

Saraswatī of Burma

Than TUN*

SARASWATĪ is the sacred river of the early Aryans and is lauded for its power to bestow fertility, fatness and wealth. It falls from the Himalayas and is lost in the sands of the desert. The river is now called Sarsuti. As a deity, Saraswatī is the Goddess of Speech and Learning. She is the consort of Brahma¹⁾. In Greek and Roman mythology her counterparts are Athena and Minerva²⁾. Hindus depict the Goddess Saraswatī as a beautiful woman riding on a swan or peacock with a vina in her hand³⁾.

Mahayanists take up many of the deities from the Hindu pantheon and Saraswatī is included in them.

The Buddhists borrowed this Hindu goddess (who) may have one face with two arms or three faces and six arms.... She confers wisdom, learning, intelligence, memory, etc.⁴⁾

When Mahayanism reached Burma, it could well be imagined that the goddess would also be popular in Burma. Yet no archaeologist has been fortunate enough to find her image in any of the sites they excavated. But a wall painting at Pagan of late 11 century A.D. looks like Goddess Saraswatī on the Goose⁵⁾ (Fig. 1). The picture is one of the eighteen figures thought to be Brahmanical found on the upper portion of the inner wall of Abeyadana pagoda, Myinpagan. The walls are of the outside of the centre room on east, south and west sides. The pagoda or cave-like temple is attributed to Abeyadana, queen of Htilaing Min whose regnal title was Srī Tribhuwanādityadhammarājā. The said pictures have no written words to identify them

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- 1) See Dowson, John. *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961 Tenth Edition, pp. 284-5 for details.
- 2) Oswalt, Sabine G. *Concise Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*, London: Collins, 1969, pp. 49-52 and 188-9.
- 3) Thomas, P. *Epics, Myths and Legends of India—A Comparative Survey of the Sacred Lore of the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains*, Bombay: Taraporevala, 1961 Eleventh Edition, p. 61 and Fig. 102 of pl. XXXVII facing p. 72.
- 4) Bhattacheryya, Beneytosh. *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1958 Second Edition, p. 349 and Figs. 230, 231, 234 and 235 of pp. 369-70.
- 5) Luce, G. H. *Old Burma—Early Pagan*, New York: Artibus Asiae, 1969, I, pp. 223, 226 and 326; III, Pl. 221d and 223a.



Fig. 1 A Male Deity on Goose (Luce. *Early Pagan*, III, Pl. 222d & Pl. 223a; Mya. *Apayartana*, Fig. 109 on p. 171)



Fig. 2 A Male Deity on Tortoise (Luce. *Early Pagan*, III, Pl. 221c and Pl. 222f; Mya. *Apayratana*, Fig. 111 on p. 172)

but some have many heads on one shoulder or many arms to one trunk and each has an animal to ride. This naturally led some scholar to name them Brahma, Siva, Viṣṇu, etc. Number sixteen in the series of eighteen becomes “Sarasvatī on White Hamsa”.⁶⁾ But the more prudent would simply mention this picture as a male deity on goose.⁷⁾ Because the sitting figure does not look feminine.⁸⁾ The head-dress and more clearly the chest show that the person is male. The animal he or she uses to ride on might help to identify the deity but the same animal might be used by several of them. For instance lion is used by many and so is the peacock. Another figure in the same set (Number Twelve) sitting on a tortoise⁹⁾ could be the Goddess Yamunā though the picture clearly shows that it is a male (Fig. 2). Nevertheless as one of the Mahayana pantheon, a picture of the Goddess Saraswati might have been drawn somewhere on the walls of temples at Pagan, though the one we now allege to find at the Abeyadana is not exact Sarasvatī.

The Shwezigon Mon Inscription of A.D. 1084 uses the word or name sarasvatī like this:

yañ prajñā makkamo’ sarasvatī goḥ stāw ḍey mukhawār gna smin Śrī Tribhuwanādityadhammarājā goḥ ut ku kāl

(The wisdom of eloquence called sarasvatī shall dwell in mouth of King Śrī Tribhuwanadityadhammaraja at all times.)¹⁰⁾

It might also be interpreted that Sarasvatī was always helping the king to say things correct and wise to the benefit of all his subjects. It is not unlikely that a picture or a statue of this goddess was kept in the palace of this king. We are told in his Palace Inscription (A.D. 1110) that gold statues of Nārayana (Viṣṇu) and his consort Śrī (Laksmī) were there.¹¹⁾

Close to the Shwezigon (Nyaung-U) on its south west sector is located a tunnel known by the name of Kyanzittha U-min. On the walls of the tunnel are drawn pictures unlike any other pictures found on many walls of several other buildings at Pagan. Although it bears the name of Kyanzittha who was king at Pagan from A.D.

6) Luce: *Early Pagan*, I, p. 226.

