

THE NON-ARYANS IN THE RĀMĀYAṆA:
THE RĀKṢASAS

In pre-historic India, before the advent of the Aryans, there were in different parts of the country several non-Aryan¹ tribes leading their lives at different levels of civilisation. As could naturally be expected, some of these were inimically disposed towards the invading Aryans while some others were favourably disposed towards

N.B. Unless otherwise specified the references are from the Critical Edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* published by Oriental Institute, Baroda.

1. The word non-Aryan does not designate any specific tribe or people; it is an exclusive term employed to refer to all peoples who were other than the Aryans, *āryetara*.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* presents a very large and complex variety of characters. Its principal characters are the Aryans who have been presented strictly as human beings. The Niṣādas or Dāśas of Śṛṅgaverapura and Śabarās in the vicinity of Mataṅga's *āśrama* were also human beings but belonging to non-Aryan aboriginal tribes. Among the rest of the characters one can easily notice a two-fold division, namely (i) the mythical characters and (ii) the non-mythical characters. Devas, Siddhas, Sādhyas, Apsarasas, Cāraṇas, Vaikhānasas, Paramarṣis, Maharṣis, Munis, Vidyādharas, Yakṣas, Nāgas or Uragas and Gandharvas on the one hand and the Asuras, Daityas, Dānavas and Piśācas on the other belong to the group of mythical characters. Originally these might have also represented human races but in the period of the *Rāmāyaṇa* – with the exception of few names like Kubera (Yakṣa), Maya and his daughter Mandodarī (Daitya) – they had almost assumed a completely mythical character. The Ṛdhras, the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas belong to the second group of (non-mythical) characters. Notwithstanding the fact that some of the characters of this group also are described as possessing a few mythical traits, the bulk of the evidence leaves an indelible impression on the reader that they were members of primitive aboriginal tribes; the Ṛdhras and the Vānaras were presumably totemistic.

them. Generally speaking, all these aboriginal tribes have been transformed into super-natural beings in Sanskrit literature. The former are represented as evil spirits (e.g. Daityas, Dānavas, Piśācas, Rākṣasas), while the latter are referred to as semi-divine beings, Devayonis, (e.g. Yakṣas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras). Vālmīki is the only exception among ancient Indian poets who directly picked up the struggle between the Aryans and one of the hostile non-Aryans as the theme of his poem² and provided in the *Rāmāyaṇa* a good deal of valuable information pertaining to them.

The *Rāmakathā* of Vālmīki belongs to a period when the Aryan sway in India was confined only to the Āryāvarta, i.e. the country to the north of the Vindhya; southern India was not only free from their political domination but was mostly an unfamiliar land to them. Agastya was perhaps the first Aryan to cross the Vindhya and establish an *āśrama* in Janasthāna³. Perhaps encouraged and inspired by his example a few more ṛṣis had also settled in some parts even farther than this⁴. But it is evident from the *Rāmāyaṇa* that the general population of this area was distinctly different from the Aryans⁵. No doubt, the poet introduces Jaṭāyus, his brother and nephew belonging to the Gṛdhras and Śramaṇī belonging to the Śabarās, we know hardly anything significant about them, except perhaps that they were aboriginal non-Aryan tribes friendly to the Aryans. Southern India in the *Rāmāyaṇa* period was largely populated by the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas who respectively played the roles of the allies and the adversaries of the hero of the epic, and naturally, the poet finds ample occasions to furnish very useful details about them.

2. Cf. «... towards the extremity of the peninsula and in Laṅkā, there was a ferocious black race opposed to the Aryan way of worship. To this race they gave the name of Rākṣasas – an appellation which in the Vedas is assigned to hostile, savage and hated beings. It was against this race that the expedition of Rāma, recorded in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, was directed». S.N. VYAS, *India in the Rāmāyaṇa Age*, Delhi, 1967, p. 23.

