

Devi Sarasvati

Sarasvati is one of the few important goddesses in the Vedas who remain significant in modern Hinduism. In the Vedas her character was clearly associated with the mighty Sarasvati River. As a river goddess she is worshiped for her ability both to cleanse and to fertilize. Later Vedic literature (the Brahmanas) consistently associates her, even equates her, with the goddess of speech (Kinsley 55-64). In later Hinduism Sarasvati is more worshipped as the goddess of learning than as a sacred river. The goddess Sarasvati represents a very early example of the tendency in the Hindu tradition toward affirming the land itself as holy. The river goddess Sarasvati of the Vedas is a prototype of such important later river goddesses as Ganga and Jumna. In Vedas it is stated, rituals were often performed on the banks of Sarasvati that give us an idea of purifying powers of the river (Kinsley 55). Sarasvati's color is white. It defeats even the light of a core of a moon. From the Vedic times whiteness and purity was associated with the river, regarding the color of goddess. And the whiteness of the Sarasvati comes by the transference from the river itself (Ghosh 24).

In later Hinduism Sarasvati's connection with a river steadily decreases. Although in some later sources she continues to be associated with a river, her characteristics and appearance increasingly bear no relation to a goddess who embodies the mighty river. In the *Asvalayana Grhyasutra* Sarasvati is invoked to give intelligence to the new born child. In the *Grhyasutra of Paraskara* Sarasvati is also asked to bestow insight and intelligence upon her worshippers (Ghosh 19). In the Epic *Ramayana* Sarasvati is regard as a goddess of speech. In the *Mahabharata* and in the later Puranas connection of Sarasvati with learning has been repeatedly emphasised.

In the Vedic writings, there are numerous references to the river Sarasvati, when Sarasvati is called mighty and powerful. Her heaven-sent stream blesses the terrestrial, atmospheric and celestial regions. She brings fertility to the land. Normally the Vedic fire rituals were performed on river banks since the river has sacred significance. All the sacred rivers are considered to have the purifying powers of flowing waters. The flow of speech, *Vac* is compared with the flow of the river Sarasvati (Wangu 21-44). That is why Sarasvati is called the Goddess of Speech or *Vac Devi*. In later Hinduism, Sarasvati still maintained some association with rivers.

For example, she is related with clouds, thunder and rain. However, Sarasvati is more associated with speech and knowledge in later Hinduism. Her mythological identification with the tongues of Brahma, Krsna, and Visnu also give her the identification with speech or creative sound. Even in the *Rg-veda* Sarasvati is called the impeller of true and sweet speech (Kinsley 54-64).

From very ancient time Sarasvati was worshiped by the Hindus. Generally the Sarasvati Puja (worship of Sarasvati) is held on the Panchami Tithi after Prnima (fifth day of Full Moon). That period is known as “Sukla Panchami”. In the month of Magha (January- February) Hindus worship this goddess of knowledge in a great festive mode. This Sarasvati Puja is an intrinsic part of the Bengali Culture; people of Bengal from all religions enjoy this holy festival. Sarasvati is specially worshiped by students, teachers, and the musicians; however in Bengali culture almost all the Hindus worship goddess Sarasvati. In some Puranas it says from the time of God Krsna people started to worship Sarasvati. Some scholars propose that Sarasvati Puja was held on the “Navami Tithi (i.e., the ninth lunar day) in ancient times rather than on the “Panchami Tithi” as its today (Ghosh 50-54).

Students of all kinds call upon her for success in their studies, In Bengal; it is the custom of girls to wear the basanti (light orange shade) color on Sarasvati day. Students are supposed to fast before the Boi (Book) Puja as this time. Also writing materials, musical instruments and school supplies are placed before the deity’s altar. Books are considered sacred to Hindus as it is also sacred to Sarasvati. So if one accidentally sits or puts their feet on even a page of a book, it is always necessary to perform *pranam* (touch it to the forehead or by hands with respect), as a form of apology for the mistake. Offerings to Sarasvati end with a *puspanjali* (special floral tribute) and everybody chant Sarasvati *stotra* three times.

Most of the children are initiated into writing during this Puja. Parents or elder in the family holds the child and guides its hand to write for the first time, Sanskrit letter-*Aum*. That part of the ritual is known as *hat-a-khri* (First time writing). In Bengal at least, Sarasvati Puja is celebrated in all the educational institutions, no matter whether the majority of the students are Hindus or from other religions. School and colleges are closed all day. Students keep the tribute flower inside of their books as a blessing of Devi Sarasvati. Also on that day of Puja everybody starts to eat kool (plum). After the Puja is over, the '*prasad*' (food that was offered to God first) is

distributed among all the people present. In some places, they make it a point to feed all the poor living in the locality.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Kinsley, David (1986) *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.

Ghosh, Niranjana (1984) *Sri Sarasvati in Indian Art and Literature*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, India

Wangu, Madhu B (2003) *Images of Indian Goddesses: Myths, Meanings and Models*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Brown, Mackenzie C (1990) *The Triumph of The Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devi-Bhagavata Purana*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Related Topics for Further Investigation and Related Websites

Asvalayana Grhyasutra
Ramayana
Mahabharata
Puranas
Vedas
Sukla Panchami
Brahma
Krsna
Visnu

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saraswati>

<http://www.bawarchi.com/festivals/vasant-panchami.html>

<http://www.koausa.org/Gods/God10.html>

<http://www.lotussculpture.com/sarasvati.htm>

<http://www.goddessherself.com/mantras/sarasvati.htm>

<http://www.geocities.com/narenp/history/info/river.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grhya_Sutras

<http://www.valmikiramayan.net/>

<http://www.vedpuran.com/>

<http://www.e-vedas.com/index.htm>

<http://www.krishna.com/>

Written by Shuvro Das (Spring 2006) who is solely responsible for its content.