

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Feminine Principle in the Vedas

### *Cosmogony, Cosmology, and Goddesses in the Vedas*

Our investigation begins with the Vedas. In their portrayals of goddesses, many Vedic passages articulate motifs that help lay the foundation for later formulations of the Great Goddess as *prakṛti* and *śakti*. The idea of an abstract female principle or principles, although not fully articulated, begins to take form in these texts, particularly in Vedic accounts of cosmogony.

In the Vedas, many goddesses are described as playing a role in the process of creation and therefore have cosmogonic significance. There are a variety of myths in the Vedas that are explicitly cosmogonic or that contain cosmogonic elements, and the roles of individual female divinities and principles in the process of creation differ in the individual accounts. In this regard, it is helpful to distinguish between different phases in the unfolding of creation, and different types of creative principles. Regarding the first point, F. B. J. Kuiper has suggested that there are essentially two different stages in Vedic cosmogony: (1) the postulation of an undivided unity that represents the primordial state of the cosmos and in which there is no fixed or stable point of

support, followed by (2) the differentiation of the originally undifferentiated primordial unity and the division of the worlds.<sup>1</sup> In the first stage, the cosmos exists in an unmanifest, subtle, potential state; it is only through some kind of transformative action that this primal unity is impelled into manifestation and differentiation (the second stage). The transition from the first to the second phase of creation requires some sort of catalyst capable of effecting a transformation. W. Norman Brown distinguishes between an animate, psychical, or willful being who is an active agent in creation, and an inanimate, material, insentient, non-psychical, and nonwillful substance that can be identified as the object upon which the first being acts.<sup>2</sup> These two principles represent in philosophical terms an efficient and a material cause. It is often, although not always, through the agency of an active, willful being that the transformation from the first to the second stage occurs. In our analysis we will distinguish between stages and types of causal principles when referring to the role of female divinities in creation.

One must also be careful to distinguish between the cosmogonic roles of certain Vedic goddesses and their cosmological significance. Many passages ascribe to certain goddesses an active role in the process of creation; others assimilate goddesses to general structures inherent within the created universe either in conjunction with or apart from descriptions of cosmogonic events. With respect to both cosmogony and cosmology, some goddesses seem to be associated largely with materiality, the "stuff" of creation, whereas others are associated more with cosmic energy, the "life force" that generates the creative process and/or enlivens creation. The lines are often blurred, however, and many goddesses are affiliated with both. Such associations imbue these divinities with meaning beyond their individual identities and personalities.

It is also helpful in this regard to differentiate between these goddesses' concrete/personal identities and their abstract/impersonal significances. Just as there are different

levels of the cosmogonic process and different kinds of principles of creation, so too there are distinct levels of manifestation of divinity. These can be chronological, conceptual, or both. Of the Vedic goddesses that we will examine, each has a personal identity, yet each also has or acquires an impersonal level of meaning that transcends the individuality of that particular goddess. In fact, although the various Vedic goddesses that we will discuss have distinct personalities and attributes, their individual identities are actually quite fluid. In the Saṃhitās, certain notable characteristics, both personal and impersonal, are consistently “cross-identified,” that is, associated with more than one goddess. The tendency toward cross-identification is further accentuated in the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads, where different goddesses who are depicted in the Saṃhitās as sharing traits and functions come to be explicitly equated with one another.

All of these tendencies—the association of goddesses with cosmogonic processes and cosmological structures, the attribution of abstract/impersonal levels of meaning to individual goddesses, and the cross-identification of traits and identities—represent seeds of the Great Goddess idea, seeds that will then sprout and develop in later scriptures. As we shall see, post-Vedic materials pick up and elaborate on these tendencies, and they become major ingredients in later formulations of the Goddess. Thus although there is no systematically articulated theology of a single Great Goddess in the Vedas, there are some important factors at work that influence the way in which the Great Goddess eventually comes to be formulated.<sup>3</sup>

In order to clarify the lines of continuity between the characteristics of various Vedic goddesses and those of *prakṛti* and *śakti* as these concepts are developed later in the tradition, we will explore in each layer of the Vedic texts some of the characteristics of six Vedic goddesses and goddess groups: the waters (*ap*), the goddess earth (Pṛthivī/Bhūmi), Aditi, Virāj, Vāc (and Sarasvatī, with whom she is

identified), and Śacī/Indrāṇī. By examining the Vedic texts layer by layer, one can trace the development of certain aspects of these goddesses' identities and traits. The deities that we will examine can be divided into two groups: those whose fundamental nature is primarily connected with materiality (*ap*, Pṛthivī, and Aditi), and those whose nature is more connected with the idea of a principle of energy (Virāj, Vāc, and Śacī/Indrāṇī). We will begin our analysis of each group with the most abstract member, namely, the waters (*ap*) in the first group and Virāj in the second, and take each goddess or group of goddesses into account, exploring both the concrete, explicit nature of the deity according to the text, including all levels of expression of that deity, and the symbolic, implicit significance of each divinity. We do not wish to read anything "into" the text from outside it; our aim is rather to read "with" the text but also beyond it, attempting to interpret certain mythological constructs and suggest their possible significances in a larger context.

