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Dissertation Proposal

Gāyatrī

Mantra and Mother of the Vedas

by

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Abstract

The short mantra popularly called Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī certainly belongs to the most frequently used and reused texts of mankind. In the course of time it even came to be venerated as a goddess itself. The aim of this study is (1.) to investigate how the mantra gained prominence as a religious text, (2.) how it was deified and (3.) how it developed into an independent deity and (4.) how these processes interacted and influenced each other. The Gāyatrī mantra as a goddess first appears in the legend of Sāvitrī, in several legends and hymns in late Epic and Purāṇic literature from about the 4th cent. CE or earlier onwards, often as the so-called “Mother of the Vedas.” In several younger texts, we also find a more elaborate, Tantric conceptualization of the Gāyatrī, most prominently in the Gāyatrī Tantra (c. 10th–11th cent. CE). This study will focus on the complex relationships between the Gāyatrī metre, the mantra, the mantra’s literal meaning and ritual function, and the mythical and literary character and deity in Vedic and Sanskrit literature up to approximately the 10th cent. CE.

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*** Abbreviations: *ABORI*: *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*; BCE: Before Common Era; CE: Common Era; cent(s): century/centuries; ed(s): editor(s)/edited; Hrsg(g): Herausgeber = editor(s); p(p): page(s); SuSe: summer semester; tr(s): translator(s); Ü(b): Übersetzer, translator(s); WiSe: winter semester.

I Background

*om bhūr bhuvah svaḥ /
tat savitur vareṇyaṃ
bhargo devasya dhīmahi /
dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt //*¹

OM, EARTH, INTERSPACE, SKY

May we obtain that desirable effulgence of the god Impeller,
who will rouse forth our thoughts!²

This mantra belongs to the most frequently used and reused³ texts of mankind. Since its composition by a poet called Viśvāmitra Gāthina about 3000 years ago somewhere in the Northwest of South Asia, hundreds of generations have engaged in its recitation, praying and singing as part of their daily religious practice, very often repeating it more than a hundred times in a row. In the time since, it has developed into what has variously been called the most important, efficacious or holiest mantra and has often been compared to the “Lord’s prayer.”⁴

While it originally was intended as part of a simple hymn dedicated to Savitṛ (the ‘Impeller’), a god who is responsible for all kinds of motion in the universe,⁵ during its long life, the mantra was to convey a variety of meanings and fulfil a wide array of functions. The mantra is popularly called Gāyatrī, an ambiguous term denoting several things.⁶ Firstly, *gāyatrī* is a Vedic metre. Secondly, there is a specific verse in the *gāyatrī* metre which is called Sāvitrī

¹ The form of the Sanskrit mantra presented above – without the Vedic accents – became prominent through the Upanayana and Sandhyā (for the accented version, see below, n. 7). While the syllable *om* can precede any recitation of a Vedic text, the words *bhūr bhuvah svaḥ* are first attested in the Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā (XXXVI 3) in the context of the Pravargya rite, where they are still accented.

² The mantra above is translated as a Vedic text; if read in classical Sanskrit, ‘obtain’ would have to be replaced by ‘contemplate,’ and Savitṛ – the “Impeller” – could also be translated as ‘Sun.’

³ For the (adaptive) reuse of texts and concepts in South Asia, see in particular the collected papers in FRESCHI & MAAS 2017 and FRESCHI 2015. For recent studies on the compilation, adaptive reuse and reinterpretation of Vedic mantras, see, for instance, PROFERES 2007, MUCCIARELLI 2014 and HAAS 2018 (see chapters III 1, 12, 15 and iv 1b).

⁴ Cf., for instance, BASHAM 1959: 162. The excellence of the Gāyatrī is constantly confirmed and emphasized in both primary and secondary literature. The following description of the mantra, taken from a current encyclopaedia of religion (MER 8: 5304), is typical: “Within the set of sacred scriptures, a single passage may stand out as the holiest of all, and therefore the most efficacious. Hinduism recognizes the mystic syllable *om* as the essence of all the Vedas, and the hymn known as the Gāyatrī (Ṛgveda 3.62.10), has achieved a place of preeminence among all mantras.”

⁵ *savitṛ* literally means ‘Impeller.’ The nature of this god has been the subject of debate. While some argued that he is the deification of a phenomenon of nature – mostly the (morning or evening) sun –, others, first among them OLDENBERG (1897), maintained that he primarily is a functional or agent god, as his name suggests. MICHALSKI (1954) argued that he is associated with the zodiacal light, FALK (1988) maintained that he manifests as the Milky Way. For an overview of the state of research, see FALK 1988: 5–7.

⁶ To distinguish between the various entities named Gāyatrī, in the following, the mantra and the goddess are

or (later) Gāyatrī and first occurs in Ṛgveda III 62.10.⁷ As it mentions the deity “Savitṛ,” it is one of many so-called *sāvitrīs* in the Vedic Saṃhitās. In ritual practice and recitation, this specific verse was later supplemented by the syllable *om* and the so-called *vyāhrtis* or ‘mystic utterances’ (*bhūr bhuvah svaḥ*), which are combined with the mantra as shown above.⁸ In the course of time, the verse, which is most often accompanied by this introductory formula by default (sometimes also extended or added at the end), came to be viewed as the epitome of the *gāyatrī* metre and as the most important *sāvitrī*. Eventually, it even came to be designated as *the* Gāyatrī or *the* Sāvitrī.

The mantra was used in a great variety of ritual contexts, and in the course of time even came to be deified as a goddess called Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī. The mantra was already widespread in the litanies of Śrauta ritual.⁹ It assumed a prominent position not only in the Upanayana (an initiation rite which takes place at the beginning of one’s studies of the Vedic texts) and the Sandhyā (a rite of worship performed daily in the morning, at noon and in the evening), but also in several Tantric contexts.

The history of the deity (or rather: deities) called Sāvitrī and Gāyatrī is rather complex. In some early Vedic texts we encounter a daughter of Savitṛ¹⁰ whose name is Sūryā or Sāvitrī, but who does not have any relation to the Gāyatrī mantra. To my knowledge, a female deity invoked by the mantra and bearing the name Sāvitrī first enters the stage in the Mahābhārata in the famous tale of Sāvitrī and Satyavat.¹¹ Later, she re-emerges with an even stronger association with the mantra in several legends and hymns in late Epic and Purāṇic literature from about the 4th cent. CE or earlier onwards, often as the so-called “Mother of the Vedas” (*vedamātrī*).¹² In several younger texts, we also find a more elaborate, Tantric conceptualization of the Gāyatrī, most prominently in the Gāyatrī Tantra (c. 10th–11th cent. CE).¹³ During the entire history of their development, the various entities called Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī were conflated in a multitude of ways, but also continued to have an independent existence.

The cultural background of these developments is the transition from the Vedic religion to early and mediaeval Hinduism, which was characterized by great religious and social changes. The Gāyatrī mantra witnessed them all, and for the most part, the mantra and

capitalized whereas the metre is italicized. Similarly, Sāvitrī is primarily used for the literary character and the goddess (and only sometimes for the mantra), and *sāvitrī* is used for any verse related or directed to Savitṛ. In some self-explanatory cases, however, the use of these terms will be handled somewhat flexibly; thus, the mantra will also be called Gāyatrī when it appears as a deity.

⁷ *tāt savitūr vāren;yaṃ, bhārgo devāsya dhīmahi / dhīyo yó naḥ pracodáyāt //*. The Gāyatrī is part of a short hymn (Ṛgveda III 62) dedicated to several gods. Formerly, the three verses III 62.10–12 probably were regarded an independent hymn and were only later conflated in a single hymn with the other verses of III 62; see JAMISON & BRERETON 2014/I: 553.

