

27. Sarasvati: The River and The Goddess

- **Prasād G. Barve-** Visiting Faculty in French, Brihan Maharashtra College of Commerce (Autonomous), Pune. Email- pragarve@yahoo.co.in

ABSTRACT

The ancient Indian entity called Sarasvati is very rare and thus special. The concept of the mighty river 'Sarasvati' of ancient (undivided) India and the concept of one of the main deities 'Sarasvati' of the Indian pantheon go hand in hand and share a unique relationship. One concept, the one of the rivers is tangible and the other concept, that of the deity is intangible. Both of them seem to be very closely related to each other, thus we move from the tangible to the intangible. Today we know that the mighty river Sarasvati was an integral part of the Harappan Civilisation and was flowing nearly parallelly to the Sindhu alias Indus. So, the recentmost way of naming this great Indian civilization is 'Sindhu– Sarasvati' or 'Indus– Sarasvati' Culture. This civilisation encompasses the vast territory flanked by the Sindhu or the Indus to the west and the mighty Sarasvati to the east, including the settlements on both their banks, namely, east and west banks of the two big rivers. The territory also included some other parts of Western India. The total area of the expanse of this Indian civilisation covered around 1,500 kms X 1,500 kms. For respecting the word limit; we are bringing brevity to our text.

Keywords: –Indus – Sarasvati Civilisation, paleo-channel, North West India, Rigveda, excavations.

Introduction

Sir Mortimer Wheeler who was the British archaeologist who worked in India and the Indian Archaeology owes to him a lot. Sir Wheeler was the director of the Archaeological Survey of India in the decade of 1940 and undertook extensive excavations of the site of Harappa. He said, "Indus has given India her civilisation and the Ganga, her faith". In fact, today we can modify his affirmation as "Indus and Sarasvati have given India her civilisation and the Ganga, her faith". And hence the civilisation today is referred to rather as the 'Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation'. This civilisation which is one of the most ancient and one of the greatest of the world was accidentally discovered while laying the railway track in undivided India's Sindh in 1921-22. This very important discovery pushed the antiquity of the Indian civilisation thousands of years back. This civilisation originated in around fourth millennium B.C.E. and reached its peak by the later half of the third millennium B.C.E. Today, more than minimum fourteen hundred settlements of this civilisation have been known to us and it is also known that more than thousands of these settlements are in present divided India. This major chunk of the Harappan or Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation settlements being found in present day India is thanks to the valley of the Sarasvati River. The two monumental Harappan cities discovered and excavated in comparatively recent times in today's India are Dholavira in Gujarat and Rakhigarhi in Haryana, both being in the Sarasvati valley. These settlements of the Sarasvati Valley discovered and many unearthed in today's India are of all types, viz – small, big, rural, urban, villages, towns and even the metropolis like Rakhigarhi and Dholavira. The Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation was area wise the biggest of all its contemporary civilisations, bigger than even the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian civilisations.

The Sarasvati was one of the major rivers of the ancient India. Originating in the Shivalik range and flowing towards the south-west, the Sarasvati, once arrived in today's Sindh, turned towards the south to meet the sea. This huge river, after its origin in the Shivaliks, flowed through today's Indian states of Haryana, Rajasthan then entering in today's Pakistan in Cholistan of Pakistani Punjab, crossing Sindh and entering again in today's India in Kutch of Gujarat and finally emptying itself in the sea near Kutch. But today we don't see the Sarasvati River on the map. Today it has disappeared. This might be a very unique case in the entire world that such a huge and mighty river originating from the high mountains, running for nearly 1,500 kilometers and feeding and giving prosperity to a huge civilisation and finally emptying itself in the sea and which fed and nourished the big and important civilisation of the world, disappears. The lost Sarasvati today remains in the form of a small trickle, that too seasonal during the monsoon, and this flow is called Ghaggar and Hakra on Indian side and Pakistani side respectively.

