Chapter-I

Sarasvatī as a Concept in the early Vedic Literature.

The early Vedic literature represents the deities in the process of their making. Concepts and ideas relating to the spiritual members of the age depicted by them move in between abstract notions and tangible imagery. The Vedic gods and goddesses are generally half-revealed and half-concealed; and this seems to be especially true so far as their anthropomorphic shapes are concerned. No doubt, some of them are visualised as sons and daughters of the heaven and earth, and noted as presiding spirits of innumerable natural phenomena, such as, sky and ether, sun and moon, forests and trees, ponds and brooks, etc; but seldom their personal images are clearly defined. For instance, Visnu of the Vedic period is only a notion, a conglomerate of several ideas; and he is not yet distinctly personified, his iconic traits are far from being crystallised. Again, in the Vedic literature usually the male deities are prominently mentioned, while the goddesses are assigned to a less significant position. However, the Vedic seers attach importance to such female deities as Aditi, the Divine Mother, Usās, the Goddess of Dawn, Prthivī, the Mother Earth, and Vāc, the Goddess of Speech. In comparison Sarasvatī appears to occupy a moderate position in the Rgveda, though she is known both as a river and a goddess:dvividhā hi sarasvatī vigravhat devatā nadi rūpā ca. As a river she maintained the boundary of Brahmāvarta, the home of the early Aryans, and was regarded by them to be the most

1. Sayana on R.v. i, 3, 12.
sacred of all ancient rivers. The priests and sages performed sacrifices to her. As a goddess she is endowed with purifying powers. She is also invoked as a source of vitality, fame and riches. She is found to be associated with the deities like Puṣāṇ, Indra, Maruts, Aśvins and others and formed in particular a triad with two other sacrificial goddesses, viz., Iḍā and Bhārati.

(i) Sarasvatī the river

The word 'Sarasvatī' refers to a 'region abounding in pools and lakes' (sarasvatī sarah ity udaka nāma sartestadvati). It also means flowing, a characteristic applicable both to the river and the goddess of eloquence. As a river Sarasvatī is supposed to sanctify all waters used for worship. From the Rgvedic times she is associated with the mystic number seven, which alludes to the seven great streams flowing through the early Aryan settlements in India. The Avesta also mentions the Hanta-Bindu and the beautiful Haraquiti. The seven people living along the banks of Sapta Sindhu are also referred to in the Rgveda. Again, the Rgveda mentions the nourishment or purification of the Soma by seven sisters of rivers (sapta-vasāro, sapta vahvih.). There is no doubt that even though the number of sacred streams was mythically fixed at seven, the identity of individual members of the group varied from time to time indicating the gradual extension of the Aryan

2. R.v. VIII, 24, 27; vii, 26, 6; v, 43, 1.
3. R.v. viii, 39, 8.
4. R.v. viii, 96, 1. 5. R.v. ix, 86, 36; ix, 92, 4.
settlement to the southeast.

While the assemblage of the seven rivers shifted southeastward the name Sarasvatī came generally to be applied to the eastern most boundary of the advancing Aryan settlement. It has been successively identified with Oxus, the Arghandab in Arachosia, the Gandhara river referred to in the Avesta, the Indus, the Sutlej and the modern Sarsuti. The first two identifications are questionable, but there is at least some justification for identifying it with the four other streams. The association of Sarasvatī with Gandhāra and Gandharvas is very old. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa refers to the bartering of Sarasvatī for the Soma with the Gandharvas by the gods. The Gandharvas are also mentioned in the later literature as having pilgrimages (tīrtha) on her banks, presumably because they were the exponents of music, song and dance. The strong current, the descent from the hills, and the possession of many tributaries and branches, the qualities usually attributed to Sarasvatī make her identification with the Indus easy. But the reference to Sarasvatī's origin in the Mānassarobara, the known source of the Sutlej, points to its apparent oneness with the latter. Besides, the dry bed of a river, archaeologically known as a tributary of Satadru (Sutlej), is to be found in the regions of Patiala, Bhawalpur and Bikaner, and this reminds

