SARASWATI THE GODDESS OF KNOWLEDGE
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Dr. Swanand Pathak

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Preface

It is believed that any intellectual endeavor should begin with the blessings of goddess Saraswati. Here is a small effort on my part to compile and write about Goddess Saraswati so as to spread the message of worship of the goddess for the benefit of those who want to utilize the knowledge to attain moksha. I greatly acknowledge the help rendered by Shri. S. T. Pathak and Smt. M. A. Borkar in editing the booklet. Let me very humbly offer the book at the lotus feet of goddess Saraswati.

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Wardha

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Hinduism considers Saraswati as the goddess of knowledge, music and arts. It is considered that all the types of knowledge may it be the bookish knowledge or the ultimate divine knowledge about Brahman it is passed to the human race by Saraswati. Considered as one of the many aspects of adi Shakti, Saraswati is the embodiment of existence itself. In the folklore of Durga Puja in Bengal, Saraswati is considered to be a daughter of Shiva along with her sister Lakshmi and her brothers Ganesha and Karrhikeya but in some Puranas (like Skanda Purana) she is sister of Shiva (Shivaanujaa).

We get the reference of Saraswati in various other Puranas with some interesting accounts associated.

The Puranas relate Saraswati to Brahma and Vishnu. Most frequently, she is associated with Brahma. Her connection with him dates earlier than to any other God. She is portrayed mostly as his wife and occasionally as his daughter. When Vishnu’s popularity in India increased, myths relating Saraswati to him appeared.

**Saraswati and Brahma**

When Saraswati is pictured as a wife of Brahma, she is usually portrayed as white
complexioned, wearing white or yellow garments, and accompanied by a peacock or a swan or both (symbols of Brahma).

**Story of origin of Brahma’s five heads due to Saraswati (From the Matsya Purana)**

Brahma created Satarupa (Saraswati) out of his own body, and got charmed with her. He was looking at her affectionately. In order to avoid his glances, Satarupa turned to the right side from his gaze. In order to see her then, Brahma created a second head. As she passed to his left and his rear, in order to avoid his lustful glances, two other heads of the god successively appeared. At last she sprang to the sky, and following her, a fifth head of Brahma was also formed.

**Brahma’s Great Sacrifice and origination of Saraswati (From the Skanda Purana)**

Brahma decided to perform a great sacrifice and for that purpose he and his wife Savitri went to Pushkara. When all the preparations were made with due rites and ceremonies for performing the sacrifice, Savitri, detained by some household affairs, was not in attendance. A priest was immediately advised to call her. But she replied that she had not yet completed her dress, nor arranged several affairs. Since
without a wife no advantage could be derived by performing a sacrifice, Brahma advised Indra to bring a wife from wherever he could find one. Indra proceeded accordingly and, he found a milkmaid Gayatri (another name for Saraswati) who was young, beautiful. Indra seized her and brought to the assembly. Then Brahma told that he would take up the milkmaid and she would be regarded as the mother of the Vedas. Thus Brahma was united with Gayatri. At this time Savitri, accompanied by the wives of Vishnu, Rudra and other Gods, come to the place of sacrifice. Seeing the milkmaid in the bride’s dress, Savitri became furious and cursed Brahma and all the other Gods and left. But Gayatri repaired most of the curses by performing proper sacrifices.

**Origin of Saraswati and her marriage to Vishnu (From the Brahma-Vaivarta Purana)**

Once Krishna felt an inclination to create and thus sprang from him Radha, his shakti. Their union produced an egg, which Radha threw into the waters. Krishna was angry at this unmotherly conduct of Radha and cursed her with everlasting youth and barrenness. At this point, suddenly from the lip of Radha sprang forth a lovely daughter Saraswati of white
complexion wearing yellow dress, decorated with jewels and holding a veena and a book in her hands. Radha again parted herself into two and her left half was transformed into Kamala or Lakshmi. At this, Krishna also parted into two and produced the four-armed Vishnu from the left side of his body. Krishna gave Saraswati and Lakshmi to Vishnu as wives.

