CHAPTER IV

SARASVATī IN THE ATHARVAVEDA
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Only a few mantras of the Atharvaveda refer to Sarasvati; and some of them are taken up from the Rigveda. They delineate the following traits of her personality.

1. Sarasvati and medical science:

The Atharvaveda, Book 4, Sukta 4, deals with such medicines and devices as could cure various ailments. The Sukta contains eight mantras, the first of which mentions a herb called 'Sepaharsanî'. It was dug out by the gandharvas for Varuna, who had lost his strength and who restored his vigour through it. Various properties have been ascribed to this herb. By its use, Prajāpati grows high, and man becomes more sturdy.

Similarly, there are other herbs called 'Rṣabhāṇa', 'Soma', which are equally useful. In this context, Sarasvati has been entreated along with Agni, Savitri and Brahmanaspati to bring back the exhausted power of a man and make his slackened limbs tightened as the bow:

1  AV., IV.4.1.
2  Griffith takes this 'osadhi' as 'the plant which strengthens and exalts the nerves', Whitney as 'a penis-erecting herb', cf. Sāyana "Sepoharsanîm Sepasah; pumsprajanasya vardhanîm vîryapradänena unnamayitrîm osadhim".
3  AV., IV.4.2.
4  Ibid., IV.4.3.
5  Ibid., IV.4.4.
6  Ibid., IV.4.5.
Medicines and herbs are associated with divinities. The trio of the goddesses - Sarasvati, Iśā and Bhāratī - has been mentioned in the Atharvaveda by such expressions as: "tisrah devīḥ ... sarasvatīḥ" and "tisrah sarasvatīḥ". It is suggested that all of them are only different aspects of a single goddess. In the Atharvaveda, VI.100.1, they are described to have provided the remedy for poisoning: "tisrah sarasvatīr aduh sacittā viṣadūṣānam". This association of herbs with deities has been brought out in clear terms in the following:

"asurāṇāṁ duhitā 'ṣi sā devānāṁ asi svasāḥ |
divasprthīvīḥ saṃbhūtā sā cakartheṣāsma viṣām ||

The herb is taken to be the daughter of Asuras; sister of gods; and, at the same time, it is supposed to have been born of the heaven and the earth.

The Atharvaveda, thus, maintains a close relationship of the osadhi (herb; medicine) with the divine beings. It cures human beings of ailments by dint of its effectiveness born of its divine association; and does them good.

The human body contains many harmful germs, which, living within

1 Ibid., IV.4.6.
2 Ibid., V.12.8.
3 Ibid., VI.100.1.
4 Ibid., VI. 100.3.
it bring great loss to it. Gods have made bodily cells so strong that
they do not easily succumb to them. They, therefore, have constantly
a severe combat with them. The cells constantly struggle with the
gems and when the latter triumph, the body suffers. Sarasvatī, along
with the heaven, the earth, Indra and Agni, has been rightly invoked
to kill these harmful elements:

"ote me dyāvāprthīvī otā deve sarasvatī
otau ma indras' cā 'gnis' ca krimim jambhayatām iti!" ¹

For crushing the germs in the body of a child, the use of 'the
Vācā herb'² is prescribed. The Sūkta 23, Book 5 in the Atharvaveda, is
of much interest in this connection. From it, we come to know that
these germs reside in our bodies and have their names, colours and
shapes.³ As Agni, the sun (Sūrya) and others⁴ destroy such gems,
Sarasvatī/also prayed for the destruction of these germs.⁵

2. Sarasvatī and the ills caused by wealth:

Wealth has been described to bring various miseries and evils
to human beings. It loosens moral values and the bonds of righteousness.

¹ Ibid., V.23.1.
² Ibid., V.23.2. Vācā is taken to be potent spell. This hymn is
akin to the hymn II.32 which deals with a charm for the destruction
of parasitic worms.
³ Ibid., V.23.4-5.
⁴ Ibid., V.23.1, 6.
⁵ Ibid., V.23.1. " ... deve sarasvatī
... krimim jambhayatām iti!"
Both lack and gain of wealth bring miseries.\(^1\) A person without wealth is utterly helpless. Only if he is courageous and does not lose his heart in distress, he masters the unfavourable situations in life.\(^2\) Even the possession of wealth brings evils to man. A wealthy man grows ambitious and his desires are unlimited. He does not remain contented with what he has. He hankers after wealth and malignity gets rooted in the heart of his hearts. The Sūkta 7, Book 5, in the Atharva-veda, portrays the evils caused by wealth. The two opening mantras\(^3\) of the Sūkta, proclaim that malignity should go away and munificence should manifest itself. Malignity is, thus, severely condemned.