3. Cf. «The credit of overcoming it (the Vindhya range) was reserved for Agastya who was undoubtedly the pioneer of the Aryan settlement in the south proper... In fact, the south was explored and colonised by him and hence this direction has well been appropriated to him in Hindu mythology». C.V. VAIDYA, *The Riddle of the Rāmāyaṇa* (Revised edition), Delhi, 1972, p. 86.

4. *Vide* the accounts of Mataṅga (VRā. III, 70/17 ff. and IV, 11/41-44) and Nisākara (VRā. IV, 59/8 ff.).

The Aryan characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* refer to themselves as *mānuṣa* or *nara* and assertively declare the Rākṣasas as aliens. Such a distinction is affirmed by the Rākṣasa characters as well⁶. Obviously, the use of the term *mānuṣa* in all such references is not indicative of the distinction between human and non-human beings⁷; it is rather meant to underline the ethnical and cultural difference between the Aryans and the Rākṣasas. In contrast to the fair Aryans the Rākṣasas were dark-complexioned. The poet generally likens them to *nīla-jīmūta* (dark cloud) and *māṣa-rāśi* (heap of beans)⁸. Likewise, the Rākṣasas – both men and women – are represented as possessing prodigious strength and huge forms. The *Rāmāyaṇa* generally describes them as *mahā-kāya* (possessing huge body), *mahāsya* (large-mouthed), *mahā-damṣṭra* (possessing big jaws) and *ghoradarśana* (of

5. Cf. «The Aryans, who were considered the superior class and came within the framework of the caste-system, occupied practically the whole of the Indo-Gangetic plain, while to the south of it – mostly forest country – lived the tribes». S.N. VYAS, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

6. Vide (i) *Na mānuṣī rākṣasasya bhāryā bhavitumarhati.* (VRā. V, 22/7).

(ii) *Vānarāṇāṃ narāṇāṃ ca ...* (VRā. V, 33/2).

(iii) *Mānuṣī mānuṣasyaiva bhāryātvaṃ bahu manyase.* (VRā. V, 22/4).

Also VRā. V, 22/4, 19, 37, 41; V, 28/17; VI, 27/4.

The distinction between the Aryans and the Rākṣasas has been very poignantly painted by the poet in the following verses:

Sumukhaṃ durnukhī Rāmam vṛttamadhyaṃ mahodarī |

Viśālākṣaṃ virūpākṣī sukeṣaṃ tāmramūrdhajā ||

Priyarūpaṃ virūpā sā susvaraṃ bhairavasvanā |

Taruṇaṃ dāruṇā vṛddhā dakṣiṇaṃ vāmabhāṣiṇī ||

Nyāyavṛttaṃ sudurvṛttā priyaṃ apriya darśanā... (VRā. III, 16/8-10)

Dr. A. GURUGE (*The Society of the Rāmāyaṇa*, Delhi, 1991, pp. 80-81) draws attention to the words *ārya* and *anārya* occurring in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He notices «a faint ethnological hint» in the employment of the word *ārya* in the two references of the *Ayodhyā-Kāṇḍa* and observes that: «The term, Anārya, is throughout used as the opposite of Ārya not only in its ethnological sense but also in its moral aspect». No doubt, these two terms have been frequently employed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to convey the sense of superiority and inferiority, of commendation and condemnation, but it is very difficult to say that an ethnological sense is unambiguously attached to either of them in any reference.

7. It may be pointed out that the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not regard the Rākṣasas as mythological dragons or fiends; on the other hand, he recognises them as exactly corresponding to himself (and Lakṣmaṇa) in shape, and terms them also as *mānuṣa* (VRā. VI, 28/32-33).