**Fight between Saraswati and Ganga (From the Brahma-Vaivarta Purana)**

Besides Saraswati, Vishnu married Ganga. One day Ganga was looking lovingly at her husband, and Vishnu was reciprocating the glances. This was too much for Saraswati who began to accuse Vishnu of partiality. Vishnu left the place to give Saraswati time to calm down. But this only served to anger Saraswati more. She advanced threateningly to Ganga when Lakshmi intervened. Lakshmi held Saraswati away from Ganga. Saraswati then cursed Lakshmi. Vishnu, having found out about what happened, cursed both Saraswati and Ganga with transformation into rivers, and also gave both of them to other husbands. Saraswati was given to Brahma and Ganga to Shiva.
Whatever may be the mythological reference, Saraswati enjoys the highest seat of knowledge in Hinduism. Not only in Hinduism Saraswati has an important place in Buddhism too. She is respected as a Guardian Deity in Buddhism who upholds the teachings of Gautam Buddha by offering protection and assistance to practitioners along their spiritual path towards liberation.

**Meaning of Saraswati**

The name Saraswati is a combination of two words ‘Saras’ meaning flow and ‘Wati’ meaning a woman. Here the flow depicts the flow of knowledge, music and arts. In fact in the ancient scriptures we have the mythological river Saraswati along with other sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu and Kaveri. In Hinduism, Saraswati represents intelligence, consciousness, cosmic knowledge, creativity, education.

**Description**

The idol of goddess Saraswati itself is the origination of most pure and serene vibrations.

Saraswati’s female form demonstrates the great respect and recognition that women held in the vedic tradition. She stands for tolerance, as well
as moral and spiritual strength. She can withstand roughness and bear pain.

Clad in simple white robes with very minimal jewels she sits on the white lotus supporting veena with one hand and playing it with another, a mala or rosary of crystals held in third and Vedas in fourth hand. Her four arms denote four sides suggesting her omnipresence. She is never shown giving Ashirvaad or blessings. This reconfirms the Gita saar, “Just do your karma don’t wait for results.” She hands no weapon to prove that knowledge is all powerful. She is always seated next to a stream clean flowing river. She is very fond of hamsa the white swan and peacock. The swan is considered as her vahana (hamsa vahini) sometimes she is also shown riding the peacock (mayur vahini)

The white color associated with goddess represents absolute truth and purity of true knowledge. The scarcity of jewels suggests her preference of knowledge over the worldly things as gold and money. This might be one reason of goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati very rarely coming together. Besides denoting four sides her four arms also represent the four aspects of human personality in learning namely mind (mana), intellect (buddhi), alertness (chitta), and ego (ahankara).
The lotus represents supreme knowledge in activity. It is a symbol of evolution and detachment. It makes its way through the ocean of life by rising above its surface—it is the path from the outer being to the inner being.

She is offering Vedas to her devotees suggesting she is the composer of Vedas and all the knowledge with letters. Placing it in the left hand means that acquisition and application of knowledge should be controlled by the softer side of the human personality. Saraswati gives the essence of one’s self. She provides us with the divine and spiritual knowledge of our lives. She is a representation of the science of life, or the vedanta, which attempts to unravel the essentials of human existence and the universe concealed within. She points to the ultimate aim of human life which is to realize the true nature of the self even if it requires an enormous amount of determination, perseverance and patience.

The rosary or mala represents the poetic form, it also symbolizes concentration or the meditative process involved in the acquisition of knowledge.

Veena represents the eternal cosmic music. The Veena points to the collective sound of all our thoughts and actions as it is manifest as music in the cosmic universe. It marks the withdrawal
of the senses and the focus needed to attain knowledge. Placing the left hand on top of the veena closer to the heart shows that knowledge should be used for the good of others. Placing the right hand on the bottom shows that negative knowledge should be kept under control. The veena points to the potential for the negative and positive purposes of knowledge—the choice is left to the person as to which type of knowledge is used. In fact there is a special type of veena called Saraswati veena. The Saraswati veena is considered as one of the oldest instruments known to mankind.

The sacred water flowing in the river represents purity of thought and action and her close association with the river Saraswati. The Saraswati River is one of the chief Rig Vedic rivers mentioned in ancient Hindu texts. The Nadistuti hymn in the Rig Veda mentions the Saraswati between the Yamuna in the east and the Sutlej in the west, and later Vedic texts like Tandya and Jaiminiya Brahmanas as well as the Mahabharata mention that the Saraswati dried up in a desert. According to some; goddess Saraswati was originally a personification of this river, but later developed an independent identity and meaning.
Devi Saraswati is very fond of Hamsa a symbol of paramahamsa a person with perfect discrimination. As the swan is supposed to separate milk from the water paramahamsa are supposed to take only the Brahman the reality in life discarding all the maya or illusion altogether.

