



ISSN 2455-7544  
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

# Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal  
Vol. 8 No. 1 March 2023

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.8, No.1, March, 2023

## Goddess of Knowledge: Hindu, Greek, & Celtic

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**Abstract :** Knowledge, along with wealth and power, has been glorified as divine entities in most ancient Cultures. Different religious sects and beliefs have been developed, based on the presiding deities of these aspects. Despite the geographical distance and cultural diversities, it is observed that there are notable similarities among the goddesses of knowledge in Hindu, Celtic, and Greek mythology. This paper highlights the areas of similarity among the Goddesses of these three Cultures. Resemblance can be traced in the creation myths, creative skills, connection with water, and festivals related to these female deities of knowledge in Hindu, Celtic and Greek mythology. The prominent similarity is rooted deep in the fundamental understanding of the beliefs and way of life of people settled in distant places and Cultures.

**Keywords:** Deities, beliefs, musical instruments, water, festivals, knowledge, harvest, gunas.

Knowledge, wealth, and power, have been the three pillars of the socio-economic system since time immemorial. These three factors have always played a vital role in the creation of society or even to bring change in it. It may be said that these elements were the three seeds responsible for the emergence of three different social classes in ancient India. Knowledge which expands the mind leads to the undermining of fear and insecurity in the quest for self-realization. Conversely to capture or to hoard anything suggests insecurity and fear of losing. Class consciousness and discrimination during the ancient period emerged out of reserving any of these three factors, that is, knowledge, wealth and power. The *Ksatriyas* tried to dominate the society using their courage and muscle power. The *Vaishyas* tried to overpower society using their wealth. The *Brahmins* considered themselves to be the keeper of esoteric power, which is knowledge.



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*Vol.8, No.1, March, 2023*

“Priests who wielded such knowledge could, by means of the substitutes the varna system provided, control the natural, and social worlds from within the confines of their ritual world.” (Smith, 1994, p:316)

Though it wreaked havoc on Indian society, it also influenced the social beliefs of almost all the world.

“Brahmins had supernatural powers. In the good old days these flowed through the performance of solemn ritual without client for these expensive rites, the supernatural powers of the Brahmins were in danger of being underused or overlooked. Fortunately there was a solution to this problem: the magical formulas that came to be collected in the ‘Atharva Veda’... These kinds of formulas and associated rites made it possible for Brahmins to exert their powers even in hostile situations, in circumstances where the support of the ruling classes was not guaranteed or worse.” (Bronkhorst 2016,p.225)

This gave birth to the segregation of gods and goddesses according to their faculty. Thus we have different names and manifestations for different gods and goddesses. This helps humans in following their aim on one hand and enhances the conflicts among different ideologies on the other (Pattanaik, 2019). For example, a man would pray to Kali in Hindu culture or Athena in ancient Greek culture, whereas for wealth he will seek the blessings of Lakshmi in Hindu mythology and Plutus in Greek mythology. The God of ocean is Poseidon in Greek myths and in Irish Culture he is revered as Lir or Llyr. Since Vedic period the God of seas and oceans in Hinduism is Varuna. The fact of the matter is pantheistic culture valued the elements of Nature as living entities and deified them, which established the idea of ‘nature divine’. In this way, we may say, the entire Pantheistic Culture endorses different deities for different attributes.

Although power and wealth have always ruled society yet the importance of knowledge has been considered superior. Knowledge has been considered both as power and wealth establishing its superiority over all other faculties. Hence knowledge has been deified with all its uniqueness in most of the ancient mythologies (Pattanaik, 2019). The idea of knowledge is symbolized in deities in ancient mythologies. In some mythologies the knowledge deities are male. For instance, Quetzalcoatl in Aztec mythology, Wenchang Wang in Chinese mythology, Odin in Norse mythology, Enki in Sumerian mythology. While in others they are female for instance, Brigid in Celtic mythology, Menrva in Etruscan mythology, Anahita in Persian mythology, Isis in Egyptian mythology. Some knowledge deities are manifested as warriors, like



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Vol.8, No.1, March, 2023

Athena in Greek mythology, some as pleasant, luminous entities, like that of Saraswati in Hindu mythology, and sometimes, a group of deities presiding over different skills and arts are introduced for instance the Muses in Greek mythology. In this paper, we have tried to trace the prominent similarities among the Hindu, Celtic and Greek Goddesses of Knowledge.