### *Samhitās*

#### THE WATERS

In the Vedas, there appear to be two different levels of manifestation of the goddesses collectively referred to as the waters. On one level, the waters are concrete and are represented in personal terms as goddesses. At this level, they appear in three different forms: (1) atmospheric, where the waters are generally identified as celestial and are associated with natural phenomena like clouds and rain; (2) subterranean, flowing under the earth's surface; or (3) elemental, where the waters are concretely manifest, often as the water contained in rivers and streams or as the water employed by the Vedic priests in sacrifice. On another level, the waters are described as abstract and impersonal. They function at this level as the primordial,

unmanifest foundation of physical creation. In this capacity, the waters serve as either the medium in which creation gestates or the subtle material matrix from which gross creation is derived. All of these categories represent different aspects or manifestations of the waters. The same naming term (*ap*) is generally used in all cases except for the most abstract level of demarcation, where the terms *ambhas*, *salila*, and *samudra* are sometimes used to denote the function of the primordial waters as the material matrix of creation. Only the term *ap* is feminine. *Ambhas* and *salila* are neuter nouns and *samudra* is masculine, suggesting that the waters thus described shed their specifically feminine identification.

As personal deities with qualities, the waters (*ap*) are depicted primarily as healing, purifying, life-giving, life-affirming, abundant, maternal goddesses, manifest as atmospheric, terrestrial, sacrificial, or in some other way tangibly liquid water. They are beneficent and are invoked often for aid, protection, strength, healing, or removal of impurity;<sup>4</sup> they are revered also as divine and immortal (*amṛta*).<sup>5</sup> In R̥g-Veda 1.23.18–19 the waters are described as the source of medicinal elixir:

I call the waters (*ap*), goddesses (*devī*), where our cows drink: may oblations be given to the streams.

Elixir (*amṛta*) is in the waters: healing balms are in the waters; gods, be swift to praise (them).<sup>6</sup>

In R̥g-Veda 10.17.10 they are invoked as mothers who are the source of purification:

May the waters (*ap*), mothers (*mātrī*), purify us; clarifiers of ghee, may they clean us with ghee, for the goddesses (*devī*) carry off all impurity: So I arise from them purified and bright.

R̥g-Veda 10.9.1–6 also praises and invokes many of their auspicious qualities, such as their protective, nourishing, and healing capacities:

These waters, indeed, are refreshing: help us to look upon strength and great joy.

Like loving mothers (*mātrī*), give us here (a portion) of your most auspicious fluid. . . . Oh waters, you refresh and rejuvenate us.

May the waters, goddesses, be for our happiness and protection, and for drinking. May they pour forth happiness and welfare.

I beg the waters, sovereigns ruling over wealth and human beings, for healing balm (*bheṣaja*).

Soma told me that within the waters are all healing balms and Agni, (who is) benevolent to all.

Other passages lauding the waters also praise their divine, maternal aspects.<sup>7</sup>

The reference to Agni-in-the-waters in Ṛg-Veda 10.9.6 hints at the waters' motherly role. They are referred to as the mothers of Agni,<sup>8</sup> who is frequently called the "Son of Waters," or as mothers of Savitṛ,<sup>9</sup> and they are described along with Aditi and the earth as the source of all the gods.<sup>10</sup> Yet they are also assigned a more universal parental role as the "very motherly ones of all that stands and moves" or "mothers of the world" and sovereigns who have supreme control over human beings (above).<sup>11</sup> Besides their identity as goddesses or the maternal source of individual divinities, they are thus also lauded collectively as the mothers of all that exists.

The waters are also described in terms that hint at a more abstract level of functioning in cosmogony. The cosmogonic role of the waters has been noted by many scholars, including Kuiper, who associates the primeval waters with the first stage of Vedic cosmogony described above.<sup>12</sup>

In many passages of the Saṃhitās, the waters assume the role of an undifferentiated, primordial matrix that serves as the support of and potential for material formation. This matrix is portrayed as womb-like, emphasizing the maternal,

nurturing, motherly aspect of the waters, and usually represents the unmanifest, abstract, subtle stage of creation that is the potential state of the material, manifest cosmos. In this capacity, the waters also function as the material cause of creation.

The waters are the maternal medium in which either the gods or manifest creation itself is said to gestate until it is ready to be born. In Ṛg-Veda 10.82.5–6, for example, the waters are described as the primordial matrix receiving the embryo/germ (*garbha*) in which all the gods are gathered at the dawn of creation:<sup>13</sup>

That which is beyond heaven, beyond this earth, beyond the gods and *asuras*—what first embryo/germ, wherein all the gods beheld each other,<sup>14</sup> did the waters (*ap*) hold?

The waters held that very first embryo/germ where all the gods came together, that one in which all worlds abide, placed on the navel of the Unborn.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the waters function as a kind of primordial womb in which the gods develop and from which they arise. This motif is also found in Ṛg-Veda 10.121.7–8, where the waters are the matrix that contains the universal *garbha*; they give birth to Agni, and simultaneously the one “life-breath” (*asu*) of the gods (probably the creator Prajāpati) is produced:

Indeed, when the great waters (*ap*) came, bearing the universe as an embryo/germ, producing Agni, then arose the gods’ one life breath . . . who with might surveyed the waters containing power (*dakṣa*) and producing sacrifice.

