

Chapter IX

Saraswati and Her Consorts

THE SYMBOLISM of the Veda betrays itself with the greatest clearness in the figure of the goddess Saraswati. In many of the other gods the balance of the internal sense and the external figure is carefully preserved. The veil sometimes becomes transparent or its corners are lifted even for the ordinary hearer of the Word; but it is never entirely removed. One may doubt whether Agni is anything more than the personification of the sacrificial Fire or of the physical principle of Light and Heat in things, or Indra anything more than the god of the sky and the rain or of physical Light, or Vayu anything more than the divinity in the Wind and Air or at most of the physical Life-breath. In the lesser gods the naturalistic interpretation has less ground for confidence; for it is obvious that Varuna is not merely a Vedic Uranus or Neptune, but a god with great and important moral functions; Mitra and Bhaga have the same psychological aspect; the Ribhus who form things by the mind and build up immortality by works can with difficulty be crushed into the Procrustean measure of a naturalistic mythology. Still by imputing a chaotic confusion of ideas to the poets of the Vedic hymns the difficulty can be trampled upon, if not overcome. But Saraswati will submit to no such treatment. She is, plainly and clearly, the goddess of the Word, the goddess of a divine Inspiration.

If that were all, this would not carry us much farther than the obvious fact that the Vedic Rishis were not mere naturalistic barbarians, but had their psychological ideas and were capable of creating mythological symbols which represent not only those obvious operations of physical Nature that interested their agricultural, pastoral and open-air life, but also the inner operations of the mind and soul. If we have to conceive the history of ancient religious thought as a progression from the physical to the

spiritual, from a purely naturalistic to an increasingly ethical and psychological view of Nature and the world and the gods — and this, though by no means certain, is for the present the accepted view,¹ — we must suppose that the Vedic poets were at least already advancing from the physical and naturalistic conception of the Gods to the ethical and the spiritual. But Saraswati is not only the goddess of Inspiration, she is at one and the same time one of the seven rivers of the early Aryan world. The question at once arises, whence came this extraordinary identification? And how does the connection of the two ideas present itself in the Vedic hymns? And there is more; for Saraswati is important not only in herself but by her connections. Before proceeding farther let us cast a rapid and cursory glance at them to see what they can teach us.

The association of a river with the poetical inspiration occurs also in the Greek mythology; but there the Muses are not conceived of as rivers; they are only connected in a not very intelligible fashion with a particular earthly stream. This stream is the river Hippocrene, the fountain of the Horse, and to account for its name we have a legend that it sprang from the hoof of the divine horse Pegasus; for he smote the rock with his hoof and the waters of inspiration gushed out where the mountain had been thus smitten. Was this legend merely a Greek fairy tale or had it any special meaning? And it is evident that if it had any meaning, it must, since it obviously refers to a psychological phenomenon, the birth of the waters of inspiration, have had a psychological meaning; it must have been an attempt to put into concrete figures certain psychological facts. We may note that the word Pegasus, if we transliterate it into the original Aryan phonetics, becomes Pājasa and is obviously connected with the Sanskrit *pājas*, which meant originally force,

¹ I do not think we have any real materials for determining the first origin and primitive history of religious ideas. What the facts really point to is an early teaching at once psychological and naturalistic, that is to say with two faces, of which the first came to be more or less obscured, but never entirely effaced even in the barbarous races, even in races like the tribes of North America. But this teaching, though prehistoric, was anything but primitive.

movement, or sometimes footing. In Greek itself it is connected with *pēgē*, a stream. There is, therefore, in the terms of this legend a constant association with the image of a forceful movement of inspiration. If we turn to Vedic symbols we see that the Ashwa or Horse is an image of the great dynamic force of Life, of the vital and nervous energy, and is constantly coupled with other images that symbolise the consciousness. *Adri*, the hill or rock, is a symbol of formal existence and especially of the physical nature and it is out of this hill or rock that the herds of the Sun are released and the waters flow. The streams of the *madhu*, the honey, the Soma, are said also to be milked out of this Hill or Rock. The stroke of the Horse's hoof on the rock releasing the waters of inspiration would thus become a very obvious psychological image. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the old Greeks and Indians were incapable either of such psychological observation or of putting it into the poetical and mystic imagery which was the very body of the ancient Mysteries.

