

# **The Significance of the Water Element in Ancient Indian Knowledge Systems**

**Aparna Kulkarni\***

Research Scholar, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune, Maharashtra, India

aparnakulkarni2306@gmail.com

**Abstract:** In Indian culture, water (jala) is not merely a physical element but is regarded as the center of spiritual, medicinal, religious, and cultural life. Vedic literature emphasizes the purifying, healing, and creative powers of water. The Rigveda states that water washes away sins, and through the mantra “Apah Sarvabheṣajam,” water is described as a universal remedy for all diseases. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa, water is praised as a source of peace and as an element that removes impurity in sacrificial rituals.

Flowing water is considered a symbol of continuity, purity, and renewal. In the Indian ritual tradition, almost every rite—such as conception (garbhādhāna), initiation (upanayana), marriage, and funeral rites (śrāddha)—begins with purification through water. Sanctified water is regarded as tīrtha, and in kalasha worship, it is believed to be the abode of all deities. Rituals such as udaka-śānti, abhiṣeka, and prokṣaṇa use water to bring about spiritual purification and the transmission of positive energy.

Mythological narratives also highlight the creative and regenerative power of water. Paraśurāma is said to have revived Reṇukā with sanctified water, while the Aśvinī Kumāras restored youth to the sage Cyavana through a ritual bath. The story of the “Yaksha’s lake” symbolizes water as a source of knowledge and wisdom. At the same time, the Atharvaveda refers to the concept of Udavajra, indicating the destructive power of water.

From all these references, it is evident that water is a fundamental principle of life, purification, creation, and the attainment of knowledge. It serves as the foundation for the physical, mental, and spiritual development of human beings.

The relationship between ancient Indian knowledge systems and mental wellbeing can be meaningfully understood by examining the concept of water and its efficacy within traditional frameworks. In Indian thought, water is not merely a physical substance but a vital element that sustains life, purifies the body, and influences the mind. By integrating perspectives from texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga Sūtras, and Ayurveda, one can see how water plays a central role in promoting holistic health, particularly mental balance.

**Keywords:** Water, saṃskāras, efficacy, potency, abhiṣeka

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the ancient Indian worldview, the universe is composed of five fundamental elements, known as the Pancamahābhūtās - earth, water, fire, air, and space. Among these, jala is associated with qualities such as fluidity, calmness, cohesion, and adaptability. These qualities are not only physical but also psychological. A balanced water element within the

human system is believed to promote emotional stability, clarity of thought, and inner peace. Thus, the efficacy of water extends beyond hydration; it becomes a medium through which mental equilibrium can be achieved.

The Vedas frequently praise water as a purifying and life-giving force. Hymns describe water as capable of washing away impurities, both physical and spiritual. This symbolic association between water and purification has deep psychological implications. Rituals involving water, such as bathing in sacred rivers or performing ablutions, are not merely religious acts but also processes that induce a sense of renewal and emotional release. The act of cleansing the body with water often corresponds to a perceived cleansing of the mind, thereby contributing to mental wellbeing.

Similarly, the Upanishads explore deeper metaphysical dimensions, where water is seen as part of the cosmic order and a manifestation of the ultimate reality, Brahman. This philosophical understanding fosters a sense of interconnectedness and reduces feelings of isolation or anxiety. When individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger, harmonious system, it enhances their psychological resilience and inner stability.

In the context of health sciences, Ayurveda provides a detailed account of the role of water in maintaining both physical and mental health. According to Ayurvedic principles, proper hydration and the balanced use of water help regulate the three *doṣas*—*vāta*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Since these *doṣas* influence not only bodily functions but also mental states, maintaining their balance is essential for emotional well-being. Practices such as drinking warm water, using water therapies, and maintaining bodily cleanliness are recommended to support mental clarity and reduce stress.

