

A Study of Cultural Significance of Village Ponds in Sonipat District (Haryana)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper discovers the cultural and religious significance of village ponds in Sonipat District, Haryana, India. Through a primary survey conducted in 35 randomly selected villages, the study examines the intricate relationship between the community and these water bodies, focusing on the traditional practices, beliefs, and rituals associated with ponds. The survey reveals that ponds are not only vital for ecological purposes but also serve as sacred spaces for various cultural and religious activities, including sacred rituals, worship, rites of passage, and community celebrations. Temples often located on the fringe of ponds further highlight their spiritual importance, reflecting a deep connection between the natural and spiritual realms. The findings indicate that while most villagers endure to uphold these traditional practices, there is a notable divide in belief systems, particularly regarding the younger generation's perception of the ponds' cultural significance. The study also identifies minimal community efforts to preserve these culturally significant sites, with many ponds facing the threat of neglect due to modern developments and changing socio-cultural dynamics. The paper concludes that proactive measures are necessary to safeguard these cultural assets, urging community engagement and policy interventions to maintain the sacred and cultural heritage of village ponds in Sonipat District.

Keywords:-Cultural Heritage, Sacred Rituals, Pilgrimage, Flora and Fauna

INTRODUCTION

A pond, defined as a smaller body of standing water, can be either natural or man-made and serves various community purposes. While some ponds are revered as sacred spaces, others are primarily used for activities like fishing. Moreover, ponds also support the cultivation of aquatic plants, such as lotus, chestnut, and red rice, contributing to the local economy and cultural practices.

Every society has its own culture, which acts as a unifying force that binds its members together, influencing their responses to various situations.

This results in behaviours that are distinct within each society, setting them apart from those of other societies. Culture comprises both explicit and implicit patterns of behaviour, transmitted through symbols, and includes the unique achievements of human groups, often reflected in artefacts. The core of culture lies in traditional ideas and the values attached to them. Culture can be seen both as a product of action and as a conditioning factor that shapes future actions. It is a complex system of learned behaviour that characterizes members of a society and is not the outcome of biological inheritance. Culture is not genetically determined or instinctive; it is a social invention that is transmitted and sustained through communication and learning.

Religion is a universal aspect of culture, and no society exists without some form of belief system. Vidyarthi (1961), in his study of the Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya, explored the interconnectedness of religion, culture, and sacred sites in ancient Indian contexts.

Bodies hold sacred significance in the lives of villagers. Many villagers hold spiritual beliefs and associate certain spirits with ponds (Jha, 1997, 1998; Vidyarthi, 1963). Additionally, there are taboos and traditional restrictions surrounding the use of pond water (Moore, Pholsena, Phommachanh, and Glemet, 2013). He introduced the concept of the Sacred Complex, drawing heavily on Robert Redfield's idea of Great and Little Traditions. He identified three key

components—sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred specialists—that together form the Sacred Complex. Additionally, Professor Vidyarthi studied the Sauria Paharia tribe (Malers) of the Sahebganj district and described the intricate concept of the “Nature-Man-Spirit Complex”. In this context,

“Nature” refers to the interaction between the Malers and their ecological surroundings.

Nature worship, or Naturism, has been a fundamental aspect of human society throughout history. This tradition is deeply embedded in the culture, religion, and social norms of traditional societies. Nature worship is expressed through the veneration of various natural elements such as stones, rocks, mountains, ponds, rivers, forests, plants, and animals, all of which are considered to hold divine significance (Ray and Ramachandra, 2014). The present study is purposively selected on ponds with the premise that ponds are considered sacred centres in the life of the villagers. Temples are often created near ponds in India due to the deep cultural, religious, and spiritual connections between water bodies and sacred spaces. Following are some key aspects of Ponds and their Cultural significance:

- i. **Symbolism of Purity and Purification:** Water is considered a purifying element in Hinduism and many other religions practised in India. Ponds near temples serve as a place for ritual purification, where devotees cleanse themselves before entering the temple for worship. This act of purification symbolizes the cleansing of sins and spiritual renewal.
- ii. **Mythological and Religious Significance:** Many Hindu myths and scriptures associate water bodies with gods and goddesses. Rivers, ponds, and lakes are often depicted as abodes of deities or as places where divine events occur. The presence of a pond near a temple enhances the sacredness of the location, aligning with these religious narratives.
- iii. **Enhancing the Sacred Geography:** Temples are often constructed as part of a sacred complex that includes ponds, trees, and other natural elements. These components together create a harmonious and holistic spiritual environment that reflects the inter-connectedness of nature and divinity.
- iv. **Support for Rituals and Ceremonies:** Many religious rituals require water, such as for ablutions, offerings, and ceremonial baths. Temples near ponds ensure a readily available source of water for these rituals, supporting the daily and seasonal activities of worship.
- v. **Historical Practices and Architecture:** In ancient and medieval India, temple architecture often included water features such as tanks and ponds, which were integral to temple design. These water bodies not only served religious purposes but also added to the aesthetic and environmental appeal of the temple.
- vi. **Social and Community Gathering Spaces:** Ponds near temples also serve as community gathering spaces, where festivals, fairs, and social interactions take place. This helps strengthen social bonds and makes the temple a focal point of village life.
- vii. **Water as a Sustainer of Life:** Ponds provide water for agriculture, drinking, and other essential activities, making them vital for the sustenance of communities. Temples near such ponds symbolize gratitude to divine forces for providing life-sustaining water, reinforcing the belief that natural resources are gifts from the gods.
- viii. **Historical Water Management Systems:** In ancient India, ponds and tanks near temples were part of sophisticated water management systems that ensured water availability throughout the year. Temples played a crucial role in maintaining these water bodies, and the association between temples and ponds helped in conserving water resources for the community.
- ix. **Sacred Baths and Pilgrimage Rituals:** Many temples are pilgrimage sites where sacred baths are considered essential rituals. Ponds near these temples provide a place for devotees to perform ritual baths, believed to cleanse the body and soul, granting spiritual merit and blessings from the deities.
- x. **Symbol of Creation and Life:** In Hindu cosmology, water is seen as the source of all creation and a symbol of life. Temples near water bodies symbolize this belief, reminding worshippers of the cyclical nature of life, creation, and rebirth, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of the temple.
- xi. **Integration of Vastu Shastra (Ancient Architecture Principles):** According to Vastu Shastra, the traditional Indian system of architecture, water bodies placed near temples bring positive energy and balance to the site. The presence of a pond or tank on the temple’s premises is believed to enhance spiritual vibrations and promote harmony.
- xii. **Cooling and Climate Regulation:** Ponds around temples serve practical environmental functions by cooling the surrounding area and regulating the microclimate. This not only creates a calm environment for meditation and worship but also makes the temple complex a comfortable and pleasant space for devotees.
- xiii. **Offerings and Ritual Materials:** Water from the ponds is often used to prepare offerings, such as holy water (Tirtha) distributed to devotees. Flowers, leaves, and other natural offerings used in rituals are sometimes grown around these ponds, ensuring a sustainable and readily available source for religious ceremonies.

- xiv. **Preservation of Flora and Fauna:** Ponds near temples often become sanctuaries for various species of fish, birds, and aquatic plants, creating a mini-ecosystem that aligns with the religious ethos of protecting and venerating life. This biodiversity adds to the spiritual ambience and serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all living beings.
- xv. **Symbol of Abundance and Prosperity:** Water is universally seen as a symbol of abundance, fertility, and prosperity. Temples near water bodies emphasise this symbolism, representing the divine as the provider of sustenance and well-being for both individuals and the community.
- xvi. **Spiritual Retreat and Meditation:** The calm and tranquil setting of a temple near a pond provides an ideal environment for meditation and spiritual retreats. The reflection of the temple in the water adds to the sense of peace, encouraging introspection and deep connection with the divine.
- xvii. **Historical Role in Social Welfare:** Historically, temples in India were not just religious centres but also social hubs where various community services, including the provision of water, were offered. Ponds ensured that water was available for travellers, pilgrims, and the needy, highlighting the temple's role in social welfare.
- xviii. **Enhancement of Temple Aesthetics:** Ponds add to the visual appeal of temples, often featuring beautifully carved ghats (steps), lotus flowers, and surrounding greenery. The aesthetic beauty of these water bodies complements the grandeur of the temple, enhancing its spiritual and artistic value.
- xix. **Preservation of Traditional Knowledge:** Temples and their ponds preserve ancient knowledge related to water conservation, ecosystem management, and sustainable living practices. This traditional wisdom passed down through generations, continues to play a crucial role in the cultural and environmental heritage of India.

