



WINDING THE COURSE: THE OTHER SIDE OF SARASVATĪ

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ABSTRACT

The Devī Sarasvatī is primarily worshipped to bestow knowledge upon her seekers. However, though her association with knowledge is the most pronounced, there are other facets to her character which have in most part remained unexplored. Her journey from a riverine deity to the one who blesses her devotees with wisdom, has been chronicled in various researches, hence the purview of this present paper is definitely not to address those issues. What it shall strive to explore is a particular aspect of Sarasvatī, her serpentine connection, which though have been hinted at various sources, does not feature in any of the works on Sarasvatī. Hence this present paper shall try to raise questions on this aspect and try to work out the connection between serpents and Sarasvatī. Interestingly myths about serpent power abound in all ancient cultures, how far lies the possibility of Sarasvatī imbibing this power is what this paper shall try to address by juxtaposing it with tales and legends from other ancient civilizations.

Keywords: *Sarasvatī, serpent, Rg Veda, Atharva Veda, wisdom, healer*

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Sarasvatī, the high Brahmanical Devī of learning, is primarily known to bestow knowledge upon her seekers. With her book and lute, she is an image of serenity and peace; however, there are other sides of this Devī which though hinted at various texts are not much dwelt upon in later traditions. For most of

us, she is the Goddess of learning whose presence is sought in libraries and educational institutions and by those involved in learning and teaching. While the origins of Sarasvatī and this deity's development through texts and icons have received the attention of scholars, there are other aspects of the deity that

has been overlooked. It is proposed to examine these other aspects of Sarasvatī which for most of the time have remained unexplored.

While tracing Sarasvatī's journey of being a riverine deity to the Goddess of learning, her many attributes come to the fore but not much attention is devoted to them, though looking at those closely, a different image of this Devī is brought before us. In the *R̥g Veda* the River Goddess Sarasvatī is described as a purifying presence (Griffith:1963:1.3.10). It is described that her waters cleanse poison from men. (Griffith:1963:6.61.63, Kinsley:1987:10-11). In the *Atharvaveda* Sarasvatī is referred to as a destroyer of poison (Griffith: 1968,:6.100). The *Atharvaveda* also refers to a young Kirāta girl digging up remedy against snake poison with golden shovels. In the same text it is said that a girl by the name of Ghṛtāci knows a spell that can neutralize the effect of poison. N.K Bhattasali was of the view that these two characters mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* were not different. He also identified Sarasvatī with Ghṛtāci. (Bhattasali:1929:221-22). Further, Jhuma Ghosh in her unpublished Ph.D. thesis has pointed out that in the *R̥g Veda*, Ghṛtāci has been used as an adjective for Sarasvatī (Griffith: 1963: 5.43.11, Ghosh: 2010:50). All this hints at Sarasvatī's association with serpents. Attempts have also been made to trace the antecedents of the Buddhist deity Jāṅgulī Tārā, who seems to share many traits with Sarasvatī, to this legend of the Kirāta girl and Ghṛtāci and it is also held by some that though under Brahmanical influence Sarasvatī had to shed all her erstwhile serpentine connection, the earlier image of Sarasvatī with serpents continued to survive through Jāṅgulī Tārā. Thus, there is a belief that Sarasvatī and Jāṅgulī were originally one, but while the former was moulded by the Brahmanical society, the latter was incorporated into the Buddhist Tantric tradition with all her past characteristics. There are definitely marked similarities between Jāṅgulī and Sarasvatī as indicated by their *dhyānas*. Both of them play the *vīṇa* and are clad in similar white dresses (Bhattasali:1929:223; Bhattacharya:1975:275-6). However, these similarities are definitely not enough to state that Jāṅgulī originated from Sarasvatī, but what seems a tenable proposition is that the process of Sarasvatī's turning to a goddess of learning might

be because of her previous serpentine connection. Of the best known attributes of serpents, one is wisdom. This is the reason why the serpent was associated with Apollo and Athena, the Greek deities of wisdom and it was also consulted as an oracle by the ancients (Wake:1873: 378).

Upon examination of the Greek myths, it becomes evident that the Oracle of Delphi, before being sacred to the Greek deity Apollo, belonged to Python, a huge Earth dragon represented in Greek mythology as the largest snake in the world. Delphi was then known as Krisa and Python who was among the first born of the Mother Goddess (Earth) Gaia inherited all her wisdom and knowledge. It was he who as the protector and guardian of Gaia's sacred city of Krisa sent prophecies to Pythia appointing her the Oracle priestess of Krisa and although Python was slain by Apollo, Pythia was taken as his own priestess thus appropriating the serpent's power of prophecy into the Greek pantheon. In this the power of the vanquished serpent was incorporated into the cult of Apollo. In fact, the name Delphi also bears the serpent connection, because it was named after Delphyne, another serpent guardian of Gaia's centre of Krisa. (Lloyd-Jones: 1976: 60-73). Thus, despite overpowering the serpents, Apollo never tried to erase the association with serpents with knowledge or wisdom, thus showing the reverence paid to their special powers.

The serpent connection is also very much conspicuous in Japan, where Sarasvatī is worshipped in the form of a white snake who is believed to be her manifestation. The Goddess Benzaiten of Japan who is believed to have overpowered a dragon, most often appears with a white snake as her headdress. Dragons and serpents are her messengers and she herself sometimes appears as a white snake. Though serpents might seem frightening, Japanese and Chinese tradition honour snakes as benevolent, just and wise. Dragons and snakes are considered by them as the bearers and guardians of the sacred wish granting jewel that represent enlightenment and sacred wisdom (Ludvik: 2013:94-109).

