

Hindu Perspective on Water

Elcy Pinto

Introduction

Vedic philosophy which is the structural basis of Hinduism identifies that water and the human body in the Hindu social system are not merely physical entities. Hindus give a lot of importance to water in their day to day life, because water is seen as source of physical and spiritual cleanliness and well-being... a striving to attain purity and avoid pollution. This widespread aspiration lends itself to a reverence for water as well as the integration of water into most Hindu rituals.

Water in Hindu Ritual

Water is very important for all the rituals in Hinduism. For example, water is essential as a cleaning agent, cleaning the vessels used for the *poojas* (rituals), and for *Abhishekas* or bathing of deities. Several *dravyas* or nutrients used for the purpose of bathing the deities and after use of each *dravya*. Water is used for cleansing the deity. Water offered to the deity and the water collected after bathing the Deities are considered very sacred. This water is offered as “*Theertha*” or blessed offering to the devotees.

Poorna Kumba literally means a full pitcher (“*poorna*” is full and “*kumbha*” is pitcher). The *Poorna Kumbha* is a pitcher full of water with fresh leaves preferably of mango tree and a coconut placed on the top. *Poorna Kumbha* is an object symbolizing God and it is regularly used during different religious rites. The water in the jar is said to be of divine essence.

Many of the *poojas* in Hinduism start with keeping a *kalasa* which is a brass, silver or gold pot filled with water adorned with a coconut amidst mango or other sacred leaves. *Kalasa* symbolizes the universe and becomes an integral part of the *Mandalic*-liturgy as it still forms an indispensable element of certain *poojas* in Hinduism. The pot is the first mandala into which the deities descend and raise themselves.

One of the religious rituals is *tarpana*, which means to please or to gratify. Specifically, *tarpana* is the act of pouring water through the hands with the use of sacred grass as a symbolic gesture of recognition, thanking and pleasing Gods, sages, and fathers.

During all purification rites water is sprinkled on the objects which are to be purified. Water used to be sprinkled on any offerings to the deities.

Before starting a meal Hindus sprinkle water around the leaf or plate in which the meal is traditionally eaten. In times past, a King was sprinkled with water in order to purify him during his coronation. This was believed to ensure an auspicious beginning to his reign.

There is also an important ritual called *Sandhyopasana* or *Sandhyavandana* which is a combination of meditation and concentration. *Sandhya* is an obligatory duty to be performed daily for self-purification and self-improvement. Regular *Sandhya* cuts the chain of old *Samskaras* and changes everyones old situation entirely. It brings purity, *Atma-Bhava*, devotion and sincerity. The important features of this ceremony are: *Achamana* or sipping of water with recitation of Mantras, *Marjana* or sprinkling of water on the body which purifies the mind and the body, *Aghamarshana* or expiation for the sins of many births, and *Surya Arghya* or ablutions of water to the Sun-god (the other two non water-based elements of the ceremony are: *Pranayama*, or control of breath which steadies the wandering mind, and silent recitation of *Gayatri*; and *Upasthana*, or religious obeisance). The first part of *Arghya* consists of hymns addressed to water and its benefits. The sprinkling of water on the face and the head and the touching of the different organs (the mouth, nose, eyes, ears, chest, shoulders and head) with wetted fingers, are meant to purify those parts of the body and invoke the respective presiding deities on them. They also stimulate the nerve-centres and wake up the dormant powers of the body. The *Arghya* drives the demons who obstruct the path of the rising sun. Esoterically, lust, anger and greed are the demons who obstruct the intellect from rising up (the intellect is the sun).

Water, Social Stratification and Hinduism

The core concern of Hindu ritualism is concerned with the manipulation and maintenance of purity and impurity. Purity is increased by associating or coming into contact with things and actors assigned pure status and by reducing association with things and actors of impure status. There are essentially two ways to bring about a condition of purity, one is to distance oneself from objects signifying impurity and the other is to purify oneself by things recognised to have the ability to absorb and thus remove pollution directly. Water is the most common medium of purification. It is considered to have an intrinsic purity and the capacity to absorb pollution and carry it away

To unfold the context of social stratification in Indian Hindu society and to determine the role of water in the regulation of social order it is essential to go

back into history to trace the origin of the institution of these belief systems and forward into existing social and cultural contexts to identify whether the institution of the caste system still exists and if it does then in what shape, context and pattern in relation to water use practices.

