

Jai Gange!

'Ganga Maiya' or Mother Ganges is a testimony to the immutable undercurrent of Indian thought, spirituality & philosophy. French writer and photographer, Mireille-Joséphine Guézennec, follows this sacred river's course to live the experience...



From its source glacier to the delta...no river in the world plays a more important religious, economic, social and cultural role in the lives of the people than the Ganges. Guided by its mesmerising course, we take a journey along its wonderful and generous waters that bathe the earth and fertilise the hearts of fervent men.

An initiatory journey

The Ganga beckons pilgrims from India and the entire world. Leaving the holy city of Haridwar, near the Himalayas, the author, a devout herself, undertook the pilgrimage towards Chardham, the four spiritual centres in Uttaranchal, then onwards to the venerable sources at the glacier of Gaumukh, dominated by the glittering summit Shivaling (6,500m).

Descending towards the lowlands, we followed the destiny of the river and its tributaries to 'Panchaprayag,' the confluence of five places towards Rishikesh, the ancient city of



yogis. After a brief stopover in Allahabad, the ancient Prayag, we stayed for a while in Varanasi, the mysterious 'Kashi' city of light, entwined by its mazes that have been witness to sacred rites of passage since millennia. Finally we took to the road towards Bengal and finally Ganga-Sagar, where the dispersed waters of the river merged with the ocean, in the vastness of eternity...

The enchantment of a river

A source of resplendent life, the Ganga has never ceased to inspire hearts in mythical odes, symbols and in art since the beginning of humanity. Her celestial origin and labyrinthine course covers over a distance of over 2,700 kilometres. Multitudes of pilgrims throng her banks at large holy cities, to perform the ritual bath and pujas. Every evening, at sunset, thousands of fire lamps are set afloat on the river in obeisance to the celebrated waters.

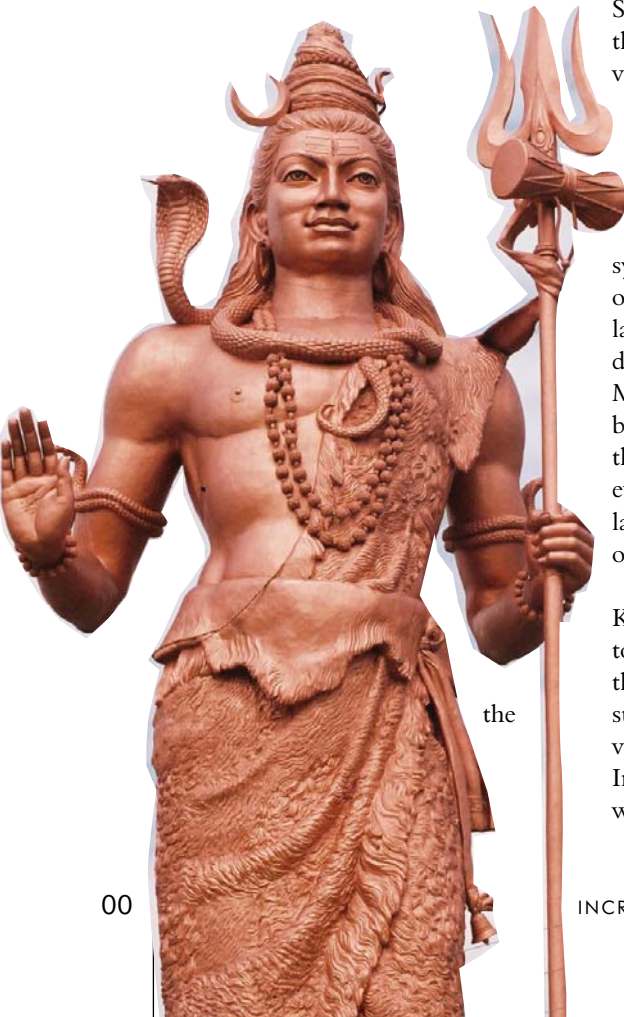
Mythically rising from Mount Kailash, the fabled residence of Shiva to the glacier of Gaumukh (3,950m) the sources of Bhagirathi-Ganga, her streams multiply in the Himalayan valley before descending to irrigate the Indo-Gangetic plains and later merging with the delta at the Bay of Bengal.

