

GAṄGĀ
The Goddess Ganges in
Hindu Sacred Geography

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O Mother Gaṅgā, may your water,
abundant blessing of the world,
treasure of Lord Śiva, playful Lord of all the earth,
essence of the scriptures and
embodied goodness of the gods,
May your water, sublime wine of immortality,
Sooth our troubled souls.¹

The pursuit of the Goddess in the Hindu tradition leads one to the bank of the river that Hindus revere as Mother—Gaṅgā Mātā, Mother Ganges. Here the mythology of the Hindu tradition and the sacred topography of the land of India flow inseparably together. The Gaṅgā is both goddess and river. She is claimed as the consort of Śiva and Viṣṇu alike. Her waters are said to be the liquid embodiment of *śakti* as well as the sustaining immortal fluid (*amṛta*) of mother's milk. And her *avatarāna*, her "descent" to earth, brings both her power and her nurturance to incarnation on the plains of India.

Along her entire length the Gaṅgā is sacred, and just as a temple or a holy city might be circumambulated, so is this entire river circumambulated by a few hardy pilgrims who walk her length from the source to the sea and back again on the other shore. Many *tīrthas*, sacred "crossings," pilgrimage places, mark her course: Gangotri, her source in the Himalayas; Hardwar, also known as Gaṅgadvārā, "Door of the Ganges," where she breaks out of the mountains into the plains of North India; Prayag, where she joins the Yamuna River as well as the mythical underground Sarasvati; Banaras (Kāśī), the city of Śiva, where she makes a long sweep to the north as if pointing to her Himalayan source; and, finally, Ganga Sagara, where the river meets the sea in the Bay of Bengal.

All along the river, and especially at her great *tīrthas*, devout Hindus bathe in the Gaṅgā, taking the waters cupped in their hands and pouring them back into the river as offerings to the *pīṭrs* and the *devas* (see figure 15). They present in the river, as in the sanctum of a temple, offerings of flowers. On great occasions they ford the river in boats, shouting, "Gaṅgā Mātā kī jai!" ("Victory to Mother Ganges!") and trailing garlands of flowers hundreds of feet long to adorn the neck of this Goddess River. They return to their homes, perhaps hundreds of miles away, carrying vessels of her water. And they come again that distance to bring the ashes of their dead to her care.

The *māhātmyas* ("praises") of the Gaṅgā, which are found in the Sanskrit epics and Purāṇas, extol the greatness of the river and describe her many glories. On the most mundane level, the chanting of her name alone is said to relieve poverty, banish bad dreams, and vouchsafe perpetual protection from the falling dung of flying crows.² On a more exalted plane, *mokṣa* itself is said to result from bathing in the waters of the Gaṅgā or being cremated on her banks.³ This is especially the case in the Kali Yuga, our present degenerate era, when the traditional means of gaining release have become too difficult for ordinary people.⁴ The Gaṅgā, it is said, is supreme among rivers, as Kāśī is supreme among holy cities and the Himalayas are supreme among mountains.

The Gaṅgā 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 Gaṅgā, others are said even to be the Gaṅgā (such as the River Kaverī, the "Gaṅgā" of South India).⁵ But the Gaṅgā remains the paradigmatic sacred river to which they are likened. The River Gaṅgā 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.⁶

If a person elsewhere in India cannot go to the Gaṅgā, going to another sacred stream *is* going to the Gaṅgā. There are said to be seven rivers of such great sanctity: Gaṅgā, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaverī. If such rivers as these are out of reach, one might simply go to the nearest stream. In fact, in every temple and home the Gaṅgā is called to be present in the waters used in ritual, either by mixing those waters with a few drops of Gaṅgā water or by uttering the name and *mantras* of the Gaṅgā to invoke her presence. The Gaṅgā is the quintessence and source of all sacred waters, and indeed of all waters everywhere.

Not only is the Gaṅgā said to be present in other rivers, but others are also present in her. By bathing in this one river, one bathes in all rivers. As a contemporary Indian author writes, "When a pilgrim dives into the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā, he feels the thrill of plunging into the waters of all the rivers of India."⁷ The *māhātmyas* claim that the Gaṅgā concentrates in her

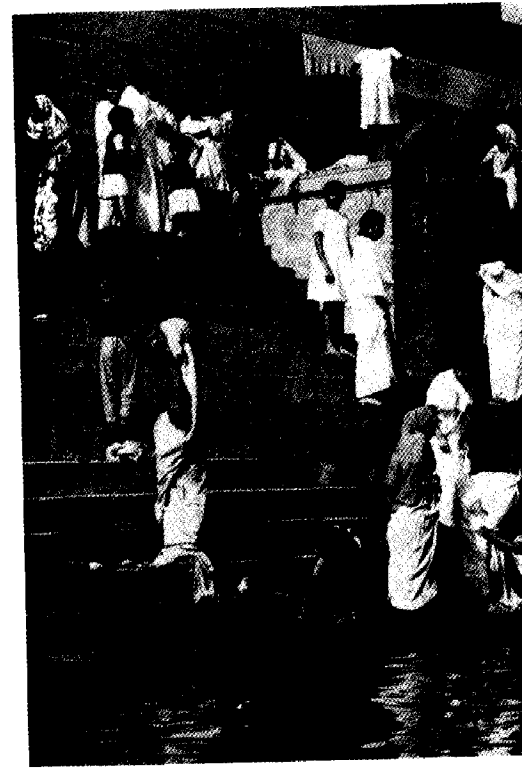


Figure 15. Bathers in the Ganges during the

waters some thirty-five million *tīrthas*. M of the river is a *tīrtha*.⁸

There are few things on which Hindu one voice as clearly as it does on Gaṅgā: tural and religious significance for Hindu continent they call home, no matter where. As one Hindi author writes, "Even the most find his heart full of feelings he has reaches the bank of the Gaṅgā."⁹

Some of those "feelings" were eloquent who was at the most westernized end of and who loved the Gaṅgā deeply:

My desire to have a handful of my ashes has no religious significance, so far as



Figure 15. Bathers in the Ganges during the festival of Makarasamkranti in Banaras.

waters some thirty-five million *tirthas*. More simply, it is said that every wave of the river is a *tirtha*.⁸

There are few things on which Hindu India, diverse as it is, speaks with one voice as clearly as it does on Gaṅgā Mātā. She carries an immense cultural and religious significance for Hindus, no matter what part of the subcontinent they call home, no matter what their sectarian leaning might be. As one Hindi author writes, "Even the most hardened atheist of a Hindu will find his heart full of feelings he has never felt before the first time he reaches the bank of the Gaṅgā."⁹

Some of those "feelings" were eloquently expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru, who was at the most westernized end of the modern spectrum of Indian life and who loved the Gaṅgā deeply:

