Chapter Four

Identification of Asuras in Vedas
The Rgvedic word 'Asura' as mentioned earlier, has undergone a remarkable change from its initial concept of 'god' to 'demon'. By the time of the composition of later Vedic texts the word Asura has taken the meaning of 'anti-god' from the initial concept of god/lord. Asura along with Rākṣasa conspicuously represented an anti-social group of people in the time of Purāṇas. As has been explained earlier many references in Vedas testify the fact that Asuras belonged to particular sect of people who were against the Vedic beliefs and practices. The traces of the early shift in the concept of Asura can be noticed in the Brāhmaṇa portions. These conceptual changes were expanded to Āranyakas and Upaniṣads also. Among the Vedas, Rgveda furnishes more information regarding the Asura concept. Atharva vedā is the next source that contains considerable amount of references to the early as well as the later concept of Asura. Yajurveda and Sāma vedā contain least references to Asura concept, but provide some valuable information. The present chapter is an attempt to trace out the ethnic elements behind the concept of Asura and the conceptual change in the meaning of Asura in early Vedic literature and also in later Vedic literature.
Asuras in Vedas

The primary concept of Asura appears in the Family Books of Rgveda which contain the oldest hymns. Here Asura, including its variants such as Asurya, Asuratva, Āsura, and Asuryā are always used as epithets for prominent Rgvedic deities in the sense of lord/god, vigour, powerful, mighty etc. The derivatives and compounds of Asura such as Asurya and Asuratva sustain the meaning Asuraship. Asuryā and Āsura mean Asuric and Asurahan is the slayer of Asura. Wilson and Hale\(^1\) translate the above noted variants of Rgvedic word Asura upholding the meanings lordship, right to rule, lordly, authority, vigorous and so on.

It is worth to be noted that the plural form of Asura does not appear in the Family Books of Rgveda. The usage of the adjective Asura is not restricted to deities. Humans are also qualified by the term Asura in the Family Books and in other parts of Rgveda.\(^2\) This is a valuable point in the case of the primary concept of Asura in early history.

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\(^1\) See the Rgveda translation of H.H. Wilson, Vol. I-IV and also W.E. Hale, op.cit., for more details.

\(^2\) A detailed discussion regarding the Human Asuras in Rgveda has been made in the present chapter itself. See pp.107-138 below for more details.
Deities as Asuras: Primary Concepts in *Rgveda*

In *Rgveda*, the deities such as Agni, Varuṇa, Mitrāvaruṇa, Savitṛ etc. had received the title Asura in the sense of lord. In the Family Books, the deity Agni is frequently called Asura in a good sense:

\[\text{पिता वज्राभिप्रवर्त्य जीवितचता}\
\[\text{विपक्षमोक्षकायं च वाधताम्}\
\[\text{आ विवेश रोदसी भूरिवयम्}\
\[\text{पुरुषार्थ भन्तरे भाषिन्}. \quad *Rgveda*, III.3.4.

In this verse, the term Asura is used as an epithet to Agni in the sense of 'invigourator'. Here Agni is considered as the father of sacrifice. According to Hale, the genitive 'vipyācitām' seen in this verse must be used in the sense of either a partitive meaning or to get an implied verbal meaning of Asura. The Rgvedic poet suggests that Agni is an Asura among the wise ones or an Asura who rules over the wise ones.

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3 The translation 'lord' to 'Asura' has been widely accepted by scholars. The present chapter will discuss the Vedic hymns which contain the meaning of lord to Asura in the following pages.

4 In the *Rgveda* translation of H.H. Wilson 'पिता यज्ञानापुष्किता...' means 'parent of sacrifices'. The word 'Asura' in Wilson's translation is 'invigourator'. This epithet to the deity Agni vividly reflects the initial concept of lord Asura. See H.H. Wilson, *op.cit.*, Vol. II, p.115. The word pitā in this context never upholds the meaning genitor. Thus it should be used here to express the authority of the deity Agni, the Asura.

The adjective Samrāj is used to Asura in another Rigvedic passage that speaks of Agni. Thus the meaning arrived at there is the 'all ruling Asura Agni'. The hymn is pronounced there as;

pr sarvāṇās asuraṁ pravartita
puṃsa kṛṣṭīnaṁagnunānādasya
indrasvayam pr tvaśaktātānī
vande yathā vandāmanī vibhumi. || Rgveda, VII.6.1.

Agni, the Asura is described here as a powerful deity like Indra. It is clear from this verse that Indra was also considered as an Asura in early Vedic literature. The adjective Samrāj6 indicates the authority of Agni who is an Asura here. The term Samrāj is explained as 'sarvasya bhuvanasyeśvarasya asurasya balavataḥ pumso virasya'.7 Hence it means, Agni is a deity who is having all ruling power like Indra. The word 'kṛṣṭi' seen in the above hymn also gives some clues to explain the meaning of Asura here. As already discussed in the first chapter, the translation of H.H Wilson for the word kṛṣṭi is 'the people'.8 Thus

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6The noun Samrāj bears the meanings 'a universal or supreme ruler', 'a sovereign lord' etc. See M. Monier Williams, op.cit, p.1181. The term Samrāj seen in Rgveda, I.27.1 means a sovereign lord which also qualifies Agni. Thus it should be believed that the term Samrāj was commonly used as an adjective in Rgveda. Samrāj in VII.6.1 can be taken as indicating the meaning of all ruling lord for Agni. The association of the term Samrāja along with the Rigvedic deities who are qualified as Asuras also gives clue to the usage of the positive sense of Asura concept in early hymns.

7Refer to the Sāvanabhāṣya of this hymn in the Rgveda translation of Max Muller, Vol. III. Krishnadasa Academy, Varanasi, 1963, p.171 for more details.

