

Hymns from the *Rig Veda*

Of the several Vedic texts, the Rig Veda is most fundamental to Indian thought, the others dealing with more particular matters such as the sacrificial formulas, melodies, and magic. Composed over a long period of time and coming into their present form between 1500 and 1000 b.c.e., the Vedic hymns were eventually attributed to the divine breath or to a vision of the seers.

A time is envisioned when the world was not, only a watery chaos (the dark, "indistinguishable sea") and a warm cosmic breath, which could give an impetus of life. Notice how thought gives rise to desire (when something is thought of it can then be desired) and desire links non-being to being (we desire what is not but then try to bring it about that it is). Yet the whole process is shrouded in mystery.

Where do the gods fit in this creation scheme?

Creation Hymn

The non-existent was not; the existent was not at that time. The atmosphere was not nor the

heavens which are beyond. What was concealed? Where? In whose protection? Was it water? An unfathomable abyss?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was not distinction of day or night. That alone breathed windless by its own power. Other than that there was not anything else.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning. All this was an indistinguishable sea. That which becomes, that which was enveloped by the void, that alone was born through the power of heat.

Upon that desire arose in the beginning. This was the first discharge of thought. Sages discovered this link of the existent to the nonexistent, having searched in the heart with wisdom.

Their line [of vision] was extended across; what was below, what was above? There were impregnators, there were powers: inherent power below, impulses above.

Who knows truly? Who here will declare whence it arose, whence this creation? The gods are subsequent to the creation of this. Who, then, knows whence it has come into being?

Whence this creation has come into being; whether it was made or not; he in the highest heaven is its surveyor. Surely he knows, or perhaps he knows not.

Agni, the god of fire, whose name is the common word for fire, is a terrestrial deity, only loosely anthropomorphic. He is most often compared to animals, with wood for his food and melted butter for his drink. He is the mouth by which the gods consume those items during the sacrifice. He is born from wood (as two sticks are rubbed together), but then devours his parents. As "Lord of the House," he is a guest in human dwellings in the form of the domestic fire.

How is Agni supposed to "bring the gods here"?

To Agni (Fire)

I call upon Agni, the one placed in front, the divine priest of the sacrifice, the invoker, the best bestower of gifts.

Agni is worthy of being called upon by seers past and present: may he bring the gods here!

Foundations (8000 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

Through Agni may one obtain wealth and prosperity day by day, splendid and abounding in heroic sons.

O Agni, the sacrifice and work of the sacrifice, which you encompass on all sides--that alone goes to the gods.

May Agni, the invoker who has the powers of a sage, true and most brilliant in glory, come here, a god with the gods!

Whatsoever favor you wish to do for a worshipper, Agni, that favor of yours surely comes true, O Angiras [member of a priestly family].

O Agni, you who gleam in the darkness, to you we come day by day, with devotion and bearing homage;

to you, ruler of the sacrifices, keeper of the Rta [cosmic law], brightly shining, growing in your abode.

So, be of easy access to us, Agni, as a father to his son. Abide with us for our well-being.

Indra is a sky god and a war god who holds the earth and the heavens apart, on occasion making the earth tremble. As the counterpart of Zeus for the Greeks or Jupiter for the Romans, he is the god of the thunderstorm, who vanquishes drought and darkness. He is the most frequently mentioned god in the Veda, the most nationalistic, and the most anthropomorphic. The serpent which he slew was a demon of drought, who had bottled up the streams; but Indra shattered the mountain, releasing the streams like pent up cows. "The lowly Dasa color" whom he has "put in hiding" presumably refers to the indigenous peoples of northern India who had been overcome by the Aryan invaders and either moved into the forests or migrated southward.

What is Indra supposed to do for the weary, the weak, the needy priest (a Brahman, of course) and the singer?

To Indra

The one who is first and possessed of wisdom when born; the god who strove to protect the gods with strength; the one before whose force the two worlds were afraid because of the greatness of his virility: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who made firm the quaking earth; the one who made fast the shaken mountains; the one who measured out wide the atmosphere; the one who propped up heaven: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who, having killed the serpent, released the seven rivers; the one who drove out the cows by undoing Vala, (1) the one who generates fire between two rocks, victor in battles: he, O people, is Indra.

The one by whom all things here were made moving; the one who put in hiding the lowly Dasa color; the one who, like a gambler who has won the stake, has taken the enemy's possessions: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who is the terrible one, about whom they ask "Where is he?" and they say of him, "He is not!" He diminished the enemy's possessions like stakes [at a game]. Put your faith in him: he, O people, is Indra.

