

The Saraswati Puja

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Hindus worship *Devi Saraswati* as the deity of learning and all creative arts. This *Puja* is traditionally celebrated at the onset of spring, which is called *Vasanta* in Sanskrit. So it is also known as the *Vasanti Puja*. *Devi Saraswati* is depicted as a lady sitting on a lotus holding a Veena in one hand and a book and a lotus in the other with a swan at her feet. Traditionally, she is dressed in all white. The image of the goddess is a symbol rather than an embodiment, or personification. Unblemished white colour represents purity and knowledge, the swan represents wisdom, and the lotus versatility. Devotees pray for these qualities through the *Puja*. Many people worship books and musical instruments, or an earthen or brass pot filled with water from a holy river like the *Ganga*, or the *Godavari*. So the image of the deity is merely a symbol with which devotees can concentrate their attention to the purpose.

Symbolism is a basic tenet of the Hindu religion, and in the broad sense Indian philosophy and culture. Since a symbol needs to vary depending on whom it is for, there are so many forms and images of gods and goddesses in our religion. Very often they are depicted as our fathers, mothers, fiancés and fiancées, and even children. Unfortunately, this has been misunderstood by many as idolatry. In reality, the Hindu philosophy is based on teachings of the scriptures, called the *Vedas*, which in Sanskrit, means knowledge. The *Vedas* are a knowledge-base compiled on the realisations of ancient Indian sages reached through *Yoga*. The Sanskrit word *Yoga* means connection. The great Indian seers made connections with ‘God’ in their inner selves. They described God as “indescribable by words and the mind” and referred to God as *Brahma*, which means the Ultimate. They tried to convey the knowledge they derived from these connections in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishad*. They knew that the quest for the ultimate knowledge was too long for an individual’s physical life time and the quest must transcend generations. They were also convinced in the temporal character of matter and so did not choose material media like written manuscripts to hand down the knowledge to the next generations. Instead, they chose the human brain which they had known to be immensely powerful for this purpose. They used to select worthy and talented disciples who could memorise and assimilate entire scriptures undistorted. This legacy of knowledge continued for centuries.

It was unfortunate for humanity that history took unkind twists and the continuity of the process was broken in India. The quest for the eternal truth suffered setbacks, but it did not stop as it is in the very core of human consciousness. We, Hindus believe that you, me, and all of us are parts of the one eternal almighty entity with whom we are seeking to get united through cycles of births and deaths. Interestingly, we are searching for oneness even in modern science also. Biologists have strong proofs that all the life forms originated from one cell through the evolutionary sequence. Physicists have been trying to unify different kinds of force fields into one. Cosmologists have the strong belief that the universe was created from one primordial entity in a big bang, is expanding and will ultimately collapse into its original form. So, the quest is on – it has only changed its face. The *Saraswati Puja* is a traditional Hindu celebration to remember and pledge our roles in this quest for the ultimate truth.