8See Chapter I of the present study, p.24. Hale also has the same opinion of Wilson about the translation of the word 'kṛṣṭi'.
the meaning of 'all ruling Asura Agni' here is intended to the people. In *Rgveda* III.29.11, also Agni is presented as an Asura i.e. having Asuratva.

In the Family Books the term Asura has been used as an epithet for Agni in verses IV.2.5, V.12.1, V.15.1, VII.2.3, VII.30.3 and so on.

In *Rgveda* Varuṇa is the most august deity who receives the lordly epithet Asura more exclusively than any other gods. He is considered to be the creator of the universe and also regarded as the person who guards the cosmic law i.e. the controller of Rta.5 Scholars like Jean Przyulski6 consider the *Rgvedic* deity Varuṇa as the god of the sea and the sky. In *Rgveda*, Varuṇa is seen as associated with water.11 At some places in *Rgveda*, Varuṇa has been praised as having the Sun as his eyes.12 Varuṇa is also mentioned as a solar deity. In *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, Varuṇa is described as the son of Aditi by sage

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6 For more details see Jean Przyulski, 'Varuna, God of the Sea and the Sky', *JRAS*, No.3 (Jul., 1931), pp.613-622.
11 The verses II.28.4; V.85.6 and VII.64.2 of *Rgveda* present Varuna as the regulator of waters. In later Mythology also Varuna is recognised as the god of water and this idea apparently was taken from *Rgvedic* references. In the Madhya-deśa, i.e. in the central part of Indian subcontinent, the deity Varuna is worshipped as a god of Sky. cf. Jean Przyulski, *op. cit.*, 613-622.
12 See *Rgveda*, I.115.1; V.I.51.1 and VII.61.1.
Kasyapa. The twelve sons of Aditi are known as Adityas. In *Rgveda* VII.60.1 Sun with other spices informs Varuna about the deeds of men.

As already mentioned earlier, Varuna was one of the deities of the Hittites. In the Boghaz Keui documents by the Hittite king Mattiwaza, Varuna is identified as 'Aruna', while in another document by king Subbiluliumas the same deity is named as 'Uruwana'. According to Kretschmer the word 'aruna' in Hittite denotes the 'sea'.

The verse II.27.10 of *Rgveda* refers to Varuna as an Asura who is the king of all:

त्वं बिबधेष्णं बलुव्यसि राजा
दे च देवा असुर दे च मलिता।
सतं नो राज्य शर्दूळ विचक्षेपं
स्वाम्यायूः सुधितानि पूजी। । *Rgveda*, II.27.10.

In the above verse Asura Varuna, the king of all is being, is praised to obtain long life. He is considered as the king of gods and mortals, which probably means men.

The same Varuna has been mentioned as the ruler of people in another context;

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13 The other sons of Aditi include Mitra, Indra, Vishnu etc. See *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, II.3.3.56. In *Rgveda* these deities are frequently associated with the concept of Asura. They were also identified as Asuras there. These references clearly say that Asura is a solar deity.
14 Jean Przyluski, *op.cit.*, p.618.
This verse speaks of the King Varuna who is having the Asuraship and also who is the ruler of people of the highest bodily form. Varuna himself says that he is a king, and other gods assigned the Asuraship on him. Varuna is also mentioned here as the ruler of men. The word 'kratu' in the above verse suggests that it is an important quality for an Asura.\(^{15}\)

Varuna associated with Mitra in dual form (Mitrāvaruna) possess a prominent place in *Rgveda*. Mitra and Varuna are called as Asuras there;

\[\text{Rgveda, VII.65.2.}\]

The term Asura in this context conveys the meaning of mightiness of the deities. In this hymn the poet praises Mitra and Varuna who are

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\(^{15}\) Hale opines that the word 'kratu' associated with Varuna seen in this hymn is an important quality of an Asura. He also thinks that the use of the verb 'dhṛ' which he translates as 'to assign' along with the Asuraship (Asurya) conveys the idea of a leader who is able to bestow the good. The basic meanings of the term are 'to make firm', 'establish', 'determine' etc. See W.E. Hale, *op.cit.*, p.56f. This reference indicates the early belief of Asura as the giver of benefits.
the mighty rulers among gods. The genitive 'devānāmasurāh' in this verse indicates the meaning 'Asuras possessed by the gods'. The term Aryan which originally means noble used here to express the nobility of Mitra and Varuṇa.

Another place where Mitra and Varuṇa are called as Asura and Deva is as follows:

महत्ता मित्राक्षरुणा
सप्राग्ना देवाकसुरा
ज्ञातयानाक्षरुणा घोषयतो श्रृङ्खला।।

Rgveda, VIII.25.4.

Mitra and Varuṇa are praised here as the possessors of Rta. This necessarily indicates the authority of these deities. Śaṅkara17 explains 'Saṁrāja' in this verse as 'samyagyadipyamānau' i.e., 'perfectly resplendent'.

Some of the other deities who are identified as Asura in the Family Books are Parjanya (V.83.6), Puṣan (V.51.1), Rudra (II.1.6; V.42.11 & V.41.3), Dyaus (III.57.3; III.56.8 & III. 29.10), Aryaman (V.42.1), and Savitṛ (IV.53.1; V.49.2). In the verses III.38.4; V.63.3 and V.63.7 although the word Asura is used, there is no mention about whom the

16 Hale opines that the genitive 'devānām' may be used here in a partitive sense. In another context he explained that a genitive used along with the term Asura conveys the meaning of rulership of Asura. W.E. Hale, op.cit., p.42f.
word Asura qualifies. Asuryām a derivative and the Asura occur with Mitrāvaruṇa in V.66.2; VII.65.1 and VII.62.2, Indra in VI.20.2; VI.30.2; VI.36.1 and so on.

