



Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati
The Three Devis of the Hindu Pantheon

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**LAKSHMI PARVATI AND
SARASWATI**

Indian mythology is special in that it gives the female energy equal status as a deity, if not more powerful. The three Indian deities constituting the Divine Trinity are Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara (Shiva). While Indian mythology abounds with stories of these Gods, it also contains many, many stories about their Divine Consorts, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, respectively.

We now go into some of the most interesting stories of these three Goddesses and what function they played in maintaining the balance of the world, working in tandem with their spouses.

Sri Mahalakshmi – The Goddess of Wealth

*"Om Mahalakshmai Cha Vidmahe
Vishnu Patnyai Cha Dhimahi
Tanno Lakshmihi Prachodayat"*

The above is one Gayatri Mantra for Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Each and every major deity in Hindu mythology has His or Her own Gayatri Mantra. Translated, this hymn means, "Om. May we meditate on the Great Goddess Sri Lakshmi, the consort of Sri Maha Vishnu. May that effulgent Maha Lakshmi Devi inspire and illumine our mind and understanding."

Sri Mahalakshmi or Lakshmi, as the Goddess is also referred to, is the Hindu Goddess of Wealth, auspiciousness, purity, prosperity and generosity. She also embodies charm, beauty and grace. Lakshmi is a very popular and powerful Goddess



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MAHALAKSHMI

in Indian mythology. In fact, representations of Lakshmi, or Shri, are found also in Buddhist and Jain monuments. The earliest archeological representations of Devi Shri were found in Buddhist monuments.

The name "Lakshmi" is derived from the Sanskrit elemental form "lakS," meaning to observe or perceive. This is also synonymous with "lakSya," meaning aim, goal or objective. Lakshmi is thus a Goddess who is regarded as the means to achieving several goals, importantly, becoming prosperous.

Lakshmi, the Consort of Sri Maha Vishnu, also incarnates as Sita (during Vishnu's avatar as Rama) and Rukmini and Radha (during Vishnu's manifestation as Krishna). As Lakshmi, She is often depicted as an indescribably beautiful woman, seated on a full-bloomed lotus, holding lotus buds in two of her hands, a pot of gold in the third and benignly blessing all those who come to her for succour. She is flanked by elephants, which symbolizes her royal status. Lakshmi, being the Goddess of Wealth, is also depicted as dressed in rich red silk, fully ornamented from head to toe in gold and precious stones.

Lakshmi's four hands represent four spiritual virtues. The fully bloomed lotus she is seated on, represents the seat of Divine Truth. The aura of joy surrounding her depicts mental and spiritual balance. Peace and prosperity always exist around her.

Sri Mahalakshmi is also depicted as being seated on the Adishesha (bed of snakes), along with her Consort, Vishnu. Vishnu lies in the Ananta Shayan (reclining) position and Lakshmi is seen pressing his feet.

The Adishesha



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LAKSHMI AND VISHNU ON ADISHESHA

an avatar of the Supreme God, known as Sankarshan. The Puranas relate how Adishesha (the First Snake) holds all the planets of the Universe on his hundred hoods and always sings the glories of Sri Mahavishnu from all his mouths. The Shesha Naag is sometimes also referred to as "Ananta-Shesha" which means "Endless Shesha".

The Adishesha is a huge, gigantic snake, depicted with a massive form that floats coiled in space, or on the universal ocean, to form the bed on which Vishnu lies. According to Hindu Vedic tradition, the Shesha is the king of all the Nagas (or serpents) and is one of the primal beings in creation itself.

The Bhagavata Purana quotes him as

Evolution and legends about Sri Mahalakshmi

The Devas (Gods) and Asuras (demons) both sought the immortality that the Devamruta (Divine Nectar) could give them. They decided to join hands to churn the ocean of milk, thereby retrieving the pot of Nectar. This is when Vishnu incarnated as "Kurma" (the Divine Tortoise), on whose back was placed the huge mountain, Mandara. A great venom-spewing serpent, Vasuki, was wrapped around it, in order to churn the ocean.

