

Research Article

Saraswati in Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Tradition: A Discussion

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Abstract

Goddess Saraswati is the patroness of art, culture and the fruits of the intellect. In Vedic hymns her name means “lady of the water” or “Flowing one”. The goddess originally derived her name from the river Saraswati. It has been conjectured that the river was attributed with powers of inspiration because many Vedic hymns were composed on its utterance. The Rigveda praises her intellectually refining presence. In puranic mythology she was associated with male deities such as Brahma and Vishnu, but she resumed autonomous status in puranic theologies and came to be worshipped independently. Saraswati became the goddess of learning, giver of wisdom to the newborn, bestower of poetic skill and granter of knowledge and wisdom. Saraswati is also known as the originator of the musical art. The objective of this paper is to show that the river Saraswati gradually in the form of goddess has been associated with intellect and artistic pursuits who pours forth the nectar of knowledge and artistic inspiration, nourishing the mind and spirit of the people. Various Saraswati images found from different parts of India indicate that the river Saraswati has been recognized in both brahmin and non-brahmin traditions overtime as the goddess of wisdom and goddess of music and art respectively.

Keywords

Vishnupriya Mahalakshmi, Brahmin Tradition, Shwetambar Sect, Buddhist Pantheon

1. Introduction

In Rigveda, Saraswati is discussed as 'Agnitame', 'Naditame', 'Devitame', but later she became famous as the goddess of learning and knowledge. In Vedic literature, many words have been used for this goddess, such as - 'Vajinivati' [1], 'Patni', 'Sumatinam Chechanti' (one who gives consciousness to the wise) etc. Other adjectives have also been used for Saraswati such as 'Vaak', 'Vagdevi', 'Vagishwari', 'Vaani', 'Sharada', 'Bharati' etc. In fact, Saraswati in the form of a river gradually transformed into the stream of knowledge [2].

2. Discussion

In mythology, she has been related to the powers of Brahma, Vishnu and Ganesh [3]. Brahma has been counted among the Tridevas (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) of Brahmin religion and He has been associated with the work of creation of the universe. In the Puranas, Saraswati is discussed as Brahma's daughter and sometimes as his power. The depiction of Saraswati with Brahma and the making of idols of them embracing each other began after the seventh century AD. During this period, their depiction with worshippers in the entourage is also visible. Such idols are found in the early

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medieval period from places like Bhubaneswar, Khajuraho, Osia, Halevid etc. The idols of Brahma embracing Saraswati are preserved in the Kandariya Mahadev Temple, Parshvanath Temple, Chitragupt and Vaman Temples. Apart from this, their idols are also available from places like Nalanda, Dhaka etc. in Bengal. The Sattva Pradhana form of Vishnupriya Mahalakshmi that was born from her was called Vedgarbhadhi and Saraswati, white like the moon, holding vakshamala, ankush, veena, book. Saraswati was depicted with Ganesha in the entourage and collectively in many temples of the early medieval period. At some places, their joint depiction is seen in the entourage and the temple's aisles and walls.

Generally, Saraswati is seen sitting on a lotus flower and playing the Veena. Swan is her vehicle which is kept near her feet. Vishnudharmottarapurana discusses that Saraswati should be depicted with four arms and adorned with ornaments. She should be depicted with a gentle face, beautiful appearance and fair complexion. Out of her four arms, a book and rosary should be made in the right hand and Veena and kamandal in the left hand respectively.

Devi Saraswati karyasarvabharanabhusita.

Chaturbhuja sakartvayatathaivachasmuthita.

Pustak Akshamala Cha Tasya Dakshinastayoh.

Vamayaschatatha Karya Vainavi cha Kamandaluh.

Sampadapratishtha Cha Karya Soumya Mukha tatha [4].

In Skanda Purana, She is described as having matted hair, pure, wearing a half-moon on her head, adorned on a lotus seat, having a blue neck and three eyes [5]. From this, it seems that instructions have been given to depict her as Shiva's Shakti also because here in her iconography, the rule of Shiva's iconography is seen or the influence of Tantra is visible.

Apart from this, Roopmandan, Manasar, Shilparatna, Anshumadbhedagam also throw light on her iconography. From about the eighth century AD, independent statues of Saraswati have been carved in sufficient numbers from various places in India, examples of which are mainly seen at many places like Khajuraho, Bhubaneswar, Chandpur, Modhera, Halevid, Velur, Somnathpur, Javagal, Tanjore, Rajasthan, Bengal etc. J. N. Banerjee, Gopinath Rao and Thapar have mentioned many idols of Saraswati [6]. These idols are made of stone, bronze and copper metal. In some examples from South India, the dancing idols of Saraswati as the goddess of music are also noteworthy. In the Hoysaleswara and Shantaleswara temples of Halevid, four, six and eight-handed dancing idols of Saraswati have been carved. Apart from this, there are also dancing idols of Saraswati in Somnathpur, Javagal etc.

