PART TWO

EPIC AND PURANIC SARASVATĪ
Sarasvatī appears in the *Mahābhārata* epic and in many of the Purāṇas, which provide a wealth of information on the conceptual and iconographic development of the goddess. The epics and the Purāṇas belong to an entirely different category of religious literature than the Vedas. While the Vedas were recited by Brahmans in a ritual context and access to them was limited to the upper *varna* (Brahman, Kṣatriya, and Vaiśya), the epics and the Purāṇas, couched in Brahmanical ideology, were conveyed in the form of narratives to virtually anyone. Like the Vedas, they were imparted orally, but, because the context was no longer ritual, their transmission did not require word for word, syllable for syllable, sound for sound precision. Some stanzas might be recited and commentary would follow. Stories were retold over and over again, but each time a little differently in accordance with the mood and inspiration of the storyteller and the response of his audience. The intention was to amuse and edify listeners, drawing them in by recounting popular myths they had probably heard countless times already. The narrators might expand, embellish, or abridge their tales of deeply cherished gods and ancient heroes, deviate to other topics, and so on.

While originally oral material, the epics and the Purāṇas were at some point put into writing, so that a written text existed to preserve what was transmitted and performed verbally. Narayana Rao, in his discussion of the Purāṇas, highlights the importance of the written version for its authors and communicators, who, as orally literate scholars, were “very proud of their knowledge of grammar and their ability to possess a written text of what they perform[ed] orally.”¹ A written text, he suggests, “that says in writing that it is not a written text but a text spoken by a great God,” is what makes the text authentic.²

The *Mahābhārata* (Mbh) epic centers on the story of the legitimacy of the succession to the kingdom of Kurukṣetra in northwestern India. In its present, written form, Alf Hiltebeitel argues, this *magnum opus* dates to a period from about the mid-second century B.C.E. to the year zero.³

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¹ Narayana Rao 1993, p.95.
² Ibid., p.96.