

THE COSMIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LITERATURE

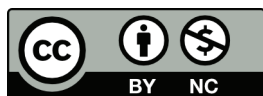
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WATER IN THE VEDIC TEXTS

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Water, cool and soothing is pure and cleansing as well as one of the prime necessities of life. Water; shapeless, tasteless, colourless and odourless, is pure in its original form and life-giving. Existence of life is affirmed through the existence of water. Civilizations of the yonder world have existed and thrived around water places. Culture, through the medium of language has expressed the significance of water and Indian culture through Sanskrit is no exception to it.

Water has a pivotal place in Vedic ritual, mythology and philosophy. The life-giving, sustaining and destructive powers of water have been referred to in many Vedic texts with awe and reverence.

It is referred to as one among five elements. Water is essential to life of plants, animals and men alike.

- Water in the Vedic texts: Vedic texts express their thoughts about water on two levels: Water, as a manifestation of nature which reaches the earth from the heavens, which originates from mountains in the form of rivers and springs and which is discovered in the womb of the earth in the form of lakes and ponds on one hand and on the other as the source of creation or that fluid which has fertile and procreative powers. In the *R̥gveda*, waters, mentioned as *Ap* are revered as goddesses. To the sacrificer, they are the motherly goddesses who proceed and pervade the world with their sweet waters (I. 23). The Vedic seer offers prayers to the waters to bless the sacrificer and his cattle. Waters are like nectar and have medicinal and procreative qualities. Waters are prayed

to eradicate sins due to speech and also cleanse the seer from sinful thoughts (X.9.2). They are worshipped by the seer to inculcate lustre. *Rgveda* mentions of three sources of water namely atmospheric, geological and terrestrial (VII. 49. 2). They are the goddesses who arrive on the earth in the form of rainwater, flow on the earth through rivers and springs and reside in wells and lakes. Varuṇa, the onlooker of truth and order, controls the waters. Waters are the source of nourishment of Soma, abode of Vaiśvānara; the terrestrial fire and the sovereign realm of Varuṇa. Waters, the female deities are urged to protect the seer (X.9.2). The seers are urged to praise the rain deity which establishes water, the source of life amongst vegetation. It is due to rain water that the earth bears plant life which is useful to human beings (V.83.1, 4). The relation between Sun and water is well-explored in the Vedic texts. *Rgveda* says that the water which gets divided in minute particles due to the heat of the Sun is carried by wind and after the conversion into cloud it rains (I. 6. 4). It explains the transfer of water from the earth to the atmosphere by wind (I. 19. 7.), disintegration of water into small particles and evaporation due to sun rays and subsequent rain (I. 23. 7). Rigvedic hymns indicate awareness of the hydrologic cycle. Plant life sustains due to the rainwater which is the combination of cloud, air and sun (X. 27. 3). The *Yajurveda* (YV) explains the process of water movement from clouds to earth and its flow through channels and storage into oceans and further evaporation (X. 19). Same thought is reflected in the *Atharvaveda* too (I. 32. 4). Life-bearing and generative qualities in primordial waters have been referred to in Sumerian cosmogony. Enki, the Sumerian god impregnates Nintur, a goddess close to the earth, by scattering his seed on the river bank. This later on gives rise to vegetation. The Greek river Okeanos and his spouse Tethys have many offsprings in the form of springs and rivers; the later procreates.

