



A TRIBUTE TO HINDUISM

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nature worship

Hinduism has always been environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. Theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology. They perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. The Bhagavad Gita advises us not to try to change the environment, improve it, or wrestle with it. If it seems hostile at times tolerate it. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism.

According to Swami B. V. Tripurari, in his book, Ancient Wisdom for Modern Ignorance, " Our present environmental crisis is in essence a spiritual crisis. We need only to look back to medieval Europe and the psychic revolution that vaulted Christianity to victory over paganism to find the spirit of the environmental crisis. Inhibitions to the exploitation of nature vanished as the Church took the "spirits" out of the trees, mountains, and seas. Christianity's ghost-busting theology made it possible for man to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. It made nature man's monopoly. This materialist paradigm has dominated the modern world for last few centuries. The current deplorable condition demands a spiritual response. A fundamental reorientation of human consciousness, accompanied by action that is born out of inner commitment, is very much needed. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfill this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and propagate them."

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Introduction



The tradition of maintaining sacred groves and sacred trees vanished from most countries, due mainly to the rise of dogmatic religions like Christianity and Islam, which advocated faith in one god and were explicitly for the eradication of 'pagan' practices. The underlying theme in Semitic religions is that of a chosen people who have been divinely granted ownership of the earth and all living things, and permission to exploit them. The Semitic perception that humans have more "dignity" than animals has gone a long way into the enormous decimation and extinction of non-human life on our planet not to mention the massacre of non-believing human beings. Hindu philosophy has always had a humane

and dignified view of the sacredness of all life, and that humans are but one link in the symbiotic chain of

life and consciousness.

According **Dr. David Frawley**, " **No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as does Hinduism. It believes in ecological responsibility and says like Native Americans that the Earth is our mother. It champions protection of animals, which it considers also have souls, and promotes vegetarianism. It has a strong tradition of non-violence or ahimsa. It believes that God is present in all nature, in all creatures, and in every human being regardless of their faith or lack of it.**"



In the ancient spiritual traditions, man was looked upon as part of nature, linked by the indissoluble spiritual and psychological bonds to the elements around him. This is very much marked in the Hindu tradition, the oldest living religious tradition in the world. The Vedas, the oldest hymns composed by great spiritual seers and thinkers which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, reflect the vibrancy of an encompassing world-view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power. Hinduism believes in the all-encompassing sovereignty of the divine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present, is not seen as something apart from the earth and its multitudinous life forms.



The **Artha-Veda** has the magnificent **Hymn to the Earth (Bhumi-Sukta)** which is redolent with ecological and environmental values.



“Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and other waters,
in which food and cornfields have come to be,
in which lives all that breathes and that moves,
may she confer on us the finest of her yield.
Earth, in which the waters, common to all,
moving on all sides, flow unceasingly, day and night,
may she pour on us milk in many streams,
and endow us with luster,
May those born of thee, O Earth,
be of our welfare, free from sickness and waste,
wakeful through a long life, we shall become bearers of tribute to thee.
Earth, my mother, set me securely with bliss in full accord with heaven,
O wise one, uphold me in grace and splendor.”

Not only in the Vedas, but in later scriptures, such as the Upanishads, the Puranas and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for all life, and an awareness that the great forces of nature – the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire – as

well as various orders of life including plants, trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation, but expresses itself through natural phenomena.

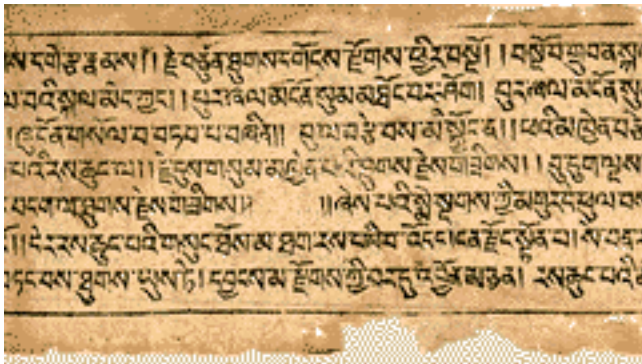
Thus, in the **Mudaka Upanishad** **the divine** is described as follows:

“Fire is head, his eyes are the moon and the sun;
The regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda,

The wind is his breadth, his heart is the entire universe,
The earth is his footstool,
Truly he is the inner soul of all."

India is a vast network of sacred places. There are seven sacred rivers, seven sacred mountains, sacred trees and plants, sacred cities. The sacrality of the land of India, gives a sense of unity to this country of so many religions, cultures, races and languages.

The Indian tradition is strongly cosmocentric, where man lives as part of a system in which everything is related to everything else. Creation and destruction take place simultaneously. Materials and energy move from organism to organism. Matter is arranged in precise order in every organism, but in death this order is followed by disorder: cycling of materials through organisms brings order once again. But today, rapidly drifting from our traditions of sustainable use and coexistence, we seem to be entering a man-centered world that implies the decimation of nature.



The **Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated.** In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals.

Atman, the world-soul, is the whole world. **God is in all things, and all things are in God.**

The **Mahabharata** hints that the basic elements of nature constitute the Cosmic Being -- the mountains His bones, the earth His flesh, the sea His blood, the sky His abdomen, the air His breath and agni (fire) His energy. **The whole emphasis of the ancient Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from natural surroundings and Earth has the same relationship with man as the mother with her child.** Planting and preservation of trees are made sacred in religious functions.



The **Varah Purana** says, "One who plants one peepal, one neem, one bar, ten flowering plants or creepers, two pomegranates, two oranges and five mangos, does not go to hell."

In the **Charak Sanhita**, destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty.

Our scriptures warn, **"Oh wicked persons! If you roast a bird, then your bathing in sacred rivers, pilgrimage, worship and yagnas are useless."** In our ancient stories, birds and animals have always been identified with gods and goddesses.

Welfare of all creatures: The Vedantic concept is that of the welfare of all creation, not only of human beings but also of what we call the lower creatures. **Dr. Karan Singh** states:

"In our arrogance and ignorance we have destroyed the environment of this planet. We have polluted the oceans, we have made the air unbreathable, we have desecrated nature and decimated wildlife. But the Vedantic seers knew that man was not something apart from nature, and, therefore, they constantly exhort us that, while we work for own salvation, we must also work for the welfare of all beings."

(source: [Essays in Hinduism - By Dr. Karan Singh](#) p. 47)

" As the curtain of the new millennium rises, the drama of life and humans seems tragic. More than six billion people are on a march of materialism, which means that acquisition, accumulation, possessions and consumption of material goods is the ultimate "good" of life. The philosophy assumes that the material resources are unlimited. Human beings are proliferating at the rate of 80 million a year and 90% of the growth is in the developing world. There, almost four out of ten people live at the edge of survival. In India alone, 320 million out of one billion are living marginally. It is not until 2100, according to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), that the Earth's population may stabilize at 10.5 to 11 billion people.



