

Ásura and its derivatives in *Ṛgveda*.

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Abstract

This paper proposes novel senses for the word *ásura* and its derivatives *āsurá*, *asuryà*, and *asuratvá* as occurring in *Ṛgveda*.

Keywords: *asura*; *asurya*; *Rigveda*

An excellent and detailed review of prior interpretations of *ásura* and its derivatives can be found in [Hal86, pp. 1–37]. W.E. Hale has not only analyzed prior interpretations, but also examined all occurrences of these words in all *Samhitā*-s, *Brāhmaṇa*-s and in Avesta. He gives the following senses for words in question as occurring in *Ṛgveda*:

An asura seems to have been a lord or leader chosen by his people who maintained his authority by their continuing to support and follow him.¹

Such a lord could be human or divine...²

I shall render *asuryàm* and *asuratvá* by “asuraship”, *asuryà*- and *āsurá*- by “asuric”,... The reader however should note how appropriate “lordship, right to rule, authority” and “lordly” would be for translations.³

These senses were adopted in the recent complete translation of *Ṛgveda* by S.W. Jamison and J.P. Brereton [JB14]. T.Ya.Elizarenkova in her translation [Eliz89], [Eliz95], [Eliz99] opted to leave these words mostly without an interpretation and rendered them thus:

ásura as “Асура”, and once as “владыка” (lord),
asuryà as “асурский” (asuric), “асурская сила” (asuric strength, power), “асурское господство” (asuric dominance), “асурская власть” (asuric authority), “асурское величие” (asuric greatness or majesty), “качество Асуры” (quality of asura), “природа Асуры” (nature of asura),
asuratvá as “могущество”, “асурская сила” (might, asuric power),
asuratvá as “природа Асуры” (nature of asura).

What differs this study from the one made by W.E.Hale is, first, restricting analysis only to *Ṛgveda*, and, second, seeking to interpret these words from *adhyātma* (reference to individual) perspective. As a result, more specific senses are obtained.

¹[Hal86, p.67]

²[Hal86, p.180]

³[Hal86, p.54]

Ásura and its derivatives occur in *R̥gveda* in 131 *ṛk*-s; without counting repeats — in 109. *Ásura* as masc. noun occurs 71 times, *āsurá* as masc. noun 5 times (4 if without repeats), *asuryà* as neuter noun or adjective 25 times, *asuryà* as fem. noun or adjective 3 times, *asuratvá* as neuter noun 23 times (2 if without repeats), *asuratvā* as fem. noun once, *asuraghná* as adjective two times, *asurahá* as adjective once.

Ásura occurs in the following hymns:

1.24.14, 1.35.7, 1.35.10, 1.54.3, 1.64.2, 1.108.6, 1.110.3, 1.122.1, 1.126.2, 1.131.1, 1.151.4, 1.174.1,
2.1.6, 2.27.10, 2.28.7, 2.30.4
3.3.4, 3.29.14, 3.38.4, 3.53.7, 3.56.8,
4.2.5, 4.53.1,
5.12.1, 5.15.1, 5.27.1, 5.41.3, 5.42.1, 5.42.11, 5.49.2, 5.51.11, 5.63.3, 5.63.7, 5.83.6,
7.2.3, 7.6.1, 7.30.3, 7.36.2, 7.56.24, 7.65.2, 7.99.5,
8.19.23, 8.20.17, 8.25.4, 8.27.20, 8.42.1, 8.90.6, 8.96.9, 8.97.1,
9.73.1, 9.74.7, 9.99.1,
10.10.2, 10.11.6, 10.31.6, 10.53.4, 10.56.6, 10.67.2, 10.74.2, 10.82.5, 10.92.6, 10.93.14, 10.96.11,
10.99.12, 10.124.3, 10.124.5, 10.132.4, 10.138.3, 10.151.3, 10.157.4, 10.177.1;

āsurá in 3.29.11, 5.40.5, 5.40.9, 5.85.5, 10.131.4;

asuryà in 1.134.5, 2.23.2, 2.27.4, 2.33.9, 2.35.2, 3.38.7, 4.16.2, 4.42.2, 5.10.2, 5.66.2,
6.20.2, 6.30.2, 6.36.1, 6.74.1, 7.5.6, 7.21.7, 7.22.5, 7.65.1, 7.66.2,
8.25.3, 8.101.12, 9.71.2, 10.50.3, 10.54.4, 10.105.11;

asuryà in 1.167.5, 1.168.7, 7.96.1;

asuratvá in 3.55.1–22, 10.55.4;

asuratvā in 10.99.2;

asuraghná in 6.22.4, 7.13.1;

asurahá in 10.170.2.

