Chapter Two

Origin and Development of the Concepts of Asuras and Rākṣasas
The concept of Asura and Rākṣasa forms an inevitable part of Indian mythology. The sense that these terms generally bear is, 'opposite to the gods'. Thus the popular notion about Asura and Rākṣasa definitely is that of evil. Indian Mythology is filled with the stories of the conflicts between good and evil, in force between gods and Asuras and Rākṣasas, and also the final victory of the former over the latter. The emergence of each civilization happens through the struggles and interaction of human cultures. The thoughts, culture, religion etc. of the winner naturally become the main stream culture of the society. This fact is very much evident in the history of the legends of Asura and Rākṣasa.

Being the oldest available literary record, the references to Asura and Rākṣasa seen in Rgveda, reflect the primary idea regarding the concepts connected with them. This chapter is an inquiry into the issues related with the origin and development of the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa. A semantic analysis of the terms also has been appended to this study.

Asuras in Rgveda: The Primary Evidences

In the oldest parts of Rgveda (Maṇḍalas II to VII) the term Asura has been used as an adjective which upholds the meaning
'powerful', 'mighty', 'life force' etc. It has been used as an adjective for prominent deities in a positive sense. Thus the prominent deities Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, Maruts etc. are described as Asura in the early portions of Rgveda. But, in some places of the latest books of Rgveda (Maṇḍalas I, VIII, IX, and X) the word has been used in its newly attributed sense of enemy, demon etc. In Atharvaveda also the primary as well as the secondary stage of the development of the term can be seen. A detailed analysis of Asura concept in Vedic and Puranic literature has been made in the following chapters of the present study.

As a prerequisite to the discussion of the Asura concept in Vedic and Puranic literature it is important to analyse the concept of Asura in ancient religious traditions like Zoroastrian and Assyrian civilizations where references to the concept of Asura occur in varied forms. These variants show the vicissitudes of the people who worshipped the deity in ancient past.

**Asura in Zoroastrian Religion**

Rgveda and Zend-Avesta are two ancient Indo-Iranian literary evidences which bear witness to a period of common development of civilization called Indo-Iranian. Zoroastrianism is considered to be one of the ancient religions in the world which
probably is 2500 to 3000 years old. The studies on early Indian and Iranian languages tell that both Sanskrit and Avestan were developed from a common source. The collections of the Sacred Books of Old Persians/Iranians are composed in Avestan, and it is known as Zend-Avesta. Zend means a commentary or explanation. The term Zend was applied only to the explanatory texts, to the translations of the Avesta. Avesta is the proper name of the original texts. The prophet Zarathustra, also known as Zoroaster is regarded as the founder of Zoroastrianism and its basic principles. The Avestan language has close affinity with the language of Rgveda. The term Ahura is the exact Avestan cognate of 'Asura' in Vedic Sanskrit. Ahura in Avesta refers to Zoroasters powerful deity 'Ahura-Mazda'. 'Ahura' denotes 'Lord' and 'Mazda' means 'All Wise'. Thus, according to the etymology 'Ahura-Mazda' means 'All-wise Lord'. Zoroastrianism maintains a monotheistic view and believes in the one and only 'Ahura-Mazda' as their supreme deity.

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4 Some scholars are of opinion that the term 'Mazda' indicates the meaning of 'Great Lord of All'. See I.J.S. Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathustra*, Madras, 1926, available on Internet. The meaning of the Iranian term Mazda as a great lord of all is closely related with the early concept of the Rgvedic term Asura as a powerful lord. The hymns that uphold the positive sense of meaning of Asura has been discussed in the fourth Chapter of the present study in detail.
5 Kedar Nath Tiwari. *op.cit.*, p.93.
The primary meaning of Rgvedic 'Asura', 'Lord' is closely related with the meaning of Iranian 'Ahura' i.e. 'Supreme Being'. The term 'Daeva' which is the Avestan cognate of 'Deva' in Sanskrit came to mean a demon in Iran. Scholars have difference of opinion about the reverse concept of these terms in both civilizations. Norman Brown classifies Asuras and Devas as two separate groups of divine beings. The term Asura which basically means 'lord' is applied both to benevolent and malevolent beings in Vedas. Sometimes occasionally human beings are considered as lords and it can be taken as a complementary metaphor and may be called as Devas.

N.N. Bhattacharya opines that Asuras were historically a collateral branch of the Vedic Aryans, who were settled in Iran. They inherited a common tradition then. That is why Vedic gods bore the appellation Asura earlier. The direct opposition started between them due to the religious and cultural schism of the two branches of community. Thus Daeva became demon in Iran and Asura became evil in India. The connection of these words with reversal change in meaning should be studied in detail for the

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6 Wash Edward Hale, Asura in Early Vedic Religion, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1999. Introduction, p.x. How the positive concept of one civilization becomes negative in another tradition and vice versa is a matter of dispute. It seems more believable to accept the reasons such as religious schisms, cultural changes etc.

