

## Chapter-4

### Analysis and Discussion

#### 4.1 Yaksa and Other Demigods

In ancient Indian literary traditions, Yaksa, Gandharva, Naga, Rakshasa, Pisacha, and other similar beings, are often classified into a kindred group (Mishra 1987). These divine beings are classified likewise due to certain elements which are mystical. The ability to change physical forms, association with flying and being omnipresent, inhabiting natural spaces like the waters and forests are some of the common elements (Aggarwal 1956).

The Yaksa, Naga and Gandharva are often categorized as divine beings because they are said to be protectors, granters of boons and are worshipful (Coomaraswamy 1927). They were/ are worshipped with rituals and offerings like any other divinity of the greater pantheon (Coomaraswamy 1927). However, the Rakshasa and Pisacha classified into the associated group are not worshipped or pleased as a divinity. The maleficent aspects like creating commotion, possessing humans, eating flesh etc. are associated to them. This is often represented in the literature as mythological narratives and tales. The Rakshasa and Pisacha are often described in constant quarrel with the Yaksa, Naga, and Gandharva. This depicts the cosmic struggle between moral and immoral or order and chaos within the same cosmic background (Aggarwal 1956, Coomaraswamy 1927).

These divine beings are grouped together in ancient Indian literature despite of their dissimilarities. They are shown mainly in association with the gods and goddesses of the Brahminical, Buddhist and Jain pantheons as beings that populate the mythological world reflecting their multilayered nature.

The sculptural repertoire of the Yaksha, Gandharva and Naga in the Ganga valley is diverse. These divinities are portrayed both as associated and independent with their distinct iconographic elements (Mishra 1987, Coomaraswamy 1927).

The researcher, discusses briefly about the Gandharva and Naga cult and their representation in the sculptural imagery. Furthermore, will explore the differences and shared elements, highlighting the underlying cultural unity amidst religious diversity in ancient India. Through this comparative analysis, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the sculptural art of ancient India, showcasing the dynamic interplay between religion, art, and culture in shaping the artistic heritage of the region.

#### **4.2 The Gandharva**

Gandharva is the most celebrated and utilised imagery in ancient Indian art. Gandharva denotes ‘divine artists’ inhabiting the celestial world of the divinities (). In art and sculpture, they are portrayed as celestial musicians and dancers with exceptional beauty and talent. Gandharva’s are also described as lovers. They are associated with the arts, particularly music and dance, and are known for their melodious voices and mastery of musical instruments. Being passionate lovers and admirers the aspect of being romantic is often associated with them.

They are paired with the *Apsaras*, the beautiful nymphs often inhabiting the waters. Apsara literally denotes ‘moving in waters’ (*ap-sarini*) and they are often depicted as gorgeous dancers with wonderful poises (Mishra 1987). Both the Gandharva and Apsara are beautiful and romantic beings, often paired together.

The Gandharva and Apsara are often referred as attendants to the superior deities both in the literary traditions and in sculptural depictions. This section specifically describes the role of Gandharva and, an attempt is made to understand their origin and responsibilities in the religious pantheons.

The literary traditions provide numerous references to the Gandharva as performers of specific functions. There are several derivations of the term ‘*Gandharva*’ mentioned in the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Epics, and the Puranic literature. In RV VII, 77,5, Indra is stated to have cut apart a Gandharva to protect Brahmanas, commentator *Sayana* describes that the word denotes a ‘cloud’ (Griffith 1896 Translation).

## गामुदकं धारयतीति गन्धर्वो मेघः ।

*Reproduced from Panchamukhi 1951.*

Different *Rik* (ऋक्, meaning to praise or invoke) of the *Rigveda* mentions their characteristics such as, the Gandharva are identified as the regulator of Surya’s horses, protectors of *Soma* and *Vayukesa*. Gandharva is called *Visvavasu* and knows all the heavenly truths. They possess mystic powers, possess women, unite lovers, lives in the sky and air, etc. (RV. X, 139, 4,5,6; X, 85, 22; V, IX.110,3; I, 22,14) indicating their status as a demigod (Griffith 1896 RV Translation).

