



**WATER IN KANNADA FOLK TRADITION**



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We recognize earth, sky, fire, air and water as five elements since long. We believe that man is created from these elements. “The element earth in him mingles with earth, fluids mingle with water, heat joins fire, air joins wind and his spirit joins the sky”.<sup>1</sup> Thus these elements are identified in him and named so. But these five elements have never been perceived together among the folks. They grasped all these elements separately. They have created Gods, myths, songs, beliefs and practices in connection with these elements.

Water is essential for every living organism. Without water it is not possible to imagine the human life and the basic business of the folks. Therefore, there is a sacred place for water, in folk tradition.

All the ancient civilizations were developed on the banks of some rivers. Egyptian culture came up on the banks of river Nile, the Babilonian culture between the region of Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Iraq and the Indus Valley Civilization of Harappa and

Mohanjo Daro on the bank of the river Sindhu. It is also well known from ancient history that the kings built their capitals near water-sources like tanks, streams, rivers etc., Because of the importance of water our ancestors had constructed tanks, dams and ponds and had protected them. They believed that doing such works was rather meritorious. Our ancestors considered water to be God itself. The ancestors used to perform many rites, rituals, observations and traditions connected with water.

Water and fire represent two opposite powers. Fire is upwardly proceeding whereas water goes downwardly deep into the earth. If the fire worship is the culture of Vedic heritage, the water worship belongs to general folk traditions of aboriginals like the Dravidians.

The folk have accepted water not only as their Deity but also thought that all Deities resided there.

### **Traditions of Life-Cycles :**

A male member undergoes sixteen Sanskaras (rituals) from his birth till death. Among them birth, marriage and death are very important. The same are called sixteen rituals (Shodasha Sanskaras). The water is being used and consumed on all such occasions. Water is the means to wash off the dirt of man, an agent to unite the human beings and one to give him emancipation at the end.

#### **1. Birth :**

When a baby is born its naming ceremony is observed. Five married women after bathing themselves would go to the water source points such as well, tank, pond or river with water pots. They bring water in pots after washing them. Then they place the water-filled pots under the cradle and perform worship. The maternal aunt pronounces the name followed by the words “kutu kutu kutu” twice in the ears of the child. “Thus the child’s name pronounced is officialised and approved. Here the water filled pitcher symbolizes the full life.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **2. Marriage :**

In many societies married women worship the pot filled with water after engagement. This is like taking an oath on water for the agreement of marriage. The official arrangements for marriage start from the worship of pounding stone. In addition to this, Goddess Laxmi’s worship will also commence. This worship is performed by

placing three equal morsels of rice on a black-coloured woollen blanket and keeping a water-filled pot on the middle of rice-morsels and keeping a coconut on the water pitcher. On the remaining two rice morsels coconuts will be placed. It is believed that these two coconuts represent Goddess Parvati and Lord Parameshwara, and the third coconut represents crores of Gods and Goddesses. That is why the water-filled pot worshipped by the worshipper becomes the particular god the devotee prays at that time.

The water and the “Kalasam” used are very much holy at the time of marriage. There is a tradition of water ablution “Dhare ereyuvadu” or “Bride offering” in marriage programme. In this the palms of the bride are placed on the palms of the groom and then a coconut is placed there and the bride’s father, mother and the elder brother and the maternal uncle pour the holy water on the coconut in the palms. On this occasion, they say “I give away in alms my daughter who is of Gouri’s stature to such a person’s son who bears the stature of Lord Shiva.” Afterwards all the assembled men and women there pour either water or milk and bless the couple. Thus the approval of the society is obtained.

By this, it is clear that the daughter-the bride –who was so far in the possession of her father is transferred to the possession of the bridegroom. Father leads the ablutioned bride giving away ceremony. But some time ago, maternal uncle’s attendance at the programme was very much important. One of the folk songs indicates the persons who are required to be present while –bride giving ceremony,

*“Dariya yarivaga yaryaru irabeka  
sodara mava iralebeku”*

and in such sayings the presence of maternal uncle is greatly emphasized. This implies the symbolical observation of “Matriarchal family system or tradition”.