Niggardliness is described to make a man morally weak and causes agony to him: “veda tvā 'ham nimīvantīn mitudantīn arāte”.\(^4\) Wealth makes a man lazy and his heart and sentiments, impure: “cittam vīrtsantyā kūtiṃ puruṣasya ca”.\(^5\)

In the last two mantras\(^6\) of the Sūkta, we get the description of the wealth accumulated through niggardliness. The first mantra (V.7.9) describes wealth to be extended to all directions because of its being unlimited: “yā mahatī mahomānā visvā āśā vyānase”. It is called ‘the calamity with golden hair (hiraṇyakesā mirṛti); for it entices a man and

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1 Cf. Śripāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara, op.cit., Part II (Sūrata, 1958), p. 85 on Ibid., V.7.
2 Ibid., p. 85.
3 Ibid., V. 7.1-2.
4 Ibid., V.7.7.
5 Ibid., V.7.8.
6 Ibid., V.7. 9-10.
dooms him to distress and various evils. The last mantra (V.7.10), where the wealth of a miser is spoken of as: 'hiraṇyavarṇā subhagā' and 'hiraṇyakaśipuh', identifies wealth with 'arāti' itself.

So as to be free from the evils of niggardliness and turning harsh to others owing to the vanity caused by wealth, one has to resort to Sarasvatī, the truthful speech, who gives rise to noble thoughts. ¹

If a person wants to get rid of all miseries and fill his heart with the sense of reverence, he should make his heart sublime and resort to this speech:

"yam yācemy ahāṃ vācē sarasvatyā manoyūjā 1
śraddhā tam adya viñdatu dattā somena babhrunā 11"²

Sarasvatī has also been understood in a wider sense. She is the personification of speech and reverence or faith.³

3. Sarasvatī and the work of protection:

The Aharvaveda gives the names of the gods Indra, Puṣan, Aditi, the Maruts, Āpāṃ Nāpāt, Sapta Sindhus, Viṣṇu, Dyāvaprthivi, Grāvā, Soma, Sarasvatī, Agni, the Asvins, Uṣas, Day, Night, etc., ⁴ who are invoked for protection. Though these deities belong to the three different regions, their existence in a gross body is represented by atoms.⁵

¹ Cf. ibid., V.7.4, "sarastatim annatati bhagam yanto havāmaka".
² Ibid., V. 7.5.
³ Cf. Śrīpāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara, op.cit., p. 88 on ibid., V.7.
⁴ Ibid., VI. 3.1-3.
⁵ Cf. AU., I. 2.4.
the body, they appear to represent good forces that guard man against evil forces.¹

Sarasvatī, occurring in the *Atharvaveda* (VI.3.2), is explained by Sātavalekara as: "vidyādevi, jñānavasvatā, sāstravidyā and sabhyata."² Sarasvatī represents science and culture. She protects human beings against ignorance and barbarism.

Sarasvatī has also been asked to free man from sins, which he commits under the influence of his sinful nature. The traits of his nature inciting him to commit sin, are described as enemies and are termed, mroka, manohā, khanā, mirdaba, ātmadūṣi and tanādūṣi.³ These sinful traits make man's mind, body and soul impure, and hence the use of such terms as mroka, tanādūṣi, and ātmadūṣi for them. The Book XVI of the *Atharvaveda* deals with the devices which a man can adopt in order to get rid of his sins and expiate his sinful deeds; water has been described as a means to remove sins from the body.⁴ The sins caused by speech, are wiped out by sweet and pleasing speech (urjā madhumatī vāk).⁵ The presiding deity of Vāni is Sarasvatī, who, in her terrestrial form, is Iśā or Iśā, also called vaikhari spoken by men on the earth.⁶

As the sun is asked to protect against day (sūryo māṅmah pātu), Aquil

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³ Cf. ibid., XVI.1.3; also cf. Sripāda Damodara Sātavalekara, *op.cit.*, Part. IV (Sūrata, 1958), p. 3 on ibid., XVI.1.
⁴ Ibid., XVI. 1.10, "srīprā āpo apa ripram āsmat".
⁵ Cf. ibid., XVI. 2.1.
⁶ See *sūkra.*, pp.99-90
against the earth (agnih prthivyā), Vāyu against the mid-region (vēyur antarikṣat), Yama against the men (yamo manusyebhyah), so Sarasvatī
is invoked to guard against earthly materials (sarasvatī pārthivebhyaḥ).¹ Sarasvatī, here may also be taken to be an earthly river of the name, removing the sins of man with its pious waters. Or, Sarasvatī here may be understood as the power of discrimination between good and evil, which keeps a man away from committing sins. This power of discrimination leads man to overcome all sins. When a person is spiritually uplifted, his soul becomes strong and gods also come to his rescue and reside in his body. Thus, the sun resides in his eyes; vēyu in his breath; agni in his speech; Yama in his phallus, and Sarasvatī in his intellect.²

