

# GANGA

## THE SANCTIFYING RIVER OF ASIA

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**T**he mighty Ganges River or the Great River of the plains of the northern Indian Subcontinent is a symbol of India. Although popularly called the Ganga River in Hindi and other Indian languages, internationally, this amazing river is known as the Ganges. From time immemorial it has been venerated as the Holy River of Hinduism. For most of its course, it is a wide and sluggish stream, flowing through one of the most fertile and densely populated regions. The life empowering Ganga flows to cover a length of 1,560 miles.

Historically, the Gangetic Plain has constituted the heartland of Hindustan and its successive civilisations. The centre of the opulent Mauryan Empire of Ashoka was Patna (ancient Pataliputra), on the Ganges in Bihar. The centres of the great Mughal Empire were at Delhi and Agra.

The six headstreams of the vibrant Ganga River - the Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Mandakini, Dhouliganga, Nandakini and the Pindar - all rise in the mountainous region of northern Uttarakhand State. Of those, the two main headstreams are the Alaknanda (the longer of the two), which rises about 30 miles north of the Himalayan peak of Nanda Devi, and the Bhagirathi, which originates at about 10,000 feet above sea level in a meltwater cave at the base of the Himalayan glacier known as Gangotri.

Rising in the Himalayas and emptying into the Bay of Bengal, the Ganga River drains one-fourth of the territory of India, and its basin brings life to millions of people. A large number of cities have been built on the Gangetic Plain. Among the most notable are Saharanpur, Meerut, Agra (the city of the famous Taj Mahal - the universal symbol of romantic solidarity), Mathura (esteemed as the birthplace of the Hindu God Krishna), Aligarh, Lucknow, Prayagraj, Varanasi (the holy city of Buddhists and Hindus), Patna, Rajshahi, Murshidabad, Kolkata, Dhaka, Khulna, and Barisal.

Use of Ganga water for irrigation, either when the river is in flood or by means of gravity canals has been prudently used since ancient times. Such irrigation is described in scriptures and books written more than 2,000 years ago. Irrigation was highly developed during the period of Muslim rule from the 12th century onward, and the Mughal kings later constructed several canals. The canal system was further extended by the British. By the 19th century, irrigation-cum-navigation canals formed the main arteries of the water-transport system. This connected people and improved livelihoods.

The advent of paddle steamers revolutionised inland transport in India, stimulating the growth of indigo production in Bihar and Bengal. As we know, indigo is a beautiful and most expensive natural dye. The dye is extracted from a plant and in 1859, those engaged in this production engaged in the famous 'Nil Satyagrah'. The unique natural dye does not cause any pollution. It is recorded that regular steamer services ran from Kolkata up the Ganga to Prayagraj and beyond, as well as to Agra on the Yamuna and up the Brahmaputra River.

The volume of the Ganga increases markedly

as it receives more tributaries and enters a region of heavier rainfall, and it shows a seasonal variation in flow. From April to June, the melting Himalayan snows feed the flowing river, and in the rainy season, from July to September, the rain-bearing monsoons unleash floods. The Ganga River next enters the State of Bihar, where its main tributaries from the Himalayan region of Nepal to the north are the Gandak, the Burhi, the Ghugri, and the Kosi rivers. Its most-important southern tributary is the Son River. The river then effortlessly skirts the Rajmahal Hills to the south and flows southeast to Farakka in central West Bengal State. West Bengal is the last Indian State that the Ganga enters. After it flows into Bangladesh, the Mahananda River embraces Ganga from the north. The Ganges basin encompasses nearly 419,300 square miles (1,086,000 square km) and contains the largest river system on the Subcontinent. The water supply depends partly on the rains brought by the southwesterly monsoon winds from July to October as well as on the flow from melting Himalayan snows in the hot season.

The Ganga-Yamuna area was once densely forested. Historical writings indicate that in the 16th and 17th centuries, wild elephants, buffalo, rhinoceroses, lions, and tigers were tracked and hunted there. Most of the original natural vegetation has apparently disappeared from the Ganga basin, and the land is now intensely cultivated to meet the needs of an ever-growing Indian population. The Ganges river dolphin can be found throughout the Ganga (Ganges) -Brahmaputra basin, but it is considered endangered.