My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Gaṅgā at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious

sentiment in the matter. I have been attached to the Gaṅgā and the Jumna rivers in Allahabad ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. I have watched their varying moods as the seasons changed, and have often thought of the history and myth and tradition and song and story that have become attached to them through the long ages and become part of their flowing waters. The Gaṅgā, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of 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 Gaṅgā. She reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas, which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast.¹⁰

It is in part the province of scholars to see and uncover those affirmations that have been explicitly denied. As one who considered himself thoroughly secular, Nehru denied that the Gaṅgā had any "religious" significance for him—presumably meaning "supernatural" significance. His attachment to the river and his desire to have his ashes thrown into it was, on the contrary, as natural and organic as his love for the land of India. In this, one might say, he was thoroughly Hindu, and his affirmation of the land, its waters, its mountains, was a thoroughly Hindu religious affirmation. For the natural is the religious. Although the river has attracted abundant myth and *māhātmya*, it is the river itself, nothing "supernatural" ascribed to it, that has been so significant for Hindus. The river does not stand for, or point toward, anything greater, beyond itself; it is part of a living sacred geography that Hindus hold in common. It is with certain presuppositions about that common geography that Hindus, even such as Nehru, behold the Gaṅgā. The Gaṅgā is one goddess we cannot consider apart from the land in which she flows and the pattern of symbols that this land embodies.

LIVING LAND

Leaving the river for a moment, let us look at some of the mythic images of the cosmos in which the Gaṅgā moves. One of the most striking aspects of the multitude of Hindu cosmogonic myths is the organic, biological vision that they express. The completed universe is imagined as a living organism, a vast ecosystem, in which each part is inextricably related to the life of the whole. And the whole is indeed alive: it is in constant process and movement, growing and decaying. There is no such thing as objectified "nature" or lifeless "elements," for everything belongs to the living pattern of the whole.

One well-known image is that of the sacrifice of the primal giant Puruṣa, a cosmogonic event in which each part of this macrocosmic being became an element of the natural world.¹¹ From his feet came this earth; from his torso the *antarīkṣa*, the mid-region of the sky, extending as far up as the blue extends; and from his head came the heavens above the sky. More particu-

larly, from his eye came the sun; from his mind the gods Indra and Agni; from his breath, the

Another image is that of the Golden Embryo in the Rig Veda the "firstborn of creation," the embryo within it all the vast and particular life of this world. Embodied for a long time, it split open; the top half became the earth; and the space between, the mid-region of the universe, became the mountains; the inner membrane became the veins of the egg, the rivers; the interior of the universe came from the life of that embryo. At the end of time is replaced by Viṣṇu, reclining asleep on the lotus within his body the whole of the universe in time is ripe, the lotus springs from his navel. Brahmā, the agent of creation.¹³

These are images of a biological world strengthened by the indigenous *yakṣa* and *gandharva* still in the Hindu mythic imagination. It is a vision by extension the land of India, is alive with it and is likened to a living organism. There is a sacramental natural ontology. In an excellent phrase: "In India the veneration of Nature has never been primitive. On the contrary, primitivity is a ductive ambiguity and inexhaustible potentiality. It is the fundament of the earliest forms of Indian religion, even the highest and most exalted speculation."¹⁴

In this organic ontological vision, the term *loka* describes the vehicle of movement from the macrocosm to the microcosm, the whole to the part, the whole one to follow certain strands of the cosmos, whole, up and down, back and forth, from the macrocosm to the microcosm. Poets use the image of the loom: the cosmos as it were, by two maidens, Night and Day, and the *Gārgī* asks the sage Yājñavalkya, "What is the cosmos, all is woven?"¹⁶ For this "All" is a woven fabric, woven horizontally or vertically, seeing it slightly differently and then another. One thread runs along the macrocosm, the fire here below, to the eye of the sacrifice, the Yamuna River, to the subtle channel of the microcosm. Another thread runs from the Moon to the earth, as waters in the vault of the heaven and as waters, to the human mind, to the River *Gārgī* within the body-cosmos.¹⁷

In a sense, everything is a symbol in that the relationships that constitutes the whole, for sy-

larly, from his eye came the sun; from his mind, the moon; from his mouth, the gods Indra and Agni; from his breath, the winds.

Another image is that of the Golden Embryo, Hiraṇyagarbha, called in the Rig Veda the "firstborn of creation," the egg or embryo that contained within it all the vast and particular life of this cosmos.¹² When it had incubated for a long time, it split open; the top half became heaven; the bottom, earth; and the space between, the mid-region of the sky. The outer membrane became the mountains; the inner membrane, the clouds and mists; the veins of the egg, the rivers; the interior waters, the oceans. Every atom of the universe came from the life of that embryo. In a later myth, the egg is replaced by Viṣṇu, reclining asleep on the cosmic waters, containing within his body the whole of the universe in unmanifest form. When the time is ripe, the lotus springs from his navel, unfolds, and gives birth to Brahmā, the agent of creation.¹³

These are images of a biological worldview, grounded in the Vedas, strengthened by the indigenous *yakṣa* and *nāga* traditions, and persisting still in the Hindu mythic imagination. It is a view in which the universe, and by extension the land of India, is alive with interconnections and meanings and is likened to a living organism. There is no nature "worship" here, but a sacramental natural ontology. In an excellent essay, Betty Heimann writes: "In India the veneration of Nature has never been discarded as outdated and primitive. On the contrary, primitivity is here appreciated in its productive ambiguity and inexhaustible potentialities. Nature cult is the fundament of the earliest forms of Indian religions and remains the basis of even the highest and most exalted speculations of Indian philosophy."¹⁴

In this organic ontological vision, the term *symbol*, if we are to use it at all, describes the vehicle of movement from meaning to meaning. Symbols enable one to follow certain strands of the complex interrelatedness of the whole, up and down, back and forth, from heaven to earth, from place to place. Poets use the image of the loom: the universe is woven on the loom, as it were, by two maidens, Night and Day, who lay and draw the threads.¹⁵ Gārgī asks the sage Yājñavalkya, "What is the warp and woof on which this all is woven?"¹⁶ For this "All" is a woven fabric. One may follow any thread, horizontally or vertically, seeing it slightly differently in one woven context and then another. One thread runs along the warp from the sun above to the fire here below, to the eye of the sacrificial horse, to the human eye, to the Yamuna River, to the subtle channel called *piṅgalā* within the body-cosmos. Another thread runs from the Moon above, to the Soma that dwells as waters in the vault of the heaven and as plants on earth, to the earthly waters, to the human mind, to the River Gaṅgā, to the subtle channel called *idā* within the body-cosmos.¹⁷

In a sense, everything is a symbol in that it leads into the living web of relationships that constitutes the whole, for symbols do not live alone but in a

pattern of meaning shaped by other symbols. But here the symbol does not, as in some Western interpretations, point beyond itself to some other reality. The Holy is constituent of the life and fullness of the whole. The symbolic referent in this organic ontology is not the Holy, but the Whole, which each symbol, each thread, helps to constitute.

