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RAKSHASAS AND ASURAS IN HINDU EPIC TALES

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Abstract

When the Aryans came to India, they found the Hindus Valley Civilization (3300–1300 BCE) more advanced than they had ever encountered before. After many battles, when the Aryans finally settled down in the northern part of India, the non-Aryans were forced to move from the north to the south. The fact that the non-Aryans were dark-skinned and had different facial structure from the Aryans gave rise to the characters called *rakshasas* and *asuras*. By analyzing relevant parts of the Hindu mythology, this paper will trace the role of social and political factors that have been instrumental in creating such stories and how gender role played a key role in them as well.

Keywords: Aryans and non Aryans, Hindus Valley Civilization, Mythology

1. INTRODUCTIONSECTION

More than two thousand years ago, when the Aryans came to India, they found a civilization more advanced than any they had encountered before. This Bronze Age civilization, considered to be one of the oldest human civilizations, flourished on the riverbanks of the Indus River Valley and was named after it: the Indus Valley Civilization (3300–1300 BCE). After many battles, the Aryans settled in the northern part of India. The non-Aryans were forced to move from the north to the south in the hope that the harsh landscape and forests would provide a barrier between them and the Aryans. The environment in which these non-Aryans were forced to live and the fact that they had a significantly different appearance from the Aryans gave rise to folk characters called *rakshasas* (demons) and *asuras* (ungodly creatures). According to Sanskrit epic tales and many Hindu folklore and mythological stories of later centuries, these *rakshasas* were vicious human flesh eaters, duplicitous, unlawful, and disgusting looking. On a historical note, the legendary Hindu *Ādi Kavi* (First Poet) Valmiki created his monumental Sanskrit epic tale, the *Ramayana*, as early as 750 BCE; most Indologists and Southeast Asian scholars believe it was written down between 200 BCE and 200 AD. One of the main characters in the *Ramayana* is Surpanakha, a *rakshasa* who falls in love with Prince Lakshmana and asks him to be her husband. Lakshmana not only rejects Surpanakha because of her looks and background, but he also punishes her by cutting off her nose and ears. This kind of treatment is not uncommon in Hindu Vedic mythology, in which *devas* (gods) and *devies* (goddesses) who represent the Aryans mercilessly kill the supposed villains *rakshasas* and *asuras*, who represent non-Aryan groups.

By analyzing relevant parts of Hindu Vedic mythology, we can trace the social and political factors that were instrumental in creating the stories and discuss how they reflect Aryans' fear of losing their cultural and religious identity. The key reason for the creation of these stories was hostility to others. Though the stories seem harmless, they emphasize social division and unrest. Less consideration has been given to gender dynamics within the epics. The Hindu mythology more generally privilege both Aryans and men and demonize darker-skinned women. The latter are especially "monstrous" and worthy of harsh punishments.

2. BODY OF ARGUMENT

To understand Hindu Vedic mythology, it is important to understand the Hindu religion and how it affected politics, society, and culture. Before the Aryans arrived, the original inhabitants of India were the Mundas and

Dravidas, who established the highly developed Indus Valley urban cultures of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Dar-Mohenjo-Daro, and Lothal between 2800 and 1300 BCE (Michaels, 2004, p. 33). They had "complex urban arrangements of up to 40,000 inhabitants, irrigation systems, houses, roads," and fortresses made out of bricks, in addition to "a corporate social order led by theocratic elites," according to Axel Michaels in *Hinduism: Past and Present* (Michaels, 2004, p. 31). Between 1750 and 500 BCE, numerous tribes of Indo-Iranian cattle nomads from Central Asia or the Near East penetrated northern India, and a clash broke out between the original and migratory groups. No one knows what caused the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, but these struggles may have played a key role. The natives had no knowledge of how to use horses and ox-drawn chariots or how to build copper and, later, iron weaponry. They would not have had a chance next to the Aryans, who were experts in all these skills.