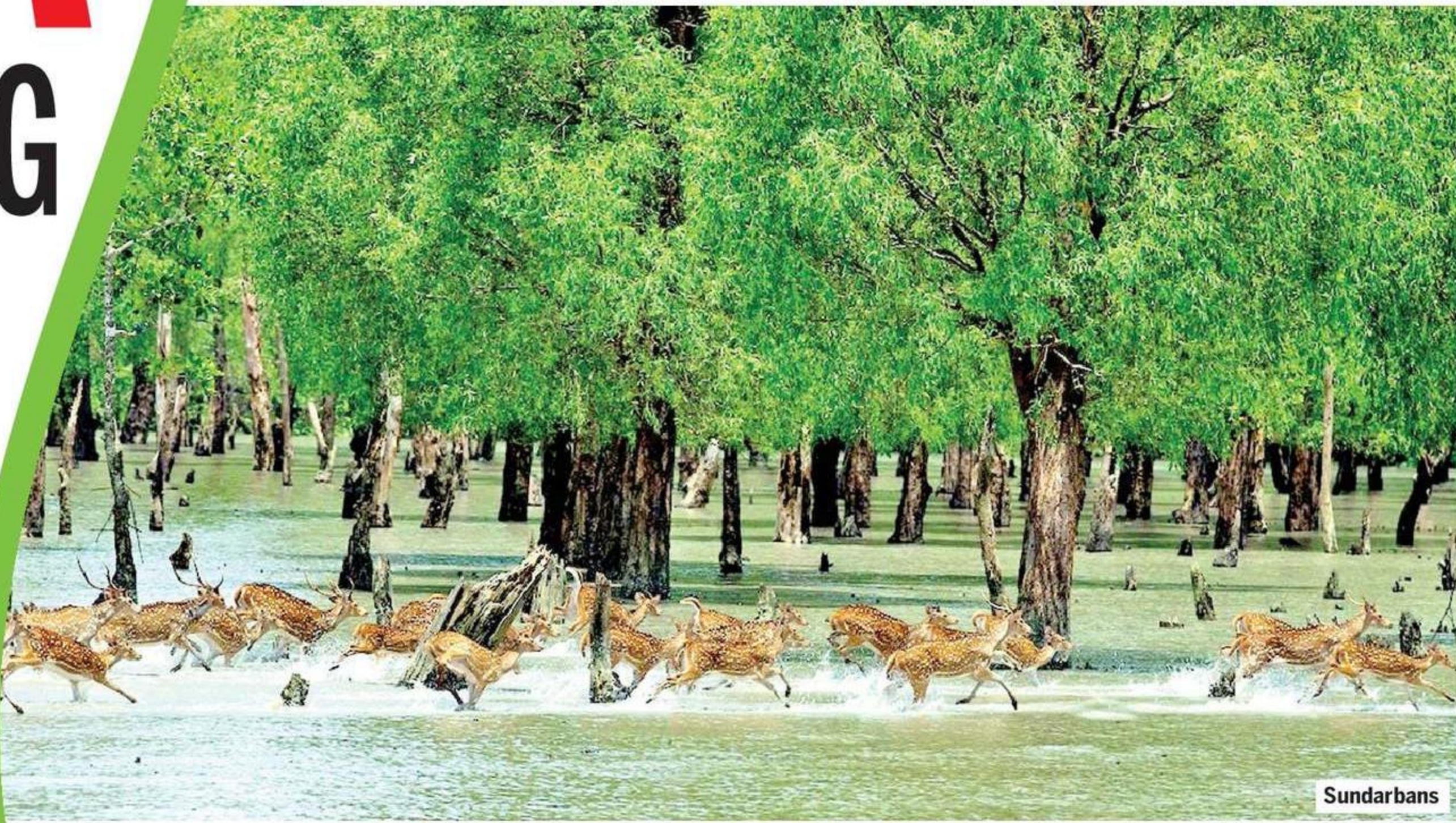
There is a vast tidal mangrove forest and swamp area here known as the Sundarbans which is a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. Many varieties of birds are found, such as mynahs, parrots, crows, kites, partridges, and fowls. In winter, ducks and snipes migrate south across the high Himalayas, settling in large numbers. The Ganga supports 140 species of fish. The Bengali tiger also thrives by the river. The Ganga River basin is one of the most intensely inhabited regions on Earth, home to millions of people. Over the past two decades, the river's water in some locations has become polluted, which is a matter of concern for environmentalists.

The religious importance of the Ganga River may exceed that of any other river in the world. It has been revered from the earliest times and

today is regarded as the holiest of rivers by Hindus, from across the globe. There is an oral tradition that Ganga was born of Lord Vishnu, before she was transformed into a mighty river. It further states that Ganga could not be released from heaven at once, so Lord Shiva had first untied his long hair, and then Ganga slowly poured down on this long hair touching the Earth without harm. The headstreams of the great river unite at Rishikesh and flow with life-giving zeal. For centuries, *Rishis* (sages) have meditated on the serene banks of the holy river. The town of Rishikesh enhanced by the spiritual river has been famous for yoga. Presently, the pilgrimage to the source of the Ganga is known as Char Dham which means Four Holy Places.

