

## **Chapter- 2**

### **Origin and Development of the Yaksa**

India has always been known for its rich diverse traditions, cultural heritage, and remarkable art. The evolution of art in ancient India is an enthralling legacy. The earliest artistic expression in the form of paintings is reported from the prehistoric rock shelters (Bhimbetka, Jogimara hills etc) and are one of the oldest in the world. The Indus Valley civilization provides the earliest forms of terracotta art, stone and bronze sculptures representing various outlines of life such as humans, animals, mythical beings etc.

Art and sculpture of India is primarily driven by the environmental setting, everyday habits, and the belief in the balance of everything in nature. The diverse landscape and climate of India have provided the artists with abundance of inspiration and thoughts (Coomaraswamy 1956). Since the ancient period to present, the flora and fauna remains the common feature of the Indian art (Coomaraswamy 1956).

The continuous migration of communities and individuals have impacted the art and its execution and depiction. This constant movement brought in thoughts and traditions, and the gradual amalgamation of cultures led to the expansion of society, cognition, settlement, and belief systems. The understanding towards worship and devotion led to the further development of religion (Coomaraswamy 1956). The religion of ancient India underwent various stages of profound changes; thoughts, and practices in the form of art and sacraments that survived to the present (Coomaraswamy 1971).

The cultural heritage and artistic traditions with various factors, such as migration, religious rituals, culture, and the diverse landscape which evolved, adapted, have shaped India over thousands of years. It is evidence to the creative spirit of people of India and their belief in the power of art to connect us to our past and inspire us towards the future (Havell 1908).

Similarly, the sculptural and iconographical representation provides specific thoughts and background of the ancient society which were significant in Indian mythology and whose importance is perceived in art and sculpture and were gradually concretized in the forms as we see in the present day.

The divinities were not always represented iconocally, they were figured in aniconic manner (Banerjea, 1941). Aniconic or symbolic representation remains a part of the Indian art. (Aggarwal 1965). The form of Aniconic worship refers of worshipping deities without using physical representation or symbolically, as we see Buddha depicted in various symbols such as bodhi tree, stupa etc (Coomaraswamy 1916). The depiction of Buddha in aniconic form was a later adaptation of the ritualistic traditions pre-existing in the ancient society. Aniconism prevailed in the society [is still prevalent such as *Banalinga* (Siva) and *Shaligrams* (Visnu/ Narayan)] and the semi divine deities were represented in such forms as personal religion. Gradually with the development of thoughts and society, there evolved iconographical representations in the field of art and sculpture.

The present chapter discusses the origin and development of Yakṣa as traced by the significant literary sources and their relationship with the other semi divine beings. The chapter further mentions the position and association of Yakṣa in the three greater pantheons i.e., Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. Moreover, the chapter provides a holistic and comprehensive view of the initial archaeological findings associated with Yakṣa.

## **2.1 Origin of the Yakṣa**

Beginning of devotion and the evolution of religious pantheons reflect profound shifts in ancient societies' outlooks and belief systems. This transformation marked a transition from more abstract or animistic forms of spiritual belief to more structured, polytheistic systems. As

societies began to conceptualize faith or religion more concretely, they developed diverse sects and philosophical schools, each interpreting the divine nature and the cosmos in distinct ways. The advent of these divinities is quite unspecified but the gradual advancement of their worship, cult and iconography are somewhat clear (Mishra 1987). Within the realms of the well-known pantheons, the divinities such as Gandharva, Naga, Kinnaras, Kimpurushas, Yakṣa and other hybrid forms., etc occupied a significant place within the same sacred space. As many other demigods gradually wilted away, it is interesting to note that yakṣa were able to hold on to their core concept and gradually several stories about the yakṣa got into the scriptures of the religious systems (Mishra 1987).

The ancient scriptures make several observations and repetitive discussion of the Yakṣa and their associations with other divinities. The origin and the gradual development of the Yakṣa cult and its associations can be traced in the literature and in the archaeological context.

## **2.2 Etymological Derivation of ‘Yakṣa’**

The Vedic texts refer the yakṣa as a sublime deity and were often identified with the ‘creatures of the wild and forests’ or the ‘remnants of an ancient demonology’ which was possibly a later addition to this idea. (Mishra 1987).

To understand the origin, it is important to trace the etymological derivation of the word ‘Yakṣa’. Quite a lot of etymological interpretations and derivations have been made by more than a few renowned scholars. They attempted several theories regarding the derivation of the term ‘Yakṣa’ and its true meaning. Different scholar has opined regarding the etymological derivation for ‘Yakṣa’.

The Ramayana, *Prajapati* (the supreme creator) created the waters (*Aapah salila-sambhavah*). To guard them he created semi divine beings, who questioned the *Prajapati* about their duties and responsibilities. Replying them he commanded ‘*Rakshdhvam*’ or protect as guardians.

Some beings misinterpreted and said ‘*Yakshamah*’ and ‘*Rakshamah*’. The beings who said ‘*Rakshamah*’ referring they would grasp or hold in their power, not allowing its free movement, became the ‘*Rakshasa*’. The beings who cried ‘*Yakshamah*’ became the ‘*Yaksha*’ indicating they would devour or eat anything given in their charge (Agrawala 1970). The Vedic Sanskrit, the root ‘*yaksa*’ has no connotation related with eating (as suggested by the Ramayana in the lines conversed above) but used in the sense of appellation (Agrawala 1970).