The Earth is endangered, according to a warning from the Union of Concerned Scientists in December 1992. A declared report states that: "Most biological systems, which have sustained life on the planet for millions of years, will collapse some time during the early part of the next century." Everywhere, the human spirit is in revolt. Extinction cannot be the future of this beautiful Earth. The perversion of technological systems must be challenged--a society on the march towards doom must accept the wisdom of the ancients that all life is sacred and its existence rests on the harmony established by evolution in the total scheme of life." (source: [Hinduism Today July/August 2000](#) p 20-23).

The current deplorable condition demands a spiritual response. A fundamental reorientation of human consciousness, accompanied by action that is born out of inner commitment, is very much needed. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfill this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and propagate them. (source: http://www.hindunet.org/alt_hindu/1994/msg00953.html)

The ancient Tamil scripture, [Tirukural](#), advises in verse 324, "What is the good way? It is the path that reflects on how it may avoid killing any living creature;" and in verse 327, "Refrain from taking precious life from any living being, even to save your own life."

Although Indian philosophers believed that the world goes through a cycle of evolution and decline, it always admonished reverence for life--respect for all forms of life and preservation of biodiversity--a continuation of evolution. The new philosophy of life challenges the arrogance of humans. The Earth is not for humans only. It is for all life--life in its various forms and structures. While individuals have a short and transient existence, evolution continues inexorably. The consciousness and spirits are beyond material existence, beyond time and space. They are eternal, an integral part of Brahman.

The [Rig Veda 1.6.3](#) states:

"Nature's beauty is an art of God. Let us feel the touch of God's invisible hands in everything beautiful. By the first touch of His hand rivers throb and ripple. When He smiles the sun shines, the moon glimmers, the stars twinkle, the flowers bloom.
By the first rays of the rising sun, the universe is stirred; the shining gold is sprinkled on the smiling buds of rose; the fragrant air is filled with sweet melodies of singing birds, the dawn is the dream of God's creative fancy."

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Mountains - The Abode of the Gods

In the words of the ancient Indian poet, **Kalidasa**:

"The Himalaya is a great devatatma, a great spiritual presence, stretching from the west to the eastern sea like a measuring rod to gauge the world's greatness." *The creativity of this genius was that he was able to see it as a single unity this overwhelmingly powerful image of the mighty Himalayan range.*

Even the mention of mountains in India brings the word **Himalaya** immediately to the mind. The Himalayan range as a whole is sacred because it is in the north, which for Hindus is the direction of wisdom and spiritual rebirth. It also includes the highest peaks in the world, which are a sight to inspire awe and wonder in people of any race or creed. Even Mount Olympus in Greek mythology would pale in front of the reverence shown to the Himalayas in the Hindu stories. Neither is Mount Fuji as significant to the Japanese as the Himalayas to Hindus. From times immemorial, the Himalayas have given out speechless invitations to sages, anchorites, *yogis*, artists, philosophers et al. The western Himalayas teems with esteemed pilgrimages so much so that the entire Kumayun range can be called **Tapobhumi** or land of spiritual practices. Where else apart from Kailash and Manas-sarovar in the Himalayas could an all-abnegating Shiva roam with his bull?



From the Himalayas has originated so many life-giving perennial rivers that have sustained such a rich civilization. Of these the Ganges is the most respected one.

Shankaracharya (788-820), who propounded the Mayavad doctrine, referred to the holy river as the goddess of divine essence, and established one of the four cardinal hermitages in the Garhwal Himalayas.

Scientist **J C Bose** (1858-1937), also ventured into the Himalayas, as expounded in his sagely philosophical essay **Bhagirathir Utsha Sandhane**, to explore how the Ganges flows down from the "matted locks of Shiva".

Apart from being a natural heritage, the Himalayas is a spiritual heritage for the Hindus. The most visited places of pilgrimage in India are located in the Himalayas. Prominent among them are the Nath troika of **Amarnath, Kedarnath** and **Badrinath**. There are also three seminal Sikh pilgrimage spots in the Uttarakhand Himalayas. **All sages and prophets have found the Himalayas best for spiritual pursuits.** Swami Vivekananda founded his Mayavati Ashram 50 km from Almora. The Mughul emperor Jehangir said about Kashmir, the westernmost extent of the Himalayas: "If there is a paradise on earth, it's here".

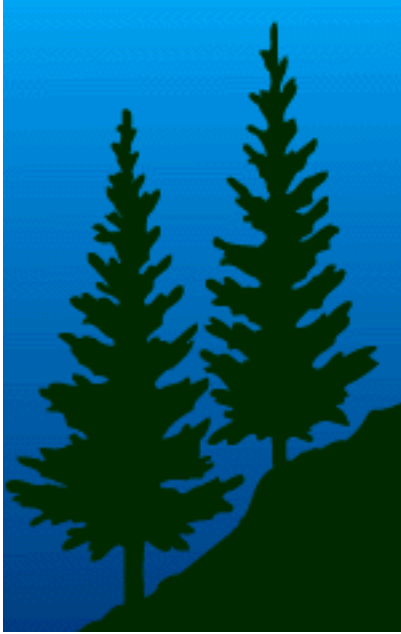
As the loftiest mountains on Earth, the Himalayas have come to embody the highest ideals and aspirations. The sight of their sublime peaks, soaring high and clean above the dusty, congested plains of India, has for centuries inspired visions of transcendent splendor and spiritual liberation.

Invoking such visions, the **Puranas**, ancient works of Hindu stories, have this to say of Himachal, or the Himalayas:

"In the space of a hundred ages of the Gods, I could not describe to you the glories of Himachal; that Himachal where Siva dwells and where the Ganges falls like the tendril of a lotus from the foot of Vishnu. There are no other mountains like Himachal, for there are found Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of mankind by the sight of Himachal."

The Himalayas are sacred for followers of five Asian religions--**Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism**

and the indigenous Bon tradition of Tibet. These religions revere the mountains as places of power where many of their most important sages and teachers have attained the heights of spiritual realization. Himalayas are often referred to as **devatma** or God-souled. **Giri-raj** or the King of Mountains, as the Himalayas is often called, is also a deity by itself in the Hindu pantheon. Hindus view the Himalayas as supremely sacred, as a corollary to seeing god in every atom of the universe. The mighty altitude of the Himalayas is a constant remembrance to the loftiness of the human soul, its vastness. a prototype for the universality of human consciousness.