Asuramāyā

Usage of the term Asura along with 'Māyā' gives some information regarding the degradation of the concept of Asura in Indian Mythology. 'Asurasya māyā' is a phrase that has been seen in one place in the Family Books in Rgveda where the hymn reads:

Saṃprajñā uṣa vṛṣṇa vijayātvā
Pṛthivyaḥ mṛtra kṣāvatvān vijayātvā
VyaśyanirvāREETAM Tātāvratvam rā̃b
Hād kṣetram āhurāryām. Rgveda, V.63.3.

Mitrāvaruṇa are said to be the cause for the rain from the sky by the power of their magic. Here Māyā is described as a power that the Asuras possess.

In Śatapathabrāhmaṇa18 the term māyā denotes Asuravidyā. According to Macdonnel and A.B. Keith, Asuravidyā means the science of the Asuras.15 Māyā is understood as a power also. The use of māyā

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18 Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, XIII.4.3.11.
along with the deities may mean the power of that particular deity used against his/her enemies. Māyā may also be the power/invigouration which is the quality of mightiness of that deity. It is this Rgvedic description that gradually developed to the popular usage of the term māyā along with Asura in later literature, especially in Purāṇa literature where Asuras essentially are supposed to have some magical power. And, this finally became a cause for the degradation of the Asura concept from god to anti-god. Thus māyā has been commonly used and identified as the magic of Asuras and also of Rākṣasas in this period.

In the Family Books in Rgveda there are no references to Indra as an Asura. But, the derivatives and compounds of Asura associated with Indra can frequently be seen in the Family Books. Indra has been praised by the poet as having the qualities of an Asura;

śatā madāsātva viśvāt'na
śatā rāgo'bh yu pārthāmāsā
dsātā vānānāmabhā'nivibhātā
vādēvēbhā dhāravyāh āsūramā. Rgveda, VI.36.1.

In the above mentioned hymn, Indra has indirectly asked to distribute booty when assuming the Asuraship among the gods. Hale thinks that

p.51. It seems that the power of Asura [māyā] in Rgveda has to be taken as the strength of the particular deity which the enemies of that deity do not have
the distribution of booty was the task of a tribal leader or one who led raid on enemies. Thus Asura here appears to be a tribal leader.\textsuperscript{20} H.H. Wilson in his translation of \textit{Rgveda}\textsuperscript{21} admits the derivative Asuryam meaning vigour and in the context the meaning can be vigour among the gods.

In the Family Books itself Indra and Agni are extolled as the killers of Asura. Even though the epithet 'Asurahan' to Indra in \textit{Rgveda}, VI.22.4 and to Agni in \textit{Rgveda}, VII.13.1, agree with this view, no adequate evidence is supplied therein to think them as some beings related with mythological demons. It seems the epithets are used to express how powerful these leaders are.

\textbf{Human Asuras}

Some of the Rgvedic hymns contain references to Human Asuras who by the nature are friends as well as enemies of Vedic poets. In the Family Books the hymns V.27.1 and VII.56.24 Human Asuras are mentioned as the friends of the Rgvedic poets while in hymns II.30.4 and VII.99.5 they are described as enemies. In hymns X.82.5 and X.151.3 these Human Asuras appear as lords, while in

\textsuperscript{20} See W.E. Hale \textit{op.cit}, p.60.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Rgveda Sanhitā}, Vol. II, p.46.
VIII.96.9; VIII.97.1 and X.108.6 they are seen as enemies of Vedic poets.

A hymn to Viśvedeva in this context is:

उपसः पूर्वः अथ यद्वप्युषः
मंडिः जन्ये अक्षरं पदे गोः
ब्रह्म देवानां उप प्रमुखः
महावेणासुरवर्त्ते कम्|| र्ग्वेदा, इ.1.55.1.

The idea conveyed by, asuratva', an abstract derivative of the word Asura, used in the phrase 'devāna-masuratvat' in this hymn according to Śāyana is 'strong', 'powerful' and 'prabala'. 'Asyati', the verbal form of the root 'asa' from which the word Asura has been derived, gives the meaning who or what throws or impels all things or beings - asyati, 'ksipati sarvān. Then the abstract form has the meanings such as 'prabalyam' or 'alavaryam' ('might' or 'sovereignty' respectively). The word 'ekam' is explained as 'mukhyam' meaning 'one' or 'unique'\(^2\). From this hymn it is clear that Asuras and Devas were not considered as two different groups of beings in early Vedic period. The lordship of all gods seems to be equal. Thus it can be said that Asura and Deva were equally powerful concepts in early Vedic period.

Reference with Ethnic Connotation

Some of the hymns that contain reference to Asura concept in *Rgveda* support the idea of Human Asuras. *Rgveda X.82.5* hints at the rivalry between the gods who rule the heaven and Asuras who rule the earth. Paranjpe\(^{23}\) considers this as general reference to the Devas and the Asuras. But it is possible to assume here that these Asuras are human lords. The reference to the ruling Asuras and Devas in the earth and heaven respectively, can logically be ascertained as two tribal groups ruling two different territories of distinct grade. The hymn X.157.4 clearly refers to their fight. It also says that Devas after slaying the Asuras protected their divinity. The Asuras mentioned here can be taken as the human enemies of Devas. Hale\(^{24}\) finds them as the mythological enemies of Devas.

In *Rgveda*, on another occasion the poet invokes Indra to destroy the godless human Asuras;

\begin{quote}
लिंगमाबुष्म महसंगमानीकं
कस्य हिन्दू प्रति वन्दं द्वर्धं
अनाचारासो असुरां अदेवां-
श्वनक्षणं तः अप वप ऋग्विकन्म ||
\end{quote}

*Rgveda*, VIII.96.9.

