

## RAKSHASAS AND ASURAS IN HINDU EPIC TALES

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### Abstract

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

Keywords: Aryans, non-Aryan, Indus Valley Civilization, mythology.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

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

By analyzing relevant parts of Hindu Vedic mythology, we can trace the social and political factors instrumental in creating the stories and discuss how they reflect the Aryans' fear of losing their cultural and religious identity. The key reason for the creation of these stories was hostility to others. Although the stories seem harmless, they emphasize social division and unrest. The Hindu mythology generally privileges the Aryans and demonizes non-Aryans. The latter are "monstrous" and worthy of harsh punishments.



In the forest, Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the great *rakshasa* king of Laṅkā, whose sole reason for abducting Sītā is to avenge the humiliation of his sister, Surpanakha, at the hand of Lakshmana, who cut off her ears and nose as a punishment for her desperate wish to marry either of the brothers. Rāvaṇa keeps Sītā in the Asoka Grove (meaning “garden”), hoping to woo her as his wife (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, 1983, pp. 75–76). After Sītā’s abduction Rama and Lakshmana go to Laṅkā and, aided by Sugriva, the *banara* king in Kiskhinda, and his armies, fight a bloody war with the *rakshasas*. Finally, Rama is successful to free Sītā, and destroys almost every able-bodied *rakshasa* in the kingdom of Laṅkā, including its king, Rāvaṇa; Rāvaṇa’s brother Kumbhakarna; and his son, Indrajit. Even though Hindu mythology portrays the *rakshasas* as cannibals, surprisingly, they did not try to eat her while she was a captive in Laṅkā. This kind of contradiction is common throughout the tale.

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

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

*Rakshasas* and *asuras* may have dark complexions, but not all of them are ugly. To prove this view is not that difficult because in the Sundara Kandam of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman describes the *rakshasa* women as “beautiful,” “moon-faced,” “radiant,” and “lotus-eyed.” (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, 1983, pp. 56–57). He perceives Mandodari, Rāvaṇa’s wife, as an attractive and beautiful woman. Searching for Sītā in the palaces of Laṅkā, he mistakes Mandodari for Sītā because he has never seen Sītā. This last example demonstrates that *rakshasas* are human; otherwise, Hanuman would not mistake her for Sītā. Another example of a racially and culturally based fabrication can be seen in the description of Rāvaṇa, who has ten heads and twenty hands. When Hanuman describes a sleeping Rāvaṇa, he describes him as having two arms and one head with a big mouth, which shows that these mythological creatures are humans who because of poetic fabrication, are seen as vicious and deformed (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, 1983, p. 32). Also, it is possible that traditional Aryan myths describe someone as having ten hands because adding hands shows the greatness of that warrior on the battlefield, not that he or she is a *rakshasa*. The Aryan goddess Durga also has ten hands, and she is considered to be the greatest warrior in Hindu mythology. According to Robert Goldman, the *Ramayana* sheds light on Hindu-Brahminical “social, ethical, moral, and political behavior” because it not only elaborates on the core *varnasrama* system but also includes “numerous examples of both powerfully normative and horrifically counter-normative characters and actions . . .” (Goldman, 2011, p. 70).

Tellingly, even though Rāvaṇa is portrayed as a savage, angry, and impatient anti-hero, many in southern India still worship him. The author of *Ramayana: A Journey*, Ranchor Prime, mentions that after slaying the *rakshasa* king, Rama himself praises Rāvaṇa for his “courageous character and [for] being a gifted” warrior “who deserved to be buried with reverence (Prime, 1997, p. 71). Why, then, did Valmiki portray Rāvaṇa as

remorseless and immoral, a gigantic, vicious-looking *rakshasa* king with ten heads who has an immense appetite for sexual pleasure, is loved by many disgusting and deformed women, and would not hesitate to steal someone else's wife to avenge his own sister's unjust punishment? The answer is simple. It was to demonstrate the struggle between two races, and the winners became the gods and the defeated ones became *rakshasas*.

Many paradoxes exist in the *Ramayana* and other Hindu myths, but one element remains constant: the physical appearances of both groups. The *devas* are fair and sometimes have a golden aura (as Sītā was described by Valmiki), with blue eyes and excellent proportions (Valmiki, trans. Tapasyananda, 1983, p. 79). The *rakshasas* and *asuras* conversely have dark bodies, red eyes, and long black hair. They are sometimes deformed, often harmful, and cannibalistic: "a nocturnal power, a demon of darkness, and therefore evil," wrote E. Washburn Hopkins in his book *Epic Mythology* (Hopkins, 1915, p. 38).

Yet Hopkins shows that the dissimilarity of physical appearances lessened over time. The *rakshasas* who appear in the *Mahabharata* (written earlier than the *Ramayana*) are described as more horrific than those in the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata*, marriage between Aryans and *rakshasas* is common, but not at all common in the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata*, the ogre Hidimba marries the Pandava prince Bhima and bears a half-ogre and half-human son, Ghototkaca; according to the *Manvantara*, all *rakshasas* are sons of Pulastya, the fourth son of Brahma and one of the greatest sages and *Saptarishi*.

When the Aryans first arrived in India, they had to marry a few non-Aryan or *rakshasas* and *asuras* women and have families. After the conquest of the northern part of India, however, when they fully settled down, they felt the need to structure their society. They divided into four classes called *chaturvarna* that are based on the work they provided. According to *chaturvarna*, society comprises four classes, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, based on the work each did. The Brahmins were the scholars, teachers, and priests. The Kshatriyas were the protectors, and they were the kings, governors, warriors, and soldiers. The Vaishyas were mostly merchants, farmers, and businessmen, and the Shudras, the lowest class, were laborers and service providers.

Nevertheless, none of the classes contained the non-Aryans or *rakshasas* and *asuras*, which could only mean that they were outcasts and not considered part of Aryan society. They were simply the others. These aboriginal races of India were subsequently transformed into evil or good beings depending on whether or not they allied with the Aryans (Vaidya, 1906, p. 140). For instance, not only did Vibhisana, Rāvaṇa's youngest brother, become Rama's ally, helping him kill Rāvaṇa, but after the death of Rāvaṇa, Rama spared his life and made him king of Laṅkā.

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

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

presence of *rakshasas* or *asuras* at the altar was considered unholy and was prevented at any cost. Second, these two races had separate religious faiths. According to historians, the non-Aryans created idols, unlike the Aryans, who prayed around the fire and did not create idols.

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

### 3 CONCLUSION

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

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