

The Rapine Connection of the Goddess of Learning

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In the Indian concept of learning (*jñāna*) or wisdom (*prajñā*) is deified as a goddess – the goddess of learning. In the Vedic context the goddess of learning is associated with *vāk* (speech), and in view of this, the goddess of learning is known as Vāgdevī. It is interesting that at the popular level the goddess of learning is more known as the goddess Sarasvatī. Because of this name the goddess has been known to be the deification of the river Sarasvatī. How and when this association came cannot be ascertained. But the analogy of learning or knowledge with a river is appropriate enough because knowledge is like a flow or current (*jñāna-pravāha*).¹ However, it is surprising that the concept of the goddess of learning has not been associated with the foremost two rivers of India, namely Sindhu and Gaṅgā (the Indus and the Ganges, respectively). The possible logicity of the association of the goddess of learning with the river Sarasvatī will be discussed later in this essay. It is interesting that the goddess of learning is known as Sarasvatī not only in the Brahmanical Hindu context, but also in the Buddhist and Jaina pantheons as well, with, however, some prefixes or suffixes added to the name. But in none of these contexts the makers of the images of goddesses have shown any attribute of rapine connection in the representations. This is true in all the three pantheonistic religions mentioned above.

The image makers have represented the goddess Sarasvatī with many attributes none of which virtually is directly associated with a river-concept. Most of the images are associated with the three attributes like the book (*pustaka*), the rosary (*akṣasūtra*) and the lute (*vīṇā*). Also in some images of the four-armed form of the goddess the *kamaṇḍalu* or the water vessel is shown. Before we take up the issue of *kamaṇḍalu* it is pertinent to state that the book, the rosary and the lute are the attributes which convey the visual association of the goddess of learning with knowledge. The book signifies the documented

knowledge, the rosary is the analogy if the floating knowledge of oral traditions and the lute implies the association of the goddess with the knowledge of the arts or *kalā* in the form of the *Śilpaśāstras*. Moreover, the lute or the *vīṇā* also can be interpreted as the co-ordinating harmony (*sura or svara*) which is the core of any type of knowledge.

The *kamaṇḍalu* in some of the images of the goddess perhaps is derived from the concept that she originally was the daughter or wife of Brahmā² who is known to have the *kamaṇḍalu* in the hand of his images as the distinctive cognizance. However, it cannot be denied that this attribute doubtless has an aquatic connection. But it is known that the *kamaṇḍalu* of Brahmā, Brahmāṇī or Sarasvatī contains water not of the river Sarasvatī but of the Ganges. The tradition has it that once while enjoying the melodious songs of Nārada the feet of Viṣṇu got melted and the fluid was collected by Brahmā in his *kamaṇḍalu*. This fluid eventually became the aquatic substance of the river Ganges by virtue of which she is known with the epithet *Viṣṇupadī* (one who originates from the feet of Viṣṇu). Even if this is taken to be the lone and remote linkage of the goddess of learning having a rapine connection, it was expected that this association was in the concept of Gaṅgā, instead of that of Sarasvatī.

In fact, the river Sarasvatī is traditionally known to be lost somewhere in her course.³ The most well known river goddesses of India are Gaṅgā and Yamunā who are often represented as independent images, respectively with a *makara* (crocodile) and *kūrma* (tortoise) or as the two deities flanking the doorway of some important temples. The goddess Sarasvatī, notwithstanding her name similar to an important river of India, is known to have a rapine connection either in her visual forms or in the devotional literature concerned with her worship at the popular level.

The most important *mantras* or *stutis* (auspicious words or eulogies, respectively) used in the worship of the goddess Sarasvatī, particularly on the *Basanta Pañcamī* day in Bengal and other parts of Eastern India are the following:⁴

- (1) *Sarasvatī mahābhāge vidye kamalalocane /*
Viśvarūpe viśālākṣī vidyām dehi namostute //

(Oh goddess Sarasvatī you are the illustrious one and you are personified knowledge and you are lotus-eyed.