The churning of the mighty oceans led to the manifestation of many celestial beings. The Devas and the Asuras were to share the spoils jointly. Among the first to appear was Goddess Lakshmi, the daughter of the King of the milky ocean. Among the others were the Chandra (moon), the Kamadhenu (the wish-fulfilling cow) and the Kalpavriksha (the wish-fulfilling tree).

The Amrit or the "nectar of immortality" was the last one to surface on the ocean. This also marked the end of Lord Vishnu's Kurma Avatar. In a bid to retain the Amrit, Vishnu then took up form of the beautiful maiden, Mohini, to distract the raakshasas (demons), took away the pot of Amrit and gave immortality to the Devas. Sri Lakshmi later went on to marry Shri Vishnu. The term "Shri" still continues to be used as an honorific address and is used till date for males all over India. The equivalent for females is "Srimati", in case she is married.

According to the Vishnu Purana, Lakshmi is born to Bhrigu Muni and Khyati. She resided in Heaven (Swarga), but due to a curse of the ill-tempered sage, Durvasa, she had to leave Swarga and made Ksheersagara (the ocean of milk) her home. Lakshmi personifies riches, wealth, loveliness, grace, beauty, charm, splendour and lustre in Mahabharata. Strangely, she is also regarded as a wife of Surya, wife of Praja-pati, wife of Dharma and mother of Kama (God of Love), wife of Dattatreya and sister or mother of Dhat and Vidhat. Lakshmi is also said to be one of the Nine Saktis of Vishnu, as a manifestation of Prakriti (Mother Nature).

The actual spiritual connotation of Mahalakshmi



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**LAKSHMI MARRIED VISHNU AT
THE TIME OF SAMUDRA
MANTHAN**

The lotus remains completely uncontaminated, even though rooted in the dirtiest, muddiest waters. This teaches us to go beyond the surface of worldly contamination and proceed deep into life, to learn precious spiritual truths from it. The lotus also embodies purity, fertility and the growth of organic life – the lotus also grows from out of Vishnu's navel.

Lakshmi's vahana (vehicle), the Owl (or the Ulooka in Sanskrit) is a bird that signifies wisdom and that sleeps through the day and prowls through the night. This is because it can only see in the dark, and goes blind in the day. This partial blindness in the creature is actually indicative of a sadhaka's (seeker) tendency of going toward the pursuit of secular instead of spiritual wealth.



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**LAKSHMI WITH HER VAHANA -
THE OWL**

Lakshmi as Bhoodevi and Sridevi

Sri Mahalakshmi appears in two forms, Bhoodevi and Sridevi, on either side of Sri Venkateshwara or Sri Mahavishnu. Bhudevi denotes the complete representation of the Material World and is an energy called the Aparam Prakriti, Mother Earth Herself. Sridevi, on the other hand, constitutes the Spiritual World or energy called the Param Prakriti. Both Bhoodevi and Sridevi are but two manifestation of a single deity, Sri Lakshmi. In fact, some legends of Sri Lakshmi state that the different goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are but manifestations of Sri Mahalakshmi.



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**VENKATESHWARA WITH
LAKSHMI**

Mahalakshmi also gives devotees darshan along with Lord Sri Venkateswara (at Tirumala). She resides in Vishnu's chest, in His Heart. Lakshmi is the embodiment of Love. She also embodies the Spiritual World or Vaikunta; what is considered as equivalent to Heaven in Vaishnavism. Lakshmi symbolizes God's superior spiritual feminine energy or the Param Prakriti, which purifies, empowers and uplifts the Jeevatma (individual soul) and sends it in pursuit of the Paramatma (Universal Soul).

Goddess Sri Mahalakshmi many names, such as Padma, Padmavati, Padmamukhi, Padmapriya, Padmakshi, Padmamaladhara devi, Padmasundari, Kamala, Ulkavahini and Vishnupriya. Her other names are Indira, Rama, Chakrika, Manushri, Kamalika, Chanchala, Jalaja, Bhumi Devi, Nandika, Vaishnavi, Lalima, Rujula, Bhargavi, Sridevi, Narayani and Aishwarya. She is commonly referred to as the Jaganmata (the Mother of the Universe) in Shri Mahalakshmi Ashtakam.

