CHAPTER IV

Vedic Rivers

Sindhu and Saraswati
4.1 Vedic Rivers

In the Vedas we have references of Nadi and Sindhu being used for rainy waters, and water flowing on the earth respectively. Rg III.33 and X.75 are the two suktas, which are mainly dealing with rivers.

Many rivers and river valleys worldwide have played a significant role in the evolution sustaining and development of civilizations. Notable amongst these are Nile, Tigris – Euphrates, Sindhu (Indus) and Hwang Ho – yang Tsekyang. Mighty civilizations grew up on the banks of these great river systems. These rivers not only catalyzed the production of crops but also facilitated their growth of trade by providing convenient transport lines.

In the Rg Veda X. 75.5

इर्मं मे गड़गे बुशुने सरस्वति श्रृणुति,
स्तों च वर्ता परहृत्या
असिक्नि गरुद्रुधे विसत्याः अंकिने
श्रुणुतया सुवर्ष्यतम ॥

Rg Veda X. 75.5

“Accept this my praise Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswathi, Sutadri, Parusni, Marudvradha, with Asikni, and Vitasta; listen Arjikiya, with Susoma.

These are all the names of rivers found in the Rig Veda. According to Roth, “Literature and History of the Veda PP.136-140, Parusni is another name of Iravati, Arjikiya is same as Vipasa and the susoma is the Sindhu."
Atharva defines the word nadi as ----

यदाः सप्तवतीरावननतर हो ।
तस्माद नदोः नाम स्थता वो नाम नितिनवतः ॥

Av. III 13.1

"नदनाम नदः"

The force of attraction of clouds, which are oppositely charged, brings lightning and thunder. Rain comes with a roar. Also it can be said Ahi the Dragon, Vrtra, the chief demon who keeps the waters of heaven imprisoned in the dark cloud. When the clouds are destroyed by Indra, the water flows with a roar. Hence they are called the roaring ones.

दिवि स्वाने रत्नेषु भूषयोपर्ययतः
शुभमुद्वित भानुगा ।
अम्रादिव न रत्नयतिः वृष्टवः
सिन्धुवदितिः वृष्णवोऽरोहुवत् ॥

Rg X.75.3

The sound pervades in heaven above the earth, Sindhu with shining wave animates his endless speed; as rains issue thundering from the cloud, so Sindhu when he advances roaring like a bull.

The application of the terms Nadi and Sindhu respectively in the senses of rainy waters and rivers show that vedic culture flourished by the period when oceans were not formed on the earth and the rivers were in the process of formation. Due to non formation of oceanic waters by the time of evolution of this culture, the terms Samudra and arnava were also used to denote mid sphere rather than oceans. As per researches in Geology the ancient most mountains and the oceans were formed on the earth in the

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precambrian or algonic era i.e., between 250 to 60 crores of years ago. The vedic culture which has recorded its history since 197 crore years ago (According to H.H.Wilson) clearly reveals that the oceans and mountains were formed on this earth with in the range or 197 crore years. In fact the Vedic literature was composed when there were no mountains and oceans visibly appeared on the earth.

The recent study of sciences show that any organism can grow only in fresh water and not in salt water. In that way the Nasadiya Sukta of Rgveda emphasizes about fresh water only. Saraswati was the name of first river system that originated on the earth. The very first appearance of this river system on the earth owes to the clouds. The most celebrated Rigvedic seer Vasistha had clearly observed its origin from the celestial parvatas i.e. clouds. According to him -----

आ नो विचो ब्रह्म: पर्वतावर सरस्वती यज्ञता गन्धु यज्ञः ।
हवं देवी जुजुशाणा भ्रुताचि श्रम्भां नौ वाचुमुखाति श्रुपोतु ॥

Rg V. 43. 11

May the radiant Saraswati come to the sacrifice from the heavens or the spacious firmament, may the Goddess, the showerer of water, propitiated by our invocation, and desirous of our gratifying praises hear.

From the great celestial parvatas (clouds) Saraswathi flows towards the Yajna cite. It hears the voice of a person who offers the oblation of ghṛta with the desire of receiving it. Not only Vasistha, but also another seer had it
the same way. According to him Saraswathi used to flow from the ‘giris’ (clouds) to ‘Samudra’ sea.

