

Abstract/ Summary

Thesis title: Sculptural Analysis of the Yaksa figurines from North India with Special Reference to Ganga Valley

The natural propensity of the religious traditions in Ancient India towards polytheism gave rise to several cults and philosophies in time. The development of the society and its belief systems led to the introduction of divinities such as the Yaksa, Gandharva, Naga, and other hybrid forms. These divinities were elementary and precursor to the depiction of the mainstream gods and goddesses. The gradual conceptualization of these thoughts led to the tangible representation of them. Eventually, art and sculpture became the medium of propagating the beliefs and religious systems.

The present research focusses on Yaksa often identified as demigods. The Yaksa constitutes the physical representation of the societies and their understanding towards religion. The religious texts of the Buddhist, Jain and Brahminical have depicted the Yaksa in different roles and responsibilities. They have been studied multifariously by several scholars like A. K Coomaraswamy and R. Mishra who opined that these were nature deities and worshipped by local population. However, these studies were governed by time bound research priorities. The Yaksa cult was carried out in isolation based on the literary traditions and generalization of their types and forms. This research work emphasises upon the sculptures availed and studied from various museum collections.

The main scope of this research lies in addressing the lacunae and providing a synchronised framework to understand the Yaksa cult and their specific identities. This required a comprehensive study of the geography, sculptures, inscriptions, and the associated intangible practices. To conduct the research, North India specifically the Ganga Valley was selected for the reason that the initial archaeological findings of Yaksa were discovered from this region.

The objectives of this work are to understand the nature of Yaksa, its sculptural representation and iconography, their amalgamation in Brahminism, Buddhism, Jainism and their physical representation and association with the other minor divinities. To achieve the objectives, extensive scrutiny of literature, field and museum visits and ethnographic survey was undertaken. The main scope of the work lies in addressing the lacunae mentioned and providing a complete understanding of the Yaksa cult.

The thesis constitutes of five chapters. Chapter one, it delves into the prior investigations conducted by scholars, highlighting their contributions and limitations. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the objectives, methodology employed and significance of the research. The chapter also provides the introduction of the physiography of the study area and political history.

Chapter Two, provides a detailed investigation of the literary sources. The description reveals the evolution of the Yaksa concept, its early manifestations and subsequent development. The ancient Indian literary traditions are filled with references to Yaksa. These mentions highlight the significant role played by them in the religious framework. Analysing the extensive literary materials, it is quite understood that the Yaksa had a pre-existing set of beliefs and rituals. eventually with the advent of the larger pantheons viz., Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism, they were incorporated as secondary deities. The Yaksa was incorporated into these pantheons slowly. The idea behind incorporation of these divinities was to expand and promote new ideologies, religious practices and apprehend the followers. Thus, the survey of the literature of ancient India enable to understand existing impact of Yaksa. Their integration into the higher cults of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Jainism demonstrates the adaptability and inclusivity of these religions, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of religious belief in ancient India. The thought of Yaksa was an outcome of a series of changes and development in the primitive religious and belief systems. The process included intricacies which were concretized over time. Furthermore, the chapter delves into the diverse designations of Yaksa in Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism. tradition, with certain Yaksa achieving elevated status within the Jain pantheon.

Chapter Three, this chapter emphasizes on the archaeological data and sculptures undertaken for the research work. This chapter examines the typological classification and sub categories of the Yaksa cult. The data is analysed and the iconographic features of Yaksa are standardised and the results of the ethnographic survey. This holistic research on Yaksa helps to understand the art traditions in ancient India and their impact on the art production. The evolution of Yaksa iconography in ancient Indian art reflects a fascinating journey of cultural and religious transformation. The Mauryan period stands out as a pivotal era for Yaksa depiction, characterized by the creation of massive stone sculptures that portrayed these beings with remarkable detail and artistry. During the Sunga period, which followed the Mauryan dynasty, there was a change in the representation of Yaksa. While the basic features of Yaksa

iconography were retained, there was a notable transition to relief sculptures. This change in artistic technique did not diminish the significance of Yaksa 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. This chapter also discusses the ethnographic survey, which 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.

Chapter Four, in this chapter, the data collected is further analysed. A comparative study is conducted between Yaksa and other demigods i.e., Gandharva and Naga. This chapter enables a better understanding of the status of Yaksa and others and their dynamism in the sculptural art. 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.

Chapter Five, this is the concluding chapter. This summarizes the key findings and emphasizes their relevance to the research objectives. It critically assesses the significance of the study's contribution while acknowledging its limitations. The chapter further outlines the avenues for the future research and addressing the remaining gaps in knowledge.