

PRE- ZOROASTRIAN ARYAN RELIGIONS



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This book contains Pre-Zoroastrian Aryan religions. We have tried our best to gather what all information we can gather and present it to you all.

This book is written by collecting information from various sources available on the internet.

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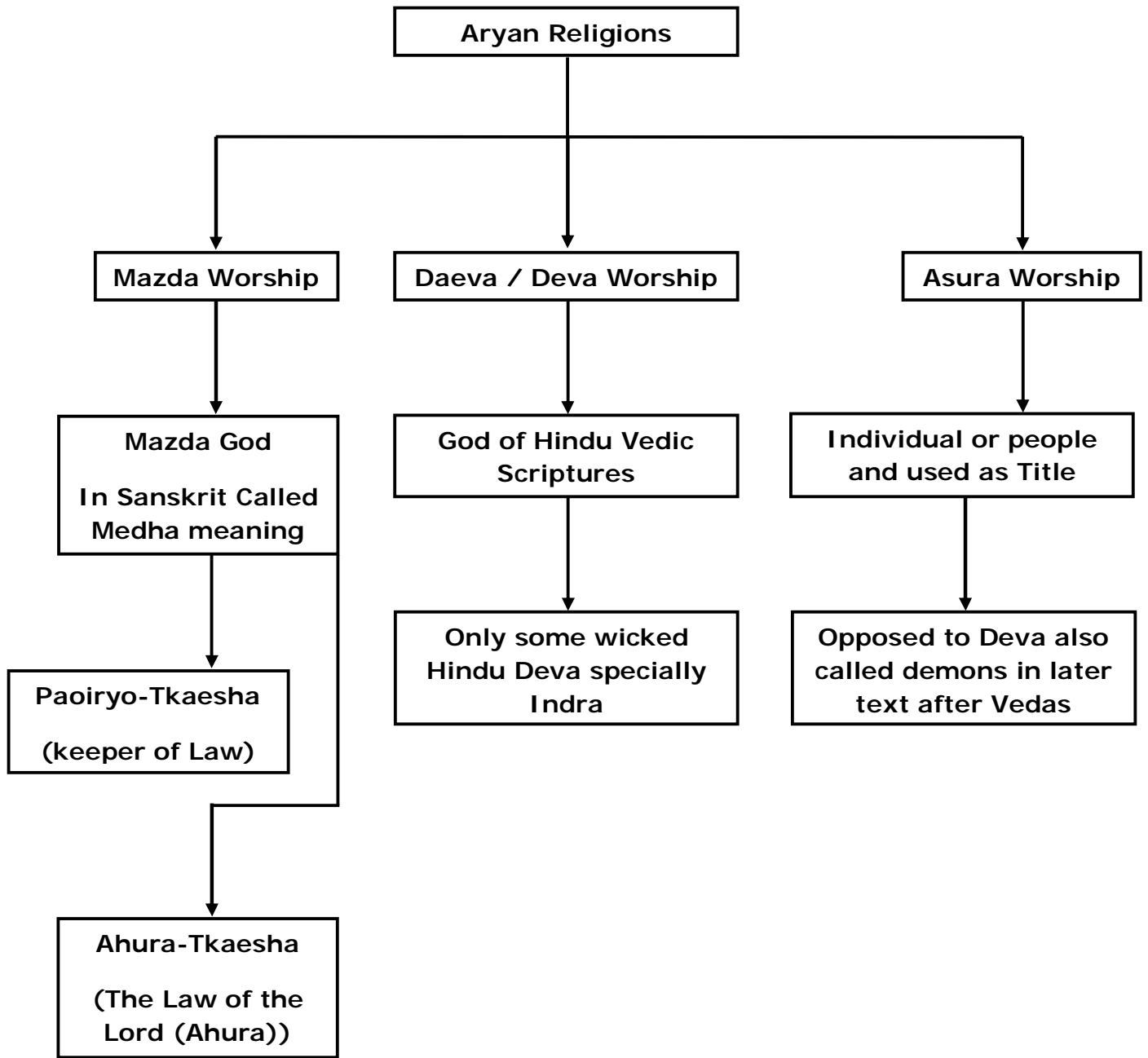
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Contents at a glance :

1.	Pre-Zoroastrian Aryan Religions	1
2.	Evolution of Aryan worship	14

1. Pre-Zoroastrian Aryan Religions :



The Farvardin Yasht's verses 89 & 90 mention that later in Aryan history, Zarathushtra proclaimed the Ahura-tkaesha, the laws of the Lord (Ahura). If the word 'mazda' related to the creative aspect of the divinity grounded in an ultimate concept of wisdom, the word 'ahura' related to the aspect of having dominion over creation through order and laws that are innate in every part and particle of creation (cf. fravashi). Zarathushtra used these two concepts to propound a belief described as Mazdayasno Zarathushtrish Vidaevo Ahura-Tkaesho, that is, Zarathushtrian Mazda-Worship opposed to the daeva through the laws of the Lord (Ahura). For the sake of brevity, we can call Zarathushtrian Mazda-Worship (i.e. post Zarathushtra) as Mazdayasni Ahura-Tkaesha.

Our sources for information about the pre-Zoroastrian Aryan religions are the Zoroastrian and Hindu scriptures: the Avesta and Vedas respectively, the Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts and the poet Ferdowsi's epic, the Shahnameh.

The description of the old Aryan religions, the names of their deities, and the groups that worshipped them, are not uniformly described in our reference texts. However, in reading the texts, some common themes do emerge, themes that allow us to attempt an understanding of the early Aryan religious beliefs, customs, and groupings - as well as the relationship between the different Aryan groups.



Battles between the devas and asuras. The cosmic wars between the deities were symbolic of the earthly wars between the two groups

We will examine three primary pre-Zoroastrian Aryan religions mentioned in our source texts: Mazda worship, Daeva or Deva worship and Asura worship.

1. Mazda Worship :

Mazdayasni :

In the Avesta's book of Yashts, verse 13.87 of the Farvardin Yasht as well as the Middle Persian Denkard at 3.35 mention that Mazda, God, was worshipped by the Aryans from the time of the first Aryan king Gaya Maretan - in other words from the outset of Aryan history. This statement is corroborated by the poet Ferdowsi's epic, the Shahnameh, and by Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts. In these texts, Gaya Maretan and his people were the first Mazdayasni meaning Mazda worshippers, the worshippers of God.

The word 'mazda' is thought by some to be related to the Sanskrit 'medha' meaning intelligent or wise. In usage, the word Mazda was used to mean God, that is, a creator who caused creation through wisdom, indeed, through a divine thought. Mazda therefore can be translated as God.

