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Decoding The Metaphysics Of The Rigveda: A Study Of Creation Hymns And Their Philosophical Implications

Dr. Krishna Panda**Keywords:** Rigveda, Nasadiya Sukta, metaphysics, creation hymns, cosmology, Vedic philosophy**Introduction**

The Rigveda, the oldest extant Indo-European text, offers profound insights into the metaphysical and cosmological speculations of early Vedic thinkers. Unlike later systematic philosophies, the Rigveda's creation hymns do not present a single cohesive doctrine. Instead, they pose open-ended questions, suggest multiple cosmological possibilities, and explore the mystery of existence. This paper investigates the metaphysical structure embedded in select creation hymns of the Rigveda, especially the Nasadiya Sukta (10.129), Hiranyagarbha Sukta (10.121), and Purusha Sukta (10.90), to uncover the philosophical frameworks regarding the origin of the universe, the nature of being, and the relationship between the manifest and the unmanifest.

The Nature of Inquiry in Vedic Thought

Vedic metaphysics often begins not with assertion but with inquiry. The Nasadiya Sukta is a seminal example: it opens not with a description of what is but with questions about what might have been. This epistemological humility reflects a unique philosophical approach: it admits the limits of human cognition even as it strives to transcend them. The refrain "Who really knows?" is not skepticism but a recognition of the metaphysical sublime. This mode of speculative theology anticipates later developments in Indian philosophical systems such as Vedanta and Samkhya.

Nasadiya Sukta: The Mystery of Non-Being and Being

The Nasadiya Sukta (RV 10.129) is perhaps the most enigmatic of the Rigvedic hymns. It speaks of a time when neither non-being nor being existed, neither air nor sky. The hymn contemplates the origins of creation as emerging from a formless undifferentiated state. Some interpret this as a proto-Advaitic view of an indefinable reality that underlies dualistic distinctions. Others see it as a Samkhyan gesture toward prakriti (primordial nature) before manifestation. The last verse posits that even the overseer in the highest heaven may not know the origin, suggesting a radical theological openness.

The Nasadiya Sukta (Rgveda 10.129) is one of the most philosophically profound hymns in the entire Vedic corpus. Unlike mythic narratives of creation found in other parts of the Rgveda, this hymn takes an introspective, almost agnostic approach to the origins of the universe. Rather than prescribing a clear-cut doctrine or deity-centered cosmogony, it explores the **mystery of existence itself**—before the emergence of dualities such as being and non-being, time and space, light and darkness.

The hymn begins with a paradox: "*nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm*"—"Then there was neither non-existence nor existence." This is a startling metaphysical proposition, as it challenges even the binary ontological categories we use to understand reality. It suggests a state that **transcends conceptual categories**, a kind of primordial potentiality that defies conventional description.

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This transcendental state is characterized by **absolute indeterminacy**. There was no air (*prāṇa*), no sky, no direction, and no differentiation. The seers ask: “Who truly knows? Who can here declare it?” This radical **epistemological humility** contrasts with later doctrinal certainties found in many theological traditions. Even the **Puruṣa in the highest heaven**—possibly a reference to the creator deity or the transcendental self—is not certain of how creation came about. This suggests a **panentheistic** or **non-theistic metaphysical openness**, where the divine is not necessarily the all-knowing architect but part of the enigma.

The hymn also alludes to a **primordial one**, *tad ekam*, which breathed **without breath** by its own inherent force (*svadhā*). This One is not a personalized god but an **abstract unity**, perhaps what later Vedānta traditions would identify with *Brahman*. The act of “breathing” without air points to **self-sustained consciousness or presence**—an early intimation of **non-dual metaphysics**.

