

Sudipta Sen, *Ganges: The Many Pasts of an Indian River*

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In this rich interdisciplinary study of the Ganges, historian Sudipta Sen explores the ecological and spiritual crosscurrents of India's most iconic river across the expanse of deep time. Impressive in its scope, *Ganges: The Many Pasts of an Indian River* marks an important contribution to recent environmental histories of water, rivers, and deltas in South Asia (Acciavatti 2015; Amrith 2018; Bhattacharyya 2018). The text extends current conversations in two ways. Firstly, Sen approaches the history of the Ganges over an extended time scale stretching from unrecorded pre-history to contemporary debates about pollution and dam construction. Along the way, he develops a careful cumulative account of human-environment relations in the Ganges valley over the “long Anthropocene” (13), with particular attention to the expansion of irrigation, agriculture, industry, and population. Secondly, the volume brings mythico-religious and sociopolitical histories of the Ganges into useful dialogue, demonstrating how the river came to acquire significance across several Indian religious traditions while also emerging as a “trophy” for the tribes, kingdoms, and empires that vied for control over its adjacent territories. These intersecting histories not only demonstrate how the Ganges came to assume a central position in the civilizations and cultures of the Indian subcontinent but also illuminate current debates about human-environment relations in the river's basin.

Chapter 1 offers a particularly interesting perspective on the Ganges' spiritual and spatial significance through the lens of pilgrimage, enriched by Sen's own experiences on India's pilgrim trails. His trip to the origin of the Ganges/Bhagirathi river at the Gaumukh glacier is retraced in vivid language, evoking the steps of countless pilgrims who have traveled to the mouth of the river in the belief that its waters hold the power to cleanse their sins (18). The Ganges is an important pilgrimage site for Hindus, and its waters have long been held to possess curative and redemptive powers (34). Large-scale Hindu pilgrimages and bathing rituals fascinated and scandalized European colonial observers, but Sen points out that the purported purity of Ganges water has also

captured the interest of many non-Hindus. Mughal emperor Akbar is known to have only drunk Ganges water and the English traders of the East India Company found that Ganges water lasted much longer than other water on their sea voyages (34). The unique qualities of Ganges water have long interested scientists, many of whom now believe that the river has unique chemical and biological properties that allow it to absorb organic waste and reoxygenate (36). Apart from this chapter, however, reflections on the material properties of Ganges water are relatively limited in the text. Instead, Sen focuses his attention to the entwined mythic, religious, and sociopolitical histories that have constituted the river as an enduring symbol of purity and sacred power across the subcontinent.

In chapter 2, Sen explores myths of the descent of the goddess Ganga in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Rather than limiting his focus to Hindu texts, however, Sen also considers artistic representations, such as a tenth-century rock-cut sculpture depicting the descent of the Ganges in Tamil Nadu (46), arguing that veneration of the river extended far beyond its physical course in the north of India. Taking a step beyond this, Sen ultimately approaches the river in civilizational rather than exclusively religious terms. Sen suggests that the feminized deity Ganga is not exclusively “Hindu.” Rather, she belongs “to a hybrid pantheon of fertility figures tied to the history of the dispersal and assimilation of animalistic cults and guardian deities” (71), which also found expression in popular forms of devotion in Jain and Buddhist traditions.

Carrying this theme forth, one of the book’s major contributions is its account of Buddhism’s importance in the emergence of the Ganges as a sacred river and in its iconography and veneration. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the political geography of the Ganges valley from the period of the warring *mahājanapada* kingdoms (seventh to fourth centuries BCE) to the emergence of the Maurya Empire, ending with a discussion of the expansive network of Buddhist monasteries and sacred sites across the Ganges basin that were supported by lively commercial exchange along the river (149). Sen demonstrates that Buddhist *saṅghas* emerged in tandem with networks of trade and commerce across the Gangetic plains, laying the foundation for devotional practices and forms of iconographic representation that were intimately connected with the river.

