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THE RIVERS AS DEPICTED IN THE BRĀHMAṆA LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SARASVATĪ

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ABSTRACT

The Brāhmaṇas form a part and parcel of the vast Vedic literature and are generally designated as later Vedic literature. 'Brāhmaṇas' stands for a huge mass of prose texts which contains speculations on the mantras, precepts for the application of mantras in different sacrifices. The term *Brāhmaṇas* has been variously interpreted. It has come from the word *Brahman* which means both the *mantra* and the *brāhmaṇa* or the priestly class who are versed in the Veda. A river is a natural flowing watercourse usually freshwater, flowing towards an ocean, sea, lake or another river. In some cases, a river flows into the ground and becomes dry at end of its course without reaching another body of water. River has been used as a source of water for obtaining food, transport, as a defensive measure, as a hydropower to drive machinery for bathing and as a means of disposing of waste. Amongst rivers, Sarasvatī occupied that position in the Vedic age which is occupied by the Ganges in the Post-Vedic age from the point of sanctity. The centre of gravity of Aryan civilization was shifting from the North-west to the eastern regions in the later Vedic age. In the R̥gvedic age, the cradle-land of Aryan civilization was located in the land of the traditional Pañca-janas in the Punjab and extended eastward to the region bordered by the rivers Sarasvatī and Dr̥ṣadvatī, the home of Bharatas. Here in this paper a discussion is made on the various rivers as found in the Brāhmaṇas. Here, it is to be noted that except some information on Sarasvatī, there is a little bit of information on the other rivers in the Brāhmaṇas. Though, the information regarding the river Sarasvatī is very little, but it has given the emphasis on the identification of Sarasvatī with *Vāk*.

INTRODUCTION:

The Brāhmaṇas form a part and parcel of the vast Vedic literature and are generally designated as later Vedic literature. The term *Veda* comprises both the

Mantra and the *Brāhmaṇa*. Veda is the name given to *Mantra* and *Brāhmaṇa* jointly. Sāyaṇācārya, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, observes— the name *Veda* is given to the vast body of literature made up of *Mantra* and *Brāhmaṇa* jointly. ‘Mantras’ or ‘Samhitās’ which are collections of hymns, prayers, benedictions, incantations, sacrificial formulae called Nivids and Litanies.

‘Brāhmaṇas’ stands for a huge mass of prose texts which contains speculations on the mantras, precepts for the application of mantras in different sacrifices, details of sacrificial paraphernalia and theological, philosophical, grammatical, etymological and metrical speculations.

The term *Brāhmaṇa* has been variously interpreted. It has come from the word *Brahmaṇ* which means both the *mantra* and the *brāhmaṇa* or the priestly class who are versed in the Veda.

Jaimini, the author of the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā*, gives the definition—*śeṣebrāhmaṇaśabdaḥ*, which means besides the mantras the remaining bulk of the Vedic literature is called *brāhmaṇa*.

Āpastambade defines Brāhmaṇas as – *karma-codanābrāhmaṇāni*, i.e. Brāhmaṇas are injunctions for the performance of sacrificial rites. Āpastamba further elucidates the term *Karmacodanā* by giving a detailed characteristics of the Brāhmaṇas. According to him, the Brāhmaṇas deal with the following six topics—*Vidhi*, *Arthavāda*, *Nindā*, *Praśaṃsā*, *Purākalpa* and *Parakṛti*.

