

Semi Divine Beings in the Hindu-Buddhist Religious Texts and Art: A Case Study of Yakshas and Yākshinīs

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Abstract

Indian religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, are rich in their long-standing traditional development of deities and scriptures, drawing inspiration from earlier Vedism and Brahmanism. There are several levels of divinity, including divine and semi-divine beings. The semi-divine beings include tree spirits (Yakshas), pond spirits (Nagas), and celestial musicians (Gandharvas), among others. These are not only mentioned in different texts but also depicted in different types of Art. Yakshas are the oldest anthropomorphic figures, which were depicted in the oldest schools of Indian Art, such as Bharhut and Sanchi, where other prominent divine figures, including that of the Buddha, were prohibited. In these schools of Art, Yakshas were depicted as guardian deities in specific scenes. Later on, other divine images, including that of Buddha, were introduced in the later schools of Art, which also included Yakshas in subservient roles. Mathura and Gandhara are the later schools, which have essential examples of Yakshas depicted in various important scenes of Buddhist Art. The focus of this paper is on the Yakshas and Yākshinīs, or, in other words, the tree spirits. The paper discusses their nature, status, and development throughout the ages, as reflected in Hindu and Buddhist texts such as the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, and Buddhist sutras. It also includes the depiction of Yakshas and Yākshinīs in the various artistic traditions of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Art schools of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, such as those of Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura, and Gandhara. It will also include a possible iconographic symbolism and Socio-Religious Background, focusing on semi-divine beings in the executed Art.

Keywords: Semi-divine Beings, Yakshas and Yākshinīs, Hindu-Buddhist Texts, Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura, Gandhara Art.

Introduction

In the earliest Vedic texts, Yakshas have not been clearly defined, but they are mentioned without any distinction between wonderful and awful creatures. According to Hillebrand (1899 [2016]), the earliest meaning of Yakshas is "magician, uncivilised beings, invisible spiritual beings of exalted character". In this regard, Keith (1989) mentioned the word Yaksha as connected with the root "Yaj", which means "to worship with offerings". However, many scholars believe that the word derives from the root "yaks," which means to move quickly towards, or to glisten or flash upon. This was indeed the true root of the word yaks would connote the fleeting appearance of light that flares upon one's vision. This derivative would therefore suggest that the Yaksha is a short-lived, phantom-like being (Coomaraswamy, 1993, p. 119-20).

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Yakshas and Yākshinīs are considered in Indian mythologies as an extensive class of nature spirits, commonly caring and sometimes unreliable custodians of the natural treasures hidden within the earth and tree roots. Yakshas and Yākshinīs are depicted in Indian Art as caretaker deities (Richards, 1995 p., 28). The word "Yaksha" is mentioned numerous times in the Vedas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads.

Yakshas were typically represented as dvarapalas, or guardians of the gates of shrines. It might be accepted that practically every building must be secured by a spirit protector. That people have been sacrificed and laid in the foundation of structures is well known. Jatakas have an early informative precedent in which the incredible gate (dvara) is protected by devata, extraordinary spirits (Coomaraswamy, 1931, p. 8).

The worship of Yakshas and Yākshinīs most likely returned to a more established rural background, between the third century BC and the second century A.D. They occur in the urban scene and cannot be portrayed or rejected as the focal point of minor, only urban, 'folk' cults. The impressive stone images from Mathura, Sanchi, Bharhut, and Gandhara were the result of urban workshops, financed by wealthy urban supporters. They portrayed the presence of iconographic traditions, distinctive skills, and an intricate system of veneration in the places of worship. The moneybag that the Yaksha, some of the time, holds in his left hand associates them with wealth (Sastri, 1959, p. 46). The Yaksha himself progressively takes on an urbane look, and it is hard to recognize a portion of the Yaksha figures and pictures of complex and wealthy worldly men of substance (Singh, 2004, p. 383). During the Mauryan period, the worship of the Yaksha image was perhaps shown as an isolated cult. An exceptionally well-preserved, almost 6-feet-high, isolated stone yaksha image found at Noh, near Bharatpur, is regarded as one of the oldest stone depictions in northern India. By the second-third century BC, Yakshas and Yākshinīs had begun to be incorporated into Buddhist depictions (Harle, 1994, p. 64). The Yaksha cult appears to have been freely incorporated into Brahmanical Hindu traditions during the Kushana period. The late Gupta period saw the Yaksha figure adopted as the guardian figure or semi-god. In the 'conventional' Hindu iconographical custom, with Kubera, the head of the Yaksha, is seen as lord of wealth and protector of the northern direction. In the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D., Yakshas and Yākshinīs were adopted as supernatural attendants in Jain iconography (Hooja, 2004, p. 375).

