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Chapter 1

Ganga-myth: The River in the Making of an Imagined Community

*Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godavari Sarasvati Narmade Sindhu Kaveri jale asmin sannidhim kuru.*¹

*When a Hindu takes Ganges water and Toolsee in his hand he will sacrifice his life.*²

Introduction

The Ganga is one of the most celebrated rivers in the world. It is not only a river; it is an emblem of “civilization.” In terms of its capacity to nurture material well-being of society over thousands of years, it is equal to or even surpasses the Nile, Euphrates, Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. Many civilizations have taken root along the banks of these great rivers, which continue to sustain them.³ Few would argue that these rivers bring us very close to the source of the historical processes that have given rise to and nurtured civilizations. Indeed, these rivers are visible relics of the past no less than ancient monuments or ageless trade routes. Study of these rivers helps us gauge some of the structural continuities of the economy, society and geo-politics over the *longue durée*. Yet as they change their course across the landscape, these rivers influence the trajectory of history too. Thus the Ganga embodies characteristics of both continuity and change.

Generally it is assumed that from time immemorial the Ganga has displayed an extraordinary capacity to sustain human life, define social organization and facilitate state formation. As the river nurtured the material life of the people who lived along its banks, these riparians reciprocated by vividly imagining and portraying the river in scripture, art and architecture as early as the first millennium BC, if not before. Through the process of representation in art and letters the Ganga came to forge a common bond among diverse people who found themselves members of a community

¹ O Holy Mother Ganga! O Yamuna! O Godavari! Sarasvati! O Narmada! Sindhu! Kaveri! May you all be pleased to be manifest in these waters with which I shall purify myself. See Eric Newby, *Slowly down the Ganges* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 23.

² Petition of the sepoys to the Commander in Chief, Barrackpore Parade ground, 1 November 1824. See Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Tulsi leaves and the Ganges water: The slogan of the first sepoy mutiny at Barrackpore 1824* (Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi, 2003), 27.

³ Richard W. Bulliet et al., *The earth and its peoples: A global history*, 5th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011). For river-based ancient civilizations, see pp. 5, 26–50. Civilization is an ambiguous term which is often employed to explain a more complex form of society. However, in this study we follow the anthropologists who use it to describe any group of people who share some common cultural traits.

based not merely on the exploitation of its material bounty, but on shared cultural perceptions generated by their veneration of the river.

The cultural connection formed by the Ganga not only linked the peoples of different regions of the Indian subcontinent spatially; it also helped create a hierarchy of the people from different strata of society who worshiped and revered the river. Thus, the Ganga came to serve myriad communities across the subcontinent, from kings to commoners. We will never know how many millions of people have made a pilgrimage to the banks of the Ganga, or how many committed the ashes of their dead to the river to help them on their way to heaven in the after-life. We only know that the ancient rites and rituals around the river have persisted well into modern times. The lure of the Ganga's cultural appeal was such that even the secular-minded Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, wished his mortal remains to be committed to the river. As he wrote in his Will, "My desire to have a handful of my ashes thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad has no religious significance, so far as I am concerned. I have no religious sentiment in the matter... The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga."⁴ As a leader of the new pluralist state of India, Nehru's unease in accepting the religious meanings of a handful of his ashes to be thrown in the Ganga can be imagined, although an overwhelming number of his Hindu followers believed in this ritual and its significance for the attainment of heaven in the after-life. Indeed, Nehru's invocation of the Ganga as "the river of India" helped bridge the distance between India as a cultural entity and India as a modern state desperately in need of a national community.⁵

The first Indian prime minister's attachment and love for the Ganga and his recognition of it as "the river of India, beloved of her people" brings to mind Benedict Anderson's famous description of the nation as an "imagined community."⁶ The Ganga proved one of the most obvious and enduring points of reference in creating the imagined community that is the nation India.⁷ Its appeal transcended religious boundaries, and attracted not only Hindus but Muslims as well. Muslim elites had long

⁴ Raghubir Singh, *Ganga, sacred river of India* (Hong Kong: Perennial Press, 1974), 9.

⁵ Sunil Khilnani, *The idea of India* (London: Penguin, 2003), 155. When returning from Europe and thinking as a world citizen in his youth, Jawaharlal Nehru had been acutely aware of the limiting and restricting scope of nationalism. As he wrote in his autobiography, "My outlook was wider, and nationalism by itself seemed to me definitely a narrow and insufficient creed." See Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An autobiography with musings on recent events in India* (London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1936), 166. But in later years, Nehru believed that to maintain the newly won independence as well as the economic and constitutional developments, a nation state would be essential; see also Khilnani, *The idea of India*, 30.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁷ It has been suggested that rather than a nation state based on linguistic and cultural homogeneity on the European model, India should be viewed as a Civilization State, keeping in mind its linguistic, religious and ethnic plurality. See Ravinder Kumar, "India: The prospect ahead," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 22:1 (1999): 2-4.

identified themselves with the river by drinking its water and some Nawabs made ceremonial use of it at the time of coronation. As we will see, some Muslims also composed hymns in praise of the Ganga. Thus, the river caught the imagination of both Hindus and Muslims and though they approached it in different ways, their attachment to the river helped create an imagined community that could transcend sectarian divisions.⁸

That the Ganga brought fertile alluvium to the soils in its floodplains and thereby increased the region's agricultural productivity and fostered human settlement was obvious to the early settlers on the Ganga plain from at least the late second millennium BC. Later the river was personified and hundreds of hymns were sung to the goddess Ganga for her munificence.⁹ In the later Vedic period and afterwards, poets and religious philosophers imagined supra-natural attributes of the Ganga, and the Hindu Trinity became closely joined with the river.¹⁰ The foundations of such imagery of the Ganga were so evocatively laid down that by the first millennium AD the fame of the river assumed epic proportions. The personified idol of the river was worshipped by the people who held it to be the mother goddess who ensured the fertility of the realm.

Here we may ask why a river assumed such singular importance in Indian history. How did there develop a community whose members identified so closely with the river? To answer these questions I shall explore the historical processes since the later Vedic period.

This chapter is organized in three parts. Section one discusses the representation of the river and its divine personification in the form of goddess Ganga in the course of history. As we will see, people have frequently invoked the river in cultural and political terms since the early historic period. The growing body of the imagined community of the Ganga is discussed in section two. The section further goes into the origins of pilgrimage to the river and tries to reason out why the numbers of pilgrims to the Ganga increased so dramatically over time. The last section explores the European discovery of the Ganga from a long-term perspective. The Europeans quickly grasped

⁸ The rightwing Hindu organizations in India have been trying to appropriate the cultural heritage of the Ganga to further their own agenda. They have come up with a trilogy of *gangatva*, *hindutva* and *rashtratva* as synonymous concepts for their brand of nationalism based on Hindu cultural perceptions. The Hindu rightwing draws heavily upon the European model of linguistic and cultural nationalism which has become outmoded in Europe where the larger collectives such as European Union have been formed. This study of the Ganga is broad-based and approaches cultural processes from the vantage point of political and economic formations along the river in the course of history. For the Hindu right-wing claim to appropriate the symbolism of the Ganga, see Eva Saroch, "Hydro-borders in South Asia: Geopolitical imaginations and contestations," in *Routing borders between territories, discourses and practices*, ed. Eiki Berg and Henk van Houtum, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 132–33.

⁹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The transformation of nature in art* (New York: Dover, 1956). For a philosophical discussion surrounding idol worship, multiplicity of images and assimilatory approach adopted in the ancient Hindu religious tradition, see the chapter "The Origin and Use of Images in India," 155–69.

¹⁰ The Hindu Trinity is comprised of three gods, namely Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh or Shiva, who are considered to be responsible for creation, sustenance and destruction.

the centrality of the Ganga in Indian religious and secular writing, visual arts, rituals and performances. For the Europeans, the Ganga was also an important geographical marker that they could identify with the land of the Ganga plain and beyond. For the Indians, the perennial water resources, the fertility of its floodplain, abundant food production and complex material culture engendered an affinity with the river that found expression in devotion and worship. Thus the river has been central to the identification of India as a cultural and political entity since antiquity, a fact of which Jawaharlal Nehru was certainly aware when he declared the Ganga to be “the river of India.”

Section I: Ganga Imagined

All along their migratory route from the Indus basin to the Ganga-Yamuna *doab* (land between the two rivers), the Indo-Aryans (the Indo-European language speaking groups of people) of the *Rig Veda* revered and praised the Sarasvati, a river that disappeared in the sands of the Thar Desert in the later Vedic period.¹¹ After they settled in the Ganga plain, these same migrants substituted the Ganga for the Sarasvati. In the *Rig Veda*, which is considered to be the oldest of the Vedic text, there is but one reference to the Ganga. In the later Vedic period, the Indo-Aryans moved further down the Ganga plain in search of more pasture and arable lands, as we will see in Chapter 2. Following the river south and east they started exploiting the bounty of the Ganga and began exalting and glorifying the river with hymns of praise. The river occupied a prominent place not only in these later Vedic texts but also in the epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, believed to have been composed between 400–100 BC and 400 BC–400 AD respectively.¹² Like the Sarasvati, the Ganga was supposed to have originated from the *kamandalu* or water-pot of Brahma, the primeval grandfather of the Indo-Aryans.¹³ When the *Ramayana* was composed, the Ganga was imagined to have descended from heaven in a story nicely encapsulated in the “Gangavataran” (descent of the Ganga) episode of the epic. This myth forms an essential part of the Hindu religious tradition. The long story was narrated to young Rama by his royal Guru, the sage Visvamitra, in order to familiarize him with the legendary history of the Ikshvakus, the lineage which Rama belonged to.

¹¹ In this study, the term Indo-Aryans denotes the Indo-European language speaking people and in no way connotes any specific racial identity. On race theory of Indian civilization and the dangers of mixing race with language, see Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 194–216. Madhav M. Deshpande, “Vedic Aryans, Non-Vedic Aryans, and Non-Aryans: Judging the linguistic evidence of the Veda,” in *The Aryan debate*, ed. Thomas R. Trautmann (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62–83; see also Romila Thapar, “The historiography of the concept of ‘Aryan’” in *India: Historical beginnings and the concept of the Aryan*, essays by Romila Thapar et al. (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006), 1–40.

¹² John S. Bowman, ed., *Columbia chronologies of Asian history and culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 328.

¹³ Steven G. Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 58–62.



Figure 2. Rama, Lakshmana and Visvamitra crossing the Ganga, image taken from the *Ramayana*, *Bala Kanda*. Originally produced in 1712 at Udaipur, Rajasthan. Source: BL, London.

