
Aestheticization of Yakshi Cult: Iconographic Representation of Yakshi Through Ages

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Abstract: *Supernatural elements are common to all cultures and there exists some sort of similarities in their association with the human world. Yakshi cult has significant importance in Indian mythology and the same importance is seen in the realm of art and religion. The representation of Yakshi in the sculptural tradition of India was varying across time. The present paper points out the various forms that Yakshi figures can assume, from the forces of a divine being, a symbol of sovereignty, sexuality and fertility, and as an object of art depending on the context, setting, presentation, and most significantly on the perception, of the viewer. It also deals with the forms of idols of Yakshi and would discuss its transition from an independent powerful deity whose worship was once common, to its eventual absorption, appropriation and marginalization by the dominant religious tradition in ancient times and later on absorbed into the Brahmanic pantheon, along with their deities among the rural communities in present times. Further, a glance at the changing perceptions towards Yakshis in the contemporary period and the way she got perceived, experienced and interpreted by various communities and by different people is done through this paper. Due to these different perceptions in different times, this female figure represented abundance, fertility, beauty, nurture, sexuality but at other times, she embodies temptation, disease and death. An attempt is made in this paper to discuss the influence of this deity in the religious arena and social life of Kerala. The main objective of this paper is to remind the people about the role of trees in the religious life of ancient people and the importance to preserve the kavus.*

Keywords: Yakshi, Fertility, Sexuality, Iconography, Mythology, Aesthetics, Deity

Introduction

The early Indian sculpture witnessed profusion in the figures of male *Yakshas* and female *Yakshis*. They have been identified as tutelary guardian deities or as beneficiary spirits who rule over nature and whose sculpt can be traced back to the pre-Buddhist era (Thakurta 2002). Their historical background of getting worship also returns to this aged past. Indian mythology has provided particular importance to *Yakshas* and *Yakshis* and the same importance is seen in the realm of art and religion. The significant early female representation in Indian art is that of *Yakshi*. Also, the *Yakshas* and *Yakshis* are a popular class of being represented in the religious literature of India. As per the ancient texts *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*, they are the celestial bodies with separate

identities radiating light and beauty around them. They have been manifested in different forms, either be demonic or divine with varying powers. They are worshipped from the hoary past because the ancient belief about them is that they possess human beings (Shaw 2006).

Etymology

Etymologically, the word *Yakshi* is derived from the word '*yaks*' meaning moving swiftly or like a flash of light. In this sense, she is a being that diverges light as she moves (Coomaraswamy 1993). Another view explains that *Yakshi* originated from the word '*yaj*' meaning something to be revered or worshipped with the offering (Coomaraswamy 1993). In the Sanskrit and Pali texts *Yakshi* is denoted as '*dev*' or '*devatha*'- or a celestial being. Sometimes, she is described as the lowest class of being like a fierce ghost or goblin. In both cases, she is venerated and worshipped (Coomaraswamy 1993). Grammarian Panini mentions *Yakshi* as a female tree spirit. *Mahabharata* refers to them as ambivalent protectors (Coomaraswamy 1971).

Yakshi – A Nature Spirit

The *Yakshis* were regarded as benevolent with superhuman strength and as guardian angels of human beings; but sometimes as malevolent causing disturbance to human beings (Coomaraswamy 1993). They were regarded as the deities connected with water, fertility, trees, forest and wilderness, most probably a tree dwelling spirit. This concept might have developed from the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* – the former considers *Yaksha* as the being that dwells on the tree of life while the latter describes him as the pillar between the earth and heaven meaning the trunk of the tree of life with other deities as branches of that great tree. Hence, they are worshipped together with the tree. This might be the basic idea of incorporating tree worship in the religious life of the people (Coomaraswamy 1993).