Ashta Lakshmi

The Ashta Lakshmis are eight manifestations of the goddess Lakshmi and preside over eight sources of wealth and thus represent the powers of Sri Mahalakshmi. They are as follows:

1. Aadi Lakshmi - The First Lakshmi
2. Dhaanya Lakshmi - Granary wealth
3. Dhairya Lakshmi - Wealth of courage
4. Gaja Lakshmi - Elephants, symbolizing wealth and prosperity
5. Santāna Lakshmi - Wealth of fertility and progeny
6. Vijaya Lakshmi - Wealth of victory
7. Vidyaa Lakshmi - Wealth of knowledge and education
8. Dhana Lakshmi - Wealth in monetary terms

Lakshmi's worship

Hindus mostly worship Goddess Lakshmi on Diwali, the Festival of Lights. They light small diyas (earthen oil lamps) all around the periphery of and inside their house, in order to welcome her into their homes. In West Bengal, she is worshiped during a full moon night in Autumn, as they believe she showers wealth on this night. It is said that she comes on her mount, the Owl, and takes away the darkness with her, leaving light and joy with her devotees.

In Orissa, Gaja Lakshmi Puja is celebrated with much fervor on a full-moon day in the month of Aswina (September-October). In some provinces, the Puja or prayer sessions go on for as many as 7-10 days, by the business community out there!

The Sri Lakshmi Stuti by Indra and the Sri Sukta are two most famous prayers to Lakshmi Mata. Then there is also the Agastya Lakshmi Stotra. There are several Lakshmi temples all over India. Most famous among them are the Ashta Lakshmi Temple at Chennai, Mahalakshmi Temples at Kolhapur and Mumbai and the Padmavati Temple at Tirupati.

Sri Parvati – The Goddess of Power

*"Sarva Mangala Maangalye, Shive Sarvaartha Saadhike
Sharanye Tryambake Gaurii, Naaraayani Namostute"*

This hymn means, *"Goddess Parvati is the auspiciousness of all that is auspicious. She is the consort of Lord Shiva, who grants every desire of one's heart. I adore such Devi Parvati, who loves all her children. I bow to the great mother, who has given refuge to me".*



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PARVATI WITH SON GANESHA

Parvati devi, in Hindu mythology, is a representation of the ultimate female divinity, the Shakti. In spite of her being a gentle mother goddess, she is known for unleashing her true power and strength in times of crisis. The Shaktas consider her the ultimate Divine Shakti, the embodiment of the total energy in the universe. Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, the king of the Himalayas, is an incarnation of Sati, the first consort of Lord Shiva, and is the mother of Ganesha, the Elephant-Headed Lord and Kartikeya (Muruga or Skanda). The Devi is usually portrayed with two arms, seated on a lion or tiger. Generally benign, this goddess is also known to take on more powerful and fearful aspects such as Kali, Durga, Chandi and

the Mahavidyas.

Her other names include Lalita, Gauri, Girija, Girirajaputri and Shailaja. Yet other names include Shyamala (the dark one), Amba, Ambika, Bhairavi, Aparna and Uma. Legend has it that when Shiva teased her about her dark complexion, Parvati took offense and left him to undergo severe penance to acquire Brahma's boon for a fairer skin color.

Legend of Parvati Devi

Though Parvati does not make an appearance in Vedic literature, the Kena Upanishad talks about Uma-Haimavati, who manifests as Shakti, the feminine energy of the Supreme Brahman. She reveals the knowledge of Brahman to the Vedic trinity of Agni, Vayu, and Indra. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata talk of Parvati as Shiva's consort. Kalidasa (5th century) and the Puranas (4th through the 13th centuries) relate in detail stories of Sati-Parvati and Shiva with comprehensive details.