We might indeed go farther and inquire whether there was not some original connection between the hero Bellerophon, slayer of Bellerus, who rides on the divine Horse, and Indra Valahan, the Vedic slayer of Vala, the enemy who keeps for himself the Light. But this would take us beyond the limits of our subject. Nor does this interpretation of the Pegasus legend carry us any farther than to indicate the natural turn of imagination of the Ancients and the way in which they came to figure the stream of inspiration as an actual stream of flowing water. Saraswati means, "she of the stream, the flowing movement", and is therefore a natural name both for a river and for the goddess of inspiration. But by what process of thought or association does the general idea of the river of inspiration come to be associated with a particular earthly stream? And in the Veda it is not a question of one river which by its surroundings, natural and legendary, might seem more fitly associated with the idea of sacred inspiration than any other. For here it is a question not of one, but of seven rivers always associated together in the minds of the Rishis and all of them released together by

the stroke of the God Indra when he smote the Python who coiled across their fountains and sealed up their outflow. It seems impossible to suppose that one river only in all this sevenfold outflowing acquired a psychological significance while the rest were associated only with the annual coming of the rains in the Punjab. The psychological significance of Saraswati carries with it a psychological significance for the whole symbol of the Vedic waters.²

Saraswati is not only connected with other rivers but with other goddesses who are plainly psychological symbols and especially with Bharati and Ila. In the later Puranic forms of worship Saraswati is the goddess of speech, of learning and of poetry and Bharati is one of her names, but in the Veda Bharati and Saraswati are different deities. Bharati is also called Mahi, the Large, Great or Vast. The three, Ila, Mahi or Bharati and Saraswati are associated together in a constant formula in those hymns of invocation in which the gods are called by Agni to the Sacrifice.

*Ilā sarasvatī mahī, tisro devīr mayobhuvah;
barhiḥ sīdantvasridhaḥ.*

“May Ila, Saraswati and Mahi, three goddesses who give birth to the bliss, take their place on the sacrificial seat, they who stumble not,” or “who come not to hurt” or “do no hurt.” The epithet means, I think, they in whom there is no false movement with its evil consequences, *duritam*, no stumbling into pitfalls of sin and error. The formula is expanded in Hymn 110 of the tenth Mandala:

*Ā no yajñam bhāratī tūyam etu,
ilā manuṣvad iha cetayantī;
Tisro devīr barhir edam syonam,
sarasvatī svāpasaḥ sadantu.*

² The rivers have a symbolic sense in later Indian thought; as for instance Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati and their confluence are in the Tantric imagery Yogic symbols, and they are used, though in a different way, in Yogic symbolism generally.

“May Bharati come speeding to our sacrifice and Ila hither awakening our consciousness (or, knowledge or perceptions) in human wise, and Saraswati, — three goddesses sit on this blissful seat, doing well the Work.”

It is clear and will become yet clearer that these three goddesses have closely connected functions akin to the inspirational power of Saraswati. Saraswati is the Word, the inspiration, as I suggest, that comes from the Ritam, the Truth-consciousness. Bharati and Ila must also be different forms of the same Word or knowledge. In the eighth hymn of Madhuchchhandas we have a Rik in which Bharati is mentioned under the name of Mahi.

*Evā hyasya sūnṛtā, virapṣī gomatī mahī;
pakvā śākhā na dāśuṣe.*

“Thus Mahi for Indra full of the rays, overflowing in her abundance, in her nature a happy truth, becomes as if a ripe branch for the giver of the sacrifice.”

The rays in the Veda are the rays of Surya, the Sun. Are we to suppose that the goddess is a deity of the physical Light or are we to translate “go” by cow and suppose that Mahi is full of cows for the sacrificer? The psychological character of Saraswati comes to our rescue against the last absurd supposition, but it negatives equally the naturalistic interpretation. This characterisation of Mahi, Saraswati’s companion in the sacrifice, the sister of the goddess of inspiration, entirely identified with her in the later mythology, is one proof among a hundred others that light in the Veda is a symbol of knowledge, of spiritual illumination. Surya is the Lord of the supreme Sight, the vast Light, *br̥haj jyotiḥ*, or, as it is sometimes called, the true Light, *ṛtam jyotiḥ*. And the connection between the words *ṛtam* and *br̥hat* is constant in the Veda.

