

# Damning the Ganga

Perceptions of the Goddess, The Story of Her Descent, and

Environmental Consciousness in Varanasi

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“Oh Ganga, mother of the world, without you  
what in this age of destruction can be done?”

-Tulsidas<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In the Western world, long dominated by the God of Abraham, goddess worship is an unusual phenomenon, to say the least. When encountered, it is likely to produce associations with the ‘primitive.’ Goddess worship in the West stirs up images of crude-looking ancient clay Mesopotamian fertility goddesses, worn by time, abandoned to museums, mysteriously other: the rituals, stories, and attributes they once embodied long forgotten. In Hindu India, goddess worship is not only living: it is vital, and it is thriving. Moreover, the Hindu goddess tradition is complex and highly ‘developed,’ at all levels of society, by any definition of the term. From stones smeared with red paint along bumpy rural roads and local traditional stories of hilarity, despair, and love, to rarified styles of painting and verse produced in the courts of kings, goddesses evoked and evoke an incredibly wide range of human religious responses.

The familiar reasons for the death of the goddess in the West and modern attitudes towards her have been documented in scholarly research as associated with the transition from hunter-gatherer tribes to agrarian and pastoral society and the correlating rise of patriarchy.<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely we will ever know precisely what happened during this

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<sup>1</sup> Hawley, John Stratton & Juergensmeyer, Mark, Tr. & Ed. *Songs of the Saints of India*. Oxford UP, New York, 1988:167.

<sup>2</sup> Darien, Steven G. *The Ganges in Myth and History*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd., New Delhi, 2001:73.

traditions within a patriarchal culture. It does not explain, for example, how an immanent nature goddess could come to represent transcendent purity.

India's environmental situation is dire and getting worse every day. When looked at in light of the still flourishing Hindu tradition of reverence for many plant, animal, and non-living aspects of the natural world, including mountains, trees, cows, and especially rivers, this too seems paradoxical. One could perhaps argue in this situation that religion must be irrelevant to what many consider political questions, i.e., gender inequality and environmental degradation. Politics, however, is ultimately a reflection of culture, and in a society as religious as India, religion and culture are for the most part inseparable. One simply cannot hope to understand the political landscapes of these issues without first understanding what they mean religiously. Given the huge amount of cultural and religious diversity of India, it would seem critical to take a very narrow approach if one hoped to accomplish anything. Yet it is important to see the bigger picture. At the core of the Feminist project is the need to understand the relationships between diverse kinds of domination, and moreover, South Asian worldviews are not as fragmentary as post-Kantian Western worldviews (there is less of a tendency, for example, to divide up life into separate spheres such as 'religion' and 'politics').

Among these views Diana Eck has described a "sacramental natural ontology."<sup>4</sup> Recently, the environmental crisis created by humanity has reached a level in India where the existence of this worldview itself is at risk. Within India's sacred geography devotees are dependent on their physical environment for access to the divine, particularly where the goddess is concerned. When sacred sites are threatened or violated, one generally

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<sup>4</sup> Eck, Diana L. "Ganga: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography." *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Berkeley UP, Berkeley, 1985:170.

heavy metals that are the waste products of industry, cheaply disposed of in the river, and the runoff from fertilizers and pesticides, many of which (e.g., DDT and PCBs) are carcinogenic.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this is a problem for the 60,000 pilgrims and residents who come to the river each morning to have a holy dip, or *snan*, and even more for those who perform *aachman*, or sipping of the waters.<sup>8</sup> For a student of religion, however, the question that immediately comes to mind is this: how could Hindus let this happen to the physical body of a highly revered goddess?

Getting to the heart of this question will require delving deeply into the meaning of Ganga: her mythology, her divine powers, her worship, and the way she is perceived by some of the millions of devotees and Hindu religious leaders who come to her banks seeking blessings. I will focus particularly on the *Ganga avatarana*, the story of Ganga's descent from heaven into the mortal world, during which she passes through the *jata*, or matted locks of the ascetic god Shiva. Ultimately I will argue that the unfortunate state of the river has been allowed in part by patriarchal perceptions of the river goddess engendered by messages in this and similar stories from Hindu scripture and folklore. Ganga, like all Hindu goddesses, is part of a larger, cross-cultural system of hegemony recognized by ecofeminists as ascribing 'feminine' qualities to nature and 'wild' or 'natural' qualities to women. This structure is, of course, problematic in and of itself. The wild, natural and feminine are on one side of a set of associated axes of meaning opposed to the rational, civil and masculine. In a patriarchal society the latter are valued and

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<sup>7</sup> Alley, Kelly D. *On the Bank of the Ganges*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002:53.

<sup>8</sup> Mishra, Veer Bhadra. "The Ganga at Varanasi and a Travail to Stop Her Abuse." *Current Science*. Vol. 89, No. 5 (10 September 2005):755.

My study will be primarily confined to perceptions and meanings of Ganga as they are relevant to my fieldwork site of Varanasi, but I will make comparative examples to try to put Ganga and her relationships with male gods in context. I consult both written texts and the text of the city itself in an attempt to discover both the origins of the tradition and what the tradition actually means to those who practice it. Hopefully my fieldwork will serve to counter some of my own Western bias, and the distortion produced by a lack of adequately corresponding vocabulary in English to express many of the concepts most vital to Hinduism. Most importantly, I do not want to essentialize Ganga, or any other aspect of Hinduism, but rather to examine the many meanings she has held and find evidence to establish which of those currently holds the most sway in determining Ganga's fate. Ganga is many things to many people, and no one position will ever be definitive. There are, however, plenty of things that most people agree on.



Figure 1. Women carrying Ganga water for *puja* (worship), Khajuraho temple, riding Ganga's vehicle, the *makara* (crocodile)

answer than one might think. As is often the case in Hinduism, there are as many answers as there are people to give them. Though some responses are more popular than others, anyone who cares to ask will come across a seemingly endless variety of stories, all connected to the activity of the various gods and goddesses that populate the Hindu pantheon, as well as sages, poets, and saints. This makes more sense knowing that “Hinduism” was not even recognized as a single religion or group of religious traditions by those who were said to ascribe to it until outsiders gave it this name, and many scholars have rejected the idea of a single “Hindu Tradition”.<sup>12</sup> Gavin Flood explains that the difficulty in defining Hinduism, let alone studying it, comes from the fact that “Hinduism does not have a single historical founder...it does not have a unified system of belief encoded in a creed or declaration of faith; it does not have a single system of soteriology; and it does not have a centralized authority and bureaucratic structure.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to extract some common themes, beliefs, practices, and symbols that are important to most Hindus, particularly within the confines of a given region or community. Among the protagonists in the most popular stories told by Varanasi residents, two divinities stand out in their cultural significance and ties to geographic features of the city. Shiva, widely credited as the founder of the city, is invoked in numerous temples, the most important of which is the Kashi Vishwanatha temple (the temple to “Shiva as Lord of the Universe”), also known as “the Golden Temple.” Ganga, who is often referred to as “Ganga Maa,” or “Ganga Maiyaa” (Mother Ganga), is, as previously mentioned, seen as embodied by the river along the Western

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<sup>12</sup> Pintchman, Tracy. *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*. State University of New York Press, New York, 1994:1.

<sup>13</sup> Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1996:6.

Shiva, storing up *tapas*, spiritual energy, with his meditation. There was something at odds here with the powerful river I saw worshipped daily. At the time I arrived the water had risen to completely cover most of the *ghats*, the flights of stone steps leading down into the river to provide access for ritual use, and was creeping up the streets and into the lanes and *galis*. It appeared even larger than the Columbia, the mighty river with which I am most familiar. How did this mighty river, the basis for Varanasi's existence, come to be depicted as so small and helpless? It was this question that brought me to the story of Ganga's descent from heaven.

