

The Yamuna: Recapturing the Connection

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As we have learned, when the Yamuna River approaches Delhi, its flow is diverted to provide the drinking, bathing, and industrial needs of India's capital district. By the time it resumes its course some twenty miles later, its oxygen content has dropped to 0%, it seethes with foam, presumably from phosphate-based soaps, and carries a burden laden with heavy metals and sewage. In short, the river is dead by the time it reaches the holy city of Vrindaban, legendary home of Sri Krishna, and Agra, where it flows behind the majestic Taj Mahal. What can be done? Two five-year Yamuna Action Plans have failed. What can stimulate India's collective imagination sufficiently to take action?

Rivers worldwide, from the Rhine to the Hudson to Ohio's infamous once-flammable Cuyahoga have been restored to relative health. Even rivers in dry climates such as Los Angeles have been revitalized. In each instance, public outcries combined with appropriate legislation and funding have been effective.

India has long seen her rivers as life-giving goddesses. David Haberman has meticulously examined the role of the Yamuna in the religious practices of Vaishnavism. Religious leaders in Vrindaban have decried the despoilization of their water source. Srivatsa Goswami, whose family has maintained Sri Radharaman Temple there for five centuries, has proclaimed: "Mother Yamuna is dead. Her children must revive her." This essay will explore some possible sources of literary and religious inspiration that might help through yet another avenue incentives to take action.

Tat Tvam Asi: Thou Art That

The Upanisads and the philosophy of Samkhya provide a way of thinking about nature that can be applied in order for a person to "think like a river," to rephrase Aldo Leopold's famous edict, "think like a mountain." By thinking like a river, and by acknowledging that healthy life depends upon a healthy river, individuals can find the voice necessary to demand change. By looking at the things of the world in terms of their intimacy with human thriving, and by looking at human contingency on the powers of nature, an understanding may arise that will lead to ending human abuses of nature.

In the Chandogya Upanisad, the sage Uddalaka Aruni instructs his son Svetaketu that "You are that!" This famous phrase, *Tat Tvam Asi*, is one of the great sentences of the Upanisads and an important foundation for Indian thought. How does Uddalaka Aruni convey this teaching? He uses the examples of rivers, tigers, lions, wolves, worms, trees, figs, food, salt, and water. All are said to contain soul, a piece of the sacred. The later teachings of Samkhya as found in the *Samkhya Karika*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and many other texts, organize this "That" or *Tat* into 25 essential elements of reality known as *Tattvas* or *Thatnesses*. Most religious or spiritual people emphasize the first *Tattva*, the spirit or soul or consciousness, known as *Purusa* or *Atman*. However, the other 23 *Tattvas* are also vitally important. The second *Tattva*, *Prakrti*, is the matrix or Mother from which all aspects of reality arise, from the ego, mind and body to the subtle and

gross elements that comprise material reality.

The last five Tattvas are the gross elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Indian culture traditionally has revered these elements, seeing the presence of the sacred in each. The *Prthivi Sukta* or *Earth Verses* of the *Atharva Veda* gives praise to the Earth as Mother:

Upon her lie the oceans, many rivers, and other bodies of water.
Her agricultural fields produce grain.
All those that live, move, and breathe depend upon the Earth.
May the Land confer upon us all riches (3).

This text urges humans to acknowledge water and to retain its purity:

O Mother Earth!
May our bodies enjoy only pure water.
May you keep us away from all that is polluted (30).

Water, earth, fire, and breath provide the conditions for human flourishing. The sacrificial process or Yajna brings this to completion in the form of rituals, large and small, all of which involve the use of the great elements.

The process of Hindu worship or Puja includes a ritual called Bhuta Shuddhi, literally the purification of the elements, through which one visualizes the elements internally and transforms oneself into a vehicle through which these aspects of the Mother may take full expression. Kumar Panda, a priest of the Chandi Temple in Cuttack, Orissa, states that “earth is equated with that part of the body below the waist; water is symbolized by the stomach region; fire is represented by the heart; wind is equivalent to the throat, nose and lungs; sky corresponds to the brain.” This priest proclaims that in moments of connectivity his body becomes transformed into the body of the goddess herself, revealing an intimacy between the human and the world: “I become the goddess.... There is no difference between Ma and me. Water and the coldness of water, fire and the burning capacity of fire... there is no difference between all these things, just as there is difference between myself and the goddess” (Preston:51-53).

