



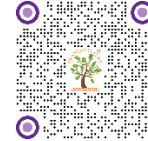
Original Article

## GANGA AND YAMUNA AT THE TEMPLE THRESHOLD: AN ICONOGRAPHIC AND SPATIAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the placement of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna at temple thresholds through formal, spatial, and ritual frameworks, situating their imagery within Vedic, epic, and Puranic traditions where both function as agents of purification and auspicious transition. It examines sculptural programmes at the entrance to the garbhagriha, focusing on doorjamb reliefs in which Ganga is marked by the makara and Yamuna by the kurma, each attended by subsidiary figures, their forms carved along the doorjamb in positions that flank and define the axis of entry. A spatial reading of this arrangement shows that the doorway operates as a regulated threshold that directs bodily movement rather than a neutral opening; the consistent placement of these figures on the lower sections of the doorframe establishes a visual and ritual field that must be crossed before access to the sanctum. Their iconographic attributes and fixed location structure a sequence in which entry aligns with the logic of ablution, allowing the threshold to be read as a tirtha, a point of crossing where movement acquires ritual value. Passing between Ganga and Yamuna produces a transition analogous to river bathing and prepares the devotee for proximity to the deity, which supports the argument that these figures function as mediating agents within a spatial system that encodes purification into the act of entry and shapes the experience of sacred space.

**Keywords:** Ganga, Yamuna, Ritual, Iconography, Temple Thresholds

### INTRODUCTION

Rivers occupy a central position in Indian religious thought and practice. Among them, Ganga and Yamuna hold a distinctive status. They function both as physical watercourses and as personified goddesses who purify, protect, and sustain cosmic order. Early Vedic hymns invoke them for fertility, healing, and ritual cleansing. Epic and Puranic texts develop these roles further. The epics present them as mothers and divine agents within human history. The Puranas situate them within a sacred geography that connects heaven, earth, and the underworld [Singh \(2020\)](#).

The mythology of Ganga's descent through Shiva establishes her as a mediator between celestial and terrestrial realms. Yamuna's association with Krishna in the Braj region links her to devotion, protection, and divine presence within lived space. Through these textual traditions, both rivers come to signify transition. They mark points where human and divine domains intersect. This symbolic meaning extends beyond narrative into ritual and built form [Kumari \(2018\)](#).

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From the Gupta period onward, temple architecture gives this symbolism a fixed visual expression. Sculptors place Ganga and Yamuna on the doorjambes of sanctum entrances. Each goddess stands on her vehicle and carries a water vessel (Purna Kumbh). Their placement at the threshold is deliberate. Architectural and ritual manuals describe the doorway as a liminal zone that requires purification before entry. The river goddesses therefore act as agents who prepare the devotee to cross into sacred space. Their presence becomes a standard feature across regional styles, even as details of form vary [Rao \(1985\)](#).

Scholars have examined the sacred geography of Indian rivers and the iconography of temple doorways. Studies discuss the theological meaning of Ganga and Yamuna in textual sources, and others analyse their sculptural representations. However, fewer works systematically connect literary construction, architectural prescription, and ritual experience within a single framework. This paper addresses that gap.

The study argues that Ganga and Yamuna function as architectural mediators. Their images translate the theology of sacred water into spatial form. By analysing textual descriptions, iconographic features, and temple placement, the paper shows how the threshold becomes a ritualised tirtha within the temple complex. The paired river goddesses structure the devotee's movement from exterior space to sanctum and give material shape to the idea of purification at the point of entry.

## GANGA AND YAMUNA IN VEDIC LITERATURE

Hindu goddesses are often understood as embodiments of complex ideas such as power and energy, yet they also appear in simple and material forms, especially as water and rivers across India [Foulston and Abbott \(2009\)](#). In this context, water symbolizes potentiality, fluidity, and the capacity for creation. Vedic literature presents water as an all-encompassing element and as a fundamental basis of the universe itself [Baartmans \(2000\)](#). Rivers, therefore, are treated as sacred beings and are described as "great descenders," a term that reflects their divine origin and salvific function. Later sections of the Rig Veda also state that bathing at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna enables a person to attain heaven [Eck \(2012\)](#).