Ganga Stories

As the story goes, once a just and righteous king of Ayodhya named Sagara wanted to perform *ashwamedha* (horse sacrifice) in order to claim the title of *chakravartin* (universal ruler), and for this purpose he let loose a sacrificial horse. Whatever lands the horse roamed in during the year became the territory of Sagara. Eventually, the gods became worried about the expansion of the king's realm and fearing that even heaven would be annexed they beseeched the sage Kapila to capture the horse. When the horse did not return to Ayodhya at the end of the year, Sagara commanded his sixty thousand sons to find out who had captured the horse. When the sons of Sagara went to the northeast of the *Jambu-dvipa* (name of the Indian subcontinent in the epics) they found the horse and the sage in the netherworld. They attacked Kapila who turned them into ashes by uttering the syllable 'Hum'. Later a great great-grandson of Sagara named Bhagiratha decided to do the funerary libation for his sixty thousand dead ancestors. Bhagiratha was told that the sixty thousand souls would reach heaven only if their ashes could be purified with Ganga water. As the Ganga was still a celestial body, Bhagiratha did penance and strove hard to bring her to earth and then carry the river to the netherworld to liberate the souls of his ancestors.¹⁴

After years-long austerities and ascetic living, Bhagiratha was able to please Brahma, who asked him to request a favour. When Bhagiratha said he wanted to be the one who could perform the funerary libations for his ancestors with Ganga water, Brahma replied that only the god Shiva could hold the fall of the Ganga on his matted

¹⁴ Valmiki, *Ramayana: Boyhood: 38–41, book one*, trans. Robert P. Goldman (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 217–29.

hair because the earth would be unable to withstand the force of such a thunderous fall. In order to please the god Shiva, Bhagiratha stood on the tip of one toe for a year and constantly worshipped him. In acknowledgment of this dedication, the god Shiva agreed to allow the Ganga to fall on his head. As the Ganga plunged from the sky, she got entangled in his matted hair and after many years Shiva released her into a lake from which the river then flowed onto the earth, this was a great event that was watched by all the celestials and worldly creatures with great astonishment. The mighty flow of the river was not uniform. In some places it flowed swiftly, winding its course while at other places the river moved slowly. In some areas it broadened out while at some other places it narrowed. Riding his celestial chariot, Bhagiratha guided the course of the Ganga to the ocean. He then entered a gaping hole in the netherworld where the ashes of his ancestors were washed in Ganga water and the sixty thousand sons of Sagara ultimately reached heaven. Then Brahma made an appearance and spoke to Bhagiratha congratulating him on his momentous feat. He named the river after Bhagiratha and called it the Bhagirathi Ganga.¹⁵ This name is applied to the river at its source in the Himalayas and again to the Hugli branch of the Ganga in modern West Bengal. The primacy of the god Shiva in the “Gangavataran” story is perhaps indicative of the Indo-Aryans’ assimilation of the traditions of the people already settled on the plain when they arrived there and shows the adaptations of the religious and cultural legacies of the pre-Aryans into hybridized Indo-Aryan-religious practices.¹⁶ The widespread appeal of such mythologies to ancient Indian traditions became possible as the Indo-Aryans subsumed and appropriated the local traditions, some of which may well have been vestiges from the erstwhile Indus Valley culture.

In another myth espoused by the *Vaishnava* sect, the god Vishnu took the *Bavan avatar* (the dwarf incarnation) in order to trick the demon king Bali out of his kingdom and thus to appropriate the entire cosmos for the gods by measuring it in three giant strides, known as *trivikrama*. In the first two strides he measured and appropriated the earth and the netherworld, but while taking the third stride to appropriate the sky his foot broke the vault of heaven. The waters stored in the vault of heaven are identified with *soma*, the nectar of the gods and the elixir of immortality.¹⁷ As soon as the toe of Vishnu touched the vault, the heavenly water gushed out in the form of holy Ganga and

¹⁵ Valmiki, *Ramayana: Boyhood: 41–43, book one*, trans. Robert P. Goldman, 231–39; see also Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 17–19; C. Sivaramamurti, *Ganga* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976), 13.

¹⁶ It has been suggested that Shiva and his consorts, including Ganga, personified *shakti* (the female energy) or mother goddess which combined “in one shape life and death.” The phallic symbol of Shiva characterized him as fertility god. It was only after cultural assimilation that Vedic religion included the worship of the mother-goddess and Shiva into its fold. See E. O. James, *The cult of the Mother-Goddess: An archaeological and documentary study* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959), 102–3.

¹⁷ Diana L. Eck, “Gaṅgā: The goddess in Hindu sacred geography,” in *The divine consort: Rādhā and the goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, 1st Indian ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 175.

found its way to earth through Mount Meru.¹⁸ Thus, in myth and legend, the celestial river was assumed to form a direct link between earth and heaven, the realm of the immortals.

The prevalence and popularity of mythical themes such as “Gangavataran” reached as far as southern India and the narrative was sculpted into a giant open-air bas-relief carved from a monolithic rock at Mahabalipuram as early as in the seventh century, during the reign of the Pallava kings.¹⁹ Art historians suggest that the *Gangadhara* theme depicting Shiva holding out a strand of his hair-lock to receive Ganga began to appear in south Indian cave inscriptions and temple art at this time.²⁰ These depict episodes from the “Gangavataran” theme in elaborate detail, and it is clear that an imagined community associated with the Ganga had already taken its hold in southern India—some two thousand kilometres from the Bhagirathi Ganga—by this time.²¹

The artistic representations of the Ganga as goddess may owe something to a tradition antedating the Indo-Aryans. With the Indo-Aryan migration and settlement on the Ganga plain, the image of a pre-Aryan fertility goddess might have been transposed onto the image of the goddess Ganga. A recent study mentions the existence of “religious cults of popular nature” in the Avanti *mahajanapada* (literally great country, or territory; circa. 500 BC) on the basis of finds of terracotta figurines of the mother goddess. However, the author does not discuss how a mother-goddess cult in Avanti was later appropriated by the dominant religious traditions.²² Probably as a result of cultural borrowings between earlier settled society and the Indo-Aryan settlers, the Ganga also came to be perceived as an emblem of fertility or the mother goddess, an important cultural aspect of the Indus Valley civilization.²³ Buddhist artistic tradition

¹⁸ Sivaramamurti, *Ganga*, 13. David Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses: Visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition* (California: University of California Press, 1986), 188–89. See Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *Vamana Purana—A study* (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1964), 55–62. Also *The Vishnu Purana: A system of Hindu mythology and tradition*, trans. H. H. Wilson (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961), 188. For a detailed description of myths about the origins of Ganga in the Shaivait and Vaishnavait traditions see Heinrich von Stietencron, *Ganga und Yamuna: Zur symbolischen bedeutung der flußgöttinnen an indischen tempeln* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 48–69.

¹⁹ Sivaramamurti, *Ganga*, 78–79; *New world encyclopedia*, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mahabalipuram> (accessed on 12 July 2012).

²⁰ Archana Verma, *Temple imagery from early medieval peninsular India* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 122–23. According to Verma, the parallelisms drawn between Shiva and the Pallava ruler Mahendravarman I along with their consorts, Ganga and Kaveri respectively, in the Trichy Cave inscription suggest the ruler’s control over the Kaveri just as Shiva controlled the flow of the Ganga; for the parallelism between Shiva and Mahendravarman and the Ganga and the Kaveri, see also Michael Lockwood, *Mamallapuram and the Pallavas* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1982), 62–73.

²¹ The occasional references to the Ganga in the works of ancient Tamil poets of the Sangam Age (third century BC to second century AD) probably point to the fascination inspired by the river. See M. Varadarajan, *The treatment of nature in Sangam literature (ancient Tamil literature)* (Madras: South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1957), 59, 121–22, 219.

²² Archana Verma, *Cultural and visual flux at early historical Bagh in central India* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 16, 37–43.

²³ For the scattered agricultural settlements in the Ganga-Yamuna River valley and the Vindhyan Plateau to the south during “the Regionalization Era of the Indo-Gangetic Tradition (4000–1000 BC),” see

probably holds a clue to such cultural mediation between the pre-existing mother goddess and the goddess Ganga.

It was not until the development of Buddhist artistic motifs in the late-Mauryan period that the rhythms of everyday life were depicted and the cult of the mother goddess representing fertility and life generation found expression.²⁴ As Buddhist ideas and cultural practices spread out from the Ganga plain, they found expression in art and architecture often drawing on local traditions. During the Mauryan period, and increasingly so during the Sunga Period (185 to 72 BC), Buddhist art depicted mythological events and people's primordial beliefs prevailing in the different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Patronized by kings and wealthy merchants, the famous Buddhist *stupas* (sepulchral mounds) at Sanchi and Bharhut in central India and the cave sculptures at Ellora in western India are replete with popular themes the depiction of which represents a fusion of both Aryan and non-Aryan themes. It has been suggested that the practice of erecting stupas represents a co-mingling of indigenous religious spirit and Vedic symbolism derived from the sacrificial altar.²⁵ Tree goddesses in the form of *yakshi* at Bharhut and Sanchi represent fertility goddesses. One figure at Bharhut is depicted as standing on a *makara* (crocodile), and in subsequent centuries the goddess Ganga is always shown associated with *makara*, and eventually the crocodile becomes her official vehicle. The themes represented in Buddhist art became the starting point from which one can trace the continuous development of the image of goddess Ganga in later art forms.²⁶

During Satavahana rule (second century BC to third century AD)²⁷ in southern India, we also find depictions of the goddess Ganga standing on a *makara* and carrying a vessel of water. Such a sculpture of Ganga (possibly second century AD) is engraved on a slab in Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh. Later sculptures from the same place depict the river goddess carrying water in a jar and food in a tray. A similar theme has been captured in a Kushan period (first and second century AD) figure carrying food and water. These sculptures show the river as a source of plenty and abundance and its maternal nurturing capacity.²⁸ It is not surprising therefore that the Ganga came to be perceived as *Ganga maiya* or *Ganga mata* (Mother Ganga) in the popular tradition of the Ganga plain. Thus the idol of Ganga the goddess and the river Ganga were mutually

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, "Cultures and societies of the Indus tradition," in *India: Historical beginnings and the concept of the Aryan*, essays by Romila Thapar et al. (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006), 75.

²⁴ S. P. Gupta, *The roots of Indian art (A detailed study of the formative period of Indian art and architecture: third and second centuries B.C.—Mauryan and late Mauryan)* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1980), xii. Gupta espouses the insular approach to the growth of ancient Indian art and discounts any outside influence; see also Niharranjan Ray, *Maurya and post-Maurya art: A study in social and formal contrasts* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1975), 1–2.

²⁵ C. B. Pandey, *Mauryan art* (Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1982), 39–42.

²⁶ Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 81–85.

²⁷ A. Ghosh, ed., *An encyclopaedia of Indian archaeology*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), 147. Ghosh states that the beginning of the Satavahana rule is controversial, although culturally the dynastic rule can be placed between the second century BC and third century AD.

²⁸ Sivaramamurti, *Ganga*, 48–1.

reinforcing and both were worshipped. Since the late first millennium BC, rulers and elites have taken advantage of the Ganga's appeal among the common folk to fashion political and cultural idioms intended to make the river a source of legitimacy for themselves.

Geography Repeats Itself

Among the kings and the empire-builders of early India the ambition to rule over the Ganga plain loomed large. This might have stemmed from the stunning wealth that the successive states since the Magadha kingdom were able to amass in the river plain owing to the rich resources and fertility of the region. The Maurya, Gupta and Harsha were all successful empires in early India and their power was centred on the Ganga plain. Thus, by the first millennium AD a direct or imagined link with the Ganga assumed a political significance that led rulers in other parts of India, particularly the south, to place images of the goddess Ganga in their temples. Since the temple embodied the ruling groups' ideology, the presence of Ganga there perhaps points to some actual or imagined link with the river and the plain. The political symbolism of the Ganga comes into sharp relief if we consider the figure of the goddess Ganga standing on a crocodile as depicted in the nicely engraved coin of Samudragupta (335 to 380 AD), the Gupta emperor. It has been suggested that the goddess Ganga was introduced on the coin in order to indicate the emperor's conquest of the Ganga plain.²⁹ The same emperor's Allahabad inscription exalted his fame "ever heaped up higher and higher by the development of (his) liberality and prowess of arm and composure and (study of) the precepts of the scriptures,—travelling by many paths, purifies the three worlds, as if it were the pale yellow water of (the river) Ganga, flowing quickly on being liberated from confinement in the thickets of the matted hair of (the god) Pasupati."³⁰ Here the Ganga is analogous to the emperor's fame and his prowess in arms. A few centuries later, the political meanings of an association with the Ganga found expression in other parts of the Indian subcontinent too.

The peninsular Indian ruling dynasties such as the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas similarly appropriated the symbols of the northern rivers. After the death of Harsha, the last powerful emperor in the Ganga plain, in the late seventh century the Chalukyas carried out their exploits to the Ganga plain. The Chalukyan king Vinayaditya defeated a number of northern feudatories and captured many royal insignia from them. Among the great spoils and symbolic objects Vinayaditya brought to the Deccan also included the "Ganga and Yamuna", as their inscriptions note. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Rashtrakutas supplanted the Chalukyas and around 800 AD the Rashtrakuta king Govinda III led an expedition to the Ganga-Yamuna doab. Govinda III claims in his inscriptions that he "took from his enemies the Ganga and Yamuna." As Richard Davis

²⁹ Radha Kumud Mookerji, *The Gupta empire* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 34–35.

