

# The Genesis of the Cosmos: A Comparative Study of Vedic, Upanishadic, and Puranic Cosmological Theories

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## Abstract

Cosmology in Vedic literature shows a complex way of looking at how the universe began, how it is structured, how it works and how it changes over time. It brings together ideas that're spiritual, religious and early scientific. Hindu cosmology as found in the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas talks about the universe as something that cycles over and over. The universe is always going through creation staying the same and then breaking down. These steps are not straight lines. They happen in a never-ending and repeating pattern of time. This means there is no starting point or final ending. Vedic and Upanishadic texts say that everything in the world we see was already there in an not yet visible form inside Brahman. Brahman is the idea that everything comes from. So creation is not about making something from nothing. It is about showing something that was already there. This is called manifestation. It happens because of the will or the plan of Brahman. Some of the texts like the R̥gveda, especially the Nasadiya Sukta and the Aitareya and Taittiriya Upanishads talk about different but connected ways the universe came to be. These texts describe the unity of everything, the role of awareness and how many things come from one single truth.. They explain the balance between being and not being. They also talk about energy and desire as the things that help the universe grow and change. Hindu cosmology thinks of time as never ending, always going in circles and not straight. The universe we live in is one part of a long list of cycles. The universe comes from Brahman. Then go back to it. This shows that everything is connected and returns to the place. The Puranas add details to these ideas. They use symbols, like the Hiranyagarbha (the cosmic embryo), and the cosmic being Virāt Puruṣa to show the whole universe.

**Keywords:** Rigvedic Cosmology, Nasadiya Sukta, Hiranyagarbha, Purusha (Supreme Spirit), Prakriti (Nature), Virāt Puruṣa,

## Introduction

In the collection of Vedic writings that includes the core topics of the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda as well as the very deep and spiritual Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads there are clear and detailed ideas about the elements that make up the universe. The process of how the universe came into being is so big and full of thinking that many books could be written about it. In this tradition the Nasadiya Sukta from the Rigveda is special and very old. Through this hymn the beginning of creation is shown clearly like a reflection in a mirror. setting the metaphysical stage for all subsequent Indian philosophical thought.

**Rigvedic Cosmology: The Nasadiya Sukta**

The Nasadiya Sukta serves as a magnificent compilation of Rigvedic philosophical elements. Within its verses, scholars identify ten primary philosophical doctrines (theories) regarding the origins of the universe:

1. **Sadasadvada** (Theory of Being and Non-Being)
2. **Rajovada** (Theory of Space/Dust)
3. **Vyomavada** (Theory of the Void/Ether)
4. **Aparavada** (Theory of the Beyond)
5. **Avaranavada** (Theory of the Covering)
6. **Ambhovada** (Theory of Cosmic Water)
7. **Amritamrityuvada** (Theory of Immortality and Death)
8. **Ahoratravada** (Theory of Day and Night)
9. **Daivavada** (Theory of the Divine)
10. **Samshayavada** (Theory of Skepticism/Doubt)

These doctrines are famously articulated in the seven verses of the Nasadiya Sukta<sup>1</sup>

1. nāsad āsīn no sad āsīt tadānīm nāsīd rajo no vyomā paro yat | kim āvarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarman ambhaḥ kim āsīd gahanam gabhīram ||
2. na mṛtyur āsīd amṛtam na tarhi na rātryā ahna āsīt praketaḥ | ānīd avātam svadhayā tad ekaṁ tasmād dhānyan na paraḥ kim canāsa ||
3. tama āsīt tamasā gūḍham agre 'praketaṁ salilam sarvam ā idam | tucchyenābhv apihitam yad āsīt tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam ||
4. kāmas tad agre samavartatādhi manaso retaḥ prathamam yad āsīt | sato bandhum asati niravindan hr̥di pratīṣyā kavayo manīṣā ||
5. tiraścīno vitato raśmir eṣām adhaḥ svid āsīt upari svid āsīt | retodhā āsan mahimāna āsant svadhā avastāt prayatiḥ parastāt ||
6. ko addhā veda ka iha pra vocat kuta ājātā kuta iyaṁ viṣṛṣṭiḥ | arvāg devā asya visarjanenāthā ko veda yata ābabhūva ||
7. iyaṁ viṣṛṣṭir yata ābabhūva yadi vā dadhe yadi vā na | yo asyādhyakṣaḥ parame vyomant so aṅga veda yadi vā na veda ||

