

Legend of Ganga-ji

By ReadWorks

India is a country known for many historical, cultural, and natural attractions, but perhaps the most famous is the Ganges (known locally as the Ganga), a river that flows through India and Bangladesh and is over 1,500 miles long. Dr. Ganesh, a sociologist from the University of Mumbai, has studied the river for many years, observing the role it has played in Indian society, the Hindu religion, and even political elections. “People visit the River Ganga for innumerable reasons,” she explains. “Second chances, redemption, closure.” In fact, for Hindus all over India (and the rest of the world), the River Ganga is a place to bring a dead body so that it can be cremated and the ashes scattered. The Ganges is thought to cleanse the soul of all sins.

Hindu legend has it that the River Ganga, in North India, comes not from the Himalayan Mountains, but from the heavens. So sacred is this river that Hindus consider it a goddess: Ganga-ji, they call it, adding “ji” to the river’s name out of respect. Dr. Ganesh has studied the divinity of the River Ganga and believes that its holy origins have inspired people to seek solace on its banks.

Up in the heavens, Hindu mythology says, Ganga-ji was a roaring, gushing river. The gods were concerned that when the river fell to Earth, and flowed through the country called India, it would be too strong and ferocious for anyone to drink from, or swim through, or use to harvest land and grow crops. A river ought to be gentle and nourishing for the land through which it passes, and for the farmers who grow plants on its banks. The gods wondered how to tame such a wild river so that the humans could benefit from its riches.

Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu gods, is said to have volunteered his services. “He is drawn and described everywhere as having thick, matted hair that he wears in a big fat knot on top of his head,” Dr. Ganesh says, pointing to pictures of Shiva in various textbooks and even to descriptions in ancient Hindu texts. The plan was to let the River Ganga fall from the heavens directly onto Lord Shiva’s head, wind her way through his thick, knotted hair, and then descend softly to India. “Lord Shiva’s hair would slow the river down, calm its ferocity.”

And that is just how Ganga-ji is perceived today: as a gentle Hindu goddess and a sanctuary for anyone who visits.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Where does the Ganges River flow?

2. The article describes a Hindu legend. What is this legend about?

3. The Ganges River plays an important role in Hindu funerals. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

4. Why might people visit the Ganges looking for a second chance?

5. What is the main idea of the article?

6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"Hindu legend has it that the River Ganga, in North India, comes not from the Himalayan Mountains, but from the heavens. So sacred is this river that Hindus consider it a goddess: Ganga-ji, they call it, adding "ji" to the river's name out of respect."

What does the word "sacred" most nearly mean as used in this text?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

The gods were afraid that when Ganga-ji fell to Earth, the river would be too strong; _____, they decided to tame the river using Lord Shiva's hair.

8. Hindus don't just see the Ganges as a river. What else do Hindus consider the Ganges to be?

9. Why are the origins of the Ganges River described as "holy" in the text? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

10. How does the Hindu legend of the Ganges River support the idea that the river is sacred? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