³⁰ John Faithfull Fleet, *Corpus inscriptionum Indicarum, inscriptions of the early Gupta kings and their successors*, vol. 3, *The Gupta inscriptions. Texts and translations* (Calcutta, 1888), 16. Insertions in the bracket are in the original.

remarks, “Once again epigraphs linked acquisition of the two northern rivers with the attainment of imperial sovereignty.”³¹

Perhaps a far clearer example of the Ganga exemplifying the imperial sovereignty of a king comes from the Chola reign in southern India. The emperor Rajendra Chola I (1012–1044 AD) assumed the title of *Gangaikondachola* (“the Chola who conquered the Ganga”) and founded a new capital *Gangaikondacholapuram* (“the town of the Chola who conquered the Ganga”), located in modern Tiruchirapalli or Trichy district of Tamil Nadu. Also a lake called *Gangaikondacholan* was dug up in around 1025 AD. These building activities were undertaken to commemorate his victory over the Ganga region especially of Bengal where Mahipala was defeated by the victorious arms of Rajendra Chola.³² This event took place around 1022 AD when the Chola army first defeated the Eastern Ganga ruler of Kalinga (Orissa) and then kept on marching northward up to the Ganga.³³ As soon as these conquests were made, the newly built capital was named *Gangaikondacholapuram* and the emperor fulfilled his desire of sanctifying his land with Ganga water.³⁴ The military triumph so eloquently celebrated by Rajendra Chola furnishes an example as to how deeply the ruling elites’ political ideology was entangled with the Ganga. Not only had the Ganga become a great legitimizing symbol for ruling elites, but the geographical spread of the imagined community created by the Ganga was no longer limited to the Ganga plain. It had taken root and flourished in other parts of the Indian subcontinent too.

The Cholas conquered or obtained suzerainty over many other parts of South and Southeast Asia, but their jubilation over the victory in the eastern Ganga plain remains noteworthy. The triumphant celebration of the Cholas’ conquest of the Ganga region was perhaps linked to a process, the genesis of which goes back to the early centuries AD. The fame of the Ganga was such that some of the ruling dynasties were named after the Ganga and the myths and legends were deployed to link these ruling houses to the river. Many centuries before Rajendra Chola’s assumption of the exalted title of *Gangaikondachola*, we hear of the Ganga dynasty and its separate lineages such as the Eastern Gangas and the Western Gangas, which held sway over considerable parts of south-eastern and south-western India respectively. Scholars believe that the formidable Western Ganga dynasty was founded in the second or third century AD and ruled over the Kaveri basin, also known as Gangavadi. The Eastern Gangas started their own era beginning in about 550 AD. Inscriptional sources refer to Eastern Ganga kings

³¹ Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 72–73. See also, J. F. Fleet, “Sanskrit and old Canarese inscriptions, no. 27,” *The Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research* 12 (1883): 156–65.

³² E. Hultzsch, *South-Indian inscriptions*, vol. 2, pt. 1 in *Archeological survey of India, new imperial series*, vol. 10 (Madras: Superintendent, Government Press, 1916), 108–9.

³³ K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A history of south India: From prehistoric times to the fall of Vijayanagar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 183.

³⁴ According to the Thiruvallangadu copper charter, “the light of the solar race (Rajendra), mocking Bhagiratha who by the force of his austerities caused the descent of the Ganga, set out to sanctify his own land with the waters of that stream brought by the strength of his arm.” R. Nagaswamy, *Gangaikondacholapuram* (Tamilnadu: State Department of Archeology, 1970), 5–6.

of Kalinga in the seventh and eighth centuries, a dynasty which lasted in one form or another until the fifteenth century. It is suggested that since the Western Gangas of the Mysore region predated the Eastern Gangas, the latter could have been an offshoot of the former.³⁵ The Western Ganga dynasty claimed their lineage from the house Ikshvakus of the solar race, a lineage they shared with Rama, the legendary hero of the *Ramayana*. According to a Kallurgudda inscription of 1122 AD, one of the rulers Bharat and his wife Vijayamahadevi, who had bathed in the Ganga during pregnancy, bore a son named Gangadatta (the gift of Ganga). The dynastic line of Gangadatta came to be called the Gangas. In one of the inscriptions of the Eastern Ganga kings it is mentioned that they were related to the Western Ganga rulers of Mysore.³⁶ It is hard to verify the historicity of these claims, but that the Ganga was a central point of reference is beyond doubt. Clearly, the Ganga had seeped into the political idiom as it exalted the political status of the ruling groups, bestowed legitimacy and validated imperial-expansionist ambitions.

During the late-first millennium AD, the “political Gangocentricity” of the subcontinent’s regional powers was the result of their imperial aspirations, which were in turn inspired by the memory of the expansive empires that had emerged on the Ganga plain since the latter half of the first millennium BC.³⁷ The political success and cultural processes of these empires helped situate the Ganga plain and the river at the centre of imperial sovereignty. In the later first millennium AD, the centre of gravity of political power shifted to the north-western parts of the Ganga plain. The semi-arid upriver plain emerged as a new political frontier because of the pressures coming from the horse-mounted Turko-Afghan warriors from Central and West Asia. In spite of these geo-strategic changes, however, the Ganga-centric cultural processes already set into motion remained in force and had spread across the subcontinent as we will see below.

The cultural geography of the Ganga was not less influential than the political. Culturally the sacred geography of the Ganga was made almost hegemonic and the many rivers of the Indian subcontinent were seen as only approximating the holiness of

³⁵ R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), 390.

³⁶ C. Hayavadana Rao, ed., *Mysore gazetteer*, vol. 2 (Bangalore: Government Press, 1930), 587–88; see also B. Sheik Ali, *History of the western Gangas*, in the series *Comprehensive history of Karnataka*, vol. 1 (Mysore: Prasaraanga, University of Mysore, 1976), 1–17 for different theories about the origin of the Ganga rulers. Ali suggests, “[t]he very fact that the capital of the Gangas was situated on the banks of the river Cauvery, namely at Talkad indicates that the name Ganga could have had affinity with Cauvery which was also called Dakshina Gange which could have inspired the founders to name the dynasty as the Gangas.” But the Kaveri or Dakshina Ganga did not inspire the eleventh century Chola ruler, Rajendra Chola who assumed the title *Gangaikonda* only after his conquests of the Ganga in the north. The Chola rulers did not assume this title after conquering the Dakshina Ganga or the Kaveri basin. It shows that the Ganga would have been the primary source of inspiration for the Ganga rulers of Mysore too. For the Eastern Gangas, see R. D. Banerji, *History of Orissa: From the earliest times to the British period* (Calcutta: R. Chatterjee/Prabasi Press, 1930), 242–88; J. K. Sahu, “Minor dynasties (Marathas, Eastern Gangas, Nalas and Sarabhapuriyas),” in *Comprehensive history and culture of Orissa*, ed. P. K. Mishra, vol. 1, pt. 1 (New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 1997), 142–48.

³⁷ Davis, *Lives of Indian images*, 75.

the Ganga. People performing religious rites or making ablutions in any river imagined the Ganga to be present. At times, other rivers assumed the identity of the Ganga itself. For example in southern India the Kaveri River is believed to take on the form of the Ganga for a month every year, and devout Hindus call the river *Dakshina Ganga*, or Southern Ganga.³⁸ Similarly, the Godavari River is believed to share many of the attributes of the Ganga and hence is called *Adya Ganga* or *Vridha Ganga* (the elder sister of the Ganga).³⁹ According to a late-nineteenth-century observation, people believed that the Godavari and Ganga shared the same source and hence they frequently called both rivers Ganga.⁴⁰

In regions beyond the Indian subcontinent we find the name of Ganga being used for the rivers and towns. The name of the Mekong (*Mae Khong*) River in Southeast Asia is believed to be an adaptation of Sanskrit words meaning “mother Ganga”,⁴¹ and the Bengalis would pronounce it *Maa Gonga*. Sanskrit inscriptions of Java in Indonesia frequently refer to the Ganga. The inscriptions imply that any stream identified with the Ganga could then be used in acts of ritual purification. In this sense, as Richard Solomon suggests, the Ganga assumed a metaphysical rather than a geographical identity.⁴² There are some cities such as Ganganagara in the Malay Peninsula which might have been founded by the Indian settlers there during the first millennium AD.⁴³ Many myths surrounding the river wove tales of its supernatural character and the legends projected it as a celestial body. As a result of these cultural processes, the Ganga became the hallmark of holiness and its water assumed sanctifying effect. So the imagined community around the veneration of the Ganga could be found outside of the Indian subcontinent too.

³⁸ W. S. Meyer, et al., eds., *The imperial gazetteer of India*, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 303.

³⁹ Anne Feldhaus, “Mountains, rivers and Siva: Continuity among religious media in Maharashtra,” in *Intersections: socio-cultural trends in Maharashtra*, ed. Meera Kosambi (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 23.

⁴⁰ Henry Morris, *A descriptive and historical account of the Godavery district in the presidency of Madras* (London, 1878), 166. In a recent work Feldhaus has suggested that the Ganga has different meanings for the people of Maharashtra. According to her, instead of using the local names for the rivers, they often call them “Ganga.” For example, the Godavari in Nasik (Maharashtra) is called Ganga. She contends whether people actually mean the Bhagirathi Ganga (the one in the north) when they refer to a local river in Maharashtra by the name of Ganga, see Anne Feldhaus, *Connected places: Religion, pilgrimage, and geographical imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 178–81. In this regard Ronald Inden is instructive when he writes that the replication of northern sacred symbols in the southern landscapes was not like paying “obsequance to some distant and awe-inspiring model of a sacred place.” Instead, people were claiming to make that place or a river homologous to its northern counterpart. See Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 256–57.

⁴¹ George B. Walker, *Angkor empire* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1955), 9. Francesca Bray, *The rice economies: Technology and development in Asian societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 73; see also Mahesh Kumar Sharan, *Studies in Sanskrit inscriptions of ancient Cambodia, on the basis of first three volumes of Dr. R. C. Majumdar’s edition* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1974), 9.

⁴² Richard Salomon, “Indian tirthas in Southeast Asia,” in *The history of sacred places in India as reflected in traditional literature: Papers on pilgrimage in South Asia*, ed. Hans Bakker (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 160–76.

⁴³ S. Paranavitana, “Ceylon and Malaysia: A rejoinder to K. A. Nilakanta Sastri,” *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8:1, New Series (1962): 371.

Section II: Ganga the Holy

A host of economic, political and cultural factors contributed to the emergence of the Ganga as the river *par excellence*, and the word Ganga became a generic term for a river in the Indian subcontinent. In myths and legends the Ganga was perceived as a manifestation of the celestial body on earth and the river could transport one's soul to heaven. The notion of the Ganga as purifier who washes away all sins became deeply rooted among Hindus of all classes. Its sanctity was beyond question for most Hindus and gradually a pilgrimage to the river for the purposes of ritual ablution became one of the most common ways to purify oneself from accumulated sins. Presently I shall describe how the pilgrimage to the river evolved and became more popular over the course of time. That the Ganga was a holy river for a majority of their subjects was not unknown to the Muslim rulers who came to dominate a large part of the Indian subcontinent in the thirteenth century. As a result, many of these Muslim rulers also connected themselves with the river and its water in various ways. Some made it a habit to drink water from the Ganga alone, even though they were stationed far away from its banks. Others used its waters during the coronation ceremony. These attachments on the part of these Muslim rulers with the river might not have sprung from religious sentiments but they were certainly aware of the political meanings of such acts of association with the river.⁴⁴

Ganga Pilgrimage

In the Ganga plain the bounty that the river bestowed upon the people made it an object of worship and its water became the symbol of holiness. As a result the river attracted increasingly large number of pilgrims who sought spiritual, moral and material salvation. Injunctions about worshipping the Ganga, especially during droughts were laid down in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.⁴⁵ Such instructions clearly show that the river owing to its role as the provider of food and nourishment was worshipped.⁴⁶ As the river constituted an essential part of people's economy and society, the worship of the Ganga as mother and pilgrimage to its sacred banks would naturally evolve in the religious culture.⁴⁷ The Sanskrit word for pilgrimage is *tirtha*, which means a place where one fords a river. It has been suggested that the term has two underlying meanings. It implies that the river in itself is a sacred place, and it suggests the idea of a

⁴⁴ Richard M Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking religious identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 246–81.