7 See W. Norman Brown, Proselytizing the Asuras JAOS (39), 1919. pp.100-103.
understanding of the cultural diversities in ancient civilization. An examination regarding these issues has been made in the following pages.

**Vedic and Avestic Terms- A Linguistic Analysis**

The linguistic studies will be of great help for better understanding of social and cultural conditions of ancient civilizations. In India and Iran so many deities have same names and some deities have identical names. Some of the identical terms in both languages are enlisted below. The terms include the names of deities and also some cult words of great significance in both civilizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Vedic</strong></th>
<th><strong>Avestic</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asura</td>
<td>Ahura</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deva</td>
<td>Daeva</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nāsatya</td>
<td>Nānghaithya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yama (Son of Vivasvant and the ruler of Dead)</td>
<td>Yima(Son of Vivahant the ruler of Paradise)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aryaman</td>
<td>Airyaman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aśvin</td>
<td>Aspina</td>
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<td>Gandharva</td>
<td>Gandaerewa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kṛśānu (The celestial Bowman)</td>
<td>Keresani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitra</td>
<td>Mithra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uṣas</td>
<td>Usangha</td>
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Vṛta                                       Vṛta
Vāyu                                       Vāyu
Vṛtraghna (Indra)                         Verethragna
Soma                                       Haoma
Hotṛi                                      Zaotar
Aṭharvan                                  Aṭharavan
Mantra                                     Manthra
Yajata                                     Yazata
Ahuti                                      Azuita
Paṇca                                      Paja
Sapta                                      Hapta
Sapta Sindhu                               Hapta Hendu
Santi                                      Hanti
Asmi                                       Ahmi
Sahsra                                     Hazara
Mātr                                       Māder
Bhrātr                                     Brader

It is clear from the above list that ancient Iranians used some loosened forms of Rgvedic words. The pronunciation of Sanskrit 'santi' as 'hanti' by Iranians holds an extremely different meaning in Sanskrit. The word 'hanti' in Sanskrit means 'to kill', whereas 'santi' means 'being' or 'to exist'. The use of 'hendu' instead of 'sindhu' shows the later name of the river Indus by which the land was named as the land of Hindus or Hindustan. This has happened on account of the pronunciation of the word by these people. The terms 'mātr' and 'bhrātr' of Sanskrit seen as 'mader' and 'brader' in Avesta have close relation with the 'mother' and 'brother' in English. These terms bear the same sense in Sanskrit, Avesta and
English languages. Vedic 'Yama' is known as the ruler of Dead while its cognate 'Yima' in Avestic is 'the ruler of Paradise'.

There are not only identical names and concepts in Indian and Iranian languages and religions but similarities and contrasts in beliefs and religious practices also are found there in. It may be noted that both the people worshipped Agni as a deity. But the followers of Ahura-Mazda did not sacrifice animals in fire as they believed that Agni is sacred and it should not be polluted with dead bodies of animals. Both performed the Soma sacrifice and Iranians called it Haoma. But they did not accept the intoxicating quality of Soma juice. They made another less intoxicating Soma juice from another plant. Iranians did not consider Indra as a deity. They called him by the name 'Verethraghna' (Vṛtraghna in Sanskrit) and consider him as an evil.

**Asura in Assyrian Tradition**

Assyrians were tenants of Mitanni Kings of Mesopotamia who had Aryan names and worshipped Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra and

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10 For more details regarding the Avestan cognates of Sanskrit words refer to Rajesh Kochhar. *The Vedic People-Their History and Geography*. Sangham Books, Pondichery, 2000, p.32f.

11 The Vedic deities Indra and Nāsatya are considered as demons in Avesta. The Vedic term Deva which is used as Dæva in Avesta denotes evil being. Refer to *Ibid.*, p.35. But in *Rgveda* these terms never have the meaning of Demon or they represent the evil
two Asvins.\textsuperscript{12} They were intermittent rulers of Mesopotamia from 1480 BC.\textsuperscript{13} The two forms 'Ashir' and 'Ashur'/Assur of Assyrian tradition resemble with the Asura in Sanskrit. These terms might have signified in early period a god, a city i.e. the city of Ashir/Ashur or a land. Later, it was written regularly as Ashshur. If the term 'Ashir' is taken to be the correct one it may mean 'the beneficent' or 'the merciful one'. Assyrians called themselves as 'Ashshurain' which clearly is derived from Ashur or Ashir.\textsuperscript{14} K.R.V. Raja\textsuperscript{15} relates 'Asura' to the Semitic word 'Ashur' which was used to denote the Assyrians, the worshippers of Ashur, who conquered Persia. He also suggests that 'Asura' found his way into India in pre-Aryan days.\textsuperscript{16}

Mitanni's language was recognizably Sanskritic. As being the tenants of Mitanni kings, Assyrians must have been influenced by Mitanni's language. According to their Boghaz-Keui accounts one
of their Kings' names is 'Daśratta' which resembles with the name of the Indian king 'Daśaratha'. Assyrians defeated Mitanni's kingdom which is evidently identified with contemporary Iran-Iraq region. They were known as devilish fighters who conquered and destroyed many cities. In Nandita Krishna's words 'they were the most feared people of their time and living demons of the ancient world'.