The close association of trees is found in the *Sramanic* religions also. Tree plays an important role in the life of Buddha – his birth, enlightenment and nirvana. He was born under a Sal tree, got enlightenment under the Pipal tree or *Bodhi* tree and had his demise under the shade of two Sal trees in Kusinagara. In the *Kalinga Bodhi Jathaka*, Buddha highlights the role of trees in his life and substitutes himself to *Bodhi* tree. In the *Jathaka* stories, trees are highlighted and referred to Buddha himself. Thus, the tree dwelling spirits became the supernatural allies of Buddha and the protectors of his followers (Shaw 2006).

The influence of tree worship and association of tree spirits/fertility spirits are found in the Jain tradition also, another *Sramanic* religion contemporary to the Buddhist tradition. The Jaina tradition had incorporated the *Yakshas* and *Yakshis* as *Sasanadevathas* to twenty-four *Tirthankaras*. Again, each of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* is associated with a *chaitya* tree. In the description of *Samavasarana*, *asoka* tree is prominent and spreads over the *chaitya*. *Asoka* tree is one of the eight *pratiharyas* of a Jaina. This itself is connected with the *Yaksha* cult that existed in the olden days. The

Tirthankara image sitting under an *asoka* tree is very popular in South India as *Pindikadavul*. This may be taken as a relic of ancient South Indian *Yaksha* worship.

According to Sir John Marshal (1926), the tree itself is regarded as the embodiment of the deity in ancient India. Some of the great Gods of the Hindu pantheon exhibit traces of a forgotten past, when they seem to have lived under trees. It is generally believed that the Gods live in trees (Marshall, 1926). All these findings lead us to the assumption that trees and tree spirits had become an inevitable factor of the religious life of common folk. Both Buddha and Mahavira had accommodated these trees and tree spirits into their tradition to communicate their ideology to the common folk who came to pay homage and worship to the tree and the deity residing on it.

Sculptural Representations of *Yakshi*

It is to be remembered that until the last centuries before the Common Era, the human cult images were non-existent in classical Hindu religions (Swalf 1985). The *Yakshi* sculptures can be considered as the first figural representation in Indian art history. Before their representation, the pillars were decorated with floral designs, geometrical designs and animal motifs. The aniconic symbols were used to decorate the Buddhist sites/ funerary mounts and to illustrate the life story of Buddha or the legends connected with his life (Shaw 2006). Buddhism never accepted the *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* as worshipping deities but instead as decorative motifs in the railing pillars and in the gateways as decorative motifs or as maids welcoming the devotees. It was a compromise from Buddha for shaking hands with the popular cult allowing the devotees for offering homage to both the local deities and Buddha (Agrawala 1971).

Shalabhanjikas/ Dohadas/ Dryads

The decorative motifs were commonly known as *Shalabhanjikas* or tree dwelling spirits. They were also known as *dohada* or dryads. They originated from the pre-Buddhist Indian style and appeared for the first time in the railing pillars of Barhut, and Sanchi surrounding the sanctuaries dedicated to Buddha (Seckel 1964). It is a symbolic representation of the fertility aspect and sculptural representation of a woman grasping branches of a tree and representation of *Yakshi*. The meaning of *dohada* is that the divine touch of *Yakshi* makes the tree blossomed. Their aspect of nudity was subdued, and the sex organs were concealed with ornaments.

Shalabhanjikas can be considered as the masterpiece of Indian sculpture and the finest reinterpretation of feminine beauty as per ancient literature – a face like moon, eyebrows like a bow, eyes like *kanjana* bird, lips like fruits of a *bimba*, nose like the beak of a parrot, neck like a conch shell, arms like a lotus stalk, hands and feet like lotus flowers, breasts like golden goblets and thigh like a plantain. This motif is also represented as a beautiful maiden kicking the trunk of a tree arousing it to blossom (Wills 2000). This belief is applicable to *asoka* tree. Other trees like *priyangu* blossoms with the gentle touch of a women. *Karnikara* blossoms with her dancing and *kadamba* with her singing (Srivastava 1988).