Just as the cosmos is a biological whole, so on the microcosmic level the land of India is pictured as an organic whole, a full sacred geography. The living landscape is dense with significance. Each village has its *grāmadevatā*, the lord of its place. The sacred literature is full of *māhātmyas* of place: the Naimiṣa forest, the Gaṅgā, Yamuna, and Godavari rivers, the Himalaya and Vindhya mountains. Such places have been affirmed to have particularly strong strands of connection to the macrocosm. They are called *tīrthas*, a word that originally meant "ford" or "crossing place" and has come to mean a "spiritual ford," a place of pilgrimage.

The earth, like the macrocosmic Puruṣa, is a body, both in its wholeness and its diversity. In the *Mahābhārata* it is put this way:

Just as certain parts of the body are called clean, so are certain parts of the earth and certain waters called holy.¹⁸

Those "certain parts" of earth that give ready access to the heavens are *tīrthas*. They are thresholds, doorways upward, where one's prayers are more quickly heard, one's desires more readily fulfilled, one's rituals bound to bring more abundant blessings. And it is precisely because these doorways were opened by some hierophany, some *avatāra*, that they are *tīrthas* for human beings. *Avatāra* and *tīrtha*, both coming from the root *tṛ*, "to cross over," are the dynamics of movements along the warp of the cosmic loom: crossing down and crossing up.

There are thousands of *tīrthas* in India, some well known through the whole land and some of but local prominence. The great *tīrtha* cycles include the seven sacred cities (*saptapurī*); the four divine abodes (*cār dhām*), one at each compass point; and the "seats" (*pūthas*) of the goddess, each corresponding to a part of the body of the goddess Satī.¹⁹ The whole of India adds up to a body-cosmos.

Pilgrims circumambulate the whole of India as a sacred land, visiting the *dhām* at each compass point, marking with their feet the perimeter of the whole, bringing sands from the southern tip of India at Ramesvaram to place in the Gaṅgā when they arrive, and returning with Gaṅgā water to sprinkle the *liṅga* at Ramesvaram. This network of *tīrthas* constitutes the very bones of India as a cultural unit. Considering its long history, India has had but a few hours of political and administrative unity. Its unity as a nation, however, has been firmly constituted by the sacred geography it has held in common and revered: its mountains, forests, rivers, hilltop shrines, and sacred cities. It is no surprise, then, that the national anthem of Nehru's in-

dependent India is a litany of the great geography. This hymn expresses a Hindu view of India itself.

LIVING WA

India's rivers have been the life-giving art of this earthly realm, the rivers and oceans support the continents, have, in the heaven, above the vaulted blue of the sky free to run upon the earth by the gods thus envisioned the connection in this way:

Forth from the midst of the flood they flow
The sea, their leader, purifying, never-sleeping
Indra, the thunderer, the bull, dug out the waters
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

Waters that flow from heaven,
Or spring from the dug earth, or meandering
All of which, bright and pure, head for the sky
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

In whose midst King Varuṇa moves,
Observing men's truth and falsehood,
Nectar they are, and bright and pure,
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

In which King Varuṇa, in which Soma, in which
Became drunk with strength,
In which Agni Vaiśvānara entered,
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

The waters are identified here as divine, the heavenly source by Indra, who dug them out for drinking and purification. Elsewhere in the hymn the waters are set free when Vṛtra is slain.²¹ There are the Indus; the Sarasvati, a river that since Vedic times has changed, and the Gaṅgā has become the Ganges; the five rivers of the Punjab. Since the Vedic period, the Gaṅgā has become the Ganges, and the divine rivers has persisted.²²

The poet seers of the Vedas launch the hymn with the purifying energy of the "gods who have been for more than two thousand years, through the ages, the source to the great poetic hymns to the Gaṅgā, the Gaṅgā harī." It is particularly the life, the mother of the Gaṅgā that has attracted poets and

dependent India is a litany of the great place-names of her sacred geography. This hymn expresses a Hindu view of the living land that is as old as India itself.

LIVING WATERS

India's rivers have been the life-giving arteries of this living land. The waters of this earthly realm, the rivers and oceans that course through, surround, and support the continents, have, in the Hindu view, their counterparts in heaven, above the vaulted blue of the sky. In the beginnings, they were set free to run upon the earth by the gods themselves. The seers of the *Rig Veda* envisioned the connection in this way:

Forth from the midst of the flood they flow,
The sea, their leader, purifying, never-sleeping,
Indra, the thunderer, the bull, dug out their channels.
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

Waters that flow from heaven,
Or spring from the dug earth, or meander freely,
All of which, bright and pure, head for the ocean,
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

In whose midst King Varuṇa moves,
Observing men's truth and falsehood,
Nectar they are, and bright and pure,
Here may these goddess waters bless me!

In which King Varuṇa, in which Soma, in which all the gods
Became drunk with strength,
In which Agni Vaiśvānara entered,
Here may these goddess waters bless me!²⁰

The waters are identified here as divine, as goddesses set free from their heavenly source by Indra, who dug their channels. They are rivers of blessing and purification. Elsewhere in the *Rig Veda* the seven rivers are said to be set free when Vṛtra is slain.²¹ There are the great Sindhu, now called the Indus; the Sarasvati, a river that since Vedic times is said to have disappeared; and the five rivers of the Punjab. Since then, the names of the seven have changed, and the Gaṅgā has become their leader, but the tradition of seven divine rivers has persisted.²²

The poet seers of the Vedas launched a tradition of praise for the blessing and purifying energy of the "goddess waters" that continued for more than two thousand years, through the many Purāṇic *māhātmyas* and *stotras* to the great poetic hymns to the Gaṅgā, such as Jagannātha's "Gaṅgā Laharī." It is particularly the life, the movement, the activity of the waters of the Gaṅgā that has attracted poets and devotees through the ages. Hers are

not the motionless waters of the precreation seas, but running, energetic waters of life. The traditional etymology of Gaṅgā derives the name from the verb *gam*, "to go."²³ Her hymns constantly emphasize the running, flowing, energetic movement of her waters, and they do so at times with elaborate alliteration and onomatopoeia, as in this line from the famous "Gaṅgā Laharī"; *marullilā-lolallaharī-lulitāmbhoja-pātala*. (May your running waters . . . "covered with lotuses that rock in your waves and roll playfully in the wind" . . . weaken the web of my earthly life.)²⁴

It is running water that is the chief agent of purification in the complex Hindu scheme of purity and pollution. Water absorbs pollution, but when it is running, it carries pollution away as well. It is in part because they are "never-sleeping" that these goddess waters bring purification. The Gaṅgā *māhātmyas* proclaim her purifying powers in elaborate detail: even to be touched by a breeze bearing a tiny droplet of Gaṅgā water will erase the sins of lifetimes in an instant!