You are the universe personified and you have large pair of eyes; I salute you; please give me knowledge of all sorts)

(2) *Jaya jaya devī carā cara sāre, kucayuga śobhitamuktā hāre /*
Vīṇārañjita-pustakahaste, bhagvatī bhāratī devī namostute //

(Oh goddess you are ever victorious and you are the essence of the universe. Between your breasts there beautifies the necklaces of pearls. In your hands you hold the lute and the painted book.⁵ I salute you, o goddess Bhāratī).

(3) *Sarasvatyai namo nityam bhadrakalyai namo namaḥ /*
Veda-vedāṅga-vedānta-vidyā sthānebhya evaca svāhā //

(I always salute the Goddess Sarasvatī. You are Bhadrakālī (the sublime form of the goddess) and I again and again salute you. You are present in all forms of knowledge presented in the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas* (limbs of *Veda*) and *Vedānta* (philosophical interpretation of knowledge). I offer prayers to you).

(4) *Yā kundedu tuṣāra-hāra-dhavalā /*
Yā śvetavastrāvṛtā //
Yā brahmācyutaśaṅkaraprabhṛtibhiḥ devaiḥ sadā vanditā /
Sāmepātu bhagavatī Sarasvatī niḥśeṣa jāḍyāpahā //

(She is of white complexion like the *Kunda* flower, moon and snow wreath. She is clad in white garments; she is always venerated by the gods like Brahmā, Acyuta (Viṣṇu) and Śaṅkara (Śiva). She may kindly give me complete relief from ignorance).

From these major descriptive attributes of goddess Sarasvatī in the *mantras* uttered for her worship we get it that in none of them there is a reference to her rapine association. Those who formulated the *mantras* doubtless had in view the visual form and characteristics of the goddess in their meditative approach (*dhyāna*). If in any of them the intention was to conceive the goddess Sarasvatī in terms of a river of that name, some of the rapine characteristics of her visualization would have been probably included. But that is not the case here.⁶ In one of the other *mantras* of the goddess she is referred to as having in her hands a book and a pen in the gesture of writing (*uddalekhanī pustakaśrī*), but not anything connected with a river.⁷ Moreover, only in her four handed form the images of the goddess sometimes hold a water vase, and not

in any literary description or image of the goddess of the two handed type. The implied meaning of the water vase in the form of the water of the Ganges or of ambrosia (*amṛta*) has already been discussed above. This may at best be interpreted as the aquatic connection of the Goddess, and not necessarily of her conception as the deified form of the river Sarasvatī. In the Buddhist and Jaina pantheons there are many cognates and derivatives of the Goddess of learning, like, Ārya Sarasvatī, Vajra Sarasvatī, Vajra Viṇā Sarasvatī, Vasudhārā, Prajñāpāramitā, Cuṇḍā, Mahāmāyūrī, etc. in the Buddhist pantheon,⁸ and the Vidyā devīs Prajñaptis and Yakṣinīs, etc. in the Jaina pantheon. In none of them the rapine element can be traced in order to subscribe to the view that the goddess of learning is the deification of the river named Sarasvatī. The goddess is invariably associated with knowledge or *vidyā* of all kinds including the knowledge of music and other performing and visual arts.

It is difficult to find out how and when the goddess of learning came to be related to the river Sarasvatī or the vice-versa. It seems that the association came through some transformation at some point of time due to the similarity of the name of the goddess and that of the river. It is possible that perhaps the transformation came through either of the following processes of philological phenomenon:⁹

- (1) *Sah rasavat + Strīyam īp = Sahrasavatī > Sarasvatī*
- (2) *Sā Sāravatī > Sasāravatī > Sarasvatī*

In the first instance it refers to one who is the quintessence (*rasa*)¹⁰ of knowledge. In other words it refers to the conception of the goddess Sarasvatī as the embodiment of knowledge par excellence.