***Yakshi* in the Barhut and Sanchi Tradition**

The *Yakshis* in Barhut are associated with clans and their cults. They were presented to greet the devotees who came to circumambulate the *stupas* (Shaw 2006). Most of the sculptures of Barhut have maintained the directness and vitality of primitive art together with the features of the development of Buddhist art. The Barhut tradition is clearly reflected in the reliefs and sculptures from Paumi, Bodhgaya, Kausambi, Amin and other Buddhist centres.

The Sanchi tradition is a continuation of the Barhut tradition. Sanchi is a small village in the Raisen district of the state of Madhya Pradesh famous for its *stupa*. This *stupa* is not far from the city of Vidisha (Misra 1981). This *stupa* is a monument of great importance to the Buddhists because it once contained the body relics of the Buddha himself. It was initially built in the Maurya period. Considerable enlargements were made in the second century BCE, the period of the stone railing as well. 'The four gates of the cardinal directions around the *stupa* like crossroads serve as the entrance to the ritual of circumambulation (Wills 2000). Narrative reliefs and statues cover the gates from top to bottom. The most striking features are the large *Yakshis* beneath trees that serve as brackets supporting the lowermost architrave (Desai 1975). There were two larger and two smaller female figures at each gateway. They were placed along the outskirts of the monasteries and hence they may be serving as tutelary deities protecting the *stupa*. This is common with the Jain and Hindu sites all over India. The *Yakshi* image at the western gateway is one of the finest examples of the *Yakshi* sculpture found in India. The mastery of the depiction of volume and texture indicates the great change that occurred in Indian sculpture during the approximately one hundred years that separate the Barhut railing from the Sanchi gates (Desai 1975).

The Sanchi *Yakshi* is having a voluptuous vision, amazingly beautiful with her ample hips, slight waist, robust shoulders, and spherical breasts. She is standing in the *tribhanga* style, a standing body position equal to that of a classical dance pose, this body position is in a cover curve like the English letter 'S' - a curve in the neck, another in the waist and the third in the knee. The prominent feature of this *Yakshi* is her stark nudity. The conceptualization of the Sanchi *Yakshi* belongs to the *Satavahana- Kushana* period.

Her attributes contain a single pearl necklace falling between her nude breasts drawing her eyes to her chest (Wills 2000). The lower portion of the body is nude, except a belt looping her hips. She has seventeen anklets on each leg and thirteen bracelets on each arm; her hair falls behind her, tied to elaborate plates. Her bejewelled belt is called a *mekhala*, which appears already on the pre-Mauryan terracotta figures of fertility goddesses. *Atharvaveda* mentions this *mekhala* as a charm symbolizing long life or *ayusya* (Coomaraswamy 1993).

The elevated and compact breasts of the Sanchi *Shalabhanjika* are really like vessels full of nectar symbolizing creative power and life force. The very basis of the *Shalabhanjika*

belief lies in her productive power and life force that are transmitted to the tree by her gentle kick or embrace and thus cause it to blossom. According to some scholars, the literary tradition of *dohada* and its plastic representation in the motif of *Shalabhanjika* seems to convey the harmony between man and nature and their interdependence (Srivastava 1988).

Her hair dress is unique. A knot on a coil of hair upon her head is decorated with a bunch of mango leaves. Her left arm is sharing the width of the branches of the tree and the right arm is intertwined with a tree branch. Her left leg is assuredly bent behind her right leg in an attempt to strike the true trunk and the right leg perches on the gateway balustrade like that of a bird. In the words of Gustav Roth, a scholar in the Buddhist art of India, there is no other pose than this one that could more clearly express the unity of a tree with its deity (Shaw 2006).