\(^{23}\) V.G. Paranjpe *op.cit.*, p.197.

In this verse Asuras are described as godless beings (adevāh) and also weaponless (anāyudhāsah). The Asuras mentioned here seem to be human lords, probably the indigenous people who do not worship the Vedic (Aryan) gods. This is the only place in Rgveda where the word 'adeva' along with Asura occurs. Here the word 'adeva' may mean 'ungodly' i.e. 'without gods'. An accent on the first syllable would be normal for a karmadhāraya compound while an accent on final syllable should indicate a bahuvrīhi compound. Thus Hale translates the word 'adeva' in the above verse as 'without Devas' instead of 'not Devas'. Paranjpe\textsuperscript{26} explains the phrase 'Asurā adevāh' as 'mighty infidels'. The phrase would thus mean 'the Asuras who do not worship the Aryan gods' i.e. the disbelievers in the religion of Vedas. Indra is invoked to destroy the godless enemies who stand helpless before him as if they were weaponless. Hale opines that there is only a very short step from here to the concept of Asura as mythological enemies.

Anthropological approach of the famous Vedic scholar Jyotish Nath is acceptable in this context of the analysis of Human Asuras.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p.3.  
\textsuperscript{26}V.G. Paranjpe, op.cit., p.195.
According to Nath, the human Asuras seen in *Rgveda* belonged to the pre-Vedic Aryan population. Nath again explains that the Asuras joined hands with the hostile Dāsa leaders like Pipru, Varcin etc. against the migrating Vedic people. This reference can rationally be related with the incidiously separating dominant culture over the indigenous culture.

Jyotish Nath also shares the view of Hale that the term Asura seen in *Rgveda*, VIII.96.9 was used as an ethnic name of certain hostile people. In the Family Books perhaps the gods such as Indra and Agni were called as 'Asuraghna' i.e., 'the slayer of mighty enemies' in this pejorative sense.

The new gods specifically associated with the term Asura in *Rgveda* Books I, VIII, IX and X are Indra, Somā Rudra, Brhaspati, Apām Napāt, Sarasvatī, Svarbhānu and Devas as whole. The conceptual change from 'devānāmasuratvam' to 'asurā adevā' never gives any hint regarding the later concept of Asura as a demon. The phrase 'asurasya māyā' whereas, gives some clue regarding the conceptual change in the meaning to certain extent. 'Asurasya māyā' actually meant 'the creative power of the supreme lord'. 'Māyā' was also used

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27 For more details see Jyotish Nath, *op.cit.*, p.114f for more details.
in the sense of 'magical power'\textsuperscript{28} and also along with various individual demons like Pipru and so on. But the term was interpreted to mean the magical power of the demon. The use of the word 'māyā' along with Asura in \textit{Rgveda} may be the reason for the early shift in the meaning of Asura from lord/god to anti-god.

The Sūkta X.124 of \textit{Rgveda} is important in this regard. The hymn seems to be an invitation from Indra to Agni to leave the Asuras and take part in the sacrifice of Devas and also the acceptance of Agni in reply. Here Indra, the chief of Devas, is joined by Agni, Varuṇa and Soma can be seen. A verse in this Sūkta refers to 'Father Asura';

\begin{quote}
पश्यन् अन्यस्य अतिचित्त वायायां
हर्तरस्य भाषा वि निम्बे पुरुषणं
शोभित लिङ्गे अरुरायो श्रेब-भयिष्यायुर्विचर्यं भागवतीम् \textsuperscript{11} \textit{Rgveda}, X.124:3.
\end{quote}

Scholars are of different opinion about which deity is addressed in this verse as Asura. Hale\textsuperscript{29} thinks that this verse is spoken by Agni. But Scholars like W. Norman Brown\textsuperscript{30} opine that these words are


\textsuperscript{29} See W.E. Hale \textit{op.cit.}, p.87. He has made a detailed examination of the views of various scholars in explaining the Sūkta X.124. But he does not arrive at a definite assumption.

being spoken by Varuna to Agni. The Sanskrit term 'pitr' normally means 'father'. Brown\textsuperscript{31} thinks that the term 'pitr' mentioned in the verse refers to Vṛtra and not to father in the sense of genitor. He opines that the hymn is not an individual affair of Indra but is a general conflict between Asuras and Devas.\textsuperscript{32}

**Asura Leaders of *Rgveda*-Ethnic Elements**

*Rgveda* categorically refers to the proper name of some Asuras. These references indicate that they were belonging to certain ethnic groups. Pipru, who is prominent among them, is considered as a powerful Asura. He is mentioned as;

\begin{quote}
वि सृवि महो अमुनदर्ष विवरो
विवेदि प्रतिगामनां

हृदप्रपात्सुरस्व गाजिन
हन्ते व्यायचक्षुवां भ्रजिमाना॥ *Rgveda*, X.138.3.
\end{quote}

This hymn says that the fortresses of Pipru have been demolished by Indra for Rjiśvan. Pipru is portrayed here as an Asura possessing māyā, and also the owner of fortresses\textsuperscript{33}. It could be understood from this context that Pipru is a Dāsa and Rjiśvan is an Ārya. Pipru may be

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.102.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.101.
\textsuperscript{33} Description of fortresses of Pipru is available in *Rgveda* I.51.5; IV.16.13; VI.18.8 and VI.20.7 also.
a tribal leader probably an indigenous who opposed the Vedic beliefs and practices. Rjiśvan is another leader of that time who follows the Aryan culture. Rjiśvan's Aryan-ness may be the reason for Indra in helping him.

