

Chapter-3

Iconographic Study of the Yaksha Sculptures

3.1 The Ancient Indian Art Traditions

Artistic expression in India can be traced back to prehistoric times, as shown by the rich rock paintings found in various rock shelters across the subcontinent. These paintings depict a wide range of themes, including flora, fauna, human figures, social gatherings, and daily life activities. They reflect the creative impulse and artistic sensibilities of early humans, providing valuable insights into their cultural and social milieu. Before the advent of civilization, regional cultures were prevalent in the part of the North Western region of Indian Subcontinent. These cultures such as the Amri, Kot Diji, Nal, Damb Sadat, Quetta, Mehargarh etc., had a variety of range of artistic depictions such as terracotta figurines, painted potteries etc (Kenoyer 1991). These cultures played a crucial precursor role towards the art of the Indus Valley Civilization. The gradual integration of the existing cultures led to the emergence of the Indus Valley Civilization (3500 BCE- 2600 BCE), one of the world's earliest urban civilizations (first urbanisation phase in India) (Kenoyer 1991). The art of this period is characterized by a high degree of standardization, as seen in the architecture, sculpture, and pottery of the time. Iconic artifacts such as the "Priest-King," the "Dancing Girl," and representations of the mother goddess are prime examples of the artistic achievements of this civilization (Kenoyer 1991).

The gradual decline of the Indus Valley Civilization (2600 BCE-1900 BCE), artistic expression in India underwent significant changes. While urban centres disintegrated, art continued to flourish in the non-urban chalcolithic cultures such as Ahar, Kayatha, Malwa, and Jorwe. These cultures produced a variety of artifacts, including pottery, ornaments which are indicative of their artistic skills and aesthetic sensibilities (Kumar 2019).

The introduction of 'iron' marked the initiation of second urbanization in India, leading to the upsurge of new urban centres and cultures (Tiwari 2009). The Gangetic plains became the most potential area and witnessed the emergence of cities and formation of states during 1200 – 1000 BCE onwards (Tiwari 2009). The sixth century BCE, marks the Early Historic phase of ancient India. After the fall of the Indus cities, it was now, the urban centres the *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas* in the Gangetic plain were witnessed.

The early historic period is marked with distinct pottery. The Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) culture encompassing from 7th to 1st century, including pre-Mauryan, Mauryan and Sunga periods. The terracotta art evidence of these periods is distinct in technique (Dhavalikar 1999). However, the Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) is known more for their utilitarian artifacts than for their artistic achievements. The Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture, pottery sherds from this culture are decorated with paintings depicting flora, fauna, and geometric patterns (Dhavalikar 1969).

Ganga Valley has witnessed several terracotta figurines of mother goddesses (?), composite forms such as Naga (Half human half snake), terracotta heads, animals etc. for pre-Mauryan contexts. Panini and Kautilya have referred to various images of cults which were 'worshiped' and followed. They also refer to the material used such as wood and clay to produce the images. Wood being a perishable material did not survive the wrath of time, but clay or terracotta did, providing a base for further understanding of imagery. It is assumed that the concept of 'personal religion' might have been present and these terracotta figurines are a product of that thought. It is supposed that the concept of local cults and other Vedic deities were already present. With the patronage of dynasties these artistic representations were modified. With the upcoming of the Mauryan, the folk art was not directly controlled by the dynastic administration but it received due patronage. The production of art might have been in small

scale initially, but with patronage, movement of traders and merchants, gradually increased followers led to the massive sculptural representation.

The pre-Mauryan period ascribable to sixth- fourth centuries BCE, the figurines were mainly hand modelled and both human and animal figures were represented in terracotta art (Banerji 1994). The prominent features were the use of appliques or deep incision to depict the eyes, ears, and mouth along with ornaments (Sen 1987). Animals such as bull, elephant, horse, ram, dog, deer, birds, etc were represented realistically (Dhavalikar 1969). Several figurines and some composite forms remain unidentified due to their lack of context (Sen 1987, Banerji, 1994).

The Mauryan phase ascribable to fourth to second centuries BCE, marked a significant turning point in the development of art and sculpture, setting enduring standards and defining characteristics that would influence Indian art for centuries to come. This period, under the patronage of rulers Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka, witnessed the flourishing of art and architecture, reflecting the political and cultural aspirations of the time.

The art of the Mauryan period may be said to be exhibited in three main phases (a) the continuation of the pre-Mauryan characteristics (b) Asokan art which included the rock edicts and monolithic pillars, bearing inscriptions (c) the beginning of brick and stone architecture (Coomaraswamy 1956). The Mauryan artisans understood the art of working with stone, producing monumental sculptures and structures that showcased intricate detailing and exquisite craftsmanship. The use of stone not only allowed for greater durability and longevity of artworks but also enabled the creation of large-scale architectural marvels. Enormous sculptures of Yaksha of sand stone are reported from Parkham, Patna, Besnagar which are exquisitely sculpted.

The Sunga period ascribable to second to first century BCE, witnessed a notable evolution in art and sculpture, building upon the foundations laid during the prior Mauryan era. Contrasting the Mauryan era, where monumental monolithic effigies were prevalent, the Sunga period witnessed a shift towards relief sculpture as a primary medium of artistic expression (Coomaraswamy 1956). Artworks from this period, particularly those unearthed at sites like Bharhut and Sanchi, are characterized by their highly decorative nature, featuring elaborate headdresses, jewellery, and garments (Coomaraswamy 1956). The Sunga rulers continued to support and advance artistic endeavours, although with distinct stylistic and thematic modifications.

Yaksa and Nagas, which were already part of the cultural fabric underwent further elaboration and development under the Sunga rule. Along with Yaksa and Naga, other local cults, and deities, were depicted in sculptural reliefs, exhibiting intricate details and elaborate ornamentation.

All through the Kushan period dating to first to third centuries CE, saw a significant development in the art. Gandhara and Mathura, the two important centres of artistic production under Kushan rule (Sen 1987). Initially, Taxila served as the capital, where the Gandhara School of Art thrived (Sen 1987, Coomaraswamy 1956). This school of art was characterized by its incorporation of Hellenistic artistic elements into Buddhist iconography (Coomaraswamy 1956). Sculptures from this school often depicted Buddha and Bodhisattvas with features such as a muscular body, drapery of the garment, and curly hair, reflecting the influence of Greek (Coomaraswamy 1956). However, Mathura emerged as another important centre of artistic activity during the Kushan period, giving rise to the Mathura School of Art (Mishra 1987). This school incorporated indigenous elements into its artistic expressions, drapery, body types, and ornamentation of the sculptures. Unlike the Gandharan sculptures, which mainly depicted standing figures related to Buddhism, the Mathura School featured both

sitting and standing images of Buddha, as well as other beings like Yaksa, Yaksi, and Nagas (Mishra 1987).

The Yaksa and Yaksi figures from Mathura are particularly noteworthy for their iconographic features. These sculptures are depicted in various poses and were adorned with various attributes. The Mathura School also introduced elements of the grotesque, crouching and squatting posture and composite figures. This trend continued into the Gupta period also (Mishra 1987).

The Yaksa figures, which were previously depicted with a "*Mahakaya*" or great body, were now shown in a reduced stature, sometimes as carriers or transporters with potbellies. Several Yaksi railing pillar figurines are also reported from Mathura. These Yaksi are depicted as standing on crouching dwarfs, nude and well adorned. Scholars have opined on the nudity that these postures were an exhibition of eroticism to spoil the *Tapa* of Buddha (Mishra 1987). It is also suggested that Mara, a figure associated with temptation and distraction in Buddhist mythology, was himself a Yaksa, further emphasizing this theme of temptation versus enlightenment, symbolizing the constant struggle between the Yaksa and Buddha's teachings.

With the advent of the Gupta period the sculptures of Yaksa- Yaksi became rare. The Gupta period often associated with Brahminical revival, which roughly corresponds to third- sixth centuries CE, remarkable development in the worship and veneration of major Brahminical/Hindu deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti (Harshananda 2001). This era witnessed the consolidation and expansion of these deities' influence, often establishing them as supreme beings within the Brahminical pantheon. The escalation of these deities to authority during the Gupta age reflected a broader cultural and religious shift towards the glorification of divine figures. This era saw the development of elaborate mythologies, rituals, temple construction and vibrant artistic expressions that continue to present.

It is observed that several prevailing divinities were amalgamated, and new deities were formed to reflect changing beliefs, societal structures, and religious practices. In the same way, Kubera, God of wealth and *Yaksaraja* (king of the Yaksa), is believed to have been integrated into mythology over time, possibly through the amalgamation of local or regional deities associated with wealth and prosperity. Kubera became a popular subject of images during this time (Mishra 1987). He is often depicted with a pot belly, adorned with jewels, and carrying a bag of jewels. It is certainly possible that the iconographical features associated with Kubera were borrowed or shared with Yaksa to enhance the Brahminical pantheon with a broader array of divine beings.

In the Gupta Art, Yaksa was either depicted as decorative motifs or in the form of *Gana* (origin and association with Siva) which were now placed in the temple. They have been depicted as *Guhyaka* (crouched grotesques figures), *Bharvahaka* (load bearers) and *Patravahaka* (vessel holder) too. The *Ganas*, *Guhyaka*, *Bharvahaka* etc. were derived from the early Yaksa images confirmed by the attributes such as the pot-belly, staff and standing or sitting posture (Mishra 1987).

Through the post Gupta period (6th -8th century CE) Yaksa had lost their independent character and status and were merged in the personalities of the greater divinities. The reduced number of independent Yaksa figure, and usage of their iconography barely as a decorative element.

However, the Yaksa and Yaksi were not eliminated entirely. By the early medieval period (8th – 12th c. CE) the concept of Yaksa evolved to encompass a multifaceted role, including representations as malevolent creatures and as figures associated with carrying loads, among other roles.

On the other hand, Yaksa was also revered as independent deities, with their own temples, rituals, and worship practices. They are seen as protectors and bestowers of prosperity and

abundance in Jainism. In Jain mythology, Tirthankaras are spiritual teachers who have achieved enlightenment. They are believed to be in a state of deep meditation (*samadhi*) and are therefore unable to directly intervene in worldly affairs or grant boons to individuals seeking worldly desires. To satisfy the desires of their devotees, Tirthankaras employed the Yaksas and Yaksis. Therefore, there are advent of twenty- four Yaksa and Yaksini *Śāsanadevatā* of the different Jain Tirthankaras. These Jain *Śāsanadevatā* continue to be worshipped as independent deities such as *Jwalamalini*, *Ambika*, *Chakresvari*, *Padmavati*, *Siddhayika* etc. in parts of western and southern India (Mishra 1987).

Thus, it can be inferred that Yakṣa was a notable divinity and held a prominent position in the religious pantheon, as evidenced by its portrayal in various art traditions with distinct iconographic attributes. However, due to the evolving nature of art, influenced by changing dynasties and their respective socio-religious interests, the depiction of the Yakṣa gradually transitioned to a less prominent role over time. Despite this, Yakṣa maintained cultural and religious importance, underscoring its enduring relevance. This transition highlights the dynamic nature of artistic expression, reflecting broader societal changes while emphasizing the Yakṣa lasting impact on cultural and religious narratives.

3.2 Characteristic Feature of Yaksa

In the realm of art, yakṣa occupied a significant status and their sculptural representations have been found throughout India. The research focuses on the region of Ganga Valley and tries to highlight the physical conceptualization over time. It is believed that art forms and image worship were quite well known in the past societies. Initially, the divinities were visualized in symbolic or aniconic form (Banerjea1941). It can be said it was precursor to the iconographic representation of the deities.

Iconography is to understand certain characteristics which are inherent and the identifiers of a particular divinity. The iconographic representation of Yakṣa plays a crucial role in Indian iconographic study as it acts as a forerunner to the representation of the other divinities. The present study endeavours to analyse the iconographic traits of Yakṣa figures, aiming to unravel their symbolic significance and evolution within the cultural and religious contexts of Ganga Valley.

Sculptures of Yakṣa were initially produced in two categories (a) free standing sculptures (b) in relief or 2D depiction.

The sculptures massive in size and were meant to be visible from all the sides or *Chaturmukhadarsana*. Most of the sculptures were carved out of Sandstone (Chunnar, Buff, red and other varieties of sandstone). The choice of sandstone as a material for sculpting Yakṣa images was deliberate, influenced by its durability and resistance to weathering. The choice of raw material guaranteed durability of the ancient specimens, preserving for the future and continued transmission of cultural and religious thoughts.

These sculptures were free-standing on a raised pedestal bearing an inscription. The inscription often provided details of the divinity sculpted, donor and *Goshthi* (followers). These inscriptions proved to be a valuable historical source because it not only mentioned the patronage but also the socio-cultural setting of the then societies.

Studying the Yakṣa sculptures from the stylistic point, they are portrayed as standing in *sthanaka* posture with broad shoulders, pot belly and one of the knees bent slightly. The arms depicted in *mudras* including *Abhaya* and *Varada mudras* or in akimbo respectively. The attributes included a money bag, sword, club and sometimes a human figure.

The facial features showcased half closed eyes depicting a meditative face with a serene smile. The sculptures depicting meditative face serve as powerful visual representations of spiritual

ideals and aspirations, inviting viewers to contemplate the nature of existence, consciousness, and the pursuit of inner peace and enlightenment.

