

The most extended hymn in praise of Pṛthivī in Vedic literature is found in the *Atharva-veda* (12.1). The hymn is dedicated to Pṛthivī alone, and no mention is made of Dyaus. The mighty god Indra is her consort (1.6) and protects her from all danger (12.1.11, 18). Viṣṇu strides over her (12.1.10), and Parjanya, Prajāpati, and Viśvakarma all either protect her, provide for her, or are her consort. Agni is said to pervade her (12.1.19). Despite these associations with male deities, however, the hymn makes clear that Pṛthivī is a great deity in her own right. The hymn repeatedly emphasizes Pṛthivī's fertility. She is the source of all plants, especially crops, and also nourishes all creatures that live upon her. She is described as patient and strong (12.1.29), supporting the wicked and the good, the demons and the gods. She is frequently addressed as mother and is asked to pour forth milk as a mother does for a son. She is called a nurse to all living things (12.1.4), and her breasts are full of nectar. The singer of the hymn asks Pṛthivī to produce her breasts to him so that he might enjoy a long life. Pṛthivī is also said to manifest herself in the scent of women and men, to be the luck and light in men, and to be the splendid energy of maids (12.1.25).

In sum, Pṛthivī is a stable, fertile, benign presence in Vedic literature. She is addressed as a mother, and it is clear that those who praise her see her as a warm, nursing goddess who provides sustenance to all those who move upon her firm, broad expanse. The *Ṛg-veda* nearly always links her with the male god Dyaus, but in the *Atharva-veda* and later Vedic literature she emerges as an independent being.

#### ADITI

Although the goddess Aditi is mentioned nearly eighty times in the *Ṛg-veda*, it is difficult to gain a clear picture of her nature. She is usually mentioned along with other gods or goddesses, there is no one hymn addressed exclusively to her, and unlike many other Vedic deities she is not obviously associated with some natural phenomenon. Compared to Uṣas and Pṛthivī, her character seems ill defined. She is virtually featureless physically.

Perhaps the most outstanding attribute of Aditi is her motherhood. She is preeminently the mother of the Ādityas, a group of seven or eight gods which includes Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuna, Dakṣa, and Amśa (2.27.1). Aditi is also said to be the mother of the great god Indra, the mother of kings (2.27), and the mother of the gods (1.113.19). Unlike Pṛthivī, however, whose motherhood is also central to her nature, Aditi does not have a male consort in the *Ṛg-veda*.

As a mothering presence, Aditi is often asked to guard the one who petitions her (1.106.7; 8.18.6) or to provide him or her with wealth, safety, and abundance (10.100; 1.94.15). Appropriate to her role as a mother, Aditi is sometimes associated with or identified as a cow. As a cow she provides nourishment, and as the cosmic cow her milk is identified with the redemptive, invigorating drink *soma* (1.153.3).

The name Aditi is derived from the root *dā* (to bind or fetter) and suggests another aspect of her character. As *a-diti*, she is the unbound, free one, and it is evident in the hymns to her that she is often called upon to free the petitioner from different hindrances, especially sin and sickness (2.27.14). In one hymn she is asked to free a petitioner who is tied up like a thief (8.67.14). In this role as the one who binds and loosens Aditi is similar in function to Varuna, who in fact is one of her sons. Aditi thus plays the role of guardian of *ṛta*, the cosmic-moral order. As such she is called a supporter of creatures (1.136). She supports creatures by providing or enforcing *ṛta*, those ordinances or rhythms that delineate order from chaos.

Aditi is also called widely expanded (5.46.6) and extensive, the mistress of wide stalls (8.67.12), and in this respect one is reminded of *Ṛṥhivī*. In fact, Aditi and *Ṛṥhivī* become virtually identified in the *Brāhmaṇas*.<sup>3</sup>

### SARASVATĪ

The close association between natural phenomena and such Vedic goddesses as *Uṣas* and *Ṛṥhivī* is also seen in the goddess *Sarasvatī*, who is associated with a particular river. Although scholars have debated precisely which river she was identified with in Vedic times (the *Sarasvatī* River of that period has since disappeared), in the *Ṛg-veda* her most important characteristics are those of a particular mighty river. Indeed, at times it is not clear whether a goddess or a river is being praised; many references hail the *Sarasvatī* River as a mighty goddess.

