

Storms: Deification in the Vedas

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ABSTRACT

Storm is a terrible event of nature in general. It harms life and property in the earth. The word storm comes from Proto-Germanic word *sturmaz* meaning 'to noise' or 'to tumult'. In atmosphere when a center of low pressure develops with the high pressure surroundings it, then the combination of these opposing forces create winds with extreme speed. This natural phenomenon is called storm. Storm has the own potential power to create havoc with various forms like thunderstorm, hailstorm, cyclone, tornado, heavy freezing rain with lightning, rain storm or heavy precipitation etc. The Vedic people observing character and destructive nature of the storms accepted that storm is an act of god. So, they personified the storms as the gods giving different names according to their character. They praised the storms for the protection of life and property.

Key-Words: Storm, thunderstorm, hailstorm, tornado, cyclone and god.

INTRODUCTION

Moving air is called wind and when it blows with extreme speed then it is termed as storm. A storm is a state of disturbance of the natural environment that creates significant disruptions to normal conditions such as strong wind, hail, thunder, lightning, heavy freezing rain, and other forms of severe weather. A storm is created due to the differences in the air pressure between two places. Air becomes hot due to the sun's heat, producing low pressure it rises and the cool air from the surroundings moves towards the area because air moves from a high-pressure region to a low-pressure region. The combination of high and low pressure in one area can create winds and the forces of the winds create storm. Due to the heat of the sun water gets evaporated from the water body, becoming water vapour rises up to the atmosphere. In the atmosphere the condensed water vapour changes back to water releasing heat to the air. The hot air rises up in low pressure and more air from surroundings rush to fill up the gap of that region. The air spirals with very high speed. This weather condition is termed as cyclone storm. A cyclone is named differently depending on its location. It is hurricane which occurs in North-Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico and the eastern and the western Pacific Ocean. The tropical cyclones are called typhoon in Japan, China and Philippines. In the South Pacific Ocean regions such as New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, etc., a tropical cyclone called Willy-Willies is occurred.

Storms harm life and properties by storm surge, heavy rain, cloud, snow causing flood, lightning. The Vedic people were very close to all the events of nature. They believed that among the events of nature storm is neither a fortuitous event nor a mechanical function of nature. For them storm represents the atmospheric movements of fierce gods like Rudra, Indra, Parjanya, Vāyu, and the Maruts. So, they prayed the fiery gods for peace upon earth and protection of their cattle and progeny.

Storm as a natural phenomenon is personified throughout the Vedas. The deified forces invoked in the Vedas were not represented by the images or idols. The worshippers gave the human forms to their gods in their own imagination. This is evident from the works of different authors such as Macdonell (1897) on Vedic mythology, Wilkins (2017) on Hindu studies, Max Muller (1860) on different ancient texts of Indian literature, Muir (1872) on Vedic literature and many more. Keeping in mind about the importance of study personification of storms in the Vedas, this paper has been made to analyze and chronicle the contexts of gods and their functions as storms create in the earth.

Objectives of the Study: The objectives of the study are:

- i. To attempt to reveal the nature of the Vedic storm gods.
- ii. To attempt to explain the storms depicted in the Vedas.
- iii. To attempt to reveal the storms as gods in the imagination of the worshippers.

METHODOLOGY

The method of the present study is analytical and objective in nature which is based on the primary and secondary sources.

Deification of the storms: The Vedas describe the storms as the characters and greatness of various gods. The characteristics and destructive activities of the storms are mentioned. Some of them are-

Thunderstorm: Storm which generates both lightning and thunder is called thunderstorm. It usually carries heavy rain. Thunderstorm occurs throughout the world but highly in the place of high humidity and temperature with atmospheric unstable condition. When high level of condensed water with unstable hot air generates deep, rapid and upward motion in the atmosphere, then thunderstorm occurs. The heat energy creates a strong rising air current that upward toward the tropopause. When the storm has expanded its energy, the rising currents calm down and the downward moving air breaks the cloud. In the Vedas, the thunderstorm is imagined as Indra whose abode is atmosphere, the rising air is the Maruts, the companions of Indra, the produced energy is thunderbolt of Indra which breaks the clouds and the clouds are imagined as Vṛtra, the demon. The atmosphere is often called as a sea in the Vedas. The term 'mountain' (*parvata*) in the atmosphere refers to clouds (RV, 1.32.2). The rain clouds as containing the rain are imagined as cows released by Indra whose milk is rain (RV, 3.44.5).