The Vedic Period - the Sanctification of Water

In Vedic texts, water is referred to as *Apah*, or literally the Waters. The Waters are considered to be purifying in a spiritual context.

‘Hail to you, divine, unfathomable, all purifying Waters...’ (*Rig Veda*).

The *Rig Veda* identifies the Waters as the first residence or *ayana* of *Nara*, the Eternal Being and therefore water is said to be *pratishtha*, the underlying principle, or the very foundation of this universe.

‘Water may pour from the heaven or run along the channels dug out by men; or flow clear and pure having the Ocean as their goal...In the midst of the Waters is moving the Lord, surveying men’s truth and men’s lies. How sweet are the Waters, crystal clear and cleansing...From whom... all the deities drink exhilarating strength, into whom the Universal Lord has entered...’ (*Satapatha*).

Early Vedic texts also identify water as a manifestation of the feminine principle, known commonly as *Sakti*. ‘I call the Waters, Goddesses, wherein our cattle quench their thirst; Oblations to the streams be given...’ (*Rig Veda*). It is said that the primordial cosmic man or Purusa was born of the Waters. Similarly later Vedic texts identify that, ‘Water is female...’ (*Satapatha*).

Vedic philosophy thus bestows a sacred character on water, which is then identified as a medium to attain spiritual enlightenment. The concept of purification in early Vedic texts was essentially spiritual, rather than moral and/or physical. Understanding the primary meaning and force of water was considered to supersede all ritual and rite. The *Vedas* identify water as the very essence of spiritual sacrifice or ‘the first door to attain the divine order’ (*Atharva Veda*). The use of water in daily life as well as in ritualistic ceremony was referred to as spiritual sacrifice, a process of attaining eternity.

A cleansing bath was believed to liberate one from sin and impurity:

‘...Whatever sin is found in me, whatever wrong I may have done, if I have lied or falsely sworn, Waters remove it far from me...’ (*Rig Veda*).

The act of bathing was considered intensely spiritual and it was believed that physical acts of imperfection were removed and spiritual oneness with the Eternal Self was attained during the process. According to the *Vedas*, it was not the act of taking a bath itself, but the coming into contact with the sacredness of water, and the attainment of such knowledge and proximity that made one sinless and guided the individual to the Eternal Self. Water was considered sacred but it was clarified that man does not pray to water, the physical entity, but to the source of life and spirituality within water. 'Water is the purified as well as the purifier, the real and spiritually conceived source of life.'

Social Order in Vedic Philosophy

In the early Vedic period, social stratification in human society existed on the basis of colour, class, individual capacity, occupational aptitude and moral and intellectual worth, rather than on the later determined caste system, which is based on inheritance-based rights and privileges. The first instance of social distinction is made on the colour and culture differences between the fair skinned *Aryas* and the dark skinned *Dasas*. Then, the division of mankind into four *varnas* from the *Purusa* or the Eternal Man is described in the hymn, *Purusa Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*:

'When they divided Man, how did they make him? The *Brahman* was his mouth; his arms were made the *Rajanya* (*Kshatriya*); his thighs were the *Vaisya*; from his feet the *Sudra* was born.'

Social hierarchy in the early Vedic society is believed to have been divinely-ordained. Historians argue that the *varna* system was an 'open class system' of flexible membership and the construction of castes and the rigid caste system did not begin in the early Vedic period. 'The Vedic quadripartition of classes or colours (*Varnasrama*) is not to be confused with the notion of caste or *jati* as this was merely a social model based on a cosmic paradigm of hierarchy'. However the system of social stratification was established in the early Vedic period, even if it was flexible and not inherently binding. The *Rig Veda* defines *varnas* and designated occupations, 'One to high sway (*Brahmana*), one to exalted glory (*Kshatriya*), one to pursue his gain (*Vaisya*) and one to his labour (*Sudra*).'

