

I think time is already ripe for historical interpretations of our old legends of the Vedas and Puranas. That a great deal of real Indian history is lurking in these stories of gods and demons can hardly be denied. According to Indian tradition Sruti (Veda) and Smirti are authoritative texts. Anyone who challenged their authority was liable to excommunication from civil society.¹ The Purana literature comes under Smirti. Thus the authority of sruti and Smirti being established, the so-called legends or impossible, incredible stories contained therein came to have a locus standi or solid foundation. These legends are based on some historical events. But the terms used by these ancient authors being now long obsolete and obscure we often fail to grasp the real historical picture behind them. For example, the terms devata (god), asura (demon), Svarga (heaven), martya (mortal world, earth) and *Patala*² are not always rightly understood by us. For a historian a war between devas and asuras in Indian literature must mean a war between two ancient races of India. In the occupation of Svarga and martya by the asuras from the hands of gods, the word svarga must be taken to be an actual place on the Indian soil. In the banishment of Bali to *Patala*, the word *Patala* must mean an actual geographical site somewhere in India, but not an underground or subterranean world.

In this paper I have undertaken to localise and identify *Patala* in Indian geography through a historical probe. I have no doubt that *Patala* means difficult terrains on the border lands of India, whereas martya means the populous rural areas (mainly the Plains) and svarga urban areas (cities and towns) By devata (fr. div-, to shine) we are to understand a superior race of the Aryans, and asura means an antagonistic race i.e. the aboriginal people of India which now go by the appellation 'tribal people' (upajati).

Patala

By *Patala* I should like to mean, by and large, the hill tracts in the north-east frontiers of India, mainly the present Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. This hypothesis is based on the following arguments :

- (i) The Asura King Bali who is said to have ruled at Sonitpur (present Tezpur near Assam border) was defeated by Visnu and driven to *Patala*. Now Bali could not make good his

escape except by retreating into the frontier hill tracts now covered by the Arunachal Pradesh. He was thus safe and his Aryan victors also did not bother about him any longer, he being far beyond the rich Brahmaputra valley under the Aryan sway. The deposed Bali's last days passed in these hills and hence this area is of course *Patala* in this legend.

- (ii) *Patala* is said to be the abode of *nagas* (snakes?).³ The Naga tribe is found in our proposed *Patala*. The older name of the *Naga* tribe is doubtless *Nago* (not *Naga*), for Arjuna married a Nago -Kanya named Ulupi. Hence this region (Nagaland) is also a part of ancient *Patala*.
- (iii) The Aryan conquest began with the Western India, and extending eastwards it's last waves died down in the Brahmaputra Plains. The main centres of Aryan administration remained far west in the *Kuru* and *Pancala* countries (modern U.P., Delhi and Panjab areas). Therefore eastern India or present north-east region was the hinterland in the Aryan empire, as also during the Muslim rule afterwards. This back-door of India could be easily called *Patala* (back side, inferior or lower region).
- (iv) Svarga, martya and *Patala* are in descending order. So are cities, villages and hill tracts in respect of development and amenities. We like to interpret the first trio to be the second trio respectively. Thus hill tracts come to be the lowest in the scale and may be compared to *Patala* in the sense of lower region. North-east India is such a hilly, backward area and may justly be called *Patala*.
- (v) King Bali had to surrender actually three Padas of his Kingdom demarcated by Visnu, not just three big steps taken by him. This means three-fourths of Bali's kingdom which extended over the plains. The remaining one-fourth, not wanted by Visnu, was obviously the the difficult terrains north of the Brahmaputra. Bali had to remain content with that dreary land (*Patala*) only. He left the capital at Sonitapur and left for an unknown hill-station in Arunachal. This was his *Patala*, where he passed his last days along with his followers. The present population there, at least a big section of it, is doubtless descended from them.