A similar role is described in Atharva-Veda 4.2, a variant on Ṛg-Veda 10.121:

The waters (*ap*), producing an offspring, set into motion in the beginning an embryo/germ (*garbha*).<sup>16</sup>

In these instances, the role of the waters is clearly feminine, for the waters act as the womb that bears creation in its potential form. The maternal nature of this role is underscored by the fact that in all these cases a feminine term (*ap*) is used to designate the waters.

In other passages, the role of the waters in the dawn of creation is somewhat different. In R̥g-Veda 10.129.1–3, for example, the cosmic, primeval waters seem to act less as a womb and more as a kind of primal soup:

There was not nonexistence (*asat*) nor existence (*sat*) then: there was not air nor the heaven that is beyond. What did it cover up? where? In whose protection? Was water (*ambhas*) there, unfathomable, profound?

There was not death nor immortality then. There was not a beacon of night or day. That One, having no wind, breathed by its own power. Other than that, there was not anything beyond.

In the beginning, darkness was hidden by darkness. All this was water (*salila*), indistinguishable.

This hymn is extremely obscure, and it is difficult to understand clearly the relationships among the various elements in the text. Nevertheless, the waters are cited as existing before differentiated creation, when everything is water (10.129.3). At this time, there is only darkness hidden by darkness, indistinguishable (10.129.3); there is not yet even any distinction between *sat* and *asat* (10.129.1). The relation between the waters and “That One” (*tad ekam*) mentioned in verses two and three is an enigma. It may be that *tad ekam* emerges from the waters, but the connection is not clearly articulated. The waters are identified in this hymn as being present before the appearance of light and differentiated form but, although appearing to be some kind of primordial material principle, are not explicitly identified as the source itself of any further material creation. Whether or not the waters are manifest or unmanifest is also not articulated. The enigmatic nature of



the role of the waters reflects the enigmatic nature of the hymn, which presents the riddle of creation but does not attempt to solve it, preferring to pose questions without supplying answers.

Ṛg-Veda 10.129 does not use the term *ap*, preferring the terms *ambhas* (10.129.1) and *salila* (10.129.3), both neuter nouns. Different terms used to designate the waters seem to indicate not different entities but rather different aspects of the same general principle. In Ṛg-Veda 7.49.1, for example, *ap*, *salila*, and *samudra* are different but related manifestations of the waters:

From the middle of the water (*salila*), the waters (*ap*), goddesses (*devī*), having the ocean as their chief (*samudrajyeṣṭha*), flow cleansing, restless.

Elsewhere, it is said that the streams and waters (*ap*) flow into the ocean (*samudra*). So, for example, in Ṛg-Veda 1.32.2, the waters released by Indra in his battle with Vṛtra are described as coming quickly down to the ocean.

In Ṛg-Veda 10.129, then, the use of neuter terms seems to indicate that in this context the waters are conceived of not as feminine entities but as principles devoid of gender. The use of gender-neutral terminology frustrates attempts toward personification and thus would make sense in this most abstract of hymns that emphasizes the enigmatic, inscrutable, abstruse nature of creation. Here, as in the cosmogonic hymns mentioned above, the waters are described as a kind of primordial matrix present at the undifferentiated phase of creation.

Although in Ṛg-Veda 10.129 the precise position of the waters in the unfolding of the cosmogonic drama is unclear, in Ṛg-Veda 10.190 they seem to appear at the crucial transitional phase between the primordial stage of creation and the emergence of differentiated forms:

Order (*ṛta*) and truth (*satya*) were born from inflamed heat (*tapas*).

From that arose night; from that (arose) the foaming ocean (*samudra*).

From that foaming ocean was born the year, arranger of days and nights, Lord over all that blinks.

Dhātṛ [the creator/ordainer] arranged in succession the sun and moon, heaven and earth, the midregions and light.

In this hymn, heat (*tapas*) is said to generate order (*ṛta*) and truth (*satya*), both of which are abstract principles, and night (*rātri*). This represents Kuiper's first phase—the undifferentiated, primordial state of creation. Following this, heat then generates the cosmic waters in the form of an ocean (*samudra*). From these waters is born the year, which then arranges time into days and nights and becomes the ruler over “all that blinks,” that is, all living creatures. This leads to the creation of the sun, moon, heaven, earth, midregions, and light by Dhātṛ, the creator or ordainer. The first element of differentiated creation, time, is produced directly from the waters, followed by the proper arrangement of the cosmos effected by Dhātṛ, who is the efficient cause of the manifest, ordered universe.

A similar position at the dawn of differentiated creation is attributed to the waters in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā, where the waters act as a kind of primal matter. They are transformed into earth through the mediation of fire:

In the beginning, this was the waters (*ap*), water (*salīla*); He, Prajāpati, becoming wind, hovered ( $\sqrt{\bar{h}}$ ) on a lotus leaf. He found no support. He saw that nest (*kulāya*) of the waters (*ap*); he piled fire (*agni*) on it; that became this (*iyam*, namely, the earth). Then indeed he stood firm.<sup>17</sup>

The primordial state of the undifferentiated cosmos is represented as formless water, which is the material matrix present at the dawn of creation, the unmanifest potential of the cosmos that must be disturbed in some way in order for

differentiated creation to come about. When the waters are transformed, they become the earth. This theme is echoed in Taittirīya Saṃhitā 7.1.5.1:

In the beginning, this was the waters (*ap*), water (*salila*). Prajāpati, becoming wind, moved in it. He saw her; becoming a boar, he seized her. Becoming Viśvakarman, he rubbed (*vi* √*mṛ*) her. She extended (√*prath*); she became the earth (*pr̥thivī*); hence the earthness of earth. Prajāpati made effort in her. He created the gods, Vasus, Rudras, and Ādityas.

