

CONCEPT AND ORIGIN OF SACRED TANKS

Santosh Kumar Rath

According to *Rigveda*, Aryans were nature worshipers. Whatever they feared they started worship of that object. The strength and activities of the natural powers like Fire, Water, Wind, Sun, Rain and Rivers are beyond the imagination of the then people. So they started worshipping these powers as objects of veneration. Among these, water is one of the most important powers. Later on water is associated with the worship of vedic god Varuna. The successors of Aryans still continue this nature worship. Worship of water is one among them. Water is very much essential for our religious purpose as well as daily life.

Water is a common and unusual as well as extra ordinary substance in the world. In our daily life water is so essential that we cannot think of any thing without water. The ancient man, who clearly sensed its importance made it a central feature of a great many mythologies including that of creation. Many religions accepts water as a symbol of spiritual purification. Its cleaning virtue stands as a mystical representation of the cleansing power of religion. Thus water has been used almost by all religions in the performance of different rituals. A number of myths and legends are woven around the sublime power of water, all applauding its divine virtue¹.

Water has many curious aspects. It is universally present and has remained unchanged over millions of years. It is at once the servant and the master of human being. Yet a common man is aware of its importance only when it fails or endangers him. Then he gets its dramatic impact accompanied by strange ideas, conclusions and solution.

The most noteworthy trait of water is that it is most useful for its purifying and cleaning quality. Without clean water we can't think of a clean and healthy environment. It cleans the dirty things of our body as well as destroys the filth it acquires from us. Fresh water has a remarkable ability to absorb the wastes, transform them into useful substances, and thus clean itself. Water is the storehouse of energy. The climate of the world is tempered by the ability of water to soak up and store the sun's heat and to release it slowly. The efficacy of water is increased by its contact with the sun's rays².

Like the other elements and aspects of nature, water too inspired the ancient man. Later on when he realised the utility of water and wished to kept the water places clean and safe, he clearly understood its importance on religious level and made the gods as

the presiding deities, thus unwittingly working on the social psychology of the layman. The water places attracted large number of people and many legends were woven around them. Gradually, along with the growth of religion and civilisation, these legends were influenced by various religious sects, social beliefs and customs, social laws and convictions. They depict the social pattern, civilisation, trade prosperity and many other traits of the groups of people residing around them, and this led to water worship³.

WATER WORSHIP :

Water has been worshipped not only in India but in many European and other Asian countries like Egypt, Iran, Greece, Rome, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Mangolia etc. Water washes away evil, disease and old age, from where arose the idea that there was somewhere a fountain of youth or of immortality. Water cleanses us morally. It is a belief that strength returns after the bath. In India water is taken in hand while uttering a course and the curse-water is believed to be very powerful, the hands are washed before accepting a present. Since water is one of the essential factors in the preservation of the life and the growth of the crops, it naturally plays an important role in man's life. Similarly agriculture and then commerce would lend and additional importance to water as a means of irrigation and transportation, which again would find expression in a cult of water-worship.

In India, water is given much importance starting from the period of *Rigveda*. The cold water treatment of febrile diseases, recently introduced in the field of medicine. The *Rigvedic* seers called the waters Goddesses as they quenched the thirst of their cattle. *Rigveda* praises water as *Apsaras* (the anthropomorphic form of water). They are mothers, or young wives; they flow in channels to the sea, but they are also celestial. The waters bestow long life, wealth and immortality. They clean and purify the worshipper, even from moral sins such as telling lies, cursing and violence. The *Atharva Veda* also praises water as a purifier⁴.

The epics also praised water. The *Mahabharata* gives many instances of the miraculous powers of water. In the *Vana Parva* of *Mahabharata*, Bhima goes in search of Kubera's lake where most beautiful and heavenly lotuses grew. When he reached the lake, he fought with the demons. To heal his wounds and recover strength he plunged into the lake and his energy was again fully restored⁵.

In the *Puranas*, we find the most elaborate form of worship of water. Here waters are considered as the most miraculous, holy, supernatural and divine. They have various gods as their presiding deities. They are blessed with many powers and attributes by the gods and sages. Many of them are said to have divine origin, or are attributed with supernatural virtues and thus are regarded sacred and worshipped.