Not only this, in the inscriptions of Gupta and post-Gupta period, strong evidence of the presence of Vaakdevi Bhagwati Saraswati has been presented by the eulogists. It was not enough for the king to be a warrior and an imperialist, but it was also an essential condition for him to be a connoisseur of poetry, a poet and a wise man. Hence, the com-

position of 'Kavya Vidhan' in the inscriptions of Gupta and post-Gupta period presents evidence of his being endowed with Saraswati. Prayagprasasti of Samudragupta contains a detailed account of Samudragupta's achievements along with his poetic interests [7]. The third, sixth and some prose parts of Prayagprasasti are strong evidences of the fact that they are trying to establish Saraswati as a repository of knowledge more than increasing the treasury. Similarly, in the Afsar inscription of Uttara Gupta king Adityasen, it is also mentioned that as long as Saraswati is seated in the mouth of Brahma, Adityasen will continue to spread his bright fame [8]. In the Harha inscription written by Ravishanti, the personality of Suryavarma, son of Ishanvarma, is shown to be a confluence of Lakshmi, fame and Saraswati [9]. In the Udai-pur prasasti of king Bhoj, it is discussed about Vaakpatiraja Munj that through his oratory skills, high poetry and reasoning power, he attained proficiency in the scriptures and this was the reason that he was praised by the name of Vakpati Raja because in the true sense he was the master of speech [10]. The book 'Saraswatikanthabharana' written by Parmar ruler Bhoj is the book after seeing which the attack on the stream was started. The Chalukya king Jaisingh Siddharaj was surprised. He called a meeting of poets of his court to write a parallel book to this book. In this Acharya Hemchandra wrote a book parallel to 'Saraswatikanthabharana' and named it 'Siddha-Hem-Shabdanushasan', which is not only a strong witness to the Chalukya king's love for learning - but also an indication of the fact that only political achievements were not enough for the kings, but as a result of mutual competition, poetry writing and excellent creation of royal eulogies got a boost, which gave Saraswati a favorable opportunity to become famous in the kingdom. It can be said that during this period, as a result of political and cultural changes, the kings' attraction towards Saraswati, the symbol of poetic composition, knowledge and scholarship, kept on increasing. Kings were not only striving for heroic achievements, but being blessed with Saraswati gave completeness to their personality [11].

Saraswati was imagined as the deity of Shruti not only in the Brahmin tradition but also in Jainism. The tantric worship of Saraswati has been mentioned by Jain Acharyas like 'Prabhavakarcharitra' written by Prabhachandracharya, 'Prabandhachintamani' written by Merutungacharya, 'Prabandhakosh' written by Rajashekharsuri, 'Kumarpalcharit' written by Jinmandan, Hemchandra, Mallishena, Mallavadi-suri, Narchandrasuri. Initially, Jains used to worship Saraswati as the goddess of Agamic knowledge. It is of special importance that the earliest independent idol of Saraswati was also made in the Jain tradition, which was found from Kankali mound of Mathura. This is from Kushan period. In this idol, the goddess has a book in one hand and a rosary in the other. Along with this, Saraswati's vehicle is a swan and a book, rosary, Varada mudra, lotus and water pot are depicted in her hands [12]. But in the tenth-eleventh century, she became famous as the goddess of music and fine arts and

she started being depicted with a veena in her hands and a peacock as her vehicle.

Worship of Saraswati was very popular in Shvetambara sect but gradually Tantra started entering into it. Two-armed and four-armed Saraswati has been depicted in many temples of Jain tradition such as Kumbharia, Osia, Dilwara, Khajuraho, Halevid, Pallu (Rajasthan). Apart from this, her beautiful depiction is also seen in Neminath temple, Vimalvasahi temple, Loodhvasahi temple. In Bharatikalp, Saraswatikalp, Saraswat Mantra Pooja and Jin Samhita, Saraswati with three eyes and a half-moon adorned matted hair has been described as having a fearsome form and roaring sound [13]. Saraswati worship was not very popular in the Digambara tradition. This is the reason why Saraswati idols are not engraved at Digambara Jain sites like Badami, Aihole and Ellora.

Saraswati has been given special importance in the Buddhist pantheon and in Buddhist texts she has been imagined as the power of Manjusri, the god of knowledge, Prajnaparamita has been shown with a book in her hand. Buddhists have accepted Saraswati as the goddess of memory, intelligence and wisdom. Saraswati is Padmavahana and instructions have been given to display a lotus, book and veena in her hands. She has been described as one-faced and always seated. At some places she has been made two-armed and four-armed also. Many idols of Saraswati are popular in countries like Nalanda, Bihar, Bengal, Tibet, Nepal, China, Indonesia etc. The Saraswati of the Buddhists is influenced by the Brahmin Saraswati but changes in many forms are also visible [14]. Her five main forms are – 'Mahasaraswati', 'Vajravina Saraswati', 'Vajrasharda', 'Arya Saraswati', 'Vajra Saraswati' [15]. It is clear that in Buddhism too Saraswati was the favourite goddess of the Buddhists. This is the reason why Saraswati was worshipped and her idols were made in many countries of India and South East Asia. With the passage of time, the entry of Tantra is also seen in the idols of Saraswati, as a result of which Saraswati started being adorned with many hands and weapons.

3. Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that initially the river form of Saraswati was established as the goddess of knowledge and with time she got associated with music and art. As a result of the special popularity of Saraswati in the early medieval period, many types of sculptures of Saraswati have been depicted in both Brahmin and non-Brahmin traditions.

Author Contributions

Pragya Chaturvedi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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