Mitannis and Assurs were identified as two ancient tribes that fought each other for supremacy over the same land i.e. the contemporary Iran-Iraq region. Assyrians were traders and rich leaders too. Most notable thing is their total repugnance for other cultures and civilizations. Besides their cruel nature, they were great builders of that time. Their famous Queen Sammumarat is believed to be the creator of the famous Hanging Garden of Babylon and also the Library at Nineveh from where over 20,000 cuneiform clay tablets were discovered. The palace of Asur-bani-pal at Nineveh is the finest example of Assyrian architecture. The palace is beautified with sculptured relief of battle scenes and animals.

In between 700 BCE and 200 BCE Assyrians reached the zenith of their power. In India this was the period when Asuras

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gained the title of demon from the concept of God.\textsuperscript{15} An interesting thing about Assyrians is that their kings had assumed the title of Ashur either before or after their names. The usage of Ashur as a title started with Puzur-Ashur I (c.1975 BCE) and seems to have become a common practice from Ashur Nirani II (1426-1413 BCE) continuing till the end of Assyrian Empire. Ashur-Ubalit, Ashur-Nasir-pal etc. are some other Assyrian kings.\textsuperscript{20}

In the early portions of \textit{Rgveda} it can often be seen that the gods and individuals like Indra, Varuṇa, Maruts, Agni, Pipru, Varćin, etc. are extolled along with the adjective Asura. The term Asura bears the meaning lord, life-force etc. there. It can be assumed from the information supplied in \textit{Rgveda} that the Rgvedic poets were much familiar with the concept of 'god Asura'. When the word was used in a good sense of meaning while extolling the gods, it definitely conveys the original meaning of that word. A semantic analysis of the very word Asura would shed more light on the phases of development of the Asura concept.

\textbf{Negativity of Asura Concept in India}

It can be observed in the later portions of \textit{Rgveda} that Asura was an abusive name for the enemies of Aryan people. Asura was

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{cf.}, Malati. J. Shenjde, \textit{op.cit.}, p.26 and Nandita Krishna \textit{op.cit.}, p.47.
viewed as opposed to the Vedic religion and practices. The enemies of Vedic people such as Dāsas, Dasyus, Paṇis etc. were described as anāsaḥ, ayajñāḥ, akṛatuḥ, mṛdhra-vācaḥ etc. in Rgvedic hymns. These people do not articulate the Vedic language as carefully as the orthodox Aryans did. They used the common dialect of the indigenous people in their speech. Their speeches were viewed as the corrupt forms of Vedic Sanskrit. Hence they were called by the name Anāsa. The term may be 'na'- no, 'āsaḥ'- mouth i.e. mouth-less. Some scholars opine that the word may mean nose-less or flat-nosed people. But this is not a possible derivation. To get more clarification the term 'mṛdhra-vācaḥ' should be analyzed.

In Rgveda VII.6.3, Agni is asked to confound the Dasyus who perform no sacred rites. Dasyus here are described as a people who are defective in speech (mṛdhra-vāc). In another context in Rgveda the furious Indra is asked to slay the footless and speechless Vṛtra in the battle. Sāyana interprets the adjective 'mṛdhra-vācaḥ' in the above mentioned verses as 'the persons

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21 अनुसूचित ग्रंथो फूपाचा फूपाचर्य अर्थां अर्थान्
प्रत तान्त्रिकों विविधताका फूपाचर्यसाराय अस्तित्वाता। Rgveda, VII.5.3. 
Here Agni is asked to annihilate the Dasyus who do not perform sacred rites prescribed in Vedas. They are also portrayed as babblers defective in speech, unbelievers and also non-sacrificing people. The commentators do not give any explanation to the word Paṇis here. It may be learnt from this description that Paṇis were an exclusive sect of people who do not come in the range of Vedic culture.

22 तल्ल विद्वानी कृपया अनुसूचितस्य यथा महान्ग्याद।
whose power of speech is undeveloped'. He again explains the
same word in *Rgveda* I.174.2 as 'the person who cannot speak
fluently' or 'who speaks softly'. It is explained thus by Yāska:
dānamanasō manuṣyaṁ indra mrdhavācaḥ kuru'.23

The reason for the defeat of Asura is supposed to be the
incorrect utterance of the language. Scholars consider Asuras as a
group of people who were having different language other than
that used by the Vedic Aryans. A passage in *Śatapathabṛāhmāṇa* is
shown in support of this view. In *Śatapathabṛāhmāṇa*,24 the verses
3.2.1.23-24 describe that Asura addressed their enemies as 'Alavāḥ
'instead of' Ārya';