AVATARAṆA

Each year as the hot and dry season reaches its peak in May and early June, Hindus celebrate the descent of the Gaṅgā from heaven to earth in anticipation of the monsoon rains. The day is Gaṅgā Daśaharā, the tenth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Jyeṣṭha. It is called the "birthday" of the Gaṅgā, and on that day her banks are crowded with bathers. A dip in the Gaṅgā "destroys ten [sins]" (*daśahara*) or ten lifetimes of sins; but as festival manuals confirm, even those far from the Gaṅgā may gain similar benefits from bathing in whatever "Gaṅgā" is near at hand.²⁵

The descent—*avatarana*—of heavenly waters to earth is an ancient theme with many variations in Hindu mythology. In one of the great Vedic myths, Indra, who has pillared apart heaven and earth and established the sky between them, engages in combat with the great serpent Vṛtra, who has coiled around the vault of heaven and closed up the celestial waters.²⁶ The waters stored in the vault of heaven are often identified with *soma*, the nectar of the gods and the strengthening elixir of immortality. In defeating Vṛtra, Indra sets free these divine waters for the nourishment of the earth.

In the many Vaiṣṇava versions of the myth, the river is called Viṣṇupadī, after its origin in Viṣṇupada ("the celestial realm of Viṣṇu" or "the foot of Viṣṇu"). Viṣṇu, who in the *Rig Veda* was Indra's helper in releasing the nectarous waters, is here the primary cause of their descent to earth. In taking his famous three strides, Viṣṇu, the dwarf-turned-giant, stretched through and took possession of the threefold universe. With his third stride he is said to have pierced the vault of heaven with his toe and released the heavenly waters.²⁷ Through this opening in the shell of the universe, the Gaṅgā, which had hitherto flowed around the cosmic egg, flowed into the heavens,

landing first in Indra's heaven, where she was caught by the god Dhruva. From there she ran down the sky from the moon to the realm of Brahmā, rimmed by the peaks of the eight directions of this world. From Meru, the river splashed into the various lotus-petal continents. One branch of the river reached the Bhāratavarṣa (India) as the Gaṅgā.²⁸

In the most celebrated myth of the Gaṅgā's descent, the god Viṣṇu, whose role is predominant. The story, well known in the *Mahābhārata*, and in many Purāṇas, is too significant for our understanding of the Gaṅgā to omit. The Gaṅgā fell from heaven in order to revive the sage Sagar, whose son, King Sagara, burned to ashes by the scorching heat of the sun. King Sagara, whose rigorous ascetic discipline finally won him the right to come to earth, but was certain that the force of her fall. Śiva promised to catch her in a thicket of his ascetic's hair before releasing her. The Gaṅgā did the Gaṅgā fall, winding her way through the plains of India, where Bhagīratha took charge. From there she reached the netherworld, where she became the waters for the sons of Sagara.

According to some accounts, the Gaṅgā emerged from the hair of Śiva, three floors above the earth, and the Bhāgīrathī to the south. This tradition is found in Vedic hymns and reminds us that the Gaṅgā is the life of earth. Indeed, when Bhagīratha brought her to earth, he only restored the ashes of the dead but not the life of the dead had been swallowed by the sage Agastya.

It is because the Gaṅgā descended in this way that her ascent as a *tīrtha*. She, as *triloka-patha-gaṅgā*, has crossed over from heaven to earth to become a place of crossing for human beings. In this way she quickened the ashes of the sons of Sagara and restored to life all of the dead. Thus it is that the story of the Gaṅgā's descent, the *dha* ceremonies, that Gaṅgā water is used in, and the fact that the place where the Gaṅgā skirts the banks of the "Holy Ground" of holy Banaras, has made the entire land all of India. For the dead, the Gaṅgā has become "the flowing staircase to heaven." There is more devotion to the Gaṅgā hymnody than the yearning for the life after death. The popular "Gaṅgāṣṭakam," for example, begins with the following verse:

landing first in Indra's heaven, where she was caught by the steady polestar Dhruva. From there she ran down the sky to the moon as the Milky Way, and from the moon to the realm of Brahmā situated just above Mount Meru, rimmed by the peaks of the eight directions and forming the calyx of the lotus of this world. From Meru, the river split into four parts and ran out upon the various lotus-petal continents. One branch, the Alakanandā, flowed into Bhāratavarṣa (India) as the Gaṅgā.²⁸

In the most celebrated myth of the Gaṅgā's descent to earth, it is Śiva whose role is predominant. The story, which is told in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and in many Purāṇas, is too long to recount here.²⁹ What is significant for our understanding of the goddess Gaṅgā, however, is that the Gaṅgā fell from heaven in order to revive the sixty thousand sons of King Sagara, burned to ashes by the scorching heat of the glance of the sage Kapila, whose meditation they had rudely disturbed. It was Bhagīratha whose rigorous ascetic discipline finally won the favor of Gaṅgā. She agreed to come to earth, but was certain that the earth would shatter under the force of her fall. Śiva promised to catch her on his head and tame her in the thicket of his ascetic's hair before releasing her to flow upon the earth. Thus did the Gaṅgā fall, winding her way through Śiva's hair and out upon the plains of India, where Bhagīratha took charge of her and led her to the sea. From there she reached the netherworld and became the saving funereal waters for the sons of Sagara.

According to some accounts, the Gaṅgā split into seven streams as she emerged from the hair of Śiva, three flowing to the east, three to the west, and the Bhāgīrathī to the south. This tradition recalls the seven rivers of the Vedic hymns and reminds us that the Gaṅgā in essence waters the whole earth. Indeed, when Bhagīratha brought the Gaṅgā to earth, her waters not only restored the ashes of the dead but also replenished the ocean, which had been swallowed by the sage Agastya.³⁰

It is because the Gaṅgā descended in her *avatarāṇa* that she is a place of ascent as a *tīrtha*. She, as *triloka-patha-gamini*, "flowing in the three worlds," has crossed over from heaven to earth to the netherworld and has thus become a place of crossing for human beings, both the living and the dead. As she quickened the ashes of the sons of Sagara, so will she quicken the ashes of all the dead. Thus it is that the story of the Gaṅgā *avatarāṇa* is read at *śrāddha* ceremonies, that Gaṅgā water is used in *śrāddha* and *tarpaṇa* rites, and that the place where the Gaṅgā skirts the Mahāśmaśāna, the "Great Cremation Ground" of holy Banaras, has made that place the best place to die in all of India. For the dead, the Gaṅgā has the epithet *svarga-sopana-saraṇī*, "the flowing staircase to heaven." There is no theme more pervasive in Gaṅgā hymnody than the yearning for the lap of the Gaṅgā at the time of death. The popular "Gaṅgāṣṭakam," for instance, begins with the following verse:

O Mother! Cowife of Pārvatī! Necklace adorning the worlds!
 Banner rising to heaven!
 I ask that I may take leave of this body on your banks,
 drinking your water, rolling in your waves,
 remembering your name, bestowing my gaze upon you!³¹