These verses postulate that at the very absolute beginning of creation, there was neither Being (**Sat**) nor Non-Being (**Asat**). The spatial dimensions of earth and sky did not exist. A profound curiosity is raised: where was the shelter and the covering for all things? Was there deep, unfathomable water (**Ambhovada**)? In that primordial state, duality did not exist; there was neither day nor night, neither death nor immortality. There was only One Principle, breathing by its own inherent power (**Svadhā**) even in the total absence of air. Everything else was darkness concealed by darkness, a void covered by emptiness, which eventually came into being through the kinetic power of heat and austerity (**Tapas**).

From this state of austerity, Desire (**Kama**), the primal seed of the mind, was born. Wise sages, searching within the depths of their hearts, discovered the resting place of 'Being' hidden within 'Non-Being'. A profound skepticism (**Samshayavada**) is introduced regarding the ultimate origins: who truly knows where this creation came from? Even the gods cannot know, because they came into being only after this

<sup>1</sup> Rgveda Saṃhitā 10.129.1-7

creation. Ultimately, only the overseer of creation residing in the highest heaven (**Parama Vyoma**) can understand this truth, if even He knows.

In addition to this, discussions on creation are available in hymns 10.81, 10.82, and 10.121 of the Rigveda Samhita. Here it is established that Hiranyagarbha (the Golden Womb), the lord of all beings, came into existence first, driving the continuous evolution of creation. The arms of that Hiranyagarbha became the cause of the spatial directions. This Rigvedic Hiranyagarbha is the direct conceptual ancestor of the Prajapati found in the Brahmana texts, making the Rigveda the foundational basis for later theories. For instance, passages 2.8.9.3-6 of the Taittiriya Brahmana serve entirely as a later exposition of the Nasadiya Sukta.

### **Upanishadic Creation Theories: Consciousness and Elements**

The idea of creation in the Upanishads is an advanced deeply spiritual version of the thoughts presented in the Brahmana texts. Before the world of living and -living things came into being there was only the Supreme Soul (Paramatma). The Aitareya Upanishad states: **ātmā vā idam eka evāgra āsīt...sa aikṣata lokānu sṛjā iti**"<sup>2</sup> (In the beginning, the Atman alone existed... He pondered, "Let me create the worlds"). This single focus on a creator is mentioned in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad<sup>3</sup> and matches what the Brahmana texts say. These include the Taittiriya Brahmana<sup>4</sup> and the Gopatha Brahmana<sup>5</sup>. These texts say that, in the beginning Prajapati was the one and he thought about the universe.

### **The Role of Water, Truth, and Duality**

In the Upanishads, natural elements are deeply integrated with mystical Truth. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declares water to be the source of all things,<sup>6</sup> **"āpa evedam agra āsuḥ, tā āpaḥ satyam asṛjanta"** (In the beginning, these waters alone existed; those waters created Truth). While the Katha Upanishad says that Fire becomes the universe the Chandogya Upanishad mentions a process. This process is also talked about in the Brihadaranyaka 6.8.4. According to this text Fire came from 'Being'. Then Fire created water. After that water formed the earth. The Prashna Upanishad talks about creation through duality. When Prajapati wanted children he did a kind of practice called Tapas. This practice led to the two things: Rayi and Prana. Rayi is Matter. Prana is Life-force or Energy.

