



Restriction of Saraswati and Banyu Pinaruh Celebration during COVID-19 Pandemic in Bali

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ABSTRACT

Saraswati Day is a day to commemorate the descent of knowledge as a source of human intelligence. According to the Balinese calendar, Balinese people celebrate the day on *Saniscara* (Saturday) *Wuku Watugunung*, which falls every 210 days of the Balinese calendar or every six months according to the solar calendar. The high potential of public enthusiasm to commemorate Saraswati and Banyu Pinaruh days cannot be separated from the previous celebrations, which were always held in festive. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, these two days were crowded with activities from students and educators on Saraswati Day, then continued with the *melukat* ritual by the Balinese Hindu community at various water sources and holy places the next day in Banyu Pinaruh. The drastic shift in situation, if it is interpreted according to the purpose of Saraswati's day itself, namely to gain wisdom, as the essence of knowledge, then the pandemic situation can be viewed as a new challenge in humankind. From the COVID-19 pandemic, humans are expected to be adaptive to their environment for the sake of mutual prosperity. Therefore, the obtained knowledge about everything that exists in this world would give a significant meaning. It would not be only a knowledge written in a book, learned, and stays on people's heads. Nevertheless, it has become an applied science that is practiced and provides significant benefits for humankind.

Keywords: Saraswati Day, Banyu Pinaruh, Restriction, COVID 19.

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BACKGROUND

Saraswati Day is a day to commemorate the descent of knowledge as a source of human intelligence. According to the Balinese calendar, Balinese people celebrate the day on *Saniscara* (Saturday) *Wuku Watugunung*, which falls every 210 days of the Balinese calendar or every six months according to the solar calendar. In Sanskrit, the word 'Saraswati' means 'flowing', 'conversation', 'words'. Meanwhile, in the Vedic scriptures, Saraswati is the name of a river or river goddess. She has many other names such as *Bharati*, *Brahmi*, *Putkari*, *Sarada*, *Wagiswari*. The goddess blesses her believer with vitality or robust health. In the *Sapta Ganga Mantra*, Saraswati's name was mentioned in requesting *tirtha*.¹ Her duty as *Wach* or "God of Words" is mentioned in the *Brahmin*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabaratha* books. Furthermore, in Balinese Hindu society, Saraswati is the *Sakti* of Lord Brahma, the Goddess of Words, and the Goddess of Knowledge.

On Saraswati day, the Balinese perform a ritual to all ancient manuscripts,

lontar, books, or any related source of knowledge. According to the tradition, the objects would be displayed and given a proper ritual to symbolize gratitude to the Saraswati goddess, the goddess of knowledge. The people would do *Brata Saraswati*, abstinence of reading and writing during the day. According to Sundarigama's manuscript, the activity aims to reflect on the knowledge; thus, the learner may obtain its essential purpose.² Then, in the evening, an event called literary night would be held in many places across Bali as the sequence of the day ritual. The literary night participant would stay up all night, discussing and reading holy books, or meditate. The day after Saraswati day is called Banyu Pinaruh. On *Banyu Pinaruh*, the people would be flocked to the water source such as spring, waterfall, lake, river, or beach to conduct the Banyu Pinaruh ritual. They would perform self-purification by water *penglukatan* to purify themselves and the knowledge they have received.^{3,4}

Many Scholars view Saraswati Day as

momentum to remember the importance of knowledge. Knowledge gives birth to many breakthroughs, including cultures, tools, sciences, laws, and many fields of expertise. Knowledge allows humans to improve themselves to unleash its potential in creating the world that we live in today. Balinese Hindu hopes that the goddess will always bless the people with inspiration, mental clarity, knowledge, serenity, and wisdom by celebrating the day.⁵

In 2021, Balinese Hindus celebrated Saraswati Day on Saturday, 28 August 2021. In response to COVID 19 pandemic situation, Bali Province PHDI (Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia) or Balinese Hindu Association Council had published a notification letter to PHDI in nine regencies in Bali. The letter requested the associated government in nine regencies in Bali to restrict the celebration of Saraswati day, Banyu Pinaruh, and Pagerwesi. Although since last two Saraswati days in 2020 were conducted amid the coronavirus outbreak, the people were still unfamiliar

with the situation. It is due to before the covid 19 pandemic. It is a familiar scene to celebrate the day with grand, festive ceremonies.