Śambara is another Asura mentioned by his proper name. He is described as possessing cities in the following hymn;

इन्द्र विष्णु दूहिता: सम्बरस्य
नव पुरो नावति च श्निभ्यम्।
शतं जनिनां: सहस्रं च साकं
हथो अप्रत्यसुरस्य जीरान्॥ Rgveda, VII.99.5.

It says that Indra and Višnu have demolished the nine cities of Śambara and they are praised for they resisted the hundred thousand heroes of an Asura named Varcin. From the mention of hundred thousand heroes of Varcin here it may presumably be suggested that he was one of the great leaders of a distinct ethnic group of that time. The adjective 'vīrān' for Asuras supports the fact that they were truly valourous people. Višnu and Indra are explained here as engaged in cosmogonic activity. Hillebrandt opines that
Pipru has been criticised as 'avrata' in *Rgveda*, I.101.2, which intents the idea 'having no vows'. Hale\(^{34}\) suggests that he was of another religion different from than that of Rjiśvan. Pipru's Māyā is described in VI.20.7. Pipru is mentioned along with Vṛtra in I.138.8. Reference to some other persons hailing from Asura sect can be found in other contexts. For instance Namuci and Śuṣṇa in II.14.5, Śuṣṇa alone in VI.18.8 appear with their proper name. As explained above Varcin and Śambara are other two Asuras seen in VII.99.5. V.27.1 speaks of an Asura called Tryaruṇa son of Trivrṣṇa. In hymn II.30.4 Vṛkadvara is concdered as human Asura. I.110.3 gives information about an Asura by name Tvaṣṭr.

There are 29 occurrences of Asura in singular form in the Family Books of *Rgveda*. Derivatives and compounds of Asura can be found 27 times there. In Books I, VIII, IX and X Asura in singular form is seen 31 times and its derivatives and compounds can be found only 16 times and plural forms 10 times. An analysis of all these occurrences of Asura in *Rgveda* beyond doubt tells that there is no any indication to think that Asura was an anti-social group of people in that period, which is the popular notion in later literature.

\(^{34}\) More details about Pipru are furnished in W.E. Hale, *op.cit.*, p.76f.
**Atharvaveda**

_Atharvaveda_ (Shaunaka recension) gives precious information regarding the concept of Asura. Early as well as later meanings of Asura can be traced out in Atharvavedic hymns. Sometimes the Asuras seen in _Atharvaveda_ seem to be some type of beings distinct from man. In certain places, exactly whom the term Asura represents is not clear. The term is used as an epithet of several deities in _Atharvaveda_ also. Agni, Varuna and Prajapati are the prominent deities who are addressed as Asuras there.

In _Atharvaveda_ also the deity Varuna is considered as a king who rules other gods;

अयम् देवानामसुरो वि राजानि
कार ति सत्या बहुरूप्य राजः
तत्त्वारिष्ट्रे ब्रह्मण शास्त्रादान
उष्ण मन्योदिधिम् नाथाम् || _Atharvaveda_, II.10.1.

Varuna is mentioned here as the ruler of divine objects. The poet praises Varuna for occupying the throne. Here the phrase ‘devānāmasurah’ seems to have been used in the sense of Asura among gods. Varuna is certainly a Deva and is called an Asura. Thus

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35 Hale opines that the deity Varuna himself is a Deva and is being called an Asura. A relative phrase ‘devānāmasuratvam’ seen in _Rgveda_, III.55.1 also holds the meaning Asuraship of the gods.
this verse is praise to Asura Varuṇa who is the leader as well as the ruler of other gods.

Both the singular and the plural usage of the term Asura is available in Atharvaveda. The rivalry between Asuras and Devas can be traced out in the following verse:

येन देवा असुरान् प्राणुक्त
येनेन्द्रै दशूरूयास्मि तमो निनाय
तेन त्वम काम मये सपन्ना-
स्तानस्माल्लोकात् प्र गुदस्व दूरम्।। Atharvaveda, IX.2.17.

The fight between Asuras and Devas is the subject matter of this hymn. Indra is described here as the destroyer of Dasyus. The fight between Indra and Dasyus seems to be the struggle between Aryans and Dasyus. This incessant conflict between two groups of people could have been a reason for a cultural change in ancient Indian society.

Feminine Usage of Asura

Interestingly, Āsuri, which may be presupposed as the feminine form of Asura, also finds place in Atharvaveda four times. It may be noted here that not all those instances are directly related with the concept of Asura. At one place in Atharvaveda it comes as;
In the above verse Suparnā and Āsurī are considered to be some sort of medicines which can cure leprosy. Suparnā may also mean sun whose rays lend warmth to plants. In the following verse also Āsurī is mentioned as a remedy against leprosy,

\begin{quote}
आसुरी चक्र प्रमे-\\
द फिलामबेषज-\\
नम फिलासनासन्-\\
अर्न फिलासे फिलासे\\
सर्दामकारस् ल्यम्।
\end{quote}

\textit{Atharvaveda, I.24.2.}

The ability of Āsurī to disappear the leprous spot is being praised here. The medicine Āsurī can kill germs and cure the wounds and it lends beautiful color to skin.

\begin{quote}
Another context of \textit{Atharvaveda} pronounces,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
तेना निव्रक आसुरीं तेंप्रस्थारीं।

तेना ति कुंवें त्वामहि स्या तेऽस्माति सुप्रय।
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

\textit{Atharvaveda, VII.38.2.}

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\footnote{Most of the scholars consider Suparnā as an Rgvedic deity having wings. Suparnā is Āsura in \textit{Rgveda} I.135.7 seems to be a solar deity.}

\footnote{See \textit{Atharvaveda}, Translated by M.A. Devichand, Munshiram Manohar Ial, New Delhi 1997, p.18f.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
Asūrī here is a charm or token used by a woman with a certain herb to obtain the love of a man. The verse also gives a mythical story of an Asūrī who was able to entice Indra. Hale\(^{39}\) opines that Āsūrī referred to here may be the female member of the class called Asuras. This interpretation opens up a link to connect Āsūrī to the later concept of Mythological Asura. This view becomes tenable because in later literature there is a number of a reference to the female characters of the Asura clan.

