

Why Read Rig Veda



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TABLE OF CONTENT

-  [Summary](#)
-  [Essence of Rig Veda](#)
-  [Critics of Rig Veda](#)
-  [Women in Vedic Age](#)
-  [Rig Vedic Mantra](#)
-  [Veda in Indian Tradition](#)
-  [Why read Rig Veda](#)
-  [Deva](#)
-  [Yajna](#)
-  [First hymn of Rig Veda](#)
-  [Veda and Upanishads](#)
-  [Vedic way of Life](#)
-  [Technology in Veda](#)
-  [Date of Rig Veda](#)





Summary

Rigveda samhita is a vast book of more than ten thousand verses in several metres in ancient Sanskrit. In spite of its antiquity - its age is six millennia or more - its ideals are relevant for the moderns also who are enamoured of the slogans of the French revolution of the eighteenth century namely, equality, liberty and fraternity. Rigveda is the only scripture among those of all religions in which the wisdom was revealed to both women and men sages. In which religion other than Hinduism, do we find women having the status of prophets? The idea of equality for all persons, particularly women, is evident in several hymns such as 10.85 [*sukta* 85 of tenth mandala] where the hymns urge that the daughter-in-law be treated as a queen. It is the only scripture where the sceptics are specifically mentioned and treated with respect without mentioning the threat of hell if they do not change their beliefs. The concept of hell does not find a place in Rigveda. It mentions the presence of several religions and languages AV (12.1.45). It calls upon all persons to strive to become noble in that pluralistic society RV (9.63.5).

The Rigveda is full of spiritual and psychological wisdom and is also magnificent poetry. It is the earliest book to declare that knowledge is infinite like a vast mountain, in which each peak corresponds to one branch of knowledge; RV (1.10.2). They welcomed knowledge from all sources, RV (1.89.1).





The Essence of Rigveda

Rigveda can be interpreted in several different planes or levels as first mentioned by Yaska, the earliest commentator (2000 BCE or earlier). Of these, the spiritual-psychological-symbolic interpretation is considered the deepest or most subtle by many ancient authorities (books) like the *Brahmana* books, *Brhaddevata*, Upanishads, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, medieval *vedantic* teachers like Sri Madhvacharya and Sri Raghavendra Swami and moderns like Sri Aurobindo and Sri Kapali Sastry. It has four key steps described briefly below [1; 16, Vol. 4].

"This is the first, the central teaching: the central aim, with which accords all the rest in the Veda, is the seeking after the attainment of the Truth, Immortality and Light. There is a Truth higher and deeper than the truth of the outer existence; there is a Light greater and higher than the light of human understanding which comes by extraordinary and transhuman sight and hearing. There is an Immortality towards which the human soul has to rise. We have to find our way to that and get into touch with that Truth and Immortality RV (1.68.2). We have to be new-born into the truth, to grow in it, to ascend in spirit into the World of Truth and live in it. Such a realisation alone is to pass from mortality to Immortality, to unite with the supreme God-head".

Here is the second doctrine of the Mystics: there is an inferior truth of this world because it is mixed with much falsehood RV (7.60.5). There is another higher truth, the Home of Truth RV (1.164.47), RV (4.21.3) - "The Truth, the Right, the Vast' AV (12.1.1) as described (taught) in the mantras. True knowledge there is termed *rta-chit* RV (4.3.4), Truth-Consciousness. And there are other worlds. But the highest is the World of Truth and Light. This is the World celebrated as the Svar, the Great Heaven. We have to find the path to this Great Heaven, the path of Truth RV (4.3.4)".

And this is the substance of the third Doctrine: In the world-journey our life is a battle-field of the *Devas* and *Asuras*; the Gods are the powers of Truth, Light and Immortality and the *Asuras*, the powers of the opposing Darkness. These are Vrtra, Panis, the Dasyus and their kings. We have to call in the aid of the Gods to destroy these powers of Darkness who cover the Light. We have to invoke the Gods in the inner sacrifice by the Voice potent with the power of the *mantra*. To them offering of whatever is ours is made; receiving all that is given by them in return, we shall be enabled and competent to ascend the path of the goal.

"Finally, this is the supreme secret of the *vedic rishis*: at the summit of all the mystic teaching is, 'The One Reality' *ekam sat* RV (1.164.46), 'That One' *tad ekam* RV (10.129.2) which later became the central goal of the *rishis* of the Upanishads, taught with explanation in detail."





Critics of Rigveda

Rigveda Samhita has been ignored or vigorously criticized by several groups, based on mistranslation or misrepresentation of isolated verses in the Rigveda. According to one group, Rigveda Samhita is a book of rituals with only occasional wisdom in it; only the Upanishads can be termed as the earliest books of Hinduism to deal with wisdom. This group includes several traditionalists and also distinguished academics like Radhakrishnan and Zehner who do not claim to be experts in the Veda. My reply is as follows; None of the critics can point to a single hymn in RV out of its 1017 hymns which gives the details of a rite or ritual. For instance, Agni, which is translated as fire in the altar, is mentioned in several hundred verses. If we read carefully all these verses and study all the descriptive epithets in them, we see that Agni is a cosmic power who performs all the actions as stated in RV (1.1.1). There is no mention of human priests lighting Agni. The hymn (1.44) explicitly states that the cosmic powers Mitra and Varuna kindle Agni, a psychological power in the subtle body of human beings.

Regarding the Upanishads, it is interesting to note that many of the famous quotations of Upanishads are contained in the Rigveda. The most famous concept of Upanishads namely *ekam sat*, the One Existence, is already found in RV (1.164.49). The famous verse of *Mundaka* Upanishad comparing the human soul and the Divine to a pair of birds is found in RV (1.164.45). The phrase, "all human beings are children of immortality, *amrtasya putrah*", quoted frequently by Swami Vivekananda is often ascribed to *sveteshvatara* Upanishad. But it actually occurs in RV (10.13.1). We shall add more information later.