Vedic texts further refer to river goddesses as "mothers," emphasizing their nurturing and life sustaining roles. The earliest group is identified as the seven mother rivers. In present day religious practice, worship commonly focuses on the saptanadi: the Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu, Narmada, Godavari, Krishna, and Kaveri [Eck \(2012\)](#). The waters of these rivers are symbolically compared to maternal milk and also to soma, the sacred ritual substance. During contemporary Hindu water rituals, mantras associated with these river goddesses are recited, reinforcing their continuing ritual and theological significance [Rodrigues \(2007\)](#).

## LITERARY FOUNDATIONS OF GANGA

Many myths describe Ganga having the origins of heavens. Ganga is known to be the consort of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva [Eck \(2012\)](#). The Bhagavata Purana [Shastri and Bhatt \(2004\)](#) traces the origin of Ganga to the incarnation of Vishnu as Vamana. When Vamana measured the three worlds in three strides, his raised foot pierced the upper boundary of the cosmos, and from this opening the celestial waters emerged and flowed into heaven. The text identifies this stream as Vishnupadi, a sacred tirtha whose waters remove sin. For many yugas, Ganga remained in the upper cosmic region known as Vishnupada, also called Dhruvamandala, the sphere associated with Dhruva, son of King Uttanapada, who performs penance there. The seven sages who revolve around this sphere bathe in the river, which confirms its status as a purifying and cosmic stream. From Vishnupada, Ganga moves along the devayana, described as radiant with celestial vehicles, and then descends to Chandramandala. Thereafter, it divides into four tributaries: Sita, Caksus, Alakananda, and Bhadra. Each follows a distinct course across the cosmic geography. Sita flows from Mount Meru through Gandhamadana and Bhadrasha varsa into the eastern sea; Caksus descends from Mount Malyavan through Ketumala into the western sea; Alakananda falls from Mount Hemakuta, passes through Bharata Varsha, and enters the southern sea; and Bhadra flows from Mount Srigavan through Uttarakuru into the northern sea. Among these branches, Alakananda holds particular importance because it traverses Bharata Varsha, thereby linking the cosmic river with the terrestrial region of India and reinforcing its ritual centrality.

The ninth canto of Devi Bhagavata (n.d.) narrates another account of the descent of Ganga in the context of a conflict among the wives of Mahavishnu. While Vishnu was in Vaikuntha with Laksmi, Sarasvati, and Ganga, Ganga cast affectionate glances toward him, which he returned discreetly. Sarasvati reacted with anger and struck Ganga. When Laksmi attempted to calm the dispute, Sarasvati cursed her to be born on earth. In response, Ganga cursed Sarasvati to take birth as a river on earth. Sarasvati then cursed Ganga to be born as a river and bear the sins of the world. Vishnu intervened and accepted these events as part of a larger order. He declared that Laksmi would be born on earth in the house of Dharmadhvaja, later become the plant Tulasi, marry the asura Sankhacuda, and eventually assume the form of the sacred river Padmavati before returning to Vaikuntha. Ganga, he said, would descend to earth as a holy river to purify humanity, brought down by King Bhagiratha and therefore known as Bhagirathi. She would also be associated with King Shantanu and later return in her divine form to Mount Kailasa as the consort of Shiva. Sarasvati would likewise take birth as a river on earth and ultimately return to Satya Loka to unite with Brahma. The narrative thus explains the terrestrial manifestation of the three goddesses while reaffirming their cosmic identities as the consorts of Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma.

The Adi Parva [The Mahabharata: Adi Parva \(1893\)](#), Chapters 96 and 97, presents another account of Ganga's birth on earth, this time as the result of a curse by Brahma. Mahabhisak, an emperor of the Ikshvaku dynasty, reached Satya Loka after attaining heaven

and went there to worship Brahma. Ganga was also present in that divine assembly. During the gathering, a breeze displaced her garment slightly. Mahabhisak looked at her with desire, and she returned his glance. Brahma observed this exchange and became angry. He cursed Mahabhisak to be born again on earth as a mortal king and declared that Ganga would also be born on earth as his wife.