*Sarasvatī* is called mighty and powerful. Her waves are said to break down mountains, and her flood waters are described as roaring (6.61.2, 8). She is said to surpass all waters in greatness, to be ever active, and to be great among the great. She is said to be inexhaustible, having her source in the celestial ocean (7.95.1-2; 5.43.11). She is clearly no mere river but a heaven-sent stream that blesses the earth. Indeed, she is said to pervade the triple creation of earth, atmosphere, and the celestial regions (6.61.11-12).

She is praised for the fertility she brings the earth. She is praised or

## Chapter Five

Hindu Religion

### "Goddesses in Vedic literature"

1. Identify the source of Hinduism
2. Identify four deities and their function in Hindu religion

## GODDESSES IN VEDIC LITERATURE

David Kinsley

The Hindu tradition affirms Vedic literature as the foundation, the sacred source, of Hinduism. This body of literature, which is exceedingly vast and varied, is held to be eternal and alone is classed as *śruti*, "that which is heard," or revelation.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important to survey this literature even though goddesses do not play a central role in the religion that is central to these texts. Another important reason for looking at Vedic literature is that some scholars have argued that the great goddesses of later Hinduism are in fact the same beings mentioned in the *Vedas*, only with new names.<sup>2</sup>

The *Rg-veda*, the oldest and most important Vedic text for a study of goddesses, is a collection of mantras, or hymns, celebrating deities, divine presences, or powers. The hymns were sung by *ṛsis*, great sages who the Hindu tradition affirms did not compose the hymns but heard them directly and then transmitted them, probably in a cultic, sacrificial context. The beings who are celebrated in the hymns of the *ṛsis* are numerous and diverse. The *Rg-vedic* pantheon, moreover, seems highly unstructured, and it is difficult to reconstruct a coherent Indo-Aryan mythology on the basis of the *Rg-veda*, which is primarily interested not in describing the mythological deeds of the deities but in praising the gods in a ritual context—a ritual context that unfortunately is also difficult to deduce in any detail.

It is clear nevertheless, that a few deities dominated *Rg-vedic* religion. Agni, Soma, and Indra, all male deities, are praised repeatedly throughout the *Rg-veda* and are the most important gods if frequency of occurrence in the hymns is any measure of their significance. Such gods as Varuna, Mitra, Surya, Bṛhaspati, Viśvakarman, and Tvaṣṭṛ are also fairly significant male powers. Although many goddesses are mentioned in the *Rg-veda*, none is as central to the *Rg-vedic* vision of reality as Agni, Soma, or Indra, and only Uṣas among the goddesses could be con-

sidered on a par with the male deities of the second rank. We should therefore keep in mind while studying the goddesses in the *Rg-veda* that although there are many female deities they do not, either individually or collectively, represent the "center" of *Rg-vedic* religion. In most cases they are mentioned infrequently and must have played minor roles compared to the great male gods of the *Rg-veda*.

### UṢAS

In the *Rg-veda* the goddess Uṣas is consistently associated with and often identified with the dawn. She reveals herself in the daily coming of light to the world. A young maiden, drawn in a hundred chariots (1.48), she brings forth light and is followed by the sun (Surya), who urges her onward (3.61). She is praised for driving away, or is petitioned to drive away, the oppressive darkness (7.78; 6.64; 10.172). She is asked to chase away evil demons, to send them far away (8.47.13). As the dawn, she is said to rouse all life, to set all things in motion, and to send people off to do their duties (1.48, 92). She sets the curled-up sleepers on their way to offer their sacrifices and thus renders service to the other gods (1.113). Uṣas gives strength and fame (1.44). She is that which impels life and is associated with the breath and life of all living creatures (1.48). She is associated with or moves with *ṛta*, cosmic, social, and moral order (3.61; 7.75). As the regularly recurring dawn she reveals and participates in cosmic order and is the foe of chaotic forces that threaten the world (1.113.12).

Uṣas is generally an auspicious goddess associated with light (6.64) and wealth. She is often likened to a cow. In *Rg-veda* 1.92 she is called the mother of cows and, like a cow that yields its udder for the benefit of people, so Uṣas bares her breasts to bring light for the benefit of humankind (3.58; 4.5). Although Uṣas is usually described as a young and beautiful maiden, she is also called the mother of the gods (1.113.12) and the Ásvins (3.39.3), a mother by her petitioners (7.81), she who tends all things like a good matron (1.48), and goddess of the hearth (6.64).