The last resort

This *Patala* region of India seems to have been the last resort of the non-Aryan population of India. The Vedic Aryans engaged

in constant war with the non-Aryan primitive peoples and drove them from west to east. Magadha was a stronghold of the non-Aryan races for a long time. Even the great Pandavas were incapable of doing any harm to Jarasandha, the great non-Aryan monarch. At last they found a powerful ally in Krisna and with his aid they succeeded in inflicting a crushing defeat on Jarasandha. The Aryan empire then included Magadha too. The non-Aryans then were cornered in *Kamarupa* and further east and north. This area was their last resort. Here reigned King Bali (already referred to), his son *Bana*,⁴ *Narakasura*, and *Bhagadatta*, all of the same stock. But the Aryan invasions did not leave them rest in peace even there for long. Bali was defeated and driven out. So was his son *Bana* inspite of a matrimonial relation with *Krisna's* family.⁵ *Narakasura* was killed in another invasion. His son *Bhagadatta* retaliated by joining the anti-*Krisna* side⁶ in the battle of *Kuruksetra*, where, unfortunately he fell fighting. With the successive fall of these great non-Aryan kings and passing over of the *Kamarupa* plains into Aryan hands, the Asura or non-Aryan people had recourse to the thick jungles and lofty hills.

Some notable events of the area

(a) *Vamana Avatara, a non-Aryan* (*Vamana* - dwarf) leader of the Aryans, defeated the Asura King Bali of *Kamarupa* of Sonitpur. *Vamana* is said to be an incarnation of *Visnu*. The popular belief is that Lord *Visnu* incarnated himself in the form of a dwarf and in this form he got the better of Bali.

But the historical fact seems to be that this dwarf avatara was a man of the non-Aryan stock belonging to the *Kamarupa* Kingdom. Hence his short stature. The Aryans might have won him over to their side or he might have adopted Aryan culture and religion of his own accord. This assumption gains ground also from the startling information recorded in the *Satapatha Brahmana* that after the defeat of Bali the gods beheaded this conquerer of Bali.

(b) *Usa - Aniruddha episode* - The love episode of *Usa*, daughter of *Banasura*, and *Aniruddha*, grand-son of *Krisna* is well-known. It is a note worthy point that Lord *Krisna's* family was matrimonially connected with the Asura King *Bana* of Sonitpur through the marriage of *Usa* and *Aniruddha*.

(c) *Krisna's 1600⁷ spouses* - It is also said that *Krisna* himself married 1600 (or 16000) girls from the land of *Bana*.

(d) *Bana-linga Siva* – It is said that King Bana introduced the worship of Siva in Bana-linga form. The other popular form is the Yoni-linga form. The Bana-linga is made of a white stone found in the Narmada river-bed. It is not clear whether this was the practice during the days of Bana, and also whether bana-linga precedes or follows Yoni-linga in use.

(e) *Kamakhya and Tamesvari* – Two great Sakta Pithas exist in the Asura Kingdom. They are the Kamakhya Temple near Gauhati and the Tamesvari Temple at Tejo in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. It seems the Asura Kings once patronised also the Sakta religion besides Saivism.

(f) *Parasurama* – It is said that the Mishmis of Lohit district (Arunachal) are the descendants of Parasurama, another Incarnation of *Visnu*. The existence of a sacred lake called Parasurama-Kunda there on the Lohit river is an important fact for consideration in this context. It indicates that Parasurama probably belonged to this region, and came of a non-Aryan family. It might be a Mishmi family as the proverb shows. His home might be somewhere about the Kunda. It was named after him because of his close association with it. According to the Mahabharata, Parasurama once bathed in this Kunda to get rid of the sin arising out of matricide.

Parasurama is said to have extirpated the Ksatriyas twentyone times. He also challenged Rama while the latter was returning from Mithila after marrying Sita. The fact may be that the non-Aryan Parasurama carried on hostility with the Aryans for long years during which he invaded eastern India under the Aryan rule twentyone times.⁸ His last encounter with Rama in Mithila, however, was rendered abortive.

