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Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Gaṅgā's Purity and Pollution

Introduction: Assessments and Worldviews

Scientists, government workers, and religious leaders in India hold differing conceptions of the purity and pollution of the natural world. Their conflicting assessments reflect a larger debate between worldviews and the divergent ways worldviews define the sacred and the profane. Especially in discussions about the river Gaṅgā (or Ganges), the sacred river that flows across northern India, we find marked disagreement between arguments defending the Gaṅgā's sacred purity and warnings about river pollution. These arguments point to a conflict of worldviews holding different assumptions about human existence. The various assessments of the river draw logical and moral or ethical legitimacy from theology, scientific discourse, and the secular policies of the state and, therefore, are windows into the ways Indian citizens use wider networks of knowledge. In this paper, I examine the most recent assessments of the condition of this river and demonstrate how specific groups of Indian citizens and state officials use these assessments to articulate their worldview differences in public debates.

Theological discourses, more than scientific and secular ones, establish various connections between moral and ecological values through sacred texts, drama, and iconography (see, for example,

Hargrove 1986, Spring and Spring 1974, Suzuki and Knudtson 1992). Several contemporary social scientists have attempted to find common threads in these diverse renderings of the universe, seeking the means to create a universally plausible environmental ethic.¹ But this goal assumes far too much. The ways that people define nature cannot be idealized solely in terms of ethical and rational notions of sustainable, equitable resource use. Portrayals of Banaras in the Hindu sacred texts (*śāstras*), for example, depict this famous pilgrimage place on the bank of the sacred river Gaṅgā as a conch shell, or the trident of Lord Śiva. These religious images have no parallel in materialist interpretations of space and create symbolic dissonance with spatial meanings constructed by scientific and official governmental worldviews. Hindu representations such as these underscore, as Singh (1993b, 113) has noted, a vision that integrates matter, mind, and spirit. Symbolic representations of space in Hindu sacred texts and the ancient concepts associated with them call for an approach to ecological understanding that moves beyond secular notions of "environment." To understand this we need to examine, in a particular locale such as Banaras, the cognitive categories and symbolic processes giving religious meaning to "natural resources" such as the Gaṅgā. This will allow us to analyze how residents respond to or resist the environmental ideologies more familiar to secular thinking.

Banaras is an important pilgrimage place and urban center bordering the sacred river. Residents and pilgrims regard Banaras as the center of Śiva's universe, as well as the beginning and end point of human civilization. Eck (1982, 23) notes that local residents claim that Kāśī, the ancient name for Banaras, contains the whole world and everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious. The Mahāśmāśāna, the great cremation ground of Banaras, survives the cyclic dissolution of the cosmos brought about by Śiva's ascetic power (see Parry 1980, 89; 1981, 339). On a more secular note, Banaras is the site of the largest combined pilgrim/tourist trade in India today. It is therefore an important locale for witnessing transformations taking place in the politics of pilgrimage.

Not sharing the ideology of the typical Hindu world-renouncer (*saṃnyāsin*), pilgrims who visit Banaras and residents who live in neighborhoods along the riverbank do not denigrate or seek detachment from the physical or natural world. Rather, pilgrims and

residents alike believe that rivers and mountains are sacred and powerful. This is why many sacred places in India are located aside rivers or on top of mountains (see Feldhaus 1995). The river Gaṅgā, in the Hindu religious vision, takes the form of a goddess who possesses the power to purify all sorts of human and worldly impurities. Hindu residents and pilgrims invoke the purifying power of "Mā Gaṅgā" (Mother Gaṅgā) through ritual ablution, meditation, and worship (*snān*, *dhyān*, and *pūjā*). Even as officials in state and central government offices espouse scientific theories of river pollution to undermine what they dub a "traditional" religious relationship with the river, devout Hindus of Banaras reject these alienating claims. This is because, as we shall see, many residents of this pilgrimage place see science and the state as powers which bring on ecological degeneracy in the name of preventing it.

In what follows, I explore assessments of the state of the river Gaṅgā and the larger worldview issues that contextualize them by presenting the perspectives of three groups of people. These are: (1) *paṇḍās* or pilgrim priests working on southern Daśāśvamedha in Banaras, (2) members of the Clean Ganga Campaign or CGC (Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan), who also live in Banaras, and (3) officials working in projects under the Ganga Project Directorate or GPD. Some government officials in the third group are Banaras residents while others reside in Delhi and other major Indian cities. Despite their varied orientations toward the sacred and secular, members of these groups have one thing in common: they consider the present period a degenerate one. The ways that each group locates spheres of degeneracy are connected to their assessments of the river's condition.

Scientific assessments made by government officials and members of the Clean Ganga Campaign locate degeneracy in ecological systems. From their point of view, human processes of population growth, urbanization, and industrial and technological development have brought on the decline in ecological balance. In contrast, residents of southern Daśāśvamedha, a neighborhood of the city which flanks the river, envision themselves at the end of a cosmic cycle. In this context, they interpret immoral behavior and abuses of the Gaṅgā as signs of diminished virtue and moral degeneracy. Scientific theories use terms such as Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) and Fecal Coliform Count (FCC) to indicate a decline in the quality of

river water. Residents of Daśāśvamedha explain that marketplace competition, cheating, and corruption are signs of the moral degeneracy of the current age. These factors, they believe, create an atmosphere in which people disrespect Gaṅgā. The former group measures how polluted the Gaṅgā has become, while the latter ponders how Gaṅgā herself might help reset the degenerate moral and cosmic order.

The Gaṅgā at Daśāśvamedha

The pilgrim priests residing and working on the southern half of Daśāśvamedha express a theory of degeneracy based on their understanding of the immediate surroundings. They link degeneracy to the religious significance of their neighborhood and the Gaṅgā at that spot. Daśāśvamedha is a sacred place (*tīrth*) as well as a residential neighborhood. Its border with the river is fortified by a series of stone steps called *ghāṭs* which give pilgrims access to the Gaṅgā. The *ghāṭ* at Daśāśvamedha is a meritorious site for ritual ablution and is ranked in sacred importance with the other important *ghāṭs* of Asi, Varanā, Maṇikarpikā, Kedār, and Pañcagaṅgā.² The *ghāṭ* marks the place where Lord Brahmā performed a ten horse sacrifice (*daśa-aśva-medha*) to gain power over the reigning King Divodāsa. Pilgrims visit the temples of Śulataṅkeśvara, Brahmeśvara, Vārāheśvara, Abhaya Vināyaka, Gaṅgā Devī, and Bandī Devī on this *ghāṭ* (Singh 1993a, 82).

The physical features of the *ghāṭ* tell another story. In its present form, the *ghāṭ* is divided into southern and northern sections (the Gaṅgā flows northward at Banaras). The sections were once divided by the Godāvarī, a tributary that drained into the Gaṅgā. In 1740, the southern section of the *ghāṭ* was fortified by Bajirao Pesava I. Ahilyabhai Holkar of Indore then extended the *ghāṭ* in 1775 (Singh 1993a, 82). At the turn of the twentieth century, Havell (1905, 106) wrote that Daśāśvamedha was the *ghāṭ* toward which the principal roads of the city converged. It was also an important point for boats bringing stone from the Chunar quarries upstream. In 1904, Maharani Puthia of the former state of Digpatia in North Bengal constructed another *ghāṭ*. She laid the foundation on the island created where the Godāvarī separated into a fork before

reaching the Gaṅgā. This became Prayāg Ghāt. Urban construction eventually covered over the Godāvarī and residents changed the name of the area to Godaulia (Singh 1993a, 39, 84). The area lying between Prayāg Ghāt and Rājendra Prasād Ghāt (formerly Ghodā Ghāt) is the northern part of ancient Daśāśvamedha. On the southern section, we find the Śitalā Temple, which still contains the ancient *linga* of Daśāśvamedheśvara Mahādev, Śiva as Lord of Daśāśvamedha (see also Vidyarthi et al., 29). Behind this temple, the shrine of Prayāgeśvara lies buried beneath the house of a powerful pilgrim priest (*paṇḍā*). The *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* (*KKh*), a sacred text describing Banaras from the eighth to thirteenth century, refers to this *linga* and shrine (see Havell 1905, 110; *KKh* 44.16–47, *KKh* 61.36–38; Singh 1993a, 48, 82–85). On a more profane note, the *ghāt* at Daśāśvamedha is also known for its “mafia-like” businesses fed by the reverence of pilgrims (see also Parry 1994, van der Veer 1988).