'*Brahmans* were to be the teachers of mankind, *Kshatriyas* were to carry weapons and protect people, *Vaisyas* were to provide food for the people and the *Sudras* were to be the footmen or servants of the other *varnas*, even if they had all originated from the same Eternal Man'.

The Post Vedic Periods and the Institutionalisation of Water-related Social Inequality

In contrast to the notion of spirituality in early Vedic texts, *Smritis* or post Vedic literature constructed the notion of ritualism. Water governed the ritualistic or bodily purification of human existence. Ritualism was related to the construct of *Dharma* or moral law and the most authoritative text on the subject of Dharma is the 'Laws of Manu', or *Manusmṛiti*. Manu is blamed for creating the caste system, however some authors argue that he may have simply recorded the system of social order that existed then. What matters though, is that Manu and other lawmakers of this period codified the social order as morally appropriate social behaviour, social duties and obligations. Social obligations and duties were classified as contributing to religious ritualism, which explains why the religiously inclined Hindus tenaciously practise Dharma as their culture. 'Dharma persists steadfastly in Hindu society, despite the fact that there is no watchdog, like the Western Church, to enforce moral regulations'

The law books or *Dharmasastras* defined in very clear terms how *Sudras* were, on the basis of their inherited status to undertake defiling and/or polluting tasks. In order to maintain purity, the *Sudras* who were essentially bound to undertake polluting tasks were excluded physically, socially and morally from the larger village commune. *Sudras*, identified in the *Dharmasastras* as the very essence of pollution, were required to live outside the village confines. Fa Hein, the Chinese traveller to India, writes about how in a public place, the *Candalas* had to give notice of their approach by striking a piece of wood, to warn others to avoid contact with them). Any physical association of a *Sudra*, especially a *Sudra* male with women of other castes, was a severely punishable act for the *Sudra*, which could lead to castration or even death, even if the association was mutually desired. Purification of touch by a *Sudra* involved taking a cleansing bath; talking to a *Sudra* was purified by talking to a *Brahman*; and the sight of a *Sudra* was purified by looking at the sun, moon or stars and rinsing the mouth with water (*acamana*). In the *Dharmasastras*, water was identified as a medium to purify the pollution obtained through the *Sudras*. The *Manusmṛiti* also elaborates how water and food cooked in water, offered or touched by the *Sudras*, was polluting. It was stated that when *Sudras* touch a well or any other stagnant water source, the source and the water is polluted.

According to Manu, apart from the eternally polluted *Sudras*, all persons became polluted and therefore 'untouchable' during birth and death in the house. Those touching members mourning during death, touching the corpse and/or carrying the corpse to the cemetery were identified as polluted. Drawing parallel with the notion of pollution accorded to death, *Sudras* were likened by him to 'a living

cemetery'. Women, on account of their bodily secretions during their menstrual cycle and immediately after childbirth, were identified as polluting regardless of their caste. During this period, all of the restrictions detailed for the *Sudras* were exercised on them. Those touching menstruating women or touching women during the first ten days after childbirth were also considered as polluting. Water was ascribed as a medium to purify all these forms of pollution.

Conclusion

We see that water has played a very important role in Hinduism from ages and continues to do so even today. It is looked with reverence because of its ability to purify and be a source of life. All the important rituals in Hinduism like *poojas*, marriage, birth and death of individual water is treated sacred and source spiritual cleansing. The social hierarchy of Manu also dwelt on how the usage of water was restricted to the *Shudras* as they were seen as polluted, because of their work. The Brahmins had privilege to access the most pure form of water whereas the *Shudras* were left with polluted sources of water which the Brahmins thought unfit for human consumptions. Thus we see that water has played a key role in spiritual, physical and social life of the Hindus in a big way.

References:

- 1 *Rig Veda*
- 2 *Science Reporter*, August 2010
- 3 *Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam*- Del Byron Schneider
- 4 *Animal Welfare and Nature : Hindu Scriptural Perspectives*-G Naganathan
- 5 *Hinduism: A Religion to Live* – N.C. Choudhari