



THE CHANGING PARADIGMS OF SARASVATI AS REFLECTED IN EARLY INDIAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

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Abstract

The recent geological findings and scientific research aimed at validating the identity of Sarasvati has rather encouraged ancient Indian scholar to probe into the literary sources to explore the possibilities that in any means could establish the identity of Sarasvati as a river. The occurrence of the term Sarasvati in ancient Indian texts has provided impetus to the research for it has been augmented with the latest scientific findings. Still Sarasvati struggles to establish its identity as a river wherefore her identity as a goddess has predominantly been established. The paper is an attempt to explore the identity of the Sarasvati citing the references from the ancient Indian texts. Sarasvati has long been the theme of discussion and scholarly debates amongst the erudite scholars emanating from all fields, distinguished historians included. The long-standing question of its existence has though stood the scrutiny of historians, archaeologists, geologists and scientists. Even so, it has been engaging the attention of critics. This paper would limit itself to finding the transformation of Sarasvati over the passage of time ranging from Vedic to the Puranic. It would thoroughly examine the sources to trace such transformations, consider all its forms and attributes, and note the quantum of the changes.

Sarasvati, the very name of the river comes, from *Saras* and *Vati*, meaning, thriving in pools and lakes, which otherwise suggests much more than its literal meaning. The name that occurs in Rigveda in the first ever textual references has a reasonable prelude to its derivation. The epithet at later stages would though acquire a multifarious dimension yet retaining its initial identity throughout the phases of classical ages as in literature corresponding to the times of Vedas, Brahmanas, Puranas and Epics- literature of early and early medieval India included of course. The name itself seems suggesting some morphological and geographical features. It is a definitive possibility that ever since the Vedic people grew familiar with the river, the portions of the river looking like lakes might have led to the use of prefix *saras* to denote the river. The course of a river through the plains-gradients can cause such a feature to be conspicuous. At later times, the prominence of such features

aided by geological changes as by tectonic upheavals could possibly have led to the river's disappearance. Today the dried bed of river Sarasvati is under the dominance of sand dunes and arid regions, particularly at its mouth, but it is interesting to note that Rigveda never makes a mention of arid conditions prevailing at the Basin of Sarasvati River; it rather portrays a lush green prosperous life accompanied by agriculture and pastoralism.

Indras would however suggest that the river had faced the earthy movements in second millennium BC or little earlier giving rise to the origin of various lakes in its bed therefore prompting the Rigvedic people to name it Sarasvati. The name etymologically does belong to the Vedic period, wherefore the river existed prior to the Rigvedic period, and it must have had a name unknown to us.

Yet another derivation for Sarasvati is that it derives from Saras+vatup+nis, a river ever affluent and flowing with water. (Khan) The name itself has stood the scrutiny of many historians. Of these, A.B. Keith and Macdonell found a close affinity of Sarasvati with Drishadvati. Edward Thomas went a step ahead suggesting Sarasvati to be Haraquaiti of Zend-Avesta, located in Helmand area of Afghanistan on the bleak premise of phonetic similarity in both the names. But such claims came to be challenged soon.

Water is the purest form of the ingredient of life, and its reverence in Ancient Indian literary sources is but natural as to those times the nature was venerated in its purest form. So, went true for waters, for people comprehended its significance in their day to day life. Waters in Vedas are not merely divine, *apah*; waters are regarded as the source of creation on earth closely associated with Prajapati who can be identified with Brahma in later Puranic sources.

The earliest notion on Sarasvati as a river is uncontested in ancient times. Sarasvati as a mighty stream has found repeated mention in Rigveda. The Sarasvati was, as Rigveda speaks of it, a mighty river originating from the Himalayas and emptying into the Indian Ocean after traversing a long distance. Ever affluent, lush green basins, and constant state of flux have been some of its characteristic features.

A clear reference to Sarasvati as a river comes from Mandala VII of Rigveda which translates as: Flowing rapidly with all sustaining waters, sweeping away in its might all other waters and flowing through the mountains up to the ocean, distributing riches to the vast world. But such connotations of Sarasvati have raised the question mark on its independent identity.