तो देवा: अस्मीतोऽन्तरायेत्तत्र स्वीकृत्यांस्यावै वरिष्ठा संवर्त्तमजुञ्जुञ्जुरुप्रतिप्रविष्टिः देवानां
स वमनमृगरोहत्र जहुष्कदिवेन्त तदेव: स्ववर्ष्टि तेषुपुरा आत्मयस्य देवो हेष्वलक
हितं वदति: परार्भमुहुः।। 23।।

tṛṇāvartarṣaḥ प्रथमाः। उपविज्ञानी सम्बलेघरसंस्मात्र ब्राह्मणो मलेश्वरस्य
हेष्व वा वारोमेवेश हिष्टत खप्नानामादति बाबानेत्रस्याः तत्तप्यसः पराभव्यज्ञ च एवमोक्तेद।। 24।।

According to Sāyaṇa 'he alava' stands for 'he araya' i.e. 'oh,
the spiteful enemies'.25 This passage indicates that Asuras were
unable to pronounce the language of Aryans properly. One who

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23 *Rgveda* Samhita Translated by H.H. Wilson, Vol. I, p.457. These issues are discussed in the Third chapter of the present study.
25 In *Mahābhāṣya* there is also a similar passage that expresses the speech of Asuras as mleccha speech. Refer to *Vyakarana Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali*, Navānīkam, Chokhamba Sanskrit Sansthan, Varanasi, 2004, I.I.1.
speaks such incorrect words is treated to be Mleccha, a barbarian i.e. an Asura. The author of this Brāhmaṇa adds a moral from the anecdote that no Brāhmaṇa should pronounce words incorrectly; for such words have no power at all. This idea supports the great care taken by the Vedic Aryans in pronunciation and their contemptuous nature towards the aboriginals who could not pronounce them properly.

With regard to the above discussion, Aloka Parasher adds more information into it. She has done a detailed discussion by analysing the opinions of various scholars regarding the Mleccha language in her Mlecchas in Early India. She observes that the author of Śatapathabṛāhmaṇa was intended to highlight the importance of sacrifice through the possession of right speech by considering it as an important requirement. She analyzes the discussions of J. Bloch and Geiger that the change of 'r' into 'l' and 'y' into 'v' is frequent in the Prakrit dialects of Eastern India and it is attested in Aśokan inscriptions also. Thus there is no strong evidence to consider Asuras as mlecchas (barbarians).

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26 Ibid, Some scholars consider Asuras as an 'l' dialect people i.e. they use more 'l' sounds in their speech cf. Jyotish Nath, The Dēsas, Dasyus and Rakṣases in the Ṛgyvedic Literature, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta, 1999, p.113.

27 Refer to Aloka Parasher, Mlecchas in Early India, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1991, pp.82ff. It should be noted here that Asuras were not called as Mlecchas directly but they are said to be speaking the words that are spoken by such people.
Romila Thapar in connection with the discussion of the degradation of the status of Dāsa who has close affinity with the concept of Asura in *Rgveda*, considers the term Aryan as a connotation which carries the idea of a person of higher status and knowing Sanskrit. The people who have an obstructed speech (mṛdhraiṣṭaḥ) and could not speak correctly like the Sanskrit speaking Aryans are considered as Mleccha. The hostility of Aryans towards the Dāsas found in *Rgveda* refers more frequently to the differences in worships and rituals than to physical differences.\(^{20}\)

David Frawley has a different view about the degradation of the Asura concept in India. According to him in the Vedic era the Brāhmaṇas and the Kṣatriyas (the priests and warriors) lived in harmony. 'Asura' was equally treated with the concept of Deva as it meant divine. Later, Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas quarreled with each other and the references to these conflicts are seen in Rgvedic hymns. In his view Asura people can be identified with Kṣatriyas or warrior people. Some of them broke the rules of Brāhmaṇas and fought against them. The conflicts arose in between the spiritual-minded priests and worldly minded kings. The development of materialistic values among Vedic people also must have been the

reason for such conflicts. But this argument on the class system by David Frawley is not acceptable as the Varṇa system was not popular in the time of Rgveda.

Analysing the Rgvedic term 'varṇa' which has undergone various interpretations in history A.C. Das refers to the discolouration of people due to the direct contact with sunrays. He opines that 'varṇa' in Rgveda never indicates caste system which was not popular in that time. Romila Thapar having examined this issue opines that 'varṇa' literally means colour and it should be taken as skin colour. But more likely, a deeper analysis would say that the term in Rgveda is used as a symbolic classifier to express differences. The references support least possibility to skin colour and many more references are of differences in language, rituals, deities and customs. Uma Chakravarti also holds the opinion that the usages of Āryavarṇa, Śūdravarṇa, Asuravarṇa etc.

[29] Scholars define the term Varṇa in different ways According to Frawley Aryan Varṇa is the quality of the spiritual classes, quality of light, truth and friendliness while the Dasyu Varṇa is the quality of unspiritual classes, darkness, falsehood, and enmity. In his view Varna means originally the social values, not hereditary caste. It is the principles followed by the social group. See David Frawley, Gods Sages and Kings, Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1993, pp.261, 262 & 264.