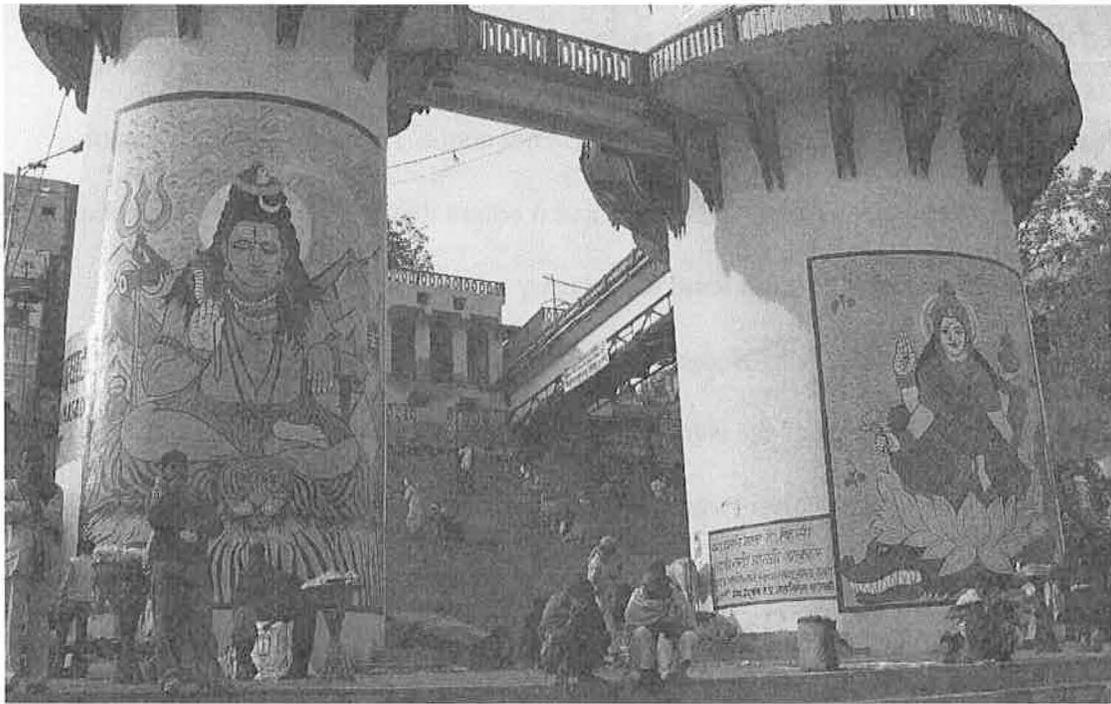


Figure 2. Murals of Shiva and Ganga on Dashashwamedha Ghat. On the left Ganga's head can be seen emerging from Shiva's *jata*. On the right, Ganga sits on her vehicle, the *makara* (crocodile). Next to the Ganga mural is sign in Hindi that says, "Ganga is our mother. Any man who throws dirty things into the river commits a sin."

I will later discuss the Ganga genesis story at some length, but first it's necessary to say a few words about 'purity' and 'pollution.' Most importantly when discussing

*gandagi*, which can be translated as “filth,” “dirtiness,” or “waste.” However, even this word is not without problems. As Kelly Alley has pointed out, “The American term *waste* lacks any relation to a sense of cultural place; it does not point to connections between place and power in the ways *gandagii* can.”<sup>18</sup>

In the last decade the emerging field of Religion and Ecology has stretched out its arms to embrace Hinduism. Many articles and several books and volumes of literature have been published, all primarily concerned with the question of whether or not Hinduism is “environmentally friendly.”<sup>19</sup> As David Haberman writes in his recent book on religion, pollution, and the Yamuna, “It is a misleading question that both reduces a complex tradition to a singularity and expects an answer never intended by any tradition.”<sup>20</sup> It is not the question I seek to answer. What I wish to do instead is explore one goddess tradition as it manifests in one city and how this tradition may have impacted the life of the river Ganga. Furthermore, the conclusions I will eventually draw in no way indicate that religious energy and devotion to Ganga cannot be harnessed to make a positive environmental impact. In fact, this has very clearly happened with some organizations and individuals, most notably Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra of Varanasi, whose NGO, the Sankat Mochan Foundation, works to fuse religion and ecology to “stop the abuse” of Mother Ganga. The obstacles facing such efforts are not religious; rather they

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<sup>18</sup> Alley, Kelly D. *On the Bank of the Ganges*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002:78.

<sup>19</sup> See: Chapple, Christopher Key & Tucker, Mary Evelyn, Ed. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Oxford UP, New Delhi, 2000; Nelson, Lance E., Ed. *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. D.K. Printworld Private Ltd., New Delhi, 2000; and, Prime, Ranchor. *Hinduism and Ecology: Seeds of Truth*. Motilal Banarsidass Private Ltd., New Delhi, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Haberman, David L. *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006:22

## Methodology

As any foreigner who comes to India to conduct research soon learns, almost any carefully planned methodology will inevitably include methods for data collection which turn out to be impossible or highly impractical, and the data one ends up with is often impermeable to familiar methods of analysis. If one has any hope of making sense of religious life in India, particularly when doing ethnography, it is by trying to see things from the informant's point of view, reading carefully between the lines, and putting everything in its cultural context. There is often some trepidation at having to abstract from what people say rather than taking them at their word, but as Wendy Doniger has written, this is not wrong if it is done carefully and only when appropriate. Just as India reveals our cultural biases to us, as outsiders, it is possible for us to see things that are hidden from our informants by their own cultural perspective.<sup>22</sup>

When I began to conduct fieldwork on this topic, it was with the intention of merging textual and ethnographic data in a way that would allow me to get the most accurate picture of how Ganga is understood in Varanasi. I considered that the best way to do this would be to gather as many different types of textual and ethnographic data as possible, so as to be able to see her from the greatest number of angles, and hopefully, by triangulation, determine where she stands in relation to different concepts and groups of people, particularly those present on the ghats themselves, where the religious life of the city and the worship, pollution, and discourses of Ganga unfold on a daily basis. That is not to say I merely had a brief look from different sides of the city or took a "bird shot" approach to studying Ganga. Rather, I did not exclude any category of data as irrelevant.

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<sup>22</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980:8.

Brahminical orthodoxy in Banaras means that, while many other traditions exist and thrive within the city as well, they are usually regarded in this way.

To provide further clarification, while all of my data was collected at my fieldwork site of Varanasi, its geographical scope cannot truly be limited to Varanasi alone. The constant turnover of pilgrims from all regions and the city's national significance make it, while not exactly cosmopolitan, something of a pan-Hindu city as previously discussed. There has always been something of a reciprocal relationship between the city and its pilgrims, as they exert influence on each other over time. I chose to interview pilgrims as well as residents because it would afford me the chance to see if there was anything markedly different about how Varanasi residents perceived a) Ganga the goddess, or b) the pollution. The pilgrims I interviewed were all from Northern and Central India, primarily Uttar Pradesh (in which Varanasi is located), Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal. In the section "Banarasi Perspectives" I focus exclusively on informants and religious practices native to Varanasi/Banaras. In all other sections I include data from both pilgrims and Varanasi residents.

My interviews took place in many locations and contexts including chai stalls, *dhabas* (small restaurants), temples, and private residences, often spontaneously, in the form of casual conversation, whenever the opportunity presented itself. Due to my limited Hindi skills, however, such spontaneous interviews were of limited usefulness and served mostly to confirm or contradict the data I was getting from my more formal interviews. The majority of my interviews took place on the ghats, where I went several times with a trusted Hindi-speaking research assistant and tape recorder. I interviewed residents and pilgrims on four ghats: Assi Ghat, Dashashwamedha Ghat, Kedar Ghat,

The limitations I faced in gathering data can be largely broken down into problems of semantics and social categories. The semantic problems extended far beyond the loaded nature of words such as “pradushan” or “gandagi” as previously discussed. Even when asking closed-ended questions with aim of determining, for example, if a devotee sees any difference between the river and the goddess, or whether or not the river is the body of the goddess, I found it extremely difficult to reach a phrasing of the question such that the informant would be able to answer it. More often than not such questions would be met with silence and an expression that indicated I had just asked something utterly ridiculous. This is probably due to the fact that my questions inevitably reflected a strongly Western mindset, and, as many students of South Asian religion have noted, Indian Hindus are simply much more comfortable with ideas that most Westerners would consider paradoxical or contradictory than most Westerners. The answer is not always “yes,” or “no,” but often “both.” As Morris Carstairs put it, “For them, it was no less provocative of anxiety to be asked to choose between two incompatible alternatives than it is for us to tolerate our own inconsistency.”<sup>24</sup>

Many of my open-ended questions, such as, “What kind of a goddess is Ganga?” met with similar reactions. Given the exacting detail with which Hindu literature and religious artwork portrays the divine, it was hard to believe this was a problem of asking people to define the indefinable. Perhaps this speaks to just how deeply entrenched ideas about this river goddess are: Ganga is Ganga, and the mere utterance of her name sums up everything one needs (or ought) to know about her. Questions such as, “What benefits do you get from worshipping Ganga?” fared slightly better, but were often met with

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 6.