In ancient Indian Mythology, Saraswati is a prominent goddess of knowledge. She is the goddess of art, music, and skills too. Altogether she has a unique role in Vedic and Puranic culture. In the Vedas, she is depicted as a river. The river is a source of livelihood too like fishing, cultivation, and even transportation thus as a river she was revered as a Mother Goddess. Later she became unanimous with *Gaayatri* or Goddess of hymns and *Savitri* or Vedic Sun God. She was considered as *Vedamata* or the mother of Vedas. But in later years, the idea of Saraswati as a river faded slowly with the disappearance of the physical river and she manifested only as the Goddess of Knowledge. The connection between the goddess of knowledge and river or water body is significant and will be discussed later. But the entire presentation of Saraswati is impressive. She is depicted as a graceful and beautiful woman draped in white and is seen to be seated on a white lotus. It symbolizes knowledge, purity, and wisdom. The color white is symbolic of *Sattwa Guna* or tranquility, one of the innately human qualities. Knowledge essentially bestows different qualities like patience, the expanse of mind, wisdom, freedom of thought, among many. She is sometimes depicted with two hands and sometimes with four. She holds '*Pustaka*' or book in one hand symbolizing the *Vedas* that signify knowledge as eternal, divine, and exalted. The rosary in her hand implies the connection between self and eternity. Goddess Saraswati holds a '*veena*' which is a string instrument that denotes creative and scientific aspects. The veena can be seen as a symbol of the human spinal cord from the '*Mooladhar*' to the '*Brahmarandhra*' and the frets and the strings indicate the four Vedas that has been discussed later in this research paper. (Sarma, 1936).

In the rich and popular Greek mythology also there is a goddess and some deities of knowledge and crafts, skills, and art. The Greek Goddess of Knowledge is Athena whose Roman counterpart is Minerva. Pallas Athena is associated with wisdom, knowledge, crafts, and warfare. She is depicted as a majestic lady tall and slim with blue eyes and curly golden hair. She is seen with a shield, spear, and helmet wearing a blue headband and a long purple cape. All the gods sought her help as she excelled in her domains. The



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shield of Athena signifies defense and her helmet suggests the cap of invisibility. Athena holds a spear in her hand. Spear symbolizes power and attention. Her prominent symbols are olive trees, owls, and snakes. These symbolize victory, wisdom, and protection from all threats. Apart from Athena, we come across the Nine Muses or the baser and inspirational goddesses who were the source of literature, science, music. They are the daughters of Zeus like Athena is. The Nine Muses are 'Thalia' the deity of comedy, 'Melpomene', who presided over tragedy, 'Erato' or the Goddess of love and erotic poetry, 'Euterpe' or the deity of music, 'Polyhymnia' or the Muse of sacred poetry and hymns, 'Clio' the deity of history, 'Terpsichore' who presided over Dance, 'Urania', the muse of Astronomy, and 'Calliope', the muse of Epic poetry. They were born to Mnemosyne, the Titan deity of memory, and Zeus. The Muses dwelt near the spring named Hippocrene that was formed by the hooves of Pegasus. This spring was considered to be sacred by them. It was believed that the water of this fountain would bring forth creativity (MacHugh, 1993). Thus, they are invoked at the beginning of many great literary and art works like Homer's 'Iliad' and Milton's 'Paradise Lost'.

Irish Mythology also introduces a few Knowledge deities. The most prominent Goddess of Knowledge in Celtic belief is Brigid who is associated with poetry, craft, and prophecy on one hand and fire and passion on the other. Therefore Courtney Weber says, Brigid, is "quaint and fierce, powerful yet graceful." (Weber,2015) She is also associated with the Spring season and healing well. The name Brigid originated from the proto-Celtic word '*Brigantia*' meaning 'the exalted one' which has a deep connection with the idea of knowledge and creativity. She is depicted as a mother or a maiden with 'flaming-sun hair' and draped in her 'cloak of sunbeam'. The sunlit cloak symbolizes purity and enlightenment and 'flaming-sun hair' suggests wisdom. Brigid is seen to carry a jug of water in her early depictions that preserved her active connection to the rivers and water. This Irish goddess is also revered as a triplicate form of three Brigid Sisters. They are '*Ban leighis*' or the 'Woman of Healing', '*Ban goibnechtae*' or Women of Smithwork, and '*Ban phile*' or Woman of Poets. She is worshipped during the 'festival of *Imbolc*' meaning milk which suggests nourishment. The word Brigid is associated with the word 'bright'. (Weber,2015) The name Brigid is cognate with '*Brhati*' in Sanskrit which was used as an epithet of 'Usha' or Vedic Goddess of Dawn (RigVeda). Brigid means virtue, power, and vigor. She is the daughter of Dagda, the father figure among



the Irish gods, and Bres, his wife. Brigit or Brigid is also considered a solar deity in this Culture. She bestowed everyone with blessings of wisdom and power (Miranda J.,1997).