Samudra in the Brāhmaṇas:

A river is a natural flowing watercourse usually freshwater, flowing towards an ocean, sea, lake or another river. In some cases, a river flows into the ground and becomes dry at end of its course without reaching another body of water. River has been used as a source of water for obtaining food, transport, as a defensive measure, as a hydropower to drive machinery for bathing and as a means of disposing of waste. There cannot be a shade of doubt that the sea or ocean was well known to the Aryans of the Vedic age. Not only did they possess knowledge of the ocean but there were sea going huge vessels and maritime trade as well. The *Ṛgvedasamhitā* mentions vessels propelled by hundred oars (*śatāritranāva*). The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* says that the ocean swells round the earth. In the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, ocean or *Samudra* has been mentioned several times. A king who will be *ekarāt* (one supreme head) will rule over the whole earth stretching as far as the ocean or girdled by the ocean like a paramount sovereign. The fathomless deep is mentioned in many *Brāhmaṇa* texts. The *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* refers to the saline water of the sea and states, ‘hence men do not drink the water of the sea’. The Vedic Aryans were conversant with the fact that the sea never transgresses its limits; the high water level reached by the full tide remains the same. This observation is also recorded in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*.

In the *Abhiṣeka* or Sprinkling ceremony, holy waters were collected from seventeen different sources consisting of rivers, pools wells, dew drops, floods, rain-water, seas etc. After that all these collected waters mixed together in a vessel made of the wood of *Udumvara* tree and the king is sprinkled with these holy waters. The *Abhiṣeka* or *Abhiṣecanīya* literary means sprinkling as a main item of the ceremony consists in sprinkling the king with holy waters collected from different sacred rivers and seas. Amongst rivers, Sarasvatī occupied that position in the Vedic age which is occupied by

the Ganges in the Post-Vedic age from the point of sanctity. Each type of water symbolizes some power or character of the king. Thus, Sarasvatī, as it is found from the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, symbolizes speech, gift of the gab, the following river symbolizes vigour, flood stands for plenty, sea for dominion and the pool or tank for loyalty of the people to the monarch, which should be sincere and harmless like the waters of a stagnant pool. The sprinkling is done jointly by a Brāhmaṇa (adhvaryu), a Kṣatriya, and also by a Vaiśya. The sprinkling vessel differs in the case of each caste. At first, all the holy waters are mixed together in a vessel made of *Udumvara* wood. Then that mixed consecration water is distributed into four smaller vessels made of woods of *Palāśa*, *Udumvara*, *Nyagrodha* of banyan and *Aśvatha* or ficus religion trees respectively.

The rivers in the Brāhmaṇas:

The centre of gravity of Aryan civilization was shifting from the North-west to the eastern regions in the later Vedic age. In the Ṛgvedic age, the cradle-land of Aryan civilization was located in the land of the traditional Pañca-janas in the Punjab and extended eastward to the region bordered by the rivers Sarasvatī and Dr̥ṣadvatī, the home of Bharatas. In the Brāhmaṇical era, the civilization shifted from the Indus valley to the Gangetic plain; Aryan civilization is a definite thing in the more eastern regions in that age with Kurukṣetra as its centre bounded on the north by Turghna, on the south by the Khāṇḍava, and on the west by Parīnaḥ. *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* refers to the eastern and western oceans. The Himalayas and the Tr̥kakud (three peaked) mountain nestled amidst the Himalayan range are mentioned in the *Taittirīyāranyaka*. So far as the rivers are concerned, the far-famed holy river Sarasvatī of the Ṛgvedic age which is invoked as the greatest among rivers (*nadītame*), the greatest among mothers (*ambitame*) and the greatest of goddesses (*devitame*) in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā* faded into insignificance and lost her former glory in the Brāhmaṇical era. The name of the Ganges is met with along with other rivers such as Yamunā, Sarasvatī etc. in the tenth *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*.

In the earlier *maṇḍalas* of the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, the name of the Ganges is never heard; this fact proves that the river Sarasvatī gradually receded into the background and the rivers of the Gangetic plain came into prominence during the later Vedic age. The rivers of the eastern region became prominent in this period. The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* mentions the river Sadānīrā as the boundary line between the Kosalas and Videhas. A. Weber and J. Eggeling identify this river with Gaṇḍak. The Vedic index lends support to the identification of Sadānīrā with Gaṇḍak. The name Sadānīrā is very significant; it seems this river never ran dry. The Aryan civilization so long nestled and nurtured in the Indus Valley or the Suvāstu region sanctified by the waters of the holy Sarasvatī shifted towards the Gangetic plain crossed the river Sadānīrā, the eastern boundary of Gaṇḍak and reached the land of Videha.