There are opinions amongst some scholars regarding the etymological derivation of the word ‘*Yaksa*’. Scholars such as Hillebrandt (1958) made an initial effort and presumed that the basic meaning of ‘*Yakṣa*’ in the Vedas may be an apparition (a ghost or an image of a dead). Eventually, Keith () suggested that it is from the root ‘*yaj*’ which means ‘to worship with an offering,’ and honour. Rhys David’s and Stede (1975) in the context of Vedic literature, derives the meaning as ‘quick rays of light’, perhaps swift creatures that could change their abode quickly and at will; whereas in the Pali literature, the word *Yakkha* means a creature to whom the sacrifice is offered [derived from the words *yaj* and *yajati* (which means to sacrifice)]; Ultimately, stalwarts like Coomaraswamy (1927; 1941) accepts the aforementioned derivations and regarded the *Yakṣa* as a local ‘*genii*’.

Most scholars have believed that the word ‘*Yakṣa*’ means to move rapidly towards or flash onto; a flash of light flashing upon sight (Coomaraswamy 1971). Pali literature abounds in references which tend to confirm the view that the *Yakṣa* could change their forms (Jataka, I.102; 233ff; II.89, Mishra 1987).

The above interpretations of the scholars regarding the etymological derivation of the term ‘*Yakṣa*’ makes it quite understandable that the semi divine beings were a part of the early stages of formation of the religious pantheons and sects, who had their own status and reputation.

Observing the present Sanskrit Dictionary (<https://sanskritdictionary.com/roots.php>) the root word √*yaksha* corresponds to *pūjāyām* (worshipful). Based on the discussions and analysing

the Sanskrit dictionary it can be stated that the Yakṣa originated as a divinity for whom rituals were performed and was well-intentioned of being worshipped.

### **2.3. Tracing the Origin of the Yakṣa Cult through Literature**

The study of the Yakṣa cult, a comprehensive understanding of its origin and development requires a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating literary sources, archaeological evidence, and iconographic analysis.

Literary sources provide valuable insights into the religious and cultural contexts in which the Yakṣa cult emerged and evolved. By examining these sources within the framework of greater pantheons, scholars can trace the complex interplay of religious beliefs, ritual practices, and socio-cultural dynamics that shaped the cult over time.

The present section provides a detailed survey of the literature and highlights the developmental process of the Yakṣa as a character and divinity. The section is further segmented into three dealing with the Vedic and Later Vedic texts, Buddhist texts and Jain texts.

#### **2.3.1 Yakṣa in Vedic and Later Vedic Text**

The Yakṣa occupied an important status in the early religious pantheon, the existence of Yakṣa is undeniable that it refers to a group of supernatural entities in the literature that is fundamentally distinct from the other Vedic gods. Early texts make a clear distinction between the dual perspectives towards the Yakṣa, first of dread and mistrust, and second of honour and generosity.

Observing the Vedic literature, Yakṣa occurs frequently, simply meaning 'something wonderful or terrible; supernatural being etc. (Mishra 1987). The word 'Yakṣa' was also used as an appellation or honorific in the scriptural traditions often synonymous with 'Brahma, Agni,

Indra, Varuna' (Mishra 1987). The Vedic hymns provide a background that Yakṣa was a mix of numerous attributes, the following hymns:

1. आत्मो न यंसद् यक्ष भूद् विचेतह् / *Rigveda, 1.190.4*
2. ना कस्य यक्षं सदमिद्धरो गा / *ibid, IV.3.13.*
3. ना कस्याद्भुत क्रूत यक्षं तनूभिः तूनाभिः / *ibid, V.70.4*
4. अमूरा विश्वा वृषणाविमा वां न यासु चित्रं ददृशे न यक्षं / *ibid, VII.61.5.*
5. अत्यासो न ये मरुतः स्वचो यक्षदृशो न शुभयंत मर्याः / *ibid, VII. 56.16.*
6. य आपिनित्यो वरुण प्रियः सन्त्वामागांसि कृष्णावत्सखा ते  
मा त एनस्वन्तो यक्षिन्मुजेम यन्धिष्मा विप्र स्तुवते वरुथम् // *ibid, VII. 88.6.*
7. यक्षस्याध्यक्षं तविषं वृहन्तम् / *ibid, X.88.13.*

(**Rigveda. Original Sanskrit Text, Mandala 1.190.4, Mandala 4.3.13, Mandala 5.70.4, Mandala 7.61.5, Mandala 7.56.16, Mandala 7.88.6, Mandala 10.88.13, Translation Griffith 1896**)

The following hymns describe 'Yakṣa' as: He is mysterious, not definable (in 1 and 2), dreadful and not to be consorted with (3 and 4); yet he is also beautiful (5), and is honorific of Varuna (6). The uncertainty is clear here with attitudes varying from respect to distrust, and this stuck with this duality of nature of the Yakṣa: malevolence and benevolence (Mishra 1987). The term 'Yaksa' has been ascribed to various connotations and scholars have observed likewise. Rigveda has used the term 'Yakṣa' in a 'neutral sense'. Coomaraswamy (1927) said that 'Yaksham' corresponds to a 'divinity' without any specific attributes. The Vedic text also mentions *Yakshadris* and *Yakshabhrit* (RV, I.190.4) which is used in the praise of *Brihaspati*, meaning one who offers sacrificial worship (Coomaraswamy 1927, p 236). *Yakshadris*, 'appears like yakṣa' as in the verse from RV VII 56-16 relates it with the Maruts, springing out of the Yakṣa. There are mentions of *Apsara* (nymphs) who are often described moving in and

around the forests, lakes, and rivers; their 'spheres extend to earth and in particular trees', *Gandharvas* who were beautiful and fond of music and leisure. The Vedic *Rakshasa* and *Pisacha* stood in close proximity to the Yakṣa. *Rakshasa* was the most common name in the *Rigveda* for terrestrial demons and goblins. Both were represented as deriving pleasure in destroying progenies. The subsequent analysis shows that the deities of this particular group possessed certain attributes which were shared or similar.

