

# Significance of Water in the Sri Lankan Context: A Sociological Perspective

## Introduction

All over the world, almost all the great civilisations started with river valleys. Those societies and their magnificent cultures produced diverse identities which are still in existence with identifiable characteristics. Water is a basic human and animal need, and is the life blood of all living organisms. This short article aims to discuss the sociological values of water, and how it was significant to the development of a unique water culture in Sri Lanka.

## Ancient River Valley Civilisations

Before we discuss Sri Lankan water culture, we have to be aware of the nature of global water-based civilisations and their contributions to the social and cultural development in the global context. For the first time in our history, the Neolithic period began with agriculture. Agriculture-based villages originated in about 9000 B.C. (Saure, 1957). The area, today known as Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, encompassed the Fertile Crescent in the Euphrates and Tigris river basins. Early forms of agriculture included the irrigation practices of Mesopotamia, Egypt and American South West other parts of the world (Storal, 1979). However in the Fertile Crescent, people had started agriculture and animal husbandry, sowing wheat seeds in hilly terraced area by 7000 B.C., and the wheat culture was started. However, water culture-based agricultural cities appeared in those two locations, originally. They are Mesopotamia and Meso America (Sjoberg, 1960).

In the second stage, additional hydraulic societies independently developed in the valley of Nile or the Indus and the Huang - Ho. The available evidence provides

information on the evolutionary process of water cultures in the global context as follows (Sjoberg, 1960):

- i. The first stage was in Mesopotamian river basins of Euphrates and Tigris.
- ii. The second stage near the Nile river area of Egypt.
- iii. The third stage in the Indus valley, Harappa in Panjab and Mohenjodaro in valley of the Indus.
- iv. Parallel to the third stage or before, the Sri Lankan hydraulic civilisation had started.

In the above-mentioned river valleys, civilisations flourished with a sound ecological basis, comprising climate, soil and water resources, and these three factors were favourable for the development of plants and animals. The qualities of life of the people under those civilisations were mainly dependent on availability of water resources. Especially, irrigation facilities were developed through human activities, paving way for good living conditions, and simple technological development enhanced stability of those civilisations.

## Water and New Settlement in Ancient Sri Lanka

At least by the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Sri Lankan civilisation had started with the North Indian migration. Anuradhapura citadel archaeological excavations disclose, before the Indian migration, there had been an agricultural society with simple technologies, but which rapidly underwent changes with the North Indian migration. The migrants started new settlements, mainly in Malwathuoya river basin, Anuradhapura, Upatissagama,

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Uruwelagama, Udenigama and later immigrants who settled in on the mouth of Walave river, Rohanagama and Mahagama (De Silva, 2005).

## Water and Sri Lankan Environmental Value System

Sri Lanka, as an agricultural society, was inspired by Buddhism and an environmental value system that evolved with the nature-based ideology. This ideology symbolises that the monsoon rain-associated air possesses divine power. It considers that the rain god can initiate prosperity in the country. Water is regarded as very pure and sacred by its own nature, and once it is polluted, it is the end of the nation.

The stanza below indicates that water is a central element in societal values.

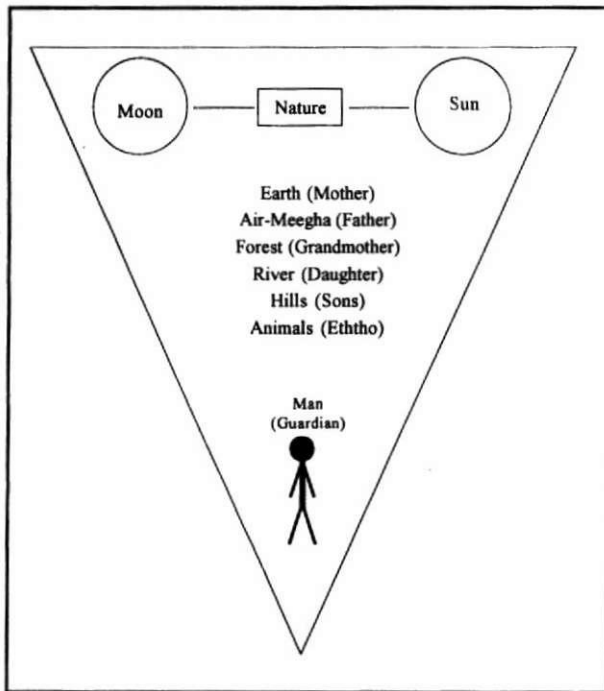
*Devo Vassathuc Kalena  
Sassa Sampaththi Hethucha  
Pitho Bhavatu Lokocha  
Raja Bhavatu Dhammiko*

The meaning of this stanza is:

May there be rain in due season  
May the crops be bountiful  
May the king be righteous  
And may the country become prosperous  
(Dissanayake, 1992).