एकाचेतत्र सरस्वती नदीनां सुविन्याति
गिरिश्च आ समुद्रात्

Rg VII 95.2

The concept of first origin of Saraswati from clouds also shows that the Vedas were composed at the time when there were no mountains and no glaciers on the earth. It marks the period before the origin of glaciers on this part of the earth. Geologists have traced the appearances glaciations on this part of the globe in Triassic period i.e. around 22 crore years ago. So there is nothing wrong if we inter that the vedic hymns containing the description of the origin of rivers from clouds were composed before glaciations.

4.2 Vedic Sindhu

According to Vedic seers Sindhu includes seven rivers.

अन्धरो वाषो अभवसतिभृजः
सुके यत्वा प्रवचनेव एकः
अन्तयो गा अन्तयः शुर्र
सोमवाशुण्डः सतवि सचिस्मूः

Rg I. 32.12

When the single resplendent Vrtra returned the blow, Indra, by your thunderbolt, you became furious, like a horse’s tail. You have rescued the
kine you have won, Hero, the Soma Juice, you have let loose the seven rivers to flow”.

The simile “Like a Horses tail” says that Indra swings his thunderbolt to keep his tail to get rid of the flies. This particular Sukta of Rigveda says that Indra let the seven rivers from the custody of Vritra. According to Puranas the Ganga divided on its descent into seven streams, termed the Nalini, Pavani and hladini, going to the east; the Caksu, Sita and Sindhu, to the west; and the Bhagirathi or Ganga proper to the South. In one place in the Mahabharata, the seven rivers are termed Vasvaukasara, Nalini, Pavani, Ganga, Sita, Sindhu and Jambunadi. In another Ganga, Yamuna, Plaksaga, Rathasthan, Sarayu, Gomathi and Gandaki. In a text quoted and commented on by Yaska, we have ten rivers named Ganga, yamuna, Saraswati, Satudri, Parusuni, Asikni, Marudvrdha, Vitasta, Arjikiya and Susoma [Rg X.75.5]. Of these the Parushni is identified with the Iravati, the Arjiki with the Vipasa, and the susoma with the Sindhu – Nirukta 3.26.

The original enumeration of seven appears to be that which has given rise to the specifications of the Puranas. [Wilson Rg. Vol. I Page. 82].

Atharva Veda also mentions ---

SaptaSindhu:

यावती यावता पूर्णियें वरिष्णा
यावतस्प सिद्धयो वित्विद्वते ।

Av. IV. 6.2

As great as heaven and earth by their width as much as the seven rivers spread out ------
O’ child of the waters, ye seven rivers protect us, let Vishnu protect heaven and us.

This Sukta is about extolling Rudra, says thus “I generated earth and heaven. I generated the seasons, the seven rivers”.

The word Sindhu in the Vedas meant both river and ocean. Some times Sindhu is regarded as water deity. Thus the verse I.122.6 of Rg.

“May the Sindhu, the renowned bestower of wealth, hear us, fertilizing our broad fields with water”. Here Sindhu said to mean the deity presiding over water.

"Dwelling on the banks of the Sindhu", here Sindhu adhi means, up on the river Sindhu.

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“May Ahirbudhnya grant us happiness, may Sindhu come, nourishing us as a cow her calf”. Thus here Sindhu is the name of the river.

The reference to Sindhu is also seen in the last verse of the Suktas from 1.94 to 1.115 of the Rig Veda. Thus it contains

“सिन्धु पृथिवी उत बौ।”
“तन्न फिनी वरणो मायहसामवतिः,
सिन्धु पृथिवी उत बौ।”

Here Agni is praised to prolong the existence and Mitra, Varuna, Aditi Ocean, earth and heaven have been asked to preserve it. Sindhu is identified with flowing water. It may mean either the sea, or flowing streams collectively or the river Indus.

In some of the mantras boat or ship is mentioned thus –

स न: सिन्धुमिव नाववति पश्च स्वस्तये।
अप न: शोषुबद्वश्च।

Rg I.97.8

“Do you convey us in a ship across the Sea, for our welfare may our sin be repented of”.

