



Hindu holy city of Varanasi as seen from the Ganges River. Photo by Jeeheon Cho in 2010, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2hDQ5T1>

Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic—or human caused—climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Hindus work tirelessly to change their habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Hindu environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Hindus described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Hindu.

As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Pollution and India's Living River

While Hinduism is a global religion, most Hindus—nearly one billion—live in India.¹ In fact, Hindu goddesses are often a part of the Indian geographical landscape. This includes the deified river: the Ganges. The Ganges River, also known as *Ma Ganga* (or Mother Ganges), flows from the glaciers of the Himalayas and crosses much of the subcontinent before flowing into the Indian Ocean. The religious origins of this goddess are varied, and devotees of different Hindu gods often believe in different stories about her. One of the more common stories comes from followers of the god Shiva. Many Shiva devotees believe Mother Ganges offered to descend to earth to purify the burning coals of the ancestors of the Hindu sage Bhagiratha. However, she was concerned that her fall from the cosmic realm would destroy the earth, so Shiva offered to catch her in his hair. Her waters ran in rivulets through his hair and onto the earth, where she purified the remains.²

The Ganges River is therefore not only a waterway, but a goddess from heaven. Thus, many Hindus believe that the river has incredible healing powers. It is a common belief that bathing in the Ganges washes away a person's bad karma and is like being in heaven. Some Hindus even believe that being brushed by a breeze which contains a single drop of the Ganges will absolve the impurities of multiple lifetimes. To most Hindus, dying in the holy city of Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges, is said to result in *moksha*—a release from the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. It is

estimated that 32,000 corpses are cremated each year in Varanasi, after which their ashes are given to the Ganges. Others who cannot afford cremation simply wrap and float the body down the river.³ To access her healing waters, Hindus travel from all over the world on pilgrimages, often filling containers with water to bring back to their homes for rituals or healings. In fact, the largest gathering of human beings in the entire world regularly occurs on the banks of the river at the city of Allahabad. Every 12 years, the city hosts the Kumbh Mela, a religious festival during which the central ritual is bathing in the Ganges to achieve *moksha*. In 2001, over 30 million pilgrims attended, making it the largest gathering in human history.⁴ Unfortunately, the river has also become one of the most polluted bodies of water in the entire world, due to

¹ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

² Kelly D. Alley, *On the Banks of the Ganga: When Wastewater Meets a Sacred River*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 56-60; David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1986), 188-189.

³ Kinsley *Hindu Goddesses*, 191, 193-4; Justin Rowlett, "India's Dying Mother," *BBC News*, (London), May 12, 2016. <http://bbc.in/21TmE16>

⁴ Linda Davidson and David Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 322-3.

India's exploding population and rapid industrialization. Over 450 million people live in the Ganges river basin, and human waste is the cause of most of the pollution. Almost five billion liters of sewage flow into the river every day, only a quarter of which is treated. By Varanasi, the Ganges is an open sewer. Fecal bacteria at this point is 150 times higher than the safe level for bathing, let alone drinking. Over 300,000 Indian children die annually from drinking contaminated water. Industrial effluent also pollutes the river, particularly from tanneries in Kanpur. Indian industries dump nearly a billion liters of waste into the river daily.⁵ Climate change has worsened the problem: water flow has decreased as Himalayan glaciers shrink.⁶

For many Hindus, this is unacceptable. Illnesses and deaths have become common, and many Hindus will not drink or bathe in the river—an important part of their faith—due to the toxic waters. Many Hindus have called for serious efforts to clean the Ganges. Hindu holy man Chidanand Saraswati has said that India is “killing its own mother.” Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist elected prime minister in 2014, ran on religious pledges to restore the purity of the Ganges. Modi even claimed divine intervention in his election. In his victory speech, given on the Ganges in Varanasi, he stated: “Ma Ganga has called me... she decided some responsibilities for me. Ma Ganga is screaming for help, she is saying I hope one of my sons gets me out of this filth... it has been decided by God for me to serve Ma Ganga.” Modi has since pledged \$3 billion dollars over five years for river clean-up and promised to use Hindu holy men as project advisors. However, most analysts agree the funds are not nearly enough to fix the problems on the 2,500-km long river.⁷ There is also another issue: not all Hindus believe cleanup is needed.