The worship of Yaksha idols and religious ceremonies of Yakshas were non-Aryan characters, which shows that Yakshas were originally non-Aryan deities. This is because the Vedic Aryans were not idol-worshippers, and their gods did not have anthropomorphic presence. In contrast, other Vedic sections were idolaters. The Yaksha images are the first anthropomorphic representations of any divinity in stone, featuring a consistent standard monograph, where iconographic features were adopted from non-Aryan institutions. There were idolatrous classes mentioned in the Vedas, such as Sisnadeva and Muradevas. The later literature and Art both confirm that the iconic features of Yakshas had originated from a non-Aryan institution that inspired the Vedic literature. The association of sex with Yakshas and a reference to Sisnadeva in the Rig-Veda also suggest that there might have been some sensible Yakshas in the Vedic society for the common folk to fulfil the religious needs of non-Aryans who also worshipped the Muras and Sisnas. To please the Yakshas, they would offer human flesh and blood and hold festivals at the Yakshas' locales. This manner of their worship also indicates that it was different from the cult of typically Vedic deities. The Vedic writing presents a short period of faith in the Yaksha with a high-god concept. With time, they became unequipped to achieve the higher goal of human presence, such as moksha (liberation), for which they were themselves struggling and venerated the Brahmanical divine beings or supplicated the Buddha or Mahavira (Misra, 1981, p. 87).

Yakshas and Yashis in Text

Both semi-divinities are known from the texts of the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, and Buddhist sutras. All of them are dealt with as associate divinities, expressed in both genders as guardian deities, mainly with a beneficent character and rarely a demonical one.

Yakshas and Yākshinīs in Vedic Text

An investigation of the idea of Yakshas reveals them to be closer to nature spirits. The beginnings of the Yaksha cult are found in the Rigveda. To make the Vedic Yaksha justifiable, the examination of the references in the Rigveda is vital. The word Yaksha is mentioned in the following sequence in the Vedic text. Yakshas are mentioned in Vedic mythologies in both benevolent and malevolent senses. In "RV, X.85.5", Yakshas are mentioned in a virtuous sense while in "RV, V.70.4" and "RV, VII.61.5", mentioned as dreadful and not somebody to be partnered with, in "RV, VII.56.16." mentioned as a beautiful being, in "RV, VII.88.6" Yaksha is honorific of Varuna, in an another verse Yaksha is mentioned as a primitive deity inhabiting the underworld and in some verses stated as god, either by obvious proclamation or by suggestion. In these texts, a striking point is the undecided approach towards the Yakshas, viz., the mentality of high regard as in the Rig Veda, VII. 56. 16, VII.88.6 and the state of mind of doubt and. defamation as mentioned by the Rigveda, IV.3.13 and V.70.4. This inward clash, later, ended up being strikingly separate in the twin parts of the idea of Yakshas, viz, benevolent and malevolent. Yaksha is all over the place, as in the Rig-Veda (X.88.13). Coomaraswamy (1993, p. 235) has said that in the Rig-Veda, IV.3.13 and V.70.4, Yaksha will be a god if one pays no attention to its malevolent character. However, his material identity is still especially missing. Only Rigveda, VII.56.16, mentions the Yaksha's beautiful form, and no further details are available about its appearance or features. In the Rig-Veda, despite Yaksha having come to be acknowledged as a divine being, he too was immaterial, like the various Vedic divinities. Yaksha, in his interpretation, has later clarified the physical part of the Vedic divine beings (Banerjea, 2004, p. 49, Carbone, 2008, p.14).

Rig-Veda II.5.1 mentioned the Yakshas as the guardians of the natural treasures. The word "Yaksha" is compounded as "Yakshadru" and "Yakshliabhrish" in some other Vedic texts, where scholars hold different opinions about its meaning. According to Coomaraswamy, in RV 1.190-4, the name Yakshadru occurs, which means simply that the one who offers sacrificial worship, while Yaksha appears as Yaksha. Bailey (1932, p.154-55) stated that, according to Coomaraswamy, Grassmann, Geldner and Hertel's explanation of the RV VII 56-16 means Yaksha-aspect, while Hillebrandt said about it that Maruts are spiers out of Yaksha. And Bailey says that the wonder of Brihaspati spreads in Devoka and on earth like droves of creatures (steeds) conveying a Yaksha. Yakshliabhrit is here, a horse that one may see a richly clad chieftain in it. In this manner, in perspective of such repercussions of the word Yaksha, it might be stated, in concurrence with Coomaraswamy, that the entire substance of the word Yaksha incorporates the thought of sudden iridescence, incredible or 'amazing indication of something typically imperceptible and puzzling force legitimately to be adored'. Despite the variety in the importance of the word, this view is held extensively (Coomaraswamy, 1931, p. 236).