Ganga sought relief from the curse. Brahma told her that she would regain her divine status after giving birth to the Ashta-vasus. As a result of this curse, Mahabhisak was reborn as King Shantanu of the solar dynasty. He later married Ganga on earth. This narrative explains her earthly manifestation through the framework of divine transgression, curse, and eventual restoration.

The descent of Ganga to earth is narrated in the Bala Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana [The Ramayana of Valmiki \(1962\)](#) and is also described in the Mahabharata [Rajagopalachari \(1968\)](#), the Brahmanda Purana [Shastri and Bhatt \(2004\)](#), and the Devi Bhagavata Purana (n.d.). King Sagara of the solar dynasty had two wives, Sumati and Kesini; Kesini gave birth to Asamanjasa, while Sumati bore sixty thousand sons. During Sagara's performance of the Ashvamedha sacrifice, the sacrificial horse disappeared near the seashore. The princes searched for it across the earth and eventually entered Patala, where they found the horse tied near the sage Kapila, who was absorbed in meditation. Mistaking him for the thief, they attacked him and were reduced to ashes by the power of his gaze. Sagara's grandson Amshuman later approached Kapila with respect and recovered the horse. Kapila declared that only the descent of Ganga could purify the ashes of the princes. In a later generation, Bhagiratha undertook severe penance in the Himalayas to bring Ganga down to earth. Ganga agreed to descend but warned that only Shiva could bear the force of her fall. Bhagiratha then propitiated Shiva, who received the river in his matted hair and released her in controlled streams. On her descent, Ganga flooded the hermitage of the sage Jahnu, who drank her waters and later released her, after which she became known as Jahnavi. She then followed Bhagiratha to Patala and purified the sons of Sagara, thereby establishing her role as a river that removes sin and grants liberation.

The Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata [The Mahabharata: Adi Parva \(1893\)](#) describes the divine nature and ritual power of Ganga. The text states that the deposition of the bones of the dead in the river ensures their ascent to heaven, and even a person who has committed sins throughout life can attain Vishnupada through devotion to Ganga. Bathing in her waters is presented as equal in merit to performing a hundred yajnas. The river is also described as sustaining spiritual benefit as long as a person's remains stay within it, ensuring an honoured place in heaven. Contact with Ganga's water, even indirectly through air or sand from its banks, is said to remove sin and confer radiance comparable to that of the devas. The text further equates dying in the waters of Ganga with the highest forms of austerity, such as prolonged penance over many years. Through these statements, the narrative establishes Ganga as a supreme purifying force whose waters grant spiritual merit, remove sin, and secure liberation.

The Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata [The Mahabharata: Adi Parva \(1893\)](#) further emphasizes the sacred status of Ganga by stating that all regions through which the river flows become holy. The river is described as a refuge for beings who seek ultimate spiritual welfare. Daily worship of Ganga is believed to protect both maternal and paternal lineages from misfortune. The text also assigns high ritual value to simple acts connected with the river: drinking its water is said to yield merit greater than long ritual observances, and worship performed for a single month is equated with the benefits of multiple yajnas. Even those lacking knowledge are believed to attain elevated spiritual status through devotion to Ganga. The sight of the river, physical contact with its waters, and the act of drinking them are all described as capable of removing sin and purifying large numbers of people.

Another theological interpretation appears in the Devi Bhagavata Purana (n.d.), which presents Ganga as a divine manifestation linked with Radha and Krishna. The text states that Ganga represents their essence in liquid form. In one narrative, Radha attempted to absorb Ganga completely, causing her to hide at the feet of Krsna out of fear. As a result, the world experienced severe distress due to the absence of water. Krishna then restored Ganga and made her flow again on earth. This account frames the river not only as a sacred purifier but also as a direct expression of divine presence and cosmic balance.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1 Ganga National Museum Collection, New Delhi**

## LITERARY FOUNDATIONS OF YAMUNA

Mythological traditions associate Krishna closely with the Yamuna River, stating that he spent his childhood in the regions along its banks and developed a deep attachment to this landscape [Eck \(2012\)](#). The symbolic relationship between Ganga and Yamuna is linked to their confluence at Prayag, a site regarded as highly sacred. This meeting of rivers is believed to hold strong ritual value, and earlier traditions considered death at this location to be spiritually beneficial [Dwivedi \(2007\)](#).

