CHAPTER III

ICONIC FEATURES OF SARASVATI IN THE TANTRIC RELIGION

In the Tantric religion sarasvati in Brahmanism is called variously as Nila sarasvati and Mahasarasvati. They appear to be represented as mother goddess. Of them Nila sarasvati is, by all means, blue complexioned. According to the Srividyarasa-Tantra\(^1\), which presides her with this colour, the hands of the goddess are beautified with blue lotuses as well.

The Tantras also seek of Mahanilasarasvati who is indowed with the same divine characters of Nila sarasvati. She is perfectly indifferent with Nila sarasvati. This Maha-nilasarasvati is, of course, considered as Tara.

In the Devi Mahatmya section of the Markandeya purāṇa the Durga, the premedial energy, appears to be represented as Mahāsarasvati. She is described as seated on lotus-seat. This goddess in the tantras is mostly alluded to as having eight hands. In her four right hands, she holds a mallet, a wheel, a bow and an arrow, while in her four left hand, she bears a conch, a plough, a spear and a bell\(^2\). On the contrary, Sarasvati has also been eulogised by Arjuna variously under the names as Chandī, Durgā etc.\(^3\) But, curiously enough, though we find interesting descriptions of their iconographical characters in the tantric literature they are hardly represented in Indian sculptures and paintings.

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1. Srividyarasra Tantra, II. 1.
2. A.C. Vidyabhudhan, sarasvati (Bengali), p. 93.
3. Ibid., p. 93.
In association with this it is very curious to describe here a more plentiful iconographic features of the goddess vasūli. In the 'Malinivijaya-tantra' Khemaraja, the disciple of Abhinavagupta, describes her along with Vāgīvārī. A.C. Vidyabhūshan is, of course, inclined to identify her with sarasvati. If this identification is to be adopted, we have to cast a look on her iconographic depiction in Indian sculptures and paintings.

In the temple sculptures from Gaya District an image of four-armed sarasvati is shown as holding vina and book in her hands. This goddess is, of course, known as Vasārī (or Vāgīvārī), who is no other than Vasūli. From this account it is certain that sarasvati sometimes appears to be adorned by the devotees under the name as vasūli.

Thus, Amulyacharan Vidyabhūshan also refers to an image of four-armed sarasvati in his book entitled 'Sarasvati'. This figure of the goddess of learning found in the village Nannur of West Bengal is locally known under the name as Vasūli. In this image of the goddess we, of course, find the iconic features of sarasvati. If this vasūli is to be identified with Vāgīvārī, we are inclined to describe this image of vasūli to be the goddess of learning and wisdom.

1. A.C. Vidyabhūshan, sarasvati (Bengali), p. 98
2. Ibid., p. 99.
3. Ibid., p. 99.
Similarly, there is another image of the goddess which is found in the same village of West Bengal. This figure curved in black marble is however, shown wearing various ornaments. She holds a rosary and a book in her upper hands, while her lower hands carry a lute (vina) in her other two remaining hands. It will be very interesting to note here that this goddess appears to be worshipped under the name as Visalakshmi. We undoubtedly find the same iconic features of Sarasvati in this image. This two images of West Bengal are said to have been worshipped by the villagers as the mother goddess.

Considering all these facts it is emphasised that Sarasvati is not only mentioned as the goddess of learning, but also she is described as the great mother goddess in the tantra literature. However, we do not find it as a mere literary theory, even it has also taken iconographical form which is evidently exhibited elsewhere. The goddess Sarasvati also attains very great importance.