Chapter Seven

Asuras and Rākṣasas and Indian Social Realm
The Study of the history of ancient world is one of the most complicated tasks. It may be noted here that the rich information regarding the cultural past of ancient India embedded in Sanskrit literature while looking peripherally offers a one sided picture, which probably is of the dominant groups. The previous chapters have discussed about the position, engagements and also the change in the concept of Asuras and Rākṣasas in Vedic and Puranic literature. The history of political power and religious schisms among ethnic groups played an important role in the making of these concepts. The impact of the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa has been of very high on the culture of the people who were kept themselves away from the Vedic faith.

People belonging to different regions in India have imbibed the legacy of non-Vedic culture represented by Asura etc. to a great extant. The tribes of India believed and worshipped Asuras and Rākṣasas not only as heroes but also as their ancestors and gods. An interrogation in this direction would make it clear that although Asuras and Rākṣasas are depicted as anti-social and even subhuman beings in the exaggerated narratives in later Vedic period, their legacy has been accepted by various sects of people in different parts of India. It is
worth to be noted that some prominent characteristics of Asura and Rākṣasa depicted in Vedic and Puranic literature have been adopted to their beliefs by certain tribal groups. This chapter is intended to analyze the impact of the myth of Asura and Rākṣasa on Indian society.

**Asur Tribe of Chota-Nagpur**

India is a country of endless diversity in human nature. All prominent ethnic races are seen in the sub continent. The tribal population of India contributes a considerable portion of India's populace. Thousand of tribal sects are found all over the country. A good number of tribal people identify themselves as distinct from the main stream population. They are not familiar with the Vedic or Brahmanic traits. Many of the tribal groups in India believe that genealogically they belong to the race of Asuras or Rāksasas.

A non-Aryan tribe of Kolarans in Chota-Nagpur in Bengal is known Asurs.¹ They claim to be the successors of Asura builders of ancient India. Still there are traces of copper, and mines in Chota-Nagpur which seem to have been worked in ancient times and tradition attributes these to the Asuras. At present also their occupation is digging iron ore, melting iron and making implements for

¹ The population of Asur tribe of Chota-Nagpur is 4894, besides 4614 Bajjia and Agari. Subodh Kapoor (Ed.), *op.cit.*, Vol. I, p.214
the neighbours. Brijhiā or Binjhiā tribe, an agricultural and landholding class in that region also claims to have connection with Asura. The subdivisions of Asur tribe are Agariās (wandering beggars with tamed monkeys), Loharā-Asurs (blacksmiths) and Pahāriās or hill Asuras. Asurs are derived into totemistic clans such as Bāsriar- sprung from the bamboo, Makrār from Spider, Ind from eel, Horo-sprung from tortoise etc.²

Scholars are of opinion that the Asurs of Chota-Nagpur are the existing Asuras who are described in Indian Mythology.³ These people speak a dialect of Kherwarian language which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages. The ancient Asuras according to Mamata Choudhary, were the dwellers in the Himalayan regions and subsequently driven out from there by the Aryans mainly towards East and all other directions also. So, it may not be wide of the range to state that the members of that sect who took shelter in the Chota-Nagpur are the successors of the Asura tribe of Vedic age.

Present Day Dāsas and Paṇis

As has already been mentioned, in Vedic literature the enemies of Vedic people are referred to as Dāsas and Dasyus. It can be learnt

² Ibid, p.214f.
from the Vedic narratives that these people are as some ethnic groups that are in antagonism with Vedic people. Some scholars consider Dāsas as a fisherman tribe.⁴ Presently, the term Dāsa is used as a sub-caste or surname by the people of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.⁵ In Bihar the people who belong to the group of Siddha-Vaidyas, Halwais and Kathbania sub-castes of Banias used the term ‘Das’ as surname.⁶

Ṛgveda attests to the fact that the Panis were the speakers of some different language and they follow a different culture from that of the Vedic believers. They were also known as merchants in the then society. Mamata Choudhary⁷ points out the Panis or Pathans of Baluchistan who speak Pushto language may be regarded as the descendants of the Panis of Ṛgveda. She opines that Panis of Ṛgveda who were the settlers of North-Western parts of India, carried on their trade with the foreigners after crossing the western ocean. Thus, it