The Sarasvati, the river considered to be mythical, started slowly to be known as reality. The surveys, the archaeological as well geological excavations, the satellite imagery, the references of the ancient texts, the observations executed over a long period by different officers, the scholars and the experts, started to turn a myth into the reality. The British colonisers have to a great extent contributed in India's archaeology. The first official survey of a territory related to the Sarasvati River was done by The East India Company's 'political agent' appointed in 'Rajputana' in 1812. His name was Lieutenant Colonel James Tod. He being very much interested in the culture; he and his subordinates explored the land of 'Rajpootana'. In his notes with the title 'Sketch of the Indian Desert' he talks about "expansive belts of sand, elevated upon a plain only less sandy, and over those surface numerous thinly peopled towns and hamlets are scattered". He also says, "The tradition of the absorption of the Caggar (Ghaggar) river, as one of the causes of the comparative depopulation of the northern desert". We have already talked about the Ghaggar and Hakra rivulets. His observation of 'depopulation' of the region due to the 'absorption (meaning disappearance) of Cuggar' fits aptly in our issue. Tod also mentions about 'the vestiges of large towns, now buried in the sands', which also affirms our argument.

The British geologist C.M. Oldham, who also was a geographer and an archaeologist, stated in 1844 that Sutlaj and even probably Yamuna emptied their water in Sarasvati which made her mighty. And today thanks to the satellite photography it is seen that both these big rivers of north India were tributaries of Sarasvati during the pre-Harappan and the Harappan times. To reinforce the same, one can observe widening of the Ghaggar basin to the south of present-day Patiala, which indicates major water streams joining the main stream Ghaggar.

The contribution to this matter by two French scholars is also significant. We can mention the name of one French Sanskrit scholar as Louis Renou (1896–1966) who had studied also the Vedas, and who has to his credit the translation of the Vedic hymns into French. He also has to his credit many books written on Sanskrit, the Vedas, the Paninian grammar and on other related topics, written in French. In his famous co-authored French book 'L'Inde Classique' (Classical India), published in Paris in 1947, he depicts the Rigveda landscape. While enumerating the rivers of 'Sapta Sindhu' (Seven Rivers) group mentioned in the Rigveda, he of course mentions the big river Sindhu or Indus and her five tributaries which form the five

rivers of Punjab, but at the same time while talking about the 'Sapta Sindhu' he says, "More important is the Sarasvati, the true lifeline of Vedic geography, whose trace is assumed to be found in the Sarsuti, located between the Satlaj and the Jamnā. With the Indus and its five tributaries, it forms the Veda's 'seven rivers'." He even clearly shows the location the Sarasvati of the Vedic India. He too calls the Sarasvati as a river more important than the Sindhu or the Indus.

The other French person who was a geography scholar Louis Vivien de Saint - Martin (1802–1896) who founded the prestigious 'Société de Géographie' in 1821. He took up the task of to reconstruct India's ancient geography from the most primitive times. He was aware that this was an immense task. He wrote three volumes about it. In his first volume 'A Study on the Geography and the Primitive People of India's North-West, According to Vedic Hymns' published in 1860, he makes the synthesis of the British accounts and surveys of recently possessed land and the Rigveda hymns, such a synthesis was done for the first ever time. Till then this field was nearly virgin. It was a difficult task to locate on map of the North -Western India, the Sarasvati mentioned in the Rigveda. He mentions the Sarasvati being "the one which the hymns mention most frequently, whose name they utter with the highest praise and predilection". He learns that it is on the banks of this very river that the Vedic hymns were collected and compiled by the sage Vyāsa. He also talks about today's monsoon fed insignificant river called 'Sarsuti' which originates at the foot of the Shivaliks from the narrow strip between the Djemna (Yamunā) and Satledj (Sutlej), and which flows by Thanesar (ancient Sthaneshwar) and Kurukshetra. And it joins again the seasonal river Ghaggar (today's small Ghaggar is devoid of water between November and June). He also mentions the small seasonal river called 'Chautang' which too originates in the Shivaliks and meets the Sarsuti which on her turn meets the Ghaggar. The Chautang has been identified as the once huge Drishadvati River of ancient India which was a major tributary of the huger river Sarasvati. Vivien de Saint Martin also observes that the Vedas talk about the Sarasvati meeting the sea. This in fact traces exactly the path of the ancient Sarasvati.

