

Preface

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 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 because 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 research delves into the prior investigations conducted by scholars, highlighting their contributions and limitations towards the Yaksa cult. The literary traditions reveal the evolution of the Yaksa concept, its early manifestations and subsequent development. 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.

The research further emphasizes on the archaeological data and sculptures to examine the typological classification and sub categories of the Yaksa cult. An ethnographic survey is undertaken to understand the contemporary traditions associated with Yaksa. A comparative study is conducted between Yaksa and other demigods i.e., Gandharva and Naga. It enabled 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.

This research work 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 work further outlines the avenues for the future research and addressing the remaining gaps in knowledge.