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**TITLE: The Apotheosis of Water and its Inevitability in Indian culture.**

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**ABSTRACT**

All great civilizations have flourished along the rivers. The Egyptian civilization along the Nile, the Babylonian near Euphrates and the Tigris, and the Indian civilization along the rivers, Sindhu and Sarasvati. In all these cases, water became the life-line of the people; but nowhere do we find the apotheosis, the deification of water as is found in the Indian Tradition.

The physical form of water in various reservoirs like the ponds, lakes, streams, rivers and oceans was first venerated, then the guardian principle got personified and then deified by Indians. Rivers yielding sweet, milk-like water, were considered to be life-bestowing mothers. Because of their constant flow, they were regarded as purifiers. All dirt, dust and impurity is supposed to be washed away by the flowing waters. Hence the apotheosis!

On account of this purifying nature, water became an inevitable part of the 'Samskaras' in Indian Culture. Samskara is refining, polishing, cultivating a thing/person and making it perfect. This can be done in two ways: 1) by removing the blemishes and 2) by adding/depositing qualities, virtues in it. Water sanctifies one in both ways. It physically washes off the dirt part and because of the divinity attached to it, it heightens the quality too!

This paper, thus will be divided in two parts. Part I would deal with the apotheosis, giving illustrations mainly from the Sriti texts, part II would underline its inevitability in the Samskaras, (a special feature of Indian Culture), quoting the Smritis

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**Introduction:** All ancient civilizations flourished along the banks of great rivers. Nile was the backbone of the Egyptian civilization and Sindhu-Sarasvati civilization got famous by the name of Vedic civilization. Proximity of water is the main factor in the development of mankind. Water, one of the five gross elements, inspired the ancient man. Though universal, it is the most unique and unusual substance in the world. This paper aims at underlining its importance in two parts. First is the apotheosis, deification of water and second is to emphasize its inevitability in Indian culture.

**Derivation:** Water, in all its forms, be it the pure form of rain or the stored water in pools, ponds, wells, lakes, rivers and oceans, deserves the veneration and profound respect from mankind. Sanskrit word for water is 'apah', derived from root 'ap' to obtain and is explained as *Aapanaa: savaRvyaapanaa:* obtainable, all-encompassing, all-pervading element. Its universality can be explained thus: on this terrain, this earth, it is the flowing water of brooks, streams etc. In the atmospheric region it is the rain water and in the celestial world it is the water stored in the solar orb.

**Characteristics of Water:** Water in its different forms has always been a source of wonder, curiosity and practical concern for human beings. The most noteworthy trait of water is its ability to cleanse, purify and because of this, the water places, the lakes ponds etc, got prominence in man's social and religious life. In addition to this, it is also endowed with the healing and curative power. It is for this reason that water is worshipped, is made into GOD. Such glorification is seen not only in India but all the world over.. Its sacredness and efficacy as a curative fluid is widely believed in. (Hastings, 1977,706) As water is a purifying agent, it is invoked to remove sins and evils. (RV.I.23.22, X.9.8) The holiness attached to bath at particular places on auspicious occasions, gave rise to the concept of *taiaR* . This word, derived from the root *ta* to get across and means a fordable place, or a ghat on a river or some water reservoir. The Jain concept of Tirthankar is based on this meaning. One who makes a fordable place to cross the ocean of transmigration is Tirthankar. Since water cleanses both body and mind, it is regarded as an eternal source of peace.(Taitt. Br. I.7.6.3) It is powerful agent that it purifies even the impurities in sacrifice. (Sat. Br. XI.4.1.15) The potency of water is used for witchcraft too! Magically charged water is used to kill enemy. This water is termed as Udavajra, water-thunderbolt.(AV.X.5.15,22,50) Water, thus becomes a secret missile.

Waters are said to bestow long life, health, wealth and immortality. Brahma Purana (II.67.2-40) narrates a story of Lakshmi and Daridra and concludes that a bath in the river removes poverty.

Waters have the germs of creation. Unfathomable water existed prior to creation, says the RV (X.129.3) At another place, it says that gods were dancing in the waters before creation (RV.X.72.6) Modern science also endorses this view that primary creation took place in water.