This stanza says; the god can make rains, then prosperity will be there, king will rule the country with justice (*Dhamma*). According to that, all values of the society are centred on water.

The water-based environmental value system in Sri Lanka considers care for water as a part of the civilised human



**Figure 1 : Indigenous environmental value system** the genuine protector of the water fountains in

behaviours. The king of the Island would rule the country with justice and as a father of the citizens, and then, rain

the earth. To enter the forest, people are expected to get permission from their grandmother (Herath, 2004). In

**Table 1 : Symbols for representation of the nature**

Unit	Symbol	Meaning
Earth	Mother ( <i>Mahikanthawa</i> )	Love, Kindness, Mercy and every bodies existence
Air ( <i>Meegha - Wessawalahaka deviya</i> )	Father	Shelter, breath, water giver, rain maker
Forest	Grandmother	Protection
Rivers	Daughters	Fertility / Procreation
Hills	Sons	Energy / Strength
Animals	Brothers / Friends	They are part of the system
Man		Guardian

Source : Herath (2004).

will be provided by the god; these will make way for prosperity.

The total environmental value system of the country focused on water. Figure 1 shows that the indigenous environmental value system in the country was based on water.

Figure 1 shows that the culture made rules and regulations to control the Sri Lankan agricultural society that has given symbolic meaning to the entire nation. Table 1 provides some symbolic meanings of the nature.

Anuradhapura, Matale, Kegalle and Nuwara, Eliya rural people say that all water fountains are belonged to the *Kiriamma* (Grandmother).

If any body needed to drink water, that person has to get permission from the grand mother. Then he/she worships to the grand mother who provided drinking water.

In addition, there are a number of water use patterns operating in those areas. The following are some examples:

- i. Water fountain - *Diya Ulpatha*
- ii. Flowing water from the fountain - *Diya Kadiththa*
- iii. Flowing water through muddy water - *Diya Madiththa*
- iv. Flowing water in a small stream - *Ela* (Tributary)

According to the norms governing in those areas, up to the *Oya* level, whatever the water stream should not be used for cultivation, or should not be diverted for another purpose by force, because at that level, water stream behaviour is very similar to a girl before her puberty. She is still young (up to *Ela* level) and when the water reaches a stream (*Oya* level), it will be regarded as a main tributary to the river, and then farmers can divert that water for whatever purpose; she is mature after her puberty.

Then, all rivers are considered as daughters, because they have the reproduction capacity. They can marry with dams, anicuts, small village tanks, big reservoirs, storage tanks and finally they can

produce water for irrigation purpose. The service of those daughters can be utilised by creatures in the world who are called *eththo*, e.g., Birds are *Kurulu eththo*, Elephants are *Botakandaya eththo*. Finally, man is also a part of the nature; he can grant everything under sun and moon.

The above description shows how Sri Lankans respected water through an indigenous central value system that operates with social needs (Herath, 2004).

## Social Functions of Water

Water has diverse functions in the Sri Lankan society, and its two types of ceremonies, namely, life cycle ceremonies and social reformations ceremonies, are associated with water. The life cycle ceremonies are those performed at different points in the life cycle, normally, at birth, puberty, marriage and death.

Some functions of water in the life cycle ceremonies include, life giving, purification, fertility improvement, medium of transfer and destroying evils, acknowledgement, etc. There are various rituals that are performed with water in different stages of life cycle, symbolising some beliefs that exist in the society. Value of water in social transformation ceremonies which are performed as common functions include, making transactions at New Year ceremonies, irrigation rituals, water cutting ceremonies in Kandy *Perahera*, etc.

Some of these functions of water in the Sri Lankan society are briefly explained in the following sections:

### Functions of water in life cycle ceremonies

*Life-giving Function* : Just after birth of a child, a drop of water mixed with milk and gold is put on the lips by midwife and women who are dealing with childbirth activities. By doing this, the society considers that water gives life to the new-born baby, i.e., water serves as a "life giver to a creature".