⁸ For the *vyāhrtis*, see, for instance, GONDA 1980: 226.

⁹ HAAS 2019a.

¹⁰ See below, p. 8.

¹¹ Sāvitrī here is the name of a princess who rescues her cursed husband by outwitting the god of death; cf. LUDVIK 2007: 123–126.

¹² Cf. below, p. 14, n. 86.

¹³ For the sources used in the proposed study, see below, pp. 12–16.

the permission to recite it served as a hallmark of (Vedic or Brahminical) orthopraxy. This development began in the middle and late Vedic period, when the stratification of society into four social classes (*varṇas*) took shape and the so-called *āryas* – the ‘noble’ or ‘honourable ones’ – were distinguished from the *śūdras*, forming the lowest or “servant” class.¹⁴ Only male *āryas*, who had usually undergone the Upanayana and were later¹⁵ called the “twice-born” (*dvija*), were entitled to perform or sponsor Vedic rituals. These “twice-born” initiates were further divided into three classes: (1) the Brahmins, who – originally – were distinguished by their knowledge of the ‘sacred formulations’ (*brahmanas*) of the Vedic texts; (2) the Kṣatriyas, or ‘rulers’ and ‘warriors’; and (3) the numerous Vaiśyas, or ‘commoners.’ The Brahmins, who were always initiated with the Gāyatrī,¹⁶ considered themselves to be at the top of this hierarchy, in which the Śūdras (4) were relegated to the lowest level and – just as women of all classes – were not allowed to pronounce and learn the Vedic texts.

In propagating their world view, the Brahmins were largely successful,¹⁷ and alongside the emerging caste system, this stratification of society has remained a central element of Hindu society up to the present day. In the mediaeval period (from c. the 5th CE onwards), the fourfold division of society was upheld and Brahminical culture continued to thrive. At the same time, however, the Vedic system of elaborate rites declined, and the worship of and adherence to a single Hindu deity such as Śiva or Viṣṇu became prevalent in all strata of society, with kings and rulers officially declaring themselves as Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas etc.¹⁸ This age¹⁹ was also characterized by the rise of Tantrism; Tantric practices and rituals, such as special types of yoga, initiation rites, devices like formulae, *maṇḍalas*, gestures and intricate visualizations,²⁰ but also public ceremonies often replaced Vedic rites and were even integrated into formerly non-Tantric traditions such as the Pāñcarātra.²¹

Against this backdrop, it is important to consider *who* uses the Gāyatrī mantra in any given context. While its employment by Brahmins (or *dvijas* in general) in the context of (Vedic) rituals does not require much explanation in terms of sociology or social history, its identification with the Goddess is more significant, since the Goddess was and is venerated in “orthodox” and “heterodox” (i.e., non-Vedic and non-Brahminical) traditions alike. The appropriation of the Gāyatrī deity (and mantra, see the next paragraph) by the latter thus has a pronounced symbolic power and may have represented an effort to establish a link to the Vedic tradition. On the other hand, the appearance of a Tantrified form of the Gāyatrī deity – as the epitome of the Vedas – in an “orthodox” text²² may have been an attempt to integrate

¹⁴ Cf. WITZEL 1995: 24 and *passim*.

¹⁵ From about the late 2nd or early 1st cent. BCE onwards; cf. OLIVELLE 2018: 21.

¹⁶ Cf. below, p. 18 (especially n. 101).

¹⁷ See BRONKHORST 2011.

¹⁸ See SANDERSON 2009.

¹⁹ Due to the predominance of Śaivism, ALEXIS SANDERSON (2009) calls it the “Śaiva Age.”

²⁰ Cf. GUPTA, HOENS & GOUDRIAAN 1979: 7–9.

²¹ See, for instance, RASTELLI 2007 and SANDERSON 2009: 61–70.

²² Cf. also below, p. 10, n. 58.

a Tantric practice into the Vedic and Brahminical fold.²³

In a similar process, a number of adaptations or modifications of the mantra – which could also be recited by Śūdras or women²⁴ – came into existence and alternative ways of initiation were developed.²⁵ While the modified Gāyatrīs were inspired by the form of the original Gāyatrī, they were directed not at the god Savitr̥, but at a deity revered by the tradition which adapted the mantra, e.g. Rudra or Viṣṇu. Even so, these Gāyatrīs (or Sāvitrīs) drew most of their “potency” from the fact that they were similar to the original Gāyatrī. At the same time, however, the Gāyatrī also continued to be used in its original form both in the Purāṇas and in the Tantras. It is this form of the mantra and its diverse aspects which will be at the centre of part A of this study.

Even nowadays, the practice of reciting the Gāyatrī has by no means come to a standstill. Apart from its continued use in Hindu traditions, the Gāyatrī also came to be used by Hindu reform movements to convert people to Hinduism or even “transform” them into Brahmins, a practice which was started by Svāmī Vivekānanda.²⁶ The so-called “All World Gāyatrī Parivār,” a religious movement founded in 1958 by Śrīrām Śarmā Ācārya, believes the mantra to be the core of Hindu civilization. In a “Vedic” ritual invented by its founder, the mantra is chanted by thousands of people, many of them converts.²⁷ Numerous spiritual manuals in various languages are devoted exclusively to explaining what the mantra means and how it is to be used.²⁸ As a result of the popularization by Vivekānanda and other reform movements (such as the Arya Samaj), the mantra has also become part of some cultural currents outside South Asia: it is printed on clothes, set to music, chanted in yoga studios, taught in spiritual seminars and explained and interpreted on numerous websites.²⁹

Among many others, the Gāyatrī’s numerous functions and forms raise the questions of how this specific mantra rose to prominence and eventually became a deity. What caused the Gāyatrī to attain the status of one of the most important texts of Hinduism? How could this mantra – which is basically a sequence of sounds – be revered as a deity? What made it possible for a prayer that is unambiguously addressed to a male god to become a goddess? How

²³ Cf. also PINTCHMAN 1994: 118: “The identification of non-Vedic elements with those that are Vedic is seen throughout the post-Vedic narrative texts and functions as a legitimizing mechanism whereby non-Vedic elements are introduced into the discourse without threatening the authority of the earlier Vedic tradition.” Of course, there is evidence for this approach in earlier times; a case study can be found in HAAS 2019b.

²⁴ Cf. GONDA 1963: 292.

²⁵ For the modified Gāyatrīs, see BECK 1994; GUPTA, HOENS & GOUDRIAAN 1979: 33, 123, 133, 153; GONDA 1963: 293. It must be noted that these modifications already appear in the Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā (II 9.1) – a Vedic text.

²⁶ Cf. LARIOS 2017: 192.

²⁷ See BECHLER 2013. For the modern employment of the Gāyatrī, cf. also SRINIVASAN 1973: 177, EINO 1993: 203, and GOUGH 2017: 291.

²⁸ To name but three books in English: Iqbal Kishen Taimni’s *Gāyatrī. The Daily Religious Practice of the Hindus* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House, 2014 [¹1978]); Sadguru Sant Keshavadās’s *Gāyatrī. The Highest Meditation* (New York: ¹1978; repr. of the 3rd rev. ed.: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000); S. Viraswami Pathar’s *Gayatri Mantra*. (Chennai: Sura Books, 2006).