Most residents of Banaras, whether they work in government service or private business, emphasize the sacred purity of the Gaṅgā. They do this by calling upon her divine power in worship rituals (*pūjā*). They understand Gaṅgā's deep symbolic history and cite eulogies to her developed in the sacred texts. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, the *purāṇas*, and the *māhātmyas*—and in temple sculpture and art—she is worshiped as a purifier, mother, sustainer, and daughter or co-wife of Śiva.³ A popular narrative, drawn from a chapter of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, describes how she descended from heaven onto the locks of Lord Śiva (see Vatsyayan 1992). Her motherly character is praised in the *Mahābhārata*, and the *purāṇas* extoll her powers to purify. Several places of healing and sacred power for Hindus are located along her 2,525 kilometer traverse across northern India (Vidyarthi et al. 1979). In these sacred complexes, pilgrims and residents perform ablutions and undertake the ritual of *ārati* to revere her. Devotees perform *ārati* by waving an oil lamp in front of Gaṅgā while standing on the riverbank. The sounds of bells, gongs, drums, and conch shells play a prominent role in the ritual. The festivals of Gaṅgā Daśaharā and Gaṅgā Saptamī celebrate her purifying power. But while they can please Gaṅgā, these rituals and festivals cannot purify her. Purity is part of a more holistic process of cosmic order and balance, within which humans should strive to live harmoniously (see also Fuller 1979, 460; 1992, 76). Still, when Gaṅgā is pleased she blesses the faithful

and purifies their minds and souls. She may also grant a devotee's wishes if they are requested through worship with pure faith.

When asked how the sacred texts (*śāstras*) guide their relationships with Gaṅgā, many residents of Daśāśvamedha point to rituals of *snān* and *pūjā* and the importance of *gaṅgā jal* (sacred Gaṅgā water) in Hindu life. When pilgrims perform *snān* or ritual ablution, Gaṅgā absolves religious impurities and, with her flow, carries away physical uncleanness. This creates, at one level, an interlocking relationship between ritual, spiritual purity, and physical cleanness. As one merchant on Daśāśvamedha put it, "People who bathe and do meditation and ritual worship of gods and goddesses understand that this is our history (*itihāsa*) and knowledge (*jñāna*)."³ Dumont and Pocock (1959, 30) point out that one must be spiritually pure to approach gods and goddesses. Even though humans may not reach the purity of the divine, there is some expectation that purity is a condition for contact with deities to be beneficial.

There are two views in current popular discourse at Daśāśvamedha about whether Gaṅgā can purify an impure person. In one view, an impure person cannot become pure simply by bathing in a sacred place. Rather, one must engage in the more holistic process of committing one's soul to Śiva. The other, more lenient view holds that one who merely recites the name of Gaṅgā gains mastery over "sin" (*pāpa*). One who takes auspicious sight (*darśana*) of her achieves well-being (*kalyāṇa*), and one who performs *snān* purifies seventy generations.⁴ The *Gaṅgā Stuti*, a hymn to Gaṅgā sung in Hindi by a *paṇḍā* of Daśāśvamedha, carries this theme. One *paṇḍā* sings this eulogy in Hindi during Ganga *ārati*:

From the place where the lotus foot of the Lord,
where Bhagīrath did great *tapasyā* (ritual austerities),
Gaṅgā flowed out from Brahmā's jug into the locks of
Śiv-Śaṅkar.

She then descended to earth on a mountain of countless
sins.

Tulsī Dās says, Open your two eyes and see how naturally
she flows as a stream of nectar.

Those who take her name in memory will get *mukti*
(liberation);

Those who do *praṇāma* (salutation) will arrive at God's
place.

Those who come to the banks of Gaṅgā will find heaven;
 Those who see the waves of emotion will get *mokṣa*
 (liberation).

O Taraṅginī [Gaṅgā], this is the nature God has given
 to you.

O Bhāgīrathī [Gaṅgā], though I am full of sin and
 dirtiness,

I believe you will give me *mukti* and a place at your feet.⁵

Idioms of Degeneracy: *Gandagi* and Dirty Business

Pilgrims who visit Daśāśvamedha relate moral values to the Gaṅgā through rituals of ablution and worship. Therefore, ritual specialists become important players in the relationships pilgrims forge with the Gaṅgā. This makes the perspective of pilgrim priests especially significant and central to the exchanges conducted on an everyday basis with the river. Much of the scholarly literature on Hinduism has treated pilgrim priests as if they were members of a common caste (*jāti*) association. But *paṇḍās* explain that the *paṇḍā* profession (*paṇḍāgīrī*) is not a *jāt* (caste group) but a *peśā* (occupation).⁶ This *peśā* is concerned with serving specific groups of pilgrims. *Paṇḍās* in this occupation establish hereditary title to identified groups of pilgrims and then defend their hereditary rights to serve those pilgrims against shifting claims made by individuals with "man and money power."

A pilgrim priest maintains his position and gains power vis-à-vis other priests by controlling access to clients. Rights to act as head priest for specified groups of pilgrims may pass through male and female lines. Affinal bequests, however, are less prestigious, so *paṇḍās* often disguise them as gifts from the patrilineage. As local accounts go, many priests are unable to keep these rights within the family without struggle. As one informant explained it, inserting an English phrase into his Hindi dialogue, members of the community with more "man and money power" wrestle away these titles from those who inherited them. Curiously enough, this informant chose to use the English phrase "man and money power" whenever referring to this form of influence.

Paṇḍās say that a good moral order exists when hereditary titles are honored. This allows the occupation to retain the family

pride and honor that has surrounded it for generations. A corrupt (*gandā*) moral order, on the other hand, emerges when this family honor is threatened by members representing other family lines or outsiders with "man and money power." Outsiders use "man and money power" to usurp hereditary rights. By "man and money power," *paṇḍās* mean power exercised by physical coercion and violence. Individuals using this power manipulate others by controlling their labor and selling them protection. A powerful individual of this nature has many men to do his work for him (to divert pilgrims to the location he controls and to perform the rituals they request) and the coercive might to make sure that at the end of the day these men turn over part of their earnings to him. When this kind of power succeeds in Banaras, the *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha say, cheating and corruption rear their ugly heads and create a dirty social condition.

These Banaras residents, like many others, express degeneracy through the notion of *gandagī*. *Gandagī* is the Hindi term for filth and dirtiness. It refers to material waste and some forms of human excretion. In the Hindu worldview expressed by Banaras residents, *gandagī* is also a metaphor for corrupt religious, social, and political relations and, generally, for the undesirable conditions of existence. To focus the discussion on how *gandagī* impacts the river Gaṅgā, we must understand the concept in relation to the more complicated term *purity* and its opposite *impurity*, and the related but not synonymous term *pollution*.

Mary Douglas (1966) explained the concept of pollution as referring to that which is not included in the conceptual category of purity and is therefore powerful by virtue of its marginality. Dumont, in *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), saw impurity as the conceptual opposite of purity, and argued that the two were inextricably bound up with social status (see also Dumont and Pocock 1959). After that, studies of Hindu caste and ritual began to use the English terms impurity and pollution interchangeably to code status and variables such as sin and evil, other aspects of morality, and the relations between gods and human beings (Das 1977; Fuller 1977, 473; O'Flaherty 1976). Later studies highlighting the centrality of the concepts of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in Hindu ritual and caste relations expanded the understanding of the Hindu worldview.⁷ But the term pollution remained confused in these

accounts, clouding the Hindu distinction between ritual impurity and material dirtiness. Use of the word *pollution* becomes even more problematic when attempting to differentiate the meanings of environmental pollution and ritual impurity when they occur in the same context.