Hindus, by far the largest group in India with more than 800 million adherents, regard the entire range as the God Himalaya, father of Parvati, the wife of Siva. King of the mountains, Himalaya lives high on a peak with his queen, the Goddess Mena, in a palace ablaze with gold, attended by divine guardians, maidens, scent-eating creatures and other magical beings. His name, composed of the words hima and alaya, means in the Sanskrit language of ancient India the **"abode of snow."** As a reservoir of frozen water, the body and home of the God Himalaya is the divine source of sacred rivers, such as the Ganges and Indus, that sustain life on the hot and dusty plains of northern India.

The ancient poets and sages regarded the range as more than a realm of snow; they saw it as an earthly paradise sparkling with streams and forests set beneath beautiful peaks. Above and beyond the earthly paradise of the Himalayas lie the heights of heaven.

1. Mount Kailash: One peak in the Himalayan region stands out above all others as the ultimate sacred mountain for more than half-a-billion people in India, Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. Hidden behind the main range of the Himalayas at a high point of the Tibetan Plateau northwest of Nepal, Mount Kailash rises in isolated splendor near the sources of four

major rivers of the Indian subcontinent--the Indus, Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Karnali. Hindus also regard Kailash as the place where the divine form of the Ganges, the holiest river of all, cascades from heaven to first touch the Earth and course invisibly through the locks of Siva's hair before spewing forth from a glacier 140 miles to the west.



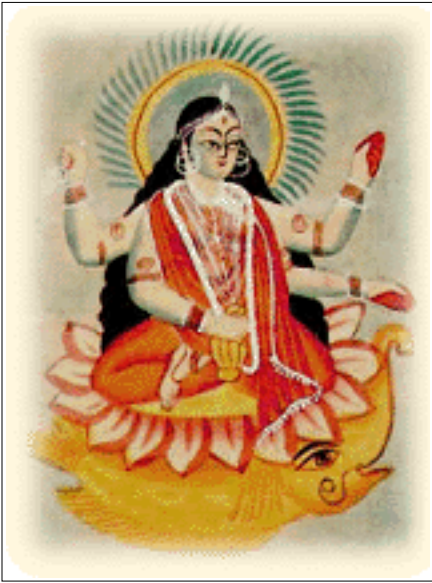
At only 22,028 feet, Kailash is thousands of feet lower than Everest and other Himalayan peaks. Yet its extraordinary setting and appearance more than make up for its modest height. Kailash retains its grandeur when viewed from a distance. More than any other peak in the Himalayas, it opens the mind to the cosmos around it, evoking a sense of infinite space that makes one aware of a vaster universe encompassing the limited world of ordinary experience. It has served as an inspiration for numerous Hindu temples and shrines in the distant plains of India. **The sight of the peak has a powerful effect, bringing tears to the eyes of many who behold it, leaving them convinced that they have glimpsed the abode of the Gods beyond the round of life and death. Neither Hindus, Buddhists, nor any Tibetans would ever contemplate trying to climb Kailash.**

Hindus view Kailash as the divine dwelling place of God Siva and Goddess Parvati. There, as the Supreme Yogi, naked and smeared with ashes, His matted hair coiled on top of His head, He sits on a tiger skin, steeped in the indescribable bliss of meditation. From His position of aloof splendor on the summit, His third eye blazing with supernatural power and awareness, the lord of the mountain calmly surveys the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and tragedies, the entire play of illusion that make up life in

the world below. The power of His meditation destroys the world of illusions that bind people to the painful cycle of death and rebirth. When He rises to dance, He takes on the functions of Brahma and Vishnu and creates and preserves the universe itself.

2. Goddess of Bliss: Nanda Devi

In addition to the paradise She shares with Siva on Kailas, Parvati has her abode on a number of other mountains. As Nanda Devi, the **"Goddess of Bliss,"** She dwells in beauty on the lovely peak of that name in the Himalayas northeast of Delhi. The highest mountain in India outside the principality of Sikkim, Nanda Devi soars in alluring curves of rock and ice to culminate in a delicate summit, poised at 25,645 feet above a ring of snow peaks that form a sanctuary protecting the Goddess from all but Her most determined admirers. The only break in their otherwise impregnable wall of rock and snow is the terrifying gorge of the **Rishi Ganga**, one of the sources of the sacred Ganga, named after seven sages of Hindu stories, who fled the oppression of demons to seek refuge with the Goddess before departing this world to become enshrined as seven stars in the constellation of Ursa Major. Shepherds and porters from nearby villages who venture into the area believe that they can sometimes hear the sounds of these sages--drums beating, the blare of trumpets and the eerie barking of dogs. The few foreign mountaineers who manage to penetrate the gorge, inching their way along the sides of sheer cliffs that plunge thousands of feet into the river roaring below, find themselves in a paradise of gentle meadows filled with flowers at the foot of the sacred peak, which stands like a temple in the middle of the sanctuary itself.



Nanda Devi lies in Uttarakhand, the principal area of pilgrimage in the Indian Himalayas. This region ranks second only to Kailash and Manasarovar in the degree of its sanctity for Hindus. Closer to the lowlands and much more accessible, it is visited by many more pilgrims, who come by the tens of thousands to bathe at Gomukh, the glacial source of the Ganga, and to worship at Kedarnath and Badrinath, lofty temples of Siva and Vishnu sequestered in narrow valleys beneath the icy thrones of the Gods themselves. The region is also the favorite haunt of holy men and wandering yogis, who come to follow the example of Siva and meditate in the sharp clear air of the heights, within sight of the peaks that lead to heaven and the goal they seek.



As the Goddess who resides on the highest mountain in the region, Nanda Devi has many shrines and temples dedicated to Her. One of the better-known ones is in the hill station of Almora, which affords one of the best views of the peak itself and the mountains that surround it. Although primarily a benevolent deity, Nanda can take on the form of **Durga**, the wrathful Goddess. The people of the region also view Nanda Devi as a benevolent source of life and renewal. According to ancient Hindu tales, a flood once covered the entire world. A sage named Manu was warned of the impending disaster and built a boat in which he survived. Vishnu incarnated himself as a fish and towed the craft to safety on a mountain peak. As the waters receded, Manu together with his family and the remnants of all living creatures went down the slope to repopulate the Earth. The people of Uttarakhand identify the mountain of the flood as Nanda Devi, and one local group, the Rajis, still regard the peak as the abode of their ancestors. According to one legend, the seven sages accompanied Manu and remained behind to dwell in the company of the Goddess.