²⁹ Furthermore, there is an annual “Gayatri Festival” on Korfu (devapremalmiten.com/holidays/gayatri-festival-corfu-greece/ retrieved on October 13, 2018).

was this goddess conceived of? What was the relationship between the mantra, the goddess, the literary character Sāvitrī, and the *gāyatrī* metre?³⁰ Finding answers to these questions is definitely a great desideratum for the history of religion and will even be important for the study of modern religious movements. While the project proposed is limited to ancient and mediaeval South Asia, there can be little doubt that an informed study of the Gāyatrī based directly on the primary sources will also be of interest outside the scholarly world.

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

Most studies relevant to the topic are confined to mentions³¹ or brief descriptions of the application³² of the mantra in particular instances or merely mention the existence of a Gāyatrī deity. Although a large number of casual mentions of the famous mantra can be found in secondary literature, very little attention has been paid to the mantra itself and its deification. Very often, the Gāyatrī metre, mantra, literary character, and deity are not clearly differentiated.³³ If Gāyatrī-related text passages are analysed or related to each other in the literature at all, this is mostly done in a haphazard way and without any attention to the social, semantic, ritual or religious context.

The following overview of the current state of research first presents the most important contributions dealing with the history of the Gāyatrī as a mantra (A), before turning to its deification in Epic, Purāṇic and Tantric literature (B, C).³⁴ Lastly, some of the most important studies on metres, mantras and deities are briefly discussed (D).

A In his seminal article on “The Indian Mantra,” JAN GONDA used the Gāyatrī to illustrate the manifold usages and interpretations of mantras with the help of the mantra *par excellence*.³⁵ He, however, confined himself to the recording, summarizing, paraphrasing and translation of several passages relating to the mantra, but avoided making any substantial interpretive remarks. Apart from his very informative collection of Gāyatrī-related text passages, GONDA also developed an interesting line of thought of a more “historiographic” nature. He considered the mantra of the Ṛgveda a prayer which also, in later times, “tended to keep alive [...] the memory of the Sun-god, the eternal source of life and inspiration.”³⁶ Here, he incidentally

³⁰ The research questions are dealt with in more detail below, pp. 19–21.

³¹ Cf. above, p. 3, n. 4.

³² Cf., for instance, GONDA 1980.

³³ While the Sāvitrī mantra and its deification can also be called Gāyatrī, the literary character Sāvitrī of the Sāvitrī legend never is, showing that it is wrong to assume complete identity between them. The word “Gāyatrī,” on the other hand, has always denoted the metre, but came to be used as a name of the mantra apparently only in post-Vedic texts. A lack of discrimination in this regard can sometimes also be encountered in scholarly literature; cf. LOMMEL 1956, PARPOLA 1994, 1998, 2000, RAY 1998. In his otherwise excellent article, even BECK (1994: 47) asserted that “this particular verse is addressed to Sāvitrī or the Sun-god Sūrya.”

³⁴ I will only consider studies which deal with material pre-dating the 10th CE; for the scope of the study, see below, p. 12.

³⁵ For the Gāyatrī, see GONDA 1963: 259–261, 274, 276 and especially 284–294.

³⁶ GONDA 1963: 284.

touched on the question if there really was a link between the meaning of the mantra and its interpretation in Tantric texts, a thus far unanswered question.

Most other studies on the Gāyatrī mantra focused on its employment in the Upanayana, the Hindu initiation ceremony, where it is taught as the first verse formally authorizing the student to learn the Vedic texts. HARRY FALK (1988), for instance, provided an important study of the role of Savitr̥ in early Vedic religion, where he suggests that the nature of this deity³⁷ was decisive for the Gāyatrī's employment in the Upanayana.

While speculations about the possible reasons for the Gāyatrī's presence in the Upanayana rite abound,³⁸ the history of the Gāyatrī outside the context of the Upanayana and prior to the time when it became part of this rite has been almost entirely ignored. The only paper exclusively devoted to the early history of the mantra is that of KRISHNA LAL (1971), who collected most (but not all) occurrences of the Gāyatrī in the Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Śrauta- as well as Gṛhya-Sūtras. LAL, however, was content to observe that the Gāyatrī did not enjoy any special importance in most of these texts, and did not research it any further. None of these publications aimed at exhaustiveness, and none considered the literal meaning of the mantra as a text.

To my knowledge, the later history of the mantra has not been researched at all. Outside the context of the Upanayana or the Sandhyā, the mantra has not received any attention; its modified versions, on the other hand, seem to have been more attractive objects of research.³⁹

B With the Gāyatrī/Sāvitrī character and deity, we enter safer ground; especially the Sāvitrī story has already attracted a lot of attention. S. A. DANGE (1963), for instance, discussed the relationship between the Gāyatrī mantra and the character of Sāvitrī in the famous tale of Sāvitrī and Satyavat. DANGE argued that Sāvitrī is but an aspect of what he called the personified “*procreator of life*, being the energy of the Sun”⁴⁰ and associated this literary character with the Gāyatrī mantra, i.e., its meaning or function. He highlighted the use of the mantra in the Upanayana, an initiation rite that, according to him, can be interpreted as a symbolic death.⁴¹ DANGE interpreted the subsequent rebirth caused by the Gāyatrī as tantamount to immortality. He based this view on the story of the “Capture of Soma” which can be found in the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas,⁴² and on the fact that some of these texts mention the immortalizing power of metres in general⁴³ – obviously confounding or blending the mantra and the metre to some extent.

The enigmatic history of the Sāvitrī character has given much cause for speculation. Its beginnings go back to the Ṛgveda, where we encounter Sāvitrī's forerunner, the mythical being

³⁷ Cf. above, p. 3, n. 5.

³⁸ Cf., for instance, HOPKINS 1895: 46–50; OLDENBERG 1897: 480; VON SCHROEDER II: 7–8; OLDENBERG 1917: 64, n. 1 and p. 46; KANE II: 302–303; S. A. DANGE 1963: 262–263; LAL 1971: 228; STAAL 1986a: 56; FALK 1988: 33.

³⁹ Cf. especially BECK 1994.

⁴⁰ DANGE 1963: 261.

⁴¹ DANGE 1963: 262–263.

⁴² Kāthaka Saṃhitā XXXIII 3, Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā III 2–7, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa III 2.4.1–7.

⁴³ DANGE 1963: 260.

Sūryā. Sūryā, the daughter of Savitr̥, is a solar goddess who is often identified with the goddess Dawn.⁴⁴ In the famous Wedding Hymn (ṚV X 85), she represents the archetypical bride and is, one after the other,⁴⁵ married to Soma, Gandharva and Agni. In the Atharvaveda, the marriage of Sūryā is briefly alluded to in various places; here she is not only called Sūryā but also Sāvitrī.⁴⁶ The mantra, on the other hand, is also called the “Mother of the Vedas” in one place of the Atharvaveda (IXX 71.1).⁴⁷

HERMAN LOMMEL (1956) was, to my knowledge, the first to identify the Sāvitrī of the Vedic wedding hymns with the Sāvitrī goddess and character of the Epic and Purāṇic Sāvitrī legends by paralleling the Sāvitrī myth with a ritual from Southern Rhodesia (!). Despite their rather speculative nature, LOMMEL’s conclusions were taken up again about 40 years later. In several publications, ASKO PARPOLA developed a great number of hypotheses about the Sāvitrī legend and *vrata*, its predecessors in the (according to him Dravidian-speaking) Indus Valley Civilization as well as various other subjects.⁴⁸

