

Chapter-1

INTRODUCTION

The society of ancient India reflects the knowledge of its philosophy and literatures in the form of art and iconography which has been expressed with such unbroken continuity to display the unfading essence of the Indian culture. The traditions of ancient Indian art have been continuous with the assimilation of new elements and religious thoughts.

Humans have consistently recognized the presence of certain components which were more influential and overpowering since prehistoric times, which gradually led to the establishment of essential representations of the forms, represented in the form of symbols or icons. With the gradual development of human cognition and the expansion of their culture, brought about various ideas of desire for inner and outer advancement. Slowly various myths of spirits and sprites were interweaved, eventually creating a pantheon of many spiritual powers for personal adoration. The divinities which appeared in the beginning, are the nature divinities and the mother goddess which was the source of life and the creator of the earliest known tales of the civilizations, depicted by all early civilization.

As the population grew, there arose several anxieties in society. Eventually, to overcome these difficulties, the people depended on divinities and thus they had reasons to call upon different divinities for their respective predicaments and thus it, gave rise to polytheism. Henceforth, 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. With the progress of human settlements and their respective philosophies, the concept of protection and security, deifying the elements

not in control, desire of fulfilments, requirement of an authority to regulate, led to the beginning of deities. These deities were generally a personification of the natural elements such as waterbodies like ponds, lakes; trees, mountains, bringing in the idea of a 'sacred space' inhabited by a deity. The sacredness may be inherent in the space, as for a religious institution or a serene place outdoors. Alternatively, a space may be made sacred by the people within it and events that occur there (Adelstein, 2018). A space becoming sacred attracts various thoughts and ideas leading to the growth of icons and symbols, which act as a precursor to the later development of religious philosophies and iconographies.

Art and Sculpture in India was/is one of the mediums for narrating the past and its theme was spiritual in nature. The temples and shrines were/are encrusted with beautiful sculptural works which forms an enormous repository of the popular religious beliefs and pantheons.

Icons or symbols were the initial stages of iconographical developments. An icon represents a divinity or mystical being created specifically for worship or other associations which involved certain rites and rituals. Primarily, these icons were a mere deification of the nature and the related elements, with the further advance of these icons and ideas, iconographies were introduced. Ancient India represented itself as a platform for such religious and philosophical growths, and the cults Naga, Gandharva, Yaksas, Apsara etc., who were the outcomes of the development of these religious thoughts.

The concept of *Yakṣa* (Pali: *yakkha*) and *Yakṣiṇī* (female counterpart, Pali: *Yakkhinī*) originated as nature deities, they constituted the tangible representation of a significant cultural ethos 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 who later were semi divine deities sometimes represented as guardians or doorkeepers. The yakṣa cult and its association with other semi- divine deities such as *Gana*, *Gandharva*, *Bhuta*, *Naga* etc., various aspects of nature are quite common but the original connotation and requirement of such practices still lies in obscurity.

Who were the patrons of this creative images, who are the divinities themselves and what was the nature of this cult, why were they carefully chosen for the visual representation; how the cult survived and transformed in the subsequent time and tradition of ancient sculpture making procedure. Questions as such are not answerable immediately. In order to address them, sculptures had to be collected, a visual text established and individual details were noted. Through empirical analysis a consequent interpretation of the relationship between the individual sculptures were created. This involved extensive museum visits and field surveys across North India and more specifically the region of Ganga Valley corresponding to the selected areas of research namely Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal.

1.1 Previous Researches

The current segment concludes with the primary findings of the review, which point to the necessity for and relevance of the current research effort. Although there has been a great amount of scholarly work done on cult of Yakṣa, their origin, growth, pantheon, and aesthetical appreciation have received not as much of attention. Within these limitations, this section is a humble effort to offer a brief review of the extant relevant literature.

The following are the previous researches in sequential order which were undertaken during the present work.

Chanda in his work interprets an image Jhinga-ka-Nagara in Mathura worshipped. Sculpturally seeing, the sculpture is in fragmentary state and the head of the figure is replaced. There is an inscription on the pedestal reading “*Sa putehi karito, Yakhilayava Kunikate, (Vasina Nake) na Kata*” which translates as the figure of Yaksi Lavaya, installed by eight sons, made by Naka, pupil of Kunika.

A. Coomaraswamy made a detailed analysis of the development of the ancient indigenous art, specifically the Yakṣa cult and its relation with nature.

V. A. Smith introduced a massive female sculpture which was uninscribed near Besnagar. The image suffered to exposure losing its aesthetic quality, but the left portion was used for identification of the image and was concluded as a Yakṣiṇī, a subsidiary deity.

V.S. Agarwal in his work ‘*Indian sculpture – A cultural saga*’ concluded that the Yakṣa in sculpture was a massive advantage. They are divine spiritually, but represented the men and women with supremacy and beauty.

Kalapriya concluded that the Bharhut art was a preserved form of primitive art but also a precursor of the Buddhist art tradition in his work “*Torana or east gateway of the stupa of Bharhut, restored from fragments, about 185-72 B.C.E*”.

Cordington provides an overview of the Mathura sculptures and their arrangement into three groups –pre-Kushan; Kushan; and post-Kushan in the work “*Mathura of the Gods*.”

Bajpai concluded that the Parkham Yakṣa is dated to Mauryan period and Baroda Yakṣa had similar characteristics and is in the work “*Kushana art of Mathura*.”

V. S. Agarwal conducted a study of Yakṣa and Yakṣiṇī found in north India, “*Studies in Indian art*”. Based on the inscriptions and existing local traditions, these were identified as Yakṣa and *Yakṣī*. The figures reported from Parkham Noh, Baroda, etc. belong to the folk art.