Parvati's birth and marriage

Parvati's earlier incarnation, Sati, self-immolates at her father, Daksha's, Yagna (sacrificial ritual). Daksha not only refuses to accept Shiva as his son-in-law, but also insults Sati when she goes to visit the Yagna against her husband's wishes. Shiva is furious when he learns about Sati's death. Grief-stricken, he loses interest in worldly affairs and undertakes severe penance in the Himalayas. Sati is reborn as Parvati.



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SHIVA CARRYING THE CORPSE OF SATI



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PARVATI PINES AND PRAYS FOR LORD SHIVA

Parvati falls for Shiva and wishes to reunite with him. She regularly visits the cave where he sits deep in penance, cleans up the place and offers puja to him everyday. When he does not even open his eyes to glance at her, however, she is terribly saddened and decides to undergo severe penance herself, in order to please him. She sheds her clothes, refuses food and water and proceeds to do penance in the harsh climate of the Himalayas. Shiva is pleased by her devotion to him and agrees to marry her. They move on from there to mount Kailas, Shiva's abode.

Kalidasa's epic, Kumarasambhavam, talks about Parvati's matchless beauty, her devotion to Shiva, their divine union resulting in the birth of Kumara (Muruga) and the eventual resurrection of Kamadeva (the God of Love) who had been killed when he tried to disturb Shiva out of his penance and get him attracted to Parvati.

The Shiva Purana describes Parvati's marriage to Lord Shiva as an allegory illustrating the desire of the Jeevatma to attain the Paramatma. Here, the idea of Lord Shiva represents a state beyond human suffering and Parvati becomes symbolic of the aspirant who wishes to achieve nirvana. Thus, the story becomes much more than just a quaint romantic tale.

Shiva and Parvati as One – the Ardhanarishvara concept

The highlight of the Shiva-Parvati union is the Ardhanarishvara concept, wherein Shiva and Parvati fuse to become One Deity. Shiva becomes the right side and Parvati, the left side. Together, they symbolize the power of renunciation and asceticism and the blessings of marital felicity. The Shaktas consider Parvati as the Ultimate Power. The Saundaryalahari, a famous literary work on the goddess by Adi Sankara, relates how Shakti is the source of all power in this universe and how, because of her, Lord Shiva gets all his powers.

Shiva and Parvati perfectly complement each other. Shakti, though a fierce energy herself, is perfectly capable of taming Shiva's famous temper. While Shiva performs his vigorous and destructive Tandava (celestial dance), Parvati performs the Lasya, a much more graceful and lighter version, to slow down the process.



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ARDHANARISHVARA

Shiva-Parvati embodying the Lingam-Yoni union



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SHIVA PARVATI AS LINGAM-YONI

In many legends, Parvati is actually viewed not as Shiva's complement, but his rival, tempting him, luring him away from ascetism. Parvati also subdues Shiva's immense sexual vitality. In this reference, the Shiva Purana says: "The linga of Shiva, cursed by the sages, fell on the earth and burnt everything before it like fire. Parvati took the form of a yoni and calmed it by holding the linga in her yoni". The Padma Purana tells the story of Parvati assuming the form of yoni to receive the lingam of Shiva, who was cursed by sage Bhrigu to be the form of the lingam.

In Tantra Shastra, the Yoni-Lingam union is the most sacred and divine. This depicts the age-old concept of the stone phallus penetrating deep into the Earth's vulva. The Puranic texts explain, "When the upright cylindrical lingam is in union with the double-creased oval yoni, then the Earth shall find peace".

Parvati – Ganesha's Mother

Parvati once wanted to take a bath, and, as none of her attendants were around to guard the pool, she made a figurine from the turmeric paste she used to cleanse her body and infused life into it. Ganesha was born thus. Parvati asked Ganesha not to permit anyone to enter the area till she said so. When Shiva tried to enter the house, Ganesha stopped him. Shiva was infuriated and severed Ganesha's head with his trishula (trident).

