

## NON-VEDIC BURIAL TRADITION IN VEDIC LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*Vedic tradition is the oldest branch of religious activity that gives the detail information on a wide range of themes from administration, economy, society, architecture to non-Vedic burial tradition. The non-Vedic traditions that are replicated in the Vedas are still practiced by over a million people. This paper is an attempt to highlight the Vedic literature as one of the primary source for studying the Asurs tradition, of which very scanty literature is available. The tradition that is discussed in this paper is associated with the one of the last rituals to pay respect to the ancestors or to the departed soul. This paper concentrate on Certain hymns and verses of Veda used as benedictions and prayers at funerals for ancestor worship. The paper study the different forms of traditions followed by the Vedic people especially Asurs for the deceased during Vedic age. It is an attempt to comparatively study the living tradition of megalithism in Jharkhand region with these Asurs non-Vedic traditions mentioned in Vedic literature. The paper presents a concern on the relation between the Asurs of Vedic age and of Jharkhand state. How come there would be similar disposal pattern practiced by ancient tribe Asurs around 3500 B.C years ago and which is still prevalent among this tribe with moderate changes.*

**Keywords:** Vedic, Non-Vedic, Tradition, Burial, Stone.

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### Introduction:

From pre-historic time we do have the archaeological evidences for the decomposition of the dead body. In the literary sources the Vedas are resourceful universal form of expression, addresses spiritual, emotional and social concerns of humanity. So re-evaluation of Vedas in the context of tradition necessitates a fresh thinking within a culture. The tradition related to the decomposition of the dead got very limited place in the historical accounts especially in the accounts from Gupta Era to Mughal period. But the Britishers such as Verrier Elwin, W. Grigson etc. took some efforts to record the living tradition of the tribe to better govern the Indian subcontinent. The importance of studying the Vedic literature can be justified by the fact that they are among those few sources which highlight the *Asur* burial tradition. Tribal society being illiterate for millennium, led them not to record their tradition in textual form. But they somehow restrain their tradition in their oral tradition.

Since antiquity Indians have different modes of disposal for the dead body. It is in the Atharvaveda<sup>i</sup> (XVIII, 2, 34) where we found the reference of dead body being buried, flown in water, burnt, left open in the air. Mostly cremation of the body is in practices as this is frequently mentioned in the various Vedic text. Although the text did not mention on which situation these different types of disposal is castoff. But it is clear that at the Vedic period (1500-600 B.C.) different group of people (Aryans and Non-Aryans), had followed different disposal traditions.

The cremation and burials were the prominent modes of decomposition of dead body from the earlier time but the earliest reference of burial tradition in Indian subcontinent comes in Rig Veda<sup>ii</sup>(X, 18, 11). Rig Veda mentions different funeral hymns, addressed to deities who control life after death. This Hymn refers to the prayers being offered to the earth goddess to embrace the dead into his womb such as mother take his son into her *Aanchal* and to protect the dead from the painful stress and welcome the dead with all *Swagatsatkar* and there in the soil the dead person lives happily.

## Methodology:

The work is based on literary and ethno-archaeological data. The literary sources are consulted to understand people practicing the Vedic and Non-Vedic tradition (Aryan or Devas) for decomposition of the body. Further, to understand the opinion regarding the death, belief and practices of the Asurs tribe the literary sources were consulted.

The Vedic literature represents the sight of the society, religion and of Aryan and non-Aryan during the Vedic age. The tradition that we have concentrated in this paper is on the *Antim-Sanskara* of Asur. The Vedic text presents the death levies of Asurs and Aryans. The text presents the fresh thought on new burials being practices among the non-Aryans, who are referred as *Asurs*. So, who were these Asurs? Asurs occurs in the later parts of the Rig Veda, they constitute a lower class of terrestrial goblins, commonly called Rakshasas. This term seems to be applicable on all barbaric tribal people. *Dev* and *Asur*, are mentioned as the two son of the *Prajapati* in the *Brahdaranyakopnisad*<sup>iii</sup>. The dev was in lesser number as compare to the Asur. Both are in constant fight with each other. The dev used to assimilate these *Asurs*. The eighth khand of Chandogaya Upanishad<sup>iv</sup> (8,8,5) describe the asur as the one who don't do dana, who don't have shradha, don't perform yajna. They worship the body.

