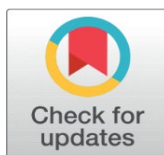
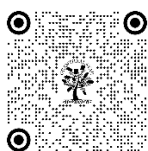


# REPRESENTATIONS OF RIVER GODDESSES IN INDIAN ART WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TEMPLE ART OF ASSAM

Dr. Mousumi Deka <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Fine Arts Department, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, Assam, India



## Corresponding Author

Dr. Mousumi Deka,  
[deka.mousumi@gmail.com](mailto:deka.mousumi@gmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1133](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1133)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

The river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are most important divinities represented in the temple art of India. Though, the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are considered as Hindu deity, but in Buddhism and Jainism they are also identified as important deity attached with religious edifices. Mostly, the river goddesses as guardian deity are associated with the temple door. In Brahmanical art, Gupta period is marked for first depiction of river goddesses on the door-jambs of the temple. In the iconographic representations, Ganga stands upon makara (crocodile), and Yamuna stands upon kurma (tortoise). In temple art of Assam, the river goddesses occupied important place to decorate the temple doorway. The stone-built door-frame of Daparbatiya temple of Assam contains unique representations of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. The study focuses upon the development of image forms of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna in Indian art, and the study also focuses upon the features of the representations of river goddesses in temple art of Assam.

**Keywords:** Religion, Iconography, Sculpture, River, Ganga, Yamuna, Temple, Assam

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ganga and Yamuna are considered as most sacred river in Indian religious life, and the rivers still exist. It is believed that the waters of Ganga are said to have the power of cleansing from all past, present and future sins. Ganga is mentioned only once in the 'Nadi-Stuti' or 'Praise of Rivers' of Rigveda. These sacred rivers turned to the sculptural images attached to the temple doorway. It is believed that when the devotees pass through the doorway of the temple it is equivalent to a bath taken in the sacred waters. The Hindu temples contain the images of Ganga and Yamuna on each side of doorway. The representation of Ganga with her vehicle makara (crocodile) is illustrated on the right-side of door-frame, and the representation of Yamuna with her vehicle tortoise is illustrated on the left-side of the door-frame. They are placed on the temple door as the guardian deity. The representations of Ganga and Yamuna are the most beautiful creations in Indian art. Most of the images

of river Ganga and Yamuna are carved on the doorway of Siva temple, since River Ganga was associated with Lord Siva who is known as Gangadhara, upholder of Ganga. Though, the image worship of Ganga was prevailed, but image worship of Yamuna was not mentioned in ancient texts, but according to the legend, the holiness of Yamuna depends upon her connection with Ganga Maitra (1921). They are symbols of fertility, growth and plenty Stietencron (2010).

The images of Ganga and Yamuna are mostly found on the temple door during Gupta period. Several ancient texts narrate about the representations of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. The Vishnudharmottara Purana mentioned that the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna were connected with Vedic deity Varuna who is the Lord of the rain, water and sea. The text mentions that in the visual representations, the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are shown to the right and left respectively of Varuna. The text again mentions that in the visual representation of Ganga, river goddess is illustrated with charming face having moon-like white colour. She is illustrated with two hands holding a chamara (fly whisk) and a padma. Her vehicle is matsya or makara. River goddess Yamuna's appearance is also good looking, and holds a chamara and a nilotpala in her hands. The river goddess stands on a tortoise Rao (1916). Ganga was mentioned in Mahabharata where she was described as a good-looking woman having body-lustre like a lotus flower. On the other hand, Yamuna is described as young girl with black complexion. The poet Kalidas of 5th century AD records in Kumarasambhava that with fly-whisks the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna appear in person to serve Lord Siva Varadpande (2006).

