

# Saraswati in Jainism: A Study

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Indian theology is unique. Various religions arose and some traveled in India since ancient times. Every religion had some main deities. Jainism though does not believe in the concept of a “Creator God” it too had many subordinate deities to their Tirthankaras. Due to religious rivalry or in an attempt to modify the form of the deities suitable to the socio-cultural conditions of the time, the interfaith exchange was inevitable. Though this is a complex process one has to inquire into which deity was originally conceived by which religion, what was its original form and how it took various forms and when the same deity was accepted by other religious people, what form the same deity took. The study helps us to see the original form of the deities and how their forms changed in the course of time.

Saraswati is an important deity in Jainism. Jainism does not believe in deities with divine powers in the traditional sense at the level of philosophy. However, Saraswati, Lakshmi, the Sasan deities, and demigods like Yaksha, Yakshini, and Nagas are given a place in their sculptures and mythology. To see what the original nature of these deities meant to the Jains, we have to understand the history of the goddess Saraswati herself.

## Vedic Saraswati

It is widely believed that the deity Saraswati originated from the Vedas. Saraswati is a deified river in the Rigveda. It is assumed that the Vedic civilization was born around 1500 BC on the banks of this river. In the Rigveda, this river is glorified with the words "Devitame, Ambitame". (R. 2.41.16) This River is described in the Rigveda as full of surging water whose waves break through the mountains. (R. 6. 61. 2, 8) She originates from the heavenly sea and never dries up. (R. 5.43.11) She makes the earth fertile. She is also called 'Subhaga' as she bestows wealth, virility, children, and immortality. In the Vedic pantheon, Saraswati is similar to the mother Goddess like Aditi, Ushas, etc. who can be compared to the goddess 'Prithvi' or earth goddess. She is said to have the power to sanctify the impure and she is so powerful that her blessings bring prosperity, the childless get sons (R. 7.96.4-6). It is seen from many verses in the Rigveda that she may have been considered as the goddess of prosperity. In sacrificial offerings, she was prayed along with the goddess Ida and Bharati.

Vedic society was not a matriarchal society but a patriarchal one, therefore, the number of female deities or mother goddesses is very low. If we look at a total of 645 deities in the Rigveda, five or six such important female deities are personifications of natural phenomena. The goddess Saraswati also arose from the respect and praise for the river Saraswati, which was considered life-giving to the Vedic society. But it should be noted here that this deity does not appear anywhere in the Rigveda as the deity of speech, wisdom, knowledge, and music as these qualities were imposed on her character in far later times.

In Rigveda, there is a deity called 'Vak' who is considered as the deity of speech. The Vedics gave birth to this deity in the late period from the idea that there is power in the chants of the Vedic sages. The deity Vak was regarded as possessing very mystical power and her association inspired the sages to create verses of Rigveda (R. 10.125). The Vedics also imagined that due to the existence of Vak hearing, sight, perception, and linguistic expression become possible. Vak was also believed to be the queen of the celestial gods. (R. 8.89) That is, many forms of the deity Vak were also conceived by Vedic seers. Vagdevata, an independent deity, was born from this 'Vak'. During the Brahmana period (eighth-ninth century BC) this deity became more important. Her character was mystified more by creating many myths around her. It was proclaimed that "Vak" gave birth to the three Vedas and that Prithvi (earth) is the Rigveda, Vayu (Air) is the Yajurveda, and Akash (sky) is the Samaveda. But at the same time, it is also said that the deity "Vak" was born from the mind of Prajapati and the process of creation started from that moment.

In short, the deity Vak in Rigveda significantly was modified in Brahmana times which lacks consistency in many places. But Saraswati and Vak were separate deities even in Brahmana times. Vak and Saraswati were independent deities with different characteristics. While Vedic Saraswati is a metaphor for the river, Vedic Vak is a metaphor for Vedic verses. Later, however, we find that Vagdevata was unified with Saraswati as it became an alternate name for Saraswati.

