

©James A. Santucci
Department of Comparative Religion
California State University, Fullerton

[Revised from the book, *An Outline of Vedic Literature*]

SAMHITĀ'S (COLLECTIONS)

Ṛgveda-Samhitā

The Collection of the Ṛgveda, *i.e.*, the
Veda or Knowledge of verses, stanzas,
or strophes (*rc-*)

The *Ṛgveda* is the oldest and most important work of Vedic literature. The collection is divided into ten books (*Maṇḍala-* 'circle') consisting of 1,028 hymns (*sūkta-*), eleven of which were subsequently introduced, called Vālakhilya's (contained in *Maṇḍala* 8, hymns 49-59). Another arrangement divides the *Ṛgveda* into eight *áṣṭaka-s* ('eighths'), each of which is subdivided into eight *adhyāya*'s ('chapters' or

'lessons') while each of the latter consists of *vārga*'s ('groups') of five or six stanzas. There are 432,000 syllables, 153,826 words, and about 10,000 lines of verse in the text, equivalent in size to the poems of Homer.

The hymns of the *Ṛgveda* were composed and handed down orally in different families during a period dating from around 1600 B.C.E. (This is the academically accepted date. There are some scholars who believe it is much earlier). They were gradually brought together over the course of perhaps several hundred years till they assumed the semblance of a collection. Then followed the formation of the *Samhitā* text which occurred around 600 B.C., or approximately at the end of the *Brāhmaṇa* period. *Maṇḍala*-s Two to Seven constitute the Family Books, that is, the hymns contained in each of these books constitute compositions of various members of the same family. Thus the second *Maṇḍala* is devoted to the compositions of the *Gṛtsamada* family, the third *Maṇḍala* to the *Viśvāmitra* family, the fourth *Maṇḍala* to the *Vāmadeva* family, the fifth *Maṇḍala* to *Atri* family, the sixth *Maṇḍala* to the *Bharadvāja* family, and the seventh *Maṇḍala* to the *Vasiṣṭha* family. These *Maṇḍala*-s most probably formed the

nucleus of the *Ṛgveda*.

The first *Maṇḍala*, however, is unlike the above-mentioned Books because it consists of a large number of hymns (191) composed by a number of poets, none of whom composed more than 26 hymns. It is probably a later addition, although many individual hymns are no doubt quite old. There can be no doubt, however, that *Maṇḍala* Ten contains hymns of later origin, judging from subject matter, grammatical structure, and the rather conscious symmetrical arrangement on the part of the redactors, who inserted 191 hymns in the *Maṇḍala*, thereby matching the number found in the first *Maṇḍala*.

The ninth *Maṇḍala* consists of hymns addressed to Soma Pavamāna, that is, the clarified sacrificial liquid. Because there are only four hymns addressed solely to Soma in the other *Maṇḍala-s*, it is safe to assume that the hymns of the Book were taken from the other *Maṇḍala-s*, perhaps for ritual purposes.

The date of the *Ṛgveda* is impossible to determine with accuracy, particularly the chronology of the separate *Maṇḍala-*

s and hymns. The best estimate may be within the range of sometime between the thirteenth to eighteenth century B.C. for the oldest hymns, to around the ninth or tenth century B.C. for the most recent of the hymns.

The only recension of the *Ṛgveda* that has come down to us is the one of the Śākala school (*śākhā*). Another recension of the *ṚV* was possessed by the Bāṣkala school, which from all accounts, differed only very slightly from the Śākala version. For a brief account of the Ṛgvedic schools, see Arthur A. Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, India (1965), pp. 42-43.