Observing the drapery and ornaments, it is relatively indigenous. The Yaksa's hair is depicted as short free flowing. They are styled with a *Mauli* (माली) or a decorative turban. The ornamentation is seemingly less which includes a *Kantha- bhusha* (a simple one strand necklace) along with a *Phalaka* (three or five slab-like gems intervals to hold together the several strings of which a necklace was composed) tied behind the neck with tasselled string; the wrists are adorned with thick bangles. The drapery includes a cloth band on the chest and a simple *Ardhoruk* (अर्धरुक) lower garment slightly transparent with pleats falling between the legs.

The fundamental iconographical features of Yakṣa sculptures, including the pot-belly, money bag, turban, and other attributes, have indeed remained consistent over centuries. These enduring features serve as identifying markers of Yakṣa across different periods and regions. However, it is essential to note that these basic features were often supplemented and enriched by new additions and modifications introduced by various dynasties and artistic traditions.

3.3 Yaksa Sculptures

The Yakṣa sculptures examined in the present study were subject to detailed investigation through field surveys and meticulous scrutiny during museum visits. These sculptures are then discussed chronologically in the context of existing scholarship. The section concludes by analysing these sculptures and their iconography, enabling the understanding their status in the society and its gradual change, impact of religious and cultural aspects of the Yakṣa cult and its broader implications in the context of ancient Indian society.

Yakṣa -Parkham Village in Mathura district (inscribed)

The Yakṣa sculpture found at Parkham (Mathura) has been ascribed to third century BCE, carved out of buff sandstone, holds a significant position in the Yakṣa art tradition due to its historical and artistic importance. This sculpture is considered a pivotal starting point for the present research of Yakṣa sculptural representations because of the scarcity or absence of other material evidence related to Yakṣa. The lack of surviving Yakṣa artifacts can be ascribed to the perishable nature of the materials used in ancient times, such as wood, used for creating Yakṣa images but did not survive the ravages of time.

The presence of the Parkham Yakṣa in stone is crucial as it has endured over time, providing a tangible link to the Yakṣa sculptural tradition. This sculpture serves as a valuable reference point for understanding the early representations of Yakṣa and their symbolic significance and gradual evolution in ancient Indian art.

The villagers worship it under the name of Jakhaiyya Baba (Mukherjee 2022). The Parkham Yakṣa, a monumental 2-meter-tall sandstone sculpture, is characterized by its simplicity and elegance. The yakṣa is depicted wearing minimal adornment, including a neckpiece, a sash crossing the body and knotted at the right waist, and a simple girdle. The hands, unfortunately broken, likely held symbolic attributes; one hand may have been in the Varada mudra, symbolizing bestowal of boons or blessings, while the other possibly held a money bag or another attribute, although the exact identity is indiscernible due to damage. Despite the missing elements, the sculpture's dignified posture and minimal adornment suggest a powerful and benevolent presence (Mukherjee 2022). Cunningham (1879) conjectured that it represented “a Yakṣa (?) or attendant demi-god who carried a chauri over the right shoulder.” It seems unlikely that an image of such size from Parkham (Mathura) served merely as a simple attendant. Its scale suggests a more significant or central role in religious or cultural contexts.



*Figure 1. Parkham Yaksa
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)*

Agni Pani Yaksa

This figure was acquired by the Museum in 1987 from the village Bharna Kalan. The sculpture has been ascribed to second century BCE, carved out of buff sandstone. The sculpture stands tall on a raised pedestal wearing a heavy turban (*mauli*) and heavy circular earrings (*Kundala*). He is adorned with the three-strand necklace and wears a lower garment (*अर्धोरुक*) with thin pleats. The arms are fragmentary, left hand is in akimbo posture, the broken hand shows thick decorated *Kada*. There is an inscription in Brahmi script which reads as:

(a)[m](a)ty[e]na pratihàre

[na]. ... jayaghosena

[bh](aga)[v](a)to à[gn]isa pra[t]i[m](à)

opposite side: 1. [ka]rità p[ri]yaátàá[a]ga[ya]

(Transliteration: Heinrich Luders, Mathura inscriptions, 1961)

Translation: “An image of the Holy One Agni was caused to be made by Jayaghosa, the minister in charge of the gate-keepers (?). May [Agni] be pleased! (Quintanilla 2007).



Figure 2. Agnipani Yaksa

(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Mudgarpani Yaksa

This sculpture is quite similar to that of Agnipani Yaksa (discussed before). It is ascribed to second century BCE, carved out of buff sandstone. Iconographically, the physical features and

adoration is similar to that of Agnipani. Both the arms being intact, the wrists are adorned with thick Kada and a bulky *Keyura* (armlet). He holds a club type or a sword (*mudgara*) in his left hand and some unidentifiable object in his other hand. There is an inscription in Brahmi script which reads as:

amatyena prati[hàr](e)[na] ...

(?)[jayagh](o)[s](ena)[to] prai

... (no)l

Translation: “. . . by Jayaghosena, the minister in charge of the gate-keepers (?) ...”

(Quintanilla 2007, Transliteration: Heinrich Luders, Mathura inscriptions, 1961)



Figure 3. Mudgarapani Yaksha
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Yaksa with a Bludgeon

This colossal statue of Yaksa is an exact prototype of the Parkham image, ascribed to second-third century CE, carved out of sandstone. The sculpture is carved brilliantly. He wears an elaborate turban and earrings along with a beautiful *Vaikaksha* (two long strings of pearls crossed at the chest), dhoti and sash which is partly visible on the left hand. The striking feature is that the divinity holds a Bludgeon or a staff depicting authority and power.

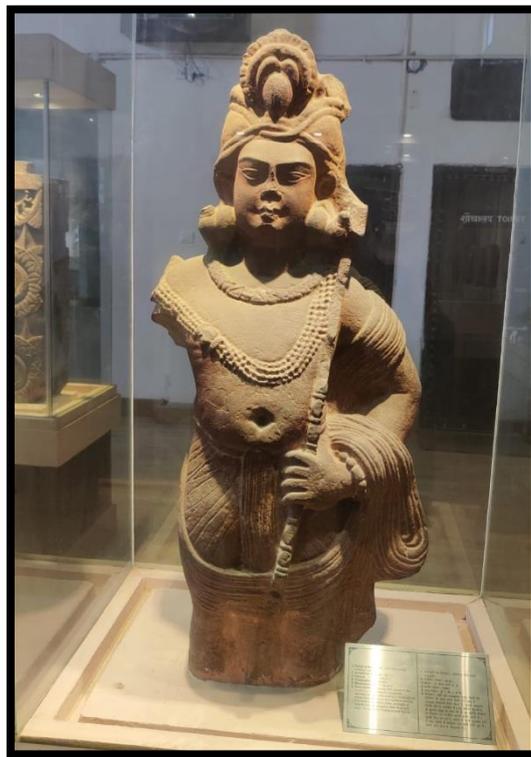


Figure 4. Yaksa
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Baroda Yaksa

This statue obtained from Baroda village of Mathura, ascribed to second century BCE, sculpted in buff sandstone was also being worshipped as *Jakhaiya*. This figurine reported from Baroda has a peculiar turban fastened through a big projecting ribbon and on the back, side suspend

two scarfs. Only the bust of the figure is found with right hand placed on the waist (seems to be) and the traces on the left side suggest a shaft (Vogel 1929). The sculpture is much damaged but the adoration includes heavy earrings, the necklace and flat girdle suggest a close relationship with the Yaksa of Parkham.



Figure 5. Baroda Yaksa

(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura (Archival records))

Yaksa with a sword and a Human/child

The image is ascribable to second century BCE, carved out of Buff Sandstone. The relief sculpture of Yaksa, adorned with a turban embellished with jewels, long earrings, necklaces, thick bangles or *Kada*, and armlets. While the drapery is partially visible, the *Uttariya* or sash can be determined. Notable is the Yaksa's depiction holding a sword, accompanied by an attendant in the *Anjali mudra*. The attendant wears dhoti, although their facial features are unnoticeable due to damage.



*Figure 6. Yaksa with a sword and a Human/child
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)*

Amin Yaksa (Padampani Yaksa).

The sculpture has been ascribed to second century BCE, carved out of red sandstone. The sculpture was found from Thaneshwar, Haryana. This Yaksa figure shows a male form carved inside the pillar in a niche. The figure has usual traits like those of other Yaksa images of Sunga period. Head is covered with a headgear tied like a turban, a long necklace of four strings, a dhoti tied with a girdle. One of the hands is holding *Padma* and the other is on the thigh quite similar to the Yaksa from Mathura. The figure is in a frontal pose like other ancient figures of Parkham and Pawaya Yaksa. Researchers have assumed that this iconography of Yaksa was a precursor to the later concept of Avalokitesvara Padmapani.

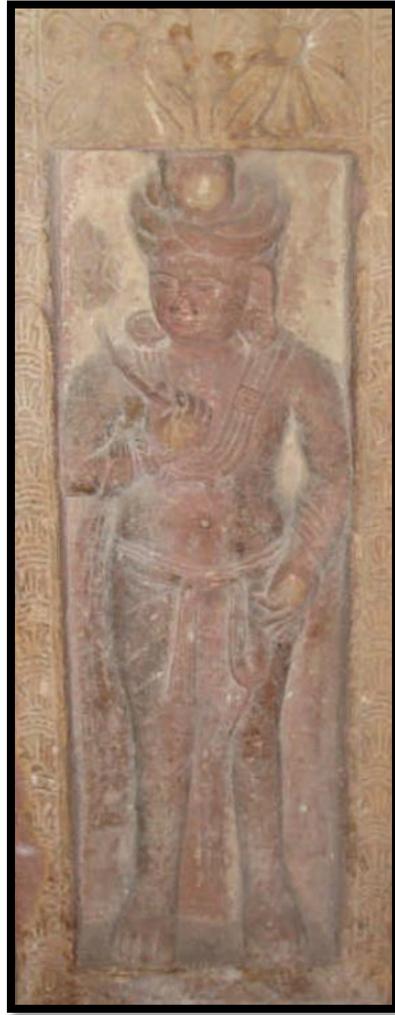


Figure.7 Amin Yaksa
(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

Female Figure Didarganj (identified as Yaksi)

Sculpted from sandstone and polished to a lustrous finish ascribable to third- second century BCE, the posture depicts a gentle forward movement in her upper body, showcasing the artist's adeptness in conveying naturalistic motion in stone. Despite the missing nose, she features delicate facial characteristics with arched eyebrows, large eyes, visible cheekbones, and small lips, accentuating her beauty. Her physique is characterized by ample breasts, a slender waist, and wide hips, emphasizing her femininity. She is adorned with intricately detailed jewellery, including forehead jewels, large dangling earrings, multiple necklaces, stacked bangles, a

bejewelled waist girdle, and ornate anklets. The meticulous rendering of her lower garment, with its draped folds clinging closely to her legs, adds to the sculpture's elegance. While her left arm is missing, however the right arm holds a long fly-whisk flung over her shoulder. The sculpture lacks any inscriptions that could provide information regarding its origin, purpose, or the identity of the figure it represents.

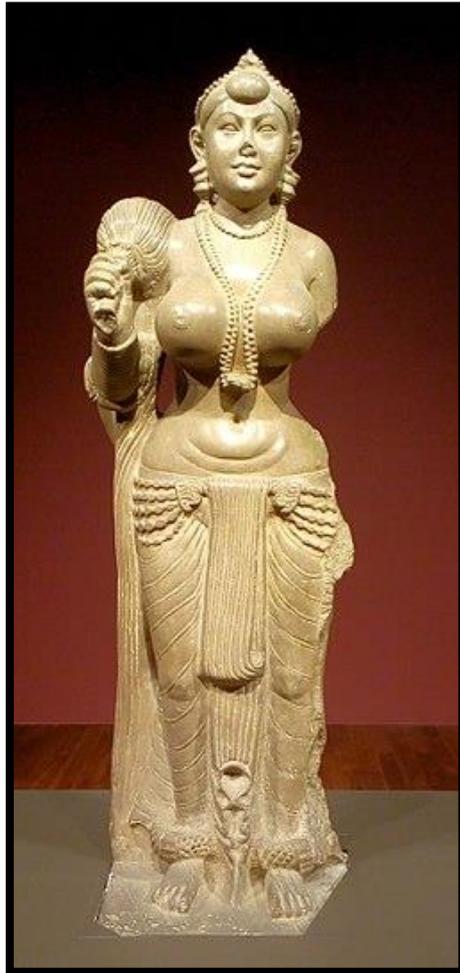


Figure 8. Didarganj Yakshi (?)
(Courtesy: Bihar Museum, Patna)

Two Yaksas from Patna

The Patna sculptures were found during the excavation by B. Hamilton in 1812 (Mishra 1986). These sculptures have been ascribed to first century BCE, carved out of chunnar sandstone. Since the presence of inscriptions in Mauryan Brahmi which reads as “*Yakhe Sanatananda*” or

possibly "*Yakhe Bharata*" and the other one reads as "*Yakhe Achusatigika*" or possibly "*Yakhe Sanigika*" (Cunningham 1882, Fleet 1888, Luders 1912). The two yakṣa figures from Patna almost identical in form and conception, we recognize the same archaic heaviness, but the treatment and modelling appear to be freer. Both the statues bear traces of the Mauryan polish on the busts of their bodies.