Originally both of the deities were not the deities of wisdom and knowledge. It was a far later development that both the deities were assimilated with adorning few more characteristics. Whether these new characteristics were invented by the Vedics themselves or were borrowed from other contemporary religions/cultures has to be considered. Sharda is also considered to be an alternative name for Saraswati, but it also is not true. Sharda was an independent deity merged with Saraswati in a later course.

### **The Saraswati in Puranas**

The Hindu/Vedic Puranas began to take their final form after the third century AD, during the Gupta period. Besides, many additions were made in the Puranas in the course of time. Therefore, we find that mythological information is often confused. Nevertheless, let us explain the nature of the mythical Saraswati. It was during this period that Saraswati and Vagdevata in the Vedas were merged and they became Vagdevi as a synonym for Saraswati. Saraswati was also known as Vagiswari, Vani, Sharada, Bharati, Vedamata, Shatarupa, and Veenapani. Saraswati was now in her entirely changed form not only the goddess of speech or river but also the goddess of knowledge, wisdom, art, and music.

According to Puranas, Saraswati was born from the mouth of Brahma. There is also a mythological story that even though she was the daughter of Brahma, Brahma became sensuous to her, and therefore Brahma became unworshipped. This was the time when Saraswati's relationship with Prajapati seized and she was associated with Brahma.

According to Puranas, Saraswati is white in complexion, the first power in the universe, pervading the world, holding a harp (Veena) and a book, giving safety, and destroying the darkness of ignorance. In the Skanda Purana, under the influence of Shaivait tradition, she is described as wearing matted hair with a crescent of moon adorning her head, a blue throat, and

three eyes. In short, she was seen as a copy of Shiva. Sometimes she is depicted as quadrilateral. The book in her hand is considered to be a symbol of the Vedas. (Bharatiya Sanskritikosh, Vol. 9, pp. 672-673, edited by Pt. Mahadevshastri Joshi)

In short, the character of Vedic Saraswati seems to have changed completely in the Puranas. The book in her hand is the Vedas, which is at least a post-10th century idea when Vedas were committed to writing. Since the writings of the Jains are ancient, it was natural to hand over the manuscripts to the Shruta Deity. There is also a strong argument that the idea of giving a book in Saraswati's hand may have been taken from the Jains.

In later times, when the concept of incarnation became dominant, Savitri and Gayatri were considered Saraswati's incarnations. In short, we have seen how the Vedic Saraswati developed over the course of time. Now let us look at the Jain concept of Saraswati.

### **Jain Saraswati**

Srutadevata (श्रु तदे वता) represents the embodiment of the entire canonical knowledge of Jainism, according to the Paṇḥavagarana (Sanskrit: Prasnavyakaraṇa), the tenth Anga of the Jain canon which deals with the prophetic explanation of queries regarding divination. Srutadevata (Pkt. Sudadevadā/Suyadevayā) is mentioned also in the Bhagavatīsūtra, Mahanisithasutra, and some other Jain texts. In the Jain tradition, the twelve *aṅgasutras* are described as her limbs, and the fourteen *purvas* as her ornaments.

Jain Scholar Paul Dundas takes the Srutadevata referred to in the Bhagavatisutra not as Saraswati but rather as an all-purpose category. Yet, another Jain scholar, Nagasaki Hojun, interprets it as Saraswati. With the discovery of Jivabhogin's commentary on the Paṇḥavagarana, it is clear that Srutadevata was identified with the Mayuravahini Saraswati by the end of the seventh century. However, connotation of Jain Saraswati alias Sarassai is not identical with Vedic Mayurvahini Saraswati.