[30] The word Varna is derived from the root 'vr' means 'to cover' which conveys the meanings a covering, good colour or complexion, beauty, lusture, class of men, tribe, order, caste etc. in later times. See M. Monier Williams, A Sanskrit English Dictionary, Asian Educational Services, Delhi, 1999, pp.924 & 1007.

[31] A.C. Das op.cit., p.133.

seen in Vedas are used to distinguish the people from one another.32

When two people, who are speaking entirely different language and belonging to different cultures, come together, the possibility to nickname each other is quite natural. This also may be a reason for the reference to Asuras as inferior class. Many of the hymns of Rgveda testify that the Vedic people who themselves considered as of higher class always tried to subordinate the other people who did not come in their way. This subordination process of Asuras by Aryans gleaned in Vedic literature provides more clues for understanding the nature of dominance and ways of subjugation in the social and cultural history of ancient Indian society.

**Asura: Semantic Analysis**

The Rgvedic term Asura needs a detailed contemplation. In the oldest parts of Rgveda the term Asura which means 'powerful' or 'mighty' is used to denote the supreme spirit. But, in some parts of the latest hymns of Rgveda and also in Atharvaveda it acquired an extraordinary semantic change from the meaning of 'god' to 'demon'. In order to highlight the divergent meaning of the term

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Asura in Sanskrit references from some important Sanskrit works are shown below.

*Nighantu*,\(^{34}\) the dictionary to Vedas, says that the root 'asu' from which 'asura' is derived has been used there in the sense of intelligence. In *Nighantu* \(^{35}\) itself 'Asura' has been used as a synonym of cloud. Other synonyms of cloud are 'adriḥ', 'grāvā', 'gotraḥ', 'valaḥ'/'balah', 'parvataḥ', 'girīḥ', 'varāhah', 'śambaraḥ' and 'vrtraḥ'. Here the words 'adriḥ', 'parvataḥ' etc. indicate strong elements. This usage may be considered as the early meaning of 'Asura' as 'invigurator', 'powerful' etc. 'Vṛtra' is a powerful Asura in *Rgveda*, Vala and Śambara also can be identified with prominent Asuras in Vedic mythology.

Yaska in his *Nirukta*\(^{36}\) says;

असुर असुरता:। स्थानेश्वरात्म। स्थानेय ज्ञात वा। अष्टे वा असुरिति प्राण नान।
असत: सारेर भवति। तेन तदन्ते।

Asuras are called by that name because they take great pleasure in evil-place or they are expelled from their places. The meaning of 'Asu' is life i.e. breathe inhaled and it rests in the body. Thus it can

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be said that one who is endowed with the life-force (āsu⁷) within his body is known as Asura. This indicates the primary meaning of the Asura concept in Rgveda.

Amarakośa⁸ describes the term Asura as one who disturbs Sura and also the one who is not Sura i.e., 'anti-sura';

असुर: देवतंयंदनुलोक्तिप्रारिवाय:
शुचिःशयाः दितितःमुनाः पुष्पेऽद्या सूर्हिष्थः। I.1.12.

The terms Daitya, Daiteya and Danuja refer to the sons of Diti and Danu who are in opposition with the gods. Thus these terms are indicating the concept of Asuras. The term 'Pūrvadevā' conveys the idea that those who were Devas, meaningly before being degraded as Asuras.

Śabdakalpadruma³⁵ gives the derivation of the word 'Asura' thus:

असुर: पूं स्त्री (असर्वत देवान्त क्षिपपि हति। असु उत्तरः। यथा, न सुरः, विरोधे न्तु तत्त्वुक्तः।
यदा नासित सुरा वक्य स्त्री। सूर्याये असर्वत लोकते हरं उत्तरः।) सुर्विरोधी। स तु कस्यमात्
दितिगभिवधत। तत्त्वाय देव, देवते, दनुः, इन्द्रिः, दानवः।

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⁷ N.V.P. Unithiri suggests that Asura is one who is having 'asu'. He explains 'asu' as a supernatural object which is in the form of liquid. According to him the ability of attaining this 'asu' is considered to be a great honour in ancient society. See N.V.P. Unithiri Vaidikam, Katavallur Anyonyaparishat, Thrissur, Kerala, 2007, p.34.
From the above reference it is clear that Asuras are capable of expelling the Devas, because they are powerful beings. Other explanations give information regarding the later concept of Asuras as mythological beings associated with evil forces.

