Sarasvant in the Ṛgveda

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0. Introduction

The word sārasvant- literally means ‘having pond(s)/lake(s)’ (the word for pond or lake is sāras-). The deity Sarasvant, then, is the male counterpart of the river goddess Sarasvati. Sarasvant is referred to only five or six times in the Ṛgveda (RV)\(^1\): I 164,52, VII 96\(^2\), 4–6, X 66,5 and VII 95,3\(^3\).


Similarly, A. HILLEBRANDT, in his work Védische Mythologie,\(^5\) examines Sarasvant in a large chapter dealing with Soma. Based on the reference in RV I 164,52, he suggests that Sarasvant must be identified with Apām Napā\(^6\) or Soma; moreover, referring to some passages in other Vedic texts, he points out that Sarasvant may also have an aspect as a moon-deity.\(^7\)

In this paper, I will look at all passages mentioning Sarasvant in the RV and consider his characteristics in detail. Referring also to other Vedic texts, I will aim to improve our understanding of this deity.

1. Sarasvant in the RV

(i) I 164,52\(^8\) divyām suparnaṁ vāyasām bṛhāntam \| apām gārbham darṣatāṁ ṗsadhinām \| abhipatō vrṣṭibhis tarpayantām \| sārasvantam ṛvase johāvīmi || ‘I repeatedly call on Sarasvant for help, who is the heavenly eagle, the high[-flying] bird, the good-looking embryo of waters [and] plants, making satisfy by rainfalls, surrounded by waters.’

Sarasvant is described as a high-flying bird. It seems that the epithet divyā- suparna- im-
plies a connection with the Sun (I 164,46) or Soma (IX 97,33). In the second pāda, Sarasvant is called ‘the embryo of waters and plants.’ An identical expression is used for Agni: III 1,13ab, gārbham darṣatām oṣadhīnām | vānā jajāna subhāgā viṁpam | ‘The fortunate piece of wood [used for kindling fire by friction] generated the good-looking embryo of waters [and] plants (i.e., Agni).’ In III 1, the poet discusses the birth of Agni in the water. Geldner points out that this hymn has several similarities with the Apām Nāpāt hymn in II 35. 9 From this point of view, it seems that those three deities have some relationship. The latter half of I 164,52 indicates the aspect of Sarasvant as a deity who brings his favor by means of water.

(ii) VII 96,4 janīyānto nṝv ṣagravah | putriyāntah sudānava | sārasvantam havāmahe ||

‘Seeking for a wife, now, being unmarried, seeking for a son, we call on Sarasvant with a good donation.’

VII 96,1–3 and 4–6 are two tṛcas for Sarasvati and Sarasvant. The poet invokes Sarasvant to bring him offspring. A similar intention is observed in a passage on Sarasvatī: II 41,17 (10) tṝvē viśvā sarasvati | sritāyūṁsi devyām | śunāhotraśu matsuva | prajāṃ devi dīdiddhī naḥ || ‘O Sarasvati, all lives depend on you, on the goddess. Among Śunahotras, become intoxicated! O goddess, distribute descendant to us!’ (11)

(iii) VII 96,5 yē te sarasva ūrmāyo | mādhumanto gṛtāścītah | tēbhīr no ,vitā bhava || ‘O Sarasvanta, what are your waves, which contain honey, dripping butter oil, become our guardian with them!’

We can see from this passage that Sarasvanta has an aspect as a fluvial deity. In the second pāda, it is mentioned that his waves contain butter oil and honey (mādhv-, a term that often denotes Soma as well). Similar examples are not infrequent in the RV: X 64,9 (12) sārasvati sarayuḥ sindhur ūrmiḥbhīr | mahō mahīr āvasā yantu vākṣaṇih | devī āpo mātāraḥ sūdayitnava | gṛtavat pāyo mādhvan no arcata || ‘Sarasvati, Sarayu and Sindhu, [come] with waves! Great, strengthening [women] come with a great support! Goddesses, waters, mothers, who prepare, praise us for milk (i.e., river water) that contains butter oil and honey!’