One of the most significant semantic developments of the word in the later Vedic period is the emergence of Yaksha as a nebulous concept. Indeed, in something like one entry in the Rig-Veda (VII.61.5), Yaksha is viewed as an imperceptible enemy. In some other passages, the Brahma-Yaksha is a ghostly being. A comparative thought is communicated in the Maya philosophy, where Indra portrays to the Rishis what the Brahma-Yaksha resembles. Eventually, this idea of apparition may have prompted the notion of Yaksha as a poorly omened sign or animal in the Kama Sutra

(IX. 3.3). Yaksha was associated with this concept, which was later reflected in a later garb. This improvement proclaimed the change of Yaksha into a satanic being. However, it is evident from the Vedic texts that, in the sense of a deity, he remains there, albeit in a distinctly different form, one that is less material, less apparent, and more spiritual, and, like the majority of the Vedic gods, representative that this ill-defined Yaksha was considered as a Deva or god (Lochtefeld 2002:430). Atharva Veda, "X, 7, 38" stated that "An incredible Yaksa amidst the universe, resting in concentrated-energy (tapas) on the back of the waters, in that are set whatever divine beings there be, similar to the parts of a tree about a trunk" concerning Varuna, Brahman or Prajapati as the highest and extreme source of life. The importance is to be connected to this idea of the Tree of Life springing from the navel. Yakshas are essentially vegetation spirits, protectors of the vegetative source of life and hence closely associated with water. This concept of the origin of life in the waters are put forward in the later decorative Art, specialty of the water-cosmology by the constantly repeating procedure of a lotus rhizome bearing leaves and flowers, frequently supporting or confining winged creatures and animals and ordinarily springing from the mouth or navel of a Yaksha, or the more clear water symbols, the filled vessel (punna-ghata) or open jaws of a makara or a fish-tailed elephant (Lazarus, 1896, p. 37).

Atharva Veda VIII, 10, 28 accepts Yakshas in their familiar sense, where Kubera and his son are called Panyajana, and Yaksas are summoned along with various divine beings referenced in a similar section of A.V., XI, 6, 10 (ibid., p. 86).

Yakhshas and Yākshinīs in Brahmanas and Upanishads

The Brahmana and Upanishads effectively describe the Yaksha as a great divinity with immense power. In Brahmana, Brahman says by concentrated energy (tapas) I became the primal Yaksha; in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, 5, 4 he who realizes that extraordinary Yaksha as the primal-born, that will be, that Brahma is the Real, he subdues these universes; in Kena Upanishad, 3,(15), and Jainiiniya Upanishad Brahmana, IV, 20, where Brahman indicates him-self to the divine beings, who know him not, they ask "What Yaksha is this?," and come finally to know through "Uma/divine power " that it is Brahman. All the texts indicate the Yakshas as wonderful beings. As already mentioned, the concept of the Yakshas is clearly outlined in the Atharva Veda, and it becomes even clearer in the Upanishads. The Brahman-Yaksha of the Upanishads signifies the same idea as in the Rig-Veda, where it is essentially applicable to Varuna. The transitional stage is also mentioned in the Atharva Veda, where the inhabiting soul or self of man is called an at (Coomaraswamy, 1931, p. 2-3)

The Hindu stories, as well as Jain and Buddhist writings, provide authentic evidence in the form of portrayals of non-Vedic cult worship, demonstrating ceremonial practices and offerings that are absent from the remedies of the Vedas. The cult of offering and gift giving can be believed to have its source in the traditions related with the offerings to Yakshas as early as first-second century A.D. Terracottas from the second century BC point to a built up Collection of mudras (hand gestures) and images, for example, the pot, the trident, the lance, the lotus, the regal umbrella, palm-prints, the offering of flowers and the giving of bounty as the showering of coins. Further related characteristics, such as the axe, trident, mace, cakra, lance, and mangalas, for example, the lotus, palm print, paired fish, and the pot, have been associated with the love of the town goddess (Ahuja 2001: 225). The Mahabharata (3, 84, and 105) likewise gives textual proof of the type of early shrines related with the worship of Yaksha and goddess sanctuaries related with Hariti, basically a stone table or altar set underneath a tree sacrosanct to the Yaksha or at a shrine to the goddess (Coomaraswamy, 1971, p. 9-10,18).

