

VEDAS (c. 1500-900 BCE)

Overview The four *Vedas* (from the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge') are compilations of hymns, myths, charms, curses and instructions on the performance and power of ritual. Orally composed in Sanskrit, and handed down for generations, they represent the oldest strata of Indian literature (and the oldest surviving literary texts still in use in any language). The earliest of the four Vedas and the one with the greatest amount of literary (or mythic) content is the *Rig Veda* (c. 1500-1200 BCE). The *Rig Veda* contains 1028 hymns in praise (*ric>rig* means 'praise') of various deities, most of whom are not worshipped today but whose stories have been preserved by later myths and epics. The literary brilliance of the *Rig Veda* lies in its vivid imagery and dramas enacted by priests, natural forces and the gods. Other parts of the *Rig Veda* speculate about the cosmos, its origins and purpose, while also explaining its structure and providing protection against its enemies. Some of its verses are, at the same time, charms and curses, intended to protect the cattle-keeping Indo-Aryans from disease, accidents and raids.

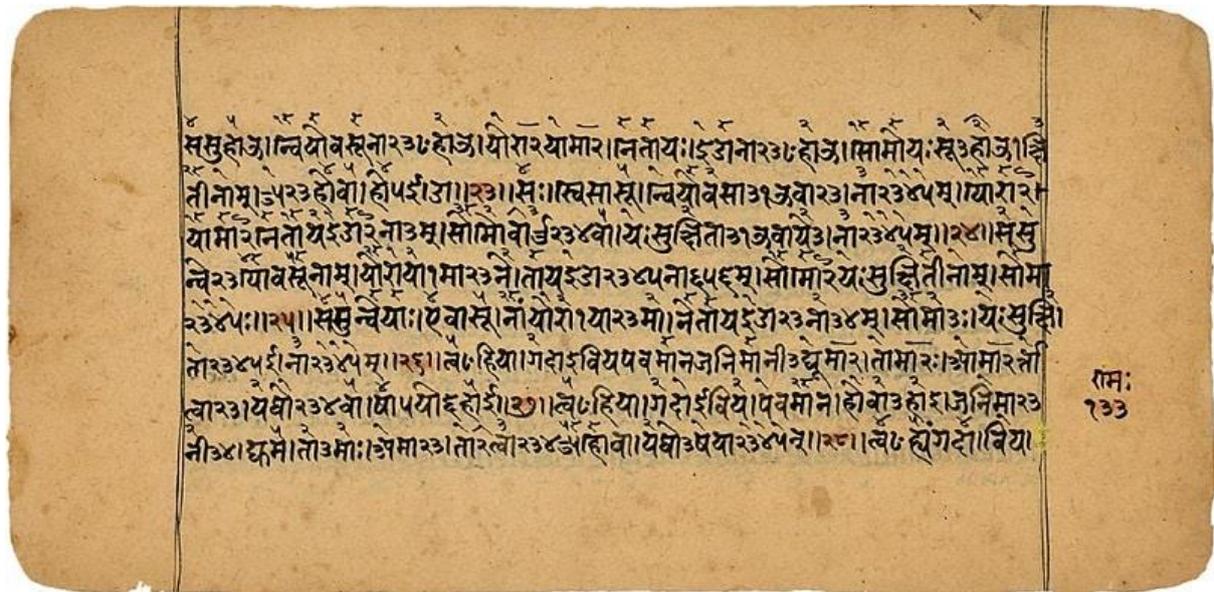
The three other Vedic compilations (*Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*), which were composed over two or three centuries (approximately 1200-900 BCE), focus less on cosmology and more on the performance of ritual. Of these three, the *Sama Veda* is the most abstruse and also musical, being a re-arrangement of certain verses from the *Rig Veda* for liturgical purposes. The *Yajur Veda* is more or less a 'hymn book,' containing verses to be sung by an assistant priest during the sacrifice. The *Atharva Veda*, the most recent of the four texts, is very different from the other three in that it is almost entirely a collection of charms and imprecations.