In this version, the waters are identified again not only as a kind of primal matter, but also as the source of the manifest earth from which Prajāpati then furthers his creation. The waters are the original, primordial “stuff” from which other “stuff” is created. The waters are also affirmed as the basis of the manifest world in Taittirīya Saṃhitā 2.1.5.4:

The plants (*oṣadhi*) are the waters (*ap*), man is what is not; the waters indeed give him existence (*sat*) from nonexistence (*asat*); therefore they say, both he who knows thus and he who does not, the waters, indeed, give existence from nonexistence.

As cosmogonic principles or as personal deities the waters are also attributed special powers, especially healing and procreative powers, and are invoked for strength.<sup>18</sup> In Ṛg-Veda 10.121 (above), the waters are said to contain *dakṣa*, meaning “energy,” “strength,” or “power,” which is also personified and associated with the goddess Aditi. Even Agni is said to have absorbed his powers (*svadhā*) from the waters when he dwelt in their lap.<sup>19</sup> Although one cannot draw any definite conclusions about the nature of the capabilities attributed to the waters in the Saṃhitās, it is important to note that the waters are conceived to be imbued with some sort of inherent abilities or powers that are mentioned in passing but not developed.

## EARTH

In the Saṃhitās, the goddess earth, Pṛthivī or Bhūmi, is less abstract than the waters. There appear to be three different aspects of Pṛthivī's nature in the Saṃhitās: (1) the physical earth that sustains living creatures and upon which we live; (2) the universal mother of physical creation; and (3) manifest matter itself that is formed in the cosmogonic process and, like the waters, is part of the narrative of creation. This last aspect is elaborated only in the Yajur-Veda Saṃhitā and thus appears to have been developed later than the other two.

Pṛthivī is addressed as "mother" (*mātṛ*) in several hymns,<sup>20</sup> and her maternal nature appears to be her dominant quality. As a motherly figure, she is depicted primarily in the first two roles mentioned above, that is, as the abundant, life-supporting physical earth that is the mother of living creatures and as the maternal source of the manifest world. Although such depictions are found in the Ṛg-Veda, one of the most elaborate expressions of these aspects of Pṛthivī appears in Atharva-Veda 12.1:

May Pṛthivī, who bears plants (*oṣadhī*)<sup>21</sup> having varied powers, spread forth and accommodate us . . . may this earth on which what breathes and moves is active assign us precedence in drinking. There are four regions of this earth, on which food and men have sprung up and which bears abundantly breathing and moving (creatures); may this earth bestow on us cattle, indeed, inexhaustibleness. . . . May she [earth] yield precious nectar; may she sprinkle us with vital power (*varcas*). . . . May this earth having many streams yield milk for us . . . may this earth, a mother to me her son, pour forth milk for us. . . . Let us always move along on the firm earth, Pṛthivī, all-producing mother of plants, sustained by order (*dharmā*), all-gracious.<sup>22</sup>

As the physical earth, Pṛthivī is a bountiful goddess described as the source of plants and herbs and is called the

all-producer (*viśvaṃsū*).<sup>23</sup> She is invoked to pour out nectar and milk to feed her children and is said to have golden breasts.<sup>24</sup> As a giver of life, Pṛthivī also appears to be elevated to a more abstract level of conception where her maternal nature is emphasized in a general sense. She is perceived to be the universal mother and sovereign of manifest creation described as conceiving the germ of all things that exist and bearing all things in her womb,<sup>25</sup> and she reigns as the mistress of whatever is and whatever is to be.<sup>26</sup> In this capacity, she shares certain qualities with the waters, but Pṛthivī is never described as subtle or unmanifest.

In addition to her aspect as the physical earth, Pṛthivī is also portrayed as the universal mother coupled with the universal father Dyaus, the male deity of the heavens. This portrayal of earth is particularly prevalent in the Ṛg-Veda. Together, Pṛthivī and Dyaus are invoked as the parents of the world and of the gods.<sup>27</sup> Pṛthivī is described as supporting the moving world that dwells upon her and, along with Dyaus, is praised as all-sustaining:

May that blessed, very victorious pair that supports (us),  
Dyaus-Pṛthivī, protect us from terrible danger.<sup>28</sup>

The coupling of Pṛthivī and Dyaus is one of the earliest expressions in Vedic literature of consort pairing, which, as we will see, pertains also to other goddesses in the Saṃhitās and becomes even more prevalent in the Brāhmaṇas. Pṛthivī and Dyaus supply the prototype for the universal male/female parental pair.