After birth, human beings expect to have a long life with prosperity, and the society expects to protect the infant. Water serves to protect the life of the people, and giving water to any creature is a merit-earning activity. In most of the dry zone areas, road-side people keep water pots known as *Pinthaliya* which has water for quench thirst for any person pass by. It is believed that any person who refused to offer water to a thirsty person to

quench his/her thirst, in his next birth, he will be born as a *Kendeththa* long-beaked bird, which cannot drink water properly (Dissanayake, 1992). *Purification Functions* : Purification functions of water are the most significant in the life cycle ceremonies. For example, just after a childbirth midwife and women who are gathered at the scene purify the baby by washing with water. This gives lifetime purification norm as a social animal. After that, everybody should get purified themselves daily during his life time. In very special occasions, the person before enters sacred places requires purification with sacred water; otherwise, it is considered as a mark of disrespect.

The second stage, i.e., puberty, is considered as making pollution (*Killa*), and certain rites (*Diyawakkarana Mangallaya*) are performed to overcome this pollution. When a young girl attained puberty, society considers that the girl should get purified with sacred water consisting of different types of leaves and flowers. At the function of puberty, she must carry a pot full of water and drop and break the pot at the back door of the house. When she enters the ceremonial premises, she has to look her face through water *Koraha*. At the death ceremony again, water plays a major role. At the death bed of a person who is thirsty requires a bit of water to drink. Traditionally, if the son of the dying person is available, he has to drop five drops of water to quench the thirst of the dying person (Dissanayake, 1992).

In the life cycle ceremonies, a person has to pass different stages in his life. This passing process cannot be reversed. Therefore, the changing process is known as Rites of passage. To overcome this process, water is considered as a purifying agent. During marriage, sacred water performs a significant role. The bride as well as bridegroom who leaves the home to participate the wedding on an auspicious time, she or he has to come

in front of a person who is carrying a glass of water with a white flower in it. The Sri Lankan society considers water as very sacred social artefact. In wedding ceremonies, when bride and groom are on the "ceremonial pedestal" (*Magul Poruwa*) and at the bonding ceremony, they exchange water among each other as a lifetime bondage.

*Fertility Function* : Another social function of water is its value as a symbol of fertility. In the Sinhalese society, water is considered as a symbol of fertility and prosperity. In the marriage ceremonies, milk and water is consumed together by the newly-wedded couple. A female who brings a glass full of water to a wedded couple who comes out of the house at the auspicious time. At the homecoming ceremony, the couple before enters the bridegroom's house, bridegroom's mother brings a pot of water and hand over to the new bride. Two things are expected from this activity. First fertility and procreation, secondly, prosperity that carries to the house by the new bride. She is considered as a treasure to the house that brings prosperity.

*A Medium of Transfer* : Fourthly, water functions as a medium of transfer. In the traditional society, the most sacred wealth of the people was transferred through water. Liquidity of water has uncountable value. Normally, in any transaction, there will be a mediator either cash or any other symbol. But in the traditional society, all the merit-earning transactions were symbolised through water. Even in marriage ceremonies, bride gives hand over their daughter to bride receivers, bride's left hand and last finger put in bridegroom's right hand and last finger tied up and pouring water indicates the bride is handed over to the bridegroom including bride receivers. Sometimes, tuskers, elephants, land, paddy field grants, etc. are handed over through offering water to symbolise the event.

Always recipients hand kept on givers hand that symbolises the merit-earning transaction in the religious domain.

In the death ceremony (*Pansakula pinkama*), living people give merit to the dead person by pouring water in to a cup till it overflows. All these water-associated activities symbolise the role of water as a medium of transfer.

**Acknowledgement Function :** Another social function of water is considering it as a symbol of acknowledgment. In any special social function in the family life, offering water is considered as invitation to the feast. Any wedding or other ceremonies, head of the family or his representative invite guests, including his own close relations for taking part in feasts, by offering a glass full of water. This indicates water is the most prestigious invitation system and acknowledgment system in Sri Lankan society.

**Medium of Destroying Evils :** Most of the societies in the world, consider water as a medium of destroying evils in different religious contexts. In Sri Lanka, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, as well as Islamic religions consider chanted water has power to destroy evils. Among Buddhists, they believed that chanted (*Pirith*) water has the power to expel or destroy evil spirits. In all religious occasions, they distribute chanted water to overcome the ill effects of evils.

### **Functions of water in social reformation ceremonies**

**In Annual New Year Ceremonies :** The most important social reformation ceremony in Sri Lanka is the annual event called the New Year ceremony. According to annual New Year ceremony, the old year is considered as a passed year that is related to the sun's transition from Pisces (Meena) to Aries (Mesha): all normal transactions are concluded stopping human interrelationships. That means all human relationships stop immediately

(separation). They are stopped assuming transit from Pisces to Aries the sun's rashi relationship. The second step of transition period has no auspicious times (no *neketh*), and is considered as *Sankranthi* period. In the third stage, society reforms with new transactions for the forthcoming New Year. This is reintegration of the whole society with new transactions. All new transition commence with water. Society is awaking with water. This social reformation festival is led by women who deal with earth mother (*Polowamahee kanthawa*). Earth mother gives water to the society. Family-level mothers have the courage and power to integrate with whole society through water transactions, because water gives life to the society.