When Louis Vivien de Saint- Martin (also known as Vivien de Saint-Martin) talks about the present day 'Sarsuti' taking its source in the narrow piece of land between the Yamuna and the Sutlej takes us back to the period, the Harappan period when this grand river was flowing and watering the big terrain along with the Yamuna on her left bank and Sutlej on her right bank as her two major tributaries.

To specify a big example of once fertile lush green land soaked by the abundant Sarasvati and harbouring many flourishing settlements but this land getting converted into a harsh desert today, we have to speak about the Indian state of Rajasthan. This land is intersected by many paleo-channels nestling many ancient habitations on their banks. It was a very hospitable land. The inhabited sites which were so numerous, and if we base ourselves on sheerly the number of such sites discovered here, that we are further to say that the Sarasvati basin was the origin of the Harappan settlements. The erstwhile Sarasvati, that is today's Ghaggar in India and Hakra in Pakistan along with the erstwhile major tributary of Sarasvati which was Drishadvati in India, that is today's Chautang could be considered as the cradle of Harappan civilisation. Talking in this context about one more similar region which today is dry and hot desert, we can cite one more example of Cholistan. Cholistan is today across the border in

south Punjab of Pakistan. Cholistan, a part of the great Thar Desert, borders Indian state of Rajasthan to the east and the Pakistani province of Sindh to the south. Cholistan is the region also from where the Sarasvati was once gushing. In Cholistan desert the archaeological excavations have shown the wide presence of pre-Harappan and Harappan settlements. So many settlements can exist only when enough water to sustain everything that a long-term human inhabitation needs is present.

In the explorations and research of the paleo-channel of Sarasvati it was observed that this mega river having the flow of a couple of kilometers wide dried of natural reasons such as change in climate, shifting of her major tributaries and according to some also the tectonic movements. Studies in the field of pollens of the ancient flora of the sites have shown the drastic change in the environment. The evidences of this paleo-channel are being found near the archaeological sites which are considered as the 'Sarasvati River basin habitation sites. The fact established that the paleo-channel of this huge river originated from the Himalayan high land and descended to as well as flowed through the plains of Haryana and Rajasthan, the sampling of the deposits was and is carried in the ex-bed of today's dried Sarasvati. During the research of the geological excavations, the remains in the form of sediments of the paleo-channel were discovered. The land of this channel is rich in clay and silt near the surface. In the depth of a several meters below the ground level the scholars and the researchers have found the 'higher Himalayan sand with coarse muscovite grains derived out of the crystalline rocks exposed in the Higher Himalayas'. Many times, it has been observed that the typical type of sand found in the paleo-channel of one site, matches with the sand found in some distant sites, establishing the fact that there was common water current which was flowing through these several sites. Some findings of the deposits brought to light during the geological excavations of the paleo-channel, match to the deposits of the present river bed which today is so many kilometers away from the site excavated, we can talk about at least one such example which is that of paleo-Yamuna and the present Yamuna.

To talk about the two of the main tributaries of the ancient Sarasvati, we can name Yamuna to her eastern side and Sutlej to her western side. To talk in a nutshell, there is an understanding among scholars that the Sutlej and the Yamuna changed their course and met finally the Ganga and the Indus respectively, thus restricting to a great extent the water supply of the Sarasvati. Due to word limit, apart from just mentioning them, we will not deal in details with the main three tributaries of the Sarasvati, namely the Yamuna, the Drishadvati and the Sutlej.