Vācaspatya⁴⁰ follows Śabdakalpadruma in explaining the meaning of Asura and states;

अश्विन शिवेष्ट देवान् हि असुरa।

Another interpretation says;

असुर: अश्विन शिवेष्ट देवान् हि असुरa।⁴¹

Here the meaning that one who has life within him is an Asura. The derivation agreed by Liṅgābhaṭṭa, throws light on the mythological background of the concept of Asura;

न विद्यते सुरा येषां ते असुरa। सुरा यज्ञवाण येषां न सनित हि असुरa। यज्ञवाण
अश्विन हि असुरa।⁴²

The approach of Liṅgābhaṭṭa to explain the Rgvedic term Asura seems to have developed from the later concept of the term. The explanation of the term as the person who gets no surā i.e. liquor which is an inevitable part in the sacrificial rituals is based on this

⁴¹ N.K. Rajagopal, Sanskritaniruktakosam, Kerala Bhusha Institute, Trivandrum, 1999, p.25f.
⁴² Ibid
view. The idea of one who is not a part of the oblation is called Asura seems to have been derived from the later Rgvedic references. In *Rgveda* there are so many references to the Aryans having the habit of drinking surā. It may be from this habit of drinking surā they attained the name Suras. Their opponents who were against the practice of having liquor naturally have been identified as Asuras.

Monier Williams\(^{43}\) has given a detailed etymological analysis regarding the terms 'asu' and 'Asura'. According to him, in *Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda*, 'asu' which is derived from the root 'as' means breath, life, life of the spiritual world or departed spirits. It also means respiration. Asura means spiritual, incorporeal, divine, supreme spirit etc. in *Rgveda*, *Ahtarvaveda* and *Vājasaneyiṣaṃamhitā*. He also gives the later concept of the term Asura as the chief of the evil spirit, demon, ghost and opponent of the gods. According to him 'sura' in the sense of god has been formed from the term 'Asura', as 'sita' from 'asita'.

T. Rangarajan\(^{44}\) gives the derivation of the term Asura like this;

i. \((asu = breath) + (ra = to bestow) = Asura\)

ii. \((a = not) + (sura = god) = Asura\)

\(^{43}\) M. Monier Williams, *op. cit.*, p.121.
\(^{44}\) T. Rangarajan, *Dictionary of Indian Epics*, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 2006, p.56.
Both derivations of Rangarajan show the primary as well as the secondary stage of the development of the Asura concept.

V.G. Paranjpe\textsuperscript{45} also believes that the word 'Asura' is derived from the root 'as' meaning 'prakşepaṇa' which reflects the idea of 'one who is capable of hurling down his opponent', 'mighty' etc. He gives another derivation according to which the word is derived from the noun 'asu' meaning 'life', 'vitality', 'one with vitality or might' etc. The derivations of Asura such as 'Asuratva' and 'Asurya' mean 'sovereign power'. The phrase 'asurā adevāḥ' means mighty infidels i.e. the disbelievers in religion. Paranjpe opines that Asuras were an ethnic group who opposed the Aryans. In his view, Asuras were an actual historical people. He analyses the absorption of Asuras by Aryans by quoting the references of Yadu, the ancestor of Yādava dynasty who married an Asura princess. He also quotes the reference to the marriage of Krṣṇa's grandson Aniruddha with Uṣā, the daughter of Asura Bāṇa.\textsuperscript{46} According to Paranjpe the reference to 'asuryam varṇam' in Rgveda 1.134.5 is used in the sense of 'the race of mighty'.\textsuperscript{47} The meaning of 'asurya' is sovereign power and thus the 'asuryam varṇam' can be taken as a racial connotation. It is clear from the above discussions that the root

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}
meaning of Asura upholds a variety of meanings both positive and negative.

**Rakṣas in Rgveda**

The Rgvedic term Rakṣas generally shows affinity with the newly developed meaning of Asura, i.e. a demon, in Vedic literature. In *Rgveda* the word indicates inimical forces that try to prevent the sacrifice from being carried out. In Vedas they are always malevolent in nature. Sometimes they associate with plagues, enemies, various evils, magicians, sorcerers and so on. The sorcerer sends Rakṣas or Rakṣases to perform his command against his enemies. According to W.E. Hale⁴⁶ the term Rakṣas clearly refers to non-human demonic beings. In the Vedas Rakṣases are more often opposed by Agni or Soma than Indra. In Purāṇa literature there is a description about the origin of Rākṣasa dynasty. They are said to be the descendants of Sage Kaśyapa there.⁴⁶

**Etymological Analysis of Rakṣas**

Rakṣas is a term derived from the root 'rakṣa' meaning 'to protect'. They are described in Vedas disparagingly as demonical

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beings on account of their antagonistic nature against the sacrificial cult. The other meanings of the root 'rakṣa' to which the word 'rakṣas' is traced back are 'to guard', 'to protect', 'to watch', 'to take care of', 'to save', 'to preserve' etc. In Rgveda itself, Rakṣas is described as 'anything to be guarded against' or 'warded off', 'harm', 'injure', 'damage', etc. The basic etymological meaning conveys the idea that, as they protected they are called Rākṣasas. There may arouse another question that 'protected whom?' It may be said here that due to their hostility with the gods they protected themselves from the Devas. But, the mythological background of the word laid open it in a different manner. In Mythology Asuras and Rākṣasas are encountered as obstructing gods when the latter are engaged in performing sacrifices.