STUDY AREA

The study focuses on Sonipat district, located in the east-central part of Haryana near the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi. Geographically, it lies between 28° 48' 15" N to 29° 17' 10" N latitudes and 76° 28' 40" E to 77° 12' 45" E longitudes, covering 5.11% of Haryana's area. The district is bordered by Panipat in the north, Jind in the west, Rohtak in the southwest, Delhi and Jhajjar in the south, and Uttar Pradesh along the eastern boundary, where the Yamuna River runs. Sonipat is well-connected by roads and a broad-gauge railway line. The district spans 2,260 sq. km with an average elevation of 224.15 meters above sea level.

Sonipat is divided into Eight administrative blocks: Sonipat, Ganaur, Kharkhoda, Rai, Murthal, Gohana, Kathura, and Mundlana, with a total of 353 villages. The district is predominantly rural, with agriculture being the mainstay of the local economy. It is characterized by fertile alluvial plains, which support the cultivation of crops such as wheat, rice, sugarcane, and various vegetables. The district's climate is semi-arid, with hot summers, cold winters, and a monsoon season that significantly influences agricultural productivity.

The presence of 1,189 ponds across the district underscores the critical role of water bodies in the local socio-economic and cultural landscape. These ponds are not only essential for irrigation, livestock, and household needs but also hold significant cultural and religious value. Many of these ponds are historically linked to the community's traditional practices, rituals, and festivals, reflecting the deep connection between the local population and their natural environment.

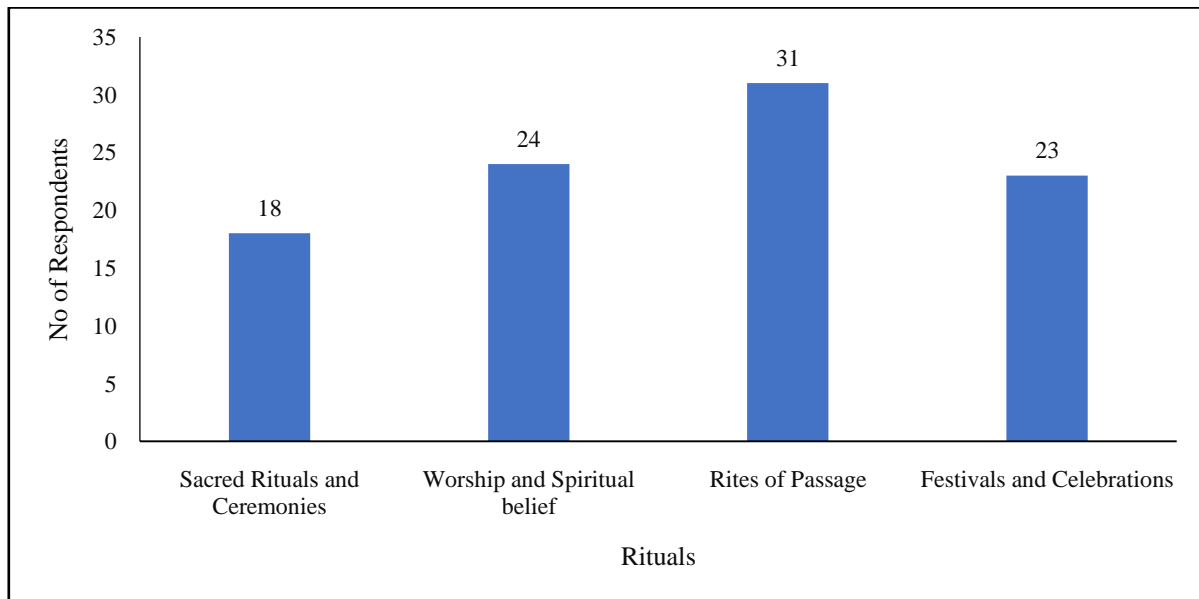
METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a primary survey conducted in selected villages of Sonipat District. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select the villages, with approximately 10% of the total villages chosen for the study. This resulted in a selection of 35 villages, from which one questionnaire was filled out in each village.