The later concept of Asura as anti-social group is also referred to in a verse in \textit{Atharvaveda}. It says:

\begin{quote}
श कृष्णा केशवसुर स्तम्भज उत्त नृणिडकः
अर्थावल्लु गुणाव्यां भंसंतोप हम्मारिः \textit{Atharvaveda}, VIII.6.5.
\end{quote}

In the English translation of \textit{Atharvaveda} by W.D. Whitney this verse is mentioned as a charm to guard a pregnant woman from demons. Hale considers the word Asura here to mean some sort of evil being, perhaps a demon or some sort of vermin. Devichand in his translation differs from the above scholars. He views this verse as a praise of the parents and relatives of a girl for protecting her from all kinds of misdeeds. Asura here may mean an uncultured person.\(^{40}\) Kesī is a

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\(^{39}\) Refer to W.E. Hale, \textit{op.cit.}, p.121.

\(^{40}\) cf, M.A. Devichand, \textit{op.cit.}, p.354.
powerful Asura often found in Epic and Puranic literature. The usage of the word keśī along with Asura can also be read as the beginning of the germination of later concept of Asura Keśī. This is a short step to the later Asura concept in the history of its mythology.

Asura is an attributive word used in a hymn with a word denoting an elephant;

वल्लुः ते वर्को जातवेदे सहु भवत्वाहुः?
शाक्ते सूर्येस्य वर्के आसुरस्त्य च हस्तनन्।
ताब्धे अधिन्त हर्वे आ धर्म पुष्करस्तन। Atharvaveda, III.22.4.

Aśvins are praised here for getting splendour. An elephant is called Asura in this verse. The sense implied here may be that the elephant is a majestic or lordly one.

In verses VIII.1.3; VIII.1.15; VIII.2.1; VIII.2.16 etc. word Asura is used in its initial meaning of 'life' or 'breath'. In verses X.3.2 and X.3.11 Asura is mentioned along with the term Varana. Varana is an amulet which is used against the evils. Asura and Dasyu together are considered as fiends or evil beings in X.3.11. This indicates the shift of Asura concept from god to anti-social beings and points to the identical concept of Asura and Dasyu. There are 19 singular and 26 plural occurrences of Asura in Atharvaveda. Derivatives and
compounds of Asura occur only 13 times. *Atharvaveda* gives more information regarding the mythical concept of Asura as a demon. Different meanings applied to Asura and its variants in Atharvavedic hymns are a significant point in the study of the history of Asura. It can be clearly observed that the shift in the concept of Asura has taken place in between the period of *Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda*.

**The Concept of Asura in *Yajurveda***

*Yajurveda* (Vājasaneyi recension) contains a few references to Asura, which regarding the concept of Asura are significant. The initial concept of Asura as lord and the later concept of mythological Demons can be seen there. Asura has been described there as a divine lord at one place:

\[
\text{तनुनादसुरो विचक्षेण केशो देवे श्रेष्ठ।}
\]

पथ अनकु मध्या चुलेयः। । *Yajurveda*, 27.12.

The initial concept of the term Asura as a lord can be seen in this verse. Asura has been considered here as a god among gods who is all possessing.

The following verse is interesting from a different viewpoint:

\[
\text{इन्द्रस्त महत्तच क्रोधायोक्तिश्च सुः परस्मानं}
\]

विश्व भूतों विभिन्निविष्ठ ज्ञोतवासो विभिन्नेन्द्रिष्ठ।।

*Yajurveda*, VIII.55.
This verse says that Indra and Maruts are stationed for sale. It seems to be speaking of some bargaining and purchasing of deities. Asura here is used in the sense of lord or divine being and it is unclear which deity is meant here. Hale\textsuperscript{41} opines that this verse is taken from the portion dealing with Soma ritual and the deity Soma is identified with various deities.

Asuryā, the derivative of Asura, is also seen in \textit{Yajurveda};

\begin{quote}
असुर्याः नाम ते लोका अन्येन तमसालक्तता।
तास्ते प्रेत्य dbcवछति ये के चातमनो जनान। \textit{Yajurveda}, XL.3
\end{quote}

In the above verse Asurya is described as the world of darkness. One who commits suicide will go to the world of Asuras. \textit{Isāvāsyopaniṣad} also contains the same verse which gives the same idea. There the term Asuryā is the world inhabited by Asuras (demons in translation).\textsuperscript{42}

Some of the references seen in \textit{Yajurveda} give information about the later concept of Asura as demons. In \textit{Yajurveda} a hymn is enunciated as;

\textsuperscript{41}See W.E. Hale, \textit{op.cit.}, p.127.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Isāvāsyopaniṣad} in \textit{Upaniṣads in Sankara's Own Words}, Vol. I-IV, Edited by V. Panoli, The Mathurabumi Printing and Publishing Company, Calicut, 1995. \textit{Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad} I.1 also contains this verse with a little difference. The term ananda is used instead of asuryā which means the world of unhappiness.
आनंदे व्यवहारनाथ स्वाहा
सोमाय बिद्यमानाय स्वाहा।
अपहर्ता असुरा रक्षसि वैदिषद॥ Yajurveda, II.29.

Agni and Soma are the deities invoked here. Asuras are mentioned here along with Rakṣases. Asuras and Rakṣases are described here as they are defeated by Agni and Soma and sitting near the altar.