## **2. RIVER GODDESSES IN INDIAN ART**

In early Indian art, river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna were not shown as independent deity, river goddesses were associated with Vedic deity Varuna. On the later phase, river goddesses attached at the entrance of the temple as guardian deity. The origin of the concept of river goddesses can be traced back to Indus Valley Civilization. Dikshit remarks on this idea as, "On the analogy of the Ganges being associated with the crocodile (makara) and Yamuna with the tortoise, the long-headed gharial, which is so common on Indus seals, and usually represented with a fish in the mouth, may have been associated with the Indus as a river god or goddess" Dikshit (1939). Though, Gupta period was marked to develop the sculptural forms of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, but the first representations of river goddesses are observed in Buddhist art of India. It is noteworthy that Jataka stories also record about the worship of goddess Ganga. The original concept of iconographic representation of river goddess is derived from Yakshi and Salabhanjika of Buddhist art. The railings, pillars of Bharhut stupa and Sanchi stupa depict a good number of sculptural images of Yakshi (female spirit of nature) and Salabhanjika (lady under sala tree). Yakshis are mostly found standing on animals or composited animal forms (Figure 1). One sculptural image of female deity in Bharhut stupa shows the iconographic representation of Ganga, because the deity is riding on the back of an elephant-faced called makara on the surface of water. The Machchhuddana Jataka identifies the goddess as presiding deity of the river and protector of the fishes Barua (1934). Another female deity known as Chandra Yakshi is observed on the fragment of pillar of Bharhut stupa. The deity stands on a horse-faced makara, and holding a branch of tree with her right hand, and the other hand which embraces the trunk touches the tassels of the girdle at the waist. Later, some features of Yakshis reflected on the representations of river goddesses.

The representations of river goddesses were frequently carved on the door-frame of the cave or temple during Gupta period. The depiction of river goddesses on the door-frame is one of the characteristic features of Gupta art. In the first phase of Gupta art, the river goddesses were illustrated at the top of the door-jambs of the temple or cave, and in later phase of Gupta art, the river goddesses started to appear at the bottom of the door-jambs. The river goddesses are observed at the top of door-jambs of the three caves at Udayagiri and several caves at Ajanta. The earliest depiction of the river goddesses is found from the Chandragupta cave of Udayagiri hill of 5th century AD (Figure 2). The river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are carved as the relief panel of the side wall at the Chandragupta cave of Gupta period. In the representation, the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are shown descending from heaven to earth, and they reached the ocean with their vehicles crocodile and tortoise respectively, and below them is Varuna, god of ocean, who holds a vessel in his hands. The river is shown by carving some undulating lines. These river goddesses are not associated with the doorway. This depiction revealed that the river goddesses were not connected with doorway in the early phase of Indian art, later their depictions appeared on the doorway. The river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna (Figure 3) appear at the top of the door-jambs of the Kankali temple at Tigawa of Madhya Pradesh. The temple belonged to the period of 5th century AD. In the representations, Ganga is shown plucking a fruit from a custard-apple tree, and Yamuna is plucking a fruit from a mango tree. Both the goddesses stand on their respective vahanas crocodile and tortoise. Gupta emperors also used the image of river goddess Ganga with her vehicle makara on the coins.

The river goddesses are very important deity for Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, because the Hindu caves, Buddhist caves and Jaina caves at Ellora depict the sculptural representations of river goddesses on their carvings. The Ellora cave no. 6 which is dedicated to Buddhism is datable to the 7th century AD, contains the river goddesses with their vahanas. At Ellora cave no. 16 which is known as Kailasa cave, one shrine is dedicated to the river goddesses Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati who stand on makara, tortoise and lotus respectively. Ganga stands for Purity, Yamuna for Devotion and Sarasvati for Knowledge Gupte (1962). The Ellora cave no. 21 known as Ramesvara depicts beautiful sculptures of Ganga (Figure 4) and Yamuna on their respective vehicles. Cave no 33 at Ellora is dedicated to Jainism, also displays the sculptural figures of Ganga and Yamuna.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Yakshi of Bharhut Stupa

Source <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharhut>

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** River Goddesses Ganga-Yamuna at Udayagiri Cave

Source <https://www.indica.today/long-reads/echoes-storied-past-ancient->

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** River Goddesses Ganga and Yamuna at Kankali Temple

Source <https://puratattva.in/tigawa>

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** River Goddess Ganga at Ellora Cave No 21