Uṣas observes all that people do, especially as she is associated with the light that uncovers everything from darkness and with *ṛta*, moral as well as cosmic order. She is said to be the eye of the gods (7.75). She is known as she who sees all, but she is rarely invoked to forgive human transgressions. It is more typical to invoke her to drive away or punish one's enemies. Finally, Uṣas is known as the goddess, reality, or presence that wears away youth (7.75). She is described as a skilled huntress who wastes away the lives of people (1.92). In accordance with the ways of

*ṛta*, she wakes all living things but does not disturb the person who sleeps in death. As the recurring dawn, Uṣas is not only celebrated for bringing light from darkness. She is also petitioned to grant long life, as she is a constant reminder of people's limited time on earth (7.77). She is the mistress or marker of time.

### PRTHIVĪ

The goddess Pṛthivī is nearly always associated with the earth, the terrestrial sphere where human beings live. In the *Rg-veda*, furthermore, she is almost always coupled with Dyaus, the male deity associated with the sky. So interdependent are these two deities in the *Rg-veda* that Pṛthivī is rarely addressed alone but almost always as part of the dual compound *dyāvapṛthivī*, sky-earth. Together they are said to kiss the center of the world (1.185.5). They sanctify each other in their complementary relationship (4.56.6). Together they are said to be the universal parents who created the world (1.159) and the gods (1.185). As might be expected, Dyaus is often called father and Pṛthivī mother. There is the implication that once upon a time the two were closely joined but were subsequently parted at Varuna's decree (6.70). They come together again when Dyaus fertilizes the earth (Pṛthivī) with rain, although in some cases it is said that together they provide abundant rain (4.56); it is not clear to what extent Pṛthivī should be exclusively associated with the earth alone and not the sky as well.

In addition to her maternal, productive characteristics Pṛthivī (usually along with Dyaus in the *Rg-veda*) is praised for her supportive nature. She is frequently called firm, she who upholds and supports all things (1.185). She encompasses all things (6.70), is broad and wide (1.185), and is motionless (1.185), although elsewhere she is said to move freely (5.84). Pṛthivī, with Dyaus, is often petitioned for wealth, riches, and power (6.70), and the waters they produce together are described as fat, full, nourishing, and fertile (1.22). They are also petitioned to protect people from danger, to expiate sin (1.185), and to bring happiness (10.63). Together they represent a wide, firm realm of abundance and safety, a realm pervaded by order (*ṛta*), which they strengthen and nourish (1.159). They are unwasting, inexhaustible, and rich in germs (6.70). In a funeral hymn the dead one is asked to go now to the lap of his mother earth, Pṛthivī, who is described as gracious and kind. She is asked not to press down too heavily upon the dead person but to cover him gently, as a mother covers her child with her skirt (10.18.10–12).

petitioned for wealth, vitality, children, nourishment, and immortality, and as such she is called *subhaga* (bountiful). As a fecund, bountiful presence, she is called mother, the best of mothers (2.41.16). As a nourishing, maternal goddess, she is described in terms similar to *Prthivī*: she quickens life, is the source of vigor and strength, and provides good luck and material well-being to those whom she blesses. In one particular hymn she is called upon by unmarried men who yearn for sons. They ask to enjoy her breast that is swollen with streams and to receive from her food and progeny (7.96.4-6; 1.164.49). She is sometimes petitioned for protection and in this aspect is called a sheltering tree (7.95.5) and an iron fort (7.95.1), neither image being particularly fluvial.

Sarasvatī is also closely related to Vedic cult, both as a participant in or witness of the cult and as a guardian of the cult. She is invoked with and associated with the sacrificial goddesses *Idā* and *Bhāratī* and with the goddesses *Mahī* and *Hotrā*, who are associated with prayer (7.37.11; 10.65.13). She is said to destroy those who revile the gods and to be a slayer of *Vṛtra*, a demon of chaos.

Sarasvatī is described particularly as a purifying presence (1.3.10). Her waters cleanse poison from men (6.61.3). Along with rivers and floods in general, she cleanses her petitioners with holy oil and bears away defilements (10.17.10).