- Water as a deity: Parjanya, or the rain-god has a unique importance in the Rigvedic socio-religious context, though the hymns exclusively to him are only three. Parjanya is conceived as the son of heaven; and his cloud is seen as the ud-

der that milks honey (VII. 101. 1). He is also the seeder Bull (VII. 101. 6; VI. 83. 1). He is the father of Soma (IX. 82.3). The Rigvedic hymns unfold a picturesque image of this god. He is the charioteer that flogs the horse (lightning striking the moving clouds); the lord in whose advance the earth (woman) bends low; the one who favours the earth with his seed. He is also believed to smite the evil-doer with his thunder, the idea being based on the auspiciousness of the mid-region speech and also giving the belief in the efficacy of the mantra. Two images about Parjanya have entered the context of ritual; one is that of the horse and the other of the Bull. In the *Sākamedha*, which is the third *parvan* (portion) of the *Cāturmāsya iṣṭis* (rites to be performed four times a year, three at the interval of four months and the last any time thereafter) —a horse is made to neigh or the bull was made to bellow and urinate or pass a stool, according to the *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* XIII. 7. & *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. II. 5. 3. 18. This sympathetic rite is, obviously, a ritual transformation of the belief that Parjanya is the horse or a bull. The authority of one more universal god is exercised in a privileged fashion on the aquatic world. In the Veda, for e.g. Varuṇa is a major god who rules over nature, gods and men; he is the guardian of *ṛta* (cosmic order), the religious order of things. He is closely linked with water. With Mitra he can cause rain; with Indra, he can declare «It is I who have swelled the rushing waters» (IV. 42). In Vedic mythology, the demon Vṛtra holds back the waters and prevents them from irrigating the earth. Indra, who is waging a difficult war against him, is finally victorious and gives life to the world by releasing the waters. Mesopotamian mythology mentions of god Enlil holding back rains and preventing underground waters from reaching the surface in order to destroy humanity. He later on unleashes the waters causing flood. Essential to the life of plants, animals and men alike, water can be identified with the life-bearing forces and fecundity itself.

- Water is associated with creation. In its fluidity and elusiveness, water may suggest the absence of form, the insubstantiality and confusion from which the world will emerge. The *R̥gveda* speaks about primeval waters i.e. *salila* (X. 72. 6, X.

129. 3). Gods were well-posed in the water and thick dust arose from them, as from dancers. This in fact points at a myth, wherein gods were in the primeval waters. They are always feminine and are believed to be the womb or mothers or wives. As they danced, a drop from the waters shot up. The gods took refuge in this particle. The particle is the Sun which is mentioned to be child of the waters and at the same time the receptacle of gods. This myth indicates the association of waters with creation, a point which has been further explored by the *Upaniṣads*¹. The Nāsadīya hymn of the *Ṛgveda* raises a question whether deep and profound water existed prior to creation. Here the word *ambhas*² is used. This word is derived from √*ami śabde* i.e. that which makes sound. This word indicates the subtleness and depth of the primeval waters. Further the hymn states that darkness concealed by darkness existed in the beginning and the world was water i.e. *salila* without distinction. The word *salila* is derived from the root √*sal gatau*. According to Dange, *ambhas* and *salila* have two different meanings. *Salila* is not exactly water but dark moisture and *ambhas* is the deep fathomless water. Sāyaṇa derives the word *salila* with √*sal*: to move, it is that moisture which is prone to stir creation activity³. *Ambhas* indicates sound by no movement. This indicates that *salila* and *ambhas* are used with definitive sense in the Vedic hymns. The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* mentions: *āpo vā idam agre salilam āst* (VII. 1. 5. 1). In the mantra *salila* and *āpah* (√*ap* √*vyāptau*) are sought to be differentiated which means that *salila* is not exactly water but dark moisture. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (*Śat. Br.*) adds that it was *āpah* alone in the beginning and that they desired to procreate, indicating that *āpah* were the agent in creation endowed with Desire. Passive waters can also be mere instruments of those who confront each other in the course of great cosmogonic battles.

¹ Dange, 1992, p. 245.

² Amarakoṣa I. 9, pp. 3-4.

³ Dange, 1992, p. 279.

