

Vidyam Dehi Namah-stutey

By Partha Sarathi Chakraborty
parthasarathiauthor@gmail.com

With a renewed enthusiasm and continued expectation of generous patronage from the Indian diaspora as in the last four years, Samhita Cultural Association of Arizona (nicknamed *AZ Samhita*) is again preparing to successfully celebrate Saraswati Puja this new year on 21st January, 2018 (Sunday) at the Community Center in Downtown Chandler (125E Commonwealth Avenue, Chandler AZ 85225). This time with a rejuvenated vigor mixed with the traditional fervor.



True to its meaning (*to unite*) and motto (*to Embrace, Share and Celebrate*), the AZ Samhita executive team brings together participation from a broad multicultural spectrum of the local Hindu Indian-origin population (be it linguistic, regional, etc.). As the fellowship gets stronger with the showcase of talent and cultural passion at every event, this attraction brings in folks of other nations as well, interested to know more about the Indian culture.

Saraswati Puja (a.k.a. *Vasant Panchami*) is a Hindu festival celebrated on the fifth day of 'Shukla Paksha' (bright half of the lunar cycle) in the Indian traditional calendar month of 'Magha'. This day typically coincides with the months of January or February in the Gregorian calendar. 'Vasant Panchami' specifically means 'the fifth day of spring', and thus this festival heralds the beginning of spring. The date marks the auspicious Saraswati

Puja celebrations in eastern, northern, central, parts of western India, and in Nepal. This festival is traditionally celebrated in various ways at different parts of the Indian subcontinent. AZ Samhita celebrates this on a weekend day closest to the calendar date, to enable strongest participation from the community.



As per Hindu scriptures, Goddess Saraswati (daughter of Lord Shiva and Goddess Durga) was born on this day. Saraswati Puja is thus primarily celebrated to worship Goddess Saraswati (also spelled as *Sarasvati*), revered as the ancient Hindu Goddess of learning, language, knowledge, wisdom, music, and all forms of art. She (being the divine consort of Lord Brahma) symbolizes the source of all forms of creative energy and power that exists in nature (in its purest form), including love, life, light, truth, and reality.

Goddess Saraswati is referred accordingly in every major ancient and medieval Hindu literature. In Hindu mythology, She is part of the trinity (a.k.a. *Tridevi*) based on the 'Devi Mahatmya' in 'Markandeya Purana'. Embedded into the 'Sankhya' philosophy of the three 'Gunas' (*tri-gunas*), She is

known as ‘Mahasaraswati’ (*creator, Sattvic*) and is thus central to key Hindu religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita.

Saraswati, etymologically is a fusion of two Sanskrit words ‘sara’ meaning ‘essence’, and ‘sva’ meaning ‘one-self’; thus their union means ‘essence of oneself’, and Saraswati means ‘one who leads to the essence of self-knowledge’. The word ‘Saraswati’ was first referred to as a deity in the Rig-Veda (oldest Hindu text). Goddess Saraswati is also worshipped traditionally in different regions of India; in other oriental countries like Myanmar, Indonesia, Japan, etc; and in other religions like Buddhism.

In Hindu images, She is depicted as dressed in a pure white sari, seated on a white lotus, symbolizing light, knowledge and truth. She thus embodies knowledge and experience of the highest reality. Her symbolism lies typically in white themes from Her dress to Her ‘vahana’ (divine vehicle) ‘hamsa’ (*swan*) – the white color implies ‘Sattwa Guna’ or *purity*, manifested by an ability to identify true knowledge, insight and wisdom. She is generally shown to have four arms, but sometimes just two. The four hands symbolically mirror her divine husband Lord Brahma's four heads, representing *manas* (mind, sense), *buddhi* (intellect, reasoning), *chitta* (imagination, creativity) and *ahamkara* (self-consciousness, ego). While Brahma represents the *abstract*, Saraswati embodies action and *reality*.

Each of Her four hands hold items with symbolic meanings — a *pustaka* (book), a *mala* (garland), a *water pot*, and a *veena* (a stringed musical instrument). The ‘book’ symbolizes the Vedas representing universal, divine, eternal, and true knowledge including all forms of learning. The ‘mala’ represent the power of meditation, inner reflection and spirituality. The ‘pot of water’ represents the purifying power to distinguish right from the wrong, clean from the unclean, and essence from the inessential. The most observable feature on the image is the *veena*, representing all creative arts and sciences, and Her holding it symbolizes the expression of knowledge that creates harmony. Saraswati is often associated with *anuraga*, the love

for rhythm of music representing all emotions and feelings, expressed in the form of speech or music. Her ‘vahana’ (divine vehicle) is a white *hamsa* (swan), often located next to her feet. The ‘divine white swan’ is a symbolism for righteousness, spiritual perfection, transcendence, and moksha. In Hindu mythology, the *hamsa* is a sacred bird, symbolically embodying the unique ability among the animal world to differentiate good and evil, essential from the superficial, and eternal from the evanescent.

