

THE GODDESS SARASVATI — FROM INDIA TO TIBET

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In the Vedic period there was a river called Sarasvatī in North-west India on the banks of which Vedic lore and learning developed. This river once flowed to the sea, but in time disappeared in the desert sands, as though to bring the Vedic period to an end. Thereafter the goddess of the same name, Sarasvatī, would convey this learning, and as the inspirer of eloquence became called by the Hindus Vāgdevī or the goddess of speech.

Swāmī Prajñānānanda (*Historical Development of Indian Music*)¹ conveniently presents the essentials of the Vedic worship of this deity. She was one of a triad of goddesses who, according to the commentator Sāyana, were conceived as three blazing flames of fire (*agni*), and Sarasvatī in time became preeminent as a fire by which there was communication with the gods. This author writes (p. 51): "In the mytho-historical literature, *Devī Sarasvatī*, the presiding deity of learning and all arts, was described as the tongue of the sacrificial fire (*agni-jihvā Sarasvatī*)". And again, "The ancient authors on music conceived and deified the primal sound, *Nāda*, as a symbol of the goddess *Sarasvatī*." He refers (p. 56-57) to the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (VII, 2.4.1-7), for the legendary association of the goddess with the Gandharvas, the celestial musicians. The Gandharva Viśvāvasu had stolen the nectar Soma from Gāyatrī (which is a certain meter, and also the charm, *vidyā*, addressed to the Sun deity at dawn). When the *Devas* learned of the theft of Soma, they sent the beautiful maiden Vāc or Vāgdevī to rescue Soma. The Gandharvas are said to be fond of women and beauty, so when Vāgdevī approached, they went to the gods (the devas), and said, "Let yours be the Soma and let Vāc or Vāgdevī be ours." Since the Gandharvas had thus secured Sarasvatī for their ranks, from that time they excelled in music. This author also mentions that Śrī or Lakṣmī, the goddess of good fortune, was gradually separated from Sarasvatī though frequently paired with her.

J. N. Banerjea (*The Development of Hindu Iconography*)² provides the main details for the classical Hinduism period. As known by the *Purāṇas*, Sarasvatī is sometimes connected with Brahmā, both as his daughter and his consort, and sometimes with Viṣṇu as one of his consorts, Puṣṭi (who thrives). The Jains put her at the head of the Śrutadevatās and the Vidyādevīs. As an independent goddess (i. e. not a consort),

1 Published by Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1960.

2 Published by the University of Calcutta, 1956.

she is usually described in such texts as the *Viṣṇudharmottara* as four-armed, white colored, dressed in white garments and decked with many ornaments, holding in her four hands any four of the following objects, manuscript, white lotus, rosary, musical instrument, water-vessel, and so on. The musical instrument is possibly the oldest emblem associated with her, although the manuscript is also old. A late Gupta form shows her in association with Brahmā, she is four-armed, with gift-bestowing gesture (*varamudrā*), the rosary (*akṣamālā*), the musical instrument (*viṇā*), and the water-vessel (*kamaṇḍalu*) in her four arms. One of her names is Śāradā, which means "she who is autumnal," also the autumn moon; and the name also stands for a kind of Viṇā or lute.

B. Bhattacharya (*The Indian Buddhist Iconography*)³ summarizes the forms of Sarasvatī in the late Buddhist period, namely four types of the two-handed goddess, and a form with three faces and six arms. From his work,

(1) Mahāsarasvatī, resplendent like the autumn moon, rests on the moon over the white lotus, shows the gift-giving (*varada*) gesture in her right hand, carries in the left the white lotus with its stem. She has a smiling countenance (*smeramukhi*), is extremely compassionate, wears garments decorated with white sandal decked in many ornaments; she appears a maiden of twelve years, and her bosom is uneven with half-developed breasts like flower-buds; she illumines the three worlds with the immeasurable light that radiates from her body. She is surrounded by four goddesses who are apparently facets of herself: Insight (*prajñā*) in front, Cleverness (*medhā*) to her right, Memory (*smṛti*) to her left, and backed up by Intelligence (*mati*).

(2) Varaviṇā Sarasvatī. She is distinguished by carrying in her two hands the Viṇā, and she plays upon it.

(3) As Vajrasāradā (deification of the autumn), she has a crescent in her crown; is three-eyed, and two-armed, carrying the book in the left hand, and the lotus in the right.

(4) Āryasarasvatī is also called Vajrsarasvatī, a common name of Sarasvatī among the Buddhist tantrics. She is a maiden of sixteen, in the prime of youth, has white complexion, and in her left hand holds a lotus stalk on which rests the Prajñāpāramitā book. No mention of what is in her right hand.