Sarasvatī is also associated with the protection of an embryo. In the Rigveda, both Sarasvatī and Śrīvallī have been invoked to grant progeny.³ From this point of view, the Atharvaveda, too, is of great importance, the Book V, Sūkta 25 of which furnishes valuable information as to the sustenance of the embryo. It contains thirteen mantras. The first mantra⁴ describes how the embryo comes into existence. It takes birth from the virility of a being, mixed with the fundamental principles of creation, the earth, water, fire, sky and air. Man's virility deposited in woman's womb, grows into a child within the prescribed period: "śepe

¹ AV, XVI. 4.4.
² Cf. Śrīpāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara, op.cit., p. 17.
³ See supra., pp. 66-67.
⁴ AV, V. 25.1.
The following few mantras invoke various gods and goddesses to protect the embryo against different quarters they represent. Prthivi is said to be great and to bear the embryos of all beings:

"yathe'yaṁ prthivi mahl bhūtānāṁ garbhām ādadei
evam ādadhāmi te garbhaṁ tasmai tvāṁ avase huve‖"  

Similarly, there are many other gods and goddesses like Sinīvēśī, Sarasvatī, the Asvins, Mitra, Varuṇa, Brhaspati, Indra, Agni and Vidhātṛ who are prayed for progeny. Divinities have close association with the embryo as the following mantra shows:

"yad veda rūjā varuṇo yad vā devī sarasvatī |
yad indro vṛtrahā veda tad garbhakaraṇāṁ pibā‖"  

4. Sarasvati and the divine strength of man:

The human body is made of the principles, i.e., air, water, fire, sky and the earth, which represent various gods and goddesses of different regions residing in the human body. We can find it in the Aitareya-Upanisad in the following:

"agnir vāg bhūtānā mukhaṁ prāvisād vāyuh prāno bhūtānā nāśike prāvisād ādityas caksur bhūtānā kṣīṁ prāvisād dīṣāṁ śrotream bhūtānā karṇaṁ prāvisām esadhivanاسبatojā lomāṁ bhūtānā tvacam prāvisām candramā mano bhūtānā hrdayaṁ prāvisāṁ mṛtyur apāno bhūtānā nabhīṁ prāvisād āpaveto bhūtānā śiśanāṁ prāvisāṁ."
Thus, these deities, in their subtle form, exist in different parts of our body. Our body is nothing beyond them. This concept, which finds so clear an expression in the Upaniṣads, can be traced back to the Atharva Veda, where we have:

"sūryo me caṅsura vātāḥ prāno 3 natarikṣam ātmē prathivi
sarīrām|
 austato nēmā'ham ayaṁ asmi sa ātmānām ni dadhe dyāvaprathivi-
bhyām gopīthāya ||"¹

In the human body, these deities reside in their subtle forms; while outside it, they exist in their gross forms.² When a man comes to know this fact, he finds no distinction between these deities and himself:

"tasmād vai vidvān puruṣam idem brahme 'ti manyate|
survē hy aṁśiṁ devatā gāvo goṣṭha ivē "sate ||"³

As these deities reside in the human body, it is full of divine strength. Man does not realise this strength hidden within himself until the veil of ignorance is cast away. In a mantra prayer has been made for obtaining mind, intellect, thought, purpose, intelligence, sense, hearing and sight:

"manasa cetase dhīya ākūtaya uta cīttaye |
matyai śrutāya caṅsase vidhēma haviṣā vayam ||"⁴

In this context, Sarasvatī has been entreated to provide a man with vital airs and breath:

¹ Ibid., V. 9.7.
² Cf. AU., I. 1.4.
³ AV., XI. 8.32.
⁴ Ibid., VI. 41.1.
"apāṇāya vyāṇāya prāṇāya bhumidhāyase |
sarasvaty ā uruvyace vidhema havisā vayam ||¹