3. Annapurna and Machapuchare: Goddess **Parvati** dwells in yet another form on sacred Annapurna One, named like Nanda Devi for the deity said to reside on its summit. A range of peaks that includes Gangapurna, Machapuchare and Annapurnas One through Four, Annapurna rises in one long sweep above the lush green hills of central Nepal. Seen from the tropical valley of Pokhara in the twilight before dawn, the range's peaks appear to float like bluish-gray icebergs on a sea of liquid shadows. Etched with shadowed flutings, the corrugated face of Annapurna One--the highest summit at 26,545-feet--becomes a golden backdrop to the slender pointed peak of Machapuchare, the "Fish's Tail."



Annapurna means in **Sanskrit "She who is filled with food."** Unlike Nanda Devi, who can take on the wrathful form of Durga, Annapurna is regarded as a purely benevolent deity. A kindhearted Goddess of plenty, She is the Queen of Banaras, the holy city of the Hindus on the banks of the Ganga south of Nepal. Each year, after the autumn harvest, the people of Banaras celebrate a festival dedicated to Her called Annakuta, the "Food Mountain," in which they fill Her temple with a mountain of food--rice, lentils, and sweets of all kinds to be distributed to those who come to receive Her blessings.

Within the heart of the range lies a hidden basin of beautiful meadows and glaciers, resembling the sanctuary

surrounding Nanda Devi. A curtain of rock and ice draped between mountains soaring to over 26,000 feet completely encloses this natural amphitheater, dropping nowhere lower than 19,000 feet except at one place. There, an incredible gorge 12,000 feet deep slices through this otherwise impregnable barrier, right beneath the overhanging cliffs and glaciers of Machapuchare, one of the loveliest peaks in the Himalayas.

Arunachala of Tamil Nadu



One of the best place to see how mountains are venerated is far to the south, where Arunachala juts out of the Tamil plain, a hundred miles from Chennai. At the foot of Arunachala is the ashram of **Ramana Maharshi**, one of the greatest spiritual masters of this century. Though he died in 1950, Ramana's ashram today is one of the most potent spiritual places in India, drawing people from all over the world. The only writing Ramana ever did consisted of devotional poems to the mountain. Arunchala, he was to say later, is the physical embodiment of Shiva, of God Himself. Why go anywhere else?

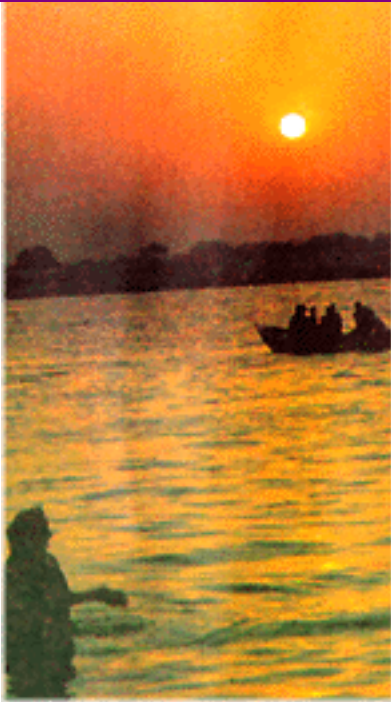
According to **Shiv Purana**, Brahma and Vishnu emerged from Shiva, the Unmanifest Source of all. No sooner had they come into form than they

began to argue about which of them had the superior role, as the creator, and the protector of the universe. To stop their quarrelling, Shiva manifested as a column of light so radiant that both Brahma and Vishnu were temporarily blinded, and had to stop their bickering.

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Rivers/Oceans/Lakes

**' O Mother Ganga, may your water,
abundant blessing of this world,
treasure of Lord Shiva, playful Lord of all the earth,**



essence of the scriptures and embodied goodness of the gods, May your water, sublime wine of immortality, Soothe our troubled souls.'

The ancient city of Allahabad lies at the confluence of the Ganga (Ganges) and the Yamuna, two sacred rivers that have been cradles of the Indian civilisation. The city is mentioned in the oldest Indian literature such as the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas. According to Hindu tales, Lord Brahma, the creator chose a place where three of the holiest rivers on earth could meet in harmony. The city is also referred to as 'Tirth Raj' or the 'king of pilgrimage centres'.

" The Ganga is a living presence, a protector, a healer of ills. The Ganga is as alive as it ever was with the hopes and dreams of an entire culture. **Even Jawaharlal Nehru, that arch-modernists, asked that his ashes be cast into the Ganga at Allahabad.** Kashi is the holiest place for Hindus. It is considered holier than the sky.

It is at Kashi that **Count Keyserling** describes the ecstasy that Hindu devotion means.

"The whole Hindu world still comes to her banks, to sing, to pray, to wash, to ask favors and blessings, to barter, to die. The Ganga is a living symbol of an ancient culture's way of life and of the sacred dimension of nature itself. Of all the goddesses, Ma Ganga, is the only one without a shadow. She is the unequivocal fountain of mercy and compassion, here in this world only to comfort her children. Her waters are the milk, the nectar of immortality, source of all life, and abundance. Countless flowers are strewn across her body daily; millions of lights set sail every evening upon her waters. While stories of gods and goddesses come and go with the ages, while stories replaces or rivals another, the organic presence of Ganga continues as ever, absorbing her devotees' offerings and ashes in the same way she has done since time immemorial."

(source: [Travel Through Sacred India - By Roger Housden](#) p. 22-23).



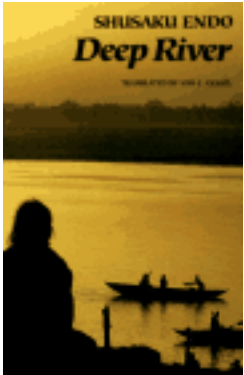
Of particular sanctity in India are the perennial rivers, among which the Ganga stands first. This river, personified as a goddess, originally flowed only in heaven until she was brought down by **Bhagiratha** to purify the ashes of his ancestors. She came down reluctantly, cascading first on the head of Siva, in order to break her fall, which would have shattered the Earth. Confluences are particularly holy, and the Ganges' confluence with the Yamuna at Allahabad is the most sacred spot in India. Another river of importance is the Saraswati, which loses itself in desert; it was personified as a goddess of eloquence and learning.

Kumbh Mela: The magic of the mystical Ganga. According to devotees, those who come to the river with a prayer, never leave back unsatisfied. *Faith in the power of the river, to heal, to resurrect the dead from the grave.* The recent **Mahakumbh** at Tirthanagari Prayag, has witnessed a mindboggling rush among people, both Indian and foreign, to take a dip in the water of the river, whose origin is as deep as the Himalayas themselves. *"Ganga Maiyya (Mother Ganga) will take care of us,"* The belief among the devotees, startles many first timers to this mela. The sheer scale of the Kumbh mela is so mind-boggling. **It's extraordinary to witness this sort of mass spiritual communion between so many people and the river.** The varied images

from Kumbh attracts everyone from Boston to Benaras." -- the biggest spiritual event in the globe. **Bishambhar Bhushan**, poor and blind, traveled two days in a cramped train from his village of Dhanvani in central Madhya Pradesh state. Bhushan, 80, scooped up the cold river with his hands, and offered it to the

heavens in a centuries-old gesture. "I told Mother Ganga, take me across life, mother," he said, his eyelids twitching with excitement. "My life's ambition is fulfilled."

