The story of the river Ganga

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Story and trivia

The Ganga river is extensively mentioned in the Vedas, Puranas, and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha.

Ganga and King Bali

Lord Vishnu has appeared in ten different forms (the dashavataras) on Earth at different times. In each avatar, he helped rid the Earth of some great demon/difficulty. One such avatar was the Vamana avatar, where he came down to Earth in the guise of a dwarf brahmin.

Bali Chakravarthy was a rich and powerful asura king who had horses, elephants, chariots, cavalry, and an army too. He was also a great devotee of Vishnu. It is said that because of this, his power grew phenomenally so much so that even Indra, the king of Gods, was afraid of losing the Heavens to him!

Indra went and asked Vishnu for help. During a great yagna, Bali, like most kings donated to the brahmins, whatever they asked for. Vishnu in the guise of a dwarf brahmin went up to Bali Chakravarthy. The king was aware that it was Vishnu who had come, for his guru Shukracharya standing by him recognized Vishnu and warned him. Believing in keeping his word, Bali bowed low to the dwarf and asked the brahmin what he would like to have.

The brahmin asked for three footsteps of land. Immediately the king agreed and asked him to measure it out. And then something magical happened — the dwarf grew into a massive size — Trivikrama. With one footstep, he covered the Earth. With the second footstep he covered the skies. For the third footstep nothing was left. King Bali offered his head. With one foot on Bali’s head, Trivikrama pushed Bali into the patala loka or the lower world of serpents and demons. While Trivikrama’s foot covered the skies, Brahma washed his foot (as it was a magnificent form of Lord Vishnu’s) and collected the water into his kamandala. This holy water became Ganga, Brahma’s daughter.

There is another legend that says Ganga was the daughter of Himavan and sister of Uma. She was taken to the heavens by Indra to soothe the Gods.

Durvasa’s Curse

Ganga grew up playful and happy under Brahma’s care. As legend goes, once when Sage Durvasa was visiting and having a bath, the brisk breeze blew off his cloth. Young Ganga who was close by happened to see this and broke into uncontrolled laughter. Quick to anger, Durvasa cursed the young Ganga, to spend time on Earth as a river in which all would take a purifying dip!

How Ganga came to Earth

It is said that King Sagar performed a great horse sacrifice (Ashwamedha Yagna) to make him very powerful. Indra, the king of Gods, was afraid his position would get shaken. He stole the horse and tied it to a tree at Sage Kapila’s ashram.
When the horse could not be found, Sagara's 60,000 sons went looking for it and found it at Kapila's ashram. Assuming that the sage had stolen it, they set about freeing it. All this commotion disturbed the sage's meditation and when he realized that they thought he had stolen it, he was furious. With one fiery glance, he burnt them all to ashes!

They had turned to ashes before the rituals of death could be completed. Hence, they wandered as ghosts. The one remaining brother, Anshuman, begged the sage for a solution whereby the rituals for these ghosts could be completed, so they could ascend to heaven. The sage said the flow of the purifying Ganga on the ashes would complete the rituals. She could be brought down by praying to Brahma.

After several generations, Bhageeratha a descendent of Sagara, did great penance for thousands of years. Brahma was pleased and granted him his wish of wanting Ganga to descend to Earth. Ganga was a willful and powerful river. Deciding that she would come down in a torrent and sweep off everything in her path, she left the heavens. But Shiva foresaw her intention and imprisoned her in his matted locks!

Bhagiratha then had to pacify Shiva, who slowly released her from his locks. And, down she came as the Bhagirathi. On her way to the ashes, she flooded sage Jahnu’s ashram. He gobbled her up in great anger. Again, Bhageeratha had to beseech the great sage to release her. Out she came, but now she was also called Jahnavi. As Ganga flowed on, people flooded her to take a holy dip in her to wash off their sins.

Goddess Ganga

First and foremost, Ganga has always been regarded a goddess. Whatever brought her to Earth – a curse or a request from a distressed man – she has always been divine to her faithful. Her form is godly – four arms, three eyes (to view the past, the present, and the future), well-ornamented, crescent moon adorning her crown, carrying a lotus in one hand, a jar of jewels in another, draped in a saree, fanned by a lady carrying a yak-tail fan and another holding a white umbrella over her head. The goddess rides a makara – a mythical creature, half crocodile and half fish. The Ganga is said to have streams in the heavens, hell, and, on Earth.

Ganga in the Mahabharatha

Kamadhenu (a wish-cow who could grant the owner anything he/she wished for) was a divine cow and the mother of all cows. Sage Vasishtha had her in his ashram as she provided him with everything he required for his yagnas.

