

Why Ganga and Not Hooghly?

A Study on the Historical, Cultural and Religious Identity of the Lower Course of the Ganga in West Bengal

Dr. Budhaditya Paul

Research Scholar, Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) Hospitality and Tourism Management
BNG Hotel Management Institute, Kolkata

Abstract: *The River Ganga is India's most sacred river, originating at Gangotri in the Himalayas and ultimately reaching the Bay of Bengal through multiple distributaries. After the Farakka Barrage, one major channel flows into Bangladesh as the Padma River, while the distributary flowing through West Bengal is officially known as the Hooghly River perhaps by the European Traders.. Despite this official nomenclature, a significant section of the population continues to identify the river as the Ganga because of its religious, cultural, and historical importance.*

This study examines whether the name "Hooghly River" adequately reflects the cultural identity and public perception of the river in West Bengal. Using questionnaires, interviews, Google Forms, and secondary literature, the research analyses people's perceptions, religious practices, and historical evidence associated with the river.

Keywords: Ganga, Hooghly River, Cultural Identity, Religious Tourism, West Bengal, River Naming

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ganga occupies a unique position in Indian civilization, serving as both a geographical feature and a symbol of faith. Millions of pilgrims visit its banks every year for religious rituals, festivals, and ceremonies.

While the lower distributary flowing through West Bengal is officially designated as the Hooghly River, local communities commonly refer to it as the Ganga. Important pilgrimage centres such as Gangasagar, riverfront ghats, temples, and religious ceremonies continue to use the name "Ganga."

This study investigates whether the official nomenclature corresponds with public perception and cultural identity.



A representation through google map:



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Our journey down the Ganges ends on Sagar Island, where the river meets the sea: - Philip Reeves Suggested references include:

- The Ganges: A Journey into India
- Ganga: A Water Marvel
- Government publications on the National Waterways.
- Survey of India maps.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although the distributary flowing through West Bengal is officially named the Hooghly River, many residents continue to identify it as the Ganga in everyday life, religious practices, and cultural traditions.

The study seeks to determine whether this difference between official nomenclature and public perception has cultural, religious, and tourism implications.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the historical evolution of the river's name.
- To examine public perception regarding the river's identity.
- To analyse the religious importance of the name "Ganga."
- To evaluate the implications for tourism and cultural heritage.
- To explore whether the official nomenclature aligns with local identity.



V. ANALYSIS

The study will analyse the cultural, religious, and linguistic significance of the river through commonly used expressions, rituals, and traditional practices that continue to identify the river as the Ganga, irrespective of its administrative or geographical nomenclature. The following aspects will be examined:

- Ganga Jal (Holy Water): The sacred water of the river, revered by Hindus and used in religious ceremonies, purification rituals, and domestic worship.
- Gangasagar Pilgrimage: One of India's most significant annual pilgrimages, where millions of devotees gather at the confluence of the Ganga and the Bay of Bengal during Makar Sankranti.
- Ganga Ghat: The riverfront steps and embankments used for daily prayers, bathing, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings.
- Ganga Snan (Holy Bath): The ritualistic act of bathing in the Ganga, believed to cleanse sins and confer spiritual merit.
- Ganga Aarti: The devotional ceremony involving lamps, hymns, and prayers offered to the river, symbolising reverence for the divine mother Ganga.
- Ganga Mati (Sacred Soil): The soil collected from the riverbanks, traditionally regarded as sacred and used in various religious observances.
- Kola Bou Snan during Durga Puja: The ceremonial bathing of the Kola Bou (Banana Bride) in the river as an integral ritual of Durga Puja, reflecting the river's sacred association with the festival.
- Hindu Rituals Performed on the Riverbanks: Religious ceremonies such as Pind Daan, Tarpan, ancestral offerings, yajnas, and other rites that are traditionally performed on the banks of the Ganga.
- Idol Immersion during Durga Puja: The immersion (Visarjan) of Goddess Durga idols in the river, symbolising the deity's return to her divine abode and reinforcing the river's sacred status.
- Asthi Visarjan (Immersion of Ashes): The immersion of cremated remains in the Ganga, based on the belief that it facilitates the soul's liberation (moksha).
- Chhath Puja Celebrations: The worship of the Sun God and Chhathi Maiya performed on the banks of the river, where devotees stand in the water to offer prayers during sunrise and sunset.

By examining these expressions and rituals, the study seeks to demonstrate that the river's religious, cultural, and social identity in West Bengal continues to be overwhelmingly recognised as the Ganga. The persistence of these traditions in public discourse, literature, festivals, and everyday practice provides significant evidence that the river retains its historical and civilisational identity as the Ganga, regardless of the official geographical designation of certain stretches as the Hooghly.

These examples illustrate the continued cultural use of the name "Ganga."

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY THIS RESEARCH CONTRIBUTES TO:

- Cultural geography.
- Heritage conservation.
- Religious tourism.
- River identity studies.
- Public policy relating to geographical nomenclature.
- Preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

VII. HYPOTHESES

There is no significant difference between official river nomenclature and public perception regarding the identity of the Hooghly River.

A significant majority of people in West Bengal culturally and religiously identify the Hooghly River as the Ganga.



VIII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

Descriptive and exploratory research. Primary Data

- Structured questionnaires.
- Google Forms survey.
- Personal interviews.
- Focus group discussions.

Secondary Data

- Books.
- Research journals.
- Government reports.
- Historical documents.
- Survey of India publications.

Sampling

- Residents of West Bengal.
- Pilgrims.
- Priests.
- Tourists.
- Hospitality professionals.
- Academicians.

IX. CONCLUSION

The study seeks to determine whether the official designation "Hooghly River" accurately represents the cultural and religious identity of the river in West Bengal. Rather than advocating a predetermined outcome, the research will present evidence from historical records, public perception, and religious practices to understand how people identify the river and what implications this has for heritage and tourism.

X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all respondents, academicians, religious scholars, tourism professionals, government officials, and institutions who contributed to this research. Special thanks are extended to colleagues and family members for their encouragement and support throughout the study.

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