Pṛthivī's place in cosmogony is articulated especially in the Yajur-Veda Saṃhitās, where Pṛthivī's relationship to the cosmogonic waters becomes particularly important and she is sometimes described as lifted out of the primordial waters or derived from water. In some Yajur-Veda narratives, for example, the waters are said to cover the earth in the beginning of creation; a boar dives down and brings up the earth, which then floats on the surface of

the waters.<sup>29</sup> Taittirīya Saṃhitā 7.1.5.1 cited above describes the earth as actually created from the waters, and Atharva-Veda 12.1.8 states that Pṛthivī was water (*salila*) in the beginning of creation. Thus it appears that the waters may be said to represent the most abstract level of materiality, and earth the next stage of formation. The waters are the fundamental material cause of the cosmos, often described as being manipulated by a creator figure who acts as the efficient cause of creation, and the earth is what is first formed.

Like the waters, Pṛthivī is also thought to have special powers, especially procreative powers. She is described as having great inherent might (*mahī svatavas*)<sup>30</sup> and as having forces (*ūrj*) that flow forth from her body.<sup>31</sup> As is also the case with the waters, this particular aspect of Pṛthivī is mentioned in passing but not further developed.

#### ADITI

Literally, *aditi* is an adjective meaning “unbounded.” As a goddess in the Vedas, Aditi seems to have many different aspects, but she is depicted primarily in three ways: (1) as a mother figure; (2) as similar or equivalent to the earth; and (3) as a universal, abstract goddess, representing physical creation itself or aspects of physical creation.

Above all, Aditi is the mother of the seven Ādityas. The story of her children’s birth is recounted in Ṛg-Veda 10.72, where Aditi is said to have given birth to eight sons. She threw away the eighth, Mārtāṇḍa, but later brought him again to life. As a mother, Aditi is also depicted in more nearly universal terms, and in her great nurturing capacity is often identified as a cow.<sup>32</sup> She is called “our birthplace,” the great mother, or the mother of kings.<sup>33</sup> She shares her maternal nature with the waters and the earth, and in Ṛg-Veda 10.63.2, all three (Aditi, the waters, and the earth) are said to give birth to the gods:

Indeed, all your names, oh gods, are to be honored, praised, and worshiped; (you) that are born here of Aditi, the waters (*ap*), and earth (*ṛṥthivī*), hear my call.

This verse suggests that Aditi, the waters, and earth may on some level be different aspects of one another, for they are homologized by being cited collectively as mother of the gods. In this vein, Aditi is at times equated with the earth<sup>34</sup> and is often presented in terms that are reminiscent of descriptions of *Ṛṥthivī*. She is described, for example, as having unrivaled bounteousness<sup>35</sup> and as being extended or broad (*urūvī*).<sup>36</sup>

On an abstract level, Aditi seems to be represented in ways that suggest she is more than an individual goddess. On this level, she is equated with aspects of the cosmos:

Aditi is the heaven, Aditi is the middle region (*antarikṣa*), Aditi is the mother, she is the father, she is the son; all the gods are Aditi, and the five clans; Aditi is what has been born (*jāta*) and what will be born (*janitva*).<sup>37</sup>

In Atharva-Veda 7.6.4, she is described as the great mother in whose lap lies the atmosphere. Similarly, in *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* 9.5, she is represented as the support of the cosmos:

In conception of strength<sup>38</sup> we call with speech the great mother, Aditi, on whom this whole world has settled.

In such passages, Aditi is imbued with a cosmic significance, suggesting that she is identified with the unbounded physical realm. This aspect of her nature is noted by F. Max Müller, who characterizes Aditi in her cosmic role as “the Beyond, the unbounded realm beyond earth, sky, and heaven.”<sup>39</sup> He describes Aditi as

the visible Infinite, visible, as it were, to the naked eye, the endless expanse beyond the earth, beyond the

clouds, beyond the sky. That was called A-diti, the unbound, the un-bounded . . . and meant therefore originally what is free from bonds of any kind, whether of space or time, free from physical weakness, free from moral guilt.<sup>40</sup>

Although Müller's assessment of Aditi's significance may stretch the limits of the textual evidence somewhat, she certainly has some kind of abstract, universal significance associated with physical creation even though her precise nature is not clearly articulated.

In Ṛg-Veda 10.72, Aditi also appears to be associated with *dakṣa*, which the waters are said to contain in Ṛg-Veda 10.121.8, but here *dakṣa* is personified. In Ṛg-Veda 10.72.4, Aditi is said to give birth to Dakṣa, who in turn is said to produce her in an act of mutual procreation. Dakṣa in this case is probably a proper name referring to an individual deity, but—as noted above—the term itself can mean “energy, “strength,” or “power.”

#### VIRĀJ

Virāj is an enigmatic character whose personal identity in the Saṃhitās is less fully elaborated than that of the other deities that concern our investigation. She is mentioned only three times in the Ṛg-Veda, and in one of these instances seems to be a Vedic meter rather than a deity.<sup>41</sup> In Ṛg-Veda 9.96.18, Soma is compared to Virāj and is described as being “like Virāj, resplendent as a singer,” but nothing further is specified.