We often hear of the seven rṣis. They are interpreted variously. The Atharvāveda mentions them as residing in our body and representing various parts of the body, namely, the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. On the other hand, they also stand for the skin, eyes, ears, tongue, nose, mind and intellect.² Thus, these seven rṣis are none else; but the seven organs of the human body. As long as they reside in the body of a man, he is alive and when they depart, he dies. They are, therefore, described as the protectors of the body. It is for this reason that they are taken to be the divine and are entreated to give us long life:

"mā no hāsisur rṣayo daivyā ye tāṇūpā nās tāṇvās tāṇjāh |
smṛtyāṁ smṛtyāṁ abhi nāḥ sacadhvam āyur dhatta pratarāṁ jīvāse nāḥ ||³

These seven rṣis are also treated as the seven energies, which are either the seven breaths, or intellect, mind and five sense organs.⁴ Sarasvatī appears to symbolise all these energies as she is described to have removed with ghṛta the deficiency caused in the soul and body:

"yadā 'sāsa vadato me vicuṣubhe yācāmānasya carato jānān asu |
tad ātmanī tānvo me viṁśatam sarasvatī tādā pr nad ghṛtene ||⁵

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1. Ibid., VI.41.2.
3. Ibid., V.41.3.
5. AV., VII.59.1.
Ghrita does not stand here merely for clarified butter, but it denotes life-energy. Sarasvatī infuses life and energy into the deficient body and soul.

5. Sarasvatī and marriage:

The Book XIV of the Atharvaveda contains two Sūktas, the first dealing with the marriage ceremony and the second devoting itself to the teachings for the bride. The first Sūkta treats of the marriage ceremony by way of describing the wedding of Sūryā. The ceremony of this immortal being sets a model for the wedding of the daughters of the mortals. Sūryā has been described as going to the house of her husband with her full bridal preparation:

\[ \text{"cittir \ a \ upabarhanam caksura abhy a\ddot{u}janam} \]
\[ \text{dyaur bhūmih kosa āśid yad ayāt sūryā patim"} \]

The Sūkta then describes the chariot used in the marriage, the gifts, etc.

The second Sūkta undertakes to impart teachings for the bride. She is instructed to follow and serve her husband taking him as if he were Viśnu himself. We are also told that Sarasvatī and Śiva grant offspring and favour with good fortune:

1 Cf. Griffith's note on ibid., XIV.1, p. 159, where he writes "The greater portion of Hymn I. is taken, with many transpositions and variations, from Rigveda X.85, which is itself a composite hymn and evidently one of the latest of that collection. Its main object is the ceremony of marriage in general, and more especially the wedding of Sūryā, the daughter of the Sun, who is regarded as the typical bride whose nuptial ceremonies are to be the pattern of marriages on earth".

2 Ibid., XIV. 1.6.
3 Ibid., XIV.1.10-12, 14, 16.
4 Ibid., XIV. 1.13.
"prati tiśṭha virāḍ asi viṣṇur iye 'ha sarasvatī
dsīvālī praśāyaṇāṃ bhagasya sumatasya asat || "¹

The bride is directed to worship Agni at first, then Sarasvatī and lastly the fathers of the family:

"yadā gārhapatyam asaparyataḥ pūrvam agnim vadhur iyaṃ|
adā sarasvatyai nūri pitṛbhyaś ca namaskuru ||"²

She should worship gods sitting on the skin of the deer laid down on the grass. In this connection, it is worth noticing that a mantra reads "... prati bhūṣe 'ha devin", an expression variously interpreted by scholars. Some find in it a clear proof for the worship of the idols of gods. Thus, Bābū Avināśa, in his 'Vedic Culture', tries to establish the prescription of idol worship in the Vedas, and for the corroboration of his view, he also quotes the Rigveda, II. 24.10, and VIII. 1.5. If we were to accept such a view, the above expression would instruct the bride to decorate the idols of gods as it is done in the modern age. This would also lead us to suppose that the decoration of the idol of Sarasvatī was also prevalent in the Vedic age. But such a view is hardly tenable. The expression merely instructs Sūryā to worship gods. The idol worship was not in vogue in Vedic times. It is only in the Purāṇas that gods are idolised for the first time.