The second group of critics traces the problems of modern Hindu society such as untouchability, casteism etc., to this ancient book. This criticism has absolutely no support from the text of the Rigveda Samhita or any other Vedic book; SYV (26.2) and the RV (9.63.5). As a matter of fact, the Vedic books explicitly state that the Vedic knowledge should be given to all including *Shudras* and strangers.

Moreover, in every society all over the globe, there is a huge gap between the ideals propounded by various religions in these societies and the actual practices. Attacking only the scriptures of Hinduism on this basis but keeping silent on the gap between the theory and practice in other religions in other societies is nothing but intellectual dishonesty.





Women in the Vedic Age

RV is the only scripture among those of all religions in which the Divine Truths are revealed to women sages also and some of these hymns describing the revelation find a prominent place in the RV Samhita like the hymn (10.125) (tenth mandala, 125 *sukta* or hymn) attributed to the woman sage *Vak Ambrini*. There are more than thirty women sages in RV with specific hymns associated with them. In all the Semitic religions like Christianity, Islam etc., there is no mention of any revelation to women and no woman is listed among the prominent disciples of the founders or prophets of those religions.

There are numerous hymns in the Rigveda indicating the high status accorded to women in the *vedic* society. RV (10.27.12) explicitly states that the practice of a lady choosing her own husband was in vogue. The hymn (10.85), the marriage hymn, explicitly states that the daughter-in-law should be treated as a queen, *samrajni*, by all the family members especially the mother-in-law, husband, father-in-law. In RV (10.85.26) the bride was exhorted to address the assembly; To be asked to address the assembly was regarded as an honour by most of the sages. Thus the statement that, "women were oppressed in Hindu society even from the *vedic* times", made orally and in popular writings by some moderns is nothing but patent falsehood. Some of the quotations given by these critics are from the period of the *sutra* books which are dated more than two thousand years later than the Rigveda. Naturally these critics suppress quotations which speak of the high status of women in the society of *Rig Vedic* period and the period of Upanishads.

Even today, some orthodox persons deny the right of chanting the Veda to women. However, they cannot cite any authoritative scripture to support their views. Any book in Sanskrit cannot be accepted as a scripture or divine revelation. When the famous poet, Sanskrit scholar and spiritual savant, Vasishta Ganapati Muni, the foremost disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi, challenged these orthodox persons to provide evidence to support their claims, no evidence was forth coming.





Rig Vedic Mantra

The Rigveda Samhita is one of four Veda Samhitas, the others being Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. All of them have been handed down to us over thousands of years by an oral tradition without an error of even a syllable by special methods of recitation using techniques similar to those in modern error detecting and correcting codes in electronics and computers. Rigveda has 1,028 hymns or 10,552 mantras, Yajurveda has 1,976 mantras, Samaveda has 1,865 mantras and the Atharvaveda has 6,038 mantras. Among these, 1,442 mantras are common both to Rigveda and Samaveda and 481 mantras are common to Rigveda and Yajurveda. All the mantras, except for some in Yajurveda, are in the form of couplets in different metres consisting of 24 to 50 syllables. Every syllable has to be recited in one of three forms indicated by the accent marks in the printed texts. Yajurveda has several prose mantras. Samaveda has additional notation because its verses have to be sung musically.

"The *vedic* word is described in RV [10.71, 1-5] as that which is supreme and at the topmost height of speech, the best and the most faultless. It is something that is hidden in secrecy and from there it emerges and is manifested. It has entered into the truth-seers, the *rishis* and it is found by following the nuances of their speech. But all do not have access to its esoteric meaning. Those who do not know the inner sense are as men who seeing see not, hearing hear not, only to one here and there the word revealing to him like a beautifully robed wife to a husband as she lays her body open. Others unable to drink steadily of the milk of the word, the Vedic Cow, move with it as with one who gives no milk; to him the word is a tree without flowers or fruits." (Sri Aurobindo's translation).

Every *sukta* or hymn of RV is associated with the name of a *rishi* or *rishika* and the name of a *deva* or *devi*. There are about thirty women rishis in the RV. The *rishi* or *rishika* received the revelation of wisdom from the supreme plane termed as *parama vyoman* in RV and transcribed it into poems with appropriate words and metres. Thus there is no contradiction between the traditional view that the Veda is *apaurusheya*, not composed by a human being and the modern view that the *rishis* are the poets of RV since the verses came out of their mouth. This is clear from the RV itself. The method of receipt of the wisdom varies from person to person; some hear it, some perceive it in their consciousness, some see it, as modern poets like Sri Aurobindo and Sri Vasishtha Ganapati Muni testify. RV (10.71.4) explicitly refers to the seeing of the words *dadarsha vacham*. Obviously seeing words is not possible without a script.

There are three types of mantras, namely *rik*, a word of illumination, *yajus* associated with *yajna* translated as sacrifice and *Saman*, that which has to be sung. All the mantras of Rigveda are *riks*. Atharvaveda has mantras of all the



Why Read Rig Veda

three types and is as sacred as the other Veda Samhitas. *Mantra* is not ordinary poetry. As Sri Aurobindo states:

"*Mantra* is the word that carries the godhead in it or

the power of the godhead,

Can bring it into the consciousness and fix there it and its workings,

Awaken there the thrill of the infinite, the force of something absolute,

Perpetuate the miracle of the supreme utterance." RV (7.10.3), RV (7.16.8).





Veda in Indian Tradition

In the Indian tradition coming down to us through the ages, all the Veda Samhitas and particularly the Rigveda Samhita are considered as repositories of the eternal spiritual knowledge. The Veda is worshipped as a person - Veda *Purusha*. It antedates all the other books of knowledge like the *puranas*, Upanishads and so on. Moreover, the important scriptures such as the *Bhagavata Purana* or the *Mahabharata* or the classical scriptures in the language Tamil like *Tiruvaymozhi* claim that they are giving in an easy way the essentials of the knowledge in Vedas, which is difficult to understand.