The word *ásura* has no occurrences that would provide a definition of it either explicitly or by means of an analogy, so the sense shall be guessed from analysis of co-occurring words. Here is what can be gleaned about *ásura* and *āsurá*:

- A1. Some deva-s are called *ásura*, namely *Agní* (10–12⁴ times), *Váruṇa* (9–11 times), *Sóma* (8–10 times), *Índra* (5–7 times), *Mitrá* (4–5 times and only together with *Váruṇa*), *Savitṛ* (4 times), *Rudrá* (1–3 times), *Dyaus* (1–3 times), *Pūṣán*, *Marút*-s, and maybe *Parjanya* once each. There are expressions giving both definitions “deva” and “asura” at the same time (8.25.4b *samrājā devāvásurā*, 5.42.11d *devám ásuram̐ duvasya*);

⁴exact number is difficult to establish due to obscurity of expressions so characteristic of *R̥gveda*

A2. there are *ásura*-s that are not *deva*-s (8.96.9c *anāyudhāso ásurā adevāḥ*, 10.82.5b *paró devébbhir ásurair yád ásti*);

A3. There might be more than two *ásura*-s at the same time (1.108.6b, 1.64.2b);

A4. an *ásura* can possess and employ *māyá* (power to configure, to frame, or to shape mental, physiological, and, may be, physical processes) (5.63.3d, 5.63.7ab — refer to *Mitrá-Váruṇa*, 10.177.1a), or be out of it (10.124.5a). Some non-*deva*-s could possess the same *māyá* as *ásura*-s (10.138.3c — referring to *Pipru*, but there is no reason to conclude that such possession makes him an *ásura*);

A5. an *ásura* can have a “garment” (*nirṇíj*) (8.19.23c, 9.99.1c, 9.71.2d);

A6. *práçetas* (foresighted, forethoughtful, vigilant, wary) used as an adjective to *ásura* 3 times (1.24.14c, 4.53.1b, 8.90.6a) referring to *Váruṇa*, *Savitṛ*, and *Índra* respectively;

A7. *sunīthá* (giving good guidance) is used as an adjective to *ásura* 2 times (1.35.7b, 1.35.10a) referring to *Savitṛ*;

A8. *viśvávedas* (whose knowledge is embracing everything) used as an adjective to *ásura* 2 times (8.27.20, 8.42.1a) referring to all *deva*-s and *Váruṇa*;

A9. *cétiṣṭha* (most attentive) used as an adjective to *ásura* referring to *Agní* (5.27.1b);

A10. *sudákṣa* (one whose mental powers are strong) used once as an adjective to *ásura* referring to *Agní* (7.2.3a);

A11. *Váruṇa* being *ásura* together with *Mitrá* is characterized as “unimpaired guide” (7.36.2c *padavír ádabdho*);

Ásura occurs in the context of the following actions:

A12. “knowing, finding” (*svarvíd* in 10.56.6a and *veda* 9.74.7b);

A13. “revealing, making manifest” (referring to *Índra* 10.96.11cd *prá pastyàm asura haryatám gór āviṣkr̥dhì*);

A14. *Váruṇa* is also called *ásura* when searching (*iṣṭí* — 2.28.7a) for “him who is doing evil”;

A15. *Mitrá* being called *ásura* together with *Váruṇa* is characterized as “arraying people” (7.36.2d *jánaṃ ca mitró yatati*).

A16. “distributing, arranging, disposing” *vidhartṛ* (7.56.24b *jánānāṃ yó ásuero vidhartā*).

As an adjective *ásura* characterizes:

- A17. *Agní* (7.30.3c) or an invocation of adepts that can reach the Heaven (10.74.2a);
 A18. a *samráj* (he who is a ruler of everyone) — *Agní* (7.6.1a), *Mitrá-Váruṇa* (8.25.4b), *Váruṇa* (8.42.1).

Adjectives specifying *ásura* are:

- A19. *márya* (transitory) (1.64.2b) is used to characterize *Marút*-s as *ásura*-s of *Rudrá*;
 A20. *ugrá* (violent, fierce, mighty) used as an adjective to more than two *ásura*-s (10.151.3ab);
 A21. “protecting, guarding” (1.174.1b addressing *Índra rákṣā nṛṇ pāhy àsura*);
 A22. “displaying power” (10.11.6d *taviṣyáte ásuvo vépate matí*) and “submitting to Indra” (1.131.1a *índrāya hí dyaúr ásuvo ánamnata*);
 A23. an *ásura* could be *suśeva* (comforting) (5.15.1c referring to *Agní*); he could be bestowing well-being (*svastí*) per 5.51.11c referring to *Pūṣán*;