Parvati came out and was distressed to see her son's lifeless body. She demanded that Shiva restore Ganesha's life at once. Unfortunately, the body's head was thrown very far away and thus could not be found. Eventually, an elephant's head was attached to Ganesha's body and bringing him back to life. Ganesha was also made head of the celestial armies, and worshipped by everyone before beginning any activity. This is how he came to be worshipped as the Harbinger of Good, as the remover of all obstacles.

Parvati as Indrajit's step-mother

Here is a little-known story about Parvati. Legend has it that Parvati had a sakhi (friend) called Sulakshana, who she was particularly fond of. One day, when Parvati had proceeded to take a bath, she realized she had forgotten to take her clothes with her. She requested Sulakshana to retrieve them from her room. When Sulakshana stepped into the room, though, she spotted Shiva sitting inside. She tried to hurry back to the pool, but Shiva refused to let her go. Shiva already had an eye on Sulakshana and expressed his desire to be with her for a while. The sakhi was aghast and rebuked him for his infidelity. She also begged of Shiva not to touch her, as she was sure to conceive if a powerful male force like his, united with her. But Shiva was adamant and assured her that she would never get into trouble because of this incident and that the seed would remain inside her till such a time that she got married and wanted to give birth to a child.

Later, when Sulakshana reached the pool, Parvati with her divya-drishti (divine vision), had already known what had taken place inside. She was furious, pushed the sakhi into the pool

and cursed that she became a frog. Sulakshana spent the rest of her life in there. She was reborn as Mandodari and went on to marry Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka. Mandodari still carried the seed sown by Shiva in her womb and gave birth to Indrajit, who is usually known as Ravana's son.

Trigunatmika, yet Nirguna

Parvati is referred to as Trigunatmika, that is, having all the three gunas, Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. At the same time, she is also called Nirguna, which means, devoid of any gunas. She is sometimes portrayed as being fully clothed in the richest of silks, decked up with precious stone-studded ornaments. However, most sculptures depict her with bare breasts, wearing a sacred thread. This was considered to be a sign of divinity in ancient India, as clothes symbolize worldly attachments and nudity indicated detachment and divinity.



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SHIVA PARVATI

Worship of Parvati

Lakshmi and Saraswati are propitiated in their original forms, but that is not so in Parvati's case. More popular than Parvati herself, are her other aspects of Durga, Kali, Gauri and so on. There are not many temples where you can see Parvati being worshipped as an idol.

Durga is universally venerated as the Warrior Goddess, who manifested in order to destroy the demon, Durg, who appeared in the form of a buffalo (Skanda Purana). Again, Durga took the form of Mahishasura Mardhini to kill the terrible demon, Mahisha. Her vahana (vehicle) is either a tiger or lion. Some cults consider the vahana to be a lioness too.

Tibetans venerated a type of lioness, called Seng-ge-dkar-mi-g.yu-ral-can. The idea of this animal being Parvati's mount probably came up due to overlap between the tribal religions of India and the Tibetan Bon Religion, particularly in the Himalayan region. Some sects such as the Mahagauri sect depict her riding Shiva's mount, the Sacred Bull, Nandi.

Though a calm and serene goddess, the dark side of Parvati is worshipped more often. Though known as a formidable warrior goddess, people also venerate her as the Queen of the Pariyan. Men are actually forbidden from entering the sanctum sanctorum of many of her temples. She is considered to be an ascetic and mystic. During the Chola period, she was often shown as wearing her hair in a severe top knot, much like sanyasis (ascetics).

Festivals



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NAVA DURGA - THE NINE FORMS OF DURGA

The Gauri Festival is celebrated on the seventh, eighth and ninth of Bhadrapada Shukla. She is worshipped as the goddess of harvest and the protecting force behind women. This is also why this festival, mainly observed by women, is also closely related with Ganesh Chaturthi as well. The Gauri festival is popular both in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

In Rajasthan, Gauri is worshipped during the Gangaur festival, which commences on the first day of Chaitra, just the day following Holi. This festival continues for a period of 18 days. Images of Issar and Gauri are made from clay and worshipped during the festival.