We have other such research works, reports, research papers and references, of course by Indian eminent scholars also, regarding today's lost Sarasvati, which we can only enumerate or cite here due to the word limit. This list is according to my limited knowledge and thus not comprehensive. The names mentioned here are purely according to the purely alphabetical order. We can mention Dr. B.K. Bhadra from ISRO, Prof. Dr. A.R. Chaudhri from Centre of Excellence for Research on the Sarasvati River from Kurukshetra University, Dr. A.K. Gupta from Dr. Ambedkar Institute of Technology, Prof. B.B. Lal from Archaeological Survey of India, Dr. V.M.K. Puri from Geological Survey of India, Dr. Rajesh Ranga from Centre of Excellence for Research on the Sarasvati River from Kurukshetra University, Prof. Dr. K.S. Valdiya from Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advance Scientific Research, and there must be surely more names. As far as the archaeological excavations of Sarasvati river basin habitation

sites are concerned, we can cite the names of at least these two eminent organisations in the alphabetical order, Archaeological Survey of India and Deccan College of Pune, this list is according to my limited knowledge and thus is not comprehensive. Let's come to the etymology of today's small seasonal rivulet called in present times as 'Ghaggar', we can observe in the Atharva Veda (4.15.12) the word 'gargara' denoting a water body or a stream. In Mahābhārata we come across the 'thirtha' on the banks of the Sarasvati with name 'Gargastrota' which was the abode of the GargaRishi. In Brahma Purāna (25.64) we come across a sacred site called 'Ghargharikā Kunda', where the name is rather onomatopoeic, the word 'gharghara' is the sound or music produced by the huge mass of water. Here this possible origin of the river name 'Ghaggar' is significant to come to the link between the concept of 'sound' and the concept of the goddess of knowledge 'Sarasvati'.

To talk about the Sanskrit etymology of 'Sarasvati', there is more than one opinion. Instead of going in the intricacies if we see broadly, we can point out these two of these multiple versions. One being derived from two words 'saras' and 'vati'. 'Sara' meaning a lake or pond and 'vati' is the feminine form of the meaning 'the possessor' or 'bearer'. Meaning the one who/which has, possesses or bears the lakes or ponds. So it might be from the fact that this huge river may be having a lot of accumulated water bodies in her flow. The other one being from the original verb form being 'sru' which implies speed, and 'vati' meaning the bearer or the possessor. A link between the speed and the ever-advancing knowledge may be done. So 'the one having or possessing the knowledge'.

No other river of Vedic India, but the Sarasvati, got the symbolism, the connotation of inspiration, of speech, of knowledge and of music. The association of the mega proportions and the speed and the sound or the music or the 'dhvani' created by the massive river Sarasvati was raised by the sages and the poets on her banks to the level related to 'sound' or 'speech' or 'dhvani' of the humans. She from the very beginning is seen and praised as 'inspiring the hymns'. This symbolism attached to her developed into the concept of 'Speech'. The give and take of knowledge in the Vedic times being mainly, if not exclusively, by the human speech or by the 'dhvani', the relation between the 'dhvani' and the 'knowledge' and the 'music' must have been established. 'Speech' and 'inspiration' lead us further to acquiring the knowledge and to the process of learning. We also see deification of this immense, impressive and benefactor or the beneficent or the giver river with her endless waters and her impacting sound or the 'dhvani'. Thus, she becomes the 'mother of the Vedas' and further the consort and sometimes daughter of Brahma. Thus, the domaine of arts also was added to her facets. She is the first river of ancient India which is turned into a goddess. And following this pattern, the other rivers like the Ganga and others were deified. We have the reference and the description of both the forms of the Sarasvati, namely the river form and the goddess form, right from Rigveda time and text.

In Rigveda we come across the Sarasvati in 45 hymns in which we see, she being praised. Among them, the 3 hymns speak entirely of her. And we observe her name occurring 72 times. Such is her importance in Vedic times. Such was this river in the Vedic times. This great river has been described as 'great flood', 'great among the great', 'the most impetuous of the rivers', 'created vast', 'limitless, unbroken, swift moving', 'surpassing the majesty and strength of all

other waters', 'comes with tempestuous roar', 'sindhumātā' meaning the 'mother of rivers/waters.