**"tasmai sa hovāca prajākāmo vai prajāpatiḥ | sa tapo'tapyat sa tapas taptvā sa mithunam utpādayate | rayim ca prāṇam cety etau me bahudhā prajāḥ kariṣyata iti"**<sup>7</sup>

Life is given to all living things by Prana. On the other hand Rayi is what makes up all the physical things around us. When Prana and Rayi come together they make things change and evolve over time. In the Brahmanas people call this pair Agni and Soma. In Samkhya they are known as Purusha and Prakriti. The Prashna Upanishad says that Prana is like the Sun, which is also called Aditya and Rayi is like the Moon, which is also called Chandramah.

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<sup>2</sup> Aitareya Upanishad (1.1)

<sup>3</sup> Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.1)

<sup>4</sup> Taittiriya Brahmana (2.2.9-10)

<sup>5</sup> Gopatha Brahmana (1.1)

<sup>6</sup> Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (5.5.1)

<sup>7</sup> Prashna Upanishad 1.4.

"ādityo ha vai prāṇo rayir eva candramāḥ"<sup>8</sup> Even time is a dual manifestation: "ahorātrau vai prajāpatis tasyāhar eva prāṇo rātrir eva rayiḥ"<sup>9</sup> (Day and Night are Prajapati; the day is Prana, the night is Rayi).

### Analogy of Cosmic Expansion

The Mundaka Upanishad beautifully illustrates creation through natural analogies:

**"yathorṇanābhiḥ srjate grhṇate ca yathā pṛthivyām oṣadhayaḥ sambhavanti | yathā sataḥ puruṣāt keśalomāni tathā kṣarāt sambhavatīha viśvam"**<sup>10</sup>.

Just as a spider brings out its web and swallows it back, as plants grow from the earth without bias, and as hair grows naturally on a body, so does the universe effortlessly originate from the Supreme Brahman. Through austerity in the form of resolve, Brahman expands, producing 'food' (Anna) which generates mind, vital breaths (Prana), the five great elements, and the vast universe with its diverse fruits of action, **"tapasā cīyate brahma tato'nnam abhijāyate | annāt prāṇo manaḥ satyaṁ lokāḥ karmasu cāmṛtam"**<sup>11</sup>.

### The Macrocosm to Microcosm

The Aitareya Upanishad has an interesting story about how the world was made. It says the Supreme Soul looked at the Purusha, which was, like a baby in the form of Hiranyagarbha. This made the Purusha burst open like an egg. The Aitareya Upanishad says that from the mouth of the Purusha came speech and Fire which is also called Agni. From the nostrils of the Purusha came the air we breathe and Wind, which is also called Vayu. The Aitareya Upanishad also says that from the eyes of the Purusha came the ability to see and the Sun. Finally, the navel and generative organs yielded semen, and from semen, water was born. **"tam abhyatapat tasyābhitaptasya mukhaṁ nirabhidya yathāṇḍam | mukhād vāg vāco'gnir nāsike nirabhidyetāṁ nāsikābhyāṁ prāṇaḥ... śīśnaṁ nirabhidya śīśnād reto retasa āpaḥ"**<sup>12</sup>

Following this, the deities entered their respective organs, **"agnir vāg bhūtvā mukhaṁ prāviśad."**<sup>13</sup> This text also outlines the threefold birth of man, **"puruṣe ha vā ayam ādīto garbho bhavati..."**<sup>14</sup> first as seed inside the male, second as an infant born from the mother, and third upon taking renunciation (Sannyasa) in old age. This contrasts slightly with the Shatapatha Brahmana, where the second birth is Vedic initiation, and the third is the funeral pyre.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan notes that the Upanishads view the physical world's initial state as the expansion of ether (Akasha), characterized by vibration. From ether comes wind; from wind's interaction comes fire (heat/light); from fire comes water, and finally earth. Thus, the Upanishads reject a blind, automated naturalistic evolution. The universe is driven by the purposeful, intellectual sequence of the Primal Brahman. Finally, the Paingala Upanishad synthesizes this into an overarching framework. In the beginning, there was only 'Being' (Sat). Nature (Prakriti) appeared within it like a mirage. From a disturbance in Prakriti, the Unmanifest (Avyakta), Mahat, and Ego (Aham) emerged, leading to the birth of Ishvara, Hiranyagarbha, and Virat Chaitanya. The Creator combined the five elements (Panchikrita