Yet another very popular festival is Navratri, a ten-day festival, during which all of the Devi's manifestations are worshipped for a period nine days. The festival is mostly to celebrate Her warrior appearance as Mother Durga, with her nine forms i.e. Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kashmunda, Skandmata, Katyani, Kalratri, Mahagauri, Siddhidaatri. The 10th day, Vijayadashami, marks her victory over the terrible demon, Mahishasura.

The Gauri tritiya is celebrated from Chaitra shukla third to Vaishakha shukla third. It is said that Parvati spends a month at her parent's home at this time. This festival is popular in Maharashtra, less observed in North India and is virtually unheard of in Bengal. This is a festival mostly conducted by married women and is somewhat similar to the Indian haldi-kumkum ceremony, where girls and women are invited to households and gifted flowers and fruits, coconuts, small gifts and packets of turmeric and saffron.

Temples of Parvati

The most famous temples of Parvati are the 51 Shakti Peeths; the Kamakshi Amman temple at Kanchipuram, Tamilnadu; the Meenakshi temple at Madurai, Tamilnadu, the Akhilandeswari Temple at Thiruvanaikaval, Tamilnadu; the Devipuram temple at Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh; and the Visalakshi temple at Banaras.

Sri Saraswati – the Goddess of Learning and Knowledge

*Yaa Kundendu tushaara haaradhavala, Yaa shubhravastraavritha
Yaa veenavara dandamanditakara, Yaa shwetha padmaasana
Yaa brahmaachyutha shankara prabhutibhir Devaisadaa Vanditha
Saa Maam Paatu Saraswatee Bhagavatee Nihshesha jaadyaapahaa*

This is a popular prayer to Goddess Saraswati, the meaning of which is as follows:

"May Goddess Saraswati, who is fair like the jasmine-colored moon, and whose pure white garland is like frosty dew drops; who is adorned in radiant white attire, on whose beautiful arm rests the veena, and whose throne is a white lotus; who is surrounded and respected by the Gods, protect me. May you fully remove my lethargy, sluggishness, and ignorance."

Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of learning, knowledge, music and



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SARASWATI

the Arts. Saraswati has also been identified with and likened to the Vedic Saraswati River. She is the consort of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. Thus, with the goddesses Parvati and Lakshmi, she completes the set of the divine Tridevi (the three goddesses, just like the divine Trinity).

According to Hinduism, Saraswati's offspring are the Vedas. Saraswati is a very popular Indian goddess and is propitiated to attain knowledge and wisdom. Saraswati also prominently features in Mahayana Buddhism, where she initially manifests in the Golden Radiance Sutra of the late 4th or early 5th Century, in a Mahayana Sutra.

Appearance of Devi Saraswati



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SARASWATI

Devi Saraswati is often portrayed as a beautiful, white-skinned woman, attired in pure white, seated on a white Nelumbo nucifera lotus. Her vahana or vehicle is the swan, which symbolizes that she is founded in the experience of the Absolute Truth. Thus, she not only has the knowledge but also the experience of the Highest Reality. Saraswati is mostly associated with the color white, which signifies purity of true knowledge. Occasionally, however, she is also associated with the colour yellow, the colour of the flowers of the mustard plant, that bloom at the time of her festival in the spring. Unlike the goddess Lakshmi, Saraswati is not adorned heavily with jewels, gold and heavy silks, but is shown as attired very modestly, maybe symbolizing her preference of knowledge over worldly material pursuits.

Saraswati is generally shown having four arms, which represent the four aspects of human personality in learning: mind, intellect, alertness, and ego. Alternatively, these four arms also represent the 4 vedas, the primary sacred books for Hindus. The vedas, in turn, represent the 3 forms of literature: Poetry — the Rigveda containing hymns and representing poetry; Prose — the Yajurveda containing prose; Music — the Samaveda representing music. Prose is represented by the book in one hand, poetry by the rosary of crystals, music by the veena. The pot of sacred water represents purity in all of these three, or their power to purify human thought.