Another study undertaken by Agarwala which concluded the character of Yakṣa cult and its importance in the art. He discusses about a male figurine adorned with turban and heavy earrings. The figurine was quite deformed and was understood that it belonged to Sunga period on stylistic grounds. He also mentions about the Baroda Yakṣa who was worshipped as ‘*Jakheya*’. Agarwal, concluded that the carving was much ruined but the adornment and depiction of suggest a close connection between the figure and the Parkham image in his study “*A new Yaksha image in the Mathura Museum.*”

Agarwala, in his research on Yakṣa *Manibhadra* discovered by Garde at Pawaya and now well-preserved in Gwalior Museum. It was highlighted by M.M. Hari Prasad Shastri that *Manibhadra* was a Bodhisattva, but R P Chandra proved that it was Yakṣa and not Bodhisattva based of evidence from Sanskrit, Jain, and Buddhist literature. Therefore, it was concluded by Agarwala, *Manibhadra* was a Yakṣa whose celebrants arranged themselves into union and dedicated image to their divinities.

K. P. Jayaswal (1965) in his work “*Statues of Two Saisunaga Emperor*” identified identifies the Parkham Yakṣa (inscribed as Kunika) as Ajatsatru because the Jain tradition refers to the second name of *Ajatsatru* as *Kunika* and Udayin who ruled between 600 BCE- 400 BCE.

In the article "*The Didarganj Chauri-Bearer – a view point,*" translated by Schlumberger, the author compares the figurines from Mathura, Didarganj and Rome on the basis of the hairstyles, jewellery and fashion.

R. C. Agarwal in his work "*Unpublished Yaksha-Yakshi statues from Besnagar*". This study refers to the Yaksha images from Madhya Pradesh and are datable to the early centuries of the common era. Another study on "*Sunga pillars from Amin, near Kurukshetra*" conducted in 1969. Based on stylistic and palaeographic criteria, Amin's two red sandstone pillars have been dated to the Sunga period.

N. P. Joshi, studied the form of a Yakṣiṇi in the work "*A celestial beauty standing under an Asoka tree, bowing one of its branches with her upraised hands.*" He alleged that the concept and idea of Yaksi was quite prevalent in the society and the sculptors were well cognizant leading to the sculptural depictions. Another research conducted in 1972 on Brahmanical sculptures now placed in State Museum, Lucknow. Joshi quotes "yaksas with deformed and irregular bodies would become a source of laughter". Similar instances are recorded in the Vamana Purana where a Yaksha named *Panchalika* saved Shiva by accepting yawning (*Vijrambhana*) and lunacy (*unmada*). He suffered severely and turn out to be a source of laughter. Joshi concluded that these references were used to create images of Yaksha with deformed limbs and body.

Bajpai in his research on "*Madhya Pradesh sculpture through the ages*" concludes that the Yaksha from Vidisha belongs to the early Mauryan period, as evident through its form and character in comparison to the Parkham Yaksha.

M.S. Randhawa's study on "*Tree-worship in Buddhist-Hindu sculpture*" concludes that the practice of worshipping trees dominated the sculptural art of Bharhut, Sanchi and

Mathura. The depiction of *Vrikshakas* was associated tree worship and the divinities inhabiting them.

There exist several publications (for instance, Randhawa 1980; Asthana 1980-1990; Khandalvala 1989, Sharma 1991) which focus on specific case studies, highlighting the distribution of the Yakṣa sculptures within a restricted geographical region, comprising of a political unit or a village. Though such studies are significant in understanding the temporal variability of the tradition, sculptural art traditions, the way the subject is approached along with the methodology adopted in the investigation of the data appear descriptive and governed by a lack of an understanding of the underlying concept behind the production of these sculptures.