⁴⁵ Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, ed. and trans. L. N. Rangarajan (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), 107.

⁴⁶ In the 1980s, during my childhood years in a small village (Kahua) in the Darbhanga district of north Bihar, I used to see my mother sprinkling a few drops of Ganga water on the heap of seeds before labourers took it to the sowing fields. My mother firmly believed that the Ganga water increases the yield of crops. Anthropologists have yet to shed light as how widespread this practice is.

⁴⁷ The cult of mother goddess was not specific to the pre-historic Indian civilization only but was found in almost all pre-historic civilizations in the Eurasian world. For the different forms of the mother goddess in India see, E. O. James, *The cult of the mother-goddess*, 99–127; see also Richard M. Eaton, *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier 1204–1760* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.

crossing from the human world to the world of the divine.⁴⁸ As we will see below, in the course of time, people came to believe in the supernatural qualities of the Ganga and they worshipped it. Making a pilgrimage to its holy banks became gradually more popular. Before describing the sacred geography of the Ganga and pilgrimage to the river, in the following paragraphs I shall briefly discuss the origins of the sanctity of the Ganga.

Apart from myths about the divine origin of the river, the sacred literature in the form of epics and the *Puranas* (400 BC to 400 AD) played a crucial role in affirming and popularizing the sanctity of the Ganga by devoting numerous *mahātmyas* (praises) to her.⁴⁹ Water bodies were revered as purifying ever since the Vedic period and we have seen how the holiness of the Sarasvati River was carried over to the image of the Ganga as the Indo-Aryans made the Ganga plain their new abode. In Hinduism the moving waters and rivers have been accorded great purifying powers and a ritual bath is prescribed as the simplest way to get rid of one's accumulated impurities. The word Ganga originated from the Sanskrit verb *gam* meaning to go. Thus, it is the constant flow of the waters which signified the Ganga as being purifying in nature. Over the ages, Indo-Aryan seers and poets composed and sang hymns praising the flow and movement of Ganga waters. As water is considered a cleansing element and the moving waters as removers of the pollutions and impurities, the Ganga with its flowing waters became holy and purifying.⁵⁰

As devotion to the river persisted, pilgrimage to the Ganga assumed growing significance by the first millennium AD. Pilgrimage was preferred to the more costly Brahmanic sacrifices and was said to yield even greater religious merit. The *Matsya Purana* of Hindu scripture states that there are 35 million *tirthas* (pilgrimages) and all of them are centred in the Ganga. The *Vanaparva* of the *Mahabharata* tried to broaden the scope of pilgrims by recommending that different *varnas* and castes, including women, could reap religious merit by undertaking pilgrimage and bathing at the holy places along the Ganga. Moreover, untouchability hardly mattered while taking a holy dip with different castes at the pilgrim places.⁵¹ The literature of the second millennium AD reaffirmed the holiness of the Ganga and included more hymns glorifying the image of the river.

⁴⁸ Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra (ancient and medieval religious and civil law in India)*, vol. 4, *Pātaṅka, Prāyascitta, Karmavipāka, Antyeṣṭi, Āśauca, Śuddhi, Sraāddha and Tīrthayātrā* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1953), 554–55; Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 184, 192; Subhadra Sen Gupta, *Tirtha: Holy pilgrim centres of the Hindus: Saptapuri & Char Dham* (Delhi: Rupa, 2001), 5.

⁴⁹ The *Puranas* (ancient tales), though believed to be from the eighth century BC, underwent substantial revision in the fourth century AD. Additions continued to be made to the *Puranas* during subsequent centuries. The epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were composed between 400 BC and 400 AD, see Bowman, *Columbia chronologies*, 328–31.

⁵⁰ Eck, "Ganga: The goddess in Hindu sacred geography," 172–74; Kinsley, *Hindu goddesses*, 189; Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 4:560.

⁵¹ Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 4:560–69.

The Sanskritist and scholar Pandurang Vaman Kane refers to the manuals written in the second millennium AD which prescribe the rituals for performing pilgrimage. Such manuals include the *Gangapattalaka* of Ganesvara (1350), *Gangavakyavali* of Visvasadevi (fifteenth century) by the queen of the king Padmasimha of Mithila (the authorship of this work is also attributed to the medieval poet Vidyapati), *Gangakrityaviveka* of Vardhamana (1495) and *Gangabhakti-tarangini* of Ganapati (1740?). These works eulogizing the Ganga also prescribe the steps to be followed during the pilgrimage. The rituals of pilgrimage to the Ganga are laid out in minute detail in many digests and manuals. These pilgrimage manuals were written primarily by the literate class of the priests and Brahmans for their largely literate clientele, and the authors might have had some stakes in regulating the rituals of pilgrimage.⁵²

There seems to have been a growing interest in the pilgrimage to the Ganga and other holy places since the early second millennium AD. The pilgrim tax levied by the Muslim rulers and the expenses of travel hardly discouraged those who were determined to undertake such a journey. The thirteenth-century Hoysala king Narsimha III is said to have granted monetary assistance of 645 *niska* (coin of gold) to pilgrims from Karnataka, Telangana, Tulu, Tirhut and Gaur in order to enable them to pay the pilgrim tax to the Turks (*turushkas*). As the amount granted by the Hoysala king does not seem to have been very large, the number of pilgrims might have been rather modest, even if they were drawn from a large geographical area. In the seventeenth century a writer called Kavindracharya was able to get an exemption from the pilgrim tax for the Hindus going to Prayag and Kashi (Banaras) from the emperor Shah Jahan.⁵³ The author received accolades and congratulatory letters from the different parts of India. This certainly shows a wider interest in the pilgrimage to the holy places especially along the Ganga, but we can hardly estimate the number of pilgrims in this period. As noted, the many treatises stressing the merits of pilgrimage may have had a positive effect in inducing pilgrims to visit the holy places if they could find the means to pay for such a journey.

Many travellers to India have left vivid accounts of the pilgrimage from ancient times. Drawing on the surviving accounts of Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya in Pataliputra around the early third century BC, Strabo informs us that the Ganga was worshiped along with the rain god Indra and local deities.⁵⁴ The Chinese traveller Hsüan Tsang' who visited India in the seventh century, wrote of the Ganga, "In the popular literature the river is called *Fu-shui* or 'Happiness-

⁵² Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 4:572–83. For the year of composition of the *Gangakrityaviveka*, see Syed Hasan Askari and Qeyamuddin Ahmad, eds., *The comprehensive history of Bihar*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1983), 250.

⁵³ Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 4:571–72. For the Turks' control over Banaras before Bakhtiyar Khilji's conquest of Bengal in 1204 and a tax called *turushkadanda* (Turk's duty) levied on the people of Maner near Patna, see Askari and Ahmad, eds., *The comprehensive history of Bihar*, 33–34.

⁵⁴ J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as described in classical literature, being a collection of Greek and Latin texts relating to India* (Westminster: Constable, 1901), 74–75.

water' that is, the water (or river) of religious merit. Accumulated sins are effected by a bath in the water of the river."⁵⁵ Indeed, by the time of Hsüan Tsang's visit to India the Ganga had already acquired the fame of being holy and in the following centuries also pilgrims went to the river banks to pay their homage, to take a holy dip and get rid of their sins. The pilgrimage to Sagar or Gangasagar where the Ganga flows into the Bay of Bengal was very important as the Nalanda copperplate inscription of Devapala (early ninth century) particularly underlines the merits of a bath there.⁵⁶ In the fourteenth century the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta was duly aware that "the Ganges is the river to which the Hindus make their pilgrimage."⁵⁷ The seventeenth-century French traveller Jean de Thévenot wrote that at Allahabad occurred "at certain times an incredible concourse of People, in Pilgrimage from all parts of the *Indies*."⁵⁸ With the passage of time, the tradition became more deeply rooted and widespread and the number of pilgrims swelled by the nineteenth century.⁵⁹

John Marshall, an English East India Company (EIC) merchant who lived in Patna around 1670–71, gives interesting information on the washing festival in the Ganga. In November, thousands of Hindus used to come from great distance to the confluence of the Ganga and Gandak (near modern Hajipur, north of Patna) both to wash themselves and to carry away Ganga water in pots. Marshall further reports that they used this water to wash their old parents and friends who could not come, and after washing with the Ganga water pilgrims thought their sins were forgiven for that year. The confluence of the Ganga, Gandak and Son perhaps represented a miniature form of the famous *tribeni sangam* (literally, the confluence of the triple braid) at Prayag, where the Ganga, Yamuna and (invisible) Sarasvati meet. The number of pilgrims at this local *sangam* must have numbered several thousand as Marshall notes, "[a]t this meeting a great concourse of people & all washing on one morning & endeavouring to wash as well as [as close to as] they can in the place where these two Rivers meete, several are yearly crowded to death."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's travels in India 629–645 A.D.*, vol. 1 (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1904), 319.

⁵⁶ Samarendra Narayan Arya, *History of pilgrimage in ancient India AD 300–1200* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), 31.

⁵⁷ Mahdi Husain, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta (India, Maldives Islands and Ceylon) translation and commentary* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1976), 4, 23, 38, 104, 236.

⁵⁸ Giovanni Gemelli Careri and Jean de Thévenot, *Indian travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the third part of the travels of M. De Thevenot into the Levant and the third part of a voyage round the world by Dr. John Francis Gemelli Careri*, ed. Surendranath Sen (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949), 93.

⁵⁹ A recent study on the Kumbh Mela at Prayag in Allahabad shows how the colonial state managed an increasing swell of pilgrims that gathered from all over India; see Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765–1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). According to Maclean, pp. 83–109, while Magh Mela is mentioned in early sources, the reference to Kumbh Mela is conspicuously absent from both Indian and European sources before the mid-nineteenth century.

⁶⁰ British Library (hereafter, BL), Manuscript Collections, Harley MS. 4254, fo. 9r; see also John Marshall, *John Marshall in India: Notes and observations in Bengal 1668–1672*, ed. Shafaat Ahmad Khan (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 157–58.

Almost a century after Marshall, in November 1767 the British surveyor Lewis Felix Degloss described the great event in picturesque detail. When he reached Hajipur the great celebration was fast approaching and he believed that the “Gentouse” (Hindus) used the “Great Ceremony” to keep the site of confluence holy. At the confluence, he reports, “Lacks [one lack equals one hundred thousand] of people frequent to Bath and Wash at the mouth of the Ganduc where Zoane River and Ganges have equal resource in their Discharge.” Festivities were organized with pomp and circumstance, illuminated boats lighting up the banks, and fire-works were all very much part of the ambience. A show of piety to the poor and offerings to the Ganga went hand in hand as “the natives of wealth in a lose attire assembling at the Banck [sic] of the River [were] administering their alms to the poor and Offering to the Ganges.”⁶¹ The mood at the festival certainly appears to have been jubilant. Even if we hesitate in taking “the Lacks of people” literally, Degloss would have certainly seen a very large number of pilgrims who had come to take the holy dip and to be a part of the celebration. They also constituted the part of an imagined community formed around their common allegiance to the Ganga.

When Lewis Felix Degloss was busy surveying Bihar in 1761, one Mustapha, originally a resident of Constantinople and in the employ of the EIC undertook a journey from Calcutta through southern Bihar’s mountainous route to Ramghur on company business. He went through a harrowing experience on the highway as bands of pilgrims were marching to Sagar, the holy spot where the Ganga empties into the sea. These pilgrims were of a different sort.⁶² As Mustapha reports, “A body of five thousands saniassees [*sanyasis* or ascetic warriors] or devotees was going in Pilgrimage to the waters of the Ganges. They are all of them tall, stout, well limbed men, in general stark naked, but very well armed.” Our traveller further says that they had come from far and wide, places as distant as Delhi and even from Indian provinces bordering Persia and Tartary. As these well-armed pilgrims moved on, along the way others joined them “the conflux of all the gentoos that intend to partake of the benediction arising from an ablution in the holy waters of the Ganges, and some worshipping at the temple of sagor [Sagar] and in the sea.” At times the horde numbered twenty thousand people and such a huge army must have obtained supplies locally, for as our traveller remarks, “Unhappy the country they must pass throughout! They consume the land and prove no less destructive than a host of locustes [sic]. However it must be confessed they scarcely commit any disorder.”⁶³

⁶¹ BL, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter, APAC), India Office Private Papers (hereafter, IOPP), Mss. Eur. Orme OV 9, “Abstract of Journal containing the proceedings of Lewis Felix Degloss Captain of Engineers and Surveyor, in coarse [sic.] of survey in the Province of Subah Bahar, commencing November 29, 1766” (hereafter, “Abstract of the Journal...Nov. 29, 1766”), fo.13r.

