

VIBRANT GANGA



CULTURAL SERVICES OF *ganga*

Nadiyan humara itihaas hain,
Nadiyan humara varitmaan hain aur
nadiyan hi humara bhavishya hain

Cultural services are the non-material benefits provided by nature like cultural identity, aesthetic appreciation, spiritual enrichment, recreation etc. They represent the manner in which people associate themselves with nature. Cultural landscapes like the Ganga River have been described as an "interface between nature and culture", wherein the palpable and the impalpable heritage, and the biological and cultural diversity interact.

Rivers have always been the lifeline of the civilizations that have flourished so far in the columns of history. The oldest of world's civilization have emerged in the river valleys as the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus and Saraswati, the Yellow River (or Huang Ho), and the Coatzacoalcos and San Juan. Ganga is yet another important river of the world from this point of view.

The river basin supports 1/4th of the country's population including the oldest city of the world; Banaras (archeological remains from the year 1200 BC have been found here). Rigveda, may not find mention of Ganga but the later three Vedas mention the importance of Ganga river. The Indo-gangetic plains were center for two mighty powers in history, the Mauryan and Mughal Empire. The answer to here be; the easy access to freshwater, and agriculture. Both these reasons are strong enough but far from sufficient to support on why a dense population resides along the flood plains of Ganga River in the middle and lower stretches. Ganga flows from the mighty Himalayas to the plains and merges with the ocean at Ganga sagar. Crossing the country's landscape from northern mountains to the eastern ocean the river not just changes its flow; it also varies in numerous aspects in terms of settlements, agriculture, livelihood, biodiversity and most importantly the dependency of its people.

A night scene of a festival, likely the Ganga Aarti in Varanasi. In the foreground, a person wearing a traditional orange and grey robe and a white turban is seen from the side, looking towards the right. In the background, a large crowd of people is gathered, and several large, bright bonfires are burning, casting a warm glow over the scene. The sky is dark, and the overall atmosphere is festive and spiritual.

culture and ganga

An ocean of history flows with Ganga, right from Gaumukh where it emerges up to Ganga sagar. The swift flow of Ganga in the mountainous region supports no agricultural practices but is high on religious and aesthetic value. People here consider it a sin to pollute Ganga, its surroundings and its tributaries. It's not just a river; it's a heritage; supporting some aquatic fauna such as; snow trout, brown trout and Golden Mahseer. This finds mention in many folklore's and poems. Descending downstream Ganga enters the mighty plains of India, being part of two great empires the cultural variation here is very high; art, architecture, religion, food habits, customs, even the day-to-day activities vary. Diverse communities reside in this stretch; their dependencies are equally variable. This region is home to artisan and craftsman since ages, their music and art finds inspiration not just in the constantly flowing river but also the floral and faunal species of Ganga. Beautiful compositions were born on the Ghats of Ganga, applauding nature and natural things.

One comes across several religious sects and beliefs as we move along with Ganga River. If Hindus have their deep rooted faith for moksha (emancipation), it's banks are birth place for 7th Jain Tirthankara Suparshvanatha of Shvetambara sect who is believed to be born in the neighborhood of Vaccharaja Ghat in Varanasi, it's was on the banks of Ganga that Lord Buddha gave his first sermon after obtaining enlightenment. The Great Mauryan Emperor King Ashoka built Maath (worship places) for followers of Buddhism so as to spread the great teachings. Cutting across the narrow division of religion, Ganga find equal respect form followers of all religious groups.



ganga the muse

Celebrated not only in mythology and legend, Ganga has been a source of inspiration to many an artist, author and poet. She has been venerated, studied, examined and explored in literature and art. Numerous hymns have been composed and sung by sages and singers about her purifying waters, hallowing her as a sacred, cleansing river. She has been painted by many an artist, famous and not so famous. Her waters have been the backdrop many stories penned by authors residing on her banks, or far away, and script writers for movies and television. The Ganga is a window into the heart and soul of India. She is an all encompassing canvas to gather insight on the mythology, art, history and culture of India.



Saint Kabir Das

Kabir was the spiritual poet and saint, who has influenced and inspired people from all sect and religions. He born in Varanasi and lived his entire life on the banks of Ganga. His writings are considered as the simplest explanation of the toughest questions and highlighted various aspects of life and concept of God. Two temples in Varanasi are dedicated to Kabir, one is managed by Hindus while other by Muslims. His teachings have been adopted by Sikhism also. It is said that his philosophy was as equally relevant today as it was then.

Tulsi Das

Like Kabir Das, Tulsi was also a poet and saint and lived in the Varanasi, where one of the Ghat is named after him. Inspired by the calmness and vastness of the Ganga in Varanasi, he started composing poetry on the Prahlada Ghat. His Ramcharitmanas is considered as an epic. He died on the Assi Ghat, Varanasi.