7) Mya. *Apayratana Luīngūphurā*, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1974 Second Printing, pp. 106 and 171 Fig. 109.

8) Luce: *Early Pagan*, III, Pl. 221d and Pl. 223a.

9) Luce: *Early Pagan*, I, p. 226; III, Pl. 221c and Pl. 222f.

10) “The Great (Mon) Inscription of the Shwezigon Pagoda, Pagan”, E face, line 41, *Epigraphia Birmanica*, II, i, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1960 Reprint, Mon text on p. 105 and English translation on p. 124; “Inscription on Biography of King Kyanzittha, Pagan”, N face, line 41, *Mwan Kyokcāpoñ: khyup*, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1969, Mon text on p. 25 and Burmese translation on p. 16; “*Shwezigon Mon Inscription*”, Rangoon: Ministry of Culture, 1956, Mon text on p. 14 and Burmese translation on p. 15.

11) “An Inscription (Mon) found near the Tharaba Gate, Pagan”, R face, line 5, *Ep. Birm.*, III, i, 1923, text p. 33 and Eng. tr. p. 67; *Mwan Khyup*, 69, 40.



Fig. 3 An Archer (?Mongol) drawn on the wall of Kyanzitha U-min, (marked B in Fig. 5),
? late 13 century

Note: My sketches are only an approximation of what is there on the wall and therefore an interested reader is advised to look up in the reference works for photographs.

1084 to 1112, the date of the tunnel or the time when the drawings were made is unknown. We have, however, one clue which in the absence of anything else is usable. At two places close together are drawn the picture of an archer ready to shoot with a bow (Fig. 3) and a sitting army officer with a hawk perched on his left hand (Fig. 4). Both of them look like Mongols. The presence of Mongols (if we are correct in calling them Mongols) denotes the time that immediately follows the fall of Pagan by the close of the 13 century. At another place (see plan, Fig. 5) in the same tunnel are drawn two pictures of what I think Saraswatī.

Identifying the figure of a woman as Goddess Saraswatī is another problem. Usually she would be shown with hands holding vina or lotus and a goose or peacock would be around. Without these attributes it is too bold to assert that the figure represents the goddess. Both of the pictures, that I am alluding to are feminine in appearance and have haloes around their heads. That is enough to call them goddesses. Goddess turning slightly to the left (Fig. 6) holds what I supposed to be a



Fig. 4 An Officer (?Mongol) drawn on the wall of Kyanzittha U-min (marked A in Fig. 5),
?late 13 century

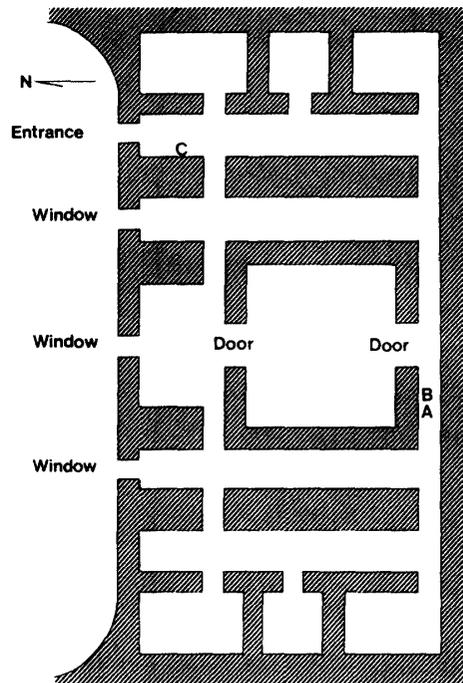


Fig. 5 Plan of Kyanzittha U-min (drawn from memory) showing places where A ?Mongol Officer, B
?Mongol Archer & C two figures of ?Saraswati are found ?late 13 century



Fig. 6 Saraswati, wall-painting, Kyanzitha U-min, Pagan, late 13 century

closed white umbrella in her left hand and a pot in her right. Goddess turning slightly to the right (Fig. 7) holds in her left hand a pot and double rings in her right. Details are missing but the rings could be swastikas. A lotus flower hovers just above her halo. The white umbrella, lotus flower, kalasha and swastika together with two gold fish, conch, flag and śrīvatsa are eight auspicious emblems¹²⁾ used by Mahayanists. The lotus suggests that the goddess is Sarasvatī. In addition to this, the pictures of the goddess at Kyanzitha U-min have a close resemblance to the painting of Mahārasvatī (11–12 centuries A.D.) found at the Alchi Monastery at Ladakh¹³⁾ (Fig. 8). But she is sitting on a goose. Unfortunately none of the goddesses of Kyanzitha U-min has a goose.

In conclusion I suggest that the two pictures of women at Kyanzitha U-min are Sarasvatīs of the Mahayanist school and they belong to the end of 13 century. The earliest mention of the name is found in an inscription of the early 12 century.