The hymn (X.88.13) from *Rigveda* mentions '*Yaksha syadhyaksham tavisham vrihantam*' Agni as the lord of Yakṣa. Subsequently, it can be noted that before the acceptance of Kubera, Indra and Skanda were offered the status; Agni is one of the earliest references in this context (Mishra 1987).

In the *Rigveda*, *Yaksa* and *Varuna* are identical. It is where the noticeable use of 'Yaksa' first appeared. By citing specific passages [(X.88.13), (X.37.1) I.115.1] where *Yaksa* is assigned as onlooking eye for Sun and Mitra, *Varuna*, etc., Coomaraswamy supported this identity and repeatedly said in the *Rigveda* that "*aspects of a single essence*" identical to later thoughts of *Atman*, *Purusha* or *Brahma* (the supreme being). According to Agrawala (1964), it will be simpler to comprehend why Buddha and other divinities have been referred to as "Yaksa" if the idea of a "single essence" is acknowledged (Mishra 1987).

A review of the position of Yakṣa in *Rigveda* establishes the fact that they were accepted as a god or as an apparition. These divinities also had their own abodes often referred as '*Niketa* or *Yakṣa Sadan*' and methods of rituals and worship. It is said that the Yakṣa inhabited the *Udumbara*, *Plaksha*, banyan tree, the sacred *Asvattha* tree in which cymbals and lutes resounded (Agarwala 1964). Agarwala (1964) quoting from *Rigveda* says that these cults were followed by undeveloped minds (*amuravisva*), yakṣa were worshipped in separate temples called the *Yaksha-Sadan*. The aforementioned discussion clears that Yakṣa had their own followers and temples. The *Rigveda* is silent about images or sculptures but references such as

*sisnadevas* and *muradevas* occur but how they are related to Yakṣa, if they existed is not identified.

The Yakṣa and their cult attained the status during the later Vedic phase which continued. The use of the term 'yakṣa' is quite repetitive in the later Vedic texts including the *Atharvaveda*, *Brahmana* and the *Upanishads*. The later Vedic period showcases Yakṣa as an apparition or ghost (Mishra 1987). Yakṣa has also been used in regard to *Brahma*, *Varuna*, *Mrtiyu*, *Manas*, *Agni* of equal position and spiritual belief which was previously mentioned in the Vedic phase (Mishra 1987). The *Gopatha Brahmana* speaks 'mahad vai yaksham tad ekam evasmi' (I'm the great yakṣa, just one only); Taittiriya Brahmana speaks *tapo ha yaksham Prathamam sambabhuva*; the *Satapatha Brahmana* says 'as a manifestation or an elusive representation', *Atharvaveda* speaks 'yaksham prithviam eka vrata', the text also equates Yakṣa with Brahman (the supreme being/ ultimate reality).

However, the references to recurring use of 'Yakṣa' proves that this divinity occupied an honourable status during the later Vedic phase (Mishra 1987). Hence, from the analysis of these verses, it can be noticed that Yakṣa was gradually attaining the position of a divinity, who was related to 'Tapo' or austerities or something sacred and the later Vedic phase consistently eulogised the Yakṣa representing it as a significant mystical motif.

The *sutras* mark the end of the Vedic period and has significant evidences which prove the transformation of yakṣa as a secondary divinity. The sutra period also provides vital indications of *Chaitya*-worship (the term *chaitya* here denotes a sacred space) which were dedicated to popular divinities (Mishra 1987). The additional development and deification of yakṣa was found to be complete by the time of the *Grhysutras* (Mishra 1987). The *Kausikisutra* (IX.3.3) refers Yakṣa as an 'ill-omened portent or creature' (Mishra 1987). The *Maitriyiniya Upanisad* (I.5) and the *Maitri Upanisad* has classed yakṣa with the *Gandharva*, *Asura*, *Rakshasa*, *Bhuta* etc. These species of spirit were usually associated with Kubera during the period of the

*Grhysutras* (Mishra 1987). The *Asvalayana Grhysutra* (I.12.1.3) refers offerings and sacrifices for chaitya; *Sraddha* rituals were performed (*Sankhyana Grhysutra*) for the Yaksa (Mishra 1987). The *Manava Grhysutra* mentions yakṣa and Kubera. Kubera was widely known during this period as *Maharaja* and *Vaisravana* (Agrawala 1964). It appears he was still not assigned the northern quarter guardianship nor the yakṣa were under his lordship (Agrawala 1964). The same *sutra* mentions the food and offerings made to Yaksa in their respective temples including cooked uncooked rice, meat, fish, flour cakes, beverages, garments, fragrant substances. Panini refers names such as *Aryama*, *Sevala*; *Varuna*, *Supari* etc., depicting the acceptance of the yakṣa as tutelary deities (Agrawala 1964).

Considering the aforementioned texts and its critical scrutiny it is quite evident that the transformation of yakṣa was continuous occasionally as a demonic being. Another important development in this period was the acceptance of Yakṣa as tutelary deities in the households (Agrawala 1953). Marking the gradual downfall of the Yaksa as subsidiary divinities who were now worshipped in minor pockets of the society.

From the following analysis of the abovementioned texts, it is understood that the priestly class were now trying to organise the yakṣa under Kubera and the religious aspect of the cult, which was eventually honoured and agreed by the social order of the religious pantheon.