All individual-level mothers, before start annual transactions for the forthcoming new year, first visit the well and hand over a package which consists of salt, rice, charcoal, a copper coin, a little bit of chillies, wrapped in a pieces of cloth. Then, the mother gets pot of water for the survival of family. Then she starts transactions with her husband and other sons and daughters. In the country-level, whole society is awaking, and they start transactions for another year. After few hours or few days, societal people transactions extend to the plant world which is dependent on the solar system. Human world is always dependent on the plant world, then every year they anoint chanted water and oil, keeping leaves of a selected plant for the head and leaves from another plant for the foot. This ceremony is oil anointing festival or in Sinhala, *Hisathelgame Mangallaya*. This shows that the whole society's solidarity, unity and integrity throughout the New Year are based on water associated transactions.

**Irrigation Rituals :** Most of the irrigation rituals were designed to create collective consciousness and human spirit among peasants, based on irrigation water. In North-Central

province, farmers perform some irrigation rituals of which, manifest functions are very common and understandable, although latent functions are providing water-associated collective mind in that particular community.

*Kiriethireema* is an annual ritual based on irrigation, and farmers collectively expect water from the sacred *Bo* tree and the *Kaludevatha Bandara* god. There are two types of *Muttimangallaya* ceremonies (Pot ceremony) performed annually to get the support of god *Ayyanayake* and *Kadawara* guardian gods of the *Nuwarakalwiya*. After seven years, they organise *Mahadana*, again this ritual is to regenerate collective spirit of the community. All these rituals are based on irrigation water, and finally those rituals enhance common unity and community spirit among peasants in the region.

**Rain Making :** According to the Sri Lankan central value system, there are a number of rain makers that contribute to making rains. In general, people say monsoon rains received are carried by monsoon winds. The value system introduces the first rain maker is *Vessavalahaka Deviyo*, who brings rains to the country. Mother earth's procreation is dependent on the *Vessavalahaka* god's rains which help to begin fertility (Hearth, 2004). In dry seasons, people pray for the god, asking for rains to protect the plants, animals and human beings. In some areas, people chant "*Vehi Piritha*", after listening to his particular *pirith*, the gods are assumed to become happy, and then somatically give rains.

People, before go to bed, used to say the stanza, *Devo Vassath Kalena*.... mentioned under Water and Sri Lankan Environmental Value System, asking rains from the god. This stanza says, another rain maker is the king of Sri Lanka. From the ancient time, kings performed rituals for citizens to get

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rains and then country was led to the prosperity.

It is considered that the sacred tooth relic has a power to produce rains, therefore, authorities annually perform *Sri Dalada Perehera* with four *Devala pereheras*. At the end of the *perehera*, the chief custodian of the *Daladamaligawa* \**Diyawadana Nilame* performs water cutting ritual with the assistance of four *Devala Basnayake Nilames*. Further, Anuradhapura sacred *Bo-tree* has the power to produce rains that is a traditional belief system in the country. To gain water, people perform different types of rituals for the sacred *Bo-tree*.

There are some regional-level rituals activities also performed to get water in different regions.

### Conclusion

Sri Lanka is an agricultural society, and its mode of production is heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture, based on monsoon rains. According to Sri Lankan culture, water is considered as sacred. Because as a life blood, people do not urinate onto water or even do not spit onto water.

Therefore, water has a very special language structure which is a cultural form that has a unique hierarchy.

Delayed monsoon rains or low monsoon rains directly affect the socio-

economic life of the citizens. Therefore, people have given sacred and divine power to water. And people interpret, define and evaluate water in terms of sociological value in their Central Value System. Then water becomes an essential part of human survival and well being.

However, at present traditional water associated value system is facing challenges mainly due to the market-oriented capitalist value system that attributes a monetary value to water, thus making it a marketable commodity, similar to any item considered only for consumption.

Also all over the island, ruthless deforestation and construction of unplanned tube wells may affect underground water resources and water springs, and streams are adversely affected by removal of natural vegetation to produce potato and vegetables that generate some income for a few people while threatening the ecological and environmental conditions essential for year around water availability for humans, animals and plants.

Therefore, rules and regulations geared to protect water resources in a sustainable manner are urgently needed as the social value systems are losing the prominence and strength in the context of modern lifestyle.

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