The Upanishads, the books of spiritual knowledge to the moderns, quote many verses from the Rigveda. The oft-quoted verse from the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* describing all human beings as the children of immortality *amrtasya putrah* is in RV (10.13.1). The older Upanishads, like *Chandogya* and *Brhadaranyaka*, appeal to the Rigveda to support their own positions by declaring "so said a *Rik*".

Rigveda Samhita itself declares in many verses that it contains a secret knowledge; see RV (4.3.16) and RV (5.62.1). Some of the relevant phrases are: the words of secrecy *ninya vachamsi, apichyam, guhyam*, hidden in the Cave and so on [2;16, Vol. 4].

In *Rig vedic* times, this secret knowledge was handed down from the teacher to the chosen disciples. Most persons of these times did not have access to this secret knowledge. The ordinary person of these times heard these mantras recited at the communal rites *yajnas* and derived the benefit from them depending on his faith in them.

Rigveda itself says in RV (1.64.39) and (7.61.5) that this secret will remain sealed for most people. The secret is not of the kind which can be told in a few words. It reveals itself only to those who have intense aspiration for understanding it and have undergone appropriate spiritual practices. RV declares; it will not be revealed to one whose being is not purified by the fire of *yoga* as declared in RV (9.83.1), also (1.24.12).

Still there are many verses which display their meaning in clear terms, some of which appear in the boxes in these pages.

There is a misconception about the Rigveda Samhita that it is a book of rituals, and is devoid of wisdom. None can point out the details of a single rite or ritual in the Rigveda. Rigveda does contain words connected with rituals like *purohit* etc. But if one reads the Rigveda carefully one sees that the rites mentioned in the Rigveda are symbolic and the performer of these rites is the God *Agni* and not any human priest or a human patron. The *Brahmana* books which give the



Why Read Rig Veda

details of the rites explicitly declare [*Shatapatha Brahmana*, 10.5.4-16] that one should understand the symbolic character of the rituals. Yaska, the earliest commentator on the Rigveda, who lived much earlier than 2000 BCE declares that Rigveda can be understood at three different levels, of which the deepest is the spiritual symbolic interpretation. The book *Brhaddevata*, later than the *Brahmana* books, declares existence of the mystic school of interpretation of Rigveda in [6.61-62]. Relation of the Upanishads to Rigveda has already been mentioned. *Mahabharata* mentions the symbolism of Rigveda in *Ashwamedha Parva* (11.7-20) and other places. The *vedantic* commentator Sri Madhwacharya (1600 CE) and his disciple, the famous Sri Raghavendra Swami, emphasize its spiritual character. This tradition has been continued in modern times by Sri Aurobindo, Sri Kapali Sastry and others by their detailed commentaries and explanations. Thus the spiritual-symbolic interpretation has the support of not only the ancient books but also that of the moderns.





Why read Rigveda?

The sages of RV expressed their wisdom about the goal of existence and the methods of achieving the goal by means of a four-fold formula of immortality or all-round perfection or bliss, freedom and knowledge which integrates all the aspects of existence and finally, the supreme Divine or God who pervades everything but is not limited by anything. If we study all the verses in RV grouped under these four headings, we get a glimpse of both the breadth and depth of the RV and notice that RV contains the seeds of all the multidimensional thoughts of the later Hindu spiritual literature. This is not to say that the sages of RV knew everything that is to be known or that the later teachers of Hinduism were not creative. Consider for instance, the concept of the One without the Second, *Brahman*, discussed in magnificent detail, in the Upanishad books of later times. One finds in the RV the seeds of the thought of these books. Similar comments can be made for the yoga of devotion and works, the occult psychological knowledge found in the *Tantrik* texts etc. Hence, the seer of modern times, Sri Aurobindo states that the earliest formula for wisdom will prove to be the last.

Similarly no one can claim that all of mathematics is contained in RV. But the beginning of the mathematics is certainly there as seen by the mention of the spoked wheel in RV (1.164) which implies a solution of circling the square.

Immortality *amrtatva* is declared as the goal to be achieved even while we are living, we being the sons of immortality (RV 10.13.1), a phrase quoted later in the *Shvetashvatara* Upanishad. Immortality is intimately associated with bliss or happiness denoted by words like *Soma*, *Madhu* etc. *Soma* manifests itself in the stone, the herb, the animal, man and the worlds beyond the range of the senses. It is the Delight of Existence. But this bliss is concealed. It can be released only by work. Veda repeatedly mentions the squeezing of *Soma*, *Somasuta*. It has to be purified. It is this bliss that can remove the incapacities in the human existence like death, old age and illness and render perfection in every part and lead to immortality. It leads from a partial consciousness of existence *asat* to *sat* the true existence, united with the supreme being, not only in its unity but also in multiplicity.

We have already discussed in Section 5 that freedom is a key idea in Rigveda. It has no conception of hell into which the critics are thrown! Knowledge constitutes the bulk of RV. The key note of knowledge is its integrality. It is not divided into several rigid compartments.

RV describes several worlds *lokas*, each world being based on a particular psychological principle. Only the earth in which we live, *bhumi*, is made of matter. Other worlds are supraphysical. In RV, the inner psychological structure



Why Read Rig Veda

of each person is considered to be a city *dama*, *puri*, *grha*, made up of many rooms, each room standing for one psychological power or faculty. These powers, undeveloped in the beginning, develop in the course of time in response to the aspiration of the individual, eventually, leading to perfection. This development is impossible without the help of *devas*, the distinct powers and personalities of the Supreme Being or God. Each *deva* manifests his power in each human being and literally grows in the human as described in hundreds of verses. The *devas* of the RV are faultless, perfect, always of one mind, always in touch with the Supreme Truth and always helpful to the human beings in their quest for the goal of supreme perfection.

RV has more than forty hymns about the aspects of every day life like marriage, the householder's life, the celibate student, wandering ascetic, the various professions, health, sickness and death. It deals extensively with the cause of suffering, the presence of evil forces and beings, their origin, and their influence on the human life; ever present is the discussion of the various paths to Immortality.