LIQUID CONSORT

The mythology of the *Devī Bhāgavata* and *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇas* relates the Gaṅgā closely to Viṣṇu and more specifically to Krishna as one of the forms of the female *prakṛti*, "nature," or in some instances as one of the forms of Rādhā herself.³² In one instance, the Gaṅgā in human form, sitting with great adoration next to Krishna, arouses the jealousy of Rādhā, who threatens to drink her up. Gaṅgā immediately disappears, taking refuge inside the foot of Krishna. The earth is then distressed by the draught that results from Gaṅgā's disappearance. It is only when the gods supplicate Rādhā and calm her jealousy that Gaṅgā emerges from the foot of Krishna and flows forth again.³³

In another myth, the three cowives of Viṣṇu—Gaṅgā, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī—quarrel among themselves over the attentions of their common husband. Both Sarasvatī and Gaṅgā curse one another to become rivers on earth and to bear the burden of human sins. At this point, Viṣṇu intervenes and specifies that in their lives as rivers Sarasvatī will become the wife of Brahmā and Gaṅgā will become the wife of Śiva. Lakṣmī, who had done nothing but try to mediate in the quarrel, will become the sacred *tulasī* plant and will remain his wife.³⁴ Gaṅgā and Sarasvatī, however, lament so loudly that Viṣṇu finally agrees that while they go their separate ways they will remain, in essence, with him.

If Gaṅgā is a cowife of Viṣṇu and a form of Rādhā, it is clear that her relationship to the Lord is intimate, so much so, in fact, that she flows out of his very body. And as Krishna and Rādhā share one body, so do they mingle in the waters of the Gaṅgā. One striking account tells of the full harvest moon of the autumn month of Kārttika. All the gods have assembled and watch in awe as Krishna and Rādhā dance. As Śiva sings rapturous songs, they all fall into a swoon, and when they come to their senses, the magic circle of Rādhā's and Krishna's dance has become a sea of water. The two have liquified to become the waters of the Gaṅgā.³⁵

LIQUID ŚAKTI

From the Śaiva point of view, it is Śiva whose relationship with Gaṅgā is most prominent and most intimate. If she is consort of Hari, so is the *śakti* of Śiva; if she flows from the foot of Viṣṇu, so she meanders in Śiva's hair.

Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, "Bearer of the Gaṅgā," is depicted as holding the Gaṅgā in his hair, either as the moon in his topknot or as the stream of water in his matted hair. Gaṅgā, therefore, is Śiva's constant consort. Her way station on her perpetual journey is the *avātaraṇa*, a continuing process, not a final destination. She falls upon Śiva before reaching the earth. Śiva involved himself in a relationship with her.

So close is the relationship of Gaṅgā to Śiva that she is occasionally depicted in sculpture as a rival of Rādhā. Usually, as cowife and rival, she arouses the jealousy of Rādhā. Gaṅgā, born of Hiraṇyakaśipu, does that of Rādhā. Gaṅgā, born of Hiraṇyakaśipu, Menā is in fact Pārvatī's sister; but she is often depicted as a rival. Her jealousy became a favorite theme of both poets and artists. For instance, Śiva's consort, Pārvatī, writes:

Who here can speak the greatness of you,
 which vanquishes our worldly fears
 by its mere beholding,
 which Śiva ever holds upon his head,
 despite the strong entreaties of the gods,
 who grows faint with envy.³⁷

Śiva is called Umā-Gaṅgā-patiśvara, "Holder of Umā and Gaṅgā," and is depicted as such by holding the Gaṅgā in his hair and a frowning Pārvatī turning her back to him.

In the *Skanda Purāṇa* Śiva, speaking of his relationship with Gaṅgā, identifies Gaṅgā with Pārvatī as the female form of the Lord's *śakti* and construed:

As Gaurī (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā.
 She who properly also worships the Gaṅgā.

And as I am, so are you, O Viṣṇu. And as you (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā. The form is the same.

And whoever says that there is some difference between Śrī and Gaurī, or between the Lord and the goddess, is a foolish person.³⁹

The Gaṅgā embodies the Supreme Śakti. She is that life energy, conceived as female, that in the fable Sadā-Śiva manifests himself in the form of a woman. She is honored, hended, praised, and loved. She can be depicted in any form. A contemporary Hindi religious woman's "murti" (image) of Parabrahma, Parabrahma, *sambhava*, calls her *sambhor ambumayi-murti*.

Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, "Bearer of the Gaṅgā," is commonly depicted wearing the Gaṅgā in his hair, either as the mermaid who clings to the crescent moon in his topknot or as the stream of water spurting up like a geyser. The Gaṅgā, therefore, is Śiva's constant companion, making his tangled ascetic's locks her way station on her perpetual fall from heaven to earth. Her *avatarāṇa* is a continuing process, not a single event; each wave of the Gaṅgā falls upon Śiva before reaching the earth. In agreeing to bear the Gaṅgā, Śiva involved himself in a relationship rather than a simple project.

So close is the relationship of Gaṅgā and Śiva that she is called his wife and is occasionally depicted in sculpture approaching him as a bride.³⁶ Naturally, as cowife and rival, she arouses the jealousy of Pārvatī, much as she does that of Rādhā. Gaṅgā, born of Himalaya, the Mountain, and his wife Menā is in fact Pārvatī's sister; but she is also Pārvatī's rival. Pārvatī's jealousy became a favorite theme of both poets and artists. The poet Jaganātha, for instance, writes:

Who here can speak the greatness of your gracious form,
which vanquishes our worldly fears
by its mere beholding,
which Śiva ever holds upon his head,
despite the strong entreaties of the Mountain's daughter
who grows faint with envy.³⁷

Śiva is called Umā-Gaṅgā-patiśvara, "Husband and Lord of Umā (Pārvatī) and Gaṅgā," and is depicted as such by artists, who show Gaṅgā clinging to his hair and a frowning Pārvatī turning her face away in jealousy.³⁸

In the *Skanda Purāṇa* Śiva, speaking to Viṣṇu, resolves the issue by identifying Gaṅgā with Pārvatī as the female aspect of the Divine, however construed:

As Gaurī (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā. Therefore, whoever worships Gaurī properly also worships the Gaṅgā.

And as I am, so are you, O Viṣṇu. And as you are, so am I. And as Umā (Pārvatī) is, so is the Gaṅgā. The form is not different.

And whoever says that there is some difference between Viṣṇu and Rudra, between Śrī and Gaurī, or between the Gaṅgā and Gaurī is a very foolish person.³⁹

The Gaṅgā embodies the Supreme Sadā-Śiva's active energy or *śakti*. *Śakti* is that life energy, conceived as female, through which the qualityless, ineffable Sadā-Śiva manifests himself in the world. This *śakti* can be apprehended, praised, and loved. She can even be touched in this, her liquid form. A contemporary Hindi religious writer speaks of the Gaṅgā as the "liquid image" (*mūrti*) of Parabrahma, Paramātmā.⁴⁰ Kālidāsa, in the *Kumārasambhava*, calls her *śambhor ambumayi-mūrti*: Śiva's water-form.⁴¹ It is a female

form, flowing out upon the earth for the blessing of all. Says the *māhātmya* from the *Skanda Purāna*:

She, the Gaṅgā, is my supreme image, having the form of water, the very essence of Śiva's soul. She is nature (*prakṛti*) supreme and the basis of countless universes.

