

The Yamuna River:  
A Confluence of Waters, A Crisis of Need  
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“How Long is the Life of Yamuna-ji?”

A few months ago a friend of mine sent me a copy of a book he had recently published on the famous Ashta Chap poets of the region of Braj.<sup>1</sup> As I was reading through this collection I came upon a verse of poetry that arrested my attention. The verse in question was composed by the sixteenth-century poet, Paramananda Das. As is true for all of the Ashta Chap poets, Paramananda Das was a passionate devotee of Krishna. In the poem in question he creates a scene in which his models of devotion -- the gopis of Braj -- approach Krishna to deliver a blessing, saying: “Live as long as the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers!” (*cira jiyō jolo Ganga Yamuna*) This is a blessing that both expresses the gift of a wish while simultaneously inferring hope for the reception of a fulfilled wish. It is clear from the theologically poetic world of Braj that the gopis desire an eternal relationship with Krishna, participating in his love play lifetime after lifetime. In short, the blessing they articulate reveals the desire for Krishna to live forever so that they can have an endless relationship with him. And the blessing they deliver rests on the assumption that the Yamuna will flow on indefinitely, as Paramananda Das living a few centuries ago must have assumed it would. What happens when this is no longer the case?

This past summer another friend sent me an article from the New Delhi *Hindustan Times* (June 23, 2010) that shocked me. The article describes the experience of a 62 year-old man who began every day with a dip in the Yamuna, following a tradition that extends

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<sup>1</sup> Shyamdas, *Krishna's Inner Circle: The Ashta Chaap Poets* (Gokul, India: Pratham Peeth Publications, 2009)

far back into past centuries. The article reports, however, that for the past seven months he has been unable to do this, “Because for a 100-km stretch between Delhi and Saharanpur district in western Uttar Pradesh, the Yamuna has disappeared. Only miles and miles of sand remain.” The article goes on to state with a photo to verify it that the empty riverbed is now being used as a roadway for trucks. For this man “who now bathes at home, the drying of the river he once worshipped is a personal tragedy. ‘The death of the Yamuna here is like a disaster in my life,’ he said in a choking voice.” I can relate to the heartbreaking emotions of this man; the current condition of the Yamuna also causes me great sadness. Even though I am a foreigner, my time spent on the banks of the Yamuna has caused me to fall in love with this marvelous river, and its worsening condition is a matter of grave concern for me.

I published a book on the Yamuna River in 2006 entitled *River of Love in the Age of Pollution*. Most of the research I conducted for the book was done a decade ago, and I stopped collecting data for this book on March 31, 2003, the day the Supreme Court set as an absolute deadline for the Delhi government to have finished cleaning up the Yamuna. Although this day came and went with any significant improvements in the river, I was more hopeful a decade ago. But the river is in even worse condition today than it was then. For many months of the year the Yamuna literally ceases to flow. Add to this the abundant articles published routinely in the newspapers of Delhi that pronounce the death of the Yamuna River due to its asphyxiation caused by domestic and industrial waste. How does a human heart take in the death of a sacred river? What does this all mean for the religious communities of northern India associated with the Yamuna River, and how might these communities respond to the polluted condition of an ever-dwindling river? Perhaps more to

the point of our gathering: How might these religious communities assist in efforts to restore the Yamuna to a healthy state? Indeed, just what role does religion have to play in all this?

But why religion? What does religion have to do with the restoration of a river? The short answer to this question is “plenty, especially in India.” In fact, I would go on to contend that religion – at least potentially -- has a greater role to play in efforts to restore rivers in India than in any other country of the world. The life of Yamuna, who has long been conceived of as an aquatic form of divinity, has been a matter of great religious concern in India for millennia. In *River of Love in an Age of Pollution* I explore the lengthy history of the rich theological literature connected to the Yamuna and track religious developments that have already taken place in northern India related to an awareness of the diminished and polluted condition of the river. From her origins as a motherly life-giving and life-nurturing goddess at the Himalayan site of Yamunotri, Yamuna flows down onto the plains to join her lover in the land of Braj, where as the highest expression of reality and chief exemplar of divine love she assumes her most special role of initiating souls into the divine love affair and generously awarding them the supreme gift of ultimate love.

This rather exalted theological perspective, however, does not keep most people from recognizing the fact that today the life of the Yamuna is extremely threatened. The polluted nature of the Yamuna not only poses a serious danger to health, but it also involves a religious crisis. It brings into question the very nature of divinity and produces a loud, soul-wrenching demand for a religious response. A pilgrimage guide in Mathura told me: “Yamuna has become a sewer, and that is what we are worshipping. This makes us feel very bad.”