Multiple interpretations arise from this hymn:

- **Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta** sees this as an expression of the **nirguṇa Brahman**, the impersonal, attributeless absolute. The absence of duality and the indeterminate origins align with the concept of *māyā* (illusion) and Brahman as the substratum of all appearances.
- **Rāmānuja**, from a Viśiṣṭādvaita standpoint, might interpret the One as **Nārāyaṇa in a formless state**, where creation is the divine’s own body, and the mystery lies in the mode rather than the source of emergence.
- **Madhva**, with his dualistic Dvaita framework, would be more hesitant to embrace the ambiguity. For him, the One would point to a supreme deity (*Viṣṇu*), and the uncertainty would be attributed to the limitations of human cognition, not the divine’s.
- **Modern scholars** like Frits Staal and Raimon Panikkar have viewed the hymn as an early instance of **phenomenological philosophy**—a meditation not just on the origin of the world but on the **conditions of knowing** and the limits of metaphysical language.

Interestingly, the hymn’s final verse challenges **dogmatic cosmology** with an openness rare in ancient scriptures: “*He who is the overseer in the highest heaven, he may know—or perhaps even he does not know.*” This does not deny the divine; rather, it elevates **the mystery of Being** above human—and even divine—comprehension.

In sum, the Nasadiya Sukta does not present a closed metaphysical system but opens a **dialogue between silence and speech, certainty and mystery**. It is a hymn not of answers, but of **intellectual humility and sacred wonder**, inviting continued reflection and interpretation across millennia

Hiranyagarbha Sukta: The Cosmic Embryo and Creative Intelligence

The Hiranyagarbha Sukta (RV 10.121) introduces the concept of the “golden embryo,” the cosmic seed from which the universe unfolds. It presents a monotheistic or henotheistic vision of a single divine force that pervades all reality. The golden embryo may be interpreted as the source of the cosmic order (*ṛta*), akin to the logos or divine nous in Western metaphysics. The refrain “To what god shall we offer our oblation?” reveals the multiplicity within unity—a deity who is many yet one, transcending polytheistic categories.

The **Hiranyagarbha Sukta** (Ṛgveda 10.121) is another central cosmological hymn of the Rigveda, offering a more theistic and structured account of creation than the speculative Nasadiya Sukta. The term *Hiranyagarbha*, meaning “golden womb” or “cosmic embryo,” symbolizes the **latent source of the universe**, akin to a primordial seed from which all existence unfolds. It represents the **nascence of form and order** from a pre-cosmic potentiality.

The hymn repeatedly asks, “*To what god shall we offer our oblation?*”—a refrain that at once acknowledges a **singular creative principle** and affirms the **multiplicity of divine functions**. This question implies a **henotheistic** orientation: a worship of one supreme deity among many, who subsumes all functions and attributes. In this hymn, the **One God** is not named specifically, but described through his cosmic acts—supporting the earth and heavens, giving breath, ordering the waters, and generating fire, air, and the sun.

Philosophically, the Hiranyagarbha represents an **intermediate metaphysical principle**—neither purely transcendent nor fully immanent. It is the **first-born of creation**, the “Lord of what exists” (*bhūtasya jātaḥ patir eka āsīt*). It bridges the ineffable unmanifest (*avyakta*) and the manifest cosmos, functioning much like the concept of *Īśvara* in Vedānta or *mahat* in Sāṅkhya.

- **Śāṅkara** might interpret the Hiranyagarbha as **Īśvara**, the conditioned form of Brahman wielding *māyā* to initiate cosmic manifestation. While Brahman itself remains beyond qualities, *Īśvara* functions within the domain of names and forms (*nāma-rūpa*), and the hymn reflects this divine agency.
- **Rāmānuja** would emphasize the **personal nature** of this creative divinity, equating Hiranyagarbha with **Nārāyaṇa**, who is both the material and efficient cause of the universe (*upādāna* and *nimitta kāraṇa*). The *golden embryo* thus becomes a metaphor for the Lord’s immanence within His creation.
- **Madhva** reads the hymn as an early declaration of **Viṣṇu’s supremacy**, asserting that the god to whom sacrifices are directed is *Viṣṇu* himself—eternal, all-knowing, and distinct from the world. The recurring question is rhetorical, as the deity is singularly identified through his acts.