The other form which Bhattacharya found is Vajrsarasvatī, with three faces and six arms, in *pratyālidha āsana* (this means right foot bent forward, left retracted), on the red lotus. She is red in color, with right face blue and left face white. In her three right hands she carries the lotus on which is the Prajñāpāramitā book, the sword and curved blade; and in the three left, the skull bowl of Brahmā, the jewel and the wheel (*cakra*.) An alternate description has a simple lotus (no mention of book on top) and a simple skull bowl (no mention of it being Brahmā's).

Passing to the Tibetan tradition, I have used the collection *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol. Kha,⁴ which is mainly given over to rituals of the three insight deities, Mañjuśrī and the white Acala. The Sarasvatī section has seven works occupying consecutive folio side numbers 394-546, or about 150 folio sides, which I have surveyed for this paper. First some general remarks may be made.

(a) Since there is only one goddess, namely Sarasvatī, among the three 'insight' deities, it follows that Prajñāpāramitā (who is occasionally depicted iconographically)⁵ is here incorporated in the Sarasvatī treatment. The reason is suggested by a Mahāyāna scripture that was popular in both Tibet and China, the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*, which devotes a chapter to Sarasvatī setting forth her *sādhana*, together with the rite of expanding insight (*prajñā*) and cognition (*buddhi*).⁶ At several places in the Tibetan materials, e. g. at f. no. 472, there is a discussion of the nature of *prajñā*. At f. no. 524, the *Prajñāśataka* is cited:⁷ "Prajñā is the root of all merits, whether seen or unseen. Since it accomplishes both, first one should endeavor to promote insight". And the same folio side states: "Among the numerous means for promoting insight, the one that is best is the reliance on Devī Sarasvatī."

(b) There were numerous *sādhana*s, or evocation rituals of deities, translated into Tibetan, and the iconographical descriptions are not always included in Bhattacharya's pioneer and still invaluable work. Thus, he did not include a four-handed type, but in this Tibetan collection the Sarasvatī of the Bo-doñ school is a four-handed one embraced by a four-handed Mañjughoṣa, although not having in her four hands the four hand symbols of the Gupta form previously mentioned. Both Purāṇic legends are represented in the collection: The white Sarasvatī of the Brahmin Kīla⁸ school is called 'Brahmā's daughter', although also referred to as a metamorphosis of Ārya Lokeśvara's great tooth, a legend contained in *Mkhas grub rje's Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantras*.⁹ The Sarasvatī in the lineage from Bo-doñ pañ-chen phyogs-las-rnam-rgyal makes her an emanation from Viṣṇu (in Tibetan, khyab 'jug).

(c) It is of interest that where the age was given I could not find in the iconographical descriptions of this Tibetan collection the age 'twelve' that was prevalent in the types Bhattacharya presented. The preference for the 16 year old Sarasvatī in these *sādhana*s is also evidenced by the description of the breasts, usually 'round, firm, high, and

4 Dehradun. G. T. K. Lodoy, N. Gyaltzen and N. Lungtok, 1970.

5 See frontispiece in Edward Conze, *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom* (The Buddhist Society: London, 1955).

6 Cf. Ferdinand D. Lessing and Alex Wayman, *Mkhas grub rje's Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantras* (Mouton: The Hague, 1968), p. 111.

7 This work is included in the Tibetan Tanjur, and attributed to Nāgārjuna.

8 Sanskritized from the Tibetan name, Bram ze phur bu.

9 See note 6 above.

large'. There is some significance in this switch, because as the *Guhyasamājatantra*, Chap. XV, 66, suggests, the twelve-year-old girl, and body boy as well, was employed as a vessel for divination of ritual success.¹⁰ The 16-year-old form loses the possible divination connection, and by the suggestion of nubility fits the form of Viṣṇu's consort, called Puṣṭi ('thriving'). Also, the age of 16 agrees with the well-known Buddhist association of 'insight' (*prajñā*) with the sixteen voidnesses (*śūnyatā*); and Sarasvatī's epithet Vāgdevī agrees with the sixteen vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet.

(d) These Tibetan materials help solve a problem alluded to by Madame Mallman¹¹ in her study of Mañjuśrī's iconography where she mentions (p. 16) that Mañjuśrī's association with Sarasvatī was previously pointed out by A. Foucher and by S. Lévi (the latter in his *Le Népal*), but that so far she has not found this in the Sanskrit text she consulted. In the esoteric sādhana of the red Sarasvatī descended from the Kashmirian paṇḍit Bhiksaparma, the statement is made (at folio no. 521. 2): "Now, here the esoteric evocation of the red Sarasvatī is explained according to the *Kṛṣṇayamāri-tantra*." This indicates that the association of Sarasvatī with Mañjuśrī is in the tantra devoted to his angry form called yamāri or yamāntaka. Therefore, it should be in such a Sanskrit text that Sarasvatī would be thus set forth.