8. VRā. III, 21/9 and V, 8/26 respectively.

frightful aspect)⁹. On this account the poet is sometimes even tempted to exaggerate this distinction and represent the Rākṣasas as possessing limbs of various animals. A huge congregation of such deformities is described in the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* as guarding Sītā in the Aśoka-Vanikā¹⁰. Some of the social institutions of the Rākṣasas are conspicuously different from the Aryans of those times. Thus, as against the patrilineal family of the Aryans, the Rākṣasas recognised the matrilineal family. The poet traces their origin to a lady, Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā who is described as Sandhyāputrī – in all probability a personification of the night –, and presumably it is on this account that the Rākṣasas are invariably referred to as *rajanīcaras* or *niśācaras*. It is significant to remember in this context that notwithstanding the fact that Rāvaṇa, his brothers and sister were born of Viśravas, a scion of the Brahmarṣi Pulastya¹¹, they are recognised, down to the present day, as Rākṣasas,

9. VRā. III, 25/8, III, 21/10, III, 65/18 and III, 2/5 respectively.

10. VRā. V, 15/5-15.

11. The following lines of the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* create an impression as if there were two separate lines of the Rākṣasas tracing their origin from Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā and Pulastya:

Evam te rākṣasā Rāma...

Sthitāḥ prakhyātavīryāste vaṁṣe Sālakaṭaṅkaṭe |

Ye tvayā nihatāste vai Paulastyā nāma rākṣasāḥ || (VRā. VII, 8/20-23).

Such an impression is evidently unwarranted, for Rāvaṇa and others are children directly born in the line of the Rākṣasas tracing their descent from Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā – their mother, Kaikasī, was the daughter of Sumālīn (VRā. VII, 9/3). It was patently on account of the matrilineal character of the Rākṣasas that Sumālīn claimed the children of his daughter (VRā. VII, 11/1) immediately when he felt that they had acquired the necessary powers for the realisation of his ends. The above-quoted lines (VRā. VII, 8/20-23) have been inserted, in our opinion, by some later editor of the *Rāmāyaṇa* who was oblivious of the matrilineal character of the Rākṣasa family.

Incidentally, it may also be pointed out here that Dr. S.N. VYAS (*op. cit.*, p. 27) recognises «Three distinct clans of the Rākṣasas», namely, the Virādha clan, the Kabandha clan and «The third clan, known as Rākṣasas or Rakṣas ... comprising the inhabitants of Laṅkā». Such a classification is most unsatisfactory mainly for two reasons: (i) In the earlier two categories, Virādha and Kabandha are just two solitary names of characters – the epic conveys no suggestion that they represented any clan. (ii) If Virādha and Kabandha could be accepted as clan names, one wonders, why Tāṭakā is not recognised as representing another clan.

One has to remember in this connection that Virādha, Kabandha and Tāṭakā are distinguished from the Rākṣasas proper, in the sense that the latter were born Rākṣasas, while these (former) were respectively Gandharva (VRā. III, 3/18), Dānava (VRā. III, 67/7) and Yakṣi (VRā. I, 23/24-25) originally; Rākṣasa-hood descended

because their mother, Kaikasī, was a Rākṣasī. The Rambhā episode in the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* is again a very unambiguous confirmation of this singular character of the Rākṣasa family. In this episode, Rāvaṇa refused to acknowledge Rambhā as his daughter-in-law, for her fiance, Nala-Kūbara, the son of Kubera, was related to him from the father's side and not from the mother's side¹².

Seizing other's women, raping and abducting them was recognised by the Rākṣasas as a lawful practice. Rāvaṇa declared this before Sītā as *svadharmā* of the Rākṣasas¹³. It is said about him that whatever woman – maiden or married – caught his fancy, he appropriated her to himself after killing her kinsmen¹⁴. That this was the Rākṣasa mode of securing a woman as wife is supported also by the words of Vibhīṣaṇa, who, while reporting to Rāvaṇa the forcible seizure of their cousin Kumbhīnasī by Madhu, approved of the act by characterising it as lawful¹⁵. It is, however, to be noted that the *Rāmāyaṇa* simultaneously describes the prevalence of the *vivāha-saṃskāra* among the Rākṣasas in a characteristic Aryan style. Thus Rāvaṇa's

upon them as a punishment when they roused by their misbehaviour the anger of some august person or other and thereby invited his curse. Thus, there are two categories of the Rākṣasas in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely, (i) Rākṣasas by birth and (ii) Rākṣasas by culture.

