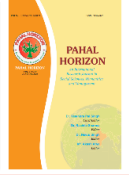




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Rivers, Rain and Renewal: Climate Consciousness in the Rig Veda

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ABSTRACT

The Rig Veda is an ancient Indian group of Vedic Sanskrit hymns. It is one of the four sacred canonical Hindu texts (śruti) known as the Vedas. The hymns of the Rig Veda should also be seen as a document of an early form of ecological or proto-environmental understanding. The proto-environmental understanding was organized in the form of a sacred cosmology, where natural elements were seen as divine. Everything in the natural world and the divine order was believed to be the basis of human welfare. The Rig Veda is described as the most complex and sophisticated text in all of the Vedas when referring to climate or climate consciousness. The paper will discuss the praise of the destructive and creative powers of the two hydrological forces (rivers and rain) as means of renewal, purification, sustenance, and life. The paper will examine (1) the ascribed divinity and all the attributes of the river goddess (rivers and rain) and the rain god (Parjanya) (2) Rta (moral order) as the divine order of the universe, (3) the ritualistic union of man and nature where the man (the sacrificer) acts correctly, while nature (the environment) rewards him with bounty, and (4) the cleansing, healing, and restorative powers of water. This paper argues that the Rig Vedic worldview offers a non-anthropocentric perspective advocating reciprocal relations with the climate, where balance is not an absolute given but rather a shifting outcome of cosmic order and ritualistic duty. This perspective provides a consciousness that is ancient and spiritual and offers a basis for a rethinking of present-day relationships between humans and nature during the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Rig Veda, Climate Consciousness, Ecology, Hydrology, Sarasvati, Parjanya, Rta.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current era, known as the Anthropocene, is marked by human-induced climate change. Sustainable models have begun to identify and analyse the historical and cultural connections with the natural world. Within this context, the Rig Veda has gained prominence. This text, like many others, is seen as a mystical, theological treatise and nothing more. However, the Rig Veda has a unique and profound perception of the world in which the universe is an active, sentient, and divine cause. The world is deprived of a passive, devoid of spirit, and dead nature character. In this context, what constitutes “climate consciousness” in the Rig Veda is not an understanding of atmospheric science, but a perception of climate and water systems as “primordial to the order of the universe, the continuum of life, the flourishing of culture, and the attainment of liberation” (Panda 147). Such a perception is expressed in the poetic and ritualistic language, rather than in a prose narrative, that venerates the rivers and the rain. These are not ordinary rain and rivers; rather, they are invoked as and considered as divine beings (*devatās*) with the power to provide or to withhold favours. This further establishes a relational order of respect, rather than oppression, toward the resources. As Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton note, the Vedic hymns treat these natural forces as “conscious and willful entities whose worship establishes a reciprocal relationship” (58). This framework creates a relational order that is based on respect and reverence, not one that is based on oppression and exploitation. David L. Haberman, in his work on river worship, extends this idea, arguing that such a worldview sees nature not as a “collection of inert objects but as a community of living subjects” (8). Thus, the Rig Veda’s ecological philosophy offers a foundational model for a sacred and reciprocal engagement with the natural world.

While the first part of the idea examines the hydrological spirituality of the Rig Veda, the emphasis shifts to the spirituality of the Vedic period, focusing on the cycles of rivers, rain, and renewal. In the Vedic period, the natural cosmological order (*ṛta*) was laterally (through the earth) actualised, sustained, and manifested via the diverse forms of water. The discussion is organised in interrelated sections. The first is concerned with the divinization of the hydrological (the Goddess Sarasvatī and the God Parjanya). The second is concerned with the *ṛta* (the binding moral cosmic law) and the interrelationships of the environment with divinity and humanity. The third is with the Yajna (sacrifice) ritual ecology, which describes humanity’s role in maintaining this order through a psychosocial climate of benevolence. As Pankaj Jain notes in his analysis of Vedic climate philosophy, water is understood as the very medium through which the cosmic order, *ṛta*, is made manifest and sustained on

Earth, directly linking spiritual law to the physical environment. He writes, “The Vedic seers perceived ṛta as being actualised through the cyclical journey of water from rain to river to ocean and back to the clouds—a cycle maintained by ritual action (yajna) and reverence for the divine within these natural forces” (112). The last section examines the various themes of water healing, purification, renewal, and the Rig Veda’s entropic response spiritually and ecologically. The scope and synthesis of this thesis clarify the Rig Veda’s environmental and hydrological conservation spirituality and elaborate on ecological perspectives of climate ethics and sustainability discourse.