(e) These Tibetan sādhanas bring up some of their own problems. Thus, the divorce from the original association with the Sarasvatī river seems complete by such remarks as frequently occur, "Sarasvatī dwells at the shore of the southern ocean." More fully (f. no. 480): "on the shore of the southern ocean, the dwelling of the gandharva maiden, in the pleasure grove of the Vidyādhara." The term 'gandharva' should be understood by the previous explanation, namely, heavenly musician'. The Vidyādhara seem also to be flying spirits; cf. Kramrisch's illustration 'Flying Vidyādhara'.¹²

The Tibetan materials at f. no. 444 call Sarasvatī the wife of the Gandharva Tambura. Now Prajñānānanda when discussing (p. 384) the varieties of *vinā*s, says: "*Tumbura, tamburā* or *tānapurā* is known as the *tumburu-veenā*". Thus, the name 'Gandharva Tambura' probably means 'Gandharva who plays the tumburu-*vinā*'. In Mallman (p. 94), Pañcaśikha, king of the Gandharvas, is playing a *Vinā*; and this entry is followed immediately by reference to 'Sarvārthasiddha, king of the Vidyādhara,' thus pairing the Gandharvas and Vidyādhara, as in the Tibetan text cited above.

10 The reasons, as pointed to in Tson-kha-pas' annotation of the *Pradīpoddyotana* commentary on the *Guhyasamājatantra*, in the Japanese Photo edition, Vol. 158, p. 126-3-4,5, is the sexual isolation, hence, 'puberty crisis' unmixed with the other sex. Chap. XV of the *Guhyasamāja* especially concerns dream and other auspices.

11 Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann, *Etude iconographique sūr Mañjuśrī* (Ecole française d'Extrême-orient: Paris, 1964.)

12 Stella Kramrisch *The Art of India* (Phaidon Publishers Inc.: London, 1954), Pl. 68.

An unsolved problem of the Tibetan sādhanas is the epithet of Sarasvatī at f. no. 520-3,4, 'messenger of Sāla'.¹³

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As to the descriptions of the goddess in this Tibetan collection, there are three basic forms: 1) the independent white goddess; 2) the independent red goddess; 3) the goddess as a consort.

(1) Here there is the white Sarasvatī of the Brahmin Kila school, f. no. 413: The officiant goes through the various preliminaries, such as bathing, taking a comfortable seat, taking refuge, generating the mind of enlightenment) and contemplating the four boundless states. Then he purifies the void with the mantra 'svabhāva' etc.¹⁴ Thereupon he contemplates that from the realm of the void appears a temple inhabited by the gods and the host of accomplished ṛṣis and gandharvas, surrounded by delectable herbs of a Mt. Meru grove, within a white and pure ocean of milk. From a PAM appears a trunk of white lotus with large petals; and from an A a moon disk, and thereon a white HRIH from which arises Vāg-devī Sarasvatī, with white body, one face, two-armed, her face calm, smiling, and lovely with charming youth of sixteen years, breasts firm and high, narrow waist, in squatting posture; with her hand holding an instrument of many strings of lapis lazuli, and evoking it with the fingers of her right hand, producing an ocean of sounds. The back half of her black glistening hair is tied together, and the remainder freely hangs down. She is beautified on the crown of head with a crescent moon, and on her head is tied a garland of white lotuses; and her tresses of hair are beautified with various jewels. The upper part of her body is covered with white silk, and the lower part wound around in variegated fashion like a rainbow. She is adorned with strings of gems and jewels and with nets having small bells. Her body, lacking self-existence, emits light rays without end and has in back a shining curtain in the form of a moon. The officiant contemplates in his own heart a lotus stalk with flowers that had been suspended downwards, that becomes directed upwards and takes on the aspect of a red lotus opening up; that within the flower is a moon, and on it a white OM. And that while he hardly breathes out, the *nāda*¹⁵ of the OM (meaning the small circle on top of the OM) emits white rays, which pass out through his right nostril, and enter the left nostril of Sarasvatī like the one he has contemplated (in front) but dwelling in the entrancing glade of the Vidyādhara on the shore of the southern ocean, and there entering her heart, attracts Sarasvatī in the

13 The name 'Sāla' was transcribed into Tibetan phonetically.

14 The mantra is given fully on f. no. 541: / Om svabhāvaśuddhāḥ sarvadharmāḥ svabhāvaśuddho'ham / "Om. All dharmas are intrinsically pure. I am intrinsically pure".

15 Compare the previous mention of *nāda* as a symbol of the goddess Sarasvatī.

gnosis form together with retinue, blazing with light, which leaving via her right nostril, like the rising moon of autumn, in an instant appears in the sky in front (of the officiant), filling the heavens with offering clouds. He offers flowers, etc. with the appropriate mantras, and then invites the goddess, while muttering with barely audible sound, while he holds breath within. He contemplates that the shining circle enters by his left nostril and merges with the OM in his heart. Then the OM transforms into a white eight petalled lotus with Sarasvatī and retinue. . . (and so on down to) pervades his whole body with light, which dispels the darkness of ignorance and expands the light of intelligence directed without hindrance on all the knowable (and so on, for the concluding part of the ritual).