We come across the references and the hymns on Sarasvati in many ancient Sanskrit texts of India such as Rigveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda and Brāhmanas like Shatapatha, Kaushitaki, Tāndya, Taitirīya, Gopath, and Eitereya. Also in different Purānas like Agni, Brahmapurāṇa, Brahmavaivarta, Brahmānda, Devi Bhāgavat, Mārkaṇḍeya, Matsya, Padma, Shivamahāpurāṇa, Skanda, Vāmana, Vāyu, Vishnubharmottara, we find her. We find her also in the great Sanskrit epics like Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata. We find her in other Sanskrit texts like Mānsār, Shilparatna, Aparājita-prichchhā, Devatāmōrtiprakaraṇa, Rōopamandana, Anshamadbhedāgama, Poorvakaraṇāgama, Tantrasār, Shiparatnākara and Dweepārṇava.

In Rigveda, we come across a concept called 'Sapta Sindhu', meaning the 'Seven Rivers'. According to majority of scholars it is accepted that these Seven Rivers of the Vedas are Sidhu (Indus), Sarasvati and the five rivers of today's Punjab namely Vitastā (Jhelum), Asikni (Chenab), Parushni or Irāvati (Ravi) and Shatadru (Sutlej). This way too we understand the presence of the river Sarasvati in Rigveda. The Sarasvati known to us, has her origin in purely physical and tangible form of an existing river. We come across her in the 'Nadistuti Sookta' (Hymns in Praise of Rivers) of Rigveda where, according to a source nineteen rivers and according to the other source twenty-one rivers known to the Vedic man are invoked and praised by each individual 'sookta' or a hymn. We are giving here a part of this NadistutiSookta going by the Vedic river geography known to the then Vedic man. This encompasses an area of thousands of kilometers with the major rivers of extreme north west of the then Vedic India which are today in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the western Gangetic plain of north India. We also observe that the Vedic composers had full knowledge of their geography with important rivers and even their main tributaries which are spread over so many kilometers away from each other. In this way we have to give credit to the wider capacity of intellect of the Vedic composers of understanding their geography on much broader scale. As a consequence we understand that they were not merely just some local village poets.

The part of these hymns says,

"O Gangā, Yamunā, Sarasvati, Shutudri, Parushni, hear my praise. Hear my call, O Asikni, Marudvidhā, Vitastā, with Ārikiyā and Sushomā."

"First you flow united with Trishtāmā, with Susartu and Rasā, and with Svetyā, O Sindhu with Kubhā to Gomati, with Mehantu to Krumu, with whom you proceed together."

Some of the above-mentioned rivers having Sanskrit names are known today as, Shutudri as Sutlej, Parushni as Ravi, Asikni as Chenab, Marudvidhā as Maruvardhvan, Vitastā as Jhelum, Kubhā as Kabul, Gomati as Gumal/Gomal and Krumu as Kurram.

Such prominent is this Sarasvati River that in Rigveda it gets attached with the connotation as embodiment of flood of illumination and knowledge as well as of inspiration. She is attributed as the impeller of happy truths awakening in the consciousness the great flood and the illumination of thoughts. She is described as 'Ambitame, Naditame, Devitame' (the 'Best of Mothers, Best of Rivers, Best of Goddesses'). Later in Yajurveda we observe her as goddess of Speech, and Word (Vāk).

In the Rigveda, we come across some important female deities or devis like Aditi, Ushas, Prithvi and Vāk Devi. In the same Rigveda, we also come across the praises of the rivers like Sindhu, Gangā, and Sarasvati among others. The hymns dedicated to the Sarasvati are observed to be one of the most numerous. Compared to the other rivers mentioned in the Rigveda, the 'humanisation' of Sarasvati is the most vivid. In the 10th and 12th hymns of the 3rd Sukta of the 1st Mandala of Rigveda the Sarasvati is referred to as the creator of the volumes of water and of the entire knowledge. Probably from very much here itself the concept of the 'knowledge giver' of Sarasvati begins. The two forms of the knowledge given by the 'knowledge giver' Sarasvati can be perceived here, the material or terrestrial knowledge and the spiritual knowledge. She has been described as originating from the 'Amrut Sarovar' or the 'Lake of the Nectar of Immortality'. She is invoked in the 'Yadnya/Yajna' rituals also. She is requested to give her honey-like water. We see her being described in many ways. She is described as originating from the mountain and meeting the sea, her waters are more sacred than any other river, she breaks the solid mountain peaks with her mighty waves, her water is described as advancing with a huge roaring sound, her waters, her flow are unlimited, full of radiance and brilliance, without obstacle, making enormous sound and flowing with a great speed. She is offered the prayer and request that 'may her water flow incessantly and causing no harm to us.'