## **Birth**

Puranic Saraswati is depicted holding a string instrument named 'veena' and a rosary garland and the Vedas in her hands. She is portrayed as a lady with divine grace and beauty. Clad in white clothes she is seen to be sitting alone, content in her solitude. Her mount is a white swan but at times she is shown sitting with a peacock without displaying its plumes. According to 'Brahmanda Puran', and many other Puranic texts, Saraswati emerged from the breath of the paternal god Brahma. This myth immediately recalls Athena's birth in Greek Mythology. Athena the Goddess of wisdom, and knowledge was the daughter of Zeus, the father of all the second-generation Olympian Gods and Metis, and Oceanoid. Zeus swallowed Metis when he came to know that she would give birth to two offsprings, a daughter, and a son, who will be more powerful than Zeus himself. Metis was already pregnant by the time. She raised her daughter and son in Zeus's mind. After a period the armors of Athena began hurting Zeus's head. At his request, Hephaestus cut his head open from where emerged Athena, the goddess of wisdom, wearing her armor. Thus it has been observed that this idea of Goddess of wisdom and knowledge will emerge from the head of the father-god in world mythology. According to research in neuroscience, wisdom and knowledge are qualities that centers in the brain (Labrecque, 2009). Thus both the goddesses of wisdom from different cultures arise from the head of the gods who, according to their respective mythologies, father the universe. Similar is the case of the Irish goddess of Knowledge, Brigid, daughter of Dagda (Miranda J., 1997). Dagda is revered as the Paternal God of in Irish Mythology. It is believed that he procreated the ancient Irish race.

## **Musical Instruments**

Interestingly, the Goddesses of knowledge and creative arts are always associated with a musical instrument and that too a string instrument. Saraswati holds a *veena*. The Muses play on the *lyre*, whereas Japanese Goddess Benten plays on a string instrument known as *biwa*. This connection is quite interesting. The nerves of a human body are comparable to the strings of a musical instrument. They are analogous in many ways. Both human nerves and strings of a musical instrument vibrate and connect two or more points.



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The chakras, or the energy points of a human body, send and receive vibrations which keep up the connection through the entire body. Thus the Greek Muses play on the lyre simulating creativity, which is a state of heightened awareness. *Veena*, the instrument that Saraswati holds is quite analogous to a human body. As mentioned by Yeda Torey Subramanya Sarma in his book “Sandhya Vandaneeya Tatvartha”, and “Veda Prakasike” (Sarma, 1936) where he describes the similarities clearly. Just like the resonator of the veena, the human brain receives all the vibrations. The strings are analogous to the spinal cord and the fretboard has twenty-four frets with the progressively increasing distance between the frets similar to that of the presacral vertebrae. Subramanya Sarma also states that these twenty four frets represent twenty-four letters or ‘*aksharas*’ of the Gaayatri Mantra. To which Krishnamacharya agrees and adds to state that the four strings on the fret indicates the four Vedas, that is, the first string ‘*Sarani*’ symbolizes RigVeda, the second namely ‘*Panchama*’ stands for Yajur Veda, the third known as ‘*Mandara*’ represents the Sama Veda and the fourth string called ‘*Anumandra*’ indicates the Atharva Veda. The three side strings denote the three Upanishadas. The secondary resonator is similar to the lower abdomen portion or *Muladhara Chakra* from where rises the *Kulakundalini Shakti* or the innermost energy which moves upwards to the Sahasra or the crown of the head. It is noteworthy that the sacrococcyx looks quite similar to the dragon head found in the veena. It is very interesting thing to know that the veena player is not only playing the instrument but he or she is the one who connects the energy points or the chakras symbolically. The vibration of the strings creates waves that connect the brain or the head portion with the rest of the human body.

