

Where Mantras Meet Metamorphosis: Insects in the Vedas

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INTRODUCTION

The Vedas, the oldest literary and spiritual compositions of India, are not only collections of hymns and prayers but also mirrors of the natural and cultural environment in which they were composed. In these sacred texts, the world is perceived as a living organism where gods, humans, animals, plants, and even the smallest insects coexist and interact. The seers who composed the mantras observed nature with keen eyes and transformed their observations into powerful metaphors and ritual symbols. Insects, with their buzzing swarms, honey-filled hives, tireless labor, and destructive outbreaks, became important motifs in this poetic and ritual universe.

Among insects, bees occupy a special place in the Vedic imagination. Their honey (*madhu*) was not merely a source of food but a sacred substance, symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and divine sweetness. Hymns often praise honey as the essence of Soma and as a blessing that nourishes gods and men alike, such as in the *Rigveda* (RV 1.90.6; RV 9.83.4), where honey and sweetness are invoked as the universal essence (*madhu vidyā*). The collective labor of bees, their buzzing flight, and their ability to produce sweetness from flowers turned them into emblems of order, abundance, and sacred productivity. The bee also later evolved into a divine form, with the goddess Bhramarī mentioned in the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as the “bee goddess” who embodies protective and creative force.

Other insects, such as ants and flies, are also mentioned in the *Atharvaveda*. Ants (*pipīlikā*) appear in narratives that highlight their industry and persistence, and they are referred to in AV 2.25.2 as part of charms concerning fertility and land. Flies (*makṣikā*) are noted for their attraction to libations and food offerings in AV 5.29.4, symbolizing both nuisance and inevitability. These references reflect the everyday experiences of agrarian communities with insect life—be it in the field, the storehouse, or the ritual ground. They also suggest a developing awareness of insects as both helpers and threats, a recognition that shaped Vedic attitudes toward ecology and sustenance.

Insects were not described merely for curiosity's sake. Their presence in the Vedas reveals a deeper layer of meaning: they became metaphors for ritual processes, spiritual attraction, social cooperation, and transformation. Just as mantras, when recited properly, pass through stages of utterance, vibration, and manifestation, insects too embody cycles of metamorphosis—egg, larva, pupa, and adult. This natural transformation resonated with the ritual transformations sought through sacrificial acts. Thus, the meeting point of “mantras” and

“metamorphosis” in Vedic thought illustrates how the smallest creatures could embody cosmic truths.

The study of insects in the Vedas therefore opens a window into early Indian ethno-entomology, ecology, and religious symbolism. It shows how the ancients wove practical knowledge and spiritual imagination together, creating a worldview where the buzzing of a bee or the marching of ants was not trivial but a sign of the interconnectedness of all life.

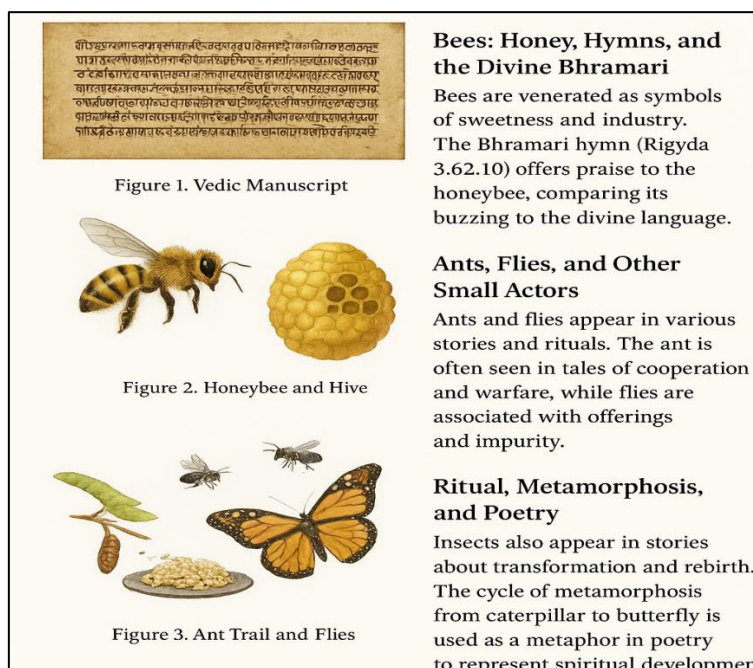


Fig- Insects in Vedic Literature

The Vedic Worldview and Non-human Agency

Vedic thought treats the world as animate and linguistically responsive: the right chant alters outcomes. In this ontology, insects are not “mere” background fauna; they are agents whose behavior can be enlisted, praised, or warded off. Because many hymns use nature metaphors to describe sacrificial efficacy, insects often appear in similes or epithets—swarming to honey like priests to libations, or consuming crops like enemies. Such imagery makes the micro-world of arthropods an index of social and ritual dynamics.