Munshi Premchand

Premchand was the Pen name of Dhanpat Rai Shrivastava one of the most famous and celebrated writers of India and authored venerable literature both in Hindi and Urdu. He was born in the city of Banaras and got his primary education there. After spending time at various places, Banaras and nearness to Ganga gave him the stimulus to write stories and novels based on various aspect of rural life. His life and literary career have been a subject of research for many scholars.

The Banks of the Ganga have been home to many illustrious artists, whose talent has been nurtured by her selfless force.

eminent *personalities*



Ravindranath Tagore

One of the most famous and celebrated Indian poets of the modern times, Tagore was also a musician and painter. His exceptional contribution to various forms of literature made him the first non-European to win Nobel Prize. He spent most of life in Kolkata, located on the banks of the Hugli, a distributary of the Ganga. Tagore was against the forced education and established Visva Bharti a school for intellectual growth of the students.

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar

Dinkar was a poet, essayist, patriot and academic and was among the poets who founded modern Hindi poetry. He was a poet of rebel and nationalism, and inspired many during the Indian freedom struggle.

Girija Devi

Girija Devi was a Hindustani classical singer from Banaras Gharana. Her passion for thumri, helped raise status of the art form and gave her status of the queen of the thumri. She received several national awards including Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan.

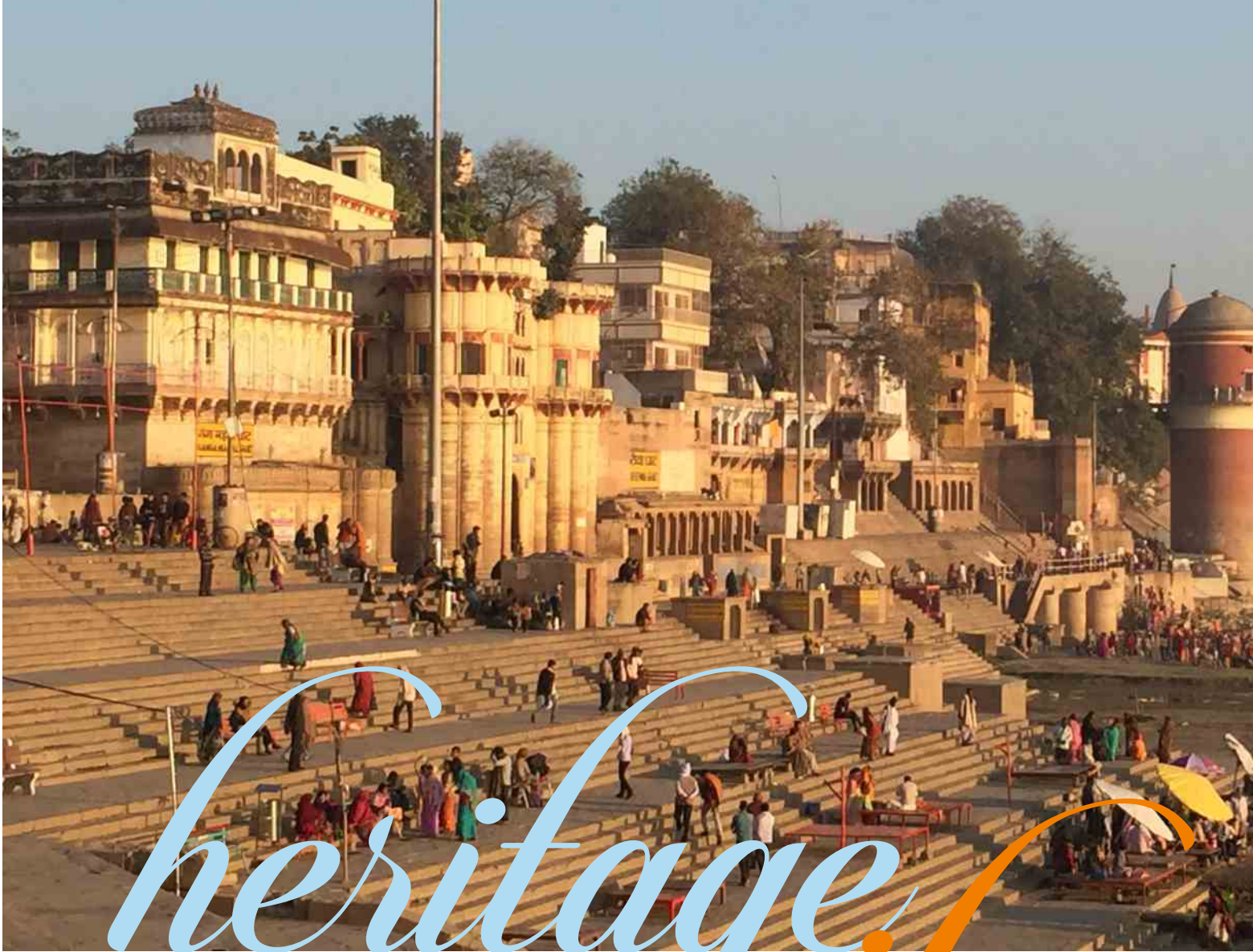
Ustad Bismillah Khan

Ustad Bismillah Khan was credited for popularizing the shehnai in Hundustani classical music. He was referred to the honorific title Ustad for his contribution in promoting the Indian culture as well as importance of Ganga River for the country. He was also had the rare honour of performing at Red Fort on the eve of Indian independence in 1947. He was an embodiment of the Ganga-Yamuna tahjeeb of India; he lived on the banks of Ganga River and attributed his success to the Lord Vishwanath. Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, instituted the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar in 2007, in his honour. He was the receipt of the Bharat Ratna. Several scholars have studied his work.



Pandit Birju Maharaj

Pandit Birju Maharaj Belongs to Kalka-Bindadin gharana of Kathak dance form. He was born in Lucknow and since very young age has been practicing and promoting the Hundustani Classical music. To promote Kathak and culture, he has performed in Varanasi on the banks of Ganga River several times. He has received several awards and accolades including Padma Vibhushan in 1986, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Kalidas Samman.



Ganga River, from Gaumukh to Ganga Sagar, is lined with places of cultural, religious, spiritual, historical and economic significance.

1. Gaumukh

Gaumukh is the snout of the Gangotri glacier and sources of the Bagirathi River. The place due to its serenity and aesthetic beauty not only have religious value but is also an attraction for mountaineers, trekkers and scholars. However, changing climatic conditions and anthropogenic pressure has impacted the health of the glacier which is continuously moving backward.

2. Devprayag

Devprayag is a small hill town located at the confluence of the Bagirathi and Alaknanda rivers, after which the river is called as Ganga.