Anticipating her later nature as a goddess of inspiration, eloquence, and learning, the hymns of the *Ṛg-veda* also describe Sarasvatī as the inciter of all pleasant songs, all gracious thought, and every pious thought (1.3.10-12). In this vein she is similar to the Vedic goddess *Vāc* (speech), with whom she is consistently identified in the *Brāhmaṇas*.<sup>4</sup>

## VĀC

Although the significance of sound and speech as the primordial stuff of creation is primarily a post-*Ṛg-vedic* concept, it is apparent even in the *Ṛg-veda* that sound, and especially ritual speech, is powerful, creative, and a mainstay of cosmic-ritual order. The goddess *Vāc*, whose name means "speech," reveals herself through speech and is typically characterized by the various attributes and uses of speech. She is speech, and the mysteries and miracles of speech express her peculiar, numinous nature. She is the presence that inspires the *ṛsis* and that makes a person a Brahman (10.125). She is truth, and she inspires truth by sustaining Soma, the personification of the exhilarating drink of vision and immortality (10.125). She is the mysterious presence that enables one to hear, see, grasp, and then express in words the true nature of things. She is the

prompter of and the vehicle of expression for visionary perception, and as such she is intimately associated with the *ṛsis* and the rituals that express or capture the truths of their visions. In an important sense she is an essential part of the religious-poetic visionary experience of the *ṛsis* and of the sacrificial rituals that appropriate those visions.

Perhaps reflecting her role as the bestower of vision, Vāc is called a heavenly queen, the queen of the gods (8.89), she who streams with sweetness (5.73.3) and bestows vital powers (3.53.15). She is described as a courtly, elegant woman, bright and adorned with gold (1.167.3). She is, like most other Vedic goddesses, a benign, bounteous being. She not only bestows on people the special riches of language, she is praised in general terms for giving light and strength; one hymn says that she alone provides people with food. She is, then, more than a kind of artificial construct, a personified abstract. She is a pervasive, nourishing deity who stimulates organic growth as well as providing the blessings of language and vision. She is often invoked as a heavenly cow (4.1.16; 8.89) that gives sustenance to the gods and men. She is also called mother, as it is she who has given birth to things through naming them. Her benign nature is also celebrated for enabling people to see and recognize friends. Bearing her mark of intelligible, familiar speech, one friend may recognize and commune with another (10.71). Thus Vāc is a bounteous cow who provides, first, the lofty, discerning vision of the *ṛsī*; second, the ritual formulas of the priest; and third, the everyday language of people which enables them to establish themselves as a community of friends.

Vāc's character is richly developed in the *Brāhmaṇas* in a series of myths and images that associate her with creation and ritual. Vāc's indispensability in ritual and cult (in which spoken or chanted mantras are essential) is emphasized in myths that tell of how the gods stole her or seduced her away from the demons after the creation of the world and, having obtained her, instituted sacrificial rituals that sustain the creation and produce bounty, life, and immortality for the gods.<sup>5</sup> Without her the divine rituals would not have been possible. In her role as creator, Vāc is said to create the three *Vedas*,<sup>6</sup> and the three *Vedas* are in turn equated with the earth (*Ṛg-veda*), the air (*Yajur-veda*), and the sky (*Sama-veda*).<sup>7</sup> At another place she is said to have entered into the sap of plants and trees, thus pervading and enlivening all vegetation.<sup>8</sup> Prajāpati, the central deity in the *Brāhmaṇas*, is described as initiating creation by impregnating himself by comingling his mind and his speech.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere it is said that Vāc, having been created by Prajāpati's mind, wished to become manifest, to multiply herself, to extend herself, and so it was that creation proceeded, impelled by Vāc's urge to create.<sup>10</sup>

Vāc plays a significant role in Vedic literature, not only in terms of being mentioned often but also from a theoretical point of view. Theologically it is suggested that she is coeternal with Prajāpati. Although the *Brāhmaṇas* are not consistent, sometimes stating that Vāc is created by Prajāpati, she does seem to have a theologically exalted position in these texts. There are also hints that it is through Vāc, or in pairing with her, that Prajāpati creates. This is different from the role of *śakti* in later Hindu philosophic schools, in which the male counterpart of *śakti* tends to be inactive. Prajāpati toils and desires the creation. Nevertheless, her role in the *Brāhmaṇas* is suggestive of the nature of *śakti* in later Hinduism. Her role vis-à-vis Prajāpati is also suggestive of the theory of *śabda-brahman* (the absolute in the form of sound) and the *spṛṣṭa* theory of creation (in which the world is created through sound).

