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Gangotri Temple Opens — Char Dham Yatra 2026 Season Begins

19 April 2026

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Gangotri Temple Opens — Char Dham Yatra 2026 Season Begins

19 April 2026 · 4 min read · 3 tags

WHY IN NEWS

The gates of **Gangotri Temple** were opened today — April 19, 2026 (Akshaya Tritiya) — marking the official commencement of the **Char Dham Yatra 2026** pilgrimage season. The four high-altitude Himalayan shrines of Uttarakhand — Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath — remain closed during winter months (roughly November–April/May) due to heavy snowfall and extreme conditions. Their seasonal opening draws millions of Hindu pilgrims each year, making it one of the world’s largest annual religious migrations.

CHAR DHAM — THE FOUR SACRED SHRINES

The **Chota Char Dham** (as distinct from the pan-India Char Dham of Puri, Dwarka, Badrinath, Rameshwaram) refers specifically to four shrines in Uttarakhand:

SHRINE	LOCATION	RIVER SOURCE	DEITY	TYPICAL OPENING
Yamunotri	Uttarkashi district	Source of Yamuna	Goddess Yamuna	Akshaya Tritiya
Gangotri	Uttarkashi district	Spiritual source of Ganga	Goddess Ganga	Akshaya Tritiya
Kedarnath	Rudraprayag district	—	Lord Shiva (Jyotirlinga)	After Akshaya Tritiya
Badrinath	Chamoli district	—	Lord Vishnu (Badri Narayana)	After Gangotri

All four shrines close in **October–November** (on Diwali or Bhai Dooj) as winter sets in and temperatures plunge.

GANGOTRI — SIGNIFICANCE AND GEOGRAPHY

Religious Significance

Gangotri is considered the **spiritual source of the Ganga** — the point where Goddess Ganga descended from the heavens to Earth. The actual geographic source is **Gaumukh** (Cow’s Mouth), a glacier **18 km upstream** from Gangotri town at an altitude of 3,892 m. The glacial meltwater from **Gangotri Glacier** forms the **Bhagirathi River**, which joins the Alaknanda at Devprayag to become the Ganga.

Geographic Facts

PARAMETER	DETAILS
Altitude of Gangotri town	3,048 metres
River	Bhagirathi (tributary of Ganga)
Gangotri Glacier length	~30 km
Gangotri Glacier area	~143 sq km
Gaumukh altitude	3,892 metres
District	Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand

Environmental Concern

Gangotri Glacier — one of the largest in the Himalayas — is retreating at approximately **22 metres per year** due to climate change. This has long-term implications for the perennial flow of the Bhagirathi-Ganga river system, affecting drinking water and irrigation for hundreds of millions of people downstream.

AKSHAYA TRITIYA — THE AUSPICIOUS OPENING DAY

Gangotri and Yamunotri traditionally open on **Akshaya Tritiya** — the third tithi of Shukla Paksha in the month of Vaishakha in the Hindu calendar.

Significance of Akshaya Tritiya:

- ‘**Akshaya**’ = never diminishing (Sanskrit)
- Considered one of the **four most auspicious days** in the Hindu calendar (others: Gudi Padwa, Vijayadasami, Kartik Shukla Pratipada)
- Traditionally associated with: gold purchases, new business ventures, weddings, property transactions

- Important in **Jain tradition** also — marks Varshitap Parana (breaking of a year-long fast by Tirthankara Rishabhadeva)

CHAR DHAM YATRA — SCALE AND GOVERNANCE

Visitor Statistics

The Char Dham Yatra attracts **30–55 lakh (3–5.5 million) pilgrims** annually (varying by year and conditions). The 2023 Yatra saw record pilgrim numbers exceeding 55 lakh.

Char Dham Project (Road Connectivity)

The **Char Dham Mahamarg Vikas Pariyojana** — a ₹12,000 crore road widening project to build all-weather 10-metre-wide roads connecting the four shrines — has been a subject of controversy:

- **National Highway Authority of India (NHAI)** executing the project
- **Supreme Court Committee** (2019): expressed concern about hillside cutting and ecological damage in ecologically sensitive Himalayas
- **Rohtang Tunnel (Atal Tunnel)**: linked project improving connectivity to Manali-Leh

Kedarnath Reconstruction

After the **2013 Kedarnath floods** (one of India's deadliest natural disasters — over 5,700 killed), the temple area was rebuilt. The Kedarnath reconstruction project (managed partly by Uttarakhand government) is now complete, with improved drainage infrastructure around the temple.

UPSC RELEVANCE

*Pilgrimage traditions, Hindu-Jain religious customs, Ganga's cultural significance. **GS1 — Geography:** Himalayan rivers and glaciers, glacier retreat and climate. **GS3 — Environment and Disaster:** Char Dham road project environmental concerns, 2013 Kedarnath floods, glacier recession.*

Key Mains Linkages:

- Gangotri Glacier retreat → Himalayan glaciology → Impact on Ganga water availability → North India's agriculture and drinking water
- Char Dham road project → Development vs. ecology debate in fragile Himalayan ecosystems
- Religious tourism → economic development of hill states → Uttarakhand's tourism-dependent economy

- 2013 Kedarnath disaster → Disaster Risk Reduction → Sendai Framework → NDMA guidelines for hill shrines

FACTS CORNER

Char Dham (Uttarakhand): Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, Badrinath — all in Uttarakhand

Gangotri altitude: 3,048m; district: Uttarkashi

Gangotri Glacier: ~30 km long, ~143 sq km; retreating ~22 m/year

Gaumukh (actual glacier snout): 3,892m altitude — physical source of Bhagirathi/Ganga

Bhagirathi + Alaknanda = Ganga (confluence at Devprayag)

Char Dham Yatra pilgrims: 30–55 lakh annually; 55+ lakh in 2023

Akshaya Tritiya: 3rd tithi, Shukla Paksha, Vaishakha month

2013 Kedarnath floods: over 5,700 deaths — one of India's deadliest natural disasters

Char Dham road project: ₹12,000 crore; 10-metre-wide all-weather roads; SC-monitored

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