In the *Mahābhārata* and the early Purāṇas, the Sarasvati-related changes may be summarized under the following categories: geography, religious practice, functions, and depiction.¹

1. Geography

In contrast with the *Rg Veda* description of a powerful flooding river, the *Mahābhārata* depicts a calmer-flowing Sarasvati. As in the *Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa*, she arises at Plakṣa [Prāsravaṇa] and disappears in the sands at Vinasana. She reemerges, however, at sites including Camasodbheda, and, flowing underground, eventually empties into the sea at Prabhāsa. In the expanded geography of the epic, therefore, the Sarasvati debouches in the ocean, as she did in the *Rg Veda*. The *Mahābhārata* thereby recalls the Rg-Vedic greatness of the Sarasvati river, recreating, through its mythologized geography, a past that is no more.

Various rivers are also identified as Sarasvati in allusion to her Rg-Vedic epithet *saptāsvasār*. In fact, like the Āpas, of whom she appeared as the representative in the *Rg Veda*, “all rivers are Sarasvati-s,” tells us the *Mahābhārata* (12:255:39a *sarvā nadyāḥ sarasvatyaḥ*).

Her geography is not only made to look like her Vedic descriptions in expanded form, but it is also endowed with a purpose reflecting the central concern of the epic: Dharma. In fact, the means of rendering her geography Dharmic is through a kind of interpretive ‘vedicization.’ The *Mahābhārata* describes the Sarasvati’s course in vocabulary and perimeters reminiscent of Vedic texts, and then accounts for it in mythic terms intended to convey that it is determined by Dharma. The stories around her geography indeed function as instructions in Dharma. To avoid the unrighteous Niśādas, she enters the earth, and for the sake of the twice-born Naimiṣeya seers, she changes her course. Appropriate to the riverine goddess of knowledge, the flow of her waters is the flow of Dharma,

¹ See also the table, From the Vedas to the Early Purāṇas, on pp.140–41 below.
which pilgrims and sacrificers along her banks not only hear about in myths, but actually behold concretely.

2. RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

There are countless tirtha along the banks of the Sarasvatī, we are told, which are populated by huge numbers of sages performing sacrifices, and also by pilgrims. The Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa’s description of sacrificial sessions carried out at various stages along the Sarasvatī, from Vinaśana to Plakṣa Prāsravaṇa, is recast in the epic in the form of a vastly expanded pilgrimage, including also elaborate myths woven around the many tirtha on Sarasvatī’s banks. Reflecting a shift from complex, costly sacrifices to the simpler, devotional practice of visiting sacred places, the merit acquired from pilgrimage to these sites is often explained in terms of its Vedic ritual equivalent. This transition in the religious observances represents also a change in the identity of the performers themselves: while Vedic sacrifices were carried out by Brahmins on behalf of other twice-born, many of the acts of worship described and advocated by the epics and the Purāṇas were open virtually to anyone—even to women, as we have seen. Changes in religious practices and consequently in their performers were in fact necessary, given the intended audiences of the respective texts. While the Vedas were accessible only to the twice-born, the epics and the Purāṇas were addressed to the widest possible public.

Despite a shift away from Vedic ritualism and its accompanying restrictiveness, the epic pilgrimage along the Sarasvatī, like the geography of the river, is filled with Vedic referents. Not only is the Sarasvatī pilgrimage derived from the Vedic practice of yātsātra, but the myths recounted at the various tirtha are also wrapped up in Vedic allusions. The Saptasārasvata Tirtha myth, for instance, recalls Sarasvatī’s Rg-Vedic epithet saptāsvasār, for it is here that seven rivers, Sarasvatī under seven different names, converge. The Rg Veda, furthermore, already contains indications of the antagonism between the seers Vasīṣṭha and Viśvāmitra. As Hiltebeitel contends, the epic’s “frame stories link with other conventions and allusions ... to make the whole appear Vedic.” It is these very Vedic references that lend the text authority.

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