

Preserving the Purity: The Role of Religious and Ethical Thoughts in Early Indian Water Stewardship

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Abstract:

Water is an essential element for living organisms and its preservation has been crucial aspect of human civilization. As the contemporary world grapples with the challenges of non-cooperation and unawareness regarding the significance of water, it is time to revisit, analyze and incorporate the useful ancient wisdoms in modern day life. The heavy dependence of humans on water has led both to the crisis of sustainability and to the invention of various methods of its preservation and management. This work includes the analytical study of ancient literary sources to understand the religious, ethical, and environmental consideration of water. The day-to-day contact with aquifers has led to the integration of ethical and cultural codes for safeguarding its nature and properties. The early Vedic texts suggests that the people of the period were conscious of the importance of natural resources, be it water, air, earth(land), forests, etc. and they tactfully placed the preservation methods in rituals, totems and traditions, which were regarded as the duty granting spiritual merit. The current situation of water bodies is dilapidated and is worsening day by day. Increasing demography, lack of resources, non-cooperation, etc. are obviously some primary reasons but the ethical degradation on both individual and community level is the most prominent though overlooked factor.

KeyWords: Aquatic Psychology, Reservoirs, Environmental ethics, Apah.

Introduction:

The origin of life is traced from water and every living being are dependent on water for their survival. The fossils of early humans have been mostly found near a river valley. Along with the fossil remains the evidences of settlements from earliest times are found at a place which had proximity to a water source i.e. river valleys, lakes, caves near water pools etc. hence it is evident from archaeological sources that humans from the very beginning had selected a reservoir-centric abode. Even the literary sources recognize water as the harbinger of settlement to the peoples. The silent

evidences revealed from the proto-historical period depicts a well-structured water management system. However, due to the un-decipherment and the paucity of the literary evidences of the period, it is quite impossible to trace the aquatic psychology of the people. Not only the proto-historical evidences, but also those found through excavations belonging to historical period also reveals some better examples of hydraulic engineering and water harvesting. The classic example is the Shringverapura, an ancient Ramayana site located on the banks of Ganga, thirty-six kms northwest to the Prayagraj.

The early Indian period, discussed in this work, broadly extends from the beginning of the Vedas to the compilation of early smritis, specifically Manusmriti and Yajnavalkya smriti. The beginning of the literary evidence in the Indian historical context occurs with the composition of oral traditions of Vedic culture people and this period witnessed the major changes in religious and cultural ethos of the society. These texts from the very beginning showcase the fearful and respectful behaviors of the Vedic people towards natural entities.

In early India, the line between a person's character and how they treated water was paper thin. Water was not just seen a natural entity for physical usage but was considered as a divinity with inherent purity, that also purified other things both morally and physically. Keeping in view the divine status and the usage in workaday, the norms and practices, at least in theory, were defined to be respectful and sustainable. But the main question arises that if earlier religious and ethical conditions were so environment centric then how did the situation changed and things became to collapse? The change occurred due to several factors throughout the historical period but this vacuum was itself taking shape from the early Indian period which would be subsequently discussed further.

1. Purity and Purificatory Nature of Water:

From the time of composition of Rigveda, we continuously get literary evidences of water being regarded as pure, which purifies the sins and wrongs of a person. Many suktas in Rigveda describes water as pure and divine, and mentions about their ability to purify others. The recitation of holy mantras used to invoke the divinity of water to liberate persons from numerous sins. Hymns 47 and 49 of seventh mandal are among the examples found in Rigveda. Another hymn speaks about the nutritional content of the water.ⁱ The great bath of Mohenjodaro and several other ritual baths at different confluences are the examples which denotes the importance of water as a purifier. Natural water was always considered pure and among all forms of water rain water was the purest. *Atharvaveda* says rain water should be preserved because it the purest form of water.ⁱⁱ *Baudhayana* and *Yajnavalkya* says that water sufficient in quantity in order to slake the thirst of a cow, which in its