Paoiryo-Tkaesha :

The opening paragraphs of the Avesta's Farvardin Yasht and the Yasht's verse 13.150 also tell us that Gaya Maretan and the other Pre-Zoroastrian Mazdayasni were called paoiryo-tkaesha meaning keepers of the original ancient law. In order to differentiate early Mazda worship from the later Zoroastrian Mazda worship, we will call this original Aryan religion, Mazdayasni Paoiryo-Tkaesha.

Ahura-Tkaesha :

The Farvardin Yasht's verses 89 & 90 mention that later in Aryan history, Zarathushtra proclaimed the Ahura-tkaesha, the laws of the Lord (Ahura). If the word 'mazda' related to the creative aspect of the divinity grounded in an ultimate concept of wisdom, the word 'ahura' related to the aspect of having dominion over creation through order and laws that are innate in every part and particle of creation (cf. fravashi). Zarathushtra used these two concepts to propound a belief described as Mazdayasno Zarathushtrish Vidaevo Ahura-Tkaesho, that is, Zarathushtrian Mazda-Worship opposed to the daeva through the laws of the Lord (Ahura). For the sake of brevity, we can call Zarathushtrian Mazda-Worship (i.e. post Zarathushtra) as Mazdayasni Ahura-Tkaesha.

1a. Did the Mazdayasna Religion Precede Zarathushtra?

Since, as we have just observed, both the pre- and post- Zoroastrian religions are called Mazdayasni, many authors have assumed that Zarathushtra was a reformer of a Mazdayasni religion that predated him, rather than the founder of a new religion. While Zarathushtra may have used previous concepts and while his followers may have incorporated elements of a previous religion, or religions, back into Zoroastrianism, Zarathushtra's teachings were different enough for him to have initially experienced great difficulty in getting others to listen to him. Our section on the war of religion further illustrates the radical nature of his teachings - regardless of the words used for divinity. There are other reasons not to assume that Zarathushtra was a reformer. His concept of being a Mazdayasni was quite different from previous concepts labelled as 'Mazdayasni'. There is an explanation for these assertions:

First, Mazda-yasni translated directly simply means God-worship rather than being the name of a religion. The form and doctrine of worship before Zarathushtra was very different from that preached by Zarathushtra, just as religions today who profess a worship of God i.e. God-worshippers, are radically different. Next, it is commonly assumed that Mazda is an Avestan name for God rather than a word for God - an assumption that may lead to incorrect conclusions. The difference is that if Mazda is the Avestan word for God, saying that the Aryans worshipped Mazda since the time of Gayo Maretan is the same as saying that the Aryans worshipped God (a supreme God) from ancient times. Mazda, or God, could have had different names through the ages, or the word for God could have changed with a change in language. For instance, if Varuna (also see below), a principle asura in the Vedas, was the name for God (Mazda) at one stage in Aryan history, then Varuna worship could also be called Mazda worship or the worship of God.

A parallel to this concept is found in the Christian Old and New Testaments as well as the Jewish Torah. There, the worship of Yahweh and Jehovah, or for that matter all the Judeo-Christian words or names for God, are synonymous with the worship of God. Despite the use of different words or names for God in the different languages of the Bible, Christians do not conclude that the Bible chronicles the worship of multiple gods throughout history. Christians say that Abraham worshipped God even though the attributes assigned to the Abrahamic God might be quite different from the more modern Christian assignment of divine attributes - thereby making Judaism and Christianity related but very different religions. Similarly, if we say that Gaya Maretan was a Mazda worshipper, the word or name for God in Pre-Zoroastrian Aryan history could have been Varuna or some other word / name, and the beliefs of the corresponding religions could also have been different, but nevertheless related, as would have been Varuna and Mitra worship, two asuras mentioned in the Rig Veda. In any event, Mazda worship before Zarathushtra might have been related but was quite different from Zarathushtra's Mazda worship.

The Avesta's book of Yashts, as well as portions of other Avestan books, may give us clues about the pre-Zoroastrian Mazdayasni beliefs, thereby serving a function in the Avesta similar to the Christian Bible's Old Testament.

2. Daeva or Deva Worship :

[Note: The words deva (Vedic Sanskrit), daeva (Avestan Old Iranian) and div (Middle and Modern Persian) are commonly considered to be variations of the same word, div being the more modern (Middle Persian) word. While the different words may at times be applied in a similar fashion, there are times when they have different connotations.]

Deva :

The devas are the gods of the Hindu scriptures.

The earliest of the Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda provides us with information about pre-Zoroastrian Vedic-Aryan deva worship.

Daeva and Div :

The daeva and div in the Avesta and other Persian texts, are evil qualities, personification of evil qualities and demons. The terms 'demon', evil person and 'negative value' (or 'base quality') are freely interchangeable in the Zoroastrian concept of the daeva or div (as mentioned earlier, div is the later version of the Avestan word daeva).

The demonization of the Rig Vedic deva, primarily Indra, in the Avesta, the naming of a book of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta as the Vi-daevo-data (modern name: Vendidad) meaning the law against the daeva, as well as the name of the religion preached by Zarathushtra: Mazdayasno Zarathushtrish Vidadaevo Ahura-Tkaesho, that is, Zarathushtrian Mazda-Worship opposed to the daeva through the laws of the Lord (Ahura), together signify the strong opposition of the Mazda worshippers to the daeva and the defining of Zoroastrian Mazda worship through its opposition to the daeva.

Not all the daeva in Zoroastrian and Persian texts are the devas mentioned in the Vedas. The Mazda worshippers began to use the word daeva generically to mean all demonic forces of evil. The word daeva and div came to include the personification of vices, other Aryan gods who were not part of the Vedic pantheon, as well as the gods of non-Aryan peoples.

In the chapter 32 of the Gathas, Zarathushtra speaks about the daeva, evil and the lie, a concept he introduces in Y.30.6. In Yasna 32.3 Zarathushtra states:

"At yush deava vispaongha akat manangho sta chithrem."

Translated as :

But all you daeva

Are the progeny of wicked thoughts (thinking).

The manner in which Zarathushtra refers to the daeva is ambiguous. Zarathushtra refers to the daeva as a group who collectively chose evil. He does not name the daeva in his hymns. However, some of the negative qualities he speaks about - such as aeshma, wrath, and achistem mano, evil mind, (Y.30.6) became named as daeva elsewhere in the Avesta.

