

DEMONS IN VEDIC LITERATURE

In Hinduism, demons are often considered to be anthropomorphic. They can be classed into four basic categories; these are abstract, celestial, atmospheric, and terrestrial demons. Although demons may be classed in these groups the divisions between categories are not clearly delineated. They are often named by their appearance or activity (see Bhattacharyya 35) and it is thought that some groups of demons, such as the Dasas and Dasyus, may have been based on indigenous peoples that were in opposition to the Aryans (Bhattacharyya 44). There are a few demons of divine lineage. While, for the most part, these spirits were considered to be forces of evil there are some terrestrial spirits that were thought to be helpful at harvest, or in battle. Arbudi is an example of one such demon who was thought to assist tribesmen in times of war by causing fear in the enemy (see Bhattacharyya 35).

The abstract demons are not often conceived as having a physical form. Rather they are usually thought of in a more impersonal way as hostile powers that fly about in the air. They are intangible substances that cause disease, problems in childbirth, and guilt. One of the primary tasks of sorcery was to deflect these demons (Bhattacharyya 35). The Aratis are abstract demons of illiberality mentioned in the *Rg Veda* (Bhattacharyya 36). They are always conceived as feminine. Nirriti is another example of an abstract demon thought of as the antithesis of Rta (Bhattacharyya 36). Another group of injurious spirits mentioned in the *Rg Veda* are the Druhs (Bhattacharyya 36). In the *Atharva Veda* fever is conceived as being a demon (Bhattacharyya 40).

Although not necessarily considered as demons, disembodied spirits also may be considered hostile forces. The most common forms of such spirits are Bhutas, Pretas, and Pisacas. Bhutas are hostile spirits and although modern usage of the word denotes a malevolent

spirit of the dead that is most likely not its early meaning (Bhattacharyya 36). The Preta are thought of as souls in waiting and are not necessarily evil or malignant (Bhattacharyya 38). The third group, the Pisacas, are described as being in opposition to the Pitrs in the later Samhitas (Bhattacharyya 39). (A common feature of different classes or groups of demons is that they are typically conceived as being in opposition to another specific class or group of beings. So the Pisacas are enemies of the Pitrs, the Asura enemies of the gods and so on.) The Pisacas are often referred to as *kavyad*, which means “eaters of raw flesh,” and are thought of as infesting homes and villages. There are many incantations against them (Bhattacharyya 39). Agni is often invoked to restore the sick whose flesh is eaten by the Pisacas (MacDonell 238).

Examples of celestial demons are the Asura. They are considered to be the primary adversaries of the gods. They only appear as the enemies of men on rare occasion (MacDonell 226). In the Brahmanas the Asura are associated with darkness, thus the days belong to the gods and the nights to the Asura (Bhattacharyya 46). However, the term *asura* did not always mean demon. In early hymns in the *Rg Veda* the word appears to have been translated as lord, denoting a leader who is respected and commands some kind of fighting force. Those beings called *asura* may also have been believed to wield a kind of magical power called *maya* (Wash 52). It is not until the *Atharva Veda* and the Brahmanas that the term comes to mean demon exclusively (Wash 114, 170). The Asura are also described as the offspring of Prajapati and in many of the passages in the Brahmanas are represented as superior to the gods in the arts of civilized life. They are sometimes thought of as being the elder brothers of the gods (Bhattacharyya 47). The gods and the Asura are often fighting with each other and during fights between the two groups the gods are often repeatedly defeated by the Asura due to a lack of leadership (Bhattacharyya 47). However, ultimately the gods win the conflicts (O’Flaherty 58).

The Asura are said to be defeated because they do not follow the correct method of sacrifice.

The main contest between the gods and Asura is over immortality (Bhattacharyya 48). There is one legend where the gods and Asura collaborate and churn the ocean to produce an elixir of immortality. The gods then trick the Asura out of their share of the elixir (O'Flaherty 61).