PARPOLA attempted to construct a coherent history of the goddess and/or literary character Sāvitrī – who for him seemed to be a somewhat monolithic being – beginning in Harappan times up to mediaeval South Asia, for the greater part disregarding the Gāyatrī mantra and its history. He tried to show that Sāvitrī’s relationship of with various male characters is often problematic; her father (Savitr̥, Prajāpati, Brahmā, Aśvapati) is often suspected of committing incest and both he and/or her husband (the sun, Soma the moon, Brahmā, Satyavat) are regularly doomed to die (again and again), often by decapitation.⁴⁹ Sāvitrī, however has the power to revive or save them. This motif is reflected in various Vedic and Purāṇic legends, in the Hindu marriage rite⁵⁰ as well as the *sāvitrī vrata*.⁵¹ For PARPOLA, the resemblances found in the narratives and rites point to the existence of an underlying structure or theme; the human couple of Sāvitrī and Satyavat can therefore be identified with a divine couple Sāvitrī and Brahmā,⁵² they “symbolize one and the same thing.”⁵³

PARPOLA’s studies cover a large amount of material and have also helped to complete the list of relevant sources to be used in the dissertation. Unfortunately, however, most of his very interesting conclusions⁵⁴ are based on superficial similarities and equations of mythemes, which are related with each other with too little regard for differentiation or chronology. The

⁴⁴ E.g. in MACDONELL 2002 (¹1897): 125. LOMMEL 1956: 98 states that Sūryā’s manifestation in nature is unknown. Since OLDENBERG (1912: 53 ad ṚV VII 69.1), this identification has been doubted. According to OBERLIES 2012: 173, she is the goddess of the grey heaven *before* dawn proper.

⁴⁵ See OBERLIES 2012: 289–290.

⁴⁶ Atharvaveda VI 82.2 (where Sūryā is also called Sāvitrī), XII 1.24, XX 143.1, XIV 2.1.

⁴⁷ See below, p. 14, n. 86.

⁴⁸ PARPOLA 1994 (chapter 14), 1998, 2000.

⁴⁹ PARPOLA 2000: 199–201.

⁵⁰ PARPOLA 2000: 206.

⁵¹ PARPOLA 1998: 186, n. 59.

⁵² PARPOLA 1998: 303,

⁵³ PARPOLA 1998: 186, n. 59.

⁵⁴ Conclusions very similar to those in PARPOLA 1998 can be found in ANITA RAY’s dissertation (pp. 131–146), published in the same year and apparently based on PARPOLA 1994 (cf. PARPOLA 2000: 194).

historic approach of the proposed study makes it imperative to re-examine all primary texts and revise all of his results, also – and most importantly – taking into account the role and history of the Gāyatrī *mantra*. The proposed study will not only clarify the similarities, but also the dissimilarities and distinctions between the various entities called Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī and will also reconstruct the often intertwined developments between them.

Surprisingly, although there now exists a mass of scholarship on Goddess cults in South Asia, the particular aspect of the goddess Gāyatrī has barely been noticed. Most general studies on Goddess-worship regularly only dedicate a few lines (rarely pages) to the fact that the Sāvitrī or Gāyatrī is *also* a mantra.⁵⁵ Even studies on goddesses which – like Sarasvatī – have certain ties to the Gāyatrī, do not go further than mentioning the mantra, for the greater part ignoring the diverse and profound associations and connotations connected with it.⁵⁶ The dearth of research is also reflected in the more general works of reference. To give but one example: *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (2009–2014) does not honour the mantra, which undoubtedly is one of the most fundamental texts of Hinduism, with a separate entry – let alone the goddess Gāyatrī.

C The early Tantric form of the Gāyatrī was only rarely the subject of scholarly consideration. An overview of the various forms of *upāsana* ('worship' or 'practice') in the Gāyatrī Tantra has been provided by JAYA CHEMBURKAR (1976). The Gāyatrī Tantra⁵⁷ is part of the Devī Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, one of the most important works of Śāktism.⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the Devī Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, too, the Gāyatrī is presented as a form of Devī, the great Goddess. ANAND SWARUP GUPTA (1972) drew attention to the fact that in the Gāyatrī Stotra of the same Purāṇa the deified Sāvitrī/Gāyatrī is identified with the three Sandhyās.⁵⁹ Here, the Gāyatrī manifests in the three Tantric "phases" of the goddess:⁶⁰ in the morning, Gāyatrī is a young girl associated with Brahmā; at noon, she is called Sāvitrī – a grown-up, young woman – and is associated with Rudra (i.e., Śiva); in the evening, she is Sarasvatī – an old woman – and associated with Viṣṇu. GUPTA cited a number of texts related to these and other identifications of the Sandhyās but omitted to contextualize or translate them; in fact his main aim seems to have been to glorify the goddess.⁶¹

D As is well known, apotheosis or deification is a phenomenon spread across many cultures. Examples can be found in Ancient Egypt, where Pharaohs were considered living gods, or Ancient Rome, where emperors were often posthumously deified by their successors. As most often it is humans who were given the status of divinity, the application of these terms

⁵⁵ Cf., for instance, KINSLEY 1986, 1995, 1998; PINTCHMAN 1994.

⁵⁶ Cf. LUDVIK 2007: 122; PARPOLA 1998: 212, 2000: 196; RAY 1998: 136–137.

⁵⁷ The Gāyatrī Tantra obviously also exists as an independent text, cf. GOUDRIAAN & GUPTA 1981: 103.

⁵⁸ HANNEDER (1997: 159–162) argued that the Devī Bhāgavata-Purāṇa may well have been created to introduce Tantric practices into the Vedic domain.

⁵⁹ I.e., the daily morning, noon and evening rituals.

⁶⁰ For these phases, see GOUDRIAAN 1987.

⁶¹ Cf. GUPTA 1972: 10.

primarily refers to the deification of heros, emperors and eminent religious persons.⁶² In many religions, however, the range of subjects susceptible to deification has been much greater: virtually any physical or abstract entity can become a god or a goddess,⁶³ and different grades and types of deification and/or personification can be distinguished – the transitions are often fluid. In the Vedic religion, even such abstract concepts as metres were deified.⁶⁴

The deification of mantras in the Tantras is well-known.⁶⁵ The relationship between a mantra and its deity was, for instance, explained by interpreting the mantra as the “signifier” and the deity it is devoted to as its “referent.”⁶⁶ Alternatively, mantras were also thought of as manifestations or powers (*śaktis*) of deities, or they were imagined as consisting of, or even being identical with, sound.⁶⁷ The beginnings of the deification of texts (such as a mantras), however, are underresearched. While the Gāyatrī also became a Tantric goddess, it is clear that the mantra does not at all address the Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī as its deity.⁶⁸ Considering that the Gāyatrī was personified from an early point onwards, it is possible that the Gāyatrī was the first mantra to be deified at all.⁶⁹

The secondary literature on mantras (and prayers) is extensive, and I will confine myself here to mentioning studies that are of particular relevance to the proposed project.⁷⁰ The application of mantras in Śrauta and Gṛhya rituals, for instance, has been analysed in a systematic manner by VINAYAK MAHADEV APTE (1939), VIMAN CHANDRA BHATTACHARYYA (1953, 1955) and JAN GONDA (1979). These works offer various categorizations of the ways of employment of mantras. The role of metres in Vedic ritual and their place in the scheme of social, ritual and cosmic correspondences which characterize Vedic thought has been studied by G. U. THITE (1987) and BRIAN K. SMITH (1986b, 1992, 1993, 1994). The reuse of mantras in Śrauta ritual has recently been studied by THEODORE PROFERES (2003, 2007). The relationship and differences of Vedic and Tantric mantras have been studied by JÜRGEN HANNEDER (1997), who also discussed an interesting “double Sandhyā” belonging to the (comparatively late) cult of Śrī Vidyā, where both the Vedic as well as a Tantric Gāyatrī are recited.⁷¹ The relationship between ritual function, form and meaning in Tantrism has been investigated by ROBERT A. YELLE (2003).

