The Image of Ṛgvedic Sarasvatī: RV VII 95, 96

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It is assumed that sārasvatī- literally means ‘possessing pond(s)/lake(s) (sāras-).’ OPers. Harauvatiś and Yāv, harax’aṭi-, the Iranian name of Arachosia (the Kandahar area today), go back to the same origin. The Sarasvati river is identified with modern-day Ghaggar-Hakra river; Ghaggar is the Indian name, Hakra Pakistani. This river flows from the Indian states of Haryana and Rajasthan to Pakistan. On some areas, this river still occasionally floods in rainy season, but most parts of middle and lower reaches have already dried up. Many remains of Indus age are, as is well known, excavated along its past river bed.

The Ṛgveda (RV) contains three Sarasvati hymns: VI 61, VII 95 and 96. The latter two are dedicated to the male counterpart Sarasvant together with Sarasvati. This paper deals with these two sūktas, and aims to get the image of Srasvati in the RV.

RV VII 95 (611)

1. prā kṣodasā dhāyasā saras eṣā sārasvatī dharinam āyasī pūḥ | prabādhanā rathyēva yāti || vīśā āpo māhinā sindhur anyūḥ || 2. ekā cetaḥ sarasvatī naddīnām | śucir yati giribhyā ā samudrāt | rāyās cētanti bhūvanasya bhūrer | gṛhtām pāyo duduhe nāhuṣāyā || 3. sā vāyṛde nār, yo yōṣanāsu | vṛṣā śiṣur vrṣabhō yajñīyāsu | sā vājīnam maghāvadhyah dadhāti | vi sātaye tan, vāṁ māmyēta || 4. utā syā nah sarasvatī juśānō | pa śravat subhāgā yajñē asmin | mitājñubhir namas, yāir iyānā | rāyā yujā cid úttarā sākkhibhyah || 5. imā jūhvānā yuṣmād ā nāmobhīḥ | prāti stōmaḥ sarasvati juśasva | tāva śārman priyātame dādhaṇā | āpa stheyyāma saranām nā vṛksāṁ || 6. ayām u te sarasvati vāsiṣṭha | dvārav ṛtāṣya subhage v, v āvah | vārdha subhre stuvatē rāśi vājān | yūyām pāta s, vāstibhiḥ sādā nah ||

1. She has flowed forward with a splash and nourishment. Sarasvati is a base, an iron fort. The large river (Sindhu) goes, just like with a charioteer, pushing out every other waters on and on with the greatness. 2. Sarasvati stands out as the only one among the rivers, being shiny, going from mountains till the ocean. Being familiar with many wealth of the world (being), she has milked butter oil, [and] milk for the descendant of Nahuṣ.
3. He (Sarasvant) grew up as a manly one among the girls, as a seed bull, a child bull [grew up] among [the girls] suitable for rituals. He settles a winning horse\(^9\) for people having capacity. May he wipe his body clean\(^10\) to win. 4. And Sarasvatī in the concern shall listen to us, enjoying [our words], as the fortunate (having a good distribution) one, in this ritual. Moving on with the worshippers having firm knees,\(^11\) she is superior to her colleagues because of connection with wealth, at all. 5. [Getting] these [things]\(^12\) from you (rivers) [and] offering with respects, —O Sarasvatī, enjoy (accept willingly) [this] chant!—settling ourselves under your most preferable patronage, we want to stand under a tree just like/as\(^13\) a shelter. 6. Here, O Sarasvatī, Vasistha has [just] opened the doors of the truth (cosmic order), O fortunate one. [So] grow up, O beautiful woman, bestow prizes on the praising person! [refrain:] You (pl.) defend us always with well-beings.

Stanza 1, 2: Image of Sarasvatī as a river: The poet praises Sarasvatī as the best river which flows from mountainous regions into ocean, and describes her strong current as a running chariot.\(^14\)

2, 4, 6: Giver of affluence: In many passages, Sarasvatī is concerned to the words which denote something affluent: e.g. rayi- ‘wealth,’\(^15\) vāja- ‘prize,’\(^16\) vāsu- ‘good.’\(^17\) It seems reasonable to suppose that she had been regarded as a goddess who brings affluence; the word subhāgā- (4, 6)\(^18\) is one of the characteristic qualifications of Sarasvatī which symbolizes such aspect. This image would be based on a natural phenomenon that a river brings fertility.\(^19\)

2: Giver of milk: Sarasvatī is frequently described as a cow.\(^20\) It is also assumed that this image is based on the fact that rivers, which provide water and grass, had been decisively important to breed cattle. Also other rivers are described as cattle in some passages; VII 36, 6 ā yāt sākām yaśāso vāvaśānāh | sārasyati saptāthi sindhumātā | yāh suṣvāyanta sudūghāh sudhārā | abhi svēṇa pāyasā pīp,yānāh || ‘When renowned [Sindhus (rivers)] [come] here all together, bleating each other, —(and) Sarasvatī whose mother is Sindhu\(^21\) as the seventh, —as they are fertile, well-milking, having good streams, swelling up with their own milk...’

