

SYMBOLISM OF WATER IN HINDU LITERATURE: FROM SARASWATI TO TIRTA AMERTA

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ABSTRACT

Water in the Hindu tradition not only serves as a physical element that sustains life, but also as a symbol of purity, knowledge, and spiritual transformation. This research aims to examine the symbolism of water in Hindu sacred texts — the Rigveda, the Bhagavad Gītā, and the Purāṇa — as well as to trace its manifestation in the ritual and cultural practices of the Balinese Hindu community. The study was conducted with a qualitative-descriptive approach through textual analysis and symbolic interpretation, using the theory of religious symbols from Mircea Eliade and Émile Durkheim. The results show that water in the Rigveda is seen as the source of life and cosmic harmony; in the Bhagavad Gītā, water is the embodiment of God's presence in the material world; while in the Purāṇa, the myth of Tirta Amerta affirms water as a symbol of immortality and wisdom. This finding finds its actualization in the tirtha tradition in Bali which serves as a medium of purification and ecological ethics. The symbolism of water in this context shows the integration between theology, culture, and ecological consciousness, and provides the basis for the development of Hindu environmental theology (eco-theology) that is relevant to the challenges of modern times.

Keywords: *water symbolism, tirtha, Saraswati, Tirta Amerta, Balinese Hinduism, environmental theology*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Water (mesh, apah, or toya in Sanskrit) is one of the most fundamental elements in Hindu cosmology and spirituality. In various sacred texts, water is understood not only as a material element that sustains life, but also as a transcendental symbol that represents the sanctity, fertility, and source of all creation. The symbolism of water contains layers of philosophical, theological, and ritualistic meanings that form one of the main foundations in the Hindu worldview.

In the Rigveda, the oldest book in the Hindu tradition, water is referred to as the "eye of life" and the "mother of all that exists". One of the famous hymns, *Apah Suktam* (Rigveda VII.49), praises water as a divine power that purifies, soothes, and invigorates. Water is referred to as a medium of spiritual and physical purification: "Waters, ye are the source of all delight; grant us health, strength, and purity." This symbolism suggests that water has been placed in a sacred position from the beginning—as a direct manifestation of the cosmic forces that sustain and restore the balance of the universe.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, the symbolism of water acquires a deeper philosophical dimension. Kṛṣṇa states that in him there are all the elements of nature, including water that "has a sweet taste" (*raso 'ham apsu kaunteya*, BG 7.8). This phrase signifies that water is a tangible manifestation of the Divine presence in the empirical world. Thus, water becomes a contemplative medium for Hindus to realize the existence of Brahman behind all natural phenomena.

Meanwhile, in the Puranas, especially *the Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Devi Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, water is personified in various forms of goddesses, such as Goddess

Saraswati—the goddess of knowledge flowing like a holy river bringing inner enlightenment. In addition, the myth of *the Manthana Ocean* (stirring of the ocean of milk) in *Vishnu Purāṇa* and *Mahābhārata* describes cosmic water as the source of Tirta Amerta—the water of immortality that symbolizes wisdom and eternal life. This narrative shows that water is not just an element of nature, but also a spiritual essence that unites the gods, humans, and the universe in one cosmic cycle.

The symbolism does not stop in the text, but finds its actualization in Hindu culture and ritual practices, especially in Bali. In Balinese tradition, holy water is known as tirtha, which literally means "road to liberation" or "sacred crossing". Tirtha is believed to have the purifying power (śuddhi) that can cleanse the innate and connect man to his spiritual source. Religious ceremonies such as *melukat*, *nyegara-gunung*, and *nunas tirtha* affirm the position of water as a sacred medium that presents a balance between humans, nature, and God (*Tri Hita Karana*).

Holy water in the Balinese context is not only seen as a rite of passage, but also as a cosmological principle that governs social and ecological life. Water sources such as *pancoran*, *beji*, and *campuhan* are considered places where divine energy resides, so their purity is maintained through various forms of ceremonies and taboos. Thus, the meaning of tirtha reflects the synthesis between Vedic theology and the local wisdom of the archipelago, resulting in a holistic and ecological form of spirituality.

Through the study of water symbolism from Saraswati to Tirta Amerta, it appears that water acts as a bridge between myth and practice, between sacred texts and living culture. Water is the symbol of the unification of the dimensions of knowledge (Saraswati), life (Rigveda and Bhagavad Gita), and eternity (Tirta Amerta). Therefore, this research is important to uncover how the sacred conception of water in Hindu literature is translated in the religious life of the Balinese people, while showing the continuity between philosophy, rituals, and spiritual ecology in the Hindu tradition.

1.2 Research Problems

Based on the description of the background, it can be formulated several main problems that are the focus of this study, namely:

1. How is water positioned in Hindu sacred texts, such as *the Rigveda*, *the Bhagavad Gītā*, and *the Purāṇa*, as a symbol of purity, the source of life, and divine manifestation?
2. How did the concept and symbolism of water (jalā, apah) in Hindu literature undergo a transformation in meaning in the context of the culture and rituals of the Balinese Hindu community?
3. How does the meaning of holy water (*tirtha*) in the ritual and daily life of the Balinese people reflect the continuity between theological teachings, ecological values, and spiritual practices?