Hailstorm: The storm which carries the piece of ices or clouds is called hailstorm. Generally it occurs during thunderstorms. It can damage the life of being, property and corps as arrow or bullet attacks. The god Rudra is resembled to the howling of the hailstorm (Macdonell 75). When hailstorm passes through one place, it roars like the thousand lions, Rudra is imagined by the roaring nature of the storms. The arrows of Rudra by which he attacks on the earth, hails also create horror in the earth damaging all. Hails flow over the earth and roaring, moisten everything (RV, 10.92.5). Thus deified Rudra is prayed for the protection of life and property.

Tornado: A tornado is a type of whirlwind storm with violent and destructive character. It is appeared as dark, funnel-shaped cloud. Usually tornadoes are associated with thunderstorms and a wall of cloud. The Maruts are resembled to these destructive and fiery appearances of the tornados. They are look like black-backed swans, the imagination of clouds, described in the *Rgveda* (RV, 7.59.7). The Maruts are said as the sons of Rudra, and the companions of Indra, both are the gods of thunderstorm. They create havoc like wild beasts with Indra and Rudra in the earth just like the tornadoes destroy the earth together with thunderstorms (RV, 1.88.1).

Tropical Cyclone and Wind storm: Tropical cyclone is occurred due to low pressure of air when moist air rises releasing heat. Here, cyclonic air and wind are imagined as the god Vāyu who moves onward touching the sky, making all things ruddy and he comes propelling the dust of the earth (RV, 4.62.2, 4). He is invoked for the protection from his destructive attitude.

Naming the storms: Whenever a storm in a place people often wonder how the storm is named with its character. Because the name should not be give without definite pattern. At the pre-satellite era (before 1960) the storms were detected by the ship observation. In that process, there was very detection error. After the installation of the geostationary satellites the detections of storms are improved significantly. To prepare a name there is a strict procedure. The concern agency has invited suggestions from thirteen world metrological organizations and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific. All members propose a name with respect to culture, religion or gender. This name should be simple, uncontroversial and not be very rude or harsh. In this context, Dr. Soma Sen Roy, the spokesperson of Indian Metrological Department, expressed that "the practice of naming storms started in the 1990s. The objections of naming storms include easy identification, easier communication on it and creating awareness among the masses" (Dutta Choudhury 1-2).

There is a list of names of the storms occurred in India where names are listed scientifically. Onil was the first name listed in 2004. The last storm was Remal. Some of the listed names are- Vayu, Nisarga, Fani, Bulbul, Maha, Asani, Biparjay, amphan, Jawad etc. In the Vedas, there is a unique etymological process naming the storms. Thunderstorm carries water in the form of rain and rain water helps in germination of seeds. Thus, thunderstorm is personified as Indra who tears the seed by rain to produce food (Yāska 10.1). He is also imagined as the god of thunder. Parjanya is the personification of rain, who gives satisfaction and favourable to men (Yāska). Air always remains dynamic. Air generates the storm to create rain and rivers. Air is personified as Vāyu who moves or blows. Rudra is designated as the howling of the storm. When storm passes, it roars doing very fiery sounds. It harms people and property. Thus people cry. Hail and thunder attack like the armies with deadly weapons. Rudra and the Maruts are borne along with the fury of boisterous winds, lightning and thunder.

Gods of the Storms: Indra: Indra is considered to be the god of atmosphere. In Yāska's opinion all the gods of the middle region are the transformation of Indra: *athaitānīndrabhaktīni-antarikṣaloke* (Yāska 7.3). Again, god Indra is also considered to be the thunder god and battle god. In this context, the opinion of Macdonell is noteworthy. He remarks: "He is primarily the thunder god; the conquest liberation of the waters or the winning of light forming his mythological essence. Secondarily, Indra is the god of battle who aids the various Aryan in the conquest of the aboriginal inhabitants of India" (Macdonell 54). Indra is the dominant deity of the middle region. He pervades the air. The scholars express their view that the terrifying thunderbolt generated from the combination of cloud, rain and storm, later on, is imagined as god Indra. But some notable scholars including Hillebrandt do not agree with this natural theory. According to Hillebrandt "Indra's name is the epitome of all energy", i.e., Indra is actually the integrated form of all energy (Hillebrandt 2: 99). Max Müller expresses that the drops of rain called Indu; the god who sent them was called Indra, the rain god, the irrigator. But it is perhaps more likely that the name Indra means strong, powerful, whose lightning and thunder are the two hands (Clyton 57). It is impossible to plough the hard soil or the seed to sow the god Indra who is supposed to bestow rain, appealed with the hymns. The people of Vedic age imagined the clouds that the winds bring from the ocean are enemies who hold their treasures in their fast embrace until, conquered by Indra; they are forced to pour them upon the parched earth. Indra is intoxicated by the juice of soma creeper and melted butter which poured in the fire. Naturally, the fog mixing with soma, butter, rice, barley etc. purifies the air to create clouds. In answer to the praises of the worshippers, the genial rains descended, the earth is changed from a desert to a garden. Different attributes ascribed to him refer principally to his physical superiority; and the blessings sought from him are chiefly of a physical rather than a spiritual character.

