

SYNOPSIS

Introduction

The natural propensity of the religious traditions in Ancient India towards polytheism gave rise to the development of several cults and philosophies in course of time. The veneration of divinities such as *Yakṣa*, *Gandharva*, *Apsara*, *Naga* was the outcome of these religious advancements. Art and sculpture have always been a medium of narrating the ancient societies, customs, traditions, and religious practices. In sculptural depiction these divinities were/are embodied as spirit gods related to fertility and wealth and later as doorkeepers or attendants (Mishra 1981).

Likewise, *Yakṣa* (Pali: *yakkha*) constitute the tangible representation of a significant cultural philosophy that depicted the personification of nature gods and guardian deities. Since such component's formed significant element of the cultural repertoire of the ancient societies, the present-day research presents a novel approach of how these cults developed in a geographical area and their sculptural representations which changed with due time.

Coomaraswamy (1971) and Mishra (1981) opined that yakṣa are possibly nature deities which were worshipped by the local population. They also mentioned several types and substantial forms of yakṣa described in the Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain literatures, respectively. Previous studies on yakṣa and its cult have been primarily descriptive, focussing upon their roles as attendants and demi-gods. These studies governed by 'time bound research priorities', although successful to a large extent in reconstructing the local history and presence of these cults. Besides these studies give further scope such as viz (a) most studies on the *yakṣa* cult are carried out in isolation without recognising the acceptance of such practices. In such instances the yakṣa cult is approached from art historical perspective that mentions about the ideals and qualities of its people. (b) there is a lack of adherence to a uniform nomenclature and understanding regarding the purpose of their sculptural depiction within the spatial region. (c) there exists a generalization of their types and forms without taking an account of their geographical and temporal variations. The forms, nature, and purpose of the *yakṣa* sculpture vary greatly in Indian subcontinent, with each type sculpted to represent the specific cultural affiliations. Furthermore, the present research primarily emphasises upon the sculptures availed at various museum collections, which are found from various cultural contexts.

The main scope of this work lies in addressing the lacunae and providing a harmonised background for the better understanding of the *yakṣa* cult and their identities. This necessitated

a comprehensive examination of their various facets such as: geographical distribution, sculptural art, inscriptions and associated intangible practices. To achieve these objectives, it was thus necessary to undertake primary survey of the sculptures (housed in the museums) and their various components such as epigraphic data, ethnographic practices in relation with the physiographic area and its adjoining landscapes. North India and specifically the region of Ganga Valley was chosen for the present research due to its historical and geographical potentials several yakṣa has been unearthed during various excavations and explorations.

Major objectives of the present research

1. To examine the origin and nature of the Yakṣa cult and its cultural association over time. This exploration will enable an understanding of the evolution of Yakṣa sculptures, shedding light on their symbolic significance and how their iconography transformed along the Ganges River.
2. To study the sculptural art traditions of the Yakṣa cult in the region in lieu of the ancient treatise of art and architecture and how the principles enumerated in the literary sources were used to portray the figurine. This was undertaken to examine if the sculpted figures of the Yakṣa exhibited emotions through their postures and expressions.
3. To examine the religious aspects of Yakṣa in Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism and their sculptural representations through time. The repetitive references to 'Yakṣa' in the literature and the sculptural representations denote a ranked status as a divinity. These representations often reflect the cultural and religious context of their time, influenced by the patronage of rulers and evolving religious beliefs.
4. The iconographical differentiation between the Yakṣa and other semi divine deities like Naga, Gandharva, Preta, Bhuta, etc., is crucial for understanding the unique character of the Yakṣa. This differentiation will reflect the varied roles and symbolism attributed to these divine beings in different religious and cultural contexts.
5. To conduct an ethnographical study and reconstruct the belief system and social practices which involved a network of components of the Yakṣa cult which emphasized on worship of these deities. An in-depth analysis of the various facets of the Yakṣa cult traditions would throw significant light on the belief system of the past societies.

Methodology

The present research work utilises Primary and secondary sources to achieve the aforementioned objectives. Primary data includes literary texts, visiting the sites and museums for observation and photographic documentation. Field visits were made to Varanasi, Mathura, Chandraketugarh and other related sites. The museums which were visited for the present research purpose were the Indian Museum, Kolkata, Allahabad Museum, Allahabad, National Museum, New Delhi, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, Patna Museum, Bihar as well as limited archaeological sites. Along with, the literary texts were subjected to study for identifying versions of the narratives found in the sculpture. Thus, a co-relation between the visual narratives and textual narratives could be affected. Secondary data sources were based on journals, excavation reports, books, and national and digital repositories of various museums such National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA); *Jatan: Varaha* Museum Repository etc.