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- A24. an *ásura* could have adepts (*vedhás*-es — *Índra* in 4.16.2c, *Rudrá* in 8.20.17b);
 A25. an *ásura* could have heroes (*vīrá*-s) (1.122.1c, 2,30.4ab, 3.53.7b, 3.56.8b, 7.99.5d, 10.10.2c, 10.67.2b) which in some cases are called *Aṅgiras*-es (3.53.7b, 10.10.2c, 10.67.2b);
 A26. *Índra* and *Viṣṇu* sometimes slay *ásura*’s heroes (7.99.5d)
 A27. deva-s sometimes slay *ásura*-s (10.157.4a) or overcome them by means of an utterance or command (*vácas*) (10.53.4ab)

Following characteristics seem to be unrelated to concept of *ásura*:

- A28. *átūrtapanthas* (having a path that cannot be obstructed) and *mayobhú* (bringing balance) is used as an adjective to *ásura* in 5.42.1d referring most likely to *Sóma*;
 A29. “causing rain ” *apó niṣiñcánn ásurah pitá nah* 5.83.6d referring probably to *Parjanya*; similar statement is in 5.63.3d referring to *Mitrá-Váruṇa*;

The word *āsurá* is assumed to be derived from *ásura* and has few occurrences.

- A30. *Váruṇa* is called *āsurá* in 5.85.5ab, *Agní* in his form *tánū napát* is called *āsurá* in 3.29.11a;
 A31. *Námuci*, who was an adversary of *Índra*, is called *āsurá* in 5.85.5ab;

A32. *āsurá* is a characterization of *svàrbhānu* in 5.40.5, 5.40.9 but since *svàrbhānu* does not occur anywhere else in *Rgveda*, the implied meaning is unclear.

Here are statements that can be extracted about *asuryà* from *Rgveda*:

- Y1. *asuryà* is compared to clothes that are put on and there are multiple *asuryà*-s that are worn one-after-another (3.38.7c referring to *Agní*);
- Y2. there are many *asuryà*-s (3.38.7c, 4.42.2b, 6.20.2b, 10.54.4a);
- Y3. several *asuryà*-s can be “primary” (*prathamá* 4.42.2b referring to *Váruṇa*);
- Y4. *asuryà* is something separable from an *ásura* (2.33.9 referring to *Rudrá*);
- Y5. *asuryà*-s are not only put on by also maintained (*dhṛ*) (4.42.2b, 6.36.1d, 6.74.1a);
- Y6. *Ādityá*-s protect *asuryà* by means of “long-lasting vision” (*dīrghádhī*) (2.27.4c);
- Y7. *asuryà*-s can be granted (*dhā*) as deva-s granted every *asuryà* to *Índra* (6.20.2ab);
- Y8. *asuryà* is said to “spring up” in *Agní*;
- Y9. as an adjective, *asuryà* defines “the sun” (*Sūrya*) as “put before deva-s pervading (*vibhu*) unimpaired light” (8.101.12cd);
- Y10. *asuryà* is something that can be said “to be pointed (attention-wise) and volatile” (*ācítā jigatnú* 7.65.1d referring to *Mitrá-Váruṇa*);
- Y11. *Bṛhaspáti* is called *asuryà* in 2.23.2a;
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- Y12. *asuryà* is something that can be said “to be undecayed” (*ákṣita* 7.65.1 referring to *Mitrá-Váruṇa*);
- Y13. an *asuryà* can be combined with “unbroken supremacy” (5.66.2ab referring to *Mitrá-Váruṇa*);
- Y14. it is stated twice that *Mitrá-Váruṇa* have “overwhelming power” (*prámahas*) for the sake of *asuryà* (7.66.2bc, 8.25.3ab);
- Y15. *Agní* in his form *apáṁ nápāt* 2.35.2cd begot all *bhúvanā* (places of existence) of *ari* through extensiveness of *asuryà*;
- Y16. *Agní*’s resourcefulness helps to encounter *asuryà* (7.5.6ab);
- Y17. *Vāyú* protects against *asuryà* (1.134.5e);
- Y18. *asuryà* is an adjective to *varṇa* (9.71.2b);
- Y19. *asuryà* is an adjective to *vájra* (10.50.3c).

From statements A1–A17, Y1–Y11 and *adhyātma* (reference to individual) perspective adopted here, it is possible, by treating the statements as a riddle, to conjecture that

A. *ásura* is “a guiding spirit”.

B. *asuryà* is “a guise or an aspect of a guiding spirit”.

Using analogies to explain the notion of *asuryà*, it might be said that a presence of *asuryà* is like a hound leading hunter to prey, like sight of blood instigating fight-or-flight reaction, like a mirror reflecting rays of the sun into a dark cave.