Counted among the atmospheric demons are the Panis. They are primarily considered to be enemies of Indra, although they are also enemies of Agni, Soma, Brhaspati, and Angirases. They are often mentioned as a group and are known for their cows and great wealth (MacDonell 227). One hymn in the *Rg Veda* describes how Indra steals the cattle belonging to the Panis (Bhattacharyya 43). Among the individual atmospheric demons mentioned, one of the most important is Vrtra. His name is derived from the root *vr* meaning “to cover” or “encompass”. Thus he is said to encompass the waters and rivers. He is conceived to be a serpent in form and references are made to his head, jaws, and hissing. He is also described as being without hands or feet. Vrtra is said to have powers over lightning, mist, hail, and thunder. His mother is Danu. His chief adversary is Indra. It is said that Indra was born to slay him. He is believed to have a hidden home where he escaped the waters that Indra released. Some scholars believe that Vrtra is possibly a demon of drought while others propose that he was originally a frost and winter demon (Bhattacharyya 43,44). In the Brahmanas Vrtra is interpreted as the moon and is believed to be swallowed by the sun (representing Indra) at the new moon (MacDonell 231).

The Dasas and Dasyu are classed as either atmospheric (MacDonell 228,229) or terrestrial demons (Bhattacharyya 35). Both groups are considered to be enemies of Indra. The Dasas are mentioned in the Samhitas and Brahmanas and their name means “slave” or “servant”(Wash 161,162). Susna is a Dasas mentioned in the *Rg Veda*. He is described as a horned serpent and is thought to be a demon of drought. He shares some of the characteristics of

Vrtra (Bhattacharyya 45). The Dasas are similar to the Dasyu. The Dasyu are described as vowless (*avrata*), and possessing tricks. They are not to be trusted. The Dasyu are said to seek to scale heaven and are defeated by Indra (Wash 146-150).

The Raksasas are terrestrial demons. The term is often used as a generic name for all terrestrial demons. They are the enemies of mankind (Bhattacharyya 41). In the *Rg Veda* they are always said to be evil and are something to be rid of (Wash 140,144). They have the forms of vultures, dogs, owls, and other birds. As birds they are often thought of as flying around at night (MacDonell 236). They are also capable of taking human form. In human form they molest women, and hurt children (Bhattacharyya 41). They are considered dangerous during pregnancy and childbirth and at weddings. During a wedding little staves are shot in the air with the purpose of injuring Raksasas in the eye. They are believed to be able to enter a person through the mouth and cause disease, madness, and destroy the powers of speech (MacDonell 236). They are dominant in the evening and at night. Raksasas are described as dancing around houses in the evening making loud noises and drinking out of skullcaps. They hate prayer and often attack sacrifices (Bhattacharyya 41). Spells can be found in the *Atharva Veda* for nullifying the sacrifices of an enemy by using Raksasas to disrupt the sacrifice (MacDonell 237). The *Rg Veda* mentions people known as *raksoyuj* (yoker of Raksasas) who are believed to be capable of invoking a Raksasa to injure others (Bhattacharyya 42). When in human form, Raksasas typically have some gross deformity such as being three headed, two mouthed, bear necked, horned, five footed, or four eyed. They can be male or female and are often associated with the colors blue, yellow, or green. They can also have families and kingdoms and are considered to be mortal (MacDonell 236). In two hymns in the *Rg Veda* the Raksasas are more clearly defined as being either *yatus* or *yatudhanas*. *Yatus* are responsible for creating confusion

at sacrifices and *yatudhanas* are eaters of the flesh of horses and men, and drink cow's milk.

Raksasas are considered to have no power in the east as the rays of the rising sun disperse them.

A falling meteor was considered to be the embodiment of a Raksasa. Agni is the god most often invoked to oppose them by burning them (Bhattacharyya 42).

The pantheon of demons is indeed varied and interesting. There are many different groups of demons each having unique roles in the world of myth and stories presented in the Vedic literature.

RESOURCES

Bhattacharyya, N. N. (2000) *Indian Demonology*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

MacDonell, A. (2004) *History of Vedic Mythology*. New Delhi: Sanjay Prakashan.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger (1976) *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Wash, Edward Hale (1986) *Asura in Early Vedic Religion*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Indra

Agni

Soma

Rg Veda

Brahmanas

Atharva Veda

Samhitas

Prajapati

Vrtra

Incantations against demons

Raksoyuj

Wedding rituals

Rituals surrounding pregnancy and childbirth

Battles between gods and *asura*

Pitrs

Maya

Noteworthy Websites

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Hindu_demons

<http://larryavisbrown.homestead.com/files/xeno.mahabcomm.htm>

<http://www.assiah.net/demonology-and-demons/dictionary/p/pretas.htm>

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