It seems to me impossible to see in these expressions anything else than the indication of a state of illumined consciousness the nature of which is that it is wide or large, *br̥hat*, full of the truth of being, *satyam*, and of the truth of knowledge and action, *ṛtam*. The gods have this consciousness. Agni, for instance, is termed *ṛtacit*, he who has the truth-consciousness.

Mahi is full of the rays of this Surya; she carries in her this illumination. Moreover she is *sūnṛtā*, she is the word of a blissful Truth, even as it has been said of Saraswati that she is the impeller of happy truths, *codayitrī sūnṛtānām*. Finally, she is *virapśī*, large or breaking out into abundance, a word which recalls to us that the Truth is also a Largeness, *ṛtam bṛhat*. And in another hymn, (I.22.10), she is described as *varūtrī dhiṣaṇā*, a widely covering or embracing Thought-power. Mahi, then, is the luminous vastness of the Truth, she represents the Largeness, *bṛhat*, of the superconscient in us containing in itself the Truth, *ṛtam*. She is, therefore, for the sacrificer like a branch covered with ripe fruit.

Ila is also the word of the truth; her name has become identical in a later confusion with the idea of speech. As Saraswati is an awakener of the consciousness to right thinkings or right states of mind, *cetantī sumatīnām*, so also Ila comes to the sacrifice awakening the consciousness to knowledge, *cetayantī*. She is full of energy, *suvīrā*, and brings knowledge. She also is connected with Surya, the Sun, as when Agni, the Will is invoked (V.4.4) to labour by the rays of the Sun, Lord of the true Light, being of one mind with Ila, *iḷayā sajoṣā yatamāno raśmibhiḥ sūryasya*. She is the mother of the Rays, the herds of the Sun. Her name means she who seeks and attains and it contains the same association of ideas as the words Ritam and Rishi. Ila may therefore well be the vision of the seer which attains the truth.

As Saraswati represents the truth-audition, *śruti*, which gives the inspired word, so Ila represents *dr̥ṣṭi*, the truth-vision. If so, since *dr̥ṣṭi* and *śruti* are the two powers of the Rishi, the Kavi, the Seer of the Truth, we can understand the close connection of Ila and Saraswati. Bharati or Mahi is the largeness of the Truth-consciousness which, dawning on man's limited mind, brings with it the two sister Puissances. We can also understand how these fine and living distinctions came afterwards to be neglected as the Vedic knowledge declined and Bharati, Saraswati, Ila melted into one.

We may note also that these three goddesses are said to

bring to birth for man the Bliss, Mayas. I have already insisted on the constant relation, as conceived by the Vedic seers, between the Truth and the Bliss or Ananda. It is by the dawning of the true or infinite consciousness in man that he arrives out of this evil dream of pain and suffering, this divided creation into the Bliss, the happy state variously described in Veda by the words *bhadram*, *mayas* (love and bliss), *svasti* (the good state of existence, right being) and by others less technically used such as *vāryam*, *rayiḥ*, *rāyaḥ*. For the Vedic Rishi Truth is the passage and the antechamber, the Bliss of the divine existence is the goal, or else Truth is the foundation, Bliss the supreme result.