One group of Indian historians has hypothesized that instead of becoming extinct; these non-Aryans moved south or east. This group of post-modern historians rejects the theory that Westerners built modern India. Without historical evidence, it is impossible to prove the validity of this theory, however, Indologist Axel Michael points out that "from about 1750 BC a new culture emerged and spread from the northwest, which is called 'Vedic' because of its texts." (Michaels, 2004, p. 33-34).Those texts are filled with stories of numerous mythological gods and evil, dark-skinned creatures who reject Aryan faith and religion, have a hostile attitude toward the Aryans, and constantly clash with them. These struggles between the Aryans and the original non-Aryans, or inhabitants are documented in the first Vedic text discovered, the *Rig Veda*, which uses the hymn form to describe countless bloody wars between the gods (or the Aryans) and dark, demonic creatures called *rakshasas* and *asuras* (non-Aryans). The two sides struggle to establish dominion over land; the mythical and allegorical interpretation is that the *rakshasas* and *asuras* are eager to destroy everything pure and good in the Aryan orders. This scenario changed in the time of *Rig Veda* X (approximately 1200–850 BCE), which shows that the Aryans were settling down. They created their own ruling government and a strong social class that enslaved the original inhabitants, eventually making them nonexistent (Michaels, 2004, p. 35).

Ramayana in Sanskrit means "Rama's travels." The tale documents Rama's triumph over the *rakshasa* king Rāvaṇa. It has twenty-four thousand <u>ślokas</u> (or stanzas) and seven *kaṇḍas* (or cantos), and it was created in the Vedic language (Sanskrit) and memorized by Valmiki's disciples and then passed down to future generations until finally being written down. Two disciples were Rama's own sons, Kusa and Lava, who heard it directly from the mouth of Valmiki and strove to spread it throughout अर्जबत्त/Arjabatta (or the land of the Aryans). According to Sheldon I. Pollock, the "text continued to be amplified even after Valmiki fixed the essential contours of the work; similarly, the monumental poem was itself not the beginning of the tradition, but a major synthesis of antecedent elements." (Pollock, 2005, p. 23). In "A Text with a Thesis: The Ramayana from Appayya Diksita's Receptive End," Yigal Bronner, a scholar in South Asian Studies, describes the *Ramayana* as "the first and exemplary work of poetry," which "has gone from a heroic bardic work to a 'mythico-religious' transformation." (Bronner, 2011, p. 51-53). The Ramayana is essential for understanding the struggle between *devas* (gods or those who are considered to be descendant of a god) such as Rama—an Aryan—and the *rakshasa*, like Rāvaṇa—a non-Aryan and the villain in the story (Bronner, 2011, p. 51-53).

The hero of this epic tale is Rama, the eldest prince of the Aryan kingdom <u>Ayodhyā</u>. Rama is the seventh incarnation of Ādi Deva (one of the oldest and greatest god of three major gods in Hindu religion), Vishnu, who chose to become human so he could slay the *rakshasa* king Rāvaṇa, a non-Aryan. After Rama's marriage to the princess of Maithiili, <u>Sītā</u>, he is unjustly banished from his kingdom for fourteen years by his father, Dasarata, the king of <u>Ayodhyā</u>, who has promised his second wife, Kaykai, that her son and Rama's second brother, Bharata, will be the crown price of Ayodhyā. Rama leaves the kingdom with <u>Sītā</u> and his youngest brother, Lakshmana, in a journey that takes them into the deep forest of Dandaka and closer to the vicious *rakshasas* and human-friendly *banara* (or monkeys) who dwell in the forest. Before their entrance in the forest, they are warned by the forest ascetics that:

तव उचुस ते वन /

चारस तपसा धर्म

चारिणः वनस्य तस्य

संचारं रक्ससैः समभिप्लुतम्. (Valmiki, trans. Pollock, 2005, p. 610-611. According to Pollock translation, this Sanskrit Vedic text means that "The forest ascetics, who followed the way of righteousness, informed

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them that travel through the forest was impeded by *rakshasa*.").

In the forest, Sītā is abducted by Rāvana, the great *rakshasa* king of Laṅkā, whose sole reason for abducting Sītā is to avenge the humiliation of his sister, Surpanakha, at the hand of Lakshmana, who cut off her ears and nose as a punishment for her desperate wish to marry either of the brothers. Rāvana keeps Sītā in the Asoka Grove (means a garden), hoping to woo her to become his wife (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, p. 75-76). After Sītā's abduction Rama and Lakshmana go to Laṅkā and, aided by Sugriba, the *banara* king in Kiskhinda, and his armies, fight a bloody war with the *rakshasas.* Finally, Rama is successful and destroys almost every able-bodied *rakshasa* in the kingdom of Laṅkā, including its king, Rāvana, Rāvana's brother Kumbhakarna; and his son, Indrajit, so he could free Sītā. Even though Hindu mythology portrayed the *rakshasas* as cannibals, surprisingly they did not try to eat her while she was a captive in Laṅkā. This kind of contradiction is common throughout the tale.