The Gandharva’s are a class of divinities often categorized with the Yaksha. Evident from *Manusmriti*, while narrating the origin of universe, ten Prajapati’s who created the seven Manus namely the *Maharishis* (the sages) and the *Yaksha, Rakshasa, Pisachas, Gandharva’s, Apsaras, Asura, Nagas, Sarpas, Suparanas, Pitris, Kinnaras, Vanaras* etc.

( यक्ष रक्षः पिशाचांश्च गन्धर्वाप्सरसोऽसुरान् ।  
नागान्सर्पान्सुपर्णांश्च पितृणां च पृथग्गणान् ॥ .....  
किन्नरान्वावरान्मत्स्थान्विविधांश्च विहंगमान्- chapt. I, 37-39

*Reproduced from Panchamukhi 1951.*

Their physiological and iconographical characteristics of the Gandharva are presented in fragmentary form in the literary sources. An attempt is made to put together the fragmentary reference and understand the iconography. Some Sanskrit verses provide a ground of the

Gandharva's as mythical divine beings. Few excerpts have been reproduced and explained about their personalities.

The Sanskrit lexicon refer the mythical beings among the *Deva-yoni* (sacred womb).

विद्याधरोऽप्सरो यक्षरक्षो गन्धर्व किन्नराः ।  
पिशाचो गुह्यकः सिद्धो भूतोऽमी देवयोनयः ॥

*Reproduced from Panchamukhi 1951.*

While commenting, *Kshirasami* explains the several groups as:

विद्याधराः जामूतवःहनादयः खड्ग गुटिकाञ्जनादि विद्याधारिणश्च । अप्सु सरत्यप्सरसो देव  
योपितः रम्भादयः । .... गन्धर्वास्तुम्बुरुप्रभृतयः देवगायनाः । किन्नराः भश्वादिमुखाः  
शृङ्गारिणः । पिशाचाः पिशिताशास्तामसाः स्वयं निर्माताः ।

*Reproduced from Panchamukhi 1951.*

The *Vidyadharas* are *Jimutvahana* and others who bear a sword, pills, magic ointments, and charms; the *Apsara* concubines of the gods moving in water namely *Rambha*; the *Gandharva* are the singers of gods, namely, *Tumburu*; *Kinnaras* are horse faced and are amorous; *Pisachas* are flesh eaters (Panchamukhi 1951).

The description of the images of the demigods are not mentioned in the Agama Text and technical literature (Panchamukhi 1951). There are few statements here and there which are collected to get a connected view of the Gandharva's. The *Matsya Purana*, *Agni Purana* and *Vishnudharmottara Purana* provides few particulars but not an overview of the iconography of the Gandharva's (Panchamukhi 1951).

There are no clearer details furnished about the physical forms of the Gandharva's in literature. The *Manasara* in chapter 58, Gandharva's are characterised by their erect or *sthanak* posture, singing and dancing with a lute or charming stick and other musical instruments. The *Vishnudharmottara Purana* mentions that the Gandharva's should be portrayed with a crown.

Their general characteristics are music, singing and offering of bunches of flowers etc (Panchamukhi 1951).

The Gandharva's were subsequently adopted by the Buddhist and Jain pantheons like the Yaksa. The Buddhist refer them as *Gandhabba* (Pali). Their description and functions did not change physically as discussed in the Vedic and Post- Vedic literature. The Buddhist tradition class them in the earthly divinities (including *Bhummadeva Naga*, Yaksa) whose function was to attend the Buddha and Bodhisattva. The Jain traditions refer them as musicians and dancers. The Jain cosmology also identify them as spiritual beings with specific roles tied to maintain cosmic balance and functioning of the universe.

