WATER, WATER STRUCTURES AND THEIR RELEVANCE DURING VEDIC PERIOD

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Water occupies a unique position in our life. It has been considered as one among the ***Pancha mahabhoot*** [1] *i.e.*, one among the five principle elements of life. As per our ancient tradition origin of life has its beginning in water. In other words, Creator created water first and then life began from this element — *Apa eva sasarajaadau tasu beejamvasrijata.*

The Vedic *aryans* realised water is life sustaining material so they gave it sacrosanct status. The vedic seers sang poem in its honour with high esteem. Later on, these poetic lines of vedas became source of inspirations who wrote in following periods. With the passage of time, all religions that sprang in India incorporated water in their sacraments and did creative practices with highest esteem.

In Vedic literary composition we find mention about many sources of water. The prominent sources we come across this period are ground water (ponds and reservoirs), sub-surface water (wells), cloud (rain), mountain channels (glaciers), rivers, and sea. This paper emphasises on the study of sources of water, its importance and utility in the socio, economic & religious life of the people of Vedic period.

Hygienic water : The vedic people were quite conscious about hygienic water or the good quality of drinking water which used to be pure, undefiled, tasty and relish able. Hymns invoking to its presiding deity *Varuna* reveal that they preferred to drink such water which was free from all sorts of impurities. At one place in Atharva veda a *rishi* (sage) chants that – water is life, it is like *amrita* (*nectar*) and it is medicine.[2] They pray for the continuous flow of pure water through their land.[3] Again in *Atharva veda*, it has been desired that "*May the water which we consume be pleasant to our taste , be free from the weakness and sickness, be the remover of fear of death diseases, be full of divine qualities and be the strength of eternal powers."*[4]

Water as the purifier has been the symbol of firm resolve. Pure water was used not only for quenching the thirst but as an invariable substance such as purifier and symbol of firm resolve if applied in particular functional mode. Furthermore, as - in religious-resolve to perform a religious act (*Sankalpa*); to start the ceremonies of welcome, offered for washing the feet of the deity (*Padya*); for washing the hands and other ablutions offered as (*Pragya*) and another form of offering is drinking water (*Achamaniya*). One more was its use in oblation (*tarpana*).

Rain: When we study the economy of Vedic period we come to know that it was primarily based on the agriculture and this in its turn was almost dependent on the rain. This is why during the early vedic period rain has been personified as the cloud and thunder which caused the seeds to germinate and was responsible for the growth of the plants.[5] The deities to whom prayers have been offered for pouring water from the sky are *Indra*, *Parjany* and *Varuna*. These gods have been requested again and again for pouring adequate rain for good production of crops.[6] Furether prayers have been also offered for timely rain to lord Varuna.[7] The Parjanya sukta credits Megha as provider of pleasure to the world by means of rain. It has been considered that rainwater is purifier of the environment.[8] It pours on the earth and by virtue of it the plants are grown on it. All these hymns mark the importance of rain for the germination of seeds and growth of crops, plants and trees. In this context, many references have been made in Vedas about rain and gods associated with rain.

O' lord of the field ! Bestow on us Sweet pure and butter like copious rain ever as cow give us milk. May the skies with rains and firmament be full of sweetness.[9]

O' Sura and Sira ! bestow on us happiness, accept this hymn. Moisten this earth with rain you have created in the sky and with the milk thst ye have made in heaven. [10]

Similarly the hymns addressing to Maruta have been the sung to bring showers in the rainy season and thus to make life of the people not only possible but happy too. [11]

These quoted lines clearly reflect that rain water was much needed for agriculture. Besides this it was also harvested and stored in ponds and tanks.

Rivers – In Vedas rivers have been represented as a dynamic force of life and fertility . The were considered as the mother sand the spiritof fertility. The *Nadi sukta which* occupies its position in the tenth mandal of Rig veda offers prayers to the rivers and hails their glory.[12]

The area in which the Vedic Aryans settled was commonly known as *Sapta* sindhu *pradesh* or the land of sevenr rivers. These rivers were which used to flow in this regions were named as Sindhu , Vitasta , Parushni , Vipasa , Sutudri, Askini and Sarswati . Though no less thatn twenty three rivers have been mentioned in Rig veda but the Sarswati has been mentioned as most prominent one and has been considered as highly sacred river in this text. This river had been so fascinating to vedic seers that they intimately lauded and glorified it at least ninety times. Three vedic seers namely Gritsamad, Bhargava and Saunaka all together praised Sarswati as Mother supreme, the river supreme and the excellent Goddess.

Ambatame, Devitame Nadiitame Sarswati. [13]

The water of these rivers was instrumental in making the land of Aryans very productive. In the Atharva veda, it is said that gods sowed the sweet barley in the gem like land watered by Sarswati. Satkartu Indra was the lords of plough to till soil and generous *Maruts* played the role of farmers in order to protect the harvest.

