

Have you ever wondered about the age of our rivers? From empire to empire, since time immemorial, civilizations across the world have sprouted on the banks of rivers. Humans have always had a close relationship with rivers, and many of the world's ancient and great civilizations were established near rivers.

The Rig Veda, one of the oldest texts of the Indian subcontinent, has multiple references to the river Saraswati —“great amongst the great, the most impetuous of rivers.” Whether the river Saraswati was a real river that was lost due to tectonic plates or a mythical one still remains a mystery, but a “culture of reverence” for rivers has been an indisputable part of Indian tradition since the time of the Rig Veda. Moreover, even the words Hindu and India have their origin from the name of the river Sindhu or its anglicized name, the Indus.

Both Indus Valley and Vedic civilizations evolved on the banks of several major rivers in North India, in particular, the river Ganga (or the Ganges). The births of great epic heroes like Krishna, Bhishma, and Karna are linked with holy rivers. Many saints and seers built their ashrams on river banks to lead a self-sustaining, peaceful, and spiritual life. Hundreds of temples were built on the banks of rivers to show utmost reverence to rivers; some of the same rituals are practiced even today, with the most famous being the Ganga Aarti in Kashi. Alas, past practices that nurtured river systems as ecological entities are all but forgotten.

Rivers are an elixir of life; they support countless flora and fauna. Rivers form a feeding and spawning area for fish and other aquatic biota that also act as water purifiers. The entire river ecosystem is the sum of the water, animals, plants, microorganisms that populate it, as well as organic and inorganic material such as sand, gravel, and rock. If we disturb this delicate ecological balance and do not nurture and take care of our rivers, we will cause unsustainable and indiscriminate damage to them. In short, rivers embody the circle of life from fertility, motherhood, growth, cleansing, and destruction to death and salvation. For example, for Indians, a dip in the holy Ganga marks the start of a new lease of life, one that is full of vigor and vitality.

Rivers are also a source of water for domestic, agricultural, and industrial purposes and of food and livelihoods. Rivers are used for transportation; those that are amenable to damming are used to supply energy. Water tables in rivers perform the important function of water storage and groundwater replenishment.

We urgently need to shift our thinking from exploitation to revitalization of our rivers. We need to realize that rivers are our national treasures. Water is not just a commodity; it is a life-making material. Humans have always had a very close relationship with rivers. For thousands of years these rivers have embraced and nourished us; now it is time for us to embrace and nourish our rivers.