



Research article

Water and Gender in Recreating Family Life with *Maa Ganga*: The Confluence of Nature and Culture in a North Indian River Pilgrimage

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Abstract: This article studies the meaning of water and gender in the North Indian pilgrimage to the sacred river Ganges. It joins the recent criticism in anthropology concerning the nature/culture divide and aims to transcend that divide by focusing on water, not *apart from* but as *part of* social life. Assuming that water's sociality is gendered, the authors look at how both the river water—itsself as a landscape material—and the pilgrims' engagements with that water are gendered. Starting from the central question: *How do men's and women's ritual engagements with the sacred female river water (mutually) construct social life?*, the article investigates men's and women's ritual use of water at different sites. It focuses on more than the central pilgrimage shrine and links the sacred river site to people's homes to know how the moving river water, collected by pilgrims at the shrine, is used in water rituals back home. Trying to counterbalance the male and scriptural bias which is prominent in the literature on Ganges' pilgrimage sites, the pilgrimage is studied from the perspective of lived religion that takes people's embodied practices and sensory experiences of nature into account as well as people's everyday life. By showing how men's and women's rituals differ and complement each other, it argues that men's rituals at the pilgrimage site and women's rituals at home serve the recreation of the family in a paired way. The argument is built on longitudinal and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork at the Ganges river shrine in Haridwar (Uttarakhand) and pilgrims' residence in Udaipur (Rajasthan).

Key words: Pilgrimage; Hinduism; nature/culture divide; sacred landscape; gender; anthropology

1. Introduction

In this article on the pilgrimage to the river Ganges in India, we will focus on two related problems. On the one hand we join the recent criticism in anthropology concerning the nature/culture divide by following the fluid movement of water across that divide. On the other hand we try to counterbalance the male and scriptural bias which is prominent in the literature on Ganges' pilgrimage sites; a tendency that emphasises issues of death, funeral rites and afterlife [1,2]; and overvalues spiritual morals like world renunciation (*moksha*), transcendence, and matters of purity and pollution. As this results in a neglect of people's *lived* religion (as opposed to prescribed or institutional religion), we concentrate on people's embodied religious practices and sensory experiences of sacred landscapes in which life and being are at the centre and values like fertility, prosperity, and pleasure are promoted [3–5].

By transcending the nature/culture divide we focus on water, not *apart from* but as *part of* social life. As people have an intense, intimate relationship with Ganges' holy water, it is an appropriate starting point to cross the divide and to study how nature and social life are intertwined [6–8]. People's bodily engagement with water (drinking it, immersing themselves in it, praying to it) is, according to Strang [9], “the perfect example of a recursive relationship in which nature and culture literally flow in each other”. Taking the assertion that water is “social by nature” [10] one step further we claim that the sociality of water must inevitably be gendered. In recent debates on the (im)possibilities to transgress the nature/culture divide the gendered aspects of both nature and human/nature relationships have received scant attention; even though that same divide has deeply influenced the gender debate since Ortner raised the question: is “female to male as nature to culture” [11].

Studying the gendered social nature of water opens up a different perspective on gender roles within private and public spaces. The (inferior) women-nature and (superior) men-culture association echoes in dominant ideologies of patrilineal descent in India and practices related to the allegedly male dominated joint families (virilocality, dowry, arranged marriages, son preference, and *pardaa*: women's veiling and confinement in the home).ⁱ The dominant discourse tends to put women in subdominant positions, living their lives at “the margins of Hindu marriages” [12]. Confined to the domicile, and valued for their “natural”/physical capacity of procreation, women are ascribed the caring roles while men, being associated with the mind and the spiritual, are awarded the more prestigious religious, political and economic roles in public spaces [11]. We contest this female/male, private/public divide through recognizing that women are deeply engaged in religious practice, not only in the domicile but also as engaged actors “in environments where Sanskrit traditions maintain a strong presence” [13]. Women's religious participation goes beyond domesticity and stretches out as far as the pilgrimage site, empowering them in their everyday life. Furthermore, a revaluation of men's lived religion is also part of our endeavour to break through the exclusive gender divide. Shrine-centred studies focussing on men as

priests or religious businessmen in the public domain of prescribed and scriptural religion [1,2] tend to overlook the importance of men's lived religion at the pilgrimage site and the important contributions they make to the rituals at home. We therefore want to explore the fluid boundaries between gendered rituals and focus on the water rituals as being inclusive rather than exclusive and investigate how together they create social life.