The notion of environmental pollution is an important term in the modern scientific worldview, crucial to a vision that seeks to expand human control of natural processes and forces. Residents of Daśāśvamedha, however, give little credence to the notion espoused in scientific and official circles. To understand how they think about physical dirtiness, it would be helpful to abandon use of the term *pollution* in its religious sense of ritual pollution. Instead I will use the term *ritual impurity* when speaking of the conceptual opposite of ritual purity. This way we will avoid any confusion between ritual impurity and the very different notion of environmental pollution.

In this chapter, the term *pollution* will denote the form of environmental degeneracy that is the subject of scientific and official government worldviews. The terms *purity* and *impurity*, on the other hand, will stand for the moral, bodily, and cosmic states proper to the religious concerns of Banaras residents. This attempt at conceptual clarification is not, however, intended to obscure the fact that Hindus recognize material waste. The notion of waste or dirtiness is an important part of the Hindu view as well. But the local understanding of material waste, encompassed by the term *gandagī*, must be understood in its own terms, as something somewhat different from the scientific/official notion of environmental pollution.

This allows us to move into a discussion of the distinction between physical cleanness and religious purity (and their antonyms) as they are elaborated in the Hindi language. As the discussion will show, at times the distinction appears blurred. But it becomes strikingly clear when *pañḍās* explain the impact of waste on the Gaṅgā. The Clean Ganga Campaign also relies upon this distinction to articulate its focus. Understanding how residents articulate these concepts is a difficult task because the sets of terms I will describe are sometimes used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the distinction remains an important element of the Hindu worldview and Hindu assessments of the Gaṅgā.

The social scientific literature has had little to say about this distinction. The few exceptions are found in references made by Srinivas in 1952 and, more recently, by Alter in his account of the wrestling ground. Srinivas (1952, 105) argued that ritual purity cannot be simply associated with cleanliness. This is because one may find a ritually pure robe that is very dirty or snow-white clothes that are ritually impure. In his discussion of the Minākṣī Temple in Madurai, Fuller (1979, 473) hinted that these categories function independently in this way. He pointed out that the physical cleanness of the temple is a precondition for its spiritual purity. Alter (1990) has contributed the most thus far in his elaboration of the spatial dimensions that mark off the pure from the unclean at the *akhārā* grounds in Banaras. I will return to Alter's account in a moment.

The ways that *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha distinguish between physical cleanness and ritual purity are central to how they define *gandagī* and assess its impact on the river. Again, their concept of *gandagī* is altogether different, conceptually, from the notion of environmental pollution espoused by science and government. *Paṇḍās* use eight Hindi terms to explain the impact of *gandagī*. Operating as four sets of binary oppositions, they are: *sāf* and *gandā*, *svaccha* and *asvaccha*, *śuddha* and *aśuddha*, and *pavitra* and *apavitra*. The first two pairs—*sāf/gandā* and *svaccha/asvaccha*—refer to material or external cleanness and uncleanness. The other two—*śuddha/aśuddha* and *pavitra/apavitra*—refer to purity and impurity of cosmos, soul, and heart. Although residents treat them as sets of binary oppositions, they do not necessarily exclude one set when using the other to signify an event or condition. This is because residents demonstrate considerable flexibility when using these terms to define their world. For example, a Banaras resident might say that Gaṅgā water is *śuddha* as if he or she means both good to drink in the sense of cleanness and good to worship in the sense of possessing eternal power. This means that *sāf/svaccha* and *śuddha/pavitra* can signify similar conditions. In many ritual contexts, cleanness and purity are closely linked. Likewise, terms designating physical uncleanness and ritual impurity may signify the same condition. *But this is not always the case*. This interchangeability demonstrates how the use of these terms is complicated. But when we focus on discussions of the river Gaṅgā, the importance of these terminological distinctions becomes more apparent.

Most informants on Daśāśvamedha define the following elements that enter the Gaṅgā as materially unclean (*gandā* or *asvaccha*): dirty water from drains (*nālās*), industrial waste, household trash, soap from bathing and washing clothes, human excrement from "doing latrine" on the riverbank, and betelnut (*pān*) spit. Many believe that material dirtiness and bodily wastes have a similar impact on Gaṅgā. Residents do not say that such *gandagī* is dangerous for the Gaṅgā, but they do value the rule for keeping dirtiness away from Gaṅgā and other places of worship. Sacred texts and popular manuals on pilgrimage, spiritual life, and good conduct communicate ideas about distancing unclean bodily functions from bodies of pure water. The *Śiva Purāṇa* (*ŚP*), for example, makes numerous references to proper conduct near bodies of water, and particularly next to rivers and tanks. About morning defecation and other routine activities, it teaches as follows:

[For defecation,] he must never sit in front of water, fire, a brahmin or the idol of any god. He must screen the penis with the left hand and the mouth with the right. After evacuating the bowels, the feces should not be looked at. Water drawn out in a vessel should not be used for cleaning (i.e. no one should sit inside the tank or river-water for cleaning purposes). No one shall enter the holy tanks and rivers dedicated to deities, manes, etc. and frequented by the sages. The rectum must be cleaned with mud seven, five or three times. . . .

For gargling, the water can be taken in any vessel or a wooden cup; but water shall be spit outside (not in the river or tank). Washing of the teeth with any leaf or twig must be without using the index finger and outside the water. . . . In all sacred rites the upper cloth should also be used while taking bath in the holy river or tank; the cloth worn shall not be rinsed or beaten. The sensible man shall take it to a separate tank or well or to the house itself and beat it on a rock or on a plank to the gratification of the manes, O brahmins. (*ŚP* 13.10–13, 15–18)

These passages direct people to distance some everyday human processes such as defecation, brushing teeth, spitting, and washing clothes from the riverbank. This principle of distancing, also

mentioned in a favorite text of one *paṇḍā*, the *Paramśānti Kā Mārg* ("Path to Great Peace"), appears to serve as a well-understood spatial benchmark for keeping uncleanness away from the Gaṅgā.

Alter's description of the *akhārā* (wrestling) ground reflects this spatial ordering. He outlines (1990, 33) how Banaras residents distance uncleanness and human dirtiness from the center of the *akhārā* ground. In the center lies a deep well of pure water which draws its strength from the soil of the *akhārā* (considered a tonic of sorts), the trees, and its proximity to the Gaṅgā. Swampy ponds encircle the clean area of the compound. Wrestlers use these ponds for cleaning after defecation. The swampy area is the unclean periphery, where the dirtiness accrued to the body through everyday life is washed away. Alter finds that a system of hydraulic classification structures *akhārā* space and the residents' movement through it. Wrestlers distinguish between swampy water used to clean one's anus, water from a peripheral well used to dampen the ground, water from another tank used to wash one's self and one's clothes, and water from the well in the center of the *akhārā*, which is for drinking. In this case, the pure well lies closest to the *akhārā* ground, and both together constitute the center of the arena. This hydraulic classification shows that physical cleanness and ritual purity alike are distanced from physical and bodily uncleanness.

On Daśāśvamedha, this rule is recognized as the ideal, even when it is breached. Unfortunately, residents claim, this spatial order is exactly what cannot be enforced on the *ghāṭ*. For many, the rule of distancing seems impossibly difficult to follow. On Daśāśvamedha *ghāṭ*, while pilgrims perform ablutions, others wash clothes with soap, a *paṇḍā* spits, an old woman "does latrine" on a corner of the *ghāṭ* (for lack of public facilities), and urban sewage flows into the river under the *ghāṭ* floor. *Gandagī* surrounds the people seeking purification.