Objectives of the study:-

- i. Assessing the Cultural and Religious Significance of Ponds
- ii. Understanding Historical Context and Age of Ponds and Temples
- iii. Exploring Traditional Beliefs, Legends, and Taboos
- iv. Frequency and Type of Rituals Performed
- v. Identifying Changes in Cultural Practices Over Time
- vi. Evaluating Community Efforts and Challenges in Preserving Ponds
- vii. Understanding Generational Perceptions and Continuity

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



Source: Based on data collected by Research Scholar during field survey

Figure 1: Type of Rituals Associated with Ponds, 2024

- i. **Sacred Rituals and Ceremonies:** About 18 respondents mentioned that sacred rituals and ceremonies are performed at the ponds. These include various rites that are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and are often aimed at invoking blessings or honouring deities.
- ii. **Worship and Spiritual Belief:** Worship and spiritual beliefs were noted by 24 respondents, highlighting that ponds are often seen as sacred spaces where worship activities are conducted. This underscores the ponds' role as spiritual hubs within the community.
- iii. **Rites of Passage:** The most frequently mentioned ritual type, noted by 31 respondents, involves rites of passage. These include significant life events such as marriages, birth ceremonies, and death rituals, which are often performed near ponds, illustrating their integral role in marking key transitions in life.
- iv. **Festivals and Celebrations:** Festivals and celebrations were noted by 23 respondents, indicating that ponds serve as central venues for communal gatherings and celebrations. This emphasizes their role in fostering community spirit and cultural continuity through shared festivities.

The survey conducted across 35 selected villages of Sonipat District sought to understand the cultural and religious significance of village ponds and associated practices. The responses reveal key insights into the relationship between the community and these water bodies.

- i. **Presence of Temples Near Ponds:** A significant number of respondents (27) reported the presence of temples on the periphery of village ponds, highlighting the strong association between these water bodies and religious spaces. However, 8 respondents indicated no such structures near their ponds.
- ii. **Age of the Ponds:** All surveyed ponds were found to be quite old, with 35 respondents indicating that the ponds were over 75 years old, suggesting their long-standing presence and historical importance in the community.
- iii. **Age of Temples Near the Ponds:** Similarly, all temples near the ponds were reported to be older than 75 years, aligning with the ponds' historical significance and suggesting a deeply rooted cultural and religious connection.
- iv. **Rituals Associated with Ponds:** Rituals associated with the ponds were noted by 29 respondents, while 6 respondents indicated no such practices. This reflects that cultural and religious rituals linked to ponds are still prevalent in most villages.
- v. **Frequency of Rituals:** The frequency of rituals varied, with most being performed annually (32 responses), followed by monthly (12), half-yearly (10), and daily (4). This suggests that while rituals are common, they are not typically a part of daily practice but are still significant in the annual or periodic religious calendar.
- vi. **Belief in Spirits or Deities Residing in Ponds:** A mixed response was received on the belief in spirits or deities residing in the ponds, with 16 respondents affirming this belief and 19 denying it, indicating a split in spiritual perceptions among the villagers.