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⁴ See T. Rangarajan, *Dictionary of Indian Epics*, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 2006, p.118. This concept may have originated from the Sanskrit term ‘Dāsa’ a term used to signify a fisherman.
⁵ They are known as ‘Kevats’ in West Bengal and ‘Kavarts’ in Dacca. See Mamata Choudhary, *op. cit.*, p.94. The names Kevats and Kaivarts are closely related with the Sanskrit name ‘Kaivarta’ which means ‘a fisherman’.
⁶ *Ibid* Edgar Thurston pointed out that ‘Dās’ is said to be the title of Jain immigrants of Northern India. Most of them are established as merchants. They belonged to the Mahants of Thirumala ( Tirupati) temple named Balaram Dās, Bhagavān Dās etc. Dāsari is another caste the members of which are the wandering Śūdra classes of Tirupati. Refer to Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. II, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1993, p.112.
⁷ Mamata Choudhary, *op. cit.*, p.104.
might be assumed that in course of time they re-settled down in the regions such as Baluchistan, coastal region of Persian Gulf and also Red-Sea. Some scholars consider that the ancestors of the Pañis were the people of Phoenicia.\textsuperscript{8} According to this view Pañis founded their kingdoms in Egypt and Chaldea under the guidance of Brāhmaṇa priests in later age. These regions are identified as the places of historical significance.

Alfred Hillebrandt\textsuperscript{9} in his \textit{Vedic Mythology} points out that the association of Dāsas with Pañis has some relations. He connects the 'Dahae' tribe with the Vedic Dāsa. According to him Pañis were a sub-tribe of Dahae who were identified by the name 'Pamians'.

\textbf{The Descendants of Hiḍimbā, Bāṇāsura and Bhīma}

\textit{Mahābhārata} character Hiḍimbā, who is a Rākṣasī wife of Pāṇḍava Bhīma and the mother of his son Ghaṭotkaca, is described there as the sister of cannibalistic Hiḍimb. But the people of Himachal Pradesh worship Hiḍimbā as their goddess. She possesses top-most position in the cultural life of the people of central Himalayan range. It may be noted here that Hiḍimbā is a Himalayan deity who receives an

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{8} A.C. Das, \textit{Rgvedic India}, R. Cahmray & Co., Calcutta, 1927, p.151.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{9} Alfred Hillebrandt \textit{op.cit.}, p.}
important place in Dussehra. In the folklore of Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, Hiḍimbā is considered as a reigning queen of Lahaul, Kula and Kinnaur. Hiḍimbā and Bhīma are believed to be the founders of many dynasties in Himachal Pradesh. Some people believe Bhīma as their mythological ancestor. The Darrang Kacharis consider themselves as Bhim-ni-fa i.e. the children of Bhīma. The Mech Kachari people are also believed to be descended from Bhīma.

Hiḍimbā is popularly identified as the wife of Bhīma. But in Himachal Pradesh there is a belief that Bāṇāsura and Hiḍimbā married at the place named Gorboring Ag near Sungra in Kinnaur district. They had eighteen children. The people of that place believe that the progenies of Hiḍimbā and Bāṇāsura are now ruling various places in that region.

Hiḍimbā-temples are situated at many places like Mehla [Chamba], Dhungri [Kullu], Srijun [Bilaspur], Janjehli [Mandi] and so

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13 Refer to B.R. Sharma, *Impact of the Mahābhārata on Folk and Tribal Culture of Himachal Pradesh*, in K.S. Singh (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.34. Tejpur which is situated in the north-east part of India is renamed as Shonitapur which was the capital of Bāṇāsura whose daughter Uṣā was married to Kṛṣṇa’s son Aniruddha. See K.S. Singh, *The Mahābhārata: An Anthropological Perspective*, p.2. This can be taken to be an honorary remark to Bāṇāsura by the people of that place.
on. In Kafor village of Kinnaur district Hidimbā is worshipped as a mother of all goddesses of that area. It is also believed that the spirit of Bānāsura is staying on the upper floor of Sungra temple. The spirit of Bānāsura is being worshipped by the people of that place.\(^{15}\)

