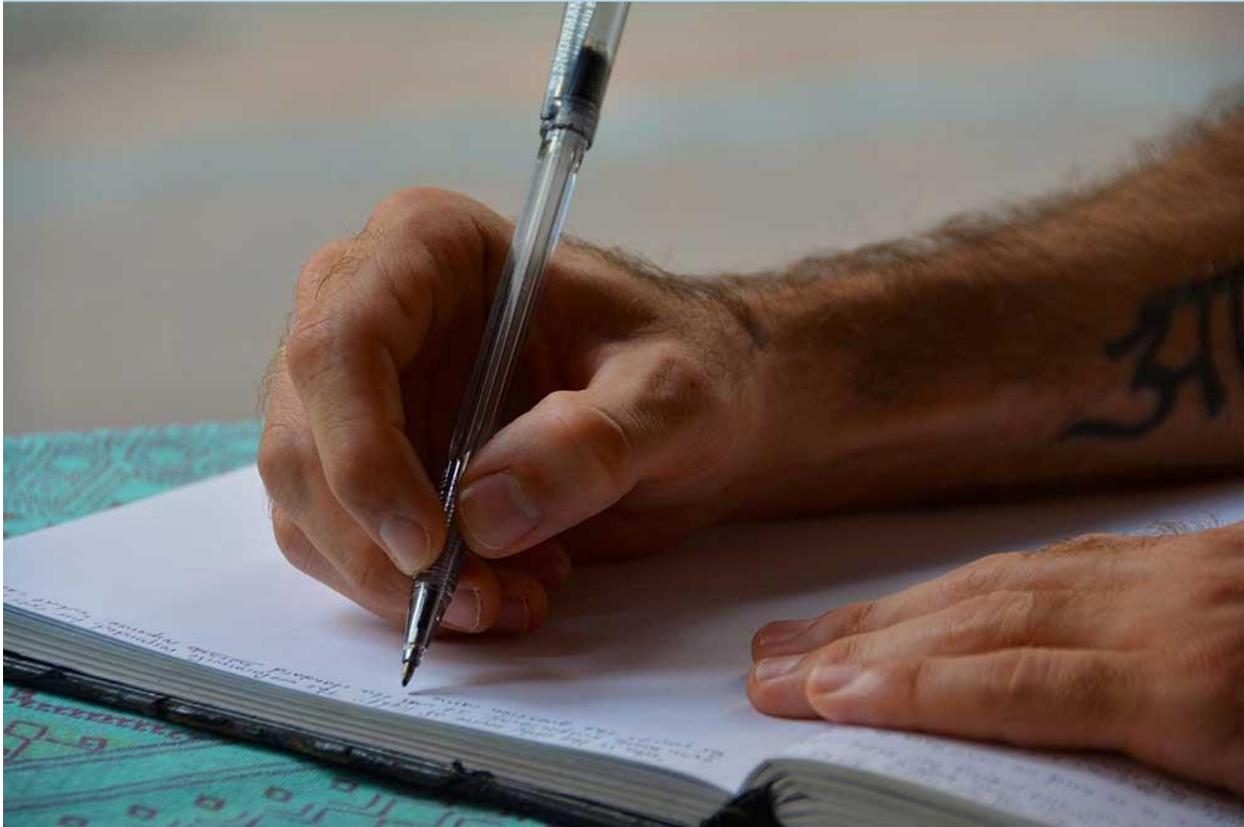


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Woman and Water Kindred by Nature

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Abstract

It has been argued that life without water is impossible; earthly life began with water all around. Ancient scripture has been quoted to drive the matter home. Woman-Water relationship is beyond controversy from the ancient time. It is a world wide phenomenon and very true in India. Human culture around the rivers in India is such that rivers are conceived as woman and somewhere as mother. The relationship between rivers and women has been shown with some detail.