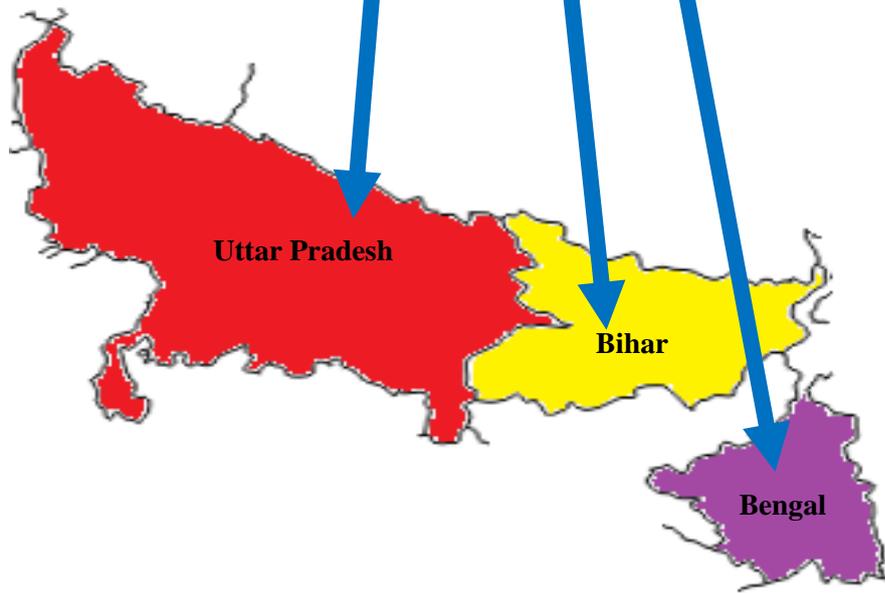
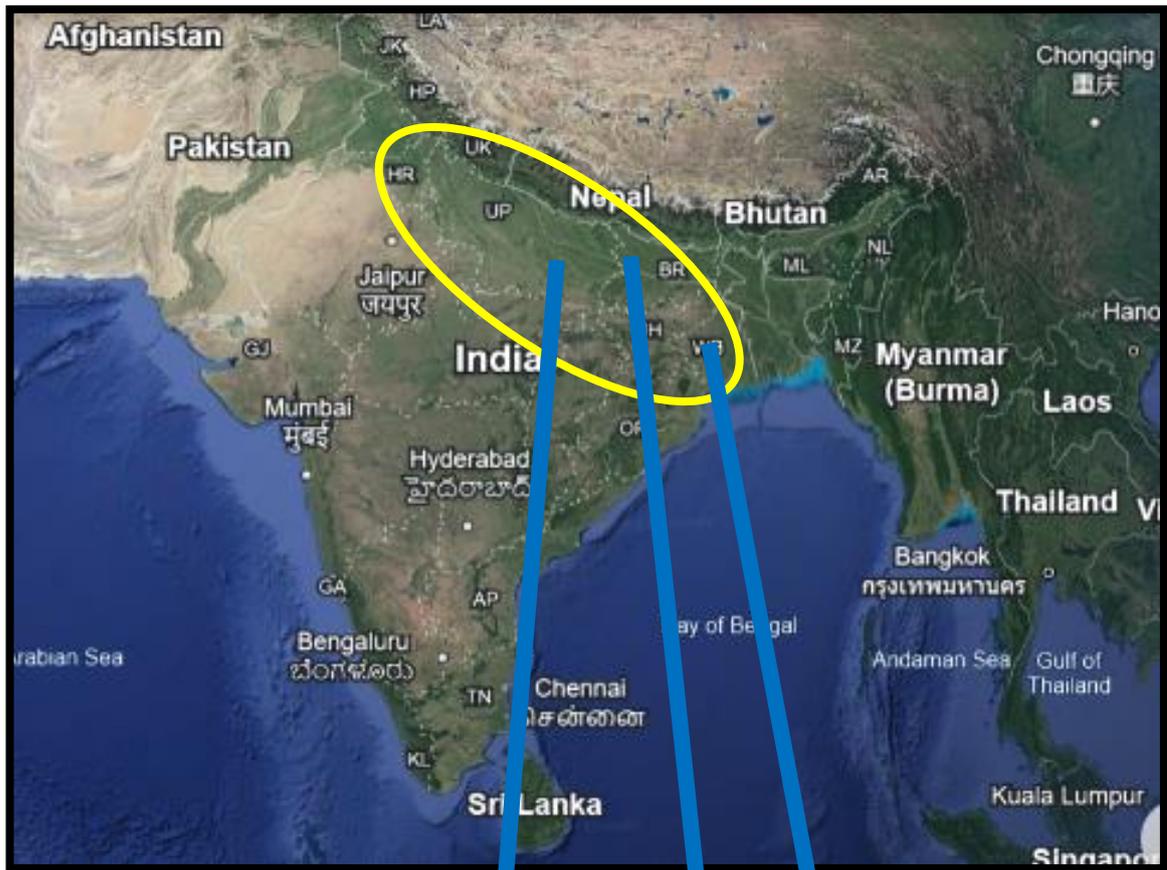
Thus, a review of the available literature on the Yakṣa traditions in the Indian sub-continent reveal that the previous studies on the tradition have primarily been descriptive, focussing upon their typologies; geographical and temporal distribution and their variance. These studies, governed by time constraints, although successful to a large degree in reconstructing the local socio-political histories, have somewhat strived to highlight the historical, cultural, and social significance of the Yakṣa cult and reconstruct their character. Besides, these studies are characterised by certain lacunae viz., (a) most studies on Yakṣa cult are carried out in isolation without recognising the universality of such traditions. In such cases the yakṣa sculptures are approached from a perspective that glorifies regionalist ideals, which emphasise upon a region's acclamation and thought process of the people; (b) there exists a lack of adherence to a uniform nomenclature; typology and understanding regarding the purpose of their productions within the same spatial and temporal region (c) There exist a generalisation of their types and forms without considering their geographical and temporal variations. The forms, nature, and purpose of production of the Yakṣa sculptures differ

significantly within the area of investigation. Furthermore, the previous researchers have mainly stressed upon the sculptures housed at various museums whereby few of the sculptures were ignored based on fragmented images and typological similarities and dissimilarities.

1.2 Study Area

The research work investigates into the significance of North India and specifically the Ganga Valley as a significant archaeological centre for the findings of Yaksha figurines. North India's historical background is intertwined with the legacies of diverse ruling dynasties, and its archaeological landscape is punctuated by an array of sculptural artifacts that offer glimpses into its rich cultural heritage.

North India and the Ganga Valley has been a crucible of civilization, witnessing the rise and fall of numerous dynasties that have left an indelible imprint on its cultural milieu. Since the 6th century BCE, North India has been a stage where the drama of history unfolded, with successive dynasties like the Mauryan, Kushana, Gupta etc., exerting their influence over the region. This enduring legacy of dynastic rule has shaped the material culture of North India, leaving behind a wealth of archaeological treasures that serve as windows into its storied past.



Map 1. The following map depicts the area under investigation for the research.

(Courtesy: Google Earth)

History and geography are two significant fields to study the human past livelihoods and settlement patterns which are interrelated. All civilizations have developed near the course of rivers where the easy availability of water and sustenance was available. The Indus valley became the cradle of one of the earliest civilizations and the fertile Ganges valley offered tempting prospects to monarchs and invaders for territorial and commercial expansion. History informs about humans their societal setups, communities etc, and geography mentions the relationship between humans and their environment and the gradual adaptation.

Small scale settlements promoted independent development; gradually, such settlements proliferated into village communities of landowners and peasant proprietors. With the growth of population, specialization evolved, and people formed themselves into federations for producing and allocating resources. The existence of guilds and the increasing use of money must have accelerated the growth of trade. The perennial source of navigable waterways in northern India, led to the expansion of trade and commerce which in turn brought in prosperity of this area (Darian 1978/2001; the Ganges myth and history). Several major trade centres and port developed on the banks of these rivers systems.

The early usage of iron in India signifies the advent of iron technology, its subsequent production, and its widespread cultural adoption across the Indian subcontinent. Initially, scholars attributed the advent of iron in the Indian milieu to around the 7th-6th century BCE (Wheeler 1946). However, recent researches push the dates back for the utilization of iron to early second millennium BCE (Tewari 2003). The incorporation of iron brought about significant cultural changes and eventually made way for urbanization in the Ganga Valley. This urbanization, often referred to as the second urbanization, was noticeable by the establishment of cities and the development of

states in the Ganga Plains and valley and adjacent regions, eventually extending throughout the entire subcontinent

From the 6th century BCE onward, northern India witnessed the ascendancy of diverse dynasties and potentates, commencing with the Haryanka, Nandas, Maurya, Sunga, Kushana, Gupta, and other ruling entities. The dynastic rules not only had remarkable effect on the administration but also showcased impressive archaeological artifacts indicating the regions magnificent socio-economic and cultural milieu.