Another verse adds some information to the content of the verse mentioned above;

ये सुपार्णि प्रतिनिधिमाना
असुराः सत्ता स्वरूपया चरति।
परंतु रूपौ निरुपौ वे भार्तवः
निश्चयोत्तमोक्षवादित्यस्मात्॥ Yajurveda, II.30.

The Asuras are described here as the demonic enemies of Agni. They are referred to as capable of assuming various shapes like small and large bodies. This verse expresses the later idea of Asuras as demons in Indian Mythology.

Asura Concept in Sāmaveda

Sāmaveda contains least information regarding the concept of Asura. Some of the verses in this Veda are repetitions of the hymns found in Rgveda. The plural form of Asura occurring in a hymn the
later concept of Asura concept as a group of hostile beings;

इन्द्रस्य बाहु स्यविरियो युवाने
वनाश्यो सुप्रतीक्षावसहो।
तो युज्योत प्रयस्मी योग आगमने
यात्राः जिल्ल असुराणा सहो महत्।। Sāmaveda, II.9.3.7.3.

Here the great power of Asuras is wished to be conquered by Indra.

According to W.E. Hale\textsuperscript{43} in this verse of Sāmaveda, Asuras appear as a group of hostile beings. But it can be taken as a positive reference as it gives the idea of the power of Asura\textsuperscript{44}.

In another hymns the initial concept of Asura is reflected as;

तमृ त्वा नूनमस्तु प्रवेतसे राघो भागमिकेऽपि
माहीव जिति शरणा त्र इन्द्र प्रेत सुन्द्र ने अवहन्।। Sāmaveda, II.6.2.12.2.

This verse is addressed to Indra. The term Asura is used here in the sense of lord divine.

\textsuperscript{43} W.E. Hale, \textit{op.cit.}, p.128. Hale has given only this mantra from Sāmaveda regarding the Asura concept. But five more references are available in the Sāmaveda translation of Ralph, T.H. Griffith.

\textsuperscript{44} It has already been discussed in the second chapter of the present study about the early meanings of the word Asura as powerful beings. See the semantic analysis of the term Asura in the Second chapter above for more details.
In *Sāmaveda* II.6.3.18.3 Indra is said to have overcome Krivi by might. Krivi, which originally means a leather bag, metaphorically refers to a cloud. But Sāyaṇa considers Krivi as an Asura or demon.\(^{45}\)

Verse I.4.1.4.1 contains reference to an Asura Kṛṣṇa. It reads as follows:

\[ \text{व द्राक्षरं अंशुमतीमलिन्धवोपन: कृष्णो दुश्मित सहस्वे:} \\
\text{अवजतमिन्ते जच्चा धम्मलमप संहृतिति नृस्माण अवद्वा:} \]

*Sāmaveda*, I.4.1.4.1.

This verse does not contain direct reference to Asura. But, the word kṛṣṇa is the name of an Asura who with his ten thousand attendants occupy the banks of river Amśumati\(^{46}\) and was defeated by Indra. The word kṛṣṇa mentioned here bears some implication with the later concept of Lord Kṛṣṇa in Indian Mythology. This is an important reference as to the fact that in Vedic age Kṛṣṇa was not a divine incarnation of Viṣṇu. He is described as a powerful Asura there. Here the concept of Kṛṣṇa may be taken as of a tribal leader having a large group of followers who apparently are the aboriginals. In later literature, Kṛṣṇa became popular as a mythical character and identified as the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu.


\(^{46}\) Amśumati is believed to be a mythical river of the air. See the explanation to *Sāmavedasamhitā*, I.4.1.4.11, p.85.
The other verses containing the term Asura in Sāmaveda are I.1.2.3.6; II.6.3.18.3 and I.6.2.1.7. However, Sāmaveda also sheds some light on the development of the Asura concept from lord to demon in Indian Mythology.

**Early Shift in the Concept of Asura in Later Vedic Literature**

Brāhmaṇas give valuable information regarding the early shift in the conceptual meaning of Asura and Rākṣasa. In this period these concepts became identical and they represented a group of anti-social beings who were in permanent antagonism with the Devas. Independent and combined use of Asuras and Rākṣasas can be seen in Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads also contain such references.

In Satapathabrahmana, which belongs to the Mādhyandina-Kāṇva recensions of Śuklayajurveda 'asu' is used in the sense of 'the breath of life'. Devas and Asuras are considered there as the offsprings of Prajāpati. This is described as;

देवाश्च वासुरास्त्र। उभयेऽपालया परिपूर्णिर ततो देवं अनुवृणविभूषय हमुराम्
मेनिरे तस्मानेतेक्षु चुल्लो पहुँचाति।। *Satapathabrahmana*, I.2.5.1.

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48 *Brhadāraṇyakopanisad* also presents the same idea that Devas and Asuras are the offsprings of Prajāpati. *cf., Brhadāraṇyakopanisad*, I.3.1., p.40.
This passage indicates that Prajāpati is the father of Asuras and Devas. Thus Asuras and Devas are brothers. In the following passages in the context, the rivalry between Asuras and Devas are described. Asuras thought to divide the world between them. Then Agni stood between the gods and an Asura-Rākṣas named Saharakṣas for the Asuras as a messenger while they were fighting for supremacy. And finally, Devas won over Asuras.\textsuperscript{49} Devas were afraid of Asuras and Rākṣasas whenever they performed the sacrifice. Frequent reference to this fact can be located in \textit{Śatapathabrahmana}.\textsuperscript{50} Here Asuras and Rākṣasas appear as identical beings.