## Water

Goddesses of Knowledge are also often found to be associated with water. Saraswati is worshipped in Vedas as a river. She is described by Rishi Grtsamidha as ‘*Ambitame Naditame Devitame Saraswati*’ meaning the best of mothers, the mightiest of the rivers, and the most prominent of the goddesses (RigVeda). The Vedic scriptures introduce the early civilization that was found in the places like Udaipur and Mewar. This river dried up and Gangetic civilization became prominent after that. The river has always supported civilization. Farming, fishing, and transportation were activities conducted around rivers. The flowing water also makes its banks fertile which in turn becomes the cradle of human settlement and civilization. The flowing water is analogous to knowledge. The fact that some parts of the subterranean river Saraswati dried



up perhaps due to a few geographical reasons strengthened the idea of Saraswati's deification as a goddess of knowledge. Knowledge, wisdom, talent, or skill lies within a man; these are invisible, intangible but intelligible. Thus the analogy between Saraswati as a river and Saraswati as the deity of knowledge became complete. True wisdom, skills and knowledge flow within a human being, it can be perceived but remains unseen as it has no physical appearance. It is manifested in speech and conduct. It also instills in us the idea that just as the underground river flows beneath the land, wisdom too, tides within the human mind. Water flows. It also sustains life. Without water, life is impossible as it nourishes every living being. Similarly, knowledge also nurtures the human brain. It stays within but sustains humans in living a good and enlightened life. It may be stated that, like water, knowledge too flows as it is dynamic and increases with practice and study. Knowledge is acquired from books, teachers, or even through keen observation of things around. Thus it becomes analogous to flowing water. Hence the connection between water, river, fountain, and Goddess of knowledge arose quite spontaneously. It is meant to be propagated and passed on. We are reminded of the Muses in Greek Mythology dwelling near the spring at Mt. Olympus. Celtic goddess Brigid does not have any connection with the river or water body but she too is portrayed with a water pot in her hand. This preserves her connection to the rivers and streams. The water pot symbolizes the womb of creation and nourishment (Weber, 2015). This again reminds me of the *kamandal* of Saraswati. Some scriptures mention that Saraswati holds a water pot in her hand. In both cases, the water pot suggests the storage of purity, creative power, and skills.

## **Festivals**

Pantheistic culture can be seen in most Civilizations. Therefore the festivals too are related to Nature rather than customs. The festivals that are celebrated around the Goddesses of Knowledge are notably associated with some specific season. Saraswati Puja or the festival for Hindu Goddess of knowledge is celebrated during the spring season thus it is also known as *Vasant Panchami*. This festival is commemorated on the fifth day of the *lunisolar* calendar month of *Magha*. It precedes the *Vasantotsava* chiefly known as Holi. Celtic festival *Imbolc* is the spring festival that is celebrated at the beginning of February, three months after *Samhain* in November. *Samhain* is the festival that marks the beginning of winter whereas *Imbolc* marks the beginning of spring. Thus this festival is halfway between the Winter Solstice and Spring Equinox.





This is also known as St. Brigid's Day, which was named so after Celtic Goddess Brigid was marked as a Christian Saint in the land. This festival is also known as *Candlemas* or *Brigantia* venerating Brigid, the Celtic Goddess of knowledge, crafts, and fire. In ancient Greece, *Panathenaea* was celebrated on accord of Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom. This festival was celebrated at the end of *Hekatombaion* which is the first month of the Greek *lunisolar* calendar known as the Attic Calendar. This is during August in the summer season. There are two varieties of the festival. The lesser *Panathenaea* was celebrated every year whereas the greater *Panathenaea* occurred every four years. This festival feted to Athena consisted of various literary and skillful activities. The connection between the spring festival and festival of knowledge and creativity is quite noteworthy. This is perhaps because almost all the ancient Cultures were pantheistic in nature. Therefore, almost all the festivals were the celebration of new crops that were harvested from time to time. Spring being the brightest season of the year got associated with the deities of knowledge. It may be because of the universal belief that knowledge is luminous and bright and is opposed to the darkness of ignorance.

## Conclusion

The evolution of different myths and mythologies through the ages and across geographical boundaries trace the development of different religions and cultures. A comparative study of various mythologies reveals the similarities of characters, themes, motifs, and beliefs which then paves the way to an Intercultural fraternity. The idea of a 'pan-human culture', which in Upanishad is termed as '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' or the '*Axis Mundi*' in other mythologies thus gains prominence. The significance of knowledge, skills, and creativity in Hindu, Celtic, and Greek cultures is defined well by the portrayal of the Goddesses in their respective mythologies. The attributes related to the Goddesses of knowledge and wisdom marks the importance of these qualities in human life. The similitudes are also logically connected. In fact the Jungian concept of 'archetype' is deeply seated in people's minds. The idea of 'archetype' appears from the basic lifestyle, habits, and activities which are commonly practiced. Similar expectations, actions, conducts, way of life, in varied geographical locations has probably given birth to striking similarities and universal symbols that aspire to deify intellect, creativity and wisdom. The attitude towards Nature is also a factor that has led to similar concepts resulting in such similitudes across the world.



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ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.8, No.1, March, 2023

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