We get an idea also about her disappearance in the ancient Sanskrit texts that followed much later the Vedas (especially the Rigveda). In the later Sanskrit texts called the Brāhmanas, we get the feel that everything is not going well for this great river. We find the first reference about the river diminishing. It is mentioned that the river is no more seen or disappears at the place called 'Vinashana' or 'Adarshana' meaning disappearance, lost or invisible and not seen, respectively. The uninterrupted and the unbroken flow of the Sarasvati is no more the same. In the Brāhmanas itself we find the reference also of the place of its source, at Plakshaprāsavana, which the epic Mahābhārata also mentions being in the Shivalik range. We find the mention also of distance from its place of source to the disappearance as 'forty-five āshwinas' meaning 'forty-five days on horseback'. Even if the mention of 'Vinashana' occurs, there occurs also the mention of it being broken or fragmented and re-appearing at some places. In Mahābhārata too we come across the reference to her being broken and to her disappearance.

When we talk of Sarasvati as Goddess, we come upon its mention in different texts of ancient India. When we try to look for these references, these few are among the many others. If we start from the most ancient Indian texts of the Vedas; the first one we have to mention is Rigveda. In Rigveda, the Sarasvati is invoked much more as a river than as a goddess. As a goddess She seems to be in her nascent phase, it appears. As a goddess, we see her invoked along with the other deities like Indra, Marudganas, Ashwins, etc. She appears sometimes in the company of the goddesses Idā and Bhārati and also with Mahi and Hotrā. The three deities are requested to be favourable while sprinkling the water around the sacred fire in the 'Upanayana' ceremony or the 'Thread Ceremony' are Aditi, Anumati and Sarasvati. She is also treated as the goddess of Inspiration, Knowledge and Speech. She is the protector of fetus and the giver of offsprings.

In the Yajurveda, we see her as the goddess of happiness, prosperity, and also the giver of offsprings. She is also understood as the wife of Ashwin. She is invoked along with Pushan during the Soma Yajna. Even in the Ashvamedh and Rajsooya Yajnas, She is invoked. In some

places she is mentioned as the goddess of Vāk, the Speech. In some other cases she is addressed as the eliminator of the bad effects of over consumption of the Somrasa.

In the Atharvaveda, we observe Sarasvati as the celestial goddess, the goddess of waters, the Inspirer of soil fertility, the goddess of power or of force of Vāk. She is also invoked as the strength giver so that one could please and satisfy all the divinities. We see her also as the protecting goddess who also is worshipped for material richness, prosperity and for offsprings and children. Apart from these, she appears also as destroyer of diseases and of germs and insects. She is remembered for appeasing the poison. Even in this Veda, She appears to be invoked with other deities like Varun, Mitra, Indra, Ilā and Bhārati.

As mentioned before, She as the goddess gets a clear mention in the two glorious epics of India, viz Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata. In Rāmāyana She is described in many instances as the Vāgdevi (the goddess of Speech) who resides on the tongue and in the throat. She is also described as the bearer of the string instrument 'Veenā'. In Rāmāyana itself she is referred to by the synonyms as 'Vāni', 'Shruti' and 'Gāyatri'. In Mahābhārata, Sarasvati's references are found as 'Devi Vāni', 'Vāgdevatā', 'Vedamātā', 'Vidyādevi', 'Neeti Devi'. She is also been associated with some other deities like Indra, Agni, Durgā, Hayagreeva and Brahmā. In this epic we also come across the worship of the goddess Sarasvati.

