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# **WATER WARS**

## **Privatization, Pollution and Profit**

**by Vandana Shiva**

South End Press

Cambridge, MA

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Printed in Canada by Transcontinental Printing



**Library of Congress Control Number: 2002100340**

South End Press, 7 Brookline Street, #1, Cambridge, MA 02139-4146  
[www.southendpress.org](http://www.southendpress.org)

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## Chapter 7

### THE SACRED WATERS

“Water is the source of all life”—The Qur’an

“*Apo hi stha mayobhuvaś*”

(“Water is the greatest sustainer and hence is like a mother”)

—Taittiriya Samhita

#### The Sacred Ganges

**T**hroughout history, water sources have been sacred, worthy of reverence and awe. The advent of water taps and water bottles has made us forget that before water flows through pipes and before it is sold to consumers in plastic, it is a gift from nature.

In India, every river is sacred. Rivers are seen as extensions and partial manifestations of divine gods. According to Rigvedic cosmology, the very possibility of life on earth is associated with the release of heavenly waters by Indra, the god of rain. Indra’s enemy Vrtra, the demon of chaos, withheld and hoarded the waters and inhibited creation. When Indra defeated Vrtra, the heavenly waters rushed to earth, and life sprung forth.

According to Hindu mythology, the Ganges River originates in the heavens. The Kumbh Mela, a great festival centered around the Ganges, is a celebration of creation. According to one fable, the gods and demons were fighting over the *kumbh*

(pitcher) filled with *amrit* (nectar), created by *sagar manthan* (the churning of the oceans). Indra's son Jayant ran away with the *kumbh* and for 12 consecutive days the demons fought the gods for the pitcher. Finally, the gods won, drank the *amrit*, and achieved immortality.

During the battle over the *kumbh*, five drops of *amrit* fell on earth at Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain, the four cities where the Kumbh Mela is still held. To this day, each city holds its own *mela* every 12 years. Allahabad's Maha Kumbh Mela in 2001 was one of the most spectacular festivals to date. Close to 30 million people gathered in the holy city to bathe in the sacred river Ganges.

The oldest and best known myth about the creation of the Ganges is the story of Bhagirath. Bhagirath was the great-great-great-grandson of King Sagar, the ocean king. King Sagar had slain the demons on the earth and was staging an *aswamedh-yagya* (a horse sacrifice) to declare his supremacy. Indra, the rain god and the supreme ruler of the kingdom of gods, feared losing his power of the *yagya* and stole Sagar's horse and tied it to the ashram of the great sage Kapil. At the time, Kapil was in deep meditation and unaware of Indra's mischief.

When King Sagar learned of his missing horse, he sent his 60,000 sons in search of it. The sons finally discovered the horse near the meditating sage and began to plot their attack on him. When the sage opened his eyes, he was angered to find the scheming brothers and reduced them to ashes.

King Sagar's grandson Anshuman was eventually successful in recovering the horse from Kapil. Anshuman reported to his grandfather that the sage had burned the 60,000 sons out of anger; the only way for the sons to reach their heavenly abode was if the Ganges could descend from Heaven so its water could cleanse the sons' ashes. Unfortunately, Anshuman and his son Dilip failed in bringing the Ganges to earth.

Finally, Anshuman's grandson Bhagirath went to the Himalayas and started meditating at Gangotri. After a long meditation, the Ganges appeared to him in bodily form and agreed to descend to the earth if someone could break her mighty fall, which would otherwise destroy the earth. King Bhagirath appealed to Shiva, who eventually agreed to use his hair to soften the descent of the Ganges. The river followed Bhagirath to where the ashes of King Sagar's sons were piled, purified their souls, and paved their way to the heavens.

Because the Ganges descends from heaven, she is a sacred bridge to the divine. The Ganges is a *tirtha*, a place for crossing over from one place to another. The *Gangastotra-sata-namavali* is an ode to the river, and reveals the profound effect of the river in India. The salute has 108 sacred names for the river.<sup>1</sup> The Ganges's role as mediator between this world and the divine is embodied in death rituals among Hindus. The ashes of our ancestors and kin are cast in the Ganges, so that, like the sons of Sagar, they too will be ensured a transition to the heavens. I was born and brought up in Doon Valley, bounded by the Ganges on the east and the Yamuna on the west. The rivers have nurtured me and shaped my sense of the sacred from childhood. One of the most moving experiences I had in recent years was immersing my father's ashes in the Ganges at Rishikesh.

Like the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Kaveri, the Narmada, and the Brahmaputra are all sacred rivers and are worshiped as goddesses. They are believed to cleanse and wash away spiritual and material impurities. Their reputed purifying characteristics are the reasons why, at their daily bath, devout Hindus chant, "O Holy Mother Ganga, O Yamuna, O Godavari, Oh Sarasvati, O Narmada, O Sindhu, O Kaveri. May you all be pleased to manifest in these waters with which I shall purify myself."

The Ganges does not merely possess the purifying qualities of water; it is saturated with antiseptic minerals that kill bacteria.