For the protection of the world do I playfully uphold the Gaṅgā, who is mother of the world, the supreme Brahman's very embodiment.⁴²

As this "embodiment" the Gaṅgā makes Śiva's activity in the world possible. Śiva-in-action is indeed *śakti*, the energy that creates and nourishes all the manifest universe. Without this energy, that One is unnameable, qualityless, and without expansion. *Śakti* bodies forth the living cosmos, and the Gaṅgā is liquid *śakti*. Her fall from heaven to the head of Śiva is repeated countless times daily in the simple ritual act of pouring water upon the Śiva *līṅga*. The unutterable incandescence of the *līṅga* of fire is joined with the torrential energy of the celestial waters. Without the Gaṅgā, Śiva would remain the scorching, brilliant *līṅga* of fire; without Śiva, the Gaṅgā would flood the earth.⁴³ Bearing her on his head, Śiva became the vehicle for the Gaṅgā's fall. But if Śiva is a vehicle for the Gaṅgā, she is also a vehicle for Śiva: for it is through her liquid *śakti* that Śiva is able to enter into the world as an active agent of salvation. As Skanda explains to Agastya in one of the Gaṅgā *māhātmyas*:

O Agastya, one should not be amazed at the notion that the Gaṅgā is really Śakti, for is she not the supreme energy of the eternal Śiva, which has taken the form of water?⁴⁴

The Śiva we speak of here, however, is not Rudra-Śiva but the One called Sadā-Śiva, who includes and transcends Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Rudra-Śiva. The Gaṅgā as the liquid *śakti* of this Supreme Śiva embodies all these gods, just as in another context she is said to embody Krishna and Rādhā together. The opening stanza of one hymn makes this clear:

Om. Praise be to the auspicious Gaṅgā, gift of Śiva, O praise! Praise be to her who is Viṣṇu embodied, the very image of Brahmā, O praise!

Praise to her who is the form of Rudra, Śaṅkara, the embodiment of all gods, the embodiment of healing, O praise!⁴⁵

Likewise, the opening stanza of the "Gaṅgā Laharī" calls her the "essence of the scriptures and embodied goodness of the gods."⁴⁶

MOTHER GAṅGĀ

It is significant that Gaṅgā is the embodied "goodness" of the gods, for hers is an energy perpetually praised as good. Her destructive force is utterly pu-

rified and calmed in the hair of Śiva. As is Mother, and she is the perfect dreamer, forgiving, without a trace of anger. In the incarnation of female divinity is tinged with the river, which possesses such tremendous power, claimed in such unambiguous terms.

The image of rivers as mothers is ancient. The texts say, for instance, that when Indra released the waters out upon the earth like mother cows to nourish the earth, rich in milk.⁴⁷ The poets beg of the river to be poured here on earth the most blessed nectar of the gods. The rivers that run upon the earth they are pregnant with the waters of the mothers of Agni, fire.

The Gaṅgā inherits her mothering character from Agni. It is she who accepts from Agni the burden of being the mother of the war god, Skanda.⁴⁹ Elsewhere she is the mother of the eight Vasus and of the Maruṭas. She finally dies in the great battle of the Mahābhārata, from the river, weeping as bitterly as any mother.

The waters of the Gaṅgā are the drink of the gods, life, so do humans drink Gaṅgā water. The river is sacred and indeed the *Mahābhārata* compares the river to the milk of hungry children thirsting for their mother's milk.

It is as Mother Gaṅgā that this river is sacred and, like a mother, the Gaṅgā can be trusted to care for her children. Even those utterly unforgotten standards will be embraced and saved by the waters of the Gaṅgā.

In India today the most widely known "Gaṅgā Laharī" of the seventeenth-century poet Tulsī Das, the Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān and his son Aurangzeb Shikoh. The poet was outcasted by his father for his love affair with a Muslim woman at court. He went to Banaras to try to restore his status among the Brahmins there, but he was unsuccessful. He was beloved atop the fifty-two steps of Pañcavati. In his fifty-two verses he composed, the river Gaṅgā, in the hymn, the waters touched the feet of the devotees, embraced them, and carried them to the other shore.

In the "Gaṅgā Laharī" Jagannātha asks the river why she will love and claim the child rejected by his father. It is so filthy with sin that all the *tīrthas* are unable to cleanse him. There are plenty of

rified and calmed in the hair of Śiva. As she flows out upon the plains, she is Mother, and she is the perfect dream-mother: embracing, nourishing, and forgiving, without a trace of anger. In India, where virtually every manifestation of female divinity is tinged with ambiguity, it is noteworthy that this river, which possesses such tremendous potential for destruction, is acclaimed in such unambiguous terms.

The image of rivers as mothers is ancient and widespread. The Vedic poets say, for instance, that when Indra released the waters of heaven, they ran out upon the earth like mother cows to suckle their young, like milk cows rich in milk.⁴⁷ The poets beg of the rivers, "Like longing mothers, give to us here on earth the most blessed nectar that you have!"⁴⁸ When the cow-rivers run upon the earth they are pregnant with the sun; they are also called the mothers of Agni, fire.

The Gaṅgā inherits her mothering capacities from those ancient waters. It is she who accepts from Agni the burning seed of Śiva and becomes the mother of the war god, Skanda.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, as the wife of Śantanu, she is the mother of the eight Vasus and of the hero-sage Bhīṣma. When Bhīṣma finally dies in the great battle of the *Mahābhārata*, she rises in human form from the river, weeping as bitterly as any mother.⁵⁰

The waters of the Gaṅgā are the drink of life. As the gods drink *soma* for life, so do humans drink Gaṅgā water. It is as nourishing as mother's milk, and indeed the *Mahābhārata* compares human thirst for her waters to that of hungry children thirsting for their mothers' milk.⁵¹

It is as Mother Gaṅgā that this river is most universally known to Hindus, and, like a mother, the Gaṅgā can be trusted to render unconditional love to her children. Even those utterly unfit for salvation by Brahmanical standards will be embraced and saved by the Gaṅgā.

