esotericonline.net/group/mantras/forum/topics/goddess-saraswati-and-her-mantras>,
accessed on 22.9.2020.
13. Vaishnavas are one of the major sects of Hinduism. Followers of this sect consider Lord Vishnu (Viṣṇu) to be the supreme lord.
14. *Gīta Govinda* is a literary work composed by the twelfth-century poet Jayadeva, which celebrates the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in Vrindāvan.
15. Itbu-moo is the mother creator in the Lepcha cosmology.
16. In Lepcha mythology, it is the land blessed by god.

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