The marked nudity in *Shalabhanjika* seems to have started from Sanchi and Mathura and continued through ages (Misra 1981). These images have attracted the attention of most scholars of Indian art. Ananda Coomaraswamy has observed that the marked nudity was due to the nature of these deities symbolizing the auspicious emblem of vegetative fertility. Sir John Marshall recognizes in them the evolved forms of the Mother Goddess of the Indus Civilization.

The *Shalabhanjika* motif is also related to a sport, particularly that of women. The first reference to this sport is found in one of the *sutras* of Panini in his *Ashtadhyayi*. He mentions that *Shalabhanjika*, *Ashoka Pushpa Prachayika*, etc. form parts of the ladies' sports of eastern India. *Shalabhanjika* was a sport related to plucking and gathering of *Sal* tree flowers. Otherwise, the ladies played a game by striking one another with the broken tender twigs of *Sal* trees.

In the Buddhist literature also, there are references about the *Shalabhanjika* festival held at Sravasti, in the *Jethavana* of *Ananda Pindika*. Buddha himself had witnessed the festival. In the *Nidanakatha Jathaka*, there is a mention about *salavana*, between Kapilavastu and Devadaha. Mayadevi (mother of Buddha) has been charmed by the beauty of this *salavana* and sport here. As soon as she caught hold of a branch of the *Sal* tree, she felt the pangs of labour. This event had led to the representation of the *Shalabhanjika* motif in Indian art (Srivastava 1988).

The groves and gardens were a common feature of early India. *Ramayana* refers to the Ashok Vatika of Ravana and the groves and orchards of Rama is Ayodhya. *Asvaghosa* has also referred to the planting of a grove with reference to the founding of the city of Kapilavastu. Hence the Sanchi art throws light to the life and culture of the period. The Sanchi sculptures have scenes of groves and *vanaviharas* in many panels on the *stupas*.

The *Shalabhanjika* is an important cultural motif in Sanchi art. This art motif is represented everywhere. But the 'Sanchi *Shalabhanjika* is unique due to its graceful execution and intense emotional extravagance' (Srivastava 1988). Projecting from the

abacus of the capitals, the supporting ends of the architraves, etc. have the graceful bracket figures of *Shalabhanjikas*. This art motif has also been executed on the railing pillars of the *Stupa* No. II. 'The Sanchi *Shalabhanjika* appears to be living female figures due to their variegated coiffure, elaborate ornamentation, graceful poses and joyous expressions' (Srivastava 1988). The varying postures of *Shalabhanjika* include standing erect or leaning forward and holding the branch of a tree, swinging with the support of a tree trunk, reclining with one leg stretched straight and the other leg resting on the tree trunk. These *Shalabhanjika* are invariably depicted under a tree, sometimes resting their foot on the tree trunk or embracing the tree with their feet and hands, or plucking fruits and flowers or holding the branches of the tree. When we go deep into the subject there arises a question in our mind, Buddhist philosophy being contradictory to worldly pleasure how can the monasteries accommodate the highly provocative and sensuous female sculptures?

The main reason for this is the development of Buddhism from a state of monasticism to a state of popular religion (Coomaraswamy 1993). So they have to satisfy the sentiments of the people who erected the *stupas* and monasteries by accommodating the *Yakshis*, a deity that belonged to bardic Indian cult practices prior to Buddhism. These cultures provided a talismanic symbolism, a feminine and ironic aura to the shrines inviting the appreciation of the reverent Indians (Shaw 2006).

Gandhara *Yakshi*

In Gandhara, the *Yakshi* figures were less important than in Sanchi. They were compositional devices between narrative reliefs or decorative elements. *Shalabhanjika* motif continued to exist in the Gandhara region with the Greek, Roman and Persian influences in attire and coiffure. They were represented in an awkward pose under unidentified trees. However, they were less sensuous and continued to be the symbol of natural beauty and fertility (Ray 1949).