In every action we see the dominant contribution of the *devas*. Thus both *devas* and humans are collaborators or co-creators in all activities. Eventually every human being can achieve the perfection natural to a cosmic power *deva*. This comprehensiveness of knowledge distinguishes RV from all other spiritual books.





Deva

No deep understanding of RV is possible without having a clear perception of the two most widely occurring words in the RV namely *deva* and *yajna*. *Deva* occurs in about thirteen hundred verses. Since Agni, Indra and so on, are characterised as *devas*, almost every verse in RV refers to a *deva* directly or implicitly.

Deva is derived from the word *div*, to shine or illumine. The *devas* are beings endowed with consciousness, but without a physical body like the humans. Thus they are supraphysical beings endowed both with knowledge and power. The sages of RV were great observers of not only nature external to them like the mountains, rivers, herbs, animals and so on but also were aware of the world within themselves. They recognised different types of powers pulsating behind and within all aspects of manifestation. Behind each cosmic power, they divined the presence of a conscious being denoted as *deva* or *devi*. Each *deva* is a distinct cosmic power. Even though RV mentions thousands of *devas*, about thirty of them get detailed attention like Agni, Indra, Sarasvati, to mention a few. RV gives a picture of the qualities common to all the *devas* in the forty hymns dedicated to the *vishve-devah*, the collectivity of all the *devas*. Individual *devas* are described in different *suktas*. Indra is described in two hundred forty hymns or roughly twenty five thousand verses. Agni, is described in two hundred *suktas* and so on.

Even though *devas* like Agni or Indra are mentioned in *puranic* texts also, they are quite different from the *devas* in RV. There is no need to bring in the anecdotes of *purana* to describe the events of RV. A careful reading of RV can answer all the questions regarding the *devas*.

To get an idea of a *deva*, consider Indra. The sages of RV were aware that the minds of the individual human beings are not completely isolated. They are all projections of the cosmic mind, the deity or *deva* behind it being Indra. Thus Indra is the Lord of the Divine Mind. Note the adjective divine qualifying the mind. The ordinary human mind has several imperfections due to many reasons such as its close association with the material human body. The divine mind is free of all these imperfections. Similarly, Agni is the cosmic power of heat and light in the manifested universe. But he is not confined to them. He is also the power of the Divine Will connected with Wisdom which vitalises all the human beings.

All the *devas* are considered as the children of the devi Aditi, the goddess of infinity, whose power is aptly described in the verse RV (1.89.10). Aditi is the earliest known conception of infinity which encompasses everything.



Why Read Rig Veda

Let us consider the relationship between these *devas* and the Supreme Being, termed as the One *ekah* or *tat*, That or *ekam sat*, That One Truth as was done in the later Upanishad texts. These *devas* are the limbs of the Supreme Being. Each *deva* is a distinct power and personality of the Supreme. The Divine consciousness and force which permeates every aspect of manifestation, living or non-living is termed as *Vaishvanara Agni*, the *Universal Force*, described in about ten hymns of RV. Even a stone is endowed with consciousness according to RV (1.70.2).

A unique feature of the Rig Vedic Gods is their camaraderie with the humans. The different Vedic Gods do not support different human beings and cause them to fight one another as the Greek Gods do in books like *Iliad*. The Vedic Gods are eager to help a person and manifest their power in him provided the person expresses his aspiration by recognising the delight of existence present everywhere, releases it by his/her activities and offers it to the Gods. The Gods like Indra manifest in the human, remove the effects of hostile forces like Vrtra in the inner life of the person and promote the all-round growth and happiness of the person.

RV does not associate a distinct *deva* with each human being or animal or plant. Each human being has a soul in him/her called as *jiva* or *atma* and this is not regarded as a *deva*. The different *devas* manifest their powers in the various aspects of the manifested nature. The functions associated with the different animals or plants are possible only because of the power given by the corresponding *devas*.

By means of the practices described in Rigveda, s/he comes in contact with these cosmic powers who are called as Agni, Indra, Ashvin, Soma etc. S/he tries to reach that state of consciousness or contact directly these universal powers. This is called as the ascent mentioned in several places. The first power to be contacted is the Agni power. Hence Agni is called the First God.





Yajna

Let us understand *yajna* by studying the epithets ascribed to it in more than one thousand verses. It is a fundamental mistake to regard *yajna* merely as a ritual or rite. Veda describes *yajna* as journey, as climbing a hill, as a battle and also as worship or rite. The worship or rite is not that done by a human being. Agni the *deva* is called upon to perform the rite; Agni is requested to do all the functions associated with the various priests. Agni is called upon to worship on behalf of the *rishi* not only the *devas* but also the human beings who have attained perfection (1.45.1).

According to the Rig Vedic mystics, a human being performs an action only because of the assistance s/he gets from the *devas* RV (5.4.10). As a matter of fact, the contribution of the human to each action is nominal. Even great poets like the Vedic poets obtained inspiration from superior planes and their main contribution is in transcribing the revealed verses in appropriate metres. *Yajna* is any activity which recognises the collaboration between the *deva* and the human. *Yajna* is not a mere rite or ritual. A *rishi* is conscious of the Divine's Hand in the performance of all activities. The later scripture *Bhagavad Gita* specifically mentions the different *yajnas* by name like *yajna* of obtaining material objects, *yajna* of obtaining knowledge, *yajna* involving self-study and so on. The sages are also conscious of the role of the *deva*, especially of Agni, so that they request him to perform the *yajna* (or the activity) on their behalf.

Let us discuss the various epithets assigned to *yajna* beginning with *adhvara*, journey. *Adhvara* is derived from *adhva* path and *ra* to move. Ritualists regard this word as a synonym for rite since one of the principal priests in the rite is called *adhvaryu*. The function of the priest is to direct the rite and this function is in tune with the meaning assigned to *adhvara*. What is this journey? Every action in our life is a step in our journey towards realising the goal, namely bliss, an all-sided perfection of not only the physical body, but the vital and mental bodies, not only an individual perfection but perfection of the entire society. Veda uses the imagery of voyage for *yajna*. Just as merchants go in their boats to distant countries and bring valuable treasures from these countries, a person who does *yajna* reaches different states of consciousness, gets priceless experiences and brings them back to the ordinary living conditions and thus makes the human life Divine.