Yamuna is described in textual and devotional traditions as the daughter of the Sun and is often associated with themes of love and devotion. Pilgrimage practices include the singing of hymns and ritual visits to the Divya Shila and the Maa Yamuna temple at Yamunotri, where the goddess is worshipped in iconic form [Eck \(2012\)](#).

Kalindi, also known as Yamuna, is regarded as one of the sacred rivers of India and is personified as the goddess Kalindi devi. She is described as the daughter of the Sun and is said to originate from the Kalinda mountain, from which she derives the name Kalindi. A well-known narrative in the Bhagavata Purana associates the river with the birth of Krishna. According to the text, when Vasudeva carried the newborn child across the flooded river during heavy rains, Kalindi parted her waters to provide him safe passage. This episode reinforces the river's role as both a divine being and a protective sacred presence [Shastri and Bhatt \(2004\)](#). Another narrative in the 10th Skandha of the Bhagavata Purana describes an episode involving Balarama and the river Kalindi. While staying in Ambadi, Balarama once went to the riverbank with the gopis. Under the influence of liquor, he wished to enter the waters and called the river to approach him. When Kalindi did not respond, he pulled her toward him with his plough. The text states that the river, personified as a goddess, then submitted in fear, after which Balarama sported in her waters with his companions. This episode reflects the anthropomorphic treatment of rivers in Puranic narratives and their integration into divine myth cycles. Another account presents Kalindi as one of the wives of Krishna. During a visit to Indraprastha, Krishna and Arjuna encountered a woman performing penance on the banks of the river. She identified herself as Kalindi and stated that her austerities were undertaken to obtain Krishna as her husband. After Arjuna conveyed this to Krishna, he took her to Dvaraka and married her. The text further records that Kalindi later gave birth to ten sons by Krishna.

An account in the Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata [The Mahabharata \(1893\)](#) records an episode connected with Kalindi during the conflict between Krishna and Jarasandha. The son of Jarasandha's minister Hamsa, mistakenly believing that his father had been killed in battle, ended his life by jumping into the river. When Hamsa later returned alive and learned of his son's death, he too entered Kalindi and died. Other references in epic and Puranic literature emphasize the ritual and sacred importance of the river. The Adi Parva describes Kalindi as one of the principal tributaries of the Ganga and states that drinking its water removes sin. The Vana Parva notes that the Pandavas refreshed themselves by drinking its waters during exile, and it also records several royal and ascetic activities on its banks, including yajnas performed by Bharata, Ambarisa, and Shantanu, as well as penance undertaken by the sage Agastya. A tradition preserved in the Vamana Purana explains the dark colour of the river by linking it to a myth in which Shiva, distressed after the death of Sati, entered the river, causing its waters to turn black. These narratives collectively present Kalindi as both a sacred landscape and an active participant in mythological history.

The [Padma Purana \(n.d.\)](#) illustrates this belief through the narrative of the merchant Hemakundala and his sons. While the father attains spiritual merit through charity and asceticism, his sons fall into moral decline. After their deaths, one is condemned to hell, but the other attains heaven solely because he had unknowingly bathed in the Yamuna for two months while residing near a Brahmana hermitage. The episode emphasizes the theological idea that ritual contact with sacred rivers could remove sin and grant liberation independent of intentional religious practice. This belief also contributed to the personification of Yamuna as a goddess.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2 Yamuna National Museum Collection, New Delhi**

## ICONOGRAPHY OF GANGA AND YAMUNA

The iconography of Ganga and Yamuna follows a clear and stable visual grammar that remains consistent across regions and historical phases. Their representations are shaped mainly by ritual function rather than narrative context. In most sculptural settings they appear as liminal figures placed at architectural thresholds, especially on temple door jambs. This placement establishes their primary symbolic role as agents of purification before entry into sacred space. From the early medieval period onward, both river goddesses are positioned on the lower sections of door frames, usually flanking the entrance symmetrically. Their presence marks the transition between the outer and inner zones of the temple. Passing between them symbolically replicates ritual bathing, so that the devotee enters the sanctum in a purified state.