natural condition and is collected on ground is pure.ⁱⁱⁱ The term ‘natural’ here implies that pure and fresh form of water free from any types of smells, taints or other defilements was only considered pure enough to perform purification. *Yajnavalkya* says water used for physical cleanliness should be in the natural pure state free from froth and bubbles.^{iv} *Manu, Visnu, Yajnavalkya, Daksa etc.* says one must bathe daily in natural water.^v Visnu says that out of water drawn in a pot, water standing in a reservoir, a spring, a river, water in which noble men of past bathed, Ganges water, each succeeding one is holier than each preceding one for a bath.^{vi} This culture of considering the water holy in which noble men have bathed earlier was also followed in Buddhism. The ‘*Anheā*’ river in which once Buddha had bathed was revered greatly by Buddhists.^{vii} Even the city where this river flowed was named ‘*Pāwā*’, derived from the Sanskrit term ‘*Pāwan*’.^{viii} In ancient societies Chandalas were among the most downtrodden people, contact with them made one impure and it required great penance to purify oneself, however some authorities suggest that water used from tank made by Chandala did not require any type of penance.^{ix} It was believed that water is itself a purifier hence it cannot be agitated.

The sipping of water (*achaman*) made the man pure by eradicating his sins. *Apstamba* generally says that a person after sipping water from what is collected on the ground becomes pure.^x Here ground water meant those of either big reservoirs or collected on pure surface. He further states, one should not sip rain water, water from crevices and warmwater without any good reason. All these categories of water were considered among the purest forms. He also prohibits purification through sipping while standing in water. These restrictions could have been to prevent from disrupting the sanctity of the purest forms of water. Almost all vedic texts have acknowledged the purificatory nature of water, Shatpath Brahmana states water as a means of purification.^{xi} The way water purifies were the sipping, touching, bathing, consuming, etc. Vedas often invokes water to remove whatever is dirty and to remove whatever sin or wrong one has committed.10.9.1 is a hymn addressed to waters in which waters are invoked to remove whatever sin or wrong one has committed.^{xii} Similarly a sage in *Vajsaneyi Samhita* prays water as mother and asks her to purify.^{xiii} Another verse in the same text invokes water to remove whatever is curable and dirty.^{xiv}

Vishwaroop on *Yajnavalkya* quotes, ‘whatever creates doubts should be touched with water, then it becomes pure’.^{xv} Water was also used as the purifier of various kinds of vessels and utensils and of the spots/grounds.^{xvi} Although there were several compounds those were used for cleansing either alone or in a mixture but it was water which is emphasized as most important cleansing agent. *Yajnavalkya* says that water alone can clean taints from gold and other precious metals because what

is produced in water i.e. shells and corals are not encased, means their cavities are not filled with impurity.^{xvii} It is therefore that water was considered pure and was used as a purifier in various cases.

2. Changing Perspective with Changing Practices:

The descriptions of various primary sources in the above part have clarified about the ancient psychology of treating water as divinely immaculate with purifying traits. Now the further discussion would clarify the changing psyche through the analysis of various sources according to their generally accepted chronology.^{xviii}

2.1. Early Divinity-

Vedic people worshipped natural forces and components as divine beings. Rigveda mentions several aquatic deities including Varuna, Apah, Parjanya, etc.^{xix} The water is stated as the originator of life, as mother source of nature's dynamics of evolution and as harbinger of settlement to the people. The other qualities given to water deities are the liquid energy of cosmic space who creates and gives peace and joy, help in achievement of food and energy for body, mind and soul, impels and invigorates people and powers, is full of sanative and washes off the negativity and deficiency, if full of life, fecundity and generative potential, is cleanser and destroyer of diseases and sickness and medicament for all and is praised to purify and sanctify with the beauty of manners and culture.^{xx} In the Rigveda and other vedas of trayi, the main focus is on the divinity of water with prayers for vitality and long life. Atharvaveda states to protect the water from being polluted which suggests that by the time of Atharvaveda the problem of contamination of water was taking shape of larger menace for society.