⁶² Cf., for instance, *ER* 4/259–262.

⁶³ In many cases, these deifications are confined to a certain (often ritual) context or time. Thus, in Ancient Roman religion, we find deified forms of ‘Fever’ (Febris) and other entities having their own temple (usually only one). For the deification of impersonal notions in Roman religion, see LIPKA 2009: 127–129.

⁶⁴ Cf. THITE 1987: 448.

⁶⁵ Cf. PADOUX 1990, especially pp. 372–426.

⁶⁶ Cf. RASTELLI 1999: 120.

⁶⁷ PADOUX 2001: 398–399.

⁶⁸ Its deification is possibly the outcome of a personification and/or identification with an already existing deity. For the hypotheses of the proposed study, see below, pp. 17–19.

⁶⁹ See below, p. 14.

⁷⁰ A fairly comprehensive bibliography can be found in the collected papers edited by HARVEY P. ALPER (1989); cf. also the collected papers in THOMPSON & PAYNE 2016.

⁷¹ Cf. also GUPTA 1972, GUPTA, HOENS & GOUDRIAAN 1979: 132. For other studies concerning the relationship of Vedism and Tantrism, see the collected papers in HARPER & BROWN 2002.

II Specific Aims

The Gāyatrī is a phenomenon which, despite its enormous significance, has yet not received the attention it deserves. To reconstruct its history is definitely a desideratum – but would be a lifetime project. The goal of this dissertation, therefore, is much more modest. Its aim is, inter alia, to contribute to the historiography of the Gāyatrī mantra⁷² in Vedic and Sanskrit literature through a detailed study of a crucial phase of its development, namely its deification and evolution into a personified, full-fledged and even independent deity.⁷³ These processes were often fluid and interwoven, as the exaltation or even personification of the mantra sometimes coincided with its deification. To really understand them, it is also necessary to reconsider the early history of the mantra’s reuse, i.e., its way to becoming the “foremost” of mantras and the accompanying expansion of the range of its ritual applications. **The aim of the study is thus (A) to investigate how the mantra gained prominence as a religious text and what associations it acquired in the process, (B) how it was deified and (C) developed into an independent deity and (D) how these processes interacted and influenced each other.**⁷⁴

SOURCES

In the preparation for this proposal, I went through as many Gāyatrī-related text passages as possible in order to collect and extend the available lists of references, citations and interpretations. This has made it possible to determine the texts that are most relevant for the study of the crucial points of its development. These can roughly be divided into three groups: texts of group A deal exclusively with the mantra, those of group B show first signs of its deification and those of group C mostly treat the Gāyatrī as a developed or even independent goddess. This grouping of texts will also determine the structure of the planned study.

The earliest text to be considered is the Ṛgveda, where the Gāyatrī mantra first appears. The Ṛgveda was probably composed between the 19th and 11th cent. BCE.⁷⁵ Most texts in which the Gāyatrī appears as a more or less independent Tantric deity were composed between the 8th and 10th cent. CE. Thus, the study will cover a period of more than 2000 years. A historical study with such a wide time frame is, however, feasible, first of all, because of the

⁷² The modifications of the Gāyatrī (studied by BECK 1994) will of course be considered, but have deliberately been excluded from this study which will focus on the “Ṛgvedic” form of the Gāyatrī.

⁷³ By calling a deity “independent” I mean that it does not *only* exist as, for instance, the child or spouse of another deity, or, as in the case of the Gāyatrī, as the deification of a text. An independent or even “full-fledged” deity can further be supposed to have some kind of cult; i.e. praise texts, prayers, temples etc. For my notion of an independent deity, see also the examples in sections A and B below.

⁷⁴ For the research questions, see below, pp. 19–21.

⁷⁵ The approximate dates given here and in the following are mostly drawn from the various volumes of *A History of Indian Literature* (ed. by JAN GONDA). They are, for the greater part, very tentative, and will be discussed in detail (and maybe also revised) in my dissertation, where recent studies – such as, for instance, YOKOCHI (2004) – will also be considered. Here, they only serve to provide a rough overview.

fact that, in most cases, the text passages concerning the Gāyatrī mantra are rather short. Very often, the citation or quotation is merely accompanied by a single word or sentence. Secondly, the focus on the goddess in parts B and C reduces the number of sources which have to be considered. In these parts, it is not necessary (and would indeed be impossible) to deal with *all* available source texts mentioning the Gāyatrī *mantra* in detail; a general survey of the history and the at the time fairly consolidated role of the mantra in Hinduism will be sufficient for the purposes of the current research project. Furthermore, some subjects will be dealt with only peripherally in the proposed study. Among these are the various modifications of the mantra, the general history of initiation mantras and the Upanayana, Sandhyā and other rituals.

A As has been mentioned above,⁷⁶ the earliest history (from c. 1100 BCE or earlier up to c. 500 CE) of the Gāyatrī mantra has been partly studied (or, rather, touched upon) by GONDA (1963), LAL (1971), KANE (II/300-304) and FALK (1988). The various instances of the Gāyatrī have, however, never been comprehensively analysed in light of the questions which will be set out below.⁷⁷ The first task, therefore, is to produce a focussed and exhaustive reassessment of the ways of employing the mantra, its interpretations and the meaning(s) attributed to it in the texts of group A:

- The Vedic Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and early Upaniṣads (from c. 1100–500 BCE) as well as the Śrauta-Sūtras quote the Gāyatrī or refer to it about 40 times in total, often in very similar ways and contexts.⁷⁸ Apart from those texts which deal with employment in the liturgies of several Śrauta rites,⁷⁹ there are some younger texts which speculate about the meaning and importance of the Gāyatrī mantra, for instance, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (XI 5.4.6,15), the Jaiminiya Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa (IV 28), the Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad.
- Dharma literature, i.e., the Gṛhya-Sūtras (5th cent. BCE +), the Dharma-Sūtras (c. 3rd cent. BCE up to the 1st cent. CE) and the early Dharma-Śāstras or Smṛtis (generally 4th/5th cent. CE +; Manusmṛti: c. 2nd cent. CE)⁸⁰, and the Epics (which generally mention the Gāyatrī mantra only in passing) are important sources of information concerning the ways in which the ritual applications of the mantra expanded in the course of time. Most important is the employment of the Gāyatrī in the Upanayana, which was presumably⁸¹ responsible for its employment in the Sandhyā.⁸²

⁷⁶ See above, p. 7, section A.

⁷⁷ For the research questions specific to this section, see below, pp. 19–20.

⁷⁸ Cf. UVC I/765, 1016 and II/20. Sometimes only parts of the mantra are quoted.

⁷⁹ E.g. the Agnihotra (VājS III 35), Aśvamedha (Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā XXII 9), Puruṣamedha (VājS XXX 2), Pravargya (VājS XXXVI 3), Āhavanīya (Taittirīya Saṃhitā I 5.6.4), Cāturmāsya (Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā IV 10.3: 149.14–15).

⁸⁰ For the dates of these works, see OLIVELLE 2018: 21 and 26.

⁸¹ For the hypotheses of the proposed study, see below, pp. 17–19.

⁸² The early history of the Sandhyā has been studied by SHINGO EINO (1992, 1993).

Since the focus of this part of the thesis is on the *pre*-conditions for the deification of the Gāyatrī, it will focus on the literature that was produced up to approximately the 5th cent. CE. However, later works on Dharma or Gṛhya ritual⁸³ and the voluminous commentarial literature (c. 7th cent. CE +) will also be considered to a certain extent, especially if they mention the Gāyatrī deity and its connection to the mantra.