In the Wynad district of Keralam many people believe that it is the place where the story of Rāmāyaṇa happened. In their view, many places there are related with the story of Rāmāyaṇa. According to their belief Rāvaṇa is simply a man and he did not abduct Sītā, but she went to his abode on her own wish.\(^{16}\)

Bānāsuramala (the hill of Bānāsura) as the name indicates is an important spot in Wynad that is believed to have connections with the myth of an Asura. The people of that place believe that Bānāsura, an Asura king, ruled there in ancient days and the place is named after the name of their king. A myth prevailing there says that there occurred a war between Bānāsura and Kṛṣṇa in which the latter cut off the hands of the former. The hands of Bānāsura fell down on earth and that place presently is called Karabānasāśeri (meaning the place where fell down

\(^{15}\) Ibid

\(^{16}\) Atecz Tharuvana, Vayanaṭan Rāmāyanam, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 2011, p.25f. The study of the people of Wynad based on their beliefs and culture can give more information about the ethnic settlements in ancient Keralam. A study based on cultural Anthropology would provide more help in this regard.
the hands of Bānā). In the folk songs of the Atiya and Kuricya tribes of Wynad, a number of stories praising their former king Bāṇāśūra are found.¹⁷ In Wynad there is a hill which is in the shape of a woman lying on the ground. People relate the mythology of this hill with the Rāmāyana-character Tātakā. According to their belief Rāma and Lakṣmana went to the forest of Tātakā where she lived with all prowess as an ally of Rāvana. Rāma and Lakṣmana quarrelled with Tātakā and at the end Rāma killed her with an arrow. The huge body of Tātakā fell down on the top of the mountain. In memory of the killing of Tātakā with the arrow by Rāma that place is named after Ambukutti (the place where the arrow was shot).¹⁶

People of Kauravas

In Mahābhārata Kauravas are popularly known as the enemies of Pāṇḍavas. The present day Kawars of Madhya Pradesh believe that they are the descendants of the Kauravas of Mahābhārata.¹⁹

Gonds, Oraons and Rāvana Tribes as the Descendants of Rāvana

Gonds who are identified as the biggest tribal group in central India and Oraons believe themselves as the descendants of Rāvana.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.74ff
¹⁶ Ibid., p.67.
¹⁹ Refer to K.S. Singh, op.cit., p.3.
Kamil Bulke\textsuperscript{20} refers to a family living in the Ketkayam village of Rayadiha in Ranchi whose family name is 'Rāvana'. But they were belonging to the 'Gidhi' clan which is a popular tribal group in central India.

M.V. Kibe considers the people of Southern parts of Indian subcontinent as belonging to Rākṣasa tribe and also think the south Indian people as the descendants of the powerful Rākṣasa king Rāvana.\textsuperscript{21} He points out that 'Rāvaṇavamsa' is a sub-caste among Gonds which might be regarded as the modern representatives of the Rākṣasas. The problem regarding the ethnical identity of these people should be studied in detail for bringing forth the real social and political history of our ancient past. V.R.R. Dikshitar\textsuperscript{22} argues that the Rākṣasas could be taken as a tribe when the society emerged from the barbarous state to a semi-civilized condition and sought to identify them with the ancestors of modern Andamaners and Australian aborigines.