K.C. Chattopadhyaya argues that the reference of Sarasvati in earlier portions of Rigveda, particularly Mandala VI and VII pertains to the river Indus for Sarasvati never seems to be such an aggressive stream as has been depicted in Rigveda. The distinction came at later stages, rather out of necessity when the little stream became prominent in *Madhyadesha*. But this viewpoint has been contested by Mohammad Israil Khan; he validates his argument so: in the Rigveda hymns wherein Sarasvati is celebrated, there is nothing which admits such an interpretation. The synonymous treatment of Sarasvati and Sindhu by Chattopadhyaya is bit hasty, as except for one instance terms have never been used interchangeably. In support of his argument, Chattopadhyaya refers to hymn 75 of Mandala X and some other hymns in which Sarasvati bears close resemblance to Indus. On the other hand, for Max Muller the Rigvedic Sarasvati is same as the later Sarasvati,

a great river making its way to sea, and yes, as great as Sutlej. But such a statement could be controversial, particularly for Rigvedic times where Sarasvati has been adorned with the status of *Naditama*, the best among rivers and an iron citadel, signifying its strength. We find hymns on eulogy, praise and salutations for Sarasvati alone.

It is not only the Veda that sing high of Sarasvati as a river, but it has been popular with other sources as Brahmanas, Upanishads, Sutras, Epics and *Puranas*. Controversies on the name and identification of river Sarasvati are numerous and historians are still at cross purpose with each other as regards its proper identification. But in order to establish its clear identity we must not rely on historical data alone. We must as well verify the data with geographical and geological parameters which could prove a step towards fruition. It is not historians or archaeologists alone who have exhausted their efforts to grapple with the problem of finding the Sarasvati identity. The theme lately has engaged the scholars from Science and Geo-Sciences as well. Extensive researches are being carried out with a purpose and the sense of occasion.

Rigvedic hymn VII. 95.2 points to the location of the river Sarasvati; *Eka Chetat Sarasvati Nadinam Shuchiryati Girikbhya Aa Samudrat*. This hymn depicts the mountains and seas but not with sense of specificity. If we are to establish the location of Sarasvati based on the Rigvedic source, we must first ascertain the mountains and the seas referred to in Rigveda. The early Rigvedic period only centred on the northern and north western regions of India to where the river system drains from Himalayas. In its support there is a reference from Purana where Sarasvati has been reckoned as one of the rivers issuing from the foot of Himalayas, known as *Himvat –Padanihshrtah* (हिमवत पदनिहर्तः). Besides, hymn 136.5 of Mandal X makes mention of two seas *purva* and *parah*, the east and the west sea simultaneously, and hymn 33.6 of Mandal IX makes a mention of four seas of which one to the north of Himalayas has already gone missing, showing the familiarity of Rigvedic people with the sea. The drainage of the river into the Rajputana sea, lying south-west to India of today, has been suggested by A.C. Das, quoting, “the result of a geological investigation shows that, in a remote age, a sea actually covered a very large portion of modern Rajputana, extending as far as south and east of the Aravalli mountains which geologists have designated by the name Rajputana sea.”

But the identification of Sarasvati with *Prachi* and *Prachimukhi* (Sk. Puran VII. 35.26) creates yet another problem in locating the course of the river. It suggests eastward flow of the river. The geological receding of Rajputana Sea is evident if at all it can support the change of course of the Sarasvati River, though some scholars seem overly comfortable with geological changes taking these as evidence for the change in course of Sarasvati River from east to west. N.N. Godbole is one of them who notes that, “a brief description of the Aravallis would be very helpful in understanding the history of Sarasvati and its course to the south and west and its possible relation to the Aravallis. The Aravallis are the true tectonic mountains formed in the pre-Cambrian period and are subjected to upliftments during post Vindhyan times.”

Now, it is at the least historically verified that Sarasvati was a river that flowed in old Rigvedic times, Rigvedic times, and post Rigvedic times through the Puranic ages but subsequently dried up owing to geological reasons much to the comprehension of scientists and least so to the satisfaction of historians. A hymn in Mandal VIII 21.18 makes mention of kings residing along the banks of river Sarasvati. Another hymn in Mandal VI 61.12

refers to *Pancha jata vardhayanti*. Their association with five tribes of Rigvedic times, Bharatas, Kurus, Purus, Matsyas, Panchals is again disputable.