**Part I Divination of Water:** Water is thus precious, comprised with many properties and therefore needs to be guarded. As a result, waters are associated with many divinities. In the RV we have many deities linked with water. Aja Ekpad, one who is unborn and has one leg, is the Sun who traverses the vault of sky everyday. Then there is Ahirbudhnya, the gigantic serpent, the dragon, holding the waters captive. In the Puranas, it is the limitless Ananta, the cosmic serpent guarding the waters. He is at times called as Vrtra. Basically it is the rain-cloud. There is a unique god associated with water and that is Apam Napat, the son or grandson of water. This is an old deity and is found in the Avesta (holy scripture of Zoroastrians) also. Besides these special gods, the regular Vedic deities like Indra, Varuna, Agni, Brhaspati too are associated with waters in one way or the other. When we speak of the association with the gods, this necessarily brings in added holiness and divinity to the elemental waters.

**Rain-God/Parjanya:** Rain water is considered to be the purest form of water. Right from the Vedic times, man regarded rain water as the boon. This nectar from the vast blue sky astonished him and inspired words of praise from him. The RV glorifies Parjanya as a mighty male deity, the divine seeder or fructifier of this naked earth. He causes the green sprouts and vegetation and thus announces the fertility of earth. (RV. V.83.1) Rain, thus is the semen, life-bestowing principle, the first visible incarnation of the divinity of water. Rain water is useful for agriculture, no doubt, but it is essential for survival. It is called 'Jivan', life. Storage of water in wells, pools, ponds, lakes etc is therefore necessary, so as to make provision of drinking water for men as well as cattle all through the year.(Ibid.8) Parjanya is treated as father by the Vedic seers.(Ibid.6) The thundering during showers is supposed to kill the evils and sins. (Ibid. 2,9) Agriculture dependent upon rains has a special term called 'Devamatrka'. Sanskrit literature has

references of 'Adevamatrka' agriculture, that which is not-dependent upon rain water. (Kiratarjuniya I.17) This in other words, is called 'Nadimatrka', dependent upon rivers.

**Rivers:** Due to its continuous flow, a river is always regarded as clean, pure and holy. It is purifier, as it washes the physical dirt and dust and metaphorically cleanses the impurities of mind. River is called 'Nadi' as it makes sound while flowing. It has the watery attire. These details helped the personification of the watery mass in the river. It's the anthropomorphic form is a lady, a dancing damsel, a mother who nourishes her children (people on her banks) on the milky white pure water. Interestingly, 'Payas', a Sanskrit word denotes both water and milk. It can be derived from root 'pa' to drink as well as from root 'pyai' to nourish. Rivers are mermaids. Ganga is depicted as dancing on Siva's locks, her body below the waist undefined, and almost formless, like a tapering wavy mass. (Sivaramamurti,1976, 43) River is tender at heart and sympathetic to all. At times she is viewed as a young mother bending a bit while breast-feeding her child and at some place she is considered to be a shy maiden bending to get embraced from her lover. (RV.III.33.1) Thus all types of female relationships are superimposed upon her, yet the image of a sustaining mother has been preserved in our tradition, both in literature as well as art and architecture. The Rv glorifies river Sarasvati as the best mother, best river and best goddess.(RV.II.41.16) On her lap, the children of the soil could sit and muse without thought of the future, (Sivaramamurti,1976, 49) depositing all their worries and sorrows in her ever-flowing streams and totally relying on her for their wellbeing. This is 'Nadimatrka' way of life. There are idols of rivers having jets of water from their jar-like full breasts and some carrying food and water for men in a tray and water-jar respectively.(Illustrations given by Sivaramamurti) The ancient text says, "water, verily is food" (Kausitaki Br.12.3)

Bath or dip in a river is regarded holy and purifying. It washes the dirt and the immaculate waters of knowledge wash away the impurities of ignorance. During consecration, the king is given a ceremonious bath. This ritual is known as 'Hiranyagarbhadanavidhi'. It signifies new birth of the king. Sri Aurobindo regards river Sarasvati as great flood of inspiration, rich in substance of thought and not the physical river. A bath in her is explained by him as that she inspires the sacrifice, his capacity to offer by awakening the consciousness of mortal man. (Aurobindo,1999,100,101) This is a

psychological interpretation. For a common man, however, bath is a physical feature. Even in Ayurveda, bath with herbs gets a special treatment. Bath in the ocean is regarded more holy, naturally because many rivers flow in their purity and thus add to the sanctity of the ocean.