स न: पश्च दशु तुराणि विश्वा
नाहि सिन्धु दुरितालय्यनि।

Rg I.99.1

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“May Agni convey us, as in a boat over a river, across all wickedness”. From 1.94 to 1.115 Rg, Kutsa Angirasa is the seer.

र्गे दो रसानित्या कुषा कुरुमा
व: सिन्धुनितिरमण ।

Rg V. 53.9

Let not the Rasa, the Anitabha, the Kubha or the wide roving ocean delay you. Kramuh Sindhu is explained as——

सर्वत्र क्रमणः समुद्रः - the every where going ocean.

Not only Sindhu some other rivers like Sarayu and Saraswati were also regarded as great rivers.

सरस्वती सरयु: सिन्धुरमितिमयः
महीरस्वस्य चनु वल्नीः ।

Rg. X 64.9

May the very great rivers, Saraswati, Sarayu, Sindhu come with their waves for protection.

In the Sukta X. 75 of the Rig Veda many rivers were praised with Sindhu. This Sukta can be called as Nadi Sukta since it mentions many rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sutudri, etc. But with all this Sindhu is praised and placed high, which is evident from the Mantras.
Straight – flowing, white coloured, bright shining Sindu bear along in its might the rapid waters, the invocable Sindhu, the most efficacious of the efficacious, is speckled like a more beautiful as a handsome woman.

The Sindhu is rich in horses, rich in Chariots, rich in cloths, rich in gold ornaments, well made, rich in food, rich in wool, ever fresh, abounding Silama plants and the auspicious river wears honey growing flowers. Atharva Veda quotes the medicinal value of the river Sindu, since it comes from the snowy peaks and it is regarded as heavenly water. Thus AV VI.24.3 says——

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“Whose spouse is the Indus, whose king is the Indus, all ye streams that are – give us the remedy for this for that we enjoy you”.

Rg Veda mentions the following Rivers. Saraswati, Sindhu, Gauri Rasa, Jahnavi, Vipas, Sutadri, Apaya drisadvati, Parusui, Yamuna, Kubha, Krumu, Anitabha, Ganga, Askni, Gomati, Arjikiya, Susoma, Sarayu, Mehatun, Sveti, Susartu, Vitasta, Asmanvati etc.

The names of the rivers in the Rgveda have always formed the basis for any analysis of RigVedic geography. The Map shows the flow of different rivers.

4.2.1 History behind the sacred river

The Aryans flourished in the fertile province of today’s Punjab, which they called the region of seven rivers – Saptasindhu [can be compared with Rg X. 75 Nadi Sukta]. Then in some course of time Aryans have moved from Saptasindhu region to the river valley of river Ganga and Yamuna, where several tiny kingdoms were established.

The mighty Sindhu River symbolizes the power and permanence of the ancient Indian civilization, which evolved over a period of thousand of years. The archaeological discovery of the Indus valley civilization, which flourished along its banks, has reinforced the antiquity of the Indian civilization.

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The name *Sindhu* of the *Vedas* is the source of the country’s name. Words like *Hindu*, *Hindustan* and *India* have been derived from *Sindhus* and ‘*Indus*’, the name given to *Sindhu* by foreigners.

The journey of *Sindhu* through India transports one to a civilization going back to 5000 years. The *Indus Valley civilization* is synonymous from *Harappa* and *Mohenjodaro*. This great *Trans – Himalayan River* is one of the longest rivers in the world with an astonishing length of 2900 k.m. Rising in South – western Tibet, at an altitude of 16,000 feet, *Sindhu* enters the Indian Territory near Leh in Ladakh.

After flowing eleven miles beyond Leh, *Sindhu* is joined on the left by its first tributary, the *Zanskar*, which helps green the *Zanskar Valley*. Many interesting mountain trails beckon the mountaineering enthusiasts to the *Zanskar Valley*. The *Sindhu* then flows past Batalik. The mighty *Indus*, when it enters the plains, is joined by its famous five tributaries, *Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej* – giving Punjab – “The Land of five rivers” – as its name.

### 4.2.2 Historical Perspective

*Sindhu* is divine. The *RgVeda* refers to *Ganga* only twice but it makes as many as thirty references to *Sindhu*. When the *Vedic seer* invokes heaven and earth he also invokes the *Sindhu*
सिन्धु: पृथ्वी उत्तर शी:

Rg I. 94.16

"May ocean, earth and heaven preserve it to us".