The *yajna* is also climbing from one peak to another, from one degree of perfection to another, (1.10.2). It is explicitly stated that we are not consciously aware of the entire journey. We can know only of what can be done at that stage. Whenever help is needed in this climb, the *devas* again manifest and help us along.



Yajna is also a battle. We have mentioned only helpful powers of the nature, the *devas*. There are also the powers that hinder our journey towards perfection. These powers are called *dasyus*, the *thieves* or *destroyers*, *Vrtra* and *Vala* being prominent among them. These *dasyus* impede our progress. They are called *ayajvanah*, people who do not recognise the principle of collaboration or *yajna*. They foster in human beings, who come under their influence, qualities like jealousy, greed etc. The human collaborators call upon the *devas* to battle these adversaries. Hence *yajna* is also a battle.

Yajna is a rite or ritual too, which is a symbolic physical representation of the various steps involved in collaboration. The ritual begins with the invocation of Agni by lighting the physical fire. The dry fuel *samit* is fed to the fire as representing all the qualities which are not necessary or not appropriate. The fire is nourished by the ghee which symbolises mental clarity. The *Soma* herb which stands for the bliss released in all actions is also offered to Agni as well as rice and grains. These are some of the steps in the famous *Soma* rite.

Every rite has four priests namely *hotr*, *adhvaryu*, *udgatr* and *brahma*, whose names indicate their functions. *Hotr* is the *deva* who calls all the other *devas* to come and participate in the divine activity *yajna*. *Adhvaryu* lays down the various steps in the successful performance of the *yajna*. *Udgatr* is the *deva* who chants the prescribed mantras in the appropriate metres at requisite times. In RV there is no mention of the four faced creator-god of that name, *Brahma*. In the Veda *brahma* always stands for the mantra, the potent Word. *Brahma* is the priest who presides over the entire *yajna* and makes sure that everything is performed in the correct manner. In the RV, it is the *deva* Agni who performs all these functions in the psychological *yajna*, the collaborative and co-creative actions of the *devas* and the humans.





The First Hymn of RV

To understand the nature of RV, there is no better beginning than the first hymn. In the Indian spiritual tradition, the meditation and *japa* of the first hymn, is the beginning for the understanding of the secret.

It is a hymn of nine verses in the *gayatri* metre. It is made of three parts each of eight syllables. *Rishi* is Madhuchchhandas. We will give the paraphrase of each verse:

1. I adore Agni, placed in front, the *deva* of the *yajna*, the invoker or the summoner in the *yajna* and carrier of felicities.
2. Agni, adorable by the ancient seers, is adorable by the later ones also. He brings here the *devas*.
3. The treasure obtained from Agni is full of hearing and strength, Increasing day by day; not subject to dwindling like ordinary wealth.
4. Only the *yajna*, which is guarded by Agni, all round reaches the *devas*.
5. Endowed with Vision and Audition, wise and firm of will Agni is the associate of the gods.
6. Agni's special Truth is his power of conferring happy and good *bhadra*, which averts falsehood.
7. We approach thee day by day, in the night and in the light, carrying our surrender by our thought.
8. The (vast) Truth is the own Home of Agni. There he increases for the *yajamana*; That he protects.
9. O Agni, cling to us like a father to the son, be easy of access to us.

This hymn employs very little symbolism. The ninth verse indicates that Agni is not a mere flame or even the deity of flame. He is a special aspect of the Divine whom the *rishi* loves with an intensity comparable to the supreme *Bhakti* described in later devotional literature. The development of a personal relationship with the Divine, is one of the key ideas of *Bhakti Yoga*, developed in the books *Bhagavatam* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Agni is approached as if he were a father, son, spouse, friend and so on.

The seventh verse indicates that the *rishis* were familiar with the techniques of meditation, i.e., directing the thoughts. The idea of surrender, developed later in the *bhakti* literature, is already present here. Here we see the mingling of Knowledge and *bhakti*.

The first verse merits careful attention. Here there is no mention of the ritual performed by human priests on behalf of a human patron. Agni carries out all the functions of the priests which are mainly psychological in character. If we study all the verses in RV where the word "kindling" occurs, we see that the



Why Read Rig Veda

kindling of Agni is not done by human beings but by the Gods themselves, often by the pair Mitra and Varuna. Thus, the *yajna* in RV is not a mere rite. RV uses ritualistic words to describe spiritual practices and experiences.

The third verse clearly indicates that the affluence bestowed upon by Agni increases day by day and thus it is non-physical.

The fourth verse refers to the travel done by *yajna*. An enigmatic phrase, it stands for the occult in the *yajna*.

The fifth verse clearly declares that Agni is the power of Divine Will endowed with wisdom and vision.

The sixth verse indicates the special truth of Agni. He bestows the auspicious power *Bhadra* which discriminates between Truth and Falsehood. Some may object that this interpretation of *Bhadra* is not in the text. But this conclusion is inescapable if we study all the verses involving the word *Bhadra*, namely (5.82.4), (5.82.5), (4.19.20), (5.1.10), (10.25.1), (10.104.9) etc.

The first hymn of RV establishes the spiritual character of Rigveda.





Veda and the Upanishads

The Upanishads have always been regarded in India as the crown of the Veda. We will briefly explore the relationship between the Upanishads and the Rigveda Samhita. Ancient Upanishads like Chandogya trace some of their statements to Veda Samhitas. Key statements of Upanishads such as the Absolute or *Brahman* is beyond the range of thought [Tai. U. (2.4)] is in RV (1.170.1) or (10.12.6).