The collapse of the spatial ideal of separating what is unclean from what is pure disturbs most residents. However, they claim they cannot do much to change the situation. In fact, apathy about control of public behavior runs high on Daśāśvamedha. Most argue that the public nature of the *ghāṭ* at this spot makes regulation virtually impossible. Banaras, some point out, does not have a strong centralized religious authority, like that in the city of Hardwar, to enforce rules strictly.

Many residents point out the rise in dead bodies immersed in wholly uncremated form in the Gaṅgā. Local residents complain that the police are often responsible for the problem because they dispose of unclaimed dead bodies in the river to avoid the costs of electric cremation, which their department has to bear. Along with unclaimed bodies, corpses are brought to the river by families who are unable to afford proper cremation. According to Hindu ritual, corpses are carriers of ritual impurity. The Hindu practice of cremation along the banks of the river, at the two auspicious *ghāṭs* of Maṇikarṇikā and Hariścandra, aims to reduce the corpse into the five basic elements of existence: fire, air, water, ether, and earth. Hindus use the words *asuddha* or *apavitra* to describe the ritual impurity of the corpse as well as the ritual impurity of the surviving family members in charge of performing the cremation rituals. After cremation, the ashes and any remaining bones are immersed in the Gaṅgā and purified by her. The impurity associated with the surviving family members is absolved after they perform rituals of *śrāddha* (rites in honor of the spirits of the deceased) over a prescribed period of time. According to the sacred texts, some individuals are not allowed to be cremated, namely holy men (*sādhus*), children, lepers, and smallpox victims (see Das 1982, 123; Parry 1994, 184–5). In the religious view, therefore, dead bodies, per se, are not problematic for Gaṅgā, because she can ritually purify them. However, cremation does constitute a good sacrificial death for corpses (other than those specified above) and absolves the impurity of the physical body. The *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha point out that most of the fully uncremated corpses found floating down the Gaṅgā should have been cremated according to rules set out in the *śāstras* (because they were neither *sādhus*, children, lepers, nor smallpox victims). To the priests, this indicates a lapse in the public respect for ritual order. The practice of partially cremating corpses in the wood or electric crematorium, and then dumping the partially burned remains in the Gaṅgā, is more excusable because the ritual procedure, although short circuited due to financial constraints, has been respected.

The *paṇḍās'* views about corpses, however, are more complicated because, when they make references to fully uncremated dead bodies in the Gaṅgā, they sometimes conflate notions of ritual impurity and physical uncleanness. That is, they also refer to these

corpses as signs of *gandagī*. The fact that residents of Daśāśvamedha refer to dead bodies as *gandagī* is the result of more than a decade of media reports on river pollution, which have defined corpses as secular bodies.

Since the 1980s, media and official reports have claimed that the number of dead bodies immersed in the Gaṅgā in uncremated or partially cremated form has visibly increased. Officials have attributed this to the rising cost of cremation, which is making it difficult for some families to cremate their deceased kin. Media reports began to publicize this phenomenon toward the end of the decade. From 1985 through 1990, reporters from Delhi and abroad published descriptions and photos of floating corpses in reports of "Ganga pollution."⁸

Although they were meant to shock the citizenry into a concern for ecological degeneracy, these media reports did little to convince Daśāśvamedha residents of Gaṅgā's impending demise. On the contrary, residents continue to believe that Gaṅgā purifies the ashes of cremated individuals and, if need be, carries away the partially cremated—or even fully uncremated—bodies without being adversely affected. What residents of Daśāśvamedha argue is that fully uncremated bodies in the Gaṅgā are less dangerous than the social conditions they reflect. These bodies represent, to them, a decline in the practice of cremation and therefore mark the moral degeneracy of contemporary society.

Paṇḍās tend to refer to corpses as *gandagī* when speaking with others who appear to embrace a scientific or ecological view of the river. Although, in these discussions, they tend to consider corpses in a secular sense, they also mock the very argument put forth by media and official reports that dead bodies, as *gandagī*, are harmful for the river. They often pointed out dead bodies to me in phrases such as, "Look Madam, dead body!" and then laughed at my disgust. Such mocking exclamations made me realize that they were not as alarmed about the uncleanness of Gaṅgā caused by corpses as scientists and officials claimed to be. In fact, they generally tended to steer the discussion about fully uncremated dead bodies back to the societal ills that the bodies reflected, which they believed were far more disturbing to their values and occupational existence.

Some residents blame pollution prevention projects for the rise in cases of partially cremated and fully uncremated corpses. Under

the Ganga Action Plan, the government constructed an electric crematorium on Hariścandra Ghāt to ease the pollution load on the river. In addition, this was to provide a viable solution to the increasing cost of wood for cremation. When it began, pilgrim priests involved with cremation rituals opposed the project because it threatened to disturb traditional Hindu practices of wood cremation (see Parry 1994, 67–68). Today, the increasing use of the electric crematorium still disturbs them, especially those priests whose services are tied up with wood cremation. The fully uncremated dead bodies floating down the Gaṅgā today do not come from the electric crematorium. Still, in the minds of the *paṇḍās*, the facility is implicated. They are a result, the *paṇḍās* say, of the further decline in respect for traditional practices set in motion when the government established an alternate form of cremation.

Residents often complain that government projects rarely serve the best interests of the public. In 1987, Ganga Action Plan authorities created a turtle breeding farm to raise and release turtles into the river to eat the flesh of floating corpses. Most residents consider this project a complete failure because they never see the turtles consuming corpses. A bicycle rickshaw pedaler I have used for many years often finds the turtles swimming up the Varanā river. They tend to make life difficult for residents taking their morning bath in that tributary. The turtle breeding farm at Sarnath outside the city limits of Banaras showed signs of downsizing in 1993. By 1995, the project had been eliminated from Phase II of the Ganga Action Plan.

As indicated above, *paṇḍās* firmly believe that partially cremated or fully uncremated dead bodies dumped in the river do not threaten Gaṅgā's spiritual integrity. But they seem to fear that industrial waste, or more generally "dirty water" from drains, may have a harmful impact over time, by making the Gaṅgā *asvachha* or physically unclean. Still residents insist that *gandagī* cannot alter Gaṅgā's power to give liberation (*mukti* or *mokṣa*) and purify the ashes of the deceased. This power is eternal and not subject to fluctuations in material reality. They add that as long as humans demonstrate their reverence through ritual ablution, *ārati*, and other forms of worship, Gaṅgā will remain happy. As long as she is happy, she will purify the cosmos, soul, body, and heart. But even if, in theory, Gaṅgā's purificatory power remains infinite, residents

do express concern about their personal health and appear disturbed by *gandagī*. Two of the three dominant *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha rarely bathe at their *ghāṭ*. They recommend cleaner locations! The most powerful boatman in the area complains that his doctor suggested he also avoid bathing at Daśāśvamedha—to prevent skin disease.

In *Water and Womanhood*, Feldhaus (1995) describes how residents of Maharashtra associate the river with feminine imagery. She argues that they stress a river's female attributes over its purificatory power. Banaras residents also conceive of the river in feminine terms, but they link femininity with motherliness, house-keeping and clean-up, and forgiveness. Many Daśāśvamedha residents and pilgrims remark that Gaṅgā, like a good mother, cleans up the messes her children make and forgives them lovingly. In this way, she cleans up other kinds of dirtiness people bring to her and excuses dirty behavior with maternal kindness.⁹ Gaṅgā is forgiving rather than angry about human dirtiness.