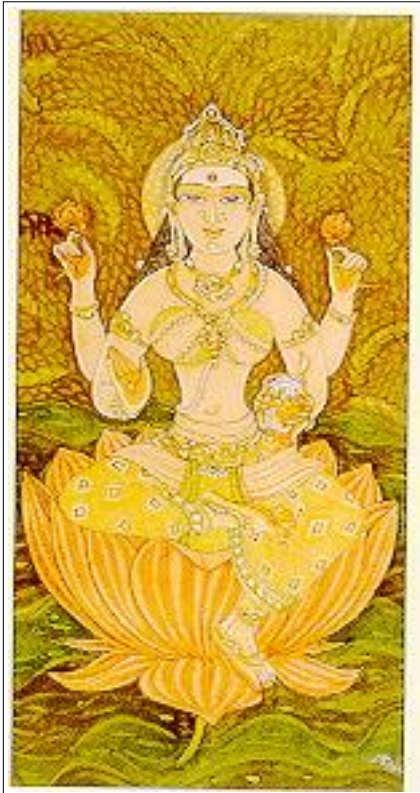
Together, the Kalpavasis and the Sanyasis, provide a glimpse into the spiritual mindset of the people of India set in their pursuit of salvation. Kalpavasis, are people who survive on minimal food and clothing, and whose number runs into tens of thousands. They sleep in the open during the freezing winter nights on the river banks, revealing the spirit of the Kumbh as much as the sadhus who come in hoards with their respective flag-bearers. In perhaps one of the largest gatherings ever, millions of pilgrims took a dip at the seven ghats at Sangam - the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna - on Wednesday, stretching the administration and the police to their limits, but reinforcing the fact the Indian milieu had not lost touch with the divine.



In his moving novel, [Deep River, Shusaku Endo's](#), a major Japanese author writes about a group of Japanese tourists, each of whom is wrestling with his or her own demons, travels to the River Ganga on a pilgrimage of grace. Each has come to India and the holy river Ganga on a spiritual quest, and each discovers that God has "many faces." (For more on Kumbh mela please refer to the [Trivia](#) chapter)

Not far from the foot of the peak itself, at nearly 15,000 feet above sea level, reflecting the light of its snows, repose the calm blue waters of the most sacred lake of Hindu religion and stories -holy [Lake Manasarovar, "Lake of the Mind."](#) The hardest of Hindu pilgrims aspire to take the long and dangerous journey over high passes to bathe in Manasarovar's icy waters and cleanse their minds of the sins that threaten to condemn them to the suffering of rebirth.

[Goddess Saraswati](#) is the embodiment of the mighty [Saraswati River of the Vedas](#). Saraswati means "the essence of one's own self." The Sanskrit word 'sara' means essence and 'swa' means 'self'. [She is the earliest goddess who is associated with a river in the Indian tradition](#). She is the divine spouse of Lord Brahma, the creator. Since knowledge is necessary for creation, Saraswati symbolizes the creative power of Lord Brahma. She is also praised for her ability both to cleanse and fertilize the earth, and has been equated with the goddess of learning, poetry, music, and culture. She is associated with speech-Vac: the goddess of riverlike, streaming speech.



Saraswati is typically shown seated on a lotus. Like the swan, the lotus seat of the goddess suggests her transcendence of the physical world. She floats above the muddy imperfections of the physical world, unsullied, pure, beautiful. Although rooted in the mud (like man rooted in the physical world), the lotus perfects itself in a blossom that has transcended the mud. She inspires people to live in such a way that they may transcend their physical limitations through the ongoing creation of culture. Goddess Saraswati is worshiped throughout India and on her special day in spring, Vasant Panchmi, she is worshipped by school children as the patron goddess of learning. The [Benaras Hindu University](#) was also founded on this day.

[The Saraswati, Ganga, Yamuna, Krishna, Kaveri, and other rivers represent an ever-flowing stream of celestial grace which purifies](#)

[and fertilizes the earth.](#)

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Mother Earth/Sun & Planet



"O Goddess Earth, the consort of Visnu, you whose garments are the oceans and whose ornaments are the hills and mountain ranges; please forgive me as I walk on you this day."

In the **Artha-Veda**, composed five-thousand years ago by the Rshis, a hymn to the Earth.

May She, Queen of what has been and will be, make a wide world for us. Earth that bears plants of various healing powers, may she spread wide for us and thrive.

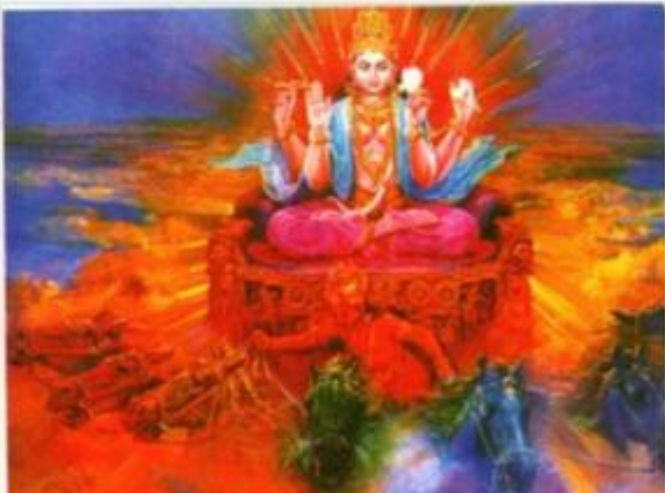
O Earth - brown, black, red and multi-colored the firm Earth protected by Indra, on this Earth may I stand - unvanquished, unhurt, unslain.

This earth, our mother, has nurtured consciousness from the slime of the primeval ocean billions of years ago and has sustained the human race for countless centuries. Will we repay our debts to our mother by converting her into a burnt out cinder circling the sun into eternity?

Rock, soil, stone and dust with these Earth is held together and bound firm. My obeisance to gold-breasted Earth... Rising or sitting, standing or walking, May we, either with our right foot or our left, Never totter o the earth. - **Atharva Veda** 12.1.26, 28

Sun/Dawn/Fire/ Worship

"We meditate upon the supreme effulgence of the Divine creative Sun, that he may give impulse to our intelligence." Rig Veda III 62.10



The Sun (Surya) is the visible presence, the vision of the Divine, the cosmic symbol for the Supreme. He is the Divine light and presence that fills all the worlds. The Sun of illumination follows in love affair the Dawn (**Usha**) of awakening. Usha or dawn represents Human aspiration as the Spiritual dawn.