This experience, also known as anthropocosm, finds poetic expression in the *Yogavasista*, an eleventh century Kashmiri Sanskrit text. The author sets forth elegant descriptions of progressive meditations on the elements, leading to a sublime state of connectivity. By reading just a few of these verses, one can get a sense of the deep love of and respect for the elements experienced by the author:

89.58. Through performing concentration on the earth,
I dissolved into the form of the earth.
While still retaining this expanded consciousness,
I became like a universal ruler (surveying his domain).
59. And indeed, through my concentration on the earth,
I went to the mines at the root of the earth.
I came to understand my body as the trees,
the grasses, the mountains, the continents, and more.
60. As I took possession of the throne of the earth,
forests sprouted from my body.
I became adorned with cities
as if laced with strings of pearls.

67. Repeatedly, the ground is plowed and turned:
cooled by the winds of the winter,
warmed by the heat of summer
and moistened by the waters of the rainy season.

68. My chest became the expansive plains.

My eyes became pools of lotuses.

My crown was the light and dark clouds.

My body (mandiram) contained the ten regions.

From this vision of the earth, the writer next rises up to experience water:

90. 10. By concentration on water, I became water,
as if this unconscious (substance) took on consciousness
inside the abodes of the oceans with its quiet gurgling.

15. [Water] takes the form of drops of dew
asleep in the beds of leaves, constant at all times,
tirelessly gleaming in all directions.

16. Along its endless journey,
[water] takes a home in various lakes and rivers,
occasionally resting gracefully by a bridge, like an old friend.

Fire is next, praised for its powers of illumination:

91.1. Then I disappeared into fire
through the brilliant concentration on fire.

I became linked with its various parts such as
the moon, lightning, stars, flames, and so forth.

2. From its essential nature as eternally luminous,
it spreads light like a beloved prince.

It makes all things visible. It makes all things right.

Thieves fail to conceal themselves in its glow.

3. Through its gentle, friendly lamps
it provides thousands of delights.

It allows all purposes to be seen
in every house, like a good prince.

4. It brings good cheer to all the world
through the sparkling rays of the moon and sun.

Through its singular delights it casts light
into the distance, lifting up and pervading
the circumference of the sky.

5. Light destroys the combined qualities
of blindness and affliction.

It possesses the quality of
revealing all truth and awakening.

11. [I saw] that stainless radiant virgin sky
become smeared with the color of saffron [at sunset],
making way for the illumination of the moon and stars,
as well as the winds that bring night dew.

12. Her grace causes the fields of corn each day
to ripen and grow up out of the darkness.

Her radiance [draws water up] into the clouds
that fill the vast crystal dome [of the sky]
and bring cleansing rains.

With equally beautiful imagery, the author turns to the power of the wind and breath:

VII.92.1. Next I came to concentrate on the operations of the wind,
spreading my thoughts resolutely
to examine the world and satisfy my curiosity.

2. I rose up into the wind [that surrounds] the earth,
playing with the people, the trees, and the beautiful blooming flowers,
protecting the water lilies.

4. I became the teacher of the dancing leaves
on grasses, trees, and tender vines.

I was adorned with the fragrance of flowers
and the splendor of medicinal plants and fruits.

10. [The wind drives] the hard showers of rain and snow.

It brings infirmity to the old.

It makes the young drunken with joy.

For the gentle ones, it brings silence and innocence.

All these experiences bring the reader to a deep appreciation of landscape, the space (akasha) that allows consciousness to be revealed.

How might these passages on Puja and Bhuta Shuddhi help the plight of the Yamuna River? By recapturing a deep appreciation of nature's gifts, by remembering the utter reliance of the human upon the powers of nature, one can develop a feeling of kinship and connectivity with the natural world. This feeling of kinship is not unknown to the world of science. Every scientist makes observations, learning secrets about material reality that were previously unknown. Science tells us that the Yamuna River is hurting. By all measurements, chemical and aesthetic, Yamuna's flow south of Delhi carries only death, not blessings. Grieving for a connection once held and now lost, humans on her banks, humans reliant on her gifts, must find a way to heal the river, to restore her power as a life-giving mother. By regarding all forms of water to be a close friend, and by simply recognizing the power of water, we can reconnect with nature and do what is necessary to protect and restore her. By reaching back into memories of two decades ago when her waters were pure and strong, the 60 million people who rely on the Yamuna's gifts can and must recapture that connection and insist upon the necessary remedies.

Sources:

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Translations from the *Yogavasistha* by Christopher Key Chapple.