While on the one hand, water becomes the divine manifestation of connecting two lives, on the other hand, the bride offering manifests the severing of relationship by pouring water, or becoming free from the responsibility. It is to be taken notice that the proverbs such as “Poured the water”, “having poured the water”, “washed off the hands”, “poured sesame and water” are very commonly used by the multitudes of folks when they cut off the relations of objects or individuals from them. On the contrary, pouring water in

the dying persons mouth shows extending lifespan of the person. Being so, water acts as connecting two lives on the one side and disconnecting or disarming two lives on the other side may be seen simultaneously in marriage rituals.

### **Feet Washing Tradition :**

After showering of rice by the relatives and others invitees gathered around at marriage function, there is a tradition of washing and worshipping the feet of the bride groom by any pair of bride's relatives such as father-mother, younger paternal uncle-aunt or elder paternal uncle -aunt. This 'mangala snana' or marriage bathing or "Surige parikrama" which was in actual practice some decades ago, is not in practice today. After marriage bathing the bridegroom generally stays away from the spot. After a while he returns to the place where the Gods' idols are kept. There is a tradition of getting purified by washing the feet again before entering the God's place. Under this pretext, the maternal uncle might appear on the scene to assist the bridegroom as he is in new dress and wearing a marriage head-ornament-'Basinga' or the bride offerers should be ready for any sacrifice. According to the proverbial saying, the one who offeres the bride virtually offers his back to bear anything. The one who offers the bride should be prepared to do any thing. Nowadays, this ceremony is generally follows the common showering of mangala or marriage akshata.

### **Five Water-Performance Festival Tradition :**

After the marriage is over, the newly-wedded couple apply oil to their heads and take bath and sit in a place for receiving "Arati" function of twirling and lighting oiled wicks in front of them. This activity is termed as "Neeru Maduvadu" or new couple water-festival. Two water festivals cannot be celebrated on the same day. The new-couple's festival may be observed only on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The commencement should be in bride's maternal home and three festivals should be performed in bridegrooms home. This might be an act of bringing about intimacy and nearness between the bride and the bridegroom and their families. The water in the "Kalas-Pitcher" in the "Arti lamp" plate is a divine symbol here.

### **3. Death :**

It is seen in some societies that the dead are buried instead of being burnt. The belief of the folks is that the dead one is given back to the mother's womb through the

process of burying in the earth. Before preparing the dead body for burying, washed in pure water and cleansed and decorated. Then it is carried to the burial yard. Where cremation of the dead-body is the accepted custom, the nearest relative of the dead man, the eldest son goes around the dead body which is kept on the pyre along with a pot which is filled with water before lighting the pyre. While, he goes around, some other person makes holes in that water-filled mud pot with a stone or iron sickle or scythe. Here the water-filled pot represents the life and the falling water represents the passage of time. After going round three times around the pyre of the dead body that pot is kept on the ground and it is broken. The process of breaking the pot symbolises the death.<sup>3</sup>

After burying or cremating the dead body all the relatives of the dead person return to the dead man's house and touch the water there and return to their own places. This too is a tradition. This may symbolize an oath taking by touching the water deity. But this also shows that they are all sharing the sorrow of the dead man's family and that they will be of help in life to the dead man's relatives. Water creates unity and therefore there are many examples of reuniting of the broken families when sharing such sorrow.

A pot filled with water is placed on the spot where the dead man had met his death. There is a belief among the folk that the dead man drinks that water after returning to this place in his next life. Shamba Joshi says that the third day milk pouring ritual is basically related to water itself. The departed man's soul is united with God's through the worship of water in a pot. Further, there is a tradition among folk to worship the water filled pot every year on the day of the dead man's departure.