Women are the water providers to not only males but to all; humans and non-humans. The situation has been aggravated in most of the patriarchal societies. The task of water manager and water provider has been thrust upon women. In recent time it has become acute. Woman and water are intertwined. Woman-Water relationship is very competitive, intimate and close like blood relationship. All efforts need to be made to solve water problem thereby solving one of the biggest problems of woman and life. Easing the relationship would help the societies move smoothly.

Key Words

Dharitri, Worship, Creation, Ocean, River, Pollution, Relationship, Intertwined

Woman-Water Relationship

“Women’s relationship with water goes beyond meeting essential needs to moving towards the larger empowerment agenda, taking the advantage of their close association with water.”¹ In a patriarchal society women have their intrinsic role as water provider. Woman sees water as a means of fighting against social injustice and gender inequality. Woman and water are intertwined. Woman-Water relationship is very competitive, intimate and close like blood relationship. All efforts need to be made to solve water problem thereby solving one of the biggest problems of woman.

Life Began in Water

At the beginning of creation elders in most civilisations conceived water all around. Creation was intertwined with water. Without water life was not possible. Water is life; life giving substance. It is the elixir and liquid of life. Without water earth would have been desolate like her closest sibling, Mars. Water is the most abundant compound on earth influencing every natural cycle on earth. It triggers activities in inorganic and organic materials at molecular to global levels. Water covers the earth. The hydrated biosphere which envelops the planet earth exactly as the skin, flesh and blood do over a skeleton, prompted some Scientists to address our planet as a Living Earth or Gaia. It is *Dharitri* in Indian mythology and “Mother Earth” as called by the moderns. But water, the begetter of life may be its destroyer; toxic effect of water pollution and consequence of Global Warming can make Man an endangered species. Thus the dancing water molecule which kick-started life can very well be the root cause of its destruction.

But how on earth water was available? Scientific speculations about its existence on earth has been continuing like the beginning of creation with big bang, some 4.5 billion years ago. Nothing is known if not truly known. It was held that at the beginning water was brought by

meteors from passing comets but this theory had to be modified when it was found that such water was heavy water; not the hydrogen-oxygen mix which is available on earth. Then the scientific idea grabbed planetesimals or mini planets with water which filled up the earth's bowl. Then the idea was dawned on scientists that the earth was born with oceans of water. It contained water from the beginning. We see that before the birth of the modern science man had inborn knowledge that earth was full of water; more water than land in it. See the oldest scripture available on earth.

Hymn of Creation (10.129.3-5):

“Darkness hidden by darkness in the beginning was this all, an ocean without mental consciousness . . . out of it the One was born by the greatness of its energy. It first moved in it as desire which was the first seed of mind. The Masters of Wisdom found out in the non-existent that which builds up the existent; in the heart they found it by purposeful impulsion and by the thought-mind. Their ray was extended horizontally; there was something above, there was something below.” (Sri Aurobindo 101)

Explanation – Out of the subconscious ocean the One arises in the heart first as desire; he moves there in the heart-ocean as an unexposed desire of the delight of existence and this desire is the first seed of what afterwards appears as the sense-mind. (Sri Aurobindo 101-02)

“The ancient concept of creation, held all over the world from the Himalayas to the Andes; conceived as the staff of things as formless expansion of waters covered over in the beginning by darkness out of which day and night and heaven and earth and all worlds have emerged.

‘Darkness,’ says the Hebrew genesis, ‘was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved on the waters.’ By the word he divided the waters with Heaven, the firmament, the other heavenly above. The mystics seized on this universal belief or this universal image and crowded

into it their psychological values. Instead of one firmament they saw two, the earthly and the celestial; instead of two oceans, three spread out before their unsealed vision. . . .”

“Between these two unknown infinities, infinite potential zero and infinite plenary x, they saw around them, before their eyes, below, above, a third sea of ever developing conscious being, a sort of boundless wave, which they spoke of by a hardy metaphor as climbing up or flowing up beyond heaven to the supreme seas. It is the perilous ocean which we have to navigate.” (Sri Aurobindo 448-49)

River in Human Life

Vedic seers visualized seven sisters in seven rivers; the *adi* or primordial rivers.