Looking into the epics, the yakṣa was represented as semi-divine beings and were generally categorised with other semi divine beings such as the Naga, Gandharva, Rakshasa. The epics also showcases the dual personality of the Yaksa i.e., malefic and benefice.

Mishra (1987) quoting from the Mahabharata says ‘that the Yaksa and the other demi gods did not belong to *Krita Yuga* (*Satayuga*) and through divine methods introduced in the realm.’

The Ramayana (VII.104.12-13) narrates an interesting description regarding the creation of the yakṣa, Brahma created beings to guard the waters, those who cried *raksamah* (let us guard) became the *Raksasas* while those who ejaculated (shouted) *Yakshamah* (let us gobble/

consume) became the Yaksas (Mishra 1987). The Ramayana too mentions *yaksattatva* and *amarattatva* (immortality) as one of the aspects of the Yaksa cult. These aspects corresponded to fertility and immortality which are characteristics of a *Devata* or a deity.

The yakṣa has been regarded as an intelligent being asking philosophical questions. In the Mahabharata we have the *yakṣa-prasna* put to Yudhishtira where the yaksa asks various metaphysical questions related to life and Dharma (righteousness). At the same, Mahabharata also refers to a yakṣi whose temple is situated in Rajgir and Pandavas paying their offerings to her (Mishra 1987). Mahabharata also provides references of yaksa being worshipped as a tutelary and individual divinity such as Manibhadra and Nanda (Mishra 1987).

One aspect associated to the Yakṣa is the 'immortality.' Agrawala (1953, 1964) speaks of the epithet *amritenavrata* and *avadhya*. The widespread belief about Yaksas was the ability of averting death and bestowing immortality to their worshippers. The similar aspect has been continued in the sculptural representation as they have been depicted holding the nectar flask in their left hands, the sculptures of Kubera has the same (Mishra 1987).

The epics also offers instances of changing forms, species and shapes (Mishra 1987). They generally changed forms due to some curse. References such as Bhimasena killing countless Yakṣa, Tataka being killed by Ram, Suryabhanu, the doorkeeper of Kubera being killed by Ravana (Mishra 1987). Such references produce an impression that the malefic character was now attached to the Yakṣa and gradually the degradation of position was taking place. These instances clear a fact that they were not beyond death but belonged to a celestial class of spirits (Mishra 1987). These semi divine beings were depicted in benevolent character as beautiful and brilliant. Sometimes they are represented as listening to *Mahabharata-Katha*, worshipping Siva on *Munjavat* etc (Mbh I.1.64 as quoted by Mishra 1987). There are instances of malevolent yakṣa such as *Tataka yakṣi* who harassed the people of *Malada* and *Kurusha* Janapada.

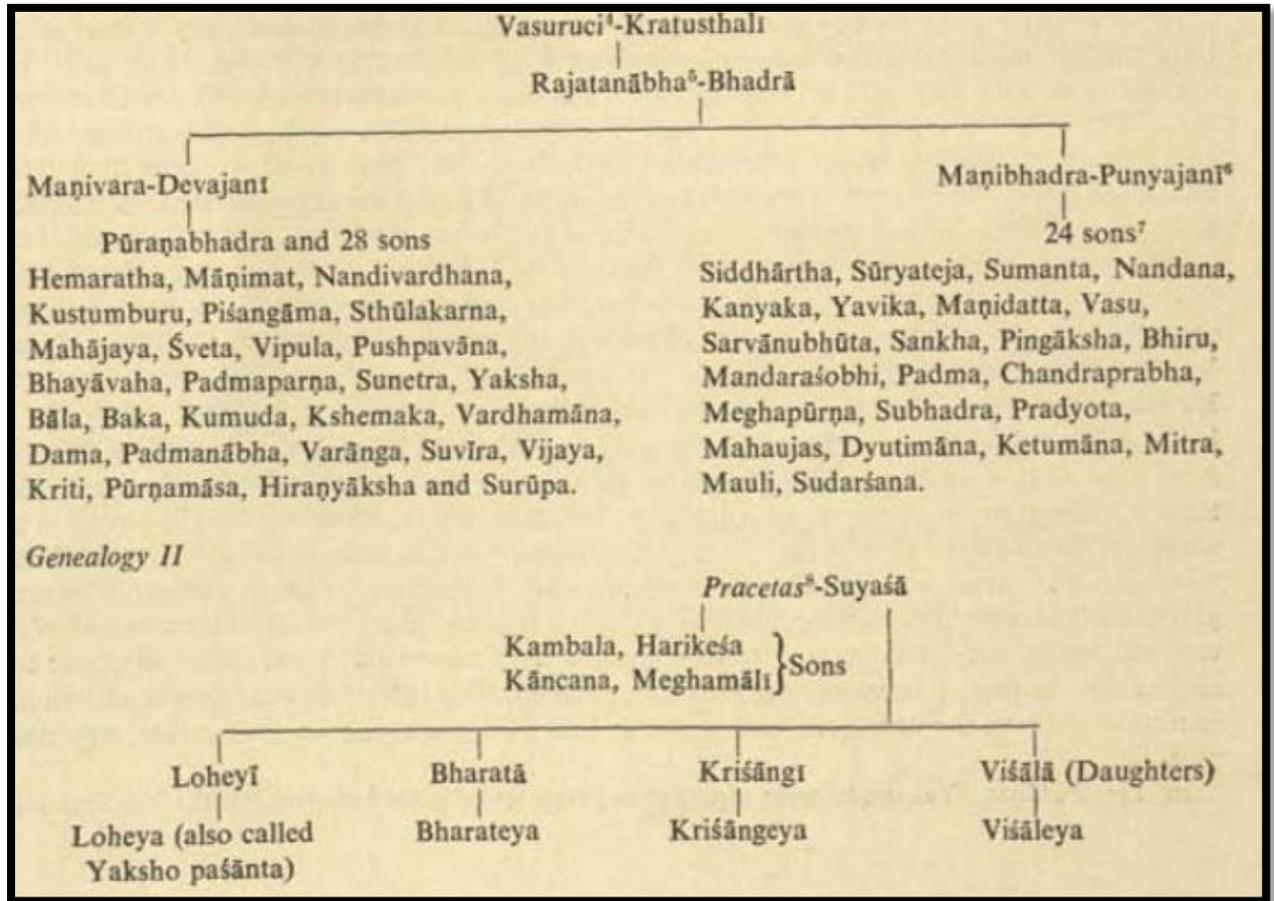
Therefore, epics provides a scene where the duality of nature as benevolent and malevolent of the yakṣa is portrayed. The malefic character is represented as creating commotion, destroying the sacrifices and violent; the beneficence is depicted as intellectual and independent, spaces of worship which is comparatively less but present.