In fact, many Hindus continue to bathe in or even drink the Ganges regularly. Confident in the healing powers of the divine river, they believe nothing could compromise the purity of their goddess. For them, Mother Ganges exists to wash away the impurities and pollution of earth and thus can cleanse herself. Major cleanup efforts are thus a waste of money and effort. Some governments and industries have taken advantage of these beliefs, and have used confidence in the cleansing power of the Ganges to justify continuing to pollute the river.⁸ Other Hindus acknowledge the problem, but lay blame on Muslims. Because cattle are holy to many Hindus, Kanpur's polluting tanneries—which create leather from cowhides—are all owned by Muslims. Many Muslims claim that they have been unfairly persecuted by Hindu nationalists, who they say would rather persecute Muslim businesses than address more expensive sewage issues.⁹

In March 2017, as cleanup efforts continued to fail, the High Court of Uttarakhand state confirmed the deified status that Hindus have long given the river. They issued a judgment that the Ganges and the Yamuna river—a Ganges tributary—are “living entities” which are entitled to human rights. Those caught polluting the river could thus be charged with assault or even murder. A few days later, activists sought murder charges against several politicians on behalf of the Yamuna River, sections of which are no longer able to support life. However, on July 7, 2017, the Supreme Court of India struck down Uttarakhand state's ruling, arguing that treating the rivers as living entities was impractical.¹⁰ The Ganges is still revered as a living goddess by Hindus across the world, but an effective solution to its pollution remains elusive.

⁵ Rowlatt, “India's Dying Mother”; George Black, “What it Takes to Clean the Ganges,” *The New Yorker*, Jul. 25, 2016. <http://bit.ly/29PU5Cy>

⁶ Krishna N Das, “India's Holy Men to Advise Modi's Ganges River Cleanup,” *Reuters*, (New Delhi), June 12, 2014. <http://reut.rs/2vnJFKN>

⁷ Rowlatt, “India's Dying Mother.”; Black, “What it Takes to Clean the Ganges.”; Das, “India's Holy Men.”

⁸ Alley, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 237; Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 191; Rowlatt, “India's Dying Mother”;

Amrit Dhillon, “The Ganges: Holy River from Hell,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Aug. 4, 2014. <http://bit.ly/2vOwWn6>

⁹ Black, “What it Takes to Clean the Ganges.”

¹⁰ Michael Safi, “Murder Most Foul: polluted Indian river reported dead...,” *The Guardian* (Delhi), July 7, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2tTIGU3>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Photos of Ganges pollution from Reuters photographer Danish Siddiqui:
<http://wapo.st/2ftgz8M>
- Photos of Ganges pollution from National Geographic photographer Giulio Di Sturco:
<http://bit.ly/2pa63UE>
- Series of videos and images from along the Ganges River from National Geographic:
<http://bit.ly/2vIV9f4>

Secondary Sources:

- BBC in-depth reporting on “India’s Dying Mother”: <http://bbc.in/2vBdlH3>
- BBC video on the religious and geographic origins of the Ganges:
<http://bit.ly/2fnnhgD>
- NPR report on the Ganges as a legal “living entity”: <http://n.pr/2sj02Ge>
- Financial Times video on pollution in the Ganges: <http://bit.ly/2vyigrY>
- The Guardian video on pollution in the Yamuna River: <http://bit.ly/2uAEIfD>
- PBS video on the Kumbh Mela festival: <http://to.pbs.org/1EnPeeb>
- National Geographic video on cremations at the Ganges: <http://bit.ly/2wo0SUM>

Discussion Questions

- How do different Hindu reactions to the pollution of the Ganges River show the internal diversity of Hinduism?
- How does *Ma Ganga* illustrate how Hinduism is deeply influenced by its context?
- How do issues of power and powerlessness impact the way that Ganges River cleanup is discussed in India?
- Do you think that a river can be considered a “living entity” by the legal system? Why might such a statement make sense in a Hindu context?
- In what ways do Hindus use their religious beliefs to justify their reaction to efforts to clean up the Ganges?
- Many Hindus know the river is incredibly toxic, but drink or bathe in the water anyway. What does this say about Hindu belief in the river?
- Look at one of the sets of images in the primary source list. How do these images impact the way you understand these issues? What are the photos trying to convey? Why?



Accumulated waste along the Ganges River at Haridwar in 2012.
Photo by Bibek2011. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2fnc2Vx>