<sup>8</sup> Prashna Upanishad 1.5

<sup>9</sup> Prashna Upanishad 1.13

<sup>10</sup> Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.7

<sup>11</sup> Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.8

<sup>12</sup> Aitareya Upanishad 1.1.4

<sup>13</sup> Aitareya Upanishad 1.2.4

<sup>14</sup> Aitareya Upanishad 2.1

Bhutas) to form the infinite universes and realms, placing them into a collective cosmic egg guarded by Vishnu and Brahma.

**"sad eva saumyedaṃ agra āsīt | tad.....brahma | tasmin ... lohitaśuklakṛṣṇaguṇamayī guṇasāmyanirvācyā mūlaprakṛtir āsīt | tatpratibimbitaṃ yat tat sākṣi caitanyam āsīt"**<sup>15</sup>

### **Puranic Cosmology: The Golden Egg and The Cosmic Being**

In the Puranas the role of Prajapati is entirely subsumed by Brahma, who represents the Supreme Spirit (Purusha). presiding over the insentient Prakriti (Nature), Prakriti consists of three Gunas (qualities), presided over by a unified trinity:

**"rajo brahmā tamo rudro viṣṇuḥ sattvaṃ jagatpatiḥ"**.<sup>16</sup>

These deities are inseparably, and dependent on each other **"anyonyamithunā hyete anyonyāśrayaṇāstathā"**<sup>17</sup>. At the beginning of creation, there was total absence of form, no day, night, sky, or earth. There was only the supreme Brahman-Purusha.

**"nāho na rātrir na nabho na bhūmir nāsīt tamojyotir abhūcca nānyat | śrotrādibuddhyānupalabhyaṃ ekaṃ prādhānikaṃ brahmapumāṃs tad āsīt"**<sup>18</sup>

This mirrors the Gopatha Brahmana **"brahmā ha vā idam agra āsīt"**<sup>19</sup>. From the unconditioned Vishnu, Pradhana (Prakriti) and Purusha were born **"viṣṇoḥ svarūpāt parato hi te dve rūpe pradhānaṃ puruṣo vipra"**<sup>20</sup>. Vishnu entered into Prakriti, agitated it, and gave birth to the Mahat-tattva (the Great Principle/Intellect) **"guṇasāmyāt tatas tasmāt... sargakāle dvijottama"**<sup>21</sup>, From Mahat, the three principles of Ego (Ahankara) emerged: Vaikarika (Sattvic), Taijasa (Rajasic), and Bhutaadi (Tamasic) **"vaikārikas taijasaś ca bhūtādiś caiva sa tāmasaḥ | trividho'yam ahaṃkāro mahattatvam ajāyata"**<sup>22</sup>, From Ego came the organs of knowledge, organs of action, subtle elements, and gross elements, **"vaikārikān mano jajñe devā vaikārikā daśa..."**<sup>23</sup>

### **The Golden Egg (Hiranyagarbha) and Virat**

When the separated principles of Nature could not create the universe on their own, they united through the grace of Prakriti and Purusha to form a radiant egg. Floating like a bubble on cosmic waters, it grew massive.

**"puruṣādhiṣṭhitatvācca pradhānāgraheṇa ca | mahadādyā viśeṣāstā hyaṇḍam utpādayanti te || tat krameṇa vivṛddhaṃ sajjalabudbudavatsamam..."**<sup>24</sup>

As stated in the Shatapatha Brahmana **"tato virāḍ ajāyata virājo'dhipūruṣam"**<sup>25</sup>, the Cosmic Being (Virat) manifested. Inside the massive Hiranyanda, all physical geography, rivers, mountains, the seven worlds, continents, oceans, and all life forms were gestated