12. VRā. VII, 26/19-30

Note: *Sutasya yadi me bhāryā tatas tvam me snuṣā bhaveḥ* (22).

13. *Svadharmo rakṣasāṃ bhūru sarvathaiṣa na saṃśayaḥ* /

Gamaṇaṃ vā parastrīṇāṃ haraṇaṃ saṃpramathya vā // (VRā. V, 18/5)

14. *Darśanīyāṃ hi yāṃ rakṣaḥ kanyāṃ strīṃ vātha paśyati* /

Hatvā bandhujanaṃ tasyā vimāne saṃnyaveśayat // (VRā. VII, 24/2)

15. VRā. VI, 25/25-28

Note: *Śrutvā cedaṃ mayā sarvaṃ kṣāntaṃ tasya hato na saḥ* /

Yasmādavaśyaṃ dātavyā, seyaṃ dharmeṇa vai hṛtā //

Reading adopted from VRā. VII, 31/30, Lahore Ed. The Critical Edition (VRā. VII, 25/28) has a slightly different reading.

N.B. The *Dharmaśāstra* texts include the Rākṣasa-vidhi in the list of lawful modes of marriage, and their definition of Rākṣasa-vivāha very closely approximates the details expressed in the references noted under foot-notes 13-15 above. (Cf. The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home, while she cries out and weeps, after (her kinsmen) have been slain or wounded and their houses broken open, is called the Rākṣasa rite – *The Laws of Manu*, Eng. tr. G. BÜHLER, III, 33). It is, however, to be noted that the *Dharmaśāstra* view differs from the account of the Rākṣasas in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in two important respects, viz. (i) it strictly relates to a maiden and (ii) it requires the performance of the marriage rites subsequent to the abduction.

marriage with Mandodarī was consecrated in the presence of fire and the maiden's father, having tacitly pointed out that she was a *bhrātrmatī*, performed the *Kanyā-dāna* with the words: «She is my daughter, O King, born by the Apsaras Menā; she is a maiden, Mandodarī by name. Do thou accept her to become your *patnī*»¹⁶. Rāvaṇa himself is said to have discharged his duty of giving his sister, Śūrpaṅkhā, in marriage to a befitting husband¹⁷. Like marriage, the mode of disposal of the dead also seems to have undergone a transformation in the Rākṣasa society. Virādha requests Rāma that after his death his body may be placed in an *avaṭa* – a cavity in the earth, a grave –, for it was the *sanātana dharma* in case of the Rākṣasas who had died¹⁸. This indicates that burial was the popular mode of disposing of the dead among the Rākṣasas. But a stage of transition is noticeable in case of Kabandha who was first put into a *mahati śvabhre*, a vast pit, and thereafter cremated¹⁹. Lastly, the mode adopted in case of the deceased Rāvaṇa corresponds to the *antyeṣṭi*, obtaining among the contemporary Aryans²⁰.

Vālmiki freely mentions Rākṣasas engaged in *svādhyāya*, *tapas*, *yajña* or *agnihotra*²¹. He calls Rāvaṇa a *vedavidyāvratasnāta*²² and alludes to the presence of *brahmarākṣasas* in Laṅkā who were well versed in the Vedas along with their six auxiliaries²³. Besides, there

16. VRā. VII, 12/12-16.

17. VRā. VII, 12/1-2.

18. VRā. III, 3/23-24.

19. VRā. III, 67/22.

20. VRā. VI, 99/41-42. Note the words *anurūpeṇa* and *vidhiyuktam pāvakam*.

21. VRā. V, 3/26; VII, 10/1 ff.; V, 16/2; VI, 69/23-26; VII, 25/7 ff.

22. VRā. VI, 80/53.

23. VRā. V, 16/2.

N.B. Brahmarākṣasas, according to F.E. PARGITER (*Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London, 1922, p. 278), were either «descended from Brahmans or Brahmans who had allied themselves with Rākṣasas».