## **II. Annual Ritual Ceremonies :**

Water has been worshipped by the folks as a symbol of divinity, woman hood, fertility and fructification. Having made the water as their supreme deity, the folks thought that other deities had inhabited in water. Therefore, it is quite evident that they believed that by worshipping the water-filled pot, they worshipped their desired God. The major Deity among all societies is the deity Ganga. Therefore, the worship of Grama Deities, Local Gods and Goddesses begin with the worship of Ganga. For this ceremony, the village deities are taken to a nearby water source. This act is named as "Going to the water spot or going to river". The worshipping of male Gods also begins by "Ganga bathing". It may be due to the influence of "Gramadevata" (village God) worship which

operates behind the act of carrying the Muslim 'Gods' to the water source in the celebration of 'Moharam Festival'.

Kalagam, Kumbha, earthen pot and Pitcher are filled with the water from nearby water source and worshipped by the folks. The Goddesses are Ganga, Gouri, Laxmi (Lakkavva, Lakumi) Yallamma, Mari, Chowdi, Durgi, Karevva, Udachamma, etc. The folk Goddesses are particularly worshipped with water only. In a sense, all Goddesses are water goddesses (Neer Devateyaru).

In the month of Shravana (July-August), the ladies worship Gowri in the form of water filled goblet. The agriculturists worship Lakshmi in the form of a mud pot filled with water on the eighth (Ashtami) day. Worshipping Goddess Laxmi with a water-filled pitcher is in vogue among the merchants. While watching the lady-ascetic in Yallamma worship who carries a water-pot on her head, it will be obvious that water is worshipped there also. In the same way the dancing with a water filled pot on head, which is a sweetened liquid, "Karaga" dancers show that it is the worship of water in Karaga celebration. Though, now-a-days, Karaga has become the performance of males, originally it was concerned with Goddesses. This is shown by the male participants in Karaga as they wear sari and "tali" (auspicious threads with lockets) and all signs of female are exhibited there. Though the ladies do not participate in this process the priority given to the female is more conspicuous there.

Generally all civilizations have been founded in the river banks or banks, sea shores. The common belief of the folk is that urinating in water is like urinating in mother's mouth, which clarifies that water is considered to be woman, that is, mother herself. That is why the tradition of worshipping Goddess Ganga by offering Saris and blouse pieces is commonly seen. The names of rivers like Ganga, Kaveri and Yamuna are all female attributives.

But the river Brahmaputra has the male name among our rivers. Some how the reason is not known. Perhaps, it might have been named after a male God because of its indiscipline and roaring and unruly nature in flowing. The Kodavas worship river Kaveri by praising her as Kaveramma, Devi Jai Kapadengala. Here amma, mother and devi are words connected with female only. Poet Bendre's lines in his poem, Gangavataran, "come down mother, come down from the matted hair of Hara and the foot of Hari and from thigh of Rishi"<sup>4</sup> refer the river as female only. Shamba Joshi while narrating the relation between female and water explains that the Sanskrit term Nari, that is woman, is

converted as neere 'woman' in native language.<sup>5</sup> We worship women and water identifying them as two fructifying powers. Therefore, it can be said that the worship of Goddess is the worship of water Goddess herself.

It is the belief of the folks that the river water is teertha (holy water) and the river banks are holy places (Punya Kshetras). Therefore there is a custom of worshipping the river on every New moon day. This, we see every year every where on Sankramana day (Sun's entering the makara rashi) people going to the rivers, tanks and ponds taking bath and keeping five lumps of mud of small stones on the river banks and applying turmeric powder and vermilion on them and worshipping in such ways and at the end offering "Naivedya" and leaving away the "Naivedya" in the rivers. In the same way, the "Kumbha Mela" also denotes that it is nothing but water worship. Besides, now a days, the ministers of state worship the Dams and the water therein when dams are full and start overflowing. This is to be noted.