The Yoga Sutras emphasize the importance of purity (*śaucha*) as a prerequisite for mental discipline and meditation. Water plays a crucial role in achieving this purity through practices like bathing and cleansing rituals. A clean and refreshed body supports a stable and focused mind, which is essential for deeper states of meditation. Moreover, the calming effect of water—whether through its touch, sound, or presence—can aid in reducing mental agitation and enhancing concentration.

Beyond textual traditions, Indian cultural practices also highlight the psychological benefits of water. Rivers, ponds, and other water bodies are often regarded as sacred spaces for

reflection and spiritual practice. Spending time near water is known to induce calmness, reduce stress, and foster introspection. Modern scientific studies on hydrotherapy and the soothing effects of natural water sounds further validate these traditional insights, demonstrating that the efficacy of water has both ancient and contemporary relevance.

The various forms of water have always inspired wonder and curiosity in human beings, and because of its purifying and cleansing qualities, water has consistently been accorded respect in religious and social life. The *R̥gveda* mentions that sin is washed away by water; therefore, water is invoked to rid a person of sins, misdeeds, and faults, and prayers are offered to the waters (*R̥gveda* 1.23.22, 10.9.8). From the idea of bathing at a specific time and in a sacred place arose the very concept of the *Tīrtha*. Water, which purifies both body and mind, is regarded as a “source of peace” (*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.7.6.3). So powerful is water that it can purify even the impurities of a *yajña* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.4.1.15).

The complete examination of any substance in order to determine its qualities and defects is not something practiced only in today’s scientific age; the ancient Indian *ṛṣis* also carried out such analyses. *Ṛṣi* Caraka studied digestion, while *Ṛṣi* Ambarīṣa studied fasting (abstaining from food). Ambarīṣa’s son, Sindhudvīpa, practiced *jala-cikitsā* (water therapy) and incorporated water into daily religious rituals in the forms of *ācamana* (ritual sipping), *abhiṣeka* (libation), and *mārjana* (sprinkling). With the mantra *āpo hi ṣṭhā*, he offered prayers to the water deities: “O divine waters, you truly are creators of complete happiness.”

“Dwell within our bodies to generate brilliance, greatness, beauty, and farsightedness. Bestow upon us that portion of yours which is most auspicious. Since the destruction of diseases and the like are most dear to you, dwell within our bodies and eradicate illness, reduce suffering, give radiance to our eyes, and bring forth the very best qualities within us.” This mantra is used for purification with water and for attracting positive energy.

Among all forms, flowing water is regarded as especially important, for within the dualistic Hindu conception of the pure and the impure (*śuddha–aśuddha*), ever-renewing, flowing water is believed not only to cleanse and purify but also to possess spiritual qualities. Hence, it is thought to have the power to attract new vitality. The capacity of water to purify and to carry away impurities is universally acknowledged. In religious rituals, purification is most often performed with the flowing water of rivers. According to traditional Hindu custom, only after using flowing water is a person considered prepared for worship or for taking food.

Similarly, the state of ritual impurity, *aśauca*, brought about by childbirth or death in the family is believed to be removed by bathing in flowing water. Bathing in a flowing river is said to wash away the sins of many births.

As James J. Preston observes, water has purificatory qualities, but the very power of water to purify depends on its “flowing nature”—*pravāhitva*. Owing to the healing capacity inherent in water, it has also proven effective as a medicine; for this reason, too, water has been worshiped and elevated to the status of a deity. The purity and medicinal power of water are recognized across the world. *Jalasañjīvanī* is considered a divine medicine. Dhanvantari is said to have emerged from the ocean holding the *amṛta-kalaśa* (pot of nectar), which has a store of medicine or medicinal water (Rgveda 1.23.19), for Dhanvantari is regarded as the personification of *Āyurveda*.

In the *amṛta-manthana* (cosmic churning of the ocean) within the sky-ocean, the *kamaṇḍalu* that emerged is identified with the sun, and the idea that the sun is the reservoir of water is seen here as well. These waters are drawn up from the earth into the sun’s vessel, where they are made *siddha*. The belief that the waters which return from the sun contain medicinal properties capable of destroying disease is quite ancient. Following is a verse which states that the waters of the Gaṅgā possess special medicinal qualities.