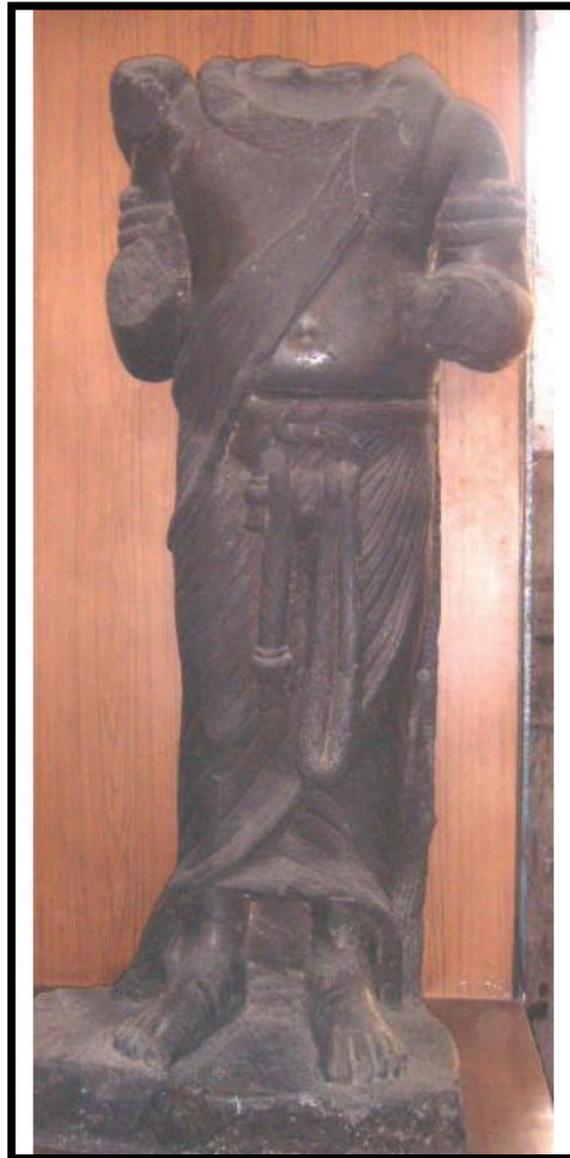


Figure 9. Patna Yakṣa
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Patravahaka Yaksa, Pitalkhora

This Yaksa sculpture has been dated to second century BCE based on paleographic grounds and now housed in the National Museum, New Delhi. The sculpture represents a standing corpulent male yaksa with its hands raised upwards to hold a shallow bowl. The Yaksa was named after the place, Pitalkhora, in Maharashtra's Aurangabad district, where it was found in 1953 by archaeologist M N Deshpande in front of a Buddhist *chaitya* (shrine). The bears an inscription in Brahmi script of on the back of the palm of the right hand of the work. It reads, “*kanhadaasena hiramkaarena kataa*” or ‘made by Kanhadasa, a goldsmith’ (Lüders, Heinrich. (1912). This text is unanimously considered as the artist's signature and so, all scholars had agreed that the work was carved by Kanhadasa.



***Figure 10. Patravahaka Yaksa, Pitalkhora
(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)***

Dwarapala Yaksa, Pitalkhora

The Yaksa sculpture from Pitalkhora is dated to second- first century BCE. The Yaksa is adorned with an elaborate headdress and ornaments. It appears that the deity might have been holding a staff depicting the protecting nature of Yaksa. The sculpture was identified as a *Dwarapala* Yaksa (doorkeeper) by MN Deshpande in 1953.

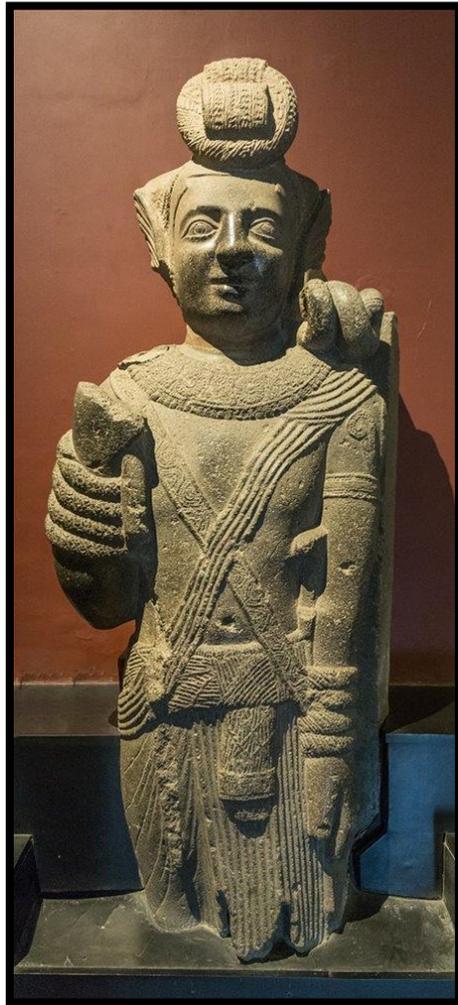


Figure 11. Dwarapala Yaksa ,Pitalkhora

(Courtesy: Mumbai Museum)

Patravahaka Yaksa, Madhya Pradesh

Patravahaka Yaksa (carrier Yaksa) dated to second- first century BCE. The sculpture now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is wearing a finely detailed hairband and a

heavy necklace distinguished by back-to-back *makaras* framing a central jewel. His powerful chest gives way to a corpulent stomach, emblematic of wealth, that hangs over his tightly drawn knotted waist-sash. Such a fully realized figure, with equally pronounced musculature on the reverse, marks an important moment in the early development of Indian freestanding sculpture. The raised arms suggest that he had held aloft a sculpted bowl.



*Figure 12. Patravahaka Yaksa, Madhya Pradesh
(Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)*

Yaksa from Besnagar

The sculpture has been ascribed to first century BCE, carved out of sandstone. This Yaksa sculpture was discovered in 1952 near the Heliodorus Pillar. The sculpture is known for its enormous size and is said to be one of the tallest sculptures of Yaksa discovered so far. The Yaksa stands in the usual *sthanaka* pose wearing a dhoti supported by a girdle. The right arm is partly broken; hence the attribute is unidentifiable whereas the left hand depicts a money bag held by him

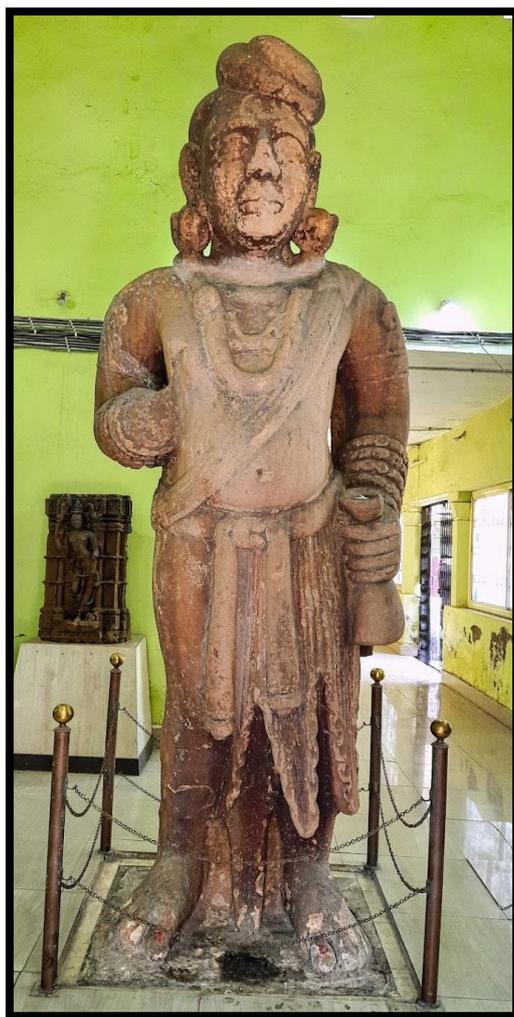


Figure 13. Besnagar Yaksa
(Courtesy: Vidisha Museum, Vidisha)

Manibhadra Yaksa from Pawaya (Gwalior)

The sculpture has been ascribed to first century BCE, carved out of sandstone. The Yaksha sculpture from Pawaya (ancient Padmavati) was discovered by M B Garde (superintendent of Archaeology, Gwalior State) during his exploration in 1916 (Garde 1916). Observing the iconography, the headless statue, standing over a pedestal. Despite the missing head, the statue's remaining features provide significant insights of the iconography and symbolism. The right arm is broken, while the left arm holds a moneybag, a common attribute associated with Yaksha. The Yaksha is depicted wearing a dhoti that reaches below the knees, tied in the front with a

plain band. He is adorned with a thick garland-type neckpiece tied securely from behind, he also wears a *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) and a scarf across his arms, indicating his elevated status. Traces of a halo behind the head suggest a divine aura surrounding the figure. The inscription on the front face of the pedestal, in Brahmi characters from the first- second century CE, the inscription records that ‘the idol was installed by few members of an association or *Goshthi* in the fourth regnal year of King Sivanandi at Pawaya’ (Garde 1952).



Figure 14. Pawaya Yaksa
(Courtesy: Gujri Mahal Museum, Gwalior)

Patravahaka Yaksa, Uttar Pradesh

The sculpture ascribed to second century CE depicts another Patravahak Yaksa from Mathura. The sculpture is quite worn out and depicts the figure with raised hand and holding a bowl. The facial expressions of Yaksa shows a happy expression, he is adorned with minimal ornamentation.

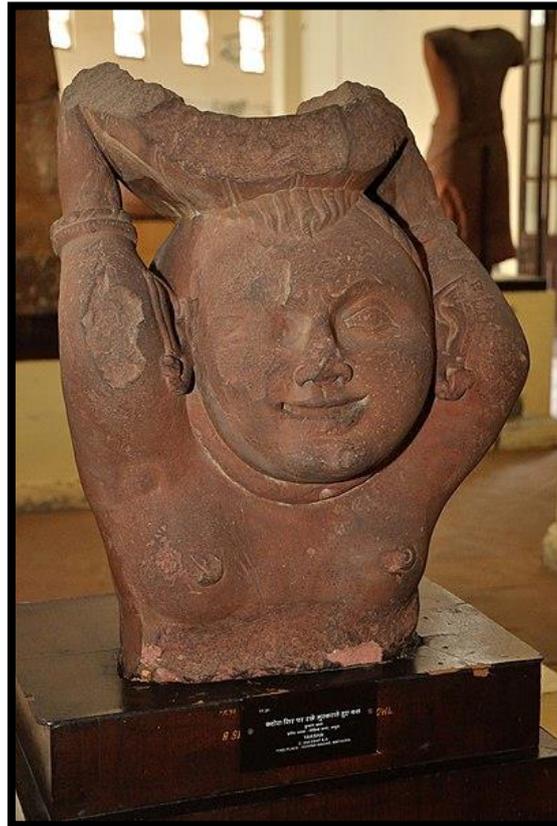


Figure 15. Patravahaka Yaksa, Uttar Pradesh

(Courtesy: Mathura Museum)

Yaksa/ Kubera Head

The head is ascribed to third century CE sculpted out of sandstone. Only the head of the sculpture survived. The facial features showcase a heavy moustached person with grinning face. The Yaksa is adorned with dangling earrings and curly hair.



Figure 16. Yaksa/ Kubera
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Bharhut Yaksa Sculptures from the Indian Museum, Kolkata

The Bharhut Yakṣa sculptures represent a significant volume of art and iconography from ancient India, particularly from the Maurya period (3rd century BCE) and the subsequent Sunga period (2nd-1st century BCE). These sculptures were discovered in the archaeological site of Bharhut Stupa in Madhya Pradesh, India, and are identified for the execution of art and iconographic details. The presence of inscriptions referring to the names of the Yakṣa sculptures is a crucial aspect in understanding the significance and context. Inscriptions include the names of the deities depicted in the sculpture, along with other specifics such as dedicatory statements, donor information, and religious or mythological narratives. These inscriptions serve as a link between the physical representation of the Yakṣa and the religious beliefs and practices associated with it.

Hence, the sculptures of Bharhut, known for their intricate details and expressive features, are also a focus of the present research. These sculptures, with their rich iconography and inscriptions, provide valuable insights into the religious and artistic traditions of ancient India, enhancing our understanding of Yakṣa worship. The corpus of sculptures under examination is predominantly crafted from red sandstone and has been stylistically dated to the second century BCE. This dating is based on a combination of stylistic analysis, archaeological context, and comparative studies with other artifacts from the period

Gangita Yaksa

Inscription: “*Gangito yaksho.*” (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

The Yakṣa is depicted standing erect with crossed hands near the chest, a gesture that may convey a sense of reverence or respect. The figure is adorned with elaborate jewellery, including necklaces, armlets, and earrings, indicating wealth and status. The headgear is intricate, adding to the figure's regal appearance. The lower portion is covered with a dhoti, a traditional Indian garment. He stands on an elephant.



Figure 17. Gangita Yaksa
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Kuvera

Inscription: “*Kupiro yaksho*”. (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

The Kuvera Yaksa stands on a crouching dwarf figure, with the right leg bent and the hands are folded in the form of ‘*Namaste*’. He wears a dhoti tied near his waist, turban, and a sash. He is adorned with necklaces, armlets and earrings.