Also included in what is called 'Vedic literature' are three categories of mainly prose texts composed (c. 900-500 BCE) as auxiliaries or commentaries to the four *Vedas*. These are, in chronological order, the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*. The *Brahmanas* are explanations in prose concerning how to perform sacrifices, that is, a manual to be used by men less learned than the priests. The *Aranyakas*, or 'Forest Books,' are less functional and more contemplative, to be used by men toward the end of life when, by convention, they enter the forest for meditation. The last and most important of these auxiliary texts are the 18 *Upanishads* (see separate essay), which represent a significant shift in the development of Indian religion, away from ritual and toward contemplation.

Taken all together, the four Vedic texts provide the foundations of ancient Indian Hinduism, more properly called Brahminism. They give us myths about the beginning of the world, about the gods and their enemies, about the necessity of ritual, about the role of Brahmin priests and about power of the spoken word itself, that is, about the *Vedas* themselves.

History We believe, on the basis of linguistic and archaeological evidence, that the Vedas were composed over a number of centuries (c. 1500-900 BCE) as the Indo-Aryans migrated from central Asia (more precisely from the area west of the Caspian Sea), across modern-day Afghanistan, through the Khyber Pass and into northwest India. These Sanskrit-speaking, cattle-raising Aryans were part of a wider Indo-European dispersal ('Erie,' the old word for Ireland, for example, is cognate with 'Aryan'). The Indo-Aryans were closely related to people who settled in Iran (another cognate word), as demonstrated by the parallels between Vedic and ancient Persian languages, religions and mythologies. It cannot be said often enough that the *Vedas* were not written down. They were orally composed, recited and transmitted from one generation of Brahmin priests to another, right from the ancient period to the present day. Both then and today, memorisation of the huge Vedic texts was an arduous undertaking, with rigorous rules in order to ensure that they would be passed down without changing a single syllable in order to ensure their efficacy in ritual. Indeed, although regional 'schools' of Vedic recitation evolved over time with different textual emphases and tonal variation, the actual words that each school recites has remained the same. Scholars, working mostly from 20th-century field research, have identified eight different 'paths' of memorisation. In one path, for example, every two adjacent words were recited in their original order, then in reverse order and finally in their original order. The most complex method involved reciting the entire *Rig Veda* in reverse order. What is less clear is the manuscript history of the Vedas. As far as we know, they

were not written down until the Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE). Extant manuscripts date from the 11th century CE and printed texts from the 19th century CE.



MS 5293

Veyagana, Book of chants of the liturgical Kauthuma Samhita of the Samaveda. India, 1672
Manuscript of the Sama Veda, dated 1672

Cultural significance The Vedas were, and still remain, immensely important to Indian culture. The *Rig Veda* contains many of the best-known ancient myths, in which the king of the gods slays the cloud-dragon, and the Sun rides his seven-horses and chariot across the heavens. The Vedas represent not just the past, though, but the very origins of Indian literature, imbuing these texts with the mystery and potency of beginnings. Vedic society has vanished, and much of Vedic religion has disappeared or been altered. Today, the four Vedas are little understood by most Indians, and many of the gods and goddesses mentioned in them are no longer worshipped. Indeed, Vedic Sanskrit became obsolete long before even the turn of the Christian era. However, and partly for this reason, it has acquired a sacred status that continues to this day. The category of 'Veda' has persisted throughout Indian history, with many important texts in regional languages being hailed as the 'Fifth Veda.' And while the practice of chanting the full Vedas has declined, some Brahmin priests, especially in Kerala on the southwest coast, still chant Vedic verses to accompany ceremonies. Elements of Vedas are also still alive in popular culture. For example, the heart of Vedic religion is the fire sacrifice, with many hymns devoted to Agni (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice. This fire sacrifice is the central ritual of modern-day Hindu weddings. Another example is the Gayatri hymn, a verse dedicated to the sun-god Surya, which is chanted today on many occasions.