V.R.R. DIKSHITAR is, however, of the opinion (“South India in the *Rāmāyana*”, PTAIOC (7th Session, Baroda, 1933) Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1935, p. 246) that the Brahmarākṣasas were either the result of the penetration of northern ideas or due to banished Brahmans.

We feel that the Aryan poet has prefixed the term *Brahma* to *rākṣasas* to designate the learned among the Rākṣasas – cf. *Vidvāṃso brahmarākṣasāḥ* (VRā. I, 11/17).

are also passages which indicate the prevalence of such practices as *svāstyayana* and *parva-homa* in the Rākṣasa society²⁴. All this evidence, naturally, gives an impression that the Rākṣasas were indistinguishable from the Aryans in respect of religion. But such an impression soon appears rash and unfounded when the following data available on the point is also taken into account.

The general remark of the poet for the Rākṣasas is, they are *Kūṭa-yodhins*²⁵. The principal ones among them are termed *māyāvins* and are actually shown employing *māyā* in warfare²⁶. Hanumat is said to have noticed in Laṅkā Rākṣasas carrying handful of *darbha* as their weapons and having the sacrificial fire-place as their instrument of offence²⁷. Such references are clear pointers to the fact that sorcery and witchcraft were commonly practised by the Rākṣasas. The term *Yātudhāna* (sorcerer) is not only found used in their descriptions but is often employed as a synonym of the Rākṣasas²⁸.

It appears very plausible that the Rākṣasas in general were the worshippers of a female deity, Nikumbhilā. At the outskirts of Laṅkā there was an extensive wood, presumably named after the deity Nikumbhilā²⁹, where the members of the royalty as well as the common Rākṣasas went for special services³⁰. What is significant to note is that dance and music along with offerings of *surā* and *māmsa* – including that of a human being – formed part of the services of the deity³¹. In some passages of the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa* Rāvaṇa is shown engaged in *Śivaliṅga-pūjana* (phallic worship) also³².

The most noteworthy feature of the Rākṣasa religion, however, is that it is only an instrument for the acquisition of wealth and power³³.

24. VRā. VI, 83/7; V, 5/12.

25. VRā. VI, 40/53; I, 19/7.

26. VRā. VI, 57/10-11; VI, 68/28; VII, 29/23.

27. VRā. V, 3/28.

28. VRā. V, 3/26; III, 24/5.

29. *Tato Nikumbhilā nāma Laṅkāyāḥ kānanaṃ mahat* (VRā. VII, 25/2).

30. VRā. VII, 25/3 ff; V, 22/41; VI, 69/23.

31. *Surā cānīyatāṃ kṣīpraṃ sarvaśokavināśinī /*

Mānuṣaṃ māṃsamādāya nṛtyāmo (a)tha Nikumbhilām // (VRā. V, 22/41)

32. VRā. VII, 31/31-40.

33. *Vide – Dharmāṃ Kāmaphalaṃ vidधि ... etanmūlaṃ trivaragasya* (foot-note 9 under Appendix I, No. 3, p. 913, *Yuddha-Kāṇḍa*).

The Rākṣasas launch upon severest types of penance and win admiration even of gods on successfully completing the prescribed courses³⁴; likewise, they perform sacrifices in which lavish offerings not only of choicest materials but even of their own limbs is made strictly in accordance with the prescribed rules³⁵. But all this is unexceptionally done to acquire some rare power, some uncommon accomplishment. In all the practices of the Rākṣasas that spirit of religion which realises itself in the cultivation of such virtues as veracity, tranquillity, compassion, continence and the like is conspicuous by its total absence³⁶. Vālmiki very aptly characterises the Rākṣasas as men «predominated by the intellect»³⁷. Indeed, the Rākṣasas are the most materially advanced people of their times³⁸. The exuberance of gold, silver, ivory and gems (such as sapphire, pearl, coral, diamond and ruby) in the description of Laṅkā, particularly the royal palace and garden, gives