Figure 18. Kuvera/ Kubera
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Suchiloma Yaksa

Inscription: “*Suchilomo yaksho*”

(Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

Another figure of Yaksha with the hands crossed near the chest. The figure has been depicted with heavy jewellery as typical with all the sculptures of Yaksas of Shunga period which consists of necklaces, armlets, wristlets, and a heavy girdle with its ends falling between the legs. Yaksha is standing with its two feet apart from each other on a platform. Above the figure we can see a half round lotus medallion.

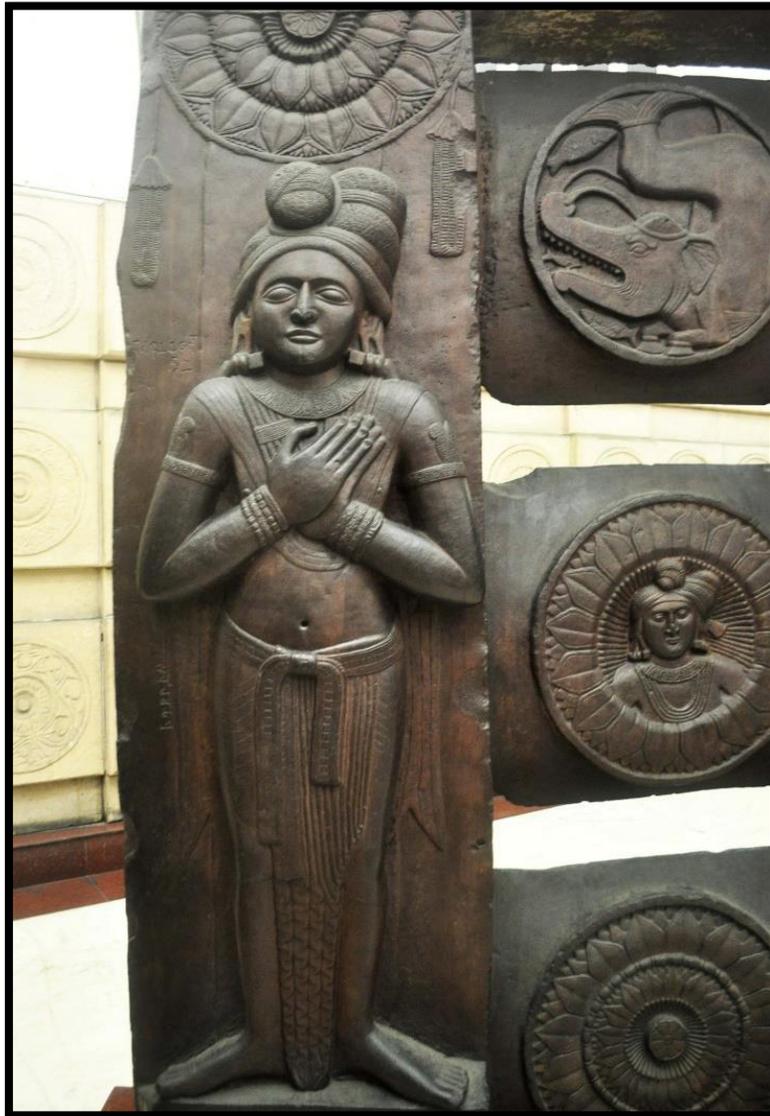


Figure 19. Suchiloma Yaksha
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Supavaso Yaksa

Inscription: “*Supavaso yaksho*” (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

This Yaksa figure has his hands crossed on the chest like *Suchiloma* and *Gangita* Yaksa. The lower part of the body is covered with a thin dhoti tied with a girdle with its ends falling in the centre of the legs. The figure is wearing necklace, armlets, wristlets, and an elaborate headdress. The left shoulder is covered with a cloth like a sash. Yaksa is standing on an elephant; the pillar depicts a half lotus medallion on the top.



Figure 20. Supavaso Yaksa
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Chulakoka Devata

Inscription: “*Chulakoka Devata*” (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

The yaksi figure is holding a branch of a tree with her right hand and her left arm and left leg encircling the trunk of the same tree. This posture provides full rhythm and grace to the tall slender figure of the yaksi standing on an elephant. She is jewelled with necklaces, armlets, bangles, anklets. The upper body is naked with the lower part covered with a heavy girdle of beads and another of cloth (tied in a knot). There is an interesting chest band with a round medal in the centre just below the breasts.



Figure 21. Chulakoka Devata
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Chhanda Yaksi

Inscription: “*Chada yakshi*” (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

The corner pillar of the stupa is covered with a beautiful damsel yaksi wearing several ornaments including a flat necklace, a girdle with five strings, armlets, bangles and a cluster of anklets. Her head is covered with some scarf. The entwined trees suspend on front from the right shoulder and fall behind, she seems to be tightening her girdle with her left hand and the arm is raised up bending the branch of a blossomed tree, the stem of which is held in the grip of left leg. She stands on a human who appears to be a *bharvahaka* (load bearer).

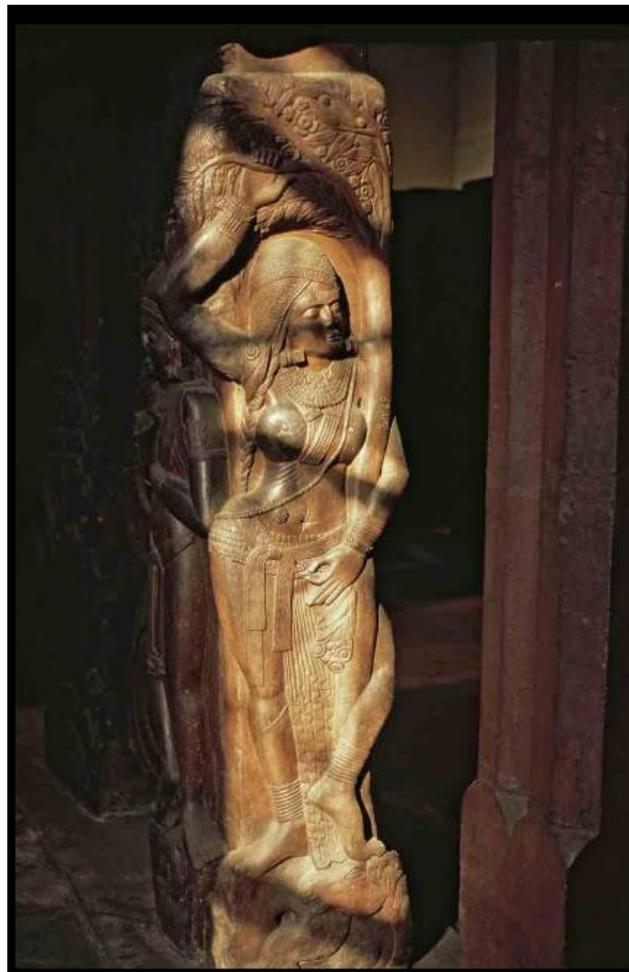


Figure 22. Chhanda Yaksi

(Courtesy: CAA, American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurugram)

Sudarsana Yakshi

Inscription: “*Yakshini Sudasana*” (Translation- Heinrich Lüders (1963))

This Yakshi is carved on a railing pillar of Bharhut stupa representing a female divinity, her right hand raised upwards in the act of holding something and her left hand on the girdle. The bend on the hip gives her a certain rhythm and grace. The upper part of the body is nude while the lower part covered with a dhoti tied with a girdle falling between the legs. She stands on a makara, adorned with heavy necklace, armlets, bangles, anklets etc. with a half lotus medallion on top of the pillar.

An inscription read as – *Bhadata -Kanakasa Bhanakasa Thabhdanam chikulaniyasa* which translates to “the pillar gift of the reverend kanaka, a reciter of chikulana.”.



Figure 23. Sudarsana Yakshi
(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

Yaksi from Mehrauli

This figure dated to second century BCE, carved in sandstone from Mehrauli. The sculpture depicts a female figure standing under a tree and embracing the trunk with her left hand. Unfortunately, it is in a much-damaged condition and many features are not identifiable. She wears a flat torque and necklaces. The girdle consists of strings supporting the dhoti worn.



Figure 24. Mehrauli Yaksi
(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

Seated Yaksa

The figure ascribed out first century CE corresponding to the Kushana period is sculpted out of sandstone from Kaushambi, Allahabad. The Yaksha is seated on a small stool, pot-bellied in frontal position. bearing all the characteristics like the other Yaksa. He wears a headdress with circular designs along with earrings, necklace, armlets, wristlets, he holds an animal possibly a mongoose or mouse.



Figure 25. Seated Yaksa

(Courtesy: Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj)

Kubera/ Yaksa

The figure ascribed out second century CE corresponding to the Kushana period is sculpted out of red spotted sandstone from Kankali Tila, Mathura. This figure identified as Kubera from Kankali Tila holds a cup. He is sitting in a squatting style with his pot belly between the legs.

The figure is adorned with an elaborate headdress, earrings, armlets, flat torque, and a girdle below the naval point which supports the dhoti covering the body. The inscription reads as – “*Mihirgarh Yaksah Dharma*”. (Translation- Fleet, J. F. (1888)), which corresponds to Mihirgarh Yaksa of Dharma.

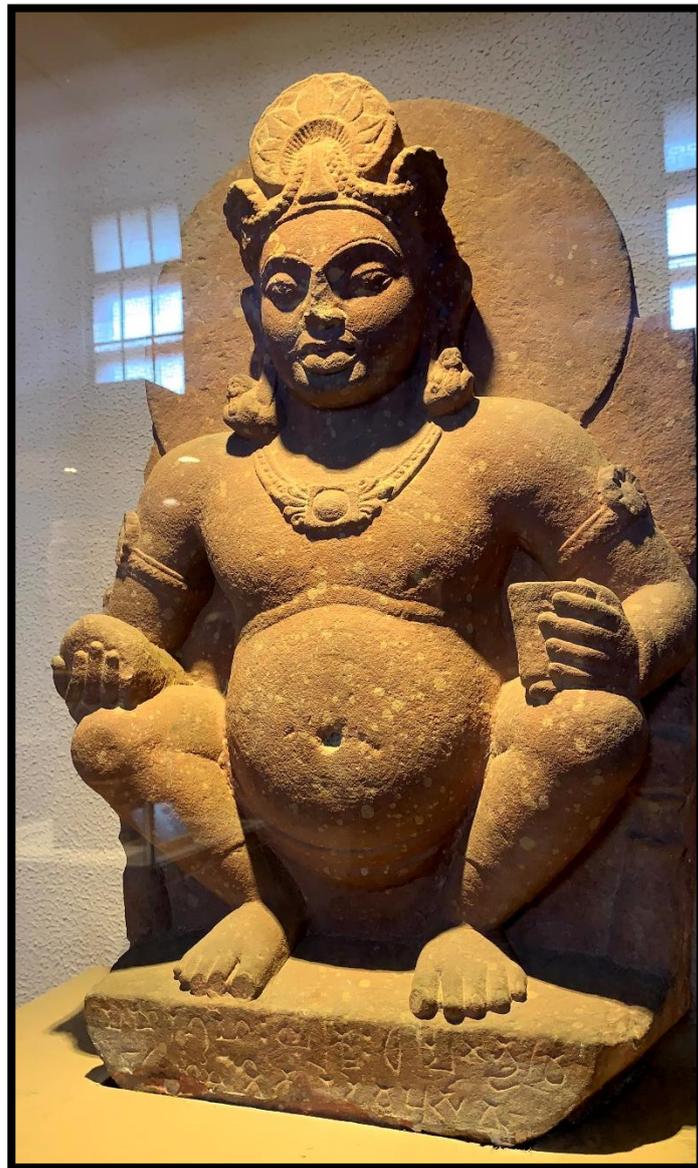


Figure 26. Kubera/ Yaksa

(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Kubera/Patrahahaka Yaksa

The figure ascribed out second century CE corresponding to the Kushana period is sculpted out of red spotted sandstone from Ahichchhatra, Ramnagar,. Similar to the earlier sculpture of Kubera, this is also a Kubera due to its pot-belly. He is shown seated in *Bhadrasana* on a high pedestal. The facial expressions are easy-going with moustache and curly hair. The body is bare except for a dhoti covering the lower portion, other end has been used as *udarabandha* looping both the upright legs and the bulging belly. The arms are missing but the verticality of the arms visibly depict that they were raised in the act of carrying.



Figure 27. Kubera/Patrahahaka Yaksa
(Courtesy: Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj)

Yaksa

The figure ascribed out second- third century CE corresponding to the Kushana period is sculpted out of sandstone from Mathura. The sculpture depicted usual features of Yaksa discussed previously. The hands and the lower part of the figure is partly broken. He is adorned with a wide necklace and wears a knotted dhoti.

