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The Ancient Tradition of Kumbha and Importance of Sangam in Life

Prof. Neeta Yadav
Head, Department of Ancient History Archaeology and Culture, Dean of Student Welfare & Dean Faculty of Arts, Siddharth University Kapilvastu

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kumbha mela is a major pilgrimage and Hindu festival that occurs every 12 years at four major locations of India- Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain. This is one of the largest religious gathering which is continued since the Vedic age. This is basically a ritual bathing in the holy waters of Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narmada and Shipra. It is believed to cleanse participants sins and grant them spiritual merit.

There are many stories regarding the origin of Kumbha festival. In the real sense Ganga is not only a river but a divine process through which a person attain salvation. Every religious ceremony is performed with the waters of Ganga, which is still considered as a nectar of life. The famous story of Samudra Manthan or Churning of Ocean is very relevant, in which God and demons fought for the nectar of immorality. During this battle, four drops of the nectar spilled over the four locations where the Kumbha Mela is held, making these places particularly sacred. It is said that Garuda dropped four drops while transporting the pot of nectar at four places. That is why it is assumed by the name Kumbha which means pot and the places associated to it became sacred places.

The festival is marked by a ritual dip in the waters, but it is also a celebration of community commerce with numerous fairs, education, religious discourses by saints, mass gatherings of monks, and entertainment. Ganga is not only a holy river. It is the sweat of penance of millions of Mahatmas which is continuously flowing in the form of Ganga. Because it is a blessed river it is a holy river which involves the worship of millions of Mahatmas and that is wahy no insect ever germinate in its holy water.

As a human life is based on Purusharthas- Dharma, Artha, Kaama, and Moksha. The ultimate aim of human is attainment of salvation. This salvation could be attained by different means.

गंगा यमुने मध्ये यस्तु ग्रामं प्रतीच्छति।
सुवर्ण मैथ मुक्ताम वा तथवान्यात प्रतिग्रहन।। 41।।

स्वकार्ये पितृकार्य वा देवताभ्यारचनेपि वा।
निष्फलं तस्य तात तीर्थम यावत तत्फलमश्नुते।। ४2।।

अतस्तीर्थे न ग्रहियात पुण्येश्वयातनेषु च।
निमितेषु च सर्वेषु अप्रमत्तो द्विजो भवेत्।। 43।।

The person who goes to the middle of Yamuna while doing self-work, literary work or worshiping God. Golden pearl or any other material is given in the patigraha (daan), the fruit of the puja of the shrine is not obtained till the time he continues to enjoy the material given in the daan.[1]

Ganga saves humans on earth, saves snakes in the lower world and saves gods in heaven, that is why this tripathga is sung.

The Besnagar depicts Ganga in a very graceful pose on back of Makara, a mythical Cocodile with legs crossed.[2]

Her right elbow rest on the shoulder of an attendant, and a male figure on the left corner is striking a dot to the snout of the animal.[3]

Altekar has described the figure of Ganga and Yamuna on the Gold Coins of Samudragupta.[4]

The word Sangam comes from the word gathering or assembly referring to gathering of Tamil poets or scholars who composed and shared their works. Tamil literature was composed between approximately 300 BCE and 300 CE. The literature consists of a vast collection of poems, and is divided into two main categories: Aham (inner, dealing with love, human emotions, and personal relations) and Puram (Outer, dealing with heroism, war and social life).

The importance of this confluence is also depicted on the temple doors. This practice of depicting river goddesses begins with the Gupta period. Two best examples of these river sculptures are found in Dasavtara temple Deogarh, Lalitpur which belonged to

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Gupta period and Jarai Math near Jhansi. The depiction of Ganga and Yamuna on temple doors is a common motif in Indian Art, especially in temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu or other deities linked to rivers and water. These representations often symbolise purity, life giving properties and divine grace. Ganga is often shown as a goddess with flowing wavy hair, which symbolises the river's movement. She is sometimes depicted holding a water pot or a vessel from which the river flows. Her vahana is makara(a crocodile like being) or depicted as flowing from lord Shiv's hair, which is symbol of Ganga descend to earth.

Her position is on the left side of the temple door. Ganga is often represented with a serene, flowing appearance, emphasising her purity and divine origins. Yamuna is also shown with flowing hair, often represented the smooth and tranquil flow of the river. She may be depicted as holding a lotus or a vase, signifying beauty and fertility. She is associated with her vahana tortoise (Kachhapa). Typically depicted on the right side of the temple door. She signifies the symbol of sweetness and divine grace. The Tortoise is often considered a symbol of longevity and wisdom as it lives a long life and moves at slow and deliberate pace. The makara on the other hand is a creature that is usually depicted a having a body of fish and the head of a crocodile or elephant. It is often considered a guardian of waters and is associated with cosmic ocean. It symbolises the transformative and powerful qualities of water. The makara is often seen as a guardian of temples and rivers. Generally the sculpture of Ganga and Yamuna are used to be exhibited in standing posture upon their respective vahanas (viz makara and kurma). Usually they hold a pot in their right hand and attended by two lady attendants, shown in standing postures on either side. A sculpture of Ganga carved on a sandstone was found from Tumain and preserved in Gujari Mahal museum Gwalior Fort(5th century CE). Similar sculpture of Ganga has been noticed from the Shiva temple at Bhumara(Panna) which belonged to Gupta period. As Altekar has pointed out that two flanking scenes also are of inusual significance, representing the birth of twin river Ganga and Yamuna, their confluence on Prayag and the final merging of the combined waters into Ocean. The whole scene is permeated with a lyrical feeling and probably conveys an ideal representation of the middle country or the Madhya desh, which was the heart of the wide culture empire built in this age.