Our idea that men's and women's lived religion needs to be studied in both public and private places, resonates Coleman and Eade's [14] argument that pilgrimage cannot be studied as an isolated phenomenon. They argue that any ethnographic approach has to take in more than the central shrine and link pilgrimage to people's everyday life, broader social processes and various intersecting forms of motion. A pilgrim's journey, as also Gold [15] puts it, is usually a round trip, yet Hindu pilgrimage has commonly been studied from that journey's destination with little attention to its closure or return lap. Previous research on European pilgrimage [16,17] also showed the importance of multisited research as the meanings people attach to the main shrine could not be fully disclosed as long as people's intimate engagements with the sacred at home remained unstudied. Following pilgrimage theorists Coleman and Eade and Rajasthan ethnographer Gold, we deliberately focus on the intersecting movement of water that connects shrine and private homes while considering the broader social process of constructing and consolidating social life to get a holistic view on how water and gender matter in this river pilgrimage.

We want to investigate not only how gender matters in nature's sociality, but also how the confluence of nature and culture can make the female/male divide more fluid. In this article, we will look at how both water—itsself as a landscape material—and human engagements with water are gendered in the specific context of the Hindu pilgrimage to the Ganges in North India. The central question we will answer is: *How do men's and women's ritual engagements with the sacred female river water (mutually) construct social life?* We will answer this question by focusing on the water rituals at the pilgrimage site of Haridwar and people's residence in Udaipur and investigate how men's and women's rituals differ and complement each other over the different locations. In doing this it will appear that we have to transgress more persistent divides, closely related to the nature/culture divide: life versus death, female versus male, domestic versus public and pilgrimage site versus everyday life.

2. The Pilgrimage

The Ganges in India is a river, a goddess and a mother at the same time. People affectionately call her *Maa Ganga* (mother Ganga) and consider her the perfect mother, embracing, nourishing, forgiving, and offering unconditional love to everyone. She is part of, as Eck [18] states, “a living sacred geography that Hindus hold in common.” All along the river people bathe in the running waters of Maa Ganga for connection, relaxation, and rejuvenation. These occasional and highly valued bodily immersions in the river are part of people's lifelong relationship with the river, a relationship that stretches far beyond the river's geographical location. The social life of pilgrims and that of the river intersect and feed into each other over long distances.

A major bathing pilgrimage centre is Haridwar, also known as *Gangadvaara*, the “door to the Ganges”, at the foothills to the Himalayas. Here, the river has just clattered down from the high mountains and now wildly pushes her way through the pilgrimage site. Still being cold and fresh and forcefully moving, she is said to be extremely clean and purifying. Haridwar is the major river city for doing *asthi visarjana* (*asthi* meaning bone ashes and *visarjana* meaning immersion in water) and for this it attracts numerous pilgrims from all over India [1]. All year round, pilgrims come to the Haridwar *ghats*—a chain of stone terraces and stairs running down into the sacred water all along the town’s riverbanks—for performing different life-stage rituals; for enjoyment during a family pilgrimage; for taking a bath and the bodily sensation of Ganga’s running waters; for making flower offerings to her; and for filling bottles with river water and taking the holy water back home.

Rivers are moving landscape elements, connecting places. Pilgrims also make the river move by fetching its water and taking it back home, herewith connecting the river, Mother Ganga and the pilgrimage site to their hometown and residence. This ritual movement of water takes place all over India and results in multiplying and scattering the sacred river over uncountable private places where it is kept for years in a sealed containers in household shrines [4,15]. In the city of Udaipur in Rajasthan, approximately 850 kilometres from Haridwar, pilgrims store substantial stocks of Ganga *jal* (water) at home as a precious souvenir and a powerful religious material to be used in a variety of domestic rituals. Both women and men love to go to the Ganges for recreation; while men particularly take the lead when they have to accompany the ashes of deceased relatives for immersion in the holy river; women manage the rituals in which bottled Ganga *jal* plays a crucial role.

3. The Fieldwork

We undertook fieldwork at both the pilgrimage site and Udaipur. Pfister spent three months in Haridwar in 2012. In 2013, she shortly visited the place again together with Notermans before she spent one more month of ethnographic fieldwork in Udaipur that same year [19]. Between 2008 and 2016 Notermans travelled to Udaipur yearly and spent a total of 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork there. The fieldwork in the crowded pilgrimage site of Haridwar—where people from different places briefly cross trying to complete a tight ritual programme—was characterized by short and loose contacts with pilgrims (men as well as women), numerous occasions of small talk and repeated daily (participant) observations of different rituals at the ghats at different moments of the day. The fieldwork in Udaipur was mainly characterized by building intimate and confidential relationships with people of different age, gender, class and caste, repeated visits and follow-up interviews at home, elicitation methods (inserting photos and small bottles of Ganga *jal* collected at the pilgrimage site in the interviews), and a limited number of case studies built up in the course of the years and focusing on key-informants (married women of different ages, classes and castes) and their social networks. Additionally, small talk, semi-structured interviews, and (participant) observation of rituals in private homes and public spaces like temples, streets, and lakes, were done in Udaipur.