CONCEPT OF TIRTHA :-

Because of the holy and divine nature of the water, they have been given the name of a *tirtha*. Tirthas are said to be holy on account of the peculiar strikingness of some

water - place or on account of the fact that some holy saints resorted to them for bathing, penance etc. "Tirtha, therefore, means a locality or place or expanse of water which gives rise to the accumulation of righteousness (merit) owing to its own peculiar nature without any adventitious circumstances". The *Skanda Purana* says, that a place on earth resorted to by the ancient good men for the collection of merit is called *tirtha* and main thing is to see those holy men, though pilgrimage is only a secondary object. In the *Rigveda* *tirtha* signifies a ford or a passage in river. According to Manu a *Brahmana* who had studied the *Vedas* is a *tirtha*⁶.

Later on even a devotee is called a *tirtha*. *Padma Purana* refers to the teacher, mother, father husband, wife all as *tirthas*. Kautilya has denoted all the persons in power as *tirthas*. The *Brahma Purana* classifies *tirthas* into four categories such as *Daiva*, *Asura*, *Arsa* and *Manusa* created by gods, *asuras*, *risis* and men respectively *Veda* also refers that sacrifices were performed on the banks of water places⁷.

THE STAGNANT WATERS :

The stagnant waters are of various kinds such of *kundas*, ponds, lakes, wells, tanks, pits etc. It appears that it was tradition to excavate a *kunda* or a tank at the holy places. Such *kundas* etc. have sprung up due to manifold reasons. Some were said to have been dug up by the deities or sages for the welfare of the people, some by the saints who practised penance, to take bath themselves or to bath their favorite gods, idols. And later on they were bestowed with miraculous powers by the deities and they became famous holy water-places⁸.

Some of the *tirthas* were believed to contain the water of all the *tirthas*. For example :- *Kotitirtha* at Bhubaneswar, *Panchatirthas* at Puri. Most of the *kundas* are connected with sacrificial altars. For example :-Markandeya and Swetagnaga tank at Puri. Sacrifices were performed there, and after the successful completion of the sacrifices, the deities blessed the performers as well as these *kundas*, tanks etc. It is clear that a water place was dug nearby or the sacrifice itself was performed near a well or water tank (*kunda*) which was already there.

Now these *kundas*, ponds and tanks etc. are holy places where a bath is recommended and which is as fruitful as at any other *tirtha*. But these *tirthas* being of stagnant waters, it is clearly mentioned in some accounts that the waters there in are not to be polluted⁹.

The points of the purity of the waters in the ponds has a long history in belief. We have indicated that it is the solar fire, or brilliance that comes into contact with the open terrestrial water places and makes them pure. Such waters though stagnant are rarely closed or covered. They appear to be invariably open to the sun, and where in lies the support for the belief of the stagnant waters being pure. It was a custom in Vedic period that one should take a dip after the end of sacrificial session. The epics and other

Puranas have praised the *tirthas* but they do not give in detail the legendary accounts of those *tirthas* where as the *Skanda Purana* gives various myths and legends associated with these *tirthas* to give sufficient examples to glorify the *tirthas*¹⁰.

SOCIAL MOTIEFS CONNECTED WITH TANKS :-

In Ancient India many social motiefs were performed at the bank of the tanks after the ending of rituals, festivals etc., Among the social motiefs, *Dana*, Salvation, Transmigration, Sin and Expiation, Curse and Blessing are most important. Of these *Dana* is most common. After bath, *Dana* is the most important feature of the holy waters. Donations should be given to a worthy and learned Brahmana, probably because it was one of the most important means of livelihood for a Brahmana according to social pattern of that age. Various kinds of *Danas* are frequently mentioned in *Skanda Purana*. These are as follows :- *Pindadana*, *Annadana*, *Godana*, *Suvarnadana*, *Ratnadana*, *Tiladana*, *Kanyadana*, *Gandhadana*, *Phaladana*, *Siladana*, *Dipadana*, *Guptadana*, *Rajatadana*, *Tuladana*, *Bhudana*, *Daksina* etc¹¹.