7. R.v. vii, 95, 1-2; vi, 62, 2; vii, 36, 6; x, 64, 9.
11. R.v. vi, 61, 2; vi, 61, 8; vi, 61, 13.
The later story of the Purānas regarding Sarasvatī's desication in the deserts. It may, however, be noted that from the time of Manu-Samhitā and the Mahābhārata Sarasvatī came to be identified with the stream which formed the boundary of the 1 Brahmavarta, separating it from the Madhvadeśa, Brahmakaṣṭra or Kurukṣetra, and which was lost in the desert. This indicates the movement of the denotation further east. Whether the river flowed directly into the present Arabian Sea or into a Rajputana Sea is not clear to us for the present, but the literary references make it apparent that it had a direct access to the sea.2

The Sarasvatī is addressed along with the Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Satadru, Parusni and other known and unknown rivers.3 She is also invoked as a great stress,4 and eulogised in various sections of the Rājveda. The rāis performed sacrifices on the banks of this river as also beside the adjoining Drasavati. She was reputed for her sanctity: 'I place thee, Agni, on the abode of Iḍā, on the most excellent spot of the earth, on the most auspicious of days. Shine, so as to enrich us, in a place of human resort, on the bank of Drasavati, the Āpayā, the Sarasvatī.'5 The reason for ascribing sanctity to the Sarasvatī is not far to seek; hymns and sacrifices arose perpetually from the devout Bhāratas on her banks, and even the

3. R.V. x, 75.3.
4. R.V. x, 64, 9.
5. R.V. iii, 23, 4.
origin of the world and the Vedas was sought in the same place. The waters of the Sarasvatī began to be used in the Brahmanic worship in connection with the removal of sins committed at any time of the day or night in the anumāriṣṭa practice. She gradually took the foremost place in the list of the seven streams which are in times imagined as sisters. Thus, the river had acquired a sacred character and was naturally regarded as the patroness of ceremonies which were celebrated on the margin of her holy waters.

(ii) Sarasvatī the goddess

Sarasvatī as a goddess is frequently invited to the sacrifices along with several other goddesses like Iḍā, Bhāratī, Hotrā, Varūṭrī, Dhiṣanā, and is also invoked along with other deities. But she is especially known for intimate association with Indrā and the twin Aśvins. In many a hymn Sarasvatī and Aśvins are praised together. It is they who advised Indrā to slay Namuci, forge the thunderbolt for him out of foam and tend him to recovery. It seems that for her healing properties Sarasvatī came to be associated with the Aśvins, the divine physicians. Again, in the Atharva Veda she appears as curing the worms of the children and poisoning in general, from which her association with Manasa, the goddess of snakes, may be assumed.

1. R.v. i, 23, 22; vi, 49, 7; x, 17, 10.
2. R.v. i. 13, 9; i. 188, 8; iii, 4, 8; v, 5, 8; ix, 5, 8; x, 110, 8.
3. R.v. ii, 30, 8; iii, 54, 13; v, 42, 12; vii, 35, 11; viii, 38, 10; ix, 81, 4; x, 65, 1-13; x, 141, 5.
4. R.v. vii, 61, 13; x, 131, 4.
5. R.v. viii, 14, 13.
6. R.v. x, 131, 5.
Sarasvati is further mentioned along with the rivers which are perennial sources of water for the arable lands. She is one who offers wealth, progeny and vitality - "Ye opulent waters, command riches; ye possess excellent power and immortality; ye are the mistress of wealth and progeny; may Sarasvati bestow this vitality on her worshippers." She is also said to have surpassed all rivers that flow pure waters from the mountains to sea. She tears away like a digger of the roots of plants, the bases of the mountains on her banks with her impetuous and resounding current. She is distinguished by the greatness among the great and the swiftest of the floods; she is the most active and is implored not to withheld her milk, that is her water. She became at once the foremost of the mothers, the best of the rivers and the greatest of the goddesses. Hence, already in the early Vedic period Sarasvatī is found to acquire great divine powers.

Further, a river god called Śarasvatī, conceived as a consort of Sarasvatī, and offering fertilizing waters, is invoked by the worshippers who seek to him wives and offsprings as well as plenty and protection. In the Rgveda, Sarasvatī is called upon to descend from the sky, from the great mountains to the place of sacrifice. She is also mentioned as

1. R.v. x, 30, 12.
5. R.v. ii, 41, 16.
6. R.v. vii, 96, 4-6; R.v. x, 85.
7. R.v. v, 43, 11.
the daughter of lightning (pāviravi kanyā), and the wife of hero (vīrapatnī). She is conjurèd to combine with spouses of the gods for securing protection to the worshippers. Thus a celestial origin is assigned to the river mentioning hfm as the offspring of thunder and rain.