शरिंेजजिभुतेव्याधीग्रस्तेकलेवि|औषधेजान्हवीतोयंवैद्योनाियणोहरिः॥

Meaning, “If the body has grown worn, aged, and afflicted with disease, then one should take the water of the Gaṅgā as medicine and call upon Nārāyaṇa as the physician.”

Since water possesses the power to remove impurities and disease, it is also used for *dṛṣṭa*, i.e., to dispel the evil eye. Thus, there is a belief that negativity and fear are driven away through it. This practice reflects the sanctity and holiness attached to water.

In all religious traditions of the world, water holds great significance. In the Indian tradition, numerous *saṃskāras* (sacraments) are prescribed from birth to death. A *saṃskāra* means purification or sanctification, which removes defects from an object, a dwelling, or a person and renders it pure (Brahmasūtra-Śaṅkarabhāṣya 1.1.4). Among the sixteen principal *saṃskāras* prescribed in Indian tradition—such as *garbhādhāna* (conception), *pūṃsavana*

(rite for begetting a son), *nāmakaraṇa* (naming), *upanayana* (initiation), *vivāha* (marriage), and *śrāddha* (ancestral rites)—water is considered indispensable.

All these rites begin with a *saṅkalpa* (vow or resolve). Before making the *saṅkalpa*, water is ritually sipped, which is known as *jala-prāśana* and is believed to purify the person internally, i.e., *antaḥśuddha*. Thereafter, *pādya* (water for washing the feet) is offered to the deity, followed by *arghya* (an offering of water, flowers, and sandalwood). Water is also used for the ritual bathing and *abhiṣeka* (libation) of the deity.

The ritual of *kalaśa-pūjana*, which invokes all the waters of the earth that are the cause and sustenance of all living beings, itself demonstrates the supremacy of water. Water consecrated through mantras is regarded as *Tīrtha*. In Indian culture, the *ghaṭa* or *kalaśa* is considered highly significant, for in a closed vessel, divinity and positivity are believed to be stored and preserved. Different deities are said to reside in its various parts: *Viṣṇu* at its mouth, *Rudra* at its neck, *Brahmā* at its base, and the *Saptamātṛkās* in its middle.

It is believed that all the oceans and rivers of the earth, as well as the four Vedas, are present within the *kalaśa*. Thus, worship of the *kalaśa* is considered worship of all these deities, and sprinkling or sipping the water within it is believed to confer their blessings. Purification is performed by sprinkling or drinking this *tīrtha*. The *kalaśa* is regarded as a symbol of the womb, and hence the water within it is seen as creative.

This same water is used in all *śāntikarma* rituals, such as *grha-śānti* and *putra-śānti*. The *udaka-śānti* rite is performed in many *saṃskāras* and various forms of worship. Afterward, the officiating priests sprinkle the water upon all assembled people as well as throughout the dwelling, thereby sanctifying them. In many temples, this ritual is performed after *ārati* and worship, and it is also called *śaṅkha-tīrtha*.

It is believed that the vibrations of the mantras chanted during the ritual are absorbed into the water, making it powerful and sacred. Therefore, water that has been consecrated through specific mantras, hymns, or rites is called *abhimantrita jala*. Such consecrated water is used in other rituals as well as for healing purposes (Efficacy of Water).

It has long been believed in tradition that water is endowed with creative power (*srjana-śakti*). Water, possessing the capacity for creation, is regarded as the cause of birth, and therefore it is thought capable of overcoming even death. Within destruction itself, it carries the womb of new life, and thus water is believed worldwide to have the power of regeneration. Stories in *Purāṇic* literature, folktales, and *tīrtha-māhātmyas* narrate how the sprinkling of *abhimantrita jala* revived the unconscious or even the dead; the very reason for these accounts lies in water's inherent "creativity."