Now that the historical identity of the Sarasvati as a river has been established, the paper shall explore other attributes and transformations of Sarasvati. The corresponding question that needs fresh perspective and investigation now is whether or not, Sarasvati was a celestial river.

The starting argument in this context was provided by K.C. Chattopadhyaya who denied its being celestial. He considered it to be terrestrial, that too in close affinity with the Indus River. This argument, although defeated on the pretext of both rivers being similar, needs a scrutiny if such a statement holds valid for the nature of the river. Sarasvati, primarily a river, gained currency as a celestial river and then river personified as goddess-Sarasvati in popular imagination much as it is with the Ganga origin and lord Shiva medication.

These stages of development have discretely been recorded in the ancient Indian sources of History. The etymological transformations of Sarasvati also point to the personification of river as a goddess. There are about eighty references to Sarasvati. Besides, she has been referred to in prayers to *Vishvadevah*. In prayers dedicated to her, river Sarasvati is thought as carved out vast by god *Vibhavan*, having celestial ocean as her mother, coming down on earth from heaven, pervading the three regions, present in heaven and earth and possessed of divinity of higher order amongst the other river-goddesses.

Given the high divinity attached to the river Sarasvati, contrary to the argument of Chattopadhyaya, B.R. Sharma argued upon the celestial character of the Sarasvati rather than the terrestrial stream. Raghunath Airi partly supports this argument that it is quite probable that, to begin with, Sarasvati would have been a celestial flood for older sages, and its terrestrial manifestation was seen in the mundane Sarasvati by younger sages giving additional context for deifying the river Sarasvati. It was not alone the religious dependence; the beneficence was seen in the river as the biggest factor in the sustenance of life. But celestial upliftment or celestial relativity never meant the denying of terrestrial significance and the river's relevance as a terrestrial goddess. In the process of glorification, the terrestrial Sarasvati, as possessed of celestial links, was supposed to pervade the three worlds.

There is yet another contest where it is held by a group of scholars that Sarasvati is not a river; it is the presiding deity of the rivers as personified by the Vedic seers. But such viewpoints cannot be taken at face value as the Vedic seers venerated the forces of nature, and sun, rivers, wind, moon, forests and the like were significant nature benefactors. So, it is not very surprising that Sarasvati might have undergone the same process but firstly over its assertion as a terrestrial presence, and not simply conjured from abstraction. The river Sarasvati too would have been deified for its association with various divinities or being thought of as an earthly form of celestial flood, possessed of divine qualities of providing opulent food and fertility, pelf and progeny. But there is every possibility of symbolism in play as regards deifying the forces of nature.

For J.Muir, the Sarasvati was merely an earthly river. Its excessive reverence by the Vedic seers who supposedly dedicated their sacrifices to the river in lieu of grace that it showered upon the inhabitants, led to it being deified eventually. Later on, the mantras began to be associated with Sarasvati which were chanted

at the time of sacrifice. The Sarasvati, being congenial with mighty stream and rhythmic flow, fit in with the deification. This is how Rigveda identifies Sarasvati both as a river and a deity.

With the passage of time, the attributes of Sarasvati started taking different shapes and dimensions. The area of its influence started expanding towards the later Vedic age, and its frequency in the hymns of later Vedic texts is notable. Yaska makes references to Sarasvati in Nirukta as *Madhyamika Vak*, and references to Sarasvati started appearing in Nighantu in the list of aerial deities. Since then the references of the Sarasvati were interpreted in two ways, one as an aerial goddess and another as a river goddess. Its association with other deities and that with the classes, particularly the warrior class, it became a frequent phenomenon which makes it easy to reveal the character of the goddess. Sarasvati is mentioned with Vishvadevah, Indra, Marut, Agni, Pushan, Ashvin, Soma, Prithvi, Parvatah, Brihaspati, Aryaman and Vishnu.

