

## Sacredness of Water in the Hindu Tradition

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Most of the cultures of the world ascribe sanctity to water. Similarly most of the religions believe in the purifying power of water. The scriptures speak about the healing power of water. It is sustainer of life. The symbol of water in the Vedas is significant. It is only water that existed before creation in it. The primordial water carries the seed of creation. It pervades and supports everything. In other words water is the primeval element; the support of all; everything else rests on it. It is without form. It is invisible and as one of the great elements, namely, earth, water, fire, air and ether it becomes visible. It belongs to the three worlds, namely, the heaven, the mid-region and the earth. The celestial water is in the form of primordial water. In the mid- region between the heaven and the earth it is in the form of rains and the terrestrial water takes various forms such as streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans.

The *Nasadiya* hymn of the *Rigveda*<sup>i</sup> a pertinent hymn on creation describes water as the first condition of life. It says, “Darkness was there, all wrapped around by darkness, and all was Water indiscriminate. Then that which was hidden by the void, that One, emerging, stirring, through the inner fervor came to be. Within it first arose desire, the primal germ of mind.” The *Shatapatha Brahmana* reiterates the view and says: “Of this universe, it is in truth the Waters that were made first. Hence when the Waters flow, then everything here, whatsoever exists, is produced.”<sup>ii</sup>

Waters are not solid like the earth, nor intangible like the air. The movement and life of the air and the gravity and consistency of the solid earth both are present in waters. They have life.

### Divinity of Water:

In the Vedanta philosophy the Reality is described as consciousness and the *Brihadaranyka Upanishad* tells us that the consciousness abides in water. It says:

“He who is abiding in the earth, yet different  
from the earth...  
He who is abiding in the water, yet different  
from the water...  
He who is abiding in the wind, yet different  
from the wind...”<sup>iii</sup>

So we should not confine water with its physical properties alone as H<sub>2</sub>O. It has Divinity within it as it has been said, “In the Waters, O Lord, is your seat, in the Waters, O Lord, is your womb.”<sup>iv</sup>

It has also been said, “In the midst of the Waters is moving the Lord, watching men’s truth and falsehood.”<sup>v</sup>

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* mentions that the waters were produced out of *vak*, the speech.<sup>vi</sup> The text mentions time and again that waters being the basis and foundation of the universe, vessels and other utensils used in sacrifice must be thrown into the waters. The practice of immersion of the idols of Ganesha and of Gauries after their worship in their festivals is in vogue. It is the return to the origin which is subtle in its nature.

The Waters, no doubt, are a resting place for all the Gods. It becomes the elixir of immortality.<sup>vii</sup>

### **The Healing Power:**

The healing power of water is mentioned in several hymns of the *Vedas*. A few passages referring to the healing power are:

“May excellent waters be helpful for our bliss and drink. May they flow all round for curing our ailments and preventing us from falling a pray to them.”<sup>viii</sup>

“A skilled physician tells me, that in waters lies the capacity to heal all ailments and digestive power which is the bringer of all sorts of happiness. O Waters, grant me medicine to keep my body free from harm, so that I may see the sun for long.”<sup>ix</sup>

“May the divine Water, the flowing water, water dug from the earth, spring water protect us.”<sup>x</sup>

“Within the Waters, Soma has told me,  
remedies exist of every sort  
and Agni who brings blessing to all.”<sup>xi</sup>  
“O Waters,... give us healing balm.”

The waters symbolize fertility. Hence the Hindu scriptures describe rain as the vehicles of fertility. Fire has been described as the son of waters, the *apam napat* in the *Rigveda*. It has a counterpart in the *Avesta*. He dwells in the depth of the waters in the mid-region between the heaven and the earth and is surrounded by divine spirits.

### **Water as Purifier:**

The waters are purifiers as they have divinity in them. Hence a prayer runs as under.