As mentioned above, a *personage* called Sāvitrī already appears in the Atharvaveda, and is also mentioned in some other Vedic texts.⁸⁴ It has yet to be established whether this personage is somehow connected to the Gāyatrī mantra (for example via her father, Savitṛ). The Gāyatrī *mantra* will, in any case, require the greater attention in this part of the study.

Fortunately, most of the instances mentioning the Gāyatrī in Vedic literature are well-recorded⁸⁵ and many occurrences in the literature up to approximately the 5th cent. CE can easily be found by means of searching keywords or collocations of keywords such as *gāyatrī*, *sāvitrī*, *tat savitur...* etc. in digitized texts. Here again, the different referents of these keywords must be distinguished, and the retrieved text passages have to be assessed individually. A preliminary search has yielded more than fifty texts containing or referring to the mantra, often more than once; this adds up to about a hundred textual occurrences of the Gāyatrī to be analysed in total. This means that the size of the text corpus to be studied is manageable.

B Apparently, the Gāyatrī is first⁸⁶ portrayed as a goddess in a passage of the Jaiminiya Upaniṣad-Brāhmaṇa and in the verbally similar and comparatively late (viz. post-Pāṇinian) Sāvitrī Upaniṣad, which is part of the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa. Here, however, she is still strongly dependent on Savitṛ and the Gāyatrī mantra and is defined rather by her relationship to them than by her own particular characteristics.

Later, a deity called Sāvitrī appears in the Sāvitrī tale of the Mahābhārata (III 277–283), where some of her attributes are transferred to the princess Sāvitrī who is named after her. In the many later Purāṇic versions of the story,⁸⁷ Sāvitrī continues to appear as a goddess. However, the exact relationship between the goddess and the literary character is yet unclear. Since Sāvitrī only briefly appears after the repetition of her mantra by king Aśvapati, it cannot be ruled out that at that time she was a literary character created “ad-hoc” rather than a goddess who was actually worshipped and had her own cult. Nevertheless, the possibility that the recitation of a mantra evokes its appearance as a deity with specific attributes is highly intriguing.

In several Purāṇas (Brahma Purāṇa 102.2–8, Matsya Purāṇa III 30-44) we find legends about Brahmā – whose consort is usually Sarasvatī – and his two wives, Sāvitrī and Gāyatrī.⁸⁸

⁸³ For instance, the Āśvalāyana Gṛhyapariśiṣṭa; cf. HANNEDER 1997: 156, n. 44.

⁸⁴ E.g., in Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa XVIII 1; Aitareya Brāhmaṇa IV 7.

⁸⁵ See UVC I/765, 1016 and II/207.

⁸⁶ It is difficult to ascertain whether the single instance of the Atharvaveda (IXX 71.1), where apparently only the mantra is praised and called the ‘Mother of the Vedas,’ already indicates deification or only personification.

⁸⁷ Cf. PARPOLA 1998: 172–183.

⁸⁸ Cf. DE GUBERNATIS 1897; RAY 1998: 110–131; LUDVIK 2007: 118–121.

In these legends, the two are sometimes distinguished from each other or are even depicted as rivals. In general, however, they only appear as manifestations of Sarasvatī,⁸⁹ the goddess of knowledge, or lend her their names. The legends go back to Brāhmaṇa accounts in which Prajāpati, a “predecessor” of Brahmā, has a daughter or consort called Vāc – ‘Speech’ or ‘Language.’⁹⁰ In the Brāhmaṇas, however, this goddess is not yet connected with the Gāyatrī mantra or the goddess Sāvitrī.⁹¹

In some Purāṇas, we also find prescriptions for the so-called *sāvitrī-vrata*,⁹² an annual three-day observance which wives perform for their husbands. In this rite, the literary character of the Epic Sāvitrī story as well as the goddess Sāvitrī are apparently not distinguished. However, the literary character – who is known as the woman who rescued her husband from death through her austerity and cleverness – is clearly the source of inspiration for this rite; the Gāyatrī mantra is, to my knowledge, neither mentioned nor recited.

In several hymns in late Epic and Purāṇic literature the Gāyatrī mantra seems to always be only identified with the great Goddess, who is called by various names.⁹³ These texts obviously do not conceive of the divine mantra as an independent deity.⁹⁴ The relevant sources for the hymns, which are in general about 30 verses long, are the following:

- Mahābhārata (c. 4th–4th cent. BCE/CE) VI, App. I, No. 1, 7–32 (the appendices belong to the latest strata of the Epic)
- Harivaṃśa (c. 4th cent. CE) App. I, No. 8, 1–55 and No. 30, 361–375
- Matsya Purāṇa (c. 4th cent. CE +) XIII 24–52, LXIII 1–29, CLIV 58–84
- Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa (c. 4th–7th cent. CE) LXXXI 53–67
- Devī Māhātmya (c. 4th–6th cent. CE) I 81, which is a part of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa
- Kūrma Purāṇa (c. 8th cent. CE +) I 11.76–218, 219–257

C In several later texts, we find a very specific and more elaborate conceptualization related to the Gāyatrī. In these texts, which are often Tantric in nature,⁹⁵ the Gāyatrī “mantra goddess” attains a more and more independent existence. It is clear that the Gāyatrī *deity* here became an object of worship in her own right. While the deification of mantras is a common Tantric practice, it is yet unclear whether the attributes of the goddess Gāyatrī somehow depend on

⁸⁹ Cf. LUDVIK 2007: 122.

⁹⁰ Cf. LUDVIK 2007: 139.

⁹¹ For the divinity of speech and the power of speech to depict and to evoke the gods, see COLAS 2012: 24 (cf. also the review by RASTELLI 2015b).

⁹² See DANGE 1963: 263–265, PARPOLA 1998: 184–193.

⁹³ Similar identifications continue to appear in later literature and are not restricted to the Purāṇas. In the *Ahīrbudhnyasamhitā* of the Pāñcarātra, for instance, she is a manifestation of Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu’s *śakti*; cf. RASTELLI 2015a: 342.

⁹⁴ In these texts, the Gāyatrī is sometimes also mentioned in other contexts (primarily as a mantra), which are not listed here but will be considered when analysing the hymns.

⁹⁵ For the difficult and often even artificial distinction between Tantric and non-Tantric practices, see especially PADOUX 2002.

the literal meaning of the mantra or its employment in ritual.

In general, the relevant sources are only part of various Purāṇic texts and are not found in “proper” Tantric treatises. As JÜRGEN HANNEDER pointed out, the followers of the Vedic and the Tantric traditions were well aware of their differences, and in general, they consciously distanced themselves from one another.⁹⁶ In Smārta texts such as the Purāṇas mentioned below, however, elements of both traditions could be more easily combined, and it comes as no surprise that the (Vedic) Gāyatrī mantra is first depicted in a rather Tantric fashion in this kind of literature.

