

SPECIAL SECTION: New Epistemologies of Water in India

Revealed by Water, Hidden in Water: Indic Hydro-epistemologies of Sacred Things

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Abstract: This essay explores two basic trajectories of the hydro-epistemology of sacred things in Indic cultures: things revealed by water—the visible gifts of water—and things hidden in water with which we can communicate only indirectly, by touching the water. Unlike Mircea Eliade’s concept of hierophany, this represents a mode of the sacred that cannot be auto-manifest and depends on water for radiating its sacrality. While the sacred things revealed by water—the conch shell, the *bana linga*, the *svarnamukhi sbila*, the *shaligrama sbila*—are water’s gifts to the Indic religions, there are things that are hidden by water; their hiddenness maintains their secrecy and sacrality. For instance, in certain Sati *pithas*, the petrified body parts of Goddess Sati are said to remain submerged in water. One can only touch them indirectly, by touching the water that is in touch with the Sati’s body. This article illustrates this two-pronged epistemology of the sacred that is propelled by water in Indic religious cultures.

Keywords: Hydro-epistemology, Sacrality, Indic, Sati Pithas, Hierophany

1. INTRODUCTION

When we set out to explore the hydro-epistemology of sacred things in Indic traditions, we found two basic trajectories: things revealed by the water—gifts that dot the boundary between nature and culture—and things hidden in the water that we can touch only indirectly, by touching the water. Sacred things from the water include the conch shell (Hinduism and

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37773/eec.v3i2.228>

Buddhism), the *bana linga*, the *svarnamukhi shila*, and the *shaligrama shila* (Hinduism);¹ these are the gifts of water to Indic religions. There are also other sacred tokens that the water hides; their concealment ensures or enhances their sacrality. For instance, in various Sati *pitbas* (sacred sites of Devi worship associated with her avatar, Sati), petrified body parts of Goddess Sati are said to be submerged in the water, thereby making the water sacred. One cannot directly touch these hidden tokens from the Sati myth; one can only touch Sati indirectly by touching the water in which the petrified flesh of Sati is hidden. This article illustrates this two-pronged epistemology of the sacred that is induced by water in Indic religious cultures.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

We find that Mircea Eliade's concept of "hierophany" is not adequate to account for the phenomena on which we focus in this article. While Eliade's idea of "hierophany" focuses on the self-manifestation of the sacred, the gifts of water revealed by its waves, as well as the sacred things hidden in its bosom, represent a mode of the sacred that is not and cannot be auto-manifest and rather depend on water for its location and function within the epistemology of the sacred. Eliade (1959) opines, "Man (*sic.*) becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*" (11).

In this article, however, we argue that in the case of waterborne sacred objects or those hidden in water, the sacred does *not* manifest or show itself. Instead, the water shows or refuses to show it. When unseen, it is still considered sacred; indeed, its sacredness is grounded in that it remains hidden by the water. On the other hand, when it is seen, it does not show itself but is revealed by running water that drops it on the shore. Here, hierophany does not refer to the agency of the sacred itself, but rather the agency of the mother of sacred things: water.

In order to explore specific forms of water-induced spirituality prevalent in various Indic modes of religiosity, we draw and elaborate on Bron Taylor's

¹ *Bana linga*—also known as *svayambhu* (i.e., self-born) linga is an ellipsoid stone that Hindus worship. The stone symbolizes Lord Shiva, the supreme god of power in the Hindu Trinity (Brahma–Vishnu–Maheshvara). The stone is commonly found on the bed of the Narmada River in Madhya Pradesh, India. *Svarnamukhi shila* is the natural stone obtained from the Svarnamukhi River in Andhra Pradesh and it represents Shakti/Devi. *Shaligrama shila*, collected from the Gandaki River in Nepal, is a fossilized shell worshipped as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu.

(2014) idea of “sea spirituality”. While speaking of “sea spirituality” in the context of surfing, Taylor dwells on the ocean as the source of life—“Mother Ocean”. According to Taylor, “there is not much we know with certainty about the origins of life other than that the ocean is literally the source” (230). This we can say without having a clue why a spirituality that evolved in close contact with the sea developed not in isolation from the senses but rather through them. This sort of “sensible spirituality”, Taylor insists, “celebrates the energies of the universe and life itself” and “does not require metaphysical speculation that reaches far beyond our ken” (230).