Saraswati Day Celebration in 2021

In Gianyar regency, The chairman of the Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia (PHDI), Gianyar, I Wayan Ardana, decided that the Saraswati Day celebration would be limited. According to the local

custom in Gianyar, all teachers, students, and even the school alumnae usually hold prayers together. However, for this year, the ceremony at school, He explained, would only be attended by a maximum of fifteen participants, unlike the celebration in previous years. The students were expected to conduct their Saraswati ritual at their homes.⁷ In Klungkung regency, a Similar situation also can be seen at the Jagatnata Temple Klungkung, Pemedal

Agung Klungkung, and other sacred landmarks.⁸ Those places were commonly packed with students from elementary to college every time Saraswati day was celebrated.

On the same occasion at Jagatnatha Temple, Denpasar, the local government applied a different approach. The Denpasar Traditional Village Council (MDA) issued circular letter number: 60/MDA-KOTA DPS/VIII/2021 regarding implementing Saraswati Day, Banyu Pinaruh, and *Pagerwesi* Day amid the Covid-19 pandemic and PPKM Level 4, August 2021. The people who would like to pray were divided into several sessions. Each session only allowed a maximum of thirty persons to enter the main temple. Guided by the pecalang, the visitors were asked to wash their hands before entering the temple and sit one meter from the other visitor. According to the Denpasar city Welfare Division, Raka Purwantara, the prayer only lasted until 8 PM. Meanwhile, Denpasar Mayor, Jaya Negara, explained that the restriction was implemented due to the Level 4 PPKM situation in Denpasar. He admitted that the Denpasar Government must adjust to the current situation.

Despite the restriction policy implemented by the local government, it did not reduce the essence of the Saraswati day ceremony. For instance, the caretaker of Widya Sradha library, Denpasar, performed a ritual to its book collections. Up to two thousand books were displayed and given proper ceremony as a symbol of praise to Saraswati goddess, the Goddess of Knowledge. The ceremony was held at the Sabha Widya Sradha library in Sumerta Kelod Village, Denpasar. Due to its location near the main street, the passerby might notice thousands of displaying books at the location. The Sabha Widya Sradha Library Coordinator, Wira Adnyana, explained that he and his team conduct the ritual every Saraswati Day together with the day of the Sumerta Kelod Village Office memorial ceremony.

The library's collection, according to him, was up to two thousand books. The collections were obtained from the village's budget, community, and third-party donations. Visitors may find children's books, religion, literature, youth books,



Figure 1. Elementary students gathered to celebrate Saraswati Day at their school in 2014.⁶



Figure 2. Denpasar Mayor prayed on Saraswati Day at Jagatnata Temple, Denpasar.⁹



Figure 3. Banyu Pinaruh in Sanur Beach before the Pandemic.¹²



Figure 4. Sanur Beach on Banyu Pinaruh, August 2021.¹³

and general knowledge books, including braille books for the blind. The head of Sumerta Kelod Village, I Gusti Ketut Anom Suardana, revealed that to maximize the library service, his party collaborated with SMKN 4 Denpasar, SMK PGRI 3 Denpasar, and five Elementary Schools nearby. The library is open every Monday to Saturday, from 9 AM to 4 PM. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the library was always busy with daily visitors. However, these days, only up to 20 people visit per day. The library was briefly closed, but due to students' request, it reopened to support the student's activities to find references

for their assignment or as a spot to do online school.¹⁰

Restriction in Banyu Pinaruh

A circular letter by Denpasar traditional village council also requested the citizen of Denpasar to conduct their Banyu Pinaruh ritual at home, not at the beach. The Head of Denpasar traditional village council, Anak Agung Ketut Sudiana, on Saturday 28 August 2021, said this circular was to re-emphasize the Circular Letter from PHDI Bali Province and the traditional village council of Bali Province. At the moment, He admitted the coastal areas of Denpasar,

such as Sanur and Serangan Village, were prone to Covid-19 transmission. Furthermore, Denpasar in level 4 PPKM expected all public places in the area to be restricted to visitors, including beaches as tourism objects. Sudiana pleaded to the public to understand the current situation. The policy was for the common good to stop the pandemic transmission. During the Saraswati Day and Banyu Pinaruh, a Joint Team consisting of Pecalang, TNI/Polri, and civil service police units were deployed to guard the beach area. Meanwhile, in Tabanan regency, Tabanan traditional village council recommended entirely restrict all access to their coastal area for any visitor during the holidays.¹¹