The folks who pray to the Deity for the birth of a child and its well being would leave the child in a coracle to float on water of the pond for a while and worship water in the pond. On "Nool Poornima Day" the folks of the Coastal area celebrate the "Narikela Poornima" (Coconut Poornima). They worship the sea on Full Moon Day and they let the coconuts flower on the sea water. Similarly, after the storms of the monsoon fishermen and the sea tradesmen worship the sea, and then only they go their boats and ships on sea water. Then also coconuts are offered to the sea. It is said that the rich among them would offer silver coconuts. Totally, this is a sentimental feeling that the sea that has protected them from dangers should protect them further in their life for ever. Perhaps this may be a vestige of the old tradition of sacrifice or "bali-offering" (Here it is to be remembered that thinking the coconut as the man's head and breaking it is "bali" offering.) The folks identify the mysterious personality of man through an act of light throwing on water. Even today during engagement the folk of the bridegroom and the bride look at each observe other with a keen eye. Before the kith and kins arrive home, they keep water-filled pitchers near the front door. The future relatives should enter the house after having washed their feet with water. They watch very keenly how the relatives enter their home after washing their feet. If the relatives pour out all the water from the pitcher while washing, it will mean that they cannot share money and property, and that they are extravagant. In case the relatives use little water, it will mean that they are misers and hard-hearted men. The relatives using the water in a moderate and

economic way will be thought of as suitable to make relation. This means that such people are generous enough and frugal. They feel that the relation with their home will be perfect and beneficial.<sup>6</sup>

During the summer season, water supplying depots were kept along the road side to quench the thirst of travelers from one village to another. The water would be served to the travelers from the water-filled barrels which were carried by carts. This was done by young boys generally. They believe that such acts would get them merit (punya). Now-a-days we see the water supplying depots by the side of town and city bus-stands. There is a notion that by sprinkling colored water in the festival of Grama-Deity (village God) and the God Hanuman fair, they would cause rain fall. Here the women are sprinkled over with water by men. That means pouring water on women would cause rain fall.

#### **Forms of water celebration for the worship of Rain:**

Excessive rains and Scanty rains make the living God of human beings miserable. For this reason there are many rituals and traditional water celebrations among the folks. During ancient days, while the rivers and streams flooded with over flowing water in the western countries, there were customs of throwing the men and animals alive in such overflowing waters. There was a custom in olden days among Indian folks, that is, when the rivers and streams were in spate an unmarried maiden (virgin) would worship the flooding waters. By throwing the water of the river or stream with a wooden or bamboo winnow called “Mara”, and there was a belief that by doing so the flooding water would recede. Our people called it “Gange Aleyuvadu” (Measuring the Ganga).

There are some rituals among folks which would cause rainfall. The “Gurachiyadu” custom is one performance, adding importance to water celebrations. Keeping a bread baking steel pare or earthen pan obverse, putting a doll made of cow dung or mud, called “Gullavva” on it, they decorate it flowers. Then it is placed on the head of a naked boy and this naked boy would go from house to house with his companions, and the isllafe folk ward pare water on it. While the water was being poured and the “Guruchi” bearing boy was swirling, the water would fall on him in drips and drops. Their hope was to receive the rain fall in the same manner. It was their firm belief that by playing “Guruchi”, they word cure rain fall.



There was one more custom of rain-invoking. It was “vara biduva paddhati” weekday leaving custom. On a particular day in a week day, specially on Tuesday and/or Friday the farmers would invoke the rain God without doing any work on their lands. On such day, they would go to river in a praying group, playing musical instruments and chanting prayers, and worship the water there, and would bear the water and pour such water on all village deities and on the thresholds of all temple doors. This custom was celebrated on the fifth, ninth and eleventh days of the month. They have such belief that the rain would come by performing such rituals.

In some part of Bagalkot District, particularly Yadahalli, there is a special custom of evoking God for bringing rain, wherein the people shut the Sanctum Sanctorum (Garbhagudi) of the temple, and pour water there till the Gods image sinks and then the water is taken out after the rain fall and that God is worshipped. Only after receiving rains.

