

Sarasvati : The Goddess of Learning

Pradeep Kumar Gan
Dr. Sanjeeb Kumar Mohanty

Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning occupies a distinct position among the Sakta goddesses of Hindu pantheon. Due to the wide prevalence of the worship of Shakti or the female energy in India from a very early period among almost all the different ethnological elements comprising the vast mass of Indian population, goddess Sarasvati became more popular among the followers of Shaktism. According to David Kinsley, goddess Sarasvati is one of the few important goddesses in the *Vedas* who has remained significant in later Hinduism, though today she is in particular, worshipped by children and students as the patron Goddess of Learning throughout India.¹ She is popular not only as a Hindu goddess, but also popular with the Jains and the Buddhists.² The word Sarasvati is derived from the words *Sarah* and *Vati* which means 'one possessing a vast sheet of water'.³ Goddess Sarasvati is known to us in various names like Vani, Vagdevi, Vac, Sarada, Bharati, Pusti, Vagisvari, Vinapani etc.⁴

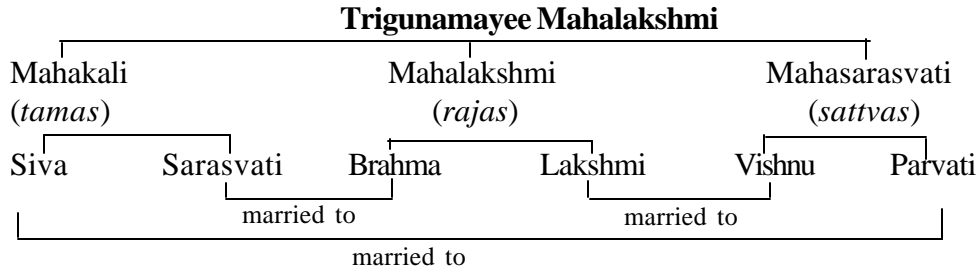
In the *Rig Veda* the earliest reference about the goddess Sarasvati is to be found as the manifestation of a river, on the bank of which most of the Vedic hymns were composed and the Vedic culture developed. The river thus appears to have played an important role in the formation of her concept. About the origin of the goddess Sarasvati, in the *Pradhanika-rahasya*, as summarized by J.N. Banerjea,⁵ it is stated that the unmanifested Mahalakshmi

takes the three forms of Mahalakshmi, Mahakali and Mahasarasvati. In her manifestation as Mahasarasvati, she is of representing *Sattoguna*. She is associated with the destruction of the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha.⁶ She is the colour of white and the most beautiful of all beauties. As indicated in the *Pradhanika-rahasya*, She is four arm holding a rosary, a goad, a vina, and a manuscript. In the *Vaikritika-rahasya*, where She is said to have been born from Gauri with eight armed and holds an arrow, spear, *chakra*, *conch*, bell, plowshare, and a bow.⁷ A similar description appears in the *Sritattvanidhi*, where She is described as the slayer of Sumbha, with the eight *ayudha*.⁸

Regarding the origin and development of Sarasvati, interesting accounts are recorded in different *Puranas*. The *Devi Mahatmya*⁹ section of the *Markandeya Purana* refers three principal forms of female principle, i.e. Mahalakshmi, Mahakali and Mahasarasvati. According to the *Brahmavaivartta Purana*,¹⁰ the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*,¹¹ the *Matsya Purana*,¹² the *Devi Bhagabat Purana*,¹³ goddess Sarasvati is stated to have been born from the mouth of Paramaatma, Krisna as his Shakti. The *Matsya Purana*¹⁴ and the *Vayu Purana*¹⁵ describe Sarasvati as *Visvarupa* and Brahma created her. In the *Matsya Purana* She is conceived as wife of Brahma, while in the *Vayu Purana*, She is described as the daughter of Brahma.