Yakshas and Yākshinīs in Buddhist Texts

In Buddhist mythology, the Yakṣa are the attendants of Vaiśravaṇa/Kubera, the custodian of the northern quarter, an advantageous god who guards the righteous. The term likewise alludes to the Twelve Heavenly Generals who protect Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha. The-Mahamayuri-Vidyaraini-Sutra, dates back to 4th century, mentioned that the Yakshas are summoned to look for the security of the Buddha Dharma and the text gives an extensive list of Yaksha's dwelling cities of India including Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka (Agravala, 1942, p. 28). The Tree is here too, an exceptionally prominent symbol in the stories of the historical Buddha, who was brought into the world under a Sal tree and who attained enlightenment under the Pipal, or Bodhi tree. In this manner, it is justifiable that the prior idea of tree worship was adopted into the Buddhist pantheon. The Bodhi tree truly turned into a reference to the Buddha himself as plainly showed in Kalinga-Bodhi-Jataka, which refers to an assortment of stories concerning the Buddha's past incarnations where the Buddha discloses that because of its genuine relationship with realization, it is just the Tree that might be substituted for his very own embodiment as an object of worship. As a vital component of the previous cosmology in India, Yakshas and Yākshinīs were incorporated into the Buddhist faith. The Buddha and generations of his disciples never challenged their beliefs or disturbed their cultic activity. These nature spirits turn into supernatural partners of the Buddha and defenders of his devotees. It has also been asserted that Yākshinīs and Yakshas are referenced in the biographies of the historical Buddha, as the trees under which he achieved enlightenment and entered the state of parinirvana were believed to be Yaksha shrines (Rouse, 1901, p.143-44). The Buddhist Sutra also provides evidence of this custom at an early Yaksha shrine, dedicated to the Yaksha Purnabhadra (Elgood, 2004, p. 338).

Yakshas and Yākshinīs in Art

Before the anthropomorphic representation emerged during the third century B.C., the pillars of the Mauryan Empire were decorated with biological and geometrical designs, as well as animal motifs and reliefs. There was no concept of figural portrayal in South Asia. Yakshi sculptures are considered the first anthropomorphic representations in Indian sculpture. Indeed, even in Buddhist holy places, the Buddha's life stories were represented in early railings of stupas, or funerary mounds, only with aniconic images. Anthropomorphic representation of classic Indian religions did not exist until the first century B.C. (Misra, 1981, p. 87). The Indian non-Buddhist Art that we have proof of in the time of Ashoka and in the period quickly following Ashoka, is essentially concerned with the religion of nature-spirits-the Earth Goddess, the Nagas or Serpent lords of the waters, and the Yaksha rulers who rule the four quarters. The Maurya types are represented by the well-known unattached female figure at Besnagar and the figure from Parkham, now in the Mathura Museum. The early Buddhist crafts of Sanchi and Bharhut, presumably somewhat later, reflect the predominance of the animistic cult in depicting low-relief figures of the Yaksha Guardians of the four quarters as defenders of the entrance gateway. Thus, the nature-spirit should act as the guardians of Buddhist holy places, showing the vital victory of Buddhism, as evidenced in the Buddhist texts, which depict a nature-spirit protecting the Buddha during a stormy week (Coomaraswamy, 1916, p. 152).

Representation at Bharut and Sanchi

The instances of Indian Yākshinīs appear on the door railings of Bharhut and Sanchi, where they surround and adorn the sanctuaries dedicated to the Buddha. These Yākshinīs were among the principal pictures to welcome followers as they entered the sacred area for circumambulation of

the stupa—all four thuranas of the Sanchi stupa held up by Yākshinīs, at least two larger and two smaller. According to the reliable accounts of the Yākshinīs, set along the edges of monasteries, one can infer that they served as protector gods to secure the stupa. The yearly Yakshi Shalabhanjika, literally translated as the one who is breaking the branch of the shala/sal tree, So the yakshi from the eastern door of Stupa 1 at Sanchi is shalabjanjika, originated from a pre-Buddhist, Indian story, where extraordinary youthful ladies were said to introduce spring by dismissing a tree trunk while parting from a branch, to arouse the tree into blooming. Asoka, Mango, and Shala trees are commonly represented with the yakshi. The Yakshi is depicted as beautiful and voluptuous in a tribanga pose, with ample hips, a slight waist, strong shoulders, and spherical breasts, wearing only a pearl necklace that falls between her exposed breasts and a belt around her hips. She wears 17 substantial anklets on each leg and 13 armllets on each arm, and her hair falls behind her, complemented by elegant ponytails. Her bejewelled belt is known as a mekhala, as seen on pre-Maurya terracotta figures of fertility goddesses (Cohn-Wiener, 1939, p. 28).

