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

1. **Geography**

In contrast with the *Ṛg Veda* description of a powerful flooding river, the *Mahābhārata* depicts a calmer-flowing Sarasvatī. As in the *Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa*, she arises at Plakṣa [Prāsrāvāṇa] and disappears in the sands at Vīnaśāna. 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 Sarasvatī debouches in the ocean, as she did in the *Ṛg Veda*. The *Mahābhārata* thereby recalls the Ṛg-Vedic greatness of the Sarasvatī river, recreating, through its mythologized geography, a past that is no more.

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

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 Sarasvatī’s course in vocabulary and parameters 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 Naimiśeya 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 Sarasvati, 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 Sarasvati, 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 Sarasvati’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 Brahmanas 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 Sarasvati, like the geography of the river, is filled with Vedic referents. Not only is the Sarasvati pilgrimage derived from the Vedic practice of yātsatra, but the myths recounted at the various tirtha are also wrapped up in Vedic allusions. The Saptasārasvata Tirtha myth, for instance, recalls Sarasvati’s Rg-Vedic epithet saptāsvasar, for it is here that seven rivers, Sarasvati under seven different names, converge. The Rg Veda, furthermore, already contains indications of the antagonism between the seers Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra. As Hiltebeitel contends, the epic’s “frame stories link with other conventions and allusions ... to make the whole appear Vedic.”\(^2\) It is these very Vedic references that lend the text authority.

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