In India today the most widely known hymn to the Gaṅgā is the "Gaṅgā Laharī" of the seventeenth-century poet Jagannātha, whose patrons were the Mughal emperor Shāh Jahān and his son, the *littérateur* prince Dārā Shikoh. The poet was outcasted by his Brahmin subcaste because of his long love affair with a Muslim woman at court. According to legend, Jagannātha went to Banaras to try to restore his status by proving himself acceptable to Brahmins there, but he was unsuccessful. As the story goes, he sat with his beloved atop the fifty-two steps of Pañcagaṅgā Ghāt and, with each of the fifty-two verses he composed, the river rose one step. At the conclusion of the hymn, the waters touched the feet of the poet and his beloved, purified them, embraced them, and carried them away.⁵²

In the "Gaṅgā Laharī" Jagannātha addresses the river as Mother, the one who will love and claim the child rejected by everyone else. He is so despicable that he is shunned even by outcastes; he is criticized even by madmen; he is so filthy with sin that all the *tīrthas* hang their heads in shame at their inability to cleanse him. There are plenty of gods who will care for the good,

but who except the Gaṅgā will care for the wicked?⁵³ He approaches the Gaṅgā with complete trust and faith:

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.⁵⁴

Above all, it is mercy and compassion that flow out from the foot of Viṣṇu or from the hair of Śiva in the form of this mothering river. It nourishes the land and all its creatures, living and dying. The hymns repeatedly affirm that this river is intended as a vehicle of mercy:

This Gaṅgā was sent out for the salvation of the world by Śambhu, Lord of lords, filled with the sweet wine of compassion.

Śaṅkara, having squeezed out the essence of *yoga* and the Upaniṣads, created this excellent river because of his mercy for all creatures.⁵⁵

In earlier ages and better times *mokṣa* could be had only by means of meditation (*dhyāna*), austerities (*tapas*), or ritual sacrifice (*yajña*). But now, it is said, in this Kali Yuga, these are no longer viable. Only the Gaṅgā can bring the blessings of salvation.⁵⁶

THE RIVER

The Gaṅgā's history in the Hindu mythological tradition is long and rich. Here we have only pointed to some of its various facets. As a celestial stream flowing upon the earth she has her mythic origins in the world of the Vedas. As the tradition developed, she wound her way into the myth and ritual of Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas alike. She is hardly the best-known consort of either Viṣṇu or Śiva, but she has acquired the position of consort to both of them, something no other goddess can claim. Even Brahmā keeps close company with her, carrying the river in his water pot.

The river's accumulation of mythological traditions demonstrates the distinctive persistence of natural geographical symbols in India. For the Gaṅgā is most certainly not loved and worshiped because she is spouse of Śiva, cowife of Pārvatī, consort of Viṣṇu, or the liquified Rādhā-Krishna. Rather,

she has attracted this mythology over the centuries, loved, worshiped and loved. Here one sees the difference between the symbol and the narrative one. For the symbol is not exhaustively narrative. First, she is a vibrant universe. Narrative myths come to her, and she conveys meaning for the cosmos and gradually lose their hold upon the imagination. The river remains, even when the stories flow on, bringing life and conveying the meaning of this age for whom everything else is denied.

In the Hindu tradition, any place can be made sacred, if the proper rites are performed. Once an image is installed, the great rites of *pratiṣṭhā* are performed, divine to that place. With any image fastidiously crafted of clay, rites of invitation (*āvāhāna*) are performed, of worship, inviting the deity to be present. After the rites are observed at worship's end, giving the deity a bath, of the Gaṅgā no such rites are ever observed. In this age in which the divine has come to dwell in the world, the immediate. Whatever is holy, whatever is sacred, the sacred is already there.

NOTE

1. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī* (Varanasi: Kashi Prakashan, 1961). Translations from this work and from the *Rig Veda* are in the *Kaṣī Khaṇḍa* (no. 20, 1961), vol. 4. The *Kaṣī Khaṇḍa* will be published in 1962.
2. *Skanda Purāṇa*, *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* 27.22 (no. 20, 1961), vol. 4. The *Kaṣī Khaṇḍa* will be published in 1962.
3. *KK* 27.30, 37, 105, and 134.
4. *KK* 27.18; 28.27-29.
5. For a discussion of the way in which the Gaṅgā is deified, see M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Kāverī and*, in an appendix, recounts the story of the Gaṅgā's descent.
6. For a discussion of what I have termed "the Gaṅgā's descent," see *Varanasi, City of Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 30.
7. Raj Bali Pandey, *Varanasi: The Heart of India* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. *jha*.
8. Rāmpratāp Tripathī, *Purāṇō mē Gaṅgā* (Varanasi: Kashi Prakashan, 1952), p. *jha*.
9. *Ibid.*, p. *ga*.
10. From Jawaharlal Nehru's will and testament, as recorded by Bir Singh, *Gaṅgā: Sacred River of India* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1961), p. 10.
11. *Rig Veda* 10.90.
12. See *Rig Veda* 10.82 and 10.121.

she has attracted this mythology over the years precisely because *she* is worshiped and loved. Here one sees the difference between the organic myth or symbol and the narrative one. For the Gaṅgā's significance as a symbol is not exhaustively narrative. First, she is a river that flows with waters of life in a vibrant universe. Narrative myths come and go in history. They may shape the cosmos and convey meaning for many generations, and then they may gradually lose their hold upon the imagination and finally be forgotten. But the river remains, even when the stories are no longer repeated. The river flows on, bringing life and conveying the living tradition, even to those of this age for whom everything else is demythologized.

In the Hindu tradition, any place can become the sacred abode of the gods, if the proper rites are performed. When a temple is consecrated and its image installed, the great rites of *pratiṣṭhā* serve to call the presence of the divine to that place. With any image fashioned of wood or stone or rudely crafted of clay, rites of invitation (*āvahana*) are observed at the beginning of worship, inviting the deity to be present, and rites of dismissal (*visarjana*) are observed at worship's end, giving the deity leave to go. With the worship of the Gaṅgā no such rites are ever observed. This river is no ordinary image in which the divine has come to dwell. She is celestial—unmediated and immediate. Whatever is holy, whatever is merciful, whatever is utterly auspicious is already there.

NOTES

1. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī* (Varanasi: Ṭhākur Prasād and Sons, n.d.), verse 1. Translations from this work and from the Vedic and Sanskrit sources are my own.
2. *Skanda Purāna*, Kāśī Khaṇḍa 27.22 (Calcutta: Gurumaṇḍala Granthamālāya no. 20, 1961), vol. 4. The Kāśī Khaṇḍa will hereafter be cited as KK.
3. KK 27.30, 37, 105, and 134.
4. KK 27.18; 28.27–29.
5. For a discussion of the way in which the Gaṅgā is an all-India agent of Sanskritization, see M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 214. Srinivas discusses the sanctity of the Kāverī and, in an appendix, recounts the Kāverī's myth of origin.
6. For a discussion of what I have termed "spatial transposition," see my *Banaras, City of Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp. 39–42, 283–94.
7. Raj Bali Pandey, *Varanasi: The Heart of Hinduism* (Varanasi: Orient Publishers, 1969), p. 30.
8. Rāmpratāp Tripāthī, *Purāṇō mē Gaṅgā* (Prayāg: Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan, 1952), p. *jha*.
9. *Ibid.*, p. *ga*.
10. From Jawaharlal Nehru's will and testament, quoted in Eric Newby and Raghubir Singh, *Gaṅgā: Sacred River of India* (Hong Kong: Perennial Press, 1974), p. 9.
11. *Rig Veda* 10.90.
12. See *Rig Veda* 10.82 and 10.121.