Peacock represents arrogance and pride and by mounting the peacock the goddess tells to overcome arrogance and pride of knowledge and skills.

Other names of Saraswati

Bharati – eloquence; Mahavidya – transcendent knowledge; Vac – speech; Mahavani – transcendent word; Arya – the noble one; Brahmi – power of the immense being; wife of Brahma Kamadhenu – the wish cow; Bijagarbha – womb of the seed or womb of the elements of speech; Vacdevi – divinity of speech; Vinapani – the one that holds the vina; Sarada – giver of essence; Satarupa-with seven forms; Vageshvari – goddess of speech; and Gayatri- song or hymn.

Forms

Saraswati is worshiped in three main forms in Hinduism namely maha Saraswati, Mahavidya Nila Saraswati & Sarada devi.
Saraswati is well known in a variety of other religions outside of Hinduism. She appears in Jainism and Buddhism, and has made her way from India to Japan as well as to other places around the world. Thurathadi in Burmese, Biancaitian in Chinese, Surasawadee in Thai and Benzaiten in Japan.

In Jainism, Saraswati has been given many titles, a few of these include: The dispeller of darkness & ignorance, the remover of infatuations, the destroyer of miseries and the giver of Knowledge. As in Hinduism, she also stands as a symbol of purity.

In the transition from early (Theravada) Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism, many elements of Hinduism were transplanted into Buddhism. In early Buddhist mandalas, various divinities were depicted of Mahayana Buddhism. In those early Buddhist mandalas, Saraswati is located in the south-west of the innermost circle, between Brahma and Vishnu, symbolizing her close connection with these two deities. In Buddhism, Saraswati is the giver of knowledge, intelligence, memory; and she confers wisdom and learning upon her worshippers. She possesses many forms within Buddhism, including Vajra-Sarasvati, Vajrana-Sarasvati, Vajra-Sarada and Mahasarasvati. During a period of Tantric dominance within
Buddhism, many of the Mahayana Buddhist texts were transmitted through the Himalayan passes to Nepal, Tibet, Java, China and eventually Japan.

In Tibet, she is known as Vajra-Sarasvati and is often depicted as carrying a thunderbolt (vajra). In Japan, the goddess Benten is seen as a manifestation of Saraswati. Her full name in Japanese is Dai-Ben-Zai-Ten or the Great Divinity of Reasoning Faculty. She is believed to bestow power, happiness, riches, long life, fame and reasoning powers. In later times she came to be regarded as one of the seven deities of good fortune. A myth in Japan speaks of a hideous pond dwelling serpent that terrorized the villages and devoured the children for miles around. Benten could not bear to witness such destruction. Therefore she stirred up an earthquake and hovered above the serpent’s lair in the dust clouds. At first Benten was filled with hate but the serpent king wooed her with soft and tender words until her heart was melted, and–making him promise to mend his savage ways–she married him. It is interesting to note that Benten, as goddess of speech was won by words.
Temples dedicated to Saraswati

There are two ancient Saraswati temples; one in Basara and the other in Kashmir.

Basara

Situated 50 Kms from Nizamabad at Basara, on the banks of river Godavari, the Sri Gyana Saraswati temple is the main temple in South India dedicated to the goddess of learning.

According to the legend Maharishi Vyasa and his disciples and sage Suka decided to settle down in a cool and serene atmosphere after the Kurukshetra war. In the quest for the peaceful abode, he came to Dandaka forest and pleased with serenity of the region selected this place. After his ablutions in the river Godavari Maharishi Vyasa used to bring three fistful of sand and place it in three small heaps and made images Sarada, Lakshmi, Kali with his mystic power and later conducted prayers. This idol made of sand has its face smeared with turmeric. Eating a little bit of this turmeric paste, it is believed, will enhance one’s wisdom and knowledge. The idol of Saraswati at Basara is holding a pot of sacred water representing creative and purification powers.
However, according to Brahmanda Puranam, Adikavi Valmiki installed Saraswati and wrote Ramayana here. There is a marble image of Valmiki and his samadhi near the temple. It is believed that this temple is one of the three temples constructed near the confluence of Manjira and Godavari rivers by Ashtrakutas. According to another school of thought ‘Bijjaludu’ a Karnataka king, who ruled the province of Nandagiri with Nanded as his capital in the sixth century, constructed the temple at Basara. The image of Lakshmi stands besides Goddess Saraswati in the sanctum sanctorum. Due to the presence of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kali, Basara is considered as the abode of the divine trinity on the Bank of the River Godavari.