2. RIVERS AND RAIN AS CELESTIAL BEINGS

The Rig Vedic pantheon is replete with nature deities, but its hydrological divinities hold a place of exceptional prominence. Their characterisation reveals a worldview where life-giving waters are seen as conscious, benevolent, yet potent forces that must be honoured and invoked.

2.1. Sarasvatī: The Mighty, Nourishing River-Goddess

The most celebrated river in the Rig Veda is the Sarasvatī, lauded as “the best of mothers, best of rivers, best of goddesses” (2.41.16). She is a very powerful and transcendent female deity and not just any body of water. Descriptions of her are varied, merging elements of the physical, the metaphysical, and the sociological.

Physical Prowess and Nourishment: Sarasvatī is foremost an energizing force. She is called in hymn 6.61 *ambitamā, nadītamā, devī-tamā* (most motherly, most river-like, most divine). She is described as “great in her might, flowing from the mountains to the ocean” (7.95.2), a “raging flood” (*pravāhe yā sasāra pārvatānām*) who breaks the ridges of the hills with her waves. The imagery of her energy and its life-giving, fertile source is insurmountable. She is their source of fertility: “She who has milk in her breasts, who is rich in wealth, may Sarasvatī protect us” (1.164.49). She waters. She abundantly sustains the community’s prosperity (*puṣṭi*).

- **Goddess of Wisdom and Speech:** Sarasvatī’s influence includes the spiritual realm as well. She is closely connected to *Vāc* (Speech) and inspires the wisdom of rituals. In 1.3.10-12, she is accompanied by the goddess *Ilā* (Inspiration) and *Mahī* (the Earth) to grant the worshipper mental fortitude and insightful thought (*dhi*). The

combination of mental and aquatic abundance is exceptional; her waters spiritually and physically cleanse and enrich the land, and mentally enrich the worshipper. This makes her indispensable for the proper performance of the sacrifice. She represents the flow of water and awareness.

- Purifier and Healer: Sarasvatī is also regarded as an agent of purification. She is requested to “purify” and “bestow medicine” (bheṣaja) to a devotee (1.3.10). Her waters remove all kinds of impurities (aghā) and moral dirt, a theme important to renewal, which will be dealt with later. The river goddess, therefore, combines the eco, the mind and the spirit and offers a complete vision of nourishment. This holistic vision is what Steven P. D. Greenland identifies as the “unifying principle” in Sarasvatī’s theology, wherein she “integrates material sustenance with cultural and spiritual enlightenment” (45).

2.2. Parjanya: The Roaring, Fertilising Rain-God

If Sarasvatī symbolises the earthly, nourishing stream, Parjanya represents the heavenly origin. He is the king of the thunderclouds, rainstorms, and, by extension, fertilization. Hymn 5.83 is solely dedicated to him and presents a detailed description of his function in the cycle of the seasons. Translator Wendy Doniger emphasizes the hymn’s visceral imagery, stating, “It portrays Parjanya’s thunder as the roaring of a celestial bull, a sound that directly heralds the life-giving rains” (157).

The roaring bull and the divine embryo:

Parjanya is also a nurturing and virile power; he is the ‘bull’ who inseminates the earth, pictured as a cow: “The bull (Parjanya) bellows to the cow (earth); he sprinkles seed upon her” (5.83.1). His roar is the thunder, and his lightning is the seed. Rain is not merely liquid; it is the cosmic essence that fuels the drive for creation and growth. As the hymn says, “From him (Parjanya), the growing things and the plants; from him, the rain-clouds are born; from him, the rivers flow” (5.83.5). Here the composer has established a definite hydrological genealogy. The rain, Parjanya gives birth to the terrestrial rivers (Sarasvatī and others), all the creatures are nourished. Such an arrangement makes him, in the words of Jan Gonda, the “cosmic progenitor whose function is to “set in motion and maintain the cycle of life through the medium of water” (87).

- Agent of Punishment and Reward: The power of Parjanya, the rain god, is two-sided. He is a giver of life, but he can also be a destroyer.

The poet prays to him, “Do not kill our people, our cattle, or our horses. Do not slay our fighters. Put away your deadly stone thunderbolt, and simply let the rain pour down” (7.101.2). This shows a clear understanding of how climate can be both good and bad. Gentle rains bring wealth and growth, but storms, floods, and dry spells bring disaster. People believe that through praise and offerings, they can keep him doing his proper job—bringing the rains that maintain the natural order and balance of the world.