Hariti - The Smallpox Deity

The most remarkable example of Gandhara *Yakshi* is Hariti. The Gandharan artists have represented Hariti in four ways; as a mother goddess, as a demon goddess, as a goddess with Cornucopia and a couple with her consort *Panchika* (Rowan 2002). She is the only *Yakshi* accommodated in the Buddhist monasteries. She has also been represented as the goddesses of smallpox. A.D.H. Bivar, who had conducted studies in the Gandhara art commends that the excess number of Hariti sculptures in the Gandhara region was in response to the specific small pox epidemic that raged through the silk route in the second century (Bivar 1970).

A reliable number of Hariti statues had been obtained from Mathrua and Guntur in the Telangana region. Art historian Naman Ahuja has supported the view of Bivar stating that Hariti's popularity grew at a time when there was a global epidemic of small pox, one that has been decimated the significant legions of the Roman army (Ahuja 2019). The villagers worshiped her as the goddess of children and childbirth.

Didarganj Yakshi

In the Mauryan period, the *Yakshi* were given a more anthropomorphic form with subdued nudity and ornamentation. The best example pointed to this effect is the *Didarganj Yakshi*. This female figure is obtained from the banks of River Ganga at a place called Didarganj, as a buried object. Their figures can be distinguished on certain grounds: colossal size, massively built bodies giving emphasis on muscular strength, free standing carved in the round and having certain specific features as drapery – a turban, a scarf flowing on the shoulders and arm, a *dhoti* hanging below up to the ankles. It is fastened with a girdle. The ornaments include earrings, a heavy torque, a flat rectangular necklace, and armllets with feathered projection. By this time the artists had attempted to overcome their initial difficulties to reconcile Greek and local ideas and to create from them a new synthesis of art suited to the needs of the Buddhist religion (Marshall 1980). There exist controversies regarding the dynastic affiliation of this *Yakshi* among scholars. Numerous examples of *Yakshi* images had been found at different places like Sanghol, Amaravathi, Mathura, Kurukshetra, etc.

Yakshi Cult in South India

The sculptures and reliefs of *Yakshi* obtained from South India are closely connected with Jainism and *sasanadevatha* cult. *Sasanadevathas* were introduced in the Jaina pantheon as an attempt to popularize Jainism among the common folk. The influence of Bhakti ideology, the overwhelming expansion of the Brahmanic impact and the reformation of the *Puranic* cult made tremendous changes in the religious and economic life of the people in peninsular India. Rituals and religious practices of the common folk, the tribals and their deities were accommodated and assimilated to the Brahmin fold. Mother Goddesses of the ethnic groups were incorporated into the Hindu fold as spouse Goddesses of the chief deities – Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma (Kinsley 1987). Tantric practices were also responsible for this change. The growth of temples as great centres of socio-economic activities with a well-developed agrarian order was a great challenge to the Jain tradition in the peninsular region. To coop with changed situations, the Jains also accommodated female deities as *sasanadevathas* to the *Tirthankaras*. Most of these deities were the Goddesses of primitive cult practices. The *sasanadevathas* or *Yakshis* were decorated gorgeously and consecrated by the side of *Jina* with awe inspiring aspects like fruits, children, etc. on one hand and dreadful aspects of weapons like war and lion (Desai 1957). All these iconographic features attracted the devotional mind of the common people. Gradually the *Yakshi* cult became prominent and gained more importance than the *Tirthankaras*. Their position was changed to independent deities.

Role of Yapaniyas in the Development of Yakshi Cult

Yapaniya sect is a product of Karnataka Jainism formed somewhere else in the northern regions of Karnataka in the early centuries of the Christian era, immediately after the schism in the *Jaina* church. Yapaniyas were highly progressive in their religious outlook and introduced many reforms in South Indian Jainism. They were behind the

popularization of *Yakshi* cult in early South India. All the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* were provided with a pair of *Sasana* deities. However, only five of them became prominent with specific iconographic features and worshipping patterns. Ambika, Padmavathi, Jwalamalini, Chakreswari and Sidhayika are the commonly worshipped *Yakshis*.