The Vedic texts give references of the eighty-two heterodox religious sects such as Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikas and Lokayata. But apart from these there was another different tradition mentioned in fragments in the Vedas, to whom we cannot certainly say which religious sect practices these traditions but some similarities of this tradition can be observed in well-known archaeological culture, living megalithic culture. The culture which is associated with the implantation of stones over the burials, have the fear of the dead, belief in life after death. This tradition is considered to be the tribal culture. We do have a reference of burial and burnt practices for the dead since Paleolithic period but the use of stone over the grave started during the 1500 B.C. or even earlier, the time when Aryan were immigrating into Indian subcontinent. The funeral of non-Vedic people mentioned in the Vedas is not connected with the Aryan but with other race probably Proto-Australoid, Mediterrenean.

Vedas, the amalgam of Aryan and non-Aryan ideals, mentions certain hymns and verses used as benedictions and prayers at funerals and ancestor worship. As the Vedic Aryans advanced into the India, they came across uncivilized tribes among all *Asurs* are mentioned frequently, they were worshipping snakes, spirits and stones. But instead of destroying their barbarian neighbours, *Asurs* allow themselves to be swamped by Aryas, the Aryan assimilated them.<sup>v</sup>

In the present time, *Asur* tribe, inhabiting the Jharkhand region. It is a primitive tribe of this region. This term is frequently mentions in the Vedas. They belong to proto-Australoid or Austra-Asiatic ethnic group. They speak Hindi, Nagpuri, Asuri, and Mundaric language. What religion do the Asur practice during the Vedic age is still a question to be answered? Earlier *Asurs* used to bury their dead but at present they also like Hindu cremate the dead in a place called *Sasan*. After cremating the body, they collect some bones and buried these bones. Later, in memory of the dead they erect stone with some rituals and tradition.<sup>vi</sup>

The clear evidence of non-Vedic tradition is found in the Satapatha Brahman<sup>vii</sup> (XII-8-2-1, 4,5) affirms that there are two types of burials; one of the Daivyas meaning of the 'Aryans and other of the 'Asuras' which is of the 'Dravidians' or the tribal, two sons of *Prajapati*. Both used to fight in all the direction. The *Dev* had displaced their enemy that is Asurs from their direction to the south. The text says that the Vedic or the Aryan burials should have four corners and should be placed on the earth while the tribal *Asura* types is shaped round and is separated from the ground with the help of stones. The *Asurs* place their burials in mid of the east and south. And they belief in mid of these direction there is way to ancestor's land or *pitralok*.

The Aryans, did not like the co-existence of the asurs, they considered them as uncivilized. The SatapathaBrahmana (XIII, 8,2) describe that the Aryan looked upon the builders of round burials, that is Asurs, with contempt and in despicable terms. They separate the burial from the ground with the help of stones. While the Aryan have the four cornered burial structure. And a clash between them forces the megalithic people to shift towards the south. The reason for the non-occurrence of megaliths over limited area could be the absence of raw materials (stone) for construction of the megaliths and manufacturing tools.<sup>viii</sup>

The tradition for the disposal of the dead that is totally different from the Aryans is mentioned in the SatapathaBrahmana (XII,8,1-4). It says about the collection of bones and placement of them on urn and erection of mound over it. Another reference of burial tradition is from the second khand of the SatapathaBrahmana, which mentions about the thing were putted within the boxes.Vedic people prefers cremation of the dead body but we found the reference of *Ayyavazhi* tradition unlike in Vedism, here in this tradition the body of the dead is buried, in a position that faces to the north and covered by sand. This shows some non-Vedic tradition element which were practising during Vedic age.

The Vedic text mentions the numerous aspects of Indian civilization. It did succeed in capturing the unusual tradition of the *Asurs*, to whom Aryans considered to be

uncivilized. In Vedic tradition, where the Asurs have the tradition of burning and entombing the dead after the death of the person while the devas follow the tradition of *Niravapanjali* (after cremation rites, the ashes are ceremonially immersed in holy water by the closet relatives), *Tarpana* (sacred offering to the Gods so that the departed soul may enter *swarg*).

The question here arises that why some were burying their dead under sand and putting stone over it. In literature we found the references that if someone dies an unnatural death than his body is to be buried such as death of the child, pregnant women etc. Due to limited references in literary sources an attempt was made to find the reason behind such act through the interview schedule of people who still in present date buried their dead one. And the reason behind it was that the cremation required the priest to do the rituals and the poor section of the society could not afford the priest. So this different style of decomposition of the body was the revolution against the oppressive Brahmanic culture. And in memory of the person a stone was putted over the body. So, the wild animals will not be able to dig it out from grave for eating.