⁶² See William R. Pinch, *Warrior ascetics and Indian empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶³ BL, APAC, IOPP, Mss. Eur. Orme OV 6, fo. 10r. In the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta also refers to this pilgrimage on the Ganga, though without naming Sagar. See Husain, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, 235–36.

The above examples suggest that the tradition of pilgrimage to the Ganga was very old and gradually, with the passage of time, it became even more widespread. Mustapha referred to pilgrims coming all the way from the border regions of Persia and China and going to Sagar in Bengal. Thus, the members of an imagined community connected to the Ganga lived not only in the south of the Indian subcontinent, but they could also be found in the north and northwest. Thus, the Ganga attracted the pilgrims from far and wide and the imagined community of river worshippers had considerable geographic reach. As the British assumed political power since the mid-eighteenth century, they took a keen interest in observing as well as regulating the pilgrim traffic.⁶⁴ The pilgrimages such as Deoghar-Baidyanath were closely linked to the Ganga as the pilgrims were obliged to take the sacred water from the river to make an offering to the idol of the god Shiva.

Ganga Consumption

Ganga water was used and consumed in myriad ways. Some used it for spiritual salvation and for ritual performances and purification; others used Ganga water and the river for consumption and health as well as for symbolic purposes. About the ceremonial consumption of Ganga water the seventeenth-century French traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier relates that at the occasion of a marriage guests were treated with a drink of sacred water, “for each of the guests three or four cupfuls are poured out; and the more of it the bridegroom gives them to drink the more generous and magnificent he is esteemed.” Tavernier further notes that in this way sometimes two to three thousand rupees worth of Ganga water was consumed at a wedding, the expenses being incurred chiefly by the transportation as well as the tax charged by the chief Brahman.⁶⁵ There might well have been a commercial economy in the trade of Ganga water, benefitting the Brahmans and porters, though it is hard to guess the size of such trade. The drinking of Ganga water was not limited to Hindus alone, for Philippus Baldaeus, a seventeenth-century Dutch clergyman in southern India, relates that “The *Mahometans* are to this day not free from that Superstition, the Water of the *Ganges* being sold among them in Bottles at a very good Price, as we do our Spaw-Waters; and they pay a considerable Custom for it.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata, Revenue Department (Sayer) 14th January to 12th August 1791, vol. 2, Fort William the 15th July 1791, pp. 250–62. See for example, how the collector closely observed the Grand Ceremony at Deoghar in order to be able to regulate it on the lines of the Gaya pilgrimage. It is remarked that the ceremony consists of pouring Ganga water on the head of the image.

⁶⁵ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier*, trans. V. Ball, ed. William Crooke, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 198.

⁶⁶ “De *Mahometanen* zijn mede niet vry van deze superstitie, als boven is aangewezen. Dit water van de *Ganges* word in potten en kruyken vervoert, gelijk by ons het *Spa-water*.” See Philippus Baldaeus, *Naauwkeurige Beschryvinge van Malabar en Choromandel, der zelve aangrenzende ryken, en het machtige eyland Ceylon. Nevens een omstandige en grondigh doorzochte ontdekking en wederlegginge van de afgoderye der Oost-Indische heydenen. Het Eerste Capittel: Naauw-keurige beschrijvinge der Indische kusten Malabar en de Choromandel*, (Amsterdam: 1672), 188. See also, Philippus Baldaeus, *A true and exact description of the most celebrated East-India coasts of Malabar and Coromandel and also*

For many Muslim rulers, Ganga water was a necessity.⁶⁷ When Muhammad bin Tughlaq transferred his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad (formerly Deogiri) in the Deccan in 1327 AD, Ganga water was carried there for the Sultan's use, even though it caused much inconvenience as the river was located forty days away.⁶⁸ The Mughal emperor Akbar used Ganga water both at home and while on travels and he called it "the water of immortality." If the royal chef had to use rainwater or the water from some other rivers for cooking, Akbar made sure that a little Ganga water was included.⁶⁹ Sebastien Manrique, a seventeenth-century Portuguese traveller and Augustinian friar, remarks that some Muslim rulers of Bengal washed themselves in Ganga water and used it during their coronation ceremonies.⁷⁰ Such use of Ganga water was the continuation of "an authentically Indian imperial ritual" though, in most cases, the Islamic rhetoric of kingship glossed over such association with Hindu symbols.⁷¹

Apart from the consumption of Ganga water and its use for political ends, the Ganga impinged on the health discourse as well. Walter Hamilton noted that besides its sanctity, Ganga water had a reputation for its medicinal properties and because of this many Muslims drank it. "In 1792, Abd ul Hakeem, the reigning Nabob of Shahnoor, near the west coast of India, although a Mahomedan, never drank any other water."⁷² At times the banks of the Ganga served as shelters to stem the spread of the cholera. When Muhammad bin Tughlaq was campaigning in Malabar and Telangana, cholera broke out among his troops. He rushed back to the newly founded capital at Daulatabad and from there he marched along with his army to the banks of the Ganga and encamped there.⁷³ Might we then assume that such a health restoring effect of the Ganga was not a secret for Muhammad bin Tughlaq and his cholera stricken troops? Many centuries later, Mark Twain, the American traveller and writer, related the

*of the Isle of Ceylon; translated from the high-Dutch printed at Amsterdam, 1672 (1745; repr. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996), 662. Thanks to its ritual value, salt made from the sacred Ganga water in the Twenty Four Parganas and Jessore in Bengal could be sold at a higher price than the superior salt of Hijili and Chittagong. See Sayako Kanda, "Environmental Changes, the emergence of a fuel market, and the working conditions of salt makers in Bengal, c. 1780–1845," *International Review of Social History* 55 (2010): 136, Kanda cites British Parliamentary Papers, vol. 26, 1856, Appendix F, no.2.*

⁶⁷ The practice of drinking Ganga water spread among the Muslim ruling elite. For a collection of notes from different foreign travellers' accounts indicating this practice see Jagamohan Mahajan, *Ganga observed: Foreign accounts of the river*, 2nd ed. (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2003), 20–24. Even the supposedly orthodox Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was no exception to this general rule as Jean de Thevenot found out that "The Great Mogul drinks commonly of the Water of the Ganges, because it is much lighter than other Waters." See Careri and Thevenot, *Indian travels of Thevenot and Careri*, 96.

⁶⁸ Husain, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, 4.

⁶⁹ Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, vol. 1 (1927; repr. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1977), 57–58.

⁷⁰ Fray Sebastien Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique 1629–1643: A translation of the Itinerario de las Misiones Orientales with introduction and notes*, trans. C. Eckford Luard, et al., vol. 1 (Oxford: Hakluyt Society, 1927), 77.

⁷¹ Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," 268–69.

⁷² Walter Hamilton, *A geographical, statistical, and historical description of Hindostan and the adjacent countries*, vol. 1 (London, 1820), 13.

⁷³ Husain, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, 147.

observations of British scientist E. H. Hankin regarding the remarkable capacity of Ganga water in neutralizing cholera bacteria.⁷⁴ Thus, the imagined community was formed not only around material bounty and spiritual salvation but also regarding the health benefits of the Ganga.

An excursion on the Ganga proved to be highly beneficial for the sick Mubarak Ali Khan, Nawab Nazim of Bengal. In September 1829 the British Civil Surgeon issued a sick certificate for the Nawab with the recommendation that he should make a three-month-long excursion on the Ganga up to Patna or Banaras “in order that he may not only have the benefit of pure air, but that his mind may be amused by the novelty of the scenery, advantages he would not derive on a shorter excursion.” It was further stated in the certificate that “His Highness has been some time past in a delicate state of health, which has of late been accompanied with a great degree of nervous debility.”⁷⁵ As it was reported from the Fort William, “[w]e were gratified to learn from the annexed correspondence that His Highness had returned to Moorshedbad in December in much better health, though not completely recovered.” Hence in March 1831 we hear that the Nazim wished “to proceed a second time on the River as far as Patna for the Recovery of his health” and such desire of His Highness was duly complied with by the Company which sanctioned 15,000 rupees to defray the estimated expenses.⁷⁶ On these long excursions the Nawab must have lived an amphibious life on the boat in the Ganga, probably taking a dip now and then. As Mark Twain notes “many sick pilgrims had come long journeys in palanquins to be healed of their maladies by a bath; or if that might not be, then to die on the blessed banks and so make sure of heaven.”⁷⁷

We have seen the consumption of Ganga water and the use of the river and its water on various occasions, for political symbolism and also for the restoration of health. Its use was not community specific and both Hindus and Muslims were served by the river and its waters. Interestingly, the best of all hymns ever composed in the river’s honour was written by a Bengali Muslim worshipper, Darab or Dharaf Khan.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Mark Twain, *Following the equator and anti-imperialist essays*, fwd. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, intro. Gore Vidal, afterword Fred Kaplan (1897; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 499–500.

⁷⁵ BL, APAC, India Office Records (hereafter, IOR), Board’s Collections, F/4/1329/52503, pp. 13–14. Following his transfer from Bengal to Patna, the civil servant John Adams wrote to his father on the 17 April 1796, “I am very glad I am going there for in the hot weather Calcutta is very dull, and I hear Patna is a remarkably pleasant place. It [is] about 500 miles from Calcutta by water. It is in the province of Bahar which is much healthier than Bengal.” A few months later he wrote to his father from Patna on the 24 September 1796, “it is one of the healthiest situations in India” and “I never enjoyed my health better than I do at present.” BL, APAC, European Private Papers, Mss. Eur. F 109/81, fos. 1–3, also loose sheets of paper without any folio mark.

⁷⁶ BL, APAC, IOR, Board’s Collections, F/4/1329/52503, pp. 3, 5; see also Francis Zimmerman, *The jungle and the aroma of meats: An ecological theme in Hindu medicine* (California: University of California Press, 1987). Zimmerman discusses the *anupa* (marshland) and *jangala* (dry land) conditions impinging on health in the medicinal discourses of the ancient Hindu medical treatises. On the advice of doctors, the Bengali Nawab Mubarak Ali Khan went for excursions upstream the Ganga in order to benefit from the healthy, dry air of the relatively less humid environment of Patna and Banaras and to avoid the insalubrious air of the humid delta.

⁷⁷ Twain, *Following the equator*, 473.

⁷⁸ Abhay Charan Mukerji, *Hindu fasts and feasts* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1918), 80.

His sacred composition called *Ganga-Stotra* is still sung by the Bengali devotees of the river.⁷⁹ Also the goddess Ganga appears invariably in the mythological tales espoused by the *ghazis* and *pirs* in the Bengali Islamic syncretistic traditions.⁸⁰ Thus, the Ganga helped in shaping an imagined community which identified itself with the river by singing hymns, by making pilgrimage and using the Ganga and its water for political and health purposes. This community comprised of diverse stocks of people drawn from a number of ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. They hardly knew each other yet they formed an imagined community linked to the Ganga in some way or the other.