This festival reflects the spring season with colors as observed in the agricultural fields of India with yellow flowers of the ripening mustard crop. Hindus associate yellow as Saraswati's favorite color for offerings. Devotees dress in yellow, give yellow offerings for worship, and then share the yellow colored snacks, sweets, and saffron rice offerings as ‘prasad’.



Saraswati Puja is widely considered as the most auspicious day to start foundations of education in life – an ability to read and write. Pre-school children are initiated in reading and writing on this day. Children are encouraged to write their first alphabet on a slate board using a chalk (‘khorī’) held with their hands (‘Hatha’) during this auspicious day, implying a sacred prelude for a life-long learning with blessings from the Goddess. This ritual is referred to

as the ‘Hathe-Khori’ ceremony for a pre-school kid in eastern India.

Traditionally, Saraswati Puja worship is normally performed during the early morning hours, accompanied with ‘pushpanjali’ (prayer with offering of flowers). Apart from other seasonal fruits, ‘Kul’ (or *Indian plum, Jujube, boroi, ber*) are offered to the Goddess and later eaten as ‘prasad’. Some people traditionally refrain from eating plums before the Saraswati Puja as an age-old belief. ‘Palash’ flowers blooming in the spring season is an important offering for this puja (also ‘Shiuli’ flower). ‘Amra mukul’ or the *mango flower*, another regional Indian speciality and an essential offering, gets placed on the ‘ghat’ (the small water-filled holy pot) in front of the deity to invoke the Goddess into the idol. After the puja, traditionally devotees eat a vegetarian meal, typically consisting of ‘khichri’, ‘torkari’ (mixed vegetables), and ‘bhaja’ (fried vegetables) along with ‘kuler chatni’ (chutney made from plums). Each year on this auspicious occasion, students offer their text books and pens to the holy deity for blessings to succeed in their studies. Inkpots filled with milk and bamboo quills are offered; which are then used by devotees after the worship is completed to write ‘Aum Namoh Saraswatyay Namaha’ on ‘Bel’ (*bael* or *wood-apple*) leaves (*Bilva-patra*) as a mark of respect to the Goddess.



With the presence of a knowledgeable and devotee-friendly priest, a very able executive-committee, and strongly committed core-members, AZ Samhita will be following most of these popular traditions and rituals, including the use of a Saraswati idol seated on a specially decorated (by the members of the organization) platform. These traditional rituals

performed are ‘pushpanjali’, ‘homam’ (holy fire), ‘Saraswati pranam’, ‘Hathe-khori’, with the use of ‘Amra Mukul’, ‘Bilva Patra’, inkpot, bamboo quills, ‘kul’, yellow flowers and offerings. Worship will be accompanied by the familiar sounds of ‘dhaak’ and ‘shankha’ (conch-shells). The worship will be concluded in the morning by distribution of ‘prasad’ to all devotees (as part of a sumptuous lunch), which include offerings (bhog) to the Goddess.

In reverence of what Goddess Saraswati symbolize, AZ Samhita will be celebrating a meticulously organized cultural program in the afternoon with well-rehearsed song and dance routines, along with other performances, and an art competition. The cultural program will be performed on-stage accompanied by a gorgeous backdrop decoration, creative lighting, and an excellent sound system. The cultural program will be punctuated by the offer of tasty snacks for all participants to enjoy.

To underline what the Goddess embodies, a special edition of the AZ Samhita literary magazine will be published. Taken together, all these key contributions from the participating members and visitors at every step of the celebration will reinforce strength of the AZ Samhita organization in planning and execution of such hugely popular events that bind together people in the valley with meaningful cultural and traditional tie; built with a friendly rapport and camaraderie. The resulting experience will be something to cherish round the year for all the participants and visitors; both young and old.

Please visit the AZ Samhita Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/azsamhita/> or the website www.azsamhita.org to know more about the organization, their upcoming events and to patronize their noble cause by joining the AZ Samhita team.