One such story is told as follows: At the command of the irate sage Jamadagni, his son Paraśurāma beheaded his mother Reṇukā. Stricken with grief, Paraśurāma at once went to his father and declared that he had fulfilled his command. Sage Jamadagni, moved by his son's obedience, offered him a boon, whereupon Paraśurāma asked for his mother's life to be restored. Jamadagni then gave him a pot containing some consecrated water and a staff. By sprinkling the *abhimantrita jala* and touching her with the staff, Paraśurāma brought Reṇukā back to life.

Thus, just as the power inherent in water can serve as a boon, it is also seen to have been used for purposes of sorcery and cursing. Water charged with magical force was employed to destroy enemies, and this was called *udvajra* ("water-thunderbolt") (*Atharvaveda* 10.5.15, 22, 50). The *Purāṇic* literature contains many stories in which water was used as a secret weapon.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Purāṇas*, the story of King Kalmāṣapāda is found, and from this he came to be known by the epithet Kalmāṣapāda or Kalmāsāndhrī. In the *Mahābhārata* (*Nalopākhyāna*, *Vana Parva*), when unjustly cursed, King Kalmāṣapāda grew enraged at Sage Vasiṣṭha. To curse him, the king took water in his hands, but his queen restrained him. Yet he realized that if the curse-charged water were cast upon the ground, it would destroy crops; if thrown into the sky, it would affect rainfall; and in any direction it was cast, it would cause harm to living beings. Realizing this, the king let the ominous water fall upon his own feet, which then became blotched black and white. From this, he came to be called "*Kalmāṣapāda*" (*Potency of Water*).

Because of this very quality of water, it is seen to have become inseparably bound with the *saṃskāras* of Indian culture. A *saṃskāra* means shaping or perfecting a person—removing faults and instilling virtues and values in their place. Since water plays a vital role in this

spiritual purification of human beings, the sense of divinity associated with it became deeply rooted. Thus, the place of water in the *saṃskāras* came to be regarded as indispensable.

The Vedas mention the use of *sūrya-jala* in *saṃskāras*. In marriage, before the rite of *saptapadī*, there was an ancient Vedic custom of sprinkling water over the bride's head. A piece of gold was attached with *darbha* grass to the hole in a chariot-yoke or plough-yoke, and through it the water was poured. This ritual points to a symbolic belief in the union of gold and the sun, and also expresses the notion that the water descending from the sun should fall upon the body so that the bride may acquire radiance like the sun. This rite is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* (14.1.30–41). From this, it is clear that the sprinkling was not only for imparting radiant skin but also for rendering the bride fit for marriage and fit for begetting a son—*putravatī*.

According to the *vivāha-sūktas* in the *Ṛgveda* (10.85) and the *Atharvaveda* (14.1), the bride was bathed in a ritual bath during the wedding ceremony as an act of purification. The *Manusmṛti* (3.4) prescribes an *avabhṛta-snāna* (purificatory bath) for one entering householdership after completing *brahmacarya* following *upanayana*. Before the consecration of a king, he was also given a special ritual bath known as the *Hiranyagarbhadānavidhi*, which signified that the king had undergone a new birth.

In Vedic tradition, *sūrya-jala* was also proposed for the attainment of sovereign power. During the *Rājasūya yajña*, the king to be consecrated was bathed with various kinds of water, among which was included water heated by the rays of the sun. In addition, water flowing from a still reservoir was also brought, and this was termed *sūryavarcasyāḥ*. The underlying idea here is that of water originating from the sun—the belief that the sun is the reservoir of water, which is explicitly found in the *Ṛgveda*.

The *Ṛgveda* (1.164.14) states that the eye of the sun is filled with rain-bearing waters, meaning that the rainwater falling upon the earth descends from the solar sphere. Likewise, the sun is called *Apāṃ garbha* (*Ṛgveda* 1.164.52), that is, “the embryo of the waters” or “the embryo produced in water.” From this, it becomes clear that the sun is *udakavān*—the possessor of water. In this way, the close relationship between the vitality of the sun and water was firmly established in Vedic ideas, and therefore bathing in flowing water came to be considered supremely important.

