CHAPTER IV

ANIMALS AND BIRDS IN VEDIC DEMONOLOGY

Although the words 'demon' and 'spirit' are synonymous there lies difference between the two. While a demon is always considered to be malevolent a spirit may be at times benevolent too. In other words a demon is an evil spirit which is both cruel and wicked, whereas, a spirit is a supernatural being who can be either a demon or an angel.

So far as the Vedic world of demons is concerned, it is inhabited by beings called Asuras, Rākṣasas, Dānavas, Yātudhānas etc. who are hostile to both men and the gods. These demons reside in the two lower regions viz, the atmospheric and the terrestrial. Demons in the Veda have been seemingly derived from pre-animistic beliefs. They are personifications of hostile powers of nature. Following primitive habits of thought all that is bad and injurious to life and society such as sickness and death of men, animals and crops, sufferings of various kinds resulting from violence, anger, wickedness, jealousy etc. are regarded as the works of evil spirits or are thought of as evil spirits themselves. Sorcery and miserliness have also been considered as an evil spirit.

Thus, the Panis who in the Veda are a class of demons are niggards. Rākṣasas may be explained as the ones "who are to be guarded against." Yātudhānas are the upholders of falsehood and afflict men in various ways. Yātus are another class of evil beings hostile to men. Again Nirṛti is a goddess of the Rakṣas—a class of demons. She has been variously called Mṛtyudevatā, Pāpadevatā and Alakṣmī. She is suffering itself.

The Vedic gods are depicted as being ever in war with these hostile forces. Indra in the Veda is Asurahā or Vṛtrahantā, Agni as a killer of evil spirit gains the epithet Rakṣohā and is specially invoked in RV(IV.4; X.87 and X.119) as Rakṣohā Agni. Agni has also been prayed through various other verses to burn Rākṣasas, Yātudhānas, Rakṣas etc. Likewise Indra, Soma, the Aśvins Brhaspati, Śūrya, Āpaḥ too are killers of Rākṣasas.

3. Cf. RV, VI.61.1.
5. Cf. RV,VII.104.15,16,24; X.87. Also see Śāyāna on them.
6. Cf. Ibid, V.12.2; VII.21.5; VII.104.21,22; VIII.60.20 etc.
7. Cf. Ibid, I.38.6; VI.74.2; VII.104.9; X.10.11; X.18.10; X.36.2,4; X.165.1; AV,VII.64.1; TA,1.28.1 etc. See Śāyāna on these texts.
8. Cf.a) KB,8.4; 10.3; SB,1.2.1; 1.2.2.13; 7.4.1.34 etc. Cf.b) Devatānukramaṇī.
9. Cf. RV,1.12.5; 1.36.20; VIII.60.20; X.87 etc.
10. Ibid, 1.133; IX.1.2; IX.37.3; IX.67.20; VII.8.6; X.162.1.2; I.129.6,11; II.23.3; SB,5.8.1.10; 1.3.4.8; TB,3.2.3.12; 3.2.4.2. etc.
All these evil beings are conceived of both anthropomorphically as well as theriomorphically. So far as the theriomorphic conceptions of the demons are concerned they take the forms of various birds such as owl, hawk, vulture or appear in the shape of dogs, apes, serpents and spiders.

At times demons are simply referred to as Mrja, i.e., wild beasts. 11 One demon mentioned thrice in the text is called Aurnavabha, i.e., a spider. 12 According to RV I.6.9 a group of Asuras called Kālakañja became spiders. 13 RV 11.14.4 refers to a demon called Uraṇa i.e., a ram. Similarly, a general designation for the demon Vītra is Ahi. 14 When used in the plural number this word means the race of demons of whom Vītra is the first born: "yatindrāhan prathamajāmāhīnām" (RV, I.32.4). 15

In RV VII.104.18 the Maruts are invoked to catch and kill the Rākṣasas who wander at night in the form of birds and spoil the sacrifices. In verse 17 we hear of a she-owl like evil creature who move stealthily at night: "pra yā jīgāti khargaleva naktamapā druha tavanām gūhanaṁ. Verses 20-22 of this very hymn speak of evil spirits:

11. Cf. RV, I.80.7; V.29.4; V.32.3.
12. Cf. Ibid, II.11.8; VIII.32.26; VIII.77.2.
13. Cf. KS, VIII. 1; TB, I.1.2.5.
15. Cf. Ibid, I.32.3.
take the form of dogs.Verse 22 refers to the large owl fiend (Ulūkayātu), small-owl fiend (Suṣulūkayātu) the dog-fiend (Śvāyātu), the Cakravāka fiend (Kokayātu), the hawk fiend (Suparnaṇayātu) and the vulture fiend (Grīdhra yātu). This Rgvedic hymn has been repeated in AV VIII.4.2.