The Puranas rank the yakṣa as secondary deities and have much to reflect the assimilation and supersession of other higher cults (Mishra 1987). There are various references to Yakṣa but are scattered. They are frequently regarded as '*Deva*' and associated with other demi-gods. The Puranas indicates a hierarchy, starting from the *Gandharvas*, *Guhyaka*, *Yakṣa*, *Rakṣasa* and *Pisacha*. This grading was based on appearance, life-span, strength, *dharma*, intellect and bravery (Mishra 1987). The Puranas relate the yakṣa and the other demigods in a matrimonial alliance, Gandharva and yakṣa, apsara and yakṣa etc. The Puranas put forward a systematic genealogy of the yakṣa, specifying how the yakṣa were born to the *apsaras* (daughter of Gandharavas).

The Epics showcases dual personalities of the Yakṣa likewise, the Puranas depict the malefic and benefice character. The changeover of the Yakṣa as a subsidiary deity was still an ongoing process and the significant literature illustrates the same.

The Vayu Purana (Ch. LXIX) mentions the malefic character of Yakṣa. It says that the infant born of Khasha, tried to devour the mother and in the process got christened/ named as Yakṣa by his father Kasyapa. It is explained that the root yakṣa is used for 'devouring or dragging elders' and since the child tried to do it, it was named Yakṣa. It is evident from these parables, the malefic/ evil aspects were gradually emphasised and imposed. The authority of Surya and Vishnu over the Yakṣa is also found in various puranas. The Vishnu Purana provides name of Yakṣa who attended the chariot of sun in different months (Agrawala 1964). The Matsya Purana narrates that in the cosmic form of Vishnu as Vaman, the Yakṣa became the nails of the great god (Agrawala 1964).

A fascinating feature of the Puranas is that it provides a systematic account of the yakṣa and their families. These genealogies also give the *anukarma* or the sequence and hierarchy the yakṣa. The Vayu Purana provides a detailed list of genealogies.



**Figure 1.** The following chart showcases the Genealogy of the Yakṣa.

(Courtesy: Excerpt reproduced from Mishra 1987)

These genealogies provide an insight that the origin of yakṣa was attributed to Apsara mothers and certain Gandharva's. they are also referred as the offspring of the Ganas of Mahadeva (Mishra 1987). Sometimes the Yakṣa were classed into the *Rakshasa* group, offspring of well-known Rishis (saints) etc. Despite such associations Yakṣa and the other semi divine beings were not treated equally.

This was lean period of the yakṣa and the other semi divine beings when the followers of the other divinities (such as Siva, Vishnu, Surya etc) were trying to wrest from the popularity and

religious status that they enjoyed initially. From the analysis of these genealogies and the relations with the other divinities, it can be safely assumed that the yakṣa had some role to play in the religious pantheons be it benefice or malefic.

All these passages discussed reflect an impressive character of the Yaksas. The Vedic literature introduces 'Yaksa' as an appellation synonymous with a *Devata* having supernatural powers, brilliance, and beauty. They were said to be intelligent, inquisitive, obliging, and immortal and someone to whom sacrifices were offered. They were sometimes independent of the influence of other cults and occasionally related.

With gradual development of the literary sources, it can be easily traced the transformation and collapse of the Yakṣa. The new upcoming pantheons required their methods of worship and practice to be popularised. The solitary method was to slowly amalgamate the existing spiritual practices which was achieved through literature.

From the analysis of the above, it can be said that this was the wiry period of the yakṣa cult when other gods and their followers were trying to seize from them the popularity they enjoyed. The original meaning was now getting outdated and fresh attempts were made to validate the transformed ideology.

### **2.3.2 Yakṣa in Buddhism**

Previous section discussed the depiction of yakṣa in the Vedic literature, Epic, Puranas etc., and their ever-changing personalities and characteristics. Similarly, the Buddhist accounts mentions Yakṣa and their several portrayals which are further discussed in this section.

The Buddhist sources mention Yakkha (Pali; Sanskrit: Yakṣa) who appears frequently in the Pali records. The Buddhist works have portrayed the Yakkha in various perspectives and popular forms. The popularity of Yakkha in Buddhism has waxed and waned over the centuries, depending on the prevailing religious and cultural attitudes of the time.

It is worth noting that most of the Yakkha of the Pali canons are not identical to the Mahabharata or Puranic works (which were discussed previously), they are additional (Mishra 1987). Furthermore, Pali works indicates and multiply the centres of Yakkha worship, since the largest number of centres are found in Eastern India, it has been suggested as the place of origin of this cult (Chanda 1927).