From the above discussion it can be understood that the Gandharva played several roles throughout the religious pantheons. Their presence reflects beauty in music of water, wind, and clouds. They are dancers and musicians inhabiting the nature and participated not only in the heavenly celebrations but also in the mortal world. At the same time, they are also part of maintaining cosmic balance and protecting devotees.

### **4.3 The Naga**

Nagas is another group of entities in Ancient India who have received much importance and attention by scholars. Their worship is well known to the ancient religious practices and can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization (Vogel 1909). The Indus snake seal that depicts a seated figure being worshipped by two devotees which can be interpreted from their posture, who were hooded by two snakes (Vogel 1909). The image of the seal provides some ideas about snakes that those were treated as some sort of sub guardian deity (Vogel 1909).

Observing the literary traditions, the Rig Veda mentions '*Indra-Vritra*,' the protagonist Indra, the ruler of the Devas was depicted as the destroyer of Vritra, designated as *Ahisarpa* (snake) (Griffith 1896 *RV* Translation). The reference of Naga worship as an independent cult finds

mention in the Yajurveda (Fergusson 1971). However, the rituals, charms and rites against snakes and snake-worshipping communities are discussed in the Atharvaveda (Mishra 1987).

The epics mentions about the Naga, the Mahabharata provides a passage mentioning the societies worshipping the snakes and not the conventional Vedic divinities (Vogel 1926). The same epic provides a detailed story regarding the origin of the Naga and their associations. A list is provided in *Adi parva* as *Ashtanaga* (eight snakes) (Mishra 1987, Vogel 1926)

The Buddhists also incorporated the Naga in their pantheons. Several *Jataka* stories refer them as *Nagaraja* inhabiting the lower world (Mishra 1987). There are several references to Naga chiefs such as *Apalala*, *Kaliya* etc in the Buddhist literary traditions who came to pay respect to Buddha (Mishra 1987).

The theriomorphic form of Naga, the earliest evidence is from the Indus Valley Civilisation (Busaglio, 1987). Several terracotta Naga figurines have been unearthed at a placed called the sites of Chirand, Mathura, Bharhut etc. (Busaglio, 1987).

The literary traditions provide the iconographical characteristics of the Naga and their portrayal. The iconography of *Nagadeva* or the chief of the nagas has been vividly described in the *Amsumabhedagama* (Panda 1993). The text describes the figure having four hands and three eyes with five hooded snakes making a canopy (Rao 1916). He said to be standing on a *padmapitha* wearing a *karanda mukuta*, the hands are in Varada or Abhaya mudra (Rao 1916).

Another later text of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *Silparatna* describes the Naga as half snake half human (Panda 1993). The number of hoods range from three to nine, split tongue like a snake and the attributes include of a shield and sword (Panda 1993).

The prior discussion offers a concise overview of the Gandharva and Naga traditions. The brevity of the content arises from the extensive body of scholarship that has previously explores

these areas in depth, hence the repetitions of the analyses are not made here. However, it is important to understand the correlation of Yaksa, Gandharva, and Naga.

These divinities are present in the mortal world and are tangible manifestations of the elements. While distinct in origin, characteristics and function, these beings overlap symbolically in several ways. Yaksa associated with protection, wealth, and nature; Naga is similar associated with water, fertility and Gandharva embody the celestial musicians and dancers.

Together, these beings form a harmonious cosmological system where the protection of nature, wealth, and cosmic order are central. Their overlapping roles as guardians, protectors, and intermediaries create a rich symbolic framework in Indian religious traditions.

#### **4.4 Comparative Study of Yaksa and other demigods**

In the realm of Indian art and iconography, Yaksa, Gandharva, and Nagas stand out as fascinating subjects, each with its distinct physical characteristics and symbolism. Yaksa has been vastly portrayed as an independent divinity and their gradual blend in the larger pantheons through literature and sculptural depictions.