Table 1: Questions asked during the primary survey

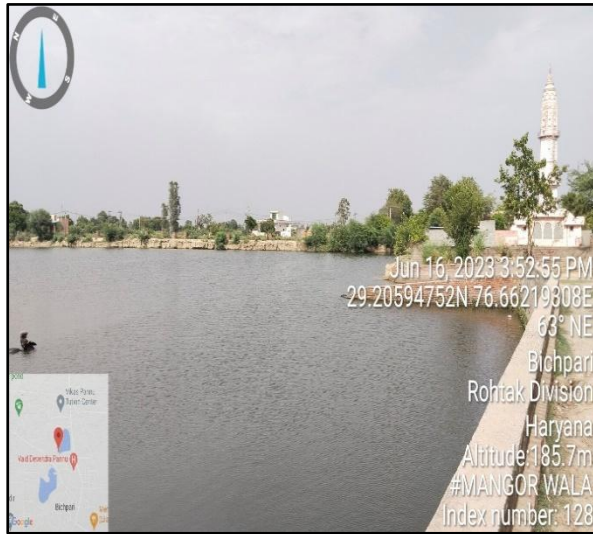
Sr. No.	Questions Asked	Type of Response	No of Response
1.	Is there any temple on the Periphery of the village Pond	Yes	27
		No	8
2.	How old is the Pond	>25 Years	-
		50 Years	-
		<75 Years	35
3.	How old is the Temple near the Pond	>25 Years	-
		50 Years	-
		<75 Years	35
4.	Are there Rituals Associated with the Pond	Yes	29
		No	6
5.	How often these Rituals Associated	Daily	4
		Monthly	12
		Half Yearly	10
		Yearly	32
6.	Do villagers believe that Spirits or Deities Reside in Pond	Yes	16
		No	19
7.	Are there any local Legends Myths or stories Associated with Pond	Yes	18
		No	17
8.	Are there any Tabos or Rules Regarding the use of Pond Water in your Community	Yes	31
		No	4
9.	Have the Cultural Practices Associated with Ponds changed over time	Yes	3
		No	32
10.	Do you think that the younger generation values the cultural significance of Ponds	Yes	18
		No	17
11.	Have modern developments affected the cultural practices associated with Ponds	Yes	5
		No	30
12.	Are there any efforts in your in your community to Preserve the Cultural Significance of the Ponds	Yes	8
		No	27

Source: Data collected by Research Scholar during primary survey

- vii. **Local Legends, Myths, or Stories:** The survey found that 18 respondents acknowledged the existence of local legends, myths, or stories associated with the ponds, whereas 17 did not, reflecting varied oral traditions and cultural narratives.
- viii. **Taboos or Rules Regarding Pond Water Use:** The majority of respondents (31) indicated the presence of taboos or rules regarding the use of pond water in their community, suggesting a strong cultural framework governing interactions with these water bodies.
- ix. **Change in Cultural Practices Over Time:** Despite changes over time, most respondents (32) reported that cultural practices associated with ponds have remained consistent, with only 3 indicating any changes. This points to a preservation of traditional practices despite external influences.
- x. **Perception of the Younger Generation:** Opinions were divided on whether the younger generation values the cultural significance of ponds, with 18 respondents affirming and 17 denying this, indicating a generational shift in cultural attitudes.
- xi. **Impact of Modern Developments:** The impact of modern developments on cultural practices associated with ponds was reported by only 5 respondents, while 30 noted no significant effect, suggesting resilience in traditional practices against modern influences.
- xii. **Efforts to Preserve Cultural Significance:** Efforts to preserve the cultural significance of ponds appear limited, with only 8 respondents acknowledging such initiatives in their communities, while 27 noted the absence of preservation efforts. This highlights a need for more active engagement in maintaining these culturally significant sites.

Photo 1: Presence of Temples near Ponds

(a) Bichpari Village



(b) Rabhra Village



(c) Moi Hooda Village



(d) Kailana Village



Source: Photos Clicked by Research Scholar during Primary survey

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the profound cultural and religious significance of ponds in the villages of Sonipat District. These water bodies are not only vital for ecological balance but also serve as sacred sites for rituals, worship, and communal gatherings. Despite modern influences, traditional practices such as rites of passage, festivals, and ceremonies continue to thrive around these ponds, underscoring their enduring role in village life. However, a noticeable generational shift and limited preservation efforts pose challenges to maintaining this heritage. To sustain the cultural relevance of ponds, it is crucial to promote awareness and community-led conservation initiatives.

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