To answer our central question we will take three steps, consistent with the three sets of gendered rituals that people perform with the river water. First, we focus on the family oriented bathing rituals, undertaken by men and women together. Second, we concentrate on male funeral rituals in Haridwar before we, third, turn to the city of Udaipur to see how women use the bottled Ganga jal in their rituals at home. We conclude by analysing how the male and female rituals differ from, resemble and complement each other.

4. Bathing Rituals in Haridwar: a Celebration of Family Life

Every day at sunrise it is peak hour at the ghats of Haridwar. Amidst the hive of activities, families peacefully focus their attention on their private rituals, creating a personal space for themselves within the masses. Having freed themselves from daily schedules and responsibilities, families enjoy their being together and their intimate connection with Maa Ganga. At sunset, people again gather at the river to attend the Ganga *aarti*, the fire offering ceremony. This ceremony is the major public ritual. People sit down at the steps, facing the river, and pray and sing along with the priests. During this big ceremony, pilgrims offer Maa Ganga small green leaf boats carrying bright coloured flowers (marigolds, roses) and incense sticks. These little boats take along their prayers for the family: for pregnancy, to have a son, a good daughter-in-law, good health, peace in marriage, or a good death.

River bathing in the morning time can be done anywhere at the river bank, and no priests are needed for instructions. Assisting each other is central to the bathing ritual. As there is a very strong current in Haridwar's Ganges, people hold each other's arms while being in or going under the water to express solidarity and togetherness. Pilgrims generally do not bathe individually. We either saw couples bathing—with and without children—or joint families. Especially the little boys who were taken to the river for *mundan*, a hair-cut ceremony to thank the goddess for the birth of a son in the family, are given a careful ritual bath by the women accompanying them. Taking pictures of the bathing is also part of the ritual: couples or families stand together in the water, holding each other and posing for a picture that will be taken home as a souvenir. To complete the bathing ritual, bottles and containers of different colours and sizes are filled with river water, also meant to be taken back home. Photos showing this unique moment of collecting holy water are also a very much wanted souvenir and meant to be shown to the relatives and friends who stayed behind.

When taking a Ganga bath, people intimately approach the holy river, immersing their physical body in her liquid body, feeling her temperature, and interacting with her energetic movements. This sensory experience of Ganga's running water is at the core of people's valuation of it. The joy pilgrims express when playing in the river touched us when we observed the bathing rituals. When asking a 43-years-old woman living in the desert city of Udaipur and having travelled three times to Haridwar with her husband and three children, what she felt when taking a bath in the river Ganges during her pilgrimage, she answered:

Cold water. Ganga is coming directly from the mountains, it's like ice water. Here in Udaipur we never have a cold shower, water is always warm, even in winter. When water is cold as ice, it's so refreshing. It makes your mind cool. When taking a Ganga snaan (bath), every bad thing you did, every person you hurt, every small animal you killed, the goddess

will forgive you all this. You can start anew, you have new life. After the snaan you are pure, neat and clean. You feel happiness because of the fresh and cool water, it's purifying you.

Our informants described the refreshment of their immersion in the river as a kind of re-birth and renewal. Men and woman together go back to the source of life—the living water—to confirm their life together and to get new energy from Maa Ganga. When people express what they experience during river bathing they commonly say they feel “re-energized”, “rejuvenated”, “they regain their strength”. The full bodily immersion makes people calm down, it makes problems seem manageable and subsequently fills the pilgrims with power. The woman cited above told us that she did not know how to tackle all problems she was facing in the family but after the bathing she felt like: “I’m fit. Fit to fight for life, fight for everything.” Ganga, she said, encouraged her to realize her plans and to pursue the goals she set for herself and her family. Such stress-relieving, life-giving and empowering aspects of the river goddess are emphasized by all informants.

In the literature on the holy Ganges river, it is often said that Ganga’s running water absorbs pollution and carries it away [1,2,18]. Though people in their accounts refer to sin, it was not the negative experience of penance or pollution that was physically felt in the water, but rather the positive feeling of getting the chance of being reborn, the happiness of starting something anew, realising one’s plans, and getting a new life. The accounts were not about morals but about the bodily pleasure of full immersion in Maa Ganga, the positive energy they get from this and the pleasure of being together with the family. While from the official Hindu perspective, men are supposed to take the leading role in public rituals, women are evidently present at the riverside in large numbers. They even play an important role in the public rituals: they often organize the pilgrimages, prepare everyone’s food and luggage, lead the hair-cut ceremonies, and take an equal share in bathing, offering, photographing, and catching water. Women and men often go for a dip together and ignore any gender segregation.