A white swan is often located next to her feet. The sacred swan, if offered a mixture of milk and water, is said to be able to drink the milk alone. The swan thus symbolizes discrimination between the good and the bad or the eternal and the evanescent. Due to her association with the swan, Goddess Saraswati is also referred to as Hamsa-vahini, which means "she who has a swan as her vehicle".

Sometimes a peacock is shown beside the goddess. The peacock represents arrogance and pride over its beauty, and by having a peacock as her mount, the Goddess teaches Hindus not to be concerned with external appearance and to be wise regarding the eternal truth.

The goddess's favorite abode, it is believed, is the state of Kashmir, among the Himalayas. Her favorite fruit is said to be the apple. In Hindu mythology, great significance is attached to offering honey to this goddess, as honey is representative of perfect knowledge.

Saraswati as a river

The hymns of the Rigveda (the first of the four vedas. The others are Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvana veda) on Saraswati, liken her to a giant river with purifying, nourishing, fertile and creative properties. This theory propounds that the river Saraswati was created from the present headwaters of the Yamuna River. In the times of yore, the waters of the Yamuna, after leaving the Himalayan foothills, turned west instead of east and emerged as Paonta Saheb.

This Saraswati river also flowed southwest across Punjab and Haryana, following the course of the now Ghaggar-Hakra River in a pathway, roughly parallel to the smaller Indus River to its west. Furthermore, the Sutlej, then, is said to have flowed further east than it does today, and merged into the Saraswati somewhere near Bahawalpur. Eventually, the giant Mother river, with all her tributaries, joined into the Rann of Kutch, which, then, was a more integral part of the Arabian Sea.

It is also said that the Harappan Civilization developed along the course of this very Saraswati river. Now that waterway remains dried up. According to some scholars, goddess Saraswati personified communication and the giver of knowledge due to the role of the Saraswati River in the development of written language in ancient India.

A high degree of seismic activity from the period of 2000 B.C. to 1700 B.C. forced the massive river's two main tributaries to change course. The Sutlej moved westward and joined the Indus River. The Yamuna, on the other hand, proceeded eastward and joined the sacred Ganges. The loss of water which resulted from these movements caused the once mighty river to dry up in the Thar Desert without having a chance to reach the sea. Without any water for irrigation or transportation, the dense population that had settled on the river basin shifted east, along the banks of the river Yamuna to the Ganges River valley. Late Vedic texts record the river as literally "disappearing" at Vinasana, then quietly merging into the Yamuna and Ganges, as the invisible river. Some claim that the sanctity of the modern Ganges is directly related to its assumption of the sacred, nourishing waters of the ancient river Saraswati.

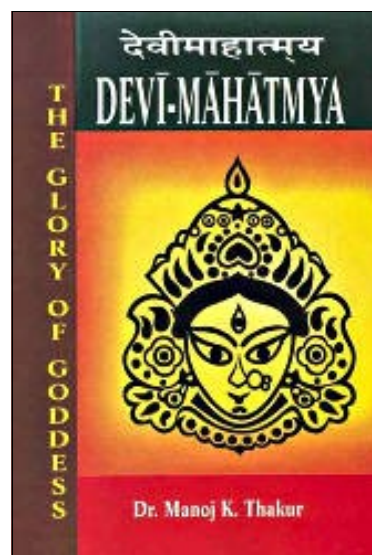
Satellite mapping still shows images of the once mighty river, still flowing as a small channel, near Kurukshetra. Further, a signboard on the main highway (the GT road) marks the former path of the once great ancient river Saraswati.

As a river/water goddess, Saraswati especially embodies creative communication in literary and verbal skills. In the post-Vedic age, She began to lose her status as a river goddess and became increasingly associated with literature, arts, music, etc. Interestingly, Saraswati's name literally means "the one who flows", which surely must have been applied to thoughts, words, or the flow of a river (in Sanskrit, the "dhaara-pravaah").

Veda's pada paatha (etymology) explains the compound word Saraswati as "Saaram vaati iti saraswati" - "She who flows towards the absolute is Saraswati" - thus edifying the ability of knowledge and communication to steer one towards spiritual absolutes.