The mode of religiosity on which we focus in this article is sensory in nature: one has to touch the holy stones revealed by water and blow the conch shell, a gift from water, by pressing one’s mouth to its mouth. However, the trajectory we follow is different from that of Taylor’s on sea spirituality. While the surfer, as a sea spiritualist, rides a wave and in doing so connects to the ocean (Taylor 2014, 230), the spiritualist or religious person who worships sacred stones or blows the sacred conch shell ritualistically hears the roiling sea or the laughter of the river in the conch shell or sacred stone, respectively. Thus, the sea spiritualist moves closer to the sea; this happy recipient of the gifts of water waits on the shore for the water to reveal, with maternal affection, her enormous riches.

3. REVEALED BY WATER

Sacred things have various connotations and functions in Indic religions. In Hinduism, where the spectrum of the sacred is bafflingly wide and all-pervasive, the sacred thing is often not just a thing, but a manifestation of the divine itself. For instance, the *bana linga*, *shaligrama shila*, and *svanamukhi shila* are all natural objects that are seen as varied manifestations of the divine. Even though one might be tempted to associate their sacrality with the Eliadean idea of “hierophany”, we need to first look at their origins. Water is a primordial mother, the manifester of sacred objects, and the bringer of sacred gifts to the people who love and are loved by it; to find the sacred stone, you must go to the river. However, we need to consider here that water in general, not just rivers, is the mother of gods. Water brings sacred gifts—the stony manifestations of the divine—to the shore, which simultaneously separates and connects nature and culture; thus, religion begins its course.

The stone’s sacrality is essentially embedded in, and curiously coterminous with, the sacrality of the water that carries it. In this context, we can see the water, carrying the sacred stones that are to be worshipped as gods/goddesses, has the palpable, physical presence of the Vedic Aditi who,

as Tracy Pintchman (1994) observes, “shares her maternal nature with the waters and the earth” (32–33). Pintchman says, “Aditi, the waters, and earth may on some level be different aspects of one another, for they are homologized by being cited collectively as mother of the gods” (32–33). If we dissociate the rivers carrying these sacred stones from the complex mythological frames that may occasionally downplay the primacy of “water as mother” and see the *jalatva* (water-ness) of the river water as the actual source of the sacrality of the divine stones nurtured in the riverbed—that is to say, if we train ourselves to read the sacred differently and non-conventionally, from a physical or tangible perspective—we come to understand how important it is to acknowledge and appreciate the power of water to bring the gods as its gifts to us.

As Shrikala Warriar (2014) rightly observes, all the *bana lingas* in the Narmada River are said to be Shiva himself. Warriar reminds us that the five main deities of Hinduism, foregrounded in the *Panchayatana*² worship initiated by Shankaracharya, “are worshipped in the form of stones found in five sacred rivers” (140–141). Interestingly, these stones are also associated with the five primordial elements of creation in Hindu cosmologies—ether, air, fire, water, and earth. Nevertheless, even though these five sacred stones are supposed to represent the five primordial elements, including water, it is water that nurtures and carries them to the religious Hindu. Water, in a way, becomes the all-encompassing entity that manifests the sacrality of all the elements, in effect becoming the ultimate agency behind the hierophany of the five sacred stones. These five stones are born of water and are manifested as sacred entities (not just “things”) through its flow. Here, we come to the spiritual dynamics of water revealing rather than hiding the sacred. The hydro-epistemology of the hierophany of these stones becomes comprehensible to us when we adopt Taylor’s (2014) framework of “sensible spirituality” and touch the heart of the sacred epistemes of popular Hinduism in their simplest forms, shorn of the scriptural superstructure that, when over-emphasized, often smothers unadorned nature.