Modern bacteriological research has confirmed that cholera germs die in Ganges water. Dr. F.C. Harrison writes:

A peculiar fact, which has never been satisfactorily explained, is the quick death, in three to five hours, of the *Cholera vibrio* in the waters of Ganga. When one remembers sewage by numerous corpses of natives, often cholera casualties, and by the bathing of thousands of natives, it seems remarkable that the belief of the Hindus, that the water of this river is pure and cannot be defiled and that they can safely drink it and bathe in it, should be confirmed by means of modern bacteriological research.<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that the Indian people hold the Ganges and other rivers dearly and believe they possess mysterious powers. It is not surprising that despite the colonization of India by Coca-Cola and McDonald's, millions of people feel drawn to the Ganges on the occasion of Kumbh Mela.

#### **An Ecological Tale**

Ganga, whose waves in swarga flow,  
Is daughter of the Lord of Snow.  
Win Shiva, that his aid be lent,  
To hold her in her mid-descent.  
For earth alone will never bear  
These torrents traveled from the upper air.<sup>3</sup>

The treks to the source of the Ganges are among my fondest memories of childhood. At an altitude of 10,500 feet stands the Gangotri, where a temple is dedicated to Mother Ganga, who is worshiped as both a sacred river and a goddess. A few steps from the Ganga temple is the Bhagirath Shila, a stone upon which King Bhagirath supposedly meditated to bring the Ganges to the earth. The shrine opens every year on Akshaya Tritiye, which falls during the last week of April or the first week of May. On this day, farmers prepare to plant their new seeds. The Ganga temple closes on the day of Deepavali, the festival of lights, and the

shrine of the goddess Ganga is then taken to Haridwar, Prayag, and Varanasi.

The story of the descent of the Ganges is an ecological story. The above hymn is a tale of the hydrological problem associated with the descent of a mighty river like the Ganges. H.C. Reiger, the eminent Himalayan ecologist, described the material rationality of the hymn in the following words:

In the scriptures a realisation is there that if all the waters which descend upon the mountain were to beat down upon the naked earth, then earth would never bear the torrents.... In Shiva's hair we have a very well known physical device, which breaks the force of the water coming down,... the vegetation of the mountains.<sup>4</sup>

The Ganges is not just a giver of peace after death—she is a source of prosperity in life. The Gangetic plain is one of the most fertile regions of the world. At the beginning of the ploughing season in Bihar, farmers, prior to planting their seeds, put Ganges water in a pot and set it aside in a special place in the field to ensure a good harvest. It is this treatment of the organic as sacred that inspired geographer Diana Eck to call the Ganges an “organic symbol.” Eck writes:

For the Ganga's significance as a symbol is not exhaustively narrative. First, she is a river that flows with waters of life in a vibrant universe. Narrative myths come and go in history. They may shape the cosmos and convey meaning for many generations, and then they may gradually lose their hold upon the imagination and may finally be forgotten. But the river remains, even when the stories are no longer repeated.<sup>5</sup>

Fourteen miles beyond Gangotri is Gaumukh, a glacier formed like the snout of a cow that gives rise to the Ganges. The Gaumukh glacier, which is 24 kilometers in length and six to eight kilometers in width, is receding at a rate of five meters per year. The receding glacier of the Ganges, the lifeline for millions



of people in the Gangetic plain, has serious consequences for the future of India.

### **Christianity and the Sacred Waters**

The sacredness of water has been inspired both by the power of rivers and by water as a life force. T.S. Eliot once wrote about the Mississippi River, "I do not know much about gods, but I think the river is a strong brown god."<sup>6</sup> All over the world we see the spiritual importance of water: in France, a temple sacred to the goddess Sequana is located at the source of River Seine, and the Marne River gains its name from Matrona, Divine Mother; the ancient name of the Thames River in England is Tamesa or Tamesis, denoting a river deity. In their book *Sacred Waters*, Janet and Colin Bord list 200 ancient and holy wells in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland that have survived into modern times.<sup>7</sup>

Spiritual worship of water was wiped out in Europe with the rise of Christianity. The new religion called water worship pagan and denounced it as an abomination. At the Second Council of Arles, held around A.D. 452, a canon declared, "If in the territory of a bishop, infidels light torches or venerate trees, fountains or stones, and he neglects to abolish this usage, he must know that he is guilty of sacrilege."<sup>8</sup> In A.D. 960, Saxon King Edgar issued a decree requiring that "every priest industriously advance Christianity, and extinguish heathenism, and forbid the worship of fountains."<sup>9</sup> Such edicts continued to be issued well into the twelfth century.