### NIRṚTI

The Vedic goddesses we have looked at so far are generally benign, protective deities to whom the hymnist typically appeals for wealth, strength, and general well-being. The goddess Nirṛti has no such benign qualities. She is not mentioned very often in the *Ṛg-veda*, but when she is, the concern of the hymn is to seek protection from her or to ask that she be driven away. The scattered references to her seem to equate her with death, ill luck, and destruction. There is just one hymn in the *Ṛg-veda*, 10.59, in which she is mentioned several times, but that hymn sums up very well Nirṛti's nature. After four verses in which renewed life, wealth, food, glorious deeds, youth, and continued long life are requested from the gods, the following refrain is invoked: "Let Nirṛti depart to distant places." Decay, need, anger, cowardice, old age, and death: these are the ways in which Nirṛti manifests herself. She thus represents a dark side to the Vedic vision of the divine feminine.

Later Vedic literature describes Nirṛti in far more detail and mentions her more frequently than does the *Ṛg-veda*. Appropriately, she is said to be dark, to dress in dark clothes, and to receive dark husks for her share of the sacrifice,<sup>11</sup> although once she is said to have golden locks.<sup>12</sup> She lives in the South, the direction of the kingdom of the dead,<sup>13</sup> is associated with pain,<sup>14</sup> and is repeatedly given offerings with the specific intention of keeping her away from the sacrificial rituals and from the affairs of people in general.

## RĀTRĪ

The goddess Rātrī is almost always associated with the night. Indeed, she is the night, and as such she is the presence or power that is petitioned by people for comfort and security in the dark hours before the triumphant return of the dawn. Her physical appearance is rarely mentioned, although she is sometimes described as a beautiful maiden along with her sister, Uṣas, the dawn. She is called glorious and immortal and is praised for providing light in the darkness, bedecked as she is with countless stars. Generally she is pictured as a benign being. She is lauded for giving rest to all creatures.<sup>15</sup> She is praised for bestowing life-sustaining dew<sup>16</sup> and with Uṣas is said to provide and strengthen vital powers.<sup>17</sup> She is especially invoked to protect people from dangers peculiar to the night. Thus, she is petitioned to keep wolves away, to protect against thieves,<sup>18</sup> and to protect people from any creature that might do them harm in the night.<sup>19</sup>

Despite Rātrī's usually benign nature, some texts refer to her in negative terms or associate her with things inimical to people. In the *Rg-veda* she is chased away by Agni, the god of fire (10.3.1), and also by Uṣas (1.92.11). Rātrī is called barren (1.122.2) and gloomy (10.172.4) in comparison with her bright and bounteous sister, Uṣas. Occasionally she is associated with the very creatures or dangers of the night from which she is elsewhere asked to protect people.<sup>20</sup> Rātrī, then, is not only the guardian of the night, the protectress of people during the dark hours of their rest, but the night itself and those things, both benign and hostile, which inhabit the night.

The majority of references to Rātrī in the *Rg-veda* link her with Uṣas, who is said to be her sister. Usually they are said to be two lovely maidens, sometimes twins. Together they are called powerful mothers (1.142.7) and strengtheners of vital power (5.5.6). They are also called weavers of time and mothers of eternal law. In their alternating, cyclical, and endless appearances, they represent the stable, rhythmic patterns of the cosmos in which light and dark inevitably follow each other in an orderly, predictable manner. Together they illustrate the coherence of the created order: the ordered alternations of vigor and rest, light and dark, and the regular flow of time.

## MINOR VEDIC GODDESSES

Several goddesses known to the *Rg-veda* are mentioned so infrequently that it is difficult to perceive what their distinctive natures might

have been. Some of these minor goddesses seem to be synonymous with abundance. Puramdhi, Pārendi, Rākā, and Dhiṣaṇā, none of whom is mentioned more than about a dozen times in the *Rg-veda*, are all associated with bounty and riches. As is the case with most Vedic goddesses, their natures appear to be benign and their presences revealed through material well-being. Sinivālī is also a benign goddess but is specifically associated with progeny. She is described as mistress of the family, broad-hipped, and prolific. When she is invoked it is to grant the petitioner offspring (2.32; 10.184).