“From the idea of the oceans arose naturally the psychological concept of the Vedic rivers. These rivers are everywhere. They are the waters which flow down from the mountain and ascend the mind ranging through and illuminating with their flow the dark subconscious secrets of vritra; they are the mighty ones of Heaven whom Indra brings on the Earth; they are the streams of the Truth; they are the rains from the luminous heavens; they are the seven eternal sisters and companions; they are the divine waters who have knowledge. They descend upon the earth, they rise from the ocean, they flow to the ocean, they break out from the doors of the Panis, they ascend to the supreme seas.” (Sri Aurobindo 450)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (Samuel Taylor Coleridge-1798), *Moby Dick* (Herman Melville-1851) or *The Old Man and the Sea* (Earnest Miller Hemingway-1952) were great adventures in the never ending seas but the tales of rivers are at our door steps. Close and intimate, our life giving source; sometimes they flow touching our back yards; sometimes vast but many times (out of the season) narrow like a slim girl in winter running or halting at times. Intimate rivers sometimes whispers; telling of their woes in dry days, rainless or warning about

the tide ahead or stormy days with violent flow. Tagore, while supervising their estate at Shilaidaha, now in Bangladesh, had often been overhearing the tales of the common village folk beginning their journeys from the Ghat (bank of a river) or ending it there coming from a distant village. Part of their stories; broken tales and unfinished dialogues, were the source of many of his short stories.

Hapi is the spirit of Nile. Babylonians worshipped Euphrates and Tigris. In India Sindhu, Brahmaputra, Darakeshwar, Gogra and some others are conceived as male rivers. But most others are conceived as female; mother figures. And they are worshipped. In folk tales river-stories are replete with woman.

Rigveda adores rivers with plenty of metaphors and simile, decorating them with further ornaments. It describes Sindhu as “Wild, magnificent white stallion, roaring and galloping through the Himalayas into the plains.”

Tales of Indian Rivers

Some myths and stories around rivers conceived as male and female aspects of it abound.

Sohni and her lover Mehar, the two rivers, were lost in their youth in Chenab but their story has been floating through the Chenab-Indus belt for centuries. Chandra, the daughter of Moon and Bhaga, the son of Sun, two lovers raced to reach Tanda, a sacred place to both Hindu and Buddhist. Chenab is born at the confluence of Chandra and Bhaga. But the story tells us that Chandra reached earlier and in her impetuous zeal to meet her lover climbed the back of the mountain. In Sikkim two rivers, Rongun (Teesta) and Rangeet were in love and wished to meet in plains flowing from their different sources. The female Rongun reached earlier and Rangeet, somehow misguided, reached later. Furious to see his lover reaching before him, he stormed ahead refusing her and Rongun had considerable trouble ahead. Ganga the daughter of Himavan

or Himalaya flows to earth to wash away the sins of mortals. The flow of Ganga imprisoned in the tresses of Siva, done to check the impact of her fall which might be disastrous to the mortals, was the cause of Parvati's (wife of Siva) jealousy for Siva giving shelter to Ganga. Ganga is conceived as Siva's daughter but somewhere she's the wife of Siva.

The stories of Jhulelal, the God of Indus, are heard across the borders of India and Pakistan for centuries despite the conflicting relationship between their people. Cauvery, born in Kodagu hills in Karnataka falls in the ocean at Poompuhar in Tamil Nadu. Her birth from Sage Agastya's overturned Kamandalu is depicted in the painted ceilings of Kapardeshwara temple at Tiruvalanjuzhi near Kumbakonam. Innumerable references may be given of Indian rivers playing a significant role in literature intertwining the lives of woman. Think of river Yamuna and Radha-Krishna affair in folk tales, Puranas and later Vaishnavite literature. Yamuna is exclusively Krishna's territory. Verses from *Krishnalila Tarangini*, *Gita Govinda* and *Tiruppavai* are replete with rapturous references to the banks of Yamuna where Radha comes to meet Krishna. In modern time it is choked and has gone away from the capital of India, away from the hearts of the moderns, living for the agriculturists and fishermen only.