In Ṛg-Veda 10.90, the Puruṣa-Sūkta, Virāj is attributed cosmogonic qualities. This hymn describes the sacrifice of the cosmic being, the thousand-headed Puruṣa, who is the source of all creation; different parts of his body engender the different parts of the cosmos. In this verse, Puruṣa and Virāj are said to produce each other, for “from him Virāj was born; again from Virāj Puruṣa (was born).”<sup>42</sup> Nothing else is said



about the particular qualities of Virāj, and it is not clear from this passage that she is even identified here as female.

In the Atharva-Veda, on the other hand, Virāj in her cosmological aspect is usually described as female, although she also appears to be identified as a male being or as a hermaphrodite on some occasions.<sup>43</sup> Even in Atharva-Veda 8.9.7, where Virāj is called the father of devotion, the verses that follow attribute to her a female gender. It is in this Saṃhitā that her creative and cosmological significance comes to the fore.

The cosmogonic role of Virāj is described in Atharva-Veda 8.10, where Virāj is described as a divine, cosmic force that enters and enlivens all creation:<sup>44</sup>

Virāj truly was here in the beginning. All were afraid of her (when she was) born, (thinking), "She alone will become this." She rose; she entered the householder's fire (*gārhaṭpatya*). . . . She rose; she entered the fire of offering (*āhavanīya*). . . . She rose; she entered the southern fire (*dakṣiṇa*). . . . She rose; she entered the assembly (*sabhā*). . . . She rose; she entered the meeting (*samiti*). . . . She rose; she entered consultation (*mantraṇa*). . . . She rose; she stood striding out four-fold in the middle region. The gods and men said of her, "She alone knows this. Let us invoke her that we both may live."<sup>45</sup>

Further on in the hymn, she is said to rise and come to the trees, the fathers (*pitṛ*), the gods, and men, by each of whom she is killed; yet she always regenerates, suggesting that she has some kind of immortal character. When Virāj again rises and approaches various groups of beings—the *asuras* and gods, fathers, men, seven *ṛṣis*, *apsarases* and *gandharvas*, other people, and serpents—they each milk from her some substance upon which they depend. In this context, Virāj is connected to notions that we will pursue in later Brahmanical literature, for in Atharva-Veda 8.10.22, Virāj is explicitly identified with the *māyā* of the *asuras*:

She rose; she came to the *asuras*. The *asuras* called to her, "Oh Māyā, come here." Virocana Prāhrādi was her calf; an iron vessel (was) the (milking) vessel. Dvimūrdhā Ārtvyā milked her; he milked that very Māyā. The *asuras* subsist on that Māyā.

The uses and connotations of the term *māyā* in the Vedic literature are quite complex and will be taken up in the next chapter. Suffice it to say for the moment that the term is used in this passage to denote that upon which the *asuras* depend for their existence.<sup>46</sup> For our purposes, what is most important is that a female divinity (for in this hymn Virāj is clearly female) is described in terms that suggest she is a universal creative power that is explicitly identified with the *māyā* of the *asuras*. As we shall see, the connection of a principle of energy described as feminine with the term *māyā* is of particular significance in our investigation.

The opening of the first verse of Atharva-Veda 8.10 ("Virāj truly was here in the beginning") suggests that Virāj may also be thought of as a kind of foundational material principle.<sup>47</sup> She is invoked as strength, yet she also has a nourishing aspect and is likened to a cow.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Virāj is identified with speech, earth, and the midregions, suggesting a general association between Virāj and material creation, but in this passage Virāj is also identified with Prajāpati and Mṛtyu, death, and is ascribed male gender.<sup>49</sup> Generally, the explicitly material aspect of Virāj is not as well developed in the Saṃhitās as are the universal energizing capabilities that dominate her character.

As a cosmic energizing principle, Virāj is also described as breathless but moving by the breath of breathing—that is, living—creatures. It is by her control that the *yakṣas*, a class of supernatural beings, move, and she is described as touching ( $\sqrt{mṛṣ}$ ) all existence.<sup>50</sup> Containing great power, she enters all creation:

She is this very one that first shone forth; entered into these others, she goes about. Great powers are within

her. The woman, the first-bearing mother, has approached.<sup>51</sup>

#### VĀC (AND SARASVATI)

Throughout the Saṃhitās, Vāc, “speech,” is portrayed on two levels: (1) as manifest in the faculty of speech, expressed in human language, and (2) as a goddess ascribed certain universal creative powers.<sup>52</sup>

Vāc’s manifestation in earthly speech is particularly lauded in Ṛg-Veda 10.71. In this hymn, Vāc’s first utterances are said to be sent forth when names are given to objects.<sup>53</sup> Men following the “trace of Vāc” discover that she has entered into those who are able to best apprehend her, the seers (ṛṣis), who then send her forth in their own speech:

With sacrifice they followed the track of Vāc; they found her entered into the ṛṣis. Bringing her near, they distributed her in many places. Seven singers chant (her) together.