(iv) VII 96,6 pipivāṁsam sārasvata, | stānam yō viśvādṛṣṣataḥ | bhaksiśmāhi prajām iṣam || ‘We want to share in the swelling breast, which is everywhere good-looking, of Sarasvanta in offspring [and] nourishment.’

Here, Sarasvanta brings people prosperity by means of his swelling breast (stāna-). It is
Sarasvanti in the \textit{Rgveda} (T. \textsc{Yamada})

assumed that the conferring of his favor is compared to milking or nursing. A similar expression is observed in a passage about Sarasvati: I 164,49: \textit{yās te stānāh śaśayō yō may-obhūr} \footnote{\textit{yō} viśvā pūṣyasi vāryāni | yō ratnadhā vasuvīd yāḥ sudātrah | sārasvati 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 up here for suckling.’

It is debatable what does the breast of Sarasvanti denoted. It may be that the terms ‘breast (\textit{ūdhār-}, not \textit{stāna-}) of the father (\textit{pitār-})’ in III 1,9 and ‘of the bull (\textit{vēṣan-})’ in IV 22,6 are the same kind of expression. \textsc{Geldner} suggests that the ‘father’ or the ‘bull’ probably denotes heaven (\textit{dyāv-}) or the rain deity Parjanya, and their breasts are compared to a cloud (a mammatus cloud?) or a rainfall.\footnote{\textsc{Geldner}}

\begin{itemize}
\item[(v)] X 66,5 \footnote{X 66,5 (T. \textsc{Yamada}) \textit{sārasvān dhibhir vāruṇo dhṛtāvratāḥ} \textit{pūṣā viṣṇur mahimā vāyūr aśvinā | brahmakīto amiṣṭā viśvāvedasah} \textit{śārma no yaṁsan trivārūtham āṁhasah} || ‘Sarasvanti with thoughts, Varuṇa who holds the rule, Pūṣan, Viṣṇu, great Vāyu, both Āsvins, immortals, those who make the spiritual power of words (\textit{brāhmaṇ-}) \{and\} those who have all knowledge/property should hold out the protection equipped with three shelters \{that protect\} us from distress.’
\item[(vi)] VII 95,3 \textit{sā vāvrdhe nār.yo yōsaṇāsu | vēṣā śīṣur vṛṣabhō yajñīyāsu | sā vājinam maghāvadbhyo dadhāti} \textit{vi sātaye tan, vām māmejīta} || ‘He (Sarasvanti?) grew up as a manly one among the girls, as a seed bull, a child bull, \{he grew up\} among \{the girls\} suitable for rituals. He settles on a winning horse for people having capacity. May he wipes his body clean to win.’
\end{itemize}

The name Sarasvanti itself is not found here; however, it is likely that ‘he’ in the beginning denotes Sarasvanti. There are three reasons for this interpretation. First, the Sarvānukramaṇī registers Sarasvanti as the deity of this stanza. Second, this stanza is a part of the Sarasvati hymn. Third, the next hymn, VII 96, is dedicated to Sarasvati and Sarasvanti respectively. But, this is not to deny that it is also possible that ‘he’ denotes other beings,
especially Apām Napāt or Agni.

It is mentioned that ‘he’ grew up among young women, and ‘he’ is described as a seed and a child (śisu-) bull at the same time. Similar examples will come to mind: III 1,4 āvardhayan subhāgam sapta yahvih śvetām jajñānām aruṣām mahitvā śisuṁ nā jātām abhy ārur āśvā devaśo aṅgim jāniman vapusyan || ‘Seven young girls (i.e., waters or rivers) raised a fortunate, white, born-with-greatness one (i.e., Agni). As she-horses come to a newborn child [horse], deities admire Agni on his birth.’ II 35,13ab sa im viṣājanayat tāsu gārbhām sa im śisuṁ dhayati tām rihanti | ‘He (Apām Napāt) made this embryo in them (the waters). He (Apām Napāt or the embryo) sucks [the breasts of] them. They lick him.’