3: Sarasvant: ‘He’ denotes Sarasvant, and ‘girls’ waters (āpas) or rivers. Sarasvant appears also in I 164, 52, VII 96, 4–6, X 66, 5. As Hillebrandt (Vedische Mythologie I, p.357ff.) supposes, Sarasvant is similar to Apām Napāt (and Soma): both are interpreted

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as an “eagle (suparṇā-)” or are surrounded by girls (waters): I 164, 52 divyām suparṇām
vāyasām bṛhāntam | apāṁ ghārbham darśatāṁ ośadhīnām | abhipatō vṛṣṭhībis tarpāvan-
tam | sārasvantam āvase johavīmi || ‘I repeatedly call for Sarasvānt for help, who is the
heavenly eagle, the high kind of bird (sun?), the good-looking embryo of waters [and]
plants, satisfying by rainfalls in the waterside.’ The description ‘a young man among girls
(waters)’ occurs several times about Apāṁ Napāt (II 35, X 30).22)

RV VII 96 (612)

1. bhṛād u gāyiṣe vaco | ’suryā nadīnām | sārasvatim in mahāyā suvṛktibhi, | stōmair vasīṣṭha rō-
dasi || 2. ubhē yāt te mahiṁ śubhre āndhasi | adhikśiyānti pūrāvah | sā no bodhī avitrī marūtsakhā|
cōda rādha mahgōnām || 3. bhadrām id bhadrā kṛṣṇatvā sārasvatvaḥ | ākāvāri cetati vājinīvati | grṛṇāmā
jamadagnivat | stuvānā ca vasīṣṭhaḥvāt || 4. janīyanto nṝy āgravah | putriyāntaḥ sudānavah | sāras-
vantam havāmahe || 5. yē te sarasva śūrīyā | mādhumanto gṛṣṭasūtah | tēbhīr no ’viṅa bhava || 6.
pipīvānsam sārasvataḥ | stāṇam yō viśvādārṣataḥ | bhākṣīmāhi prajām iṣam ||

1. I sing, 23) in any case, a high word: [She is] asurī among rivers. Glorify just Sarasvāti,
with good admirations, [and glorify] heaven and earth, with chants, O Vasīṣṭha! 2. With
your greatness, O beautiful woman, Pūrūṣ dwells in [the place of] both andhas,24) so you,
having Maruts as followers, become our guardian! Drive/Urge the generosity of people
having capacity/of the well-to-do ones. 3. Promising good lucks Sarasvāti shall make even
the good luck. [She] who never looks down on the tribe’s member,25) who has the winnig
power, stands out, as she is welcomed like Jamadagni, praised like Vasīṣṭha. 4. Seeking
for a wife, now, being unmarried,26) seeking for a son, we call Sarasvānt with good donation,27) 5. O Sarasvānt, what is your waves, which contain honey,28) dripping butter oil,
become our guardian with them! 6. We want to share with swelling breast, which is every-
where good-looking, of Sarasvānt in offspring [and] nourishment.

Stanza 1: The mistress of the rivers: The word asurīva- suggests that Sarasvāti has the
status of the ‘lord’ (āsura-).29) Sarasvāti and Asuras (Ādityas without Aṁśa) are enumerated
in one passage: I 89, 3 tāṁ pūrva-vāyā nividā hūmahe vayām | bhāgam mitrāṁ ādītim
dākṣam asrīdhām | aryāmānaṁ vārūnaṁ sōmaṁ āsvinā | sārasvāti nah subhāgā māyas
karaṭ || ‘Them we call by the first nivid (appointing sentence): Bhaga, Mitra, Aditi, never
failing Dākṣa, Aryaman, Varuṇa, Soma, both Āsvins, Sarasvāti, having a good distribution,
should provide refreshment for us!’

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2: Sarasvati and Maruts: Sarasvati frequently appears with Maruts. Maruts symbolize not only a thunderstorm or heavy rain of monsoon season, but sometimes also ‘the light of spring’ which concerns with the plundering raid performed by Aryans before a rainy season. The relationship between them can be explained by ‘the rising of water level because of rainfall.’

3: vājini-vaṭi- ‘woman equipped with winning powers’: Sarasvati is often called vājini-vaṭi-. This is derived from vāja- m. ‘chariot race, victory, prize, trophy of war, etc. (cf. EWAia).’ OLDENBERG (K.I.Schr., pp.21-25) suggests that this polysemic originally means ‘the power to dash possessed by racehorses, the power demonstrated at chariot races.’ The -in- stem vājin- ‘characterized with vāja-’ is used in the meaning of ‘powerful; hero, racehorse’ (cf. EWAia). The feminine vājini- appears as adj. of Uṣas (III 61,1) or Sarasvati (VI 61,6). vājini-vaṭi- (f. vājini-vaṭi-) appears seventeen times in the RV, and in most cases in the feminine, similarly mainly of Uṣas and Sarasvati. In addition, vājini-vaṭi- (f. vājini-vaṭi-) tends to occur with the words concerned to the chariot races, e.g. rātha- ‘chariot,’ āśva- ‘horse,’ vāja- ‘race, prize,’ rayi- ‘wealth.’ DÔYAMA (diss., p.168) assumes two meanings for this word: ‘having winning horses (vājin-’ or ‘bringing a prize (vāja-),’ although it is difficult to distinguish these two in each passage. However, the basic concept seems to be sought in ‘having the power to win (chariot races).’ Thus it is assumed that Sarasvati had been regarded as a goddess of victory.