<sup>15</sup> Paingala Upanishad 1.1

<sup>16</sup> Markandeya Purana 46.18

<sup>17</sup> Markandeya Purana 46.17

<sup>18</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.2.23

<sup>19</sup> Gopatha Brahmana 1.1.1

<sup>20</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.2.24

<sup>21</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.2.23: see also Bhagavata Purana 2.5.22, Agni Purana 17.2, Vayu Purana 4.23.24

<sup>22</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.1.35-37; Agni Purana 17.3

<sup>23</sup> Bhagavata Purana 2.5.30-31

<sup>24</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.2.53-54

<sup>25</sup> Shatapatha Brahmana 13.4.1.2

"**hiraṇyamastu yo merus tasyolbaṃ tanmahātmanah...**"<sup>26</sup>, Vishnu Purana 1.2.58<sup>27</sup>. After residing within for a full year (Parivatsara), Brahma split the egg into two halves, creating heaven, earth, and the sky between them "**hiraṇyagarbho bhagavān uṣitvā parivatsaram | tad aṇḍam akarod dvaidhaṃ divaṃ bhuvam athāpica**"<sup>28</sup>

From the limbs of the Virat Purusha, the four Varnas were born: Brahmana from the mouth, Kshatriya from arms, Vaishya from thighs, Shudra from feet "**puruṣasya mukhaṃ brahma kṣatrametasya bāhavaḥ...**"<sup>29</sup>, Furthermore, the physical realms (Bhurloka, Bhuvārloka, Svarloka, etc.) were mapped onto His cosmic body, "**yasyehāvayavair lokān kalpayanti manīṣiṇaḥ...**"<sup>30</sup>, The Puranas extensively detail various distinct creations, Brahmi-Manasi (from mind), Raudri (from anger), Angaja-Manavi (from the body of Manu), Maithuni (sexual union), and the symbolic creations of 'Omkaara' and 'Swastika' "**sa (omkāra) sarvamantrapaniṣad vedabijam sanātanam**"<sup>31</sup>,

### Acharya Manu's Systematic Theory of Creation

The Smṛiti tradition, spearheaded by Acharya Manu, attempts to synthesize these vast cosmological ideas into an orderly, structured doctrine. Manu postulates that in the beginningless state of dissolution (Pralaya), the universe was unknowable and asleep in darkness.

"**āsīdidaṃ tamo bhūtam aprajñātam alakṣaṇam | apratarkyam avijñeyam prasuptam iva sarvataḥ**"<sup>32</sup> The self-existent, unmanifest Supreme Lord appeared, manifesting space and other elements to dispel this darkness. Desiring to create, He first created water and placed a seed within it "**... apa eva sasarjādaḥ tāsū bījamavāsrjat**"<sup>33</sup>, This seed became the radiant Golden Egg (Hiranyanda), from which Brahma who is both manifest and unmanifest was born.

"**tadaṇḍamabhavaddhaimaṃ sahasrāṃśusamaprabham | tasmin jajñe svayaṃ sarvalokapitāmahaḥ**"

"**yatkāraṇamavyaktaṃ nityaṃ sadasadātmakam | tadvisṛṣṭaḥ sa puruṣo loke brahmeti kīrtyate**"<sup>34</sup> After a year, Brahma split the egg into two halves to form heaven and earth, with the intermediate space and oceans in between "**tābhyāṃ saśakalābhyāṃ ca divaṃ bhūmiṃ nirmame | madhye vyoma diśaścāṣṭāvapāṃ sthānaṃ ca śāśvatam**"<sup>35</sup>, Brahma then created the 'Mind', Ego, the Great Principle, the organs of knowledge and action, and the subtle elements "**mahāntameva cātmānaṃ sarvāṇi triguṇāni ca | viṣayāṇāṃ grahītṛṇi śanaiḥ pañcendriyāṇi ca**"<sup>36</sup>. From the imperishable Creator, the perishable world of forms and elements was synthesized (Manu 1.18-19).