Such, then, is the character of Saraswati as a psychological principle, her peculiar function and her relation to her most immediate connections among the gods. How far do these shed any light on her relations as the Vedic river to her six sister streams? The number seven plays an exceedingly important part in the Vedic system, as in most very ancient schools of thought. We find it recurring constantly, — the seven delights, *sapta ratnāni*; the seven flames, tongues or rays of Agni, *sapta arcīṣaḥ*, *sapta jvālāḥ*; the seven forms of the Thought-principle, *sapta dhīṭayaḥ*; the seven Rays or Cows, forms of the Cow unslayable, Aditi, mother of the gods, *sapta gāvah*; the seven rivers, the seven mothers or fostering cows, *sapta mātaraḥ*, *sapta dhenavaḥ*, a term applied indifferently to the Rays and to the Rivers. All these sets of seven depend, it seems to me, upon the Vedic classification of the fundamental principles, the tattvas, of existence. The enquiry into the number of these tattvas greatly interested the speculative mind of the ancients and in Indian philosophy we find various answers ranging from the One upward and running into the twenties. In Vedic thought the basis chosen was the number of the psychological principles, because all existence was conceived by the Rishis as a movement of conscious being. However merely curious or barren these speculations and classifications may seem to the modern mind, they were no mere dry metaphysical distinctions, but closely connected with a living psychological practice of which they were to a great extent the thought-basis, and in any case we must understand them clearly

if we wish to form with any accuracy an idea of this ancient and far-off system.

In the Veda, then, we find the number of the principles variously stated. The One was recognised as the basis and continent; in this One there were the two principles divine and human, mortal and immortal. The dual number is also otherwise applied in the two principles, Heaven and Earth, Mind and Body, Soul and Nature, who are regarded as the father and mother of all beings. It is significant, however, that Heaven and Earth, when they symbolise two forms of natural energy, the mental and the physical consciousness, are no longer the father and mother, but the two mothers. The triple principle was doubly recognised, first in the threefold divine principle answering to the later Sachchidananda, the divine existence, consciousness and bliss, and secondly in the threefold mundane principle, Mind, Life, Body, upon which is built the triple world of the Veda and Puranas. But the full number ordinarily recognised is seven. This figure was arrived at by adding the three divine principles to the three mundane and interpolating a seventh or link-principle which is precisely that of the Truth-consciousness, Ritam Brihat, afterwards known as Vijnana or Mahas. The latter term means the Large and is therefore an equivalent of Brihat. There are other classifications of five, eight, nine and ten and even, as it would seem, twelve; but these do not immediately concern us.

All these principles, be it noted, are supposed to be really inseparable and omnipresent and therefore apply themselves to each separate formation of Nature. The seven Thoughts, for instance, are Mind applying itself to each of the seven planes as we would now call them and formulating Matter-mind, if we may so call it, nervous mind, pure mind, truth-mind and so on to the highest summit, *paramā parāvat*. The seven rays or cows are Aditi the infinite Mother, the Cow unslayable, supreme Nature or infinite Consciousness, pristine source of the later idea of Prakriti or Shakti, — the Purusha is in this early pastoral imagery the Bull, Vrishabha, — the Mother of things taking form on the seven planes of her world-action as energy of conscious being. So also, the seven rivers are conscious currents corresponding to

the sevenfold substance of the ocean of being which appears to us formulated in the seven worlds enumerated by the Puranas. It is their full flow in the human consciousness which constitutes the entire activity of the being, his full treasure of substance, his full play of energy. In the Vedic image, his cows drink of the water of the seven rivers.

Should this imagery be admitted, and it is evident that if once such conceptions are supposed to exist, this would be the natural imagery for a people living the life and placed in the surroundings of the ancient Aryans, — quite as natural for them and inevitable as for us the image of the “planes” with which theosophical thought has familiarised us, — the place of Saraswati as one of the seven rivers becomes clear. She is the current which comes from the Truth-principle, from the Ritam or Mahas, and we actually find this principle spoken of in the Veda, — in the closing passage of our third hymn for instance, — as the Great Water, *maho arṇas*, — an expression which gives us at once the origin of the later term, Mahas, — or sometimes *mahān arṇavaḥ*. We see in the third hymn the close connection between Saraswati and this great water. Let us examine a little more closely this connection before we proceed to the consideration of the Vedic cows and their relation to the god Indra and Saraswati’s close cousin the goddess Sarama. For it is necessary to define these relations before we can progress with the scrutiny of Madhuchchhandas’ other hymns addressed without exception to the great Vedic deity, King of Heaven, who, according to our hypothesis, symbolises the Power of Mind and especially the divine or self-luminous Mind in the human being.