Parjanya: Parjanya, the god of rain, occupies a very subordinate position among the Ṛgvedic deities, being invoked in about three hymns only. He has also been mentioned less than thirty times with other gods. The word *parjanya* is an appellative of the rain cloud as well as the proper name of its personification in the sense of an atmospheric rain god. In the *Ṛgveda*, Parjanya is referred to the rain cloud. It is stated that the water mounts and falls day by day, Parjanya, the rain clouds, vitalize the earth and Agni, the fire exhilarates the heaven. The most prominent characteristic of Parjanya is the shedding of rain. He travels through the space with the help of a watery car. He attracts the water laden cloud to rain or liberate the bond and draws downwards the water skin. As a result all the high-low places of the earth become level. Just as the charioteer stirs up the horses and guides the warrior to his vision, Parjanya also displays the raining clouds. As long as the rainstorms pervade the space, the sound of the clouds roaring like a lion is produced from a far. He comes with thunder shedding rain water as a divine father of the worshippers. In one passage, it is stated that frogs create sound in the rainy season pleasing with rain water like the Brahmins who busy with their Vedic studies.

Vāyu and Vāta: Vāyu and Vāta are the two names of divine personification of wind. However, Vāyu and Vāta are not used in the same sense in the *Ṛgveda*. Basically, Vāyu is the god and Vāta is the element. Vāyu and Indra are given intimation by the ancient interpreters as either one of them might represent the main god of the atmospheric region. The name Vāta is found with Parjanya whose closeness with the thunder is much more vivid than Indra. As Macdonell's opinion, Vāta is not the element of Vāyu. Vāta cannot be generated without the existence of Vāyu. When Vāyu moves then Vāta's existence has been proved. Vāta is particularized in a more concrete way than Vāyu. Hence the blowing wind is to be identified as Vāta. The movement or the blowing action of Vāyu is termed as Vāta.

Rudra: The god Rudra occupies a predominant place in the Vedic as well as the post-Vedic literature. In the *Rgveda* he is entitled as the god of air, while in the latter texts he is regarded as the god of earth, the closed divinity of the beings. The Maruts are considered as the hosts of Rudra in the Veda. However, in the latter texts, Rudra is hosted by different evil spirits and fearful beings. In both stages, the god Rudra is said to have the two different personalities. He is stated as fierce, harmful, invulnerable and unattainable and as the ruddy boar, which creates havoc in the heaven like a demon. He uses the death-inflicting missiles. He is addressed to preserve all types of wealth of the worshippers. In the post-Vedic stage also, Rudra shows his malevolence and wrathful characters. But in a minute study, it reveals that he is not exclusively malevolent and maleficent, he also bestows blessings on his worshippers either they are men or beasts. He roars in the air, giving rain with lightning, so he is called Rudra. The name of Rudra generally means one who cries immediate after birth or one who makes to weep at the end of time.

The Maruts: The Maruts are the deities of atmosphere. They are said as the residents of atmosphere. The Maruts are personifications of storm accompanied by wind, the rains and lightning which occur above the surface of the earth. In one passage, it is said that the Maruts make the clouds to shed the rains displaying their strength. Their act of creating the rains is depicted as accompanied by the sound of thunderbolt. R. N. Dandekar shows the four stages of mythology related to the Maruts. He writes- "The principal stages in the evolution of the mythology relating to the Maruts may be briefly stated as follows- (i) The Maruts seems to have been independent divinities and were regarded as the hosts of the spirit of dead. (ii) The Maruts were later associated with Rudra after the latter god was included in the Vedic pantheon mainly as the god of death. (iii) Later, on account of their disciplined military formations, the Maruts came to be associated with Indra, the national war god of the Vedic Indians. (iv) When in course of time Indra came to be looked upon as a rain god; the Maruts became, naturally enough, the storm gods"(Dandekar 238).

Storm-Gods in South Asian Culture and Literatures: In South Asian cultures beyond India—such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, and regions of Pakistan—storms have often been deified or associated with divine beings in mythology, folklore, and literature. While Indian traditions dominate much of South Asia, these other regions have developed their own localized interpretations of storm deities, often blending Hindu, Buddhist, indigenous, or Islamic elements. Here's an overview of how storms are perceived as gods or divine forces in non-Indian South Asian cultures:

1. Nepal (Buddhist and Hindu Syncretism):

- **Vajrapani** ("Thunderbolt Holder"): In Nepalese Vajrayana Buddhism, Vajrapani is a powerful deity who wields the *vajra* (thunderbolt) and represents the power of all Buddhas. He is often invoked in storm-like wrathful forms.
- **Indra** is also revered in Nepalese Hinduism and is associated with storms and rain, especially in traditional Newar rituals.
- **Local deities like Ajima or Bhairava** may also be invoked during thunderstorms or natural disasters, reflecting the association of storms with divine warning or cleansing.