According to the Vedic text *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Rāvana was not evil; he was the gatekeeper of Vaikuntha (the spiritual realm where there is no suffering) and was cursed to be born in the material world (Prime, 1997, p. 8). When Rāvana became the king of Laṅkā, he convinced Lord Brahma to make him immortal, except he could be killed only by the hand of a human since he never believed that a human would possess the power to kill him. He spent his life in a feud with the gods and other Aryan kings. There were many battles between gods and *rakshasas* and *asuras* over the control of heaven, and in most cases the gods won by slaying their vicious-looking opponents. According to another Hindu Vedic scripture, *Purana*, the *asuras* were the sons of Diti and Danu (for that reason sometimes they are called Danaba, meaning demon). They were the main opponents of Adityas (pronounced *A-daiteya),* or gods, who have since their birth been in battle with each other (Hopkins, 1915, 46). In *Shiva Purana*, many of these battles are documented. One of the most famous and frequently told tales in Hindu mythology is the battle between the *asura* king and son of Ramba (who was also a *rakshasa*), Mahishasura, and the *adhi shakti* (the most powerful godess), Durga.

As this tale goes, Mahishasura was brutal, enjoyed terrorizing Aryans on earth and the gods in heaven. One day, he finally conquered heaven, and the frightened gods were forced to leave. The Trideva (or three supreme gods)—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—created Durga, and all the gods gave her one of their divine weapons so she could slay Mahishasura and free the heaven. The casualties of the bloody battle between Durga and Mahishasura included his entire army of *asuras* and his chief lieutenants, Chikshur, Chamar, Asiloma, Vidalaksha, Durdhara, Durmukha, and Mahahanu. Every one of them was viciously slain by Durga, who with immense strength beheads Mahishasura too. These tales were created to display the strength and cruelty of the gods and goddesses so that others would feel fearful of Aryan power. The same attitude is documented in the *Ramayana* when Tataka, the man-eating, ugly, and deformed demon, is slain by Rama; he first cuts off her nose and ears and finally penetrates her heart with a sharp arrow and kills her (Prime, 1997, 25). This kind of remorseless killing can only be explained if we look at Tataka as a member of a non-Aryan clan associated with cannibalism that lived mostly either on the southern seacoast or deep in the forest. According to Dr. S. N. Vyas, "traces of this race of cannibals are still to be found in the Andamans, Borneo, Sunda, and other islands in the Indian Ocean." (Vyas, 1967, p. 27-28).

Rakshasas and *asuras* may have dark complexions, but not all of them are ugly. To prove this view is not that difficult because in the Sundara Kandam of the Ramayana, Hanuman describes the *rakshasa* women as "beautiful," "moon-faced," "radiant," "lotus-eyed." (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, p. 56-57). He perceives Mandodari, Rāvana's wife, an attractive and beautiful woman. Searching for Sītā in the palaces of Laṅkā, he mistakes Mandodari for Sītā because he has never seen Sītā. This last example demonstrates that *rakshasas* are human; otherwise, Hanuman would not mistake her for Sītā. Another example of the racial and culturally-based fabrication can be seen in the description of Rāvana, who has ten hands and twenty hands; when Hanuman describes a sleeping Rāvana, he describes him as having two arms and one head with a big mouth, which shows that these mythological creatures are humans who because of poetic fabrication are seen as vicious and deformed (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, p. 32). Also, it is possible that traditional Aryan myths describe someone as having ten hands because adding hands shows the greatness of that warrior on the battlefield, not that he or she is a *rakshasa*. The Aryan goddess Durga also has ten hands, and she is considered to be the greatest warrior in Hindu mythology. According to Robert Goldman, the *Ramayana* sheds light on Hindu-Brahminical "social, ethical, moral, and political behavior" because it not only elaborates the core *varnasrama* system but also includes "numerous examples of both powerfully normative and horrifically counter-normative characters and actions*…*" (Goldman, 2011, p. 70).