Eliade (1959) explains that for the religious person, “the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*” (12). However, in the case of sacred things brought by water to the domain of religion, true power and reality are in water itself. While the *bana linga* or the *shbaligrama shila* may be seen as *svayambhu* (self-born), in the final analysis, they are the offspring of water. The maternal agency of water cannot be overlooked, when a non-

² Panchayatana refers to the veneration of the five Hindu deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti/Parvati, Surya, and Ganesha.

biased “contemplative cultural critic” (Mani 2009, 1–4), capable of overcoming an obsession with scriptures, touches these sacred stones with love and reverence and hears in them the laughter of waves. Kapila Vatsyayan (2010), while discussing sacred stones like the *shaligrama shila* and *bana linga* in the context of Indic water myths, focuses on the ecological message that “these simple stones” convey, which facilitates “a sensitive comprehension of ecology” (xiv). Indeed, by worshipping these stones, we celebrate the primordial motherhood of water. It is in the water as a physical matrix that different ideas and figurations of the sacred take shape. As the origin of all sacrality, water weaves a complex web of the sacred by revealing certain things and hiding others.

From the sacred objects that are considered direct manifestations of the divine, we now move to those tokens of the sacred that do not ontologically overlap with the divine, but are nevertheless associated with it or have other sacred functions. Take, for example, the *shankha* (conch shell). As Gautam Chatterjee (2001) elaborates, the conch shell “symbolises the cosmic space of which the attribute is *śabda* or sound” (77). While the sacred stones representing the five deities are gifts from the rivers, the conch shell is a gift from the sea. However, its relationship with the sea is quite complex—the sea, as it were, remains alive within the physical body of the shell. “Like the insides of the sea, conch-interiors are considered innately sacred, and devotees adorn their entire physical and spiritual selves and homes by using its internal parts” (Sarbadhikary 2019, 7). Even though the conch shell has many sacred functions in Hindu rituals, “the conch’s sacrality rests with the object’s naturalness, not ritual value” (Sarbadhikary 2019, 8). In other words, it is a *natural* gift from the sea.

Following Sarbadhikary’s (2019) insistence that the conch shell, “when sounded every dusk”, makes “the home open out to the sea again” (8), we can say that it is a peculiar gift from water that opens our hearts to the sea and to the ultimate abundance of water. Drawing on the view that the shankha always reminds us of “nature’s innate freedom” (Sarbadhikary 2019, 8), we argue that water gives us the conch shell to help us recognize, again and again, its source in primordial waters when we hear the sound of the sea emerging from its cavity.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the conch shell is a “symbol of the proclamation of the Buddha’s teachings, which fearlessly resounded throughout the ten directions” (Beer 2003, 171). Once again, we find in the conch shell, which is a gift from the rolling waters of the sea, the cadence of the waves. The sacred gifts that come to us from water cross the boundary that separates nature and culture; thus, we understand that culture is, in the context of the

hydro-sacred, not a process of transcending nature but one of celebrating its gifts.

4. HIDDEN IN WATER

Now, we shall focus on the ways water hides sacred objects and invites the religious person to touch the water—this is the only way to access what is hidden underwater: the unrevealed sacred. Here, the secret and the sacred become one. Water preserves the sacrality and secrecy of the hidden object, forcing us to understand that water is not just a matrix of sacred stones, but also a medium for communicating with that mode of sacredness that revels in its inaccessibility. Here, you do not dive into the water to find or grab the sacred object; you simply touch the water or take a dip in it, without presumptuously trying to discover the sacred thing hidden in the water. In certain Sati *pithas*—sacred spots where lie hidden parts of the corpse of Goddess Sati, dismembered by Vishnu's *chakra* after her self-immolation and the destruction of the *yajna* arranged by her father, Daksha (Mukhopadhyay 2018, 10–11, 7–681)³—one recognizes this phenomenon of water hiding the sacred beneath its surface. Sati's sacred body parts, in petrified form, are hidden in the water, out of reach. One can only touch the water, take a dip in it, or sprinkle it on one's body; it is only by touching the water that the person, indirectly, accesses the sacred aura of the goddess's petrified body parts and pays tribute to them. In these cases, one cannot directly touch the body of the goddess; one's respectful touch must be mediated by water. In the case of tantric Shaktism, there are many ritualistic contexts in which touching the goddess becomes an important way of paying tribute to her and being blessed by her touch. Touch is mutual—whatever you touch also touches you, especially within the panentheistic vision of tantric Shaktism (Williamson 1984, 253–254). However, in the case of the sacred body parts of Sati, hidden by water, the sacred touch, although mutual, is *mediated*. You touch the water that is in touch (literally) with the sacred body parts of Sati, and the water touches you back, on behalf of the goddess. Just as with the revelation of sacred objects, in the case of hiding sacred objects too, water enjoys the agency of ensuring the sacred function of those objects.