Sometimes calm, sometimes fervent, the Ganges unfolds her abundant waters in the course of the four seasons. Her banks are chiselled gracefully in the unpredictable geographical curves, at times sharpened, narrow and deep and at others made vast across the indomitable expanse.

The story of Ganga, Bhagirath and Shiva

Ganga, the adopted daughter of Lord Brahma, led a carefree life in svarga loka (heavens), until the immolation of 60,000 sons of the powerful King Sagara, reduced to cinders by the fire from the third eye of the great Sage Kapila enraged for being disturbed while in meditation. The king, on the verge of becoming the master of the Earth, suddenly lost peace ... Following a long and severe penitence to achieve redemption for his forefathers, Bhagirath, the 7th descendent of King Sagara, invoked Brahma to grant the cleansing effects of the Ganga to the Earth, in an effort to put an end to its mortal destiny.

Touched by the burning devotion of Bhagirath, the celestial Goddess agreed to go down to Earth. However, Shiva, the supreme yogi, resident of Mount Kailash, blessed by the Gods,



the

celebrated by the sages/rishis, was invoked to hold the force of her descent in his chignon. Since then, Ganga runs amok through the hair of Shiva before her impetuous waters touch Earth, to cleanse devotees who come in contact with her.

Yogis, saints and sadhus ... Mystic wanderers

In India reside exceptional beings who have abandoned ordinary life and the pleasures of material gains on Earth. Following the example of Shiva, who meditated on the summit of Mount Kailash, they devote themselves in body and soul to practices of asceticism and meditation.

These beings - saints, sâdhus and yogis - transferred profoundly by alchemy and pranic energy, tie their locks in a huge chignon and wear rudraksha necklace, reminiscent of the supreme ascetic. Attired in saffron or white, one can see these mendicants walking alone with pristine devotion on arid tracks. The most ascetic of mendicants reside in forests and inaccessible caves in the Himalayas. These solitary beings descend on rare occasions' like the Khumba mela at Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain or Nasik, once every 12 years...



The tradition of pilgrimage

India has always had the spiritual tradition of pilgrimage that every man aspires to undertake at some point in his life, in gratitude to the Gods, to invoke blessings for a desire or in search of spiritual centres.

The Himalayas which are fabled residences of the Gods are a favoured destination for spiritual peregrination. Shallow mountain streams become sacred, tirtha, likely to bring an internal transformation of the being. Head towards the Ganga, meditate on her banks, have a ritual bath, give offerings, walk along towards the source...it provides a spiritual high and a means to fulfil aspirations and a dream that is part of an accomplished life for many.



Gather water at source and tradition of kanvad

Certain months are dedicated to rituals and pilgrimages. The month of Shravan (mid July to mid August) is devoted to a pilgrimage for Shiva. A tradition invites pilgrims to

walk to the source of the Ganga and collect the holy water, Gangajal, for their home or village shrines.

Over days the pilgrims called kanvadiye walk to the source at Gaumukh and return after collecting the water in cans tied to their waists or on two ends of a stick balancing it on their shoulders. The water from the revered source must never touch earth before being placed at the shrine.

Haridwar: At the foot of the Himalayas

Located at the foot of the Himalayas, Haridwar or Hardwar is one of the principal holy cities of India. This ancient city is a reference to Hari-Vishnu and Hara-Shiva, both supreme divinities in the Hindu pantheon, as indeed a doorway to the Himalayas, the abode of the Gods. A point of departure on the pilgrim's route, to the source of the Ganga! ...

Many temples dedicated to Vishnu and Ganga were built at the edge of the river for veneration, including an



immense channel for easy access to the sacred water.

During certain festivals destined by the lunar calendar, such as the Khumba mela, tens of thousands of pilgrims troop into Haridwar for the ritual bath. Each evening, the sunset is celebrated with the enchanting Aarti at Harki Pauri.

Chardhams or high spiritual places in the Himalayas

Similar to the four saintly places established by the revered Adi-Shankaracharya, saint and philosopher at four cardinal points of India, there exist four places of sacred importance, chardham, in the Himalayas. In affiliation to the sacred river these are all located at more than 3,000 meters: Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath.