Actually, the notion that wisdom was inherent in serpents and was to be gained by paying homage to it was universal. Hence even though when serpents do not emerge victors and end up being conquered,

their qualities are passed on to their conquerors as was probably the case with Sarasvatī, Apollo and Benzaiten.

Just as wisdom was ascribed to the serpents, the serpent was also frequently regarded as the symbol or cause of life and healing. During a Plague in Rome a sacred serpent was brought from Greece to stop the pestilence. Among the Muslim peasantry of Egypt till as early as the twentieth century there prevailed the cult of Shekh Heridi, a serpent, with a shrine and priests, having curative powers. In ancient Mediterranean religions, the Agathos Daimon or Good Spirit was usually depicted as a serpent and was much revered. The Agathos Daimon was considered as one who ushered in good health and fortune. Representations of the snake headed goddess Ranno also abound in Egyptian temples who is depicted as nursing the young princes.

Health was also intimately associated with the serpent and that became manifested when a crown formed of snake was given particularly to Isis, a goddess of life and healing. The serpent was also the symbol of other deities with similar attributes. Among the many attributes of the serpent, longevity is one that led it to become the very symbol of eternity. The serpent's ability to renew its youth by shedding its skin gave it an aura of immortality and quite fittingly so for even today it seems that it is accident alone that can take away its life (Wake:1873:373-90; Davis: 1888:161-171). Apollo, Asklepios, the healer gods of Greek mythology, and Asklepios's daughter Hygeia are also closely connected to serpents. Asklepios was proficient in healing and could defer withering that came with old age. For this he was given a serpent as an attribute, indicating that those who take the aid of medical science undergo a process similar to the serpent. The belief became so well entrenched that the Rod of Asklepios, which is actually a rod or staff entwined by serpents wielded by the Greek God Asklepios, has been adopted as the Universal medical symbol (D'irsay:1935:451-482).

Hygeia's connection with snakes, like that of her father, is also evident. She is the goddess of health, cleanliness and sanitation who like her father also shares a close bond with serpents. When Asklepios was killed by Zeus, harmless serpents were found

inside the temples built in his honour, which were almost dead. Hygieia tended to these snakes and so is depicted with a serpent around her arm and a bowl of medicinal potion in her hand. Like the Rod of Asklepios, the Bowl and the Serpent have become an internationally recognized symbol of Pharmacy known as the Bowl of Hygieia (Warwick: 1884:82-101).

Interestingly *Sarasvatī* too exhibits healing aspects. In the *Rg Veda* she and the *Aśvins* are stated to have healed *Indra* (Griffith: 1963:10.131). She along with the *Aśvins* is also referred in an incantation for safe pregnancy and delivery, where various *devas*, including the *Aśvins* and *Sarasvatī* are asked to place the embryo in a woman's womb (Griffith: 1963:10.184; Ludvik: 2007:46). The *Yajurveda* also contains references to *Sarasvatī* as a healer. In one instance *Sarasvatī* and the *Aśvin* twins are described as being accompanied by *Varuṇa* and *Sāvitrī* as they made it possible for *Indra* to regain his strength (Ludvik: 2007:51). The *Atharvaveda* also depicts *Sarasvatī* as a healer. *Sarasvatī* along with *Agni* and *Sāvitrī* is shown in this text as one who infuses vitality. In the *Atharvaveda*, *Sarasvatī* is the one who along with *Indra* and *Agni* fight against the germs that cause human illness so that humans can regain their health. The *Atharvaveda* contains prayers invoking *Sarasvatī* so that she destroys the germs inhabiting our bodies (Griffith:1968:5.23).

Could it be possible that *Sarasvatī* too inherited this particular trait from serpents with which she seems to share a connection? It is true that *Sarasvatī*'s serpentine connection might seem incredulous today, but hints are scattered in the early texts that suggest a plausible connection between *Sarasvatī* and the serpents. The much-celebrated serpent deity of Bengal, *Manasā*, portrays many traits that are quite similar to those of *Sarasvatī*. *Manasā* too like *Sarasvatī*, rides on a swan and in one of the *dhyānas* of *Manasā* she is stated to be the giver of all knowledge and is herself well versed in all learning. Many scholars believe that the characteristics of fair complexion, the *hamsa* or swan as the mount and the capacity to destroy poison as recited in the *dhyānas* of *Manasā* forge her connection with *Sarasvatī* (Bhattasali:1929:218-19). Like *Sarasvatī*, she also can heal a person and has the power to

bring back the dead ones to life, which she did for *Chañd Saudāgar's* seven sons (Sen:1953:220-22) When Śiva, her father in the *Mañgalakāvya*s (a popular genre of Bengali literature) was in the jaws of death after drinking the poison obtained from the second churning of the ocean, it was Manasā who saved her father by muttering mystic verses as antidote to the effect of poison (Sen: 1953:35-39). What made Sarasvatī and Manasā, separated by time and tradition, portray similar traits? Could the answer lie with the serpents whose association is pronounced with the non-Brahmanical Manasā and might lie latent in Sarasvatī?

Thus, one can conclude that there appears to be considerable evidence to associate Saraswati with serpents and trace the source of her attribute as a goddess of knowledge and wisdom to this association. The healing attributes of Saraswati and serpents is also suggested by ancient literature. In the light of the above discussion it is not possible to pass any judgement on the total nature of the Goddess Saraswati because further investigations are needed to come to any conclusion. However, this well known Brahmanical deity as examined through a different lens seems to open up a Pandora's box of questions to which nothing can yet be stated with any conviction.

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