2. Bhutan (Vajrayana Buddhism and Indigenous Beliefs):

- **Lungta (Wind Horse):** Though not a storm god per se, the *wind horse* carries the fortune of the individual. Storms or strong winds are sometimes seen as the stirring of spiritual energy or omens.
- **Tsen spirits:** Local Mountain and atmospheric spirits often linked with sudden weather changes and storms. People offer rituals to appease them, particularly in mountainous regions.
- **Guru Rinpoche's wrathful forms** are believed to command the weather and control natural elements during spiritual battles with demons.

3. Sri Lanka (Sinhala Buddhist and Indigenous Beliefs):

- **Vibhishana:** Though not a storm god, this guardian deity is linked to cosmic order and weather. Storms may be interpreted as signs of displeasure from guardian deities.
- **Yakka and Nāga spirits:** Indigenous traditions link sudden storms and natural events to these supernatural beings. Some Yakkas were seen as storm-causing demons or protectors.
- Ancient epics such as the *Mahavamsa* mention tempests and natural disasters as divine interventions or omens.

4. Bangladesh (Islamic Mysticism and Folk Traditions):

- While Islam does not promote the worship of natural elements, **folk traditions in Bengal** have localized deities and spirits:
 - **Bon Bibi and Dakshin Rai:** Though forest spirits, storms and tempests in the Sundarbans are believed to be signs of conflict between these forces.
 - **Shitalā and other Hindu goddesses** are still worshipped syncretically in rural areas, with storms sometimes interpreted as divine anger.
- **Bengali ballads and folktales** often personify storms as wrathful or mournful beings, especially in the context of rivers and cyclones.

5. Maldives (Islamic Context with Pre-Islamic Echoes):

- Pre-Islamic Maldivian mythology included **sea and storm spirits**, such as *Rannamaari* (a sea-demon legend). Though Islam is dominant today, such stories remain as cultural memory.
- Storms are now largely viewed through an Islamic lens—as tests or signs from Allah—but oral traditions continue to preserve personified natural elements.

6. Pakistan (Tribal and Sufi Interpretations outside of Vedic influence):

- In regions like **Balochistan** or **Sindh**, storms are associated with the wrath of nature spirits or divine trials. Among **Pashtun** and **Baloch** tribes, weather gods existed in pre-Islamic traditions.
- **Sufi poetry** often uses storms symbolically to describe divine ecstasy, wrath, or transformation (e.g., Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Bulleh Shah).
- **Bari Malangs and Pirs** are sometimes believed to have control over weather or to offer protection during tempests.

CONCLUSION

Storm as a natural event disturbs and destroys lives and property. It obstructs the normal life. People suffer from the stormy period with loss and pain. Basically, symbolically represent physical, mental and emotional turbulence in their malevolent role. But, in the beneficent role, storms bring rain and create an environment for new creation. In the Vedic era, people considered first that storms represent the atmospheric movements of fierce gods. Gradually, they began to think that even if the storms create a devastating situation; it was not a destructive act. It was only the process of destruction and creation in course of time. The Vedas identified Indra, Parjanya, Rudra, Vāyu and the Maruts who are responsible for the destructive and creative motion of the storms. These names find godhood in the imagination of the worshippers and personified as the regenerative power and vital energy of nature. They have the power and war like qualities who blow the winds to create and destroy. There was no means of forecasting wind, storm, thunder, heavy rain, drought etc. and the measures to be taken later in Vedic times as there is today. Therefore, they worshipped the causes of the phenomenon as gods as a way to escape them. Worship of storm gods—both in traditional and modern contexts—reflects humanity's enduring

respect for the power of nature. Even though ancient Vedic storm deities like Indra, Rudra, or the Maruts originated in a time when survival was closely tied to weather patterns, their worship (or remembrance) continues today for several key reasons. We worship or remember storm gods today not just for practical needs like rain or protection, but also to connect with nature, honor tradition, and invoke qualities like strength, transformation, and balance. While the form of worship may evolve, the spiritual and symbolic role of these deities continues to hold relevance. In South Asian cultures beyond India, storms are rarely treated as gods in isolation. Instead, they are linked to divine wrath, ancestral spirits, guardian deities, or spiritual energy. These interpretations often blend indigenous beliefs with dominant religions like Buddhism and Islam, showing a rich spectrum of cultural reverence and fear toward natural forces.

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