My most significant problems came in getting information from women, who I considered critical to getting a complete picture of Ganga. I had hoped that being a woman myself this would not so great an issue, but few women were willing to talk to me at all. Of those that were, many claimed to be unable to answer my questions. “I don’t know anything. Why don’t you go talk to that *pandit*?” was a common response. Despite many sincere efforts, I was unable to convince them that their opinion was valuable to me, and I continued to be referred to male authority figures. Illiteracy was often cited as evidence of their ignorance. One female chai walla (tea vendor) on Pandey Ghat said to me matter-of-factly, “I spent my whole life raising my children. What do I know?” Middle and upper class women were the most willing to talk, but several times it happened that after a couple of questions the interview would be hijacked by her husband, after which the woman would merely offer affirmations of whatever her husband had said.

My analysis draws most heavily upon scriptural exegesis and sociological, ecofeminist analysis. My primary academic interest is in the area of religion and the environment, and I am most interested in determining how people’s religious perspectives have shaped their view of the natural world. Tracy Pintchman argues that, “The formulation of the Great Goddess may well have implications with respect to notions about gender and gender roles in Hindu society.”<sup>26</sup> I argue that, in so far as she is associated with natural phenomena, the formulation of the goddess has implications for environmental consciousness as well. In the West, “environmental consciousness” is largely a scientific phenomenon. While it has been argued that aspects of religion in the

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<sup>26</sup> Pintchman, Tracy. *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*. State University of New York Press, New York, 1994:18.

## The Goddess

Worship of the goddess as mother on the Gangetic plain goes back as far as a bone carving of a female fertility deity, carbon dated to 20,000 BCE and found in a cave in Mirzapur, only fifty kilometers from Varanasi.<sup>27</sup> While little is known about the culture that produced this image, there is more evidence of goddess by the Indus Valley civilization, which reached its peak during approximately 2300-1800 BCE.<sup>28</sup> Water worship was prevalent in this civilization, as was phallus worship, which was likely connected to a fertility god known to archaeologists as “proto-Shiva.”<sup>29</sup> The writers of the Vedas made comparatively few mentions of female divinity, which tended to take a back seat to heroic male divinity. In the words of Sudhakar Pandey, “The female deities of Vedic times had weak personalities.”<sup>30</sup> More suggestively, it has been noted that all of the Rig Vedic dialogues with women involve sexual seduction, where immortal women fail and mortal men succeed, but mortal women succeed and mortal men fail.<sup>31</sup>

Goddess worship slowly regained its popularity through the epic period, finally culminating in writing of the *Shakta Puranas* and the founding of shakta sects, which view the great Mother Goddess as supreme. Tracy Pintchman attributes this to the gradual merging of the Brahminical (represented by the Vedas) and non-Brahminical (represented by the Indus Valley civilization and other Dravidian or indigenous traditions) pantheons and theologies. “In order to maintain its status and acceptance in

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<sup>27</sup> Jayakar, Pupul. *The Earth Mother*. Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1990:xii.

<sup>28</sup> Darien, Steven G. *The Ganges in Myth and History*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd., New Delhi, 2001:39.

<sup>29</sup> Pandey, Sudhakar. *Ganga and Yamuna in Indian Art and Literature*. Indra Prakashan, Chandigarh, 1984:35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, Wendy. *The Rig Veda*. Penguin Books, New York, 1981:245.

*Shakti* comes from the Sanskrit root *shak*, “to be able,” and refers to energy or power on a cosmic level. It denotes the aspect of *Brahmin*, or ultimate reality, that is dynamic and creative. *Maya* is the result of the interaction of *prakriti* and *shakti*, that is, the material universe that is human experience.<sup>37</sup> It is often translated as “illusion,” and denotes the transitory nature of the material world that distracts from the Absolute and keeps one bound in cycles of *samsara* (rebirth). Ascetic traditions with which Varanasi has been long associated (as opposed to *bhakti*, or devotional traditions) are primarily concerned with lifting the veil of *maya* to uncover the true ultimate nature of the self and reality. Thus we can see how the Goddess’ creative powers have become associated with her power to create illusion and placed in opposition to the masculine principle of transcendent ultimate reality.

While *shakti* is positive, a concept near and dear many Hindus regardless of education, that links the Goddess to her fertility and reproductive power, it does not ultimately belong to her. Without *shakti* even the greatest gods in the Hindu pantheon would become impotent and powerless, but, as Wendy Doniger has pointed out, in scripture and mythology, “she derives this power from the authority of male gods in the first place, when they create her out of their own powers.”<sup>38</sup> There are many examples of this, the best known being the goddess Durga, who was created out of some of the essence of each one of the gods to defeat the buffalo demon, and, as we will later see, Ganga herself, who is said to derive her power from contact with each of the three primary male deities: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

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<sup>37</sup> Pintchman, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, Wendy. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*.129.

for fear of killing her, initiating the narrative translation project. If the goddess were viewed as simply malevolent, one would think devotees would be glad to get rid of her.

Ganga, as we will see later, appears to have transitioned from an independent daughter with many “fierce” aspects into the apotheosis of maternity, purity and benevolence, not officially married, but firmly under the control of Shiva, and often considered his consort. Her bountiful aspect, in the life-giving water that she brings to the Gangetic plain, and her connection to the life-cycle are obvious, but she has also been responsible for numerous floods, and her waters contain whirlpools and crocodiles that have been the end of more than a few devotees. No matter how many people drown in her waters, however, the river is considered a blessing, because by dying in such a way one is assured of immediate liberation.

On second look, Ganga is not so different from warlike Durga of the *Devi Mahatmyam*, who kills demons but in doing so sends them to heaven by touching them with the purity of her sword. Interestingly, Durga is also referred to as “Mother,” although she is unmarried and has no children. There is a link in the *Mahatmyam* stories of Maharashtra rivers studied by Feldhaus, where rivers are sometimes involved in killing demons, who are also sometimes transformed and liberated.<sup>41</sup> If demons are symbols for sin, as Feldhaus suggests, than martial descriptions of river’s obliteration of sin make more sense. The difference between Ganga and the Great Goddess of the *Devi Mahatmyam* and other Shakta texts seems to be that while the Great Goddess, of whom Durga is a part, “embraces the totality of reality,”<sup>42</sup> Ganga has become essentialized,

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<sup>41</sup> Feldhaus, Anne. *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*. Oxford UP, New York, 1995:181.

<sup>42</sup> Erndl, 158.

Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra,” Rita DasGupta Sherma argues that under orthodox Hinduism, this feminization ultimately negates any benefit that the initial sacralization may have had for the natural entity.<sup>46</sup> As we will see in the following sections, this has to do with traditional expectations of women and mothers in Hindu society and also with the general devaluation of the immanent feminine in favor of the transcendent masculine.

Sherma contrasts this phenomenon with the heterodox tradition of Hindu tantra, which has historically been practiced mostly by women, low-caste people, and the marginalized. In tantra, and also in the shakta traditions, the Great Goddess is the ultimate reality, and sacred immanence is not subordinated to sacred transcendence. Shiva is perceived as an element of *shakti*, rather than vice-versa, and “there is no stark matter/spirit dichotomy splitting body and soul.”<sup>47</sup> Sherma writes that it is “an emphasis on the sacred nature of ‘this world’ and the valorization of earthly life that especially distinguishes Goddess theology.”<sup>48</sup> In tantra women are still associated with the material, but this should result in honor and respect as opposed to suspicion, as material reality is conceived of as the body of the Great Goddess. Ritual purity and impurity are seen as human delusions for, ultimately, “to the pure, all things are pure.”<sup>49</sup> Sherma argues that, because of its reverence for materiality and the feminine principle, tantric philosophy could be a useful for “the cultivation of an earth-centered spirituality.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sherma, Rita DasGupta. “Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra.” *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. D.K. Printworld Private Ltd., New Delhi, 2000:96.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 124.

### A Note on Orthodox Womanhood

Prabhati Mukherjee writes in her book *Hindu Women: Normative Models* that, “There has been a gradual decline from a position where women enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom [in the pre-Vedic period] to a state of dependence under the full control of their husbands [in the classical period].” Reasons she cites include the “imposition of brahminical austerities on society,” and “foreign invasions of India affecting women’s status adversely.”<sup>53</sup> Rita DasGupta Sherma writes that orthodox, Brahminical Hinduism has historically branded women as impure, inferior, and as barriers to spiritual attainment.<sup>54</sup> This has much to do with the association of women in general with the construction of the “feminine principle” of *prakriti*, *shakti*, and *maya* that defines the goddess as discussed in the previous section. The feminine principle ties all women to the material realm of illusion and impurity, particularly because of their rhythmic bodily functioning, that is, menstruation.<sup>55</sup>

The Vedas and the epics continually warn against the dangers of woman. In the *Mahabharata* that nymph Narada states that “God created women with all kinds of vices and they were the worst possible sinners. They were so deadly that death, hell, snakes, all combined stood on one side and women on the other.”<sup>56</sup> The examples of the “good woman,” the foremost of whom is Sita, the wife of Rama, are all women who unquestioningly worship their husbands as gods and exhibit an incredible capacity to bear suffering. In fact, the traditional understanding is that only through serving the husband

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<sup>53</sup> Mukherjee, Prabhati. *Hindu Women: Normative Models*. Orient Longman Ltd., Hyderabad, 1978:5.