Videha Māthava, the king of the Videha along with his priest Gotama Rāhugaṇa, is described as carrying the sacred sacrificial fire eastward from the banks of the Sarasvatī over Kosala (Oudh) across the river Sadānīrā and finally settling at Videha (Tirhut) after the tribal name of Māthava. The memorable passage of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* proves categorically that the Videhas received their culture from the west that Kosala, was Aryanised before Videha and that the territory bordered by the river Sadānīrā was conquered by the Vedic Aryans.

Now, in the following pages, a discussion is made on the various rivers as found in the Brāhmaṇas. Here, it is to be noted that except some information on Sarasvatī, there is a little bit of information on the other rivers in the Brāhmaṇas. Though, the information regarding the river Sarasvatī is very little, but it has given the emphasis on the identification of Sarasvatī with *Vāk*.

THE RIVER SARASVATĪ:

(a) Association of river Sarasvatī with *Vāk* :

The association of *Vāk* and goddess Sarasvatī is contended clearly only in the Brāhmaṇas. The sacred waters of the river Sarasvatī infused life into the people residing along its banks and this fresh life was the cause of the holy speech in the form of sacred hymns, which, led them to associate the river with speech or conceive it as the goddess of speech. The association of the river Sarasvatī with *Vāk* is endorsed by the fact that *Vāk* is described to reside in the midst of Kuru-Pāñcālas.

From the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, it is found that the waters of the Sarasvatī were used for consecration. It is also told that the consecration was done with speech, i.e. the river Sarasvatī. On its banks, sacrifices were performed and its blessings were sought for their success.

The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* informs us that the mantras chanted in the sacrifice are taken to be *Vāk*, and owing to the predominance of the chanting of the mantras the sacrifice itself has been associated with *Vāk*. On account of the constant recitation of the mantras in honour of gods associated with the sacrifice, the sacrifice itself was identified with the gods. The full association is sustained because there is no distinction. Consequently, the sacrifice has been associated with *Vāk*.

In this regard, the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* has greater number of references than others. The sprinkling of water of the Sarasvatī is thought of as it were done with speech (*Vāk*), in the consecration ceremony. This *Brāhmaṇa* further emphasizes that Sarasvatī is speech and speech itself is sacrifice. Though, Sarasvatī is speech, Prajāpati is described to have strengthened himself and also to make her his progeny.

In the *Vājasaneyīsamhitā*, *Vāk* is taken to be the controlling power of Sarasvatī. The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, has taken Sarasvatī to be *Vāk* first and then *Vāk* to be her controlling power, probably discretion born of knowledge. The base of all ideas before they are expressed through speech and heard by ears. Sarasvatī or *Vāk* is also related with mind (*manas*). Thus, in her inactive form, speech is mind. Hence, Sarasvatī is associated with mind and Sarasvatī with *Vāk*. Thus, Sarasvatī and Sarasvatī jointly form the complete *Vāk*.

In one statement of the *Gopathabrāhmaṇa*, the identification of Sarasvatī with *Vāk* is clearly asserted. The *Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa* identifies Sarasvatī with *Vāk*. *Vāk* is considered as the progeny of Prajāpati in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*. In the later literature, Prajāpati is identified with Brahmā, the creator. The cosmic feature of *Vāk* is more evident when metre has been identified with mind and mind with Prajāpati. Metre is taken to mean various elements. Thus, there is a close affinity among Prajāpati, *Vāk* and metre.

The *Śāṅkhāyanabrāhmaṇa* identifies Sarasvatī with speech. Thus, the *Brāhmaṇa* says that one, who worships Sarasvatī, pleases *Vāk* (speech) because Sarasvatī is *Vāk*. In the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*, it is also found that the

association of Prajāpati, who is, according to *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, possessed of Prāṇas and *Vāk*, with the sacrifice and *Vāk*. Since *Vāk* is the indication of Prāṇas, *Vāk*, i.e. Sarasvatī, is considered superior to Prāṇas.