Our observations of the bathing rituals show that pilgrims long to express family solidarity and fecundity while connecting with Maa Ganga. The meaning of the pilgrimage is not to pull men and women apart but to bring them together in Ganga’s presence, to celebrate life and family life. Like people cannot live without water, they neither can live without each other: it is their togetherness that brings life and is celebrated at the riverside. The image of bathing families, enjoying and protecting each other, is a beautiful portrayal of the connecting role that Maa Ganga plays in her devotee’s lives, caring for both the horizontal (marriage, affinity, consanguinity) and vertical (offspring, descent, ancestors) family lines.

Being immersed in the water is, as Strang states in her comparative studies on the meaning of water and rivers, “going back to the womb” [20]. In Haridwar, this statement even makes more sense as pilgrims consider the river to be their mother: her waters are everyone’s womb, men and women, young and old, poor and rich. Her waters are, in Strang’s words [21], “a generative and regenerative force”. Couples and families return to Maa Ganga’s womb to reconfirm their life, to secure their offspring and to care for their predecessors. Bathing in Maa Ganga’s womb is recreation in the sense of play and relaxation, and of renewal and revitalization at the same time [22]. By recreating in the river pilgrims obviously re-create the family.

Our informants directly referred to the re-creating aspects of river bathing by alluding to the fertility-oriented wedding ceremony. A 32-years-old female pilgrim said: “I travelled to Haridwar together

with my husband for our honeymoon. We didn't have children yet but went there together with my husband's parents and his sister to ask Ganga for multiplying the family." A similar association with the wedding ceremony was made by a 43-years-old woman, saying: "When taking the Ganga *snaan*, my husband and I hold each other's hand and jump up and down seven times. Seven times up and down the water, like we do during the wedding ceremony. We then walk seven times around the sacred fire, hands tied up." The couple's close physical connection, their mutual commitment, and their desire to multiply or secure the family are thus repeated each time they take a river bath together.

5. Men's Performances at Haridwar's River Bank: Death As a Regeneration of Life

Besides the informal bathing rituals in which entire families participate according to their own wishes, there are other more formal rituals done at the riverside. They are meant to honour one's dead relatives, require priestly guidance, and have to be performed at allocated places: the concrete square platforms built over the river at the central and most important Har Ki Pauri ghat. These rituals are the mourning-ritual *asthi visarjana* and the ancestor ritual *pind daan* (*pind* meaning balls of food, *daan* meaning offering). Both rituals are rooted in the belief that the river goddess is not only a mother but also a visible and tangible mediator between the world of the living and the realm of the ancestors.

In both rituals men are the principal actors. They carefully follow the instructions of a *pandit* (male priest) who guide them through the ritual. While the spouse and sometimes a little child are present during the ritual (and remain in the background to support and assist), the first born son of a deceased relative has to take the lead.ⁱⁱ He has the hereditary position to guarantee the family line. According to the ideology of patrilineal descent, males are the lineage heads who link foregoing, present and successive generations.

The first ritual we observed at the riverside is *asthi visarjana*, an ancestor ritual preferably done within the twelve days of the mourning period. After cremation, the remaining ashes and bones—now called *phul* (flowers)—are collected at the cremation ground and put in a red bag of cloth to be transported, immersed and cooled down in the river water, and offered to Maa Ganga. The eldest son (possibly accompanied by his wife) travels to Haridwar to assist his parent (father, mother, uncle) on his or her passage to be reborn as an ancestor. The other women in the extended family stay behind to care for the mourning relatives visiting them at home, and to prepare the food party that concludes the mourning period on the twelfth day after death.

When a parent dies, the firstborn son has to perform various religious tasks: to light the cremation fire, to perform *kapaal kriyaa* (cracking open the burning skull with a bamboo pole to release the spirit) mid-way through the cremation, and to accompany the "flowers" to Maa Ganga. The son and his wife solemnly go through all necessary ritual stages till the moment is there to open the bag with ashes and bones and to release them in the running Ganges.

By sinking the flowers in the Ganges the first-born son recreates the family line in a two-fold way: he gives the deceased parent the opportunity to be reborn as an ancestor from the womb of Maa Ganga, and after a last cleansing bath in the river, he himself is reborn as the new family head [23]. Death thus

regenerates family life in these rituals. Water is not only the fundamental source of *life* but also of *afterlife*. For our gender analysis of the river water rituals, it is important to emphasise that when “life is created out of death” [24], men’s reproductive roles are centre stage. Parry in his study on men’s ritual activity at the Ganges pilgrimage site of Banaras emphasises that:

A father has to produce a son to perform his obsequies and to perpetuate the ancestral offerings he has made. (...) Without a son there is no prospect of attaining heaven. (...) The father repays his debt to his father by giving him birth on a new and higher plane, and this newly created ancestor in turn confers fertility and material prosperity on his descendants. (...) Not only is the son responsible for the rebirth of his father, but there is also perhaps a sense in which he is himself reborn as his father—or at least as the bearer of his father’s worldly status and responsibilities. He is described as the “rebirth” of his father [25].

