

The Cosmogonies of the Vedic Samhitas

A cosmogony is a theory about how the universe originated; it may take on a mythological form as a creation story, or it may be presented in the form of a philosophical treatise, a divinely inspired revelation, or a scientific theory. The aim of any cosmogonic postulation is to provide an answer to the questions “How did we get here?” and “How did our universe originate?”, and in doing so, help us to lay some groundwork for asking the bigger questions of “Who, or what, am I?” Within the Hindu tradition there is much speculation on these fundamental questions, and many different theories have been put forth from theistic creation by a supreme being to the evolution of order from primordial chaos.

A striking characteristic of the Hindu religion is the wealth of diversity found within the traditions that are subsumed under the umbrella term of “Hinduism”; this characteristic diversity is particularly evident when we consider the many distinct perspectives on cosmogony which are accepted as orthodox. Compared to traditional Judeo-Christian cosmogony, where there is essentially one perspective of the creationary act which is primarily expounded in the first couple chapters of the book of *Genesis*, the range of perspectives on cosmogony found in the Hindu tradition can appear quite intimidating. Though the expansiveness of the tradition’s cosmogony can seem daunting, and the somewhat obscure nature of the traditions cosmogonic postulations may seem impregnable, distinct streams of thought can be seen running through the traditions which help us delineate the different theoretical systems at play, allowing us to group related cosmogonic traditions together categorically. We are able to categorize the cosmogonies of ancient India into those that view our universe as being begotten from the activity of **material principles**, those which view our universe as resulting from the activity of **abstract principles**, and those which view our universe as resulting from the work of a divine agency, or **divine**

principles (Bhattacharyya 2). Material principles can be defined as substances that are clearly observable matter such as water, wind, fire, and earth. Abstract principles are human concepts such as desire, being, non-being, time, and chaos, and creative energy. The divine principles found within the Vedic Samhitas are cosmic beings such as Brahma-Prajapati, Brahman, and Visvakarman. According to Bhattacharyya (2) a process of evolution is evident in Indian ideas of cosmogony, developing from primitive materialistic conceptions, through abstract formulations, and then to cosmogonies which explain our universe as resulting from the actions of a supreme being or divine presence.

Theories that view our nascent reality, including the gods, as emerging from pre-existent matter appear to be the oldest Hindu cosmogonies, though this may seem counter-intuitive to those in the modern occident where the inheritors of the Enlightenment thinking and dogma have a tendency to presuppose that primitive man was hopelessly ensnared in “superstitious” supernaturalism, creating his gods and his myths to answer any difficult question that might arise. According to Bhattacharyya (2) it seemed “perfectly reasonable to the primitive peoples who saw land growing from the accumulations of river-borne silt and desert wastes rendered cultivatable by irrigation, to conclude, for instance, that water was the primary element and the source of all that existed.” The belief that our cosmos developed out of primordial water is very common in the ancient world, and can be found in the cosmogonies of the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Egyptians, and there are even hints of it in the Hebrew Bible, although here the water is subjugated to the presence of the divine YHWH (“And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” American Standard Version). The similarities between this passage and the creation account found in *Nasadiya* hymn (Griffith) of

the *Rg Veda* are striking. I reproduce this account in full because of its centrality to the early Vedic understandings of cosmogony, and also because it represents a confluence of many different Hindu conceptualizations of the creative act in that it includes elements from the cosmogonic formulations beginning with material principles (water), those beginning with abstract principles (night, chaos, desire, warmth) and those beginning with divine principles (God/ the One. Verse.7). An interesting characteristic of this hymn is that it does not really seem to make truth-claims the same way as we find in say, the first couple chapters of *Genesis*. Instead the writers seem to be asking questions, and following different lines of inquiry, instead of trying to lay out a calculated and definitive answer to the cosmogonical issue.

HYMN CXXIX. Creation

“1. THEN was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.

What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

2. Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.

That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.

3. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminated chaos.

All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.

4. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit.

Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.

5. Transversely was their severing line extended: what was above it then, and what below it?

There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder

6. Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation?

The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?

7. He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it

Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.

