

SARASWATI PUJA AND BASANTA PANCHAMI

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For the last two centuries, succeeding generations of students in Bengal have been praying hard to Ma Saraswati — to help them with their studies and their imminent exams. This was more before the internet and Professor Google rained free wisdom on them, but students continue to pray to the goddess, nevertheless, especially before their examinations.

This particularly beautiful goddess wears sparkling white and yellow — and as we know, the latter is the preferred colour for Basanta, spring. She is one of the very few deities who have survived from the Vedic period, but not without her many lows. We notice that she is hardly worshipped in other parts of India — we rarely see any temples dedicated to her anywhere. Yet, this same devi is revered in far away Bali and Japan.

In fact, the fifth day of month of Magh (January-February) when she is worshipped in Bengal is better known as Basant Panchami or the ‘spring festival’ in most parts of India. It is, incidentally, the first of the two spring celebrations, the other being Holi that always comes 40 days later. Spring festivals are not uncommon: Catholics, for instance, observe a festival called Candlemas in early February. Even China has its mammoth new year celebrations around this time.

The fields are all yellow with mustard and bright yellow is meant to drive away the grey winters, heralding the season of joy. In fact, people bring dholaks out and perform merry dances but Bihar leads the way by playing with colours in anticipation of Holi. In many parts of north India, it is mandatory to wear yellow clothes or turbans and some put on a haldi tilak as well. In Punjab, Haryana and Kashmir saffron is used a lot to colour rice and flavour or colour sweet halwa in UP and boondi in Bihar.

Brajbhumi deserves special mention here, because it is the favourite season of Radha-Krishna and this is a special day when the countdown to Holi begins, with very colourful and lively celebrations. All temples are decorated with yellow flowers and even rice, milk and burfis are all very yellow.

In Punjab, both Hindus and Sikhs celebrate Basant Panchami with gusto and pray to Ma Ganga, placing their books, pens and musical instruments before this river, not Saraswati. One washes away all sins by taking a bath at the Sangam on this day and pilgrims get triple benefits from the Ganga, Yamuna and the mysterious Saraswati. Kashmiri pandits are different, as on this day, they worship neither Saraswati nor Ganga, but a Tantric goddess named Tiky Tsoram. To add to variety,

we also find Jagaddhatri puja in some places of the north India — this was recorded by Major CH Buck in 1917.

Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and adjoining belts actually invoke Siva on this day with mango flowers and the ears of wheat. Even Kamadeva, who was reduced to ashes by Siva's laser glance for disturbing his Tapasya, is also worshipped during these 40 days, along with his wife Rati of course. Very few know that many Sufis have actually been celebrating Basanta from the 12th century, ever since the legendary poet Amir Khusrau wore yellow just to brighten the mood of the sad Chisti saint, Nizamuddin Aulia.

When Vishu's influence increased, the Puranas glorified his role over other deities on this day. Murdoch noted in 1910 that "the designation of 'Sri' before Sri Panchami indicates that Lakshmi is to be worshipped and the day was originally dedicated to her. The same text, however, also directs the honour of Saraswati and hence 'Sri' also meant Saraswati". To add more confusion, we see how in the Brahma Purana even Bharakali is invoked along with Saraswati, which just illustrates the wide choice that Hinduism, offers.

A century ago, Pandit Madanmohan Malaviya introduced Saraswati pujas in the new Benaras Hindu University but except for Uttarakhand, Assam and Bengal, we hardly find her worshipped anywhere else on this date. In the south, they celebrate her on the last day of Navaratri in Ashwin, so what explains Bengal's obsession for this goddess? The modern version of worshipping Saraswati started in educational institutions of Bengal is a post colonial improvisation that the aspirational class from humbler backgrounds started in the 19th century. To them, education was god — as their life depended on studies and exams. Without these they could hardly get their coveted jobs as clerks under the Company or the Crown or in mercantile institutions.

Saraswati's Vedic origins are quite controversial. Brahma was originally regarded her father, but the Matsya Purana and the Brahma Purana have salacious stories of how he was enamoured by her and how the poor daughter tried to avoid all his heads, but failed. Since our task here is neither to gossip nor to do any Freudian analysis, let us accept the standard position that as Gayatri, she was his wife which is why her Gayatri-mantra is repeated every day as a powerful invocation.

We must also remember that Saraswati is equally important as a river, a very holy one. Throughout history, Hindus have worshipped not only rivers, but also their original sources, their confluences or sangams and their sagar-jatra, where they meet the sea. Indologist, HD Griswold noted in 1897, in his 'Religion of the Rig Veda' that "Saraswati is the region where the five Aryan tribes tarried the longest and it was doubtless the centre of gravity of the Rig Vedic world. Its banks would be hallowed by the composition of hymns and the performance of sacrificial rites".

Vedic civilisation was thus nourished by the Saraswati, just as ancient Egypt was by the Nile and Babylon by Tigris-Euphrates. Volumes have been written on how this river once flowed from the Himalayas to the sea, parallel to the Indus, and how the Shatadru or Sutlej was its main tributary while Yamuna was the other. The defining moment of Indian civilisation came when the Aryans finally crossed the Saraswati, as the 'real India' of both Aryans and non-Aryans was really born after that. It is fascinating to note how the missing Saraswati is still worshipped with more devotion than the live Sapta-sindhu rivers because millions firmly believe that she still flows underground and joins the Ganga. She finds repeated mention in Vedic literature and the Puranas, that were composed after Saraswati dried up, preserved and enhanced her status.

From the 5th century, Vedic-Puranic deities were one of India's most popular exports to many Asia-Pacific countries and their values found deep favour, as much as Buddhist ones. We forgot, however, to patent them or charge any royalty for these Intellectual Properties. Mahayana Buddhism also adopted and transformed many Hindu deities and thus our peaceful Saraswati became Vajra in Tibet, where she is portrayed holding a dangerous thunder-bolt.. In neighbouring Myanmar, we find her in the Lakshman Sen-period Mon inscriptions near the ancient capital of Pagan and Saraswati is honoured as Thurathadi, the protector of Buddhist scriptures.

From the 7th century onwards, we find Brahma and Saraswati in Cambodian epigraphy and she is praised by the Khmer poets as Vageeswari, the goddess of eloquence, writing and music. In Thailand, she is known as Suratswadi or Pra Surasawadi, the goddess of speech and learning and one comes across several old icons at old Thai temples.

Let us now check on Bali, one of the few places outside India where her worship is still important. Unlike Indians, Balinese considered her to be a major deity. Balinese Hindus invoke her as water and consider it holy to bathe in rivers or in the sea or at sacred waterfalls on this day. Very large images of Saraswati adorn schools, colleges and universities, where she is revered for learning, music and wisdom.

Moving to Japan, we find that she had arrived there in the 6th century, with many other Vedic and Puranic deities, and that she was worshipped there till the 8th century. She is called Benzaiten, from her Chinese name Bian-Chaiten, and she is still quite visible in many temples like Kamakura, Nagoya and even Tokyo. She is seen playing a Biwa, a traditional Japanese stringed musical instrument and she was actually promoted as one of the Seven Gods of Fortune. Saraswati is primarily the goddess of flowing water and everything else that flows, like words, speech, music etc, but she is also associated with snakes and is actually married to a sea dragon.

After such hectic travels, it is now time for us to return to our own Ma Saraswati and her clean white swan, for some cool comfort and for her blessings.

What is clear, however, is that Saraswati is a metaphor for stupefying variety and that the strength of Brahmanism lay not in uniformity, but in its superb management of contradictions.