Elsewhere Sarasvatī is said to fill the terrestrial regions and the air and occupies three abodes. She restrains the attack of advancing enemies like an iron-barrier or a fortress and a support. She bestows wealth, and fertility and besought to listen to the prayer of her worshippers at their sacrifices, to receive their praises, to shelter and protect them like a tree, and to grant reputation to the unrenowned. She is represented as having given to Vadryāsva a son, and Divodāsa an incitation to the fulfillment of obligation. She is said to be coming to the place of sacrifice in the same chariot with oblations. Her waters are unctuous with butter and she alone can undertake the supply to Nāhuṣa with butter and milk for a thousand years' sacrifice. Along with Iḍa and Bhāratī she forms the triple

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1. R.V. vi, 49, 7.
2. R.V. vii, 95, 4-6; x, 65, 13.
3. R.V. vii, 95, 1.
4. R.V. vii, 95, 2.
5. R.V. x, 95, 4.
6. R.V. x, 95, 5.
7. R.V. ii, 41, 16.
8. R.V. vi, 61, 1.
9. R.V. x, 17, 8.
10. R.V. vii, 95, 2.
tongue of the sacrificial fire and, because she is identical with speech, pouring of butter (ghee) on her waters was forbidden. She also directs, stimulates and causes prosperity of her devotees. She affords protection, conquers enemies and destroys the abusers of the gods. She is dreadful, moves along a golden path and is a destroyer of Vrtra. The worshippers seek prosperity and riches of all descriptions from her prolific breasts. She being the receptacle of all powers of life, bestows offsprings, and assists procreation.

From the above discussion it is clear that Sarasvatī was conceived by the Vedic ṛṣis primarily as a river and secondarily as a goddess with varied potentialities. Whenever they thought of the river, they thought of the benevolent deity. They prayed to her for permanent shelter, peace and happiness. 'Guide us Sarasvatī to precious wealth, reduce us not to insignificance; overwhelm us not with excess of water; be pleased by the friendly services and access to our habitation and let us not to repair to places unacceptable to thee'. Thus, originally a river deity, Sarasvatī

1. R.v. ii, 1, 11; ii, 3, 8; v, 42, 12; x, 110, 8.
2. R.v. ii, 30, 8; vi, 49, 7.
3. E.V. vi, 61, 3.
4. E.V. vi, 61, 7.
5. E.V. i, 89, 3; viii, 21, 17; x, 17, 8-9; ix, 67, 32; i, 164, 49.
7. P.v. x, 184, 2.
8. R.v. vi, 61, 14.
becomes already in the Rgveda a formidable goddess capable of offering protection, wealth and all other material and spiritual things to her worshippers. Sarasvatī, the river, thus transcends in the concept of the Aryans to Sarasvatī, the omnipotent goddess.

(iii) Vāc and Sarasvatī

We may next try to ascertain the position of Vāc in the Rgveda and the manner in which the two goddesses, Vāc and Sarasvatī, are connected with each other. Vāc is speech personified and is referred to in more than one occasion as an active and important goddess. She herself narrates her origin, association and attributes. She is a goddess who provides sustenance, and nourishment to the holy sages who performed sacrifices and offer oblations to her. As the daughter of Abhrṇa, she praises herself as the supreme universal soul. Literally, Vāc signifies speech, but actually, as we know from the Rgvedic hymns, she is the active power or Sakti of Brahmā and is endowed with the attributes of creation. She is invoked as the ultimate source of primary elements from which the universe came to existence. She is the personification of wisdom and eloquence and is praised as a Muse. The following extract of the Rgveda will reveal her origin, and attributes: "I am associated with the Rudras, the Vasus, the Ādityas and the Viśvdevas. I uphold both the sun and the ocean (Mitra and Varuṇa), the firmament.