From this last incident it appears, Parasurama advanced as far as Mithila leaving behind Assam (Kamarupa) and Bengal (Vanga) desolate and terror-stricken as a result of his frequent, cruel raids like those of Mahmud and Taimur in historical times.

His weapon, the axe (*parasu*), is another indication that he might be a high-lander (tribal).

Thus we see that the non-Aryan races of north-east India, our *Patala*, produced a great conqueror like Parasurama, who was also regarded as an Avatara. We have already spoken of another such Avatara (*Vamana*).

(g) *Prahlada* – The great devotee Prahlada also belonged to a non-Aryan family of this area. King Bali of Sonitpur was a grandson of Prahlada whose father was the famous Asura King Hiranyakasipu. Probably Prahlada was the pioneer in introducing Visnu-

bhakti in north-east India.

(h) *Bali (sacrifice)* - The word 'bali' in the sense of sacrifice is perhaps reminiscent of King Bali of this region who made the greatest sacrifice of all times, by giving away his entire Kingdom to Vamana as a gift.

To sum up, the Asura races of north-east India produced the great donor Bali, the great invader Parasuram, and the famous devotee Prahlada.

(i) *Reference in the Veda* - The Satapatha Brahmana speaks of Pracyah asurah⁹ (eastern asuras). Now, the author of the SBr. Sage Yajnavalkya being a man of Mithila, the 'Pracya' in his writing of course means further east, that is north-east frontiers. That the Asura or non-Aryan population has been living here since the Vedic days is clear.

Conclusion

To-day this great, ancient Asura race living in the north-east corner of India called *Patala* by us total only some lakhs though the area covered is not small. Arunachal is bigger than modern Assam, and almost equal to West Bengal.

State	Area	Population
Arunachal	84000 Sq. miles.	6,32,000
(Assam	79000	
West Bengal)	89000	
Nagaland	17000	7,75,000
Mizoram	21000	5,00,000
Meghalaya	22400	13,36 000
Tripura	10500	21,00,000
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	1,54,000	54,00,000

The race living here are called Aka, Dafla, Miri, Abor, Mishmi, Singpho, Khamti etc. They are a brave, hardy people rightly placed in the strategic north-east frontier like the hardy Panjabis in the West. Linguistically Tibeto-Burman, and also perhaps ethnically, they are part and parcel of Indian society right from the dawn of civilisation. The area is fast developing, but much more yet remains to be done. Arunachal is now a full-fledged state. This will boost up the State's over-all development. Communication with

the main land by rail and road should be improved. More schools and colleges are to be set up. Avenues for cultural contacts with the rest of India should be opened in newer and newer forms. The present history conference at Pasighat should pioneer many more in the years to come.

Further, the study of Vedas and Puranas should be encouraged among the frontier races for these texts contain the early history of the non-Aryan races of India, and their glorious past, glimpses of which have been noted above. For example, the following line of the Rigveda Samhita speaks of a forty year long fight between Indra and the Asura (non-Aryan) Sambara and the ultimate capture of the latter : Yah Sambaram parvatesu Ksiyantam catvarim-syam saradi anu-avindat¹⁰ (who found out Sambara dwelling in mountains in the fortieth autumn). There are many such passages pregnant with the Asura or non-Aryan history. The great power of the Asuras of the time is made clear by this. Hence historical interpretation of our ancient texts is expected to usher in a new era in Indian history.

References

1. Vide *Manu*, 2. 11 ; also vide 2.6, 10, 12.
2. Usually taken to be a sub-terranean region.
3. Vide *Padma-Purana*, *Patala* - *Khanda*.
4. *Banasura*, *Ban Raja*.
5. Vide *Usa-Aniruddha* episode.
6. i. e. the Kaurava side.
7. Or 16000.
8. Comparable is Sultan Mahmud who raided western India almost as many times.
9. S. Br. 13, 4, 1. 5.
10. Ru. 2.12.11 Another Sambara is mentioned in the *Harivamsa*. Krisna's son Pradyumna killed him and carried off his wife Mayavati. Pradyumna married the daughter of another Asura named Vejranabha.