<sup>54</sup> Sherma, 100.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Mukherjee, 10.

become immortal. And there is that song, which says, ‘Oh Mother Ganga, I shall offer you chunri [a miniature dupatta, a scarf worn for modesty], make my suhaag [married state, i.e., husband] immortal.’ This is a devotional song for Ganga.” Another pilgrim woman from Dhanbad, Bihar, doing *puja* and having a *snan* on Dashashwamedha Ghat with her family explained that this tradition as started when “She [Ganga] Took Rama and Sita across her [in the *Mahabharata*] and then Sita asked for her blessing. She [Ganga] said that, ‘As long as my current keeps flowing, your sindoor [vermillion powder, a signifier of the married state] will remain eternal,’” meaning, of course that her husband would be granted immortality. A woman from Allahabad told me that, “If a woman does not have children, and she does the darshan of [looks reverently upon] the Mother [Ganga] with a pure heart, then God gives her children.” Every fall, on the occasion of a festival of the sun god, *Suryaraja*, thousands of women bathe in Lolarka Kund, near Tulsi Ghat, which is filled with Ganga water, in the hopes of being granted sons. Clearly, the tradition of women worshipping Ganga to fulfill obligations under the orthodox conception of women as wives and mothers is alive and well. This exemplifies not only their own commitments of orthodox womanhood but also their tendency to essentialize Ganga as an ever giving and nurturing mother, firmly in the category of the benevolent “goddess of the breast” described by Doniger.

mentioned Bhagiratha, his *tapasya* (asceticism), and usually the sons of King Sagara. All of these elements are also present in the much shorter *Mahabharata* version,<sup>62</sup> but for reasons I will discuss later, my fieldwork indicates that the *Ramayana Ganga avatarana* has been more influential and popular in Varanasi. I occasionally heard mention of Ganga washing over Vishnu's foot, but this was always told as an aside intended to lend even greater holiness and significance to Ganga. The lower popularity of the Vamana versions probably has to do with the prevalence and special significance that Shiva and Shaivism enjoys in Varanasi. After comparing it to the *Mahabharata* version, I will focus primarily on the *Ganga avatarana* of the *Ramayana*. First, however, the story of Ganga as the mother of Bhishma must be discussed in context.

In the *Mahabharata* Ganga is especially associated with seduction. Not only is she portrayed as a beautiful and bluntly seductive woman, but the river is often the site of seduction, especially by *apsaras* (e.g., Vol.1 151.1-6), and *gandharvas* and *apsaras* are portrayed as engaging in love play along her banks. (Vol.1 158.4) She becomes the mother of Bhishma by twice seducing King Shantanu, also known as Mahabhisha, once in heaven and once on earth. In the court of Brahma her skirt is blown up by the wind, exposing her. Everyone quickly looks away, except for Mahabhisha, who gazes at her "fearlessly," and is banished from heaven by Brahma as a result. Ganga is taken with him, and when she discovers the Vasus are cursed to be born as sons to King Shantanu, she agrees to become their mother and then drown them quickly to spare them a mortal life. She also insists, however, that she will leave him one living son, "so his lying with me for a son will not remain fruitless." Later, she rises seductively from the river while

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<sup>62</sup> When using verse numbers I will refer to: van Buitenen, J.A.B. Trans. *The Mahabharata*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973 (Vol. 1), 1975 (Vol 2-3).

actions are out of the control of even of her husband, a king. Her grief for Bhishma shows maternal tenderness but it also emphasizes the point that the series of events leading to the tragic battle at Kurukshetra began, in some respects, with her seduction of Mahabhisha/Shantanu and attempted seduction of his father. Traditionally, where inter-caste marriage is concerned, if the wife is of a higher caste than her husband it is said to go 'against the grain.' The fact that she is a higher being than her husband adds to the *adharmic* nature of the situation, which King Pratipa correctly recognizes can only bring destruction. The Pandava brothers and Karna are fathered by gods with mortal women, and are all born strong, beautiful, and virtuous, but the result of Shantanu's marriage to Ganga is tragic. Bishma, the only surviving son, is similarly beautiful and virtuous, but because of vow of celibacy he never fully participates in worldly life.<sup>64</sup>

Eck also notes that Ganga's grace is more necessary in the Kali Yuga, "when the traditional means of gaining release are too difficult for ordinary people."<sup>65</sup> This is a fairly common idea, referenced for example in the quote by Tusidas used as the epigraph. It is clear, especially in the context of the *Mahabharata*, that Ganga's power and purity and the *adharmic* nature of the age are intimately related, or rather, they are two sides of the same coin. It is reasonable to suggest that the more one emphasizes a strict interpretation of *dharma* and condemns *adharmic* behavior, the more it becomes necessary to emphasize Ganga's essential purity. There is tension, however, between this image and her image as a seductress not so unlike the *apsaras* who play along her banks. Feldhaus observed the connection between rivers and *apsaras*, arguing that the femininity of rivers is explained by the femininity of *apsaras*. "Rivers are female because *apsarases*

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<sup>64</sup> Narasimhan, Chakravarthi V. Trans. *The Mahabharata*. Columbia UP, NY, 1965:10.

<sup>65</sup> Eck, Diana. . "Ganga: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography." 167.

Ganga is often described as the elder sister of Yamuna, another important river goddess (despite being much larger at their confluence in Allahabad, or *prayag*, Yamuna is considered a tributary of Ganga), and in scripture she is also frequently described as the older sister of Uma, or Parvati, Shiva's wife. Parvati literally means "daughter of the mountain," and as Ganga originates in the Himalayas, she is also a daughter of the mountain. In the *Ramayana* version of the *Ganga avatarana* she is most frequently referred to as the daughter of the mountain king, Himavata or Himalaya. Other versions hold that Himavata had three daughters, Ganga, Ragini ("dawn" or "twilight"), and Parvati. All three performed austerities in an attempt to win the honor of becoming the mother of Shiva's son, but only Parvati was successful.<sup>67</sup> This marks a point of divergence between the literature and the perceptions of devotees, who were only occasionally aware of Ganga and Parvati's sibling relationship, and were far more likely to know of Parvati's jealousy over Ganga residing on her husband's head. That Ganga is the daughter of the King of the Mountains is significant, according to Stella Kramrisch, because "the Mountain in the cosmos of Indian myth was the center of that cosmos."<sup>68</sup> Of course, Shiva is also strongly associated with the mountains. Feldhaus devotes an entire chapter of her book to the relationship between "Mountains, Rivers, and Siva." In addition to the natural origin of rivers in the mountains, she concludes that, "rivers are seen, like Siva and mountains, to embody the wildness of nature. In addition... it may be that people... see rivers not simply as *similar* but as *complementary* to Siva and mountains. Rivers make possible the taming of the wilderness."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kramrisch, Stella. *The Presence of Shiva*. Princeton UP, Princeton, 1981:344.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 345.

<sup>69</sup> Feldhaus, 35.

The first thing one will note is that the *Mahabharata* version is much shorter, which indicates that the author of this section in all likelihood considered it significantly less important than the author of the *Ramayana*.<sup>71</sup> Supporting this theory is the fact that the *Ganga avatarana* is recited by Vishvamitra to an eager Rama and Lakshmana, who, after the story of her birth in heaven, “applaud” the tale and beg to hear more. (35.1-5) It is also followed by a *phala shruti*, while the *Mahabharata* version is not. Vishvamitra declares, “The tale I have just told you, ‘The Descent of the Ganges,’ brings one wealth, fame, long life, heaven, and even sons.” (43.20) In contrast, the *Mahabharata* version has the tale being told to Yudhisthira, who requests to hear not about Ganga, but about Bhagiratha. (104.3)

In the *Ramayana* version, Ganga’s status as the elder daughter of Himalaya is strongly emphasized and cast in a positive light. Daughter of the mountain (Himalaya) is the most common epithet used to describe her, and the effect is to evoke her power and consequence. When Suparna reveals the key to liberating the souls of the 60,000 sons of Sagara who have been reduced to ashes by the anger of the sage Kapila, he says, “you should not offer them the water of this world. Bull among men, the Ganges is the eldest daughter of Himalaya, It is she alone, the purifier of the world, who should purify these men now turned to heaps of ash.” (40.18-9) Vishvamitra’s story begins with how Ganga and Uma were born to Himalaya and his wife Mena. (34.13) The *Mahabharata* version, on the other hand, begins with King Sagara (after Yudhisthira requests to hear about Bhagiratha), and does not mention Ganga’s celestial birth or her relationship to Parvati at all. In fact, the only mention of her as a daughter is at the very moment of her descent:

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<sup>71</sup> All further citations of the epics in this section refer to Vol.1 of the *Ramayana* and Vol.3 of the *Mahabharata*, the *Balakanda* and the *Aranyakaparvan*.

great king? What should I give you? Speak, best of men, I shall carry out your word.”