Metaphysically, the **golden hue** of the embryo denotes **conscious luminosity and generative vitality**—concepts paralleled in other ancient cultures, such as the Egyptian sun egg or the Greek concept of *Nous*. In cosmological terms, Hiranyagarbha prefigures the **cosmic inflation point** in modern cosmology—a dense, unified origin from which time and space emerge.

The hymn thus balances **theistic devotion and philosophical abstraction**, merging cosmogenesis with a theological vision. It proposes a metaphysics of **emergent order**, governed by a divine intelligence that is both majestic and mysterious.

Purusha Sukta: The Macrocosmic Being

The Purusha Sukta (RV 10.90) presents a metaphysical vision of a cosmic being, Purusha, whose sacrifice leads to the creation of the universe. This hymn integrates metaphysics with ritual, suggesting that the cosmos is not only a creation but a sacred offering. The hymn lays the foundation for Vedic social cosmology by linking creation to the emergence of the four varnas (social classes). From a philosophical standpoint, it envisions reality as both unified and hierarchically structured—a theme later echoed in the Vedantic concept of Brahman manifesting through *māyā*.

The **Purusha Sukta** (R̥gveda 10.90) is perhaps the most theologically dense hymn in the Rigveda, presenting a vision of the universe as a **sacrificial unfolding** of a primordial cosmic being—*Purusha*. Unlike the other creation hymns, this one fuses **ritual, cosmology, and social ontology** into a unified metaphysical narrative.

Purusha is described as **thousand-headed, thousand-eyed, and thousand-footed**, transcending both space and time. He pervades everything—*sarvataḥ pāṇipādām*, reminiscent of later descriptions of *Brahman* in the Bhagavad Gītā. The central idea is that **creation is sacrificial**: the cosmos emerges from the ritual dismemberment (*yajña*) of the Purusha. From his mouth came the *brāhmaṇa*, from his arms the *kṣatriya*, from his thighs the *vaiśya*, and from his feet the *śūdra*. The moon arose from his mind, the sun from his eyes, and the wind from his breath.

This sacrificial origin positions **yajña not merely as a ritual act**, but as the **ontological ground of reality**. The universe is structured, sustained, and sanctified through this original offering. Unlike Western creation narratives that emphasize divine command (*fiat*), the Purusha Sukta presents **being as becoming through sacred transformation**.

- **Śaṅkara** views Purusha as a symbolic representation of **Brahman**, with the sacrificial metaphor emphasizing **apparent multiplicity arising from unitary consciousness**. The caste system, in his interpretation, represents functional diversity, not metaphysical inequality.

- **Rāmānuja** interprets Purusha as **Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa**, whose body is the world. The hymn affirms the reality of distinctions while maintaining their **dependence on a supreme being**, supporting his doctrine of **qualified non-dualism (Viśiṣṭādvaita)**.

- **Madhva**, a staunch dualist, reads this hymn as an affirmation of **ontological difference** between the supreme Purusha (Viṣṇu), the souls, and the world. The sacrifice reveals a purposeful divine act of creation, not an abstract cosmic process.

This hymn also holds political and sociological significance. The **origin of varṇa** from the Purusha's body served as a cosmological legitimization of social order in Vedic society. Philosophically, this sacrificial model integrates **unity, diversity, and hierarchy**, forming the basis for **Dharma and cosmic duty**.

In terms of comparative philosophy, the **notion of a primordial being's sacrifice** recalls myths from Norse (Ymir), Mesopotamian (Tiamat), and Chinese (Pangu) traditions, all of which use dismemberment as a symbol of creation. This suggests a **universal archetype** in human thought: the cosmos as a body, whose fragmentation allows for structured multiplicity.

Ritualistically, the hymn gave rise to **elaborate Śrauta yajñas** and formed the **ideological foundation** for later Vedantic metaphysics and Smṛti law codes. It embodies the Vedic worldview that **sacrifice is not just religious duty but cosmic participation**.