Another group of minor goddesses seems to be associated primarily with the sacrificial cult of the *Rg-veda*. When Iḷa, Bhāratī, Mahī, and Hotrā are mentioned, they are almost always being summoned to take their place on the sacrificial grass prior to a ritual. They are also almost invariably grouped with Sarasvatī. Iḷa (Iḷa in the *Brāhmaṇas*) seems to be associated with the sacrificial offering itself, specifically the cow from which many sacrificial objects were taken. She is called butter-handed and butter-footed, which is reminiscent of Agni's description as the presence or deity who actually takes the sacrifice and transmits it to the other gods. While it may be the case that these goddesses are some type of personification of certain aspects of the sacrificial ritual, they are mentioned so seldom, and almost always along with a list of many other deities, that such a conclusion seems only a guess, with the possible exception of Iḷa (Iḷa). Why these goddesses happen to be invoked with Sarasvatī is also not clear. There is no indication that they are associated with rivers, and Sarasvatī is not a particularly important goddess in the sacrificial ritual itself.

The most interesting references in the *Rg-veda* to the goddess Sūryā, the daughter of the sun god Surya (sometimes Savitṛ), concern her wedding. All the gods desire her, but her father wishes to give her to Soma; however, it is settled that the first to reach the sun will wed her. The twin gods, the Aśvins, win the race and the bride, and although Sūryā is said to be given to the god Pusan (6.58.4) and to be wooed by Soma (10.85.9), the other references to her in the *Rg-veda* almost always describe her as riding in the chariot of her twin husbands, the Aśvins, who after winning her are said to have attained all that they desired (8.8.10). Although it may be implied that Sūryā is fair and desirable, there is actually little description of her beyond the rather obscure picture of her in the *Rg-veda* (10.85) in which she seems to be likened to the sacrifice and is said to pervade the cosmos. Her husband in this hymn is Soma; the hymn may be describing the interdependence of Soma and the sacrifice (personified as Sūryā) in the metaphor of a marriage. The Aśvins in this hymn are the groomsmen of her father, which is unusual.

References to Dānu, Saraṇyū, and Saramā are so infrequent and so lacking in description that it is difficult to even speculate on what their distinctive natures might have been. Dānu is identified as the mother of the cosmic demon Vṛtra, who is defeated by the god Indra. She is compared to a cow (1.32.9), although her son, who is described as without hands and feet, is more reptilian in appearance. The word *dānu* is used elsewhere in reference to the waters of heaven; it may be that Dānu was associated with the formless, primordial waters that existed prior to creation, the waters in which Vṛtra hid and which he withheld from creation until they were freed by Indra's mighty deed.

Saraṇyū is the daughter of Tvaṣṭṛ and the sister of Viśvarūpa. She is said to marry the god Vivasvat (10.17.1) and to give birth to twins, Yama and Yamī (the progenitors of the human race). It has been suggested that her nature is essentially impetuous, for her name means "quick, speedy, nimble,"<sup>21</sup> but there are no references to this aspect of her nature in the *Ṛg-veda*. Saramā, whose name has a similar meaning, "the fleet one," is in later literature known as the mother of dogs, a heavenly bitch. But there is no indication of this aspect in the *Ṛg-veda*. In the *Ṛg-veda* her only significant action is to seek out the thieving Paṇis, who have stolen cows, and to act as Indra's messenger to the Paṇis in negotiating the return of the cows. Perhaps her ability to track and cross rivers hints at her later canine nature.

One hymn of the *Ṛg-veda* (10.146) refers to a goddess of the forest, Araṇyānī. From this one hymn we get a rather clear picture of the goddess. She is an elusive figure who vanishes from sight and avoids villages. She is more often heard than seen. She speaks through the sounds of the forest, or one may even hear her tinkling bells. She seems to make her presence known especially at evening, and those who spend the night in the forest sometimes think they hear her scream. She never kills unless provoked by some murderous enemy. She is sweetly scented, is mother of all forest things, and provides plenty of food without tilling.

This goddess is interesting for two reasons. First, she hints at an archaic type of goddess known as the mistress of animals, although there is no specific reference to her guarding animals or providing them for human hunters. Second, she sounds very much like the Yakṣīs of the later Indian tradition, those female beings who dwell in the forest, are worshiped away from the village, and who have, despite their generally benign qualities, certain uncanny characteristics. This late hymn of the *Ṛg-veda* may well be an early literary reference to a Yakṣī or to a goddess modeled on those indigenous creatures of the Indian forests.