2. P.v. x, 125, 1-8.
(Indra), fire (Agni) and both the Áśvins. I uphold Soma, the destroyer of foes and sustain Tvastrī, Pusan and Bhaga. I grant wealth to the devout worshippers who perform sacrifices, offer oblations and satisfy the deities. I am the queen, the conferror of treasures, the possessor of knowledge, the first among the Holy ones and pervader of all beings. He who eats good food through me, as he who sees, who breathes or who hears through me, yet knows me not, is lost. Hear then the faith which I pronounce. I declare that I am worshipped by the gods and men. I can make a man exceedingly mighty, a Brāhmaṇa, a rṣi, a gifted men. I can stretch the bow for Rudra, to slay the fierce enemy of the holy man. I can rouse and order battle for the people and spread through heaven and earth. I bring forth the father on the head of the universal mind; my origin is within the waters, in the midst of ocean from where I extend to all existing worlds and touch heaven with my forehead. It is I who like the wind breathe forth and set all existing world in motion. I am above the heaven and beyond this wide earth and what is the Great one, that am I."

It appears from the above narration that Vāc accompanies all the gods and supports Mitra, Varuṇa, Indra, Agni and the Áśvins. She bends Rudra's bow against the unbelievers. She resides inside the water and encompasses all beings. She is called the queen of the gods and the divines. She is also enumerated as the deity of atmosphere and thunder or as the madhyamikā Vāc, the voice of the middle region.
It is clear from the above that the principal idea underlying the concept of these two deities - Vāc and Sarasvatī is that of good fortune which brings in blissful prosperity and abundance. Sarasvatī as a river goddess offers sustenance and nourishment to the Vedic sages who performed sacrifices on the banks of the Sarasvatī. She is regarded as the holiest of all ancient rivers and called upon to descend from the sky, from the great mountain to the sacrifices.1 She is further described as the daughter of lightning and the wife of a hero. Vāc also resides in the region intermediate between heaven and earth and is supplicated to combine with the spouses of the gods to afford protection to the worshippers. Thus a celestial origin is offered to both the deities and they were known to be the offsprings of thunder and lightning.

Whatever may be the underlying concept behind the association of Vāc with Sarasvatī, it should be noted that in the Rgveda they are represented as two separate deities. It is in the later Vedic literature that the two deities, by the association of ideas, came closer to each other and finally became identified as a single divinity. This identification is possible owing to the fact that both of them possess some common characteristics and are associated with a number of common deities. Sarasvatī is found to be engaged in a healing sacrifice along with Aśvins and through speech she communicates vigour to Indra. Vāc also declares herself as the supreme deity, upholds Indra, Agni and both the Aśvins and

1. R.v. v, 43, 11.
sustains Tvastri, Pusān and Bhaga. The association of Vāc and Sarasvatī with such common deities, especially with the Ásvins, is striking and noteworthy. From such common qualities and associations it is not unlikely that the process of identification of Vāc with Sarasvatī had its beginning in the early Vedic period, but it was completed only in the subsequent times.

We may note that in the Rgveda, Sarasvatī, though acclaimed for so many virtues, is never raised to such power and position as assigned to Vac who is regarded as the supreme, independent and universal soul. Although Vac is eulogised only in two whole hymns of the Rgveda, she is the means of communication between the heaven and earth and as one responsible for the constant assimilation of varied phenomena of the nature to the sacrifice. She is the embodiment of the re-awakening of life at dawn with songs of rejoicing over the new birth of the world. She serves as the ultimate source of primary elements, a representation of spirits and also the means of communication between men and gods. She is depicted as being created by Prajāpati and finally married to him in order to maintain procreation. It may thus be presumed that in spite of her limited references in the Rgveda Vāc plays a vital and significant role in the process of creation and sustentation and precedes Sarasvatī and all other independent and subordinate female deities in the early Vedic pantheon.
The Aryans after entering into India had settled themselves on the banks of the river Sarasvatī having clear and pure waters congenial to a peaceful and religious life. Holy rites and ceremonies were performed there and a new culture had developed around the place. The small tract of land thus becomes a place of pilgrimage and the sacred river attained the position of goddess of abundance and nourishment. Thus the goddess Sarasvatī, originated out of her riverine identity, all through maintained a separate role and in a broader sense had no traditional connection with Vāc, the goddess of speech. To conclude, in the Rāveda Sarasvatī and Vāc are found to be two distinct goddesses concurrently worshipped and invoked by the early Vedic Aryans.