River conceived as Woman or Mother

As have already been mentioned, innumerable rivers throughout India have adorable female names and are conceived as beautiful ladies which includes Kosi river of Bihar. River stories are replete with personifications. Many of them are deified.

Marathi Rituals in Worshipping Rivers

Usually performed to honour a woman, Maharashtrians toss haldi and kumkum in the river water; they fill the lap (oti) of a river by putting coconut, haldi (turmeric), kumkum (a kind of red cosmetic) and grains with flower and coin. With a piece of cloth placed with it they pray for the

fertility and well being of the river as they pray for a woman. In temples they dress rivers with sari. Rivers are conceived here with all aspects of femininity; the mud that flows in rivers during monsoon is conceived as *rajas* which makes them *rajasvalaas* (menstruating women). The *Asaras* (apsaras) are river goddesses born as lesser deities. They were cursed by the ascetics who were disturbed by them during their severe austerities to attain divinity. Saati Asaras or seven apsaras are feared as they may cause serious harm to women. They live in certain deeper or richer areas of the river or water ways and are worshipped by women in various ways. There are many temples dedicated to them. 2

Such beliefs and rituals with little variations are in vogue in other regions of India. Not only in Maharashtra, temples dedicated to Ganga are aplenty throughout the country.

River's Course

But revered rivers sometimes become turbulent destroyers when instead of their deification we hear of their demonification. Along with grand rivers there are lesser rivers too. Rivers doing havoc sometimes are titled, Kirtinasha and Karmanasha (destroyer of fame and wrok), Phalgu (flowing underground), Johilla, Dakini and Shankhini (sorts of female ghouls), etc. Ganga entering Bangladesh becomes Padma. In nineteenth century it took a turn from its early southern course and thus abandoned Rajnagar, built by Raja Rajballabh; destroying villages, buildings and other settlements in its wake and was called Kirtinasha or the destroyer of fame. Stories emerged along the course of rivers.

Many rivers travelling though mountains descends in plains of Bengal and flows through Bangladesh to reach the sea as many of them reach the sea through West Bengal (India). The same rivers takes different names in Bengal and Bangladesh like many of them have in countries

of their origin and intermediate countries they flow through. Rivers have no countries but on their way from beginning to the end in sea they brace and grace countries belonging to humans.

River Songs

Rivers give rise to songs like songs of Volga boatman, Marathi Koli songs, songs of river by racing boats in Kerala, China's Haozi river songs and more in more countries. But Bhatiyali is born in Bangladesh, the country of rivers, telling about the Bhati or ebb; downstream of the river where floats the boats as if from eternity in wide waters; infinite. Bhatiyali is a song apart with philosophic ideas, creating monologues, their tunes inundating the shores of the rivers. Bhatiyali songs were composed by the famous folk music exponents like poet Jasimuddin (1904-76) of the then East Bengal, India (now Bangladesh) which were sung by the boatmen sailing over the vast rivers. One such famous song sung by Abbasuddin Ahmed is:

You have set me adrift

You have sunk me

The endless waters have no shore

And remember the reverberation of the song, "*Gnaga amar maa, Padda amar maa*" or "Ganga is my mother, Padda is my mother" in the sonorous voice of Bhupen Hazarika. Many such songs were sung by Abbasuddin Ahmed, Nirmalendu Choudhury and others. Names of great musicians and film makers who used such songs were, S. D. Burman, Ritwik Ghatak and Salil Choudhury.