In the Sati Pitha of Kankalitala, adjacent to Shantiniketan in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal, there is a *kund* (a small water body) beside the

³ *Chakra* or *Sudarshana Chakra* is the divine discus that is the weapon of Vishnu. *Yajna* is a ritual that is performed in front of a sacred fire and is accompanied by chants (*mantras*). It is part of the ancient Indian tradition and has been referred to in Vedic literature (especially the *Brahmanas* and the *Yajurveda*).

temple of Goddess Kali. According to legend, Sati's waist fell here and is still submerged in this water body (Clark 2011; Devasharman 2015, 100). In a piece on the Sati Pitha of Kankalitala, William Clark (2011) expresses wonder about the invisibility and inaccessibility of Sati's actual body part at this site:

I cannot help but wonder if at the bottom of the *kund* there may be some sort of rock formation corresponding to the fallen body part of Ma Sati. It seems likely that an isolated, shallow pond such as the Kankalitala *kund* would periodically dry up during periods of draught, exposing the bottom. If and when this does occur, is an object revealed that was the initial source of attraction for ancient people to this sacred site, or is the Kankalitala *kund* merely a pond that has acquired sacred status for reasons unknown?

However, as Yatinandan Devasharman (2015, 100) points out, the *kund* at Kankalitala never actually dries up fully. Even during the summer, when the entire Birbhum district reels under scorching heat, this *kund* remains full. According to legend, it has a subterranean connection with the Manikarnika Ghat of Varanasi. Devasharman informs us that devotees of the goddess consider the water of the *kund* to be as holy as that of the Ganges. They convey their secret desires to this *kund* and, when their desires are fulfilled, they place sweets and paper boats on the surface of the water. They sprinkle the water on their heads while expressing their desires and sip the water. In other words, for the devotees of the goddess, the water of the *kund* is alive; it listens and responds to their pleas. The water is precious because it is the only medium of communication with the sacred part of Sati's corpse that is submerged in it. The devotee conveys their plea to the petrified body part of Sati, and the response comes through the water. They have to touch the water to convey their heart's desires to what is hidden in it; the benediction of the sacred remains of the goddess are also conveyed through the water. Without loving the water and being loved by it, you cannot engage in a loving relationship with the feminine divine enshrined in this Sati *pitha*.

In the context of sacred objects hidden by water, another example would be Lake Manasarovara, which is famous as one of the holiest and most important Hindu pilgrim spots. According to the myths of Shaktism, Sati's right hand fell into the Manasa Sarovara, which is now located in Tibet and is called Manasarovar (Devasharman 2015, 191–194). While for Hindus in general the water of this lake is sacred in itself, the Shakti worshipper experiences this sacrality from a different perspective. Here too, Sati's body part is submerged in the Manasarovara—it is not accessible. Only water remains before the eyes and hands of the devotee. The Shakti worshipper conveys the message of devotion to the goddess only by touching the water of the lake, which keeps Sati's petrified hand hidden beneath its surface.

5. CONCLUSION

We have shed light on those sacred functions of water in Indic traditions that often escape our critical gaze. While Indic water epistemologies typically focus on the sacrality of water itself (Vatsyayan 2010, xiii–xviii), we have underlined the intricate ways in which water determines the epistemology of the sacred in India. Rather than being an apparently passive, abstract instance of the sacred, or an *object* of worship, water engages in active play with the very epistemes of sacrality. It conditions, modulates, and determines the modalities of the manifestation (the sacred objects it reveals) or non-manifestation (the sacred things it hides) of the sacred things that are at the heart of the religious cultures of India. Whether it reveals or hides them, the agency lies in the waves and ripples of the water.

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