Complementary to the way women give birth to children from the waters of their womb, at death it is men who perform the acts of regeneration by giving birth to ancestors from the waters of Maa Ganga’s womb. Phul, we learn from Gold [26], not only means “flowers” but “also means womb and menstrual blood, the very place and stuff of birth.” This shows how the oppositional extremes of life and death come very close in people’s performances at the river side. Women *and* men play a prominent role in the recreation of family life: while women give birth and are held responsible for the accompanying rituals (while their husbands support them in the background), men give re-birth and are held responsible for the accompanying rituals (while their wives support them in the background). Women’s and men’s contributions keep the life cycle going in different though complementary ways.

When asking a 32-years old mother of a single daughter whom she dearly loves and affectionately educates, who will bring her ashes to Haridwar when she dies, she said: “My daughter can do, but if my husband’s brother’s son is ready to do it, he will go, as he is the one who will carry on the family line. My daughter will leave the family after marriage and devote herself to her husband’s family.” In a similar way, all women we interviewed confirmed the complementary tasks women and men have in building their family. The women did not interpret such a gendered division of tasks as discrimination or subordination; they rather refer to patrilineality as a practice in which men also have to take up the responsible position of reproducing the family.

To study how gender is at stake in the riverside rituals and how men and women complement each other, it is important to note that the re-birth of an ancestor is not always accomplished with the ritual of ashti visarjana. People’s care for their deceased relatives does not stop here as some ancestors still ask for attention in their spiritual after-life. This care is equally given by husband and wife, with men taking the lead at the riverside and women taking the lead back home (which will be further explained in the next section). Whether an ancestor persists asking attention depends on the way he/she died. The spirits of those who died a good death (at old age, having living progeny, preferably a son) receive peace when their bodily remains sink in the river. They are able to distance themselves from the living to join the lineage ancestors in the ancestor realm. In contrast, the spirits of those who died a bad death (in the prime of their life, due to an unexpected, painful or violent event) are not able to distance from the living relatives and

stay unquiet. They continue asking for attention and interfere in the affairs of their living kin, either by giving advice and blessings or imposing their needs and whims upon the left-behind family [27].

This brings us to the second ancestor ritual we observed at the Ganges in Haridwar, the ritual called pind daan which is meant to honour one's ancestors and conciliate the restless, disturbing spirits of ancestors who have not yet left and are able to bring misfortune in the family. When a family suffers from any inexplicable though persistent problem, they feel obliged to appease the displeased ancestor who is supposed to cause problems. By doing pind daan the family aims to invoke the blessings of the ancestor and to help him or her to go to the spirit world. It unites, as Gold [28] states, "the spirit of a recently deceased person with previous generations in his patrilineage, and thus with the ancestors in the ancestor-realm." The ritual thus expresses the ongoing reciprocal relationship between living and dead relatives: The dead need the living for helping them to depart peacefully and the living need the blessings of the ancestors to live a healthy and prosperous life [29].

Pind daan needs to be done by a male heir and guided by a priest. In nearly all rituals we observed the wife of the family's son was also present and supported him in all stages and ritual gestures. While from a patrilineal ideological perspective the man is supposed to be the main actor during these rituals, from the perspective of lived religion, women also matter as they are used to look after the spirits of the lingering dead who have become household deities, fed and honoured at the family's home shrine.ⁱⁱⁱ The attendance of both spouses is thus needed to remove the lingering presence of a dead relative's spirit from his home forever.

Though pind daan literally means 'the offering of balls of food' people mostly offer rice or flour balls to the ancestors in this ritual. The couple mixes the different ingredients with Ganga jal and knead the rice or flour dough into small balls that are put in rows on a plate and decorated with flowers, representing the different generations of ancestors. It is interesting that here, like in the ritual of ashti visarjana, the symbolism of birth and parturition is present. Pind, a term which can denote any rounded mass also means "embryo, formed with the mixing of semen and blood matured in the woman's stomach by her digestive fire" [30]. In the light of our gender analysis looking for the complementarity of women's and men's ritual acts, it is revealing to see pind as an embryo that represents the ancestor to-be-reborn. It leads us to a conclusion that both sacrificial acts, those of sinking the flowers and making the rice balls, are (predominantly) male acts of regeneration.

6. Women's Performances with Ganga Jal in Udaipur City

Whatever reason the pilgrims have to visit Haridwar, they will always fill bottles with the precious river water to take it back home. Besides the fact of being transportable, pilgrims attribute two other important qualities to the holy river water. The first is that the water always remains pure and powerful and never spoils, even when it is bottled for years. The second is that one drip of holy water, when mixed with ordinary water, will turn the whole amount into pure and holy water. It thus easily multiplies itself and this is key to the way women handle small amounts of river water for years. Once the river water enters pilgrims' homes, it becomes women's affair. In line with the literature [12,13] we observed that in the

domestic sphere, women, and especially the older ladies, take the lead in religious activities, while men support them in the background.