¹ Ibid., XIV. 2.15; Griffith takes Sarasvatī as an adjective for the bride and writes: 'Sarasvatī: bride is complimentarily addressed as an incarnation of the Goddess of Fertility'.
² Ibid., XIV. 2.20.
³ Ibid., XIV. 2.22-24.
⁴ Ibid., XIV. 2.25.
⁵ Cf. his views quoted by Śrīpāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara, op.cit., Part IV, p. 53 on ibid., XIV. 2.
(6) **Sarasvatī and unity:**

One of the Sūktas of the *Atharvaveda* mentions unity, obviously as the result of love. If there is no mutual love and affection, there can be no unity. The feeling of love joins man's head with his heart in friendly bonds. The mind should control the emotions of the heart and the heart should soften the mind so as to pulsate with the noble feelings of love and compassion. Thus, they should work in unity. Mind should also be under one's control. In one mantra, the deities like Mitra, Varuṇa, Sarasvatī, the centre of the earth as well as both of its ends are asked to bring unity to us:

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mahyam tvā mitrāvarunau mahyam devī sarasvatī  
mahyam tvā madhyam bhūyā ubhāv antau samasyatām
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Thus, the *Atharvaveda* preaches us unity and harmony.

7. **Sarasvatī and agriculture:**

The *Atharvaveda* associates Sarasvatī with agriculture (krṣi).

We should bear in mind that Sarasvatī is taken to be the presiding deity of trees, fruits, rice-fields and plants, which may be included in agriculture. Though the conception has been elaborately put forth in later mythology, its origin can be traced to the *Atharvaveda*. In accepting the deity of agriculture, Sarasvatī is taken as an earthly river. The neighbouring areas of the Sarasvatī river are described to be very fertile, abounding in the yield of grains, particularly for making

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1. Ibid., VI. 69.1.
2. Ibid., VI. 69.3.
oblations to gods because of their piousness. The fields on its banks were ploughed by gods for the crop of barley. Indra is portrayed as the lord of the plough (sīrpatiḥ) and the Maruts as the farmers (kīnāsāḥ):

"devā imām madhunā samyuktam yavana sarasvatyām adhi mañūv acarkṛṣuḥ
indra āśīt sīrpatiḥ sātākratuh kīnāsā āsan marutah sūdānavaḥ ||"¹

Thus, the Sarasvatī river, which was pious not only to men; but also to gods, was the best river promoting agriculture. Though a terrestrial river, gods had close association with it and, thus, divinity was attached to it, too. The instance of Indra and the Maruts as agriculturists shows the greatness and divine message for the occupation of cultivation.² Agriculture depends on water—water particularly obtained in the form of rain, without which no harvest is possible. Sarasvatī, as the name itself suggests,³ abounds in water. She is also associated with the clouds. In a mantra, she is requested to provide water from her clouds so as to save krṣi from burning in the scorching heat of the sun as well as not to shatter it with the thunder of the clouds.⁴

8. The trinity of goddesses:

The conception of the trinity of the goddesses Sarasvatī, Ida and Bhāratī is also found in the Atharvaveda. At one place, Sarasvatī

¹ AV., VI.30.1.
³ Srīpāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara, op.cit., Part III, p. 45 on ibid., VII.12.
⁴ Ibid., VII.12.1.
has been mentioned with Bhārati and Iḍā, all described as 'the three goddesses' (tisro devaḥ). In another mantra, we find the ambiguous expression 'tisrah sarasvatih', (the three Sarasvatīs'), variously interpreted by scholars. Śāyana explains it as: "tisrah trisankhyākāh sarasvatih sarasvatyas trayārūpāḥ. yadvā idā sarasvatī bhārati 'tī tisro devyāḥ sāhacaryāt sarasvataḥ ucyante". Thus, according to him, 'tisrah sarasvatih' denotes the three forms of Sarasvati; or, the goddesses Sarasvatī, Bhārati and Iḍā are collectively called by the name of Sarasvati because of their close association. The Petersburg Lexicon takes it to suggest "three rivers named Sarasvatī or perhaps simply three rivers in general." Griffith takes it to mean "Three Sarasvatīs: the multiplication is analogous to that of the three heavens and three earths." Śripāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara understands the above expression as "three Sarasvatīs as goddesses of learning" and gives them the name of mātrabhumi, mātrabhāṣa and mātrsabhysta. According to him, Bhārati is mātrabhumi who feeds up all; Iḍā is mātrabhāṣa who inspires man to perform sacrifice; and Sarasvati is mātrsabhysta, who incites man to perform good deeds.

1 Ibid., V.12.8.
2 Ibid., VI.100.1.
4 Cf. Max Müller, op.cit., p. 512.
5 Griffith's f.n. on AV,, VI. 100.1.
6 Śripāda Dāmodara Sātavalekara on ibid., VI.100.1.