The relevant text passages are the following:

- Kūrma Purāṇa (c. 8th cent. CE +) II 18.1–121: The Gāyatrī mantra goddess is identified with the Sandhyā and is to be visualized in the sun⁹⁷
- the Gāyatrī Stotra of the Devī Bhāgavata-Purāṇa (c. 9th–10th cent. CE; XII 5.2–28): the three forms of the Goddess are described
- Gāyatrī Tantra, which is part of the Devī Bhāgavata-Purāṇa (XII 1–2): about 600 verses and some long prose passages entirely devoted to the goddess Gāyatrī, containing several meditation texts as well as a prescription of the initiation ritual (*dīkṣā*)
- Garuḍa Purāṇa (c. 10th–11th cent. CE) I 36.1–18, 50.19, 217.1–13: Sandhyā prescriptions; visualizations of the Gāyatrī/Sandhyā; 37.1–9: Gāyatrī is praised as the highest deity
- Prapañcasāra Tantra (c. 10th cent. CE) XXX⁹⁸ and Śāradātilaka (c. 11th cent. CE) XXI: the outer appearance of the Gāyatrī deity is described

The main subject of this part of the thesis is the history from the first appearances of the Gāyatrī as an independent goddess up to the Gāyatrī Tantra. This Tantra may actually be the first longer text exclusively dedicated to the goddess and as such will receive special attention. In addition, several later texts will be taken into account, for they may serve to uncover nuances and associations that existed already in the earlier sources in a latent form. Of special importance are, in this regard, the Gāyatrī Upaniṣad and Gāyatrī-Rahasya Upaniṣad, two undated short texts which both deal with the Gāyatrī mantra and deity.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ HANNEDER 1997: 155.

⁹⁷ Some of the intertwined conceptualizations which can be found in this latter group of texts have obviously survived up to the present day, as they can be found in the liturgies of at least two modern rites; cf. SRINIVASAN 1973: 177; EINO 1993: 203; GUPTA, HOENS & GOUDRIAAN 1979: 132.

⁹⁸ See BÜHNEMANN 2001.

⁹⁹ Other relevant sources are the Śaṅḍilya Upaniṣad (III; c. 15th cent. CE+), the Haribhaktivilāsa (III 306–330; c. 16th cent. CE) and the Varivasyā-Rahasya (c. 18th cent. CE), where Śrī Vidyā is identified with the (Vedic) Gāyatrī. Cf. also GUPTA 1972.

III Research Methods

The historical-philological reading and exposition of the Sanskrit texts and their analysis against their textual and cultural background will be the main research method of this study. Its focus will lie on the diachronic developments revolving around the above-mentioned texts in which the Gāyatrī is deified (B, C) and the texts preceding this development (A). The relevant text passages will be contextualized against the backdrop of their source texts and analysed according to the scope of the research questions set out below. Sanskrit and Vedic sources will be translated and subject to philological analysis if deemed necessary. In a second step (D), the results of this analysis will be compared and related to each other with a view to their (possible) logical or chronological sequence of these texts.

As is well-known, the dating of South Asian texts is often extremely difficult and the tracing of precise chronological developments is often impossible. In many cases it is clear, however, which texts pre-date those that first introduce the Gāyatrī as a goddess. As the authors of the latter were usually familiar with the former, it is reasonable to study the earlier texts in order to see how the later authors tied their ideas to the pre-existing tradition.

This twofold approach is inspired by the method THOMAS B. COBURN employed in his analysis of the names and epithets of the Goddess in the Devī Māhātmya. In order to uncover the associations that these words had for the text's authors, reciters and recipients at the time of its composition, COBURN investigated their history in the (Vedic) texts preceding the Devī Māhātmya.¹⁰⁰ In the same vein, the study of the prehistory of the Gāyatrī deity as a mantra will demonstrate the meaning of its deification for those who began to venerate the mantra as a goddess and how it may have affected her conceptualization.

HYPOTHESES

Before describing the research questions in detail, I will articulate my ideas regarding the deification of the Gāyatrī and my underlying hypotheses in order to clarify the central concern of this study. It goes without saying that these hypotheses may be subject to modification and change; even though they are based on preparatory research, they do not yet represent definite results. There may have been several preconditions for the development and eventual deification of the Gāyatrī mantra:

1. For reasons yet unknown, the Gāyatrī mantra was widely employed in Śrauta ritual and definitely belonged to the more well-known verses directed at Savitṛ and composed in the *gāyatrī* metre.
2. Probably due to its comparatively high profile in Śrauta ritual, the mantra was chosen as one of the verses mentioning Savitṛ that were employed in the Upanayana to initiate the

¹⁰⁰ Cf. COBURN 1983: 69–86 and *passim*.

Vedic students.¹⁰¹ As the *gāyatrī* metre was thought to be the best of all metres and was associated with the Brahmin *varṇa*,¹⁰² it became the most important of these verses to be used in the Upanayana.

3. In the Upanayana, the mantra was also conceptualized as a personified being – the “mother” of the initiate, whose new father is the Guru.¹⁰³ In time, it was also called the “mother of the Vedas,” a rhetorical figure at first, but one that was perfectly suited to the emerging notion of the *Gāyatrī* as a goddess.
4. The cause for its employment in the Sandhyā was possibly its function as a prominent initiation mantra or the association of the *gāyatrī* metre¹⁰⁴ and/or *Savitṛ* with morning and evening, or a combination of both.
5. Due to its extremely important as well as frequent employment in the Upanayana and the Sandhyā, the mantra RV III 62.10 was regarded as the epitome of the *gāyatrī* metre and even came to be designated as *the* *Gāyatrī*. Its employment in the initiation and its daily repetition in the morning and evening rites made it a highly familiar and, possibly, “all-pervading” entity in the minds of its users – who also knew it as the very first mantra they had learned during their initiation into the study of the Vedic tradition
6. *Sūryā Sāvitrī*, the daughter of *Savitṛ*, represented the archetypal bride and later also the ideal wife. In the *Sāvitrī* story of the epic, which is apparently not directly connected with the daughter of *Savitṛ* known from the Vedic texts, the mythical personage was first brought together with the mantra.¹⁰⁵
7. In the time since, the *Gāyatrī* has also been conceptualized as an independent entity, that is, its personification was no longer felt to be dependent on the mantra, but she was rather conceptualized as an independent, supernatural being who could manifest as or with the help of the mantra, literary character and deity. As a deity, the *Gāyatrī* could also reappear in the Sandhyā, where she was envisioned in various ways during the recitation of the mantra. While she may not have been an important deity at that time, she could be seen as a form of *Devī*, the great Goddess.
8. As the Mother of the Vedas, the personified or deified mantra came into the conceptual vicinity of goddesses like *Sarasvatī*, with whom she was even identified, and was also said to be the wife or daughter of *Brahmā*, the source of the Vedas. In the Purāṇic accounts, some of the mythemes related to the myth of *Prajāpati* and *Vāc* and its successor, the

¹⁰¹ Other *sāvitrīs* were used as well; cf. KANE II/302. As I have tried to show (HAAS 2019a), the selection of these verses probably depended on their comparatively frequent employment in Śrauta ritual.

¹⁰² Cf. SMITH 1992.

¹⁰³ Cf., e.g., SMITH 1986b: 73–76; KAJIHARA 2016: 277, n. 15.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. THITE 1987: 438–441, SMITH 1993: 80.

¹⁰⁵ Apart from being a perfect example of the widespread practice of deifying even abstract concepts, the deification of metres (cf. THITE 1987: 448) does not seem to have been involved in the deification of the *Gāyatrī* mantra. The connection of the deification of the mantra and the deification of the metre, suggested by DANGE (1963: 260; see above, p. 8), is unsubstantiated.

myth of Brahmā and Sarasvatī, were transferred to the goddess Gāyatrī/Sāvitrī.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions below are meant to unravel the highly complex relationships between the Gāyatrī metre (1) and mantra (2), its literal meaning (3) and ritual (or other) function (4), (Sāvitrī) mythical (5) and literary character (6) and deity. (7) The hypotheses above have been formulated as a first step to do so. To prove or disprove them, it is necessary to study the properties and attributes of the Gāyatrī in the texts presented. The relations of some of the seven aspects have been recognized and studied from a general perspective already. However, in each and every Gāyatrī-related text passage, one has to be aware of all seven aspects listed above, even though not all of them may be relevant in any given case.