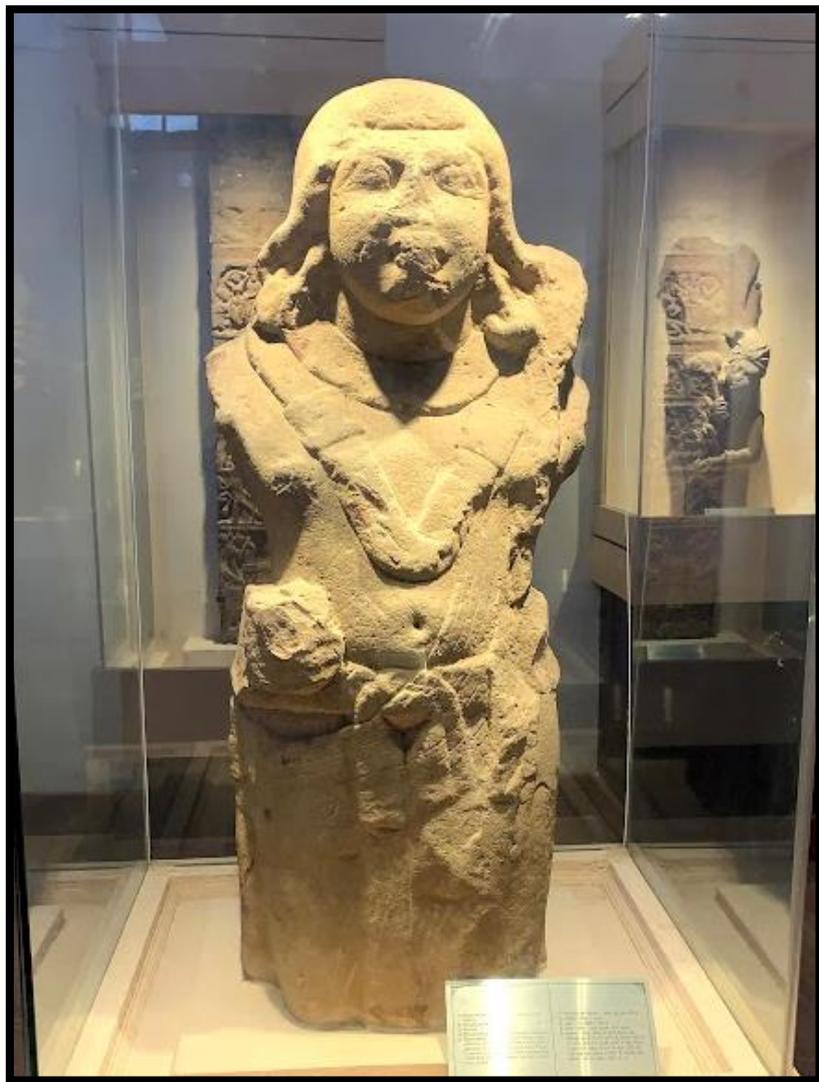


Figure 28. Yaksa
(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura)

Kubera/ Yaksa

The sculpture ascribed to third century CE, sculpted of red sandstone. The Yaksa sits in *bhadrasana*, on a high but plain pedestal. The sculptures depict a pot belly, both the arms are lost which might were originally raised apart and possibly holding a vessel similar to a Patravahaka Yaksa. He is wearing a dhoti and a cloth-girdle is seen running across the left knee.

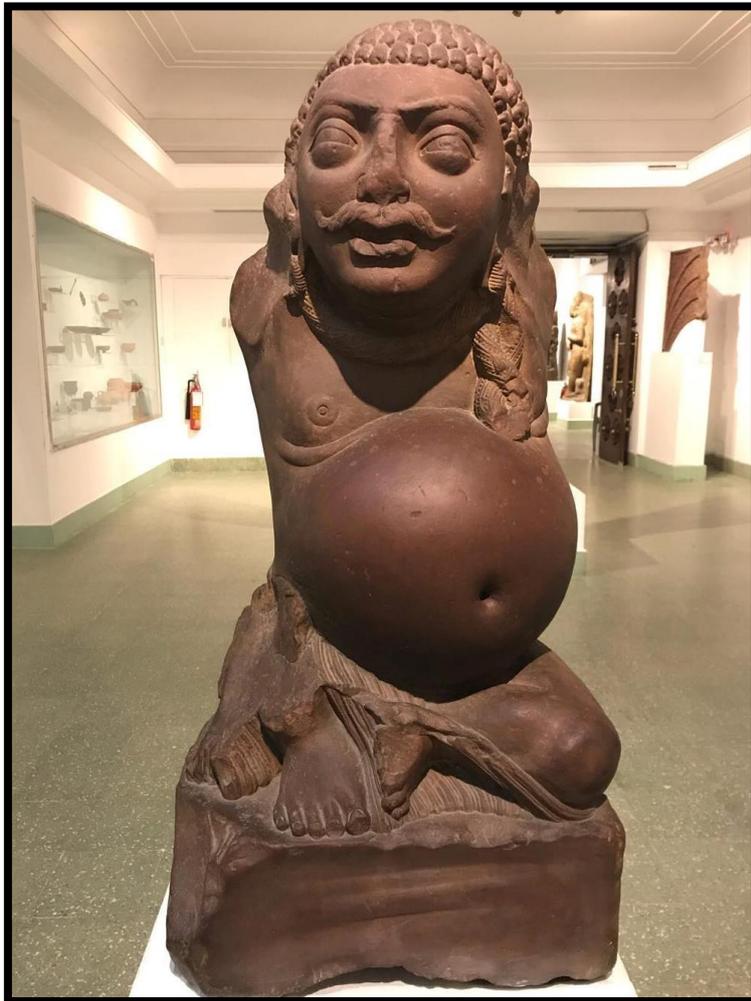


Figure 29. Kubera/ Yaksa

(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)

3.4 Study of the Sculptures

To enhance the comprehension of the detailed analysis provided, the table serves as a structured framework that systematically categorizes and presents key aspects of Yakṣa images. This organized format facilitates a clearer and more accessible presentation of the material, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the sculptures' materiality, stylistic features, contextual significance, and cultural implications. By breaking down complex information into distinct categories, the table enables a more detailed understanding of the sculptural analysis of Yakṣa images.

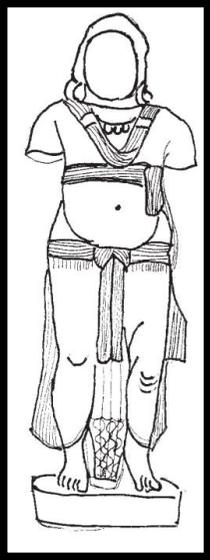
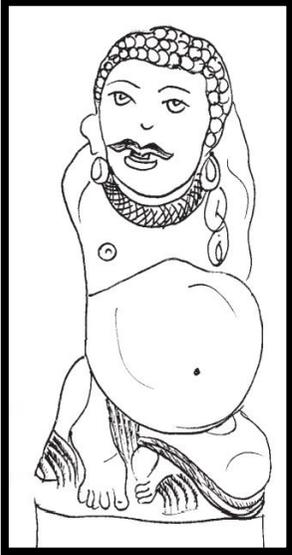
<i>Mauryan</i>	<i>Sunga</i>	<i>Kushana</i>
		

Table 1. The following table showcases a comparison of sculptural execution during the periods of Maurya, Sunga and Kushana.

Characteristics	<i>Mauryan</i>	<i>Sunga</i>	<i>Kushana</i>
Material	Sandstone	Sandstone	Sandstone
Size (Height in meters)	3m -1.5 m	2.5m – 1.5 m	1.5m – 1 m
Posture	Standing	Standing	Crouching, squatted
Attributes	Money bag, Padma, Agni, Club, Sword	Hands folded to chest or on the sides, or holding a branch	Money bag, wine cup, vessel
Inscription	Present- Brahmi	Present- Brahmi	Not present, if there not related to Yaksa

Table 2. The following table depicts the different attributes of the Yaksa during different dynastic periods and their gradual changes.

Yaksa remained a centre of attraction and ramification by the ancient sculptors. In the artistic expression Yaksa occupied a significant status and their physical representations have been found throughout. The aforementioned discussion provides a holistic view of the sculptural depictions since the Mauryan periods. There are no/ less monumental figurines of Yaksa has been reported from the pre- Mauryan context however the advent of the Mauryan administration massive figurines were erected. The thought of local cult like the Yaksa was already present in the society as a part of personal religion. The terracotta heads and figures might have played the role of divinity for the laity. The enormous structures were produced under a patronage as it provided a range of benefits including monetary, procurement of raw material, standardization of craftsmanship and skilled labour.

The Yaksa from Parkham is a fundamental find of the Yaksa pantheon. Before this sculpture, there are 'no' such effigies with such standardised iconography and execution, which was eventually followed through the next upcoming centuries. The sculptures which were modelled during the Mauryan period are huge, in standing posture, moderately ornamented, with a modest *dhoti* and turban. The significant aspect of these sculptures are the inscriptions. The inscriptions are in Mauryan Brahmi, mentioning the name of the deity, donator of the image and the *Goshthi* or the group of followers. These followers were traders, merchants, travellers, sculptors, etc. The inscription refers to *Manibhadra* congregation or followers of Manibhadra and *Jayaghosena* the minister of gate keepers, supporting the image construction of *Agnipani* and *Mudgarapani* Yaksa. Such reference provides concrete evidence of the independent cultic practices. These sculptures were made enormous and were installed on important trade centres and routes (Mathura, Kashi, Patna etc) to propagate the idea of this deity and the aspect of guardianship, protection and wealth which are the fundamental needs of a human. The inscription enabled the visitors and travellers to know about the social and religious practices of a place and carry souvenirs of the same. The terracotta head might have served the purpose of souvenirs for the voyagers. Even though, the local cults were flourishing but they were still conflicting with the Buddhist idea and approach. The sculptures of Yaksa during the Mauryan phase are independent of the Buddhistic elements.

Focussing the Sunga sculptures, there are no huge sculptures of Yaksa but they are now adorned in the pillar slabs of the Buddhist Stupa. The sculptures of Bharhut (discussed previously in this chapter) play a significant role to understand this approach. The railings of Bharhut are well adorned with several *Jataka* stories (Buddha's previous life stories) and other demi-gods. The sculptures of Yaksa were now carved in relief or 2D depiction with the general iconography (except *chaturmukhadarsana*) and ornamentation. The deliberate and skillful depiction of *Jatakas*, along with figures like Yaksas, Nagas, and other deities, in the sculptural art of the

period, indicates a gradual process of incorporation into the Buddhist pantheon. The sculptures also bear inscriptions in Brahmi referring the names of the deities without any reference of their congregation. The inclusion of figures like Yaksas, Nagas, and other deities alongside Jatakas in Buddhist art, indeed created the impression or conveyed the concept that these deities are attendants or supporters of the supreme deity, the Buddha. This artistic representation serves a dual purpose: it maintains a connection to pre-existing local beliefs and deities while also emphasizing the Buddha's central role in the Buddhist cosmology.

The sculptures ascribed to the Kushana time frame introduced a new addition which is squatting, crouching or grotesque gestures like protruding eyes, tongue sticking out or grinning teeth, retaining few original aspects of the initial iconography including the pot-belly and attributes like money bag. With the gradual assimilation and sharing of the iconography, the Yaksha iconography was ascribed to Kubera (God of wealth and called '*Yaksaraja*'). The sculptures showcase more Kubera and less of what Yaksha was.

The Yaksha figures have been a focal point for ancient sculptors, occupying a significant place in artistic expression across different periods. While monumental Yaksha figurines are conspicuously absent from pre-Mauryan contexts, their emergence during the Mauryan administration marked a shift. Signifying that the concept of local cults, like Yaksha, was already ingrained in society as part of personal religion. The Mauryan period saw the manufacture of enormous Yaksha sculptures, characterized by their standing posture, modest ornamentation, and attire, including a dhoti and turban. Inscriptions in Mauryan Brahmi found on these sculptures mention the deity's name, the donor of the image, and the *Goshthi* or group of followers, which comprised traders, merchants, travellers, and sculptors, among others. The presence of inscriptions provides concrete evidence of independent cultic practices. During the Sunga period, Yaksha along with Yaksi was adorned in the pillar slabs of Buddhist stupas indicating a

gradual process of incorporation into the Buddhist pantheon. By the Kushana period Yakṣa almost lost its independent status and was identified with Kubera.

The Yakṣa sculptures represent more than just artistic expressions; they are also significant markers of religious and cultural changes over time. These sculptures reflect the evolving religious landscape of ancient India, illustrating the assimilation and adaptation of local cults into broader religious frameworks, such as Buddhism. The transition from pre-Mauryan absence to Mauryan monumentalism, and later to Sunga adornment in Buddhist stupas, demonstrates a dynamic process of cultural exchange and integration.

Therefore, the above analysis enables to understand the evolution of Yakṣa sculptures from the Mauryan to the Kushana periods reflecting a dynamic interplay between local cults, Buddhist influences, and evolving iconography. The transformation reflects broader shifts in religious, cultural, and artistic representations, marking the significant change in the visual as well as doctrinal depictions of Yakṣa.

3.5 A Comparative analysis of Yakṣa and Yakṣi: Origin, Roles, and Artistic Depictions

The previous sections and chapters provide a detailed view of the Yakṣa sculptures and their origin, association, and artistic depictions. As already discussed in chapter 2 and 3, that ‘Yakṣa’ is used as a generic term throughout the thesis and is gender neutral. In the case of artistic depictions ‘Yakṣi’ (or Yakṣini, Pali: Yakkhiṇī) is used to denote the female forms. These semi-divine beings are often associated as the counterparts or the female manifestations of Yakṣa or sometimes as standalone divinities with their own domain. The present section brings out the comparative analysis of the both Yakṣa and Yakṣi. Before understanding the sculptural representation of the Yakṣi figures, it is important to explore the literary traditions to understand their origin and role.