The Apām-Napat present in a water reservoir is a fuel-less fire, which is referred to as *nādyā* in the Ṛgveda (Ṛgveda 2.35.1). It is described that oblations should be offered to this fire residing in rivers or flowing waters. This is the very water that is brought for various rites in the *jalayajña* (water sacrifice). Therefore, performing *abhiṣiñcana*, bathing, or *abhiṣeka* with such water in these rites must have an important connection with the radiance of the Sun and the fire element, which is probably why such water is called *sūryavarcasya* (imbued with the splendour of the Sūrya).

Just as the intense flames of fire purify metals, it is believed that bathing in a water stream with this fire purifies the human mind. Since water is considered maternal, entering its womb and emerging again is akin to receiving a new birth. Similarly, one who emerges after being sanctified by the fire in water is “pure, sacred, and intense,” eager with knowledge. Therefore, river bathing is traditionally considered transformative in life.

In Paurāṇic literature, as well as in *nadī-māhātmya* texts, such wondrous stories are narrated, in which immersion in water or river bathing is described as producing miraculous transformations. This indication of transformation symbolizes the end of the previous life and the attainment of a new divine life.

The ritual in which children are placed in a cradle or *paradī* and then released onto water is observed as a fulfilment of a vow to the *Jaladevatā*. Letting the children into the water is symbolically understood as offering them to the fire, giving the *havirbhāga* to the fire residing in the water current. The *Apām-Napat* in the water reservoir is the fire through which the water becomes enriched with radiance. It is believed that, due to the brilliance of the water, children released into it become radiant and successful.

This is evident in the story of Gaṅgā and Vasu, in which the Vasus are described as the sons of Gaṅgā and themselves as symbols of radiance (*vas*—to shine, to illuminate). The Vasus residing in water, belonging to the family of Varuṇa, are connected with both *āpa* (water) and *tejas* (brilliance), which are mutually contrasting elements. Therefore, bathing in such waters is believed to make a person divine, radiant (*tejasvī*), and wise (*jñānavanta*).

The use of water in *abhiṣeka*, *prokṣaṇa*, as well as in Vedic *yajña* rituals, or performing *āpoṣaṇa* (from *āpaḥ* + *aśana*, “drinking water”) for self-purification, is not merely due to the element of water (*jala-tattva*) but also because of the associated principle of radiance (*teja-*

*tattva*). Water merges with the Sūrya and then descends back onto the Earth. Since the Sun itself is *Agni*, the rainwater (*vr̥ṣṭījala*) that comes from it is infused with the brilliance of fire (*agni-teja*), and consuming or using it is believed to purify the human being.

## CONCLUSION

From this, it is understood that ‘water’ (*jala*) is not only a natural element but also holds significance in spiritual and cultural life. *Abhimantrita jala* and the associated mythological stories have an important connection with human culture and tradition. In conclusion, the concept of the efficacy of water is deeply embedded in ancient Indian knowledge systems and is closely linked to mental well-being. Water functions as a physical necessity, a therapeutic agent, and a symbolic medium of purification and balance.

By understanding and integrating these traditional perspectives, one can appreciate how simple elements like water can contribute significantly to holistic health. This synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern understanding highlights the enduring relevance of Indian knowledge systems in addressing contemporary concerns related to mental health and emotional balance.

---

## References

1. N.B.Patil N.B., Folklores in the Mahābhārata Dhere R.C., Sant, Loka, and Abhijana
2. Dāṅge S.A., Aśvatthācī Pāṇe
3. Dāṅge S.A., *Purāṇakathāñcā Artha–Vāda āṇi Vivecana*
4. Gokhale Manjushā, *Apsarā*