2.2. Usage with Divinity-

In the later texts the usage of water is also discussed along with its divine status. In the gryhsutras, which deals with the rites (samskaras) of life, the usage of water is emphasized in a way that no ritual was complete without the help of water. Till the time of early gryhsutras and other Brahminical sources, the usage of water was mostly described during rituals and sacrifices, hence, like Atharvaveda it was just a formal order to protect the natural properties of water. As the performers of rituals, the priests, mostly resided in the rural areas where natural sources of water faced less pressures and were less imbalanced than those of highly populated areas, the main focus on texts were on the ritualistic use and purification.

2.3. Sustainability with Usage-

By the time of Dharmasutras, which roughly belong to the period beginning with second urbanization, i.e. starting from sixth century BCE to fourth century BCE, we see the shift in the texts. The earlier texts mostly dealt with describing the divinity and prayers to the water and then slowly shifted with insertion of some preservation ideas alongside the prayers. The dharmasutras discussed about the norms dealing with the protection of water bodies relatively higher than earlier texts along with stating the divine nature of water. The latter nature was never unoverlooked but the focus of the texts was shifting towards conservation. This shift may have been due to the expansion of urban settlement following the period of second urbanization in the northern plains where mostly these texts were composed.

2.4. Responsibilities for Sustainability-

While the divine nature of the water was still relevant and was discussed with same frequency as before, the later sources, such as dharmashastras and law books, i.e. Arthashastra began to include discussions on preserving and managing water. Arthashastra and Manusmriti both the texts put the duty of distribution and preservation of water on kings.^{xxi} They also allow the authorities to take the help of enforcement means and agencies to fulfill the need. These texts also give liberty to the authorities for the use of coercive measures, inflict punishments, both corporal and monetary, on the perpetrators to ensure the safety of natural entities.^{xxii} We also get some epigraphical and archaeological examples of ruling authorities of the same period as of these texts who tried and even at some level for the time being succeeded in fulfilling their rajdhama of providing means for access of water.

3. Results:

If we closely monitor the early Indian texts, we notice the change in their attitude towards natural resources. The texts mostly focused on water as it was most common natural component whose imbalance was clearly visible. The changing trends in the scriptures suggest the changing conditions. The texts starting with praising the water as divine slowly inserted the norms for management of water, first as polite suggestions and then as mandatory compliance and at last took the help of coercive measures. The change was also due to increasing population and expanding settlements. The emphasis on the preservation with assistance of moral, corporal and physical bindings showcases the changing behavior of society.

Among the major problems of water pollution in India, one is the pollution caused due to religious wastes. It has been the habit of Indian people to disperse or immerse religious leftovers in water

bodies. The question lies if the religious thought regarding water in ancient India was such that it treated water as mother who helped in achievement of food and energy, then why and how the rituals evolved in a way that became menace for water bodies? Obviously, there are several factors that totally differ in this vast time frame, such as the size of population, the nature of ritual objects/ viands, etc. The other factor is the misunderstanding and blind following of practices. The beginning of this practice of leaving materials on the banks of water bodies can be traced from gryhsutras.^{xxiii} This was done with three main reasons- first, the materials dealing with personal self was buried near the banks so that no one can use it for black magics, second, the materials used for rituals and sacrifices were of pure nature and hence were not meant to be defiled and third, leaving old clothes at banks of rivers were due to their impurity and wearing those clothes again would bring back the pollution which would make a person unfit for rituals as the rituals demanded complete sanctity including with respect to clothes. This practice has been ongoing throughout the centuries without considering the textual teachings focusing on the preservation of water and has been continuously deteriorating the condition.

4. Discussion:

Water is a compound that quenches thirst and is essential in thriving of life, that is the modern meaning based on its utility. Back in the past, water had same qualities but was considered more than a daily use compound which helped in its preservation with natural balancing. The People of ancient India respected water as spiritual symbol and it was taught to them both as individual and social duty to preserve water. In the wake of modernization and cosmopolitanism, we have been depriving ourselves of ethnic moral and cultural values, which were inscribed in religious traditions. The Indian psyche, obsequious for western validations have harmed us so much so that is not easy to reprieve. Although, ancient aquatic wisdom had inherent morality and sustainability but we cannot solely rely on it keeping in view the various adverse factors of contemporary time. Further scientific and collaborative assistance with the sense of altruism would be needed to preserve the purity of lifegiving nectar, i.e. water.