Chapter 5 offers an account of Buddhism’s expansion between the end of the Maurya Empire and rise of the Guptas, as well as a fascinating exploration of guardian spirits associated with trees and water, known as *yakṣas* (male) and *yakṣīs* (female). Sen regards these spirits as early prototypes of river deities. Widely regarded as the custodians of sacred places, *yakṣas* were both feared and respected (155). Though the origins of popular *yakṣa* devotion are obscure, Sen details the importance they held in the Ganges valley during and after the decline of the Mauryas. Interestingly, *yakṣa* cults appear to have grown rapidly with the spread of Buddhism during the Gupta and Shunga periods, and Sen argues that these fertility cults were eventually absorbed into popular Buddhism (160–61). The Buddha himself is known to have honored the powerful *yakṣī* Hariti, a famous guardian of children (156). As Buddhism spread across the subcontinent as a powerful political, commercial, and religious force, it continued to take creative inspiration from the Ganges’ riverine ecology and nearby forests. Buddhist *Jātakas* (legends about the Buddha’s previous lifetimes) are replete with natural elements, and *yakṣas* and *yakṣīs* are important in both Buddhist and Jain iconography.

As Sen explains in chapter 6, the goddess Ganga took a more recognizable form as a deity under the Gupta Empire in the fifth century CE. During this period, sculptors

began representing the Ganges as an imperial emblem; she became a beautiful goddess flanked by fantastical aquatic creatures in the shape of dolphins or crocodiles, known as *makara*. As a symbol of “power, prosperity, and plentitude,” the Ganges was not only imagined in riverine form but became synonymous with the imperial territories through which the river flowed (188). Inscriptions, coins, and sculptures from this period exhibit “generic Hindu expressions of divinity” (199), despite the fact that society remained largely Buddhist (215). The iconography of the Ganges that emerged during the Gupta period has exerted long-lasting influence across both north and south India.

For the empires that rose and fell in the Ganges basin, however, the river held more than just mythic and sacred importance. As Sen points out, the Ganges gradually became one of the most densely settled river valleys in the world, and the region’s agrarian surplus and related revenue extraction sustained successive imperial regimes. In chapters 7, 8, and 9 Sen discusses the political history of the basin from the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Gahadavalas of Kanauj, Delhi Sultanate, and Mughal Empire up to the British Empire. The final chapters of the book focus increasingly on human influences on the Ganges river basin from the emergence of a densely settled population and agrarian peasant economy (chapter 8) to the British Empire’s rapacious exploitation of natural resources, which transformed the subcontinent’s riverine landscape to an unprecedented degree (302–3).

Sen concludes with a discussion of the confounding paradox of human-environment relations presented by the Ganges in contemporary India. An enduring symbol of purity and sacred power, the Ganges is also one of the world’s most polluted watersheds. For the half-billion people living in the Ganges basin, the river provides an everyday source of drinking water, sanitation, and irrigation (351). But the river has become saturated with industrial effluents, untreated sewage, and toxic agricultural runoff. Today, the Ganges is simultaneously imagined both as “a symbol and memory of the past of India” (341), as Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked, and as the means of providing technological progress and economic development for the growing nation’s future (346). This tension means that the river’s ability to continue to act as the bountiful “maternal spirit of their civilization” (353) is under threat as never before.

Sen’s study does an excellent job of illuminating the complex foundations of this contradiction. However, despite discussing the mythic and religious symbolism of the Ganges as goddess in detail, Sen’s analysis of this paradox would have been strengthened by more attention to the implications of gendering the river as female. Feminist geographers have convincingly argued that the gendering of rivers and women in South Asia carries relevance beyond the symbolic; it also structures men and women’s everyday access to and engagements with water (Lahiri-Dutt 2006). Attention to the gendering of the river might shed additional light on how the Ganges can be “worshipped and neglected at the same time” (344). Indeed, if the Ganges is seen as a civilizational “mother,” understanding the river’s current predicament might also require consideration of ideologies of motherhood, especially common constructions of mothers as eternally bountiful and forgiving. In short, more attention to the gendering of nature might help to clarify the paradox Sen uses to frame the Ganges’ pasts and uncertain future.

As a whole, the book offers an indispensable guide to the entangled human and nonhuman histories of the river Ganges. Expanding beyond the usual boundaries of

environmental history, Sen attends to mythology, regional literatures, architecture and fine arts, popular devotional practices, and archival sources with equal skill. The text reads beautifully and contains striking photographs and maps of the river and its environs. *Ganges* will undoubtedly become a touchstone text in a number of fields. It will be of particular interest to scholars and students of history, anthropology, geography, and religious studies, as well as South Asian studies more generally.

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