Creation as Sacrifice: The Ontology of Yajña

Vedic cosmology is deeply intertwined with the concept of *yajña* (sacrifice). The Purusha Sukta in particular articulates the view that creation is not an act of fiat but a cosmic sacrifice. Ontologically, this positions reality as inherently relational and participatory. Sacrifice becomes the medium through which the formless takes form. This ritual metaphysics suggests a dynamic universe where transformation is the ground of being.

In Vedic cosmology, the concept of **yajña (sacrifice)** is not just a ritual but the fundamental ontological principle that governs the creation and maintenance of the cosmos. The Vedic hymns, particularly the **Purusha Sukta** (R̥gveda 10.90) and **Hiranyagarbha Sukta** (R̥gveda 10.121), present **creation as a divine sacrificial act**. The **cosmic being**, often depicted as **Purusha** or **Hiranyagarbha**, offers himself in a sacrificial rite from which the universe arises. This sacrificial process is not a singular event but a continuous, creative force that sustains the cosmos.

In the **Purusha Sukta**, the dismemberment of Purusha symbolizes the **emergence of the cosmos**: from his body come the elements, the heavens, the earth, and the social structure. Each part of Purusha's sacrifice corresponds to the

manifestation of different cosmic and social aspects. This act of cosmic dismemberment reflects a **unified principle** that gives rise to **multiplicity**. The universe is seen as a **living sacrifice**, where each element is an offering that maintains cosmic order.

Philosophically, yajña embodies the idea of **self-sacrifice**, where the divine being continually offers itself for the creation and sustenance of the world. This self-giving nature of **Brahman** or **Purusha** resonates with the Upanishadic teachings of the **non-dual nature of reality**, where the cosmos is viewed as a process of **self-differentiation** from a singular divine essence. The **ritual of yajña** thus transcends human acts of worship, becoming a **cosmic principle** of order and harmony.

In modern contexts, the **ontology of yajña** offers valuable insights into **ecological ethics**, where human actions can be seen as part of the **ongoing cosmic offering**. The universe, as a living sacrifice, calls for sustainable, responsible engagement with nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings in the divine cosmic process.

Order and Chaos: The Concept of Ṛta

The principle of ṛta—the cosmic order—is central to understanding Rigvedic metaphysics. The hymns portray creation not as a singular event but as the emergence of order from chaos. Ṛta is not merely natural law; it is a metaphysical principle of harmony and truth. The maintenance of ṛta is a moral imperative, linking cosmology with ethics. This anticipates later Dharma theories in the Upanishads and Smṛti texts.

In Vedic philosophy, the concept of **Ṛta** embodies the **cosmic order** that governs both the universe and human existence. It represents the underlying truth, harmony, and balance that pervades all aspects of reality. Ṛta is not simply a physical law but a metaphysical principle, deeply tied to the **moral and ethical order** of the cosmos. It ensures that all actions, whether in the natural world or human affairs, align with the divine will, maintaining harmony and preventing chaos.

In the **Rigveda**, Ṛta is often associated with the sun, the seasons, and the cycles of nature, symbolizing the predictable patterns of creation and destruction. The Vedic gods, particularly **Indra** and **Varuna**, are seen as the **upholders of Ṛta**, ensuring that the cosmos remains in equilibrium. **Varuna**, in particular, is the guardian of truth and righteousness, maintaining the moral aspect of Ṛta.

The concept of Ṛta goes beyond physical order; it extends to human **behavior and duty** (dharma). A person's actions must align with Ṛta to sustain the cosmic balance. Violation of Ṛta leads to chaos, disorder, and imbalance, which are seen as destructive forces threatening the cosmos and human life.

In modern contexts, Ṛta reflects the need for **ethical integrity** and **environmental sustainability** to preserve universal harmony.