Surya is possibly the most Vedic God. In the RgVeda, he is worshipped as Savitr. As the source of life, light and warmth. He is also the source of inner enlightenment as the famous Gayatri mantra suggests. At dawn, the householder and his wife rise, purify themselves with a bath--usually in a temple pool or a river if one is available--and then make an offering to the fire-god **Agni** in their household fire.

Agni represents the consciousness force, the Sacred Fire. The man will then turn towards the rising sun and ask for blessing and understanding.

The **Gayatri mantra** (chant), which forms the core of the Hindu faith, is actually addressed to Surya:



**"O splendid and playful sun,
we offer this prayer to thee.
Enlighten this craving mind.
Be our protector.**

**May the radiance of the divine ruler guide our destiny.
Wise men salute your magnificence with oblations and words of
praise."**

Lord Rama was also taught, by sage Agastaya, the *Adityahridayam*, a prayer addressed to the sun god.

" The Sun is the foremost physical manifestation of divine creative power. In the glorious morning the faithful bend towards the giver of life in one single gesture of adoration. "

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Plants/Animals



Forests and groves were considered sacred, and flowering trees received special reverence. Just as various animals were associated with gods and goddesses, different trees and plants were also associated in the Hindu pantheon. The **Mahabharata** says that 'even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in the village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect.'

Hindus see divinity in all living creatures. Animal deities therefore, occupy an important place in Hindu dharma. Animals, for example, are very common as form of transport for

various Gods and Goddesses. The entire clan of Shiva is replete with ecological symbolism. Shiva's consort Parvati is considered the daughter of the mountain. She is the personification of Mother Earth. In Hindu stories and iconography, there is a close relationship between the various deities, and their animal or bird mounts. Each divinity is associated with a particular animal or bird, and this lends a special dimension to the animal kingdom.



As the sheep is to Christianity, the cow is to Hinduism. Lord Krishna was a cowherd, and the bull is depicted as the vehicle of Lord Shiva. Today the cow has almost become a symbol of Hinduism. As opposed to the West, where the cow is widely considered as nothing better than walking hamburgers, in India, *the cow is believed to be a symbol of the earth - because it gives so much yet asks nothing in return.* Because of its great economic importance, it makes good sense to protect the cow. It is said Mahatma Gandhi became a vegetarian because he felt cows were ill-treated. Such is the respect for the cow, notes scholar Jeaneane



Fowler, that Indians had offered to take in millions of cows waiting for slaughter in Britain as a result of the crisis in beef production in 1996.

Snakes are a symbol of healing and primal energy. In art, the *Naginis* are figures of beauty. Vishnu reclines on the serpent **Ananta** eternally. In Kerala, snakes are worshipped as guardians of the home; and it is said that when a snake enters your life, there will be a new birth of creativity and wisdom. In Bengal, the goddess Manasa, a divine nagini, is worshipped for her powers to vanquish illness. Dogs have always been man's faithful friends, loyal and loving. Yudhishtira refused to enter heaven without his dog. After the Pandavas crossed over to the celestial zones, Yudhishtira's dog became dharma personified. He told Indra, "This dog, O Lord, is highly devoted to me. He should go with me. My heart is full of compassion for him".

Even the Lord Krishna always wore a peacock feather in his crown.

Ganesha, the son of Shiva, is a combination of elephant and man. The elephant is worshipped in this country and even today forms an integral part of many temples and festivals. **Muruka or Subramanyan**, another son of Shiva, also with the trident as his favorite weapon, and the peacock as his vehicle, is a deity of woods and mountains in South India. Animals also appear as independent divine creatures.

Sacred Groves and Trees

The *pipal* tree or *asvatta* (*Ficus religiosa*) has had a conspicuous position in the cultural landscape of north India and human collective memory for more than 5,000 years. It was depicted even on Mohenjo Daro seals. Buddha himself found enlightenment under a *pipal* tree (Mansberger, 1988). Buddha is reported to have been born in a sacred grove, Lumbinivana, full of *sal* trees (Gadgil, 1985).

For Hindus the *bel* tree, *Aegle marmelos*, is associated with Shiva, *tulasi* with Vishnu, and fig (*Ficus glomerata*) with Dattatreya, the son of



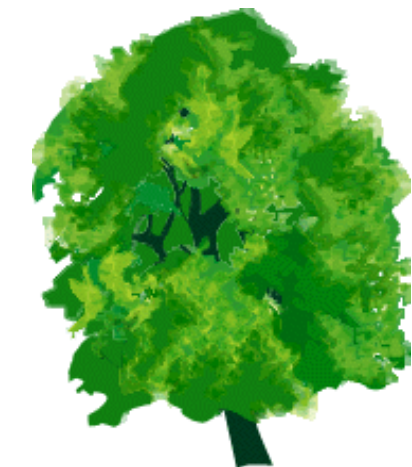
Trimurty.

Nakeera, the Tamil poet of the Sangam period, states that Lord Muruka could be found in the forest, in a place surrounded by water, rivers, tanks, meeting places under trees, new-grown groves, etc. The *kadampa* tree is likened to Lord Muruka himself. Sangam tradition holds that he is the owner of all the hilly tracts with rich groves (Ramachandran, 1990). Ayyappa, Aiyandar and Sasta (all considered to be the same) of south India is essentially a deity of the woods, whose province is to guard the fields, crops and herds of the peasantry and to drive away their enemies.

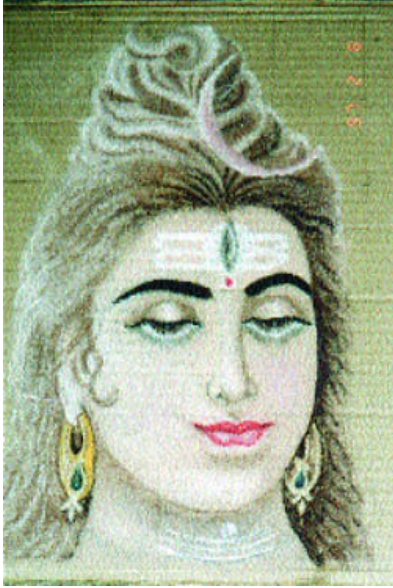
No temples existed in India during the Vedic period. They were not to be found in the pre-Buddhist period except for wooden ones. The ancient Buddhist sacred place was the *stupa* (Hastings, ed., 1934). The various gods and goddesses whom the indigenous population of peninsular India worshipped were not accustomed to dwell in the secluded atmosphere of temples; they loved the open air. *Even today, for the gramadevata (village goddess) of south India there are no temples in many villages.* The deity

may be in the shadow of a big tree. Generally they are lodged in small shrines. In a good number of villages no object is placed to represent the deity and the tree itself is regarded as the embodiment of the deity.