Religion everywhere is multi-faceted, involving a wide range of perspectives. It must, therefore, be acknowledged that the role religion plays in the environmental crisis is a complex one. While interviewing people who worship the Yamuna as a goddess, I found roughly three types of religious responses to the pollution of the river. Some denied that the river is polluted, or that the pollution has any effect on the river goddess or any living beings dependent on her. A pilgrimage priest I spoke with in Mathura exclaimed: “Yamuna-ji is not polluted in any way. She can never be polluted.” Although this position is increasingly hard to defend, it is based on a feminine theology that tends to view the river goddess in a highly transcendent fashion. She is a powerful and good mother who cleans up the messes of her children in an effective and forgiving manner – no matter how naughty they are. In this case, religion can function to inhibit or even resist environmental concerns and restorative action. But the situation is much more complex than this. The mother theology of the Yamuna can also serve as a positive resource for environmental concerns and activism.

The second type of Yamuna devotees I encountered tend to believe that the pollution does not affect the river goddess herself, but acknowledge that it does harm living beings who come in contact with the polluted water. A young priest in Gokul told me: “Mother Yamuna gives us back whatever we give her. If we give her good things, we get back good things. If we give her bad things, then she gives us back bad things. Therefore, for our sake we should stop polluting her.” Those who hold this perspective are beginning to consider limits to Yamuna’s forgiveness. One informed me: “The people polluting the river will be punished. She will punish those people with diseases caused by the pollution itself – like cancer.” This group is certainly more likely to engage in environmental activism than the

first group, but it is the following group that is much more committed to protecting and restoring the river.

This third group contends that the pollution is having a harmful effect on beings who come in contact with the water, as well as on the river goddess herself. Although they share in the theological perspective of Yamuna as a divine mother, these are beginning to view her as a vulnerable and ailing mother in need of care herself. Yamuna devotees of this type report, “Mother is sick,” or even, “Mother is now dying.” Maternal theology, then can work both ways: evoking either a self-nurturing presence or a presence in need of care herself. Claims that “Mother Yamuna is sick” signal an emerging shift in Yamuna goddess theology. Previously, for centuries, she was viewed as a powerful Mother who nurtured and blessed the lives of her devotees. No problem was too great for her to take care of. But here she becomes an ill mother in great need of help. Whereas those who deny the pollution has any effect on Yamuna as a goddess tend to do little toward combating the pollution and restoring the river to health, this emerging view – which also rests on a maternal theology – is beginning to promote restorative environmental activism as devotional service to Mother Yamuna.

An excellent exemplar of this latter view is Gopishwar Nath Chaturvedi of Mathura. When I first met him he declared: “Mother is very sick. When one’s mother is sick, one does not throw her out of the house. We must help her. Therefore, I do Yamuna *seva*.” Although a few decades ago, the word “seva” would simply have referred to standard acts of worship, such as offering flowers, fruits, hymns, and incense to the river; today it is increasingly coming to mean in this context “environmental activism.” Here *seva* means environmental activism understood and expressed as religious devotionalism, as an act of

loving service to Mother Yamuna. As devotional service to Yamuna Maiya, educational programs have been launched, clean-up days have been scheduled, boatmen have been organized and enlisted in restorative work, and PILs have been filed in the courts, resulting in sewage treatment plants being built, polluting industry shut down, and minimum flows established for river health. Such work -- which already exists and is enacted as loving service to Yamuna Devi herself -- demonstrates the great potential for a more robust and effective alliance between environmental scientists and policy makers and members of religious communities. This work represents an initial trickle that may just turn into a mighty river of restorative action.

But what is the next step? Yamuna is slipping rapidly into a frighteningly dreadful and possibly terminal condition. Clearly much more needs to be done! Any solution to this problem will necessarily have to involve informed environmental scientists, caring and dedicated politicians, and civil engineers, but it will also have to involve effective religious leaders, who are well-positioned to influence large numbers of people in all walks of society. The rich theological traditions associated with the Yamuna provide a wonderfully powerful resource to motivate people to become involved in the political will and environmental action required to restore the river to health. For this reason we must call upon religious leaders in India – in partnership with environmental scientists -- to step into a more active role in guiding India toward restoring the health of its sacred rivers.

In conclusion I want to return to my opening question: How Long is the Life of Yamuna-ji? I am one who certainly does not want to give up on hope, but I am much more sober and cautious today than I was a decade ago in considering this question. No one knows what will become of the Yamuna; only time will tell. Yet even after considering all

the grim statistics of river pollution, I urge us all to embrace the path of hope and compassion, and to support and engage in restorative efforts as acts of sheer love. *Shri Yamuna Maiya ki Jaya! Ciram jiva! Long may She live!*