The connection among Sarasvant, Agni, and Apām Napāt that we have seen in (i) must be recalled here.

2. Sarasvant in Other Saṁhitās

In this section we deal with Sarasvant in other Saṁhitās: the Atharvaveda Šaunaka-recension (AV), the Atharvaveda Paippalāda-recension (AVP) and the black Yajurveda-Saṁhitās. We can divide examples into two types according to context: first, passages that seem to be based on those from the RV mentioned above, and also, original passages. Below I will present examples of comprehensive passages from AVP; for other variations among the Saṁhitās I will place information in the endnotes.

AVP XX 9\(^\text{16}\),5 ā pratyāñcam dāsuṣe dāś, vānasām sarasvantam puṣṭipatim\(^{17}\) rayiṇām\(^{18}\) | rāyas poṣam śravas, yam\(^{19}\) vasānam\(^{20}\) | iha huvema sadanam rayiṇām || ‘For the devout one, here, turn toward him, I want to call devout Sarasvat, prosperity’s master over properties, the one to be celebrated who wears the growth of wealth.’ 〜 AV VII 41,2

AVP XX 9,6 yasya vratam paśavo yanti sarve | yasya vratam\(^{21}\) upatiṣṭhanty\(^{22}\) āpah |\(^{23}\) yasya vrate puṣṭipatir niviṣṭas | tam sarasvantam avase huvema\(^{24}\) || ‘To whose rule all cattle move, upon whose rule waters attend, in whose rule the prosperity’s master has entered, we call to this Sarasvant for the sake of [his] support.’ 〜 AV VII 41,1, Maitrāyaṇi Saṁhitā (MS) IV 10,1, Kāṭhaka-Saṁhitā (KS) XIX 14, Taittirīya-Saṁhitā (TS) III 1,11

AVP XX 9,7 ye te sarasvam uṛmayo | madhumanto ghṛtaścutah | tebhir no ’vitta bhava ||\(^{25}\) = RV VII 96,5. 〜 MS IV 10,1, KS XIX 14, TS III 1,11

AVP XX 9,8 divyaṁ samudram\(^{26}\) payasaṁ \(^{27}\) ruḥantam\(^{28}\) | apāṁ gārbham\(^{29}\) ṭśabḥ(ām)\(^{30}\)
'Make Sarasvanti sit here, who is the heavenly ocean, the rising milk, the embryo of waters, the bull of plants, gratifying with the wealth, surrounded by waters [and] sitting on the wealth.' ~RV I 164,52, AV IX 4, KS XIX 14, TS III 1,11

AVP XVI 24\(^{33})\), 9 daivir viśa payasvān ā tanośi | tvām indram tvām sarasvantam āhuḥ | sahasram sa ekamukhā dādāti | yo brāhmaṇa ḍsabhām ā juhoti || 'Being rich in milk, you stretch out people of the deities. They call you Indra [or] Sarasvanti. He gives a thousand [cows] with one face (i.e., who go toward the same purpose) whom Brahman offers the bull/to the bull.' ~AV IX 4,9

Briefly, it follows that the characteristics of Sarasvanti that are seen from these Samhitās more or less coincide with those of the RV. It seems that the AV and the AVP lay more stress on the aspect of Sarasvanti as a giver of material affluence or glory, but an essential difference cannot be observed.

3. Sarasvanti in Prose: Sarasvati and Sarasvanti as a Pair

A general view of Sarasvanti in Vedic prose reveals one significant characteristic: he is almost always described as a male counterpart of Sarasvati, TS III 5,1 is a typical example. In the context of Anvārambhaṇīyeṣṭi, Sarasvanti and Sarasvati are identified with the full moon and new moon, respectively. It is suggested that they are ‘a pair (mithunā-),’ and offspring are acquired from them.