Rather than distributing the water as a souvenir to neighbours or friends, women keep it for private use. No one is allowed to touch their stock of holy water; it is up to them to decide on the use of it. Though collected at a mass pilgrimage site, the bottled water is so much linked to intimate family events, that it is only used in the circle of women's most intimate relatives and friends. They mix the sacred water with well water in belly-shaped pots and apply it in all kind of rituals.^{iv} Some rituals are regular, other occasional, some daily, other weekly or yearly, but all are meant to secure the family and to promote the family's fecundity, prosperity, and health. The preciousness of the water and the exceptionality of the long journey undertaken to get it, sharply contrast with the everydayness, easiness and inconspicuousness with which women treat the water. As we cannot give a full account of women's repertoire of water rituals, we will restrict our account to three different categories of ritual practice in which women use the collected Ganga jal at home: purification rituals, daily worship rituals (*puja*), and occasional rituals that are part of goddess festivals (*Navratri* and *Gangoj*).

Purification rituals with Ganga jal are done in times of a temporary pollution of the body through birth, menstruation, death, or daily domestic chores. For instance, when a daughter or daughter-in-law comes back from hospital with her new-born child both will be sprinkled with Ganga jal in order to purify them from the temporary pollution of child birth and to protect their health as well as that of the joint family. At the unforeseen though inevitable moment a relative dies, women will pour some drops of Ganga jal into the mouth of the dead person in order to purify the body before it leaves. The purification power of Ganga jal is also important for the women themselves who, during their daily routines constantly have to switch between domestic chores and religious work. Religious work demands bodily purity which is jeopardized in impure domestic work. With the help of some drops of Ganga jal they can accomplish those switches much faster. Yet another purification ritual is sprinkling the house with Ganga jal for expelling evil spirits. This ritual is always done with the intention to restore peace and a good atmosphere in the home when unwanted spirits roam around.

A few days after we met a 34-years-old married woman with two daughters and offered her a bottle of Ganga jal we brought from Haridwar, a substantial amount of the water seemed to be used already. "I cleaned everything," she said, "the walls, the floor, the bed, the kitchen, the kitchen utensils. I washed myself, the children and the gods. We all feel safe and happy now." Later, we heard from her 70-years-old mother-in-law, whom we had equally offered a bottle of sacred river water, that she kept it in a safe place and instead used the water of her daughter-in-law. "I am relieved", she said. "Now that I have that water, I can die peacefully."

The second category of ritual practice consists of daily worship rituals. In every joint family there is (besides the smaller shrines for each daughter-in-law) one principal home shrine where twice a day, at sunrise and sunset, *puja* is done under the expert guidance of the eldest lady, the mother-in-law (the wife of the eldest man in the family). Being the matriarch in the household this woman is charged with the maintenance of the lineage god (*kul deva*), the village god (*grama deva*, god of the village the family originates from) the ancestors (especially those who died a bad death, remain restless and seated in the

home shrine), her personal favourite god (*ishta deva*) and a number of varying popular Hindu gods. They all dwell at the home shrine to be remembered and pampered. On behalf of all people in the household, the woman bathes, clothes and feeds them, prays and sings for them in order to make them happy. Washing them with the precious water of Maa Ganga is a first requisite to please and propitiate the gods and ancestors and to foster their willingness to care for the family by giving their protection and prosperity in return.

Though women do not easily give away their bottles of collected Ganga jal, they do distribute the precious water in their daily worship: by sprinkling the water, giving a *tilak* (red dot on the forehead) containing the water, and indirectly via the gods and ancestors when they give their blessings in return for all the favours given to them. Doing so, the water supports them in connecting the gods and the family, and to make both vertical (between the living and the dead and between different generations) and horizontal (between the relatives in the household) connections within the family. Women's engagements with the river water thus ensure that the family is well. At the same time they built up religious authority by keeping Maa Ganga at their side in doing all this care work.

While the goddess cares for everyone—men and women alike—and men need her help in their re-creating and caring acts at the riverside, women as females more strongly identify with her motherhood and female body. To illustrate this, we now turn to the third category: the occasional festivals. From women's vast ritual repertoire, we select two and thereby focus on their water aspects: the yearly *Durgaa* (Mother Goddess) festival Navratri (celebrated nationwide), and the family related ritual Gangoj for Maa Ganga.^v Both rituals are done to invite the goddess in people's homes.