The canonical Pali literature associates Yakkha (yakṣa) with the Kinnara and Peta (Preta). *Vividhatirtha Kalpa* (p.33) a later Jain work mentions yakṣa whose proper name was Kinnara. The shared trait between the yakṣa and Kinnara was the art of singing. Jatakas discusses instances where creatures having composite human and equine form called Yakkhi or Yakhha (Pali; Sanskrit- yakṣa). The Ramayana (IV.42.30) speaks of an *Asvamukhi* woman and her 'niketa' (abode).

The Buddhist Pali texts mention Yakkha as a class or an individual demi-god having great strength. Likewise, *Atanatiya Sutta* and *Sutta Nipata* talks forty-one and twenty-eight yakkha chiefs respectively. There are mentions about certain yakkha pairs such as Hemavata and Satagiri; Suciloma and Kharaloma etc. some groups of Yakkha with several thousands of followers such as the seven Yakkha guards of *Jotika setthi* of Rajagriha namely *Yamakoli, Uppala, Vajirabahu, Vajira, Kasakandha, Katattha* and *Disapamukha* (Mishra 1987).

Yakkha is not always a degenerate class of demi-gods, the word is sometimes used as an appellation applied to Buddha and *Sakka*. *Sakka* the four regent gods, followers of Vessavana and to Purisa (Purusha- individual soul). The Niddesa define yakṣa as *sata, nara, manava, jiva, jantu* etc. and the Pali works mention *Yakkhatam*. These references in the literature are helpful towards the understanding the Yakkha before they transformed into subsidiary deities. These terms were utilised as an appellation, class of divinities and sometimes included humans as well (Mishra 1987).

They are generally enumerated as in the third rank of the secondary gods. Their king *Kubera* (*Vaisravana* or *Alakesvara*), guardian of the north along with the other three guardians who were also styled Yakṣa (or *Dikapala*) (Coomaraswamy 1927). The canons also mentions various individual Yakṣa such as *Alavaka*, *Satagera*, *Bemawata*, *Purnaka*, *Viriudaka*, *Gangita*, *Suchiloma*, *Supavasa* (*Supravriṣa*), *Nandaka*, etc.

Yakkha are categorised as *Bhummadevata*, *Amanussa* and *Naivasika* (local genii). The Jatakas often mention the Bodhisattvas born as a tree spirit called a *Devata*. The Buddhist tendency of depicting Yakkha as a demon is quite common, although at many places *Devata* and *Yakkha* are equivalent. Generally, they form an associated group of demi-gods including Rakkasas, Danavas, Gandhabbas, Kinnaras etc., sometimes a hierarchy is suggested in which the yakkha is rank below the *Petas* and/ or between the *Manussa* and *Gandhabba*. The concept of Yakkha is permeated with animistic beliefs and they appear as spirits.

The conversion of the malevolent yakṣa depicts a new form of competition to eradicate the status and forms of worship. Buddha converted some yakṣa, made them ineffective. The role of yakkha towards Buddha was sometimes as an enemy, friends and counsellor (Mishra 1987). The *Atanatiya Sutta* describes ‘Yakkha neither believed in the Buddha nor in his teachings; they were generally of middle or inferior ranks and his rank also contained the followers of Yakkha’. The texts such as *Jatakas*, *Udana* etc., refers yakṣa such as *Alavaka*, *Suciloma*, *Kalmapashade* etc., who were converted due to their practice of cannibalism, creation commotion which was not accepted by Buddha and his belief system. The texts also mention benevolent yakṣa such as Yakkha Kalavela in the Mahavamsa who saves a prince during his pre-natal stages; Yakkha Kunda protector of a forest; Yakkha Kuveni who helps humans etc. The benevolent Yakkha granted treasures and boons to the humans (Mishra 1987).

Vessavana (chief of the Yakṣa or Kubera) is mentioned multifariously in the Pali texts as *Chaturmaharajika Deva* an ardent follower of Buddha and the Yakkha were terrified of him

(Mishra 1987). These instances establish the idea that the Yakkha pre-existed with individual identity. The Yakkha and the Buddhist thoughts depicted a metaphoric struggle between the new religious entrance and the existing independent cults. Even though the Buddhist alliances tried to minimise and eradicate the Yakkha and its religious practices. These attempts were unsuccessful and the Yakkha were accommodated in the Buddhist pantheon as subsidiary beings.

Subsequently analysing the Buddhist texts, it can be noted that the repetitive references of Yakkha and Yakkhinī (Pali; female counterpart) as divinities or genii were widespread in society. The repetitive usage and depiction of the yakṣa in the art forms indicates an existence of the worship and practice of the cult.

Buddhism originated as a challenge to the existing religious system which were present in the society, Yakṣa like the other local divinities were gradually amalgamated to the Buddhist faith to continue their sacred existence. The popular cult of Yakṣa and the religion of Buddha had to establish a relationship so that the people accept and pay homage to both religions (Agarwala 1971).

### **2.3.3 Yaksa in Jainism**

The Jain literature provides sufficient information about the yakṣa and their worship. Jainism welcomed the Yakṣa and Yakṣī as the attendants of the Tirthankaras and protective deities or *Śāsanadevatā*. Their introduction to the Jain pantheon as attendant deities of the Tirthankara was due to the belief that the Tirthankaras could not be approached for fulfilment of worldly desires, as they were detached from all the worldly bondages (Shah 1987). Therefore, for the sake of attaining material benefits and to achieve the desires, these deities were accommodated secondary or as the attendants to Tirthankara.