The other group of ancient Indian texts called the 'Purāna's bear the mention of Sarasvati as goddess, along with her river form. In fact, in the Purānas we come across here more than the chronologically previous texts. We have in the Purānas, the blossoming of the themes mentioned in the Vedic literature. We observe the complete development and transformation of Sarasvati, the very special River it was, into an individual divine entity complete in itself, of the Goddess Sarasvati, without hampering her form as the river. The river which was honoured as the 'Devitamā' meaning the highest or the best goddess in the Vedas, has been seen elevated to the still further stature of the goddess worshipped even by the deities 'Brahmā, Vishnu and Mahesh'. Though her stature is observed as elevated, She at the core is still the 'Vāgdevi' and the 'Nadidevi' of the Vedas. In Rigveda, Sarasvati and Bhārati are mentioned as two separate entities, but further in the Purānas, we see Bhārati incorporated in Sarasvati. Sometimes, especially in Bhāgavat and Brahmavaivarta Purānas, we see 'Vāk' or 'Vāni' being synonymous to Sarasvati. In Skanda Purān, we see her addressed as 'Vrishti', meaning rains or showers. In Vāmana Purān, She has been praised as 'moving ahead as per her own will' and as 'creator of water from the clouds', thus further she also gets the attribute as the 'River Sarasvati Reigning Goddess of Rains'. In the same Purāna, She is depicted as all the waters being herself. Thus, we see her even in the later period, as always inseparable from Water. We come across numerous synonyms of this Goddess. She is addressed with different names in the Purānas. We are not able to enumerate all of them here due to our restraint. So here are a few of them – Shataroopā, Sāvitrī, Medhā, Smriti, Mahāvidyā, Mahāvāni, Vedagarbhā, Kāmadhenu, Bhāshā, Aksharā, Shāradā, Kāshirpuravāsini, Vishwaroopā, Sarvakanthavāsini, Kavijivhāgravāsini, Vichārākārini, Granthabeejaroopā, Veenāpustakadhārini, Jaganmātā, Jagadambikā, Sureshwari, Keerti, Nidrā, Shree...and the list is long. In the Purānas, She appears to be associated with the deities and celestial beings, some of them are– Vishnu, Shiva, Sāvitrī, Gāyatri, Lakshmi, Gandharvas, and Soma. As far as her physical description is concerned, she is with fair complexion and is generally described as having four arms, draped in white clothes, adorned with precious

jewelry. In her four hands she bears mainly four of these as mentioned in different Purānas-book, Veenā, rosary, lotus, Kamandalu, Ankush and Pāsha.

Iconographically speaking, her mount is a swan. The white color is associated with herself and her mount the swan and is depicted with a peacock. The white color signifying the purity, lack of dirt and the 'sattva' tendency. The swan signifies the good intelligence which is capable of differentiating between the good and the bad. The attributes shown with the goddess are the string instrument 'Veena' the resonance of which evokes the entity of the universe. The rosary may denote the piousness, calm and pursuit of knowledge. The book symbolises the strength of words and of knowledge, of the prose and of poetry which are variations of the speech itself. And the hand posture or gesture 'abhayamudrā' giving protection and assurance.

