INTRODUCTION

- There was neither non-existence nor existence then.
- There was neither the realm of
- Space nor sky which is beyond
- What stirred?
- Where?
- In whose protection?
- Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
- Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning,
- With no distinguishing sign, all this was water.
- The life force that was covered with water emptiness.
- The One arose through the power of heat

X.129

These lines of Nasadiya Sukta (na asat, not the non existent) in the 129th hymn of the 10th mandala of the Rig Veda speak of the speculations by the seers of Rig Vedic times about the Creation of the Universe. Max Muller examined the Hindu perceptions of Creation from the Rig Veda, in which two ideas of an uncreated and self-developing world, and of a Creator or Maker run side-by-side. Before the Creation of the Universe, there was said to be nothing but the bottomless, uninterrupted, limitless water. The world is therefore spoken of as having been originally water without light (Salilam apraketam ; Rig Veda X.29.3) These waters are coeval with the Universe (X.30.10) The water contained in an egg from which every thing else emanated (Rig Veda.X.82.5). No one knows how and from where this Creation came. Even the gods came after it. He who is called the seer in high heavens, he may know, or even he may not. This concept of Rig Veda about the Creation of life is surprisingly compatible with the current understanding of the origin of life on earth. The fossil evidence found in western Australia, eastern South Africa and elsewhere indicate that single celled bacteria and stromatolite colonies
flourished in primitive oceans some 3.5 billion years ago. Just like Rig Vedic seers, modern science too has not solved the puzzle about how water came to possess the first egg from which life sprang. However, water is an essential component of inorganic mixtures from which chemists, in their quest to understand the origin of life, attempt to produce complex organic molecules.  

Thus water was an extraordinary and omnipresent element in Rig Veda. It was the upholder of all lives and the saviour of everything living or dead on earth. Not only Rig Veda but the societies existing even prior to it in the ancient world practiced spiritual veneration for water. King Menes of Egypt (3rd B.C) diverted the river Nile with a 15 meter dam to establish Memphis, his capital city. Around that time the Egyptians had innovated 'Nilometers' to measure discharge of the Nile to divert excess water for agriculture. In around 1760 B.C. Hammurabi set in place the earliest known human laws for regulation, distribution and maintenance of irrigation structures. Another 60 years later a well dug in Egypt had reached to a depth of 100 to tap the water table and water tunnels were being used in Palestine and Syria to divert water from natural springs to towns.  

Our Rig Vedic ancestors were no more different from their predecessors in respecting all the natural elements. Water was therefore considered Divine.

The waters in Rig Veda were both terrestrial and celestial. The release of waters and the breaking forth of the dawn or emergence of light are described as simultaneous event (I.164.51). In fact the movement of the waters and the spreading of the rays of light came from the same source and followed the same path of 'rita' simultaneously. These waters, when set free for movement, were described as mooved upwards by Indra after the killing of Vritra (II.15.6; I.80.5; I.32.12 etc). The luminaries also moved along with them. Their downward movement is described in VIII.69.11 where the seven rivers flow into the jaws of Varuna as into a surging abyss or ocean.  

Rig Veda has several gods attributed to water. Apas, who is addressed in four Suktas, is the God of waters. There are other gods too who, apart from having their own independent portfolios, are also in some direct or indirect way related to some or the other form of water. They are Indra, Varun, Parjanya etc.

Apah or Apas or the God of water, come from the Vedic Sanskrit term Ap (ap) for "Water." It turns into Ab - the Persian word for water. In Rig Veda, god Apas is somewhere described as mother, some where as a woman and somewhere as the Master Lord. He blesses those who follow the gods and conduct 'yagyas'. Indra, the bearer of 'Vajra', had created a path for Water and he never diverts from that path.

Samudra-jyestha Salilasya Madhyapunana Yantyanivishmanah |
Indrah ya vajri vrishabho raraad TaApoa devirih mamvantu ||

VII.49.1
He, whose destination is the ocean, who purifies the world, is always flowing, such water lives in the middle of the Universe. Indra, who possesses ‘Vajra’ and rains the desires, broke opened a path for these divine waters. May these waters help me and be received by me.