In the Ramayana, Sindhu is seen to be given the title "Mahanadi", which means ‘the mighty river’.

In the Mahabarata the Sindhu is reverently mentioned along with other two holy rivers, the Ganga and Saraswati. References to the Sindhu are also seen in many ancient literary works like those of "Kalidasa", "Bana", and 'Panini'. The fame of the mighty Sindhu had spread even beyond the subcontinent and it found reflections in the literary works of the Greek and Roman empires. It finds mention in some of the earlier literature of India. Kalidasa says in the “Raghuvasma” that on the advice of his maternal uncle Yudhajat, Rama conferred Sindhu on Bharata. Rama’s ancestor Raghu’s horses had relaxed on the banks of the Sindhu.

The Bhavishya Purana says that Shalivahana, the grandson of Maharaja Vikramaditya of Ujjain, established law and order in “Sindhustan” and fixed his frontier on the Sindhu.

4.2.3 Legends

There is a legend that the great Buddha had graced Sindhi with his visit. Finding the climate extreme, and the area dry and dusty, he had permitted the “Bhikshus” to wear shoes here. When Buddha went round his
native Kapilavastu in a chariot, it was mentioned that the “four auspicious horses of lotus color, had come from Sindhudesh.

To this day, historic Buddhist Stupas are found in Sindhu. Chandragupta Maurya first won Sindhu and then Punjab. It was from this base that he displaced the Nandas, occupied Pataliputra and established the great Mauryan Empire.

Sindhu was part of Dasaratha’s empire. When Kekayi goes into a sulk, Dasaratha tells her,

“The sun does not set on my empire. Sindu, Sauvira, Saurashtra, Anga, Vanga, Magadha, Kashi, Koshal, they are all mine”. When Ravana kidnapped Sita, Lord Rama sent the Vanaras to look for her, among other places, in Sindh with its “remarkable swimming horses”.

Kashmir’s ancient royal history Rajatarangini has many, references to Sindh and Sindhis. Kuya’s son Sindhu rose to lead the elephant brigade of Kashmir. He was advisor to queen Dida. A top honor was named after Sindhu, “Sindhu Gaja”, “Elephant of Sindh”.

4.2.4 Sindhu Darshan:

The Sindhu Darshan or Sindhu festival aims at projecting the “Indus” as a symbol of India’s unity and communal harmony. Whilst promoting tourism to this area, this festival is also a symbolic salute to the brave

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soldiers of India. *Sindhu* stands for peaceful co-existence, a symbol of our country’s identity and civilization. The “Sindhu Yatra” will help to forge a bond of unity with those who live in far-flung corners of the country, thus providing them an opportunity to visit the beautiful region of *Ladakh*.

4.3 Vedic Saraswati

"आ मे धनं सरस्वती पवसति च शान्तयः।"

Av 19.31.10

There are numerous references to river *Saraswati* in the ancient literature of the *Vedic* and post *Vedic* period. *RigVeda* describes *Saraswati* as a mighty river with many individually recognized tributaries. *Saraswati* is the symbolic name of “Vak”, “Goddess of learning”. But what it is peculiar is that *Saraswati* in the Vedas occur not only as a symbol of *Vak* but also as a river and that also not as any feeble one but as one of the mightiest rivers of the then Indian, than the *Sindhu* itself. *Saraswati* according to the *Rig Vedic* account emerges from the mountains, breaking the mountain ranges by her tremendous stream and merges into sea. Rg VI. 61.2

"इयं शुभेभिविस्वन्ध्र्व इवारुजयोऽस्तु गिरीणां तवधेशुरुणिभिः।
परावतस्वीवस्ते सुभुविभिः सरस्वतीमविवासेन शीतिभिः।।"

Seer *vasistha* says that it is a mighty river flowing clear water from the mountains to the sea. Rg. VII. 95.2

"एकाचेतत्त्व सरस्वती नदीनां शुभिभि गिरिभ्य आ समु दात।"

*Vedic Rivers*

*Sindhu and Saraswati*
Saraswati is one of the few important Goddesses in the Vedas who remain significant in later Hinduism. In the Vedas her Character and attributes are clearly associated with the mighty Saraswati River. She is the earliest example of a Goddess who is associated with a river in the Indian tradition. As a river Goddess she is praised for her ability both to cleanse and to fertilize.