The earliest goddess worshiped by the Jainas was Shrutdevata alias Sarassai. Shrutadevi goddess is the personification of *Jinvani* or sermons of the Tirthankara and not a personification of the river named Saraswati. Jain Sarassai is a combination of two words, Saras+ Sai= Sarassai. The word Saras means lake and lotus and Sai means memory, remembrance, contemplation, and time, according to the Prakrit dictionary. So when the two words come together, Sarassai seems to mean the lake or ocean of memories (of the Jin's words). Thus the Jain Sarassai is the goddess of speech of the Tirthankaras and its memorizing. Sarassai in the original Prakrit form was with the artificial sound change was transliterated to Saraswati. The original meaning was lost which created confusion.

The teachings of the Tirthankaras have attained the highest place in the Jain scriptures. Their preachings were divine to them. So the Jains gave it the title of Shrutadevi elevating her to the divine status. Shrutadevi is also called the goddess of education and speech because it is through this preaching that the darkness of ignorance is eliminated, and envy, suffering, and pain are ended. According to Digambara tradition, when the sermons of Mahavira were written in the

form of "Shatkhandagama" and when the "Dhavala" commentary on it was completed, that day is celebrated as "Shrut Panchami". This day is also celebrated as Prakrit Language Day.

For thousands of years in the history of Jainism, the preachings of the Tirthankaras have been remembered and spread by the Ganadharas. That is why memory is also important. It was intended that the mendicants and the preachers should also meditate on memory. The idea of this deity was born in the minds of Jain seekers after considering these important aspects of Shrutadevata. From the known Dnyat Dharma Sutras, it is evident that there was a tradition of meditating on this deity to sharpen memory. Moreover, the concept developed that the ancient Jain scriptures were its organs and ornaments. The ancient religious literature of the Jains is called "Suyanan" (Srutajnana). This is also explained in the scriptures like Vyakhya Prajnapti (2nd century AD) and Paumchariya. She is the most popular and ancient goddess in Jainism. The festival of this goddess is celebrated as 'Jnana Panchami' in Svetambar and 'Shruta Panchami' in Digambar tradition. The place for this deity is compulsory in Jain temples. It is also worth noting that even in Hindu temples, which are currently under Vedic influence; there is no tradition to keep an idol or image of Saraswati. We will notice that the *Jinvani* of the Tirthankaras and Kevalis is the foundation of Jainism and therefore it has been given the status of a deity from ancient times.

Jain mythology is remarkable in this regard. According to a myth, at one end of Jambudvipa is the Himwan (Himalaya) mountain and there are seven big lakes on this mountain. Rapid rivers flow through these lakes and reach the sea, irrigating vast areas. Lotuses bloom in these lakes and each lotus is the abode of a Sasana (education) goddess. These Sasana (Education) deities are collectively recognized as deities of education in the Jain mythologies. Sasan means education. These Sasan Devis are 24 with independent names and are believed to symbolize the twenty-four Tirthankaras. In fact, each Tirthankara has its own Sasana deity. These names have come with some changes in the Digambara and Shwetambara sects. 16 of the Sasan Devis are considered to be Vidya Devis. The answer to how the alternate name of Shrutadevi came to be Sarassai is in this myth. As Saras means lake and Sai means memory, we will notice that the word Sarassai comes from the sense of the head of the Sasana goddesses that adorn the lotuses in the celestial lake.

For example, according to the Shwetambaras, the order of Sasana deities of the Tirthankaras is – Chakrashwari, Ajita, Duritari, Kali, Mahakali, etc. and according to the Digambaras that order is- Chakrashwari Rohini, Prajnapati, Vajrasrinkha etc. That is, even though there are only twenty-four governing deities, some of their names have changed.