Literary Sources	Descriptions of Aquatics
Vedas	Prays water and aquifers as divine beings and considers them as forebearers of health and life.
Later vedic texts and Gryhsutras	Teaches the divinity of water and ordains the ways for its use in daily rituals and chores.

Dharmasutras	Along with the divinity emphasizes on the equitable and sustainable use of water.
Dharmashastras and Law books	Considering the pre-established status of water they also the authorities and communities for its better use. They also prescribe authorities to take help of restorative and punishable means for the disobedients.
Jain and Buddhist Sources	Focuses on the proper use of aquifers without disturbing the natural balance and preaches rigorous practices following ahimsa towards the water.

Fig. 1. Change of attitude towards water as seen in different ancient literary sources.

References:

ⁱ *Rigveda 10.17.10*, (Tulsi Ram trans.) (2013), Agniveer

ⁱⁱ *Atharvaveda 1.9.1.4*, (W. D. Whitney trans.) Vol I, (1856), Motilal Banarsidas

ⁱⁱⁱ *Baudhayan Dharmasutra, 1.9.10* (Patrick Olivelle trans.) (2000), Motilal Banarsidas and Vidyarnava S. C. (1918), *The Sacred Book of the Hindus, Yajnavalkya Smriti, I.192-193 translations with commentary of Mitaksara*, The Panini Office

^{iv} *Yajnavalkya Smriti, I.20*

^v *Manusmriti IV.203*, (George Buhler's trans.) (1886), Clarendon Press, *Visnu Dharmasutra 64.1-2 and 15-16*, (J Jolly trans.) (1880), Clarendon Press and *Yajnavalkya smriti I.159*

^{vi} *Visnu Dharmasutra, 64.17*

^{vii} Carlleylle, A. C. L. (1885), *Explorations done in Gorakhpur, Saran ad Gazipur, 1877-78-79-80, Archaeological survey of India, Vol. XXII, p. 31*

^{viii} Ibid, p. 30

^{ix} Vidyarnava S. C. (1918), *The Sacred Book of the Hindus, Yajnavalkya Smriti translations with commentary of Mitaksara*, The Panini Office, p. 288

^x *Apastamba Dharmasutra, I. 15.2*, (Patrick Olivelle trans.) (2000), Motilal Banarsidas

^{xi} *Shatpath Brahmana, I.7.4.17*, (J Eggeling trans.) (1882), Clarendon Press

^{xii} *Om; Apo histha mayobhuvah, tâna ûrje dadhatana, mahe ranâya chakşase.*
Om; Yo vah śivatamo rasah, tasya bhajayateha nah; usatir iva matarah,
Om; Tasma arah gamâma vah yasya kṣayaya jinvatha; Apo janayatha cha nah. - (Rig. X. 9. 1 to 3.)

^{xiii} *Vajsaneyi Samhita IV. 2*, (R. T. H. Griffith trans.) (1987), Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers

^{xiv} Ibid VI.17

^{xv} Kane PV (1930-1962), *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol IV, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, p. 321

^{xvi} *Yajnavalkya Smriti* I.182-183, 188 and *Manusmriti* V.109, 112, 126

^{xvii} *Yajnavalkya Smriti* I.183 and *Manusmriti* V.112

^{xviii} The chronologies are based after PV Kane.

^{xix} *Rigveda* 1.32, 2.28.4, 5.85.6, 7.64.2

^{xx} Ibid. 10.17.10, 10.30.14, 10.137.6

^{xxi} *Manusmriti* 7.196

^{xxii} *Manusmriti* 9.279 and *Arthashastra* 3.9.25-26 and 4.13.35-36

^{xxiii} Muller Max M., (1892), *The Sacred Book of The East*, Vol XIX, *Aswalayan Gryhsutra* 4.4.10, Clarendon Press