THE PURIFICATION TIMELINE, EVIDENCE-RATED

People cleaned water for thousands of years before they knew why. Some of it worked.

● WORKED
shown to remove or kill the cause of waterborne disease.

◐ PARTLY WORKED
works in some conditions, or only against some dangers.

◌ NOT TESTED
plausible, but with no trial or only an association.

◇ RITUAL
about meaning and purity, not hygiene. No hygiene claim is made.

	PRACTICE	WHEN AND WHERE	WHAT PEOPLE DID	RATING	WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS
1	**The Great Bath** CONTESTED	Mohenjo-daro, Indus Valley, 3rd millennium BCE	Built a watertight public tank, about 12 m by 7 m and up to 2.4 m deep, with fitted brick, gypsum and bitumen	◇ **Ritual (inferred)**	The structure is documented. What it was used for is inferred, since no texts survive. [6]
2	**Ancient Sanskrit water methods** DATED VARIOUSLY	India, dated variously from about 2000 BCE to the 3rd–4th century CE	A medical text lists boiling, heating in sunlight, plunging hot iron, filtering through sand and gravel, and a clearing seed	● **Worked (boiling, filtering); Not tested (others)**	Boiling and sand filtration do work. The date of the text is disputed, and most accounts copy one 1948 source. [7]
3	**The Hippocratic sleeve**	Greece, traditionally attributed to about 400 BCE	A cloth bag to strain water	◐ **Partly worked**	Straining removes sediment and some particles, not most germs. The attribution is traditional.
4	**The mikveh**	Jewish law, ancient to present	Immersion in a pool of naturally gathered water, such as rain or spring water	◇ **Ritual**	Purity is defined by the water's origin and path, not its cleanliness. Drawn tap water alone does not qualify. [10]
5	**Misogi**	Japan, Shinto, ancient to present	Whole-body washing in a Shinto purification rite; forms include cold-water washing, sometimes under waterfalls	◇ **Ritual**	A living rite. No hygiene claim is made.
6	**Sand filtration**	Paisley, 1804; London, 1829	The first municipal sand filters	◐ **Partly worked**	Slow sand filters remove many pathogens biologically, if the water is clear enough. [14]
7	**Broad Street pump**	London, 1854	John Snow traced a cholera outbreak to one contaminated water pump	● **Worked (as proof)**	Linked cholera to water, years before germ theory was accepted.
8	**The Ganges** CONTESTED	India, Hankin, 1896	A scientist reported that Ganges water showed germ-killing activity	◌ **Not tested**	A single 19th-century laboratory report. Later writers have linked it to bacteriophages, but this is contested. [5]
9	**Chlorination**	Jersey City, 26 September 1908	The first continuously chlorinated city supply in the US, defended in court as “pure and wholesome”	● **Worked**	Disinfection became the standard, after a public fight over what “pure” means. [8]
10	**Tea**	England, 18th century	Tea drinking spread, which meant boiling water	◌ **Not tested (association)**	Tea's spread is linked to falling death rates, most where water was bad. It is a historical association, not a proven cause. [4]
11	**Sari cloth**	Bangladesh, trial 1999–2002	Filtering pond water through old sari cloth folded four times	◐ **Partly worked**	Cut cholera by 48% across about 133,000 people. It works because cholera bacteria ride on plankton. It is not a general germ filter. [1] [2]
12	**Copper vessels**	India, Ayurvedic practice	Storing water in copper pots	◐ **Partly worked**	In one laboratory test, water stored 16 hours in copper lost its culturable diarrhoea-causing bacteria. Lab conditions only. Not a substitute for safe water. [3]
13	**Orr's bathtub**	California, 1962	Leonard Orr stayed in a bath for about two hours and called it his first Rebirthing experience	◇ **Ritual (experience)**	Orr's own account. A personal experience, not a hygiene claim. [18]
14	**The Kumbh Mela**	Prayagraj, India, 2025	Tens of millions bathed in sacred river water	◇ **Ritual**	Some samples exceeded bathing-water standards, and a later regulator analysis reported median values within the criteria. Both can be true, since samples, places and methods differ. Ritual purity and measured hygiene are separate questions. [11]

Ritual purity and hygiene are different ideas. They sometimes overlap, as with boiling and sand filtering, and sometimes they don't, as with sacred waters that fail a modern bathing test. Neither is worth less.

SOURCES

[1] Colwell et al. (2003), PNAS 100:1051–1055: sari cloth and cholera.
[2] Smithsonian Magazine: sari cloth follow-up.
[3] Sudha et al. (2012), Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition 30:17–21: copper vessels.
[4] Antman (2023), Review of Economics and Statistics: tea and mortality.
[5] Hankin (1896), Annales de l'Institut Pasteur; Abedon et al. (2011), Bacteriophage: the Ganges.
[6] Kenoyer, Harappa.com: Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro.
[7] University of Wisconsin–Madison, Ancient Engineering Technologies: Sanskrit water methods.
[8] Leal, Fuller et al. (1909), AWWA; chlorination histories: Jersey City.
[10] My Jewish Learning; Mishnah Miqva'ot: the mikveh.
[11] Deccan Herald; Business Today: Maha Kumbh Mela water reports, 2025.
[14] TU Delft, Trikannad et al. (2023): slow sand filters.
[18] Leonard Orr's Official Blog (2009); Leonard D. Orr Foundation, “My Story”; Self & Society (1990).

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