Supplementary Note

Sarasvatī, Goddess of Eloquence,¹⁴⁾ occupies only a subordinate position in the Hindu pantheon.¹⁵⁾ Her worship is mostly confined to sects connected with

12) Singh, Madanjeet. *Himalyan Art—Wall-painting and Sculpture in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti, the Siwalik Ranges, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan*, New York: Graphic Society, 1968, p. 81.

13) Singh: *Himalyan Art*, p. 60.

14) Bath, A. *The Religions of India*, Eng. tr. by Rev. J. Wood, New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1969 Sixth Edition, p. 256.

15) Thomas, P. *Epics, Myths and Legends of India—A Comprehensive Survey of the Sacred Lore of the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains*, Bombay: Taraporevala, 1961 Eleventh Edition, p. 61.

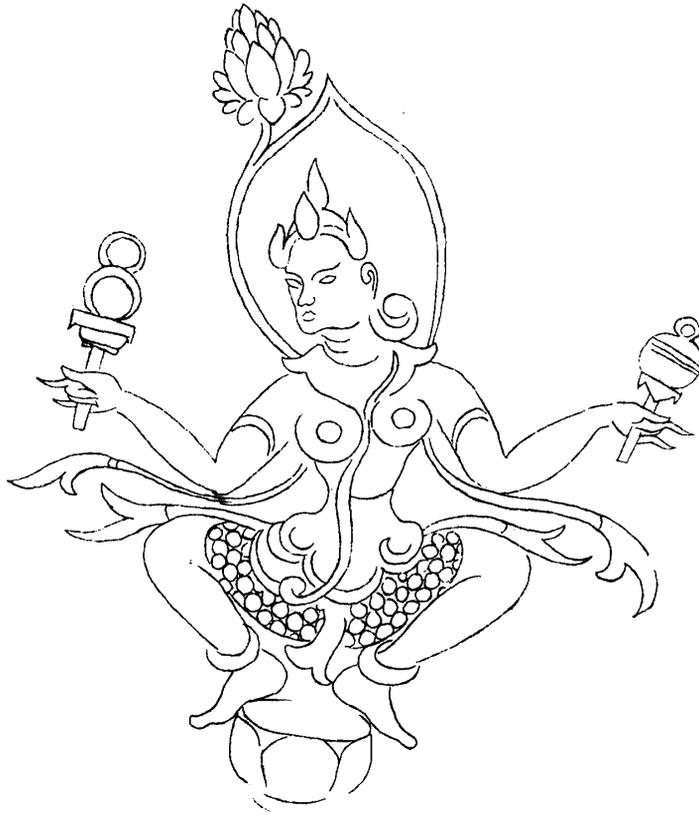


Fig. 7 ?Saraswati, wall-painting, Kyanzittha U-min, Pagan, ?late 13 century



Fig. 8 Mahasaraswati, Alchi Monastery, Ladakh, 11–12 century A.D. (from Singh, Madanjeet: *Himalayan Art—Wall-painting and Sculpture in Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti, the Siwalik Ranges, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan*, New York, Graphic Society, 1968, p. 60)

Siva. A lady full of compassion could become popular with the Buddhists¹⁶⁾ and it was probably in about the 5 century A.D. that she was worshipped by the Buddhists. With them she holds a prominent position as one of the guardians of the Religion. From being consort to Brahma, she becomes the Sakti of Mañjuśrī¹⁷⁾. She is also important in the Sino-Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism¹⁸⁾. With Pustaka (Book) on Padma (Lotus) held by her left hand and Akṣamāla (Rosary Beads) on her right hand which is in the Varada mudrā (gift bestowing attitude),¹⁹⁾ she supersedes Prajñāpāramitā (former Buddhist Goddess of Wisdom).²⁰⁾ This change could have happened when Vajrayāna form of Buddhism rose to eminence and spread beyond India in the 7 and 8 centuries A.D.²¹⁾ Even in Japan, Goddess Sarasvatī is recognisable in the deity of Benten.²²⁾

Sarasvatī mentioned in A.D. 1084 Shwezigon Inscription in early Mon seems to be the earliest reference to the goddess in Burma. But in Burmese literature we find a fairly numerous reference²³⁾ to her. These references date from 1494 to 1924. In almost all these references Sarasvatī is the Goddess of Eloquence and Wisdom. From being a Hindu deity, she became Buddhist and how this happened is mentioned in *Gāthākḥrokchay Pyui*, (§ 78) and *Wohāra linattha* (§ 72) identifies her as a deity having an abode at a lake. In three places, viz. *Hitakārī* (§ 3), *Nānāchanda* (§ 106) and *Ādikappa* (p. 116) she is described as a deity of white complexion, riding a goose and holding a lotus in one hand. At one reference we find a remarkable statement like this.

