

REVIEW ARTICLE



The divine feminine in the ṛgveda: Antecedents, symbolism, and cosmic principles

Prashil Sharma

Department of History, Vikrant University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of the divine feminine in the Ṛgveda and its contribution to Earth system philosophy through the lens of Vedic cosmology. It explores the symbolic, theological, and ecological significance of feminine deities such as Aditī, Uṣās, Sarasvatī, Prthvī, Rātrī, and Vāc, who are represented as sustaining forces of cosmic harmony, fertility, knowledge, speech, and natural order (ṛta). Rather than being portrayed merely as mythological figures, these deities embody interconnected principles that regulate both the human and cosmic realms. By analyzing key hymns and their textual contexts, the study highlights how Vedic thought conceptualizes the Earth and the universe as a living, interdependent system sustained by balance, continuity, and sacred responsibility. The paper argues that Vedic feminine cosmology offers an early philosophical framework that resonates with contemporary Earth system philosophy by emphasizing ecological interconnectedness, cyclical regeneration, and harmony between nature and humanity. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the feminine divine in the Ṛgveda is not secondary to the masculine principle but functions as an essential cosmic power underlying creation and preservation. Through this exploration, the paper contributes to broader discussions of environmental ethics, spiritual ecology, and the relevance of ancient Vedic perspectives for understanding sustainable relationships among humans, nature, and the cosmos.

KEY WORDS

Ṛgveda; Divine feminine; Vedic cosmology; Ṛta

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Introduction

The Ṛgveda is one of the foundational texts of early Indian civilization and philosophy, traditionally dated to around 1500 BCE, although its exact historical period remains uncertain. The text offers deep insight into the religious consciousness, ritual practices, cosmological understanding, and social structure of Vedic society through its articulation of ṛta. This universal cosmic order governs both nature and human existence. While scholarly attention has often focused predominantly on the male deities of the Vedic pantheon, the hymns dedicated to feminine deities such as Aditī, Uṣās, Sarasvatī, Prthvī, Rātrī, and Vāc reveal an equally significant theological and cosmological dimension within Vedic thought. These divine feminine figures are represented as sustaining powers that embody fertility, dawn, wisdom, speech, nourishment, protection, and cosmic harmony, thereby functioning as essential forces that preserve balance within the universe.

The feminine deities of the Ṛgveda were revered by early Vedic communities not merely as mythological entities but as manifestations of sacred cosmic principles that nurture and sustain life. They are portrayed as both gentle and powerful, protecting the moral and natural order while ensuring continuity, regeneration, and interconnectedness between humanity, nature, and the cosmos. Through their association with light, fertility, knowledge, and the rhythms of the natural world, these deities symbolize the dynamic processes through which creation and preservation are maintained. The imagery of dawn dispelling darkness, the Earth providing nourishment, and speech conveying divine wisdom reflects a sophisticated philosophical understanding of existence grounded in harmony and reciprocity.

This paper examines the concept of the divine feminine in the Ṛgveda and its contribution to Earth system philosophy through the lens of Vedic cosmology. By analyzing selected hymns and

their symbolic and theological contexts, the study explores how feminine divinity is conceptualized as an integral force sustaining both the cosmic and earthly realms. The discussion is limited specifically to Ṛgvedic texts and does not extend into later Purāṇic traditions or contemporary reinterpretations. The study argues that the feminine cosmology embedded within the Ṛgveda presents an early philosophical framework that resonates strongly with contemporary Earth system philosophy through its emphasis on ecological interconnectedness, cyclical regeneration, sacred responsibility, and harmony between humanity and nature. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the feminine divine is not secondary to masculine authority but constitutes a fundamental cosmic power underlying creation, continuity, and preservation. Through this exploration, the study contributes to broader discussions of environmental ethics, spiritual ecology, and the enduring relevance of ancient Vedic thought for understanding sustainable relationships among humans, the Earth, and the cosmos.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, textual methodology to examine the concept of the divine feminine in the Ṛgveda through an interpretative analysis of selected hymns. The research primarily relies on the Ṛgvedic corpus as the principal source for understanding the theological, symbolic, and cosmological representations of feminine deities in early Vedic thought. The study analyses English translations of the Ṛgveda to explore the meanings, symbolic expressions, and philosophical dimensions of feminine divinity, particularly in relation to cosmic order, fertility, speech, wisdom, and protection. By engaging closely with the textual structure and thematic content of the hymns, the study seeks to understand how feminine deities function within the broader framework of Vedic cosmology and Earth-centered philosophy.