Tellingly, even though Rāvana is portrayed a savage, angry, and impatient anti-hero, many in southern India still worships him. The author of *Ramayana: A Journey,* Ranchor Prime, mentions that after slaying the

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rakshasa king, Rama himself praises Rāvaṇa for his "courageous character and being a gifted" warrior "who deserved to be buried with reverence (Prime, 1997, p. 71). Why, then, did Valmiki portray Rāvaṇa as remorseless and immoral, a gigantic, vicious-looking *rakshasa* king with ten heads who had an immense appetite for sexual pleasure, who is loved by many disgusting and deformed women, and who would not hesitate to steal someone else's wife to avenge his own sister's unjust punishment? The answer is simple. It was a struggle between two races, and the winners became the gods and the defeated ones became *rakshasas*.

There are many paradoxes exist in the *Ramayana* and other Hindu myths, but one element remains constant: the physical appearances of both groups. The *devas* are fair, sometimes have a golden aura (as Sītā was described by Valmiki), and have blue eyes and excellent proportions(Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, p. 79). The *rakshasas* and *asuras,* on the other hand, have dark bodies, red eyes, and long black hair. They are sometimes deformed, often harmful, and cannibals: "a nocturnal power, a demon of darkness, and therefore evil," wrote E. Washburn Hopkins in his book *Epic Mythology* (Hopkins, 1915, p. 38). Yet Hopkins shows that the dissimilarity of physical appearances changed over time. The *rakshasas* who appear in the *Mahabharata* (written earlier than the *Ramayana*) are described as more horrific than those in the *Ramayana*. In the Mahabharata the marriage between Aryans and *rakshasas* are common, but not at all common in the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata*, the ogre Hidimba marries the Pandava prince Bhima and bears a half-ogre and half-human son, Ghototkaca; according to the *Manvantara*, all *rakshasas* are sons of Pulastya, the fourth son of Brahma and one of the greatest sages and *Saptarishi*. When the Aryans first arrived in India, they had to marry a few non-Aryan or *rakshasas* and *asuras* women and have families. After the conquest of the northern part of India, however, when they fully settled down, they felt the need to structure their society. They divided into four classes that they called *chaturvarna* based on the work they provided. According to *chaturvarna*, society was divided into four classes, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, based on the work each did. The Brahmins were the scholars, teachers, and priests. The Kshatriyas were the protectors, and they were the kings, governors, warriors, and soldiers. The Vaishyas were mostly merchants, farmers, and businessmen, and the Shudras were the lowest and were laborers and service providers. Nevertheless, none of the classes contained the non-Aryans or *rakshasas* and *asuras,* which could only mean that they were outcasts and not considered to be a part of Aryan society. They were simply the others. These aboriginal races of India were subsequently transformed into evil or good depending on whether or not they allied with the Aryans (Vaidya, 1906, p. 140). For instance, not only did Vibhisana, Rāvaṇa's youngest brother, become Rama's ally, helping him kill Rāvaṇa, but after the death of Rāvaṇa, Rama spared his life and made him king of Laṅkā.

A few major elements of the *Ramayana* bear discussion. One is the spoken language. The early Sanskrit language was divided into three dialects: *vanara, manusi*, and *devijati*. The educated elite Aryans used the *manusi* dialect, the Brahmins used the *devijati* dialect, and those who were the commoners or non-Aryans used *vanara,* the corrupt Deccanese (or southern Indian) form of Sanskrit. The first time Hanuman (the *Banara* lieutenant and faithful servant of Rama) meets Sītā in Laṅkā, he cannot decide which form of Sanskrit to speak because he does not want her to think he is a *rakshasa*, who are good at disguising themselves. When Hanuman speaks, he chooses *manusi*, and Sītā feels comfortable talking to him (Valmiki, trans. Mudholkar, 1920, p. 677, verse 20). Sītā would not be understood if Hanuman spoke *vanara*. Second is the role of women. Even in the context of severe punishments, disfiguring a woman's face is cruel, yet Lakshmana disfigured Surpanaka, and never felt remorse. When Rama mutilated and killed Tatakare, he was praised by others. We can argue that it is because Surpanakha and Tataka both overstepped their roles as dark-skinned, and as women. Tataka was a non-Arayn warrior and monstrous, so she crossed her role when she attacked Rama, and Surpanaka did when she asked Lakshmana to marry her. They both were punished, surprisingly though; no one questions Durga's behavior. She killed men with impunity because she was an Aryan and allowed to kill non-Aryan men because they were nothing but evil *Asuras.*