Gandharva's are celestial beings, often depicted as handsome, youthful personalities with enchanting musical abilities (Panchamukhi 1951). They are known for their melodious voices and mastery of musical instruments like such as lute. In contrast, Nagas are serpent-like beings, sometimes depicted with a human upper body and a serpent tail, or in a fully serpent form (Aggarwal 1956). The physical representation of the both are quite different; Gandharva's are portrayed as human-like beings with a focus on beauty and musical attributes. Nagas are depicted with a mix of human and serpent features, often with multiple snake heads and intricate serpent-like bodies, sometimes with hooded heads to signify their divine nature.

The following table provides a basic understanding of the physical representation of these mythical beings:

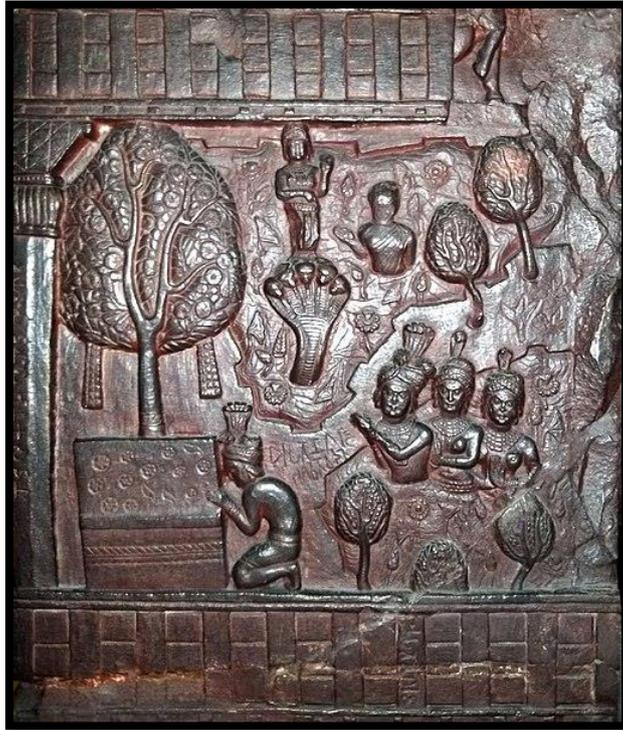
<i>Yaksa</i>	<i>Gandharva</i>	<i>Naga</i>
		

*Table 1. The following table show the depiction of Yaksa, Gandharva, and Naga in artistic representation.*

The natural inclination of the religious traditions in Ancient India towards polytheism gave rise to the development of several cults and philosophies over time. Including Yaksa, Gandharva, Naga, and other hybrid form. The religious thoughts were concretized and represented in the sculptural imagery. The researcher has selected these divinities to understand the comparison of sculptural representation because the literary traditions have grouped these divinities in one distinct category of celestial beings. These beings have shared characteristics such as living in forest, water bodies and trees; changing physical forms and omnipresent.

The Gandharva's have been represented as beautiful beings, flying, or playing musical instruments or with their counterparts Apsaras. Unlike the Yaksa, we do not find any free standing or independent sculpture of Gandharva. They have been executed in the Buddhist art as attendants. Their roles including playing instruments or music for Buddha, adorning stupa (symbolic of Buddha) with garlands (Amravati, Mathura) and being amorous with the Apsaras. Whereas the Nagas had a much better status. The literary traditions have provided descriptive evidences of the Naga. They have been represented in theriomorphic form (as serpents, example Bharhut) and anthropomorphic form (half human half snake, example Mathura, Bharhut etc).

The characteristic and iconographical features of Yaksa have been discussed in detail in the preceding chapters. Yaksa has been identified as a divinity, whose large-scale sculptures are reported since the Mauryan period. The sculptures were enormous free-standing effigies with a pot belly and money bag as one of the signifying attributes. Along with the Yaksa, several other demigods flourished in the same time frame including the Gandharva and the Naga.