ORIGIN OF THE TANKS :-

The trace of modern water storage tank i.e., the Great Bath dates back to the Harappan civilization . During *Puranic* period we found many instances of water storageing. A place named 'Sringaverapura' near Allahabad (where Lord Rama crossed the sacred Ganges in Guhaka's boat) yielded water storage tanks with hydraulic technology of 1st century B.C. The city was provided water from the river Ganges, taken through several channels and silting tanks¹². The Tamil Sangam literature also referes to tank irrigation.

As regards the origin of the tanks its may be said that every temple must have had a device to take very heavy blocks of stone to a great height. This could be done only on earthen ramps which could be raised as the height of the temple increased. The inside of the temple must also be filled with earth to prevent collapsing before the temple was completed. The stones were placed on wooden rollers and rolled up the ramps. The earth for these was dug, so that a tank could be formed. That is a reason why every big temple or group of temples has a tank in the neighbourhood. The Surplus stone brought for building the temple was used for linking the embankments and building the steps. After the temple was completed the earth was removed from the ramps as well as from inside the temple and spread outside leaving the temple floor lower than the surrounding ground. Sometimes there was so much of surplus stone that the only way to dispose it of was to build temples around the tank¹³.

According to *Silpa Sastras* tanks should be established on the Southern side of the temples. There are several types of tanks. Among these the *Sarbatobhadra* type was most popular. Besides this *Bhubanabarga* and *Bisamatobhadra* types can be found. Generally size of the tanks varies from place to place but most of them are of square and rectangular size.

Not only in Orissa but also in entire India we find tanks. There are many big and ornate tanks in the State of Gujurat and Rajasthan. In these areas this tanks are isolated.

The state of Tamil Nadu is also famous for many big and old tanks. Interestingly these tanks are mainly located within the temple compound unlike Orissa. The Chola kings constructed large tanks for irrigation purpose. Besides these the inscriptions of Karnataka region speaks about the large irrigation tanks. With the gradual march of time the concept of Sacred tanks became popular. Tanks were also constructed by Sultans and Noble person to cater the need of the people.

TANKS IN INDIAN ART :-

Like other panels and sculptures the impression of tanks can be found in Indian Art. A panel of Sanchi (2nd c.B.C) depicts a lotus tanks with a decorated boat. The front portion of the boat looks like a face of tiger and the back portion of the boat has a fish-tail like look. A wooden cell situated centrally in the boat contains an object of veneration. It is observed in the figure that some people are swimming by the help of wooden logs which implies, possibly might be a view of *Chapa* festival of that age¹⁴.



A panel from the Sanchi Stupa depicting a lotus tank with a decorated boat and people swimming.

Two guard rooms flanking the main wing of Rani Gumpa cave of Udayagiri, Bhubaneswar depicts a lotus tank, in which are sporting elephants¹⁵. A painting of Cave no - 2 of Ajanta also depicts a tank full of lotuses and lilies¹⁶. The paintings from the cave of Sittanvasal, Tamil Nadu shows a *Tirthankara* in a lotus tank. Fishes and lotuses are clearly depicted in this mural. Besides these there are several depictions of tank in Indian Art.

REFERENCES :—

1. Kumar, Savitri, V, *The Puranic Lore of Holy Water-places*, p-1, Delhi, 1983.
2. *Ibid.* p-3.
3. *Op.cit*, pp. 3-4.
4. *Op.cit*, pp. 6-7.
5. *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva.
6. Kumar, *op.cit*, p-8.
7. *Op.cit*, p-9.
8. *Op.cit*, p-11.
9. *Op.cit*, pp.12-13.
10. *Op.cit*, p-14.
11. *Op.cit*, pp.22-39.
12. Sunday Express, p-14, Bhubaneswar, January 5, 2003.
13. Senapati, Nilamani, *Puri District Gazetteer*, p-755, Bhubaneswar, 1977.
14. Panda, D.C, *Prachina Bharatiya Kalakrutire Naujatra 0 Naubaniyyara Drusya* (Oriya), of Balijatra Smaranika, Cuttack, 2001.
15. Mitra, Debala, *Udayagiri and Khandagiri* (A.S.I.), 3rd Edition, p-25, New Delhi, 1992.
16. Mitra, Debala, *Ajanta*, (A.S.I.) 9th Edition,-p-31, New Delhi, 1983.

*Research Scholar,
Dept. of Ancient Indian
History, Culture & Archaeology,
Utkal University, Bhubaneswar - 4*