It is only in Gupta art, as in the literature of this period, that the twin rivers make their appearance for the first time in the scheme of temple architecture. Kalidas[5] making a pointed reference to them as attendants of the deity, is referring to a principal feature of contemporary art. The Dasavtara temple at Devgarh is having a plain interior but its doorway is exquisitely carved and decorated, the jambs showing the figure of Ganga and Yamuna carved on them.[6]

The Rigveda parishista (1200-100 BCE) contains one of the earliest reference to Prayag and its related pilgrimages which shows that the sanctity of the Prayag was recognised even in the formative stages of the Vedic tradition.

Matsya Purana- mentioned Prayag as the site where Brahma, the creator of Universe, offered the sacrifice after the great deluge, thus sanctifying this location.

प्रयागे तु महादेव यज्ञं यज्ञप्रतिर्यो
तत्रापश्यत स्वयं ब्रह्मा तीर्थराजाम जगतगुरु।।



12the century Ganga



Ganga Avataran – Shiva and Parvati- Elephanta caves



River Ganga on Makara



River Yamuna on Tortoise



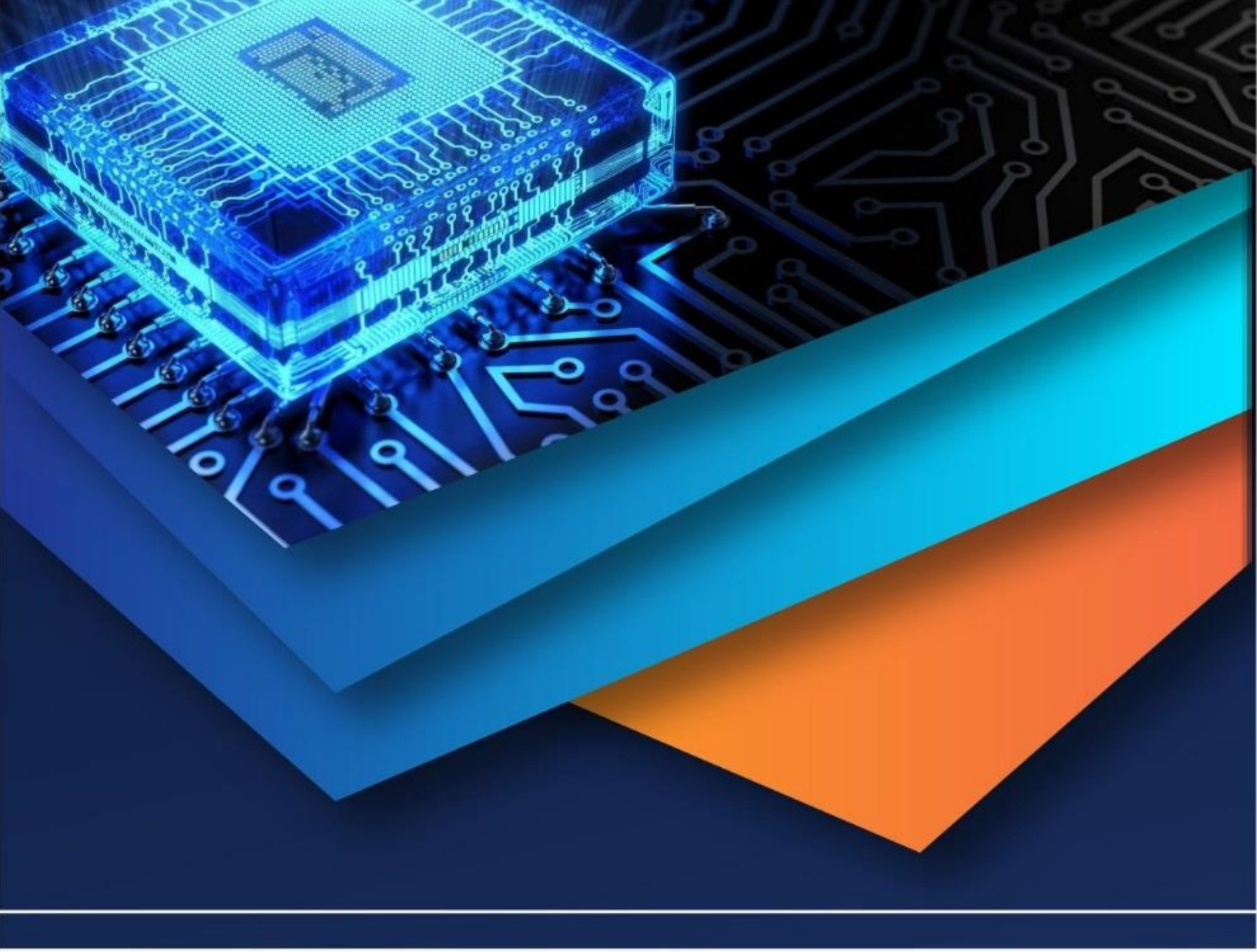


Ganga and Yamuna on Dasavtara temple at Devgarh, Lalitpur Jhansi

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