Representation in Mathura

The Yaksha and Yākshinīs, or Devatas, were among the most valued subjects for Buddhist railing pillars of the Mathuran School. The figures of Yaksha and Yakshi were prevalent subjects in early Indian sculptures, who functioned as guardians of the wealth of the earth and also as local guardian spirits. Their ruler, Kubera, also known as Jambhala, was the God of Wealth and one of the most well-known divinities to be enlisted on the Buddhist cause during a time of growing prosperity. He is well represented among Kushan works from Mathura as a glorious figure holding a drinking vessel and frequently a bag of gold, and sometimes appears to look sufficiently intoxicated to need the help of Yaksha attendants. In Palikhera Block figure 10 indicates Kubera seated on an omphalos-like seat of authority holding a mug, while attended by his Yaksha court, one of whom holds a bunch of grapes. Behind these figures a rich background of vegetation is shown, likely intended to speak to one of the garden nurseries of the Yaksha lord in his mountain domain on the mythical Mount Kailasa, maybe the renowned Caitraratha where the trees were said to have jeweled leaves and excellent young ladies as fruits. The unconventional throne of Kubera symbolises the mountain itself. Similarly, a Kushan Mathuran stone pedestal from Maholi depicts an intoxicated Yakshi sinking defenselessly to her knees as she is helped by Yaksha revellers (Carter, 1982, p. 251).

Although such bacchanalian deeds concerning Yakshas and related creatures may appear to be paltry or ill-suited to Buddhist imagery, it is imperative to stress that, Kubera and the Yakshas were primeval lords of all "wet and shining" nature in its exceptionally embodiment (rasa) as contained in rain, dew, sap, blood, semen, and spirituous alcohol (sura). Not only were the Yakshas thought to be imbibers, but also guardians of the liquid essence of fertility, the water vitae or amrita substance, which they conveyed in flasks and cups, prefiguring the vessel of the otherworldly elixir of eternality (amritakalasa) carried by the future Buddha Maitreya and later by other Bodhisattvas (Carter, 1982, p. 52).

In the Buddhist legends about Kubera as Pancika and his wives (Nanda, Abhirati, Hariti), the character of Hariti is substantially more complex. In later Art, the type of Hariti is nearly adapted to that of Sri-Lakshmi. In a few places, there is an indication of an association between the goddess Sri (Lakshmi) and Yakshas. For example, as the spouse of Dharma in the Epic, she is the mother of Kamadeva, and her hand bears the sign of a Makara. In Jataka No. 392, she is the daughter of Dhataratha, who is a Yaksha at Bharhut (Coomaraswamy, 1931, p. 4).

Representation in Gandhara Art

Sculptures in Gandharan Art were a combination of different religions, cultures, or ideas, often a fusion of Graeco-Roman, Indian, and Parthian styles and iconographies. During the Kushan dynasty, the images of Yakshas and Yākshinīs flourished. The characteristics of Gandharan Yākshinīs are similar to those of Indian Yākshinīs; however, due to successive invasions by Romans, Greeks, and Persians over centuries, Gandharan Art was stylistically influenced (Rowland, 1965, p.115). In Gandhara, they are depicted as dryads/wood nymphs, wearing foreign attire, and generally remain underneath an unidentifiable tree. In contrast, the Sanchi Yakshi is not as exaggerated as the Gandhara Yakshi. Gandharan Yākshinīs frequently remain over a purna kalasa, or fortunate pot, which was in old Indian customs the symbol of beauty and favourable luck. They commonly stand underneath foliage instead of a tree branch (Coomaraswamy, 1916, 145-46).

Gandharan Yākshinīs differ from the Sanchi Yakshi, which were sculpted in the round and set outside stupa doors. Gandharan Yākshinīs serve less as protectors of the Buddhist faith and are increasingly subtle in their typical iconography. In Gandhara, they are more clearly defined as compositional devices between narrative relief panels. Corinthian pilasters often isolated reliefs in Gandhara; however, on different occasions, the reliefs were separated by Yakshi figures in a standing position. In India, the male Yaksha sometimes assumes the position of a column, taking on a supportive role. While the role of female beauty taking the place of columns is a purely Greek architectural idea, revisiting the caryatids supporting the patio of the Erechtheion in Athens. They initially appeared in ancient Greek Art around the mid-6th century B.C. and were also used in Roman architecture. The Gandharan Yākshinīs, however, presumably influenced by Greek caryatids, don't remain in the round, replacing columns; they are depicted primarily in relief as a replacing pilaster. They are installed not to grace the gateway, but instead depicted as beautifying components serving a relief panel, or may serve as scene separators. (Assomull, 2013, 48-9). According to Sir John Marshall, the first four/five decades of Kushan rule were the developmental and most significant period in the history of Art, during which artists were in a position to merge Greek and local ideas in Art and create a new, synthetic religious Art form to fulfil the needs of the Buddhist religion. The Gandharan artists have amalgamated some Indian traditions regarding Yakshas and Yākshinīs with foreign ideas, depending on their location and period (Marshall, 1980, p. 47, 71).