\textit{Aitareyāranyaka}\textsuperscript{51} of \textit{Rgveda} explains the meanings of 'asu' like thus:

\begin{quote}
स घोसु स एव प्राणः स एव भूतिशचामुच्च्य। ते भूतिति देवस उपासकः किरेद् ते
वृद्धेष्वस्वास्वाय तहस सूतो ध्वनिर्विव व प्रसंसित। अध्रुवित्वःतुस्श्च व पराक्षोऽस्मि...
\end{quote}

Here ‘asu’ means life which is the primary sense of the term. The preposition devas and Asuras are connected with bhūti and abhūti here is interesting.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{The Śatapathabrahmana}, p.68f.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, I.1.2.2-4; I.3.1.5; I.4.4.8; III.3.3.16 etc.
\textsuperscript{51} Refer to \textit{The Aitareyāranyaka}, Edited by A.B. Keith, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 1995. II.1.8, p.107. Here the term ‘asu’ is described in the sense of prāṇa i.e. breath which is its primary sense.
Taittiriyasamhitā of Śuklayajurveda gives an important reference about the sacrifice of Asuras as follows;

असुरेऽ ये बल आसीत ते देवास्तुण्वित वनं तुष्णायायायायायायित भावयते।
तद्यत्र जेवके परिशोष्या मानित्य पुनःस्वयेनान्। विसिं तं मानित्य व्यापृयः वत्सोऽथी रक्षालोकहर्दे।
Taittiriyasamhitā, VI.3.7.2.

This passage clearly informs that the 'Yajña' was a ritual practiced by the Asuras in the early stage and adds that Devas had taken away it from Asuras. It is also explained here that Devas thrice performed the sacrifice to smite away the Rakṣases.53

It is clear from the above passages that Asuras were the propounders of sacrifices. In the succeeding passages it is described that Devas became unable to defeat Asuras.54 Then they performed another sacrifice named Agnihotra in order to gain power to defeat Asuras and thus they became victorious.

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52 Taittiriyasamhitā, Vol. III, edited by R.L. Kashyap, Sri Aurobindo Kapali Sastri Institute of Vedic Centre, Bangalore, 2005, p.118. In another context it is explained that Asuras did in the sacrifice whatever the devas did. Deb देव ये जगद्धार्थक्षुर्त तस्मां अक्षुर्त. cf. VI.4.6.1. This clearly is a contradiction that in the same text itself it is mentioned that the sacrifice was of Asuras in one place and in another context they are portrayed as imitating the sacrifice of Devas.
53 Narendrabhooshan also considers that in early times the sacrifice was with Asuras. In the beginning of flood the power of Asuras i.e. the evil activities increased in the world. Due to this reason devas tried to own the authority of sacrifice. He opines that devas obtained the authority of sacrifice from Asuras by satisfying them. He quotes Maitrayanīsamhitā which states that the first king of the world was an Asura. Refer Narendrabhooshan Yagaparicayam, D.C. Books, Kottayam, 2013, p.70.f.
54 Sec Taittiriyasamhitā, Vol. III, op.cit, VI.4.6.1.
A reference to the religious practices of Asuras is available in *Brhadāraṇyakopanisad* as,55.

... 

It is said here that gods, men and Asuras are the three offsprings of Prajāpati. They were the religious students of him. Here Asuras are treated as equal with gods and men. This reference points at the positive attitude towards Asuras in the beginning.

**Asuras and Varṇa System**

*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* of *Suklayajurveda* also deals with the rivalry between Asuras and Devas. Reference to Varṇa system, in connection with Asuras and Devas is also available in this work. Brāhmaṇas are described there as belonging to the Devavarṇa while the Śūdras to the Asuravarṇa.56 Indra-Vṛtra conflict which is frequently seen in Vedas also is found in I.2.3.3 in this text. It is

55 *Brhadāraṇyakopanisad*, p.385f.
56 श्रुतीमयम् ध्रुवमय्यम मूलमय्यमः अपूर्वंशुद्द्: In the commentary it is explained as: अनूर्विन्कः स्यामूर्विन्कः अनूर्विन्कः अनूर्विन्कः तस्माद| तस्मादः| तस्मादः| तस्मादः| तस्मादः| तस्मादः

See *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* of *Kṛṣṇayajurveda* with the commentary of Śāyanācārya, Edited by Pushpendrakumar, Nag Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, I.2.6-7, p.100.
described in the form of a story. According to the story Indra defeated Asuras by killing Vṛtra.⁵⁷

Brāhmaṇs and other works of later Vedic period (including Aranyakas and Upaniṣads) were composed in the time when Varna system was deep-rooted in ancient Indian society. The reference to Asuras seen in these texts in connection with certain caste is to be understood as a reflection of the political hegemony over the indigenous people by the Vedic culture. The victory of Indra over Asuras by killing Vṛtra may be read as the subordination process by the people of a dominant culture, who themselves believed to be belonging a noble culture, over the indigenous culture.

From the above discussions it may be ascertained that in the early period of Vedic history Asura never had the connotation of evil. The adjective usage of the term Asura never upholds such an idea. It seems that the ambivalent root meaning of Asura helped in the formation of the concept of Asura as hostile being. This concept gradually extended to the later concept of Asuras as the fearful enemies of Devas. The reference to the Human Asuras can be taken as the primary stage of the development of Asuras as the enemies of

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⁵⁷ भवनोदवहः पुराणं असुरवयर्मादय। स वर्णलोकवाचमवद्। [Ibid., p.88f.]
Vedic people. The usage of the word mâyā along with Asura as the power of Asuras is the secondary stage of the development of Asuras as mythical beings probably the enemies of Devas. Constant attempts to gain political power on the part of Vedic people also must have a considerable role in imagining Asuras as powerful opponents of Vedic religion. By the period of Brāhmaṇas, the concept of Asuras and Rākṣasas came to be converged and they together are construed as the enemies of Devas as well as mankind. The following chapters of the present study will discuss these issues in detail.