



Ganga Sagar: The Once in a Lifetime Pilgrimage

Millions believe in the power of redemption of a dip at the confluence of holy Ganga.

Makar Sankranti in the month of January is associated with the famous Gangesagar *mela* (fair) in the Sagar Islands, the place where the holy Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal. The Sagar Islands, also called Sagardvip, are situated in the southernmost tip of the delta, which the river Ganga forms in the Sundarbans. Just about 100 kms south of Kolkatta, this is a picturesque place.

One is simply overwhelmed at the sight of a sea of humanity that converges at this site during

the Makara Sankranti, the day marking the transition of the Sun into **Makar Rasi** (Capricorn) on its celestial path, considered especially auspicious for a holy dip in the *sangam*.

There are countless groups of devotees chanting “*saare teerath baarbaar, ganga sagar ek bar*” meaning, “You can go to all the holy places number of times, but a pilgrimage to Ganga Sagar equals them all and is a once in a lifetime experience.” There is a strong belief that a dip in the confluence helps redemption for all sins in this birth.

Legend

The legend associated with the festival is mentioned in several ancient texts, including the Valmiki Ramayana. King Sagar of the Ikshavaku dynasty had no son. After performing many *yajnas*, his first wife gave birth to a son who was named Ajyamash, while the second queen Sumati bore sixty thousand sons.

True to his name prince Ajyamash was a cruel despot. When king Sagar performed the famous *Asvamedha Yajna*, he deputed his sixty thousand sons for the safety of the sacred horse that is central to the *yajna*. The celestial chief Indra became apprehensive of his position if the *yajna* was successfully concluded. Hence, at a time when the sons were not alert, he took away the horse and hid it near the hermitage of sage Kapila, at the site of Gangasagar. The sage was at that time in deep meditation, and not aware of Indra's mischief.

The sons of king Sagar began search of the horse in the entire earth and the nether world, and they reached the site of the sage's *asram* where they found the horse tied and the muni in meditation. Without checking how the

sacrificial horse found its place at the hermitage, they began abusing the sage, who became angry at their unruly behaviour, and caused them to burn by the might of a ray from his eyes.

When king Sagar got no news of his sons, he sent Anshuman, son of Ajyamash, in their search. Anshuman in the course of his search reached the sage's *asram* and saw the mortal remains of his cousins. When he came to know the truth, sage Kapila became repentant, and at the request of Anshuman, he provided a solution for the salvation (*moksha*) of the dead cousins.

He suggested that Anshuman bring the sacred river Ganga on earth, whose pure water only could provide salvation to the departed souls. Thus began the herculean effort of bringing Ganga onto earth through intense *tapas*, starting from king Sagar, followed by Anshuman and then his son Dilip, and finally by king Bhagiratha.

Finally, pleased with the single-pointed meditation of Bhagiratha, the creator Brahma, who held Ganga in his *kamandal*, agreed to let her flow on earth, but asked Bhagiratha to please Siva who

alone could hold the might of the river's turbulent flow. The king then meditated upon Siva who was pleased with the devotion and accepted to contain Ganga in his matted locks. Thus Ganga finally came down to earth, and followed king Bhagiratha to the present Gangasagar for the salvation of sixty thousand sons of king Sagar.

It is this legend that attracts millions of devotees to this little island with the hope of attaining salvation themselves and redeeming the souls of their ancestors.

Ganga Sagar Mela

The Ganga Sagar *mela* is one of the largest annual assemblage of devotees in India, with over a million pilgrims coming from far-flung corners of India and beyond, speaking different languages and belonging to diverse castes and creeds, for a sacred dip at this holy confluence.

It is overwhelming to see the sea of pilgrims, with the chant “*Kapil Muni Ki Jai*,” (Hail the sage Kapila) renting the air, above the din of the grinding motors of the vessels ferrying the pilgrims across. The never ending stream of pilgrims keeps pouring in throughout the day and night before the

auspicious day, and the pilgrims occupy any available space on the sandy beach.

People wake to the sound of the bells, blowing conch shells and chanting prayers. An array of shops, stacked with heaps of vermilion, *rudraksha*, colourful beads and conch shells line the pathways. People crowd around the *naga sadhus* without whom the *mela* is incomplete.

Sage Kapila's Temple

The temple of sage Kapila remains the chief attraction of all the visitors. The temple, as we see it today, is by no means the spot where the sage had meditated. It had gone under the sea a millennium ago, followed by many others built in its place, which had also been swallowed by the advancing sea.

It is fascinating how sheer devotion and belief in the hoary traditions of our land rule high even today. No wonder river Ganga is worshipped as a mother as well as a Goddess 🙏

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