Deva imām madhunā samutam yavam
Sarswatyāmadhi Manāvacakrush
Indra Asit Sirapati Śatkartuh
Kiāsā Asan Marutah Sudānvah [14]

The word Dabariya points out a river which fills pits and ponds with its water. The Sarswati also means one who creates lake and fills them with its water.[15]

The study shows that on the eastern end of the Aryan land river Ganges was flowing while on the western end it was flanked by the river Kurram (Afghanistan). Between the two ends of east and west there were many rivers were flowing. [16] Starting with Ganga in west and moving towards west we come across the names of following rivers of that time – 1 Ganga, 2Yamuna, 3 Sarswati, 4 Sutudri, 5 Parushni 6 Maruvridha with Askini, 6 Arjikiya with Vitastam 7 Susoma ,8 Sohan 9 Sindhu 10 Tristama (?), 11 Susruta 12 Rasa (?) 13 Sveta, 14 Kubha (Kabul) 15 Gomal 16 kurmu (Kurram)

During the later vedic period the settlement area of the vedic Aryans expanded towards east which comprised more net work of rivers. Atharva veda [17] mentions names of few rivers wgucg were flowing in Indo- Gangetic doab. These were Saryu, Sadanira, Kaussiki and sone .

During normal season these rivers provided water to the agriculture fields. However, during rainy season these deposited fertile silts which resulted in the rich production and ultimately brought prosperity in the socio- economic life of the Vedic people.

Canals In Vedas we get references about preliminary canals or artificial channels. The tern *Khanitrima apah* [18] has been used for canal for channelizing water. Small channels drawn from

well, ponds and small rivers which supplied water to a little long distance is referred as *Kulya.* Muir [19] considers kulya as artificial way for water supply. Terms **Surmi** and **Susira** mentioned in Rig Veda with all likelihood were used for broad channels and their distributaries.

In Atharvaveda in a hyms we get mention about the commissioning of a canal. At another point we come to know about the ceremony when water from the river was channelized in to a newly constructed channel. In the same text we also find a metaphorical representation of a canal drawn from a river in the form of a calf and a cow.[22]

Here, O' ye , water hear,
Here is your calf, ye holy ones
Flow here, Just here O' might streams,
Whither I am leading you.

In kausika suktra, it is revealed about the flow of river which was diverted into Channels and sublet channels.

These vedic period channels supported the peasants community in farming as well as in social life for fulfilling the requirement of water in their day today life.

Wells The Aryans were quite acquainted with exploitation of underground waterby means of wells. The word ***avata*** is frequently mentioned in Rigveda. The occurrence of this word signifies that the vedic people had close association with this kind of structure to fetch underground water. Such water structure was also called as ***akshita*** [24] which means unfailing source of water. Hence well was constructed by means of digging so it was called as khanitrima.[25] Another term which was commonly used for well was ***koop*** or ***kup*.** However, it may be amot point whether koop was synonymous to ***avata*** or it was different type of structure.

Jaminya Brahmana [28] which is associated with Sama veda refers to a well which bottom was not visible due to greater depth. Taking out water from such well must have been a difficult task. So they might have developed water lifting devices. It appears that water from the deep wells was lifted either by means of a rope or by means of some device. In this context we get mention of a stone wheel called ***asmachakra*** which used to be mounted on the parapet of well. A passage concerned with it mentions that water was raised by a wheel made of stone i.e, **asmchakra.** It was fastened with a strap (**Varatra**) with a pail (**kosh**) in order to fetch water from deep wells. [27]

During this period, well water was not only brought in use for drinking and house hold purposes it was also utilised for irrigating the crops and watering the plants. In this context water was lifted out by means of animal force and it was let off in to water-channels called **surmi** and **susira**. Passing through these channels water ultimately used to reach to standing crops.

Ponds - Ponds or tanks were quite known to the vedic people. Hrida[29] was a kind of big tank and some of those were as large as the size of a lake. Water in the larger tanks was stored by means of artifiial channels. The term ***vesanta***[30] was applied to denote large size tank and ***Vesanti***[31] for a pond of smaller size. One more term which we come across is ***sar***[32] which was also applied in the sense of a tank.

It appears that during the rainy season water was stored in these structures and later on it was utilised for watering the vast tracts of agriculture fields as it was not possible by means of wells due to its own limitations.

Socio Religious Faith :

The word *Dhārāpravāh*, in general sense, is used for continuous flow of water stream or cascade without any pause. But *dharapravah vani* is considered as a divine blessing of goddess Sarswati. The vedic river Sarswati is personified as goddess of wisdom.

During later vedic period there developed a new tradition in social life. Water became a necessary for coronation ceremony of a king. As per Satpath Brahmana , for this very purpose, water was primarily brought from the holy river Sarswati and then from the major rivers of the land and nearest sea. The water of local ponds was not undermined. This too was mixed with the collected water. Then prayer was offered that – " Water you are the provider of kingship, please bless this person with the post of king".[33] As the pond water is stagnant on the earth so it was believed that it would render the mind of his subjects stable in favour of the king . Thus his rule would not get disturbed in such a way even the water of local ponds was having full importance for empowering the king and maintaining the royal power.

Having desire for rule over the larger territory prayers were offered to various gods, goddess and to the rivers and reservoirs of the concerned area. Thus, in order to obtain the royal power as well as dignity of the kin g it was obligatory for the designated king to perform such rituals. It was believed that the gods provide only the ability in a man required for a king but royal capacity is obtained only from the large reservoirs and small ponds. So these water structures were always offered prayers and due regards were given to them. On the other hand it was also the duty of a king to keep them filled with water and not let them dry.

Thus we find water and its various sources had great importance in every field of the life around them whether it was drinking, agriculture, religious beliefs or social custom. This is why they gave it utmost importance.

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