In Jain iconography, Shrutadevi (i.e. Sarassai) is considered to be the preeminent of Sasana (learning) or Vidyadevatas. Acharya Hemachandra has also explained in *Abhidhanchintamani* that Shrutadevi means Saraswati. Western scholars like Ludwick believe that Vidya Devi emerged in Jainism after the fifth century AD. (Sarasvatī: Riverine Goddess of Knowledge: From the Manuscript-carrying "Vīṇā" ...By Catherine Ludvik) But this goddess of education is not a goddess of knowledge, but Ludvik states that these deities were created after the fifth century to increase the belief in the Jain religion and Tirthankaras who have mystic powers. But there seems no truth in that. However, there is no dispute among scholars that Srutadevata (Sarassai) as the presiding deity of the teachings of Tirthankaras and Kevalis was

revered in Jainism in very early times. It was not any river personified but was considered as a deity of the ocean of remembered speeches of the Jina's.

Deities of Jainism are classified differently. According to Jainism, the abode of deities is divided into three categories. It is the concept of Jain Puranas that Saraswati and Lakshmi live in the upper world, the Sasana deities or the goddesses of learning in the middle world (Tiryagaloka), and the Yaksha-Yakshini live in the underworld or Patalloka. We have seen through the Jain mythology how the Sruta deity could have got the name Saraswati (Sarsasai). The Vedic concept of Vagdevata and the Jain concept of Srutadevata are entirely different and have nothing in common as thought. Therefore, the prevailing opinion that the Saraswati deity was accepted by the Jains under the influence of the Vedics cannot be accepted. On the other hand, Saraswati as Vagdevi (deity of speech) and deity of wisdom as a Vedic goddess has to be considered to have developed under the influence of the Jains because the history of Jainism (Samanas) goes way back to pre-Vedic times.

During the Sanskritization of the language, Sarassai became transliterated as Saraswati and we see that the Vedic Saraswati and the Jain Saraswati may have been mistaken for one due to identical names but with different connotations. The Saraswati of the Jains is not even remotely related to the river.

We have seen above the journey through which Vedic Saraswati underwent changes in the mythological period and it is clear that both developments were independent of each other.

Vedic Saraswati also is absent from ancient iconography as the Vedics initially were not idol worshippers. In fact, the earliest sculptures found so far are of Jain Saraswati. Images of Vedic Saraswati begin to be found only after the 4th century A.D. Also it is pertinent to note that Vedic Saraswati became Veenadharni (lute holder) in the Middle Ages, which was not the case earlier.

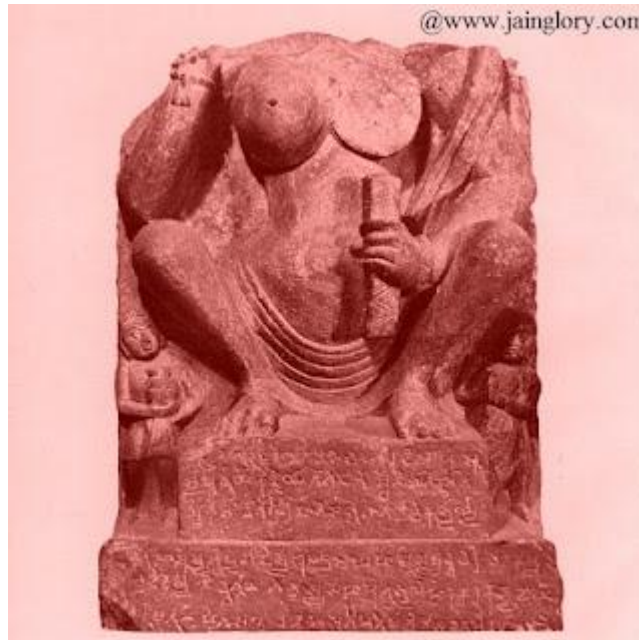
### **Jain Saraswati-sculpture**

An idol of Saraswati with Yaksha image is found at Ghantasala in Andhra Pradesh which dates back to the second century BC. Ghantashala was an ancient port and many Jain as well as Buddhist archaeological remains have been found here. The statue of Saraswati found here belongs to the era of Emperor Kharvela and since the Kalinga state was adjacent to Andhra Pradesh, Jains had a great predominance in Andhra at that time. Initially, the Yaksha accompanying this Saraswati idol was thought to be *Kalabhairava*. Archaeologists therefore speculated that this idol might be of Vedic or Hindu Saraswati. But in Hindu or Vedic iconography no other male deity exists along with Saraswati. Moreover, Vedic religion did not have the concept of idol worship before. Vedic deities are always embodied in abstract forms, so this idol cannot be of Vedic Saraswati. Hindus have never accepted Saraswati as the goddess of knowledge as they didn't belong to the Vedic religion anytime in history.