Residents of Banaras, therefore, differ quite markedly from residents of the village of Ghatiyali in Rajasthan described by Gold (this volume). Residents of Ghatiyali claim that God is angered by deforestation and, in retaliation, withholds rain. The forgiving nature of Gaṅgā that Banaras residents describe is problematic for the environmental activists in the Clean Ganga Campaign, who hope to raise awareness about pollution prevention. Environmental activists in Banaras argue that this view of sacred purity and loving tolerance leads to a passive acceptance of polluting behavior. However, these very activists understand that revising this deep religious association between water and long-suffering womanhood, so as to include human responsibility for Gaṅgā's well-being, will be difficult indeed. The villagers Gold describes may be in a better position to accept the message of environmental activism because they understand that the environment participates in the fruits of human sin. Residents of Daśāśvamedha, on the other hand, link morality to *gandagī* but do not find that the Gaṅgā participates in the sin-game (*pāp-līlā*) of humans. This means that she is, by extension, unaffected by the sins of humans and not motivated toward retaliation. She did, after all, descend to earth to wash away those very misdeeds.

Environmental activists are frustrated by the fact that residents of Daśāśvamedha passively accept the conditions of *gandagī*

by pointing to Gaṅgā's own power to solve the problem. To understand the broader context of this apparent complacency, however, we must trace how pilgrim priests connect Gaṅgā's purity (and purificatory power) to their own occupational interests. *Paṇḍās* consistently defend their conviction that human-created *gandagī* does not alter Gaṅgā's purity. But they do not deny the presence of *gandagī* in the river. This position is most noticeable when they argue that Gaṅgā may be materially unclean (*gandā* or *asvaccha*)—that is, affected by *gandagī*—but not impure (*aśuddha* or *apavitra*). In their discussions about how waste impacts the Gaṅgā, the distinction between physical cleanness and sacred purity is most salient. Their comments allow us to see that the blurring of the distinction in the spatial dimensions of the *akhārā* does not mean that, because purity and cleanness are closely connected, they mean the same thing all the time. Impurity and uncleanness are also intimately linked in references to the fully uncremated dead bodies floating in the Gaṅgā. But when residents attempt to logically explain how uncleanness and sacred purity coexist in the Gaṅgā, they allow the conceptual categories to work independently. Gaṅgā, while she can be dirty, cannot be impure. Therefore, like the robe Srinivas found, she is both dirty and pure. However, if she is dirty (*gandā/asvaccha*), it is because people have made her that way (see Alley 1994, 130).

The idea that Gaṅgā's purity overrides human *gandagī* is a self-serving one for *paṇḍās*. Pilgrim service is lucrative and *paṇḍās* want it to remain that way. As one *paṇḍā* put it, "From sunrise to sunset, it is just earning, earning, earning." Many scholarly accounts have estimated that over the past four decades the number of pilgrims visiting Banaras daily to see the divine (take *darśan*) has steadily increased (see Fuller 1992, 205; Parry 1994, 108; Veer 1994, 122). Local gossip puts the *paṇḍās'* earnings at well above average for Banaras. *Paṇḍās* do in fact own substantial homes on southern Daśāśvamedha. In them sacred icons are enshrined. One mansion towers above the Rām temple on Prayāg Ghāṭ. Another home contains the Prayāgeśvara shrine, and a third shelters a goddess, reputedly made of gold. From look-out points on their property, these *paṇḍās* watch over the activities on the *ghāṭ* and oversee the exchanges that the lower-ranked pilgrim priests, *ūrth purohīts* and *ghāṭīyas*, undertake with pilgrims. For over three

generations, the *paṇḍās* of southern Daśāśvamedha have retained their rights to serve pilgrims coming from the former princely states of Palamu, Singrauli, and Sonbhadra. Even as the district names have changed over time, many pilgrims continue to identify—when looking for the Banaras priest who serves clients from their region—with the former princely states within whose old borders they still live.

These princely states were located in regions which now extend across the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They mark the historical homelands of several tribal groups in India. These tribal groups now comprise the agricultural or small land-holding class in these states. Pilgrims pay fees (*dakṣiṇā*) and offer donations (*dān*) to *paṇḍās* in exchange for shelter, offerings blessed by deities (*prasād*), and ritual services. *Paṇḍās* also receive commissions from the income of the other priests who rent spaces on the *ghāṭ* from them. On their wooden platforms, the lower-ranked priests preside over pilgrims' offerings throughout the morning, assisting them also by watching over their personal possessions.

Like the villagers of Ghatiyali described by Gold (this volume), *paṇḍās* feel caught up in a moral and cosmic degeneracy which sets the context for their social concerns. In their account of the present degenerate state of the world, *paṇḍās* deflect blame from human agency by pointing toward a cosmic design in which truth turns against humankind. The cosmos passes through many aeons in its cyclical passage; the Kali Yuga is the last of four declining ages that form one such aeon. The Kali Yuga, or "Dark Age," began on February 18, 3102 B.C.E. and will continue for another 426,904 years (Fuller 1992, 266). This time spells diminished virtue, moral degeneracy, and sin for all living souls. As Madan (1987, 128) put it, in this age people do not engage in severe penance to gain the favor of gods and goddesses, and therefore very few individuals receive divine blessing. The *Śiva Purāṇa* describes the Kali Age as follows:

At the advent of the terrible age of *Kali* men have become devoid of merits. They are engaged in evil ways of life. They have turned their faces from truthful avocations. They are engaged in calumniating others. They covet other men's wealth. Their attention is diverted to other men's wives. Injuring others has become their chief aim. (ŚP 1.12–13)

For *paṇḍās*, the Kali Yuga forms the cosmic backdrop to their current predicament. *Paṇḍās* argue that "man and money power" has succeeded in dominating the pilgrim services and businesses in Banaras. Because of this, the *paṇḍā* profession has been dirtied. In discussions of power, *paṇḍās* extend the metaphor of *gandagī* to signify immoral and ritually imbalanced social conditions. *Paṇḍās* argue that because they are forced to defend their hereditary right rather than remain divinely entitled to it, their moral authority wanes. This instability contributes to the lax ritual atmosphere in which respect for Gaṅgā is diminishing. But the degenerate pull of the Kali Yuga does not overpower her. She staves off the collapse, retains her purity, and continues to wash away human dirtiness. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* powerfully expresses this theme in the myth of Gaṅgā's descent from heaven. Gaṅgā flowed over the foot of Viṣṇu into Brahmā's water jug (*kamaṇḍal*) and "washed away the dirt, in the form of the sins of the whole of the world, by her touch, and yet, remained pure" (*BhP* 5.17.1).

Given Gaṅgā's transcendent power, people can aim to please her and thereby assist in partially rejuvenating the moral order. *Paṇḍās* believe that pilgrims can please Gaṅgā by worshiping her, even if they cannot purify her. Purificatory power can be achieved only by the few. The rare individuals who have purified themselves through *yoga* and become saints, channels of divine blessing, do have powers to repurify Gaṅgā. As Vatsyayan (1993, 167) writes, the respect paid to Gaṅgā by saints is especially important, as the transfer of their ascetic power (*tapas*) to Gaṅgā can re-purify the cosmos. But ordinary pilgrims and residents cannot emulate saints. *Paṇḍās* know their spiritual power is limited, because they have not renounced the material world and live amidst human *gandagī*. Nevertheless, they know they can at least please Gaṅgā by performing *ārati* on auspicious occasions.

At the time of my field study, I suggested to the *paṇḍās* that they make speeches in their forthcoming *ārati* celebration to raise awareness about the problems *gandagī* creates for Gaṅgā. This was not an entirely unusual proposition. In February of 1994, they performed their first big *ārati* (*mahārati*) on the auspicious occasion of Māgha Pūrṇimā. Māgha Pūrṇimā is the full moon day in Māgh (January–February), a day when Gaṅgā *snān* is especially meritorious. The group claimed a concern for cleanness then, and

media reports praised them for their efforts to clean the *ghāṭs* before the worship ceremony. They performed their second public *ārati* alongside a music festival organized by the Clean Ganga Campaign on Tulsī Ghāṭ. The third performance fell on Kārtik Pūrṇimā, the full moon day in the auspicious month of Kārtik.