Once divinity and purity are associated with river, some restrictions and taboos creep in. The Grhya Sutras ordain that one should not take bath without clothes. (Asv. G. S.III.9.6.8). Nude bath is as good as insulting and humiliating the deities residing in waters. The famous episode of 'Ciraharana' in the Bhagavata Purana, illustrates this. There Krsna tells Gopis that they have disregarded the divinities by taking nude bath and that they will have to appease and pacify their wrath by worshipping Shakambhari deity. This is a mother goddess and vegetation personified as the name suggests. The iconic representation of river is many times done as Apsaras. There are instances of many apsaras turning into rivers. The mythological pattern is set. Indra is worried about the austerities of some seer, sends one of his heavenly nymphs to seduce the ascetic. The ascetic curses the nymph to turn into a river and then mitigates the curse by saying that she would regain her proper form upon flowing into some major river. Mula, Mutha, Nira, all tributaries of river Bhima in Maharashtra, are said to be named for such nymphs, who were liquefied in this way. (Anne,1995, 41) In relation to ocean, which is seen as masculine, the rivers that flow into it are seen as wives. Sometimes, some kings marry these rivers and beget sons, whereupon they get freed from their curse. The famous story of Santanu marrying Ganga or King Samvarana marrying river Tapi is too well-known to be quoted here.

The name apsaras is associated with water. In fact the apsaras are the divine dancers, moving in waters. They can be helpful and benign; but at times they are harmful. That is why one has to be very cautious while entering any unknown water place. The 'Yaksaprasna' in the Mahabharata hints at this harmful aspect, though in a male form. In Maharashtra these are called 'Sati Asara' or 'Parya'. The phonetic similarity of this word 'pari' with the English word of the same meaning 'fairy' is noteworthy. These are female goblins. Many times they are accompanied by a male, not their husband, but a guardian, protector, like a foster brother. He is called 'Mhasoba' or 'Joting' or 'Vetal'. These are ghosts. Thus it is clear that the folk river goddesses can be harmful at times. They take

human form, especially of young maiden, dressed in white saris. These are folk-goddesses of rivers and normally have a shrine or a temple at the riverside. Dr. Dhare and Dr. Morwanchikar have dealt with this concept in details and I won't like to repeat that here. They are treated as married ladies, called 'Suvasini'. They are offered green glass bangles. There is a rite called 'oti bharane', filling the lap of the river like that of a 'suvasini' with coconut, a blouse piece, grains of rice or wheat, a betel nut, turmeric powder and kumkum. This is a good wish for fertility. This rite is also performed when a new irrigation plant is inaugurated, a canal is thrown open or a dam is built. This is not just greeting the river goddess, but is a desire to appease her, to urge her not to cause any harm. Even during floods, rivers are placated by throwing a coconut in the stream. This can be compared with the customary throwing of coconut in the ocean by the fishermen on the full moon day of Sravana.

The zoomorph of a river is mostly a cow. The names of rivers like Godavari or Gomati are apparently linked with cow. A folk-tale in Andhra Pradesh tells that once Garuda snatched away the calf of a cow and flew. The cow followed its shadow on the earth. While the cow was chasing, milk was oozing from her udder. That turned into the river Godavari. According to the Brahma Purana, Parvati was jealous of Ganga on Siva's head. She, in consultation with Ganesa, sent her friend Jaya in the form of a cow to the hermitage of sage Gautama. The sage tried to drive away the grazing cow with a blade of grass. The cow died. The sage then propitiated Siva and asked for Ganga. Ganga descended at the hermitage. In her flow, the cow got revived. That stream is called Goda-vari, giver of the best cows. In the case of others too, they are seen emerging from 'Gomukha'. Indra is said to release the water-cows from the clutches of demon Vrtra or Pani.(RV.I.32.11 and many more references) Other animals associated with a river are fish, tortoise, serpent and elephants.

**Part II Water and Culture:** Culture has a very vast connotation. It deals with the concrete material world as well as the abstract inner world. For a commoner, it means rites and rituals, beliefs and practices, festivals and fairs and general norms of life. All these aspects can't be discussed here for want of time. I would, therefore deal with the Samskaras, an integral part of Indian Culture and Indian festivals.