Descriptive study of Yakshas and Yākshinīs**Example from Bharhut****Figure 1: Yākshinī, Bharhut (Asher (Ed.), 2003: 35)****Description**

Yakshini standing figure shown hugging a tree with her left hand and foot round the trunk. Her left hand touching the v part and holding the branch with her right hand above her head. She has upright head as if she looks at far distance like a guard. Her nude body is bedecked with jewelry and underwear. The jewelry includes, ear pendants, heavy necklaces, bangles in wrist and below the calf of her legs.

Example from Sanchi

Figure 2: Yakshini from Sanchi Stupa, (Coomaraswamy 1916, fig. A).



Description

The bulky and almost nude Yakshini is standing, grasping the branches of the tree above her head and her right leg is wrapped around its trunk. She is bedecked with necklace, belt around waist and bangles in wrist and leg.

Example from Mathura

Figure 3: Railing Pillar with a Salabhanjika, Mathura, Kushan Period, second century AD. Carter, 1982: Figure No. 9).

**Description**

Salabhanjika is depicted in standing position, with her right hand is touching a tree branch above her head, while she holds her right breast with her left hand. She is nude except for the ear pendants, double necklace, bangles, and underwear.

Figure 4: Palikhera Block, Mathura, Kushan Period, Mathura Museum, (Carter, 1982: Figure no. 10)



Description

Yaksha Kubera is shown seated with left leg bent above the *omphalos*-like throne while his right leg is laying on the ground. Attended in his court with a tankard in his right hand near his chest. He is nude except for the underwear. In background a rich vegetation is shown, which according to Carter (1982:252) is probably the representation of one of the gardens of the Yaksha king in his mountain realm on the mythical mount Kailasa. His throne itself symbolizes the mountain.

Examples from Gandhara

Figure 5: Conversion of Yaksha Atavika by Buddha. (Photo by researcher from Peshawar Museum).



Description

The broken Panel is showing Buddha converting a barbarian Yaksha Atavika to Buddhism. The bearded Yaksha Atavika is standing to the right facing towards the Buddha with a child in his lap. He wears a short trouser with upper garment and his necklace has a tree lead at the center.

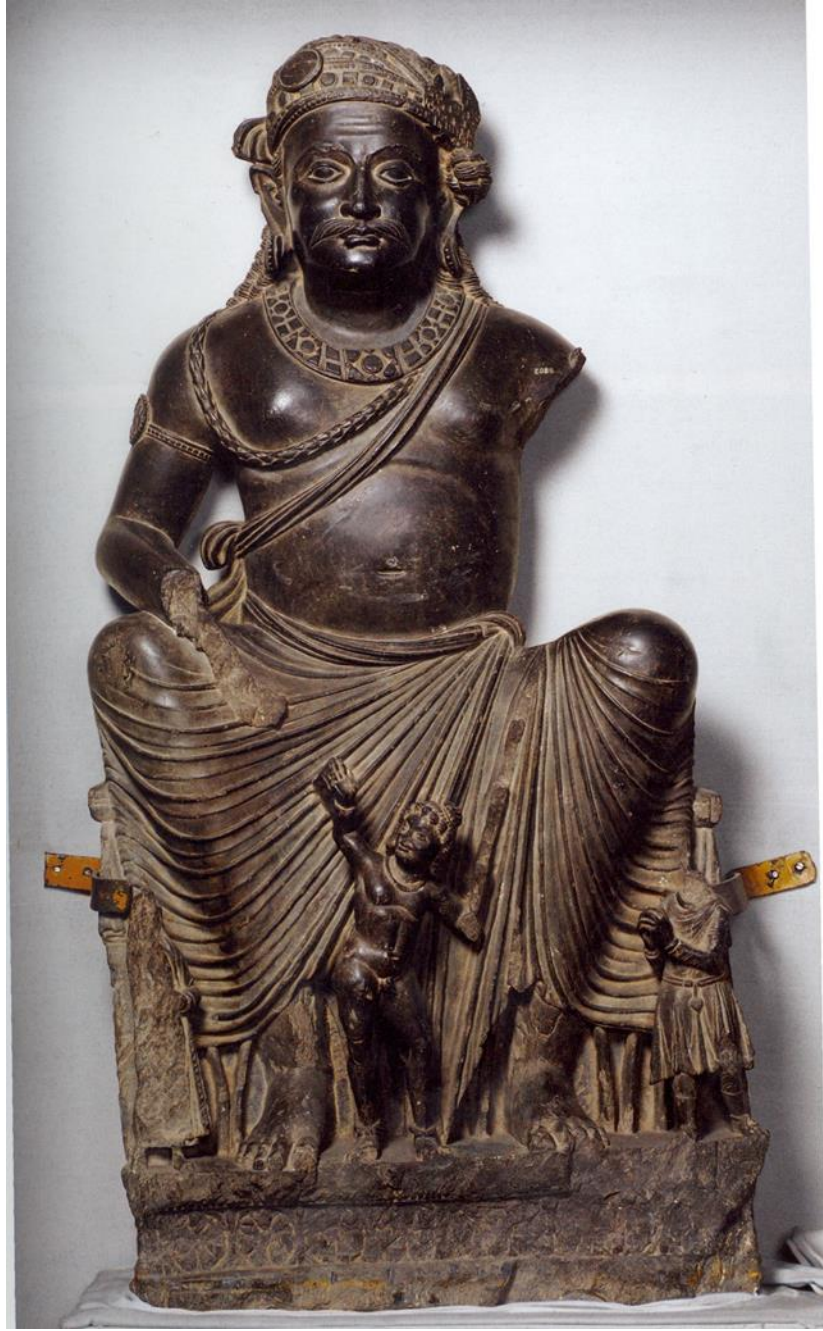
Figure 6: Hariti-Ardoxsho and Panchika-Kubera, Sahri Bahlol 2nd- 3rd century, Peshawar Museum (PM_3014)