Themes of the Rig Veda

Wonder Anyone reading modern-day translations of the hymns in the *Rig Veda* will be struck by its sense of wonder. We can envision ancient priests sitting under a night sky and chanting verses about the goddess of Dawn (Usha), the god of the thunderbolt (Indra), the god of the sun (Surya) and the lord of the underworld (Yama). We read descriptions of the radiant sun who 'has filled heaven and earth, and the space between; who is the inner reality of the moving and the unmoving.' The people who composed and recited these verses lived largely under the open sky; as pastoralists, rather than settled farmers, they did not build cities or towns. But they did spend long hours contemplating the nature of the world they saw around them, which was not always benign. These ancient people constructed a complex system of recitation and ritual that, they hoped, would control the otherwise unpredictable natural forces. Nothing was left to chance, and the only figures of fun in these ancient texts are the hapless gamblers who lose their wealth and their families. And what the

ancient Aryans could not control they tried to comprehend. How did the world arise? Whence did it come? What happens at death? Chanting the 1028 verses of the *Rig Veda* and performing the intricate elements of a fire sacrifice might help to preserve one's health and prevent natural disasters, but even then, the ancient Aryans could never be certain. That is why the most famous hymn of the *Rig Veda*, which attempts to explain the origins of the world, ends with a question (see the first text in translation, below).

Speech Another prominent theme of the *Rig Veda* is the power of speech. In a sense, this is simply a case of self-promotion since the text itself was orally composed, recited and transmitted. But perhaps there is no other world religion or sacred text that celebrates the power of speech so often and with such enthusiasm as this ancient Sanskrit compilation of hymns. One explicit demonstration of this valorisation is that speech is actually a goddess (Vac) in the text. As the 'mother of the Vedas' and the consort of the powerful god Indra, she energises the priests and others who respect her. Speech is also said to have four layers, or divisions, of which humans only understand the first; the other three are the revealed to gods and priests. Speech is not just sound, the pleasing rhythms of poetry (though it is certainly that); it is also a force that can affect the material world. If, that is, it is chanted in the correct manner. This is where the concept of the *mantra*, a much-misused word, is relevant. A *mantra* is a word or formula, which, if spoken by a knowledgeable person in the correct way, is potent. Based on the concept of correspondence, through which the visible world is linked to the invisible, speech can alter the conditions of someone's life, whether to increase prosperity through sacrifice or to thwart disease through a spell. Finally, the theme of the potency of speech connects this ancient layer of literature with India's many oral traditions, both popular and sophisticated.

Optimism A third important theme in the *Rig Veda* is its sense of optimism. Despite the uncertainties of the natural world, the ancient Aryans express an exuberance and enthusiasm for life in this ancient text. While there are a few 'dark' hymns fearful about the after-life and the indignity of poverty, most of the text celebrates the life-giving powers of the world, the fecundity of the earth and the magnanimity of the gods, especially if men honour them with sacrifice. A great deal of the *Rig Veda* is devoted to the heroism of cattle-raids, the benefits of having sons and the intoxicating juice of the *soma* plant. Of course, men will always suffer ailments and setbacks, but the people of the *Rig Veda* appear to be wealthy pastoralists, confident in dealing with their enemies and reassured that there is order in the cosmos. Order underpins happiness and prosperity, and order can be (more or less) guaranteed by the priests who chant the verses that manipulate the world. It is striking, indeed, that we come across few sorrowful hymns in the *Rig Veda*. Ghosts are scarce, and any anxieties about death are covered up by a buoyant, exuberant celebration of life. Beneath those vast, open skies, the ancient Aryans saw a world filled with wonder and prosperity, and successful sacrifices would secure a permanent place in heaven. Gloomy considerations of death, of the inexorable laws of karma and a painful return to earth, were left for the *Upanishads*, which appeared centuries later.

Key stories

Creation The pantheistic *Rig Veda* contains more than one creation myth. One verse proclaims that speech (the goddess Vac) created the world (not dissimilar to the biblical 'In the beginning was the word'). In another verse, the world emerges from a primeval sacrifice of a man, who is then divided into four parts corresponding to the four major caste groups. In other verses, the world is created from a 'golden womb' and a 'universal egg.' The most often quoted story, however, suggests that the world arose from a combination of water, heat and desire, which comes close to an ancient understanding of biology. But this famous story is also layered with doubt and questions about creation. In it, the Aryans sages ask, 'How did being evolve from non-being?' They ask but find no certainty, not even among those 'who look down on it, in the highest heaven.' When we read these lines in the *Rig Veda*, we enter a dialogue about the mystery of life that stretches back three thousand years.

Indra A second, very well-known story is that of Indra, the king of the gods, who slays the dragon-demon Vritra. Indra is the most prominent of all the gods in the *Rig Veda*, with nearly one quarter of the verses dedicated to him and his martial exploits. Warriors as well as pastoralists, the ancient Aryans created Indra as a supernatural figure who represents strength and valour. Vritra, the serpent-like monster, was a huge demon that lay coiled around a mountain within which all the world's waters were contained. He is the enemy of all gods, having swallowed the sun and the heavens.