Tradition demands that one start their pilgrimage at the temple to the west, Yamunotri and finish the circle going eastwards to Badrinath. Pilgrims commence their voyage at Yamunotri (3,200m), the revered source of the Yamuna, then onwards to Gangotri at 3,048m. Finally one must hit the road again to reach the high altitude temple dedicated to Shiva, Kedarnath (3,584m). Leaving the valley of

Mandakini, one reaches Alakananda quickly to arrive at Badrinath (3,096m) with its colourful temple devoted to Lord Vishnu. A pilgrimage to the highest reaches of Uttaranchal is pure enchantment for the heart and the spirit.

Gaumukh – The call of the sources...

From Gangotri, where the interstitial waters of Bhagirathi-Ganga resound, 27 kilometres remain to be traversed for Gaumukh by an altitude path, where the scenic beauty is spellbinding. A stopover for the night is a must in the splendid valley of Bhojbhasa at 3,800 meters, dominated by magisterial white peaks.

Once again ascending towards the source, under the watchful diamantine peak, Shivaling which dominates at 6,542 meters, pilgrims have installed small sanctuaries dedicated to Shiva. The path is precarious and almost non-existent. Suddenly, in the distance the glacier appears. We advanced, with bated breath to contemplate closely, the birth of the perennial water that spouts out at more than 3,900 meters from the 'Mouth of the cow', at Gaumukh... Bhagirathi-Ganga is born!



The junction of five places or Panchaprayag

Leaving Badrinath under an abundant monsoon rain, we again went down the narrow valley prodigiously chiselled by the Alakananda. At strategic points of the valley one crosses immense cascades, where Alakananda comes in confluence with the water of five rivers going down the Himalayas, the panchaprayag.

Vishnu Prayag is the first junction where the waters of the Dhauli Ganga joins, then the rivers Nandakini and Pindar Ganga come together at Nanda Prayag and Karna Prayag, the last junction.

In Rudraprayag, Alakananda

combines with Mandakini at the foot of the temple dedicated to Shiva-Rudra. Finally, at Deoprayag, the fifth junction, Ganga takes its maiden name for the first time, the alliance of Bhagirathi and Alakanada. Hence, Ganga hurls towards the plains in a powerful torrent.

Rishikesh: The ancient city of the wise Rishis' and yogis

With the strong and rich surge of water recently gathered of the pristine melted snow, the Ganga deploys her torrent in the valley of Rishikesh. From here onwards the river matures into her controlled self, making her way graciously towards her union with the Ocean at the Bay of

Bengal. Since Vedic times, the wise and renowned rishis took meditative residence in the neighbouring foliage of mysterious forests. Their disciples lived in ashrams close to their eminent masters to be initiated into the extraordinary thousand-year-old exercise, yoga.

Ayurveda, the science of longevity, was taught and practised here by medical experts who battled all evils



with rare minerals and secret herbs from the Himalayas, a science that is esteemed today.

At sunset, close to the bridge Lakshman Jhula, the geometric temple with a vermilion exterior is reflected in blue waters of the declining sun. Balancing on the large suspension Ram Jhula, a bridge anchored in the faith of Ram, many throng the evening Aarti, not far from the Parmanath Ashram. At the foot of the Ganga, where Shiva sat on a resplendent throne, lights and arabesques of scintillating gold, music and devotional songs (bhajans) unite hearts during the mystical night ...



Allahabad, at the confluence of the three rivers

Anciently known as Prayag, Allahabad is renowned for the khumba-mela, held every 12 years, the last which was held in 2000, is a festival determined by planetary positions and has immense cosmic dimensions. The festival (mela) commemorates a mythical event, where at the time of the churning of the Ocean, devas (Gods) disputed with the asuras (demons) over the pot (khumba) that contained the nectar of immortality (amrita) which emanated from the churning. The temptress skill of Vishnu in the guise of Mohini brought triumph to the Gods who became immortal.

Allahabad is also renowned for the convergence of the three rivers Yamuna, Ganga and the mythical Saraswati, below the grounds surface. At this juncture one fervently

conducted sacred rites on a boat in the middle of this rare geographical marvel.

