



Article

The Pollution of Sacred Water

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Spirituality, ecology, and ethics in India's time of thirst

When the water isn't fit for bathing a people's gods—and not even safe for the people to drink—then what is next? Tulasi Srinivas explores the connections between spiritual, ecological, and humanitarian tragedy in her article for *The Revealer*, "[Bathing the Gods in Bottled Water: An Account of Climate Change and Faith](#)."

The sacred Vrishabavathi River is a tributary of the Arkavathi River which is sourced in the ancient Nandi Hills. Srinivas writes that, in addition to its ecological importance, water has deep spiritual significance in the Hindu tradition. In addition to its ecological importance:

Hinduism is a religion rooted in natural topography. Gods are found in rocks, hillocks, woodlands and trees, rivers and rills. In religious texts and myths, water bodies in particular have an explicit ability to transform space, to extend or truncate time, and, most significantly, to manifest god's paradoxical nature as simultaneously transcendent and immanent,

independent and dependent, formless and formed.



Source: Tinucherian via Wikimedia Commons

The Gali Anjaneya temple was erected 572 years ago. It is one of many centuries-old temples built to honor the river's life-giving power. Today, the caretakers of those temples can no longer conduct their holy rituals in the river. They have no choice but to purchase bottled water instead. In [an interview with Varsha Gowda of the Deccan Herald](#), interdisciplinary environmental researcher Sharachchandra Lede explains that the pollution of the river comes from many different sources. "The black colour and the foul smell emanate from untreated or badly treated domestic sewage ... As for the frothing, it is unclear what is causing it. It might be phosphate in detergents or some kind of bacteria, and the government is not cooperating with us to conduct research."

"Bathing the Gods in Bottled Water" places this spiritual problem in the context of environmental degradation that can be seen throughout the Indian subcontinent.

All of India has a toxicity problem. Its cities quiver with mountains of rubbish, and its lakes, rivers and streams are awash with factory pollutants, detergent runoff and sewage sludge.

In Srinivas's eyes, the degradation of India's sacred landscape cannot be disentangled from

the continued plight of the poor of the country, or from the political toxicity of Narendra Modi's government, which neglects to use its power to cleanse the environment but expends great political capital in an attempt to scour the country of non-Hindus.



Source: Ajin K.S. via Unsplash.

Despite these grave concerns, Srinivas hopes that a return to the core ecological values of Hinduism will help restore India's lands and sense of justice. It is the same kind of hope we see in other places throughout the world—[China](#), [Puerto Rico](#), [the Amazon](#)—where Indigenous understandings could restore balance between the human, natural, and supernatural worlds.

In each case, the question looms: At what point is it too late for restoration?