

The Role of 'Water' in Vedic Activities

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Abstract

Water is the part of our life. It is the most common liquid on earth. It is a liquid that descends from the cloud as rain, from streams, lakes and seas and it is a major constituent of all living organisms. It is an odourless, tasteless, very slightly compressible liquid oxide of hydrogen H₂O which appears bluish in thick layers. Water is the elixir of life, has taken today the centre stage all over the world. It covers 73.4% of the earth's surface. Human body is made of approximately 71% of water. It helps to carry out many important jobs in human body such as removes bacteria from bladder, helps in digestion, carries nutrients and oxygen to the cells and maintenance the sodium balance in the body. The health benefits being by the water.

Human life is fully dependent on the five basic elements, which are earth, water, fire, wind and sky. Among them, water is considered as the most essential and vital element for the survival of all. Water provides clarity of mind. Since our brain is mostly water. It depends on proper hydration. Drinking of more water is helpful in the freshness of mind. These are the usefulness of water in the present life, in the Vedic period also, water had a special role in various activities. The Indian philosophy through its *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and *Brāhmaṇas* has given some effective statements to the importance of water. Water is considered according to Hindu religion as the source of purity. In the Vedic period, there was a method of sanctifying oneself with water before starting any funeral ceremony or any sacrificial work. Not only that, water was also used as an important component to maintain peace in the field in the sacrificial fire. In this paper, there has been discussed this necessity of water in several ways.

Keywords: water, Vedic activities, functions, sipping, purified, sacrifice, obsequies

Methodology

This work is mainly based on secondary sources of information such as published documents, books, journals, etc. The paper makes use of previously published works in addition to citing from original vedic texts, etc. Data are collected through the overview of previous works and related texts. These primarily include *Vedas*, *Vedāngas*, *Brāhmaṇas* and *Sūtras*. In this approach, the data collection begins with specific observation of the previous literatures and then I analyse the data collected. For interpretation I follow current trends of

research methodology on Indology.

Human life is fully dependent on five basic elements. Among them, water and air are most important for the survival of humans. With the help of wind, people breathe, and proper watering keeps the blood circulation of the body in a right way and regulates all organ activities. So, it is a common fact that water is life. Because, every life in this earth is nourished by water. Drinking of water, bathing with fresh water has a great importance for removing the impurities from body. So, in our ancient scriptures, the usefulness of bath through freshwater is discussed very seriously.

पवित्रं वृष्यमायुष्यं श्रमस्वेदमलापहम्।

शरीरवलसन्धानं स्नानमोजस्करं परम् ॥ (च. सू. 5.94)

Bathing is purifying, libidinal stimulant and life-giving. It reduces fatigue, sweating and dirt. It brings about strength in the body and enhances ojas. The Indian philosophy through its *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and *Brāhmaṇas* has given some effective statements to the importance of water. Water is considered according to Hindu religion as the source of purity. It makes us pure and fresh. Our ancient *Dharmasūtras* literatures also established this concept in a gentle way. *Boudhāyana Dharmasūtra* says

अद्भिःशुद्धान्ति गात्राणि । (वै. ध. 1.5.8.2)

This means, our body becomes fresh and clean through water. This water is very much important in sacrificial works also. In sacrifice, the first work is to pure himself through *Ācamana*, which we can be achieved through water. *Ācamana* is the way, by which a sacrificer pures himself. *Boudhāyana* says- त्रिरपो हृदयं गमाः पिवेत्। (वै. ध.1.5.8.15) that a sacrificer should sip the water three times in this way, that it reaches till his heart. This concept of sipping is clearly defined by *Goutama* in his *sūtra* शुचौ देश आसीनो दक्षिणं बाहुं जान्वन्तरा कृत्वा यज्ञोपवीत्यामणिवन्धनात्पाणीप्रक्षाल्य वाग्यतो हृदयस्पृशस्त्रिस्तुर्वासप आचामेत् । (गौ. ध. 1.1.35) That he should be seated in a pure place, placing his arms between his knees, arranging his dress and, after washing his hands silently, sip water three or four times that reaches till his heart.

This method of sipping is reserved for *Brāhmaṇas*. The procedure of sipping is different for different castes. The warrior caste (*Kṣatriya*) should sip the water three or four times that reaches till his throat. For *Vaiśyas* this sipping water should be tasted, and a *Śūdra* should touche the water by his lips for sipping. In *Manusmṛti*, this method is clearly defined.¹ And through the *Ācamana* the sacrificer becomes blameless and faultless.

Haradatta also explains this concept in *Mitākṣarā* commentary - आचमनादिना नित्यं शुचिः शक्तिविषये न मुहूर्तमाप्यप्रयतः स्यात् । But sipping is strictly prohibited at the time of walking, standing,

¹ हृद्भाभिः पूयते विप्रः कण्ठगाभिस्तु भूमिपः।

वैश्यःद्विः प्राशिताभिस्तु शूद्रः स्पृशाभिन्ततः॥ (मनु. 2. 62)

lying down or bending forward. However, this method of sipping is not implemented just before the sacrificial work. In order to purify oneself after eating in funeral ceremony, it is necessary to take care of it. In the *Āpastambha Dharmasūtra* we get support for this view-
आचम्य चोर्ध्वौ पाणी धारयेदाप्रोदकीभावात् । (आ. ध. 2.8.19.8).