Benares-Varanasi, holy city par excellence

The supreme confluence at Varanasi, the culminating waters of the holy rivers ... the ancient Kashi, resplendent city of the lights, the echo of prayers in ode to the clamours of Shiva and Ganga resound... In the lanes of this most ancient city of the world, 1,001 songs celebrate the name of the Master of the metamorphoses, 'Om Namah Shivaya' and at the heart of the labyrinth in the large golden temple of Vishwanath, is enthroned the immense and sacrosanct Jyotirlingam, emblem of Shivas' luminous essence.

In Varanasi the vast river surpasses its spiritual importance and during the monsoon its passionately swollen waters know no limits ... On its many ghats,

pilgrims went down the stairs for the ritual bath and performed the most sacred oblations and rites. The enchantment of a vibrating river as with the amber rays of dawn playing on its waters and in the evening the crystalline sound of the lamp fire and water ... From around the world, enthusiastic men and women join together in a collective homage to the Ganga.

Ganga: an apotheosis of the rites

The celestial Ganga, subsequently the River of the World, 'Lokanadi,' pours its sacred waters in a predestined gesture orchestrated in the trilogy of the Hindu pantheon... where Brahma creates the world, Vishnu preserves it and Shiva transforms it...The worthy waters of the Ganga that reverberates in the spiritual imagination of India is forever associated with all propitious ceremonies etched in the astral

constellations.

Each year towards full moon in November, Kartik Purnima, bedecked in marigold garlands Varanasi competes with none other than Indralok, the splendid heaven of Indra, the King of the Gods. In accordance with the scriptures, Hindus must achieve 16 rites, samskaras, none of which would be complete without the sacred water of the holy river. The inception of a child, birth, passage infancy rites, education, marriage and finally the passage into the other realm, the Ganga associates herself at all moments in the destined alchemy of human existence.

Ganga Sagar: The river's nuptial with the vast Ocean (Sagara)

The waters of the Ganga, at the verge of its union with the Ocean, were heralded in the past by the triumphant conch of Bhagirath, where his 60,000 ancestors found redemption. In this vast and tumultuous delta, the ramified waters of the Ganges fans out to receive the powerful streams of the Brahmaputra, consequently called Yamuna. Coming full circle, towards an ordained destiny!

Many a valley were crossed, many curves forged and adopted, the fertilising and fecundate river brings bountiful splendour as she irrigates a vast span, changing many lives before arriving at the penultimate stage, the Ganga Sagar, where she blends with the waters of the Bay of Bengal. Each year, in mid-January, at the time of Makar Samkranti, when the sun starts its northward ascent, an important festival spreads out. Pilgrims come in the thousands to partake in the ritual bath in the sea and to pay tributes to the conjugal waters, the marriage of the resplendent Ganga with the vast expanse of the Ocean, as she embarks in the munificence of her last journey.



One offers the sacred symbols of nuptials, sindur-chubri, (a small basket of vermillion) to the river waters that unfailingly blends and unfolds in a white wave towards the horizon.

On the dark sands, our ephemeral footprints seal the vow of union.

Offerings to Ganga

Abundance of offerings to the abundant river...garlands of lamp scintillating fire!

Offerings to the Ganga, baskets of a million flowers: red, yellow, vermillion or white, colours all of radiant delight.

Offerings of fruits and coconut.

Offerings of the sacred plants, tulasi (basil) for Vishnu and the trifoliate bel for Shiva ... Sainly herbs durva and kusha touched by the Amrita...

Swirls of heady incenses that permeate senses ...

Twined garlands of scented sandal, rudraksh seeds as rosary beads...

Offerings of mantras and sacred piety, mudra gestures that beseech the deity...

Offering of vermillion on Ajna chakra, frontal force of sublime energy...

Oblations of sweets to appease the Gods, blessed food the devotee's Prasad...

Earth, water, fire, air and ether ... the elements combined.

Agni, the sacrificial pyre,
O messenger to the heavens above, in swirls of smoke transport our forged prayers...

Our fervent words and pristine thoughts...

May all these offerings to the