While *ārati* evokes public praise for Gaṅgā and affirms her purifying power, *paṇḍās* also expect the ceremony to generate donations. They often complained to me that *ārati* was expensive for them. They had imported the silver lamps and whisks (*cavār*) from Bengal and had the “gents and ladies” costumes made with fine cloth. *Paṇḍās* claim that it is difficult to bear the cost of *ārati* on a monthly basis. They continue to conclude, however, that *ārati* is the only method they can use to encourage reverence for Gaṅgā.¹⁰ The relationship that people establish with Ganga through *ārati* is meant to be morally uplifting. Proper morality is reflected in the respect worshipers give to powerful cosmic forces (such as Gaṅgā’s purificatory power). Efforts to please the gods and goddesses that control these forces are meritorious moral acts that can help to bring the population out of the current state of degeneracy.

This assessment, that Gaṅgā’s purity is the primary force staving off moral and cosmic degeneracy as well as physical pollution, puts the *paṇḍās* outside policy discourses on pollution prevention carried out by government agencies and non-governmental citizen-action groups. The *paṇḍās* do not act as city advisors or assume positions in organizations such as the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, or the Clean Ganga Campaign. Their own organization is called the Ganga Seva Sangh, which means “Association for [Religious] Service to Gaṅgā.” It is focused exclusively on the religious concerns of Hindu pilgrims.

Degeneracy and the Genealogy of Environmental Pollution

Government officials and scientists articulate idioms of degeneracy markedly different from those expressed by the *paṇḍās* of southern Daśāśvamedha. Unlike the *paṇḍās*, they locate degeneracy in the physical river Gaṅgā and in the ecological system within which the river is an integral water supplier. Ecological degeneracy is, for them, a consequence of human activities associated with industrialization, urban growth, and the overpopulation of the river basin.

Discussions of ecological degeneracy go back no more than fifteen years in Indian scientific and secular discourses. Three professors who teach engineering at Banaras Hindu University were the first to focus public attention on problems of river pollution. In 1982, they formed an organization called the Clean Ganga Campaign (Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan) and listed it under a religious institution run by one of its principal members. They find that the distinction between physical cleanness and sacred purity is crucial to their environmental message, and they evoke it as a way to form a syncretism of Hinduism and science. The importance of this distinction is at first evident in their organization's name. They use the word *svaccha* (which they spell *swatcha*) to show that they are an organization concerned with physical cleanness rather than sacred purity. But CGC members are not removed from religious concerns. The leading member of the group is also the head priest of a religious institution, the Sankat Mochan Foundation. This organization manages the Sankat Mochan Temple, an important Hindu temple where the saint-poet Tulsī Dās received his vision of Hanumān, the monkey-god of the *Rāmāyana*. The leaders explain that their concern is with the impact of waste on the physical Gaṅgā. They do not contest or seek to denigrate her eternal sacred purity.¹¹ While they revere Gaṅgā through worship rituals in their private lives, they do not claim to promote a revitalization of such rituals through their own organization work.

The Clean Ganga Campaign's agitation in the early 1980s focused Indira Gandhi's attention on issues of river pollution. They asked her to consider establishing sewage management programs in cities bordering the river. After Mrs. Gandhi's death and the passage of power to her son Rajiv, the first official policies addressing sewage management and pollution prevention were drawn up. In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi established an agency called the Ganga Project Directorate to oversee the Ganga Action Plan. The Ganga Action Plan or GAP was set up to create pollution prevention programs and sewage treatment infrastructure in five Class I cities (those with populations over 100,000) bordering the Gaṅgā. Well before sufficient data had been collected to understand the waste complex, decisions were made on sewage treatment and management. The many contracts for treatment plants, funded by foreign lenders, were modeled on energy-intensive methods more suitable

for climates in Western countries. In Kanpur and Mirzapur, for example, the Indo-Dutch Cooperation Programme established treatment plants according to the process called the Upflow Anaerobic Sludge Blanket (UASB). Using a different method in Banaras, the government built one activated sludge treatment plant to treat eighty million liters of urban sewage per day (mld). They made other renovations to sewage lines and pumping stations under the first phase of the Plan. In June of 1993, the Ministry of Environment and Forests announced that under Phase I of the Ganga Action Plan they had commissioned fifteen treatment plants. All the plants combined are able to treat 300 million liters of sewage per day.¹²

In official and scientific reports, the parameters of Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) and Fecal Coliform Count (FCC) have been used to measure levels of river pollution. Under the first phase of the Plan, several universities in the Gangetic plain received grants to establish water monitoring programs in four cities—Hardwar, Allahabad, Banaras, and Patna (Murti et al. 1991). Until 1992, data were forwarded to the Ganga Project Directorate, which then published results selectively. Since that time, however, the CGC members have considered the data passed to the Directorate by academic departments and government water monitoring agencies invalid (see Sankat Mochan Foundation 1990, 1992, 1994). The CGC has, in fact, used the issue of validity to challenge government monitoring programs in a more comprehensive way. To do this, in 1992 they established their own water monitoring laboratory with domestic and foreign financial assistance. But their aim was not simply to generate alternate data. They pressed the GPD to expand its own monitoring program. While official monitoring used the parameter of BOD—along with others such as dissolved oxygen, conductivity, pH and temperature—it did not include the parameter of fecal coliform count (FCC) (see Alley 1994, 134–36). Clean Ganga Campaign members argued that fecal coliform, an important indicator of human sewage levels, ought to be a required component of monitoring. Furthermore, the FCC data could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the sewage management system. After the CGC made this argument in many meetings, the government agreed to include this parameter and began testing for it in 1994. The Clean Ganga Campaign, on the other hand, began monitoring water quality with the FCC parameter in 1992.

In their June 1993 report, the GPD announced that pollution levels in the Gaṅgā were declining because of infrastructural improvements in sewage management and treatment. They reported a decline in BOD levels in Banaras from ten mg/liter in 1986 to between one and two mg/liter in 1992 (Ministry of Environment and Forests 1993). Members of the Clean Ganga Campaign charged that these declines were exaggerated. According to CGC reports published in 1994, BOD levels just downstream from Daśāśvamedha Ghāṭ were much more variable. In May, BOD varied from 1.11 mg/liter to 26.50, depending on the time of day monitoring occurred. Higher figures tended to reflect times when the sewage lines leading to the Gaṅgā under the *ghāṭs* were open (see Sankat Mochan Foundation 1994). FCC levels were as high as 440,000 colonies per 100 ml in March and exceeded 320,000 in April of 1994.¹³

Assessing Pollution in Order to Treat It

After the treatment plant in Banaras was completed in the spring of 1993, the Clean Ganga Campaign began to notice various operational problems. For example, the plant's collection chamber proved too small to hold incoming discharge from the city during the monsoon. Consequently, the sewage backed up through the main trunk line after heavy rains. During previous monsoons, officials had diverted the city's discharge into the Gaṅgā through the outlet point lying downstream from Rāj Ghāṭ (see Alley 1992, 126–27; Alley 1994, 132–34). In early 1994, the Clean Ganga Campaign members demanded that government officials close the outlet drain to the Gaṅgā. They asked them to comply with the stated objectives of the project and divert all sewage to the plant. Consequently, the sewage backed up, creating what they called a "surcharge" in the main trunk line. The CGC pointed to this as proof of the inappropriate design of the collection chamber. After many requests from the CGC, the Ganga Project Directorate convened a meeting of technical experts in the field of sewage treatment to discuss the problems at the Banaras plant. This occurred in August of 1994. The CGC was invited to attend, and I followed along as a foreign member. At the forum, CGC members charged that monitoring officials had not conducted a thorough study of city waste discharge

before designing the plant. Consequently, they constructed the collection chamber improperly. They added that discharge rates put out by the Ganga Project Directorate in 1994 were also dubious. Pointing out that the data from their research contradicted official reports, they demanded a role as an outside witness in future discharge measurement and monitoring.