The cryptic symbolism used in Rigveda prevented the deep knowledge of Veda Samhitas from becoming widespread and the age of Rigveda came to an end. Much later, perhaps a millennia or so, attempts were made to recover the knowledge of the Vedas. The *Brahmana* books like the *Shatapatha Brahmana* focused mainly on the rituals whereas the Upanishads attempted to recover the spiritual knowledge. As Sri Aurobindo states: "The *rishis* of the Upanishads sought to recover the lost or waning knowledge of the Veda by meditation and spiritual experience and they used the text of the ancient mantras as a prop and authority for their own intuitions and perception or else the *vedic* word was a seed of thought and vision by which they recovered old truths in new forms. What they found, they expressed in other terms more intelligible to the age in which they lived". As examples of the first method, we may mention the *Chandogya* Upanishad (3.12.5) or *Bhhadaranyaka* Upanishad (4.4.23) which state "as stated in the *Rik*, the mantra of Rigveda". As an example of the second, we may mention the concept of *Brahman*. RV mentions repeatedly the Supreme One, or the One Truth, *ekam sat*, which underlies all existence. The Upanishads developed this seed of thought into the magnificent conception of *Brahman*.

Upanishads themselves are not philosophical, but express their findings in a manner which the intellect can understand. These findings are the basis for the later systems of Indian philosophy. But in the Indian tradition, intellectual knowledge alone will not lead to the realisation of the spirit. The Upanishads contain many hints for spiritual practice. But there are not many books in print which discuss the relevance of Upanishadic thought for spiritual practice. One such book is the "Light on the Upanishads" by Sri T.V. Kapali Sastry which discusses some of the secret *vidyas* in the Upanishads and relate them to the corresponding ideas in RV. These *vidyas* are identified either by the name of the teacher like *Shandilya Vidya*, *Bhrgu Varuni Vidya* or by their contents like the *Bhuma Vidya*, *Vaishvanara Vidya*, *Madhu Vidya*, *Prana Vidya* and so on. *Vaishvanara* means the divine force, which permeates every aspect of existence. This knowledge in the *Chandogya* Upanishad is related to the similar idea in the RV contained in the ten hymns to the Deity *Vaishvanara*. The *madhu vidya* or the doctrine of the honey or bliss as the foundation of all existence, discussed in detail in *Bhhadaranyaka* Upanishad (2.5), is related to the corresponding mantras in the first book of Rigveda (1.90). Again the particular method of realisation described in the sixth book of *Bhhadaranyaka* Upanishad (6.3.6) involves the



Why Read Rig Veda

chanting of the famous *gayatri* verse of RV (3.62.10) and the *madhu mantrah* of RV (1.90). This particular method is extolled in the *Bhṛhadaranyaka* Upanishad (6.3.7 - 6.3.12) stating, "If any one sprinkles it on a dry stump, branches would grow and leaves spring forth".

There are numerous mantras of RV quoted verbatim in Upanishads. There are many key phrases in the Upanishads which have their corresponding ones in RV. A systematic study of the Veda and Upanishads has not been done. We give here just a few examples. The oft-quoted passage of *Shvetashvatara* Upanishad (2.5), "Hear ye, children of immortality", occurs originally in Rigveda (10.13.1). The famous *hamsa mantra* of *Katha* Upanishad (2.2.2), "The Swan that settles in the purity... born of Truth, -- itself the Truth, the Vast" occurs originally in RV (4.40.5). The famous *mantra* of the two birds signifying the individual soul and supreme soul found in *Mundaka* Upanishad (3.1.1) is originally from RV (1.164.20), boxed below. It is hardly a coincidence since the word *suparna* translated as bird occurs in more than half a dozen verses of RV bearing always the symbol of soul. Some commentators often misinterpret the phrase two birds in RV as husband and wife. The definition of Brahman's in transcendental RV (1.170.1). The famous utterance of Upanishad that *Brahman* cannot be attained by duality is in RV (5.12.2). The idea that *Brahman* cannot be attained by mere action or effort is in RV (8.70.3) and (5.48.5), *Brahman* cannot be approached by thought (RV.1.170.1 or Kena U., 1.3).

We reiterate that the *vedic* sages did not regard the family life as an obstacle to achieving spiritual excellence. A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.





Vedic way of Life

To achieve the goal of immortality or bliss, the RV suggests a way of life referred to as *patha*, *pantha*, *yajna* and so on, in more than one thousand verses. However, it does not give any external signs of this path. RV does not make any firm distinction between the spiritual life and the so called worldly life. It calls upon all persons differing in their external conditions like men, women, married, householders or wandering ascetic, king, craftsmen, to participate in this way of life, as in (1.89.8). Every sage calls upon the *deva* to reveal the path to the Truth. The implication is that the journey of life is mainly psychological, each person has to find a path which is suitable for him or her. For instance, (6.9.2) uses the analogy of a loom with its warp and woof which weaves cloth; This verse is in RV (6.9.2).

The reply is in the next verse (6.9.3).

The *deva* Agni knows the warp, knows the woof,

Again, the *deva* guides the human being from within.

There are many references, one of which is (6.9.5).

An immortal Light set inward for seeing,

A swiftest mind within men that walk on the way (6.9.5).

The entire nature seems to commune with the *rishi* as mentioned in (6.9.6).

This journey is described as a *yajna*, not a mere rite but a collaborative effort accompanied by the *devas*. It is also described as a battle against the supraphysical hostile forces *Vrtras* and *dasyus* who want to oppose the journey towards the Truth. The *devas* secure the victory in these supraphysical battles on behalf of the humans. Again the journey is described in numerous places as a ship in an ocean (1.99.1), taking the person to the shores of Knowledge. Another hymn (1.10.2) describes the journey as going from one peak of mountain to another higher peak. Only at each peak does the person know what to do next. Whenever any help is needed, the *devas* arrive and offer the help.