Various mythological tales linked the river with the celestial spheres and its origin was imagined from the waters stored in the vaults of heaven as we saw above. The Ganga was also believed to have restored the sixty thousand dead sons of Sagara to heaven. Since the river was assumed to be a link between the earth and heaven, a pious Hindu always sought to be cremated on the banks of the Ganga with the belief of attaining heaven thereby. If cremation on the banks of the Ganga was not possible then a descendant was obliged to immerse the mortal remains in the river—a rite that Jawaharlal Nehru, as we have seen, sought to be performed on his demise, although he refused to attribute any religious meaning to this act. This practice had a pan-Indian appeal among all classes of Hindus. A seventeenth-century Portuguese account relates a story about the pilgrimage undertaken to the Ganga in Bengal by Ram Varma, the raja of Cochin on the Malabar Coast. The raja eventually died on 11 September 1600 when he was still about 80 leagues away from the river. He was cremated on the banks of the Ganga. The deceased raja had brought his mother's ashes too which were also committed to the river.⁸¹ More than two hundred years after Ram Varma had died, the ritual bondage between the royal household and the river remained intact, and in the early nineteenth century, the mortal remains of the Cochin rajas were carried all the way from south India to Banaras to be committed in the sacred river.⁸² The link between the Ganga and royal family, thus, seems to have remained virtually unbroken since at least the first millennium AD.

In Hindu popular tradition the Ganga is believed to be a river which ensures a pathway to heaven and millions of people still rush to the river on every possible occasion. The ancient belief of the Ganga as a celestial stream continues to form a very basic core of popular religious perception. At almost all pilgrimage centres priests called *Ganga-putras* (sons of the Ganga) monopolize the rituals connected with the worshipping as well as committal of ashes to the river. At each bathing season they

⁷⁹ Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 159.

⁸⁰ Asim Roy, *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 237–39, 242–43.

⁸¹ José Leal Ferreira and Rashmi, “Relatorio da Pimenta, A Report by Francisco da Costa, 1605,” in *Portuguese presence in India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, ed. Yogesh Sharma and José Leal Ferreira (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2008), 158–59.

⁸² BL, APAC, IOR, Board's Collections, F/4/1466/57632, Extract political general letters from Fort St. George, 1834, pp. 1–11.

make a good living out of the gifts and donations received from pilgrims and bathers.⁸³ When the descendants of the “late Rajahs of Cochin” were in Banaras it was reported on 22 January 1834 that “the Ganga pootrens (sons of the Ganga) demand Rupees two thousand for being allowed to throw the Ashes into the river and for the performance of ceremonies attendant thereon.”⁸⁴ Indeed the rituals of heaven ensured steady incomes for at least one group of religious specialists.

Not only Indians believed that the Ganga originated from heaven. So did Greeks and Romans, and medieval European geographers and writers who thought that the Ganga was a river of paradise. How did such an image of the Ganga pervade the western Eurasian world, how did it generate curiosity in the Age of Enlightenment and how did Europe ultimately discover the Ganga? British surveyors of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries were eager to explore and map out the source of the famed river by the exigencies of colonial control and the age-old European curiosity about the source of the Ganga. The following section discusses the outsider’s image of the Ganga, which largely corroborates what Indians themselves thought about the river.

Section III: Discovering the Ganga

During the medieval and early modern periods, in ecclesiastical circles as well as among secular European geographers, paradise and the source of the Ganga evoked great curiosity. It was commonly believed that the river had its origins in paradise, a belief that originated from a flawed understanding of the writings of the Greek and Roman geographers. Some armchair travel accounts of the European Middle Ages also gave currency to these myths and discussed the fabled lands and paradise at length. As books became more widely available after the growth of print culture in fifteenth-century Europe, curious readers became consumers of all sorts of travel literature. Many readers in Europe relied on these fables and believed famous rivers of the Eurasian world to have their origins in paradise. As we will see below, Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of the Americas, hoped to find the river of paradise or the Ganga. In medieval Europe when empirical geographical information was hard to come by, metaphysical speculations were given free rein. However, during the classical period geographers and scholars from the Greco-Roman world had taken a keen interest in and collected some first-hand information on India and the Ganga.

Early Contacts across Eurasia

The Persian or Achaemenid Empire (559 to 330 BC) facilitated long-distance communication across a large part of the Eurasian world. During the reign of Achaemenid kings, parts of India and most Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor came under the suzerainty of a single polity. Such political unification facilitated manifold contacts between the Greeks and the Indians who were active as

⁸³ Mukerji, *Hindu fasts and feasts*, 78.

⁸⁴ BL, APAC, IOR, Board’s Collections, F/4/1466/57632, Extract political general letters from Fort St. George, 1834, p. 5.

administrators, mercenaries and merchants in the service of empire. In spite of such contacts, hardly any first-hand eyewitness Greek accounts of India from the Achaemenid period have been preserved, although there are some scattered references to Indians in the works of the Greeks who were in the employ of the Persians. Though there are grains of truth in these accounts, they are highly exaggerated and fantastic.⁸⁵

The extant information drawn from the fragments of the *Geography* (500 BC) of Hecataeus (549 to 486 BC), the *Histories* of Herodotus (484 to 425 BC) and *Indica* of Ktesias (late fifth to fourth century BC) do not enable us to form a sufficient and reliable picture of India. Ktesias, who worked as a physician in the Persian court at Susa from 416 to 399 BC, may have occasionally met with Indians or Persian officers who had served in the Punjab or the Indus region. His information about India is occasionally correct and at times fantastic and wondrous.⁸⁶ Ktesias does mention that “[t]hrough India there flows a certain river, not of any great size, but only about two stadia [about a quarter of a mile] in breadth, called in the Indian tongue Hyparkhos, which means in Greek the bearer of all things good.” His account seems to relate it with certain myths as the provider of amber as the Indians themselves do not produce amber. Pliny sheds some light on the course and direction of the river based on the authority of Ktesias when he writes, “Ktesias says that in India is a river, the Hyperbarus, and that the meaning of its name is the bearer of all good things. It flows from the north into the Eastern Sea [Bay of Bengal].”⁸⁷ As Alexander wanted to terminate his campaign after reaching the Ganga, which the Greeks supposed to be the end of the world, we may infer that the Ganga was assumed to be an important geographical landmark by the late fourth century BC. Alexander, after the initial success of his campaign in the Punjab, gathered information about the Ganga and the armies of the east from his local informants and allies such as Phegeus, a local prince of a region near the Beas River, and Porus. That there existed a great plain (the Ganga plain) and a great kingdom to the east were new discoveries to the Greeks.⁸⁸ This information about India’s geography aroused curiosity among the Greeks and within a decade of Alexander’s campaign we find Megasthenes at Pataliputra (modern Patna).

After Alexander’s death one of his generals Seleucus Nicator fought Chandragupta Maurya and ultimately ceded a large amount of territory in exchange for five hundred elephants, a huge military asset for waging war against his adversaries such as Antigonos in Asia Minor and Ptolemy in Egypt. This exchange resulted in a

⁸⁵ Jean W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek world: A study in the transmission of culture* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 8–15.

⁸⁶ J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as described by Ktesias the Knidian; Being a translation of the abridgement of his “Indika” by Photios, and of the fragments of that work preserved in other writers* (1883; repr. Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1973), 7–17. He knew about gold and silver in the mountains of India, elephants, talking parrots and so on, but he also included fabulous tales of the Indian dogs of very great size that can fight even with lions, a fountain of liquid gold and reed plants along the banks of the Indus so thick that their stems could hardly be encompassed by two persons.

⁸⁷ Cited in Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 163.

⁸⁸ A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The tragedy of triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1996), 74–80.

marital alliance between the Seleucids and the Mauryas and a Greek bride came to reside in Pataliputra. Several Greek ambassadors visited the Mauryan court at Pataliputra and at least two of them—Daimachos and Megasthenes—are known to have written books based on their personal observation. While the work of Daimachos has been lost completely, the *Indica* of Megasthenes has survived in fragments. From this work we learn much about India during the Chandragupta Maurya's reign (321 to 297 BC) and also about the Ganga.⁸⁹

Megasthenes was much impressed with the Indian rivers generally, but he considered the Ganga the greatest of all rivers in the world and noted that “neither the Egyptian Nile, nor the Danube which flows through Europe, can for a moment be compared” with it in terms of the water the river discharged.⁹⁰ Even Arrian, who takes a critical view of the accounts available to him, seems to be in agreement with Megasthenes about the greatness of the Ganga. Thus Arrian wrote, “[w]e ought not, therefore, to distrust what we are told regarding the Indus and the Ganges, that they are beyond comparison greater than the Ister [Danube] and the Nile.”⁹¹ Megasthenes also commented on the source of “the Ganga, as some maintain, [is] rising from uncertain sources...; while others think that it rises in the Skythian mountains ... [o]thers again assert that it issues forth at once with loud roar from its fountain, and after tumbling down a steep and rocky channel is received immediately on reaching the level plains into a lake, whence it flows out with a gentle current.”⁹² It is interesting to note that neither Megasthenes nor Arrian relates the origins of the Ganga to paradise or talks about the river's celestial connections. It is possible that during Megasthenes' visit to Pataliputra the Indian myths about the celestial origins of the Ganga were yet to gain popularity. Perhaps it was only in the later period, somewhere between the third and first centuries BC, that the legends around the Ganga such as “Gangavataran” gained currency. Around the third century AD, the Ganga had already caught the imaginations of poets and literary figures of the Roman world and Christian writers began to identify the Pishon, a river of Eden in the book of Genesis, with the Ganga.⁹³

Starting in the first century AD, trade contacts between the Roman Empire and India acquired new dimensions as the direct maritime route linking India with the Red Sea was supposedly discovered by a Greek sailor called Hippalus.⁹⁴ In any case, during the Roman Empire the Red Sea port of Myos Hormos received more than a hundred ships laden with the Asian merchandise and the ship captains brought new data on

⁸⁹ Sedlar, *India and the Greek world*, 62.

⁹⁰ Megasthenes, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian; being a translation of the fragments of the Indika of Megasthenes collected by Dr. Schwanbeck, and of the first part of the Indika of Arrian by J. W. McCrindle*, rev. by R. C. Majumdar, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Chuckervetty, Chatterjee, 1960), 45.

⁹¹ Megasthenes, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, 197–99.

⁹² Megasthenes, *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, 63.

⁹³ Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 167–69.

⁹⁴ Lincoln Paine, *The sea civilization: A maritime history of the world* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, forthcoming, 2013) challenges the “discovery” by Hippalus and suggests that trade contacts might have developed much earlier.

astronomical observations made in India and Ceylon.⁹⁵ From the Red Sea ports, Asian goods were carried overland to the Nile and then down to the Mediterranean port of Alexandria and transhipped to Rome. As the trade expanded, Alexandria emerged as a cosmopolitan city of the Roman Empire where not only Asian goods but also merchants and scholars converged and disseminated knowledge of the eastern world.⁹⁶ Scholars at Alexandria built on legacies of the works of earlier geographers and scholars such as Eratosthenes, Posidonius, Hipparchus and Apollodorus. It has been suggested that the Roman geographer Strabo spent considerable time there and much of the material for his *Geography* would have come from the books kept in the library of Alexandria.⁹⁷ Later, in the second century AD, Ptolemy carried forward the scholarly tradition of Alexandria and bequeathed a most up-to-date work on geography.

These geographers certainly benefitted from the large repertoires of geographical works at Alexandria and gained fresh information to critique and improve upon the earlier works. Yet many imperfections and gaps in geographical knowledge of India and the Ganga remained. For example, Strabo located the source of the Ganga in the Caucasus. Subsequent historians such as Arrian and Curtius reiterated Strabo's views. Steven Darian suggests that the early geographical knowledge which conceived the source of the Ganga in the Caucasus inspired the medieval Christian theological writers of Europe. They imagined the myth of paradise and its four rivers—the Ganga among them—being located in the Caucasus.⁹⁸ As late as the seventeenth century Edward Terry, English traveller to India, was still echoing the same sentiment of the Ganga originally issuing from the Caucasus Mountains.⁹⁹ Apart from the source of river and paradise, the Ganga became an important geographical marker ever since Ptolemy drew his world map. Subsequent maps distinguished between India within and India beyond the Ganga (*India intra-Gangem* and *India extra-Gangem*), a cartographic convention that continued well into the early modern period. The Ganga thus became the pivotal marker in the western map-makers' geographical understanding of India which was essentialized by the river.