*Correspondence: Mr. Prashil Sharma, Department of History, Vikrant University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India, e-mail: Prashil.sharma15@gmail.com

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Textual analysis

The study employs textual analysis as a major methodological approach to investigate hymns dedicated to feminine deities such as Aditi, Uṣās, Sarasvatī, Pṛthvī, Rātrī, and Vāc. Selected hymns are carefully examined to identify recurring symbols, metaphors, theological themes, and cosmological concepts embedded within the Rgvedic verses [9]. Particular attention is given to the linguistic and symbolic representations that portray feminine divinity as a sustaining and regulating force within the cosmic order. The analysis further explores how the hymns articulate ideas of creation, continuity, nourishment, protection, and the interconnectedness among nature, humanity, and the divine realm. Through this interpretative reading, the study highlights the philosophical significance of feminine principles in maintaining harmony and balance within the universe.

Historical interpretation

The research also incorporates a historical interpretative approach to understanding the selected hymns within the broader socio-religious and cultural context of the early Vedic period. The hymns are examined not only as sacred literary compositions but also as reflections of the worldview and spiritual consciousness of early Vedic society. This approach helps in understanding how feminine deities were perceived, worshipped, and celebrated within ritual and cosmological traditions. The historical interpretation further enables the study to analyze how these deities symbolized natural forces, ethical principles, and cosmic functions central to the Vedic understanding of existence and order. By sitting the hymns within their early Vedic context, the research aims to reveal the philosophical depth and cultural significance of feminine divinity in ancient Indian thought.

Philosophical approach

The study further adopts a philosophical approach to examine key Sanskrit concepts such as *rta*, *Vāc*, and *Aditi* within the framework of Rgvedic cosmology. These concepts are analyzed in relation to their symbolic and metaphysical meanings as presented in the hymns. The research investigates how *rta* represents the universal cosmic order, how *Vāc* embodies sacred speech and creative knowledge, and how *Aditi* symbolizes boundlessness, protection, and cosmic unity. Through this philosophical exploration, the study seeks to understand how feminine principles contribute to the structure and continuity of the cosmos within Vedic thought. The research remains limited to the Rgvedic corpus and does not extend to later philosophical, Purāṇic, or theological developments, thereby maintaining a focus on the earliest textual representations of the divine feminine in the Vedic tradition.

Rta and Feminine Divinity: A Conceptual Framework

Rta is often pronounced “*Rita*” and is the principle that keeps the universe in balance; its law guides humans to work with nature, and the concept establishes a framework for maintaining truth (*satya*). It is not just a vast and empty space; rather, *rta* connects the physical world and the spiritual dimensions through the laws that govern them. *Rta* is normally seen as the natural law or order that guides the universe and its events [1]. It is only through the power of truth that creation occurs, as listed in the RV 10.90.7; however, the mischievous acts of humans are forgiven by the upholder through rituals, sacrifices, and chants, which uphold the

universal order [2,3]. Thus, *rta* further ideologizes the Vedic philosophy, not just as ancient but also as holding a cosmology, morality, and ritual practices that shaped the early Indian view and influenced modern thought.

Furthermore, *Aditi* is referred to as Mother Earth, which signifies the nurturing aspect of *Aditi*, mentioned over 100 times in the Rgveda, and becomes one of the few feminine deities to have been listed in all ten mandalas. She is known as the mother of *Adityas* and other entities, and she embodies creation, protection, and sustenance [4]. *Uṣās* is regarded as a destroyer of darkness by bringing divine energy into the physical world; her radiant morning light kills the demons within a person. She has been highlighted after *aditi* with nearly 40 verses and hymns in the Rgveda. The name of the river, *Sarasvatī*, comes from *Saras* and *Vati*, meaning thriving in pools and lakes [5]. She is regarded as an inspiration and giver of knowledge that represents sacred speech. *Pṛthvī* reflects the love and protection of the early Vedic period; she nurtures the livelihood and is known for her fertility. *Rātrī* is known for the time of rest that provides protection during the night and offers renewal to boost health, and *Vāc* delivers speech by performing sacrifices or *yajnas*.