In the Avesta's Aban (Avan) Yasht (5.94), we read of the Daevayasni, the daeva worshippers. In the Vendidad's chapter 19, the Daevayasni are juxtaposed against the Mazdayasni.

Further, a book of the Avesta, is Vi-daevo-data (the Vendidad), meaning the law against the daeva, mentions (in verses 10.9 and 19.43) Indra, a Rig Vedic deva (see below), by name. Verses 10.9 to 10.16 mention additional daeva: Sauru, Naunghaithya, Tauru, Zairi, Aeshma, Akatasha, Zaurva, Buiti, Driwi, Daiwi, Kasvi, Paitisha, the daeva of Varenya (Varena) and the daeva of Mazana, presumed to be a nation (not mentioned in Vendidad's list of sixteen nations) - modern Mazandaran. Daeva mentioned elsewhere in the Vendidad are Akem-Mano / Aka-Manah (evil mind) (19.4).

Of the daeva listed in the Vendidad, only Indra has a direct Vedic equivalent. Sauru is thought to be the Vedic Sarva (sometimes used in the Vedas as a name of Shiva). Similarly, Naunghaithya is thought to be the Vedic Nasatya. In the Vendidad, Indra operates under the auspices of anra mainyu, the evil spirit (in later texts, the embodiment of anra mainyu is Ahriman, the devil incarnate).

Deva Indra :



**The Rig-Vedic deva, Indra,
riding his elephant, Airavata**

Indra is a principle deva in the Rig Veda where he has more verses addressed to him than any other deva. In the image to the right, Indra is seen riding his elephant Airavata. Unlike the invisible, non-anthropomorphic, genderless, non-iconic Mazda, the devas are represented and worshipped as idols or graven images.

Indra's arch foe was the asura Vrita who was "manifested by the father of a youth killed by Indra. The young man had three heads, one for studying, one for eating, and one for watching. Indra was extremely jealous of the peaceful, studious youth. Finally, Indra was so enraged that he hurled a thunderbolt at him and cut off his heads." (p. 502, *Dictionary of Ancient Deities* by Patricia Turner, Charles Russell Coulter). Vrita emerged from the slain youth's body and was granted invincibility during night and day, to materials wet or dry, on land and on water.

Thereafter, in encounters between Indra and Vrita, Vrita was either victorious or succeeded in frustrating Indra's exploits, until that is, Indra was aided by Vishnu as the trickster. On Vishnu's advice Indra feigned a friendship and made a truce with Vrita. Then, after many years, Vishnu and Indra discovered the means to penetrate Vrita's invisibility. One day, while

they were walking on a seashore at twilight - a time that was neither day nor night - the wily Vishnu gathered the froth of the ocean - which was neither wet nor dry - and threw it at Vrita standing at water's edge - a spot that was neither land nor water - engulfing and choking the asura.

We read into the myth, core values of the deva and asura worshippers, as well as the methods the deva-worshippers employed in order to co-exist for generations with the dominant asura-worshippers: bidding their time while plotting to gain power through subterfuge.

Div as Evil People :

In Ferdowsi's epic, the kingdom of King Gaya Maretan was attacked by divs led by Ahriman's son - a battle that is discussed further below.

Div as Vices :

The *Shahnameh* goes on to list in its pages nine principle vices called divs:

- Az - greed
- Niaz - desire
- Khashm - wrath
- Rashk - envy
- Nang - dishonour
- Kin - vengeance
- Nammaam - tell-tale
- Do-ruy - two-faced
- Napak-din - heretic

These divs and vices closely parallel the daeva characteristics - the demonic personification of vices - mentioned in the Avesta. The vices are considered evil by Zoroastrians and the antithesis of the virtues of an ashavan.

Nature of the Div (Evil) :

Book 3 of the Denkard (a Middle Persian non-scriptural text) gives us interesting observations into the perceived nature of the div: Evil has no creative powers. If we extrapolate the statement we are led to the concept that Mazda, God, is creative [Dk 3.40: "The Self-existent is One, and God alone has created"], constructive and pure (cf. Pak Yazdan, a Pure Divinity) while the div is the dualistic antithesis - it is destructive and polluting. Therefore demonic forces cannot create. They can only pollute and contaminate, and thereby cause evil or transform something good to evil - like a drop of poison contaminating pure water and thereby transforming it from something life-giving to something deathly. When entities through an act of choice, choose evil and set about their acts of deception or destruction, they become that element of evil [Dk. 3.144 "Because of wisdom (i.e. choice) that a person is a doer of good or evil deeds". Also see Dk 3.33]. The consequence is that since divs can only destroy, they will ultimately destroy themselves - that is the promise of Zoroastrian eschatology. However, the good must participate to bring about and facilitate that eventuality.

Other Denkard passages and Middle Persian texts question whether Ahriman and the divs exist at all. Perhaps referring to Chapter 30 of the Gathas, they postulate that existence or being is a result of the creative process from which life and goodness emerged. The evil mind (akem-mano / aka-manah), other aspects of evil, and the personification of evil, are progressions of being or existence's dual aspect - the aspect of not-being or anti-existence. The symbolic analogy here is that darkness is not an independent entity. It is the absence of light - it is not-light. Darkness is banished instantly when light emerges [Dk 3.142: Where there is much shining of light, there is permanence of light and disappearance of darkness]. The banishment of darkness is enduring if the light is enduring as with an ever-burning flame. Yet a flame is fragile. It is extinguished not by darkness, but by the lack of attention by those who must nurture it and feed it pure foods as a mind is fed the food of good thoughts and the body, good deeds. It follows that Ahriman and the divs cannot exist independently, but manifest themselves in the absence of goodness. Therefore evil would cease to be manifest if goodness were all pervasive - an ultimate goal towards which Zoroastrians dedicate themselves. Once again, the good must play an active part for without the spread of light, without the maintenance of an ever-burning flame, the darkness of evil cannot be banished. [cf. Dk 3.27, 33, 34, 40, 50, 130, 132, 142.]

3. Asura Worship :

The Rig Veda or other Hindu religious texts do not directly mention Mazda worship or Mazda worshippers. Rather, they mention a set of deities who carry the title asura.