Yaksi played dual role of both beneficent and maleficent, their character focussed on granting boons, protecting children as well as monstrous Yaksi who fed on human flesh, possess men for pleasure, haunted villages, and forests etc (Mishra 1987). Unlike the Yaksa, the term Yaksi appears quite later in the literary traditions. Though there are no direct reference to ‘Yaksi’ in the Vedas and epics, these references in the texts provide foundational metaphorical and conceptual material that gave rise to the concept of Yaksi.

The hymn X.97.3 in Rigveda mentions about nature spirits in relation to rivers and trees and hymn X.97.3 refers deities who are guardians of wealth and abundance (Griffith & Shastri, 1973). Both the hymns provide a faint idea about a group of divinities who were existing and held some significance in the socio-religious realm. It can be noted that these are core characteristics of Yaksa and Yaksini both in the later developed phase of the literary traditions. In the same way, Ramayana in verse IV.42.30 mentions about an abode of a horse faced women and is referred as *Asvamukhi* (Valmiki- Ramyana, English Translation by Griffith 1870). It is interesting to note that the Jatakas (*Jatakathavannana* no 432- *Padakusalamanava* Jataka) provides a detailed storyline story of a *Assamukhi Yakkhi* (Pali) (Cowell 1895). The Mahabharat does not provide a detailed description of the Yaksi as it does for the Yaksa, but it refers to a tutelary deity named ‘*Nanda*’ at Rajgriha. It also mentions in verse 105, chapter 54 (*Vana parva*) about female divinities referred as *Devi*, and by eating the *prasada* (*naivedya*) of the *Devi* one would be forgiven of the sin of *Brahmahatya* or killing a Brahmana (The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, 1884;). As above-mentioned the epics do not provide a direct reference to the Yaksi but the idea of female divinities, identified as Yaksi in the later periods.

The Puranas, the general theme about the female divinities is fertility, beauty, auspiciousness, and guardianship. Puranas refer to the term ‘Yaksi’ as attendants (Mishra 1987). During this period the Puranas showcase both the Yaksa and Yaksi under the overlordship of Kubera who

is said to be *Yaksaraja* and is identified as the lord of wealth and prosperity (Coomaraswamy 1971; Mishra 1987). *Vayu Purana* provides a genealogy of several Yaksa and Yaksi (discussion in chapter 3 along with the list of genealogy as reproduced from Mishra 1987. *Vishnu Purana* (chapter 6) discusses Kubera and his attendants as Yaksa and Yaksi (Wilson 1840). *Matsya Purana* (chapter 73) discusses the Yaksa and Yaksi linked to the natural elements (Tagare 1958). *Garuda Purana* (chapter 49), *Skanda Purana* (Kashi Khanda, chapter 75) and *Devi Bhagavata Purana* (chapter 32) mentions both the Yaksa and Yaksi as guardians, their connections and significance at sacred spaces and rituals (Shastri 1951, Mishra 1987). This discussion on the Puranas makes it quite evident that the Yaksi were now quite a widespread appellation, they were beautiful divine beings associated with fertility and nature.

In Buddhism, Yaksa and Yaksi held a prominent place in the pantheon. The role of Yaksa in Buddhism has been discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Yaksi was depicted both in malefic and benefice characters. She is divine as mother and evil as a monster. The Buddhist texts *Divyavandana*, *Jataka*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sutra* mentions the well-known Yaksi such as *Hariti*, *Panchashikha*, *Manohara*, *Sankhini*, *Ghantakara* etc., who are divine, protectors and are associated with nature (Mishra 1987). The *Jataka* gives us a description of these Yaksi's, such as *Sutasoma Jataka* (Tale no 537) mentions Yaksa and Yaksi as fearsome beings, who kidnap and threatens humans, however they are transformed into a divine being by the virtue of the protagonist (most of the time *Buddha* or *Bodhisattvas*). Similarly, *Valahassa Jataka* (Tale no 196), *Champa Jataka* (Tale no 506) and *Bhuridatta Jataka* (Tale no 543) describes them as cannibals, seductive, shape shifters and malevolent spirits (Cowell 1895). From the above examples it is interesting to note that the Yaksi (sometimes the Yaksa also) often acted as obstacles that the Bodhisattva must overcome, symbolizing moral challenges like temptation, deceit, and violence. However, the depiction of the Yaksi in the Jatakas is not uniformly negative, as the stories highlight their potential of redemption. Therefore, Yaksi in Buddhist

traditions retained their status as powerful beings associated with nature, protection, and fertility. Within the Buddhist framework, sometimes they were portrayed as malevolent entities reformed through Buddhist teachings and attendants to the Buddha, symbolizing their ultimate integration in to the pantheon.

In Jainism the Yaksi are referred as '*Sasanadevatas*' and are paired with their male counterparts 'Yaksa.' They are divine attendants of the Tirthankaras (Shah 1987). The Tirthankaras are detached from the worldly desires while the laypersons, still engrossed in the material pleasures. Hence the Yaksi and Yaksa serve as intermediaries, providing boons that help to navigate the balance between spiritual progress and worldly pleasures (Tiwari 1989). The role of Yaksi is quite significant in Jainism, not only relate to fertility, nature, she is an independent deity with her own methods of worship. The prominent Yaksi such as *Ambika*, *Chakresvari*, *Padmavati* whose temples are still found and are continued to be worshipped as individual deities in Telangana, Karnataka, Gujarat (Tiwari 1989, Shah 1987).

Therefore, from the above discussion on the literary traditions, it can be determined that the role of the Yaksi was quite dynamic. From Vedic texts hinting about the existence of the concept of natural spirits to concretization of the idea of being 'Yaksi' under the umbrella of the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain pantheons.

The earliest archaeological evidence of Yaksi was reported from Didarganj (East Patna, Bihar) in 1917. The monumental sculpture came to be identified as 'Yaksi', she is widely known as '*Didarganj Yaksi*' now instated at Bihar Museum. However no inscriptional evidence was reported on this sculpture, based on the art, polishing technique, and comparison of the Lohanipur Torso and Ashokan Pillars (these evidences possess the famous Mauryan polish), it was ascribed to the Mauryan Period dating back to third- second century BCE. The iconographical details are discussed in Chapter 3. The researcher *does not identify* the sculpture

of Yaksi because based on the literary evidences and later sculptural development none of the Yaksi images have been found with a 'fly-whisk.' Most of the sculptural representation of the Yaksi are in association with nature such as trees, plants, and water bodies. However, Yaksi who are attendants in the Buddhist and Jain pantheons are often depicted with the flywhisk showcasing a subsidiary status. Mauryan sculptors did not make an elaborate image of a subsidiary deity, she can be identified as an image of decoration for the Mauryan palaces or courts. It is interesting to note that the sculptures found from other regions of Yaksha and Yaksi, none of them possess the flywhisk as an attribute.

Yaksi from Besnagar (Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh), this sculpture was discovered in 1875 by Alexander Cunningham. In his report he provides a detailed overview of the Yaksi sculpture. The sculpture depicts a standing figure with round breast and wide hips, both the hands are missing, she is adorned with several strands of necklaces along with anklets and armlets. In the absence of inscriptional data for this image, it is relatively dated to second- first century BCE based on the Yaksha sculpture found from the same vicinity.

Bharhut Yaksi (Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh). The Yaksi sculptures were found in 1873-74 from Bharhut stupa and the remnants are now housed in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. The sculptures ascribed to third- first century BCE based on inscriptional evidence. The inscriptions in Brahmi mentions specific names of the Yaksi such as *Chanda*, *Sudarshana*, *Chulaloka Devata* etc. If the sculptures are analysed the linear thought in their depiction is the presence of natural elements such as tree or plant or flowers, the original thought of the Yaksi being a nature spirit as traced in the literary sources. It is interesting to note that the term 'Yakkhi' appears in the inscriptional evidence for the first time. There is inscriptional evidence only for Yaksha.

Bhuteswara sculptures (Mathura, Uttar Pradesh) ascribed to second- first century BCE. These beautiful sculptures adorned the railings of a Buddhist stupa. Each pillar of the railing is

decorated with a standing Yakshi figure. They are depicted as sensuous and young with round breast and long legs. Some of them are holding a bunch of flowers or fruits, a tumbler, or a birdcage.

Therefore, if the developmental trajectory from Didarganj Yaksi to the Bhuteswara Yaksi illustrates the evolution of the concept in tangible forms. The progression reflects a shift from the early emphasis on monumental, standalone sculptures to votive sculptures to integral components of architectural frameworks such as railings, toraṇas and facades. Under the Buddhist and Jain pantheons both Yaksa and Yaksi were amalgamated and specific inscriptions were attached depicting their status in the pantheon. Even though this transformation underscores the broader socio-religious and aesthetic developments of Indian art at the same time it subtly depicts the collapse of Yaksi as a divinity and gradual assimilation in the larger pantheons.

The table below depicts the developmental phase from freestanding sculptures to more as architectural elements.

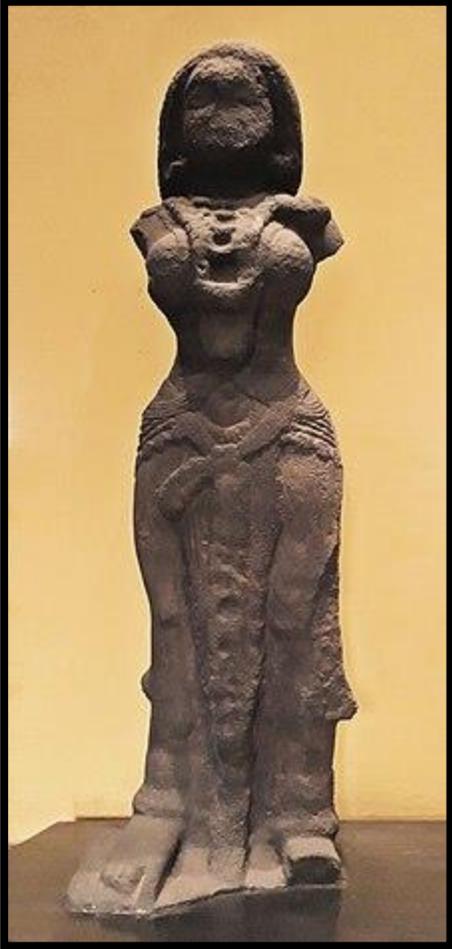
Didarganj Yaksi	Besnagar Yaksi	Bharhut Yaksi	Bhuteswara Yaksi
 <p>A standing female figure, the Didarganj Yaksi, carved in light-colored stone. She has a serene expression, wears a tall, ornate crown, and is adorned with multiple necklaces and armlets. She holds a lotus flower in her right hand. Her lower body is draped in a long, pleated garment.</p>	 <p>A standing female figure, the Besnagar Yaksi, carved in dark stone. She has a more somber expression and wears a large, rounded, dome-shaped crown. Her body is adorned with intricate jewelry, including necklaces and armlets. She stands on a simple base.</p>	 <p>A standing female figure, the Bharhut Yaksi, carved in dark stone. She is depicted in a more dynamic pose, wearing a tall, leafy crown. She is adorned with extensive jewelry, including necklaces, armlets, and bangles. She stands on a base with a small animal figure at her feet.</p>	 <p>A standing female figure, the Bhuteswara Yaksi, carved in dark stone. She is depicted in a more dynamic pose, wearing a tall, leafy crown. She is adorned with extensive jewelry, including necklaces, armlets, and bangles. She stands on a base with a small animal figure at her feet.</p>

Table 3. Depicting the range of sculptural representation so Yaksi.

Aspect	Yaksa	Yaksi
Role & Symbolism	Deities associated with wealth, strength, prosperity, and guardianship.	Deities associated with beauty, nature, fertility, and abundance.
Physical Characteristics	Often depicted as robust, muscular, and corpulent.	Depicted as graceful, sensuous forms with narrow waists, full hips, and detailed ornamentation.
Attire	Minimalistic attire, often a <i>dhoti</i> or simple garment.	Depicted with elaborate jewellery such as <i>Kamarbandha</i> and transparent skirt.
Attributes	Depicted holding money bag, wheel, staff, or sword.	They are generally depicted holding branches, flowers, fruits, or birds.
Association with Nature	Sometimes depicted near trees or as protectors of specific regions.	Frequently shown under trees (<i>salabhanjika</i>) or with flowering branches.

Table 4. Differences between Yaksa and Yaksi

Sculptures of Yaksa and Yaksi are among the significant representations. These sculptures not only highlight the aesthetic sensibilities of their makers but also serve as embodiments of broader philosophical and religious ideals. Observing the table it can be inferred that Yaksa sculptures, primarily associated with guardianship and depicted with robust physiques. In contrast, Yaksi emphasises beauty, sensuousness, and nature, depicted with intricate jewellery and garments, their posture and expressions radiating charm and grace. The further iconographical features are discussed in chapter 3.

The emergence of the Yaksi as deities can be contextualized within the socio-cultural dynamics of ancient rural societies. In these settings, women sought divine figures to resonate with their roles and experiences, particularly those linked to fertility and prosperity. The Yaksi thus evolved as local/ folk deities, embodying feminine ideals, and fulfilling the need for spiritual

association with natural and agricultural fertility. In contrast, Yaksa was mainly associated with protection and guardianship of wealth. Their worship was often linked to traders and merchant who invoked their blessings for safe travel and security of their goods.