In sculptural representations, the goddess Ganga is shown standing upon her vahana, the makara [Darian \(1978\)](#). This aquatic composite creature is understood as a symbol connected with water, vegetation, and the sustaining basis of life. At the same time, it also conveys associations with the unknown depths of the sea and the element of danger linked to powerful waters. Ganga is commonly depicted holding a kumbha, or water vessel, which signifies abundance and life-giving capacity. As a divine figure, Ganga is often described as embodying the benevolent energy of the gods. Her destructive force is believed to have been restrained and regulated through her descent into the matted hair of Shiva. In visual and literary traditions, she also appears in a maternal role, marked by qualities of nourishment, protection, and forgiveness rather than anger.

In visual representation, goddess Yamuna is usually shown standing upon a tortoise that serves as her vehicle. She commonly holds a blue lotus, a fly whisk, and a water pot, objects that indicate purity, fertility, and ritual use [Jones and Ryan \(2006\)](#). The Agni Purana [Shastri and Gangadharan \(2013\)](#) describes Yamuna as dark in complexion, riding a tortoise, and holding a water pot, reinforcing her status within the sacred river cult tradition.

The Vishnudharmottara Purana [Kramrisch \(1993\)](#) provides a clear iconographic description of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna as attendant figures placed beside major deities, especially Varuna. In this account, Ganga is described as fair in complexion, compared to the brightness of the moon, and shown standing upon a makara. She typically holds a chamara in one hand and a lotus in the other, indicating both royal service and purity. Yamuna is distinguished by a dark blue or black complexion, likened to the nilotpala flower, and is shown standing upon a tortoise. She also carries a chamara along with a blue lotus, which functions as her identifying attribute.

Sculptural examples follow these textual prescriptions closely. Both goddesses appear as graceful female figures placed symmetrically on architectural thresholds, particularly on temple door jambs. They often stand beneath trees and are accompanied by attendants. In several carvings they hold a purna kumbha, reinforcing their association with fertility, abundance, and ritual purification. Their placement at entrances is not merely decorative but symbolic, marking the transition into sacred space and signifying ritual cleansing before worship. The visual contrast between Ganga's light complexion and makara vehicle and Yamuna's darker tone and tortoise mount remains a consistent iconographic device used to differentiate the two river goddesses in early and medieval temple art [Rao \(1985\)](#).

## SYMBOLIC AND RITUAL FUNCTION

The Narada Purana [Shastri and Bhatt \(2004\)](#) repeatedly presents sacred rivers as agents of purification and merit, placing Ganga at the highest level among them while also including Yamuna within the same sacred geography. The text states that bathing in these rivers removes sin, grants religious merit, and supports progress toward liberation. Ganga is described as especially powerful because her waters purify even grave moral faults, while Yamuna is mentioned alongside her in lists of holy rivers whose waters produce similar ritual effects. The Purana also links their sanctity to pilgrimage practice, explaining that visiting their banks, performing offerings, and conducting rites for ancestors bring lasting spiritual benefit. Their sacredness is therefore framed not only in mythic terms but also through repeated ritual use, where contact with their waters functions as a direct means of purification and religious transformation.

The ritual symbolism of the Ganga is rooted in her understanding as both a supreme purifier and a liminal presence that mediates between different planes of existence. In Hindu ritual thought, flowing water possesses inherent cleansing power, and the Ganga, believed to originate in the celestial realm before descending to earth, embodies this purificatory capacity in its most potent form. Contact with her waters through bathing, sprinkling, or ritual use is understood to remove accumulated pollution and restore ritual purity, while the immersion of ashes in the river ensures the safe passage of the soul to the ancestral realm. At the same time, the Ganga functions as a symbolic threshold, reflected in her association with the concept of tirtha, a crossing place between worlds. This liminal role explains her placement at temple doorways in the Gupta and early medieval periods, where she marked the transition from the human to the divine sphere. As a continuous link between heaven, earth, and the realm of the dead, the Ganga thus represents both purification and passage, embodying the ritual idea that spiritual transformation occurs through processes of cleansing and crossing [Kinsley \(1998\)](#).