The word asura is the Vedic equivalent of the Avestan ahura. Avestan words can frequently be changed to their Sanskrit equivalent by replacing h with s. Ahura is in turn said to be derived from the word ahu, meaning lord. As with the English word 'lord', ahu is a descriptive title for both a human lord (e.g. a feudal lord or landlord) and a divine lord. In the Avesta, God or Mazda, is sometimes addressed as Ahura (Lord) and sometimes as Ahura Mazda (Lord God). The use of the words in this manner can also be found in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

It is pertinent to note that in the older Veda, the Rig Veda, the term asura or lord is used (as in the Avesta) for individual gods and for people - but never for a group of gods. In other words,

asura does not define a class of gods. Rather it is a title. In these older Vedic texts, the term deva, however, is used for both individual gods and the group of devas (visve devah). In other words, deva is used both as a title - a superior god - and as the name for the group of gods. Some gods with the title asura are also referred to as devas. This nomenclature changes in the later Vedic texts, where the word asura is used as a title and as the name of a group of gods, gods who had evolved into demons.

There is a considerable difference in the way asuras are treated in the older and younger Vedic texts and the difference may help us understand the manner in which the Aryan religions, and the relationship between them, evolved.

In the earlier Vedas, the devas and asuras are said to have been born of a common parent, but the asuras were the older (purva-deva) and stronger siblings - powerful and beneficent gods who merited equal if not greater respect than the devas.

In the later Vedic texts starting with the **Atharv Ved**, the asuras are referred to in the plural, that is as a group of deities. It is also in these later texts that the asuras are depicted as being opposed to the devas. In conflicts between the two, the asuras were invariably victorious. The devas were victorious when they used a ruse or received the help of a benefactor trickster such as Vishnu.

In the post Vedic texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita, Puranas and Itihasas, the asuras are transformed and treated as a group of demons who possess the vices of pride, arrogance, conceit, anger, harshness, and ignorance (Gita 16.4). In the Brahmana texts, the asuras are hostile and opposed to the devas with whom they are in constant conflict.

However, no individual god who carries the title asura in the Rig Veda ever appears as an inimical adversary of the deva gods in the later Hindu religious texts, and none of the gods who bore the title asura in the older Rig Veda are mentioned in these later texts. In other words, the asuras of the earlier texts are not to be considered as demons. In one later text, the Upanishad, the new character of the asuras are accompanied with a new word, sura, meaning god, thereby implying that asura meant a-sura or a not-god.

It stands to reason that the change in the way the asuras were perceived by the deva worshippers closely parallels the changes in the relations between the asura and deva worshippers. There is an acknowledgement that the asura worship preceded deva worship and that in the early years, the asura worshippers were the dominant group.

A name that appears to be common to both the Avesta and Vedas is the Vedic asura Mitra (also see below) and the Avestan Mithra. In the Vedas, Mitra is often addressed together with the asura Varuna.

While the Vedas tend to anthropomorphize all its deities, it is probable that the asuras, Varuna, Mithra and Agni were originally invisible, non-anthropomorphic, genderless, non-iconic deities (cf. the attributes of Mazda) who may have been worshipped together as Asura worship or exclusively as Mazda worship.

References :

Asura in Early Vedic Religion, Hale, Wash Edward (1986), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass
Review - Asura in Early Vedic Religion, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, The, Oct-Dec, 1993 by Stanley Insler.

Differences between Deva & Asura Worship :

In his book, *The Hymns of Atharvan Zarathushtra*, Jatindra Mohan Chatterji calls the Rig Vedic devas the seen gods, and asuras the unseen gods. In other words the devas like Indra were anthropomorphic and capable of representation as idols, while the asuras like Mitra were, for the main part, non-anthropomorphic and formless.

In the Rig Veda, the devas preside over natural phenomena and the exercise of power and might while the asuras preside over the establishment of a moral and social order. For instance, the deva Indra is guardian of the weather and victory in battle earning the title sahasra-mushka, 'the one with a thousand testicles' (Rig Veda 6.45.3), while the asuras Varuna and Mitra are the guardians of the cosmic and moral laws of rita (cf. asha).

In the Rig Veda (4.42.1-6), when Varuna declares, "I, Varuna, am the king; first for me were appointed the dignities of asura, the Lord. I let the dripping waters rise up, and through rta I uphold the sky." Indra replies, "Men who ride swiftly, having good horses, call on me when surrounded in battle. I, the bountiful Indra, provoke strife. I whirl up the dust, my strength is overwhelming... . No godlike power can check me - I who am unassailable. When draughts of Soma, when songs have made me frenzied, then both the unbounded regions are filled with fear." The hymns addressed to Varuna are more ethical and devout in tone than the others, and form the most noble or high-minded portion of the Rig Veda.

If the qualities of the gods reflect the values of the worshippers, then for asura worshippers building and maintaining a peaceful society based on law and order was a priority. For the deva worshippers, the priority would have been the exercise of power through might and fear. The asuras are ethical where the devas are materialistic. While in the Rig Veda both deities and their respective allies are worshipped, Indra and deva worship clearly take precedence. The largest number of Rig Vedic hymns are dedicated to Indra - nearly 250 out of a total of 1028. Agni, an asura, is invoked in about 200 hymns, a greater number than the number of hymns dedicated to Varuna.

In Buddhism, the asuras are seen as lesser deities who are never satisfied and who continuously strive to better themselves. Zoroastrianism sees continuously striving for improvement towards excellence as a fundamental purpose of life.

The characteristics assigned to the devas and asuras reflected what beliefs the rulers and their supporting priests wished to promote in society. The ideal of continuously striving to improve oneself could have promoted ambition amongst the common people, while some rulers and priests may have thought it more desirable to promote satisfaction or resignation to one's lot in life - a life that had been divinely ordained. Rulers and priests so inclined would have promoted deva worship that included the caste system rather than asura worship that saw working to better oneself as a virtue and not a sin.

As in our example above, the differences between what the devas and asuras represented became differences in core beliefs, values, the nature of human beings, and the organization of society. These differences appear to have become strong enough to produce a deep societal divide - a schism - with the deva worshippers on one side, and the asura and Mazda worshippers on the other side. The Mazda worshippers were the Iranian-Aryans, The deva worshippers are generally thought of as being Indian-Aryans though they could have been any of the non-Iranian groups.

Incorporation of Pre-Zoroastrian into Mazda Worship & Zoroastrianism :

Some of the asuras such as Mitra, are included in the Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta, as angels (fereshstes or yazatas) and guardians or lords (ahuras/asuras) of core Zoroastrian values and ideals.

In the Avesta, the names of the yazatas are also names for core values and ideals. For instance, as an angel in the Avesta, Mithra is the guardian of the values and qualities associated with friendship. In day-to-day language, Mithra means a friend, the ideals of loyal, trustworthy, caring and kind friendship and the qualities of kindness, helpfulness and benevolence. As a core value Mithra is the value of keeping of promises.