This water dwells where gods dwell. Mitravarun and Surya are his companions. He keeps an eye on the good and evil deeds of men.

As already mentioned, water has two forms- celestial and terrestrial. Both have the same destination, and that is the mighty ocean. Water is the mother of Agni and is therefore the producer of fire. The world moves with the pure and simple movement of the water. It washes away the impurities and also cleans the inconsistencies of human behaviour.5

Ya Apaodivya Ut Va Sravanti Khanitrima ut va yah swayamjah |
Samudrartha Yah Shuchayah pavakasta Apao Devirih Mamvantu ||
VII.49.2

The water which is created in the universe, the water which flows in the form of river etc, the water which comes from the digging of the wells, canals etc., the water which is self created in the form of waterfalls etc, who enters into the ocean and who is pure and full of light, who is full of divine characteristics, help me in this world and be received by me.

Water is a great medicine. It does away with the diseases and is the giver of health, strength, long-life, wealth and immortality. The world prays for its favours. It is invited to receive the ‘Som’ libation.

Yasam Raja Varuno Yati Madhyai Satyanrite Avapashyanje yajnanam|
Madhushchutah Shuchaye yah pavakah ta Apao devirih mamvantu||
VII.49.3

The waters which are sent to the middle of the universe by king Varuna after checking the true and untrue (deeds) of human beings, the water who distills sweetness, full of light and is the great purifier, who is full of divine values, such water help me in this world and be received by me.

The waters are often associated with honey: their milk mixed with honey is produced in the sky, gladdens the gods, and become the drink of Indra, giving him heroic strength. Here, the celestial waters seem to be identified with the heavenly Soma. Elsewhere, the waters are used in preparing the terrestrial ‘Som’. Thus they appear, bearing Ghee and honey, in accord with the priests that bring well-pressed ‘Som’ for Indra. ‘Som’ delights in them as a young man in lovely maidens. He approaches them as a lover; before him- the youth, they- the maidens, bow down.
VII.49.4

The water in which the king of waters Varuna dwells, the water in which ‘Som’ lives, in whom all gods drink exhilarating strength, the waters in which the leader of all—Agni enters, who are full of divine values, help me in the world.

Thus, Apah is the god who is exclusively the god of waters. But there are other gods also in Rig Veda who, beside having other duties, are in some or the other way related to one of this ‘Panchbhuta’ i.e. water.

Indra, who is the greatest of all gods in Rig Veda and to whose adulation 1028 Suktas are devoted, is called the ‘liberator of waters’. There are several stories attached to Indra, but the one related to water is that of ‘Vritra’. Accompanied by the Maruts and exhilarated by ‘Som’, he attacks ‘Vritra’, who is often called ‘Ahi’ (serpent) and is the stopper of rains. He smashes ‘Vritra’ who encompasses the water, and so deserves the exclusive epithet “apsu-jit” or “conquerer of the waters”. In this struggle, which is constantly renewed, he also pierces the mountains and releases the pent-up waters, like the imprisoned cows. The demons, whom Indra throws down, dwell on the ‘Parvata’ or ‘giri’ (mountain or cloud) and an “adri” (rock) is said to encompass the waters. The clouds containing the waters are figured as fortresses (“pura”) of the aerial demons described either as autumnal or as made of iron or stone and as 90, 99 or 100 in number. He is therefore, called the ‘fort-destroyer’ (‘purbhid’) but his exclusive and chief epithet is ‘Vritra-slayer’ (‘Vritra-han’).

