

WATER AND RELIGION: A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Water is the very essence of life. The life-giving waters are for the welfare of society. The water-worlds are an intrinsic part of the constitution and the development of religions. For at least 2-3 billion people on this planet, religion shows the way how to deal with water, not scientific knowledge! Water has a central place in the practices and beliefs of many religions for two main reasons. Firstly, water cleanses. Water washes away impurities and pollutants, it can make an object look as good as new and wipe away any signs of previous defilement. Water not only purifies objects for ritual use but can make a person clean, externally or spiritually, ready to come into the presence of his/her focus of worship. Secondly, water is a primary building block of life. Without water, there is no life, yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. The significance of water manifests itself differently in different religions and beliefs but it is these two qualities of water that underlie its place in cultures and faiths. Water is a source of life that represents (re)birth, knowledge, salvation and time. It is often perceived as a god, goddess or divine agency in religions. Water is, therefore, a key element in ceremonies and religious rites. The present study would attempt to show the linkage between water, religious customs, and culture within a South Asian perspective.

Introduction:

“In one drop of water are found all the secrets of all the oceans; in one aspect of you are found all the aspects of existence” (Khalil Gibran).

Water is one of the four classical elements in ancient Greek philosophy and science. It is considered to be both cold and wet; water is regarded basic substance of the universe. It is pervasively and powerfully presented within philosophical, literary, and geographical thought. Thales, who is widely regarded as the first Greek philosopher, claimed that water is the source of all things. Reasoned from the circumstance that moisture appears to nurture and inhabit all living things, Thales claimed that such wetness is contained in seeds and sperm, making water as the progenitor-agents of much life. Such philosophical explanation can be supported by the nature of water.¹ Not only it is obvious that the survival and growth of plants, animals, and people largely depends on water; the fact that babies are nurtured inside and protected by amniotic fluid before birth, suggests how particularly close and harmonious the relationship of the people and water is. With water, there is life. Covering two-thirds of the Earth, water is what constitutes us.

Not only does it bring life to this planet, but also teaches us the realities of life. It contains within itself the mixed feelings in our hearts, which make us relate to it in every step of our lives. The rush and anger in the waves of an ocean are like the ups and downs we face every day, but when in the end it touches the shore and kisses our feet, all our worries are gone, and a sense of calm heals our souls. The sound of water gushing towards us balances our discomfort and revives us to go on with our lives with a feeling of contentedness.

All natural forces have the contradicting qualities of being beneficial and destructive, and none more so than water. Water is one of the most powerful and destructive of forces, and at the same time it is the most necessary to Life. It is the only material on Earth without which there would be no life at all. Water brings life not only in its sweet (fresh), reviving form, but also when it is salty, in both states forming an environment for the living and growth of many animals and plants. Water forms over 70% of every living body, and covers about two thirds of the face of the Earth. Scientific researchers have determined that life was formed in a watery environment; and though it is clear that at the beginning, Earth was a ball of fire with no room for water, many ancient myths indicate the existence of water before any sort of creation, even before the Earth itself had been formed. In myths that declare the world was born out of Chaos, water was part of that chaos, as it is expressed in Genesis: "...the earth was without form, and void; and ... the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters". Void is the old word for the modern concept of Chaos. The story does not explain how the water got there before Creation. According to the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, "The waters are the source of all potentialities in existence; the source and grave of all things in the universe; the first form of matter". This idea is revealed in the attitude of various peoples and cultures around the world toward Water, i.e., in Egypt it symbolized birth, renewal and growth, for the Chinese Dao religion, adaptation and persistence and in Jewish Talmud water represents for wisdom and learning. For some tribal people, water carries magic and witchcraft, and is used to connect this world to the other world through the wishing well which is the source of all Wisdom. According to the people of Timor in Indonesia, Water influences preparation for war, hot water causes high spirit and readiness for battle, while cold water chills the warriors' mood and makes them unfit for it. So, Ideas and cultural traditions arising from water are therefore at the central core of this world of waters. The dual character of water as nature on the one hand, and the element man needs to drink to live on the other hand, gives water a special role in social and cultural constructions of the material world.²

Water in Religious Practices as Symbol of Life, Purification, Protection and Healing: South Asian View:

Modern definitions of South Asia are mostly consistent in including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan as the constituent countries. Some scholar includes Afghanistan and Maldives within the realm and some excludes too. It is a native land for more

than a few ancient religions. The major religions in the subcontinent are Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity. Other minor religions in the South Asia include Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and the Bahai faith. Hinduism is the most dominant religion in the South Asia with a following of approximately 80 percent of the population in India. It is also popular in Nepal. Islam is the second-most popular religion, practiced by about 600 million/one-third of the South Asian population. South Asia has the largest population of Muslims in the world. Christianity is the third-largest religion, practiced by about 3 percent of the population. Buddhism and Sikhism accounts for about 4 percent of the population of South Asia. Jainism and two other minor religions that have their origins in this area, practiced by 1 percent of the population.³ And finally, there are still Indians who practice animist religions that predate all the other religions listed, especially in remote areas. The most common thing of this different religions is, the use of water, which is believed to have a cleansing power that reaches beyond the physical body.

According to Jewish *Talmud*, all the waters that exist on earth Lower Waters collectively, and the waters that fall from the sky in all kinds of precipitations Upper Waters. It also expresses the idea that “Upper Waters are male, Lower Waters are female”, which agrees with most myths in the world, though not all of them. The Lower Waters can be further divided by their nature into gathered waters, including seas, lakes, pools, wells and marshes; and running waters which include rivers, brooks, and springs. There are different kinds of myths connected to each of those types of waters according to their nature and deities.⁴ The physical and aesthetic properties of water give it a unique mythical-religious potential and therefore it has played an important role in myths and different religious rituals which are described as follows:

Water in Hinduism with a special reference to Ganges:

Water is an integral part of Hindu beliefs and customs and it is always given a sacred position in the centuries-old civilization of India. The civilization originated and flourished on the banks of the sacred rivers and the influence of the rivers is reflected in all aspects of life. According to ‘*panchamahabhuta*’, the five elements of nature include earth, water, fire, air and sky where water represented by a circle, symbolizes fullness. In the hymns of the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, the *Upanishads*, the epics and the great works of Vedic scholars, the importance of water is often highlighted. Lord Vishnu, the God of existence, is also known as “Narayan”, which means one who resides in water. The origin of life from water and the development of species explained through the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu is a Hindu theological concept in Vedic history. The incarnations through the ages start from water as a fish and continue as a tortoise, boar and lion to a perfect human being. Importance of rivers and water bodies is highlighted throughout the epics “*Ramayana*” and “*Mahabharata*”. There are several legends about water and water bodies. The epic “*Ramayana*” (Valmiki) explains a lot about the river Sarayu (Ganges) in which Lord Sri Rama disappeared on the way to heaven. Saints appearing in

epics always lived in the vicinity of rivers, as physical purity associated with mental purity was believed a must in realizing eternal truth. In all religious practices, the sprinkling of divine water is an inevitable part. The water is purified with “*mantras*”, inviting the presence of the seven sacred rivers. This divine water is used to anoint the idol, which is then distributed to devotees. Associated with every Hindu temple and ashrams, there are big ponds and wells. It was a popular belief that bathing in holy rivers or drinking some drops of water from these rivers before the last breath, can help remove the sins acquired from the evil deeds during the lifetime and through the generations. In the functions following funerals and during the offerings to ancestors, bathing and dipping items for worship in holy water bodies, including the ocean, is considered of great spiritual value. Praying with a handful of water in the morning and the evening was part of daily life. There are several water bodies considered sacred in the different States of India. Cultural traditions have helped conserve many of the water resources and the forests and wetlands that maintain them. Former generations gave due consideration to the right to use water for all creations. Open wells have been in use for centuries. Near the well, they used to construct small pits to fill water so that birds, reptiles or animals could drink. Some class of Brahmins even judged the behaviour of a newly-wedded girl by asking her to water the sacred plant “*tulsi*” and by watching to see if she kept some water in the bucket used to draw the water from the well for other creatures. It was a custom not to empty the bucket until sunset.⁵

There are seven sacred rivers in India, namely the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Besides, river Kshipra, Pamba, and Krishna is also considered holy. River Ganges, the greatest river of India is not only a waterway, but a goddess from heaven. Thus, many Hindus believe that the river has incredible healing powers. Great cities like Haridwar, Rishikesh, Prayag and Varanasi were built on her banks and these have become famous centers of art, music, textile weaving, literature and every other artistic endeavor apart from spiritual pursuits.