During the nine-day festival of Navratri women focus their ritual attention on a particular temporary representation of the goddess in their home shrine: a coconut, dressed in a red sari and wearing a gold coloured garland made of marigolds, that is put on a *kalash* (terracotta belly-shaped pot) filled with Ganga jal.^{vi} This together is put on a bed of soil mixed with barley seeds. During the nine days, women pour Ganga jal into the kalash that trickles down the pot, irrigates the soil and makes the barley grow. Women say, the more they care for the goddess by watering her, the higher the green grass-stalks will grow and the more support the goddess will give in return. Fertility is at the core of this ritual practice. The coconut is dressed like a married woman with sari and golden necklace expressing her marital status and the colour red being the colour of blood, fire and fertility. Both coconut and kalash filled with water represent women's wombs that nurture life and bring offspring. "When the grass grows high, the goddess will give us prosperity in life," informants repeatedly told us and thereby referred to plenty and healthy offspring, plenty of food and money, and success in marital and professional life.

For the ritual of Gangoj women also fill terracotta water pots with Ganga jal and put them on a bed of soil mixed with wheat seeds. Again they water the pots to make the wheat grow and to see whether the goddess reveals her commitment or not. This ritual happens according to the particular circumstances of a family: after a wedding, when finishing house building, after the 12-days period of grief, after a long journey, or after any bad event when people want to start anew.

As soon as the goddess, through the sprouts, shows her loyalty, the married women of the family carry the pots with Ganga jal on their heads to Pichola Lake (one of Udaipur's main city lakes) without

spilling one drop of the sacred water. During this procession, women are beautifully dressed and accompanied by a female drummer in front and a few male relatives behind who protect them. Men are not allowed to carry the pots “because the goddess is female”, our informants explained. On arrival at the waterside the women do puja and subsequently have to bring the goddess safely back home. The way back, we were told, is the heaviest part of the ritual, as the goddess now possesses one or more women in the procession. Through the pots she enters their bodies and makes them move wildly, which makes the task of not spilling the precious Ganga jal even more difficult. One 35 years old woman told us: “The pots become very heavy when the goddess enters through the pots, it’s like you have a big stone in your body that gets rolling, you have to restore your balance all the time. It’s an exercise.” The accompanying men have to protect the women, keep them straight, and prevent them from hurting. Moreover, they have to keep the goddess going by offering coconuts on the way and pouring the coconut water in the pots and sprinkling it on the women’s bodies. The oldest man, the one representing the lineage, carries the walking stick he has brought from a pilgrimage to Haridwar before.^{vii} The man in charge of the stick has to touch the pot and the woman’s body with that stick to urge her to go on. We were told that the goddess needs the action of both women and men to confirm that they will welcome her into their home. On arrival, the women take off the pots from their heads to finish the possession and have to rest for a while. The man has to pay for a food party to celebrate the goddess entrance in the house with close friends and relatives.

The complementary actions of women and men, that are needed to bring good luck and fertility to a family, are nicely enacted in this ritual. The ritual also shows that women’s domestic use of Ganga jal is not restricted to the house, but stretches out to the streets of Udaipur, finding a public stage at the main ghat of Pichola Lake and on the busy streets in the city’s center. The overpowering sound of the drum draws anyone’s attention and makes people step aside. Men symbolically perform and publicly confirm the unity of the goddess and the woman’s body by giving coconut water to pot and woman and by touching both pot and woman with their stick. Unlike the death- and ancestor related rituals in Haridwar where men take the lead and find themselves supported by their wives in the background, in this ritual women are the leading figures and feel supported by the men accompanying them in the background. What is more, the attributes collected at Haridwar—the male stick and the female water—cooperate in this ritual to make the water goddess moving and to bring fecundity in the family. By looking at women’s rituals with Ganga jal at home, we see that in addition to people making journeys to Maa Ganga in Haridwar, the goddess also travels to visit the pilgrims at home. Both come and go to substantiate their mutual dependence and to give life to the family.

7. Conclusion

The water rituals we encountered were unmistakably differentiated by gender, with specific and clearly defined tasks for men as the lineage heirs and for women as the providers of offspring. The gendered rituals also appeared to be site-specific with the male dominated rituals restricted to the pilgrimage site in Haridwar and the female dominated rituals to their residence in Udaipur. From a holistic and multi-sited perspective, we found that the difference inherent to such a gendered ritual specialization

did not refer to any dividedness. Rather than connected with a nature/culture divide we found men's and women's activities to be closely intertwined. With women being associated with birth and men with death and rebirth, and with both genders having intimate connections with the river, there was no matter of "female to male as nature to culture" [11]. We rather found the complementarity of the gendered rituals to be the foundation of any ritual's success and fruitfulness. Men's rituals at the pilgrimage site and women's water rituals at home serve the recreation of the family in a paired way. Men and women *together*, but also *apart* when *being* together, approach the sacred river to re-create family life. With women giving birth to children after pregnancy and men giving re-birth to ancestors at death, they both take their responsibility in the reproduction and renewal of the lineage. Their rituals are complementary *at* and also *across* the sites; they are based on inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness and unite rather than divide.