Sri Maha Saraswati

Sri Maha Saraswati, in Indian mythology, is the presiding Goddess of the Final episode of Devi Mahatmya. Here she features as part of the trinity of Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Saraswati. She is also depicted in a way she is never otherwise shown, with eight arms. Legend has it that Sri Maha Saraswati is born from the body of Devi Gauri (one of Parvati's forms) and manifests in order to destroy Sumbha and other demons. In Tantrasara, she is also worshipped as Mahavidya Nila Saraswati.



DEVI MAHATMYA
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

Other origins of Devi Saraswati

Though we know Saraswati as a peaceful, benevolent deity, there is also another forceful, powerful aspect of the Devi which is lesser known. The RigVeda talks about Saraswati, manifesting in association with Indra, to destroy Vritraasura, the Serpentine One, a demon who hoarded all of the earth's water, bringing on severe drought and famine. She is also commonly associated with and seen as equivalent to other powerful Vedic goddesses such as Vak, Savitri, and Gayatri. Saraswati represents intelligence, cosmic knowledge, consciousness, creativity, enlightenment, education, music and the Arts. She is not only worshipped for secular knowledge, but also for the true divine knowledge essential to achieve moksha or liberation. She is additionally referred to as Shonapunya, meaning 'the One purified of blood'.

In the Skanda Purana, she is associated with Lord Shiva and, in some Tantras, with Ganesha, the Elephant-Headed Lord.

The Brahma Vaivarta Purana talks about how Vishnu had three wives, who used to quarrel constantly with each other. He eventually tired of the situation and kept only Lakshmi, giving Ganga to Shiva and Saraswati to Brahma.

According to Vedanta, goddess Saraswati is revered as the feminine energy and knowledge aspect (shakti) of the Ultimate Brahman, as one of many aspects of Adi Shakti.

Accompanied by Goddess Lakshmi and other associates, the catur-vyuha expansions headed by Lord Vasudeva (an aspect of Vishnu) are manifest in the eight directions, beginning with the east. In the directions beginning with the southeast, the palaces of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Rati (Kamadeva's consort), and Kanti respectively are situated.

Saraswati's iconography worldwide

- Gairidhara and Handigaon in Kathmandu also have Saraswati temples.
- Saraswati is also popular in Japan and is referred to as Benzaiten in that region.
- Saraswati (Thuyathadi in Burmese) represented in Bamar fashion, is seated by the side of a river, on a hamsa (swan) and holds the scriptures of the Tipitaka. This image is strikingly close to the Indian aspect of Devi Saraswati.

Festivals

The Saraswati Puja is performed on the 5th day of the Magha Month of the Hindu Almanac. This is also commonly known as Basant Panchami.

In many provinces of India, especially in the South, Saraswati Puja is conducted on the 9th day of Navratri, a 10-day festival that celebrates the power of the Sacred Feminine. The last three days of Navaratri, beginning from the Mahalaya Amavasya (or the New Moon day), are dedicated to the worship of this goddess. Further, south Indians refrain from learning anything new on this day, as it is believed that the Saraswati Puja day has to be spent in complete contemplation of the Goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom.

Books, musical instruments, ghungroos (dancing bells) are placed before the deity on this blessed day of Mahanavami and are taken out only on the Vijayadashami or the Vidyarambham (literally, the "start of learning anew") Day (the 10th and final day of the festival). On Vijayadashami day, students seek the blessings of their teachers, considering them to be the embodiments of Devi Saraswati herself.

Temples

Saraswati temples are rare to find, but there are major temples for the goddess in Pushkar (Rajasthan), Dasera Tekri Navsari (Gujarat), Shringeri (Karnataka), Basara Town (Andhra Pradesh), South Paravoor (Kerala), Bharathi temple (known as Kollam Bharathi locally) near Atmakur, Panachikkad (Kerala), Kumbakonam and Koothanur (Tamilnadu) and Kurnool Dist in Andhra.

This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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