It is a common belief that bathing in the Ganges washes away a person’s bad karma and is like being in heaven. Some Hindus even believe that being brushed by a breeze which contains a single drop of the Ganges will absolve the impurities of multiple lifetimes. Dying in the holy city of Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges, is said to result in ‘moksha’ release from the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. It is estimated that 32,000 corpses are cremated each year in Varanasi, after which their ashes are given to the Ganges. Others who cannot afford cremation simply wrap and float the body down the river.⁶ To access her healing waters, Hindus travel from all over the world on pilgrimages, often filling containers with water to bring back to their homes for rituals or healings. In fact, the largest gathering of human beings in the entire world regularly occurs on the banks of the river at the city of Allahabad. Every 12 years, the city hosts the Kumbh Mela, a religious festival during which the central ritual is bathing in the Ganges to achieve moksha. In 2001, over 30 million pilgrims attended, making it the largest gathering in human history.⁷

Unfortunately, Ganges has also become one of the most polluted bodies of water in the entire world, due to India's exploding population and rapid industrialization. Over 450 million people live in the Ganges river basin, and human waste is the cause of most of the pollution. Almost five billion liters of sewage flow into the river every day, only a quarter of which is treated. By Varanasi, the Ganges is an open sewer. Fecal bacteria at this point are 150 times higher than the safe level for bathing, let alone drinking. Over 300,000 Indian children die annually from drinking contaminated water. Industrial effluent also pollutes the river, particularly from tanneries in Kanpur. Indian industries dump nearly a billion liters of waste into the river daily.⁸ Many Hindus still continue to bathe in or even drink the Ganges regularly. Confident in the healing powers of the divine river, they believe nothing could compromise the purity of their goddess. For them, Mother Ganges exists to wash away the impurities and pollution of earth and thus can cleanse herself. Major cleanup efforts are thus a waste of money and effort. Some governments and industries have taken advantage of these beliefs, and have used confidence in the cleansing power of the Ganges to justify continuing to pollute the river. The Ganges is still revered as a living goddess by Hindus across the world, but an effective solution to its pollution remains elusive.

Water in Islam:

'We made from water every living thing' (21:30). This powerful statement in the Quran sums up the importance of water in Islam. The word water occurs more than sixty times in the Quran, rivers over fifty and the sea over forty, whereas fountains, springs, rain, hail etc. occur less frequently.⁹

In Islam, life and knowledge originated from water, a divine gift that symbolizes profound wisdom, the drink that quenches the souls thirst. It is an integral part of Islam and has been embedded in Islamic beliefs and scriptures. Using the blessing of water as a source of growth, sustenance and purification, Muslims are required to perform *wudhu* and *ghusl* (ablution rituals) using water before prayer throughout the day. With descriptions of paradise mentioning adorned gardens wherein rivers flow, it is believed that water will also benefit in the afterlife, thus reinforcing its importance to mankind. Islam attaches great importance to cleanliness. This is reflected in the Islamic view on life, which makes ablution and bathing a duty. Islam also requires Muslims to wash their hands before and after meals and to wash their clothes to purify them. All these obligations are related to individual and collective acts of worship, emphasizing the Islamic concept, which considers man's body and soul, two parts of a single and entity, as mutually complementary. Following from this sanitation and hygiene are considered of prime importance to human life; this is reflected in ideology and practical application. Providing water to others is considered as *sadaqah*, a good in Islam. Some *hadith*, or traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (SM), relate to the obligation to assist the thirsty ones, whether humans or animals.

In Islam, water is seen as an objective gift of God with no mystic value attached to it, yet it is an endeared part of the environment since it is a God given source of life. The well of

Zamzam is located right in the heart of Mecca. The water that comes from this well is not seen by Muslims as holy water but is given great value because the prophet of Islam described it as sweet to drink and a curer. Substantial number of pilgrims visits the well each year while performing *hajj* to experience what the prophet thought of it.