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Describe and analyze the position and symbolic meaning of water in Hindu sacred texts, especially *the Rigveda*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Purāṇa*.
2. Uncovering the forms of reinterpretation and internalization of water symbolism in the traditions and rituals of the Balinese Hindu community.
3. Explain the relationship between the symbolism of water in Hindu literature and the religious and ecological life views of the Balinese people, thus forming a holistic understanding of purity and life.

1.4 Research Benefits

1.4.1 Theoretical benefits

Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of the study of religious philosophy and Hindu literature, especially in understanding the symbolism of natural elements as a theological medium. This study enriches the

understanding of how Hindu sacred texts construct cosmological and spiritual views through the symbol of water as a metaphor for knowledge (Saraswati), life (Rigveda, Bhagavad Gita), and immortality (Tirta Amerta).

1.4.2 Practical Benefits

Practically, the results of this study can provide insights for:

1. Academics and students in understanding the relationship between sacred texts and religious cultural practices, especially in the Hindu context in Bali.
2. Religious leaders and spiritual practitioners, as a reflective foundation in maintaining the purity of water sources and the implementation of tirtha-based rituals.
3. The general public and environmentalists, to foster ecological and spiritual awareness that maintaining the purity of water is the same as maintaining the sustainability of life.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Framework on Religious Symbolism

In the study of religions, symbols are understood as the primary means of expressing sacred reality. According to Mircea Eliade (1959) in *The Sacred and the Profane*, symbols constitute "*hierophany*" — the manifestation that makes the sacred visible in the profane world. Within this framework, the elements of nature such as water, fire, earth, and air are not merely material phenomena, but rather gateways to a deeper religious experience.

Eliade emphasized that water has a universal symbolic meaning as a symbol of purity, regeneration, and cosmic potential. Through water, all forms of life are born, and through water all stains are purified. As described below.

"Water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is the source of all existence and the vehicle of purification." (*Eliade, 1959:130*)

Meanwhile, Émile Durkheim (1912) in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* explained that religious symbols not only represent spiritual reality, but also express the collective consciousness of society. In this context, the meaning of water is not only theological, but also sociological, since it serves to unite communities in common rites and beliefs.

Victor Turner (1969) in *The Ritual Process* added a performative dimension of symbolism: the water in ritual functions as a liminal medium, that is, the transitional space between the profane and the sacred. In moments such as purification (*melukat*) or spiritual initiation, water becomes a transformative tool that marks a change in one's spiritual status.

On the basis of these theories, water symbolism in Hinduism can be understood not only mythologically, but also as a phenomenon of religious and cultural philosophy that integrates cosmology, morality, and spirituality.

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design. by examining the results that have been obtained through study literature, both journals, books, research results, and magazines related to the research title (Ratna, 2006). This research was conducted for 1 month in July 2025. The results of the research that have been obtained are analyzed and expressed in the form of narratives.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Water in Vedic Cosmology and Theology

In the Rigveda, water (apah) is placed in a very sacred and vital position. The *Apah Suktam* Association (VII.49) praises water as the divine force that sustains the life of all beings:

"Waters, ye are the source of all delight, grant us health, strength, and purity."

Here, water is depicted as a universal principle of life that provides well-being and purity. In another hymn (*Rigveda X.9*), water is referred to as the "mother of all living", describing its cosmogonist function as the *materia prima* (origin substance) of the universe. This view is in line with *the philosophy of Sāṃkhya* which considers the element of water (*apas tattva*) to be the second element after ether (*ākāśa*), which contains the potential for life. In a spiritual context, water is the symbol of the union between *puruṣa* (soul) and *prakṛti* (nature), affirming the cosmic balance that is the basis of *dharma*. Water also plays an important role in the practice of Vedic rituals, such as *abhiseka* (holy watering) and *snana* (purification bath), which depict the restoration of inner and outer purity. Thus, in the Vedic tradition, water is not only a physical substance, but also a sacred medium for restoring cosmic order (*ṛta*).

4.2 Water as a Manifestation of God in the Bhagavad Gītā

In *the Bhagavad Gītā*, the symbolism of water acquires the dimension of **Vedānta philosophy**. Śrī Kṛṣṇa states in *Bhagavad Gītā VII.8*:

"*Raso 'ham apsu kaunteya, prabhāsmi śāśi-sūryayoḥ*"

"Aku adalah rasa manis dalam air, cahaya dalam bulan dan matahari."

This verse shows that water is not only a symbol, but a direct manifestation of God's presence (Brahman) in the form of sensory experience. The sweetness of water (*taste*) signifies the existential happiness that arises when man realizes his oneness with nature and God.

In *Bhagavad Gītā XV.13*, Kṛṣṇa also says:

"I entered the earth and sustained all creatures with my power; I became the moon that grows all plants with their juices." This verse reinforces the meaning that water, rain, and moisture are expressions of Divine love that sustain life. Thus, water becomes a symbol of God's unbroken grace and love.