According to the *Śat. Br.* in the beginning the waters and the ocean alone existed. The waters had a wish: «How shall we procreate? They made an effort. They practiced ascetic heating (*tapas*) and so it happened that a golden egg appeared». This egg contained *Prajāpati*. Thus not only is water filled with the desire for procreation, it is also capable of truly creative effort and ascetic heating (XI. 1.6.1). *Prajāpati* himself undertakes creation. In the *Śat. Br.*, *Parameṣṭhin*, son of *Prajāpati*, wished to become all things on earth. So he became water, *Prajāpati* became breath and *Indra* became word (XI. 6.16). Whatever their amniotic qualities, the primordial waters are formless and not especially substantive, since *Prajāpati* still remains an embryo within them. After his birth however, the god creates more defined and concrete waters outside of himself. In this way the text shows that the deity penetrates the waters just as he penetrates the entire universe.

- Water in the Vedic sacrificial ritual: Waters play an important role in the entire sacrifice. They are of four types:
 - a) *vasatṃvarā*: These waters are taken from a flowing source, before sunset. The sacrificer distributes it all over the *savana*-i.e. three *soma*-pressings (*Śat. Br.*, III. 9. 2. 1-8.),
 - b) *praṇṭā*: These waters are taken from the place of the *gārhapatya* to the *āhavanīya*,
 - c) *ekadhana*: *Ekadhana* waters are carried in pitchers by the wife of the sacrificer. These waters are used for mixing with the *soma* juice (*Ibid.* III. 9. 3. 27.) and
 - d) *nigrābhya*: These waters are in fact *vasatṃvarā* poured into the *Hotr* cup. They are used for moistening the *soma* shoots at the time of pressing (*Ibid.* III. 9. 3. 29; III. 9. 4. 14.). The *Śat. Br.* says that for establishment of fire the ground is to be dug and five *sambhāras* are collected which include water (II. 1. 1. 1ff). Water is used for calming down the ground that is injured. They symbolize food and also that they are 'woman', the fire being the man. This forms the procreative couple (II. 1. 1.13).

The waters form an essential part in the *Rājasūya* sacrifice. Waters from various sources have to be collected for the consecrational lustration of the king. The belief is that the waters that are flowing con-

stitute a 'nation of waters', *i.e.* *apām raṣṭrām* (*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* I. 7. 5. 1). The mantras from the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* and the consequent explanation in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* shows the beliefs regarding these waters, the idea being a sympathetic relationship between this *raṣṭra* of waters and the *raṣṭra* of kings. The various types of waters to be collected are —flowing; flowing against the current; flowing away from the main current; sea-water; from a whirlpool (with a mantra to *Apām Napāt*); from a steady sunny spot in a stream, water from rain while the sun is shining; from a stagnant pool, from a well, dew-drops, honey; embryonic fluids from a cow that has given birth to a calf; milk; ghee; those mixed with light sunrays⁴. According to the *Śat. Br.* there are seventeen types of waters *i.e.* liquids.

- Water in the *Upaniṣads*: The *Upaniṣads* mention the role of water on three levels:
 - a) Water as the source of creation

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* abound in references pertaining to water. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* tells in a Thalesian style that water was the source of all things: In the beginning, waters alone existed; from Waters was born Satya, which produced Brahman. It gave birth to Prajāpati from whom all gods were born. Thales regarded water as the origin of all things and his philosophy did not need the hypothesis of a God as responsible for the creation of Water. The *Upaniṣad* regards water as the origin of all things whatsoever. In the passage explaining the progressive definition of Brahman, *Drpta Bālaki* of the Gārgya clan meditates on water as Brahman (II. 1. 12). Here *Drpta Bālaki* concentrates on the gross nature of world as Brahman and Ajātaśatru focuses on the subtle aspects of the individual Self as Brahman. The *Madhuvidyā* portion incorporates water as essence of the world and the entire world as the essence of water (II. 5. 2). After the departure of the soul, different organs of the body of a human being merge into the different manifestations of the world. His blood and semen are deposited into water, says the *Upaniṣad* (III. 2. 13). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* notes the discussion between *Kabandha Ātharvaṇa* and *Patāncala Kāpya* on the thread which holds the world together. At one instance it is water which is the spirit of the world. The *Upaniṣad* says, «he who dwells