River in Literature

In modern Indian novels too rivers have their revered roles intertwined with the lives of women; the tales are beaded together in the frame of narrative connecting rivers and serpents, the cult of the goddess, the feminine principle in interesting and significant ways. There are many Indian

river stories involving the lives of women, like Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, *Ganga* by Samaresh Bose, *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* by Aditya Malla Barman, *Hasuli Banker Upakatha* by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. Meenachal river in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* plays a pivotal role in the lovers' lives. More such tales are in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitava Ghose, River Nila in *Kaliyachan*, a Malayalam film and others. In world literature also rivers have played a significant role in human affairs like *Mystic River*, a novel by Dennis Lehane. *Secret River* is part of a trilogy on Australia. And *Love in the Time of Cholera* is a book by [Gabriel García Márquez](#) about the [Caribbean Sea](#) and the [Magdalena River](#). There are innumerable prose works which includes rivers. Poetry throughout world abounds with rivers.

Woman is more Water Bound than Man

Giving examples Nafisa Barot the writer of the article "Storm in a Water Pot" further states that "Jashoda and Baluben, two strong leaders from Bhal and Bhavnagar villages, always said that in comparison to men, women have a stronger memory of their early survival in the water in the wombs." 3 The writer argues that women's conventional responsibility for water unleashes their powerful energy to struggle against all odds and strive for empowerment.

In the extreme climate of Thar Desert in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan, receiving the lowest rainfall in India, Karnika Bahuguna, the reporter, talks to women of the village, Khadero ki Dhani. Nakata Devi at her 75 years brings water from the beri, a percolation well, storing rain water from a kilo metre away seven times within the course of the morning. Asked, she says, "Do I have a choice? We need water. Even the animals need to drink." 4

And Monu Kanwar says, "Men in the village do not fetch water even if they are at home. It has always been womens' responsibility." 5

They said that during the summer they abstained from taking bath for 10, 15 days and washed clothes at a gap of some 20 days. They also admitted that their life has light of leisure compared to some 30 years ago when they had to bring water from sources at a distance of 20 kilo metres. Let us think of a country like India where opposing extreme climatic conditions prevail. Whereas Khadero ki Dhani receives on an average an annual rainfall of 164 mm, Mawsynram in Meghalaya receives an annual rainfall of 11.87 metres which is the highest in the country, if not the highest in the world.

“Gujarat’s coastal and tribal areas offer several examples of women from vulnerable and excluded communities showing active engagement and leadership in securing a water source close to their villages and communities.” 6

Not only gender discrimination, discrimination between people in distributing water has been acute. It is said that in Mumbai people living in buildings receive three times the quantity of water of their counterparts dwelling in slums who receive only 45 litres of water per person per day. And they constitute 52 per cent of the population of the city. Large dams create discrimination in availability of water resources among different people. It displaces and ejects people from their traditional ancestral lands. India has some 5500 large dams, next only to China created for development but of the privileged people mostly. Corporate takeover of urban water has changed the life supporting water into a commercial commodity. Imitating bottled water system of the West our Governments have encouraged private business houses to take over water sources from people’s hands. What once was a free life saving item has now become a priced product without people’s consent, forcibly. People have moved against such drives in Sangli, Khdadwa and other places. Even the railway stations do not encourage use of free drinking water by not maintaining good water supply arrangement in platforms, pushing the people to buy them.

And with Government support such multinational giants as Coca-Cola have been thriving at different places in spite of people's movement against them in Rajatalab in Varanasi, Plachimada in Kerala, Wada in Thane and other places. It is reported that three million litres of Sardar Sarovar water is entering into Coca-Cola bottles every day at the cost of the drought affected areas of Gujarat. The maltreatment of the river bodies creates havoc sometimes in the life of riverine people as it has happened around Kosi river in Bihar.