\textsuperscript{20} Kamil Bulke, op.cit., p.132f.
\textsuperscript{21} M.V. Kibe Cultural Descendants of Rāvana, Kane Festschrift, 1941, p.264-66. But the argument of Kibe that the south Indians are the descendants of Rākṣasa king Rāvana does seem tenable for the want of adequate evidence.
\textsuperscript{22} V.R.R. Dikshitar, South Indians in the Rāmāyana, Transactions of the All India Oriental Conference, 1993, p.245f.
Śūrpaṇakhā as a Goddess

The popular Rāmāyana character Śūrpaṇakhā who belongs to the race of Rākṣasas and sister of Rāvana, the king of Laṅkā, is being worshipped as a goddess in Nilgiris in South India. The women who belong to the Nāttu caste of Keralam believe themselves as the daughters of Śūrpaṇakhā.23

According to a myth prevalent in Keralam the Rāmāyana character Khara, the administrator of Rāvana in the Daṇḍaka forest, was a great devotee of Śīva. Śīva became pleased by his whole hearted devotion and gave him three liṅgas. He took them to his home by holding two on each hands and one by placing in his mouth. Due to the long journey he became tired and stopped at Ettumanur in the Kottayam district of Kerala and placed the liṅga on the ground which was in his mouth. But he was unable to lift the liṅga from there when he wished to restart his journey. Then he found a sage named Vyāghrapāda there and requested him to install that liṅga at the Vaikkathappan temple. Then he installed the second liṅga at the

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23 Ibid, p.405, Nāttu is said to be a subdivision of Kollam (Black smith). According to another view it is a sub caste of and Malayan (people live in hill areas probably the forest dwellers) of Cochin in Kerala. cf, Edgar Thurston, op.cit., Vol. V, p.249.
Anandaprabhu temple at Vaikkam and the last one at the Śiva temple of Kaduthuruthi.\textsuperscript{24}

**Asura King Bali**

In Purāṇas, Bali is the son of Virocana who was a descendant in the family of Hiranyakāśipu one of the greatest of Asuras. Bali is popularly recognized as a powerful Asura king. When he became the Emperor of the world, Devas became afraid and went to Viṣṇu for help to destroy Bali. Then Viṣṇu took the Vāmana form and asked Bali three feet of earth. Even warned by his preceptor Śukrācārya, Bali has given permission to Vāmana to take three steps of earth. Then Vāmana assumed a huge form and with his two feet he took two steps and the last step was on Bali's head. This way he sent Bali into the nether world. This mythical story\textsuperscript{25} clearly reflects the attempt of Devas to gain political hegemony. In history this is a common process practiced by the dominant class over the people of the lower strata in the society.

As an appendage to the above legend there is an interesting mythology in Keralam related with the Asura Bali who is popular as a benevolent ruler. The people of Kerala believe that their king Bali will

\textsuperscript{24} Refer to Nandita Krishna, *op.cit.*, p.206.

\textsuperscript{25} Refer to *Vāmanapurāṇa* Chapters XX-XXXI for the description of the story of Asura king Bali.
be visiting his people in every year in the day of Tiruvōnām which
usually comes in the Malayalam month of Chinnām\textsuperscript{26}. In the name of
their king's visit the people of Kerala celebrate this day as the festival
of Tiruvōnām, by welcoming him with drawing pictures with flower in
the entrance of each house, preparing feast, engaging in various plays
etc. The belief of Asura Bali as the former king of Kerala seems to bear
significant connotation regarding the Asuras and the attitude of the
people towards them.

The mythology of Asura king Bali can be found in other places
also. There is a festival named Balraj which is being celebrated in
memory of Asura Bali in the Balag village of Shimla district\textsuperscript{27} The
people of that place consider that Asura Bali was their former king who
ruled that region with Balag or Baligram as his capital.

**Buddhism and Asura Concept**

Buddhist writers contributed a large number of literary works in
Pāli, Prakrit and Sanskrit. *Jātakamālā*, 'the garland of the stories' of
Buddha's former births, contain abundant information about the social
history of earlier period. Many of the stories in it refer to Māra, the evil

\textsuperscript{26} The Malayalam month of Chinnām usually comes in the months of August-September.

\textsuperscript{27} Refer to *Impact of the Mahābhārata on Folk and Tribal Culture of Himachal Pradesh* in K.S.
Singh (ed.), op.cit, p.33f.
force in Buddhism. The concept of Māra has significant resemblance with the later concept of Asura. Buddhist literature frequently refers to Māra as the tempter of Buddha. In the Atīkathā of the fortieth Khadirangārajātaka refers to the story of the tempter Māra. There Māra tries back a merchant from giving-alms. Māra also tries to defeat Pacceka-buddha who came to the house of a merchant for begging alms. By the holiness of the merchant, Māra was defeated and returned back to his abode. The story contains certain similarity with the disturbance of Asuras in Vedic rituals and driving away of Asuras from their habitats. The Māra concept in Buddhism appears to have been imagined in the model of the Asura concept.