This distinction highlights the evolution of Yaksa-Yaksi worship, reflecting the interplay between folk beliefs and the broader cultural and economic practices of ancient India.

3.5 Ethnographic Survey

Yaksa and Yaksi were/ are the most celebrated divinities since the ancient times. It is fascinating to note that their status in the pantheons, roles and responsibilities kept changing over time. They are worshipped under several names such as *Jakh*, *Yakkha*, *Jakhiya* etc till today. Yaksa worship in the parts of India, showcases the enduring spiritual and cultural significance of Yaksa. However the original concept of being Yaksa got blended with other religious practices over time, their essence persists in the reverence as folk deities or local gods related to nature, protection, and fertility.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the concept of Yaksa worship can still be observed in the local traditions and festivals. One of the significant festivals is that of *Khechmavas* (*Khech- Khichadi* and *mavas- amavas*) or *Yakshamavasya* celebrated on *Paush Krishna Paksha Amavasya* (somewhere between December- January). The Kashmiri Hindus call Yaksa as *Yech*, as per the Kashmiri folklore it is said that the Yaksa, every winter they had come down to the plains in search of food creating a havoc in the process, to prevent further loss, valley dwellers offer Khichadi to the *Yech* in lieu of protection.

Himachal Pradesh, several local deities are famous in alignment of the concept of Yaksa. *Jamlu Devata*, is the guardian of the sacred forests, mountains, and water bodies. Rituals and festivals celebrating nature often accompanied by traditional dances and offerings, reinforces the idea of Yaksa.

In Punjab, *Jathera* and in Haryana, *Kshetrapala* (field guardian) are the names which aligns with the attributes of Yaksa. They are local deities related to the nature-centric ethos of Yaksa.

Yaksi is more prevalent in the Peninsular India. Yaksi in Kerala plays a dual role she is identified as a *Gramadevata* protector of sacred lands and resources, also she is an ogress who possess and seduces men and feed on human flesh. In Tamil Nadu, under Jainism Yaksi such as *Padmavati*, *Chakresvari*, *Ambika* became famous with their own distinct and independent methods of worship.

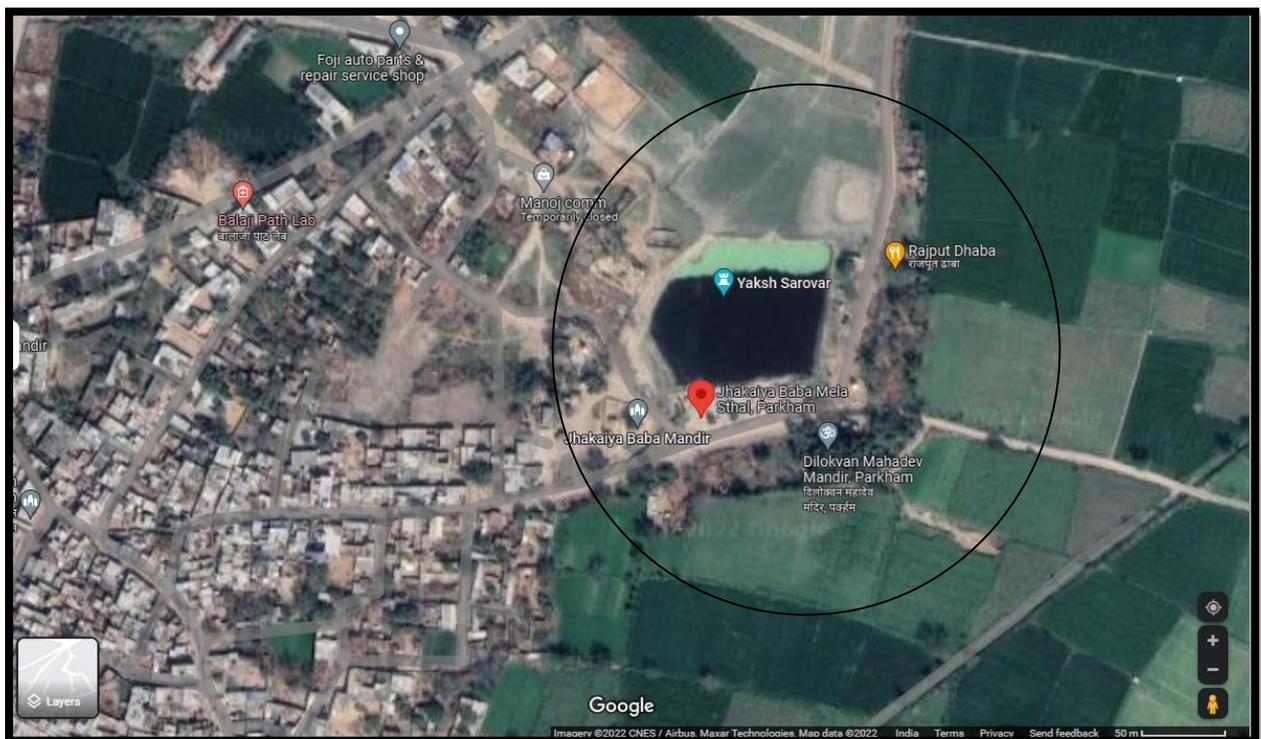
Likewise, Western India also has the remnants of the archaic Yaksa worship. *Pabuji* (protector of camels), *Tejaji* (protection against snake bites), *Mehaji* (guardian of fields and cattle), *Jogmaya* (related to power and protection), *Aai Mata* (associated with healing) are some of the local deities of Rajasthan. In Gujarat, *Khodiyar Mata* (water goddess, associated with fertility), *Meldi Mata* (related to agriculture), *Sikotar Mata* (associated to travellers), *Barwada Dada* (protector of cattle), *Maldevji* (protector of seafarers) etc are the well-known deities.

Therefore, if we analyse and conclude the above discussion, it can be observed that the ancient Yaksa/Yaksi worship is preserved in multifarious forms, including through local deities, nature worship and cultural practices. Even though the 'Yaksa' as a distinct divinity has largely integrated into the larger pantheons, their core nature as guardians, protectors and deities of wealth and fertility remains an important part of the region's heritage. These traditions highlight the indirect survival of the Yaksa cult.

The ethnographic survey conducted in 2021 and 2022 in Mathura and Varanasi, efforts were made to understand the Yaksa practice and trace its continuation. It was believed that the Yaksa were still worshipped, under different titles in these areas. The survey involved engaging with local communities, religious followers, and scholars to gather information about the worship practices, rituals, and beliefs associated with these deities.

1. Parkham, Mathura

Parkham (27.2717 N, 77.7080 E) is a small village situated 22.5 kms south of Mathura. Parkham became a significant site after the discovery of the sculpture of *Manibhadra* Yakṣa. On palaeographic grounds the image was dated to 200 BCE- 50 CE (Luders 1961; Quintanilla dates to 150 BCE (2007)), the badly corroded inscription in early Brahmi script mentions about donation made by eight brothers for the *Manibhadra* congregation; donated by *Gomitaka*, pupil of Kunika (Luders 1961). Indicating a popular and important congregation or cult which was practiced during the ancient times.



Map 1. Location of the temple

(Courtesy: Google Maps)

Current Temple Complex

The present temple (27.60348234854281, 78.66663021110507) was constructed in 2014 by a wealthy trader from Bombay (after interviewing the locals) who is said to be an ardent follower of the '*Jhakaiya baba*'. The temple is square in plan with no visible superstructure (Shikhara),

with few flights of steps leading to the main sanctum (garbhagriha) where four sculptures are installed of the *Jhakaiya baba* and his wife (as stated by the villagers who call her devi), and two attendants one male and other female on the either side. The complex is enclosed by a boundary, constructed by the donator (trader). There are other subsidiary shrines of Shiva and Ganesh which are outside the enclosure of the *Jhakaiya baba* temple. A lake near the temple which is referred as '*Kund*' by the villagers and narrates a story that Bheema (one of the Pandava) visited here before the war of Dharmakshetra (Kurukshetra). The Mahabharata refers visiting of the Pandava to Nanda Yakṣī, Rajgriha (Rajgir, Bihar) (Mishra 1987) but no literary references mention about Parkham.



*Figure 30. The Temple
(Courtesy: Researcher)*



Figure 31. The Temple Complex

(Courtesy: Researcher)

Iconography

The iconography of the main deity *Jhakaiya baba* and his wife is not visible, as the villagers and the priest did not permit to touch the deities, both the deities stand on a raised platform. The male figure wears a turban and earrings. Similarly, the devi holds a lotus in her left hand and the other is in *Varada mudra* adorned in a saree. The attendants stand too on a pedestal, the male wears a dhoti and a decorated girdle with earrings, layered neckpiece and holds a money bag the indicator of a yakṣa and the other hand holds a *Chakra* (wheel) like attribute and no headdress. The female attendant wears a girdle, with heavily ornated jewellery and headdress. Her hands and attributes are not visible clearly as she was covered with a dupatta.



*Figure 32. View of the main Sanctum Sanctorum
(Courtesy: Researcher)*



*Figure 33. Attendent Yaksa and Yaksi to the main deities
(Courtesy: Researcher)*

Comparison of the Ancient and Recent

Observing the sculptural representation of Parkham Yaksa (ancient), the yakṣa is not heavily adorned, he wears a neckpiece, with a sash going across the body and joins at the waist with a knot on the right, along with a simple girdle. Both the hands of the sculpture are broken, possibly one of them must be in *Varada mudra* and the other holding a money bag or some other attribute. The present sculptures are also made of stone, the sculpture of *Jhakaiya baba* and his consort is about 1.5m tall but their attributes are not visible. The attendant on the either side share similar iconography to the main deity (as communicated by the villagers). Therefore, the image of the attendant is taken into consideration for the comparative study. The image of the attendant is similar to that of Parkham yaksa. The attendant image is about 50- 60 cm (approx.) and stands on a pedestal. He wears similar neckpiece and sash; he holds a usual money bag in his right hand and a wheel (whose significance is not clear).

Therefore, from the iconographical similarities it is assumed that the Yaksa cult was prevalent and had survived from the amalgamations and incorporations of the greater pantheons with few iconographic changes.



Figure 34. Parkham Yaksha, Mathura Museum

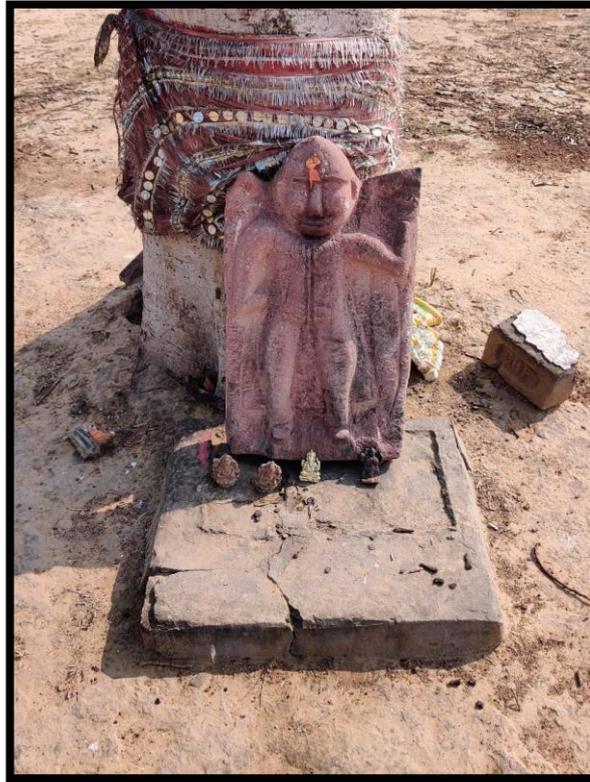


Figure 35. Attendent Yaksha

(Courtesy: Mathura Museum, Mathura; Researcher)

Jhakaiya Mela

Every year in the month of Magh (January) a “Jhakaiya Mela” which translates to Yaksha fair is conducted every year and people from the surrounding villages congregate at Parkham to worship *Jhakaiya* baba. The villagers produce crude sculptural form of the yaksha and are placed on the boundaries of the village and the water body. The Yaksha raises his left hand with a cheerful face.



***Figure 36. Reconstruction of Yaksa for Jhakaiya Mela
(Courtesy: Researcher)***

From the exploration which was undertaken in December 2021 revealed a cultural continuance of the practice of yakṣa worship which was prevalent during the ancient times. Villagers referred the deity with several names like *Jhakaiya baba*, *Jakkho baba*, *Jakhiya baba* and *Bir Baba*. Presently only the modern temple stands with the diminutive representation of the cult. After interviewing the villagers, it was observed that, yakṣa or *Jhakaiya baba* was more significant than the other popular deities like shiva and Vishnu (even though the region of Mathura is known for the Krishna cult).

