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Period ____

The Ganges River is one of the largest and by far most important rivers in India. It plays a major roll in India's economy and is also plays a major roll in the Hindu-Indian people's lives.

The mountain course of the Ganges is much shorter than that of other major rivers of the Indian subcontinent. It starts its icy trek from melting snow 14,000 feet high in the Himalayas. From their it goes southeast through the Himalayan foothills, across the plains of northern Indian, and down to the Indo-Bangladesh delta, where there it empties into the Indian Ocean. It swells by melting snow in the spring and by rains in the summer. It alternates from a roaring river to pools separated by shoals and sandbanks. It used for irrigation for crops, drinking water for people, and a burial ground for the dead.

To the Hindu-Indian people, the Ganges is more than just a river; it is a holy river. In Hindu religion and in mythology, the Ganges is a goddess, Ganga, daughter of the mountain god Himalaya. Ganga was the consort of all the gods until a human king, Bhagiratha, was permitted to bring her to Earth as the river Ganga. Bhagiratha's purpose was fulfilled when her sacred waters released the souls of the 60,000 sons of the king Sagara from their ashes. The 60,000 had been burned in wrath by the god Vishnu.

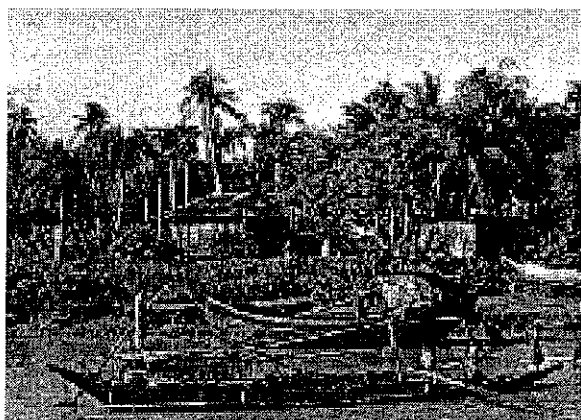
Every day people bathe in the sacred water believing that it will wash away their sins. It is believed that even a few drops on their tongue will clean their bodies. It is also believed that if you were cremated on the banks of the Ganges that it would guarantee that the soul would escape from the material world's cycle of suffering.

Unfortunately the river is not as clean and as purified as the Hindu people believe it to be. 40 percent of India's population live along the Ganges River, most without access to sewer and sanitation facilities. Dozens of cities, towns, and villages spew millions of gallons of industrial and human waste into the Ganges waters every day. This also includes half-cremated human corpses and whole animal corpses. One good reason for the half cremated human corpses is because of the lack of wood and fuel. But the impacts of the highly toxic waste are far more hideous than the sewage. For example, in Kanpur, hides of goats, cows and horses are brought in for tanning. The skins go through an extensive chemical process. The large amount of water used in this process; now mixed in with chemicals are dumped back into the river.

The profanation of the river Ganges does not only affect the humans of the region. The native plants and animals have suffered as well. Freshwater animals such as the smooth Indian otter, the gharial crocodile, the Asian small-clawed otter and various species of turtle are all in decline. The Center for Science and the Environment in New Delhi conducted a study where they put some fish in the water by a shoe factory in Barauni, the city responsible for all the oil sludge. The fish only survived for 48 hours.

There have been many clean up acts, such as the GAP act (Ganges Action Plan) and the Oswald Plan. The GAP act began in 1985. It was meant to clean up India's most important river but after twelve years of work and \$300 million in funding, the GAP has achieved few of its objectives. A recent study has proved that the amount of sewage flowing in the Ganges has doubled since 1985, while a government audit found evidence of widespread corruption in siphoning off earmarked for the project.

The Oswald plan was to release thousands of turtles, which were supposed to eat the rotting corpses floating in the water. Many believed that the plan would fail, and that the turtles would be caught by the locally fishermen and be eaten. Others thought that they would leave the area. But in November 1991 a survey showed that 60 percent of the turtles had remained in Varanasi area and were seen nibbling on human flesh. Even though the river is in serious need of help it is still improving. The water at Varanasi has improved substantially, but the fact remains that it will take more coordinated and sustained effort before the wasters of the Ganges becomes as clean as it needs to be.



The Ganges sounds like it is an awfully polluted river and is nothing but a waste dump, but all this is not true. The river Ganges is a help to India's economy. It provides irrigation for the crops and after the flooding water recede back to its normal size during the raining season, silt is left behind making the land around the Ganges very fertile.

Hopefully in the future the river Ganges will be as clean as the Hindu pilgrims believe it to be. It maybe a while but with more coordinated and sustained effort the waters of the Ganges will be clean.

1. Why is the Ganges respected so deeply?

2. How have Indians interacted with their environment in a negative way?
How have they sought to solve their problems?

3. What was the Oswald Plan? Was it successful?