An interesting stage in the transformation of the sacred tree into the anthropomorphic form was observed by the Italian traveller Della Valle, who visited India in 1623–25. He found in Surat the worship of Parvati in



the form of a tree. Her face was painted on the tree and offerings were of vegetable origin (Wheller and Macmillan, 1956).



*In the personification of Lord Shiva, for instance, we may observe the evolution of Indian traditional thought of living in partnership with nature. He is as old as Indian thought and his origin probably merges with oblivion in the Indus Valley culture. He has mountains and wild places as his abode. His entangled hair symbolizes the primeval untamed forest. The **Ganga** originating from his tress depicts the watershed function of sacred groves. Serpents coiled around his neck symbolize coexistence with the denizens of the ecosystem. By his trident and leopard skin attire he brings to our mind the picture of the hunter-gatherer. This destruction is followed by creation; incorporating the elements (*bhutas*) from Mother Earth sprouts crops and grasses and once again forests. The sacred grove, on the other hand, was aboriginal forest which enhanced overall landscape heterogeneity and thereby greater plant and animal diversity. The necklace of *rudraksha* (*Elaeocarpus* spp.) adorning Shiva's neck also highlights his links with the forest.*

Various trees, fruits and plants have special significance in Hindu ritual. Hindu religious scripts, stories, and rituals have attempted to drive home the importance of preserving nature by deifying it through the centuries.

Lord Krishna says in the **Bhagavad Gita** (9.26):

Patram Pushpam phalam toyam, yo mey bhaktya prayachchati Tadaham bhakt yupahrutam asnaami prayataatmanaha

I accept a leaf, flower, fruit or water Or whatever is offered with devotion.

The **neem** tree is sacred and its flower is offered to God and eaten on New Years day although it is sour. The **bilva** tree, its flowers and fruits are very sacred for Shiva worship. The **tulsi** plant is regarded as the abode of Krishna and is important in all pujas. **Sandal wood**, its paste and oil are important in worship of gods.

All plants and flowers have medicinal value in the Hindu system of medicine (ayurveda) brought by the divine medicine man **Dhanvantari** during **Samudra mathana (churning of oceans)**.



The **coconut** tree and the coconut are sacred and are offered to God during worship. **Mango** leaves are used as festoons during pujas and auspicious events. All flowers and leaves of plants are used during worship for pushpa puja and patra puja. The **lotus** is a sacred flower and plant for Hindus. The **banana** plant and leaves are used for ornamentation and worship.

The 'tulsi' plant or Indian basil is an important symbol in the Hindu religious tradition. The name 'tulsi' connotes "the incomparable one". Tulsi is a venerated plant and Hindus worship it in the morning and evening. Tulsi grows wild in the tropics and warm regions. Dark or *Shyama* tulsi and light or *Rama* tulsi are the two main varieties of basil, the former possessing greater medicinal value. Of the many varieties, the *Krishna* or *Shyama* tulsi is commonly used for worship.

Tulsi As A Deity


The presence of tulsi plant symbolizes the religious bent of a Hindu family. A Hindu household is considered incomplete if it doesn't have a tulsi plant in the courtyard.



Many families have the tulsi planted in a specially built structure, which has images of deities installed on all four sides, and an alcove for a small earthen oil lamp. Some households can even have up to a dozen tulsi plants on the verandah or in the garden forming a "tulsi-van" or "tulsivrindavan" - a miniature basil forest.

Vaishnavites or believers of **Lord Vishnu** worship the tulsi leaf because it's the one that pleases Lord Vishnu the most. They also wear beaded necklaces made of tulsi stems. The manufacture of these tulsi necklaces is a cottage industry in pilgrimages and temple towns.

Tulsi As An Elixir: Apart from its religious significance it is of great medicinal significance, and is a prime herb in Ayurvedic treatment. Marked by its strong aroma and a stringent taste, tulsi is a kind of "the elixir of life" as it promotes longevity. The plant's extracts can be used to prevent and cure many illnesses and common ailments like common cold, headaches, stomach disorders, inflammation, heart disease, various forms of poisoning and malaria. Essential oil extracted from *karpoora* tulsi is mostly used for medicinal purposes though of late it is used in the manufacture of herbal toiletry.



According to Jeevan Kulkarni, author of *Historical Truths & Untruths Exposed*, when Hindu women worship tulsi, they in effect pray for "less and less carbonic acid and more and more oxygen - a perfect object lesson in sanitation, art and religion". The tulsi plant is even known to purify or de-pollute the atmosphere and also works as a repellent to mosquitoes, flies and other harmful insects. Tulsi used to be a universal remedy in cases of malarial fever. Prof Shrinivas Tilak, who teaches Religion at Concordia University, Montreal has made this historical citation: In a letter written to *The Times*, London, dated May 2, 1903 Dr George Birdwood, Professor of Anatomy, Grant Medical College, Bombay said, "When the Victoria Gardens were established in Bombay, the men employed on those works were pestered by mosquitoes. At the recommendation of the Hindu managers, the whole boundary of the gardens was planted with holy basil, on which the plague of mosquitos was at once abated, and fever altogether disappeared from among the resident gardners."

Tulsi In Legends: According to one legend, Tulsi is also mentioned in the stories of Meera and of Radha immortalised in Jayadev's Gita Govinda. The story of Lord Krishna has it that when Krishna was weighed in gold, not even all the ornaments of Satyabhama could outweigh him. But a single tulsi leaf placed by Rukmani on the pan tilted the scale. In the Hindu stories, tulsi is very dear to Lord Vishnu. Tulsi is ceremonially married to Lord Vishnu annually on the 11th bright day of the month of Karttika in the lunar calendar. This festival continues for five days and concludes on the full moon day, which falls in mid October. This ritual, called the 'Tulsi Vivaha' inaugurates the annual marriage season in India. (source: <http://hinduism.about.com/religion/hinduism/library/weekly/aa062000a.htm>)

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Conclusion:



What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. Centuries of rapacious exploitation of the environment has finally caught up with us, and a radically changed attitude towards nature, is now not a question of spiritual merit or condescension, but of sheer survival. This earth, so touchingly looked upon in the Hindu view as the Universal Mother, has nurtured mankind up from the slime of the primeval ocean for billions of years.