The references of megalithic culture's features such as worshipping the human body, fear of the dead, offering goods to the dead etc. is found in the Vedas. All this tradition is still prevalent among the *Asur* tribe of Jharkhand region. The earliest reference of the tradition of worshipping the body is referred in the seventh khand of text Chandogya Upanisha (7,1-4). The text says that the tradition started with the query to understand the concept of soul by the Asur's lord Virochan and the Devta's lord Indra from prajapati.<sup>ix</sup> In the eighth khand, of text Chandogya Upanishad (8,1-3), we have the reference of Prajapati explaining the soul as *Amrat, Abjay, Brahma*.<sup>x</sup> But the Asurs lord misunderstood the concept of *Atmavidyagyan*. He interpreted the soul as in this whole world the body is worthy of worship, worthy of taking care and do service to this body. The one who worship this body will get to conqueror this whole world and other world (lok and parlok).<sup>xi</sup> From here the cult of worshipping the body started.

We found the differences among the death practices of Asurs and Devtas. The Twelfth Khand, of Chandogya Upanishad (12,1-3, 6) text help in understanding all those differences were there at the Vedic time. The differences behind death practices arise when the lord of the Devta Indra again visit to the prajapati and again understood the concept of soul to clarifies his doubt. This time prajapati told him that the soul is not the body but it is that part which resides in this body, it never dies, no one can touch it, it can roam anywhere, the *pran* is attach to this body and when person dies the soul get free.<sup>xii</sup> By analysing this fact, we come to know that the difference arises in the worship of two groups

who got the knowledge of soul from the same source prajapati. While the asur understood the soul as to worship the human body but on the other hand Devtas understood worshipping the thing that resides in the body of the human that is soul or jiv, only worshipping this untouchable, undead one can attain or conquer both the world (Lok and parlok). Hence, the tradition that the Devta's offers prayers to the soul and Asura prayed the body started.

Another tradition related to the burials is offering of goods to the dead by the Asur. It is mentioned in the eighth khand of Chandogaya Upanishad (8,8,5). They offer *bhiksha* (flower, food) to the dead body, they decorate the dead body with dress and ornaments and they believe that by doing all this they will conquer the other world or *parlok*. The Virochan community believe that by doing this type of *sanskara* the *jiv* of the dead person reach the *swarg* and he live happily thereafter there.<sup>xiii</sup> Similar sort of belief and tradition is statically practiced among the present day Asurs tribe of Jharkhand.

The tradition of offering goods because of the fear of the dead and unwanted things is for the first time discusses in the Atharvaveda. The Asur and Dev both have the fear of the dead and because of this they offer prays to the departed soul and offered food, cloth, tools etc. In Atharvaveda (V, 31, 8), we found the reference of the dangerous things done by the, the things they dig in the *samsana*, the dead.<sup>xiv</sup> So, they offer prayers and goods to the dead. So, that the dead can rest in peace and did not harm them. The other reason for goods to be offered was that the people of Vedic age believe in the life after the death. So, they offered all those goods which could be needed by the departed soul in his next life.

The reference of another tradition is of implanting the stone over the burial is founded in the Rig Veda. In Rig Veda (X, 18,4) there is an reference of stone circle to protect the living humans from the dead so that no one died an pre mature death.<sup>xv</sup>

## Conclusion:

The Vedic text mentions the numerous aspects of Indian civilization such as human knowledge, belief, behavior etc. The 'Vratya' tradition of the tribal and natives of India that observed different rituals probably different then Vedic Aryans has been mentioned for the first time in Vedic texts. It did succeed in capturing the unusual tradition of the *Asurs*, to whom Aryans considered to be uncivilized. In Vedic tradition, where the Asurs have the tradition of burning and entombing the dead after the death of the person while the devas follow the tradition of *Niravapanjali* (after cremation rites, the ashes are ceremonially immersed in holy water by the closet relatives), *Tarpana* (sacred offering to the Gods so that the departed soul may enter *swarg*). The Asur's unlike the Aryans belief in the adoring the body, offering goods to the dead, belief in life after death, they have the fear of the death.

This shows that the tradition for the dead which were first originated from the same root, with the passage of time certain differences emerged among them, but the tradition continues. The interesting fact to observe is that even today all above mentioned tradition is still followed by some tribes. The tradition of stone memorials over the dead, fear of dead, goods offered to the dead etc. still perpetuates in twenty-first century.

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