⁴ Dange, 2000, p. 321.

in the water, yet is within the water, whom the water does not know, whose body is water, who controls the water from within, he is the self, the inner controller, the immortal».

b) Water as part of creative activity

Pravāhaṇa Jaivali asked *Śvetaketu* whether he knew how water becomes a human being in an oblation. Here, a cosmic sacrifice is mentioned wherein the yonder world is the fire, the sun its fuel, the rays its smoke; the day the flame, the quarters the sparks. In this fire gods offered faith. Out of that offering King Soma emerged. The second fire is rain, the year is its fuel, the clouds smoke, the lightning the flame, the thunderbolt the coals, the thundering the sparks and rain showers emerge. The present world is fire in which the rain showers are offered out of which food emerges. In this way human beings are created, wherein water in the form of rain is instrumental for creation. The *Brahmasūtras* refer to this creation in the aphorism: *tadantarāh pratipattau ramhati sampariṣvatah prasnanirūpanābhyam* (III. 1.1). This aphorism refers to water as an element from which the embodied soul has been created. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* describes the creation of the world. It states that at the beginning of the world, 'sat' was all alone. It thought to be many and then fire was produced. Fire produced water which sent forth food (VI. 2. 2-4). The *Upaniṣad* establishes the inter-relationship between these manifestations. Whenever a person grieves or perspires, water is produced through heat. Abundance of rain leads to rich harvest, thus it is water which creates food (c. f. *Aitareya Upaniṣad* I. 3.2; *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II. 1.1).

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, it is said that by the union of *Sat* with the three elements viz; fire, water and earth the varied manifestations of the world are created. *Sat* is the primary being, fire or heat is its first product. Out of heat, water is produced which generates food. *Sat* penetrates into these three as their inner soul and by mixing them up makes them threefold. The red colour of fire is the colour of *tejas*, the white of *āpas* and the black is of *anna*. Thus reality is one, it is due to the derivations of speech, we speak about it as manifold. This philosophy of *trivṛtkarāṇa* has found place in the *Brahmasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa and has been extensively elaborated by Śāṅkarācārya and other Vedāntins. The *sūtra tryātmakatvāntu bhūyastvat* discusses about the reference given to water rather than the other elements (III. 1).

2). Śaṅkarācārya argues that a body of a living being mainly comprises of water because it outweighs other elements; the reference is made to water. Water is the dominant element of the semen and the egg of man and woman respectively. Clarified butter, soma, milk are essential ingredients of a sacrifice and water dominates in them. Thus, in the great cosmic sacrifice in which *Dyus* is the fire, the fruit is the juice of *Soma*, herein there is preponderance of water. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* refers to the abundance and cooling effect as the essential qualities of water. Thus in the great cosmic sacrifice, which has creation of the soul as its ultimate fruit, water is the dominant element. In the creation of the world, water is the key element. In this way, water plays an important role in the creation of the animate and inanimate world.

c) Figurative representation of water

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, while representing the world to be the sacrificial horse mentions rivers as the blood vessels of the horse. When Prajāpati prepared food for himself, he created mind, speech and breath, water is the breath of Prajāpati, whose light-form is the moon (I. 5. 13).

Metaphorically, the knower of Self becomes as transparent as water (IV. 3. 32). As the ocean is the goal of all waters similarly Self is the final receptacle of intelligence (IV. 5. 12-13). In the beginning, this world was just water. That water produced the true Brahman which created the world. Here water is indicated as the seed of the universe in undifferentiated form (V. 5. 1). The relationship heat and water has been analogically explained by the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. It says that when a person is thirsty, it is heat which carries of whatever is drunk (V.8.3). While explaining oneness of the Atman, *Uddālaka* gives the analogy of the rivers and sea. He says just as rivers flow to the sea and they become sea itself, similarly the entire world becomes self itself (VI. 10.1-3).