4-6: tṛca for Sarasvanti: The poet invokes Sarasvanti to bring a descendant, and describes him as having the “sweet [or intoxicating] and butter oil dripping wave.” A similar “wave” appears in X 30,8 (Apām Napāt hymn) or X 64,9, but in these passages, the owners of the wave are Sarasvati or other rivers. In the last stanza, the topic is a breast of Sarasvanti. Similarly, the breast of Sarasvati is referred to in I 164, 49: yās te stānah śaśayō ṣa may-ohhār | yena viśvā pūṣyasi vār.yāṇi | yo ratadāḥ vasuvid yāḥ sudātraḥ | sa sarasvati tām iḥā dhātave kah || ‘What is your continuously existing breast, which is refreshing, with which you prosper in all the chosen/precious things, which is created of the treasure, goods-finder, which has good donations, O Sarasvati, that [breast] you should make here to suckle.’ It needs further to be investigated the accurate relationship between Sarasvanti, Sarasvati, Apām Napāt, and the waters (āpāḥ) in general.

1) Cf. MAEMOKU “The decline of Indus civilization and environmental changes,” Environmental
The Image of Vedic Sarasvati (T. Yamada) (33)


3) Edd, ekāacetat.


5) Interpreted as a “general” inj. Following the Pp. (ekā acetat): ‘Sarasvati stood out (ipf.) as the sole one.’ It may also be: ‘Sarasvati has an understanding.’ Cf. Goto Die “I. Präsensklasse” im Vedic, 1987, p.138, 140.


9) Referring to Lassen and Bāu VI 1,13, Geldner (II, p.265) suggests that the eastern part of Indus may be a growing area of horses.

10) The function of (perf.) opt. is “the speaker’s will (cupulative).” Kümml (Perfekt, p. 373) interprets as the reflexive, and Geldner mention in the footnote: ‘Sarasvati den Leib des Rennpfardes in seinen Fluten.’ It may be interpreted that Sarasvati itself is described as a winning horse.

11) -jīnu- is a weak form of jānu- ‘knee’; Scarlata, Wurzelkomposita im Ṛgveda, 1999, p.344: ‘people walking with steady steps or standing up straight,’

12) Geldner supplies ‘an offering,’ and Grasmann Wörterbuch zum Rigveda, sp. 1671 (s.v. hū) ‘a hymn (gīr-),’

13) Generally, iva and nā are translated as ‘just like,’ however in many passages, it means also ‘as,’ cf. Goto W-G, p.692.


15) III 54,13, VII 35,11, VII 40,3, VII 95,4, X 17,9, X 30,12.

16) This word is taken up later.

17) I 3,10, I 164,49, II 1,11, VIII 21,17.

18) This term is used for Sarasvati in I 89,3 and VII 21,17 too.


20) I 164,49, VII 36,6, VI 61,14, VII 96,5, IX 67,32, X 64,9.

21) It may denote that Sarasvati had been regarded as a branch of Sindhu, or Sindhu as the best river.


24) āndhas- ‘stem/root of soma,’ Geldner suppose that ‘the dual andhas’ mean ‘soma and surā (former is the beverage for gods and latter is for people)’ or ‘soma and milk.’ It can be also interpreted as ‘both darkesses, i.e. darkness and light/night and day.’


26) Cf. Mayrhofer Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen (EWAia) I, 1991, p.719f. It is supposed that this word originally means ‘not being pregnant.’

27) In many passages, dānu- means ‘rain,’ therefore it gives two meanings: ‘dripping liquid’ or ‘gift.’

28) mādhu- can be interpreted as soma.


30) II 30,8, III 54,13, V 46,2, VII 9,5, VII 39,3, VII 40,3, IX 81,4, X 65,1, and here. Above all, II 30,8 and III 54,13 tell their brave aspect.


32) I 3,10, II 41,18, VI 61,3 and 4, VII 96,3.

33) Other examples are referred to Sindhu, Aśvins, etc. Above all, Aśvins are sometimes called vājinīvasu-. PW and Grassmann give the same meaning as vājinīvant-. This word is mainly used for Aśvins, and in some passages this is also connected with chariot races. The image of Aśvins to lead the chariot may be assumed.

<Key words> sārasvati-, Sarasvati, Ṛgveda, RV, river, sindhū-, Sindhu, sārasvant-, Sarasvant, Marut, Apām Napāt, vājinīvatī-

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