Why did Hindu mythology portray non-Aryans as evil *rakshasas* and *Asuras* and give them animal characteristics and tendencies? The answer lies again in the *Ramayana*, which shows that Rāvaṇa's *rakshasa* army is composed of many men who wear masks of tigers, camels, stags, and other animals provoking fear and concealing their identity. These masked faces with fearsome characteristic may have inspired the tales of ferocious night creatures, demons that terrorized the Aryan sages or noble Brahmins. For instance, when the sage Visvamitra tries to carry out a sacrifice, Marica and Subahu, two *asuras*, throw blood onto the altar to ruin the whole performance. On many occasions, Rāvaṇa obstructs religious ceremonies by creating terror or taking away the animals that are about to be sacrificed. Based on these confrontations between the Aryans and the *rakshasas* or *asuras,* two things could be deduced. First, the entrance of *rakshasas* or *asuras* at the altar was considered unholy and was prevented at any cost. Second,

these two races had separate religious faiths. According to historians, the non-Aryans created idols, unlike the Aryans, who prayed around the fire and did not create idols.

In a historical context, the Ramayana represents the sociopolitical and socio-cultural structure of ancient India quite well. Even though Valmiki wanted to portray the Aryan civilization of the northern part of India, he also shed light on the non-Aryan races as well, through his elaborate description of Rāvaṇa and his city in Laṅkā and the monkey king, Bali, and his city in Kiskindha. In his book *India in the Ramayana Age*, Dr. S. N. Vyas proves that actual ancient Indian kingdoms of Andra, Pundra, Cola, Pandya and Kerala, were mentioned by Valmiki in the *Ramayana* (Vyas, 1967, p. 30). He argues that the Aryans "attempted to push to the south of India into the dense jungles of the *rakshasas* sphere and bring them under their sway." (Vyas, 1967, p. 30). A formidable obstacle was the Vindhya mountain range; in the time of *Ramayana*, the sage Agastya first crossed and established an *ashram* at Dandakaranya on the northern banks of the Godavari River in southern India. Many Aryans sagas also followed Agastya, which created tension that most of the time ended up in battle. In the south the *rakshasa* tried to push the Aryans back north by creating havoc. Dr.Vyas correctly indicates that "politically, the Ramayana bears the first well-documented account of *rakshasas* and Aryan pitted against each other in vigorous opposition." (Vyas, 1967, p. 30). It can be said that the battle between Rāvaṇa and Rama is the last stand of the *rakshasas,* since after the war was won; there is no documentation of any other war between these two groups.

3. CONCLUTION

Who were these *rakshasas* and *asuras*? Indian history scholars have conflicting theories. Some believe that *rakshasas* and *asuras* were a subgroup of Aryans who went south and settled there, becoming detached from those who lived in the north. Some believe these people could not hold their positions in the Aryan Brahminical social order and thus were cast out and portrayed as *rakshasas* and *asuras*. This theory is supported in Vedic texts because most of the *rakshasas* and *asuras* were the descendants of either an Aryan sage or a god. On the opposite side are scholars who believe that the *rakshasas* and *asuras* were non-Aryan Dravidians and the earliest inhabitants of South India and Ceylon. These non-Aryan dwellers lived in the forest regions of Deccan or moved farther south and established their own kingdom and had their own culture, religion, and social order. Because of Aryan territorial expansion, they were pushed to the eastern peninsula, Indonesia, Oceania, and Malaysia. This theory has been supported by Dr. John Fraser and Tony Ballantyne. In his book *Orientalism and Race,* Ballantyne indicates that the Maori tribe in New Zealand is descended from these non-Aryans who left India in search of a better place (Ballantyne, 2002, 56-82). In either case, the role of Hindu mythology is enormous, since it holds the key to the cultural and social structure of ancient India.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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