- Water and holy places: The word *tṛtha* is derived from the root *√tr*, means 'to swim, to cross waters'. The meaning assigned to this word is a water place or a path to a water place, ford of a river, bathing place or place of pilgrimage on the banks of sacred stream⁵. According to the *Ṛgveda*, the

⁵ Bharadwaj, 2004, pp. 182-205, fn. 1.

word *tīrtha* appears to have been used in the sense of a road or a way (I. 169. 6. & I. 173. 11). But at one place in the *R̥gveda*, its occurrence can be explained in the sense of a 'holy place' or 'place of pilgrimage, in which it is now popularly used⁶. The word *tīrtha* occurs 8 times in the *R̥gveda*⁷. Kane points out that the importance of holy places, visiting them and performing religious rites were known in the Brāhmaṇa period, and the word *tīrtha* came to be denoted as a locality or spot or expanse of water which gives rise to the accumulation of righteousness (merit) owing to its own peculiar nature without any adventitious circumstance. According to Rudhart Jean:

whenever they are found, waters are often bound up with divine powers... water fulfils a positive function. It bathes, dissolves and purifies. It symbolizes a generative and life-giving quality very similar to creative power and is thus divine and sacralizing. It has a positive trait of conferring purity and immortality⁸.

Vedic *tīrtha*-s are first mentioned in connection with the performance of sacrifice, a ritualistic practice going back to hoary antiquity. In the ritual context, the term *tīrtha* is understood as a ford; the passage for moving along within the sacrificial area; the path lies, in all *iṣṭi*-s between the *utkara* and the spot where Praṇitā waters are kept and between the *cātvāla* and *utkara* for a rite which requires an Uttaravedi according to the *Āp. Śr. Śā.* (XII. 5. 4.). The *tīrtha* for driving the cows which are sacrificial fees lies between the *śālā* and the *sadas* and from there to the south of the Agnīdhra⁹. Kane explains the term *tīrtha* as:

the way for going to or coming from the *vihāra* is between the Praṇitā and *utkara* in the case of *iṣṭi*-s (i.e. to the east of *utkara* and to the west of Praṇitā) and between the *utkara* and the *cātvāla* pit in other cases. This path for going to the *vihāra* is *tīrtha*. The sacrificial ground where the fires are maintained is called *vihāra*¹⁰.

⁶ *R̥gveda* X. 31. 3.

⁷ Dubey, 2004, pp. 206-214, fn. 3.

⁸ As quoted by Bakre, 1998, pp. 252-253, fn. 207.

⁹ Chitrabhanu Sen, 1978, p. 70.

¹⁰ Kane, 1953, p. 984.

He has pointed out that «all religions have laid great emphasis on the sacredness of certain localities and have either recommended or enjoined with great insistence pilgrimages to them»¹¹. In the sacrificial context, thus the term *tīrtha* is associated with water. Purity is another essential trait of water. It cleanses off dirt, be it mundane or in the form of sins. In the Purāṇas, places situated on the banks of the water places became designated as *tīrtha*. Taking a dip in a holy river is believed to wash off sins. Voluminous literature in the form of *Māhātmyas* developed around it. Even in the present times *tīrthas* are very significant for the Hindu community. Mahākumbhamelā, which is visited by crores of people, bears testimony to this fact.

The religious and philosophical significance of water indicates the awareness which Ancient Wisdom had regarding the importance and sanctity of water. *Sūtra* literature and *Purāṇas* have a list of do's and don'ts pertaining to water. In the present scenario, where there is a possibility of wars between nations fought for want of water, thoughts from the Vedic texts will be beneficial to understand how did our Ancients regard water with awe and reverence. Philosophical ponderings and religious significance will be helpful for the generation of present times to use this manifestation with care and reverence.

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¹¹ Kane, 1953, pp. 552-827.