N.B. The Critical Edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, based as it is on the *Dākṣiṇātya-pāṭha*, consistently drops valuable information about the Rākṣasas contained in the *Paścimottariya-pāṭha* published by Bhagavad Datta and Ram Labhaya in 7 vols. from Lahore, 1931-1947. This information is perfectly in agreement with the general picture of the Rākṣasas presented by the poet in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Dākṣiṇātya-pāṭha* remained current in a region and period which came under the strong influence of Vaiṣṇava Alvars (vide G.M. BHATT, "Introduction", *Aranya-Kāṇṇa*, Cr. Ed., p. xxvi), and presumably on account of the bias for the Rākṣasas, the adversaries of Rāma (Viṣṇu) it distorted facts about them. We have utilised this information because we feel convinced that it belongs to the genuine *Rāmāyaṇa*.

34. VRā. VII, 5/8-10; VII, 10/3-10.

35. VRā. VII, 25/3 ff.; VII, 10/10.

36. N.B. In a literary work it is often difficult to find a true picture of a people alien or hostile to the religion and culture of the poet. Usually a poet's vision in such cases suffers from a partiality towards his own beliefs and customs and he is apt to colour his pictures of the alien people by mixing elements of his own culture. The references to Vedic religious practices by the poet in case of the Rākṣasas may be due to this bias of the poet, or it may be argued that they were introduced in the Rākṣasa community by Rāvaṇa and his brothers who became acquainted with their form, but not the spirit, during their stay in Viśravaṣa's *āśrama*.

37. *buddhi-pradhānān* (VRā. V, 4/12).

38. Bewildered by the opulence of Rāvaṇa's palace Hanumat thought that it was a celestial region, the Svarga, the town of Indra (VRā. V, 7/27). Dr. GURUGE, however, holds a different opinion. He remarks: «The tendency to speak of the buildings in Laṅkā as made of and abounding in gems may be explained either as a result of the special effort made by the author or authors to emphasize the supernatural aspect in the description of the Rākṣasas or as a conscious representation of the fame Ceylon enjoyed as a country abounding in gems». A. GURUGE, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

the popular imagination every right to hold that the town was all made up of gold. But one should not entertain from this an impression that in the town of the Rākṣasas there was just a vulgar display of wealth. The references to art-galleries (*citraśālā*), sport-pavilions (*krīḍāgr̥ha*), bowers (*latā-gr̥ha*), pleasure-groves (*niṣkuṭa*), day and night pleasure-resorts (*divā-gr̥ha* and *niśā-gr̥ha*), moonlit chambers (*candra-śālā*) and parks provided with lakes and ponds and furnished with artificial hills, birds and animals³⁹ indicate that the Rākṣasas were men of taste and sophistication. They helped themselves to all sorts of non-vegetarian dishes and did not hesitate to consume raw meat⁴⁰; even cannibalism seems to have obtained among them⁴¹. Likewise, they seem to have been extremely fond of various kinds of beverages. This only shows that gratification of the senses was the supreme objective of the Rākṣasas⁴² and they recognised no inhibitions against it. This is expressly corroborated from a reference to the *pānaśālā* of Rāvaṇa about which the poet says, it satiated the five senses (of the Rākṣasas) by providing for them their choicest objects⁴³. It may be remarked in passing that this intemperate sensuality turned the Rākṣasas into *loka-kaṇṭakas*⁴⁴ (a curse to their fellow-men) and evoked a bitter repugnance for them in the Aryan poet, which he strongly expresses by declaring that *adharmā* was the course of the Rākṣasas⁴⁵.

The *Uttara-Kāṇḍa*, the supplementary portion of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, furnishes details about the origin and past history of the Rākṣasas. It traces their origin to certain mythical beings created by the Prajāpati to guard the cosmic waters⁴⁶. To this class of beings belonged Heti

39. VRā. V, 5/34-35; V, 10/14-15; V, 12/5 ff.

40. VRā. V, 9/11-25.

41. VRā. III, 54/22; V, 20/9; III, 20/2, 12; III, 68/18; II, 108/12; VI, 48/17.

42. *Kāma eva hi sarveṣāṃ kāraṇānāṃ prajojanam* |

.....
Karmaṇātra nu kalyāṇaṃ labhate kāmamāsthitaḥ ||
(VRā. VI, 43/7-9, Lahore Ed.).