Additionally, the Clean Ganga Campaign members presented a proposal for oxidation ponds as an alternate method of sewage treatment. This proposal had the support of their cadre of foreign experts, which included researchers at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Stockholm. More suited to India's hot climate, it uses only a fraction of the energy consumed by the activated sludge process. This alternative, they submitted, would avoid the high energy costs incurred by the activated sludge plant. This is crucial because the electric board of the state of Uttar Pradesh has not consistently supplied the required energy to the plant since its commissioning.

Alongside its role as a watchdog of official policy, the Clean Ganga Campaign also considers itself the local vanguard for raising awareness about pollution prevention. Since 1982, it has organized many educational programs to bring this issue to public attention. In late 1994, they hosted a "Public Forum" with Dr. Karan Singh, the chairman of the People's Commission on Environment and Development and former Indian Ambassador to the United States. They organized this event to hear residents' opinions on waste problems affecting their sacred river. During my fieldwork, I passed on to the *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha invitations to the event. They attended under the banner of their organization, the Ganga Seva Sangh, and had their first formal meeting with Clean Ganga Campaign members.

The CGC maintains respect for religious notions of Gaṅgā's purificatory power, while pleading for measures to reduce the material waste load on the river. They do not state that Gaṅgā is impure in a sacred sense, for they do not believe this and science provides no proof for it. Instead, they maintain the distinction between physical cleanness and purity to argue that despite her purificatory power, she is becoming *asvaccha* and needs to be *svaccha*. At the same time, in official circles using scientific language, they publish their water quality data to argue for accountability in sewage management and treatment. The individuals who

debate about measurement and data, however, constitute a small circle. This circle does not include any residents of Daśāśvamedha. While discourse on water quality data does not alienate other Banaras residents, it has not achieved the effect of increasing local membership in environmental groups such as the CGC. This is precisely because residents do not understand the scientific ideas within their assessments.

There are no other organized groups which challenge government projects in Banaras. There are a few smaller clubs which claim concern for the environment and several professors, journalists, and playwrights who are, in passing, critical of current sewage management. But they do not regularly contest the official view. Therefore, the gradual increase in government attention to waste management projects has not coincided with the emergence of an environmental movement. Terms such as BOD and FCC mean nothing to most residents of Banaras. Moreover, citizens interpret the tendencies of officials to package their environmental goals with instrumental-scientific rationality as attempts to forward the material interests of the elite. For them, this means that everything, in the final analysis, is reduced to money. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations tend to talk in a scientific language that assumes a position of superiority. At the same time, the government's assessments imply the inferiority of religious modes of discourse. Defensively, the *paṇḍās* of Daśāśvamedha argue that their knowledge, informed by sacred texts, is more authoritative. *Paṇḍās* admit, however, that sacred (*śāstrik*) knowledge is weak in material power and explanation, and therefore threatened in the Kali Yuga by science and the "man and money power" behind it. Thus, according to *paṇḍās*, not only does science negate divine power, but it is associated, through money, with the moral degeneracy of the Kali Yuga.

In the Name of Gaṅgā

While there is no sociologically recognizable environmental movement in Banaras today (see, for example, Buttel 1987, 1992; Buttel and Taylor 1992), residents engage in constant verbal resistance to the government's ineffectual campaign to combat pollution. The CGC does engage in direct confrontation with government officials in the Ganga Project Directorate, but their activities involve only a

small minority of the local population. The GPD, the CGC, and residents of Daśāśvamedha are for the most part aware of each other's claims about sacred purity and environmental pollution. However, while all claim to be acting out of genuine concern for her welfare, each group is skeptical of the others' desire to respect the Gaṅgā's purity or prevent her being polluted. In other words, each group accuses the other of acting "in the name of Gaṅgā" (*gaṅgā ke nām par*), not in true service to her. There is a sense on all sides that concern for the Gaṅgā is more often than not rhetorically staged to obfuscate other, more self-interested motives. *Paṇḍās* see sewage treatment plants and projects as vehicles for state moneymaking. Quite often, they complain that pollution prevention work is merely "on paper" and does not produce any productive results. Many residents of Daśāśvamedha insist that officials have not adequately capped the drains feeding dirty water (*gandā pānī*) into the Gaṅgā. *Paṇḍās* are also suspicious about the activities of the Clean Ganga Campaign, since they remain outside that circle as well. They charge that most of the CGC's work includes foreigners, who are contributing money and material supplies. Moreover, *paṇḍās* argue that all the money allocated for sewage management has been "eaten." They often express this with the phrase, "They've eaten it all up" (*sab khā liyā*). The efforts of both are vitiated, in the *paṇḍās'* eyes, by the money-grabbing ethos of the Kali Yuga.

The CGC agrees that the Government of India has not used public funds properly to build effective sewage treatment plants and to renovate existing infrastructure. In response, the Ganga Project Directorate charges that the CGC is offering exaggerated criticisms and fanciful proposals for alternatives. Government officials also blame pilgrims and residents of Banaras for their adherence to a tradition that encourages an intensive use of the river for religious purposes. Furthermore, government officials point out that *paṇḍās* uphold the ideology of purity to support their own economic interests. Finally, all groups are suspicious that the anthropologist, with her curious concern for Gaṅgā, is studying pollution also to make money.

Conclusions

Both *paṇḍās* and the scientific-official camp agree that degeneracy exists, but they locate its core in different spheres. For *paṇḍās*,

marketplace competition, cheating, and corruption are signs of moral degeneracy and reflect a cosmic cycle. Although to some extent, they believe they are caught in this cosmic cycle, *paṇḍās* suggest that the moral order can be reset by Gaṅgā's power to purify. A conviction among people to follow principles in sacred texts through adherence to ritual, they maintain, could also bring back a popular respect for Hindu beliefs. Religious beliefs do not provide a disincentive for cleaning the river, per se, because they affirm a high value for Gaṅgā and are based upon a deep spiritual understanding of the river. However, that ablution (*snān*) and worship (*pūjā*) continue to occur, even in a context of *gandagī*, reassures Hindu believers that the integrity of Gaṅgā's sacred purity is protected. Moreover, *paṇḍās* make sacred purity a much more complicated issue because they use this conviction to support their occupational activities. The belief in sacred purity in this case makes acceptance of immoral or corrupt behavior possible even when that very behavior is denounced.

I have shown that residents of Daśāśvamedha and the sacred texts they read advocate the distancing principle to deal with the problems of human uncleanness and *gandagī*. Religious attitudes would not, therefore, necessarily bode ill for the ecological future of the river if residents and pilgrims could enforce the distancing principle while worshipping Gaṅgā's sacred purity. The urban predicament, however, is complicated, and even *paṇḍās* know that waste drainage and treatment systems are essential to keeping Daśāśvamedha livable. Residents seem to want better enforcement of both religious and secular laws to regulate public behavior on the *ghāṭs*. Unfortunately, current scientific-official projects do not, in many residents' eyes, meet this need. *Āratī* may please Gaṅgā and help to rejuvenate the moral order, but *paṇḍās* know the ceremony alone cannot enforce the ancient ideal of distancing uncleanness from the river bank.

Academics and officials, even while respecting religious ideas about Gaṅgā's power to provide for human well-being, locate degeneracy in the ecological balance of the river. There is no common agreement between academics, officials, and residents of Daśāśvamedha about how to approach the problem of *gandagī* and its impact on the Gaṅgā. *Paṇḍās* and Clean Ganga Campaign members evoke the distinction between physical cleanness and sacred purity and therefore share some common ground in their assessments. However, the scientific knowledge of the latter group is meaning-

less to the former. All players do acknowledge that sewage treatment and public activity on the riverbank fall well short of keeping human uncleanness away from the river. But when residents face what they consider are the vacant meanings of scientific concepts and witness the blunders in official cleaning and sewage treatment projects, the divide between the concerned parties is heightened and communication is blocked.