Many a one, seeing, has not seen Vāc; many a one, hearing, does not hear her. But to many another she has revealed herself, like a longing, well-dressed wife to her husband.<sup>54</sup>

Ṛg-Veda 8.89.11 asserts that the gods generated Vāc and now animals of every type speak her, suggesting that she is manifest in all earthly vocal utterances. Ṛg-Veda 1.164.45 indicates that this earthly dimension is only one quarter of the totality of Vāc, whose other three quarters are concealed and do not come forth. What humans speak constitutes only the fourth dimension:

Vāc is measured out in four parts. Those Brahmins with insight know these (parts). Three parts, which are hidden, mortals do not activate, (but) they speak the fourth part.<sup>55</sup>

Atharva-Veda 9.10.13 echoes a similar sentiment, describing Vāc as abiding in the highest heaven. Thus Vāc has a divine, transcendent aspect as well as an earthly dimension.

In Rg-Veda 10.125, Vāc describes herself as powerful and all-pervasive:

I am queen, gatherer of riches, knowing, the first among those worthy of being honored. I am she, having many stations (and) much-bestowing, whom the gods have distributed in many places.

Through me, he who discerns, who breathes, who indeed hears what is said, eats his food. Though ignorant (of this), they dwell in me. Hear that you are heard! What I tell you is to be believed.

I, myself, say this welcome news to gods and men. He whom I love, I make him powerful, (I make) him a Brahmin, (I make) him a seer (*ṛṣi*), (I make) him wise. . . . I have entered into heaven and earth. I bring forth the father at the summit of this (creation). My *yonī* (womb/origin/abode) is within the waters (*ap*), in the ocean (*samudra*). Thence I extend over all worlds, and I touch heaven with my uppermost part.

I also blow forth like the wind, reaching all the worlds. Beyond heaven, beyond the earth, so great have I become through my grandeur.<sup>56</sup>

This hymn indicates that Vāc is immanent in creation (“distributed in many places” and “entered into heaven and earth”) but also transcendent (“beyond heaven, beyond the earth”). She is that which sustains and enlivens all of creation, a principle of life-energy that pervades the universe. In verse seven, Vāc is associated with the (primordial) waters, from which she stretches forth extending throughout the worlds, and in which is located her *yonī*. The term *yonī* can mean “place of rest” or “seat,” which would signify that Vāc’s abode resides in the waters. Or, the term can mean “origin” or “place of birth,” indicating that Vāc may be born in the waters. Finally,

and perhaps most significantly, the term can mean “womb, uterus” or “vagina.” If this is in fact what is meant by the term in this context, then the waters are the womb or generative organ of Vāc. Such a description of the relationship between the waters and the goddess would emphasize the above-described role of the waters as cosmic womb and thus would be in keeping with descriptions of the cosmogonic role of the waters narrated elsewhere in the Ṛg-Veda. It would also indicate that the waters are an aspect of Vāc.

Vāc’s role in creation and her relationship with the cosmic waters are described somewhat differently in Ṛg-Veda 1.164.41–42, which portrays Vāc as a buffalo-cow (*gaurī*) who lows, forming the waters (*salila*) and bringing creation into existence:

The buffalo-cow [Vāc] lowed; she fashioned the floods (*salila*), having become one-footed, two-footed, four-footed, eight-footed, nine-footed, she who in the highest heaven has a thousand syllables.

From her flow forth the (heavenly) oceans (*samudra*), on account of which the four directions exist, and from her flows the *akṣara* (imperishable/syllable), on which the entire universe exists.<sup>57</sup>

In this hymn, Vāc is the source of the primordial waters that form the subtle material matrix of creation. They flow forth in differentiated streams as her utterances, and manifest creation is formed from this speech-water. The physical cosmos is born through Vāc’s creative powers, which give rise to the primal floods. Here, as in Ṛg-Veda 10.125, Vāc is connected to the primordial waters.

The association between Vāc and water is in fact important. Vāc is equated with the river goddess Sarasvatī in the Yajur-Veda and in later texts.<sup>58</sup> As a hypostatized river, Sarasvatī is an aspect of the goddess-waters (*ap*) and shares some of their characteristics. She is associated with wealth, power, and medicine, as are the waters;<sup>59</sup> like them also, she

is said to abound in milk and is depicted as a maternal figure who nourishes her progeny.<sup>60</sup> She is described as the divine one in which all living beings are situated<sup>61</sup> and in Atharva-Veda 7.10 is asked to nurse her children:

Your breast, which is ever-flowing, delightful, favorable, well-invoked, granting good gifts, by which you nourish all precious things, Sarasvatī, make it be received.

Sarasvatī is also conceived as penetrating and filling the realms of the earth and the firmament, and she is said to have sprung from three sources.<sup>62</sup> She is called the best of rivers (*nadītāmā*) and is depicted as extremely potent, surpassing all other waters in strength.<sup>63</sup>

Like the other goddesses that we have examined thus far, Sarasvatī also has more than one aspect in the Saṃhitās. Besides being a river goddess, she is also connected with Vedic sacrifice. Sarasvatī is often invoked and called to the sacrifice along with her two partners, Iḷa and Bhāratī (or Mahi), and it is said that the pious worship Sarasvatī during sacrifice.<sup>64</sup> She is also said to govern all thought and is invoked for inspiration.<sup>65</sup> The identification of Sarasvatī with Vāc is a highly complex problem, and the mechanisms of this equation are beyond the scope of this investigation.<sup>66</sup> It should be noted, however, that the descriptions of Vāc link her generally with the waters, which share with her a cosmogonic and cosmological role, and in later texts with Sarasvatī, who is a manifestation of these waters. The connection between Vāc and the maternal waters is more developed in the Brāhmaṇas, where the two appear to be different aspects of the same principle.