(107.15) When he asks her to come down, she replies, “I shall accomplish what you ask, great king, beyond a doubt. But the impact from my fall will be most difficult to endure,” and then helpfully instructs him to propitiate Shiva so he will catch her. (107.20-4) In the *Ramayana* version, on the other hand, Bhagiratha does not speak directly to Ganga at all, but rather to Brahma, who grants him the boon and then acts as a go-between: when he had “addressed the king in this fashion, he spoke to the Ganges, and then went to heaven.” Shiva also appears in person, saying, “Best of men, I am pleased with you and will do what you desire. I shall bear the daughter of the mountain king on my head.”

(41.20-42.2) Two things are notable about this passage. First of all, Shiva is referred to as Umapati, the husband of Parvati. Secondly, the verb used here to mean hold, support, or bear, is the same one used to describe the work of Virupaksha, one of the elephants who support the earth, in 39.12. In other words, while Shiva may have no problem containing Ganga, he is effectively functioning as a beast of burden, and the reference to him as Parvati’s husband and Ganga as the daughter of the mountain king further reinforces the special status these goddesses are given in this passage.

There is another side to the respect and reverence shown to Ganga as daughter of the mountain by the author(s) of the *Ramayana Ganga avatarana*, in contrast with the *Mahabharata*’s caricatured depiction of her as a feckless seducer of and aid to kings and other divine beings. Her power is acknowledged, but therein lies a problem: it is so great that it could destroy the entire world. Brahma tells Bhagiratha, “the earth would not be able to withstand the force of the Ganges’ fall.” (41.25) In the *Ramayana*, Ganga’s seductive power is also connected with her procreative power. Like the abundance and

Effectively, Shiva succeeds in damming the river. Ganga is trapped in his *jata*, and cannot get out despite years of trying. One can only guess why Shiva kept her trapped for many years, or what about this made him “immensely pleased,” but there may be a clue in the word “confused.” It recalls what happened when Agni spilled Shiva’s semen into the river: “all the channels of the Ganges were filled with it... Then the Ganges spoke to him, the priest of all the gods. ‘O god, I cannot bear your powerful semen. A fire is burning within me, and my mind is confused.’” (36.14-5) “Confused” is translated from two different Sanskrit words, but these incidents express Ganga’s bewilderment at being overwhelmed in two different ways: first from within, having all her channels filled with the fiery substance, symbolizing Shiva’s masculine virility, and again from without, when she somehow becomes contained and trapped within Shiva’s *jata*, a symbol of his asceticism. In this way the force of nature that is Ganga becomes overpowered by the totality that is Shiva. *Duhsaha* (visarga not italicized), the word translated as “irresistible,” can also mean “hard to bear,” or “unendurable.” His pleasure and her confusion can only result from his incredible feat of containing the uncontainable. He is not satisfied by simply catching her and letting her descend. Unwilling to be like the elephant Virupaksha, he restrains her for a while to prove that he is ultimately the higher power. By the time she emerges, she is sufficiently chastened and domesticated that she “follow[s] in King Bhagiratha’s train.” (42.23) After she emerges from Shiva’s *jata* the gandharvas also decide to bathe in her, “Thinking, ‘Water fallen from Bhava’s body is holy.’” (42.17) Of course, she was holy before having any contact with Shiva, but now her holiness is defined by these first bathers in terms of association with him, just as modern bathers have cited her contact with Vishnu’s toe.

### Ganga's Descent: A Modern View

I asked many dozens of people on the ghats of Varanasi how Ganga came down from heaven. I received many answers, including incomprehension. All of the stories were somewhat different, but patterns did emerge. Usually most aspects of the stories told more closely reflected the *Ramayana* version, with one exception. Ordinary devotees, priests and pilgrims alike often described Ganga herself as mediating the terms of her descent, and only occasionally did Brahma enter the equation.

One *sadhu* on Dashashwamedha Ghat told me, "She [Ganga] had told Bhagiratha to do penance for Shankarji [Shiva], saying that only after Shankarji will bear the brunt of her force would she come to earth." Similarly, one pilgrim who had come to do *tarpan* for the souls of his ancestors on Dashashwamedha Ghat gave this typical response to the question, "Why does Gangaji live in Shiva's *jata*?"

Because Ganga's current was very strong. When she got ready to come to earth, she asked the question, "Who on earth will check my speed (force)?" [kaun mera veg rokega?] If there is no one to do that then I will go straight to paataal [the underworld] and I will not remain on earth." So then Bhagiratha did tapasya for Shankarji [Shiva].

Although she is often described as requesting that Shiva catch her, when asked, "Did Gangaji *want* to remain in Shiva's *jata*?" people usually answered with a strong "No." One resident housewife, when asked this question exclaimed, with a quizzical look, "No, why on earth would she want to remain in Shivaji's *jata*?" The minority that answered in the affirmative to this question were usually sexualized the relationship between Shiva and Ganga and focused on the *ménage a trois* between Shiva, Ganga, and Parvati. A boatman on Dashashwamedha Ghat responded, "Yes, because Shankarji also

heaven.”<sup>73</sup> It is important not to confuse, “she came to earth to grant them liberation,” and, “she wanted to come to earth to grant them liberation.” When I asked, “Did Gangaji want to come to earth?” the residents of Banaras and visiting pilgrims almost universally answered, “No.” Of the fifty-some people of whom I asked this question, a few were ambivalent, and only once did I hear a definitive, “Yes” (from a middle-class woman from Allahabad who had her two young sons with her, and stressed Ganga’s compassion for all people as her children). Many contrasted the pleasant, easy life Ganga lead in heaven with the difficult one she now leads on earth, where she has the dirty job of cleaning up everyone’s sin. Some explained the great importance she holds as a type of recompense for this indignity. A middle aged, working-class male Brahmin devotee of Ganga, who comes to Assi Ghat every morning to do her puja, was one of these:

When Ganga came down from heaven, initially she was not willing to stay on earth. She pleaded with Vishnu Bhagawan [the Supreme Lord Vishnu] that she did not wish to live on earth. Then Vishnu Bhagawan said to her, "I know you will have to encounter a lot of sin there, and a lot of dirt will be thrown into you, but, as a compensation, you will be entitled to half of all the puja done on earth." That's why in every puja, if Ganga jal [holy water] is not sprinkled on the puja materials, the puja is not considered clean. Ganga came to earth on this condition.

From this perspective, Ganga certainly did not come “in her great mercy.” At best, it was a type of begrudging willingness brought about by acknowledgement of the immediate necessity. An elderly female flower-seller on Assi Ghat told me, “Initially Ganga was reluctant to come to earth, but Bhagirath convinced her that she needed to come to earth to purify it.” Another elderly woman from Bihar who had come to live out

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<sup>73</sup> Eck, Diana. *Banaras: City of Light*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982:211.

Further elucidating the perception of Ganga by her devotees, the characterization of Ganga as “proud” or “haughty” and “insolent” as it is recorded in some versions of



Figure 3. Ganga, represented by two women kneeling on the heads of crocodiles, flowing from the hair of a combined image of Vishnu/Shiva, Khajuraho temple.

scripture has been well absorbed by popular understanding. (It is hard to know whether these versions reflect or inspired this understanding.) Ganga’s “haughtiness” is most often brought up (without any prompting) by upper-caste men and pandits or pandas. Dr. Jitendra Nath Dubeui, the

Mahant (head priest) of the Kashi Kedar Temple (a Shiva temple) was among the many who affirmed this. He told me that, “When Gangaji set off to come to earth, she became slightly arrogant [ghamand ho gayaa]. She thought to herself, ‘when I descend, who will check my force?’ [kaun mera veg rokega?] Meaning that her flow had so much speed [tej] in it, that no one would be able to stop it. Then everyone got together and decided that only Lord Shiva had the strength to check her force [veg].” Another example is that of a panda on Dashashwamedha Ghat who told me that Shiva “trapped Gangaji in his jata,” because “he had become angry” with her arrogance.