In Bangli Regency, one of many infamous temples for *melukat*, such as Taman Pecampuhan Temple, was temporarily closed on Banyu Pinaruh Day. Other temples in Bangli Regency also implemented the same policies. However, permission was only granted to people who would like to ask for the temple's holy water. The head of the Bangli traditional village council, Jro Ketut Kayana, said that the community should follow the government advice broadcasted in a circular letter. In a normal situation, during Banyu Pinaruh, many places of worship were packed with visitors. In this pandemic situation, all activities were restricted. It was understandable. If it were not restricted, indeed, a huge commotion would have occurred in many places.¹⁴

The mass prayer and *melukat* activities in Tirta Empul Temple, Tampaksiring, Gianyar, Bali was closed with a series of Saraswati Day and Banyu Pinaruh to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, the authorities gave tolerance to people, who came not in a group, that would like to pray at Tirta Empul Temple. The Head of the Tampaksiring Police, AKP Ni Luh Suardani, confirmed that her party and management agreed to close the temple for mass prayer and *melukat* activities, starting from the Saraswati Holy Day on Saturday 28 August 2021 to Banyu Pinaruh on Sunday 29 August 2021. They anticipated a mass wave of visitors that usually come to every Banyu Pinaruh. Not only Tirta Empul temple but Gianyar's coastline was also closed to visitors. The Gianyar Police collaborated with the



Figure 5. Melukat in Tirta Empul Temple before Covid 19 pandemic.¹⁵

Gianyar sub-district head and village officers throughout Gianyar regency, Bali, agreed to close the beaches during Saraswati day and Banyu Pinaruh.

The Head of the Gianyar Police, Kompol Gusti Ngurah Yudistira, admitted it was a tough choice. However, He appealed to the public, especially to people who intend to visit the beach area for Banyu Pinaruh, to postpone their plan. He advised the ritual to be performed at home during the pandemic. Furthermore, Gianyar regional disaster management agency appealed to the public to avoid visiting the beach area during Banyu Pinaruh due to the high tides and strong sea currents. The head of the Gianyar regional disaster management agency, Ida Bagus Suamba, on Friday, 27 August 2021, explained that currently, for the next few days, the strong wind in the southern sea affected the sea waves. Therefore, his party advised people to conduct their Banyu Pinaruh ritual at their respective homes. As of August 2021, he revealed that there had been two drowning cases swept away by waves. A victim has not been found at the moment, while the other is saved. Further, his party coordinated Balawista Gianyar to monitor the situation along the coast of the Gianyar Regency.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The Saraswati Day and Banyu Pinaruh implementation on the island of Bali in 2021 followed the instructions according to the government's suggestions and recommendations. The government's suggestions and recommendations were broadcasted in a circular letter Number: 076/PHDI-Bali/VIII/2021 by PHDI Bali & circular letter Number: 008/SE/MDA-ProvBali/VIII/2021 by Bali Province traditional Village council (*Majelis Desa Adat*). Official notifications and local regulations then strengthened the circular letter in each district. Thus, the policies can be implemented as expected to prevent potential crowds due to community social, custom, and religious activities. Previously, the last two Saraswati and Banyu Pinaruh activities in 2020 had been carried out similar to the current situation. However, notifications about the ritual activities restrictions were continuously informed to minimize the crowd possibilities due to the less-informed community.

The high potential of public enthusiasm to commemorate Saraswati and Banyu Pinaruh days cannot be separated from the previous celebrations, which were always held in festive. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, these two

days were crowded with activities from students and educators on Saraswati Day, then continued with the melukat ritual by the Balinese Hindu community at various water sources and holy places the next day in Banyu Pinaruh. The drastic shift in situation, If it is interpreted according to the purpose of Saraswati's day itself, namely to gain wisdom, as the essence of knowledge, then the pandemic situation can be viewed as a new challenge in humankind. From the COVID-19 pandemic, humans are expected to be adaptive to their environment for the sake of mutual prosperity. Therefore, the obtained knowledge about everything that exists in this world would give a significant meaning. It would not be only a knowledge written in a book, learned, and stays on people's heads. Nevertheless, it has become an applied science that is practiced and provides significant benefits for humankind.

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