Source <https://wikimedia.org>



### 3. RIVER GODDESSES IN TEMPLE ART OF ASSAM

In ancient temple sites of Assam, some beautiful sculptural images of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna have been discovered. Two beautiful sculptural images of river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are observed at Daparbatiya temple site. The temple is situated at Tezpur, and is in ruin condition now. The temple was belonged to the Gupta period of 5th century AD. Though, Assam was not ruled by the Gupta rulers, but the rulers of Varman dynasty which was the first historic ruler in Assam, were the contemporary to the Gupta rulers. From the historical sources it was known that there was a good relation between two dynasties. Though, the inscription was not discovered at the temple site, but it was assumed that the Daparbatiya temple was originally constructed in Gupta period, because one carved door-frame of stone existed on the plinth of the temple (Figure 5), and two representations of river goddesses were sculptured at the bottom of the door-jambs. The river goddess Ganga is illustrated on the right-side, and Yamuna is carved on the left-side at the bottom of the door-jambs (Figure 6). The vahanas are absent on the images, because the extreme lower parts of the goddesses are unfortunately broken. Both the river goddesses carry the attendant figures who are in different postures. The river goddesses stand in tribhanga posture holding a long garland in their hands. Two flying geese carry garlands in their beaks towards each hallow of the river goddesses. According to Banerji, this is new feature in Gupta art Banerji (1933). The scene is rightly considered as the most lyrical poetry is written on the stone Choudhury (1987). In the composition of river goddess Ganga, two female attendants in standing posture are depicted with goddess. One of them is holding fly whisk, and another attendant figure is partially broken. On the other hand, river goddess Yamuna is shown with three attendant female figures. Two are in tribhanga posture, and hold a water pot and flywhisk in their hands respectively, and other attendant figure is in kneeling posture offering flowers in anjali-mudra to the river goddess. The river goddesses are beautified by necklaces, earrings, anklets, bangles etc. The female deities and other attendant figures wear highly transparent dresses which clearly exposed bodily forms. Mongoloid look is reflected in the appearances of the river goddesses. Regarding this matter, Banerji mentions that reflection of mongoloid looks in the figures is one of the characteristic features of Benares school of art which reflected on the river goddesses of Daparbatiya temple Banerji (1981). The figures are naturalistic in the carvings where the correctness of anatomy of the river goddesses is very similar with the Hellenistic sculpture. Besides, the standing postures of the goddesses are very similar with the Venus of Milo of ancient Roman art Choudhury (1985). It is astonished that in a limited space, the artist was able to carve the figures proportionately. The river goddesses are sculpted with exquisite feminine grace and alluring charm.

Two sculptures of Ganga and Yamuna are excavated from Ambari archaeological site, Guwahati now preserved at Assam State Museum (Figure 7). The images are found in good condition. The goddesses are easily identifiable for their vehicles makara and kurma. Here, the river goddesses are associated with snake or Naga as canopy behind their heads. River goddess Ganga is given three-hooded snake canopy behind her head, and at the back of Yamuna's head is placed two-hooded snake canopy. The right hand of each goddess holds a water-vessel, and the left hand holds a tail of the snake with abhaya-mudra. They are richly decorated with all kinds of ornaments. They wear heavy rounded earrings which are decorated with lotus flowers. A long necklace falls over the breasts of each river goddess. A naturalistic approach was given on the carvings of the makara and kurma. In the

carvings, the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna were influenced by the Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture flourished between 800 AD-1200 AD. Main feature of the Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture was the stele carving which was attached to river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. At the top of each stele of river goddesses, one kirtimukha motif is illustrated. These images of river goddesses were not associated with the doorway of the temple. The images of river goddesses can be assigned to 12th century AD.

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Door-frame at Daparbatiya Temple

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** River Goddesses Ganga -Yamuna at Daparbatiya Temple Door

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** River Goddesses Ganga and Yamuna, Ambari Archaeological Site

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, we may state that river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are highly developed, and pleasing sculptures found in temple art of Assam. Though, there is religious significance to depict river goddesses on the door-jambs of the temple, but the images of river goddesses are illustrated for the beautification of the temple. The carvings of the river goddesses in Brahmanical art were started right from Gupta period, and continued till 12th century AD in temple art of Assam. It is observed that in temple art of Assam, river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are not associated with the temple door in all times. On the ornamentations of the divine images, influences are found from Gupta art and Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture. The figures express the perfect nature of femininity. The sculptor was success to capture the emotions and feelings like real human beings through their carvings.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Banerji, R. D. (1933). *The Age of the Imperial Guptas*. The Benares Hindu University.
- Barua, B. (1934). *Bharhut*. Indian Research Institute Publications.
- Choudhury, R. D. (1985). *Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*. Agam Kala Prakashan.
- Choudhury, R. D. (1987). *The Sculptures of Assam*. Assam State Museum.
- Dikshit, K. N. (1939). *Prehistoric Civilization of the Indus Valley*. University of Madras.
- Gupte, R. S. (1962). *Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad Caves*. D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd.
- Maitra, A. K. (1921). *Rupam*. Quarterly Journal of Oriental Art. No. 6.
- Rao, T. A. G. (1916). *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. Volume II. Part II. The Law Printing House.

- Stietencron, H. V. (2010). *Ganga and Yamuna River Goddesses and their Symbolism in Indian Temples*. Permanent Black.
- Varadpande, M. L. (2006). *Woman in Indian Sculpture*. Abhinav Publications.