In this context, water serves as a metaphor for a fluid and inclusive spirituality: just as water conforms to its container, so man should conform to the Divine will through devotion and *dharma*.

4.3 Cosmic Water and Tirta Amerta in the Purāṇa

The Purāṇa texts, water symbolism developed into complex mythological narratives. One of the most famous stories is the Manthana Ocean (the stirring of the milky ocean) in *Vishnu Purāṇa* and *Mahābhārata (Adi Parva)*. In this story, the gods (*deva*) and asuras stir the cosmic ocean to obtain Tirta Amerta — the water of eternity.

This story has a profound philosophical meaning: (a) the ocean symbolizes a collective subconscious full of potential and chaos; (b) Mount Mandara as a stirring represents the spiritual efforts of humans to cultivate themselves; (c) The Tirta Amerta that arises is spiritual enlightenment or eternity, the result of the struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

In addition, Goddess Saraswati is often depicted flowing like a holy river, bringing knowledge (*vidyā*) and enlightenment. The water of the river Saraswati symbolizes the current of divine wisdom that purifies ignorance. Thus, water becomes a metaphor for knowledge and consciousness — the two main aspects of liberation (*mokṣa*).

3.4 Water Symbolism in Socio-Religious and Balinese Cultural Perspectives

In the Balinese Hindu context, the concept of holy water (*tirtha*) is a transformation from Vedic and Purāṇa symbolism into a form of local culture and rituals. Etymologically, *tirtha* means "holy crossing" — the place or medium that allows man to cross *samsara* to *mokṣa*.

Rituals such as *melukat*, *nunas tirtha*, and *nyegara-gunung* demonstrate an understanding that holy water is a spiritual energy that restores the balance of the tri mandalas: self (*atma*), environment (*bhuana*), and God (*parhyangan*). In a

Durkheimian perspective, tirtha is also a symbol of collective solidarity that maintains the social and ecological cohesion of Balinese society.

Water taken from sacred sources such as *campuhan*, *beji*, and *tirta empul* is believed to have the power of purification of the mind and mind. This is where Turner's theory of liminal symbols finds its relevance: water tirtha marks the transition from a profane state to a holiness, both in religious ceremonies and in everyday life.

The symbolism of water in the Hindu tradition—both in sacred texts and in Balinese culture—embodies the unity between cosmology, theology, and ritual praxis. It not only explains how water is understood, but also how man experiences the sacredness through water.

Tirtha as Ecotheology: Maintaining the Purity of Water and Nature

The meaning of holy water in Bali is not only limited to religious rituals, but also forms ecological ethics. In the Balinese Hindu view, the source of water is the manifestation of *Lord Vishnu* and the place where spiritual energy resides. Therefore, keeping rivers, lakes, and springs clean is not only an ecological obligation, but also a dharmika responsibility.

This concept is in line with the principle of *Tri Hita Karana*, namely the harmony between humans and God (*parhyangan*), humans and others (*pawongan*), and humans with nature (*palemahan*). Thus, water serves as a meeting point between spirituality and environmental sustainability.

This understanding shows the dimension of Balinese Hindu ecotheology, where water is seen as a manifestation of God's love that must be maintained in purity. Rituals such as *tumpek uduh*, *tumpek wariga*, and *mapag toya* reflect ecological awareness born from water theology.

As described in Hindu sacred texts such as *the Rigveda*, *the Bhagavad Gītā*, and *the Purāna*, water is a symbol that unites the cosmological, theological, and spiritual aspects of life. In the context of Balinese Hindu society, this symbolism is not only understood conceptually, but is practiced through various forms of rituals and value systems.

Balinese society places water as the core of purity (*śuddha tattva*) and spiritual resource (*śakti*). Water not only serves as a rite material, but also a representation of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa* in her manifestation as *Lord Vishnu* — the sustainer of life and the source of all fertility. Therefore, every sacred activity in Bali always begins and ends with the use of *tirtha*, signifying the importance of water as a mediator between humans and God.

In Mircea Eliade's view, water is "*the matrix of all potentialities*," where everything originates and is repurified. This understanding is clearly reflected in the Balinese ritual which treats water not as just an object, but as a spiritual entity that has divine power (*taksu*).

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the reading of the text and theory, it can be concluded that:

1. Water in Hindu literature is a multidimensional symbol—cosmological, theological, epistemological, and ethical. Eliade's theory of symbols explains the sacred function of water as a hierophany; Durkheim explains its social function; Turner explains its ritual-transformational function.
2. In the Balinese Hindu context, this symbolism transforms into ecological and spiritual praxis through the concept of tirtha, which affirms the continuity between myth and life, text and action, knowledge and purification.

5.2 Practical Advice

Local governments and Hindu religious institutions in Bali need to strengthen **tirtha-based ecotheological education**, so that the spiritual awareness of the people can be integrated with the water resource conservation movement.

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