3. Haridwar

Hardwar is one of the holiest places of Hindu religion. According to Hindu mythology, it is one of the four sites where drops of Amrit got spilled during 'Samudra Manthan', and one of the sites for Kumbh festival. The city serves as a window to the Indian culture and hosts a large number of religious and international spiritual tourists. Now developing as industrial development site the city provides livelihood opportunities for many.

4. Allahabad

Also known as Prayag is a city of offering and is located on the confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. As recorded in Akbarnama, the city was founded by Emperor Akbar and hosts the Kumbh festival. Allahabad is also famous as city of prime ministers, as seven out of 15 have connection with it. The city has also a great influence on the literature as many Hindi authors lived here.



5. Varanasi

Varanasi, one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world, is considered as a pilgrimage by Hindus to which anyone wishes to stop over once in a lifetime with numbers of sacred places including Ghats, Kashi Vishwanath Temple etc. Varanasi is said to be originated from the God Shiva, making it the holiest for Hinduism and Jainism. The Jain Ghat with the Tirthankara temple in Varanasi has a special place for the Jain community of India. The seventh Jain Tirthankara Suparshvanatha of Shvetambara sect was believed to be born in the neighbourhood of Jain Ghat. Varanasi is also known for its industrial and cultural values with an abundance of art, music and culture. Sarnath, 8 kms away from Varanasi, is one of the major Buddhist destinations. The Lord Gautam Buddha after attaining enlightenment had preached his first sermon to his five disciples. A home to numerous Buddhist stupas, monasteries and temples along with the museum.

6. Patna

The Ganga has emerged as an important unifying factor between two communities in Patna. A mosque, which is the fourth-oldest mosque of the city, is situated near the bank of the Ganga River and Harmandir Takht. The river is a live evidence of the years old religious harmony. The Hindus bathe in the Ganga's water for

salvation whereas the Muslims use the same water for the act of washing themselves before prayer.

7. Kolkata

Kolkata is known as the most important cultural centre of India. The blending of Eastern and Western culture along the Ganga stretch influences over the centuries has stimulated the creation of numerous and diverse organizations that contribute to Kolkata's cultural life. The ancestors of a community called "Maithili" and their King Bhagyachandra Maharaj, native of Northeast, shifted to Navdeep village situated on the bank of Ganga River. They believe that Moksha can be achieved by immersing the ashes after death in the Ganges. They also perform all rituals after death on the bank of Ganga River which assures the heavenly salvation after death. Indeed, the role of Ganga is so important in the rituals that a shloka in Mahabharata mentioning about the importance, says, "If only (one) bone of a (deceased) person touch the water of the Ganges, that person shall dwell honoured in heaven."



species in mythology



1. Goddess Ganga and the Gangetic Dolphin

Goddess Ganga descended from the heaven on earth and dolphin was one of the many creatures that appeared with the holy river (WWF, 2017). Dolphin is considered as the vehicle of goddess Ganga and was provided highest level of protection by King Ashoka during his rule. Both Dolphin and Makara are considered as vahana of the Goddess Ganga.