Texts belonging to the epic and Puranic corpus contain extensive mahatmayas that praise ganga's purifying power. Devotional literature also reflects this maternal imagery. One well known example is the hymn Ganga Lahari composed by Jagannatha, where

the river is described as a compassionate mother who accepts and shelters even those rejected by others Eck (1996), Eck (2012). In iconographic terms, the lotus and the water pot function as her primary attributes and indicate auspiciousness, fertility, and purification. Her waters are frequently compared to milk and are understood as a sustaining substance essential for life itself Eck (2012).

Ritual traditions across Sanskrit sources consistently emphasize the purificatory and sacred efficacy of the river Ganga. In the Mahabharata Rajagopalachari (1968), Ganga is explicitly described as a sacred river whose remembrance itself removes sin, while ritual immersion in her waters produces spiritual purification, placing her within the broader framework of tirtha practices associated with sacred geography. This ritual function is reinforced in the Ramayana, where Ganga water is used in formal rites and is associated with hermitages and ascetic landscapes, indicating her centrality in ritual life and sacrificial contexts. Puranic sources further elaborate the theological basis of this ritual potency. The Devi Bhagavata Purana (n.d.) affirms her status as a divine being whose sacred nature enables ritual cleansing and spiritual merit. Across these textual traditions, Ganga emerges not merely as a physical river but as a ritual medium through which purification, merit, and sacred contact with the divine are achieved.

All three traditions; textual, ritual and visual signify that the Ganga and Yamuna have not only mythological stories about them but that they also continue to be seen as representations of purification and transformation. Sacred water was first defined by the Vedic conceptions found in the epics and puranas and then later through visual representation. That definition can be found in temple architecture, where the river goddesses are clearly positioned at the entrance of the sanctum in order to clearly create meaning within the threshold. By placing the river goddesses at the door into the sanctum, the door itself now has meaning as a point of transition from the external everyday world into the internal sacred space. Crossing the threshold is a symbolic act of purification similar to that of a ritual bath and prepares the devotee for meeting God. Therefore, the threshold serves as something more than a physical boundary; it is a conceptual tirtha, a place where the concepts of movement and change come together.

The relationship between text-based resources and sculpture forms along with aspects of ritual practices exhibit how these thoughts can be expressed through both an image and space. As figures of transition, Ganga and Yamuna serve to highlight the process of moving into the sacred from one space (the profane) to another. In addition, because they are consistently placed at temple entrances shows the continual design feature of an entry into a temple's inner sanctum to have been a defined/mediated space, as opposed to an act of freely entering.

## CONCLUSION

Ganga and Yamuna, located at the entrance of the temple, exemplify how Indian sacred architecture reflects theological concepts through physical and visual means, thus moving from abstract definitions of both purification and transitioning to ritual behaviour as a lived experience. The sacred rivers Ganga and Yamuna evolved out of the Vedic, epic, and Puranic traditions as sacred rivers with purifying qualities. As such, they are represented as liminal figures in temple iconography and in the temple, act as intermediaries for the worshiper's movement into the sanctum. Located at the entrance of the temple, Ganga and Yamuna define the tirtha, the entrance, as a site of ritual purification; as a result of entering, the ritual act of passing through the tirtha represents the ritual act of entering and being immersed in the water of Ganga and Yamuna. Therefore, myth, ritual, and architectural form converge to make a significant encounter with the divine and not only does the individual pass through the physical site of the temple, but they also undergo transformation. The continuous presence of Ganga and Yamuna in temple forms reflects a central idea in Hindu religious thought: the movement from the profane to the sacred occurs through purification at a point of transition where the sacred is encountered and embodied.

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