The association of Sarasvati with Indra is highly symbolic where she is depicted as performing the acts of valiance, *balakrit* and shedding rain, *rasanupradan* which functionally is peculiar to the deities that belong to the pantheon of Indra. It has been observed that Sarasvati bears some attributes corresponding to Indra, showing close connection with Indra. There is a reference when Sarasvati with Asvins cured Indra when he was confronting Namuchi of Asura birth and gained the title of *Vira Patni*, the protectress of Vira, Indra. Yet another reference shall relate the Agni with Sarasvati where seers invoke Agni and request to bring all gods in general and Sarasvati, Marut and Asvins so that they may confer riches on the sacrificer. A.C. Das adds to this by concluding that Sarasvati in Rigveda is not only the name of the river and region watered by her but also of Agni or sacrificial fire. Three epithet of Sarasvati, *pavaka*, *diyah vasuh* and *trishadastha* are enough to show her association with Agni. Another epithet, *Marud-vati* and, too, the *Marut-Sakha* attribute seems befitting given the similarity in functions performed by Marut and Sarasvati.

There is a very interesting narrative of a male deity Sarasvat, identical to Sarasvati, to whom two hymns have been dedicated in the VII Mandal. The concept of Sarasvat as male counterpart of the Sarasvati might have been invoked but it did not gain popularity and prominence perhaps for the pre-established authority and identity of goddess Sarasvati. Sarasvat has been classified in the Nighantu among the gods of atmospheric regions, and has differently been interpreted as Vayu, Surya and Indra by different scholars. At times, he is associated with the atmospheric god though riverine in nature like the Sarasvati in Rigveda. Besides his association with river god, friendly to men, *naryah* is evident in Rigveda. Sarasvat is prayed like other Vedic gods including Sarasvati to bestow progeny and food. He is also invoked for help by worshippers like Sarasvati and Indra.

The complete personification Sarasvati was a slow and subsequent phenomenon which culminated in the iconography at much later stages. In Rigveda though we do not find clear picture of the various body parts of Sarasvati like hands, mouth, legs as is found in post Vedic literature of many gods and goddesses. But relativism had started its role where the waves of the river were poetically conceived to be its hands. The references sing of Sarasvati tearing down the mountains with its hands. The waters of rivers ascribe the breasts endowed with wealth and prosperity, attributing the cloud to be the physical form of Sarasvati. We shall consider the various epithets describing the features, forms, and attributes of Sarasvati.

The epithet that occurs quite a few times in Rigveda describing the charm and elegance of Sarasvati is *Shubhra*, used as an adjective of Sarasvati. This epithet represents the full moon night, depicting the pure white brightness and serenity. Also, it is symbolic for the waters of Sarasvati which are pure, neat, and clean. The cleanliness and purity of its water symbolises its pure beauty and goddess Sarasvati is also considered to be goddess of *vak*, *speech* and in this way *varna*, *pad* and *vakya* are taken to be her limbs, and the meaning her soul. Knowledge is symbolised by the white light and aptly she is called *Shubhra*. Her association with epithet *dhiyahvasuh* arises from *dhih* and *vasuh* meaning intellect, knowledge and rich and wealthy.

The concept of mother goddess has also been attached to Sarasvati as is that of fertility. The function of nourishing and looking after is related to mother and that is how this association becomes even more feasible. The connotations like *ambitama*, *sindhumata* and *mata* depict her attributes as mother goddess, and in Vedic hymns like Mandal VI 49.7, 61.4, she is invoked for food, riches and progeny. In a hymn, Sarasvati is shown descending from parvata to the ocean, clearly indicating its genesis from the mountains. In Mandal X, the hymn 64.9 portrays clearly the dual character of Sarasvati as a river and a goddess along with Sarayu and Sindhu which clearly points to the tradition of deifying the ordinary rivers once they were conceived as indispensable for survival and growth.

The epithet *Saptsvasa*, has been variably interpreted by the scholars, but the most familiar interpretation is that of its association with the rivers, particularly the seven rivers of the north to whom due importance was assigned, namely Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Sutlej, Ravi, Beas and *Marud Vridha*. This epithet presents the Sarasvati as a sister but there are different interpretations attached to this epithet.