Bees: Honey, Hymns, and the Divine Bhramari

Bees are the best-documented insects in Vedic literature. Honey (madhu) is a recurrent ritual

ingredient and a symbol of divine sweetness and blessing; references to bees and honey occur in multiple Rigvedic hymns and later Upanishadic passages. Several hymns address or invoke bee-like creatures, and there are even dialogues framed as speech between poets and bees. Honey’s ritual value made bees a frequent poetic motif for abundance, memory and the transmission of blessings.

Beyond the Vedic hymns, the figure of Bhramari (literally “she who is like a bee”) appears in later devotional and Puranic contexts as a Bee-Goddess or form of the Devi—linking the divine feminine with the buzzing world and concentrating symbolic meaning around creation, protection, and the choruses of nature. This later development echoes older Vedic associations of bees with fertility, sweetness and ritual power.

Ants, Flies and Other Small Actors: Pests and Portents

The Atharvaveda and other early texts preserve names and procedures related to pests. The Sanskrit term *pipīlikā* (ant) appears in Vedic and Upanishadic contexts and later lexica treat numerous insect names and their behaviors. The Atharvaveda also contains laments and charms concerning crop damage—evidence that early agrarian communities observed pest species and devised ritual-practical responses (smokes, charms, offerings). Even similes that compare worshippers to flies around honey show the poet’s eye for insect sociality and appetites.

Ethno-entomology in Early Sanskrit Sources

Scholars who study early Indian writings find surprisingly detailed entomological lists and classifications in texts connected with medicine (e.g., *Suśruta*) and agricultural practice. These lists name multiple fly, ant and mosquito types and describe harmful and beneficial species. This points to sustained observation and practical knowledge—how insects affect health, crops, and stored grains—alongside their symbolic roles. The overlap of textual genres (ritual, medical, agricultural) shows insects’ pervasive place in life and literature.

Ritual, Metamorphosis and Poetry: Why Insects Fit the Mantra

Insect life-cycles—egg, larva, pupa, adult—are vivid natural metaphors for transformation (and for the efficacy of ritual: action → hidden change → visible fruit). Vedic poetry loves such staged processes: chant, offering, result. Bees and ants model social organization and productive labor; flies and pests dramatize vulnerability and the need for ritual protection. Because Vedic ritual centers on process (the correct sequence of sounds and acts), insect metamorphosis provides an apt poetic mirror.

Case Study: Hymnic Uses—Swarming and the Simile of Honey

A concrete example: some Rigvedic hymns compare the faithful or the sacrificial singers to insects that gather where sweetness is poured—an image that gives moral valence to both the worshippers (attracted by divine reward) and the ritual product (the libation and its promise). Another hymn speaks of offerings drawing “flies” to the sacrificial honey, using the common insect reaction to sweetness as a metaphor for spiritual attraction. These recurring images show how everyday insect behavior became part of a shared symbolic toolkit.

Science and Symbol: Modern Scholarship on Vedic Insect Imagery

Recent interdisciplinary work—combining entomology, history, and religious studies—argues that ancient Indian texts contain both precise empirical observations and metaphorical

uses of insects. Scholars emphasize that reading the Vedas for “ecological knowledge” yields insights into ancient agricultural practices, honey-harvesting, pest control, and the symbolic economy of ritual. While Vedic hymns are not zoological treatises, they register human–insect relations that shaped livelihoods and religious imagination.

CONCLUSION

The Vedic portrayal of insects demonstrates how early Indian society observed, interpreted, and integrated the natural world into its sacred worldview. Bees, ants, and flies were not merely creatures of practical importance in agriculture and daily life but also served as metaphors of fertility, persistence, disturbance, and transformation within hymns and rituals. Their presence in the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* shows a profound awareness of ecological interdependence long before modern science articulated such concepts. Just as insects undergo metamorphosis, the Vedic rituals and mantras were understood as transformative acts, leading from hidden potential to manifest reality. By linking insects with divine forces, agricultural abundance, and symbolic cycles of renewal, the Vedas reveal an early form of ethno-entomology where spiritual and natural domains converge. This synthesis reminds us that the smallest beings held immense significance in shaping cultural imagination, offering timeless lessons about harmony between humanity, ritual, and ecology.

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