N.B. The parallel verses are found in VRā. VI, 52/7-9, Critical Edition, but the reading is extremely faulty and ambiguous.

43. VRā. V, 7/26.

44. VRā. I, 14/19.

45. VRā. V, 26/12.

46. VRā. VII, 4/9-13.

N.B. C.V. VAIDYA (*op. cit.*, pp. 78-79) opines that: «The two races (Rākṣasas

who is termed *Rākṣasa-puṅgavaḥ*. His son, begotten on Bhayā was Vidyutkeśa, who married Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā, the daughter of Saṃdhyā. In this line were born Mālyavat, Sumālin and Mālin, who are said to have been the first occupants of Laṅkā, a town designed and constructed by Viśvakarman, originally for the Devas. These Rākṣasas were vanquished by the Devas led by Viṣṇu and were driven out of Laṅkā. The Rākṣasas then passed their period of adversity in Pātāla or Rasātala till they found their sheet-anchor in Rāvaṇa, the son of Kaikasi, the daughter of Sumālin. They instigated Rāvaṇa to reclaim Laṅkā from Yakṣarāja Kubera who had settled there with his followers during the intermediary period⁴⁷.

The trustworthiness of the above account cannot be vouchsafed. Nevertheless, some suggestions in it about the origin and past history of the Rākṣasas seem to be plausible. From the references to their mythical origin and their descent from Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā⁴⁸ it appears that the Rākṣasas were an aboriginal, migratory tribe of South India and originally lived on the sea-coast and protected the waters. In course of time, when they became powerful, they seem to have looked for a permanent and secure settlement⁴⁹, and in the process discovered Laṅkā, a magnificent town built on the hill-top in a southern island. The above account, supplemented and supported by other references in the epic, also shows that the Rākṣasas, having earlier suffered a few vicissitudes in their political life, had emerged in contemporary history as a mighty power. With a strong and capable leader in

and Yakṣas) probably lived originally in the south of India from which the Yakṣas were gradually ousted and driven towards the north by their ferocious brethren».

47. VRā. VII, Cantos 4-11.

48. C.V. VAIDYA observes that the names of Rākṣasas found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are all based on their personal peculiarities. «The only name which has an aboriginal and true ring is that of the family of Rāvaṇa viz., Sālakaṭaṅkaṭā which fortunately still exists in the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* as a proof, though solitary, of the fact that the Rākṣasas were a real aboriginal race of cannibals like the Aztecs». (C.V. VAIDYA, *op. cit.*, Appendix No. 5, pp. 156-7).

49. Note the words: *Gr̥hakartā bhavāneva devānām hr̥dayepsitam /*
Asmākam api tāvattvaṃ gr̥haṃ kuru mahāmate //
Himavantaṃ samāśr̥tya Meruṃ Mandarameva vā /
Maheśvaragr̥haprakhyam gr̥haṃ naḥ kriyatām mahat //
 (VRā. VII, 5/18-19).

Rāvaṇa they had not only reclaimed their old possessions but, by entering into alliance with their powerful neighbours, the Vānaras⁵⁰, they had made their position extremely secure. Moreover, by establishing a military post in the Daṇḍakas, they were slowly even trying to penetrate further into the North. It is significant to remember that mighty Aryan kings of that period found themselves utterly helpless in counteracting their onslaughts⁵¹.