A local journalist recently remarked that I would not find the seeds for a mass revolution (against *gandagī* and dirty business) on Daśāśvamedha. On the other hand, efforts to clean up pollution are tied to infrastructural and monetary assistance at the national and global levels. Therefore, we can expect to find more pollution prevention schemes developed by officials and scientists in the coming years. Indeed, *gandagī* is everywhere, and to everyone a burden. Whatever environmental activists and government officials may think, they need to be aware that the worldview of the local people must be an important factor in any solution. Since environmental activists find that the belief in sacred purity ultimately allows residents to reject or opt out of projects to tackle the problems of *gandagī*, they should try to interact with local religious leaders to sort out how occupational interests linked to ritual purity can become more connected with the need for physical cleanness. Greater communication between environmental activists and residents of Daśāśvamedha and other neighborhoods could also heighten the public awareness needed to force government agencies to be accountable for the municipal cleaning and waste management projects they undertake.

On one occasion, when I pleaded that *paṇḍās* take a greater interest in cleaning their *ghāṭ* and enforcing rules of distancing uncleanness from Gaṅgā, one *paṇḍā* insisted that it was the government's duty to clean the area, through the local municipality. If they do not do their work, he argued, then our only alternative is to turn to Gaṅgā. Reminding me about a passage from the *Gaṅgā Stuti*, he then began to sing, "O Bhāgīrathī [Gaṅgā], though we are full of sin, give us a place at your feet, give us *mukti*."

Notes

1. See, for example, Callicott 1994, Capra 1991, Fox 1990, India International Centre 1993, Lovelock 1988 and Singh 1993b.

2. See Eck 1993, 13–14; 1982; Havell 1990 (1905), 109–10; Motichandra 1985; Singh 1993a; *KKh* 52.1–10; and Vidyarthi et al. 1979 for discussions of the sacred importance of Daśāśvamedha.

3. See Alley 1994, 130–31 for other references to Gaṅgā's forms and meanings.

4. This account comes from a *paṇḍā*'s favorite text: *PM*, p. 39. In Hindi, the passage is as follows: Gaṅgā apnā nām uccāraṇ karnewāle ke papo kā nās karti hai, darśan karnewāle kā kalyāṇ karti hai, aur snān-pān karnewāle kī sat pīriyo tak ko pavitra karti hai.

5. This *stuti* was written by Kavi Kesav. One *paṇḍā* had the *stuti* hand-written on a single sheet of paper and helped me in translating it. It is sung in their *ārati* ceremonies.

6. See Veer 1988 and Parry 1980, 1981, 1994 for other characterizations of this occupational group. The term *paṇḍā*, however, is a designation that these pilgrim priests do not particularly like, though they use it to refer to each other in local discourse. When I informed them that I use this term in my description of their occupation, they requested that I use a more respectable term to describe their work. They suggested that I use the title *rāj purohit* (the king's priest) or *paṇḍit* (learned Brahmin). These are terms which in their mind do not carry a negative connotation. This discontent with the title *paṇḍā* reflects their feeling that outsiders and brokers have spoiled the image of the *paṇḍāgiri* by cheating pilgrims and corrupting the service occupation.

7. See Carman and Marglin 1985; Gold 1988; Madan 1985, 1987; and Raheja 1988.

8. English-medium newspapers in India and other countries have tended to sensationalize the issue of dead bodies in the Gaṅgā more than the Indian papers written in the Hindi medium have. An article from the *Washington Post* entitled "Devout Hindus Resist Efforts to Clean Up the Sacred Ganges" (Claiborne 1983) and a report in the *Patriot Magazine* entitled "Save the Ganga" (Singh 1984) are the earliest media reports to highlight dead bodies as signs of Gaṅgā pollution. They predate the formation of GAP. The *Patriot Magazine* opens its article with the following description:

At the edge of the steps on the Dashasmedh [sic] ghat a bare bodied man sits cross legged getting ready for his "aachman." A few feet to his right bobs the decayed carcass of a cow in the river, a crow hovering over it. I turn away in disgust, but a more grisly sight awaits me: two dead bodies floating near the edge of a ghat and a group of pilgrims having bath completely oblivious to them.

Along with this, the caption for a photograph of a corpse washed up on the riverbank reads: "A *Ghat*: As mysterious as the dead bodies floating." Later reports in the *Star Tribune* (Tempest 1987) and the *Smithsonian* (Ward 1985), among others, also consider dead bodies an environmental problem. The Hindi newspapers have been less inclined to highlight dead bodies, and have tended to focus more on the activities of the Clean Ganga Campaign and on reports of water quality. One of only a few exceptions to this is found in an article in *India Today* entitled "No Bhagirath Came" (Sharma 1987). The article opens with the following passage: "Ganga—one clean [*svaccha*], pure [*śuddha*] and benign [*mṛdu*] Ganga. But there is one dream that burdens the Hindu heart. In Varanasi today half-burnt corpses are seen swimming in this river." In most Hindi reports published from 1987 through 1994, the term *svaccha* is frequently used in calls for a clean Gaṅgā. In a few reports, the word *śuddha* is used interchangeably with *svaccha*. These Hindi reports also use the terms pollution (*pradūṣaṇ*) and polluted (*pradūṣit* or *dūṣit*) when describing the condition of the river. Many reports refer to cleaning projects as methods that will "free Gaṅgā of pollution" (*gaṅgā pradūṣaṇ se mukt hogī*).

9. Curiously, unlike other gods or goddesses who may become angry if defiled by humans (see the chapters by Gold, Sherma, and Nagarajan, this volume; also Dumont and Pocock 1959, 31; Fuller 1979, 469; 1992, 76; Harper 1964, 183–86; Sharma 1970, 1819; Srinivas 1952, 41–42, 78), Gaṅgā does not lash back at this human abuse and defilement.

10. This reminded me of a story that a devotee of Anandamayi Ma, a highly regarded female saint, told me in 1994:

Śiva and Pārvatī were talking, and Pārvatī asked him a question. She said, "If so many people are taking bath (*snān*) and absolving their sins, why does the same kind of life persist?" Śiva took Pārvatī to the riverbank to demonstrate his response. Śiva disguised himself as an old man with leprosy and stood near the bathing area. As people were leaving, he asked them, "Whoever has been purified and is now without sin, bless me with Gaṅgā water (*gaṅgā jal*) so I may be saved." Despite his requests, no one stopped for him. Finally, one man agreed to bless him because he said he had just performed ablutions. He purified the old man and walked on. Then Śiva said, as he turned to Pārvatī, "Because not enough people have faith, they carry their sin and do ablutions as a mere routine. You cannot simply do it," he concluded, "you must believe it."

11. See Alley 1994, 135 for one leader's formula for reconciling the contradictions between scientific and Hindu worldviews.

12. See Ministry of Environment and Forests pamphlet entitled "Ganga Action Plan Achievements" issued by Project Director, Central Ganga Authority, Ministry of Environment and Forests, 5 June, 1993.

13. Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) indicates whether there is enough oxygen in the water to sustain aquatic life. Acceptable BOD levels for bathing are set at 1–3 mg/liter and for drinking, at less than 1 mg/liter. Fecal Coliform Count (FCC) is the most probable number of bacterial colonies in a water sample. Acceptable levels for bathing are less than 500 per 100 ml.

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- KKh** *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*. Edited by A. S. K. Tripathi. 2 parts. Varanasi: Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, 1991. (All translations cited are from Singh 1993a.)
- PM** *Paramśānti Kā Mārg*. Shri Jaidayal Goyandka. Varanasi, n.d. (All translations are my own.)
- ŚP** *Śiva Purāṇa*. Translated by a board of scholars and edited by J. L. Shastri. Vol. 1. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990.

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