We find her worship, praise and icons even in Jain and Buddhist faiths where she is seen with more or less the same attributes. She has travelled and has covered far and near distances out of the present Indian Territory. Here, we will deal with only three such lands and that too in short. These are Buddhist lands and there we see Sarasvati as goddess present in their culture and in worship. To cite just three examples of the same, we can talk about the Tibet, Myanmar and Japan. In Tibetan Buddhism, which follows the Mahāyāna belief, She is the same as in India with a string instrument, her depiction shows also the lotus, which is so very omnipresent in the depiction of the Indian deities. In Tibet She is considered as the goddess of 'audible arts' like music, poetry and rhetoric. Again, here too, we notice her strong connection with the concept of 'Vāk'. The only major difference is that she is depicted with the typical Tibetan face and the artistic expression is in Tibetan way. If we talk about Burma alias Myanmar, it follows the Pāli Theravāda Buddhism. In Myanmar, She is known as 'Surassati' and pronounced as 'Thuyatati'. She is considered as the one who commands the tongue and lips, is the goddess of learning and speech, goddess of luck and prosperity. She is presiding deity of arts and science. She is also referred to as protector of the 'Tripitakas' meaning the 'Three Pitakas' which are the holy books of Theravāda Buddhism. The Burmese version of Rāmāyana which is locally called as 'Rāma Ragan', we have the mention of Rāma's lips being influenced by her. In a historical poetry work titled 'Mintaya-Shwe-hti E-gyin' in the praise of the great Burmese king Tabinshweti (rule 1531-1550) it is said that his tongue has the influence of Sarasvati. In the poetic creation named as 'Sujā Pyo' it is affirmed that it is Sarasvati who teaches arts and science to every child. In a poetry in praise of another important king Bodawpaya (rule 1782-1819) who conquered Arakan, we read that his glory is so great that even Sarasvati is not competent enough to describe it. Even in the comparatively modern literary Burmese works, we witness her presence in many Burmese literary works. Even there we see her relation with the Water. In the Burmese texts such as 'Vohāralitthadipani Kyan' we see that the dwelling of Sarasvati is in a lake. In 'Ādikappa Kambhā Oo Kyan' it is said that she resides in the lake called 'Sidantara' and takes care of the good of the people. In 'Thonsai-khuna Min' we come across her as the wife of Brahmā and is carried by a swan. In 'Nānāchanda Pyo' She is seen as moving on a swan and bearing a white lotus in a hand. More interestingly she is considered also as the goddess of love. One of the many works that depict her as the goddess of love is the prose work 'Piyasiddhi Alinpya Kyan'. Even in Japan Sarasvati is worshipped under the name 'Benzaiten'. There seem to be two kinds of Benzaiten, one with two arms and the other with eight arms. The one with two arms has a 'Biwa' (the Japanese version of Veenā) and rides on the white dragon. Her Japanese version keeps the basic idea of Sarasvati and adds the local

colour to it in the form of Biwa and the dragon. Here too she is of course the goddess of speech, learning and arts, but in addition she gets another facet of being the goddess of war.

Conclusion

Saraswati remains as probably an extremely unique case in the entire world. We can see Saraswati for so many of her unique features which make her probably the greatest river of India and probably one of its kinds in the entire world. We can enumerate the following points regarding her very uniqueness.

- The journey from an ancient mighty and a huge river praised the most, to a famous and important deity so widely worshipped even in the modern times. Thus, a unique amalgamation of an important river and of an important deity.
- Even after receiving the form of a deity, she doesn't lose her original aspect of the river.
- The cradle of one of the known most ancient civilisation which was area wise the largest civilisation of the same period of the world.
- The cradle of Indian Civilisation.
- Considered as the first most holy river of India.
- The first ever deified river of India.
- She is probably the only river and deity which has been addressed to using so many different nouns and adjectives.
- Numerous references, praises and invocations of hers in extremely numerous texts spread over such a huge span of time show her prominence.
- Such is her greatness that She is praised and worshipped even outside India and interesting part is that her form has been given so many local colours/depictions.
- Hers is probably the unique example in the world of disappearance of a river of such a huge magnitude and of even after her disappearance she being very much alive in the public memory.
- It can be called as The River of India.

References

- Danino Michel (2010). The Lost Saraswati – On the Trail of the Saraswati ,Penguin Books, New Delhi.
- Dhavalikar M. K. (2002). Environment and Culture- a Historic Perspective, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.
- Dhavalikar Madhukar Keshav (2006). Kone Eke Kali Sindhu Sanskruti (In Marathi), RajhansPrakashan, Pune.
- Edited by Raghavan V. (1966). Proceedings and Transactions of the All-India Oriental Conference Twnty First Session, Vol.II Part I, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.
- Jansen Eva Rudy (2004). The Book of the Buddhas, New Age Books, New Delhi.
- Joshi J.R. (1978). Minor Vedic Dieties, University of Poona, Pune.
- Khare Sushila (1966). Monographs of the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, No.4, Saraswati, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.
- Singh Jaskaran (2022). Another Saraswati Paleochannel Found, Times of India, Chandigarh, 24 April 2022.