**Goddess Hārītī**

Buddhist mythology speaks of a female divinity called Hārītī. Hārītī is described there as a Yakṣīṇī. The story of Hārītī is narrated in the Jātaka stories 510 and 513. In early Buddhist literature she is mentioned as the mother of five hundred demons whom she fed of human flesh. She used to steal human beings for the same. Buddha

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24 The narration of the Jātaka stories follow a threefold division: Pachppannavattu (the present story), Ṭatitavattu (the story that tells Buddha’s former births), Samodhān (relevance of telling the Ṭatitavattu).

once stole her child in order to make her feel the pain of a mother who loses her child. Hearing the words of Buddha she understood the reality and became a great devotee of him. Jātaka stories describe Hārītī as a goddess whom the people worshipped for begetting children. Mahāyāna Buddhists used to pay homage to Hārītī. It is evident from the chronicles of It-Sing that, the picture of Hārītī was portrayed in the walls of the kitchens of Buddhist Monasteries. The legend of Hārītī shows some common features parallel to the myths of Hiḍimbā and Śūrpaṇakhā. Both were absorbed by the people of tribal India as their goddesses albeit they were portrayed in literature as fearful Rākṣasīs.

Lalitavistara, refers to the attempt of Māra to disturb the meditation of Buddha by assembling the army of demons. There the men of Māra are described as having grimacing faces, animal’s muscles, unproportionable bodies and sometimes having a second face on their bellies. Buddha protected himself from them with the perfection of his wisdom. The narration of the men of Māra here more or less is the same with the Puranic description of Asuras and Rākṣasas. These descriptions are highly mythical. The daughters of Māra, Desire, Unrest

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and Pleasure, are also trying to disturb the meditation of Buddha. Their attempts also were failed by the power of his wisdom.\(^{31}\)

**Representation of Asura and Rākṣasa in Nāṭyaśāstra**

The changing attitude of society towards the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa is reflected in Nāṭyaśāstra. Nāṭyaśāstra is treated as the fifth Veda and the oldest available literary record on Dramaturgy. It presents an account on the attitude of Asuras towards the popular notion of the mainstream society towards them. The Asura concept in Nāṭyaśāstra seems to have been adopted from later Vedic period (especially from Epics and Purāṇas) where they are pictured as the enemy of Devas. In the first chapter of Nāṭyaśāstra, Asuras are called by the names Dāitya, Dānava, Yākṣa, Kinnara, Rākṣasa etc.\(^{32}\) In the festival called Indradhvajamahā, Bharata with his sons enacted the play *Dāityaparājaya* which depicts the story of the victory of Devas over Asuras.\(^{33}\) Seeing the portrayal of their defeat in the play Asuras became angry and they tried to disturb the festival. Brahman although tried to convince Asuras about the nature of 'Nātya' but failed. Due to disturbance of Asuras, Devas thought of making a Nāṭyamaṇḍapa for

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\(^{33}\) *Ibid.*, vv. 52-55.
presenting Nāṭya before invited audience. They also made some rules
and regulations for presenting Nāṭya. After that Bharata with his sons
enacted the Amṛtamāntha-Samavakāra\textsuperscript{34} and Tripuradāha-Dima.\textsuperscript{35}
The common theme of these dramas is the defeat of Asuras by Devas.
This theme became popular by the time of Purāṇa literature and
adopted as a common theme in Indian mythology.

Further in the 21\textsuperscript{st} chapter of Nāṭyaśāstra, while dealing with the
costumes of Rākṣasis Bharata recommends that, Rākṣasi characters
should wear indranīla (precious blue stone) white teeth, black dress
etc.\textsuperscript{36} According to the descriptions there, one who has a yellowish
hair, reddish eyes, fat body, loud noise etc. is fit for a Rākṣasa
character.\textsuperscript{37} Piśāca and Bhūta character should leave their hair
untied.\textsuperscript{36} Here it can be viewed clearly that this picture is closely
connected with the concepts manifested through the Puranic
literature.