In this context think of the great crisis in the Lake Chad region in Nigeria where the water body has been reduced in depth from 11 metres to 2 metres. 90 per cent of the water body has dwindled in 50 years creating conflict between communities aggravated by the inhuman brutal group called Boko Haram. Lives of six million people are in danger. The situation aggravated due to the construction of dams in the upstream of the water channel.

Warning bell rings that more than half of the world's major aquifers storing ground water are depleting faster than they can be replenished. The deplorable water availability and its future prospects are gloomy indeed. In it the position of women is very relevant; their proper placement and utilisation of their services is very urgent. Not only individuals but international bodies and institutions have passed rules, adopted resolutions and suggested methods of solution. The following discussions culled from relevant sources are given below which amply focusses on the issue.

“By 2025, the UN estimates that as many as 5.5 billion people, the two thirds of the world's population, will face a water shortage. The degradation of water quality worsens the imbalance between water supply and demand. It threatens the sustainability of life in an increasing number of regions throughout the world. . . .

“Women are most often the collectors, users and managers of water in households as well as the farmers of irrigated crops. For example, at least half of the world food is grown by women farmers and it amounts to 80% in some African countries (FAO, 2000). Easier access to fresh water would improve living conditions for girls. Lack of access to water is an obstacle to their right to have access to formal education. Women are the main users of water: for cooking, washing, family hygiene and sanitation. Women, especially indigenous women, have particular knowledge of ecological linkage and fragile ecosystem management. . . .

“Although women’s better understanding of natural variations of water availability, accessibility is acquired through countless generations’ experience as managers of domestic water sources, this knowledge is still scorned or simply ignored by policy-makers and engineers who are still usually men’ (Baden, 1993)

“Sharing of water resources and the need to protect less favoured groups such as women and children call for the application of the principle of equity contained in the Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. ‘Considering that women are the main users of water, in rural as well as urban areas, their participation as water-scientists, engineers and policy makers is an urgent moral imperative in respect of the democratic governance’ (Deshingkar, 1995)

“As per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations condemn discrimination on the basis of sex and clearly state: ‘All are equal before the law and entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.’” (Article 7)

So it may be held that all are entitled to equal protection without any discrimination.

“It implies that access to fresh water must provide equal opportunity for both women and men to enjoy a productive livelihood and that it must ensure that the life for the next generation would

improve living conditions for girls who generally drop out of school and start working in the fields . . .” (UNICEF in 1998) 7

Lack of access to water is an obstacle to girls’ right to have access to formal education. What girls do even at the cost of getting education is often ignored. Women’s considerable knowledge of water resources, including quality, reliability, and storage methods is too often not taken into account by decision makers though this hidden chest of knowledge is one of the major keys to the success of water resources development and irrigation projects.

While UNO opined that “A sustainable development that doesn’t involve women will not succeed in the long run.” (UN, 2001),

CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), Inc. (Copyright © 2011) believes:

“From our experience, the central involvement of women and girls in water-related programs can increase the benefits to women and the success of the programs. However, the challenge we must meet is for programs to be designed with an understanding of the potential of women and girls as change agents.” (www.care.org)

It further states that they should think about women’s ability to change their lives and that of the communities. The programs would work better by utilizing the ideas and insights of women and girls.

What we have been observing from our childhood in different urban, semi urban and village areas in India, even in slums and such areas in big cities, that whenever during scarcity a water tank comes from distant place to distribute water as relief to people’s urgent need for water, mostly women queue up to receive it. Before a tube well sometimes they wait for hours to receive a pittance of water during scarcity. Village ponds and lakes are guarded by women. They

are the last to give up the struggle for water. They have been suffering extremely in some remote areas for ages. This is the prevailing condition in most developing and underdeveloped countries. In rich Western cities water scarcity is not so acute; climatically and by habit they use less water than others. But everywhere women are more attracted by water than men. Woman vis-à-vis water is a relationship very competitive, intimate and close like blood relationship. All efforts need to be made to solve water problem thereby solving one of the biggest problems of woman.

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