The gross elements which are credited as the foundational substances of reality came to be called the *bhutas*, a concept which is found in an embryonic form in the *Rg Veda* and is

developed in the later Vedic literature, including the Upanisads (Lal 7) Aside from primordial water (*apah*), the other well established *bhutas* include *agni* (fire), *vayu* or *vata* (wind), *dyaus* or *akasa* (sky), and *prthivi* (earth) (Lal 7). These principles have a dual nature as both material elements and also, later, as deities such as Agni, Vayu and Dyaus. Exegesis of the *Rg Veda* and critical reflection lead to the hypothesis that these elements were first observed empirically in the environment and recognized as “natural” phenomena, and only later sacralized as personal deities who could be approached by man and propitiated through rituals. This chronology goes against the accepted “wisdom” of many dogmatic materialists who have created a historical myth which perceives humanities intellectual development as an upward evolution from “superstitious supernaturalism” and “blind faith” towards “rationality” and “empirical science.” These individuals imply that belief in the unseen is necessarily a vestigial relic of the primitive mind which is unwilling to grasp the stark reality that there can be no ultimate reality which transcends empirically observed phenomena and lies outside the grasp of man’s rational mind; there can be no realms beyond our perceptual capacities, and no realities unfathomable to the rational mind.

The reality is that the intellectual development of the ancient Hindus probably followed a chronology antithetical to their dogma; at the level of the intellectual elite, the Hindus first conceived of creation as resulting from material principles, then abstract principles, and then the divine principles. Closely related to these cosmogonies based on basic material principles is the concept of *hiranya-garbha* (the Golden Embryo, or World Egg) which, again, ancient Hindu cosmogonies share with other ancient cultures. In most of its many incarnations this concept envisions our embryonic cosmos as existing in the form of an enormous egg which floats on top of a fathomless deep (Bhattacharya 3). With the hatching of this egg, the cosmos spring into life, just as a young chick bursts forth from its shell when the appointed time has come. The idea here

is that just as the life of a reptile or a bird lies dormant within its shell, the primordial Life of the cosmos at one time lied dormant within a cosmic World Egg. Again we see the ancient Indian's conceptualizing the cosmic nativity in terms of things that they had observed empirically in the world around them.

The second stream of thought within ancient Hindu cosmogonies is the idea that the universe emerged from abstract principles, as opposed to merely evolving out of matter or being created by a divine being. The *Nasadiya* creation hymn I reproduced earlier exhibits the influence of this stream of thought in verse three where "darkness," "void," "indiscriminated chaos," and "Warmth," are spoken of as primordial principles which played a role in the emergence of the universe as we know it. These formulations are, again, not unique to Hindu thought, but are found throughout many cultures around the world. The primary characteristic that distinguishes the material principles from the abstract ones is that the material cosmogonies are based on observable substances such as water (*apah*) or fire (*agni*), whereas the abstract cosmogonies are based on immaterial human concepts such as desire, disorder, being, or non-being. Some particularly important abstract principles for Hindu cosmogony are the ideas of *sat*, *asat*, and of *tapas*. The word *sat* can be translated as being, the word *asat* as non-being, and the word *tapas*, which is literally translated as flame, can in respect to cosmogony be considered to refer to a creative cosmic fire, or spark. According to Miller (51) *tapas* is what drives the universe forward, causes the primordial elements to blossom into the universe as we know it, then drives the cycle its conclusion only to restart anew. This idea of a cyclical universe may not have been envisioned by the *rsis* as it is laid out in the Puranas, and scholars debate when the concept of a cyclical reality developed in Hindu thought (Miller 64). In the *Rg Veda* we read that the universal order, or *rta*, as well as Truth, were both created through the action of the *tapas*.

Griffith translates the beginning of this creation hymn (*Rg Veda* XCX. 1) as follows: “FROM Fervour kindled to its height Eternal Law and Truth were born: Thence was the Night produced, and thence the Billowy flood of sea arose.” In this hymn we see the abstract concepts of Night, Eternal Law, Truth, and Fervour (*tapas*) giving rise to the material concept of the primordial sea. Furthermore, in the *Atharva Veda* (XI.8) we read that “Both Tapas and action were within the mighty ocean. Tapas arose from action; that did they worship as highest.” (Roth and Whitney)