According to Jain literature, the *Vyantara Devatas* include *Pisacas*, *Bhutas*, *Rakshasas*, *Yaksas*, *Gandharvas*, *Kinnaras*, *Nagas*, *Kimpurushas*, *Mahoragas*, and *Asuras*. The Jain texts

mentions the leaders of these group of demi-gods. Yakṣa had thirteen chiefs namely *Purnabhadra*, *Manibhadra*, *Svetbhadra*, *Haribhadra*, *Sumanobhadar*, *Vyatipatikabhadra*, *Subhadra*, *Sarvatobhadra*, *Manushyayaksha* etc. Among all the yakṣa, Manibhadra and Purnabhadra yakshas and Bahuputrika Yakṣiṇī have been the most favoured one. Out of these chiefs *Purnabhadra* and *Manibhadra* have been described as the *Indra* or the chiefs (Mishra 1987, Shah 1987).

The Jain works from the sixth to the tenth century CE, mention some of the iconographic features of *Yaksharaja* (*Sarvahna* or *Sarvanubhuti*) and *Dharanendra* Yaksha and *Cakreshvari*, *Ambika*, *Padmavati* Yakshini. The description of their habitat, appearance, identifying features which includes the seventeen *adhikaras*, has been vividly described in the *Triloka Prajnapati*. The same text mentions two categories of habitats *Bhavanapura* and *Avasa* and *vata* tree as their identifying attribute (Mishra 1987).

According to the Jain chronicles, Yakṣa assumed different characters in relation to human beings. They were categorised as benevolent, malevolent, and converted. The benevolence of the Yakṣa is a familiar trait, it was reflected in the names of the yakṣa chiefs with ‘*Bhadra*’ suffix indicating their auspicious nature and representing the yakṣa as protective deity fulfilling the wishes of those who worship them. Several literary works have provided the instances of the benevolence of Yakṣa, such as ‘*Nayadhammakahao*’ refers to occasions as a Yakṣa named Selaga, protecting from the local ogress named Ratnadvipa (sometimes calamities and epidemics were personified as evils in the texts) and transporting a traveller *Jinapalita* of Champa safely to the outskirts of the city. Manibhadra is known to have put down the small-pox epidemic which raged in the town of Samilla. The *Parisisthaparvana* mentions about Yakṣa named Bhola who granted wealth and subsistence to her devotee Buddhi. The Jain cosmology details that the *jagati* (raised platform) of the Jambudvipa had four gates namely, *Vijaya*; *Vaijayanta*, *Jayanta* and *Aparajit*, and several deities served as the lords of these gates.

The names assigned as the guardians of these gates, are quite similar to the deities whose shrines are referred in the *Arthasastra* who enjoyed a dominant status as a divinity and shrines were erected central to the city (Mishra 1987). Several such examples are cited in the literature regarding the benevolent attitude of the yakṣa and its position in the religious pantheon.

The inclination towards protection and the literary portrayal of protective responsibilities likely contributed to the Yaksa's role as guardian deities. In literature, there are instances where yakṣa, as tutelary deities, had dedicated shrines and served as focal points for folk entertainment and assembly. This suggests that they were not only respected and worshipped but also integrated into the social fabric as symbols of protection and communal gathering. Such depictions reinforce their significance in the cultural and religious landscape of ancient North India, reflecting the intersection of belief, art, and community engagement.

In Jain literature mentions the malevolent Yaksas indistinctly. This could be due to their malevolent nature, Jainism often emphasizes non-violence and spiritual purity, so malevolent beings might not be given as much attention in their texts compared to benevolent or spiritually significant figures and hence the malevolent yakṣa were not featured in the literary tradition. However, some are mentioned in the *Brihat-Kalpa-bhashya* such as Yaksini at Golla and an evil-minded Yaksa named Surapiya, he made an obligation of making wooden images and ones who failed to do so were punished with epidemic (Mishra 1987).

Above and beyond these malevolent and benevolent group of Yaksa, there are converted type as well which are relatively prevalent in the literary traditions. The process of subduing and converting them into the Jain creed was similar to that followed by Buddha (Mishra 1987). Usually, the yakṣa held Mahavira or the Jain monks who would stay in their shrines, following a conflict between them, ultimately the conversion of the yakṣa.

Several categories of yakṣa in relation with Mahavira and the Jain monks are deduced in the literary works. The literary works like *Antagadadasao*, *Brhatkalapabhashya*, and *Kalp sutra*

offer names of such Yaksa who were ardent followers of the *Jina* and the ones who created commotion, molested the sages, caused physical pains, and violating their fundamental vows (Mishra 1987).

Jainism certainly holds a unique position in providing a comprehensive classification of the Yaksas, within its cosmological framework. The Jain scriptures such as *Rupamandana*, *Vastusara*, *Aparajitapriccha* and *Triloka Prajnapati* provide descriptions of the twenty-four Yaksa, including their physical appearances, attributes, and roles within the cosmic order. These descriptions contribute to the rich iconography associated with Yaksa in Jain art and iconography (Mishra 1987).

The Jain tradition's detailed classification and iconography of Yaksas not only enrich the religious and artistic heritage of Jainism but also provide an insight into the complex cosmological framework of the tradition.