**What is Samskara:** Technically Samskara means consecration , that removes blemishes (if any) from a thing/person and deposits qualities and virtues in it. (Brahma Sutra. Sankarabhasya.I.1.4) In Indian tradition, right from birth till death, various Samskaras are prescribed. The number oscillates between 16 and 40. These include Garbhadhana, Pumsavana, Namakarana, Upanayana, Vivaha, Sraddha etc.. In all these, presence of water is inevitable.

**Ritual Details:** All our rituals begin with Samkalpa, sipping water before declaring his wish/ decision to undertake any rite. This is supposed to purify him from within. Then water is offered to the desired deity as 'padya'. Arghya, offering of water with flowers or sandalwood paste, is given as a way of greeting. The most important and distinguishing feature of any ritual, however, is ritual bath or sprinkling.

**Snana and Abhiseka:** Regular river bath is advised and preferred in our scriptures. Bath in a river is worth the donation of 100/1000 dark-coloured cows, according to our holy texts.(Anne, 1995,47) Bath is supposed to give new life, new birth to a person, because river is regarded to be a living unit. In the Skanda Purana, there is a story of Katha, a celibate, studying in the hermitage of sage Bharadvaja. As 'gurudaksina', the sage asked him to marry his ugly daughter Revati. After marriage, Katha propitiated Siva and asked him to confer beauty and prosperity on his wife. As told by Siva, he bathed his wife and washed her. She turned into a beautiful lady. The stream which flowed got the name Revati, which later on joined Ganga. Thereupon a reward of beauty was assured for a person who took bath at that place Sage Chyavana got rejuvenated and cast off his old emaciated body after a bath (Bhagavata Purana.IX.3.13ff) A ceremonious bath is given to a bride in open as a lustration rite. (RV.X.85,AV.XIV.1 Both are marriage hymns) Ceremonious bath (Avabhrthasnana) is a customary rite for a student, indicating end of his celibacy and eligibility to attain the new status of a householder.(Manu Smrti.3.4)

Water is imbued with power of spiritual purification. All temples are located near water source. The devotees are supposed to bathe or wash their hands and feet before entering the shrines. This is an universal custom. In Judaism at Mikveh, a holy day, ritual bath is considered important. Muslims, before their daily prayers (namaz) wash hands, feet and eyes. All the mosques have water source. In Christianity water is linked with

Baptism. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in river Jordan, with a belief the water rejects original sin. Thus bath is important in all traditions.

When full bath is not possible, sprinkling is done through jars filled with water. It is symbolic bath. Divinity and positive vibrations are stored and protected in closed jars and not in the open buckets. Therefore in Indian culture, much prominence is attached to ghata or kalasa. It is believed that Visnu, Ruidra, Brahma and other gods and goddesses dwell in different parts of a ghata. Thus worship of ghata is worship of all these gods and sprinkling of water from ghata is being blessed by them. Ghata also symbolizes the womb and signifies fertility . The water in a ghata is thus creative, fertile fluid and not just elemental water.. The water from ghata is used in pacificatory rite as well. Due to the inherent power of water to remove evil and illness, water is used to ward off 'evil-eye' also.

**Festivals:** Festivals form a special feature of any culture. Festivals provide occasion for people to gather together, socialize with each other and pay homage to deities for their favour. All over the world, some festivals are associated with harvest. After reaping bumper crops, sons of the soil express their gratitude towards the factors causing their prosperity. Water, rain river are these prominent principles.

In India, many festivals are connected with the rainy season. Nagapancami, to express gratitude to serpents, the real friends of farmers and the zoomprph of water is celebrated in Sravana. Onam or Pongal also come as harvest festivals. On the full moon day of Sravaan the fishermen throw coconuts in the ocean to pacify it. Then comes Pola, the veneration of bulls. Bull is an emblem of physical strength and symbolizes Indra.

Simhastha or Kumbha, after every 12 years, is the most distinguishing feature of Indian Culture. No invitations, letters or brochures are sent to anyone and yet thousands of devout people gather at places like Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain, Kumbhakonam Puskar etc and take a dip in the holy river. The binding force is Water.

I'll end up my paper with a Vedic verse, in the veneration of Apah (RV.VII.49.4)

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