Water in Christianity:

In the Christian faith, water is both a symbol of life and source of strength. It is also a reminder that, some things are indeed vital for our survival. Almost all Christian churches or sects have an initiation ritual involving the use of water. The use of water is important for its own symbolic value in three ways: it cleanses and washes away dirt, fills everything it enters as God fills those who are immersed in him and we need water to survive physically as we need God to survive spiritually. In the early church baptism was usually performed with the person standing in water and with water being poured over the upper part of the body. This was called 'immersion' but today the term refers to the method of dipping the whole body under water which is used, for example, by the Baptist and Orthodox churches. Another important significance of water for Christianity is the "living water" that Jesus described himself as. (John 4: 1-42) is the story of Jesus and a Samaritan woman to whom he offers living water so that she will never thirst again, in other words eternal life through him. Living water can be equated with eternal life, salvation.

Holy water is water which is blessed for use in certain rights, especially that which is blessed at the Easter Vigil for baptism of catechumens. The use of water other than for baptism goes back to the 4th century in the East and the 5th century in the West. The custom of sprinkling people with water at mass began in the 9th century. At this time 'stoups', basins for holy water from which people could sprinkle them on entering a church, were in common use. Holy water is also used at blessings, dedications, exorcisms and burials.

Ablutions in Christianity are mainly baptism and the washing of fingers and communion vessels after the communion. This takes place in two parts. Firstly, the chalice is rinsed with the wine, and then the chalice and priest's fingers with wine and water. This ablution is important because after the bread and wine has been consecrated, Christ is believed to be present.

Water in Buddhism:

Throughout his lifetime the Buddha emphasized the importance of people respecting the natural resources on which of course all life depends. Water is vital to life: over 90 percent of the bodies of all creatures consist of water. According to one part of the *Book of Buddhist Discipline* the Buddha states quite clearly that a human life is composed of four elements, one of which is the Water element, known as adhesion. The adhesion element (such as bile, phlegm, blood, etc.) has a cohesive function that holds all particles of matter in a human body together and thus prevents them from scattering. He says, only food on which all living creatures depend but they also need water. Without water we cannot survive.¹⁰

In Buddhism symbolism and ritual is pointless because they seek spiritual enlightenment that comes from seeing the reality of unreality. Water does however feature in Buddhist funerals where water is poured into a bowl placed before the monks and the dead body. As it fills and pours over the edge, the monks recite “As the rains fill the rivers and overflow into the ocean, so likewise may what is given here reach the departed”.

So for Buddhists water is said to symbolize purity, clarity and calmness. It is crucial to Buddhists to live in harmony with the environment. Water is seen as a life giver in Buddhism. It's also a symbol of fertility; of transfer (of energy and merit) and of seasonality. In Sri Lanka, it is believed that, if someone's spiritual energy is very high, then there will be a lot of rain in the right season and if the rulers are also very just and right then there will be a lot of rain. So there is a very whole complex set of thinking and values that are connected to water.¹¹

Water in Sikhism:

According to Sri Guru Granth Sahib, water is considered to be the most important origin of life. God has created the world combining air, water and fire. First he created air. The entire universe was then created from water and light of the lord exists in everybody. Similar to Hinduism, water is a key part of Sikh prayer. Water is thought to purify and clean the soul and mind as well as the body.

Sikhs use water in special ceremonies in which they call the water as ‘*Amrit*’. They use it as holy water for drinking some part of it and the other part is sprinkled on the eyes, face and head. When someone expires, they burn the body and collect the ashes to immerse or present it to running water or any other water body such as rivers, lakes and so on.

Conclusion:

“Thousands have lived without love, not one without water” (W. H. Auden). “Water is the mother of the vine, the nurse and fountain of fecundity, the adorer and refresher of the world” – Charles Mackay.

It is through water that we are physically and spiritually interrelated and interconnected with the living and non-living beings of earth and to the whole of life. Planet earth is seen as an irregular ball immersed in water. If the sacred gift of earth is life, then water is the custodian of life. Water is a feature of the natural world that has been a centerpiece of spiritual symbolism and religious ritual in human communities for thousands of years. With remarkable regularity across human cultures, water has been used to communicate the sacred value of life; the spiritual dimension of purification, protection, and healing; which offers an access to the transformation and connection to the divine.

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