Famous Vedic scholar Jyotish Nath in his study about the Vedic term Rakṣas, analyses the origin of Rakṣas and Rākṣasa from the same root 'rakṣa'. Rākṣasa is a variant of 'Rakṣas' meaning a protector, that is derived from its original nominative sense. He followed the interpretation of Yāska in explaining the Rgvedic word Rakṣas in the ablative sense meaning 'one from whom anything is to be protected'. He in his work quotes Paul Thieme for

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45 A detailed study regarding the origin of Rākṣasas has been made in the Fourth chapter of this study.
explaining the Rgvedic term Rakṣas. The Avestan word 'rāḵya' which is derived from the root 'rāḵ' is suggested as the Avestan cognate of Rgvedic Rakṣas. In his opinion, the meanings of the word 'rāḵya' in Old Slavonic are 'crooked', 'perverse' 'bad' etc. which concord with the Rgvedic meanings of Rakṣas, in positive as well as negative sense of the term.

The etymology of Rakṣas according to Śatapathabrāhmana is:

वेवान् वे चोन वनमानांत्यनपरक्षणानि। रक्षो न वक्ष्येत् हि तदु वदरक्षणः

tasmādākṣaṁ।

In the above passage Rakṣas means 'an obstructor', 'demon' etc. Here the root 'rakṣa' bears the meanings 'to withhold', 'to check' and 'to obstruct'. Yāska shows different derivations to the word Rakṣas. He says;

रक्षो रक्षितव्यमस्मात्। रहस्सिः क्षणोति या॥ रात्र नक्षत्र इति या॥

In his opinion the Rgvedic term 'Rakṣas' is derived from the root 'rakṣa'- 'to protect' in the ablative sense which means 'from whom anything is to be protected' or 'one who attacks in solitary

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51 The Śatapathabrāhmana, Vol. 1 with the commentary of Śāyanācārya and Harisvāmin, Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2006, p.11.
places' or 'one who approaches at night'. Thus the meaning of the word can be taken as 'a tremendous man capable of inflicting evil'.

In *Amarakośa* Rakṣas is mentioned as one among the many groups of divine origin who may be called 'demi-gods'. It reads;

विश्वास्थरों पररोषकरश्शोगन्तिर्विक्विन्तरा
पिशाचो गुकक्षसभो भूतोभी दैवयोगय 
I.1.11

It may be noted here that Rakṣas are given the status of Yakṣas and Gandharvas, who never are considered as evil beings.

According to *Śabdakalpadruma* the etymology is;

पू रक्षयमान रक्षा, रक्षा य राक्षस 

Here also the root meaning is 'to protect'. But here also the ablative sense is accepted in deriving the term. Thus, one from whom protection is necessary is called Rakṣasa. This statement also says that there is no difference in 'Rakṣas' and 'Rākṣasa'.

*Vācaspatya* says;

न रक्षते हविस्तानु, रक्षव्यापादानासुर, राक्षसैः

From whom Havis is to be protected is a Rakṣas. Havis is the auspicious product offered to a deity in a sacrifice. Here also the root and its meaning differ from that of *Śabdakalpadruma*.

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52 *Nighanta* and *Nirukta*, p.220f.
53 *Amarakośa*, p.57.
54 *Śabdakalpadruma*, p.110.
Monier Williams\textsuperscript{56} explains the root 'rakṣa' and also its various derivations such as 'rakṣā', "rākṣasa", 'rakṣaṇa', and 'rakṣas'. The basic meaning of 'rakṣa' includes 'to rule' (the earth or country), 'to keep a secret', 'have regard to another's feelings' and 'to spare'. 'Rakṣā', means 'guarding', 'watching', 'protecting' and 'serving'. The term is used as a proper noun to denote a 'watcher', 'keeper' etc. 'Rakṣas' also has the meaning of 'rakṣā'. 'Rakṣā' as an amulet repeatedly appears in the hymns of \textit{Atharvaveda}. It also denotes a sort of 'bracelet' and 'any mysterious token' used as a charm.

Modern scholars like Subodh Kapur\textsuperscript{57} define the term 'Rakṣas' as 'evil spirits of demon'. Sometimes Rakṣas are imagined as the attendants of Kubera and the guardians of his treasures. Its usage more frequently is seen in the sense of 'mischievous', 'cruel' and 'hideous monster', 'devouring human being', 'opponents of gods' and 'disturbing pious people'. This view can be taken as the later change of meaning of the term Rakṣas in Indian mythology.

\textsuperscript{56} Vācaspātya, Vol. IV, p.4787.
\textsuperscript{57} M. Monier Williams, p.859f.
Mcdonnel and Keith explain the term Rākṣasa as normally referring to demon in early Vedic times and it is only metaphorically applied to human enemies. In their viewpoint, no definite tribe is meant by the term 'Rakṣas'.

