

Rakṣas Concept in Vedas– A Semantic Study

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Abstract

As being the oldest available source of literature Rgveda provides many valuable knowledge systems on ancient Indian thought and culture. Thus, the engagements of Rakṣas seen in Rgveda can be taken as their primary concept. In the primary stage the concept traced its original root meaning. By the end of Vedic literature, the nature of the above concept became opposite sense of meaning. In Epics and Puranic stories, they are identified with negative connotation. This paper aims to discuss a semantic study of Rakṣas to trace out the real nature of the concept in the yester years.

Keywords : *Root meaning of Rakṣas. Etymology of the word Rakṣas. Change in the concept through history. Cultural difference of the people that caused in the change of the conceptual meaning of Rakṣas.*

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Introduction

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. Hale¹ 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 Purana literature there is a description about the origin of Rākṣasa dynasty. They are said to be the descendants of Sage Kaśyapa there.

Divergent Meanings of Rakcas

Rakṣas is a term derived from the root 'Rakṣ' means a 'protector'. They are being described in Vedas disparagingly as demonical beings for their antagonistic nature to be sacrificial cults. The meaning of the root 'Rakṣa' to which the word 'Rakṣas' is traced back means 'to guard', 'protect', 'watch', 'take care of', 'save', 'preserve' etc. In *Rgveda* itself Rakṣas is described as 'anything to be guarded against' or 'warded off', 'harm', 'injury', 'damage', etc. Thus, the etymological meaning may be as: as they protected, they are called Rakṣasas. There may arise another question that 'protected whom?' It may be said 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 when gods were engaged in performing sacrifice Asuras and Rakṣasas obstruct them can be seen.² The etymology of the word Rakṣas puts the import of the term into some doubts should also be noted here.

Monier Williams³ gives a detailed analysis regarding the root 'rakc' and also its various derivations such as 'Rakṣa', 'Rakṣasa', 'rakcaGa', 'Rakṣa' etc. The etymological meaning of 'Rakṣ' is 'to rule' (the earth or country), 'to keep a secret', 'have regard to another's feelings', 'to spare' etc. 'Rakṣa', means 'guarding', 'watching', 'protecting' and 'serving'. The term used as a noun to denote a 'watcher', 'keeper' etc. 'Rakṣa' also means as that of 'Rakṣa'. He analyzes the Rgvedic meaning of 'Rakṣas' as 'anything to be guarded against' or 'warded off', 'evil being' or 'care', 'preservation', 'security' etc. It also denotes a sort of 'bracelet' or 'amulet', 'any mysterious token', used as a charm. 'Rakṣa' as an amulet has been variously seen in the hymns of *Atharvaveda*.

Famous Vedic scholar Jyotish Nath⁴ has done a detailed study about the Vedic term Rakṣas. He in his work quotes Paul Thieme in explaining the term Rakṣas in *Rgveda* that the word 'raxsya' which derived from the root 'rak' is considered to be the Avestan cognate of Rgvedic Rakṣas. The meanings of the word 'raxsya' in Old Slavonic are 'crooked', 'preserve', 'bad' etc., which concord with the Rgvedic meanings of Rakṣas both in positive as well as negative sense of meaning.

The etymology of Rakṣas according to *ŚatapathabrāhmaṆā*⁵ is:

देवान् वै यज्ञेन साजमानंस्तानसुररक्षानि ररक्षुः-
'न यक्ष्यदेव' इति । तद् यदरक्षन् तस्माद्रक्षांसि ॥

From the above reference Rakṣas means 'an obstructor', 'demon' etc. Here the root 'Rakṣ' bears the meanings 'to withhold', 'to check' and to obstruct.

In Yāska's⁶ words;

रक्षो रक्षितव्यमस्मात् । रहसि क्षणोति वा । रात्रौ नक्षत इति वा ।

In his opinion the Rgvedic term 'Rakṣas' is derived from the root 'Rakṣ'- to protect in the ablative sense which means 'one from whom anything is to be protected or he attacks in solitary places or one who approaches at night.'⁶ Thus the real meaning of the word can be taken as a tremendous man capable of inflicting evil.

According to *Śabdakalpadruma*⁷ the etymology is;

पुं रक्षन्त्यस्मात् रक्षः, रक्ष एवं राक्षसः

Here the root traced the meaning 'to protect'. One from who protection is necessary is called Rākcaśa. It is clear from this statement that there is no difference in 'Rakṣa' and 'Rākcaśa'.

*Vācaspatya*⁸ says;

न रक्षयते हविरस्मात् रक्ष व्यानादानेऽसून् राक्षसैः ।

One from whom Havis is to be protected is considered as a Rakṣas. Havis is considered as an auspicious product in a sacrifice. In this book also get the root meaning as that of *Śabdakalpadruma* i.e., 'to protect'.

But modern scholars like Subodh Kapur⁹ defines the term 'Rakṣas' as the names of 'evil spirits of demon'. Sometimes Rakṣas are imagined as the attendants of Kubera and the guardians of his treasures. More frequently as 'mischievous', 'cruel' and 'hideous monsters', 'devouring human being', 'oppose gods' and 'disturb pious people. This view can be taken as the later change of meaning of the term Rakṣas in Indian mythology.

Mcdonnel and Keith¹⁰ explain that the term Rākcaśa normally refer to demon in early Vedic times which is only metaphorically applied to human enemies. In their view point no definite tribe is meant by the term 'Rakṣa'.

Epic and Puranic Literature

In Epic and PurāṆa literature the term Rakcas become identical with Asuras and denoted as a sect of demonical beings who are always opposed by the Devas. There is a story in the UttarakāṆḍa of *VātmīkirāmāyaṆa* about the origin of Rakṣasa dynasty. The story was told by sage Agastya to Rāma. According to *VātmīkirāmāyaṆa* the lord of creature Prajāpati created water first and generated some creatures to protect that element. He asked to guard carefully that element.

Hearing this some said ‘Rakṣāma’ (we shall protect it) and some others said ‘Yakcāma’ (we shall worship it);

रक्षामि इति यैरुक्तं राक्षसास्ते भवन्तु वः।

यक्षाम इति येस्क्तं यक्षा एवं भवन्तु वः॥ (VātmīkirāmāyaGaVII.4.12)

Hearing their replay Prajapati said that those among them who had said ‘rakcāma’ will become ‘Rākcasas’ and those who had said ‘Yakcāma’ will become ‘Yakcas’.

Conclusion

From the above discussion there is no clue for Rākcasasas demonical beings in Vedic age. The word traced the original root meaning there. By the time of Epic literature i.e. in VātmīkirāmāyaGa Rākcasas are described as demonical beings and always opposed and killed by Rāma and others. This contradiction can also be seen in the case of ‘Asura’ as both positive as well as negative sense of meaning in Indian mythology. I later Vedic literature Asuras and Rākcasas became identical and identified as opposite to gods.

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