The ancient geographical tradition of the Greco-Roman world which laid much emphasis on empirical observations stagnated in the Middle Ages. Many geographical misconceptions took root, among the most glaring of which was confusing Ethiopia for India and locating there the mythical Prester John, the powerful Christian ruler who was believed to have been the potential ally of Christian Europe in its war against the Saracens. This was of a piece with contemporary geographers' conception of the Indian

⁹⁵ William Arthur Heidel, *The frame of the ancient Greek maps: With a discussion of the discovery of the Sphericity of the earth* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1937), 105.

⁹⁶ Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe*, vol. 1, bk. 1, *The century of discovery*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 16–18.

⁹⁷ Harold T. Davis, *Alexandria, the golden city*, vol. 1, *The city of the Ptolemies* (Evanston: Principia Press of Illinois, 1957), 191.

⁹⁸ Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 167.

⁹⁹ Edward Terry, *A voyage to East-India: Wherein some things are taken notice of our passage thither, but many more in our abode there, within that rich and most spacious empire of the Great Mogol* (London, 1655), 88.

Ocean as an inner lake bounded by land on all sides. Indeed the Church Fathers played a great role in the making of this and many other myths that were widely circulated in medieval and early modern Europe. The Ganga too came to be discussed among the Church Fathers and Christian geographers. Many misconceptions about its origins were uncritically accepted and several myths and legends were woven around the paradise and river theme.

As the tradition of empirical geographical knowledge was lost, the literal interpretations of Biblical stories became the foundations of the Church Fathers' geographical knowledge and they located the earthly paradise, a realm of deathlessness (immortality), to the east of India. The long poem *L'image du monde* (1245 or 1247) written in French for presumably lay consumption described the terrestrial paradise and positioned India on its further side.¹⁰⁰ Others positioned paradise on the summit of the highest mountains "almost touching the moon." Medieval chroniclers such as the English Benedictine Ranulf Higden located it in a spacious country, "not less in size than Egypt or India." As a result of these metaphysical discussions, paradise was brought down from such a mountain summit to somewhere in the contiguous regions of the habitable world, because the four rivers of paradise could never have flowed through the well-known countries had paradise not been located in their vicinity.¹⁰¹

A fourteenth-century armchair travel account written by the pseudonymous Sir John Mandeville tried to lend some credence to the narrative of earthly paradise. Mandeville confessed to his reader that he himself had never been to paradise but related what he had been told by those who actually tried to reach it: "And in the most high place of Paradise, even in the middle place, is a well that casteth out the four floods that run by diverse lands; of the which the first is cleped [named] Pison or Ganges, that is all one, and it runneth throughout Ind or Havilah, in the which river be many precious stones and much *lignum aloes* and much gravel of gold."¹⁰² In addition to Mandeville, other Church Fathers, travellers, and geographers including Josephus, St. Jerome, Cosmas Indicopleustes, Isidore of Seville, Giovanni de' Marignolli, Martin Behaim described paradise and the Ganga of gold and precious stones in their respective works. A twelfth-century Latin adaptation of the fifth-century work, *Iter ad Paradisum*, explains Alexander's march to the Ganga as a search for the "Earthly Paradise."¹⁰³ Such descriptions of paradise and the Ganga formed part of the medieval European literary and scholarly discourse, and Mandeville's "best-seller" in particular,

¹⁰⁰ Lach, *The century of discovery*, vol. 1: 28. Philippus Baldaeus also espoused a similar view, see *Naauwkeurige Beschryvinge van Malabar en Choromandel*, 187. See pp. 186–89 for a discussion on the source of the Ganga, and the Indians' perception of the river.

¹⁰¹ Charles William Chadwick Oman, *Unfortunate Colonel Despard and other studies* (1922; repr. New York: B. Franklin, 1967), 218–20.

¹⁰² John Mandeville, *Mandeville's travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 235. For the sources of Mandeville's travel, see also C. Raymond Beazley, *The dawn of modern geography: A history of exploration and geographical science from the middle of the thirteenth to the early years of the fifteenth century (c. A.D. 1260–1420)*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 319–23.

¹⁰³ George Cary, *The medieval Alexander* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), 19; Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 180–83.

must have impinged upon the mind of the European reading public. The ongoing “printing revolution” in Western Europe since the fifteenth century added to the curiosity of the reading public who consumed “true” tales of travel as much as they did myth and fables about the exotic lands.¹⁰⁴ The wider circulation of travel literature also attracted those who were about to embark on the voyage of exploration in Renaissance Europe since the late fifteenth century.

Christopher Columbus, the European “discoverer of the New World”, specifically mentions those authorities who located the earthly paradise to the East.¹⁰⁵ On his fourth voyage, Columbus anchored off the coast of Panama presuming that he had reached India judging from apparent signs of civilization and an abundance of gold among the natives. From the inhabitants of Veragua he learnt that the province of Ciguare was nine days’ journey to the west. He was also told that “the sea surrounds Ciguare, and that from there it is about ten days’ journey to the river Ganges.” In believing Ciguare to be only few days away from the Ganga, where the earthly paradise was located and where plentiful gold was found, Columbus was only trying to conform to the mythical image of the river and paradise transmitted in the fantastic or legendary traditions of medieval Europe.¹⁰⁶

Cleary, the Ganga along with the earthly paradise had become an important landmark for the explorers and navigators of the Age of Exploration. While the Ganga was ultimately reached by the Portuguese by the early sixteenth century, paradise or the source of the river continued to mystify the European geographers. The European geographical interest for knowing the course as well as source of the Ganga continued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the eighteenth century, several maps tried to depict the course of the Ganga.

Ganga Mapping

The early modern trade between Europe and India involved cross-continental interactions and the exchange not only of commodities and bullion but of ideas, geography, myths and religions. As direct maritime trade links were established between Europe and India from the late fifteenth century, the earlier geographical misconceptions were subjected to empirical data obtained from traders and travellers. João de Barros, the Portuguese compiler of information pertaining to the Indies,

¹⁰⁴ For the “printing revolution,” see, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The printing revolution in early modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–12. See also, Andrew Gow, “Gog and Magog on *Mappaemundi* and early printed world maps: Orientalizing ethnography in the apocalyptic tradition,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 2:1 (1998):61–88.

¹⁰⁵ Cecil Jane, trans. and ed., *Select documents illustrating the four voyages of Columbus: Including those contained in R. H. Major’s select letters of Christopher Columbus*, vol. 2 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1933), 38. During his third voyage Columbus wrote to the Spanish king Ferdinand referring to agreement amongst Isidore, Bede, Strabo and St. Ambrose about the earthly paradise being located in the East.

¹⁰⁶ Jane, *Select documents*, 2:82–86; see also Kirkpatrick Sale, *The conquest of paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 203–6; Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A sketch of a physical description of the universe*, trans. E. C. Otté, vol. 2 (New York, 1850), 251; and Darian, *The Ganges in myth and history*, 183–84.

published his map of the Ganga in 1550 which may be considered the first European map of the river in the Age of Exploration. Though de Barros must have relied on the data supplied by the Portuguese merchants coming to Bengal, his map lacked precision and showed only the estuary.¹⁰⁷ During the seventeenth century, Dutch merchants were able to draw a map of the Ganga but it remained imperfect. It hardly depicted stretches of the Ganga beyond that section of the river in Bengal and Bihar that was known to the Dutch owing to their trading operations in the region. As the Mughal Empire began to decline and the Europeans encountered little restrictions in their access to the hinterland, their cartographic knowledge of the river grew rapidly in the eighteenth century. With the success of the English Company a host of surveyors, missionaries and other enthusiastic cartographers and naturalists contributed to the growing knowledge of the actual course as well as the source of the Ganga, which was finally surveyed and mapped in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰⁸

The Dutch Reformed Church clergyman Francois Valentijn published his *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indie* in the early eighteenth century, comprising of eight volumes dealing with various regions of Asia. The fifth volume of Valentijn's work deals with Coromandel and Bengal. He had never visited Bengal himself and had obtained most of his information from the Dutch Company's servants active in the area. His map of Bengal was based on a map in the possession of Mattheus van den Broucke of the VOC director in Bengal from 1658 to 1663. This map shows the course of the Ganga up to Chhapra to the north of Patna. It also depicts the overland route following the river up to Taaspour (Tajpur), northwest of Chhapra on the southern banks of the Ganga. Flags shown along the course of the river indicate Dutch factories at places such as Hugli, Rajamahall, Patna and Chhapra. The course of the river is rather imprecisely demarcated, especially where it turns southeastwards from Chhapra to the Bay of Bengal. On this map the tributaries of the Ganga such as the Son, Gandak and Baghmata are not indicated.¹⁰⁹ This map clearly shows the limited cartographical knowledge about the course of the river and its tributaries at the time.

An English map of the first half of the eighteenth century depicts the entire course of the Ganga as well as the important pilgrim centres such as Haridwar, Allahabad, Banaras and Sagar. The map is drawn in two parts, the first extends from a little above Haridwar to Banaras and the second part sketches the river from Patna to Sagar, the meeting point of the Hugli branch of the Ganga and the sea. The former is very casually drawn and abstract, possibly based on an Indian original, while the latter is European in style but lacking any indication of longitude and latitude. The first part shows the Ganga splitting into more than half a dozen streams below Haridwar. These

¹⁰⁷ P. L. Madan, *River Ganga: A cartographic mystery* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 76.

¹⁰⁸ Madan, *River Ganga*, 104.

¹⁰⁹ Francois Valentijn, *Oud en nieuw Oost-Indiën, vervattende een naaukeurige en uitvoerige verhandelinge van Nederlands mogentheyd in die gewesten*; pt. 5.1, *Keurlyke beschryving van Choromandel, Pegu, Arrakan, Bengale* (Dordrecht, 1726), "Nieuwe Kaarte van't Koninckryk Bengale, door last van den Ed: Heer Mattheus van den Broucke Zal:r in zijn Ed: Leven Directeur in Bengale en Raad Ordinaris van Nederlands India, Opgesteld door Joh: van Leenen," facing p. 146.

channels are shown in the shape of a cow's head with the remark, "The Rock which the Indians say is like a cows head." The toponyms of the second map, in contrast, closely resemble the Dutch convention of spelling the place and river names. On this basis it has been suggested that the English map was possibly based on the map published in the *Oude and Nieuw Oost-Indiën* of Francois Valentijn.¹¹⁰

In 1755, the Dutchman Jan de Waal drew a coloured map showing the Ganga plain between Mau in the east of Patna and Banaras in the west. Not much is known about either the mapmaker or his objectives in making this map. It is possible that he had been to Patna as a merchant or that he relied on the information supplied by Dutch merchants' residing at Patna. The map depicts the Ganga and many of its tributaries, and the land routes and towns are very distinctly marked. All these serve to show the commercial importance of the region for the Dutch. At least the nine Dutch trading posts are shown by flags, the flag indicating the Patna factory being the largest and hence suggestive of its prominence. Other Europeans such as the English were reduced to only one settlement at Saidabad to the south of Patna. Another interesting aspect of the map is the depiction of the Bhojpur region in yellow colour. It is hard to guess what exactly the map maker had in mind but we know the highlighted region had had a turbulent history in terms of its relations with the Mughals. Overall, this map underlines a keen awareness of the region's economic and political significance, and above all the central place taken by the Ganga and its tributaries.¹¹¹

A few years after Jan de Waal's map, the English Samuel Dunn drew another map based on data collected by Henry Vansittart in Bengal in the 1760s. This map seems to be the accurate and most up-to-date before the map of Major James Rennell was published in 1781. Dunn's map shows the advances in cartographical knowledge about the actual course of the Ganga. The river has been charted out in intricate detail, showing many channels, islands and most of the tributaries falling into the Ganga. Although the course of the Ganga has been shown up to Allahabad, information about the river beyond Patna was clearly limited and the number of settlements along the river thins out rapidly.¹¹²

Since the second half of the eighteenth century, the growing political dominance of the English Company coincided with increasing knowledge of the course of the Ganga. As the coast became the new centre of political power, the Company projected the economic and political dominance of the maritime zone onto the hinterland. The Ganga channelized the British power to the upriver right in the heart of Hindustan. The British colonial expansion and the charting of the course of the Ganga progressed hand

¹¹⁰ J. J. L. Gommans, Jeroen Bos, Gijs Kruijtzter, et al., *Grote atlas van de Verenigde Oost-indische Compagnie*, vol. 6, *Voor-Indië, Perzië, Arabisch Schiereiland* (Voorburg: Atlas Maior, 2010), sheet 406.