Keeping with what appears to be a philosophical method of extrapolating cosmogonic theories from observable, empirical phenomena, the *rsis* envisioned the conception of the cosmos in procreative terms. In this way, the Vedic Samhitas put forth the idea of a fundamental sexual dualism which draws a distinction between a paternal Sky Father named Dyaus and a maternal Earth Mother named Prthivi, The Samhitas claim in several places that it is these two beings that gave birth to the gods as well as men, and that they sustain all created beings (*Rg Veda* I.159.2; 160.2; 185.1) According to Bhattacharyya (5) the concept of heaven and earth as universal parents eventually developed into the idea of Prakrti who “began to be conceived of as the germinal productive principle- the eternal mother capable of evolving all created things out of herself but never so creating unless united with the eternal spiritual principle, the Purusa.” In a later work entitled the *Purusa-sukta*, the idea is put forth that our universe was created by a cosmic being who sacrificed his own body to himself, and so from the various parts of his body different parts of our reality were born; the gods Indra and Agni arose from his mouth, the sun emanated from his eyes, etc. We have now started to shift from abstract principles to beings that much more closely resemble conventional divinities. Dyaus and Prthivi can be conceived of as “proper” gods with personalities, or they can be seen as cosmic principles of masculinity and femininity. Just where they fall on the spectrum between these two conceptions appears to

remain convoluted in the texts of the early Vedic Samhitas; the same goes for the concepts of Prakrti and the Purusa.

The variety of perspectives on cosmogony within the Samhitas becomes apparent when one realizes that although the heavens and earth are said to have given rise to the gods, in other passages it appears as if the gods were responsible for the creation of the heavens and earth! We see the *rsis* in the first *mandala* of the *Rg Veda* (I.189.1) asking how the heavens and earth first came into being, and how they were created, while maintaining that they still support all things that exist: “WHETHER of these is elder, whether later? How were they born? Who knoweth it, ye sages? These of themselves support all things existing: as on a car the Day and Night roll onward.” (Griffith). Bhattacharyya (19) shows that in another passage (*Rg Veda* X.81.2-4) this question is repeated, and the answer is given that the sole creator is a being called Visvakarman: “He who hath eyes on all sides round about him, a mouth on all sides, arms and feet on all sides, He, the Sole God, producing earth and heaven, weldeth them, with his arms as wings, together. What was the tree, what wood in sooth produced it, from which they fashioned out the earth and heaven? Ye thoughtful men inquire within your spirit whereon he stood when he established all things.” (Griffith) Here we see the movement towards the idea of the *deva ekah* or the one god or being from whom existence found its origin.

Part of the reason that the Samhitas seem to have such a convoluted system of cosmogony, if it can be called a system at all, is because the texts take a henotheistic approach to their worship of the divine and their hymnology. This means that although the system is polytheistic and there is a sense that each god has their own specialized role in the cosmos, when the worshippers approach each deity they elevate it to the supreme position in the pantheon and address the deity as if addressing the Supreme. It can be argued that this is a prefiguring of later

developments in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gita* where all the gods are seen as extensions of the one god, or the one Being. Just some of the Vedic gods who are attributed with a significant role in creation include, Usas, Brahmanaspati, Soma, Varuna, Agni, Brahma-prajapati, and Mitra. The development towards the idea of a single divinity who was primarily responsible for creation finds its expression with the developments of deities like Brahma Prajapati, Visvakarman, and eventually the later development of the idea Brahman, the all pervading eternal presence which is the immutable and all-encompassing Self. According to Bhattacharyya (18) it appears as if the development of the idea of a single Creator responsible for the establishment of the cosmic order was an unfolding process that took place over time, a process which was preceded by a period in which the “various departments of nature were distributed to different gods, each to preside over his own area.” Each of these gods was deemed to be responsible for some part of the creation, depending on what their exact role was in the preservation of the cosmos, what status they held within the pantheon, and the process by which the deity themselves were allegedly created.

Originally then, the name Visvakarman, or the “great architect of the universe” (Bhattacharyya 18), was used to refer to a number of gods who were believed to play some special role in the creation of the universe; this word only later came to refer to a single creative divinity. In this way we find both Surya the sun-god (*Rg Veda* X.170.4) and Indra (*Rg Veda* IV.17.4) referred to as Visvakarman in the Vedas. When conceived as a single creator god, Visvakarman is envisioned as all seeing, with eyes, faces, arms and feet protruding from all sides of his body. Furthermore, it is maintained that he is responsible for endowing the gods with their abilities and their names, and also for creating the heavens and the earth (Bhattacharyya 19).