While it is clear that the verse or mantra and its metre (1, 2) must not be confounded, the fact that the verse is composed in the *gāyatrī* metre is definitely one of the mantra's most important characteristics. As is well-known, metre can even be the primary reason for the employment of a mantra,¹⁰⁶ and there is good reason to assume that this was often the case in the employment of the Gāyatrī in various Śrauta and Ṛ̥hya rites. Especially in the case of litanies, one has to be aware of the metre in order to be able to explain the presence of a given verse. The *gāyatrī* metre was in any case also associated with, for instance, the Brahmin *varṇa* and the god Agni, and associations such as these were possibly also transferred to the Gāyatrī mantra. The following research questions can thus be formulated:

- What is the relationship between the metre, the mantra and the ritual function of the mantra?
- What role does the *gāyatrī* metre play in the various ritual applications of the Gāyatrī mantra? Is it important in the employment of the mantra?
- Are the associations connected with the metre transferred to the mantra?

In order to ascertain the relationship of meaning and function (3, 4), I base myself on a theoretical scheme that was proposed by HARVEY P. ALPER in his editorial introduction to *Understanding Mantras*. ALPER suggests to analyse mantras according to their linguisticity and purpose. Linguisticity defines to what extent a mantra is to be understood as a valid linguistic utterance (i.e., as a part of language) or whether it just consists of meaningless syllables. Its purpose, on the other hand, can be determined to be directed toward the achievement of either a practical/mundane/quotidian or a transcendental/redemptive goal.¹⁰⁷ In Śrauta ritual, for instance, the Gāyatrī was used for a range of “mundane” and this-worldly purposes and could obviously still be understood as a linguistically valid utterance. However, the fact that

¹⁰⁶ Cf. GONDA 1979: 236.

¹⁰⁷ The scheme was devised exactly “for the purpose of comparison” (ALPER 1989: 7) of mantras.

the Gāyatrī mantra evolved into a female deity, who may, for instance, also grant salvation, could indicate that it was at that time no longer understood as part of ordinary or poetical language (even though consisting of language).¹⁰⁸ In this case, her role in the Upanayana or the Sandhyā may have been much more important than the mere meaning of the mantra.

Inspired by ALPER's approach, I formulate the following questions:

- Is the mantra regarded as a linguistic utterance?
- Is the literal meaning of the mantra given any importance?
- What meaning is attached to it?
- How and to what end is it used?
- What is the relationship between the literal meaning of the mantra and its ritual context and/or surrounding text?
- What is the relationship between the literal meaning of the mantra and its ritual function?
- If a new usage or interpretation of the mantra is introduced, how does it relate to the previous usages and interpretations?
- Is there any continuity in the mantra's functions and interpretation?

If one wants to understand the meaning of the mantra (3) as a text, cultural, semantic and grammatical developments must always be taken into account. In the course of time, almost every noun and verb of the mantra came to be understood in a different way. As the archaic grammatical forms of its two main verbs had died out in classical Sanskrit, even they had to be reinterpreted. The role of Savitṛ, the deity whom the Gāyatrī addresses, changed considerably over time; while at first he was a rather important deity, his name later came to be considered as a mere synonym of the sun. This makes it necessary to always discuss the meaning of various parts of the short mantra in roughly contemporaneous texts.

In studying the mythical and literary character as well as the goddess (5, 6, 7), it is important to always be aware that these may be distinguished in some texts, but may be undifferentiated or blended in others. In South Asia, goddesses were and are often perceived as mere manifestations of a single, great Goddess. Nevertheless, they need to be differentiated: a Sāvitrī mentioned in the Ṛgveda is not necessarily the same as one referred to in the Matsya Purāṇa. Even though the literary character(s) and goddess(es) have often been identified, they continue to exist as separate conceptual entities.

In view of these facts, it is necessary to further extend the list of research questions:

- What relationships exist between the mythical character Sāvitrī, the deity Savitṛ, the Gāyatrī metre and mantra, its literal meaning and ritual function, the literary character and deity?
- Does deification automatically entail personification or the idea of an anthropomorphic

¹⁰⁸ For the idea that mantras *consist* of language but *are* not language, see STAAL 1996: 253–278.

figure? Are there other ways of deification in the case of the Gāyatrī?

- Is personification in a religious text automatically tantamount to deification?
- How does the linguisticity of a mantra relate to its deified form?
- Is it always only the mantra which is personified/deified, or sometimes also the metre?
- How do the associations connected with the metre affect the conceptualization of the Gāyatrī deity?
- How was the Gāyatrī deity conceptualized?
- Is the Gāyatrī just a manifestation of the supreme Goddess?
- Was the Gāyatrī mantra only identified with the supreme Goddess when it had been established as a deity already?
- Who is the goddess or supreme Goddess with whom the (personified) Gāyatrī mantra is identified?
- How does the identification affect the conceptualization of the Gāyatrī deity and mantra?
- What is the relationship between the Gāyatrī and the supreme Goddess?
- To what extent is the Gāyatrī goddess an independent deity?
- Is the Gāyatrī herself presented as the supreme deity?
- Which specific traditions viewed the Gāyatrī as a deity, in what way and for what reasons?
- What position does the Goddess/goddess hold in the traditions that viewed the Gāyatrī as a deity?
- How do these traditions relate to Vedic orthodoxy and/or Tantric currents?

Answers to these questions may be found by a close reading of the sources. As a mantra like the Gāyatrī is more often simply used or reused and only rarely the sole subject of explanation or exposition, context and the immediate textual surrounding become most important. Sometimes the use of certain words indicates the esteem in which the mantra was held – or whether it was just viewed as one mantra among others. Sometimes its ritual employment points out which part of its literal meaning was taken to be the most important. Especially in the case of liturgical texts, it is the combination of the mantra with other verses as well as its placement among them which is the only way to get access to the meaning of the mantra itself. In the case of the Gāyatrī deity, the attributes and epithets and their variations become very important; sometimes it is also the narrative framework that is most telling about the conceptualization of the deity. Here, the Gāyatrī must also be examined in relation to the deities with whom it is identified.

IV Work Procedure and Timetable

The work procedure and the outset of the dissertation will be guided by the analysis of the aspects of the Gāyatrī as set out above. Part A will deal with the Gāyatrī mantra’s rise to prominence. In part B, the earliest sources for its deification will be examined – this chapter will necessarily also contain an extensive contextualization of the utilized texts within the (early) history of the Goddess cults in South Asia. Part C will be devoted to the Tantric worship of the Gāyatrī deity and, specifically, the Gāyatrī Tantra. In part D, the results of the preceding parts will be woven together.

TIMETABLE

Year	Semester	Tasks & Time/Week
1	SuSe – WiSe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● research for and writing of part A: c. 100 textual occurrences are to be thoroughly analysed within 10 months; 2 months for revision and additional work
2	SuSe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● research for and writing of part B: analysis and contextualization of the Sāvitrī legends and six hymns within 5 months; 1 month for revision and additional work
	WiSe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● research for and writing of part C: analysis and contextualization of a dozen passages in various texts within 1 month; at least 4 months for the study of the long Gāyatrī Tantra; 1 month for revision and additional work
3	SuSe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● writing of the concluding part D; tying up of loose ends
	WiSe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● writing of the introduction, summary, abstract etc. ● quality assurance: rechecking and correction of all data and formalities ● proofreading by a native speaker ● assessment of the thesis ● defensio

V Select Bibliography

This bibliography only contains a selection of some of the works already consulted. For the dissertation, much more literature will be (and has already been) taken into account. For reasons of space, text editions have been omitted.

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