Ganga’s arrogance, however, is only the proximate cause of her being caught in Shiva’s *jata*. The ultimate cause, as understood by Hindus in Banaras,

by and assimilated into totality. After emerging from Shiva's *jata* Ganga is no longer the daughter of the mountain but Bhagirathi, the daughter of Bhagiratha.<sup>74</sup> Her sibling relationship to Parvati is subsumed under her ambiguous status as co-wife. She is not quite married but not quite single. Much of Ganga's particularity has been lost, and her identity and significance is now largely the province of male *tapasya*.

One Dashashwamedha pandit put it quite succinctly: "Shankarji released Gangaji onto earth only after diminishing her power to a considerable extent." Of course he is not directly referring to her divine powers or *shakti*, but as we have already seen, *shakti* and hydraulic power are not insignificantly linked. Even not knowing this it would be easy to infer that something fundamental has happened to the nature of Ganga's divinity over the course these events. In heaven she was, according to some, "arrogant" and haughty, and tried to plead her way out of coming to earth. She thought she would be able to flow straight past Shiva, but she was wrong. There is another incident of Ganga being swallowed up by Rishi Jahnu that is sometimes mentioned, reinforcing the message of Ganga being tamed and put in her place. A particularly violent version of the story which includes both incidents and illustrates especially well the change in Ganga's nature from arrogant to repentant (and also presents destruction as Ganga's intention) was told to me by a young Brahmin man who is a part-time pandit at the Kashi Kedar Temple, in response to the follow-up question, "Why did Ganga not want to come to earth?":

Because she used to say, "On earth there are sinners; I won't go."  
And she first ran to Vishnu, but Vishnu told her that "You will have to go to earth, like it or not, because the God of the gods, Mahadev [Shiva], is calling you, and even I cannot refuse him." Then at that time Ganga came down to earth, but very arrogantly, and in a fury, thinking to herself, "I

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<sup>74</sup> See the *Ramayana*, Vol. 1, 43.5-7, and the *Mahabharata*, Vol.3, 108.17.

Lakshmi [the wife of Vishnu, of whom Krishna is one of many incarnations or *avatars*].”<sup>77</sup> This somewhat elucidates the unique position these rivers hold in orthodox Hindu theology. They are both associated with one of the major gods, but not as a main or first wife, and are usually worshiped independently. Instead, they are variously ascribed the somewhat tenuous positions of “lover” or “co-wife.” It is as if these powerful, life-giving river goddesses were accepted into the orthodox Hindu pantheon, but with reservations, particularly in the case of Ganga, who, according to the young Brahmin pandit’s version, threatened to destroy the world, had to be tied up, begged for forgiveness, clashed with a sage, and begged for forgiveness again. His story clearly establishes the superiority of Parvati, the “good wife.” It appears that Ganga’s independent side, the side of her that represents nature, is perceived as dangerous by a significant portion of Brahminical orthodoxy even to the present day.



Figure 4. A postcard image showing Ganga and Shiva gazing seductively at one another while Ganga rests in Shiva’s *jata* and Bhagiratha prays for her release.

<sup>77</sup> Haberman, 119.

Those who denied the existence of the pollution tended to be extremely fervent in this belief, and seemed to have been put on the defensive by public service announcements and media campaigns professing the opposite. When I asked one pollution-denying pandit on Pancaganga Ghat if he drank Ganga water, he puffed out his chest and struck it with his fist for emphasis as he said, “Daily, every day, every single day. There are three hundred sixty-five days in a year, and I drink Ganga water three hundred sixty-six days. And I drink it in plenty. And do I look sick to you?” Later he went on to say, “If anyone were to say in front of me that Gangaji has become dirty, then I would beat him up.” (Needless to say, I did not push the issue.) An elderly widow from Bihar living at a temple on the same ghat told me calmly but resolutely, “I know that my mother Ganga remains pure.” Part of the reason for this denial comes from the semantic overlap between terms such as *ashuddha* and *ganda*, and part of it comes from the fact that the religious discourse, which, by the most literal interpretation, precludes such a possibility, is still the dominant discourse in many parts of Varanasi. Kelly Alley also found this to be the case. She concluded that, “the religious interpretation of Mother Ganga claims the greatest measure of hegemonic power.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite this hegemonic power, signs of Ganga’s pollution are difficult to ignore, and among those I interviewed, particularly residents and those who visit the river daily, complete denial was a minority opinion, which may suggest a shift from recent years.<sup>79</sup> In many places, especially near sewage drains and downstream of the heart of the city, the water is dark and foul smelling, and in nearly all places the banks are lined with heaps of

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<sup>78</sup> Alley, Kelly D. *On the Bank of the Ganges*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002:234.

<sup>79</sup> Stille, Alexander. “The Ganges’ Next Life.” *The New Yorker*. Jan 19 (1998):65.

devotees and religious leaders tended to bring up Ganga's status as "Mother." A female pilgrim on Dashashwamedha Ghat said in response to the question "Does the pollution make Ganga angry?" – "That is hard for me to say. Of course she is a mother, and a mother forgives everyone. A mother has a very big heart and she forgives everyone. That is why she is still here on this earth, otherwise she would have left earth and gone back [to heaven] a long time ago." An interesting variation on this theme was brought up by a pandit on Dashashwamedha who said in response to the same question, "She is not concerned with the extent to which you will pollute her. Just as a woman remains pure both before and after marriage, similarly our Mother [Ganga] is pure," suggesting a connection between the "pollution" of a woman by sex and the pollution of Ganga by material waste. One female flower seller on Dashashwamedha even represented the pollution as part of Ganga's wifely subservience. When I asked her, "What do you think about all the filth and pollution in Gangaji?" she replied, "The Mother came to earth to put up with all this [sab sahne ke liye]. Ganga's husband [Shiva] said to her, 'Go to earth and suffer every possible kind of human behavior.'"

These informants confirmed Kelly Alley's statement that Banaras residents, "think of the river in gender-specific ways, linking femininity not only with purificatory power but with motherliness, housekeeping and cleanup, and forgiveness."<sup>80</sup> When asked directly, however, they did not depict Ganga's motherly forgiveness in contrast to fatherly forgiveness or discipline. I asked over two dozen devotees what would happen if someone were to pour *gandagi* on a lingam, Shiva's aniconic representation, in the same way that *gandagi* has been poured into Ganga. All the devotees, besides finding this to be

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<sup>80</sup> Alley, 98.

Rama, is Ganga's lot, and graceful acceptance of it is part of what makes her a good role model. Moreover, from observation of people's behavior around Shiva temples and around the river, it is clear that a much more reverent attitude is maintained towards the temples, where, despite the fact that flowers may indeed be offered with dirty hands, shoes, spitting, and relieving oneself are strictly prohibited. As previously mentioned, some temples, particularly the Vishwanatha temple, do not even allow non-Hindus due to their ritual impurity. If Shiva and Ganga are equally forgiving as divine parents, then why is there this tendency to tread so much more carefully in the presence of Shiva? Taking my fieldwork as a whole, I maintain that this is a case where there is some disconnect between beliefs and attitudes. The gods may not get angry, but one may still fear negative repercussions as a result of having behaved disrespectfully towards them, and where Ganga and Shiva are involved, it seems that people are more likely to fear repercussions as a result of behaving disrespectfully towards Shiva.

There was a third group, however, that believed that Ganga does in fact get angry, and that those who pollute and disrespect her will have to suffer the consequences, in this life or the next. One elderly female flower seller on Assi Ghat responded to the question, "Does the pollution make Ganga angry?" by saying, "Of course. If someone commits excesses against me, I will get angry. One should not commit excesses. She likes people who understand her nature. If I mistreat Ganga, she will surely get angry with me, but if I pray to her for liberation then she will be favorably inclined towards me." A middle-class pilgrim woman from Madhya Pradesh said, "Of course she will feel angry. [gussa to aega hi], because it is an unthinkable [anarth] act they are committing. The flooding that takes place during the monsoons is the angry face of Ganga. During that time she flows in

Many of those who affirmed Ganga's anger also stated or implied that there would be consequences for those who pollute. A male devotee on Pancaganga Ghat said, in reference to the pollution, "There are many kinds of sin that are not worth forgiving. There are sins that are not forgivable in the court of your parents or your guru. And there are sins which are not forgiven even in the court of God." A female devotee on the same Ghat said, "As are one's actions [karma], so shall be the fruit [reward] that one will receive." Dr. Jitendra Nath Dubeui, Mahant of the Kashi Kedar temple, gave one of the more explicit warnings to sinners in response to the question, "Is Ganga angered or hurt by the pollution?"

It is only natural that she does. If I misbehave with you, then you will get angry. If anyone were to behave badly towards you, then you will get angry won't you? When someone spits into Gangaji or urinates on her bank she definitely feels pained by these things. But the person who makes her suffer in this way will necessarily have to pay the price for that action... Necessarily, every action that you do, you will have to get the fruit of that action. If you are doing good, you will receive good. If you are doing bad you will receive bad. When Gangaji or the gods punish someone for their actions, then they make them suffer bodily. That person has to work off their [bad] karma by suffering physically. It is called *prayashchit* [repentance], and one has to repent, whether one likes it or not.