We do not know if the incorporation of asura worship into Mazda worship took place before, during or after Zarathushtra's time. In the hymns of Zarathushtra, the Gathas, Zarathushtra does not accommodate or incorporate the asuras in the manner that we see elsewhere in the Avesta. Indeed, depending on the interpretation of the Gathas being read, Zarathushtra can be seen as preaching an uncompromising monotheism. Regardless of the interpretations that abound, the Avesta taken as a whole together with Middle Persian literature and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh provide the full spectrum of belief and a consistent ethic. The texts are a repository of a rich heritage consisting of some of the earliest literature and history known to humankind - a history interwoven with the references to the asuras and daevas.

Appendix: Hindu Religious Texts :

Vedas :

1. The Rig Veda contains hymns (mantras) about the mythology and ancient Vedic practice (At Wikipedia: Description, Translations, also Mandalas. At Sacred Texts: Sanskrit, English.),
2. The Sama Veda consists mainly of Rig Vedic mantras, arranged in the order required to perform the Soma ritual. (At Sacred Texts),
3. The Yajur Veda contains instructions for the soma rituals in prose (at Sacred Texts) and,
4. The Atharva Veda consists of spells against enemies, sorcerers, diseases and mistakes made during the sacrificial ritual. It also outlines royal duties and expounds on spiritual matters. (At Sacred Texts)

Each of the four Vedas are divided into two sections :

1. The Samhita or mantras, hymns and,
2. The Brahmanas - commentaries, interpretation and instructions for the the rituals.

The Brahmanas are further sub-divided into two sections :

1. The Aranyakas, description of especially dangerous rituals such as the Mahavrata and Pravargya and,
2. The Upanishads.

Upanishads :

The Upanishad , meaning sitting near (the teacher), are philosophical and metaphysical writings about the relationship between the soul and Brahman. Collectively, the Upanishads are called the Vedanta, the end of the Veda, because they appear at the end of each Veda, and because they are considered the culmination of Vedic knowledge.

Notes on the Vedas :

The predominant deities of the Vedas, headed by Indra, are different from those in later, post-Vedic Hinduism. The central story of the Vedas is Indra's battle and eventual killing of the asura Vrita. The ritual focus is that of the yajna (cf. Avestan yasna) - the act of worship. The spiritual focus is in joining ancestral souls in the Vedic equivalent of heaven. The concept of reincarnation would enter Hinduism in the post-Vedic period. Reincarnation is not an native Aryan concept. The doctrinal focus is the purva or original mimamsa - inquiry or investigation.

Post Vedic Scriptures :

1. Itihasas (epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata). The heroes of the epics are avatars, incarnation of God, Vishnu, as human being: Rama, in the Ramayana, and Krishna, in the Mahabharata. Unlike the gods of the Vedas and the mystic all-pervading and formless Brahman in the Brahmanas, the avatars are developed loving and righteous personalities (Sacred Texts: Ramayana),
2. Puranas (mythology),
3. Agamas (theological treatises),
4. Darshanas (philosophical texts) and,
5. Dharmashastras (law books)

Bhagavad-Gita :

Also known as the Gita, the Bhagavad Gita (meaning the song of God) is a section of the Mahabharata where Krishna exhorts the devotee to abandon the mortal self and give oneself to the infinite love of God. By loving God a person loves the immortal self, and thereby finds harmony and peace with the universe.

Puranas :

The Puranas consist of narratives ranging from the history of the universe from creation to destruction, cosmology, philosophy, geography, genealogies and myths of kings, heroes, sages, and demigods. Some individual Puranas feature a particular deity and their exploits such as Durga-Devi and her killing of Mahish-Asura. The Puranas are usually written in the form of stories told by one person to another.

Notes on the Post-Vedic Scriptures :

In the post-Vedic scriptures, the focus of veneration of Indra in the Rig Veda, is replaced by the worship of Vishnu, Shiva and (Durga) Devi. Although Vishnu was a Vedic deity, he rises to pre-eminence in the post-Vedic scriptures. The Vedic yajna is replaced by a different religious ritual called the puja. The ritualistic purva mimamsa is replaced by the speculative philosophies of Vedanta also called the uttar, or later, mimamsa.

References to Asuras - Chronological Order in Vedic texts :

Rig Veda books I, VIII, X; Atharva Veda; Sama Veda, Rig Veda Khilas (supplementary chapters) and the mantras of the Yajur Veda; Brahmanas.

Source :

<http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/aryans/religion.htm#daevaworship>

2. Evolution of Aryan worship :

In reading the different Zoroastrian and Hindu texts, we are left with the impression that the three different Aryan religions as well as the relationship between them, evolved significantly over time. They could have looked very different at different points in history and also in different locations. The relationship between them also changed from one of coexistence to irrevocable separation.

The communities in which the religions were practiced could have been exclusivist or pluralistic communities. Rulers of exclusivist communities could be expected to acknowledge a single religion or even a single deity within the deva or asura pantheon. Rulers of pluralistic communities could be expected to be more ecumenical.