Sarasvati has been identified in various hymns of Rigveda as giver of wealth, giver of pleasure, bestower of offspring, and giver of food. There are some special characteristics associated with the deity Sarasvati as *Vajinivati* as bestower of food, *Pavaka* as purifying, *Ghrithachi* as showering waters and the like.

The changing dimensions of the characteristics of Sarasvati find mention in Yajurveda where again, firstly she is depicted as goddess, and a river, and of course the goddess of speech. A verse from Yajurveda, “*dhiyo vishva virajati*”, mentions her as a goddess of speech. The unique exposition of Sarasvati in Yajurveda is that of a physician. In the description of *Sautramani*, which is performed by gods to appease Indra and *Bhesaj* sacrifices, she is presented as a physician wherefore Ashvins stand by her. In this sacrifice all gods play the part of physicians, but the role played by Sarasvati and Ashvins is the distinguished one.

In Atharvaveda again, she appears engaging with medicines and devices that could cure the various ailments though very few hymns of Atharvaveda refer to Sarasvati. The symbolism of material and abstract is once again dealt with in Atharvaveda where wealth has been described as bringing various miseries and evils to human beings, reflecting badly upon the moral values and bond of righteousness. So, to be free from such evils, one has to resort to Sarasvati, that is, truthful speech that gives rise to noble thoughts and hence noble deeds. Besides this, Atharvaveda associates Sarasvati with the practice of agriculture. Assumed to be the presiding deity of trees, fruits, rice -fields and plants, the Sarasvati is taken as earthly river-goddess, neighbouring areas being described as fit for agriculture. References depict that fields on the banks of the

river were ploughed by Indra, the *Sirapatih*, and Maruts as farmers for growing barley, accentuating its significance for agriculture. Thus, she is not only pious for men but for gods as well. The conception of trinity of goddesses, Sarasvati, Ida and Bharati is also found in Atharvaveda, where a reference dwells on Sarasvati accompanying the latter two and forming the *trideviah*.

The similar depiction of Sarasvati in Brahmanas and other post-Vedic literature is evident. But this representation underwent a huge transformation in Puranic literature. As regards the origin of Sarasvati, we find different account in Puranic literature. As in *Matsya* and *Padma Purana*, the Sarasvati is referred as produced by Brahma, the great creator, who can be compared to the Prajapati of Rigvedic times, who having produced Vedas and *Shastras* from his mouth, ten mind born sons, produced Savitri from the half portion of his body as a female form as his wife, who was gifted with the faculty of the creation of the world. A similar story follows in *Vayu Purana* where Brahma asked Purusha to separate his male and female parts into two and he did the same. In *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, it is held that Sarasvati was born from the mouth of *Parvatman*.

Anthropomorphosis is a noticeable phenomenon in the Sarasvati in the Puranic period where each feature, right from skin to the outfits becomes important. The colour of Sarasvati is an important feature that cannot be ignored. Where in Rigveda, she appears as Shubhra, and physical features have less familiarity, in Puranic times as complete physical aspects are treated as subject of utter importance. Now she has pure white complexion, depicted by epithets like *paramjyotirupa*, *jyotisvarupa*. She is depicted as all white deity despite that she is called *Syama* as well which probably denotes her youth and not the colour. Sarasvati inherits her vehicle, Swan from her father, Brahma and peacock is also alluded to be the vehicle of Sarasvati. Much of such features are the subject of iconographic studies and I shall not take it up here.

References to Sarasvati are also made in the classical sources by writers like Kalidasa, Bharavi, Magha, Bhavabhuti, Dandi, Subandhu, Banabhatta, Bhartihari, Rajshekhar and Kalhana.

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Sarasvati therefore is a deified river representing abundance and might. *Saptasvar*, Sarasvati is revered as best amongst rivers, *naditama* and the divine one amongst the rivers. It has been worshipped throughout the Rigvedic and post Rigvedic times and still finds a place as a deity, disappeared and then the quest for its search has finally met some rewards. Numerous references from the early Indian literary sources definitely point to its presence as a river and later being deified into the goddess which has throughout the historic phase undergone a paradigmatic shift. An attempt has been made to show such transformation by citing examples from the sources. But the topic yet remains open to the investigation of scholar and historians.

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