

Purushasukta: An Excerpt from the Rig Veda

The *Rig Veda* is one of the most important texts of the Hindu tradition. It is the earliest of the four canonical sacred texts known as the Vedas. It consists of a large collection of hymns, or *suktas*, in praise of the gods, which are chanted at various rituals (British Library, n.d.) The oldest *suktas*, which have survived in the *Rig Veda* from the early period of the Indo-Aryan invasion, were almost exclusively composed by a hereditary priesthood. They were handed down by different families through oral traditions until they were collected in family groups and compiled into the earliest form of the *Rig Veda* (MacDonnell, 1917). The full collection consists of 1,028 *suktas*, organized into ten books. Evidence indicates that the *Rig Veda* is one of the oldest texts in any Indo-European language. It likely originated from the region of present-day Pakistan between 1500 and 2000 BCE (British Library, n.d.).



Vishnu, assuming the form of the all-encompassing cosmic being.

The excerpt below comes from Book 10, Verse 90 of the *Rig Veda*. It is one of several *suktas* in the Vedas that describes the creation of the world. In the “*Purushasukta*” or “*Hymn of Man*,” the gods are the agents of creation. The material out of which the world is made is the body of a primeval giant named Purusha. In this story, the act of creation requires the ritualized sacrifice of Purusha, whose body is divided to become the plants, animals, humans, and Gods of the world (MacDonnell, 1917). The process also creates the sacred texts and establishes the practice of ritual sacrifice. Other Indo-European myths share similar narrative content, and many represent the world as being created from the body of a primordial

being (Lincoln, 1975, p. 123). Similar creation stories can be found in Germanic, Roman, and Indo-Iranian traditions, as well as Zoroastrian mythology.

The tenth book was the final addition to the *Rig Veda*, and both its language and subject matter demonstrate its later origins. In particular, “Purushasukta” was the subject of much debate by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Friedrich Max Müller (1859), a German-born philologist, believed the hymn was added at a later date based on its diction and content (p. 571). Specific references to the four varnas of the caste system and the *sukta*’s introduction of a pantheistic worldview suggested that this particular *sukta*, or parts of it, may have been added at a later time. Others disagreed. Scholars like B. V. Kamesvara Aiyar (1898) argued that the references to the caste system indicated an earlier, less-rigid system of thought and did not support a later date of origin (p. 5). Kamesvara Aiyar also disagreed with conclusions about the hymn’s language, arguing that just because the language showed exceptional refinement, it shouldn’t be assumed that it came from a later period (p. 7). Modern scholars, including David Keane (2016) have reached a general consensus that the references to the caste system were added by more recent authors to justify the strict socio-economic divisions of modern social structures (p. 26). ♦

Rig Veda, Book 10, Verse 90

Adapted from John Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India*, Volume 1, London: Trubner, 1872. (pp.9-11).

¹ Purushaⁱ has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side enveloping the earth, he overpassed (it) by a space of ten fingers.

² Purusha himself is this whole (universe), whatever has been and whatever shall be. He is also the lord of immortality, since (or, when) by food he expands.

³ Such is his greatness, and Purusha is superior to this. All existences are a quarter of him; and three-fourths of him are that which is immortal in the sky.

⁴ With three-quarters Purusha mounted upwards. A quarter of him was again produced here. He was then diffused everywhere over things which eat and things which do not eat.

⁵ From him was born Viraj,ⁱⁱ and from Viraj, Purusha. When born, he extended beyond the earth, both behind and before.

ⁱ The Supreme being, the first primal being who is sacrificed, and from whose sacrifice all else is created.

ⁱⁱ Viraj: the Cosmic body.

⁶ When the gods performed a sacrifice with Purusha as the oblation, the spring was its butter, the summer its fuel, and the autumn its' (accompanying) offering.

⁷ This victim, Purusha, born in the beginning, they immolated on the sacrificial grass. With him the gods, the Sadhyas,ⁱⁱⁱ and the rishis sacrificed.

⁸ From that universal sacrifice, were provided curds and butter. It formed those aerial (creatures) and animals both wild and tame.

⁹ From that universal sacrifice sprang the richa and saman verses, the metres, and the Yajush.^{iv}

¹⁰ From it sprang horses, and all animals with two rows of teeth;^v kine sprang from it; from it goats and sheep.

¹¹ When (the gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? What are said (to have been) his thighs and feet?

¹² The Brahman was his mouth; the Rajanya was made his arms; the being (called) the Vaisya, he was his thighs; the Sudra sprang from his feet.^{vi}

ⁱⁱⁱ Demi-Gods who guard the rites and prayers of the greater Gods.

^{iv} References to stylistic conventions of Hindu scriptural verse.

^v In particular referring to cows.

^{vi} This is referring to the four castes in Hinduism, and therefore is the reference to the creation of all humanity. Each caste had a particular role in society; Brahmans referred to

¹³ The moon sprang from his soul, the sun from his eye, Indra^{vii} and Agni^{viii} from his mouth, and Vayu^{ix} from his breath.

¹⁴ From his navel arose the air, from his head the sky, from his feet the earth, from his ear the (four) quarters: in this manner (the gods) formed the worlds.

¹⁵ When the gods, performing yajna,^x bound Purusha as victim, there were seven sticks (stuck up) for it (around the fire), and thrice seven (offerings) of fuel were made.

¹⁶ With sacrifice the gods performed the sacrifice. These were the earliest rites. These gods have sought the sky (heavens), where the former Sadhyas, dwell.

members of the priest class, the Rajanyas were rulers, administrators, and warriors, the Vaisyas were artisans, merchants, tradesmen, and farmers, and the Sudras were the various laboring classes.

^{vii} King of Heaven, ruler over the celestial beings or Gods

^{viii} God of Fire

^{ix} God of Wind

^x Hindu ritual sacrifice

Works Cited

British Library. (n.d.). *Rigveda*. Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022 from:

www.bl.uk/collection-items/rig-veda.

Kamesavra Aiyar, B. V. (1898). *The Purusha Sukta*. G. A. Nateson. Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022

from: archive.org/details/purushasukta00unkngoog/page/n4/mode/2up.

Keane, D. (2016). *Caste-Based Discrimination in International Human Rights Law*. Routledge.

Lincoln, B. (1975). "The Indo-European Myth of Creation." *History of Religions*, 15(2), 121-154.

Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022 from: jstor.org/stable/1061927.

MacDonnell, A. A. (1917). *A Vedic Reader for Students*. Clarendon Press. Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022 from:

oll.libertyfund.org/title/macdonell-a-vedic-reader-for-students#Macdonell_0562_1931.

Müller, F. M. (1859). *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*. Williams and Norgate. Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022 from:

archive.org/details/historyofancient00mluoft/page/570/mode/2up?view=theater.

Images Cited

Unknown author - Vishnu Vishvarupa, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Public Domain in U.S. Retrieved on Jan 31, 2022 from:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33706068>