Several important Vedic gods are said to have wives or consorts. None of these goddesses is mentioned very often in Vedic literature, but

it is important to note their existence in light of subsequent Hindu mythology, in which many of the most important goddesses are consorts of well-known Hindu gods, and also in light of the later Hindu concept of *śakti*. The names of these early goddesses are usually formed simply by the addition of a feminine suffix to the god's name: for example, *Indrāṇī*, *Varunāṇī*, *Agnāyī*, and in later Vedic literature *Rudrāṇī* (the wife of Rudra). With the exception of *Indrāṇī*, these goddesses have no independent character of their own. They are mentioned so infrequently and are so lacking in descriptive detail that they appear to be mere minor appendages to their husbands, who are powerful beings in the Vedic pantheon. *Indrāṇī* is mentioned far more often than any other goddess of this type, but even so it is clear that she is greatly overshadowed by her husband, Indra. She is described as beautiful, and one hymn of the *Ṛg-veda* pictures her as jealous of rivals (10.86). She is also called by the name *Śacī*, which denotes power and suggests the later idea of *śakti*, the feminine, personified might of the gods of later Hindu mythology. Indeed, in another hymn (10.159) *Indrāṇī-Śacī* boasts of having won her husband by conquering him and brags that he is submissive to her will. In the same hymn, however, she goes on to petition the gods to rid her of rivals for Indra's favor, and elsewhere she is said to stay at home (3.53.6). Despite suggestions of the later *śakti* idea, then, *Indrāṇī* is actually a minor goddess of little power, despite her boasts to the contrary.

## CONCLUSION

Several conclusions concerning goddesses in Vedic literature are clear. First, none of them rivals the great male gods in these texts. Indeed, *Uṣas*, the most popular goddess (in terms of the number of times she is mentioned and the number of hymns addressed specifically to her), is only a deity of the third rank. In short, male deities dominate the Vedic vision of the divine.

Second, there is evidence that some of the Vedic goddesses survive in the later Hindu tradition. *Prṥthivī* persists in later Hinduism and becomes associated with the god *Viṣṇu*. She is often called *Bhūdevī* (the goddess of the earth) and appears in myths primarily in the role of supplicant to the gods because of the burden of having to sustain a notoriously evil demon. *Sarasvatī* also continues to be known in the later tradition and becomes popular primarily as a goddess of learning, wisdom, and culture.<sup>22</sup> Although the goddess *Vāc* disappears, in later Hinduism *Sarasvatī* might be said to express *Vāc*'s primary meaning as

inspired speech, and the idea of the creation of the world through sound probably finds inspiration in the ideas about Vāc in Vedic literature. Similarly, the idea of *śakti*, though it is not developed in Vedic literature, is suggested in the various consorts of the male deities, especially in Śacī (Indrāṇī). Many of the Vedic goddesses, however, simply disappear in the later Hindu tradition. Uṣas and Aditi, for example, are rarely found in later texts.

Third, many of the most important goddesses of the later tradition are not found at all in Vedic literature or are simply mentioned by name in passing. Such important goddesses as Pārvatī, Durgā, Kālī, Rādhā, and Sītā are unknown in early Vedic literature. Śrī, though she appears in later Vedic literature, is not fully developed and does not occupy the central role that she does in the later tradition. Furthermore, none of the Vedic goddesses is clearly associated with battle or blood sacrifice, both of which are important associations in the myths and cults of several later Hindu goddesses.

Fourth, there is no one great goddess in the Vedic literature. Although some scholars have affirmed her existence in this literature,<sup>23</sup> she quite simply is nowhere mentioned. There is no evidence that the authors of the Vedic texts supposed that all the individual goddesses are manifestations of one great goddess. Since the Vedic texts do not assume a great god who manifests himself in individual gods, I fail to understand why such an assumption should be made for the female deities. It is as if the sexual identification of the goddesses is so overwhelmingly significant that one is justified in lumping them all together. But clearly the goddesses vary greatly and are as distinct from one another as the male gods are from one another.<sup>24</sup> The Mahādevī (great goddess) does not appear until the medieval period in Hinduism, and she is the product of a carefully articulated theology.<sup>25</sup> Although some goddesses are conflated with one another at certain times and places and in certain texts, even in Vedic literature,<sup>26</sup> this does not justify imposing on such examples a much later, systematic *śākta* theology.