“अभितमे नदीतमे देवितमे सरस्वति।
अग्रवस्ता हि स्मरि प्रशस्तिमयै नस्त्रुष्य।”

Rig. II. 41.6

“Saraswati” best of mothers, best of rivers, best of Goddess we are as it were, of no repute, grant us, mother distinction.

“इष्म ब्रह्म सरस्वति जुष्मवालनविनविन।”

Rg II. 41.18

“Saraswati, abounding in food, abounding in water, be propitiated by these oblations”.

Later Vedic literature (the Brahmanas) consistently associate her, even equate her with the Goddess of speech. Increasingly in her later history her association with river is de-emphasized and her association with speech poetry, music and culture in general is affirmed. In classical and medieval Hinduism, Saraswati is primarily a goddess of poetic inspiration and learning. She is associated with the creator God Brahma. Saraswati to this day is worshiped throughout India by school children as the patron Goddess of learning.
4.3.1 Saraswati as a River:

*Saraswati* as the embodiment of the *Saraswati River* is significant in both a historical and a theological sense. The religion of the Vedic Aryans was primarily a portable religion. It centered on a fire cult that did not require permanent temples or places of worship. The domestic hearth itself was a center of worship. By and large vedic religion was appropriate for a nomadic people or for a people who only recently had ceased to be nomadic. In fact the *Aryans* of the Vedas migrated into Northwest India sometime during the 2nd millennium B.C. and gradually spread throughout the subcontinent in the course of many generations. The reverence given to *Saraswati* as the embodiment of a *river* in Northwest India is important because it indicates that the *Aryans* had begun to identify their culture with a specific geographical location and were beginning to settle down to a non-nomadic way of life.

The transition from a nomadic to an agricultural, village culture is central in the transition from the religion of the vedic *Aryans* to classical Hinduism. In classical Hinduism, India herself is affirmed to be the center of the world the navel of the earth, the special and sacred location of the divine. This is dramatically specified in the sacrality of many individual features of the Indian subcontinent, especially the sacredness of the major rivers of the land. The *Goddess Saraswati* then, represents a very early example of this tendency in the Hindu tradition toward affirming the land itself as holy. The
river Goddess *Saraswati* of the Vedas is a prototype of such important later river Goddess as *Ganga* and *Yamuna*.

The river Goddess *Saraswati* is also important in a theological or religious sense since it suggest the sacrality inherent in rivers or water in general. While the symbolism of water is rich and complex in the religions of the world, two typical associations are important in Vedic descriptions of *Saraswati*.

First she is said to bestow bounty, fertility and riches.

"आ में धनं सरस्वतिः पयस्फति च धान्यम्।"

AV. 19.31.10

Shall *Saraswati* bring to me riches milk and grain.

"शिवा न: शंतम्भ सम्पृवइस्वरी सरस्वतिः।
मा ते युयोम संदृश्:॥"

Av. VII. 68.3

Be kind and most auspicious; be gracious to us, *saraswati*. May we be ever in thy sight!

"पालु नो देवी सुभगा सरस्वती।"

Av VI.3.2

"O" *Saraswati*, auspicious Goddess, guard us well.

"सरस्वती दाशुः वार्या वाला।"

AV XVII.1.41

Saraswati send bliss to him who giveth. Also Rg X. 17.7

"पावऽक न: सरस्वती वाजेमिवाविनीविता।"
"May Saraswati, the purifier, the bestower of food, the recompenser of worship with wealth ----"

Secondly, Saraswati represents purity, as does water, particularly running water.

\[
\text{Rg I. 3. 10}
\]

May the maternal waters purify us.

\[
\text{Rg X.17.10}
\]

Saraswathi Said to be a purifier

\[
\text{Rg.I.3.10}
\]

\[
\text{सरस्वती सूमतीनामः}
\]

\[
\text{वै कृश्मा वि राजति ॥}
\]

\[
\text{Rg I. 3.11}
\]

Saraswati the inspirer of those who delight in truth, the instructress of the right – minded,

\[
\text{Rg. 1.3.12}
\]