Description

The couple is sitting in European fashion on a couch. Panchika is holding a staff in his right hand, while Harithi holds a cornucopia in her left hand and a money bag in the right.

Figure 7: Yaksha with child between legs, from Guides Mess Mardan, 2nd -3rd century, Peshawar Museum (PM-2953)

**Description**

This sculpture depicts a figure of bejeweled Panchika seated on a couch with an elaborate headdress, looking forward. His figure is positioned in a similar stance to those sculptures in which

Panchika is accompanied by Harithi. In this case, it appears that the apparent isolation of Panchika is because the right portion is missing. Panchika's left arm is broken at shoulder level, while his right hand is placed on his thigh. The lower garment is transparent, with a sling or belt-shaped element crossing over the chest and left shoulder. The *dhoti* is marked by slightly curved incised lines. A nude child is depicted standing between the legs of Panchika. Two figures of reduced size, located to the left and right of Panchika likely represent the donors.

Figure 8: Yākshinī Haritī with three children, Sikri, 2nd -3rd century, Central Museum Lahore, No. G-102



Description**Figure 9: An independent Yākshinī representation (Kurita, 2003)**



Figure 10: Yakshas standing on pots and holding tree branches are flanking the dream of Māyā on a Stūpa drum panel, from Jamālgarhī, The British Museum, (Zwalf, 1996, Fig. No. 141).



Description

The broken Stupa drum panel is showing the Dream of May. On each side is a framed and fleshy Yaksha standing on a pot base with averted rims. Both are naked, their genitals are visible, and their legs are crossed at the ankles. The right one of the panels is depicted with his left raised arm to hold foliage while his right hand is resting on his thigh. The left one is also with raised left hand while his right hand is raised near his shoulder with open palm.

Figure 11: The episode of Srīgupta inviting Buddha for a meal. On two Corinthian pilasters Yakshas are depicted (PM_02795)



Description

The rectangular relief is depicted with two scenes. To the right of the Buddha, the kneeling Shrigupta with hands broken is probably in *namashkara mudhra*. Behind him another turbaned

figure is standing in *namashkara mudra*. Between the heads of *shrigupta* and the other figure a head of a *Yaksha* is visible under the door cornice.

The two Corinthian pilasters are provided one at the right and the other separating the two scenes. The left pilaster has a defaced *Yaksha* in *Anjali mudra*, standing on a lotus pedestal. The second pilaster also has a figure on a square base.

Figure 12: Yākshinī under a tree standing on a pot (PM_00116)



Description

This broken panel has two scenes where the left one is missing. The *Yākshinī* is depicted as the scene separator between the two scenes. She is standing on a pot under the stylized palm tree, framed in a bead-and-reel molding. She grasps the palm leaf with her raised right hand while her right hand is resting on her hip. She wears *dhoti* and a scarp draped around the shoulders and hanging free at the sides. Her upper body is nude up to waist. She only wears a necklace.

Figure 13: Stone fragment of frieze with two worshippers while a Yākshinī stands in frame, from Sahri Bahlol, Mardan (PM_01187)



Description

The stone fragment of frieze with two worshippers and *Yākshinī* stands in frame.

To the right of the frieze a Yākshinī is framed in *tribanga* pose on stone slab supported by square stone under arboreal canopy. She holds the branch of the tree with her right hand while left hand is resting on her hip. She wears headdress, ear pendants, a necklace, a shawl hanging down behind her shoulders. Her upper body is nude and wears *dhoti* as lower garment tied around her waist.

Discussion

At the time of the birth of Śākyamuni, Māyādevī has been shown in the typical pose of a Yakshini (the female tree spirit). Thus, the sculptor elevated her to the level of at least that of heavenly being. When Buddha was elevated to the highest level of beings how could they have forgotten his mother to be just a human like others?

