

Sacredness of Water

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A popular saying in Sanskrit declares, “There are indeed three jewels on the earth, water being the first followed by food and good saying. The fools term the prices of stone as jewels.” This saying reflects the general sentiment for water that Hinduism cherishes.

Water occupies a prime place in the cosmological order in ancient Hindu scriptures. In the Rigveda, the Nasadiya Sukta (X 129) speaks of the origin of the universe. The seer says that in the beginning there was neither *Sat* nor *Asat*. Darkness enveloped darkness and the first element was the primal water without any attribute. The principle Upanishads elucidate the evolution of the world from the Ultimate Reality. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.2.1) states that the Ultimate Principle thought that it should become manifest. So it mediated. While meditating water was born. From water came fire and from fire came forth the air and other elements.

In the Chandogya Upanishad , it is said that there was *Sat* in the beginning. It thought, “Let me multiply, I shall create. ‘It created *Teja* , that is ,Fire. The fire also reflected that it should become many and so it produced waters. The waters created food.’(VI.2.4) The Lord decided that he should enter these three deities, namely, fire, water and food and create the names and forms, that is, the world which has names and forms as attributes (VI.3.2). The three elements are associated with a particular colour. Water is described as having white colour. It is through the combination of these three elements the gross world came into existence. The vital energy, that is, *Prana* is made of water (VI.5.1). The Chandogya Upanishad (V.3.20) narrates that sage Gautama went to Pravahana Jaivali to learn the secret doctrine about how water turns into a Person after fifth oblation. It is elucidated that at the first stage waters called Faith are transformed into the moon. The moon turns into rainfall in the next stage from which grows food. From food originates semen and from semen foetus comes into being. Thus according to the Chandogya Upanishad , water is the seed of the human person.

In the same Upanishad (Chapter VII), it is described that Narad approached Sanatkumar requesting him to teach the worship of Brahman. Narad had already mastered the Vedas with their auxiliaries and many other empirical skills. Santkumar told him that whatever Narad had acquired was the gross form of Knowledge. He must contemplate on subtler levels of life to realize Brahman.

In this journey from gross to subtle, the teacher asked him to concentrate on water as Brahman. He brings out the connection between water and life in very lucid words. He says “When there is lack of abundant rainfall, creatures are in agony thinking that, “Food will be scarce.” Again, when there is abundance of rainfall the creatures become joyous thinking, “Food will be plentiful.” Water indeed is all these that have forms. That which is this earth, that which is in intermediate-space, that which is heaven, those which are mountains, those who are gods and human beings, and those which are animals and birds, grass, trees, ferocious animals, worms, flies and creatures including ants – it is water what has taken all these forms. Meditate on water.’ (VII.10.1) Of course water is not the ultimate symbol for meditation on Brahman.

Since water was governed by Lord Varuna according to the Vedic Tradition, it gained importance in purifying rituals. Varuna was regarded as the guardian of Cosmic Order – *Rit*. He was supposed to punish those who failed in their duty. In the *Aghamarshana* ritual that removed sin, the seeker beseeched Varuna to cleanse the sins done knowingly or unknowingly by offering water. The hymn for *Aghamarshana* prays Varuna who is in the waters to purify the seeker. The rivers are enumerated as the representative of Varuna. Thus we can understand the religious importance of rivers and explain how taking a dip in sacred rivers became an integral part of Hindu religious life.

Oblation of water and chanting of the *Aghamarshana* hymn(Rigveda X.190) are important steps in daily *Sandhya Vandana*. The mode of worship prescribed by the Puranas and in practice even today starts with taking a sip of water uttering the names of Keshava, Madhava and Govinda. The worshipper goes on chanting other names of Lord Vishnu. This act is called *Achamana*. The course of worship has sixteen ingredients wherein offering water for the deity is called *Achamaniyam*. It is said that one who offers *Achamaniya* for God attains long life, vigour, prosperity and all other objects of his wish. The deity is offered water for washing feet and bath as well. In Shaiva tradition, the Shivalinga is offered *Abhisheka* with water or milk. The water which is poured on the deity during *Abhesheka* is considered very sacred and accepted as *Thirth* that purifies the devotee. *Abhesheka* is an integral part of many rituals. The King is given a sacred bath with the water from holy rivers and his ascend to the throne is called *Rajyabhisheka*, Consecrated water is sprinkled during *Shanti Homa*-s on the members of the household to purify them and to bestow peace unto them.

The ordinary water taken for daily bath can also be consecrated to render it sacred. A prayer is offered that invokes the holy rivers to reside in the water. Thus water has occupied a special place in religious life of Hindus. It is the

irony of the time that Water respected so much is misused, abused and contaminated so much that we need purifiers to drink water. We are unmindful of the diminishing water levels. It feared that the next world war may be fought over water. Let us now respect water as the most sacred manifestation of God.