These feminine deities highlight the significance of the forces that act through them and create a bond to uphold the law by worshipping the female deities and respecting nature simultaneously.

Discussion

Aditi

Aditi is categorized as the most significant divinity as per the Rgveda where she proclaimed the motherhood who provides and protect the humanity, her vastness is unimaginable or infinite as is seen to have been the greatest of all because she holds the central place to uphold the cosmic order, however, RV 1.89.10 portrays her as the most collaboratively working deity in the sense of nurturing the Earth, simultaneously working within the whole cosmic principle [6,4]. Ritik 2024 further clarifies that *Aditi* is revered as the eternal mother, encapsulating the infinite and nurturing aspects of the cosmos. Her role as the mother of the *Adityas* and other divine beings underscores her centrality in the Vedic pantheon [8]. In Pandit's (1958) research paper, he cited that there are undoubtedly many mantras dedicated to her in the Vedas as a personal deity, a deity with a vivid, real, and individual identity as *Agni*, *Indra*, and others. It is because the *Aditi* is the mother of the *Adityas*, and through her, the powers of *Agni*, *Indra*, etc. emerge. This further elaborates the statement, with the support from the *Devī Atharvashirsha* solak 13, which provides immense clarity that she is the natural phenomenon that created all beings, such as *Gandharvas*, *Pitṛs*, *Gods*, *Asuras*, and *Rākṣasas* [9]. The daughter of *Daksa*, who is the head of all, is called *Sati*, *Devī*, *Kali*, etc.

Uṣās

She is regarded as the most beautiful deity, who mesmerizes living beings with her calm yet energetic gaze at dawn. According to the Rgveda, she is described as a life-giving, radiant, and youthful *devī*. She is highlighted in multiple verses of the Rgveda, and her majesty is described in nearly 40 hymns. With an immense glare, she dispels darkness, bringing light and happiness. For example, RV 1.49.4 portrays her as bringing energy to all living beings through her radiance. Her power brings renewal and hope, which she upholds, and she thus protects everyone from demons and darkness, inspiring

humanity and animals to follow kindness [10]. Similarly, Ritik (2024) expressed that the goddess of dawn is amazing, bringing hope, renewal, and enlightenment, and her importance is well preserved in the ṛgveda. She stands as a powerful symbol of inspiration and vitality, essential for the sustenance of life and progression of time [4]. Therefore, the Aditī and Uṣās play a decisive role in the Ṛgveda, providing a perspective in which they collectively work to maintain the balance of cosmic law that protects humanity and enables it to grow and sustain life through creative energy and skill. As part of that early Vedic society, they were offered prayers and sacrifices.

Sarasvatī

Goddess Sarasvatī is the power of knowledge; she is deliberately seen as an intellect who guides the path of learning, providing fruits and bringing culture and art. Her name in the Vedic hymns refers to 'lady of the water' or 'flowing one,' because many of the sages composed the Vedic hymns on the banks of rivers and were worshipped independently [11]. RV 2.41.16 highlights that she is the goddess of all and the best of mothers, providing immense knowledge that brings about change and renewal and protects the humanitarian [12]. According to Macdonell, Sarasvatī in the Ṛgveda is portrayed as a place of sacredness and a sacrificial ritual where the greatest perfection was practiced [13]. As the author Dutt highlights, the kings mentioned in the Ṛgveda were said to reside on the banks of the Sarasvatī River [14]. This shows that the deity is not just about wisdom or learning; it combines the physical and cultural landscape of the Vedic civilization, and it is through her nature that living beings shine through the process of fertility. Therefore, her nature is lost, but her higher rank as a deity holds the place still. Her motherhood flourishes through many hymns and verses as Sarasvatī, or Saptasvarā, one of the greatest rivers.