- The Cycle of Life-Giving: Parjanya’s work follows a repeating, life-giving cycle. The hymn says, “The winds blow, the lightning flashes, plants spring to life, and the sky fills up. Food for the whole world is born when Parjanya fertilizes the earth with his rain” (5.83.4). Here, rain is the key step that starts many events in nature. It connects the weather, plant growth, and the food supply for everyone. Parjanya’s rain is like the engine that keeps the world’s ability to renew and grow itself running.
- The Rig Veda, through the personifications of Parjanya and Sarasvatī, speaks of freshwater sources as the highest of the divine. They are not mere resources to be exploited. Instead, their favour and grace are to be considered as the essential precondition of all culture and life. This understanding forms the core of the text’s climate consciousness.

2.3 Ṛta: The Cosmic Order as Ecological Principle

Sarasvatī, Parjanya, and all other natural phenomena act in accordance with a principle that is supreme and, equally, impersonal. The principle is called Ṛta. Ṛta is often referred to as ‘cosmic order’ or ‘truth,’ but these terms miss out on the deeply ecological aspects Ṛta embodies. It captures the ‘universal law’ that dictates harmonious and balanced order in the world. Ṛta is the law that governs the world’s dynamic equilibrium, where the seasons change, the sun rises and sets, the rivers flow, and the rain pours. Indologist Hermann Oldenberg noted that Ṛta’s most visible expression is in the “unfailing course of the cosmic waters, directly linking it to the hydrological cycle governed by deities like Parjanya and Sarasvatī” (194).

- The Natural Law: Ṛta is what structures the order of nature. Dawn (Uṣas) follows Ṛta’s path; the sun (Sūrya) is Ṛta’s charioteer (1.50.4); the rivers flow with Ṛta. In hymn 4.23.8-10, the sage says, “I follow the path of Ṛta, I hold to the truth. The sun follows the path of Ṛta... The waters, following the law of Ṛta, flow never-wearying.” The clearest of Ṛta’s manifestations are the consistency of climate and hydrology. The life-sustaining facets of the two are

indicative of Ṛta's presence. Disruptions to Ṛta are not just physical consequences but a collapse cosmically and morally. Drought, unseasonal storms, the drying of riverbeds are all manifestations of the disruption.

- **Moral and Ritual Order:** Most importantly, Ṛta is internally connected with the human realm. Only through human action—ritual action (yajña), in particular—can Ṛta be sustained. Varuṇa, the keeper of Ṛta, along with Mitra, is its upholder. They punish anṛta, which refers to falsehoods and disorders, including the breaking of oaths and social contracts, as well as violations of the proper relationship to the world. The Varuṇa poet asks, “Release us from the sins of our fathers, and from those we have committed in our own persons... Let not the thread be cut while I am still weaving my song” (7.86.5-6). This is the thread of life, order, and ecological balance.
- **Reciprocity and Interdependence:** The idea of Ṛta demonstrates radical interconnectedness. The gods rely on sacrifice by humans (the offerings of soma, ghee, and praise) for their power and fortitude. Humans, for their part, rely on the gods and the natural elements they represent for rain, sunlight, and the land's bounty. The cosmos, operating by Ṛta, is reorganized and revitalized by human ritual. In turn, the gods renew their enchanted energy. This involves the creation of a sacred, symbiotic ecosystem. The stability of the climate is the entwined, ritualized responsibility of the gods and humans, aligned with Ṛta. The absence of rain is a sign of broken accord, typically blamed on humans' insufficiently performed rituals and asceticism.
- The Ṛta framework is the basis for the climate consciousness evident in the Rig Veda.

3. THE YAJÑA AS CLIMATE STEWARDSHIP

The yajña (or Vedic sacrifice) was the primary human innovation for engaging with the ordered universe's divinity. It was much more than a ritual; it was a reproduction of the universe's Ṛta on a microcosmic scale. It was a form of climate consciousness in practice.

