

Where the Ganga makes an OM

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Abstract

Review Article

The main tributaries of the Ganges, the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers merge at Devprayag to form the River Ganga [1, 2]. Between Devprayag to Byasi (around 25 km), the river takes a winding course that forms the sacred syllable “Om” twice. This stretch of the Ganga holds spiritual significance, being associated with Sage Ved Vyas, who is believed to have had his ashram at the centre of the first “Om.” The second “Om” ends at Byasi, a hamlet named after the sage Vyas, or Byas. Rishi Ved Vyas, regarded as the compiler of the Vedas, Mahabharata and Puranas is closely linked with the syllable “Om,” which begins and ends all Vedic chants [3]. The “Om” shape of the river isn’t visible from the highway, the riverbanks, or even mountain tops—it is only revealed through local tradition and confirmed via satellite imagery like Google Maps. This region, between Rishikesh and Byasi, especially between Shiv Puri and Byasi, is sacred, as it is the site of penance of several ancient sages including Vashisht, Parashar, and Ved Vyas. A notable landmark is the Vashishta Cave, near the Ganga, associated with Rishi Vashisht, the preceptor of the Raghu dynasty and guru to Lord Rama’s father, Dashrath.

Keywords: Ganges River, Devprayag, Om shape, Ved Vyas, Spiritual significance



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DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The mystical significance of the Ganga is profound and ageless. The more one interacts with the river, the more the river reveals. The more the reverence, the more are the spiritual rewards. So much so that even

liberation, Moksha, is assured in the hallowed environs of the holy river, most notably at Varanasi. As the tributaries of the Ganges descend into the Shivaliks from the Himalayas, the final *Sangam* (confluence) takes place at Devprayag, where the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda merge to form the mighty Ganges (Figure 1).



Figure 1: At Devprayag, the River Bhagirathi which arises from Gaumukh, unites with the Alaknanda, which flows down from Badrinath, to form the mighty Ganga

From this point onwards till Byasi (around 25 kilometers), the river flows tortuously through deep gorges and forms the syllable “Om” twice. This stretch of the Ganga is associated with the greatest author and proponent of the Sanatana Dharma, the Sage Ved Vyas. While the ashram of Vyas lies at the very centre of the first Om, the second Om ends at Byasi, a hamlet named after the sage Vyas, or Byas (Figure 2).

The distance by road, between Devprayag and Rishikesh is around 70 kms, while from Devprayag to Byasi it is 40 kms. The highway, going from Rishikesh to Devprayag, and onwards to Badrinath, is located on the right bank of the river, while the Vyas *ghat* (bathing spot), Vyas *chatti* (market), and Vyas temple are all on the left bank. So, while Byasi is on the highway side on the left bank, and every traveller crosses it, very few travellers know about Vyas ghat, since it is not easy to access, being on the opposite bank. To reach the opposite bank, one has to cross the river Ganga upstream at Devprayag, and then drive downstream to reach the spots associated with Rishi Ved Vyas. Near to the Vyas ghat, the river Nyar meets the Ganga (Figure 2).

The upper loop of the ॐ lies in a deep gorge, and forms a peninsula, called Vyas dweep. On the left bank lies Vyas Ghat, and the temple of Ved Vyas. This is where the River Nyar meets the Ganga.

In fact, the crescent above the ॐ is formed by this Nyar river, also called the Narad Ganga in this region (4). Right at the confluence of the Narad Ganga with the Ganga is the Ashram of the greatest scribe of all times, Ved Vyas, the one who generally is credited with preserving and propagating the immortal Vedas with the fountainhead “Om”. Everything written in the Vedas begins and ends with an Om. Example, Om Bhur Bhuva Swaha or Om Ganeshaye Namah or Om Namah Shivaya. The Nyar valley, is in fact, home to the oldest fort in Garhwal, and it is a very picturesque valley, with vast irrigated fields on both sides [5, 6]. The irrigation is due to the canal system created by the sage Ved Vyas. Excavations in the valleys of the West and East Nyar, which join together to form the Nyar at Satpuli, have revealed evidences of a very ancient civilization here.