In the second instance it may be reference to the female aspect of the core (*sāra*) of knowledge which actually is how the goddess of learning is conceived. The second proposition has the support of the fact that one of the alternate names of the goddess Sarasvatī is Śāradā, meaning (one who is the giver of the essence) and also in the fact that in the above mentioned *mantras* of the goddess (given at no. 2 above) the goddess Sarasvatī is addressed to be as *Carā cara sāre* (essence of the Universe).

But in a thorough investigation the conclusion that we have been able to reach at is that the goddess of learning has been associated with river Sarasvatī

by an interpretative liberty taken at some point of time, and nobody tried to find out when exactly this percolation took place. If it was so it will lead us to a very important art historical issue in which it will be once again proved that the composers or the compilers of iconographic literature were distanced from the image makers for some reason or the other. This issue would be taken up in a subsequent essay.

References & Notes

1. The meaning of the word Sarasvatī has been rendered as 'the flowing one'. See *Iconographic dictionary of the Indian Religions, Hinduism-Buddhism-Jainism* by Gosta Liebert, Leiden, 1976, p.260. Even Liebert does not take up the issue of the association of the goddess of learning with the river Sarasvatī, although he mentions that the goddess of learning is sometimes associated with the river Sindhu and several other sacred rivers of India. This is, however, the popular belief, but no scriptural support for this association is known.
2. Liebert, *op.cit.*
3. It is not convincing that the goddess of learning might have her name derived from a name of a river which had lost its course. Knowledge or learning is something divine and continuous. It cannot be associated with a river which had lost its course in the way.
4. There are numerous other *mantras* with various descriptive epithets. But in none of them the rapine connection has ever been mentioned, even indirectly.
5. There is the adjective *rañjita* before the word *pustaka* or book. I take it as a reference to a book with paintings or a painted book. If it is so, it is interesting to note that this is perhaps a pertinent reference to the books with miniature paintings many of which are known to us. The tradition has it that a book is considered to be more auspicious if it is decorated with paintings. Many *kalāpustakas* or books of or with art (paintings) are known even from the Buddhist and Jaina sources.
6. The *Pratimālakṣaṇa* has a full chapter describing the iconographic form of the goddess Sarasvatī. There, as well as in similar other descriptions of the goddess in several other iconographic texts, the goddess is not attributed with any epithet that would have established her rapine linkage. See *Pratimālakṣaṇa* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara* by D.C. Bhattacharya, New Delhi, 1991, chapter 64, pp.105-108.
7. This description of the goddess Sarasvatī occurs in the *Purohita-Darpaṇa* (the priests manual) used by the *pandits* for the worship of various deities. There is a huge compendium of many such descriptive *mantras* of several deities in a work entitled *Pūjā-Paddhati* now lying in the Asiatic Society, Calcutta bearing the catalogue no. A-10. In this work there are about a dozen descriptive *mantras* of the goddess Sarasvatī, but in none of them the rapine connection is mentioned.

8. D.C. Bhattacharya, *Studies in Buddhist Iconography*, New Delhi, 1978.
9. It is well known that the linguistic grammar depends on various factors of interactions, interchanges and substitutions by factors of phonetic usage conditioned by geomorphic reasons.
10. 'Sarośāstrāmytaraso' is the phrase used in the *Pratimālakṣaṇa*, chapter 64, verse 4. D.C. Bhattacharya, *Pratimālakṣaṇa* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara*, New Delhi, 1991, chapter 64, p.106.

River Sarasvatī in image form is present in the 'Shrine of River Goddesses' in the Kailash Cave at Ellora. She is seen here standing on lotus flanked by Gaṅgā on right and Yamunā on left.

- R.S. Gupte & B.D. Mahajan, *Ellora and Aurangabad Caves*, Bombay, 1962, Pl.CII, p.190. (Editors)