**Ganges** is a great river located in the northern Indian subcontinent. The Ganga (popularly called in Hindi) is one of the most sacred rivers to Hindu people. Starting in the Himalayas and flowing into the Bay of Bengal, it drains one-fourth of the territory of India, and its basin supports hundreds of millions of people.

Key Facts & Information

Physical Features

* The Ganges River travels through two countries, namely India and Bangladesh.
* The river flows through several states including Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.
* The fertile soil from the Ganges Basin is instrumental to the agricultural economies of India and Bangladesh..
* The Ganges River has five headstreams, namely the Bhagirathi, the Alaknanda, the Mandakini, the Dhauliganga, and the Pindar – all rise in the mountainous region of northern Uttarakhand state.
* The Ganges river water supply depends partly on the rains brought by the southwesterly monsoon winds from July to October as well as on the flow from melting Himalayan snows in the hot season from April to June.
* In April 21, 1975, a major barrage was constructed and was called Farakka. It is located close to the point where the main flow of the river enters Bangladesh, and the tributary, Hooghly (also known as Bhagirathi), continues in West Bengal past Kolkata.
* Tehri Dam was constructed on Bhagirathi River as well, a tributary of the Ganges. Construction of the dam in an earthquake prone area made it controversial.
* Another dam was built on the Son River, called Bansagar Dam, a tributary of the Ganges for both irrigation and hydroelectric power generation.

Ganges River and its Cultural Significance

* The Ganges River is worshipped in Hinduism and personified as the goddess Gaṅgā.
* The city of Varanasi is the holiest of cities along the Ganges River and many Hindus travel there to place ashes of their dead in the river.
* In historical times, it was believed that Turks, Mongols, Afghans, Persians, and Arabs came from the west and intermingled with locals. To the east and south, especially in Bengal, people speaking Austroasiatic, Indo-Aryan, and Tibeto-Burman languages have joined the population over the centuries.
* According to the Myth of the Ganges, the goddess Ganga descended from heaven to dwell in the waters of the Ganges River to protect, purify, and bring to heaven those who touch it.
* Devout Hindus visit the river daily to offer flowers and food to Ganga.
* To purify, devout Hindus drink the water and bathe in the river to cleanse and purify their sins.
* It was also believed by Hindus that, upon death, the waters of the Ganges River are needed to reach the World of the Ancestors – Pitriloka. As a result, Hindus bring their dead to the river for cremation along its banks and afterward, their ashes are scattered in the river.
* In other cases, corpses are also thrown into the river.

Plants and Animal Life

* According to historical writings back in the 16th and 17th centuries, forests near the Ganges river had wild elephants, buffalo, bison, rhinoceroses, lions, and tigers, all of which were hunted there.
* Fish found in the river, especially in the delta area, form an important part of the inhabitants’ diet.
* Along the Bengal area, common fish include featherbacks, barbs, walking catfish, gouramis, and milkfish.
* The Ganges river dolphin, or susu (Platanista gangetica), a nearly sightless cetacean with highly developed sonar capabilities, can be found throughout the Ganges-Brahmaputra basin, but it is considered endangered because of encroaching human activity.
* Many varieties of birds are also found around the river, namely mynah birds, parrots, crows, kites, partridges, and fowls.

Current Threats

* In addition to human and industrial waste, some religious activities also increase the pollution of the Ganges.
* Hindus believe that they must take offerings of food and other items to Ganga and as a result, these items are thrown into the river on a regular basis, even more so during religious events. Human remains are also often placed into the river.
* The Ganges is already highly polluted, which threatens not only humans, but also more than 265 fish species, 90 amphibian species, and the endangered Ganges river dolphin.
* The levels of fecal coliform bacteria from human waste in the waters of the river near Varanasi are at least 3,000 times higher than the what is regarded by the World Health Organization as safe (Hammer, 2007).
* The water of the Ganges has been found to contain high levels of chromium sulfate, arsenic, cadmium, mercury, and sulfuric acid (Hammer, 2007).
* The Ganga Action Plan, an environmental initiative, was created to clean up the river, but has been a major failure thus far due to the following reasons: corruption, lack of technical expertise, poor environmental planning, and lack of support from religious authorities.