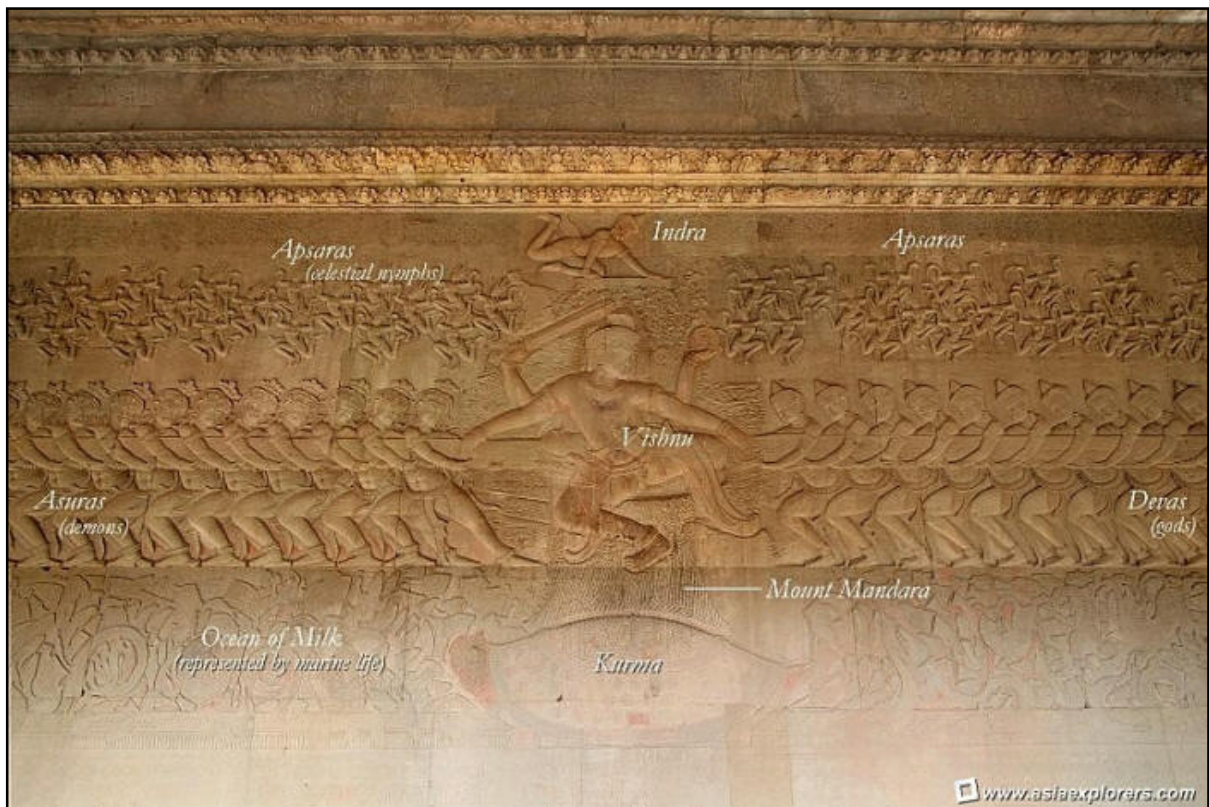
At times the three religious groups coexisted while at other times they competed violently.

Coexistence :

An example of a pluralistic, ecumenical accommodation of the asuras and devas by specific communities is a c. 1400 BCE peace treaty with the Hittites, the rulers of the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni invoked the asuras Varuna and Mitra, as well as the devas Indra and the Nasatyas. Mitanni was located southwest of Lake Van, in an area that is part of Southern Turkey and Northern Syria today.

In the Rig Veda, we read that the initial relationship between the asuras and deva was one of coexistence. This relationship would gradually change to one of competition. Nevertheless, some asuras such as Agni (fire) are invited by the deva chief Indra to become devas (Rig Veda 10.124) and Agni is sometimes referred to as a deva. In verse 5, Varuna, a principle asura, is also invited by Indra to become a deva.

Cooperation between the asuras and devas is not relegated to the earlier Hindu scriptures, the Rig Veda. Stories of their cooperation can be found in the later Puranas, such as the story of Mount Mandara. However, their cooperation is short-lived. In the story, a catastrophic flood befalls the earth submerging the treasured possessions of the devas and asuras including the elixir of immortality, Amrita (cf. Avestan Amertat, immortality). The peak of the lofty Mount Meru rose above the flood and this is where the gods gathered and caucused on how to retrieve the Amrita. They agreed to a plan proposed by the deva Vishnu. Together, they uprooted the mountain Mandara and placed it on the back of Kurma, the tortoise. The gods then coiled the world serpent Vasuki around the mountain like a rope with the asuras holding one end of the snake and the devas the other end. By coordinating their actions, they used the snake coiled around the mountain to rotate the mountain and thereby churn the cosmic ocean formed by the flood. As the waters churned, the ocean turned to milk and then to butter, revealing the lost elixir of immortality and other treasures. The cooperation soon ended. According to the Bhagavata-Purana, as soon as the Amrita was produced, the devas took possession of it, and broke their promise to the asuras to give them half. As a consequence, the asuras then tried to steal it from the devas. A struggle ensued which the asuras lost and the devas consumed the nectar of immortality all by themselves.



Devas and Asuras using the world serpent Vasuki and Mount Mandara to churn the cosmic ocean

The story marks the end of cooperation between the devas and asuras and the start of a deep and irreconcilable schism between them. Their relationship had deteriorated to the point that they were henceforth bent on mutual destruction.

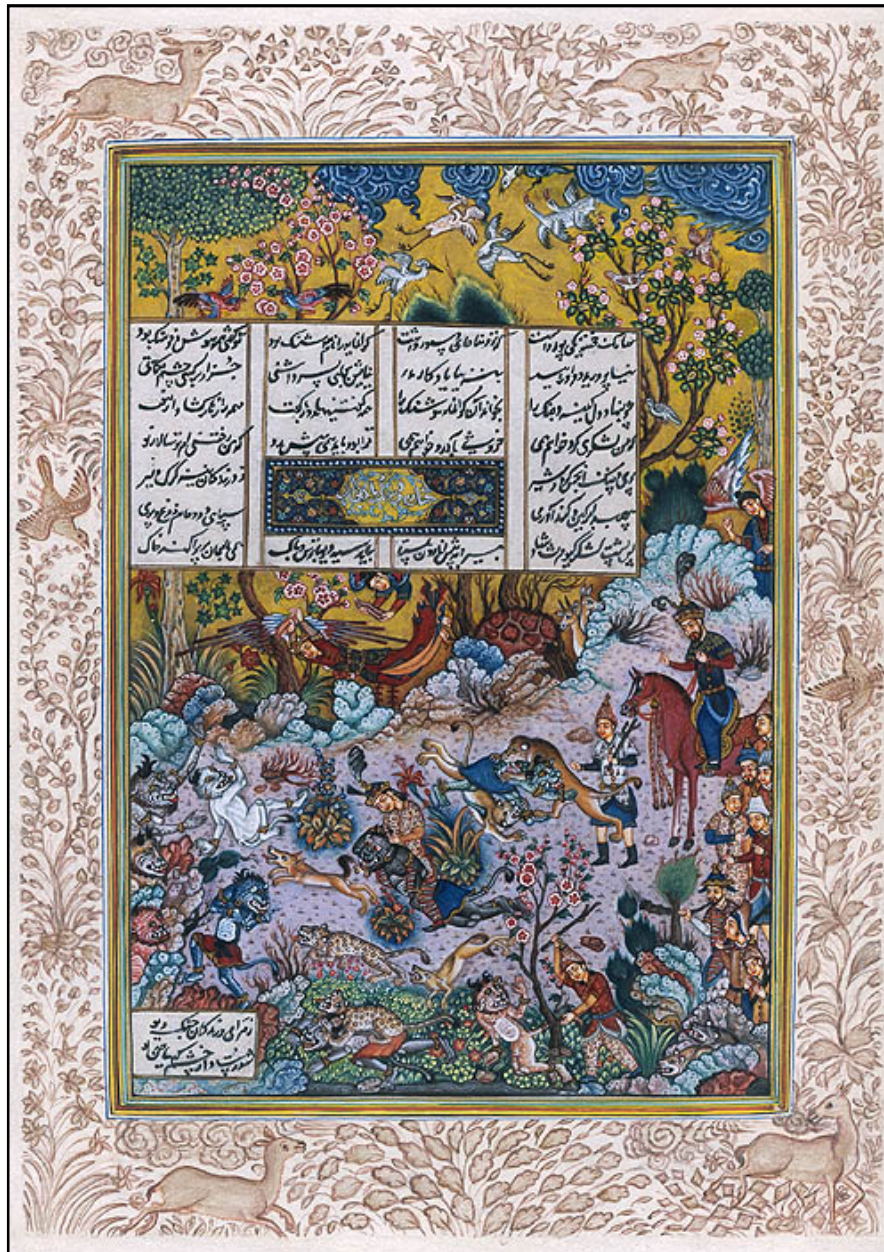
Schism between Mazda-Asura and Deva Worshippers :