- 16) Eliot, C. *Hinduism and Buddhism—An Historical Sketch*, II, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968 Reprint, pp. 145–6; Bhattacharyya, Benoytosh. *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1958 Second Edition, p. 350; Gupte, R. S. *The Iconography of the Buddhist Sculptures (Caves) of Ellora*, Aurangabad: Marathwada University, 1964, pp. 9 and 109.
- 17) Eliot. *Hinduism and Buddhism*, II, p. 19; Grunwedel, A. *Buddhist Art in India*, London: Susil Gupta, 1965 Second Edition, p. 105; Smith, V. A. *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, Bombay: Taraporevala, Third Edition, p. 151.
- 18) Grunwedel: *Buddhist Art*, p. 105.
- 19) Goetz, H. *India—Five Thousand Years of Indian Art*, Hoole Verlag, G.M.B.H., Baden-Baden, Germany, 1964 Second Edition, p. 104; Gupte. *Icon Ellora*, pp. 110 & 116; Gupte, R. S. and B. D. Mahajan. *Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad Caves*, Bombay: Taraporevala, 1962, p. 128.
- 20) Gupte. *Icon Ellora*, pp. 103, 107 and 108.
- 21) Gupte. *Icon Ellora*, p. 28.
- 22) Gupte. *Icon Ellora*, p. 109; Grunwedel. *Buddhist Art*, pp. 105, 148 fn.
- 23) Toe Hla, one of my colleagues supply the extracts from Silavaṃsa. *Chutoṇ: kham: Pyui*, (1494) §27; *Kantoamañ: kyoñ: charātoau: Loḥasara Pyui*, (?1500) §54; *Hloaukā: suṃ: thoñmhū: Mañ: tarā: rhwethī: Ekhyāñ: (1516) §34; Un: Nui: Gāthākḥrokchay Pyui*, (1517) §78; *Mañ: rājā: Hitakarīlañkā (1750) §3; Twañ: sañ: mañ: kri: Mudulakkhaṇa Pyui*, (1751) §16; *Rhwetoñsihasū: Ratanakre: muñnan: twañ: jātoaukri: (?1756) pp. 29, 38–40, 52, 152 & 161; Lakwainoaurathā: Lhyokthum: (1762) pp. 214–15; Rhwetoñnandamit: Calañ: mañ: moñpoñ: khyon Ekhyāñ: (1771) §55; Tui: Rāmarakan, I (1789) p. 79; Ariyāvaṃsaādiccaramsi: Samantacakkhudīpanī, I (1808) pp. 91 & 92; Ariyāvaṃsaādiccaramsi: Nānāchanda Pyui, (1826) §106; Mahājeysaṅkhayā Lhesañ: Atwañ: wan: Wohāralinatthadīpanī (1830) §72; *Buddhuppatti Pyui*, (?1900) §19; Rhwe Noau: *Adikappakambha-ū: Kyam: (1901) p. 110; Manlañcharatoau: Mahāsutakārīmaghadevalaṅkāśac (1904) §1 and Laytipaṇḍita Ū: Moñ Kri: Sūrassatīñī (1924) passim.**

Goddess Sarasvatī exists right from the beginning of the Earth. She is powerful. She speaks exceedingly well. It is believed that when she favours a person, that person would utter only words of importance. Authors of non-religious works like *Rāma*, *Samma* and *Dandī* worshipped her before they commence writing. But one who works on a religious text would certainly pay homage to the Tipitaka which Sarasvatī symbolises. Thus it was expressly mentioned by the Tontwan: charatoau on 31 August 1762 (*Lakwainoauratha Lhyokthum*., pp. 214–15).

Fairly recent references to Sarasvati and her propitiation can be found in:

Balinatcāpūjoaunañ, Rangoon, Thudamawadi Press, 1951, pp. 13, 17, 29–30 & 97.

Cin Phe. *Bhurā:kui:chūpūjoaunañ:cātam*., Rangoon, Shwedagon U Pyine Publications, 1973, pp. 111–12, 121, 122, 123, 125, 127 & 245.

Guha, Devaprasad. “Ghoramanta (alias) Goravinda—A Burmese God,” *JBR*, XLIII,i, June, pp. 51–5.

Kyoau (Dibbacakkhu Charā). *Imphrūtoau Mantanpon:khyup*, Rangoon, Thudamawadi Press, 1961, pp. 139, 140, 142, 143, 144, 147, 148, 149, 151, 152, 155, 157 & 161.

Maung Htin Aung. “The Nine Gods,” *JBR*, XXXVII,ii, December 1954, pp. 1–9.

Phui: Kha. *Sum:chay, khunaman*., Rangoon, Myanmagonyi Press, 1973 Fourth Printing, pp. 16, 20, 21 & 24.