

# Rivers of Punjab and Saraswati in Literary Tradition

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**Abstract**—Traditionally, theological perspectives inclined to depict the river Saraswati as the mighty flowing river which lies in the land of Brahmavarta. Rig Veda, the first literary evidence of Saraswati described it as the most flowing river along with the Drashavati river. Atharvaveda and other literary sources considered Saraswati as the massive and momentous river of that time. Archeological shreds of evidence proved that Saraswati River was completely dried in 1900 BCE, and had to have been in the process of drying by 3000 BCE or before. But there is not even a single verse in the Rig Veda about the Saraswati diminishing in any way. Some Puranic texts refer to Vinashana, the place where the Saraswati river stopped flowing. According to these sources, the location of Vinashana was the Bharner (near Kalibangan) and Pushkaranya of Kurukshetra. Through the puranic evidence, we can find the geographical locations of the river Saraswati and also the time period of its extinction process. This paper aims to provide chronological corrections and is an attempt to provide the information that drying of river Saraswati was not the main cause of the decline of Indus Valley Civilization and also to provide the description of the relation between the Saraswati River and Aryan invasions theories.

When the Aryans came to India there were seven rivers in the Punjab, they named it Sapta Sindhva, the land of seven rivers. The Persians took the name from the Aryans and called it the Hafta Hindva. Sometimes later, after the seventh river, the Saraswati, had dried up, people began to to exclude the Indus from the count (since it marked only the western boundary of the province) and renamed it after remaining five rivers as Pentopotamia or the *panj-ab*, the land of the five waters. The *Rig Veda* (10.61.12) mentioned Saraswati as one of the seven rivers

triṣadhasṭhā saptadhātuḥ pañca jātā vardhayantī |  
vāje-vāje havya bhūt ||

Seven-sistered, sprung from threefold source, the Five Tribes'  
prosperer, she must be  
Invoked in every deed of might.

Thus it might be those seven sisters, which were considered as in the Sapta-Sindhva region and Saraswati was also one of them.

As it is mentioned in the Manu-Smriti (2.17-18) “That land, created by the gods, which lies between the two divine rivers Sarasvati and Drishadvati, the (sages) call Brahmavarta. The custom handed down in regular succession (since time immemorial) among the (four chief) castes (varna) and the mixed (races) of that country, is called the conduct of virtuous men.”

The Saraswati River is mentioned in the Rig Veda many times but the most important was book 6, hymn 61, and book 7 hymn 95 & 96. The most noted verse from the Rig veda that refers Saraswati river is 7.95.1.1-2, -

1. prakshodasadhayadasasra
2. eshasarasvatidharunamayasiṣuph
3. prababadhanarathyevayati
4. vishvaapomahinasindhuranyaha
- 5.

“Pure in her course from the mountains to the ocean, alone of streams Saraswati hath listened.”

This was believed that Saraswati was completely dried up in 2000 BCE and the process of drying had to have been begun at about 3000 BCE or before. But Rig Veda described it as a massive flowing river that means Saraswati was not started to dry up in the Rig Vedic period and there is nothing in the Rig Veda about the Vinashana (the place where the river Saraswati disappears).

But it was mentioned in the Manu-Smriti (2.21) “That (country) which (lies) between the Himavat and the Vindhya (mountains) to the east of Prayaga and to the west of Vinashana (the place where the river Sarasvati disappears) is called Madhyadesa (the central region).”

In Mahabharata, where the Saraswati was decreasing to a shorter course was mentioned such as in 3.130.3; 6.7.47; 6.37.1-4; 9.34.81; and 9.36.1-2. The Mahabharata also describe the geographical location of the river. Saying that it flowed near Kurukshetra (3.81.125). In Mahabharta 3.81.115, it is described that Kurukshetra is located in the south of Saraswati and the north of Drashavati.

Research explains that the demise of the Saraswati River was caused by the lack of water it had previously received from the Yamuna, which had changed its course to flow eastward into the Ganga. Then the Sutlej also turned southwest, while the

glacial melt also decreased, all of which greatly weakened the flow of the Saraswati. This resulted in the disappearing into desert at a place called Vinashana, or Samanta-panchaka in the Mahabharata, before it reached the sea. (Frawley, 2010)

Sridharasvani (c 1400 AD) cited by C. Rayachaudhuri in his gloss on *Bhagavata Purana* (1.9.1) locates Vinashana in Kurukshetra itself. The fact is that during the age of composition of the *Brahmanas* and *sutras*, when the sacrificial cult was at its climax, the name of Vinashana stuck to one particular locality, which almost constantly remained humming with all sorts of sacrificial activity.

The *Rig Veda* (10.75.5) “Nadi Stuti” or “An ode to the Rivers” mentioned the location of Saraswati River along with the other rivers of northern India from the east and placed it between the Yamuna and Shutudri, as mentioned in the following verse:

imaṃ me ghaṅge yamune sarasvati śutudri stemam sacatā  
paruṣṇyā |  
asiknyā marudvṛdhe vitastayārjīkīye śṛṇuhyāsuṣomayā ||

“Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Shutudri (Sutlej), Parushni (Ravi), Asikni, Manuvridha, Vitasta, Arjikiye, Shrinuhya, and Sushomaya.”

Ramayana also mentioned the Saraswati River in the Ayodhya kanda, Sarga 71, verse 5. It says “arriving at the confluence of Saraswati and Ganga rivers, Bharta entered the woods of Bharmuda, the north of Viramatsya region.”

Therefore, if Saraswati was dried up in 1900 BCE and its process of being drying up started in about 3000 BCE, that means Mahabharata mentioned the stories of third millennium BCE. And Rig Veda belongs to before that period.

The theory of Aryans invasion was also linked with the Saraswati River; especially it also contradicts the Central Asian theory. If Aryan named the area Sapta Sindhva and include the river Saraswati in those seven-sisters rivers, that means Saraswati was a momentous river and was not dried up in Vedic period. Saraswati was also considered as one of the cause of decline of Indus valley Civilization, mainly the Kalibangan, Dholavira. But if Saraswati was not dried up in the time of Indus Civilization, that means we have to look upon other causes of decline of this first civilization of India.

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