¹¹¹ Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 4VELH 121; Gommans, et al., *Grote atlas*, sheet 408.

¹¹² BL, Map Room, Maps K. Top. 115.31. A map of Bengal, Bahar and Orixia, laid down by Samuel Dunn from original surveys and journals kept by Henry Vansittart, 1765–1770 AD. For the Company's efforts to map out Bengal and to keep geographical information secret, see Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an empire: The geographical constructions of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 132–45.

in hand in the second half of the eighteenth century. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the scientific mapping of the source of the Ganga and the emergence of the British as paramount power after their victory over the Marathas, a formidable contender for the Indian empire, were not a mere coincidence. From the European viewpoint, the discovery of the source of the Ganga was as unexpected and exciting as the British Indian Empire formation. However, there is a long history of European fascination about the source of the Ganga, particularly in the Age of Exploration.

Several myths about the source of the Ganga were circulating among the geographers and cartographers during the sixteenth century. The “Lago de Chiamay,” the supposed source of the Ganga, was believed to be located in the northeast corner of Assam. Lago de Chiamay first appeared in the preface to Giovanni Battista Ramusio’s edition of *The Book of Marco Polo* in 1553. According to Sven Hedin “Ramusio had access to Barros’ geographical manuscript, which, although the preface is dated July 1553, may easily have taken place a few years earlier.” Hedin further suggests that Lago de Chiamay already appeared in the maps of Gastaldi before 1550, and he quotes Nordenskiöld “[t]hat the first volume of Ramusio’s work was laid under the press in 1550.” Hedin argues that “Gastaldi got the information of the lake’s existence from Barros, probably at the same time as Ramusio got the short text of it.” It has been suggested that Barros got his information from traders and travellers to the east who might have heard of the discovery of the lake in the 1540s from the Portuguese traveller, Fernão Mendez Pinto.¹¹³ Later on, the Lago de Chiamay turned out to be a figment of Pinto’s imagination.

As the Age of Exploration continued, there was a heightened urgency among the European missionaries and travellers to find and locate the source of the Ganga. As the Portuguese Jesuit fathers came into contact with the Mughal court circles, the source of the Ganga generated curiosity among some of the Indian rulers. The Mughal emperor Akbar is believed to have dispatched a fact-finding mission to the source of the Ganga in the late sixteenth century.¹¹⁴ It has been suggested that after the Mughal expedition to the source of the Ganga the Indians came to know that *Gomukh* (lit. the cow’s head) was not the source of the river but that it “rises much higher in the Country towards the middle of Great Tartary.”¹¹⁵ In the seventeenth century, Edward Terry writes of Haridwar and *Gomukh* that the Ganga “passing through or amongst large Rocks, makes presently after a pretty full Current: ... That principal Rock, through which this river *Ganges* there makes a Current, is indeed, or (if not) according to the fancy of the Superstitious *Indians*, like a *Cow’s Head*...” (Italics in the original).¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Sven Hedin, “Early European knowledge of Tibet,” *Geografiska Annaler* 1 (1919): 316–18, 334; see also Fernão Mendez Pinto, *The travels of Mendes Pinto*, ed. and trans. Rebecca D. Catz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 266.

¹¹⁴ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India 1653–1708*, ed. and trans. William Irvine, vol. 1 (1907; repr. Calcutta: Temple Press, 1965), 139–40; Madan, *River Ganga*, 102.

¹¹⁵ Hedin, “Early European knowledge of Tibet,” 294.

¹¹⁶ Terry, *A voyage to East-India*, 88.

After the British assumed political power, James Rennell published his survey of the course of the Ganga and Brahmaputra Rivers in 1781.¹¹⁷ The subsequent publication of his map charted the course of the Ganga with a fair degree of precision, though the source of the river still remained imprecisely located on the map. Rennell's map was largely based on a corrected map of Tibetan Lamas by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1697–1782), the cartographer of the king of France and also on the information provided by a Jesuit missionary in India, Joseph Tieffenthaller. In the early eighteenth century, the Chinese emperor Kang-shi had sent two Lamas trained in geometry and arithmetic to survey the source of the Ganga and to bring water from it. However, it was discovered that the Lamas never reached the source themselves but that they had based their map on oral information collected from other Lamas residing in those parts of Tibet. In correcting the Lama's map d'Anville removed the head of the Ganga from latitude 29½° and carried it higher up to nearly 32°, although the actual source was located at Gomukh in the Gangotri glacier at 30° latitude. His map also placed the early course of the Ganga much to the north-west of the Himalayas. Rennell had himself expressed some doubts about the correctness of Lamas' map, as did Anquetil du Perron (1731–1805), who published the geographical researches of Tieffenthaller about the source of the Ganga in 1784. But the inadequacy of Tieffenthaller lay in the fact that he himself never made a journey to the source of the Ganga and obtained geographical information from native informants.¹¹⁸ Thus, it appears that even in the late eighteenth century the source of the Ganga was still shrouded in mystery and that geographical knowledge about its actual position relied only on inferred sources.

According to Dilip Chakrabarti, the works of Anquetil du Perron mark the beginning of theoretical research on the historical geography of the subcontinent. Chakrabarti quotes Carsten Niebuhr: "One still finds among the Indians, one of the oldest nations of the world, so many valuable remains of antiquity, which deserve more attention from the literati of Europe, than has been hitherto bestowed on them."¹¹⁹ In order to expand their horizons beyond Judaeo-Christian thought, the Western philosophers and the French encyclopaedists in particular were taking serious interests in the antiquities of India. Many believed India to be the source of culture and religion. For example, the French philosopher Voltaire was "convinced that everything has come to us from the banks of the Ganges, astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis, etc."¹²⁰ The

¹¹⁷ James Rennell, *An account of the Ganges and Burrampooter rivers* (London, 1781), 1–26.

¹¹⁸ H. T. Colebrooke, Esq. "On the sources of the Ganges, in the *Himádri* or *Emodus*," *Asiatic Researches comprising history and antiquities, the arts, sciences, and literature of Asia*, vol. 11 (1818; repr. Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1979): 429–33. For the location of the confluence of the Alakhnanda and Bhagirathi streams at Devprayag (30° 9' N. latitude and 78° 31' E. longitude), see also James Bell, *A system of geography, popular and scientific, or A physical, political and statistical account of the world and its various divisions*, vol. 4 (Glasgow, 1832), 469.

¹¹⁹ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, "The development of archeology in the Indian subcontinent," *World Archaeology* 13:3 (1982): 326–27.

¹²⁰ Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan myth: A history of racist and nationalist ideas in Europe* (London: Sussex University Press, 1974), 185; also Chakrabarti, "The development of archeology," 328; For special

British explorations of the source of the Ganga may also have been inspired from the philosophical undercurrents sweeping Europe in the eighteenth century.¹²¹

With the assumption of the East India Company's rule since the second half of the eighteenth century, committed efforts were directed towards mapping and surveying the newly acquired territory. The new regime needed to generate geographical knowledge for purposes of administrative control of their new empire. The significance of the Ganga for the prosperity of the colonial possession was obvious to the early British administration who set about to undertake its scientific mapping. Thus, from the second half of the eighteenth century, much attention was directed to surveying the river and its source. According to the early colonial administrators, it was also a matter of the British national pride to map out the source of such a celebrated river. In the words of the late eighteenth-century orientalist H. T. Colebrooke, Esq., "Perhaps the national credit was concerned, not to leave in uncertainty and doubt a question which the *English* only have the best opportunity of solving; and one at the same time so interesting, as that of exploring the springs of one of the greatest rivers of the old continent, and whose waters fertilize and enrich the *British* territories, which it traverses in its whole navigable extent" [italics in the original].¹²²

The Hindu cosmography and other religious texts often located the source of the river in the Mansarovar (Sanskrit *Manas*, mind; *sarovar*, lake). Accordingly the Lamas also believed the river's source to be a lake which they called Mapama. These speculations came to an end with the survey by Lieutenant William Webb in the first decade of the nineteenth century. As a result of this survey previous knowledge about the Ganga rising in the lake Mansarovar to the north and west of the Himalayas was rejected. Further, Webb's survey found out that the source of the Ganga was south of the Himalayas.¹²³ In the first half of the nineteenth century, the great trigonometrical survey of India was able to dispel many myths about the source of the Ganga as well as speculations about the actual height of the Himalayan Mountains. The progress of British arms into the Himalayas after the Gurkha War (1814–15) paved the way for further geographical explorations. The trigonometrical survey was conducted by Lieutenant Webb, Captain John Hodgson and his successor James Herbert and as a result the actual source of the Ganga and the real height of the Himalayan Mountains were ascertained by the 1830s.¹²⁴ Interestingly, the British scientific discovery of the

interest taken by philologists and orientalist in nineteenth-century continental Europe in the study of the Sanskrit language and the Vedas that engendered "a second renaissance" in Europe, see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 26–27, 188–89.

¹²¹ A similar quest to solve the geographical mystery led the British explorers to reach the source of the Nile in the nineteenth century, see Tim Jeal, *Explorers of the Nile: The triumph and the tragedy of a great Victorian adventure* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012). See also, John Keay, *Mad about the Mekong: Exploration and empire in South East Asia* (London: HarperCollins, 2012).

¹²² Colebrooke, "On the sources of the *Ganges*, in the *Himádri* or *Emodus*," 441.

¹²³ Colebrooke, "On the source of the *Ganges*, in the *Himádri* or *Emodus*," 442.

¹²⁴ John Keay, *The great arch: The dramatic tale of how India was mapped and Everest was named* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 115–20; see also Bell, *A system of geography, popular and scientific*, vol. 4, 467–69. Bell writes, "From the brow of this curious wall of snow, and immediately above the

source of the Ganga confirmed one Indian legend that the river originated in the *Gomukh* at the Himalayas.

Conclusion

The external perception about the Ganga as the defining river of India confirms Indians' perception of the river as the well-spring of Indian civilization. Since evidence from both within the subcontinent as well as without suggests the centrality of the river, it is hardly surprising that an imagined community emerged in India which associated itself with the river in one way or another. The pilgrimage to the holy places on the banks of the Ganga, the purifying powers of its waters, and the river being a visible link between the earthly and celestial realms helped create a huge community of people with a firm attachment to the river over the course of several millennia. This helps explain why the ruling dynasties sought an actual or imagined association with the Ganga. Can it be then assumed that for the pre-modern Indian dynasties, the river was a source of legitimacy? How else can we explain the prominence given to the Ganga by the several rulers who placed the image of the Ganga in the royal temples or jubilant celebrations of the Chola emperor on his conquest of the eastern Ganga plain? The Muslim Nawabs and the Mughal emperors did not believe in the sanctity of the Ganga, yet many of them associated themselves with the river. With Nehru's secular invocation of the Ganga as the river of India in the twentieth century, we come a full circle.

As we have noted above, the roots of an imagined community of the Ganga may be traced to the early migration and settlement in the Ganga plain since the late second and first millennium BC. The cultural processes through which the Ganga was mythologized went hand in hand with the significant economic and political transformations of the Ganga plain. After the decline of the urban society of the Harappan civilization, from the end of the third and early second millennium BC, there appears to be a pull towards the Ganga plain where people and resources gravitated. From the first millennium BC, the Ganga plain witnessed significant economic change, the urban growth and state formation. Why was it that the Ganga plain underwent momentous changes since the first millennium BC? As I explore this question in the next chapter, we will see that the Ganga remained central to the processes of the economic and political changes.

outlet of the stream [of the Bhagirathi], large hoary icicles depend. These an illiterate Bramin who accompanied captain Hodgson from Gangoutri [in 1817], called 'the hair of Mahadeva [Shiva]', whence the Ganges is said in the Shasters to flow. It is this extraordinary outlet that, in Hodgson's opinion, the appellation of 'the cow's mouth' is aptly given." 468.