An objective assessment of the total evidence available in the *Rāmāyaṇa* reveals that the political organisation of the Rākṣasas was radically different from that of the contemporary Aryans. The poet refers to the Rākṣasas as *gaṇa*⁵² and their ruler as *rakṣogaṇeśvara* or *niśācara gaṇeśvara* or *rakṣogaṇarāja*⁵³. The term *gaṇa* is defined by Kātyāyana as «a collective organisation of Kulas»⁵⁴. The *Rāmāyaṇa* does allude to the presence of *Kula-vṛddhas*⁵⁵ and *Rākṣasa-vṛddhas*⁵⁶ in the Sabhā of Rāvaṇa. Moreover, contrary to the popular belief that Rāvaṇa was an absolute sovereign, an autocrat, the *Rāmāyaṇa* provides a graphic description of the National Assembly⁵⁷, the Sabhā or Paṇṣad, of the Rākṣasas, which was, in fact, the supreme body to take final decisions in matters of vital concern for the state. This Assembly was constituted of the King, the Yuvarāja, the Senāpati, the Mantrins, the Amātyas and other oligarchical chiefs. For arriving at a collective decision, each member of the Assembly was given an opportunity of freely and frankly expressing his views on matters under discussion, provided they were supported by reasoning. Keeping with the special political character of the Rākṣasas, the entire army also, in Laṅkā, belonged to the state; no individual chief among the Rākṣasas is

50. VRā. VII, 34/38-40.

51. Note the words of Daśaratha in VRā. I, 19/19-22.

52. VRā. V, 46/51; VII, 37/8.

53. VRā. V, 48/10; VI, 31/71 and VI, 47/123 respectively.

54. «*Kulānāṃ hi samūhastu gaṇaḥ samparikīrtitaḥ*» (Kātyāyana quoted by R.C. MAJUMDAR, *Corporate Life in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1918, p. 94).

55. VRā. V, 46/58.

56. VRā. V, 44/58, Lahore Ed. The Critical Edition (VRā. V, 46/53) reads *rākṣasa-vīrāṇām* in place of *rākṣasa-vṛddhānām*.

57. VRā. V, Cantos 77-90, Lahore Edition.

N.B. For details about the Sabhā of the Rākṣasas *vide* the author's *A Socio-Political Study of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, Delhi, 1971, pp. 340-346.

anywhere described as possessing a separate army-unit of his own⁵⁸. All this shows that Rākṣasas living in Laṅkā under the leadership of Rāvaṇa had organised themselves as a tribal oligarchy.

Dr. Guruge has noted the various views expressed by modern scholars with regard to the identification of the Rākṣasas⁵⁹. Obviously these scholars have been guided by one or the other aspect of the life of these people as directly stated in or implied by the descriptions in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the present state of our knowledge such attempts are no better than mere hazards. Therefore, steering clear of such pitfalls, Dr. Guruge remarks: «The Rākṣasas appear to be a tribe of primitive and ferocious people with cannibalistic tendencies, who occupied the southern outposts of the sub-continent»⁶⁰. But even his remark states only a partial truth about the Rākṣasas of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; this remark does not take into account the advancement that the Rākṣasas, as a people, had made during their settlement in Laṅkā under the leadership of Rāvaṇa⁶¹. The discussion in the foregoing pages unambiguously shows that they were no longer a primitive tribe. The contemporary Rākṣasas of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were a highly civilised non-Aryan people with distinct social, political and religious institutions, zealously professing and pursuing a strongly materialistic view of life.

58. It is significant to note that Khara being appointed in-charge of the military post in the Daṇḍakas by Rāvaṇa was supplied a force of twenty-four thousand soldiers from Laṅkā with Dūṣaṇa as Balādhyakṣa. VRā. VII, 24/28-33 (note the words – ... *Daśagrīvaḥ sāinyam tasyādideśa ha, caturdaśa sahasrāṇi*, 33).

59. A. GURUGE, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-7.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

61. Cf. «The various races of the south on the other hand were more advanced in civilization and they either allied themselves with the invading Aryans or offered a stubborn and powerful resistance to their advance». C.V. VAIDYA, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Also: «The Rākṣasas therefore may be considered to reflect, not so much a forest-tribe like the Vānaras but rather another relatively advanced culture to the south with whom the Aryans were just coming into contact». J.L. BROCKINGTON, *op. cit.*, p. 123.