But the water which has been defiled with colours, perfumes or flavouring substances, and is collected in unclean places is not suitable for sipping.²

Āpastambha Dharmasūtra also mentions this idea as भूमिगतास्वप्स्वाचम्य प्रयतो भवति । (आ. ध. 1.5.2).

By doing *Ācamana* through water on earth a person becomes clean and pure.

Water is also helpful in sacrificial work for cleaning or scaring the firewood and alter. *Adhvaryu* takes the sprinkling water, and sprinkles in the firewood with this mantra: ‘a black deer, living in the den, art thou. I sprinkle thee, agreeable to *Agni*’³ etc. Again he sprinkles in the alter, with this text - ‘Thou art the alter, I sprinkle thee, agreeable to *Barhiṣ*’⁴ etc.

Again, in one *sūtra* of *Boudhāyana*, seer prays to water for his own purification -

आपः पुनन्तु पृथिवी पृथिवी पूता पुनातु माम् ।

पुनन्तु ब्रह्मणस्पतिर्ब्रह्मपूता पुनातु माम् ॥

यदुच्छिष्यमभोज्यं यद्वा दुश्चरितं मम ।

सर्वं पुनन्तु मामापोऽसतां च प्रतिग्रहं स्वाहेति ॥ (वौ. ध. 2.5.8.11)

This means, water makes the world pure, pure world makes me pure, *Brahmaṇaspati* makes me pure, *Brahma* makes me pure. I have committed sins by eating uneatable foods and the endowment I have taken from worthless persons. Water makes them all faultless.

Again, in *Dāna Karma* also the water is important. *Āpastambha* says that a person should have relief of some water before commencing the given work.

सर्वाण्युदकपूर्वाणि दानानि । (आ. ध. 2.4.9.8)

Here is another statement said by *Boudhāyana* about the importance of water.

आयं गौः पृश्निक्रमो दित्येतामृचं त्रिरन्तर्जलं पठन् सर्वस्मात्पापात्प्रमुच्यते । (वौ. ध. 4.4.4.3)

This means, if a person utters the mantra आयं गौः पृश्निक्रमो three times standing in water, he is relieved from all sins. Gautama also declares this concept in his *sūtra* - अन्तर्जले वाऽघमर्षणं त्रिरावर्तयन्सर्वपापेभ्यो विमुच्यते । (गौ. ध. 3.6.11). He says that if a person goes down in the water and utters

² न वर्णगन्धरसदुष्टाभिर् याश्च स्युरशुभागमाः। (ब. ध. 3.36)

³ कृष्णो स्याखरेष्टोऽन्वये त्वा जुष्टं प्रोक्षामि वेदिरसि बर्हिषे त्वा जुष्टां प्रोक्षामि बर्हिरसि मुभ्यस्त्वा जुष्टं प्रोक्षामि। (यजुः. सं. 2.1)

⁴ ibid.

the verse of *Aghamarṣaṇa ṛṣi* three times, his intentional and unconscious sins shall go away.⁵ These statements present that to purify oneself and protect oneself from any type of sins everywhere, water is considered as the vital element.

Water plays a strong role in both life and death for everyone. After death, the norm of giving water to dead people is prevalent since ancient times. Seer *Āpastambha* has discussed this matter. He says - केशान्प्रकीर्य पांसूनोप्यैकवाससो दक्षिणामुखास्सकृदुपमज्ज्योत्तीर्योपविशन्त्येवं त्रिः । (आ. ध. 2.6.15.7) This means that when a person is shrugging his hair, mixing dust, holding one garment, facing towards south, giving water three times to the dead people, the soul of the deceased gets peace as a result of water donation. Not only that, the person who gives water to his forefathers, he himself also gets satisfaction.⁶ When a *Brāhmiṇ*, after bathing, satisfies his predecessors with water, he obtains the whole reward for the performance of the obsequies (*śrāddha*).⁷

शान्तिरापः तदद्भिः शान्त्या शमयन्ते (श.ब्रा. 2.6.2.18)

Water is peace, because peace can be achieved through water. Water is a means of purification; with water we accordingly purify ourselves. आपो हि वै सत्यं (श.ब्रा. 7.4.1.6) that truth is the same as the waters or waters are the truth. Hence it is said, where waters flow, that is a form of the truth. We come to know about the importance of water from these verses of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

Like *Dharmasūtras*, there is a lot of information about the necessity and information of water in *Brāhmaṇa* literature. The *Brāhmaṇas* are a layer or category of Vedic Sanskrit texts embedded within each *Veda*. These are particularly noted for their instructions on the proper performance of rituals.