In classical literature, one of the synonyms for Sarasvatī is *girā*. She is understood as the spoken form of *Vāk* (speech). In the Brāhmaṇas, she has been called *Jihvā*, i.e. tongue, a physical organ of speech, and the word *Vāc* or *Vāk* is used for the human speech.

(b) Sarasvatī and Sarasvān:

In the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, Sarasvān represents *manas* (*manovaisarasvān*) and Sarasvatī *Vāk* (*vāksarasvatī*). It also speaks of two Sārasvatas as two fountains. The identification of Sarasvān and Sarasvatī with *manas* and *Vāk*, respectively, has been asserted in another *kāṇḍa* in clear terms. Thus, *manas* and *Vāk* are brought into close relation with each other. Sāyaṇācārya commented on this as--*manascaiv'tyādī. asyayajñasarīrasya imau.....itijāniyaditīarthah*. Sarasvān is described as Sarasvatīvān and Bharatīvān in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*. Sarasvatī has been invited repeatedly to the sacrifice and, as *Vāk*, has also been identified with it. As having Sarasvatī, i.e. *Vāk*, or speech, Sarasvān is called Sarasvatīvān, and as having Bhāratī, i.e. *Prāṇa* or breath, which sustains the body, he is described as Bhāratīvān.

(c) The Legend of *Vākin* in the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*:

In the Brāhmaṇas, it is found that *Vāk* changes into a woman of her own accord. It is cleared by the following legend. The Gandharvas are expressed as having a great craving for women. *Vāk* is the wife of the gods. The *soma* was with the Gandharvas, which added immensely to the anxiety of the gods. Consequently, they, along with seers, thought out a plan to get the *soma* back from the Gandharvas. Meanwhile, *Vāk* interfered and revealed that the Gandharvas were the lovers of women. She offered help by assuming the form of a woman and approaching them for purchasing back the *soma*. The gods declined to accept it, for without her, they could not sustain themselves. *Vāk* promised to come back to them after the end was accomplished. The gods accepted it and the *soma* was, thus, purchased from the Gandharvas by *Vāk*. The Gandharva Viśvavasu stole the *soma* and guarded by the Gandharvas *Svān* and *Bhrāji*.

(d) The legend of *Vāk* in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*:

In the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, the above legend has been propounded elaborately. The legend runs thus: The *soma* was in the heaven. The gods were desirous of performing the *soma* sacrifice on the earth. But it was not possible in the absence of the *soma*. They, therefore, created two illusions, Suparṇī and Kadrū, for bringing the *soma*. Suparṇī and Kadrū quarreled with each other and the latter defeated the former. Consequently, Suparṇī had to retrieve the *soma*. For this purpose, she turned herself into metres; and of them, Gāyatrī, the goddess of metres, brought the *soma*.

Gāyatrī speculating the form of bird flew to the heaven to bring the *soma*. While on her way back, the Gandharva Viśvavasu insinuated her and the Gandharvas robbed her of the *soma*. The unexpected delay in the Gāyatrī's

bringing the *soma*, caused anxiety to the gods. They themselves thought that the sole reason for it should lie in the snatching away of the *soma* by the Gandharvas. With no hopes of redeeming it, they thought it. As the Gandharvas were fond of women, they decided to send *Vāk* to them in order to take the *soma* back.