Let us recall the ancient Hindu dictum:

"The earth is our mother, we are all her children." Mountains are mystical realms of Gods, heaven and spiritual masters. Trees

and termites, all of Nature has been venerated by ancient Hindus, Greeks, Native Americans and other Pagan religions around the world. They worshipped Nature and to treat the forces of Nature as heavenly superhuman powers. Zeus, Apollo the Sun god, has his own attending ministers; Minerva, the Goddess of wisdom, a western Saraswati, for whom learning springs from the head of love."

" God sleeps in the rocks, proclaims the Hindu scriptures, "dreams in the plants, stirs toward wakefulness in the animals, and in mankind is awake to his own ego individuality. "

" Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam -- The Whole Universe is one Family. "

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Articles

The Mahakumbh: Its Sacred Significance
By Pankaj Dixit

<http://www.timesofindia.com/today/20edit5.htm>

WATER is the basis of all life on earth. Of the Panchmahabhut or the five natural elements, water is considered to be the key to life. Human beings feel a close affinity to it, since three-fourths of the human body is constituted of water. In this respect, our body is like a microcosm, as the surface of the earth (the macrocosm) is constituted similarly, being three-fourths, water.

The confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati at Prayag stands for the meeting of Ida, Pingala and Sushumna Nadis at Muladhar Chakra known as Yukta Triveni. Kumbha symbolises the arousing of six chakras to reach Ajna Chakra where these three nadis meet again to form the Mukta (Liberation) Triveni for yogis.



The Ganga always flows and rushes very fast to the sound of Gama-Gam (meaning go-go) while the Yamuna moves slowly with a placid flow to the sound of Yam-Yam (meaning control-control). Likewise whether one acts fast in life or acts after deliberate thinking, it must be decided by his knowledge and temperament. And both these aspects should be supported by the invisible Saraswati, the faculty of Jnan (knowledge). The meeting of these three rivers in the spiritual realm represents the three gunas or qualities of the native, i.e. Sattvic or subtle represented by Saraswati; Rajasic or the vibrant



Ganga; and Tamasic or the dark Yamuna. These three rivers also signify the three saktis, Mahalakshmi, Mahakali and Mahasaraswati; the three sacred fires of sacrifice; the three Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh; and the three notes of music, Sa for Saraswati; Re for Yamuna; and Ga for Ganga.

Further deep in the spiritual sphere, these three rivers represent the three phases of time i.e. present, past and future; the triangle or minimum space enclosed in time; Nad, Bindu and Kala; and the three humours, vata, pitta and kapha. The Triveni also denotes the three basic philosophies of the Gita, i.e. Jnan Yoga, Karma Yoga

and Bhakti Yoga.

The Kumbha occurs in a cycle of every 12 years - the most sacred or auspicious time is calculated on the basis of a specific planetary configuration, considering its cosmobiological effect on the human body and mind. Various astronomical conjugations during Kumbha represent various stages of the solar cycle which has a direct influence on human beings and the biosphere. The ritual bath or snan on specific days i.e. full moon, new moon and Basant Panchami have been specifically prescribed on the basis of the bio-effects of lunar phases. The imposed electromagnetic fields on water are transmitted into the human beings taking bath in the Holy Prayag giving them great health benefits. The number 12 here signifies time or Kal as there are 12 adityas, 12 zodiac signs, 12 months, and 12 Jyotirlingas (self-emergent sivalingas). The entire world exists in time, moves in time and space, and is controlled by time. According to Atharvaveda, Kumbh is the representation of space situated in Kal supervising all of us. Spiritually the holding of Kumbha at an interval of 12 years symbolises the need for purifying the body by sublimating the inherent vices of the 12 sense organs, i.e. Panchkarmendriyas (five organs of action), Panchjnanedriyas (five organs of perception, the mind and the intellect - and thereby to arouse the six psychic centres or chakras separated from each other at a distance of 12 angulas for attaining the Amrit Kumbha or pitcher of nectar.



There is another mystical explanation of the Kumbha. The human head and neck form an inverted pitcher or Kumbha from where Amrit or nectar flows downwards into the body. The two eyes represent the sun and moon gods, the nostrils represent Ganga and Jamuna, the tongue is Vani or Saraswati and it spans 12 angulas of space.

Astrologically during Kumbha the three grahas, Jupiter, Sun and Moon, play a prominent role in the two Zodiac signs, Taurus and Capricorn respectively. The presence of Sun in Capricorn or Makara signifies the Swadhishtan Chakra, the centre of procreation representing the water element. Makara also signifies the Kama as Kamdev, popularly knows as Makaradhvaj. Accordingly Madam Blavatsky in her famous book Sacred Doctrine records that Capricorn is universal intelligence, which is transformed into human intelligence through water. It is therefore that one of the famous **Shahi Snans** occurs on Basant Panchami, the day of Kamdev. Likewise Jupiter's or Jiva's (life force) presence in Taurus

signifies the creative power of universe, Shiva Shakti or the Male and female forces.

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Did you Know?

Sissa's request and Chess

Among the fascinating legends told about the origin of chess is the story of Sissa, a scientist and the inventor of the game. In western India, Raja Balhait had asked his advisers to create a game that

demonstrated the values of prudence, diligence, foresight, and knowledge. Sissa brought a chessboard to the raja and explained that he had chosen war as a model for the game because war was the most effective school in which to learn the values of decision, vigor, endurance, circumspection, and courage. The raja was delighted with the game and ordered its preservation in temples. He considered its principles the foundation of all justice and held it to be the best training in the art of war.



The raja said to his subject Sissa, "Ask any reward. It will be yours." Being a scientist, Sissa felt rewarded by the pleasure his invention was giving others; but the kind insisted, and finally Sissa said, "Give me a reward in grains of corn on the chessboard (ashtapada). On the first square one grain, on the second two, on the third four, on the fourth double of that, and so on until the 64th and last square."

The raja would not hear of it. He insisted that Sissa ask for something of more worth than grains of corn. But Sissa insisted he had no need of much and that the grains of corn would suffice. Thereupon the raja ordered the corn to be brought; but before they had reached the 30th square, all the corn of India was exhausted. Perturbed, he looked at Sissa, who laughed and told his raja that he knew perfectly well he could never receive the reward he had asked because the amount of corn involved would cover the whole surface of the earth to a depth of nine inches.

The raja did not know which to admire more: the invention of chess or the ingenuity of Sissa's request. The number involved is 18,446,744,073,709,551,615 grains. This number had been

previously calculated by the early Indian mathematicians, who incidentally, had invented the decimal system long before it reached the Arabs and Europe. (source: [Feast of India: A Legacy of Recipes and Fables](#) - By Rani p. 84)

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sushama@atributetohinduism.com

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nature worship

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