- **The Sacrifice as Nourishment and Exchange:** The offering of ghee and other grains along with the soma juice over the holy fire is the central ritual of Yajna. Agni was the divine fire and the messenger to the other deities. In many of the hymn compositions, for example, in 1.1, it is Agni who plays the role of the Vedic priest, r̥tevis, who brings in the other deities. Agni is also the priest of the Yajna. As the other Gods are the beneficiaries, it was expected to be a

transactional Yajna. In hymn 10.121, also called the hymn of the cosmic person, the poet says, “From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the hymns and chants were born...the horses were born, all animals with two rows of teeth; the cows were born; from it were born goats and sheep.” While this is in the metaphysical realm, it still contains the echoes of sacrifice generating a bounty. The sacrifice was the main motor of the cycle of exchange that nourished the yajna and the entire world. This perpetual cycle, as theorized by Charles Malamoud, constitutes a “closed circuit of nourishment, where the ritual fire transforms material offerings into metaphysical sustenance, fuelling the cosmic order, or *Rta*” (18).

- Agni and the Waters: The interplay of fire and water has always been a strong ecological motif in rituals. Agni is often described as hiding in or being born from the waters (1.65.1-5; 2.35), likely referencing the phenomenon of fire (lightning) appearing from the rain. In rituals, Agni, born of the friction of fire-sticks, is continually offered ghee (a cow product), which in turn is from the by- or the grass. Agni is exclaimed *svāhā*, and the offering is believed to be turned to the sky as smoke, and the ghee is supposed to turn to the sky as smoke to become, in the words of the later Vedic commentators, the clouds that will later fall as rain. In doing so, it, with the oblation, the ritual, and the offering, symbolically and potentially completes the cycle of the hydrological cycle: Earth (offerings) -> Fire (Agni) -> Sky (smoke/clouds) -> Water (rain) -> Earth (fertility). Thus, the person performing the ritual actively engages with the climate system.
- Invoking Specific Climatic Boons: Numerous hymns mention requests for specific ecological outcomes. In the well-known “Hymn to the Earth” (*Bhūmi Sūkta*, 12.1), the Earth is described as “atmosphere-bearing, treasure-holding, world-supporting,” and the hymn requests her blessings. Many hymns composed for Indra, the thunderbolt (*vajra*) hymns, celebrate the victories of Indra over the drought-demon *Vṛtra*, who “enclosed the waters.” *Vṛtra* is Indra’s antagonist as an ancient rain producer. “He slew the serpent, then released the waters and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.” (1.32.1-2). The community, by singing these hymns, ritually re-enacts this victory so that the life-giving waters may continue to flow. The *yajña* is an act of climate intervention, a ritual for rain, river sustenance, and the flourishing of crops.
- Ritual practices of the Rigveda describe the interaction between people and the divine forces of nature as a system in which human success depends on the fulfillment of divine expectations. Nature,

especially in relation to climate, is seen as an active partner in sacred conversations mediated by fire, prayer, and offerings.

4. PURIFICATION, HEALING, AND CYCLICAL RENEWAL

The most important aspect of maintaining Ṛta and performing yajña is the renewal of life, of social order and of the cosmos. In the Rig Veda, water is the primary symbol of renewal on all three levels: physical, moral, and spiritual.

- **Water as Purifier (Pavitra):** The notion of purity (śuddhi) forms the centre of most Vedic literature. Pollution (mala) or sin (aghā, enas) – ritual, moral or physical – is viewed as a form of entropy, a deviation from Ṛta. Water, more particularly, flowing river water, is the most supreme of all purifiers. Hymn 10.9, dedicated to the “Waters” (Āpas) states: “Waters, you who are the sources of joy, grant us your most exhilarating essence, like mothers loving their children ... You, Waters, are healing; you carry away all defilement” (10.9.1-2). Sarasvati is implored to “wash away all stains” (1.3.10). This purificatory act is not symbolic; it was actually performed (enacted) as ritual ablutions. Water, by the act of ritual wash (ablution), purges the individual or the community of the personal, social or macro- ritual or moral disorder (mala), and therefore, the individual or the community is restored back to an integrated state of harmony with Ṛta, so as to be able to participate in the life-giving sacrifice.
- **The Healing Waters (Bheṣaja):** Like purification, water also brings healing. The Waters are often named ‘bheṣaja’ - ‘the medicine’. “May the Waters, the mothers, cleanse us, the most holy, who never slumber...in whom Soma dwells, and all the healing powers” (10.9.8-9). The divine, the intoxicating Soma is frequently connected with waters and described as the best elixir of immortality. The rain that Parjanya sends is a healing remedy for the parched earth. This shows us that water is the healing remedy for a world ailing with disease, decay, and drought.
- **Cyclical Regeneration and the Dawn:** Uṣas, the goddess of dawn, has the most beautiful and refined praise and depiction of the theme of renewal. Each sunrise can be viewed as a rebirth, a victory, and a defeat of the chaos and darkness that the night brings. In the veda, Uṣas is referred to as the daughter of heaven and one, “who follows the path of Ṛta” (1.124.3). The kāvya describes Uṣas’s arrival with a flowing light that is the brilliant wave of a river, “She has appeared like a brightly shining wave of water” (1.92.4). The light of the dawn perpetually sets the world in motion and brings little to the world in