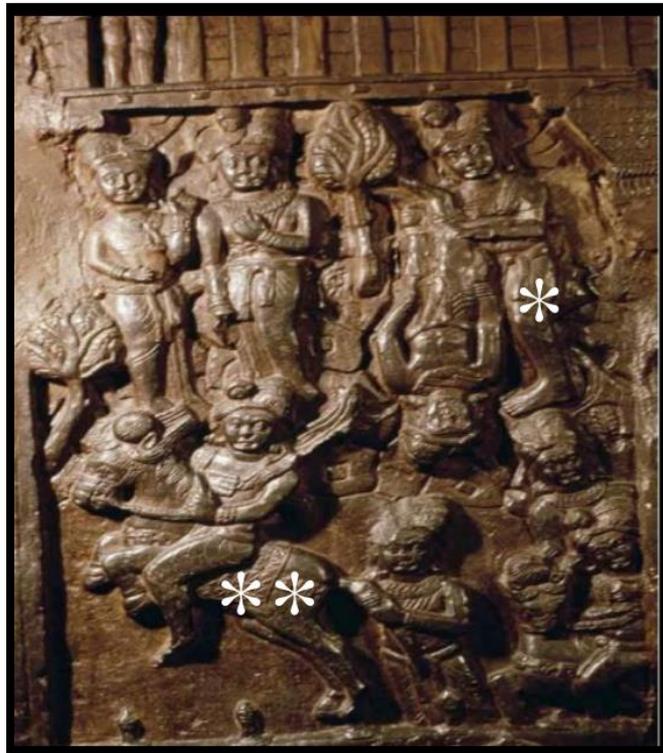
*Figure 1. Naga in Theriomorphic Form*  
(courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)



*Figure 2. Naga in Anthropomorphic Form*  
(courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)



*Figure 3. Gandharva with Apsara*  
*(Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi)*



*Figure 4. Yaksa (denoted with \*)*  
*(Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)*

## 4.5 Discussion

At the outset of the research, it was aimed to establish a degree of uniformity in the sculptural representation of Yaksa. The researcher tried to comprehend the concept of Yaksa and classify different types of sculptural representations and develop parameters for evaluating their identities. This initial approach likely aimed to create a framework for understanding the diverse representations of Yaksa in ancient Indian art and to establish a systematic method for analysing and interpreting these sculptures.

Before the advent of the massive sculptural representation, as reported from Parkham, it is assumed that these divinities were worshipped independently. The terracotta heads reported from various sites such as Mathura, Patna, Ahichhatra, Kaushambi, Tamluk etc. provides evidence. With the enthroning of the Mauryan, new features were added to the pre-existing cults including Yaksa.

Scholars have mentioned about the Mauryan art and its bifurcation into the court art (including the monolithic pillars) and local or folk art. However, the researcher believes that the term folk or local art is not appropriate in the case of the Yaksa sculptures because the execution of the folk art might have been small scale and specific to the communities. The enormous sculptures of Yaksa were produced at a superior level and just as a form of folk art. It is expected that the sculpting of the enormous effigies of the Yaksa were manufactured under the patronage of the Mauryan rulers. It is said so because without the support of the ruling administration, erecting such figurines would not have been possible.

The sculptures were produced not only for artistic depictions but for more political and religious aspirations. The effigies of Yaksa were placed at trade routes, significant crossings, and trade centres. This was a strategic move of the administration towards organization and functioning of the communities.

The placement of the Yaksa sculptures at strategic locations suggests a form of religious sanction by the ruling dynasty. This authorization was significant for ensuring that the traders, travellers, and visitors respected the divinity represented. Without such permissions, it would have been difficult to promote adherence and acceptance to the religious beliefs.