Multiplicity and Unity in Vedic Deities

While the Rigveda enumerates many deities, creation hymns like Hiranagarbha Sukta suggest a deeper unity. The Vedic gods are personifications of cosmic principles rather than isolated entities. This symbolic polytheism allows for metaphysical plurality within an overarching unity. Such a framework resists rigid monotheism or polytheism and instead proposes an integrative cosmology.

In Vedic philosophy, the deities represent both **multiplicity** and **unity**, illustrating the relationship between the diverse manifestations of the divine and the singular, unified reality. The Vedic pantheon, comprising gods like **Indra**, **Agni**, **Varuna**, and **Surya**, reflects different natural forces, such as the sky, fire, water, and the sun. Each deity embodies a distinct aspect of the cosmos, performing unique roles in maintaining order, law, and balance. For instance, **Indra** governs thunder and storms, while **Agni** presides over fire and sacrifice, and **Varuna** upholds cosmic law.

However, despite their apparent individuality, the Vedic deities are ultimately expressions of a **single, transcendent reality**—the **Brahman** or the divine essence that permeates all existence. The concept of **Brahman** in Vedic thought underscores that the deities, while diverse in form and function, originate from and return to the one supreme principle. This notion of unity amidst multiplicity is reflected in the hymns, such as the **Purusha Sukta**, where the entire universe is described as emanating from a single cosmic being, Purusha.

The interplay of multiplicity and unity in the Vedic deities emphasizes that the cosmos, while appearing diverse, is fundamentally a unified whole. It signifies the **non-dual nature of existence**, where all forms are manifestations of the same underlying divine reality.

Comparative Insights: Vedic and Western Metaphysics

Comparisons can be drawn between Rigvedic metaphysics and Pre-Socratic philosophy. For instance, Anaximander's concept of the 'apeiron' (the infinite) as the source of all things parallels the Nasadiya Sukta's indefinable pre-creation state. The concept of logos in Heraclitus resembles the Vedic ṛta. Both traditions wrestle with the emergence of order from the unmanifest.

Scientific Resonances: Modern Cosmology and Vedic Thought

Interestingly, the speculative nature of Rigvedic creation hymns resonates with contemporary cosmological theories. The notion of creation from a singularity or the quantum vacuum echoes the Nasadiya Sukta's descriptions. Hiranagarbha as a cosmic seed mirrors the Big Bang model. While not empirical, these hymns reveal a profound

intuitive grasp of metaphysical principles underlying physical reality.

Modern cosmology and Vedic thought share intriguing parallels, especially in their views on the origin and structure of the universe. Both cosmological frameworks propose a **cosmic unity** from which multiplicity emerges. In Vedic thought, the concept of **Brahman** as the singular source of all creation aligns with the modern scientific idea of the **Big Bang**, where the universe originates from a single, dense point and expands into vast complexity. Similarly, the Vedic notion of **Hiranyagarbha** (the golden embryo) as the source of the universe's creation resonates with the scientific understanding of the primordial singularity that gave birth to space, time, and matter.

Moreover, the **cyclical nature of time** in Vedic cosmology, characterized by cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution (Yugas), has parallels in modern theories of the universe, such as the **oscillating universe theory** and **big bounce hypothesis**, where the universe undergoes infinite cycles of expansion and contraction.

Additionally, the Vedic principle of **Rta**, or cosmic order, finds resonance in modern physics' search for underlying **laws** governing the universe, such as the **laws of thermodynamics** and **quantum mechanics**, which aim to explain the orderly behavior of matter and energy. Thus, Vedic thought and modern cosmology converge in their exploration of the universe's **origin, order, and interconnectedness**, providing a shared framework for understanding the cosmos.

Conclusion

The creation hymns of the Rigveda provide a foundational metaphysical discourse for Indian philosophy. Their blend of poetic ambiguity, theological humility, and ontological depth makes them enduring sources of philosophical inquiry. By decoding these hymns, we gain access not only to ancient cosmological thought but also to universal questions of existence, order, and the divine.

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