If the above conjecture is accepted, the following can be guessed from the statements A1–A27 and Y1–Y18:

an *ásura* is a vigilant and knowledgeable source of guidance (A6–A13);

an *ásura* provides guidance not with clues, hints, obscurations or commands but through framing perception, cognition and physiological processes with integral, vision-like suggestions (A4, A5, Y6, Y9, 7.13.1ab where *Agní* characteristics *dhiyamdhā* and *asuraghna* are given next to each other) or through changed state of mind/body (“the fence of *Savitṛ*” in 4.53.1);

the said framing can be fleeting and luminous-apparition-like (Y10, 10.99.2a *dyutā vidyūtā*, A18), or persistent and obsession-like (Y6, A19, Y14);

ásura role itself can be fleeting (A18), or lasting by having its guise maintained (Y5, Y12);

an important power of *ásura* falls into category of *māyā* — “the power to frame, shape or configure perception, thinking, and physiological states”. But, unlike *māyā* of *Vṛtrá*, *ásura*’s acts through casting light on, through illumination of inner states, thoughts, motives, physiological changes, as contrasted with other ways to frame, shape of configure them — through hiding or covering, through emphasis on a subset of possible alternatives, through unsubstantiated assumptions, etc.

the guiding “light” of *asuryà*, when occurring on the mental plane, is not necessarily visual, but can express itself as an auditory impression (1.54.3c, 10.74.2b, 1.126.2d), as a phantom smell, as somatic signals (*Sóma* and *Rudrá* called *ásura*-s send those — 6.74.1b *pra vām iṣṭáyó’ramaśnuvantu*), etc.;

an *asuryà* can be represented by aspects of an animal behavior (10.54.4ab stating that four *asuryà*-s of *Índra* are those of a buffalo);

an *ásura* can put on a guise (also called a garment *nirṇij*) and remove it as fast and easily as flames of fire surge up and subside when drops of ghee fall into it (8.19.23); this ease and flash-like employment of *asuryà*-s is most characteristic of *Índra*.

Several further statements about *ásura* and *asuryà* can deduced from the above but without support in the *ṛk*-s of *Ṛgveda*:

unlike general awareness, wakefulness, or dreaming — *asuryà*-s are specific in their guidance — internally stirred ones (*vipaścítah* initiates?) see with the mind “a small bird” while adepts look for the track of “the light” that, being a part of *ásura*’s *māyā*, propels it (10.177.1);

when *asuryà*-s manifest in the physiological plane, they predispose the body to particular state transitions: for example, when one is shivering from cold, the mere sight of fire close by might trigger dilation of blood vessels and feeling warmer as a result;

if *ásura* has to be interpreted on the external plane, it seems to refer to a leader of a group of warriors, a mastermind behind group's operation.

The word *āsurá* seems to mean “one of *ásura*-s” or “an agent of an *ásura*”.

The word *asuryà* occurs only once as adjective of *Sárasvatī* in 7.96.1a defining her as *asuryà* of flowing waters.

The word *asuratvá* occurs only in two slightly different phrases — as a refrain in 3.55 and in 10.55.4d. *Asuratvá* can be derived from *ásura* by adding secondary suffix *-tva* thus giving to it sense “the state of being *ásura*”. The refrain of 3.55 *mahád devánām asuratvám ékam* can be rendered in at least two ways by interpreting differently the word *ekam*. It can be understood in the given context as adjectives “one and only”, “unique”, or as an adverb “when single, alone”. The first option was used in [JB14] but does not agree with A3 or Y2. Two other options do not result in a contradiction with any of the A- and Y- statements.

An example of *ásura* in action where words serve as *asuryà* seems to be given in 3.55.7c and 3.55.8abc:

They whose phrases are warlike bring forth wars.

...

He regards as coming near everything turned towards [him]

as if [it was coming from] the nearest fighting [him] warrior.

Inside, the mental gesture follows attaining it's aim extra of a cow (=word).

An observation of von Bradke that *ásura* tends to have positive connotations when used in singular but negative when used in plural can be explained as the understanding by poets of *Ṛgveda* that multiple sources of guidance at the same time are confusing and disturbing, while one at a time is beneficial. A possible interpretation of the refrain in 3.55 as

“Mighty is the state of the deva-s of being a guiding spirit — when single!”

also supports this explanation.

The interpretation given here to *ásura* and its derivatives fits well with all but two occurrences (re: *svàrbhānu*) of them in *Ṛgveda* and makes unnecessary the assumption of its meaning changing from earliest parts of *Ṛgveda* to the latest. It also explains the apparent conflict between deva-s and *asura*-s depicted in later texts as an interference of different guiding impulses. Such interference tends to occur with increasing frequency as the complexity of social organization and intensity of social interactions grow.

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