Significance and Scope of the Present Research Work

Since the ancient times several deities were prevailed in the society and were worshipped with their own independent cult practices. Such practices are prevalent in the contemporary world and still adored in the rural villages. These deities have their own positions among others and are worshipped with great reverences. Similarly, the yakṣa were once predominant deities who gradually lost their significance with the forthcoming of the greater pantheons. The yakṣa cult as a subject of serious archaeological research has not been given its due importance. Various scholars and researchers have worked, but the thrust area of the work was mainly focussing on the sculptures found during the various seasons of excavations and explorations and their relationship with Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism how they were patronizing the practice and hence gained popularity gradually and their steady decline. Hence, very limited work pertaining to the nature and origin of the Yakṣa and its cultural association; evolution of the form of the yakṣa sculptures; their symbolic meaning and iconographical transformations is available. There has been no analytical attempt carried out looking into the development in understanding the practice as a whole in relation to the devotee/ socio-economic and religious aspects.

The main scope of this work lies in addressing the aforementioned lacunae and providing a synchronistic framework for the better understanding of the *yakṣa* cult and their identities. This necessitated a comprehensive examination of their various facets such as: geographical

distribution, sculptural art, inscriptions and associated intangible practices. To achieve these objectives, it was thus necessary to undertake primary survey of the sculptures and their various components such as epigraphic data, ethnographic practices in relation with the physiographic area and its adjoining landscapes.

The selection of North India, particularly the Ganga Valley region, as the focus of this research is based on its rich historical and geographical significance. Previous studies conducted in this area have highlighted its potential for exploring yakṣa sculpture. The Ganga Valley's historical and cultural heritage, combined with its geographical features, make it an ideal location for studying these traditions. This region has been noted for its abundance of yakṣa sculptures, as evidenced by earlier investigations. Therefore, the present research aims to build upon this existing knowledge base and further contribute to our understanding of yakṣa sculpture in the context of the Ganga Valley's cultural and historical milieu.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the present study's scope and its place within existing research in the field. It delves into the prior investigations conducted by scholars, highlighting their contributions and limitations. Furthermore, it outlines the primary objectives of the present research, elucidates the methodology employed, and emphasizes the significance and breadth of its findings. By identifying gaps in existing knowledge, this chapter underscores the need for more systematic data generation, positioning the current study as a critical step in advancing the field's understanding. Through this detailed exploration, the chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, framing the research within its broader context and laying the groundwork for its contributions to the field. This chapter provides an introduction to the physiography and environmental setting of the area which was taken into consideration for the present research., viz North India and Ganga Valley. The chapter also discusses the brief political and cultural history including the dominant dynasties and their socio-political importance on the region and how it impacted the art and sculptural representations. The objective of this chapter is to provide an outline that will help to understand the spatial distribution of the Yakṣa cult which has been documented in this research within the cultural background of the region.

Chapter Two: Origin and Development of the Yakṣa Cult

In this chapter, the origins of the Yakṣa cult are meticulously traced through a detailed investigation of the literary sources. The narrative unfolds, revealing the evolution of the concept of Yakṣa over time, shedding light on its early manifestations and subsequent development. The chapter meticulously explores the multifaceted nature of Yakṣa, unravelling its significance within the cultural and religious contexts in which it emerged. Furthermore, the chapter delves into the diverse designations of Yakṣa across various religious traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism. By contextualizing the concept within these different religious frameworks, the chapter offers a nuanced understanding of Yakṣa's role and significance within each tradition. Through a comprehensive analysis of literary sources and religious texts, this chapter provides a rich tapestry of insights into the origin, development, and religious significance of the Yakṣa cult, offering a valuable contribution to the scholarly discourse on this fascinating subject.

Chapter Three: Iconographic Study of the Yakṣa Sculptures and Ethnographic Survey

This chapter focusses on the data gathered for the present research endeavour. The diverse range of data sources under scrutiny encompasses field and museum surveys, yielding a rich array of material for study. The chapter meticulously examines the typological classification of Yakṣa sculptures, shedding light on the various categories and subcategories that emerge from this classification scheme. Additionally, the chapter delves into the patterns of geographical and temporal distribution of Yakṣa images, providing valuable insights into the historical and spatial contexts in which these representations flourished. Furthermore, the chapter presents a detailed analysis of the sculptural artistry manifested in Yakṣa images, offering a nuanced understanding of their aesthetic qualities and symbolic significance. Finally, the chapter encompasses ethnographic surveys, which provide a cultural context for understanding the role and significance of Yakṣa in the communities studied. By organizing the material into three specific sections—iconographic analysis (4.1), typological classification (4.2), and ethnographic investigation (4.3)—the chapter ensures a systematic and comprehensive exploration of the data, enriching the research's findings and contributing to the broader scholarly discourse on Yakṣa.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter, the key insights gleaned from the preceding discussions are distilled and elucidated, emphasizing the pivotal findings of the present research. Through a comprehensive analysis, the chapter delves deeper into these significant findings, providing a nuanced understanding of their implications for the field. Additionally, it candidly addresses the limitations encountered in the present work, offering a reflective appraisal of its scope. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the future scope of research in this area, identifying avenues for further exploration and underscoring the dynamic nature of scholarly inquiry in the field of Yakṣa studies.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The concluding chapter of this thesis summarizes key findings from the preceding discussions, emphasizing their relevance to the research objectives. It critically assesses the significance of the study's contributions while acknowledging its limitations. Additionally, the chapter outlines avenues for future research in the field, suggesting potential directions for expanding upon the current work and addressing any remaining gaps in knowledge.