Once when the Vasus (minor gods) were visiting him along with their wives, one of the wives took a fancy for Kamadhenu and craved to own it. The Vasus stole Kamadhenu for her. When Sage Vasishtha realized this, he was furious and cursed them as punishment. They were to be born as mortals on Earth.

When they begged the sage for forgiveness, he softened the curse by saying that the Vasu who had initiated the theft would have to endure life for longer on Earth, but he would be an illustrious man. The other seven would return to the heavens within a year of their birth. To realize this, the Vasus begged Ganga to have them as her children and she agreed. And so it happened that King Shantanu of Hastinapur once found a beautiful maiden on the banks of the Ganga. He fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. The beautiful lady said she was Ganga and agreed happily to be his wife.

She had a condition though – he was not to question any of her actions. They married and were very happy. But, Ganga did a strange thing – every time she had a baby, she would drown it in the river. Shantanu kept quiet seven times watching her drown their children, but he could not keep quiet the eighth time.

When he asked her why she was drowning their eighth child as well, she smiled and gave the baby to him and left for the heavens. Before she left, she explained that the babies were Vasus born to her and had to be drowned so they could return to the heavens. The eighth, left in the care of Shantanu, would grow up to be an illustrious man – Bheeshma.
A Bheel version

There is an interesting folk version among the Bheels, quite different from the mainstream Mahabharatha, which is passed on in an oral tradition. The Bheels are a tribe who live in various states, but are said to be from Central India.

There is a frog which starts out on a pilgrimage to the Ganga. On the way, a herd of cattle step over him and crush him to death. He enters a lady and is born as her son. Then he goes to work for Indra, where he does well and is eventually asked to move on. As salary, he is given a cart-load of gold.

Then he leaves again on a pilgrimage to the Ganga. On the way, a bullock dies and he prays to the Sun god to help. The God helps but asks for half the cart-load of money as payment. After he agrees, the Sun God helps him resuscitate the bullock. At the Ganga after a dip, the man tosses all his wealth into the river. On his way back, the Sun God asks him for his share. When he is unable to pay, the Sun God turns him into a jackal.

The jackal lives on in the forests on the banks of the Ganga. One day, on seeing the beautiful Ganga he asks her to marry him. Laughing at his audacity, she flows on. When he bugs her further, she throws a stone at him, which hurts his eyes. Offended, the jackal chases her. She runs and hides behind her Guru Sarsankhar. When the jackal is spotted, the guru burns him and gives her the ashes to float in the river. When she does that, the ashes speak to say that she is doing it as he is like her husband!

Ganga returns to a patala, but over time, the ashes grow into a sal tree on the banks lying low over the waters. Again, it speaks to the Ganga saying she is like his wife as he can hug her. Furious, she tosses him out of the water.

For a dozen years, the tree lies there and dries up. Then Guru Sarsankhar comes by and gets the log to catch fire. Out of it stepped Shantanu!

He goes along with the guru. Shantanu then fashions a bow and arrow and starts randomly killing birds and animals. The guru urges him to stop this, as it is a sin. But, the stubborn Shantanu says he will continue until Ganga marries him!

The guru summons Ganga and asks her to marry Shantanu. She agrees, but under one condition that he would have to toss into the Ganga every child they have. Shantanu agrees and finally gets to marry her after so many rebirths, trials, and tribulations. They go to live in the Cloud Palace. They have three sons and each time Shantanu ends their life. But, when a princess is born, he leaves her with someone he trusts. When Ganga asks him, he lies. She is very upset with him. On three claps, she produces all three princes, but the princess is not there. She immediately leaves ending her marriage, for Shantanu had lied to her.

Trivia

1. This river originates in the southern Himalayas from the glacier Gangotri.
2. The Sundarbans delta, the largest delta in the world, is formed at the mouth of the Ganga.
3. Farakka and Haridwar are the sites of the two largest dams on the Ganga.
4. The Ganga is also called the Ganges River.
5. This river system, along with the Brahmaputra, is home to the Ganges River Dolphin, one of four freshwater dolphin species found in the world. These dolphins are unique because they are blind; their eyes lack lenses.
6. The Ganga is heavily polluted. Pollution starts right at the source due to human pollutants.
7. The river has the unusual ability to retain oxygen, meaning that it purifies itself by killing off bacteria.
8. Many proposals have been made to clean the heavily polluted Ganga, but no progress has been made.
9. Technically, at many points in its course, the waters are not sanitary enough to bathe in. Yet, the river is considered holy by so many that it is swum in by many every day.

10. Not only is the Ganges a holy place where many bathe, but it is also popular in some parts for its river rafting.

11. The river, with its many tributaries, is essential to the agriculture of both India and Bangladesh.

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