The archaeological evidence provides insights into the social and economic affluence and cultural accomplishments by the ruling dynasties. Several excavations and explorations have revealed artifacts and architectural structures shedding light on the architectural competence, technological growth and advancements and artistic expression and execution of the respective dynasties. The inscriptions and sculptures found from these archaeological contexts provide valuable glimpse of the existing social structure, belief systems and economic activities flourishing.

The academic inquiry into the geographical features and human settlement serves as a methodological cornerstone for understanding the complexities in the historical context. Therefore, the study of environmental settings and geography enables the researcher to evaluate the multi- layered dimension of subsistence patterns, historical development, belief systems and culture.

Geography and environment, the physical landscape, climate, topography etc., play a significant role in determining the human settlement and culture. These factors enable to understand the adaptive responses, cultural expression, ritualistic practices, artistic understanding, and subsistence patterns.

Through a detailed study of the geographical factors will provide a roadmap of the influence of nature and geography in relation to the historical and archaeological development.

North India encompasses the present geopolitical states of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. This region is demarcated by the evident geographical features, the natural boundaries, the Indus- Gangetic plains and Himalayan Mountain range separate India from the Tibetan Plateau and central Asia.

The Indus- Gangetic plains is a vast alluvial territory and holds a paramount significance in defining the expanse of Northern India (Islam 2000). The region is characterized by fertile soil deposition by Indus and Ganga River, the important element of agricultural and economic growth.

For better understanding the present segment is divided into geographical units, (a) Indo- Gangetic divide (Punjab and Haryana); (b) Upper Gangetic plains (majorly Uttar Pradesh); (c) Middle Gangetic plains (Bihar) and (d) Lower Ganga plains (Bengal).

North India remained a central point of attraction for the cultures to flourish since the third millennium BCE. The decline of the Indus Valley civilization and the gradual migration and shift toward the eastern region led to the development of the society and utilization of the resources. After the Indus civilization declined around 1900 BCE, the expanse of Ganga valley gained its importance due to availability of natural resources such as the perennial flow of Ganga, the Doab (Ganga-Yamuna) region, making the land fertile for various crops and mineral resource; easy accessibility to the sea making the region a vast trade centre.

Ganga Valley or the Ganga Plains said so, was undertaken for the research work which included specifically the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal. The sites of Mathura, Banaras (Varanasi), Allahabad, Sravasti (Uttar Pradesh); Patna (Bihar) and Chandraketurah and Tamluk (West Bengal) and the site/ local/ state museums were visited, curators and locals were interviewed, photographic documentation was undertaken.

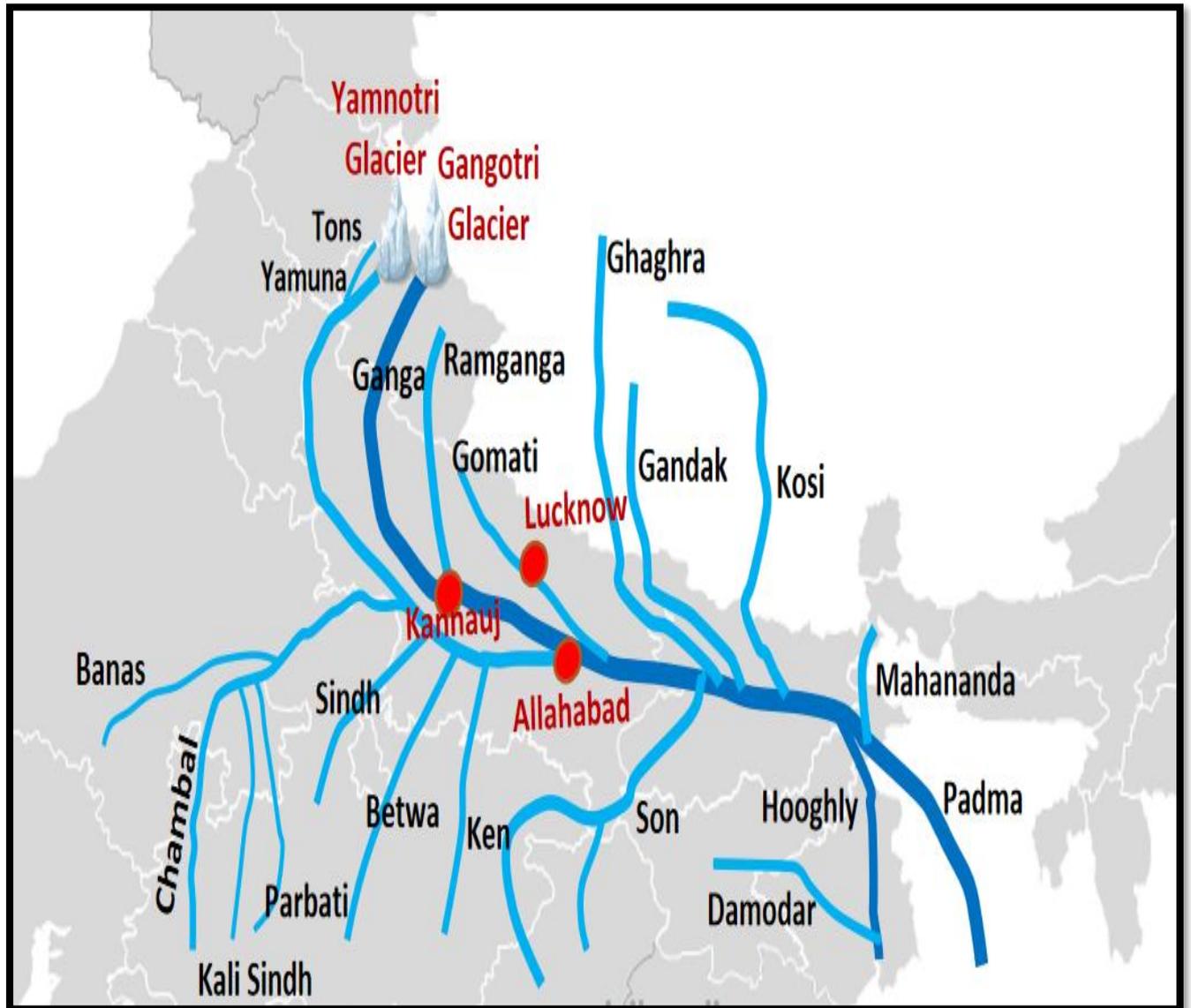
1.3 Environmental Setting

The Gangetic plains refer to the region that is situated in the valley of this largest river. With a total area of 319,000 square kilometres, the plain is among the biggest of its kind. For thousands of years, it has provided sustenance for a substantial population. One of India's most significant natural areas, the huge Gangetic plains are made up of alluvial plains that extend from Uttaranchal into Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal. The Vindhya and Chhota Nagpur plate branches, as well as the foothills of the Himalayas in the north, encircle the plain.