(2) There is the secret evocation of the red Sarasvatī in the lineage from the Kashmirian pandit Bhikṣaparama (f. no. 505). The aim is to expand the fulfilment of *prajñā*. After the various ritual preliminaries, much the same as in the case of evoking the white Sarasvatī, the officiant meditatively ascends to the void contemplating all dharmas as void and without self. He contemplates that from the realm of the void there appears an eight-petalled lotus, that upon it his own mind changes into a red HRIH, which sends out rays that make offering to the nobles, chase away the darkness of nescience of the sentient beings, and amount to the light of *prajñā*; then returning, change into a knowledge mirror. That melts into light, and himself (i. e. the officiant) imagines that he becomes the Devī Sarasvatī with body red like the color of coral, with one face, two hands, the right hand holding the wish-granting jewel (*cintāmaṇi*) and the left hand holding the knowledge mirror (*jñānādarśa*), with right leg bent forward and left retracted, breasts firm and large, with head ornament of various jewels, earrings, necklace, hand bracelets, a girdle belt of pearl, a garment of variegated silk that flares out, the maiden aged exactly sixteen, countenance calm, smiling, and charming, (body) sending out innumerable rays; and he imagines that appearances are devoid of self-existence, like reflections on the mirror; and imagines on the head a white OM, on the neck a red ĀH, and in the heart, a black HUM. (Then the officiant, as in the earlier rite attracts from the shore of the southern ocean Sarasvatī in the gnostic form just as he has imagined her above).

In explanation of the meditation procedures in the above cases of the white and the red Sarasvatī, the officiant first evokes the deity, here the goddess Sarasvatī, as the symbolic being (*samayasattva*)—a conventional representation; then attracts the knowledge being (*jñānasattva*)—usually from the sky, but here from the shore of the southern ocean, perhaps meaning the Milky Way; and the entrance of the knowledge being or circle into the officiant to be lodged in his heart, is held to establish the lineage of the deity in that person, who thus unifies the symbolic and knowledge beings.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. Lessing and Wayman, *Mkhas grub rje's* index, under 'Beings', Symbolic Being and Knowledge Being.

(3) Here, for the red Sarasvatī as a consort in the Bo-doñ lineage, the officiant follows preliminaries somewhat along the lines of the preceding evocation of the red Sarasvatī, leading (f. no. 542) to the officiant's becoming meditatively Vajradevī Vāgīśvarī, the venerable Sarasvatī, whose color of body is red, with one face, four arms, of which the two basic ones embrace the male deity; and with the two remaining ones, in the left holds a precious musical instrument of many strings that is resting on her left side, which with the fingers of her remaining right hand she slowly plays, producing an ocean of musical sounds with the full gamut of notes, gratifying all the Buddhas; while her two feet are in the lotus intertwined. Next to her is the Lord, the venerable Mañjuḥṣa, with body red-yellow, one face, and four arms, with the two basic arms embracing the goddess; and with the two remaining ones, in the right wields a sword that blazes with light rays, and in the left holds a blue lotus on top of which is the Prajñāpāramitā book. Both of them have bodies wondrous to see, adored with all manner of jewels, and dwell amidst a furious light display. On the petals to their East is Insight (Prajñā), on the southern one is Intelligence (mati), on the western one is Memory (smṛti) and on the northern one is Cleverness (medhā). Each of these have one face, two arms, hold a sword with the right and a white lotus with the left, are each adorned with silk and jewels, and stand with their two feet together. The central deities and the retinue all have on their forehead an OM, on their neck an ĀH, in their heart a HUM.

In this case, there was no indication of the goddess's age, although the presumption is that she is here also sixteen years old.

Finally, the elaborate ritual of the white Sarasvatī in the lineage from Bo-doñ paṅ-chen phyogs-las-rnam-rgya! mentions a role of the goddess's *vinā* in the yoga of the watches (at f. nos. 473-474). This has to do with the yoga procedure of evoking the goddess at the *sandhis*, especially dawn and dusk, taking rest with the goddess's blessing, and being aroused by the sound of her *vinā*. The text says: "The great music from the sounding of the *vinā*, of the profound and far-reaching dharma, awakens him from all the inner and outer sleep, and he sees directly her face".

In conclusion, the powerful goddess personality of Sarasvatī that had developed in the Vedic period continued unabated through the many centuries, even though the iconographic details varied and despite the adaptation of the goddess to later tantric meditation procedures. The goddess's ability to promote insight and inspiration did not suffer serious detracting even when she advanced from twelve to sixteen years.

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