the form of life. The same pretty much goes for the diurnal and annual cycles. The renewal of life perpetually returns for the poet of hymn 1.113, “The same dawns have come again and again...She, the young, has re-awakened all life, all movement.” The cycles of life and death, the seasons, and days possess a fundamentally hopeful nature. What little is present in the dead and decayed world does not stay that way forever. Little is defined by a decaying world and is defined by the renewal that is guaranteed to come from Ṛta.

Thus, rivers and rain in the Rig Veda are the tangible agents of a cosmic process of cleansing, healing, and rebirth. They are the means by which the world is constantly refreshed and saved from entropy, embodying the eternal promise of renewal that lies at the heart of the Rig Veda’s climate consciousness. Ultimately, this integrated system reflects what scholar Steven P. D. Greenland identifies as a profound “ecological theology within the Vedas, where hydrological forces are revered as the very mechanics through which the sacred principle of Ṛta—universal order and balance—is dynamically sustained” (48).

5. CONCLUSION: AN ANCIENT CONSCIOUSNESS FOR A CONTEMPORARY CRISIS

The Rig Veda speaks of the climate with reverence. It speaks of the rivers and rain as divine beings who grant life as opposed to ‘resources’ that can be taken advantage of. It describes an order, or balance, to the world and reminds us that people foster this balance with rituals of gratitude and respect. In this sense, the climate is a positive indicator of a harmonious world spiritually, morally, and naturally. It speaks of the balance collapsing when the climate is out of order.

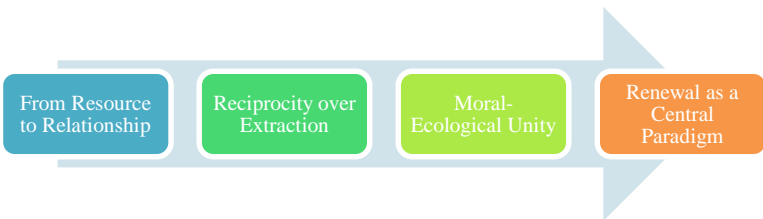


Figure 1.1: Vedic Ecological Worldview and Modern Crisis
Source: Author Compiled

This ancient worldview offers several critical provocations for the modern ecological crisis:

- From Resource to Relationship: The Rig Veda challenges today's understanding of water as a resource or a commodity. To a Vedic seer, a river or rain would be a sovereign being. Such an understanding enables a relationship of reverence, gratitude, and negotiation. Conversely, treating a river or a rain as an object for exploitation promotes a sense of entitlement and power.
- Reciprocity over Extraction: The concept of Rta along with the closed-loop economy of yajña is based on reciprocity, where people offer (which ultimately comes from nature) and receive back from nature. This is completely different from the linear, extractive model of industrial civilization, which takes without ritual, thanks, or return, leading to depletion and pollution.
- Moral-Ecological Unity: The Rig Veda connects the health of the environment to the behaviour and rituals of the people. Aghā denotes a type of pollution that is both a moral and a physical issue. In the times of carbon and plastic pollution, it is a clear reminder that the destruction of the environment is the result of a lack of ethics and human responsibility and a disregard for the order of the cosmos.
- Renewal as a Central Paradigm: The Rig Veda offers an alternative to the narrative of irreversible loss and doom based on the cyclical renewal. It does not deny destruction (as seen with the fearsome Parjanya) and suggests that fear of destruction is part of the universe's built-in renewal.
- In short, "Rivers, Rain, and Renewal" in the Rig Veda are more than just poetry. They are the foundation of an ancient but deep way of understanding nature. Remembering this idea does not mean going back to an old way of life or believing in its gods. It means learning from its main lessons: that nature is sacred, that we have a duty to give back, and that we must seek balance. By doing this, we can find new ways to see our role in climate. The health of the flowing rivers and the life-giving rain determines our future.

Note: All translations of Rigvedic hymns are from Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

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