The Gangetic plain has always held a unique position in the history of India since the earliest times. The Ganga-Yamuna Doab, a part of ancient *Madhyadesa* which is a densely populated northern region of the country. The Ganga has its basis in the Gangotri glacier, nearly twenty miles long and three miles wide surrounded by peaks, 21,000-24,000 feet above sea level.

Its two main sources – The Alakananda and the Bhagirathi flow past the sacred villages of Badrinath and Gangotri long since regarded as the most revered centres of pilgrimage (Mackay 1945). Further south the Alaknanda River is joined by the Mandakini. The true source of Ganga is at Gomukh (13,500 feet) the giant ice cave. Till Devprayag its name is Bhagirathi. In Devprayag, Bhagirathi meets the Alaknanda River

where it takes the form of Ganga. Flowing south it passes through Rishikesh, the last point in the Himalayas, before Ganga enters the plains breaking out between the hills lies Haridwar (Islam 2016).



Map 2. The present map shows the Flow of river Ganga and its tributaries.

(Courtesy: Google Maps)

The Gangetic plain is further divided into three divisions namely the (a) Upper Ganga Plain, (b) the Middle Ganga Plain (c) the Lower Ganga Plain. These divisions are discussed here.

- **The Upper Ganga plain**

The Upper Ganga plain is a portion of the greater plain of the Ganga and Yamuna. The area lies between the Yamuna valley in the west and 100m contour in the east covering a wide area of 1,49,029 km² of the state Uttar Pradesh in the north and Yamuna in the south. It covers almost 51% area of the western Uttar Pradesh. The region includes within its bounds 550 km east-west and 380 km north-south (Singh 1971). The region presents an amalgam of pre-historic to present culture. The region covers incorporates within its bounds the divisions of Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Moradabad, Ghaziabad, Bulandshahar, Aligarh, Badaun, Bareilly, Pilibhit, Shahjahanpur, Etah, Mathura, Agra, Rohilkhand, Lucknow, Unnao, Kanpur, Etawah, Fatehpur, Allahabad, (excluding Meja tehsil), Kaushambi, Pratapgarh, Sultanpur, Faizabad (now Ayodhya).

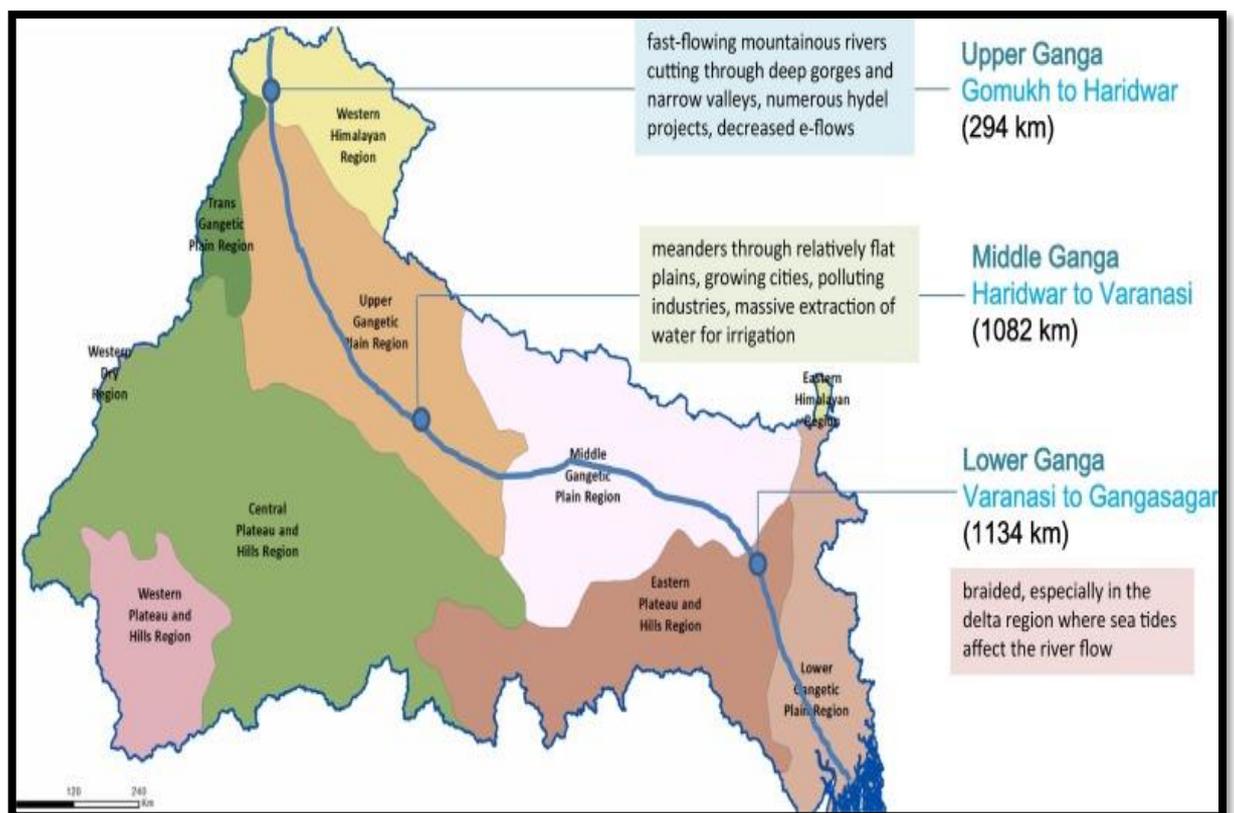
- **The Middle Ganga Plain**

The Middle Ganga Plain covers an area of 1,44,409 km². The area flanked by the Himalayas on the north and the peninsular ranges on the south, roughly includes Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh plains lying on either side of the Ganga and Saryu (Singh 1971). This region holds an immense cultural and economic significance. It includes marginal portions of the Shivaliks in the north and peninsular formations in the south (Singh 1971). The major units of this plain are Ganga Ghaghara Doab, Gandak, Kosi. Some rivers join the Ganga system out of which the Son River being the most important joining from south. The Middle Ganga Plain includes the administrative divisions of Gorakhpur and Varanasi and tehsil of Balrampur and Utraula (Gonda),