Saraswati makes manifest by her acts a mighty river and in her own form enlightens all understandings.
In this hymn *saraswati* is identified with the river. As *Nirukta* says

हि किया हि सरस्वती विग्रहवदुदेवता नदी रूप च
तत्र सरस्वतीपेतस्य नवीन्दुदेवता वच्च निगमा भवनिता।

*Nirukta* 2.23

Her *water* enriches the land so that it can produce riches. The *waters* of the river represent life itself in a dry environment, which Northwest India may have already been at the time of Aryan migrations. It is stated frequently in the Vedas that rituals were often performed on the banks of the river *Saraswati*, which were held to be especially sacred for ritual purposes. This probably suggests the purifying powers of the river.

*Saraswati*’s purifying power in the Vedic texts also suggests in her the association with medicine and healing. In the *Sathapatha – Brahmana*, she is called upon to heal sickness and is referred to as a healing medicine. In the *Rgveda* she and the *Aswins* twin Gods often associated with healing, are said to heal the god *Indra*. As a divine physician then *Saraswati* is petitioned to cleanse the petitioner of disease.

Although *Saraswati*’s nature and characteristics are overwhelmingly associated with a mighty River, this is no ordinary *river*. Early Vedic references make it clear that the *Saraswati* River originates in heaven and flows down to the earth. This idea, also affirmed in the case of such important later *river Goddess* as *Ganga* as a way of asserting the sacred nature of the *rivers* in question. The *saraswati* represents an ever-flowing
stream of celestial grace, which purifies and fertilizes the earth. The earthly manifestation of Saraswati as a river thus represents only a partial disclosure of other being. Physical contact with her earthly manifestation however connects one with the awesome, heavenly, transcendent dimension of the Goddess and of reality in general.

4.3.2 Saraswati in later Hinduism

Saraswati’s connection with a river steadily decreases in later Hinduism. Although she continues to be associated with a river, in some late sources her characteristics and appearance increasingly bear little or no relation to a goddess who embodies the sacrality of river.

As early as the Brahmanas Saraswati is consistently identified with Vagdevi, the Goddess of Speech. It is not at all clear what intrinsic connection between Saraswati and Vagdevi led to this association. Perhaps the centrality of sacred speech in Vedic cult and the importance of Vedic rituals being performed on the banks of the Saraswati River led to the identification of the two goddess. In any case, Saraswati increasingly becomes a goddess associated with speech, learning, culture, and wisdom. Most post-vedic references about her do not even hint that at one time she was identified with a river.

In later Hinduism, Saraswati is sometimes said to have been born from the God Brahma. Brahma, desiring to create the world, goes into meditation, where upon his body divides into two halves, male and female. Enraptured by his female half, who is saraswati, Brahma desires her mates with her, and creates the demigod Manu, who subsequently creates the

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world. A similar version of her origin is found in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* and *Devi-Bhagavata-Purana*. According to these texts, *Krishna* who is identified with absolute reality (Brahman), divides himself into male and female, *Purusha* and *Prakriti, Spirit*, and *matter*, in order to proceed with creation. His female half takes, on five forms or five dynamic powers, one of which is *saraswati*.

Although *Saraswati* nature and appearance change dramatically from the *Vedic period* to later *Hinduism* as her association with a *river* decreases, she does maintain some characteristics of her earlier history in a few cases even maintaining her association with a *river*. She is associated, for example with clouds thunder and rain and is said to be the presiding deity of rain. In the *Vamanapurana* she is described as moving through the clouds and producing rain. The *Vamanapurana* also identifies *Saraswati* with all *waters*. Her association with *soma* in some texts and with water in general suggests that *saraswati* is identified with the underlying sap of vitality necessary for all living things, that she nourishes. These continued associations with *water*, and sometimes with *rivers*, indicate a certain continuity between the *river Goddess* of the *Vedas* and the later *Goddess*.

*Saraswati* is also identified with thought and intellect. She represents the peculiar human ability to think, which has permitted human beings to create and imagine their innumerable cultural products, from cooking pots to philosophic systems.

*Saraswati* is also embodiment of arts. Poets often praise her for assistance. She is often associated with music and fine arts.