Appendices

The concluding section of the research work provides a comprehensive list of yakṣa sculptures, detailing their geographical locations and the corresponding time periods. This compilation serves as a valuable resource to understand the diverse manifestations of yakṣa and its tangible forms across different regions and historical epochs

References

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STATEMENT-I

(Statement showing the particulars, on which the work is based, the discovery of new facts and of new relationships between the facts observed by others and how the work tends to help the general advancement of knowledge.)

Yakṣa are seen as the survivors of the preceding traditions of worship. These have been noticed in most parts of the sub-continent, wherein the tradition has either ceased to exist or continued to be practiced in some regions. Earlier studies on these traditions have mostly been focussed upon highlighting the types of Yakṣa available in Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanism and their role as attendant deities (for instance, Coomaraswamy 1971, Mishra 1981). These studies although significant to a certain degree towards building local history, have perceived them as regional phenomenon, emphasizing upon merely one attribute of the Yakṣa cult. The neglect of other attributes in the synthesis of data has hampered our understanding of the cult. The present research has sought to address these lacunae and seeks to develop a synchronised framework to incorporate the data acquired from diverse approaches. The present work has revealed the necessity of multidisciplinary approach towards reconstructing the yakṣa cult tradition and understanding their 'individualities' from the time of their inception to contemporary times within a geographical region.

Following are the major findings of the work:

1. The present research led to the understanding of the origin and nature of the Yakṣa cult. This exploration will enable an understanding of the evolution of Yakṣa sculptures, shedding light on their symbolic significance and how their iconography transformed along the Ganges Plains.
2. The present research led to the study of sculptures of yakṣa found from several seasons of excavations, explorations and reserved in museums. The study of the yakṣa sculptures provides a holistic view of the semi divine beings with its individual cult and how it gradually gained significance in the three larger pantheons.
3. The typological classification of the yakṣa sculptures was undertaken as per their sculptural art formations. The yakṣa images which were inscribed/uninscribed were undertaken for a chronological study. To understand the chronological distribution, the yakṣa sculptures were dated as per the prevailing influences of various dynasties in the region. Hence, the yakṣa sculptures were classified under four time periods viz, (a)

Mauryan (330-285 BCE); Sunga (285 BCE-100 BCE); Kushana (100 CE-300 CE) and Gupta (300 CE-600 CE).

4. Ethnographic studies were undertaken to understand, its ritualistic practices and how it continued as a part of the local population. It was also understood that the yakṣa figurines were found in multiple contexts depicting a continuity of the practice. These surveys have revealed the processes leading to shift in the context of the yakṣa, from the time of their making to contemporary times, thereby determining their 'individualities'. The data acquired from associated intangible components such as oral traditions, worship practices and beliefs have been rationally incorporated in the thesis by minimising subjective elements.
5. The data collected from site surveys; museum visits have been incorporated in this thesis in a sequential method. The incorporation of data besides highlighting the diverse facets of yakṣa cult has revealed the need for such studies to understand the tangible expressions of certain significant cultural ethos of past societies.

STATEMENT-II

(Statement indicating the sources of information and the extent to which the thesis is based on the works of others and portion of the thesis claimed as original.)

The study is based on the yakṣa sculptures documented through explorations and museum visits undertaken in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal between 2020 and 2023. The research seeks to reconstruct the yakṣa traditions and situate them in the socio-cultural history. The yakṣa sculptures were studied by Coomaraswamy (1924,1971), Tavakar (1971), Mishra (1981) Sutherland (1991) and Quintanilla (2007), who considered the aspect of attendant deities being yakṣa.

The portion of the thesis claimed as original include the documentation of the yakṣa sculptures based on their sequential and geographical distributions and their variance, study of sculptural art depictions and analysis of associated intangible components. Through these analyses. An attempt has been made elucidate the ‘characteristics’ of the yakṣa cult.

The following is the list of references which formed the basis for the formulation of concepts used in this thesis.

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