Faizabad, Tanda and Sultanpur and Kadipur, Pratapgarh and Phulpur, Handia, Karchhana and Meja (Allahabad) in the eastern Uttar Pradesh and division of Tirhut Bhagalpur and Patna (Islam 2006).

- **The Lower Ganga Plain**

The Lower Ganga plain is regarded as the most fertile and densely populated alluvial tract of India. The region encompasses from the foot of Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south and from the edge of Chhota Nagpur plateau in the west to the boundary of Bangladesh and Assam in the east (Singh 1971). It includes the West Bengal and the Kishanganj tehsil of Purnea district of Bihar (Islam 2006).



Map. 3 Major Segments of the Ganga Plains

(Courtesy: Dutta et al. 2020)

1.4 Geological Structure: The Indo Gangetic Plain

Geomorphology of the Ganga Plain, part of the peripheral Himalayan promontory basin is primarily shaped by the interaction of tectonics, climate change and human activity during late quaternary. Ganga plain occupies a dominant position in the Indo-Gangetic plain (Singh *et al* 1994). It exhibits a wide range of alluvial geomorphic features which are product of climate and tectonic changes during Late quaternary. Large scale irrigation of man about 4.3 thousand years back into the Ganga Plain had pronounced effect on landscape development (Islam 2006).

The region is characterized by quaternary alluvium with varying combination of clay silt, sand and gravels. The region of Ganga plain is monotonous except some variations in the northern part where the Bhabar of the Himalayas grade into the plains and in the southern part (Islam 2006). After the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, the Gangetic plain became the '*area of attraction*' for the people, though in Uttar Pradesh. The Indus Valley Civilization sites are found, but are confined to its western area with a heavy concentration in Saharanpur district located on the tributaries of river Yamuna (Deshpande 1977).

(a) Drainage

The study of drainage system is very important in settlement analysis, for it is the streams which shape the topography of a region which acts like a basal platform for the organised growth of settlement.

Ganga is the main drainage line of this vast plain, along with its tributaries like the Ghaghara, the Gandak, the Yamuna, the Son, and the Kosi, it has been depositing thick alluvium throughout its basin since ages about one fourth of entire population of India still live in this fertile plain. The plain continued to be a centre of Indian civilization

and several types of urban centres developed along the river banks. The religious centres like Varanasi (ancient Kasi), Gaya, Mathura etc., which speak of the ancient glory which have inspired and mustered sages, seers, philosophers, and literature who conceived and expanded the spiritual and moral thoughts.

The Ganga plain is a narrow irregular shaped depression with a gentle eastern gradient. The northern and southern part of the Ganga plain has a slope. The surface in the eastern and western parts are located close to its southern margin topographically the lowest parts. The axial rivers Yamuna, Ganga are present in the middle part of the surface located near Ghaghara River. The river Ganga is present at a higher surface in the southern part of the plain. The altitude changes in the axial part from 175m near Mathura in the west to 25m near Azamgarh in the eastern part (Islam 2006).

The cross-profile of the river system changes with the region. The depth of the stream may be 15-20 meters below the level in the case of the Yamuna and Ganga in the Upper Ganga plain. This is widest flood plain in U.P. probably because it is related to the large mountain catchment of Ghaghara and steeper gradient (Hayden *et al* 1934). The major tributaries of Ganga viz. Yamuna, Ramganga and Ghaghara which are the only perennial rivers. Several seasonal streams beginning from the Shivalik's e.g., Maskara, Punja, Solani, Ratmau, Pilokhar etc. irrigates the northern region of the area. Several perennial streams namely the Kali west, Sukhta, Gomti, Deoha etc. emerge from the sub-mountain region. The Rind, Sirsa, Isan, Sasurkaderi, Kali east etc. originate from the lakes in the tract. The Ganga though the two important tributaries the Ghaghara and the Gomti join the main stream in the Middle Ganga plain. Ganga and its chief tributaries, Yamuna, Ramganga, and the Ghaghara are the Himalayan Rivers which carry adequate water all the year with high seasonal fluctuations (Islam 2006).

(b) Soils

The Ganga plain is characterised by quaternary alluvial with varying combinations of clay, silt, sand, and gravels. It is thus, evident that lithologically, The Ganga plain is monotonous except some variations in the northern part where the Bhabars of the Himalayas grade into the plains and then in the Southern part. Geologically the entire Gangetic plain is known as a 'trough' filled with alluvium (Chowdhary *et al*, 1977).

The soils grade from fine silt in the flood plain and the delta to the coarse material the upper Ganga plain. The Doab which is structurally a part of the Ganga plain has been formed by the infilling of the Indo-Ganga trough during the Pleistocene period. The alluvium of the plains has undergone but little paedogenic evolution since their deposition by fluvial agency in the sub-recent times. The alluvial soils vary greatly in texture and consistency, ranging from sand to loam and silts. There are certain areas with clays that are ill drained and sometimes charged with injurious accumulation of the Sodium salts, reducing a sterile condition called '*Usar*' (Islam 2006).