On the contrary, in Jainism, the idea of being a Yaksha with Sasan Devi is far ancient. What's more, along with the Tirthankaras, the attendant Yakshas are also depicted. Moreover, the archaeologists also agree that this statue is made in the Indus-era iconography style. (Jainism: art, architecture, literature & philosophy by Haripriya Rangarajan, G. Kamalakar, A. K. V. S. Reddy,

K. Venkatachalam, Sharada Pub. House, 01-Jan-2001, p. 20) So it is proved that the oldest image of Sarassai alias Saraswati found in India belongs to Jains.

Next, we turn to the Saraswati image found at Mathura. There is no doubt that this is a Jain idol of Saraswati because the pedestal of this idol is inscribed with a seven-line inscription of the donor of this idol. This article sheds a lot of light on the then-Jain system. This idol belongs to AD 132 (Kushana period). The idol is now housed in the museum in Lucknow and was found during excavations at Kankali Tila in Mathura. Many images and inscriptions related to Tirthankaras and Jaina idols have been found here and the awareness of Jain predominance at that time can be seen from these inscriptions. Cultural lexicographers have called this period as 'Jain period'. (Bharatiya Sanskriti Kosha, Vol. 9, p. 673)



Although this idol is broken, two attendants are shown beside it. The goddess is sitting in a squatting position holding a scripture in hand. A brief translation of the Prakrit text of this inscription reads- "Success I. On Shukla Dashami of the fourth winter month, in the 54th year (of the Kushan dynasty), I Sihaputra Gov (Gop) blacksmith, offers the above idol of Saraswati to this dance hall at the behest of the Aryadeva, the preacher (reader) of the Kottiyagana, the Sthaniya kula, the Vaira Sakha, and the Srigriha sambhoga has been set up for the welfare of all beings."

This article mentions the Kottiya Gana, the Sthaniyya Kula, and the Vaira (Vajra?) branch. It is believed that this sheds light on the distinctive religion and social structure of the Jains of that time. The text of this inscription gives an indication that there were clans of families and branches of clans formed from the Ganadharas of Tirthankaras. This reinforces the possibility that there was some internal connection between "Staniya kula" and later Sthanakvasi branch of Jainism. Besides this inscription of a blacksmith, inscriptions of many goldsmith donors who were Jains have also been found in Kankali Tila. This Aryadeva was the chief preacher of the lay-disciple blacksmiths of that time which can be seen from the text of some other inscriptions.

This shows that Jainism was widely practiced in the Kushan period even among the common people. " (Early Inscriptions Of Mathura A Study by Bajpayee, Kalyani Das p. 143-153)  
"Angavija" a book in Maharashtrian Prakrit was also written during this period. That book also sheds light on the social system of those times.

The inscription informs us that in the Kushan era, Jain Saraswati had become the deity of dance and music as well since the idol was dedicated to a dance hall. Though Vedic Saraswati later became the goddess of music she never was considered the goddess of dance.

