

## Why is the Ganges River Important?

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### **Lesson Transcript**

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Ever wonder why the Ganges River is so important to the people of India? This lesson discusses the geography of the river, its religious significance, how it sustains life for the people of India, and a rare, endangered species living in its water.

## **The Ganges River**

Have you ever realized that most of the earliest civilizations in human history developed near rivers? Even over the course of history, many great cities grew on the banks of rivers all over the world. This is because rivers often enrich the soil for crop growth and provide transportation for people and cargo. In this way, the Ganges River in India is no different. However, since the

earliest known times, the **Ganges River**, referred to in India as **Ganga or Mother Ganga**, has represented a sacred force to the people. In many ways, the river symbolizes India itself, as stated by the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Ganges is the world's third largest river, measured in water output rather than length or width, and one of the longest rivers to flow through India. Formed by the convergence of the Bhagirathi River and the Alaknanda River, two bodies of water formed by melting snow from the Himalayan Mountains, the Ganges River Basin covered nearly 25 percent of India. Through the convergence of rivers and its own branching out, the river and its related waterways flow in China, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh on a 1,560-mile journey.

## Religious Significance and Mythology

To Hindus, the Ganges River is the most sacred body of water in the world with sacred pilgrimage sites and cities along its banks. Many of the stories from Hindu scripture occurred along the river and, more than once, Hindu gods drank from it. The river itself is also the embodiment of the goddess Ganga, daughter of Himalaya, the mountain god.

In Hindu beliefs, the Ganges River came to earth from the heavens, where it flowed through sacred lands until an Indian king, Bhagiratha pleaded with Lord Brahma, a powerful god, to bring the river to Earth. However, the river was too powerful and would destroy the world if it flowed here, so King Bhagiratha begged Lord Shiva, a strong and mighty god, to help contain the river's force so it may flow on Earth. Shiva captured the rushing water and used his hair to slow the river's force, helping to guide it gently down to Earth.

## Sacred Powers

To Hindus, ***Gangaa jal***, the name for the **waters of the Ganges**, possesses sacred power capable of cleansing the soul and healing the body. Hindus use the water to cleanse ritual objects, symbolically purify themselves before rituals and prayers, and even drink the water to help with illnesses. Many pilgrims travel to the Ganges for rituals and ceremonies, bringing water back for friends and family to use. While no one can carry enough water back for everyone, Hindus believe any water mixed with even a drop of Ganges water will inherit the sacred properties. Finally, many pilgrims will bring the ashes of the deceased with them to the river where they believe that dissolving the remains in the sacred water will help their loved ones reach paradise.

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