The alluvial deposits mainly consist of sand, silt clay with occasional gravel beds and can be divided into two principal types:

- a. ***Khadar*** – The recent alluvium
- b. ***Bhangar*** – Older alluvium Khadar

The Ganga Khadar soils are rich in plant nutrients are found in the narrow flood plains of the river. Here the Ganga brings a new layer of alluvium every year and the clay has less 'kankar'. These soils are deficient in organic materials specially phosphorus and are sandy to loam in texture (Puri 1960). The Khadar is broader than that of the Yamuna and is quite extensive in the western part of the region from Farrukhabad to Kanpur. A little of Khadar can be assigned to the Upper Pleistocene and most to the

recent age. The Khadar imperceptibly merges into the deltaic and other accumulations of the prehistoric times (Islam 2006).

Bhangar alluvium is classified as the earliest deposit. It contains 'Kankar' nodules and cankerous concretion in the flood plains and the delta is sandier. The older alluvium or the 'bhangar' consists of concretions and nodules of impure Calcium Carbonate. The Bhangar is mainly composed of clay loam. The Bhabar and Tarai regions contain gravel deposits comprising coarse sand pebbles and cobbles with clay and silt one distinctive character of the bhangar is the formation of 'Kankarpars' (hardpans) in the sub-soil zone through capillary action owing to the alternating calcareous sand and clay beds here as also elsewhere in the zone of seasonal rainfall, which adds to soil moisture retention in the sub soil zone (Islam 2006).

1.5 A Brief Political History of North India

Ganga has been the cradle of Indian Culture and Civilization. The idea of universal power was a constant theme in the North Indian region since the 600 BCE, rulers and kings wished to extend their geographical dominions. Ancient India attained a semblance of political unity under the imperial banner of Magadh (modern day Patna and adjoining regions).

Earlier Ancient India presented a disconsolate picture of fragmented political units with ever-varying boundaries and engaged in mutual wars and annexations. The early sixth century BCE shortly before the advent of the Heterodox (*nāstika*) school of religious thoughts, there were sixteen great states or the *Soḷasa Mahājanapadas* in Northern India. According to the Buddhist work *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the following were *Aṅga*, *Māgadha*, *Kāśī*, *Kośalā*, *Vṛji* (Vajji), *Mallā*, *Chedi*, *Vatsā* (Vamsa), *Kuru*, *Pañcāla*, *mātsya* (Machchha), *Śūrasena*, *Aśmaka* (Assaka), *Āvanti*, *Gāndhāra* and *Kāmbhoja*. The

Dīgha Nikāya refers them in pairs and Chullanidesa adds Kalinga to the list and substitutes *Yonā* with *Gāndhāra* (Sen 1984,).

The North India and specifically the Ganga valley gained the reputation with the introduction of iron as the new raw material making it the centre of second urbanization. With the upcoming of the *Soḷasa Mahājanapada* or the sixteen great states and the consolidation of them brought into various social and political systems which continue till present. The kingdom of Magadha was destined to play a crucial role in the viable and fluid spectrum that existed in the sixth century BCE. Magadha provided a decent platform for commingling of various people and cultures which produced not only great rulers but also a centre of evolution of religions, art, architecture etc.

The realm of Magadha was destined to play an important role in the viable and fluid spectrum that existed in the sixth century BCE. Corresponding to the present districts of Patna and Gaya (both in Bihar), occupied a strategic position between the upper and the lower parts of the Gangetic plain which provided Magadha a gratified ground for the development of the political and socio-economical outline.

Magadha first gained its political importance under Bimbisara who founded the Haryanka Dynasty in 543 BCE with its capital at Girivraja (modern Rajgriha), he pursued a policy of expansion by combining dynastic marriages with aggressive militarism. Ajatasatru's son and successor, slayed Bimbisara and took up the throne in 461 BCE. His reign marked the apogee of the Haryanka dynasty, but during his rule there was an outbreak of hostilities with Kosala and Licchavi where Ajatasatru came victorious. He was succeeded by Udayin or Udaybhadra (as per the Pali accounts) who founded a new town 'Kusumapura' at Pataliputra; Udayin's successors were non-entities and thus Sisunaga who was an Amatya (minister) was placed to the throne. He

was further succeeded by Kalasoka under whose reign two significant events took place viz., the meeting of the second Buddhist council at Vaishali and the final transfer of the capital to Pataliputra. Kalasoka was brutally killed by Mahapadma Nanda leading to the fall of the Haryanka dynasty in 413 BCE (Sen 1987).

Mahapadma, the founder of Nanda dynasty (413 BCE), is described in the Puranas as a person of low origin and was a great emperor who united the fragmented parts of India under one political dominion. He was succeeded by his eight sons; the last ruler was Dhana Nanda.

Chandragupta Maurya dethroned the last Nanda ruler and unified the Indian subcontinent under his rule and thus established the Mauryan empire. Chandragupta (323 - 273 BCE) under the guidance of Kautilya pursued his administrative and military career. The remarkable achievements of the first emperor of India were the conquest and unification of Punjab, upsurging the Nanda rule and battle with Seleucus which was concluded with a treaty and marital alliance. Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara (297- 273 BCE) who had an ordinary period of rule and was succeeded by his son Asoka (268- 238 BCE), the most noteworthy ruler of the Mauryan empire after Chandragupta. *Aśoka* added to the existing territorial region, art, sculpture and architecture reached its pinnacle under his rule with the introduction and large-scale expansion of rock-cut architecture, sculptural art etc. during his rule Buddhism flourished nationally and internationally. Rock edicts and pillars were erected for the dissemination and propagation of faith and ideas (Sen 1987). During this period the sanctioning of art was commissioned in the form of court art (which was directly sponsored by the royal) and the folk art or the art of the locals was present for which patronage was not directly sponsored but certain amount was granted by the royals for the development of the art. Parkham Yakṣa and other colossal sculptures were carved in

such a way that they were to be viewed from all directions and were installed at important crossings, tax centres and trade points. With the demise of *Aśoka*, the empire declined gradually, *Bṛhadratha* (187 BCE) the last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by his chief *Puṣyamitra Śuṅgā* with whom the new reign of the Sunga was established (Sen 1987).