According to T.A. Gopinath Rao,¹⁶ the three forms of Mahalakshmi, Mahakali, and Mahasarasvati divided their bodies into two halves, i.e., one male and the other female. Accordingly, Mahalakshmi created Brahma and Lakshmi, Mahakali created Siva and Sarasvati, and Mahasarasvati produced Vishnu and Parvati. All came into action forming their union with their male counterparts. Sarasvati married to Brahma, Lakshmi married to Vishnu and Parvati married to Siva and they were engaged for creation of the universe, preservation of the universe, and destruction of the universe respectively.¹⁷

is called the 'impeller of true and sweet speech and awakener of happy and noble thoughts'.²² As evident in the *Tantrasara*, where Sarasvati has more *dhyanas*, in compare to other goddesses. Her name is Varnesvari, which means 'goddess of letters'. She is also described as Varnajanani, the meaning of 'mother of letters'.²³ The other epithets of Sarasvati included in different literature as *Jihvagravasini* (dwelling in the front of the tongue) and *Kavijihvagravasini* (She who dwells on the tongues of poets), etc.²⁴



In the *Krishna Yajurveda*,¹⁸ Sarasvati came to be identified with the Vedic goddess Vac (speech personified), who appears in the *Rig Veda* as the vehicle of knowledge, while in the *Aitreya Aranyaka*¹⁹ She is called the mother of the *Vedas*. In the *Rig Veda* Sarasvati is very often invoked with Ida and Bharati. Ida, Bharati and Sarasvati are the three manifestations of Agni and are known as *Yajnuagni* (sacrificial fire). On account of their close intimacy, these three goddesses are called three Sarasvatis.²⁰ Goddess Sarasvati is also depicted as the annihilator of demons. She destroyed Vrtra and other demons.

*Utasya nah Sarasvati ghora
Hiranyavartanah / Vrtraghni vasti sustuition//²¹*

With the passage of time Sarasvati's association with a river and fertility gradually decreases and She increasingly becomes a goddess associated with speech, learning, wisdom and culture. Even in the *Rig Veda*, She

Like Lakshmi, Sarasvati is also associated with many male deities. As an individual goddess She is closely associated with Brahma. The *Brahmavaivartta Purana* states that Visnu has three wives, who constantly quarrel with each other, so that eventually he keeps only Lakshmi, giving Ganga to Siva and Sarasvati to Brahma.²⁵

In the early stage of evolution, Sarasvati was associated with different *Vedic* gods, such as Indra, Maruta, Asvinis, etc. In the *Veda* Sarasvati was the goddess of rain and the counterpart of Indra. She was believed to be in charge of rain.²⁶ Goddess Sarasvati's association with Ganesha is clear from the fact that, they are often juxtaposed, one next to the other in Orissan sculptural art particularly in motifs involving teaching. According to *Sarada-tilaka Tantra* and other texts, as Pusti, She is the consort of Ganesha.²⁷

Goddess Sarasvati is also regarded as the Shakti of Siva as in the *Tantrasara*, where She is coupled with Siva. In the *Suta Samhita* of the *Skanda Purana*, Sarasvati is associated with Siva and is described as having a blue neck like Siva.²⁸ In the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*,²⁹ She is the spouse of Rudra in *Manidvipa*, the celestial residence of the Devi. She is also associated with music as is apparent by the *vina* that is prescribed for her in various texts. In the *Brahmavaivartta Purana*, where she is prescribed a book and the *vina*.³⁰

As the goddess of learning She has various names such as Vagisvari, Sarada, Sarasvati and Bharati, etc., having different *vahanas* associated on different situations. Goddess Sarasvati is associated with *hamsa* (swan), the lotus, the ram, and lion. According to the *Puranic* texts, Sarasvati inherited her *vahana* swan (*hamsa*) from her father or husband Brahma, who has swan *vahana*.³¹ According to the *Satapatha Brahmana*, ram is the mount of Sarasvati from the *Vedic* period. Sarasvati is also described as *Mayura vahana*. It is probably to symbolize her philosophical relation with Agni that She holds the peacock the symbol of Agni, as her vehicle. According to *Krisna Yajurveda*, the lion is her mount and She was invoked in the form of a lioness to destroy the demons.

Today, Sarasvati is worshipped primarily as a goddess of speech, learning and the fine arts. Her early associations with water, fertility, as a goddess of healing, as goddess of prosperity are mostly forgotten. In the present Indian society, every year, She is worshipped on the day of commencement of knowledge and on the fifth day of the bright half of the lunar month of *Magha* (January-February), while her basic *mantra* is the same with which the *guru* first imparts instructions to his students.

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Pradeep Kumar Gan is a Scholar in History, Culture & Archaeology and works at Fakir Mohan University, Vyasa Vihar, Balasore, Orissa.

Dr. S.K. Mohanty works at Fakir Mohan University, Vyasa Vihar, Balasore, Orissa.