While places of Hindu pilgrimage, called *Tirthas*, are located throughout the Subcontinent, those that are situated on the Ganga have particular significance. Among these is the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna near Prayagraj, where a bathing festival, or mela, is held in January and February. This has garnered international media attention. During the ceremony, hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims immerse themselves faithfully in the sacred river amidst prayers and other rituals. Other holy places for immersion are found at Varanasi and Haridwar.

The Hindus cast the ashes of their dead into the river following an ancient tradition, believing that this act bestows the deceased direct unhindered passage to heaven. Cremation sites and ghats (temples at the summit of riverside steps) for burning the dead have been built in many places on the banks of the Ganga River. The most famous is at Varanasi. Hindus acknowledge that dying at Varanasi and being cremated there leads to the state of Moksha, which breaks the cycle of life and death. The cosmic waters of this transboundary river will flow for centuries to come, refreshing millions of people.



Sundarbans



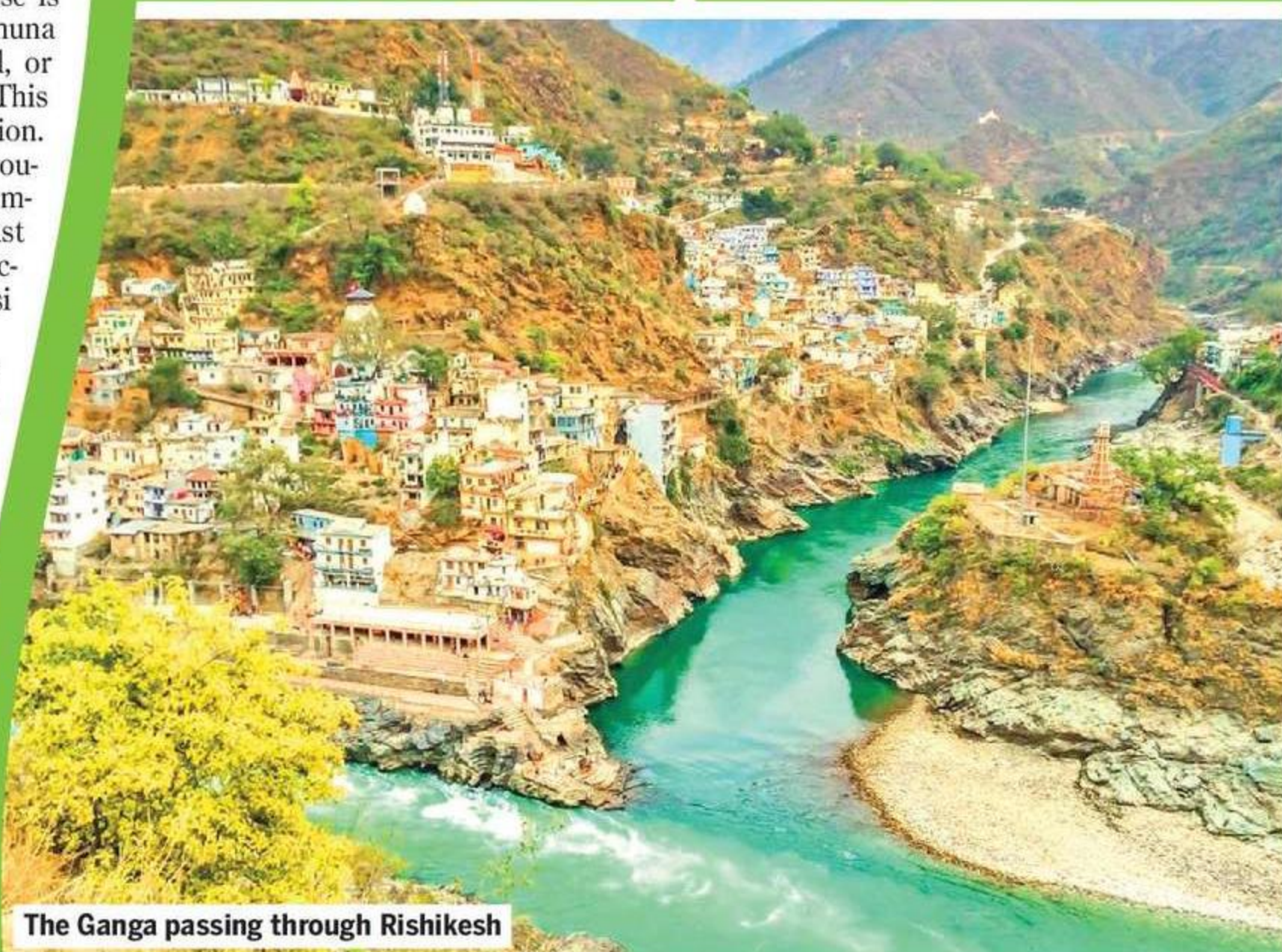
Indigo production



Priests performing a ritual

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The Ganga passing through Rishikesh