2. Makaras

Portrayed as Ganga's vahana it is exemplified with the head of an elephant and the body of a fish. In eastern astrology, it has been interpreted as a 'Water Horse', which resembles to the western astrological sign of Capricorn, depicted as having the head that of a goat and body of a fish. Several water gods, demigods and deities have makaras as their transporters. Varuna, the water deity also rides a makara, so does Kamadeva. The Tridevis ride water creatures, with Yamuna on a turtle and Saraswati and Ganga on Makaras. Makaras are sometimes depicted in as crocodile, as in the case of Lord Varuna's vehicle.

3. Kurma

Kurma, the second of the ten avatars (incarnations) of the Hindu god Vishnu. This incarnation of Vishnu is associated with the mythological story of the churning of the ocean in search of amrita (the elixir of immortality). Gods and demons came together in churning for the vast ocean to obtain amrita. The great serpent Vasuki nag presented himself as a rope, and Mount Mandara was used as a churning stick. Lord Vishnu took the form of a Kurma to support the churning stick on his back. Thus providing a firm foundation. An earlier incarnation of Prajapati identifies with Kurma who took that shape in order to create offspring.

4. Matsya

According to a legend during the great flood the Matsya Avatar took place to save the pious and the first man, Manu, who was advised to build a giant boat and carry the seed of life along with the Sapth rishi (seven sages) for recreating a new world after the major destruction. Lord Matsya is depicted as a four-armed figure with the upper torso of a man and the lower of a fish. This Avatar of Lord Vishnu symbolizes the restoration of true knowledge, subverted by egoism, which has to be destroyed in the process.



5. Origin of life

In mythology and in modern science it is believed that the life on earth originated in water and has been supported throughout. Talking of the numerous incarnations, it has been observed that importance of various aquatic creatures has been highlighted in the course. One can easily interpret how important is the existence of each and every creature to maintain the environment. Even if one of the creatures goes missing, it will result in chaos, not just disturbing the habitat but the whole ecosystem as such.





Kumbh Mela

Kumbh Mela is among the most sacred and largest Ganga festivals in India, and is one of the largest congregation of devotees (about 20-30 million) for any festival in the world, and has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017. It is held, alternatively, in Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Allahabad (Prayag) every twelve years. It is believed that the Ganga River contains of Amrit (nectar of immortality) and a dip during the Kumbha Mela would lead to nirvana or moksha. It is said in the scriptures that the Kumbha Mela is so auspicious that even a single dip in the Ganga River during this festival is equivalent to performing millions of other rituals.

Ganga Saptami

Ganga Saptami, also known as Ganga Pujan or Ganga Jayanti, is believed that on this day the holy river Ganga descended upon the earth. Devotees worship Goddess Ganga and perform several rituals along with the 'Ganga Aarti'. A dip in the Ganga River during this festival is considered auspicious and holds an important place in the religious and cultural beliefs. A huge participation from the people is observed during 'Ganga Shobha Yatra' that is organized at various Ghats.

Makar Sankranti

Makar Sankranti is considered to be one of the oldest Hindu festivals. It is said that King Sagar's sons and Bhagirath's ancestors were liberated from the curse of Saint Kapil on Makar Sankranti. Pilgrims take a dip in the Ganga during the festival as it generally believed that such a practice would absolve them of their past bad karmas and purify their soul.



Sri Ganga Dusshera/Dashami Festival

Ganga Dussehra is celebrated annually for ten days, from the new moon night till the beginning of the holy month of Jaishtha. Thousands of devotees visit the banks of the Ganga to take a dip in her holy waters as a symbol of their devotion to Lord Vishnu and Goddess Ganga. Devotees collect Gangajal for their daily worship. Idol of Goddess Ganga is wrapped in 108 colourful saris during this festival, one each for her 108 names. Aquatic animals such as fishes are fed flour balls.

Ganga Mahotsav

An auspicious five day festival known as Ganga Mahotsav is celebrated in Varanasi on the full moon day after Diwali, commemorating the glory and sanctity of the Ganga River. During this festival, the banks of the Ganga River are lit with thousands of earthen lamps (diyas) along with the continuous chanting of Ganga vedic hymns. It is believed that on this day all the gods descend on earth and bathe in the holy Ganga River. People from different places visit the Ganga Ghats and celebrate the festival by performing auspicious rituals, offering prayers and bathing in the Ganges. This festival provides a platform for India's finest arts, crafts and culture.



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