Appropriation of Jaina *Yakshinis* in Kerala

Jainism had made permanent establishments in the peninsular regions of India with *Chaithyalayas* and temples, especially in the Kerala regions. They had their settlements along the trade routes. The decline of trade and conversion of royal patrons to the Hindu fold were the main reasons for their setback of Jainism in Kerala. Their temples were either confiscated or sold to the Brahmin landlords of the locality. The present scholar has conducted an ethnographic survey in connection with the doctoral thesis and has recognized the *Jaina* pantheons as well as the *Yakshinis* who had been assimilated and appropriated to Hindu *Bhagavathis*. The presence of *Jaina* images and cognizance of these *Yakshinis* helped to recognize them. Only a few of them had been preserved and many of them were covered with metal covering to conceal their identity. Some others were ruined due to the ravages of time. Ambika *Yakshi* is recognized for her cognizance of children and the lion. Chitharal, Vennayode near Manathavady, and Neelamperoor had the images of Ambika *Yakshi*.

Padmavathi *Yakshi* had a cognizance of three hooded canopy over her head and a *kukkuda sarppa*. Splendid images of Padmavathi are found in Nagercoil, Chitharal, Neelamperoor, etc. Kallil near Perumbavur has a cave temple in which a *Yakshi* is consecrated. The identity of the *Yakshi* is not clear as it is covered by a *panchalohagolaka*. M.R. Raghava Warriar has identified the yakshni as Sidyaika. Neelamperur near Kottayam is having a *Bhagavathy* temple where the Goddess inside is a *Yakshi*. This is a strange image found only at Neelamperur in Kerala. The Goddess is holding a mirror in the left hand applying *thilaka* with her right hand finger. The right leg is resting on an arecanut tree. The presence of arecanut tree and her posture has a close resemblance to the *Sundara Yakshi* concept. During festive occasions the Goddess is taken out for procession. This relates her identity with Padmavathi. Paruvassery near Palakkad is having a *Bhagavathy* temple called Palliyarakavu. The main deity in the *srikovil* is a *Yakshi* and the image of Chandraprabha *Tirthankara* is installed outside the *srikovil*. Like Kallil, the identity of the *Yakshi* is concealed with a metallic mask. The presence of Chandraprabha *Tirthankara* and the flames around her head identifies her as Jwalamalini.

The ethnographic survey conducted by the author along the river belts of Central Travancore regions connected to trade routes and medieval markets found that about 25 *Kavus* are having *Yakshi* consecration as *upadevathas* and about 100 structural temples are identified as having *Yakshi* consecration as *upadevathas* (Unnikrishnan 2017). Other than this, a good number of cult points are identified as *Kavus* and *Tharas* where *Yakshi* is worshipped as main deity (Unnikrishnan 2019).

Conclusion

The *Yakshi* cult developed in North India during the period of *Janapadas* spread all over India with slight modifications as per the regional and conceptual differences. In spite of large scale appropriations and assimilations, the primitive cult points still exist with primitive modes of rituals, rites, divine concepts, and worshipping patterns. People still worship this deity with votive offerings for the fulfilment of their desires, for attaining wealth and progeny. The concept of *Yakshi* as a tree spirit is still continued in Kerala by worshipping her in the *Kavus* and under the trees like *pala*, *ilanji*, *chempakam*, etc. In some *kavus*, she is consecrated in the Jasmine pavilion. This concept is further reinstated with the belief related to some temples. In Chettikulangara *Bhagavathy* temple, it is believed that the *Yakshi* and her consort, *Gandharva* reside in the grove around the temple. Devotees pay homage to these deities by visiting this grove. As D.D. Kosambi has stated, the cult points developed in the primitive ages would continue through ages because the people are here. Thus, *Yakshis* are not traced to any major religion but are still recognized as the rural guardian deity connected with nature.

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