The story of the differences between the asuras and devas were of course a reflection of the differences and the violent conflict between the deva and asura worshippers. While, as we have mentioned, the Hindu scriptures do not directly refer to Mazda worshippers, the Zoroastrian and Persian texts talk about the conflict as one between the deva and Mazda worshippers. We will therefore refer to the conflict as between the deva and asura-Mazda worshippers.

Primordial Battles Between Mazda & Deva Worshippers :

According to the poet Ferdowsi's epic, the Shahnameh, at the dawn of history the Mazda worshippers and the deva worshippers fought two primordial battles. The battles took place during the reign of the first Aryan king, Gaya Maretan (a name later shortened first to Gayo-Mard and then Kayomars in the Shahnameh). The first battle started when the deva worshippers led by Ahriman, attacked Gaya Maretan's Mazda worshippers. During the battle, Ahriman's son killed Gaya Maretan's son Siyamak, and the first battle resulted in the defeat of Gaya Maretan's army by Ahriman's hordes. However, retribution was to follow. After a bitter period of mourning, Gaya Maretan assembled a large army led by his grandson Hushang. The

Mazda worshippers then attacked and defeated the deva worshippers in a second battle, a defeat that resulted in a subjugation of the deva worshippers by the Mazda worshippers.



Hushang slays a div - a scene from the Shahnameh

These initial battles were to characterize the relationship between the deva and Mazda worshippers in subsequent millennia. Periodically, one group would win dominance over the other. Nevertheless, until, their separation into the nations of Iran and India, they did coexist, possibly within a community or in adjacent communities.

The War of Religion :

If Gaya Maretan and his successors had asserted the dominance of Mazda worshippers over the deva worshippers, that state of affairs would change over time, and the deva worshippers would turn the table and gradually assert their dominance.

This change in dominance is recorded in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. The Shahnameh's chapter on King Vishtasp and Zarathushtra opens with the following lines which we have adapted from James Atkinson's translation of the Shahnameh:

I've said preceding sovereigns worshipped God (Mazda)

By whom their crowns were given

To protect the people from oppressors.

God they served, acknowledging God's goodness -

For to God, the pure, unchangeable, the Holy One!

They owed their greatness and their earthly power.

But after times,

Worship of God gave way to idolatry and pagan faith,

And then Mazda's name was lost

In adoration of created things.

At the time of Zarathushtra's birth, Mazda worship had lost ground to deva worship, as had the virtues of honesty and not causing harm to others. A young Zarathushtra, disgusted with the dishonesty, violence, greed and lawlessness that surrounded him, resolved to dedicate his life to changing this state of affairs. He preached establishing an ethical order based on the old Mazdayasni faith - one that would come to be known as the Mazdayasni Ahura-Tkaesha.

The first royal patron of Zarathushtra's religion was King Vishtasp. Ferdowsi's Shahnameh tells us that King Vishtasp was king of Balkh, which at that time had become a tributary state of Turan (Sugd).

When King Vishtasp adopted the Zoroastrian Mazdayasni faith, he also decided to stop paying tribute to King Arjasp of Turan, whereupon Arjasp gave Vishtasp an ultimatum to resume paying tribute and forsake his adopted faith, or face a devastating invasion (cf. Warner & Atkinson translations of the Shahnameh):

"Abandon your ill course,

Be awed before the God of Paradise,

Put far from you that aging miscreant,

And hold a feast according to our customs... .

"If not, in a month or two,

I will enter your kingdom with fire and sword,

And destroy your authority and you.

I give you good advice:

Do not be influenced by a wicked counsellor,

But return to your former religious practices.

Weigh well, therefore, what I say."

Vishtasp rejected the ultimatum and what followed was the War of Religion (cf. Greater Bundahishn 9.36 and Lesser Bundahishn 12.36) in which Vishtasp was apparently victorious.

The conflict and Vishtasp's victory could have resulted in the deva worshippers living in his Central Asian kingdom, leaving or being pushed south through the Hindu Kush mountain passes into the upper Indus valley (today's Pakistan). It is possible that the Indus valley had previously been populated by deva worshippers, and that those from Central Asia migrated to join their co-religionists. The Hindu Kush (meaning Hindu Killer) would from that point, have formed a border between the Zoroastrian Mazda worshippers and the deva worshippers.

The Indus Valley was called Hindu (later Hind or Ind) in the Avesta. The locals called the region Sindhu and then Sind. Replacing 'h' with 's' is a common way of transforming many Avestan words to Sanskrit. The Persians eventually called the people of the region Hindi, a name that would in western parlance become Indie (India). Indians, however, refer to their country as Bharat. In addition, the name for the religion of the deva worshippers, Hindu, is also derived from the Avestan / Iranian / Persian names for the Indus region. Hindu is not a name for their religion used by the ancient Hindus. Hindus refer to their religion by various names such as Sanatana Dharma, meaning eternal law in Sanskrit, or the Vaideeha Dharma.

However, the Greater Bundahishn also records in 9.36, "In the War of Religion, when defeat was with the Iranians." Such a defeat could have pushed the Iranian out of their Central Asian homeland westward. The Lesser Bundahishn in 12.32-33 states, "32. From the same Padashkh-Vargar mountain unto Mount Kumish, which they call Mount Madofryad ('Come-to-help') -- that in which Vishtasp routed Arjasp -- is Mount Miyan-i-Dast ('mid-plain'), and was broken off from that mountain there. 33. They say, in the War of the Religion, when there was confusion among the Iranians it broke off from that mountain, and slid down into the middle of the plain; the Iranians were saved by it, and it was called 'Come-to-help' by them."