Prthvī

The word 'Environmental Consciousness' is powerful, highlighting the essence of living and protecting, and offering a proper way of working, living, and being aware of giving back through spiritual connection, yajnas/sacrifices, prayers, etc. Prthvī not only defines the Earth, but she also defines the whole of a 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', she whole heartedly binds all in one ground and protects in her womb that spread all around the mountain, she thus sustain the cycle of life that govern the humanitarian, animal, and plants in the ṛgveda, she is considered the most excellent goddess that delight the Earth by her greatness. However, we find fewer hymns dedicated to her in the ṛgveda. Still, the reference is entirely collected in the book of Atharva Veda, Prithvi Sukta, which describes 'Earth is my mother and I am her son' [15,16]. Therefore, to acknowledge the Prthvī who is associated with the puranas, itihāsas, and vedas in the early vedic society that underscores the legendary stories of her, and in some stories, she is the daughter of emperor Prithu, and another story describes that the Prthvī is the mother of Sita Devī, an ideal woman [18]. However, it is now the treasurer for the humans who can progress sustainably with a proper understanding of the use of planet Earth [17]. Thus, Prakriti or Prthvī represents the vast, which provides the nourishment or boundless for the foundation to emerge from the reality to enhance the livelihood for the humanitarian to uphold the law, which is bound by the universal force.

Rātrī

The most beautiful goddess of the darkness that brings the starlit night, with twinkling eyes, drives away the dark and keeps the humans safe under her blanket throughout; she is the radiant of the heaven that possesses the youthful maiden. Rātrī

also takes the form of those things contained within the darkness. She has taken the splendor of the lion and the stag, the form of the tiger and the leopard. She is so familiar with the things that lurk in the darkness that she is most often called upon within spells of protection [18]. Even the ṛgveda mandala 10 hymn 127 thoroughly expresses the night that gives pleasant rest of time under her presence; she thus approaches only in the night, but her timing falls right after the usas, which brings the situation under control and provides aid and assistance [19]. Humans in the early Vedic period prayed to her at night for protection, so they could rest comfortably and be protected from scenarios that might harm them.

Vāc

The word Vāc originated from the root, specifically the voice that utters, and is not ordinary language but a divine feminine sacred force. She is also the cosmic authority to protect the force, celebrated and expressed in the 10 mandalas of the Ṛgveda, known as the Devī Sūkta [20]. The mantras of Vāc are considered the most sacred, and it is through these that she is correctly spoken to, offering her sacrifice during yajnas, as they are the medium of knowledge; her power generates a vibration in the cosmos that highlights her as an independent universal presence to uphold the force. The goddess is creative and holds great authority, resembling the connection between the realms RV 10.125.7 [21].

Conclusion

The divine feminine in the Ṛgveda plays an essential role in acknowledging early Vedic cosmology; however, the feminine deities Aditī, Uṣās, Sarasvatī, Prthvī, and Vāc are among the most embodied deities that embody the cosmic force that sustains the Rta. Their sustaining power helped early Vedic humans collaborate with the universal law to enhance their sustainability and to highlight the feminine power in the ṛgvedic period. Feminine Deities are no less than the masculine that provides nourishment, protection, fertility, etc. Their symbolism is sacred and pure, which authorizes renewal and is blessed by the divine; therefore, Aditī is symbolized as infinity, Uṣās as a cycle of life, Sarasvatī as knowledge, Prthvī as nourishment, Rātrī as protection, and Vāc as sacred speech. Their symbol and the theological depth hold the cosmic order.

The understanding of feminine deities in the Ṛgveda is not only seen as an outer layer of the cosmic principle; they are also seen as the core of the universe and are deeply concerned with the balance they maintain. Humans in the early Vedic period came into contact with the divine and offered them sacrifices through prayers, rituals, and yajnas. Most of the selected hymns are done with the correct utterance by the sages to humble the deities, who are even regarded as the Panchamahabhūtas. Hence, this paper is bound within the ṛgvedic corpus and does not delve into the later Purāṇic interpretations.

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