TS III 5,1\(^{34})\) ... sarasvatyai carū bhavati śārasvate dvādaśakapālo. 'māvasyā vai śārasvati pūrṇamāśah śārasvān. tāv evā sāksād ā rabhata, ṭdhnōty ābhyyām, dvādaśakapālau śārasvate bhavati, mithunāvā yā prājāyai, mithunāvā gāvau dākṣinā, samṛddhyat. ‘The caru pottage is used for Sarasvati and [the purodāṣa consisting of] twelve kapālas for Sarasvanti, Sarasvati, indeed, is the new moon and Sarasvanti the full moon. He (sacrificer) visibly takes both. He achieves by means of both. [The purodāṣa consisting of] twelve ka- pālas is used for Sarasvanti. For pairing, for generation. A pair of cow is daksinā, to complete.'\(^{35})

4. Conclusion

In the RV, Sarasvanti is described as a flying bird [(i)] and connected with watery objects such as the rainfall and rivers [(i) and (iii)]. He stands by his worshippers [(i) and

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(iii) with thoughts [(v)] and brings offspring to them [(ii) and (iv)]. Although the word sárasvant- itself is male, he has a breast and brings affluence to people by means of it [(iv)]. In some of these characteristics, we can recognize the similarity with Sarasvatí [(ii)-(v)]. On the other hand, we can also point out the same motif as in the passages on the birth of Agni and the Apām Napāt hymn [(i) and possibly (vi)]. The image of Rgvedic Sarasvanti remains in the later Sāṁhitās. But in Vedic prose, Sarasvanti is mainly referred to as one of a pair of deities, along with Sarasvatí.

3) The word sárasvant- itself does not appear in this stanza. On this point, see section (vi).
4) Sanskrit-Wörterbuch, St. Petersburg 1855-1875, VII pp. 784-785.
6) apām nāpāt- 'the grandson of waters' represents an aspect of Agni in the water. On this deity, see E. B. Findly, “The ‘Child of Waters’: A Revaluation of Vedic Apāṃ Napāt,” Numen XXVI, Fasc. 2, 1979, pp. 164-184. ‘Waters (āpas),’ used generally in the plural, are described as living beings, distinguished from water as an inanimate object (udān-, udakā-).
7) See also J. Gonda, Pūṣan and Sarasvati, Amsterdam 1985, p. 7 or M. I. Khan, Sarasvati in Sanskrit Literature, Ghaziabad 1978, pp. 68-70.
8) This stanza is a part of the hymn known as ‘the riddle hymn.’
10) This stanza is a part of a tça for Sarasvati.
11) pāda d = II 32,6d. In this passage, the ‘goddess’ is Sinivālī. See also X 184,2ab: gārbhāṃ dhehi sinīvālī | gārbhāṃ dhehi sarasvatī | ‘Place the embryo, O Sinivālī! Place the embryo, Sarasvati!’
12) This stanza is part of a hymn dedicated to all deities (Viśve Devāh).
14) This is part of a hymn dedicated to all deities (Viśve Devāh).
15) For example, RV I 3,10-12, VII 35,11 and X 65,13.
17) AV consistently records puṣṭāpati- and AVP puṣṭipati-.
18) AV puṣṭapātim rayiṣṭām.
19) AV śravasyum.
20) AV vāsānā.
21) AV vratá.
22) AV, TS upatiṣṭhanta, MS upatiṣṭhantā.
23) KS yasya vratam upatiṣṭhanta āpo yāsyā vrate paśavo yanti sarve.
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24) AV hvāmahe, KS johavīmi.
25) MS, TS tēsāṃ te sumnām imahe.
26) AV suparṇām.
27) KS vāyasam, TS vāyasām.
28) AV bhāntam.
29) KS patim.
30) AV vṛṣabham.
31) AV vṛṣṭyā, KS vṛṣṇyā.
32) AV ā no gośthē rayiṣṭhāṁ sthāpayanti.

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(Key words) Sarasvant, Sarasvati, Rgveda, Agni, Apām Napāt, river, water.

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