Vāc apparently also has a more nourishing, maternal dimension, and, like other goddesses we have examined, she is likened to a cow and is described as yielding food.<sup>67</sup> However, it is her all-pervading, enlivening powers rather than her maternal qualities that dominate Vāc's character.

## ŚACĪ/INDRĀṆĪ

The term *śacī* is used in the Vedas primarily in two ways: (1) as a general term for the strength of the gods; and (2) as a proper name for the wife of Indra, also called *Indrāṇī*.

As a general term denoting strength or the divine powers of the gods, *śacī* is used several times in the Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā and is associated especially with Indra. The term *śacīvat*, "possessed of might," is used to describe Indra and is applied to other deities on only two occasions; similarly, the epithet *śacīpati*, "lord of might," which is used to describe Indra, is ascribed to other divinities only once, when it is applied to the Aśvins (Ṛg-Veda 7.67.5).<sup>68</sup> The term is often used in the instrumental plural to denote the agency by means of which the gods execute their actions.<sup>69</sup>

The term *śacī* in the Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā, as in later literature, is also another name for Indra's wife, *Indrāṇī*.<sup>70</sup> As his consort, Śacī is Indra's strength personified. S. K. Das argues that the terms *śakti* and *śacī* originally denoted the nature functions of divinities and sees in the hypostatized Śacī a development whereby the power of a divinity, his *śakti* or *śacī*, is conceived of in feminine terms and then deified. In this regard, Das distinguishes between *śakti/śacī* and a similar group of goddesses called *Gnās*, "women," who are the divine consorts of the gods.

In the Vedic stage *Gnā* certainly implies in the collective sense a 'group of Divine Females' who produce or promote fertility and wealth. Thus whereas the Ṛgvedic Śacīs represent 'Divine Powers' as the deified nature functions of male gods, forming an essential element in the constitution of the latter's personalities, the *Gnās* are distinctly separate principles of 'female energy' acting in association with their 'male counterparts.'<sup>71</sup>

Unlike the Gnās, who are personified as distinct female divinities, Śacī/Indrāṇī appears to be portrayed as the energy that is an inherent aspect of her male counterpart and is identified as female. As we shall see, in later literature this image of a god possessed of a divine, female power will become a central theme in accounts of cosmogony and contributes to the way in which the Great Goddess is constructed. We do not find in Śacī the same explicit cosmogonic or cosmological implications that we have seen in Vāc and Virāj; nevertheless, by embodying the nature of divine energy presented in the Ṛg-Veda as the feminine aspect of a male deity, Śacī represents an important piece of the puzzle.

In the Vedic Saṃhitās, we can discern two important tendencies regarding the nature of female divinities. First, several different goddesses are associated in some way and on some level with materiality and/or a principle of energy. These goddesses are sometimes represented in concrete terms and associated with visible, manifest aspects of the cosmos, but they are also conceived in abstract terms and associated with nonvisible, non-manifest principles of creation. Both levels of description are present in the Saṃhitās. Second, although these goddesses are discrete divinities, they share certain traits and characteristics, and similar terms may be used to describe different goddesses. Thus there is a certain amount of cross-attribution of traits and even identity (as in the case of Aditi-Pṛthivī, Sarasvatī-Vāc). Furthermore, goddesses who are associated with materiality may also be attributed powers, and vice-versa; the principles of materiality and energy are not distinctly separate from one another. Thus goddesses associated with matter are not portrayed as entirely passive, and those connected to the principle of energy are associated also with materiality.



*Brāhmaṇas*<sup>72</sup>

The depiction in the Saṃhitās of the different goddesses that we have examined thus far leads us to conclude that the association of materiality and energy with female divinity seems to be part of the Vedic tradition from the very beginning of its existence. We have also seen that although many of the characteristics of these goddesses are shared, each goddess is portrayed as a discrete, individual deity. In the Brāhmaṇas, two further developments occur: (1) the tendency for different discrete goddesses to shed their individual uniqueness and to be identified with one another in some way is increasingly prominent; and (2) through this process of cross-identification, a more general notion of female divinity that is rather fluid in character begins to become increasingly dominant. Individual goddesses become less distinct and are associated more generally with one another and with cosmogonic and cosmological structures. Thus the personal level of identity of these divinities tends to take a back seat, while their abstract identities and functions become increasingly important.

## THE WATERS

Descriptions of the waters as the matrix of creation are found scattered throughout the Brāhmaṇas even outside of any cosmogonic context. The waters (*ap*) are described as the great ocean present at the beginning,<sup>73</sup> the foundation (*pratiṣṭhā*) of the universe,<sup>74</sup> and the first-made of the universe.<sup>75</sup> They are said to have produced everything that exists.<sup>76</sup> The notion that the waters are present at the beginning of the cosmogonic process and are in some way foundational seems to be well accepted in these texts, and they are even described generally as pervading ( $\sqrt{āp}$ ) all of creation.<sup>77</sup> The waters are also identified with the gods and are called the abode of all the gods.<sup>78</sup>