Since the ancient times trade and commerce played a crucial role. The trade centre's such as Mathura, Patna, Kaushambi etc., served as hubs of economic activity, attracting people from different regions. Erecting the Yaksa sculptures at these centres, the ruling dynasties could ensure that the indigenous belief systems reached a wider audience, including traders and merchants from distant land. It is also served as a form of maintaining cultural relations. It promoted a sense of cultural identity and pride among the artists and the followers.

Also, these locations served as major tax collection centres. The presence of these massive sculptures attracted the masses thereby making these locations ideal for collecting taxes and tolls which was not possible without the authorization of the ruling dynasty. The association of these divinities legitimised the taxation and revenue activities.

Another role of these Yaksa sculptures was that of protection and guardianship of the region. The placement of these sculptures at strategic locations served a dual purpose, first, spiritual protection of the traders and travellers passing and secondly, political control and authority over these regions

Hence, the sculptures reported from Parkham, Patna, Pawaya, Besnagar etc., are identified as independent divinities within the ancient societal framework is significant. The fact that these representations were indigenous implies that they were rooted in prevailing traditions and beliefs, rather than being imported or imposed from external sources.

The basic iconographical features of Yaksa have been traced as pot belly, decorated *Mauli* or turban, plain dhoti (sometimes decorative), attributes including money bag, club, staff (*danda*)

and presence of an inscription. The researcher takes these features as a pivotal point to distinguish Yaksa sculptures from other types of sculptures.

Several excavations and accidental discoveries have led to finding of sculptures from North India and Ganga Valley. The most famous sculpture of the Yaksa cult after the Parkham Yaksa is the female figurine reported from Didarganj (eastern Patna) and has been identified as Yaksi (female counterparts of the Yaksa) by the several stalwarts. The sculpture showcases high level of craftsmanship and execution. Observing the iconography, she wears beautiful ornaments and dhoti, head jewellery. The striking attribute is that she holds a fly-whisk (*Chauri*) in her right hand and the left is broken.

In the Indian sculptures of the major divinities lack holding of the fly-whisk as an attribute. Observing the Yaksi sculptures from Bharhut and Besnagar, these divinities are depicted with vegetation. Though the Besnagar Yaksi sculpture is partly damaged but the ornamentation and execution depicts her as a divinity.

Even though the findspot of these sculptures are different, they both display a level of commonality in the execution of drapery, postures, and ornamentation. The absence of flywhisk in the major divinity's iconography proves that, this attribute was associated with attendants or subordinate ranks.

Thus, the Didarganj sculpture might have served as a decorative piece of the Mauryan palace and not as a divinity to be worshipped. Therefore, referring the figurine as Yaksi remains debatable.

The emergence of Buddhism and Jainism led to the gradual incorporation of the pre-existing cults as evidenced by the sculptural representations. The Mauryan produced massive sculptures whereas the Sunga carved the Yaksa sculptures in relief. The remnants from Bharhut (remains housed in Indian Museum, Kolkata) depicts several Jataka tales and Yaksa as malefic or

secondary character. The interesting fact is that there is presence of inscriptions with the term 'Yakkho' (Sanskrit: Yaksha; Pali; Yakkho) denoting that they were independent at some point of time and their blend into Buddhism was a strategic move to prove the laity that the divinity worshipped by them was just an attendant to a major deity 'Buddha.' The sculptural representations of divinities such as Yaksha, Naga, and Gandharva not only symbolized religious beliefs but also played a significant role in the socio-political and economic landscape of the Mauryan and Sunga periods.

Yaksa sculptures were depicted in grotesques forms during the Kushana period. The Yaksha along with other divine beings including the Gandharva and Naga were now portrayed as attendants losing their prominence and status of being independent deity. Such depictions reflect a trend in which the pre-existing deities were assimilated in the greater pantheons.

The Gupta period witnessed the resurgence of Brahmanism, marked by construction of temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti. The final transformation of the Yaksha as demigod occurred during this period. They were incorporated in the Brahminical pantheon under Kubera, said to be the god of wealth and 'Yaksaraja' Chief of the Yaksha.