Brahma Prajapati, or Hiranyagarbha, the other Vedic god who is seen as being important for creation, is described in similar terms; he is seen as having arisen from the primordial waters and is responsible for the creation of the world and the preservation of the sky and the earth. It is also maintained that the gods derive their power from him and that they are subject to his will for he is the “god over all the gods” (Bhattacharyya 19). With the later theological, cosmological, and mythological developments of the Upanishads, the Puranas, and the Epics we see a flowering of this concept of the Ineffable One, and also the development of some new conceptions of cosmogony and the relationship between the Supreme Being and its creation. The various modern traditions subsumed under the umbrella term “Hinduism” are still influenced by the ancient cosmogonies which envisioned material, abstract, and divine principles as having each been responsible for the creation of our universe, either working alone or in concert. To this day Hindus the world over, and indeed individuals of all faiths and creeds, continue to ponder the origins, destiny, and meaning of our universe, as well as mankind’s place in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

References and Further Recommended Reading

- Bhattacharyya, Narendra Nath (1983) *History of Indian Cosmogonical Ideas*. New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal.
- Gombrich, Richard F. (1975) "Ancient Indian Cosmology." In *Ancient Cosmologies*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Kuiper, P.B.J. (1983) *Ancient Indian Cosmogony*. New Delhi: Viskas Publishing House.
- Kumarappa, Bharatan (1986) *Realism and Illusionism in Hinduism*. New Delhi: Mayur Publications.
- Lal, J. K. (1995) *Pancamahabhutas, Origin and Myths in Vedic literature*, in volume two, *Vedic Buddhist and Jain Traditions*, of the seven-volume, multi-author collection *Prakrti: The Integral Vision*. Kapila Vatsayayan (ed.). New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.
- Miller, Jeanine (1985) *The Vision of Cosmic Order in the Veda*. London: Routledge & Kegan.
- Muir, John (1873) *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and Progress of the Religion and Institutions of India*. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Prabhavananda, Swami, & Manchester, Frederick (2002) *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*. New York: Published by New American Library, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.
- Ralph T. H. Griffith (1974) *The Hymns of the Rgveda*. Orient Book Distributors
- Vatsayayan (ed.) (1995) *Prakrti: The Integral Vision*, a seven-volume, multi-author work. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.
- Whitney, William Dwight (2002) *Atharvavedasamhita: Sanskrit text, English translation, notes & index of verses according to the translation of W.D. Whitney and Bhasya of Sayanacarya (including 20th Kanda)*. Delhi: Parimal Publications.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Agni
Ahm/Om
Akasa
Asat
Atharva-veda
Bhutas
Big Bang
Brahman

Brahma-Prajapati
Creator/Creation/Creationism/Hindu Creationism
Deva Ekah
Dyaus
Ein Sof
Evolution/Evolutionism
Genesis
Greek Cosmogony
Hebrew Cosmogony
Hindu Cosmology
Hiranyagarbha/World egg/Golden Embryo
Logos
Materialism
Nasadiya Hymn
Prakrti
Purusa-Sukta
Prthivi
Quantum Physics/Quantum Mechanics
Rg-veda
Rta
Sat
Siva
Singularity
Soma
Supreme Being
Tapas
Upanishadic Cosmogony
Vata
Vayu
Visvakarman
Visnu
Yahweh/ I AM
Yuga

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_creationism

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_cosmology

http://www.vedanta-newyork.org/articles/cosmology_in_vedanta.htm

<http://www.salagram.net/KCSolutions2KaliYuga.html>

<http://www.kamat.com/indica/faiths/gods/list.htm>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04405c.htm>

<http://www.mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/index.html>

<http://www.leaderu.com/humanities/wood-cosmogony.html>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04405c.htm>

http://www.astro.uni-bonn.de/~pbrosche/hist_astr/ha_items_cosmo.html

<http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/112.htm>

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-59832/Hinduism>

<http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Vaiseshika/id/23115>

Written by Caleb Ostrom (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.