Asura Deva conflict in the Hindu Scriptures :

The perpetual war between the asuras and devas form some of the central themes in the later Hindu texts. This might signify that at the time when these texts were written, the relationship between the Aryan asura and deva worshippers had deteriorated to such an extent that they engaged in continuous internecine conflict.

The perpetual conflict between the devas and asura described in the Hindu texts found its way into Buddhist literature as well. In Pali Theravada Buddhist literature, the most frequent references to asuras are in connection with the continual war between asuras and devas. Similarly, in Mahayana Buddhist literature the asuras, motivated by envy of the devas, are constantly at war with them. [111: 21-6].

Mahish-Asura & Durga-Devi :



Durga-devi killing Mahish-asura in the form of a buffalo

An example of the transformation in relations between the deva and asura worshippers in Hindu scriptures from a grudging acknowledgement of the onetime supremacy of the Mazda / asura worshippers to violent conflict, is the Hindu myth of the battle between female deva, Durga-devi and the asura, Mahish-asura (see image to the right) in chapters 81 to 93 in the Markandeya Purana.

[The Vedic name Mahish-asura may have an Avestan equivalence in mazishta-ahura i.e. the greatest ahura/asura. Mahish-asura could transform himself into a buffalo and the scenes of Durga killing Mahish-asura sometimes depicts Durga killing a buffalo, a scene reminiscent of Mitra killing the bull in Roman mithraeums. (Curiously, Mithra in Iranian tradition is the name of a woman.) Durga carries the title Mahish-asura-mardini, mardini meaning a killer of the feminine gender.]

According to the myth, Mahish-asura was pious and worshipped Brahma, the supreme deity among the devas and asuras. As a reward, Brahma granted Mahish-asura supremacy and omnipotence over all deities and humans - no man or male deity would be able to defeat him or kill him. Mahish-asura used his omnipotence over males to defeat Indra, the king of the devas, and take control of Swarga Loka, Indra's realm in the upper mountainous regions, and Prithvi Loka, the lower regions. In doing so, Mahish-asura drove Indra and all the other devas (in other words, the deva worshippers and temples housing the devas) out of Swarga Loka.

This description of Mahish-asura as an omnipotent god, a god who was supreme over both devas and asuras, is a description shared only by the Rig Vedic asura Varuna who is designated in the Rig Veda as the asura who is king of everyone, both gods and mortals (RV II.27.10). "This asura rules over the gods," is a further statement of omnipotence in Atharva Veda I.10.1. No other Vedic god is described in this manner. Asura Varuna is often thought to be the Vedic equivalent of the Avestan Ahura Mazda.

Swarga Loka, is the mountainous kingdom where Mount Meru stands. Mount Meru and its companion mountains are the hub from which the Himalayas stem (a possible description of the Pamirs). Bharatavarsha, Ancient India, lay to the south of the Himalayas. The Vedic description of Mount Meru is similar to the Zoroastrian description of Airyana Vaeja's Mount Hara.

After an eon-long lament by the expelled devas, Brahma created Durga, a female deity who avenged the devas by killing Mahish-asura whose omnipotence did not extend to females. The killing of Mahish-asura and the defeat of his armies enabled the devas to return to Swarga and Prithvi Loka.



**The Deva and Mahish-asura armies meet in battle
Berkley Art Museum Artist unknown. Karnataka, India
1830-1845 CE. Ink, gouache, and gold on paper**

There are indications in the myth, that while Mahish-asura was in the beginning allied to other asuras, Mahish-asura eventually drove these asuras out of Swarga Loka as well. (This could mean that Mahish-asura was worshipped not just as a supreme God, but as an only God as well.) When the devas prepared to invade and retake Swarga and Prithvi Loka, the other asuras assisted Durga by providing her with weapons.

The myth has embedded in it, the common roots and the schism between the Aryan religious groups: the deva, asura and Mazda worshippers. It may also contain history. For instance, at the outset there are the common roots, shared history and co-existence among the groups. Next, there is the rise to dominance of the Mazda worshippers who drove the deva worshippers out of the upper and lower regions of the Aryan homeland. Later, the Mazda worshippers drove out the asura worshippers as well. Eventually, however, the deva worshippers, assisted by the asura worshippers, assembled a strong army and drove the Mazda worshippers out of Airyana Vaeja. The war of religion between the two groups may have therefore taken place in two stages, the second stage ending in the Mazda worshippers being driven out of their traditional lands. The Bundahishn 12.33 states that "They say, in the war of the religion, there was confusion among the Iranians... ."

There is an inexplicable gap in Zoroastrian history this myth might help to fill. The gap occurs after the closing of the Avestan canon and the start of Median and Persian history (c. 800 BCE). Some reason or event caused the Zoroastrians to migrate westward out of the upper Aryan lands.

The story is an example of how the schism between the two groups became part of Hindu scripture. Similarly, an entire book of the Avesta, the Vendidad, derives its name from Vi-dev-data, the law against the devas, that is, the law against evil.

Post Seperation relations :

Once the two groups of Aryans had separated, the deva worshippers migrating south across the Hindu Kush mountains into the upper Indus valley, the relationship between the deva and Mazda worshippers appears to have oscillated between peaceful neighbourliness and conflict. However, when conflict did arise, it was more in the nature of kings and ruling groups seeking power (sometimes perhaps at the behest of religious advisors) than animosity between two peoples.

To this day, the two peoples, the Zoroastrians and Hindus, intuitively feel a certain historic kinship. When the Zoroastrians were driven out of their Iranian homeland by the Arabs, it is the Hindus of India who gave the Zoroastrians a home, and the two groups have coexisted peacefully in India for over a thousand years, each honouring the other's freedom to maintain their religious beliefs.

Zoroastrians owe a debt of gratitude to their Hindu cousins for having opened the doors of their land for Zoroastrians to enter not just as guests but as members of a family. Even the Zoroastrians who remained behind in Iran benefited from Indian hospitality since the Zoroastrians (the Parsees) who prospered in India were able to provide support and advocate on behalf of their Iranian brethren who were discriminated against and persecuted in the land of their ancestors.

It is on this note: the completion of a full cycle of relations between the Aryan religious groups, that we end this chapter on Aryan heritage - a heritage that started and ended in coexistence and cooperation.

Source :

<http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/aryans/religion2.htm>