2. Varanasi

Banaras or Varanasi situated on the left bank of Ganga in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Anciently called Kashi is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world and holds great religious and cultural significance. By the second millennium BCE, Varanasi was the centre of Vedic philosophy and religion in addition to being a bustling economic and trade centre recognized for art, sculpture, and trade. Kashi was part of the sixteen *Mahājanapadas* and at Sarnath Buddha gave his first sermon. According to the renowned Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang, travelled to Varanasi in the year 635 CE and claimed that the city stretched for nearly three miles (five kilometres) along the Ganges River. It was during eighth century CE, Adi Shankara established the worship of Siva as an official sect of Varanasi. After then, Varanasi suffered during the three centuries of Muslim rule that started in 1194 CE. The city's religious and cultural pursuits saw some alleviation under the Mughal ruler Akbar in the 16th century CE. Late in the 17th century CE, under the rule of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, there was another setback; nevertheless, the Marathas afterward funded a fresh upsurge. In 1910, the British established Banaras or Varanasi as a new state with Ramnagar as its capital. It was in 1947 Banaras was included in Uttar Pradesh with the declaration of India's independence. Thus, Banaras (ancient Kashi) was a significant centre for the socio-economic and political development of ancient India and the remnants follows till present in the form of various local religious practices and traditions.

The Bir-Brahmas of Banaras

Banaras is said to be the most sacred city with its sacred geography it attracts several pilgrims all around the world. The most attracting feature which was noticed and published by Prof. V. S. Agrawala in 1970 where in his work '*Ancient Indian Folk Cults*' mentions about the *Birs* (*veer*- meaning brave or courageous) and *Brahma* baba of Banaras region whose temples were/

are found near the Ghats and were celebrated deities however the worship of Vishwanath was renowned. These Bir- brahma Babas are local/ folk deities who are represented in various forms and shapes. Throughout the survey and conversating with locals, priest and others it was noticed that the idea of Bir- Brahma is quite archaic in the society and is prevalent along with the worship practice of Kashi Vishwanath.

With general explorations and interviewing locals and the priests it was identified that the Bir and Brahma Baba images and shrines are found in four general categories specifically (1) aniconic mounds, cones, or posts (also called the *Dih* baba), (2) imageless enclosures, (3) small, carved figures in bas-relief, and (4) images reconstituted from recovered, broken sculptural fragments.

Among these, the aniconic mound-shapes and imageless shrines are most frequently encountered in rural settings, and the carved figures and sculptural fragments in the denser sections of the city. The ongoing process of urban expansion, however, has resulted in the incorporation of many rural-type shrines into the life of growing city neighbourhoods (Freitag 1989).

The Bir- Brahma shrines are present in the interiors of the modern Banaras and the worship is quite conventional like offering of flowers and water. The locals believe that the Bir/ Brahma/ Jogi Babas are dedicated in the memory of the dead who suffered premature, unnatural, or violent deaths and were not subjected to the conventional rites of death. Therefore, not capable of *mokṣa* (liberation) making them angry, jealous, and causing visions, misfortune, and illness. The shrines are widely diverse in nature some resting on the raised platforms (Chabutra) or nestling at the base of holy trees.

Remarkably, the discovery of Bir-Brahma shrines within the interiors of modern Banaras unveils a striking juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary. The worship rituals associated

with these shrines stand out for their traditional nature, involving reverential offerings of water and flowers. This observance reflects a remarkable cultural continuity that has withstood the test of time, preserving age-old practices at the heart of modern Banaras.

Insights gathered from the local community shed light on the deep-rooted significance of Bir-Brahma in the cultural tapestry of Banaras. According to local narratives, these shrines serve as dedicated spaces for remembering the departed—ghost spirits who suffered untimely, unnatural, or violent deaths, bypassing customary death rites. Consequently, these spirits are believed to be trapped in a state of restlessness and discontent, incapable of achieving mokṣa, or liberation.



Figure 37. aniconic mounds, cones, or posts (also called Dih baba)

(Courtesy: Researcher)



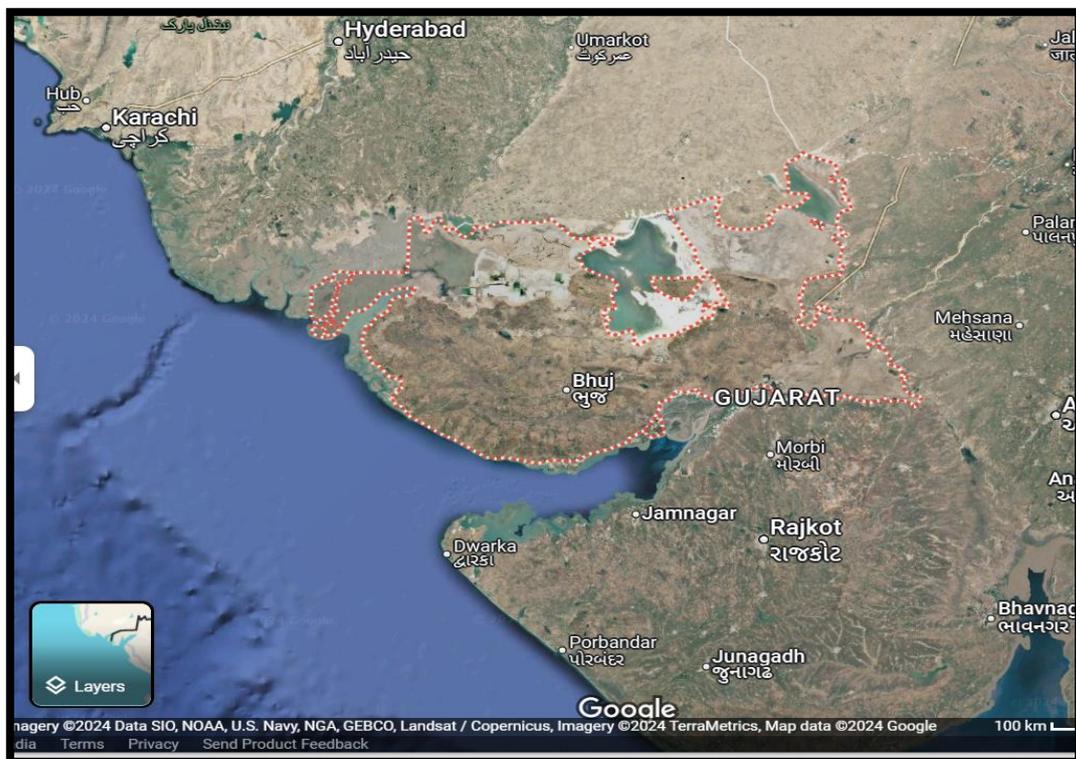
Figure 38. imageless enclosures (Akela baba)
(Courtesy: Researcher)



Figure 39. small, carved figures in bas-relief
(Courtesy: Researcher)

3. Kutch, Gujarat

Kutch (also called Kachchh) is in the westernmost part of India in Gujarat. The region is well known for its unique geographical features and cultural heritage. Kutch is a diversified land, featuring vast deserts, salt marshes, fertile plains, and coastal areas along the Arabian sea. The earliest archaeological evidence from Kutch traces back to the Indus Valley civilization. Since then, ruled by several dynasties including Maurya, Kshtrap, Gupta, Maitrak, Chalukya, Solanki etc., during the Historic period (Kumble 2013).



Map.2 Depicting the boundary of Kutch, Gujarat.

(Courtesy: Google Maps)

Jakh Botera of Kutch

The Yaksa traditions are prevalent in the parts of Gujarat as well. Yaksa is called *Jakh/Jakha/Jakhdada* etc. In Kutch, the divinity is called *Jakh Botera* or 72 Yaksa. As per the folk tales, Jakhs are a legendary group said to have been shipwrecked on the coast of Kutch. These divinities are described as tall, fair, and seated on horses. Their origins are indistinct, but they are connected to the historical town of Punvaranogadh, founded around 878 CE by Punvar, son of the chief of Kera, Kutch. After a dispute with his family, Punvar established the city, and its architect was punished by having both hands cut off. Seven virtuous devotees of the Jakhs, arriving from *Rum-Sham* (likely Anatolia or Syria), settled near the town. When Punvar's queen sought their help to conceive a child, they were initially unable to grant her wish due to her husband's sins. Punvar later captured them and subjected them to cruel punishment. One devotee sought help from the Jakhs, who appeared with seventy-one brothers and a sister, Sayari, in a divine display. Despite Punvar's resistance, Sayari transformed into a mosquito, causing Punvar to lose his protective amulet. A stone eventually struck him, leading to his death, and the Jakhs cursed the town, which remains desolate.

In another version, King Punvar oppressed the Sanghar community (tribals), leading them to seek the Jakhs' aid. Seventy-two Jakhs arrived, took the fort, and killed the chief. The Sanghars honoured the Jakhs by naming a hill Kakkadgadh after their leader, Kakkad, and established a temple dedicated to them. Another version presents the Jakhs as healers who helped the poor, but King Punvar killed them for their influence.

Iconographically the representation of Jakh dada is quite unique, they are represented as tall, fair, and well-built divinities seated on white horses. The locals suggest that the reason behind such depiction is that these are migrants from Iran which reached Gujarat through the sea routes and might have assimilated the existing traditions with little variations. Presently, Jakh is now

integrated in the Brahmanical pantheon and more specifically under Shiva. The worship and rituals include pouring of water, offering flowers and fruits to the deity.

Jakh Mela

The Jakh Mela is held during August and September. Two distinct fairs are held *Nana Jakh No Mela* at Madhapur and *Mota Jakh No mela* at Nakahtrana. The fairs last for four days and attracts numerous devotees who participate in several rituals and ceremonies. The religious observances are conducted at temples dedicated to *Jakhdada*. Devotees offer incense (*dhup*) and perform *aarti* as acts of veneration. Following these rituals, the deities are adorned in a process called *shringar*, which involves dressing them with turbans (*pagadhi*), robes (*vastra*), parasols (*chatra*), and jewelry. These practices reflect a blend of devotional fervour and the preservation of traditional iconographic elements associated with Yaksha worship.



Figure 40. Names of the 72 Jakhs

(Courtesy: Researcher)



*Figure 41. Temple entrance
(Courtesy: Researcher)*



(a)



(b)

Figure 42. (a) and (b) Interior of the temple Jakh dada seated on horse

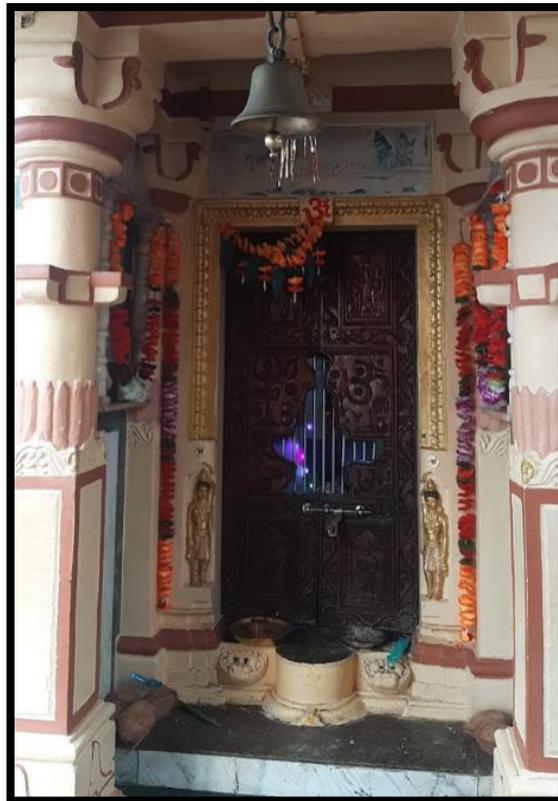


Figure 43. Vestibule of the temple

(Courtesy: Researcher)



Figure 44. View of the area during the Jakh Mela from the Kakkadbhit Temple

3.6 Conclusion

This holistic research on Yaksha helps the researcher to understand the art traditions in ancient India and their impact on the production of art and sculpture. The evolution of Yaksha iconography in ancient Indian art reflects a fascinating journey of cultural and religious transformation. The Mauryan period stands out as a pivotal era for Yaksha depiction, characterized by the creation of massive stone sculptures that portrayed these beings with remarkable detail and artistry. These sculptures, often found in the vicinity of stupas and other religious structures, served not only as artistic expressions but also as symbols of protection and guardianship. During the Sunga period, which followed the Mauryan dynasty, there was a change in the representation of Yaksha. While the basic features of Yaksha iconography were retained, there was a notable transition to relief sculptures. This change in artistic technique did not diminish the significance of Yaksha in art but rather provided a new dimension to their portrayal, showcasing the artistic innovation of the period.

The Kushana period marked another significant phase in the evolution of Yaksa iconography. Under the Kushana rule, new postures, such as squatting and crouching, were introduced, expanding the range of expressions and meanings associated with Yaksa. Despite these innovations, there was a gradual decline in the independent status of Yaksa, with Gupta and Post-Gupta art depicting them more as decorative motifs in temple structures rather than as central figures.

However, Yaksa did not lose their significance. During the early medieval period, particularly under Jainism, Yaksa gained prominence as Śāsanadevatā, or deities of command. In this context, Yaksa was worshipped with their own distinct iconography and rituals, highlighting their continued cultural and religious relevance.

The ethnographic survey provides a much more detailed understanding of the continuation of Yaksa worship and its practice in various regions and communities. This survey sheds light on how Yaksa worship has evolved over time, adapting to local beliefs and practices while retaining its core symbolism and significance.

Therefore, the evolution of Yaksa iconography in ancient Indian art reflects not only artistic innovation but also the changing religious and cultural landscape of the times. From being celebrated beings depicted in massive stone sculptures to serving as decorative motifs in temple structures, Yaksa's journey is a testament to the rich and diverse artistic heritage of ancient India.