After a ferocious battle, Indra defeats this demon by using his thunderbolts, which break open the mountain and release the penned-up waters. Indra's killing of the demon is thus a quasi-creation myth since the *Rig Veda* says that by crushing the demon and releasing the cosmic waters, Indra 'gave life to the Sun and Dawn and Heaven.' As the releaser of waters and the wielder of thunderbolts, Indra is often called the 'storm' god. This figure of natural and supernatural power is one of the most enduring in all Indian mythology, appearing not only in all layers of Hinduism but also in Buddhist and Jain myths. He was also successfully transported overseas to southeast Asia, where Hindu kings and merchants spread their culture in the region (c. 500-1200 CE). Indra also has an obvious parallel with Zeus in Greek mythology and Thor in Norse mythology.

Caste system A third significant story in the *Rig Veda* is the so-called 'creation of man,' which explains the four-fold division of Indian society, which over time evolved into the caste system. In its original form, however, this story is less about sociology and more about the power of ritual sacrifice. The 'cosmic man' who is dismembered is called *purusha* (lit. 'man'), which seems to be an anthropomorphic combination of various deities and also a microcosmic representation of the world. The sacrifice of the cosmic man is described as a template for the ritual sacrifices performed on earth by priests. This is another example of the Vedic principle of correspondence, that the invisible is linked to the visible and that the vast cosmos can be replicated in a human being. Ever since the late 18th century, however, when foreign scholars began to translate the *Rig Veda*, the story has been seized on as an explanation for caste. And there is no doubt that the metaphor of dismembering the primal man did have a social meaning. This is clear when we read: 'His mouth was the Brahman, his arms were the Rajanaya [Kshatriya caste], his thighs the Vaisya [caste]; from his feet the Sudra [caste] was born.' Again, as with many Vedic myths, this creation story has close parallels with the sacrifice of a giant, primordial man (*ur mensch*) in German and Norse mythology.



(young men instructed in Vedic chanting, Kerala, date unknown)



(Indra riding his elephant and holding his thunderbolt, Java c. 900 CE)



(Representation of the cosmic man, painting on parchment, Orissa, 18th century)

Reading

Joel Brereton and Stephanie W. Jamison, *The Rig Veda*, 2014

Wendy O'Flaherty (Doniger), *The Rig Veda*, 1981

Frits Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Rituals, Mantras, Insights*, 2008

Texts

1 Creation of the World, translated by Wendy Doniger, 1981

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep? There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat. Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above. Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows. Or perhaps he does not know.

2. Indra slays Vritra, translated by Wendy Doniger, 1981

I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the thunder-wielder.

He slew the dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.

He slew the dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder Twashtar [the heavenly artisan] fashioned.

Like lowing cows in rapid flow descending, the waters glided downward to the ocean.

Impetuous as a bull, he chose the Soma, and quaffed in threefold sacrifice the juices.

Bountiful Indra grasped the thunder for his weapon, and smote to death this firstborn of the dragons.

When, Indra, you had slain the dragon's firstborn, and overcome the charms of the enchanters.

Then, giving life to sun and dawn and heaven, you found not one foe to stand against you.

Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vritra worst of dragons.

As trunks of trees, what time the axe has felled them, low on the earth so lies the prostrate dragon.

He, like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many-slaying hero.

He, brooking not the clashing of the weapons, crushed--Indra's foe--the shattered forts [clouds imprisoning rain] in falling.

Footless and handless still he challenged Indra, who smote him with his bolt between the shoulders.

Emasculated yet claiming manly vigor, thus Vritra lay with scattered limbs dissevered.

Nothing availed him. Lightning, nothing, nor thunder, hailstorm or mist which he had spread around him.

When Indra and the dragon strove in battle, Mighty Indra gained the victory for ever.

Indra is king of all that moves and moves not, of creatures tame and horned, the thunder-wielder.

Over all living men he rules as sovereign, containing all as spokes within a rim.

3 The Creation of Man, translated by Michael Meyers

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 Rajanya [Kshatriya 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.

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.