Now a days there is heavy rush of pilgrims coming to Basara to perform “Akshara abhyasam” for the children. Many people, in fact, take their kids to Basara for “Akshara abhyasam” before commencing formal school education. Special poojas and celebrations are held at the temple during Maha Sivaratri, beginning 15 days before (Vasantha Panchami) and continuing 3 days after the festival. Devi Navarathrulu is celebrated for ten days. Since Maharishi Vyasa spent considerable time in prayers, the place was then called “Vasara” and
turned into Basara due to the influence of the Marathi language in the region.

Sharada Peeth

Was the famous temple of the goddess Saraswati (Sharda) in Northern Kashmir on the banks of what is known as the Neelum river in Pakistan and Kashmir (referred to as Kishenganga river in India) Its ruins are now in the Neelum District of Pakistan Administered Kashmir near the Line of Control (LoC). Kashmir was sometimes called Sharada Desh because of this temple.

The place was once a celebrated centre of learning headed by Kashmiri Brahmins. It is at this temple that Sankaracharya received the right to sit on the Sarvajnanapeetham (throne of wisdom). It was a centre of great Sanskrit scholars and Kashmiri Pundits and was a famous centre of Buddhism and later Hinduism. Sharada script and Takri (from which Gurmukhi is derived) is supposed to be originated from the Sharada Peeth. Originally more widespread, its use became later restricted to Kashmir, and it is now rarely used except by the Kashmiri Pundit community for ceremonial purposes.
There are other temples dedicated to Saraswati in Deupatan, Kamalakshi, Thimi, Bhadrakali and Swyambhu, Neel Saraswati at Gairidhara, in the Kathmandu Valley. Saraswati Temple in Roorkee, Prthudakeshwara Temples in Pehowa, Haryana were built by the Marathas in honor of Saraswati. Saradamba Temple is there in Sringeri.

**Saraswati Puja and festivals**

Saraswati Puja is celebrated with enthusiasm in various parts in India in festive mood.

**Saraswati Puja in Eastern India**

In the eastern part of India, West Bengal, Bihar and Assam, Saraswati Puja is celebrated in the Magha month (January-February). It coincides with Vasant Panchami i.e. the 5th day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Magha. This 'Panchami' is also known as Saraswati Day, because it is believed that on this day the goddess was born. People place books near the Goddess' statue or picture and worship the Goddess. Book reading is not allowed on this day.

The color yellow is given special importance on Vasant Panchami. On this day, Saraswati is dressed in yellow garments and worshipped. People prefer to wear yellow clothes on this
holy day. Sweetmeats of yellowish hue are distributed among relations and friends. The goddess is also offered honey on this day. Some people feed Brahmins, some perform Pitri-Tarpan (ancestor worship) and many worship Kamadeva, the god of love on this day.

However, the most significant aspect of this day is that children are taught their first words on this day, for it is considered an auspicious day to begin how to read and write. Educational institutions organize special prayer for Saraswati. The great Indian guru Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya laid the foundations of the world class academic institution of Kashi Hindu Vishwa Vidyalaya on Vasant Panchami.

Saintly people and individuals inclined towards spiritual progress attach great importance to the worship of goddess Saraswati. As a practice, only educated people and men of principle worship goddess Saraswati for spiritual enlightenment. In their opinion, there can be no comparison between the king and the learned or the spiritually advanced. The king is honored within his kingdom, whereas the learned is respected or worshipped throughout the world.
Ritual worship of Saraswati in the Bengali tradition