#### **The traditions of making the underground water flow :**

In the yester years, there were celebrations of worship of the built up tanks and dug wells. In case the water flow was not seen there, a custom of live sacrifice of some bird, animal and at times, human being was there to get the water sources therein. In folk literature one may notice the stories of Bhagirathi and Madagada Kenchavva, which reveal the prevailing beliefs and practices related to water.

#### **Water for Purification :**

For cleanliness and holiness water is quite essential. Any dirt and unholiness may be washed off by water. That may be through sprinkling water and bathing in traditional celebrations.

The Traditions of Purification by Water Sprinkling :

1. Among Halakki Vakkaligas of North Canara District, “Atti Torana” bathing is observed in marriage ceremony. That is a tradition of purifying the water filled pots before the marriage eve of the house. Five women take five small mud bowls and fill them with water and then sprinkle this water on the bride groom’s head with mango leaves. They perform this with a belief that the bridegroom is made pure by this celebration in the same way we may recall that the Brahmins putting cotton masses in their “homa” (sacred fire) and clean the area.<sup>7</sup>

2. There is a purifying tradition of the neighborhood on the occasions of Veerashaiva marriages and consecration of God Veerabhadra. In this celebration, holy water is poured before erecting the idol and also the water is sprinkled around.
3. There is a custom of getting oneself sprinkled with water standing before the front door of the house after returning from burial ground and later becoming purified and then entering into the house. In some societies on returning from burial ground, people enter their homes only after bathing.
4. After coming from barber's shop while entering the house the tradition of getting one self sprinkled with water on him and becoming purified so and later only the person can enter into the house. There is a belief among the folks that if some one enters the house after his hair cut from the barber without taking bath the cockroaches and other insects and worms start growing in the house.
5. There is more than one custom of purification of the house by sprinkling the worshipped water in the centre area of the house.
6. Before the sheep is sacrificed to Deity there is a custom of sprinkling water on sheep's head and thus it is believed that it is purified.
7. Once upon a time there was a custom of being purified by sprinkling of water on ones body when he had touched low-caste men.

#### **The traditions of Cleansing (Purifying) by bathing (bathing tradition)**

1. Getting purified by bathing after attending a funeral.
2. Some time ago there was a tradition of getting purified by sinking into the water and coming back to his place if some one did a bad act or sinful act.
3. There was a tradition of getting purified by bathing before being prepared for the worship of God.

#### **Water for Medicine :**

All societies in the world believe that the water has the power to remove the diseases and protect from demonic powers. There is a belief that many diseases can be cured by drinking one litre pure water on empty-stomach every morning after rising from the bed. Chinese call the same as "Water Therapy".

In folk belief mantra chanted water given by the spell chanter (Mantric) can expel the demonic powers from the diseased and possibly make him healthy. Therefore they observe the spelled water sprinkling on the sufferer. The folks believe that the demonic

powers such as ghosts and devils fear the water. They think that such powers are afraid of coming (lingering) nearer to the person who has got water with him. At many occasions they thought that the devils and the ghosts are accosted from a person possessed by them by drowning the person three times in the river water. This is done with strong belief.

Our people have been worshipping the water keeping it in temples and adding importance to it from ancient times. Therefore they had constructed tanks, ponds and pits near temples and kept them clean. We being the men of mechanical and technical age have erected houses and made grounds on these holy places by ruining them.

**Foot Notes :**

1. Purushottama Bilimale, Koodu Kattu, P. 60
  2. K. Y. Narayana Swamy, Neeru : A Cultural Study.
  3. Ibid.
  4. Vaman Bendre (Editing) Entire Way (manner) of Ambikatanaya Datta, Vol-4, P. 43.
  5. Shamba Joshi, Halumata Darshan, P. 207.
  6. K. Y. Narayan Swamy, Neeru A Cultural Study.
  7. N. R. Nayak, Culture of Halakki Vakkaligas, P. 178.
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