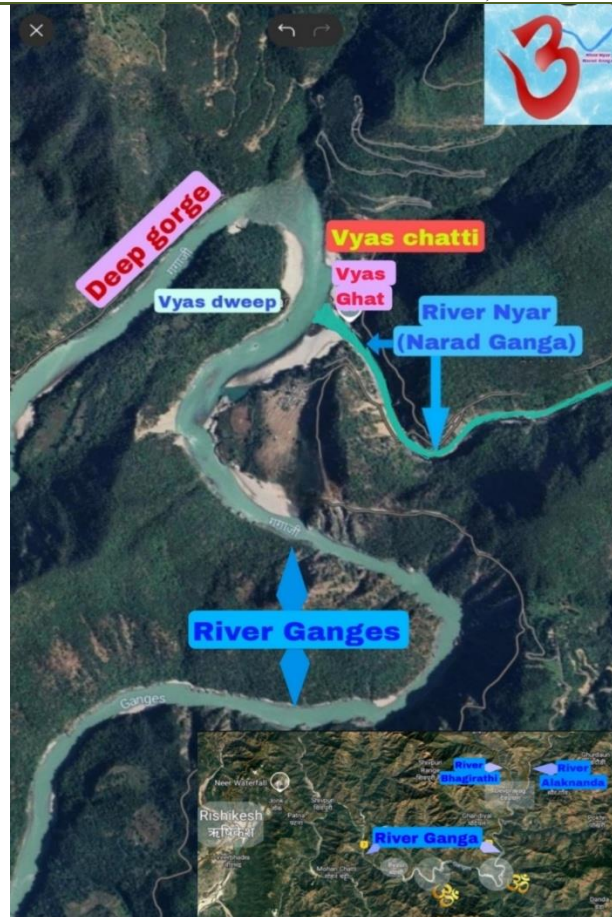


Figure 2: Shows the holy symbol Om carved out by the waters of the Ganga



Figure 3: The formation of the two Oms ॐ, is highlighted in the top image, and magnified in the images below. Devprayag is shown on left bottom

While driving along the highway running between Haridwar and Badrinath, there is no way to realize that the river Ganga is flowing in an Om formation, neither can this be appreciated when one is walking along the banks of the Ganges, in the deep gorges. One can only see the turbulent river and the high rising mountains all around. Climbing the surrounding mountain tops only offers glimpses of the river, but one cannot really see the “Om” from the mountain tops. This fact is only elucidated, if one comes to the Vyas Ashram, where the local people tell you about the holy river flowing in an Om pattern, and Google, as you can see, finally proves it so (Figure 3).

This stretch of the Ganges is of great significance, since it the penance spot of several Rishies of ancient times, including Vashisht, Parashar and Ved Vyas. Between Rishikesh and Byasi, or more specifically, between Shiv Puri and Byasi, just at the level of the Ganges, there is a huge Vashishta cave which is named after the Rishi Vashishta who was the Kul Guru, or the preceptor for the Raghu-vanshi kings of Ayodhya [7]. Thus he was the Guru of Lord Rama’s father, Emperor Dashrath.

Rishi Vashishta used to run his operations from this huge cave in which he had his spiritual headquarters. From here, the Brahma-Rishi used to run the temporal affairs of the kingdoms also. Therefore, this is the place where Dasharatha frequently used to visit, to seek advice from his guru, and Lord Rama also visited this area because. Rishi Vashishta was based here. Rishi Vashishta was one of the Saptarishis as we all know, and he was a very highly evolved soul, and in the epic Ramayana written by Valmiki there is a whole section of question-answer dialogue or verbal intercourse between Rama and Vashishta. Lord Rama, while still in his early youth, asked the questions and Vashishta answered the questions, and this part of the Ramayana is known as the Yog Vashishta, which is considered to be one of the most important texts of Sanatan Dharma. It’s sometimes considered to be a separate book from the Ramayana, just like the Bhagwat Gita is considered an individual text, though the latter forms part of the Mahabharata. The transcendental philosophical aspects dealt with in Yog Vashishta, are the ones which are propagated and

sermonized by the ashrams dotting the course of the Ganges.

CONCLUSION

Between Devprayag and Byasi—a distance of approximately 25 kilometers—the Ganga flows in a serpentine fashion that traces the sacred syllable “Om” twice. This spiritually significant stretch of the Ganges is linked to Sage Ved Vyas, whose ashram at Vyas ghat is believed to have been located at the center of the first “Om.” [8]. The second “Om” starts where the first ends, and concludes near the village of Byasi, named after the sage himself. It can be thus seen that this stretch of the river Ganges, between Rishikesh and Devprayag, where Rishi Vashishta also had his ashram, is a historical region. The other Saptarishis also had their ashrams dotted all around this area of Rishikesh. In Rishikesh-Haridwar area, in fact, there is a Saptarishi Kund, and the seven Rishies used to keep roaming all along this region of the Ganga where the two OMs are formed, which is therefore a highly spiritual land.

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