Another god who is closely associated with water is Varuna. He is the upholder of moral and physical order symbolized in ‘rita’. He is a king and a universal monarch who regulates the natural and unnatural elements of the world. His special connection with waters is unmistakable. He is the overall lord of all waters on Earth (oceans, rivers, tanks, pools etc.) and water below the earth. He regulates this water and causes rains to pour. Royal Mitra and Varuna send down the
rains (V.62.3). Again, Varuna has set free the water of the downward opening cloud for the (benefit of the) heaven, the earth and the firmament; thence he is the monarch of all the worlds, watering the soils, as the rain bedews the barley (V.85.3; V.85.4). Varuna is prayed to ‘stretch forth your arms for the prolongation of our existence, bedew with water the pastures of our cattle (VII.63.5; VII.84.2)

Varuna causes the rivers to flow. If the ocean does not overflow, although the rivers constantly pour into it, it is due to the ‘maya’ of Varuna.

The difference between Indra and Varuna lies in the fact that where Indra is the liberator of waters, Varuna is its regulator. Both the gods are executing their assigned duties when they deal with waters. Indra is the lord of wars and therefore fights against Vritra to liberate the water and Varuna is the regulator of ‘rita’ and in this capacity he regulates the channels, forms and mediums of water.

Water, in the form of rain sustains life on earth. Parjanya or clouds causing water to downpour is also, therefore deified in Rig Veda. Parjanya means the clouds causing the downpour of rains. This cloud is called a large pot full of water which is known as ‘driti’.

"Sing forth and laud Parjanya, son of heaven, who sends the gift of rain. May he provide our pasturage. Parjanya is the god who forms in kine, in mares, in plants of earth and womankind, the germ of life. Offer and pour into his mouth oblations rich in savoury juice: May he for ever give us food"

-VII.100.2

Rishi Atri prays Parjanya in the following words:

Pra vata vanti patyanti vidyat udoshadhir jihate pinvate swah |
Ira vishwasmai Bhuvnai Jayate Yatparjanyah Prithivi Retsavati ||

V.83.4

When Parjanya protects the earth with his waters i.e. irrigates the earth, then winds (for rains) are blown, lightening strikes, vegetation sprouts and grows, sky downpours the drops of water and the earth becomes capable for the welfare of the whole world.

Thus, Parjanya or the cloud is the bestower on waters of earth which, in turn, is responsible for all the medicines, vegetations and other life–supporting objects on earth.

Rishi Atri further says:

Mahant Koshamudacha Nishinch syandtam Kulya Vishitah Purastat |
Ghriten dyavaprithivi Vyundhi suprapanam Bhavatr agnghnyabhyah ||

V.83.8
O Parjanya! lift up the mighty vessel, pour down water and let the liberated streams rush forward. Saturate both the earth and heaven with fatness and for the cows let there be drink abundant.

Once the rains have poured abundantly, it is to lord Parjanya only that Rishi Atri prays to stop. He says:

Avarshirvarshamudu shu gribhayakardhan vanyatvaitva u |
Ajijana oshdirbhjanaya kam ut prajabhyovido manisham ||

V.83.10

O Parjanya! You have poured down the rain flood. Now withhold it. You have filled the waterless areas, covered the deserts with water and made it fit to travel. You have made the herbs grow for our enjoyment and have won the praises from all living beings.

Rishi Bharadwaj says, "Parjanya and Vaata, showerer of rains (VI. 49.6) and "May Rudra.... sending rain...... and may Parjanya and Vaata grant us abundant food (VI.50.12). Thus, Rishi Bharadwaj thinks that Parjanya and Vaata are two distinct deities and together, they both cause rain. Science agrees with this view. Water-vapour is vaata Devta. This Vaata is warm and so gets lighter. It lifts towards the sky. As it ascends, its gets cooler. At one particular point, it gets condensed and water-vapours turn into tiny dews i.e. Vaata devtaa. In this condensed shape the water vapour i.e. Vaata devata becomes clouds i.e. Parjanya.

Rishi Vatsa Kaandava establishes a relationship between Indra and Parjanya. He observes, " Indra who is great in might like Parjanya the distributor of rain.... (VII.6.1). Again, "When his (Indra's) wrath thundered, dividing Vritra joint by joint, then he drove the waters to the ocean" (VII.6.13) "You, Indra, have cast into the rushing streams him who obstructs your copious waters." (VII.6.16).