In the 15th century, the Hereford Diocese Cathedral Registers passed a decree banning the worship of wells and other water sources in Turnaston, England:

Although it is provided in the divine laws and sacred canons that all who shall adore a stone, spring or other creature of God, incur the charge of idolatry. It has come to our ears, we grieve to say, from the report of many credible witnesses and the common report of the people, that many of our subjects are in large number visiting a certain well and stone at Turnaston in our diocese where with genuflections and offer-

ings they, without authority of the Church, wrongfully worship the said stone and well, whereby committing idolatry; when the water fails they take away with them the mud of the same and treat and keep it as a relic to the grave peril of their souls and a pernicious example to others. Therefore we suspend the use of the said well and stone and under pain of greater excommunication forbid our people to visit the well and stone for purposes of worship. And we depute to each and all of you and firmly enjoin by virtue of holy obedience, to proclaim publicly in your churches and parishes that they are not to visit the place for such purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the ban on water worship, people's deep faith in the sacredness of water persisted. In order to protect holy rituals, people converted sacred places for Christian use; old customs were absorbed into Christian rituals and water worship hid behind a Christian facade.<sup>11</sup> Water maintained its sacredness in rituals of baptism and hand washing. Baptism sites and churches were built close to and, at times, over wells.

### **Giving "Value" to Water**

The word *value* is derived from the Latin term *valere* meaning "to be strong or worthy." In communities where water is sacred, the worth of water rests on its role and function as a life-force for animals, plants, and ecosystems. However, commodification of water reduces its value only to its commercial value. The *Oxford English Dictionary* now defines value in primarily economic terms: "that amount of some commodity, medium of exchange etc, which is considered to be an equivalent for something else; a fair or adequate equivalent or return." Like the term *value*, *resources* also has an interesting root. It originated from the word *surge*, meaning "that which has the capacity to rise again." Unfortunately, the term now means that which gains value as raw material for industry.

The proposal to give market values to all resources as a solution to the ecological crisis is like offering the disease as the cure. With the arrival of the industrial revolution, all value became syn-

onymous with commercial value, and the spiritual, ecological, cultural, and social significance of resources was eroded. Forests were no longer living communities; they were reduced to timber mines. Minerals were no longer veins of the earth; they were merely raw material. We are now witnessing the commodification of two vital resources—biodiversity and water—which, for a long time, were beyond the reach of forest industrialization. Biodiversity is now a mere genetic mine and water a commodity.

The water crisis results from an erroneous equation of value with monetary price. However, resources can often have very high value while having no price. Sacred sites like sacred forests and rivers are examples of resources that have very high value but no price. Oceans, rivers, and other bodies of water have played important roles as metaphors for our relationship to the planet. Diverse cultures have different value systems through which the ethical, ecological, and economic behavior of society is guided and shaped. Similarly, the idea that life is sacred puts a high value on living systems and prevents their commodification.

Protection of vital resources cannot be ensured through market logic alone. It demands a recovery of the sacred and a recovery of the commons. And these recoveries are happening. A few years ago, a few thousand pilgrims used to walk from villages across north India to Hardwar and Gangotri to collect Ganges water for Shivratri, the birthday of the god Shiva. Carrying *kavads* (yokes from which two jars of holy water dangle and are never allowed to touch the ground) the *kavadias* now number in the millions. The highway from Delhi to my hometown, Dehra Dun, is shut during the weeks of the pilgrimage. Villages and towns put up free resting and eating places along the entire 200-kilometer pilgrimage route. The brightly decorated *kavads* containing Ganga water are a celebration of and dedication to the sacred.

No market economy could make millions walk hundreds of kilometers in the muggy heat of August to bring the blessings of the sacred waters to their villages. The 30 million devotees who

went to bathe in the sacred Ganges for the Kumbh Mela did not see the value of the water in terms of its market price but in terms of its spiritual worth. States cannot force devotees to worship the water market.

Sacred waters carry us beyond the marketplace into a world charged with myths and stories, beliefs and devotion, culture and celebration. These are the worlds that enable us to save and share water, and convert scarcity into abundance. We are all Sagar's children, thirsting for waters that liberate and give us life—organically and spiritually. The struggle over the *kumbh*, between gods and demons, between those who protect and those who destroy, between those who nurture and those who exploit, is ongoing. Each of us has a role in shaping the creation story of the future. Each of us is responsible for the *kumbh*—the sacred water pot.

- 1 See appendix for a list of the 108 names for the Ganges.
- 2 Swami Sivananda, *Mother Ganges*, (Uttar Pradesh, India: The Divine Life Society, 1994), p. 16.
- 3 H.C. Reiger, "Whose Himalaya? A Study in Geopietry," in T. Singh, ed., *Studies in Himalayan Ecology and Development Strategies* (New Delhi: English Book Store, 1980), p. 2.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Diana Eck, "Ganga The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography" in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, John Stratton Hawley, Donna Marie Wulff, eds. (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1982), p. 182.
- 6 Uma Shankari and Esha Shah, *Water Management Traditions in India* (Madras, India: Patriotic People's Science and Technology Foundation, 1993), p. 25.
- 7 Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *Sacred Waters: Holy Wells and Water Lore in Britain and Ireland* (London; New York: Granada, 1985).
- 8 Ibid., p. 31.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Robert Mascal, *Bishop of Hereford*, pp. 1404-1417. Also see Bord and Bord, *Sacred Waters*, p. 45.
- 11 Ibid.