It must be stated that the changes in the concept of Asura and
Rākṣasa as the representation of evil forces happened not only due to

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, Chapter 4, vv. 1-4.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, vv. 5-10
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, Vol. III, Chapter 21, vv. 62-64.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, Chapter 21, v.144; Vol. IV, Chapter 35, vv. 7-8.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, Vol. III, Chapter 21, v.150.
the religious and cultural differences but also due to the result of a strong impact of the political change in the society. As has been shown earlier, in Vedic period both Asuras and Rākṣasas were not portrayed as having fearful appearance. In the time of Nātyaśāstra the attitude of the society has changed and it is clearly reflected in the depiction of Asuras in Nātya.

Impact of the Later Asura-Rākṣasa Concept in other Mythologies

The impact of the later concept of Vedic Asura and Rākṣasa are found in the mythology of Greeks, Islamism, Christianity etc. In the mythology of Greeks the concept of Titans resembles with that of the Indian Asura and Rākṣasa. One of the Greek mythologies speaks of the story of the war between Titans with Zeus and Poseidon, the sons of Chronos. Titans were defeated and driven away to the hell by their opponents. This account reminds the Devāsurasaṅgrāma in Indian mythology to certain extent. Zeus is the war god of Greek mythology. The legends of Zeus resembles with the Vedic myths related with Indra.

The impact of later concept of Asura and Rākṣasa can also be traced out in Islam and Christianity. The concept of Jinn in Islam
exhibits some relation with the concept of Asura and Rāksasa of later period. All evil activities are attributed to Jinn. The concept of Asura and Rāksasa and the myth related with a serpent described in the Old Testament also bear some resemblance.

It should be noted that a large number of tribal groups who absorbed the prominent Asura-Rāksasa beliefs into their life and culture belong to the non-Brahmanic faith. Vijay Nath following the views of Stephen Fuchs about the Indian tribal religious beliefs observes that almost all cultivating tribes have imbibed a generous portion of Hindu religious ideas and tradition. She observes this incident as a direct co-relation between agricultural expansion in marginal areas and religious indoctrination of tribal groups residing there.

It can be ascertained on the basis of the analysis made in this chapter that the legacy of Asura and Rāksasa although is subdued by the mainstream culture has been rooted deeply in the psyche of many sects of people in India. It is the cultural, social and political changes that resulted in the transformation of the scenario in its history. However, the tribal beliefs which are the remnants of a begone age can

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be taken as the survival of historical memories. The people who believe themselves as the descendants of some powerful Asura and Rākṣasa characteristics are found now only in the peripheries of the society. This may be due to their extermination by the so called main stream culture. This may also have helped in the formation of their strong belief in their powerful heroes who strongly opposed the sacrificial cult of Vedas.

It may also be observed that the people who were identified as Asura, Rākṣasa and related categories in Puranic stories are powerful beings. They were portrayed as highly vigourous as well as ambitious people. They are also depicted in these texts as they were engaged in worldly pleasures and hence were abused by the followers of the mainstream culture. Devas are portrayed in these texts as residing in the heaven engaging in all pleasures. As they are the advocates of the mainstream Vedic culture they attained a divinity and portrayed as ideals to be followed. The influence of political hegemony of dominant culture over the indigenous culture is evidently revealed through the descriptions of Vedic and Puranic literature.

The above discussions helps one to make a safe conclusion to the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa has considerable impact in the life and
belief of common people. The worship of powerful female Asura and Rākṣasa characteristics resembles with the worship of mother goddesses. Worship of mother goddess was familiar to the Indus Valley Civilization as is evident from the archaeological sources. Hence, the roots of this concept have to be searched even beyond the Vedic period. Thus, it may be seen that, the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa has undergone many ebb and flow in the cultural and religious history of India.