The idol is in white, symbolizing purity. The sari of the deity is white or yellow dyed in the natural dye made from “Shiuli” flowers. The place where the idol is kept for the puja is decorated with rangoli and the design of a fish is considered auspicious. A flat low stool made of wood is covered with yellow cloth and the idol is placed on it, facing east. Then, the face of the idol remains covered till the priest begins chanting the mantras at the commencement of the puja. A green coconut is placed on an earthen pot with a red checked cotton cloth called “Gamcha”. For the actual puja, flowers are used but the most significant is the Palash or flame of the forest and marigold flowers. Students place their books in front of the goddess. The offerings to the goddess are mainly fruits: most significant are berries from the wild plum tree. Other fruits include tapioca. Sweets must include puffed rice, jaggery and yogurt. Family members bathe early and dress in yellow attire and assemble in front of the Goddess. The earthen pot is tied with a string which will be untied only on the next day by the priest before Bisarjan. A havan puja is done by the priest using special wood, ghee, joss sticks and incense. There absence of a burnt smell signifies the success of the puja. A diya
or lamp is also kept lit along with the prasad. A handful of flowers particularly marigolds and flame of the forest are given to each devotee to offer to the goddess as “pushpanjali”—Pushp, meaning flowers and Anjali meaning offering. The offering is done in batches of devotees who repeat mantras after the priest. Arati is performed by the priest in the morning and again in the evening. This is done while chanting Sanskrit slokas and accompanied by the blowing of conch shells and the beating of drums. The lit lamp used during the Arati is passed around for each devotee to warm his/her hand and touch their heads. Nobody touches books on that day. This signifies that the goddess is blessing the books placed in front of her that day.

**Saraswati Puja in South India**

In the southern states of India, Saraswati Puja is conducted during the Navaratri. In Tamil Nadu, Saraswati Puja is conducted along with the Ayudha Puja (the worship of weapons, and implements including machines). On the ninth day of Navaratri, i.e. the Mahanavami day, books and all musical instruments are ceremoniously kept in front of the Goddess Saraswati early at dawn and worshipped with special prayers. No studies or any performance of arts is carried out; as it is considered that the
Goddess herself is blessing the books and the instruments. The festival concludes on the tenth day of Navaratri (Vijaya Dashami) and the Goddess is worshipped again before the books and the musical instruments are removed. It is customary to start the study afresh on this day, which is called Vidyarambham (literally, Commencement of Knowledge).

In Kerala, the last three days of the Navaratri festival, i.e. Ashtami, Navami, and Dashami are celebrated as Saraswati Puja. The celebrations start with the Puja Veypu (Placing for Worship). It consists of placing the books for Puja on the Ashtami day. It may be in one’s own house, in the local Nursery School run by traditional teachers, or in the local temple. The books will be taken out for reading, after worship, only on the morning of the third day (Vijaya Dashami). Children are happy since they are not expected to study on these days. On the Vijaya Dashami day, Kerala celebrates the Ezhuthiniruthu or Initiation of Writing for the little children before they are admitted to nursery schools. This is also called Vidyarambham. The child is made to write for the first time on the rice spread in a plate with the index finger, guided by an elder of the family or by a reputed teacher. The little ones will have to write “Hari Shri Ganapataye
Namah” and recite the same to mark the auspicious entry into the world of education.

In some parts of Maharashtra especially vidarbha region Saraswati, also known as Sharada Devi, is worshiped in the form of idol sitting on peacock. The festival is known as Shardotsav after Navaratri festival.

**Saraswati vandana and its meaning**

It is believed that every intellectual work should begin with Saraswati vandana and the blessings of the goddess. Saraswati vandana is a beautiful hymn composed in Sanskrit which depicts Saraswati in a beautiful manner. At the end; a boon is asked by the devotees of this goddess of knowledge for the protection and removal of all the lethargy

“Ya Kundendu Tushaara Haara Dhavalaa
Ya Shubhra Vastraavrita
Ya Veena Vara Danda Manditakara
Ya Shveta Padmaasana
Ya Brahma Achyutaha Shankara Prabrithibhih
Devai Sadaa vandita
Saa Maam Paatu Saraswati Bhagavati
Nishyesha Jyaadyaapaha”
Meaning

“Oh Goddess Saraswati,
Who is fair as a jasmine flower
The moon or a snow flake,
Who is dressed in white
And whose hands are adorned by veena
Who is seated on a white lotus,
To whom Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara pray,
Please protect us and remove our mental inertia”

Om! Peace Peace Peace….