13. See, for example, *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.9. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.5.6 and *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 45–47 also contain accessible accounts of the transformation of the Hiranyagarbha motif.

14. Betty Heimann, *Facets of Indian Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 107, in the essay entitled “Indian Metaphysics.” I am also deeply indebted to another essay in this posthumous collection, “India’s Biology,” in which Heimann develops the notion of a biological worldview.

15. See, for example, *Atharva Veda* 10.7 and *Rig Veda* 10.130.

16. *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6 and 3.8.

17. The esoteric symbolism of the two rivers is elaborated by Heinrich von Stietencron in his work *Gaṅgā und Yamunā* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972). He deals primarily with the river goddesses as they appear to the right and left of medieval temple entrances in northern India.

18. *Mahābhārata* 13.111.16.

19. “Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Māyā (Hardwar), Kāśī, Kāñcī, Avantikā (Ujjain), and the city of Dvārāvātī (Dvārakā)—these seven give *mokṣa*.” This verse describing the *saptapūrī* is found in many Purāṇas and is known to practically every literate Brahmin. The four divine abodes are Purī in the east, Rameśvaram in the south, Dvārakā in the west, and Badrināth in the north. On the *pīṭhas*, see D. C. Sircar, *The Śākta Pīṭhas* (1948; repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973).

20. *Rig Veda* 7.49.

21. The seven are mentioned repeatedly as a group. See, for example, *Rig Veda* 1.32.12, 1.34.8, 2.12.12, and 4.28.1. *Rig Veda* 10.75 mentions the Gaṅgā, but she does not figure among the seven.

22. These seven rivers are the Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Godāvarī, Sarasvatī, Narmadā, Kāverī, and Sindhu.

23. Amarasimha, *Amarakośa* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series no. 198, 1970).

24. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 20.

25. Rāmpratāp Tripathī, *Hinduō ke Vrat, Parva, aur Tyauhār* (Allahabad: Lokbhārati Prakāśan, 1971), p. 86.

26. See W. Norman Brown, “The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62, no. 2 (1942): 85–98. See also, for example, *Rig Veda* 1.32, 2.12.

27. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.17; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8.7. Sculpture depicts this myth as well. C. Sivaramamurti, in *Gaṅgā* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976), includes two plates from twelfth-century Mysore in which Brahmā is shown pouring the Gaṅgā from his water pot upon Vāmana-Viṣṇu’s upraised foot.

28. *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.44; *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇajanma Khaṇḍa 34; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.17; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 2.2.8.

29. For versions of the story, see *Rāmāyaṇa* 1:38–44; *Mahābhārata* 3.104–8; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.8–9; *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 10; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.11; and KK 30. K. Damodaran Nambiar lists many others in “The Nārada Purāṇa: A Critical Study,” *Purāṇa* 15, no. 2, supplement (1973): 1–56. In several accounts of the *avatarāṇa* it is Krishna to whom appeal is made by Bhagīratha.

30. The *Mahābhārata* account of the *avatarāṇa*, for instance, immediately follows the story of Agastya’s swallowing the ocean.

31. “Śrī Gaṅgāṣṭaka,” verse 1, in *Nitya* (Varanasi: Thākurdās Surekā Cairiti Phand,

32. See C. Mackenzie Brown, *God as Mother* (Vt.: Claude Stark and Company, 1974).

33. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa

34. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa

35. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa

36. Sivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, fig. 6.

37. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 12.

38. Sivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, pp. 21–24, fig.

39. KK 27.182–84.

40. Tripāthī, *Hinduō ke Vrat*, p. 95.

41. Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava* 10.26.

42. KK 27.8–9.

43. For other elaborations of the *agni-saptapūrī* legend, see Doniger O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythic World* (University Press, 1973), pp. 286–92.

44. KK 28.84.

45. KK 27.157–58.

46. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 1, q

47. *Rig Veda* 10.75.

48. *Rig Veda* 10.9.

49. O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism*, p. 286. The birth and multiple mothers of Skanda.

50. *Mahābhārata* 1.95–100 describes the birth of the Vasus and Bhīṣma. *Mahābhārata* 13.15.1–16.1 describes the death of Bhīṣma.

51. *Mahābhārata* 13.27.48–52.

52. The legend, which is well known, at the birth of Kāśī, has several variants. Lakshman Ramdas summarizes Jagannātha’s life and legend in his English translation. In another of Jagannātha’s poems, the *Bhāmīnī Vrat*, he describes the birth of the river.

53. These summarize some of the sentiments expressed in the poem and 45.

54. *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 24.

55. KK 28, 84 and 88.

56. KK 27.19.

31. "Śrī Gaṅgāṣṭaka," verse 1, in *Nityakarma Vidhi tathā Devapūjā Paddhati* (Varanasi: Ṭhākurdās Surekā Cairiti Phaṇḍ, 1966).
32. See C. Mackenzie Brown, *God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India* (Hartford, Vt.: Claude Stark and Company, 1974), pp. 161-67.
33. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 11; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.13.
34. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 6; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.6.
35. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa 10; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.12.
36. Sivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, fig. 6.
37. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 12.
38. Sivaramamurti, *Gaṅgā*, pp. 21-24, figs. 7 and 8.
39. KK 27.182-84.
40. Tripāthī, *Hinduō ke Vrat*, p. 95.
41. Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava* 10.26.
42. KK 27.8-9.
43. For other elaborations of the *agni-soma* polarity and resolution, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 286-92.
44. KK 28.84.
45. KK 27.157-58.
46. Jagannātha, *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 1, quoted at the start of this essay.
47. *Rig Veda* 10.75.
48. *Rig Veda* 10.9.
49. O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism*, pp. 93-110, describes the many myths of the birth and multiple mothers of Skanda.
50. *Mahābhārata* 1.95-100 describes her marriage to Śantanu and the birth of the Vasus and Bhīṣma. *Mahābhārata* 13.154.18-25 tells of Gaṅgā's lament at the death of Bhīṣma.
51. *Mahābhārata* 13.27.48-52.
52. The legend, which is well known, at least among the traditionally educated of Kāśī, has several variants. Lakshman Ramachandra Vaidya related something of Jagannātha's life and legend in his English introduction to the Sanskrit text of another of Jagannātha's poems, the *Bhāminī Vilāsa* (Bombay: Bhāratī Press, 1887).
53. These summarize some of the sentiments of *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verses 13, 28, 29, and 45.
54. *Gaṅgā Laharī*, verse 24.
55. KK 28, 84 and 88.
56. KK 27.19.