But by the 8th-9th century, we also see some features and legends of Vedic Saraswati beginning to influence the Jain concept of Saraswati. This is clearly evident from the Prakrit inscription on the fragmentary image of Vitraga at Wai (Maharashtra). In this inscription, Saraswati is referred to as the laughter in the mouth-lake of the four-faced Brahma. This inscription is engraved by Jain lay disciple Bhimdeva who built the temple of Vitraga in AD 1067 during the Rashtrakuta period. Dr. V. B. Kolte states that this inscription bears the influence of the Great Poet Pushpadanta. (Some Copper Plates and Inscriptions of Maharashtra, Dr. V. B. Kolte, Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture. 1987, pp. 12-13) It may surprise us as to why the Jain Saraswati has been associated with Brahma in this inscription. But, after the decline of the Gupta Empire, the Vedic religion went on the back foot for some time but in a couple of centuries Vedic adherents started to gain influence in the courts of feudal lords and then kings throughout India and vehemently they started propagating the Vedic religion and myths in new zeal because they received patronage from local rulers thus was easy for them to penetrate the tenets of other local religions to prove their supremacy. In fact, this era was of religious rivalry. It affected the Jains as well as the Hindus. This was the period when the Vedic myths and philosophy entered Jain and Hindu religious thought. In fact, an attempt was made to identify Vedic Saraswati with Jain Sarassai. As Jains of this time were in search of their roots, it seems that Tantras also entered into Jainism during this period. Medieval Jain literature mentions that scholars like Bappabhatti Suri, Hemachandra, Mallisena, and Narachandra Suri acquired prodigious talent by the grace of Saraswati. However, for Jains, the purpose of a Saraswati hymn indeed was to please the deity Shruta or Sarassai.

Given the above discussion, it is clear that the prevailing view that the Jain goddess Srutadevi (Suyadevi) and their own deity Saraswati (Sarassai) developed under Vedic influence, as explained at various places, is not true. Both deities arose independently in different times and areas of origin. Jain's concept of God is completely different. The Vedic Saraswati of the Vedic period and the Saraswati of the Puranic period are also not identical. In fact, there does not seem to be any continuity in their concepts of Gods. The Vagdevata also comes as a separate symbol of Vedic hymns and later it was not even a separate deity but was merged with Saraswati. We also see other alternate names of Vedic Saraswati and her attributes being affixed in course of the time.

The question is why this happened. There appears to be continuity in the Jain concept of deities at least as far back as the tenth century. The concept of Saraswati or Shruta deity is seen to exist continuously without any change under her preeminence as chief of Sasana deities (education/vidya). There is no change in the twenty-four associated Sasana deities, one for each of the 24 Tirthankaras. The concept that Goddess Saraswati resides in the upper world while

Sasanadevata resides in Tiryaga i.e. Madhyaloka shows the universal nature of Saraswati or Srutadevata in the Jain canon.

However, it can be seen that the Vedic concept of Saraswati underwent rapid changes over time as other deities were unified with her. The myth of Lord Brahma becoming enamored of his own daughter Saraswati and pursuing her is nowhere to be found in Jain literature because they knew the distinction. The Jain Srutadevi or Saraswati (Sarassai) was the deification of the speeches of the Jinas whereas Vedic Saraswati was the personification of the River on whose banks Vedas were composed and the sacrifices were conducted. Speeches of Tirthankaras are the foundation of the Jain religion. It was not merely general knowledge but knowledge to make every human being move toward the position of Kevali, Siddha, and Arhat. (Omniscient)

The idols of Jain Saraswati must have been made in very ancient times. After the Anga and Purva Granths were written down, Shruta Devi got a separate status and these texts came to be considered as her organs and ornaments. Since Jinvani was propagated by remembrance, the Shruta-devata must have come into existence long ago.

A 2nd-century BC Jain idol of Saraswati from Andhra Pradesh shows a direct link with Indus iconography and shows how ancient the tradition of Sarassai could have been.

## **Conclusion**

Though the names are identical the Jaina Saraswati (Sarassai) and Vedic Saraswati are entirely different deities. Both have independent origins. Though today we find both share few similar attributes they are the result of religious conflict and assimilation process in good and bad times. However, considering both deities as one and the same is not correct if the theological history of both religions is carefully studied.

-Sanjay Sonawani