Chapter - XI

Sarasvatī as a Concept in the later-Vedic Literature and the epics.

In the Rgveda Sarasvatī and Vāc are represented as two separate deities. While Sarasvatī is regarded as a deity of secondary importance, Vāc as speech personified occupies a supreme position. Vāc is further recognised as the embodiment of sakti of energetic principle. Although Vāc and Sarasvatī establish close association with Agni, Puṣān, Maruts and Aśvins, they maintain their individual peculiarities throughout the Rgvedic period. As time elapsed the association becomes closer and finally Sarasvatī and Vāc with all their qualities and attributes are identified as a single deity. The river Sarasvatī had subsequently acquired a divine character and was regarded a patroness of ceremonies, which included the chanting of mantras, and had as such prepared the background for identifying her with Vāc, the goddess of speech. In the later Vedic literature Sarasvatī is called the mother of the Vedas, and the same is said of Vāc in the Brāhmaṇas and the Brhat-devatā. No wonder that most of the synonyms of Sarasvatī connect her with speech. As divine wisdom is expressed through speech, Sarasvatī becomes the wife of Brahma and the revealer of Vedic lore. Her intermediate identification Vāc, the female seer of learning, might have expedited the process that raised Sarasvatī to a divine status. Thus the river association of Sarasvatī, so frequently met with in the Rgveda, recedes into the background in the Brāhmaṇa and her divine aspect comes to the forefront. Later on she has
also been mentioned as the wife of Indra, as one who contains within herself all worlds, and being sought after by the sages.

In several passages of the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa Sarasvatī and Vāc are mentioned as a single divinity: 'Flow to Sarasvatī Sarasvatī doubtless is Vāc (sarasvatīni navvasveti; vāgvaī sarasvatī). Vāc is here a female divinity of upper region, the guardian of waters and the bestower of fertility. In an explicit language it is narrated how the works of creation was contemplated by Prajāpati in association with her. Prajāpati desired, "May I multiply, may I be propagated." He pronounced in devotion; he practised austeres-fervour. Having done so he first of all created sacred knowledge, the three-fold Vedic Science. This became a basis for him. Wherefore men may say, sacred knowledge is the basis for the universe. Hence after studying the Vedas a man has standing ground; for sacred knowledge is his foundation. Resting on this basis he (Prajāpati) practised austeres-fervour. He created the water from Vāc (speech) as their world. Vāc was his; she was created. She pervaded all this whatever exists. As she pervaded (ānnot), waters were called āpah. As she covered (avrnnot) all, water was called Vār. Elsewhere it is stated that creation was preceded by speech; a celestial voice without beginning or end was uttered by Svayambhu (i.e. Prajāpati) from which all activities proceeded. According to the Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa, Vāc is an imperishable thing, and the

1. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, xiv, 2, 1, 12.
2. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, vi, 1, 1, 8-10.
3. Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa, ii, 8, 6, 5.
first born of the ceremonials, the mother of the Vedas and the centre-point of immortality. Delighting us, she came to sacrifice. May the protecting goddess be ready to listen to her invocation - she whom the rishis, the composers of hymns, the gods, sought by austere-fervour and by laborious devotion.

In the Brhad-Aranyaka Upanisad Vāc is designated as a cow.

Let a man worship the cow Vāc. She has four udders, each representing a formula, viz., svaha, vasat, hanta and svadhā. The gods live upon her two udders, svaha and vasat; men upon hanta, and the fathers upon svadhā. Breath is her bull, the mind is her calf. Vāc has thus been identified here with cow, and as such reminds us Sarasvāti's similar identification with the same benevolent animal.

In an interesting legend of the Yajurveda the emergence of Vāc and Sarasvāti as a single divinity appears to have been narrated. The gods arranged a healing sacrifice, where Aśvins as well as Vāc as physicians were present and all of them offered vigour to Indra. Elsewhere, Sarasvāti is mentioned as Vāgdevī for the reason that with the help of speech she offered vigour to Indra.

In some of the legends of the Brāhmaṇas, Vāc's independent association with king Soma and the Gandharvas is also mentioned. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa states how king Soma was obtained by the gods from the Gandharvas. The gods and the

1. Brhat ARAanyaka Upanisad, p.892 (Dr. Roer's Edn.).
2. Yajurveda, 19, 12.
rsis desired him and said, 'How shall we get him to come to us?' Vāc said, 'The Gandharvas are found fond of females; buy him in exchange of me turned into a female.' They answered, No, how can we live without thee? She rejoined, 'Buy him and whenever you have occasion for me, I shall return to you.' They agreed, turned Vāc into a female and in exchange of her brought king Soma. The Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa tells the same story, but says that the gods turned Vāc into a woman, one year old; and that after she had gone they induced her by singing and playing on flute to come back.

The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, however, gives a variant of the story and relates that the Soma existed formerly in the sky, while the gods were on the earth. They in order to offer it in the sacrifice sent Gāyatrī to bring it for them. While she was carrying it off, the Gandharva Vībhavasū robbed her of it. The gods knowing the inclination of the Gandharvas for females sent Vāc, the goddess of speech, to get it for them, which she succeeded in doing. It is further stated that Vāc was created by Brahmā who had incontinent love for his own creation. The story relating to this licentious action of Brahmā is further elaborated in the Matsya, Bhāga-
vata and other Purāṇas.