The one who is the impeller of the weary, of the weak, of the Brahman seeking aid, the singer; the one with goodly mustaches who is the helper of him who works the stones, who has pressed the Soma (2): he, O people, is Indra.

The one in whose control are horses, cows, villages, all chariots; the one who has caused to be born the sun, the dawn; the one who is the waters' leader: he, O people, is Indra.

Foundations (8000 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

The one whom the two lines of battle, coming together, call upon separately, the nearer and the farther, both foes; even the two who have mounted the same chariot call upon him individually: he, O people, is Indra.

The one without whom people do not conquer; the one to whom, when fighting, they call for help; the one who is a match for everyone; the one who shakes the unshakable: he, O people, is Indra.

This is one of the latest compositions in the Rig Veda, as it suggests a sort of pantheistic philosophy. Purusa is a cosmic giant, of whom the gods and the cosmos itself are composed; yet he is also the object of the sacrifice to the gods. From him then are derived the gods in the heaven and, from the remainder, all the rest of what is, both the living and the non-living.

The top four castes are supposed to have been derived from Purusa: the Brahmans, the Rajanya (or Ksatriya), the Vaisya, and the Sudra. Which body parts are associated with each group, and what seems to be the significance of those parts?

Purusa, the Cosmic Person

Thousand-headed is Purusa, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. Having covered the earth on all sides, he stood above it the width of ten fingers.

Only Purusa is all this, that which has been and that which is to be. He is the lord of the immortals, who grow by means of [ritual] food.

Such is his greatness, yet more than this is Purusa. One-quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

Three-quarters of Purusa went upward, one-quarter of him remained here. From this [one-

quarter] he spread in all directions into what eats and what does not eat.

From him the shining one was born, from the shining one was born Purusa. When born he extended beyond the earth, behind as well as in front.

When the gods performed a sacrifice with the offering Purusa, spring was its clarified butter, summer the kindling, autumn the oblation.

It was Purusa, born in the beginning, which they sprinkled on the sacred grass as a sacrifice. With him the gods sacrificed, the demi-gods, and the seers.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the clotted butter was brought together. It made the beasts of the air, the forest and the village.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the mantras [Rig Veda] and the songs [Samaveda] were born. The meters were born from it. The sacrificial formulae [Yajurveda] were born from it.

From it the horses were born and all that have cutting teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it, also. From it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusa, how many ways did they apportion him? What was his mouth? What were his arms? What were his thighs, his feet declared to be?

His mouth was the Brahman [caste], his arms were the Rajanaya [Ksatriya caste], his thighs the Vaisya [caste]; from his feet the Sudra [caste] was born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni [fire]; from his breath Vayu [wind] was born.

Foundations (8000 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

From his navel arose the air; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the [four] directions from his ear. Thus, they fashioned the worlds.

Seven were his altar sticks, three times seven were the kindling bundles, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound the beast Purusa.

The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. These were the first rites. These

powers reached the firmament, where the ancient demi-gods and the gods are.

Translated by Michael Myers

(1) The cave in which the cattle were imprisoned.

(2) A beverage made from the juice of a plant (probably a hallucinogenic mushroom) and used in religious ceremonies; also a god.

The Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita has been an essential text of Hindu culture in India since the time of its composition in the first century A.D. One of the great classics of world literature, it has inspired such diverse thinkers as Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and T.S. Eliot.

Chapter One THE FIRST TEACHING ARJUNA'S DEJECTION

Arjuna, his war flag a rampant monkey, saw Dhritarashtra's sons assembled as weapons were ready to clash, and he lifted his bow. 20

He told his charioteer: "Krishna, halt my chariot between the armies! 21

Far enough for me to see these men who lust for war, ready to fight with me in the strain of battle. 22

I see men gathered here, eager to fight, bent on serving the folly of Dhritarashtra's son." 23

When Arjuna had spoken, Krishna halted their splendid chariot between the armies. 24

Facing Bhishma and Drona and all the great kings, he said, "Arjuna, see the Kuru men assembled here!" 25

Arjuna saw them standing there: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, and friends. 26

He surveyed his elders and companions in both armies, all his kinsmen assembled together. 27

Dejected, filled with strange pity, he said this: "Krishna, I see my kinsmen gathered here, wanting war. 28

My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh. 29

The magic bow slips from my hand, my skin burns, I cannot stand still, my mind reels. 30

I see omens of chaos, Krishna; I see no good in killing my kinsmen in battle. 31

Krishna, I seek no victory, or kingship or pleasures. What use to us are kingship, delights, or life itself? 32

We sought kingship, delights, and pleasures for the sake of those assembled to abandon their lives and fortunes in battle. 33