Also, concepts like *Bharvahaka*, *Pataravahaka Yaksha*, *Guhyaka Yaksha* etc were introduced and were depicted materially in the temple architecture. This assimilation was accompanied by the retention of certain iconographical depictions, indicating a process of syncretism and adaptation. Similarly, the Naga were blended into Brahmanical traditions, with Vasuki becoming associated with Shiva and Sheshnag with Vishnu. This blending of deities resulted in a mix of theriomorphic (animal-like) and anthropomorphic (human-like) iconography, reflecting the diverse cultural influences of the time. Gandharva's, on the other hand, were celestial musicians and singers with charming personalities. They were often depicted as flying

nymphs or as bearers of garlands, adding a sense of beauty and elegance to the artistic representations of this period.

Thus, Gupta period was characterized by a synthesis of diverse religious traditions, resulting in the incorporation of the pre-existing deities into the broader Brahminical framework, while also enriching the iconography and symbolism of the pantheon with new narratives and representations.

Literary traditions play a significant aspect for creating a background for the divinities and other beings. Several passages from the literature depicts the status and importance of Yaksha. One of the significant references come from a story, where Sujata a milkmaid brings a bowl of *payas* or sweet rice to the austere Siddhartha, and asks him if he was a 'Yaksha'. This narrative provides a base to comprehend that the Yaksha were pre-existing.

The celestial group includes the Yaksha, Gandharva and Naga and are identified as demigods. It is so because there are not extensive religious texts specifically attributed to them, nor any monumental architecture or religious building dedicated to them.

The depiction of these deities in sculptural forms are often treated as '*rural*'. '*folk*', '*tribal*' or '*popular*' art of a geographical region. However, the Yaksha remained popular and functioned at regional levels.

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya acknowledges the presence of the regional divinities as *Desadevatas* or a tutelary deity. Kautilya also mentions about the ritualistic practices, popularity and beliefs associated.

The Yaksha sculptures were placed in open spaces may be under a tree or near a water body. Therefore, no architectural monuments are reported, but it is assumed that there might have been a presence of a *Chhatra* made up of perishable item and did not survive the ravages of time. Other than free standing colossal sculptures, several terracotta figurines and plaques have

been reported from Ganga Valley. The true meaning of these plaques is not known but an assumption is made that these were the images of the divinities and served as a souvenir utilised for personal religion or for the household worship practice.

The existence of the cults and their material evidences provides a dynamic religious milieu. The art and sculpture were utilised as a medium of transferring the ideas and thoughts to the laity. Yaksa along with Gandharva and naga, became a popular theme of the sculptors. Even though they were not the conventional deities, these beings rivalled the establishing tradition and religious practices.

The process of incorporation and amalgamation was not instant but occurred over a period, marked by negotiations and adaptations between the different religious thoughts. Gradually, the concepts and ideas were blended in the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain pantheons, producing a new religious thought.

The ethnographic study conducted in the study area enabled the researcher to understand the contemporary form of the Yaksa. Presently, they are identified with terms like *Jakkho*, *Jokkho*, *Jhakiya*, *Jhakaiya baba*, *Bir baba*, *Brahma baba*, *Jacchi mata*, *Jokkhi* etc. These terms denote a divinity with powers of protection, wealth, and guardianship. The execution of the images is rudimentary in form but attributes like money bag, staff, vegetation remains constant.

The research methodically outlines the Yaksa cult, offering a nuanced understanding of its versatile nature through the dual lenses of literary traditions and sculptural representations. By delving into these diverse sources, profound insights into the religious and cultural significance of Yaksa worship, as well as its physical representation in ancient India, have been gleaned. The sculptural remnants discussed in this context serve as compelling indicators of the scale of organization and the widespread popularity not only of the Yaksa cult but also other coexisting cults.