In Epic and Purāṇa literature the Rakṣas became identical with Asuras and denoted sect of demonical beings who are always opposed by the Devas. Uttarakanda of Vālmikirāmāyaṇa narrates a story about the origin of Rākṣasa dynasty. The story was told by the sage Agastya to Rama. According to it, the lord of creation Prajāpati created water first and generated some creatures to protect that element. He asked them to guard carefully it. Hearing this some said 'rakṣāmah' (we shall protect it) and some others said 'yakṣāmah' (we shall worship it);

रक्षामा हि देवले रक्षसास्य भवन्तु व: ।
यक्षामा हि देवले यक्षा एव भवन्तु व: || Vālmikirāmāyaṇa, VII.4.12.

Hearing their reply Prajāpati said that 'those among them who had said 'rakṣāmah' will become 'Rākṣasas' and those who had said 'yakṣāmah' will become 'Yakṣas'.

59 This topic has been discussed in detail in the Fourth chapter in this study.
60 A detailed discussion of this issue is made in the Sixth chapter of this study.
The above anecdote does not favour the argument which considers Rākṣasas as demonical beings. The word here adheres to the original root meaning. But, interestingly throughout Vālmīkiraṃāyaṇa Rākṣasas are described as demonical beings and always opposed and killed by Rāma and others. This contradiction can be seen in the case of 'Asura' also.

Asuras and Rākṣasas as Identical Beings

In Rgveda there is no indication about Asura and Rākṣasa as identical beings. But, the nature and engagements of Asuras and Rākṣasas seen in later Vedic corpus give some clue to the later concept regarding them. It was in the time of Brāhmaṇas a change in the conception of these terms i.e. the enemy of Devas, had taken place. It continued and developed through the Epics to Purāṇas. The concept that imagines Asuras and Rākṣasas are demons or evil beings has become complete in Purāṇas. A thorough examination of the Epics would reveal a significant fact that Asuras and Rākṣasas represent the aborigines of India. The frequent victory over these people by Aryans recorded in Epics is just to heighten the triumphs of the Aryan heroes.

Purāṇas are the invaluable source of the legends of the frequent struggle between Devas and Asuras and the final victory
of the former over the latter. In Purāṇas, Asuras and Rākṣasas become more mythicized and identical. Viṣṇu and Devī (Śakti) often take incarnations to vanquish Asuras and Rākṣasas. In this time the terms such as Daityas and Dānavas also became popular to denote Asuras and Rākṣasas.

It must be noted here that 'demon' is the term commonly used in English language as the translations of Asura, Rākṣasa, Dāsa, Dasyu, Daitya, Dānava etc. The term 'demon' basically meant an evil spirit. The word finds its origin in the Greek word 'daimon' which denotes a semi-divine intermediary between gods and men, a super human being, a lesser divinity, a deified hero etc. 61 N.N. Bhattacharya62 gives a fourfold division of demons, celestial, atmospheric, terrestrial and abstract. Among the division of demons, Asuras come under celestial group. Rākṣasas, Dāsas and Dasyus are included in the terrestrial group of demons. Pañis and Vṛtra are atmospheric beings. Manyu, Nirṛti, Arāti, etc. are abstract demonic beings.

**Asuras and Rākṣasas in Epics and Purāṇa Literature**

Epics and Purāṇas contain abundant information regarding the degradation of the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa from its initial

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stage. In these works these beings became identical and are depicted as representing evil forces. In Mahābhārata the Pāṇḍava Bhīma kills many Asuras throughout the story. At one context the Kaurava hero Duryodhana is mentioned as an incarnation of Kali, a Rākṣasa at one place. The concept of Asura and Rākṣasa therein reminds the Vedic concept of human Asuras. Rāmāyaṇa also contains a number of stories which deals with Rākṣasas. In this Epic, Rāma, with his brother, kills numerous Rākṣasas. Each story in Epics and Purāṇas recounts the victory of Devas over Asuras.\textsuperscript{63}

It is clear from the above discussion that Asuras and Rākṣasas were two distinct categories of people who were having different thought and culture from that of the Vedic followers. The cultural, religious and also linguistic differences made them the enemies of the followers of Veda. The Semantic study of Asura and Rākṣasa evidently attests the shift in the concepts of both through the past ages. The parallel ideas of these concepts, the names of some prominent Vedic deities etc. in Assyrian and Iranian religious traditions proclaim the commonness of culture in ancient ages.

The concept of Asura in Iranian and Assyrian civilizations and also the Rākṣas concept seen in Old Slavonic language

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, preface
\textsuperscript{65} The Sixth chapter of the present study the changing scenario of Asura and Rākṣasa concept, on the basis of the Epics and Purāṇas.
evidently indicate the common origin of civilizations in ancient world. In Vedas and Purāṇas, an apparent vision about the origin and the degradation of the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa is available. The ambivalent root meanings of both terms also help in understanding the degradation of the positive concept of these categories into negative sense.

The changes in the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa as representing the evil forces happened not only due to the cultural differences, but were the result of a strong impact of the political change in the society. The chapters ahead would analyse the data available in the early and later Vedic literature in order to understand the truth behind the concept of Asura and Rākṣasa.