### Time, Vedas, and Human Society

To give order to the cosmos, Brahma created the divisions of Time Nimesha, Kashtha, Kala, days, nights,

<sup>26</sup> Vayu Purana 4.80-83

<sup>27</sup> Vishnu Purana 1.2.58

<sup>28</sup> Agni Purana 17.9-10.

<sup>29</sup> Bhagavata Purana 2.2.37

<sup>30</sup> Bhagavata Purana 2.2.36

<sup>31</sup> Bhagavata Purana 12.6.41

<sup>32</sup> Manu Smṛiti 1.5-6

<sup>33</sup> Manu Smṛiti 1.8

<sup>34</sup> Manu Smṛiti 1.9-11

<sup>35</sup> Manu Smṛiti 1.12-13

<sup>36</sup> Manu Smṛiti 1.14-15



months, and the twenty-seven constellations "**kālaṃ kālavibhaktīśca nakṣatrāṇi grahāstathā**"<sup>37</sup>, To uphold the Dharma of creation, He manifested the Rigveda, Yajurveda, and Samaveda from Fire, Wind, and the Sun "**agnivāyuravibhyastu trayam brahma sanātanam | dudoha yajñasiddhyarthamṛgyajuḥsāmalakṣaṇam**"<sup>38</sup>, From these three Vedas, Brahma extracted the essence of cosmic sound: the three letters of Omkara (A, U, M) and the three great utterances (Vyahritis: Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah).

**"akāraṃ cāpyukāraṃ ca makāraṃ ca prajāpatiḥ | vedatrayānniraduhad bhūrbhuvahṣvaritīti ca"**<sup>39</sup>.

Finally, to populate the world, Brahma divided his own body into two parts, bringing forth a man (Manu) and a woman (Shatarupa). From Manu evolved the sages, gods, and all humanity. Brahma divided society functionally by creating the Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra from His mouth, arms, thighs, and feet "**...mukhabāhūrupādataḥ | brāhmaṇaṃ kṣatriyaṃ vaiśyaṃ śūdraṃ ca niravartayat**"<sup>40</sup>, He imbued living beings with natural dualistic qualities violence and non-violence, truth and untruth. Just as the seasons naturally arrive with their own signs, embodied beings repeatedly attain the actions and qualities assigned to them at the dawn of creation.

### Comparative analysis

This article compares the ideas about the universe found in the Rigveda and the Upanishads. It shows that there is a development in thinking instead of a complete change. In the Rigveda in the Nasadiya Sukta the idea of creation is approached with some uncertainty and a lot of curiosity. The hymn does not give an answer but instead asks questions about being and not being. It suggests possibilities like Sadasadvada and even includes doubt, which is called Samshayavada. This reflects an early stage of thought where speculation and poetic imagination dominate.

In the Upanishads the ideas become more organized and deep. They focus on one idea, like Brahman or Atman as the source of everything. The idea of creation is not just seen as a mystery but as something that can be understood through metaphysical reasoning. This includes the evolution of elements and the role of consciousness. What I find interesting is that the spirit of asking questions from the Rigveda is not thrown away but made better in the Upanishads. Overall the comparison shows a transition from poetic inquiry to structured philosophical thought, in a structured way but the search for the truth stayed the same.

### Conclusion

The cosmological theories present in ancient Indian literature share a deep metaphysical continuity, yet they show different philosophical evolutions. The Rigvedic Nasadiya Sukta provided the foundational inquiries of doubt, desire, and the emergence of Hiranyagarbha, which the Brahmana texts and Upanishads elevated into a highly spiritualized process governed by the conscious Paramatma. The Puranas systematized creation into a complex interplay of the Trimurti, the Gunas, and the Cosmic Being. Finally, the Smriti tradition, via Manu, consolidated these vast concepts into a rigid, structured chronology of Time, elemental evolution, and human social order.

<sup>37</sup> Manu Smriti 1.24

<sup>38</sup> Manu Smriti 1.22-23

<sup>39</sup> Manu Smriti 2.76, Gopatha Brahmana 1.1.25-27

<sup>40</sup> Manu Smriti 1.31

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