

The Rg Veda

The *Rg Veda* is the oldest book in Vedas and is arguably one of the oldest texts known to mankind. It is known as a Samhita as it is a collection of hymns formed around 600 B.C.E. or at the end of the Brahmana period (Santucci 1). Before being written down the *Rg Veda* was orally transmitted from generation to generation, being composed around 1800 B.C.E. (Santucci 1). Translated it comes to mean “Veda of verses,” aptly named because it contains 1028 hymns (*sukta*) that comes to total over 10,000 verses (Renou 3). The fact that the *Rg Veda* is a collection from a multitude of authors makes it difficult to attach a set date to the work; furthermore, some sections of the *Rg Veda* appear to be written at different times. This belief is derived from the fact that the writing styles change between books, as language and writing developed in India (Renou 5). The *Rg Veda* along with the other Vedas (*Sama*, *Yajur*, *Atharva*) is considered to be *apauresya* (divine in origin) (Prabhavananda 25); the universe is claimed to be created from the knowledge of the Vedas, therefore Vedic knowledge is claimed to have existed before mankind was even created (Prabhavananda 25).

The *Rg Veda* can be divided into 10 books or Mandalas (circles) (Santucci 1). Of these 10 Mandalas, II to VII are the oldest (Renou 5). These are known as the family books, as each book was written by a *rsi* (semi-divine visionary) from a certain priestly family. These families were: in order, Gritsamada, Vishvamitra, Vamadeva, Atri, Bharadvaja, and Vasishtha (Renou 5). The family books (Mandalas II – VII) are arranged in descending order of the number of hymns they contain; therefore, Mandala II has the most hymns and Mandala VII has the least (Renou 3). The VIII Mandala is not considered one of the family books. Though the majority of this Mandala was written by the Kanva family, hymns 67-103 were composed by other families (Santucci 1).

Mandala IX is solely concerned with Soma, a plant used in Hindu rituals; the hymns of Mandala IX were taken from the other Mandalas and therefore reveal that this Mandala was written after Mandalas II – VII (Santucci 2). The first Mandala contains 191 hymns from a series of different poets, none of whom composed more than 26 hymns in the Mandala (Santucci 2). Many researchers agree that this first Mandala was a later addition to the *Rg Veda* although some individual hymns date back many years (Santucci 2). Mandala X is without argument the most recent addition to the *Rg Veda*. Researchers came to this conclusion by studying the grammar and subject matter of the Mandala and finding it to be in more recent style of writing (Santucci 2). Mandala X contains 191 hymns, making it an exact match to the first Mandala (Santucci 2). In each Mandala the arrangement of the hymns is in descending order in relation to the number of verses found in each hymn. If two or more hymns have the same number of verses, then the order of those hymns is determined by the length of meter (Renou 3).

The hymns within the *Rg Veda* were used during religious and social ceremonies and are still used in Hindu rituals. These hymns contain instruction on the procedure of ritual and prayer (depending on what ceremony is taking place).

During a wedding ceremony, a Brahmin (priest) will read from the Tenth Mandala, hymn number 85 (Chandra Das 370). This hymn is known as “The Marriage of Surya.” It tells the tale of Surya’s (the Sun) marriage to Soma (the Moon) (Chandra Das 370). All Hindu “marriages are modeled upon this one, and the bride is called Surya (O’Flaherty 267).” Verses 20 – 47 of this hymn are recited during the wedding ceremony (O’Flaherty 267).

There are hymns within the *Rg Veda* that a mother can say to protect her unborn. During 1800 B.C.E. when the *Rg Veda* was composed it was believed that there were demons that were

constantly looking to harm both mother and child (Chandra Das 385). To repel these demons, parents would recite hymns to ward off the evil spirits. The hymn “For Safe Pregnancy and Birth” found in Mandala X.184 prays to a number of gods that the seed be safe and brings forth a child at the end of the pregnancy (O’Flaherty 291). Mandala X.162 contains the hymn “To Protect the Embryo” which invokes Agni to drive away the demons who may try to harm either the mother or the developing child (O’Flaherty 292).

The majority of Hindu funerals result in cremation of the deceased. The reason is the belief that cremation is necessary to detach the soul from the body, otherwise the soul will “linger” as a *preta* (ghost) (Chandra Das 412). The mantra that is sung at a cremation ceremony is Mandala X.154 “The Funeral Hymn,” and asks that Yama take the deceased to heaven. Burials without cremation are reserved for infants who are without sin and Sadhu (holy men; renouncers) who have overcome their human desires and evil inclinations and are too regarded as without sin (Chandra Das 412). All other humans must be cremated in order for Yama (the god of death) to take them to heaven. The hymn that is sung at a burial of an infant or Sadhu is Mandala X.18, “Burial Hymn,” a prayer to Mother Earth to “wrap... up” the deceased, and for Yama to build a house upon the grave for the deceased (O’Flaherty 52).

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

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