Although it is a minority opinion, the belief that the pollution is offensive to the goddess and will be punished through the natural operation of *karma* is clearly extant in Varanasi. Moreover, this belief is held by a wide cross-section of people, from illiterate women to the mahant of this highly significant temple. Given that it is based on such a simple and universal principle, one must ask why it is not more prevalent. Based on my interviews, this appears to be due to either a complete denial or unawareness of the

own mother gives birth to you and takes care of you, in the same way Ganga gives wealth, happiness, and children.”<sup>86</sup> The characterization of Ganga as “Mother” is not just honorary, but the basis for understanding the nature of her divinity.

Also of particular note is the blurring of the distinction between sin or ritual impurity and physical pollution revealed by and religious leaders and devotees who denied the pollution or who said that Ganga was not angered or harmed by the pollution. Kelly Alley notes that “Some Hindus living in cities in Uttar Pradesh invoke the scientific notion of water quality to support the master narrative of Ganga’s sacrality.”<sup>87</sup> A common example of this is the assertion that if Ganga water is stored in a bottle or other container for a long period of time, even years, it will never “go bad” (*kharab*) like regular tap water. I was told several times that if Ganga water is stored, “no worms will grow in it,” and even a few times that one would not find any “microorganisms,” contrary to the Sankat Mochan Foundation’s lab results.

It appears that the dominant religious discourse has attempted to absorb the scientific one. On the other side of the issue, however, is the all-pervading nature of Hinduism’s sacred ecology. Mother Ganga can only be pure and polluted when one accepts the existence of two separate realms of being. This explains why very traditional Hindus, for whom Ganga is just as divine on earth as she is in heaven, often accuse government officials and activists who bring up the issue of Ganga’s pollution of being anti-religious. Because Ganga, as a representation of the feminine principle, manifests sacred immanence much more strongly than sacred transcendence, if her immanent form

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>87</sup> Alley, Kelly D. *On the Bank of the Ganges*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002:66.

## Banarasi Perspectives

*Hail to you, O Mother Ganga, O river goddess  
Your devotee has all his desires fulfilled  
You are glorious like the moon, your water is clear and pure  
Whoever surrenders himself before you transcends all difficulties  
The whole world knows that you redeemed the sons of King Sagar  
Your kind eyes give happiness to all the three worlds  
One who comes into your shelter is saved from the agony of death,  
is liberated from the cycle of rebirth and attains heaven  
One who chants your name regularly is relieved of misery  
and will easily attain liberation*

These are the words of an *aarti* song played and sung for Mother Ganga on ghats across Varanasi every night. A conch shell is blown to summon the goddess, after which she is offered incense, flowers, cloth, the cooling wave of fans, the chanting of mantras, and several displays of fire, all to the sound of clanging bells and gongs. This ceremony, which has been performed in one form or another for hundreds, if not thousands of years, is explicitly called “Ganga *aarti*,” yet during it devotees sing the praises of many other deities as well, not the least of whom is Shiva. The ceremony on Assi Ghat is often ended with several rounds of “Kashi Vishwanatha ki jai!” (hail to Shiva as Lord of Kashi and the Universe). The more popular *aarti* on Dashashwamedha Ghat is even more notable for this, and in fact it would be easy for a foreigner familiar with the many names of Shiva to think that the *aarti* was for him, if only the ceremony didn’t take place by the water itself. Near the end of the Assi *aarti* two devotees recite a series of Sanskrit verses and mantras, some from the Vedas, which begins with praise to Shiva: “He whose group of *jatas* are beautiful like the waves of the Ganga; He whose left side is always adorned by Parvati; The beloved of Vishnu and the destroyer of sexual desire.”

[pataal] by my weight." She explained that the Milky Way galaxy is "akash Ganga," the Ganga that flows in heaven, and said, poetically, "You will feel that a river is flowing in the sky when you see the stars." Continuing with the story, she explained that "When she [Ganga] fell from heaven with a great bang, Shivaji opened his locks in this way [illustrates with hand motion] and he absorbed her completely into his jata. He absorbed all her tej [force or brilliance] inside him." Only a small amount of Ganga was released, but the force of the river seen on earth attests to her power: "She is still in Shivaji's jata. He only let go three drops of Ganga and merely from the three drops such a surging current of water came about," Mishra informed me. She related the story of her pilgrimage to Gomukh, the glacier that is considered the main source of the Ganga, many years ago: "The place where Ganga originates looks like the mouth of a cow, and all this strong current has originated from that place. She does not originate as a huge waterfall, but she seems to come out from a cow's mouth. And this original stream that comes out from the cow's mouth falls on to Shankarji [Shiva], who is sitting there."

In addition to affirming that Ganga did not want to come to earth, Mishra affirmed that Ganga came to earth in a wild, dangerous fury. It was only after she was captured by Shiva that "Her anger subsided." She further explained that, "That's why when people here bathe in Gangaji, they say loudly, 'Har Har Mahadev Bhagirath' They mention the names of both, Shiv and Bhagirath, because Bhagirath brought Gangaji to earth, and Mahadev absorbed her into his jata" (as they also do during the *aarti*). However, she disagreed that the goddess Ganga is angered or affected by the pollution, citing the detached nature of God, who sees everything on a much larger scale than simple human beings, as the reason. In response to the question, "What does Gangaji

rivers go and merge into the ocean. And the ocean is supreme. Gangaji also merges into the ocean... All of them have immersed themselves completely in the ocean. But the ocean does not get increased or diminished by the addition of the rivers.” Mishra further explained that, “In our scriptures God has said, ‘Consider your husband God, and be reverential towards him as you would be reverential towards God, and if you do that I will be very pleased with you and will make you entitled to go to heaven. And if you insult you husband even the least bit, or if you fight with him, then you will go to hell [narak].’” The implication here seems to be that while all of the female rivers offer their waters to the male ocean and become “submerged” in him, the ocean does not “need” the rivers, just as God is not said to “need” the devotee, or the husband his wife, whether or not that is actually the case. The ocean is a notable exception to the feminization of nature, undoubtedly because of its vastness and its immense power, which are considered to be characteristics of the masculine.

Another Banarasi Hindu who holds masculine power to be supreme was Dr. Jitendra Nath Dubeui, the mahant of the Kedar Kashi temple who characterized Ganga as “slightly arrogant” and said that those who polluted her would have to “pay the price” for their actions. Dubeui said that initially Ganga did not want to come to earth, “Because she was apprehensive of the large number of sinners she would have to encounter here on earth. She thought to herself, ‘Oh how many sinners will climb onto me, will jump into me?’” He told a story in which Ganga’s flow is checked by Shiva yet again, this time in Varanasi, and in which he frightens her into submission:

There is a temple here called Shooltankeshwar Mahadev. When Ganga had set off for earth with her original strong flow, then to check her, Shankarji hurled his trident onto the ground at the very place where this



Figure 6. The ghat-side entrance to the Kashi Kedar temple, which allows devotees to have *darshan* (holy sight) of Ganga and the Shiva lingam at the same time.

the importance of Ganga has diminished in this Kaali Kaal [the Kali Yuga].” Dubeui suggested that greater education was needed, saying, “Only if everyone becomes aware that Gangaji should be cleaned will she become clean.” However, Dubeui also stated that he and everyone in his household bathes in and drinks Ganga water on a daily basis, and Ganga water continues to be used in his temple. He

explained this by saying, “For a

devotee, whatever kind of water gets mixed into Ganga jal becomes Ganga jal. People are going about their lives thinking this way about Gangaji.”

I found the responses of young people to among the most straightforward, from my perspective, which I attributed to either the fact of their being more Westernized than their elders or having had less time to be indoctrinated in the dominant religious discourse, and probably some of both. One eighteen year old boy I met who works in his uncle’s *dhaba* (small restaurant providing cheap, simple food) in Assi provides a particularly good example of what I mean by “straightforward.” He was insistent that

about Shiva from a daily television serial called “Aum Namah Shivaya” (a popular mantra in praise of Shiva). He further informed me that Shiva is the strongest god in the universe, because he created all forms. “All the people believe this,” he said, apparently ignorant of the devi tradition alive and well in the large Durga temple less than a kilometer away. Will television rewrite the history of popular Hinduism? That is a topic for another paper, but what I want to point out is that this young man made the obvious connection that so many older people were unwilling to make because it would have compromised the Vedantic dogma so popular since the independence movement that all gods are really one, and therefore there can be no inequality amongst them.