In AV, Gandharvas and Apsaras too are looked upon as evil beings. AV,IV.37.11 refers to a pair of Gandharvas who attack women, one taking the form of a dog and the other that of an ape. AV, IX.9.5 refers to Apsarasas who are dog-like in shape. Yet another verse of AV Viz. VIII.6.2 refers to a Koka demon which is hostile to women. In AV VIII.6.10 and 11 we hear of demons who dance around human dwellings at dusk braying like donkeys: "ye sālāḥ parinṛtyanti sāyaṃ gardabhanādīnāḥ". There, we also hear of yet other evil spirits who cry like cocks and make great noise in the forests.17 In AV,IV.20.9 has been described a Pīḍaca who is a flying creature that moves across the sky but regards the earth as its abode. Again AV,II.24 speaks of two pairs of evil spirits (Kimīdins) of which one pair is made up by two such spirits called Sarpa and Anusarpa (one who looks like a serpent).

TĀ 1.28.2 invokes Agni to kill evils like Irśyā (envy), Asūyā (jealousy), Bubhūkṣā (hunger), Manyu (anger) 16. Cf. Sāyaṇa on RV,VII.104.22; AV,VIII.2.6.2. 17. Cf. HGS, 2.3.
and Krtyā (sorcery). There we are told that all these evils possess a chariot which is full of evil spirits in the shape of ugly looking parrots (Kiṃśukas). In this connection it may be recalled that in the GB Uttara Khaṇḍa (2.1) the parrot has been called Yama i.e., belonging to Yama.

In PGS 1.16.24 the disease called hooping cough is spoken of as a demon called Kūrkura (Sūnaka) and has been described as doggy. Its mother is Saramā and the two dogs of Yama are its brothers. Commentator Gadādhara calls this disease 'bhaṣanākhyāḥ vāḷgraha' i.e. a disease named after the dog which afflicts a child.

It is interesting to note that in the Vedic literature evil spirits have been at least twice conceived of as a combination of human and animal forms. In AV VIII. 6.2 one comes across a demon which is bear-necked (Ṛkṣagrīva) and in TĀ I.28.1 Nirṛtī has been depicted as vulture-headed (GrdhraśIrṇī).

While concluding this chapter it is necessary that one should take into account the birds and animals of evil augury, for such birds and animals are closely associated

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with evil spirits. Usually a bird or an animal is looked upon as unfavourable for it is believed to have been possessed by some evil spirits or is thought of as a messenger of some such spirits, or it is one who according to common belief possesses "fore-knowledge of forth coming disester."  

In RV X.165 the dove is said to be a messenger of Nirṛti. There this bird has been called "hetih pakṣini" i.e., a bird who brings in death. Commenting on this Sāyaṇa says: "pakṣini pakṣopetā hetih hananahetuh kapota." Should such a bird enter one's dwelling the gods should be invoked through RV X.165 for averting forthcoming misfortune that may befall the householder as well as his domestic animals. The very first verse of this hymn says "devaḥ kapota iṣito yadidchan duṭo nirṛtyā idamajagama tasma arcāma kṛṇavāma niśkritim saṁ nōstu dvipade catuspade/" The last verse of this hymn alludes to the evil effects of the call of an owl and offers a prayer to death "...... yasya duṭah prahita eṣa etattasmai yamāya namōstu mṛtyave/" In this connection, it may be recalled that in RV.11.42 and 43 we read invocations to a bird so that it may become Sumaṅgala and Bhadravāci. AV VI.29.2 refers to both the dove and the owl as the messengers of Nirṛti: "yau te duṭau nirṛta idametoprahita distant relatives.

20. Cf. AGS, 3.7.7.
Another bird of augural nature as mentioned in AV VIII. 64.1 is a Kṛṣṇah Sakunih, which according to Śāyaṇa means a crow. This bird has been spoken of as an indicator of misfortune (Durita) and evil (Aṁhas). Similarly, in AV IX.9.9,15,16 the beast of prey besmeared with blood and the carrion vulture are described as messengers of Yama—the god of death. The AB 2.15 on the other hand, considers all large birds as the mouth (messenger) of Nirṛti:

"nirṛter vā etanmukhaṁ yadvayāmsī yacchakunayaḥ."

It may be noted in this connection that in many parts of India a particular call of the owl is still considered as ominous. As a matter of fact, the owl has been regarded as a bird of evil omen in many other countries besides India.