Thus, a relationship of Parjanya (rain cloud) with Indra has been established and Rishi Vatsa Kaandava says that Indra's active help causes rain.

Rishi Aatreya establishes a relationship of Marudagan, the Lord of winds, with Parjanya. He says "Leaders (of the rain), munificent givers, they cause that which is the treasury (of water) to fall from the sky for (the benefit of) the donor (of the offering); they let loose the rain cloud and the shedders of rain (spread) everywhere with abundant water” (V.53.6) Rishi Prajapatiravaachya establishes a relationship between Parjanya, Indra and Marudagan. He says:

"When the showerer roars in other (regions) he sends down the rain upon a different herd, for he is the victor, the auspicious, the sovereign; great and unequalled is the might of gods (III.55.17).

"Our King, the nourisher of all, abides (in the firmament) nearest to this earth like a benevolent friend; the valiant (Maruts) precede him (when abroad), and dwell on his mansion; great and unequalled in might of gods (III.55.21).
"The plants, Indra, come to perfection by you, from you the waters (flow), earth bears her treasures for you; may we, your friends be sharers of these blessings; great and unequalled is the might of Gods" (III.55.22).

Rishi Deerghatmaa Auchathaya says, “The uniform water passes upwards and downwards in the course of days; cloud give joy to the earth, fires rejoice the heaven.” (I.164.51)

Rishi Kaandavo Ghaura prays: “Come to us, Maruts with undivided protected assistance, as the lightening (bring) the rain.” (I.39.9)

Rishi Atri says, “Send down for us Maruts, the rain from heaven; drops of the rainy charge descend; come down Parjanya, sprinkling water by this thundering (cloud), you who are the sender of rain, our protector. (V.83.6).

Rishi Vasukarna Vaasukra defined this relationship in these words, “We offer praise to the company of Maruts.... who, encouraged by Indra, and instructed by Varuna, have acquired a portion of the light of the sun, the wise worshippers beget the sacrifice”. (X.66.2). “May... Vaata and Parjanya, (the utterers) of the mighty thunder, the waters, the plants, amplify our praise... ” (X.66.10)

These Rishis in their own way have tried to establish a relationship between Indra, Parjanya and Marudagan. They believe that rainfall is possible only when the three come together. And it is right. Science has proved this fact correct that rainfall is made possible only with the combination of these three elements only.

Thus, waters occupy a pivotal role in Rig Veda. The veneration went up to the extent of deifying this element. The society, like the other contemporary ones the world over was fully aware of its importance in human as well as non-human aspects of life and thus attached great value to it. Its attributes its role in the functioning of the earth, and its importance in society excited adulation in all branches of human life.

Water was therefore, made the very basis of the creation of the world and because no life can sustain without it, water constituted major point of thrust it Rig Veda. All the major gods including Indra-the greatest god of Rig Veda are in some or the other way linked to water. If one is the liberator of water (Indra) the other one is its regulator (Varuna). Parjanya, Maruts and Marudagan are worshipped for their own functions related to water. Mitravarun and Surya are the companions of Apas-the deity of water. He is also the producer of Agni. ‘Som’ the pious drink of Rig Veda also has its source in water. Thus, water is at the beginning, centre and end of this universe and the human life within it. It is appropriate to end with an insight of the ancient seers about the nature of water:

Yaapo divyaa utavaa sravanti Khanitrimaa utavaa Yaa Swayam Jaa |
Samudraartha Yaa Soochayapaavakaasta aapo devi iha Maamvantu ||

VII.49.2
"The waters which are from heaven, and which flow after being dug, and even those that spring by themselves, the bright pure waters which lead to the sea, may those divine waters protect me here."

REFERENCES


6. Ibid.

7. V.M. Apte: op.cit.; pp.373-374.

8. ibid.

9. Dr. H.D. Shastri and Dr. Krishna Kumar: op cit., p. 12.

10. S.S. Gupta: “A study of the Deities of Rig Veda” In http://books.google.co.in