One of the striking features of the ideal of *Vedic* life is: there is no exhortation to give up desire. All later Hindu and Buddhist scriptures from the Upanishads to the Gita regard the overcoming of the desire as the first step in spiritualising life. This feature together with the mistranslation of some of the prayers of *Vedic rishis* as asking for cows and horses have made many, both in India and in the West, to regard the RV as devoid of the higher aspects of spiritual life. This is a fundamental mistake. Veda pursues the strategy espoused in the *yoga* of



Why Read Rig Veda

devotion, *bhakti yoga*. It calls upon the seeker to establish an intimate relationship with each *deva*, Agni, Indra and others, like son, friend, father, mother etc. When the faith develops in these *devas*, then this faith gives the certitude to the seeker that the *devas* will give whatever is needed. Then the hankering after desires disappears. The perfect person is called in RV as a person whose desires have been satisfied *aptakama*, the same phrase being used in the *Brhadaranyaka* Upanishad.

It is interesting to observe that in RV there is no condemnation of the persons who are skeptical of the existence of *devas* (8.100.3). There are many references to poets saying that they recite the Vedas, still they are plagued by a variety of troubles. RV has no conception of hell. Hence there is no question of the unbelievers or skeptics being thrust to hell after their death.





Technology in the Veda

The gods like Indra and Agni are supraphysical powers and the powers of nature like rain, wind and so on, are only aspects of their powers. Since the *rishi*, the knower of Veda, has established a relationship with one or more of these cosmic powers, it follows that he can appeal to these deities, so that, the physical powers of nature act so as to be beneficial to the humans. For instance, the god Indra can be appealed to release rain in times of draught and to stop the downpour in times of excessive rainfall. Even in these times, there have been persons who have displayed these powers at times of real need alone and not for boastful exhibition of their prowess. One such person was Sri Ganapati Muni (1878-1936), a great poet in Sanskrit, an adept in the Vedas and the Tantras and the first disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Moderns, by and large, are skeptical of persons who claim to have powers to influence physical nature. The question posed is, "why such persons do not come forward to help bring rain in times of intense draught". Such skeptics should read carefully the book for an account of over four hundred experiments, performed over a period of some forty years, in this century, in various parts of India. These experiments comprise not only the onset of rain at times of draught but also, its stoppage when it is excessive. Most of these experiments have been successful and they have three key features:

1. Specification of the appropriate atmospheric conditions as relevant to each season; for instance, wind has to blow from a certain direction in a particular season;
2. Performance of a particular type of *yajna* - a fire-ritual accompanied by chanting of mantras from the Veda;
3. Spiritual attainment of the person performing the *yajna*. Absolute faith in the efficacy of the procedure is essential to its success. There can be no guarantee of the rain pouring down or its stopping, should an unbeliever follow the procedure casually without meeting its prerequisites.

It is not irrelevant to note that attempts to produce rain by the use of methods based on physical sciences have a probability of success of less than fifty percent. Also, there are no methods in physical sciences, yet, for the stopping of rain.

Some physical scientists and their followers object to these methods, even if they have been shown to be successful empirically, on the grounds that they cannot be explained on the basis of principles of physical sciences. It is appropriate to recall the quote from H. Bauer regarding the attitudes of engineers versus those of physicists. "It is not uncommon for engineers to accept the reality of phenomenon that is not yet understood as it is very common for physicists to



disbelieve the reality of phenomenon that seems to contradict the contemporary beliefs of physics”.

A word on health sciences is in order. There is a plethora of healing techniques such as acupuncture, acupressure, naturopathy, homeopathy and so on, having high rates of success under carefully monitored conditions. Every one of these health sciences is well founded on its own principles, its success demonstrable. But the proponents of allopathic brush these away, as so much rubbish.

In the Rigveda, Ashvins are the divine physicians. There are many references to their miraculous powers such as giving sight to the blind, RV (1.117.17), restoring youth to the old, RV (1.117.13), and so on. Of course, mere casual chanting of the verses cannot invoke these powers of the Ashvins. Traditionalists claim that, in addition to the chanting, some extra techniques called as *prayogas* are needed. Unfortunately, most of the knowledge of these *prayogas* has been washed away by the passage of time. They have to be recovered by *tapas*.

The *Rig vedic* ideas on the birth of the universe, as indicated in (10.190), is almost modern. It begins with *Satya*, the Truth. RV sages believed that no manifestation at any level, whether individual, societal or cosmic is possible, without concerted effort, *tapas*. Hence *tapa* follows the Truth. A proper translation for *tapas* is *askesis* even though it is commonly rendered as penance; Then comes the Night, the symbol for the step prior to manifestation. Then comes Space and next, Time in its cyclic aspect *samvatsara*. Then comes the sequence of sun, moon, heavens, the mid-region and earth.





Date of the Rigveda

Before we discuss the probable range of dates for the Rigveda based on the massive multi disciplinary evidence collected in the last twenty years, we will give the dates given in text books of Indian history authored by Indians and others.

Max Muller assigned the period 1500 BCE to 500 BCE for Rigveda Samhita. One of the reasons given is that beginnings of human kind cannot be earlier to 4000 B.C.E. Since the evidence was flimsy, he recanted his earlier assignment near the end of his life. However, many Indian historians still believe in this assignment. According to these persons, all the Veda Samhitas were not composed in India. They were composed by members of tribes, the so called Aryans, who invaded India from the Northwest, destroyed the old civilisation in the Indus Valley, supposedly Dravidian, and drove out these original inhabitants to the south of India and other parts. The ruins of this early Indus Valley civilisation dated 3000 BCE are at Harappa and Mohenjadarro which are dated 3000 BCE or earlier. This Aryan invasion theory was proposed by the British archaeologist Wheeler around the early part of the twentieth century.

It is said that the battles between Indra and *Dasyus* in the Rigveda are really the battles between the Aryans and the native Dravidians of the Indus Valley. Rigveda has no mention of the word *dravida*. It has a word *anaasa* noseless referring to the demons or *dasyus*. Some scholars identify these *dasyu* with the Dravidians since Dravidians supposedly do not have prominent noses!