Yakshas and Yākshinīs are subject to the great king Vessāvana of the Northern quarter of the world. The first heaven which is just above the human state is that of the four Mahārāja-s of the four cardinal points of the world. These great kings, as the texts mentions, paid visits to Buddha Śākyamuni as stated in the Sutta 32, verse, 2. of the Dīgha Nīkāya. Although there is mention of the Yakshas who had faith in Buddha and paid visits to him but according to the same sutra, majority of the Yakshas were hostile to the dharma (Walshe, 1987).

Tree is regarded as the abode of Yakshas and is also connected with the fertility rituals of various sorts. That is why it is visited more by women seeking off-springs or by newly wedded couples, even continued in some modern cultures in Pakistan. In accordance with the Buddhist tradition itself, the daughter of a farmer Sujātā, who offered a rice milk preparation to Siddhārtha for eating and after eating which he had attained enlightenment, had come to worship the tree under which Bodhisattva Siddhārtha was meditating. The tree, already sacred, was sanctified further by the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment while sitting under it. It is now a tree that is a must in every Buddhist temple and monastery and has come to acquire the name *caitya-vriksha*, the shrine tree (Mittal, 1993, p. 156).

“... the Tree of life, synonymous with all existence, all the worlds, all life, springs up, out, or down into space from its root in the navel centre of the Supreme Being, Varūna, Mahāyāksha, Asūra, Brāhman, as he lies extended on the back of the waters, the possibilities of existence and the source of his abundance. That Tree is his procession....in a likeness (mūrta), the emanation of his fiery-energy (tejas) as light, the spiration of his breath (prāna); he is its wise, indestructible mover (rerivā)” (Commaraswamy, 1993, p. 8).

“... Ashoka was said to have been taken before a tree bearing his own name (Ashoka), known in India by its magnificent red flower, and there, due to the prestige that the sage Upāgūpta exercised over the gods, the emperor was able to converse with the dryad who lived under the bark. Consequently, she had the rare privilege of seeing the infant Buddha born...Other texts state that it was a fig tree, (plakṣa), which spontaneously bent down one of its branches towards Māyā's right hand. Still others opt for a śala, the most common species in the sub-Himālayan zone and the very same kind of tree that, eighty years later, shaded the death of the Blessed One. The important point to be remembered is that tradition attributed to Māyā, at the time, the sculptural pose par excellence, according to Indian aesthetics even of today” (Foucher, 2003, p. 30).

Conclusion

Yakshas and Yākshinīs are semi-divine beings mentioned from the beginning in the Vedas and other later texts. These are considered the spirits which reside in the trees. The concept is diffused in Indian religions.

These are invisible beings which also connote the fleeting appearance of light that flares upon one's vision. Therefore, Yakshas are considered in Indian mythology as an extensive class of nature spirits commonly caring custodians of the natural treasures hidden inside the earth and tree roots, as also depicted in Indian Art as a caretaker deity. The word "Yaksha" is mentioned numerous times in the oldest Indian texts, such as the Rig-Veda, Brahmanas, and Upanishads.

Yakshas were also often represented mainly as dvarapalas, guardians of the gates of shrines. The money bag that the Yaksha sometimes holds in his left hand associates him with wealth.

During the Mauryan period, the worship of the Yaksha image was perhaps shown as an isolated cult. By the second-third century BC, Yakshas and Yākshinīs had started to be adopted into Buddhist depictions (Harle, 1994, p. 64). The Yaksha cult seems to have been incorporated freely into Brahmanical Hindu traditions during the Kushana period. The late Gupta period saw the Yaksha figure being adopted as the guardian figure/semi-god, in 'conventional' Hindu iconographical custom, with Kubera, the head of the Yakshas, is seen as lord of wealth and protector of the northern direction. In the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D, Yakshas and Yākshinīs were adopted as supernatural attendants in Jain iconography (Hooja, 2004, p. 375)

The Yaksha images are the first anthropomorphic representations of any divinity in stone with a consistent standard iconography, where the iconographic features were adopted from non-Aryan institutions. Besides the essential Indian texts, Yaksha is one of the few anthropomorphic images that were carved in the ancient Art schools of Bharhut and Sanchi, and later, it was also carved in Mathura and Gandhara with a developed and refined form of the image. Thus, Yakshas are semi-divine beings that are not only found in the oldest texts and Art of India, but they also continued in Mathura and Gandhara.

Texts and arts complement each other and are certainly separate but effective mediums of narration. Sometimes we have to rely more on the text, and sometimes we look to Art as a more permanent medium when we are unsure whether the text is in its original form or not. Thus, Art (Gandhara Art in our case) plays a vital role in the propagation of a specific message, in our case Buddhism and the Buddha's life story, and narrates the roles and positions of Yakshas and Yākshinīs in stories connected to the Buddha.

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