In another legend of the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa the circumstances leading to the transformation of Vāc into a lioness has been mentioned. The gods (Ādityas) performed the Soma

1. Taittiriya Brah, vi, 1, 6, 5.
sacrifice and Agni was there as the officiating priest. At the completion of the rite Vāc was offered to the demons (Angiraya) as a gift (daksina), but the demons refused to accept her on the ground that it would bring misfortune for them. When Sūrya (the Sun) was selected as her substitute, and the demons were pleased to accept him, Vāc being displeased took the form of a lioness and began to kill the gods and the demons. Finally, at the mediation of Agni Saharakṣa the dispute was settled up and Vāc remained with the gods. The story relating to the transformation of Vāc as a lioness is also stated in the Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa (iii,187).

The Satapatha Brāhmaṇa also mentions that Sarasvatī along with other gods and goddesses takes away all the attributes of the goddess Śrī who brings in blissful prosperity and abundance. There it is stated that Prajāpati got tired in creating beings and Śrī came to him while he was in the fatigue. The gods and goddesses were envious of her beauty and resplendence and wanted to kill her. But Prajāpati dissuaded them from doing so, as she was a female and asked them to take away all her qualities sparing only her life. Agni, Soma, Varuṇa, Indra, Mitra, Brhaspati, Sāvitrī, Pusān, Sarasvatī, and Trāstrī took away from her food, kingdom, universal sovereignty, noble rank, power, holy lustre, dominion, wealth, prosperity and beautiful forms, respectively. Hence we note that Sarasvatī obtained the virtue of prosperity from the goddess Śrī.

However, afterwards on Prajāpati's advice, Śrī restored all her qualities by offering ten sacrificial dishes to the ten divinities. It is further related in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa.
that Sarasvatī by curing Indra received ram and ewes as her reward. Thereafter ram became associated with Sarasvatī. 'He-goats are sacred to Áśvins, ewes to Sarasvatī and cows (and bulls) to Indra; they say: if these animals are sacrificed, he (the sacrificer) by means of these deities gains those (three) animals.'

A close study of the later Vedic literature shows that during the period of their composition the two Rgvedic deities, Vac and Sarasvatī became identified. But in some of the myths, connecting Vāc with Soma and the Gandharvas, she figures as an individual having no immediate connection with Sarasvatī. However, on several occasions, the Brāhmaṇas clearly states that the concepts of the two Rgvedic deities, Vac and Sarasvatī, whose origin and attributes were primarily different, came to be combined together and were completely identified. The amalgamation, transformation and identification of these two deities had passed through several stages and ultimately led to the formation of the new concept of Vāgdevī. On the banks of Sarasvatī the Vedic rituals were practised and mantras were recited, these sacred activities sanctified the river and ultimately turned into a deity. Again, Vāc or speech, an element indispensable for the spread and development of scriptures, was also personified as a deity. These two deities, notwithstanding their separate and individual peculiarities, are found mentioned as a single divinity in the Brāhm-

manas, wherein Sarasvatī and Vāc are regarded as the same goddesses - 'Sarasvatī is Vāc' (vāgvai sarasvatī).

In the Mahābhārata Sarasvatī is called the mother of the Vedas (Vedāham mātaram naṁga) and the daughter of Brahmā (ṛta brahmāsūtā devī). The same is said of Vāc in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (Vāc aksaraṁ prathamajā rtasya Vedānam mātā amṛtasva nābhīh). Again, it is related in the great epic that prior to the creation of the universe when the Brahmārsis were performing austerities, 'a voice derived from Brahmā entered into the ears of them all; the celestial Sarasvatī was then formed out of the heaven.' She is further described as 'devī Jīhvā sarasvatī' and 'jīhvāyam Vāc sarasvatī.'

In the Bhīṣma-parvan of the Mahābhārata Acynta (Krṣṇa) is said to have created Sarasvatī and the Vedas from his mind. Gāyatrī who is identified with Sarasvatī is also called the mother of the Vedas in the Vanaparvan. Moreover, some information about Sarasvatī's position during the days of the composition of the great epic may be had from the Tārkṣya Sarasvatī Sātvatā in the Vanaparvan. Markandeya related how Sarasvatī instructed Tārkṣya about the celestial

2. Ibid: verse 13234.
3. Taittirīya Brāhman: 11, 8, 8, 5.
regions and especially about the virtues of different scriptures to the Brāhmaṇas. Then she spoke of the Agnihotra sacrifice where she had come to clean away the doubts and misunderstanding of the priests (Brāhmaṇas). Thereafter Tārksya addressed her as a deity of wisdom and intelligence, and wanted to know her origin and attributes. She disclosed that she was created out of the good works of the sacrifice. She could remove the doubts of the sages and was able to show the paths leading to the attainment of salvation. She advised Tārksya to perform the Agnihotra sacrifice in order to enjoy the supreme bliss or happiness.