There is a difference in the above interpretations of the legend. According to the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, it is *Vāk*, who took initiative. *Vāk* disclosed to the gods the fact that the Gandharvas were fond of women and, therefore, offered herself from bringing back the *soma* from them. She insured the gods to come back to them with the *soma*. According to the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, the gods already knew the nature of the Gandharvas that they were fond of women. Therefore, she sent her to them. She accomplished in getting the *soma* from the Gandharvas; but according to the version of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, while she was returning with it, they chased her and demanded the gods to offer her to them in exchange for the *soma*. The gods agreed to it with the condition that if *Vāk* wanted to come back to them, the Gandharvas should not force her to remain with them against her will. Consequently, both the gods and the Gandharvas began to woo her. The Gandharvas chanted the Veda and the gods played on a lute in order to win her over. The gods were victorious and consequently, the Gandharvas had to lose the *soma* as well as *Vāk*. *Vāk* (as Sarasvatī) is held to be the patroness of arts and sciences and is invoked as a muse in the classical literature. Her affiliation with the arts and sciences goes back to the Brāhmaṇas where she is described to have been pleased by the gods playing on a lute, which shows that she had a great liking for music.

(e) Some epithets of Sarasvatī in the Brāhmaṇas:

There are some important epithets of Sarasvatī in the Brāhmaṇas. These are *Vaiśambhalyā*, *Satyavāk*, *Sumṛdīkā* etc. Among the Brāhmaṇas, only the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* uses this epithet only once. This epithet means one who brings up the whole *prajā*. Sāyaṇācārya also explains this as—*viśvāṃ prajānāmbharaṇaṃ poṣaṇaṃ viśambhalaṃ tat kartum kṣamā viśambhalyāt ādrśī*. In this context, *Vaiśambhalyā* points to Sarasvatī as a river. The Sarasvatī is so called because it brings up through its nourishing waters the persons living upon agriculture. Sarasvatī is also called giver of food (*Vājinīvatī*).

In the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*, Sarasvatī is called *satyavāk*, ‘possessed of true speech’. This signifies that Sarasvatī is all truth in the capacity of *Vāk*. Sarasvatī is free from falsehood and that is why she is mentioned in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā* as illuminating holy thoughts (*cetantī sumatīnām*). The epithet *sumṛdīkā* which occurs in the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* has the same meaning as *mayobhūḥ* used for Sarasvatī in the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*. Sāyaṇācārya described it as *sukhotpādīkā* and *sukhyasyabhāvayitrī*.

Besides these, there are some other epithets like *Subhagā*, *Vājinīvatī*, *Pāvakā*, etc. in the Brāhmaṇas. Vedic Sarasvatī is called the *tejas* of the Sun. In one of the legends of the Brāhmaṇas, there is a relation between Sarasvatī and Āditya.

OTHER RIVERS IN THE BRĀHMAṆAS:

In the three places of the *Pañcaviṃśabrāhmaṇa*, there is mention of river Yamunā. Besides these, in some other contexts of this *Brāhmaṇa*, there is mention of the Dr̥ṣadvatī river.

In Hindu mythology, different kinds of myths and symbols associated with water are described. In ancient Hindu mythology, water is described as the foundation of the whole world, the essence of plant life and the elixir of immortality. In most of the theological literature, water is associated with creation myths. According to the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, after the great dissolution with the cosmic flood, Lord Viṣṇu appeared as the Fish *avatār* (incarnation) and saved representatives of all plant and animal species. Since Fish god was incarnated in water, people believe water is the most sacred substance and have reverent regard for river sources, riverbanks, confluences, seacoasts, and even ponds.

CONCLUSION:

Amongst rivers, Sarasvatī occupied that position in the Vedic age which is occupied by the Ganges in the Post-Vedic age from the point of sanctity. Each type of water symbolizes some power or character of the king. Thus, Sarasvatī, as it is found from the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, symbolizes speech, gift of the gab, following river symbolizes vigour, flood stands for plenty, sea for dominion and the pool or tank for loyalty of the people to the monarch, which should be sincere and harmless like the waters of a stagnant pool. Thus, in the Brāhmaṇas, a little information is found regarding rivers. Only two or three rivers played the role in this literature. Though, the information regarding the river Sarasvatī is very little, but it has given the emphasis on the identification of Sarasvatī with *Vāk*.

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