With a smaller size and less centralization as compared to the Mauryan empire, the Śuṅgā kingdom (185 BCE) saw several local rulers attempt, with different degrees to establish their own dynasties. They controlled most of the Gangetic valley occupied from the Mauryan and parts of northern and eastern India (Ahuja 2006). Eventually their rule diminished and the control of power was limited only around Magadha and Vidisha (Sen 1987). During this declining stage of the Sunga, other dynasties were introducing their own coinage system in reconstructing the history of the regional communities which were not a part of the Sunga reign (Sen 1987). It was in 72 BCE, when the Sunga dynasty was dethroned by the *Kāṅva* in Magadha. The *Kāṅva* ruled for a limited span of time, until 27 BCE where the Andhra's overthrew them ending their reigning period (Sen 1987). The Andhra's never dominated or ruled the history of Magadha, their supremacy being concentrated in Deccan, Central, and Western India (Ahuja 2006).

The Kalinga kingdom and parts of Andhra Pradesh witnessed the dominance. The well-known instance is the Kalinga war with the Mauryan ruler Asoka. The Hathigumpha inscription (Udaigiri, Bhubaneswar) provides a genealogy of the Kalinga dynasts founded by *Kharavela* (Sen 1987). The inscriptional and textual references present him as a powerful '*Chakravartin*' monarch, under whom several expeditions to Aṅga and Magadha were undertaken (Ahuja 2006).

The Gangetic valley faced several dynastic and political upheavals. The Indo- Greeks, Parthians, Bactrian Greeks etc. were continuous visitors as evident from numismatic evidences (Ahuja 2006). After the continuous fall and rise of different rulers and reigns, a unification of the region was under the Kushana rule around first- second century CE (Sen 1987). Their dominance was not only in the North- western (Gandhara) but also in the interiors of the Ganga Valley i.e., Mathura. The Kusana supremacy is evident through inscriptions, art, and architecture with distinct style (Ahuja 2006).

Thus, the Maurya's the first empire of ancient India developed the existing art and sculpture traditions. The following dynasty, Sunga not only further developed the existing artistic traditions but also introduced distinct stylistic features such as drapery, execution of art and ornaments. Furthermore, Kusana art introduced the schools of art specific to a region viz., Mathura and Gandhara with their separate stylised characteristics.

Art remains the unifying factor of the dynasties and region. The amazing indication is the artistic unity over a broad geographic region from Punjab in the north to the Deccan (Ahuja 2006). The artistic union is witnessed in the selection of raw material such as, terracotta, stone, wood ivory or bone (Ahuja 2006).

The second century BCE witnessed the division of the subcontinent into several political units. However, distinct in political administration and power, the connecting theme and similarity between them was the importance of art (Thapar 1996).

1.6 Major objectives of the present research

1. To examine the nature and origin of the Yakṣa and its cultural association over the time This would lead to an understanding of the evolution of the form of the yakṣa sculptures; their symbolic meaning and iconographical transformations along the flow of river ganga.
2. To study the sculptural traditions of the Yakṣa in the area in lieu with the sculptural treatises and how the principles enumerated in the literary sources were used to portray the '*ideal*'. This was undertaken to examine if the sculpted figures of the Yakṣa exhibit emotions through their postures and expressions, resulting in the portrayal of the '*ideal*'.
3. To examine the religious aspects related to Yakṣa in Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanism and their sculptural representations with the presence of various dynasties. An understanding of this side would highlight the character of the Yakṣa and its relationship with the religions and the dynasties.
4. To examine the iconographical differentiation between the Yakṣa and the related minor deities i.e., the *Naga*, *Gandharva*, *Preta*, *Bhuta* etc. An understanding of this side would highlight the character of the Yakṣa.
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.

1.7 Methodology

The research work adopts a multi-disciplinary approach to achieve the objectives by integrating insights from various disciplines. This approach permitted a comprehensive analysis of the Yaksha cult, considering its diverse aspects and implications.

The primary data utilized in this research comprises literary texts, field visits to museums and archaeological sites, and photographic documentation. Field visits were conducted in Varanasi, Mathura, Chandraketugarh, and other related sites. The museums visited for research purposes include the Indian Museum in Kolkata, the National Museum in New Delhi, the Allahabad Museum, the Bharat Kala Bhawan, and the Patna Museum along with the archaeological sites.

During these visits, detailed observations were made and documented through photography to gather visual data for analysis. The aim was to establish a correlation between the visual narratives depicted in sculptures and the textual narratives found in literary texts. This approach was attempted for a comprehensive understanding of the narratives rooted in the sculptural depictions within their textual and cultural contexts.

The secondary data employed played a crucial role in the research. These secondary sources included journals, excavation reports, books, and national and digital repositories of various museums, such as the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA) and Jatan, Vara Museum Repository. These sources provided valuable contextual information and scholarly perspectives, enriching the analysis of the primary data.

1.8 Significance and Scope of the Present Research Work

From the ancient times there were several divinities of minor importance and worshipped with important gods. 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 did not get its due importance. Eminent 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.

North India and specifically the region of Ganga Valley was chosen for the present research due to its historical and geographical potentials and earlier investigations here on these traditions have attested it to be *yakṣa* sculpture yielding area.

1.9 Conclusion

Every country has its unique set of narratives, which include folklore, fables, epics, romances, religious myths, and legends. It frequently represents self-explanatory events from daily life or those borrowed from a text, well-known folk tale, or myth. Similarly, *the cults Naga, Gandharva, Yakṣa, Apsara etc., were the outcomes of the development of these myths, fables and thoughts and which gradually represented in the sculptural art as the advancement of the human society.*

Yakṣa has long been perceived as a disparate category with a limited and fragmented cultural background. There is a lack of information on the origin, development, and how they were/are regarded as local deities or spirits to worship for various reasons. There has been modest investigation into distinguishing them from other lesser divinities such as the *Rakshasa, Gandharvas, Apsaras*, and others.

As a result, there are gaps in the research on the role of Yakṣa figures and their placement in the Indian religious pantheon.

This study would contribute to the existing scholarship and comprehension of Yakṣa in North India. This research is an attempt to discover the iconographical differences between the Yakṣa and other minor deities such as the *Rakshasa, Gandharvas, Apsaras* etc.

As a result, studying and working on the Yakṣa cult would aid in revealing the sculptural as well as spiritual meaning of the figurines and how they became so popular among India's village culture.