Studies considering only one side of the divide tend to confirm the belief of the segregations of sexes (often linked to the subdominant/dominant divide, corresponding a nature/culture divide) and consequently get an incomplete view on people's meaningful engagements with water and thus their contributions to the lineage and the joint family. When restricting the research to men, women's active contributions to the ritual repertoire remain hidden, both in private and public domains. Restricting the research to women in their domicile would not only overlook women's public ritual action but men's ritual contributions in the private domain as well. By taking both locations and both genders into account, our study re-values men's religious performances as they do *more* than the prescribed death-and ancestor related rituals and they do it *together* with their wives and families. Even at home, where women claim religious authority and lead in ritual and prayer, men have to contribute as otherwise the rituals would fail.

In the complementarity of the gendered rituals, the gender of the river highly matters. The goddess is seen as a female and a mother, approached by her (male and female) devotees for her water body: the motherly womb, the source of life and afterlife. The imagery of the womb that gives life recurs in all rituals, at the shrine and at home. With the distribution of bottled river water, people set a parallel distribution in motion, that of the image of the womb. It appears in all kinds of red-coloured belly-shaped water pots and in the sari-dressed coconuts, and reminds every one of the power of women's reproductive capacities. Through duplicating the river and herewith the image of the womb, women's power becomes omnipresent. This power is equal to female divine power, and is called *shakti* (life energy, conceived as female). It is recognized, feared, and worshipped by both women and men. This power, however, does not operate in isolation but needs to be balanced with male divine power in order to bring life; otherwise it could be destructive.

Our water and gender perspective on social life enables us to go beyond the dominant discourse on patrilineal kinship and family-making in India and to present a more gender sensitive view on the ideal of patrilineality. Because of practices like virilocality, dowry, and arranged marriages, and their connotation with patriarchy, women tend to be portrayed as "outsiders", or "visitors" in her husband's home. Reproducing, worshipping and working for a family that is not "their own" they are thought to be dominated by their in-laws and particularly the male relatives. The women in our study, however, resolutely identified their post-marital joint family as "their family", the lineage elders as "their ancestors" and the lineage gods as "their" lineage gods. Through all water rituals described in this study they make

themselves familiar with their husband's lineage and make it their lineage as well. The water rituals thus show that patrilineal family-making has to be seen as a joint project in which both female and male forces are evenly matched. The ideal of a "joint family" (originally meaning "joining the generations") is, in religious practice, "jointly" made by the spouses, constantly trying to create or restore the balance.

Our focus on water as a gendered landscape material thus made it possible to move beyond the nature/culture divide *and* to transcend the gender divide as well. In the perceptions of the people involved as well as our observations of the rituals we found the boundaries between men's and women's ritual actions and responsibilities to be open and fluid. The flowing movement of water revealed that gender relations are less rigidly segregated as is often assumed from a male, scriptural or ideological, patrilineal perspective. Power and authority are not concentrated in the hands of men but alternately attributed to men *and* women. Family making is not a matter of ideology and normative rules alone, it is done in embodied practices and sensory engagements with sacred landscape elements. In these engagements men and women construct family life in a differentiated though mutual and complementary way.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- i. A joint family is a type of extended family composed of parents, their unmarried daughters, their (unmarried and married) sons, and their sons' wives and offspring, living together under one roof.
- ii. When there is no son born in the family or the first born son is not able to travel, the closest male relative, preferably a younger brother or a father's brother's son may replace him in this ritual.
- iii. To settle the spirits of restless ancestors a silver plate or medal is put in a woven basket. That basket is given a central place at the family's home shrine where it is worshipped daily under the leadership of the oldest woman in the house.
- iv. Though women in the city have taps with running water at home, they generally do not use that water to mix it with Ganga jal. They prefer to use well water that they collect at the nearest water pump in the city streets. Well water is considered purer as it is not treated with chemical products, like the tap water is.
- v. Contemporary Hinduism knows an almost uncountable number of goddesses. They all represent the great goddess Devi but have different appearances, myths, and meanings. Durgaa and Ganga are among the most popular appearances and strongly associated with fertility.
- vi. Coconut water is considered very pure because the nut is completely closed, keeping all possible pollution out. The shape of the coconut resembles the shape of a *yoni* which refers to both the mother goddess and a vagina.
- vii. Wooden walking sticks are sold in the souvenir market in Haridwar. When the oldest son of a deceased relative brings the ashes to Maa Ganga in Haridwar, and is reborn as the new family

head, he generally buys a stick. It symbolizes his changed status and gives him a hold in his new position that carries a lot of new responsibilities.

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