“May this Earth so purified purify me!  
 May the Lord of the Holy World purify me,  
 May [Earth], purified by Brahman, purify me!”<sup>xii</sup>

It is believed that waters can make a man free from his sin. Hence the prayer:

“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.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The *Yajurveda* refers to purifying power of water. One of the prayers in this *Veda* runs as under:

“Hail to you, divine, unfathomable, all purifying Waters!”<sup>xiv</sup>

As the waters purify<sup>xv</sup>, the worshipper comes up out of them pure and cleansed. Hence the *Brahmana* texts prescribe the ritual of bath for purification. It has been stated, “O swiftly moving purifying bath, you flow gently down. With the help of the Gods may my sins against the Gods be removed and with the help of mortals may my sins against mortals be washed away.”<sup>xvi</sup>

“O cleansing bath, cleansing as you flow, may I wipe out with the help of the Gods such sin as I have committed against the Gods and with the help of men such sin as I have committed against my fellowmen... There is not in him who has taken a bath even as much as sin as there is in a toothless child.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Hence we find that a dip in water of river Ganga or other sacred reservoirs of water is considered as a ritual by Hindus. They have faith in the bath ritual. Before entering a temple a devotee must take a bath or at least wash his feet. Most of the places of pilgrimages are also found in the vicinity of rivers or lakes.

### **Water as Mother:**

In the *Rigveda* Goddess Sarasvati, celebrated than any other river, is addressed as a great mother, a great river and a great goddess. She herself is a great purifier.<sup>xviii</sup> The devotees pray her to make them well known. Later she became the Goddess of knowledge as both have a common feature. The stream of a river flows constantly; similarly speech, the vehicle of knowledge flows

uninterruptedly. Waters are addressed as mothers in the Vedic texts frequently. One of the texts says,

“May the Waters, the mothers, purify us.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Another text includes the prayer:

“ You like loving mothers are  
Who long to give to children dear.  
Give us of your propitious sap.”<sup>xxx</sup>

### **Water as Source of Happiness:**

Waters give strength and happiness. Hence it has been stated,

“O Waters, source of happiness, pray give us vigor so that we may contemplate the great delight.” Ye, waters, truly bring us bliss, ‘so help’ ye us to strength and power, that we may succeed in ‘big life’s struggle and look on God.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

“ These Waters be to us for drink;  
divine are they for aid and joy.  
May they impart to us health and strength!”<sup>xxxii</sup>

The Divine Waters flow constantly, they never sleep,  
they are pure.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Dead bodies of children and holy men are either  
buried or thrown into rivers. This is going back to  
the origin, for the reason that the waters are the  
foundation of all this universe.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

From the waters is this universe produced.<sup>xxxv</sup>

In the Christian tradition we find that Jesus, before conferring eyesight on the blind asks him to apply mud on his eyes and then to wash the eyes by water.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This signifies that sin, the impurity can be purified by water. Water plays a significant role in Baptism. The literal meaning for Baptism is “to deep, immerse, wash.”

Coming back to the Hindu tradition, I would like to conclude with the prayer in the *Atharvaveda*, “May the gleaming waters...be for our well-being and joy.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

### **End Notes**

i *Rigveda X. 129*

ii *Shatapatha Brahmana VII.4.1.6*

- iii *Brihadaranyka Upanishad III.7.3-7*
- iv *Shatapatha Brahmana VI.8.2.4*
- v *Rigveda VII.49.3*
- vi *Shatapatha Brahmana VI.1.1.9*
- vii *Shatapatha Brahmana IV. 4.3.15*
- viii *Rigveda X. 9.1*
- ix *Rigveda X.9.6-7*
- x *Rigveda VII. 49.2*
- xi *Rigveda X.9.6*
- xii *Mahanarayaniya Upanishad 317-318*
- xiii *Rigveda X.9.8*
- xiv *Taittiriya Samhita I. 2.2*
- xv *Rigveda X.17.10*
- xvi *Yajurveda III.48*
- xvii *Shatapatha Brahmana IV. 4.5.22-23*
- xviii *Rigveda I.3.10*
- xix *Taittiriya Samhita I. 2. 1*
- xx *Rigveda X.9.1-2*
- xxi *Atharvaveda VI.22.2*
- xxii *Rigveda X.9.4*
- xxiii *Rigveda VII.49.1*
- xiv *Shatapatha Brahmana XII. 5.2.14*
- xv *Shatapatha Brahmana VI.8.2.3*
- xvi *The Holy Bible, John 9*
- xvii *Atharvaveda VI.23.3*