The *Brāhmaṇa* literatures have discussed the importance of water mostly from sacrificial point of view. As it is established in *Kouṣītakī Brāhmaṇa* - शान्तिर्वै भेषजमापः शान्तिरेवैषा भेषजमन्यते यज्ञे क्रियते (कौ. ब्रा. 5.1.4) The water is peace and herbal. By this, peace and medicines are made after the sacrifice. That is why, after the completion of the sacrifice, the sacrificer touches the water saying *Vaṣatkāra*.

'यज्ञं वा आपः' in this verse of *Kouṣītakī Brāhmaṇa*, *yajna* is compared to water. That is, if one goes to the water, then it is thought that he is going to the object of sacrifice. The sage invites water to fulfil all the wishes of the sacrificer, as it is said that all objects of desire are

⁵ उदकस्यान्तर्निमग्नस्त्रिशद्रात्रमघमर्षणं त्रिरभ्यस्य सर्वस्मात्पापात् ज्ञानकृतादज्ञानकृताश्च मुच्यते। (

⁶ वारिदस्तृप्तिमाप्नोति। (मनु. 4.229)

⁷ यदेव तर्पयत्यद्भिः पितृन्स्नात्वा द्विजोत्तमः।

तेनैव कृत्स्नमाप्नोति पितृयज्ञक्रियाफलम् ॥ (मनु. 3.283)

the waters.⁸ We can conclude from this hymn of *Śukla-Yajurveda* that water (*Āpaḥ*) is very important in sacrificial work.

देवीरापो अग्नेगुवो अग्नेपुवोऽग्न इम मद्य यज्ञं नयताग्रे।

यज्ञपति सुधातुं यज्ञपति देवयुतम् ॥ (शुक्लयजुः सं. 1.12)

In this hymn, seer prays to the god of water to lead forward the sacrifice, to lead forward the sacrifice's lord, take good care of the sacrificer and take him closer to god. So, it is ordered that the sacrificer drink water before commencing the sacrificial work, and thus the *Brahmacāriṇ* suffers no harm of any kind as it is declared in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* - “अमृतं वा आपो मृतमशानेत्येवैनं तदाह तदेनमुभयतो मृतेन परिगृह्णाति तथा ह्यास्य ब्रह्मचारी न कां चनातिर्माच्छति। (श.ब्रा. 11.5.4.5)

Sacrifice is a sacred duty. It is said that when a man gets attracted to the sacrifices and make sacrifices, he takes his second birth - यं यज्ञं उपनमति स यज्ञायते तद्वितीयं जायते । (श. ब्रा. 11.2.1.1) Therefore before commencing this action, the equipment needed for this work has to be purified. All the instruments of *yajna* are sanctified by the water spray. The significance of water scarcity is the sanctity of the sacrifice - तिरोहितमि वास्त्यथ प्रोक्षणस्य वन्धुर्मध्यामेवैतत् करोति । (श. ब्रा. 3.6.1.11) Not only that, whatever obstacles or turmoil arises in *Yajna*, they are removed or cooled by water- “यद्वे यज्ञस्य रिष्टं यदशान्तमापो वै तस्य सर्वस्य शान्तिरद्भिरेवैनत्तच्छान्त्या शमयन्ति” (श. ब्रा. 12.4.1.5)

For this reason, seer *Adhvaryu* takes some water in a *kamandulu* and sprinkles it on the altar of *Āhavanīya Agni* with this hymn इदं विष्णुर्विचक्रमे.

Water is also used to destroy enemies at the time of sacrifice. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* declares वज्रं वाऽआपो । (श. ब्रा. 12.9.2.6). Thus, the priest matches the water with thunderbolt and throws it in that direction where there are enemies with this mantra of *Śukla-Yajurveda*- दुर्मित्रियास्तस्मै सन्तु योऽस्मान् द्वेष्टि यं च वयं द्विष्मः । (शुक्ल. सं. 20.19)

The destructive power of waters has also been prescribed in one verse of *Atharvaveda*, where seer *Atharvā* says,

आपो यद् बस्तपस्तेन तं प्रति तपत योऽस्मान् द्वेष्टि यं वयं द्विष्मः । (अ. सं. 2.23.1)

The scriptures and Brahmanical texts were intimately connected with the people of Vedic period. There are instructions on religious rituals for households in the *Dharmasūtras*. On the other hand, in the *Brāhmin* texts, there are discussions on the rules of sacrifice. Water

⁸ आपो वै सर्वे कामाः स एषोऽकामः सर्वकामो न ह्येतं कस्य चन कामः । (श.ब्रा. 10.5.4.15)

has been identified as one of the most sacred elements in the Vedic period- पवित्रं वा आपः । (श. ब्रा. 1.1.1.1) Before starting any action, a person has to purified himself with water. The significance and importance of water for various Vedic activities are mentioned in the *Dharmasūtra* and *Brāhmiṇ* books. But not only in the Vedic period, but also in the present society the tradition of purifying oneself with water is prevalent before starting any good action, which is an essential part of human livelihood.

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