The details of the pilgrimages around the banks of the Sarasvatī, the sacred river, have also been narrated in the Mahābhārata. But this description differs much from that of the Vedas. In the Vedas Sarasvatī is a large and rapid river flowing from mountains to the sea. In the Mahābhārata the same river is described as a stream that loses itself in the sand. This river, wide and rapid during the floods, contains little water in other seasons of the year. In theṚgveda nothing is said of the disappearance of Sarasvatī in the sand. Though it is difficult to determine specifically the time when Sarasvatī had disappeared in the desert, it is at least possible to state that the river lost much of its potentiality sometime after the Vedic age, but before the composition of the Šalva-parvan of the Mahābhārata, when the water of the sacred river did no longer flow to the sea.
According to the *Manu Samhita*, the narrow tract called the Brahмavarta lying between the Sarasvati and the Drдadvati had been for a considerable period the seat of some of the most distinguished sages of ancient time. As a result several Brahmanical institutions and pilgrimages grew up along the banks of the Sarasvati. These places became famous for collection and compilation of the hymns of the *Vedas*. Thus it is easy to ascertain why sacred character was assigned to the small tract of land lying between the Sarasvati and the Drдadvati. The *Mahбabhбrata* also attaches great importance to the sacredness of this river. It states, "Those who dwell in Kuruksetra, south of the Sarasvati and the north of the Drдadvati dwell in heaven." It further states that "it is a place where the beautiful and sacred river used to flow previously and it has now been the spot where the Sarasvati disappears. Here is the gate of the country of the Nisбdas and it was owing to her hatred for them that she sank into the earth." From the *Mahбabhбrata* we may further learn that Valadeva (Valarбma) proceeded to Vinбśana where the Sarasvati became invisible in consequence of her contempt for Sudбras and Abhirбas. Nevertheless, Vinбśana was the abode of Vyбёд, the compiler of the *Vedas* and the *Purбnas*. Sometime when the *Vedas* had fallen into disuse and were forgotten, the priests (i.e. the Brбhmaṇаs) were then instructed by

Sārasvata, the son of Sarasvatī, about the Vedas. It is stated that a twelve years' draught occurred; the great rṣis travelled hither and thither in search of food and thus lost the Vedas (teṣām kṣudhā parītānām nastāḥ veda abhidhāvatām). Even the great sage Sārasvata was about to depart, but was dissuaded by Sarasvatī. She said, "Go not hence, my son; I shall give you excellent fish for food." He accordingly remained there and preserved the Vedas (prānām veda-vināca dhārayam) and communicated them again to the rṣis at their desire.

The Mahābhārata has further mentioned that it was on the banks of the Sarasvatī that Kṛṣṇa, Bhārata and Vāla-khilya had performed sacrifices and the place was described as a sacred one (punyatīrtha). The Daivatavana and the Kāmyakavana were on the banks of the Sarasvatī and the Pandavas dwelt on it; the hermitage of Dadhīci was also situated on its bank. It is further stated that at the sacrifice of Yajati, the Sarasvatī produced milk (dugdham) and thickened milk (ksiram) and the sage Vasistha praised highly of her sacredness. She had risen from the Mānasa lake (pitāmahaśya sarasah) and the whole universe was filled with her waters. She is the source of growth (pusti), splendour (dyuti), fame (kīrti), success (siddhi), intellect (buddhi), speech (vāc) and consecration (svabhā). It was finally stated in the

2. Ibid: appendix.
in the Mahabharata that the sixteen hundred wives of Krsna had plunged into the waters of the Sarasvatī.

From the above passages it would at least appear that there had been a time when the sacred stream did not lose itself in the sand. It seems that while during the Vedic period the Sarasvatī flowed throughout the year; it turned to be a seasonal river in the days when Kṛṣṇa made his exploits. Although the Vedic account of the Sarasvatī differs much from those of the Mahābhārata, it is very unlikely that the river to which so important a position is assigned in the Brahmanical writings, could ever have lost its identity, or that its name and sacred character could have been transferred to another stream. It is almost certain that the Sarasvatī of the present day is the river mentioned in the Vedas and the Mahābhārata. It had been the resort of pilgrims from the earliest time; and it flowed through the holy land of Kurukṣetra which was sacred even before the war wars of the Mahābhārata, but the river became lost to sand during the last phase of its composition. Thus, the Mahābhārata being composed in a period covering eight hundred years, say from 500 B.C. to 300 A.D., the Sarasvatī may be assumed to have been disappeared in the desert in the first or the second century A.D. We may, therefore, note that the river concept of the deity continued to the date of the Mahābhārata, though she is found to be developed as a deity concept already in the Ṛgveda. Thus, in spite of a steady conceptual emergence of Sarasvatī as a goddess found in the later Vedic
literature, the entire period depicted therein as also the period of the great epic continues to be a phase of transition between the Vedic and the Puranic concepts regarding her. It is also to be noted in this connection that there is hardly any reference of Vāc and her association with Sarasvatī in the Mahābhārata, which is a significant departure from the early Vedic trend, and thus Sarasvatī is fully established both as a deity and a river during at least the last period of composition of the great epic.