Another young person I spoke with was Baby, a fifteen year-old girl who sells *diyas* on Dashashwamedha Ghat. She said that she does puja of Ganga every day, and when I asked her why, she said, “Everyone says you get merit [punya] by doing so... Everyone does puja, that's why I also do it.” She said that she bathes in Ganga daily even though she knows the river is polluted: “Yes, we still bathe in her. We consider her to be pure [pavitra]. But if you go to the next ghat you will find that water from the gutter is falling into Gangaji, bringing all the garbage of the city into her.” It seemed that this girl, like many others, had been able to create a mental divide between the “pure” Ganga and “all the garbage of the city,” and thus remained undisturbed by it. When I asked what blessings she gets from Gangaji, she gave me as concrete an answer as one could ask for: “I rely on her for my livelihood.”

Dr. Ramesh Panda, a professor of Sanskrit at Banaras Hindu University and a *purohit* (temple priest) at the BHU New Vishwanatha Temple, who was also my teacher, makes a pastime of delivering lectures (both formal and informal) on the high level of

consistent with the statement of one Vaishnava devotee on Dashashwamedha Ghat that, “Ganga Maa knows what you need even without your asking.” Food, that most basic of necessities, is one of the vehicles through which Dr. Panda’s philosophy claims dependence on the mother: “If there is no lady in the house, or if the wife is sick, then how will you get food? How will you eat? You must go to a hotel [restaurant], and then you will get sick.” When I asked him if there is a connection between how women are currently being treated and how people have been treating Ganga, he responded by saying, “It is the same with Gangaji, because Gangaji is also a lady. For example, if a lady is walking on the road, and some boys make some [offensive] comments at her, it is just like when people throw trash in Gangaji.”

Dr. Panda falls into the large category of people who attribute Ganga’s problems to a lack of respect for or faith in supposed traditional Hindu beliefs and values. This perspective acknowledges a connection between human maintenance of Ganga’s ecological health and *dharma*, or religious duty, and is consistent with the theological concept of the Kali Yuga, but lacks a certain amount of credibility in Kashi, possibly the most traditional city of its size, where expressions of faith and devotion are never in short supply. A pilgrim may remove his or her shoes at the top of the ghat, offer salutations to Gangaji before taking a holy dip, and pay for extensive *pujas*, but this has no effect on the sewage or industrial waste entering the river. The disconnect between transcendent goddess and immanent river still remains. Moreover, it holds as self-evident, and therefore refuses to examine, the complex relationship of the devotee with the divine mother and its effect on that which she is physically called upon to sustain.

Mishra which provides low-cost housing for foreign researchers and students and creates a social nucleus for the expatriate community.

The ghat itself is inundated with foreign presence. Just adjoining and around the corner from the ghat are two luxury hotels, the Ganges View and Hotel Palace on Ganges, and overlooking the ghat is Vatika, a popular tourist restaurant, the Kashi Annapurna Bookstore, and a recently opened Internet Café. Also around the corner is the very popular Harmony Bookshop. Both bookstores deal almost exclusively in English-language books. On Assi ghat there is a nightly aarti service that provides a space for community worship but is also useful in attracting tourists. It is rare to find the ghat being utilized exclusively by locals, and moreover it is here that one observes the most interaction between foreigners and locals. As expatriates and long-term tourists are more likely to speak some Hindi, and Assi is the ghat most popular with English-speaking students from the University, much interaction is driven by the desire of both groups to hone their language skills.

In Assi, the presence of a less transitory foreign community and greater interaction between foreigners and locals in Assi has undoubtedly had some effect on the way local people view the condition of the river. It is likely that this greater acceptance of the river's pollution is a result of that interaction. This acceptance has not, however, changed behavior or created any significant new movements address the pollution of the Ganga.

its exploitation, and by beginning to examine how different traditions and narratives interact and compete to create the potent symbols that construct religious and material reality. In the case of Ganga, her status as Mother constructs her identity sometimes to the exclusion of all else. She is, as one devotee put it, the goddess who “gives you everything.” As Mother, it is her job to give and to suffer, to endure endlessly without demanding anything for herself. It is possible that Ganga’s status as Mother could be understood in a more positive way, as exemplified by Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra, the Varanasi activist who would say to devotees, “Ganga is our mother. Come and see what is being thrown on the body of your mother – sewage and filth. Should we tolerate sewage being smeared on the body of our mother?”<sup>93</sup> However, as my fieldwork illustrates, this is a minority view.

One thing many have yet to recognize about the goddess Ganga is that, at least mythologically, she was not always the “good mother” that she is known as today. According to many versions of the Ganga descent story, as we have seen, before coming to earth she was a wild, untamed goddess of great power, who flowed everywhere at will and sanctified all creatures. She has great reproductive power, as only her cool waters could produce an embryo from Shiva’s fiery seed. In the *Ganga avatarana* of the *Ramayana* it is affirmed that she was so powerful that her force would destroy the earth if Shiva did not catch her. Among the residents and pilgrims in Varanasi, there is a strong popular understanding that Ganga never wanted to come to earth in the first place, and it was only through obligation or coercion by Bhagiratha and the gods that she eventually descended. She is understood, especially by Brahmin men, to have been arrogant and

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<sup>93</sup> Stille, Alexander. “The Ganges’ Next Life.” *The New Yorker*. Jan 19 (1998):65.

drought and famine,<sup>96</sup> more akin to the way that the so-called “fierce goddesses” or “goddesses of the tooth” are worshipped today. Remnants of this older conception of Ganga remain, for example in the boat owner who said that “the full force of Ganga's anger” can be seen during her floods. Even women who worship Ganga in the hope of giving birth to sons are a testament to her connection to fertility and reproduction. Yet for most devotees Ganga is holy primarily for her ability to grant *moksha*, a goal which inherently assumes that living in the material world is not worthwhile, and because she is “Bhagirathi,” because she comes from Brahma’s *kamandalu*, because she “washes over the foot of Vishnu,” and because she “flows from Shivaji’s *jata*.” That is, she is not holy because she is a giver of life, or because she is an aspect of the goddess, but because she liberates from life and has contact with three important male deities, and thus brings some of their essence with her.

It is likely that the self-sacrificing and self-effacing aspects of Ganga were strengthened as the Brahminical orthodoxy gained prominence. It would have been necessary to make Ganga into a more desirable role model in order for her to be fit for a prominent place in the orthodox pantheon, which her great geographical importance insured she would not be denied. The Ganga descent story itself has a ring of the archetypal “conquest of nature” (and similarly, conquest of woman) story. It is all the more significant that her conquest is effected by Shiva, the powerful male god who has great erotic powers but is also the foremost of ascetics, and who in his extremes represents the abstract totality of human existence. In his matted locks her waters were “dammed,” making them safe for humans in narrative and ritual.

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<sup>96</sup> Pandey, Sudhakar. *Ganga and Yamuna in Indian Art and Literature*. Indra Prakashan, Chandigarh, 1984:21.

tend to obfuscate the sources of pollution in the river,<sup>98</sup> and in my interviews informants were far more likely to mention bathers, flowers, animals, and *paan* spit as sources of pollution than sewage. None mentioned industrial waste. Those who did mention the drains tended to express a sense of powerlessness in the face of corrupt and ineffective government. “What can we do?” (*Kya kare?*) said one man, throwing his hands in the air. Perhaps things would not look so hopeless, or at least hopelessness would not be such a barrier to action, if the preservation of natural systems such as the Ganga was viewed as a religious duty. The *Mahabharata* states, “Dharma exists for the general welfare (*abhyudaya*) of all living beings; hence, that by which the *welfare* of all living creatures IS sustained, that for sure is *Dharma*.”<sup>99</sup>

Given the powerful nature of the concept of *dharma*, it is possible that if the understanding of *dharma* expounded in this passage were related to the care of nature and discussed widely among Hindus it would inspire action even in the face of such bleak circumstances. It would be justified to ask whether it is ethical to mine, and potentially exploit, a tradition in such a way, if the magnitude of the looming environmental crisis facing humanity, of which Ganga is only a small part, were not so dire, and if the pollution of Ganga was not a threat to the tradition itself. Haberman argues that environmental action as religious duty is sustainable mentally and emotionally: “Environmental action as *seva* [religious duty] is surrendered action: it involves fighting the battle lovingly each moment while surrendering to the bigger picture.”<sup>100</sup> Dr. Veer

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<sup>98</sup> Alley, Kelly D. *On the Bank of the Ganges*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002:37.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in: O.P. Dwivedi. “Dharmic Ecology.” *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Oxford UP, New Delhi, 2000:13.

<sup>100</sup> Haberman, 191.

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