The motivation for the British administrators in India to include the invasion theory in history books should be clear. Indians who descended from the Aryans should not complain against the British rule since they themselves are immigrants and hence they have no more *Right* than the British to rule India.

This theory has several major drawbacks. First of all *arya* in the Veda means a noble person, not the name of a tribe. RV (9.63.5) states, "make all of us in the universe *arya*, noble". As observed earlier, the battles in the Rigveda do not occur on earth, but in the atmosphere or the subtle planes; they are battles of the *devas*, the powers of Light versus the demons, the *Dasyus*, the powers of ignorance. To regard these battles as between two different human tribes, we have to eliminate ninety percent of the Rigveda which contains detailed description of the *devas* as supraphysical forces of Light and those of *Dasyus* as the forces of ignorance.

Finally all the modern archaeologists like Shaffer declare that there is no archaeological evidence for such an invasion; the invasion is a myth propagated by historians. Thus the suggested date 1500 BCE-500 BCE has no support at all.



Now we will discuss the date of Rigveda from all the available multidisciplinary evidence, some of which were collected in the last decade, some others known earlier.

Let us first consider the satellite photography studies of the Indus Valley. The *Sarasvati* described in Rigveda is a massive river, located between *Yamuna* and *Shutadri* (Sutlej) flowing into the ocean. The satellite studies indicate this river as completely dried up by the date 1750 BCE. The Satellite study cannot refer to the *Sarasvati* (Haraquiti) river in Afghanistan since it is a small river that dries up in the desert. Thus the lower bound for the *Vedic* civilisation is 1750 BCE. It is more ancient than this date because Rigveda does not mention any desert; it is mentioned in the *Brahmana* books - *Shatapatha Brahmana* - which is at least 500-1000 years later than Rigveda Samhita.

The knowledge of mathematics in Rigveda and related texts is another important evidence. Rigveda not only mentions the decimal number system for integers but also the infinity. It mentions in detail the spoked wheel with arbitrary number of spokes (1.164.13,14,48). Clearly such verses would imply that these authors knew the associated mathematical properties of circle and square. The algorithm for circling the square needed for making the spoked wheel is given in the *Baudhayana Shulba Sutra* which is the oldest of the *Shulba Sutras*, ancient mathematical texts dealing with the methods for the construction of altars needed in *Vedic* rituals and other related mathematical topics. These books are later than the Rigveda Samhita. Even though Dutta made a detailed study of these books around 1930 and showed that the theorem attributed to *Pythagoras* is contained in these books in a more general form, the western indologists like Keith (or Whitney earlier) did not pay much attention since they were convinced, without any proof, that all the sciences in ancient India - mathematics, astronomy etc., were borrowed from Greeks or Egyptians. It was in 1962 that the American mathematician Seidenberg showed that, "the elements of ancient geometry found in Egypt and Babylonia stem from a ritual system of the kind found in *Shulba Sutras*." The *Shulba Sutras* contain the algorithm for building the pyramid shaped funeral altar (*smashana chit*). Recall that the Egyptian pyramids are used as tombs for the dead. There is no ancient Egyptian literature for the detailed construction of these pyramids. Hence it is more than likely that their source is the *Shulba Sutras*. This piece of evidence fixes the date for the *Baudhayana Shulba Sutra* which gives a lower bound date for Rigveda.

Next let us consider the astronomical evidence. Rigveda and all other ancient books contain several statements of astronomical significance like the position of Sun in the Zodiac on the two equinoxes, vernal or spring equinox and autumn equinox. Indian Astronomy is based on sidereal Zodiac. The Zodiac is divided into 27 roughly equal segments, all are measuring $13^{\circ} 20'$ of arc. The seventh mandala of the Rigveda records the vernal equinox in Mrigashira Constellation



pointing to a date around 4000 BCE - a fact noted by Jacobi and Tilak. Again several *Shulba Sutras* declare that a pole star is visible. Since a visible pole star occurs only at certain epochs, such a citation gives a normal range of dates for that event. There is much more information beyond the scope of this paper.

Next we consider the Harappa culture. Findings tested with calibrated C-14 methods show that, "the Harappa culture should be dated to the period 2700-2000 BCE with a terminal date not lower than 1900 BCE, a date suggestively close to the drying up of Sarasvati". It was a fashion for the historians to declare that the Harappa Culture had no connection with the culture of the *Vedic* era. Now things are beginning to change. In one of the seals of the Harappa period, there is a picture of a bull with one horn. It was called as a unicorn. But the Sanskrit epithet, *eka shrngah*, one with a single horn, is a common epithet for Lord Shiva in the Veda Samhitas [RV 7.19.1] and the bull is always associated with Shiva. There is a seal of a meditating person in a sitting lotus pose in the Harappa seals. On the Harappan seals, there are inscriptions in a script which was not deciphered for a long time. Recently N.K. Jha has suggested a deciphering approach which is very promising. The language is syllabic like all Indian languages, the script seems to be close to old Brahmi. The researcher Jha has identified the inscriptions on several seals, which appear to be words from the lexicon of Vedas, *nighantu* published by Yaska, the first commentator on Rigveda and a lexicographer. So Harappa civilisation presents the end of the *Vedic* period.

Again Rigveda does not mention either silver or cotton. Since the date of cotton is well established, again we get a lower bound on the Rig Vedic date.

Now the evidence can be summed up and some range of dates can be given. Rigveda repeatedly refers to ancient sages and modern sages as in (1.1.2). The age associated with these ancient sages can be called as the high *Rig Vedic* period which is declared to be 3100 BCE or early. This period 3700-3800 BCE is the closing of the Rig Vedic age, especially the Mandalas seven and third associated with the sages *Vasishta* and *Vishvamitra*. The *Shulba Sutra* texts of *Baudhayana*, *Ashvalayana* etc., can be dated 3100-2000 BCE; 1900 BCE is the drying up of Sarasvati and the end of Vedic age. The Vedic civilisation ended, as indicated by the Harappa ruins, due to ecological causes, draughts and desertification. There was no invasion by any one.