One pivotal development in the conceptualization of Yakshas is their portrayal as Śāsanadevatā, a term that denotes deities associated with the governance or protection of specific territories or regions. This concept is particularly notable in the *Harivamsapurana*, a text dated to 783 CE, where Yaksa is referred to as Śāsanadevatā. This reference marks a significant milestone in the evolution of the Yaksa concept within Jainism, as it emphasizes their role as divine protectors or guardians within the religious and territorial context

The list of twenty-four Yaksa-Yaksini pairs was finalized in about eight-ninth century CE as found in *Kahavali*, *Tiloyapannatti*, and *Pravacanasaroddhara*, which provides the Tirthankaras and their related pair. The independent iconographic forms of the twenty-four Yakṣa and Yakṣiṇī were standardized during the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, as mentioned in the *Nirvankalika*, the *Trisastisalakapurussacaritra*, the *Pratisthasara-samgraha*, *Pratisthasaroddhara*, the *Pratisthatilaka* and *Acaradinakara*. These texts provide a detailed

perspective of the identifying symbols, colours and attributes of the Tirthankaras and the dedicated pair of the *Śāsana-devatā* (Mishra 1987, Shah 1920).

These aforementioned literary works provide the names of the Tirthankara and their respective twenty-four Yaksa and Yaksi which are reproduced in the table below:

| <i>S. No</i> | <i>Tirthankara</i>               | <i>Yaksa</i>            | <i>Yaksi</i>        |
|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1.           | <i>Rishabhanatha</i>             | <i>Gomukha</i>          | <i>Chakreswari</i>  |
| 2.           | <i>Ajitanatha</i>                | <i>Mahayaksha</i>       | <i>Ajitabala</i>    |
| 3.           | <i>Sambhavanatha</i>             | <i>Trimukha</i>         | <i>Duritari</i>     |
| 4.           | <i>Abhinandana</i>               | <i>Yakshanayaka</i>     | <i>Kalika/ Kali</i> |
| 5.           | <i>Sumatinatha</i>               | <i>Tumburu</i>          | <i>Mahakali</i>     |
| 6.           | <i>Padmaprabha</i>               | <i>Kusuma</i>           | <i>Shyama</i>       |
| 7.           | <i>Suparsvanatha</i>             | <i>Matanga</i>          | <i>Shanta</i>       |
| 8.           | <i>Chandraprabha</i>             | <i>Vijaya</i>           | <i>Bhrikuti</i>     |
| 9.           | <i>Suvidhinatha</i> <sup>f</sup> | <i>Jaya</i>             | <i>Sutarika</i>     |
| 10.          | <i>Shitalanatha</i>              | <i>Brahma</i>           | <i>Asoka</i>        |
| 11.          | <i>Shreyamsanatha</i>            | <i>Yaksheta/ Isvara</i> | <i>Manavi</i>       |

|     |                     |                             |                    |
|-----|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 12. | <i>Vasupujya</i>    | <i>Kumara</i>               | <i>Chandi</i>      |
| 13. | <i>Vimalanatha</i>  | <i>Shanmukha</i>            | <i>Vidita</i>      |
| 14. | <i>Anantanatha</i>  | <i>Patala</i>               | <i>Ankusi</i>      |
| 15. | <i>Dharmanatha</i>  | <i>Kinnara</i>              | <i>Kandarpi</i>    |
| 16. | <i>Shantinatha</i>  | <i>Garuda</i>               | <i>Nirvani</i>     |
| 17. | <i>Kunthunatha</i>  | <i>Gandharva</i>            | <i>Bala</i>        |
| 18. | <i>Aranatha</i>     | <i>Yaksheta/ Yakshendra</i> | <i>Dharini</i>     |
| 19. | <i>Mallinatha</i>   | <i>Kubera</i>               | <i>Dharnapriya</i> |
| 20. | <i>Munisuvrata</i>  | <i>Varuna</i>               | <i>Nadarakta</i>   |
| 21. | <i>Naminatha</i>    | <i>Bhrikuti</i>             | <i>Gandharva</i>   |
| 22. | <i>Neminatha</i>    | <i>Gomedha</i>              | <i>Ambika</i>      |
| 23. | <i>Parshvanatha</i> | <i>Parsva</i>               | <i>Padmavati</i>   |
| 24. | <i>Mahavira</i>     | <i>Matanga</i>              | <i>Siddhayika</i>  |

**Table 1. The Twenty-four Śāsanadevatā**

*(Courtesy: Reproduced from Mishra 1987, Shah 1987)*

The compilation of the names of the twenty-four Yakṣa and Yakṣiṇī alongside the Tirthankaras in the Jain literary works reflects the tradition's significant role in standardizing these divinities.

This contribution is notable as earlier texts did not contain such comprehensive listings, indicating the Jain tradition's efforts to systematize and enrich its narrative.

These references suggest a resurgence of the Yaksha cult, despite Jain efforts to subdue it. In Central and Western India, many Yaksini gained sanctity due to their privileged status (Mishra, 1987). This trend indicates a complex interplay between Jainism and the indigenous Yaksha tradition, with certain Yaksha achieving elevated status within the Jain pantheon.

The thought of Yaksha was an outcome of a series of changes and development in the primitive religious and belief systems. The process included intricacies which were concretized over time. The acceptance of Yaksha in the ancient religious system underwent several stages of supersession, sublimation, and transformation in their identities.

The ancient Indian literary traditions are filled with references to Yaksha. These mentions highlight the significant role played by them in the religious framework. Analysing the extensive literary materials, it is quite understood that the Yaksha had a pre-existing set of beliefs and rituals. eventually with the advent of the larger pantheons viz., Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism, they were incorporated as secondary deities.

The Yaksha was incorporated into these pantheons slowly. The idea behind incorporation of these divinities was to expand and promote new ideologies, religious practices and apprehend the followers.

Thus, the survey of the literature of ancient India enable to understand existing impact of Yaksha. It becomes apparent that these divinities were not just peripheral rather pivotal in the religious context. Their integration into the higher cults of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Jainism demonstrates the adaptability and inclusivity of these religions, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of religious belief in ancient India.