

Yaksha: From Folk Beliefs to The Royal Art

Dr. Ashish Kumar Chachondia*

*Assistant Professor (History) Institute for Excellence in Higher Education, Bhopal (M.P.) INDIA

Abstract : Throughout history, humans have created folk deities or demigods through their imagination to satisfy religious sentiments and fulfil wishes. These demigods have played an essential role in folk religion, revered for protection and prosperity. In Indian literature, these demigods are referred to as **Vyantardeva** or **Ardhadeva**. The **Shilpashastras** (scriptures) outline the rules for depicting these Vyantardevas in various parts of the temple. They were likely included in architecture based on prevalent beliefs among the people. These deities include **Yaksha-Yakshi, Navgrahas, Dikpalas, Gandharvas, and Kinnaras**. It's notable that other demigods, considered attendants of the main deity, also find a place in architecture. In Jainism, the concept of **Shasan-Devatas** (attendants) of the Tirthankara significantly increased the number of these demigods. In Indian art, the idols of all these semi-deities are engraved on various parts of temples according to scriptural guidelines. Indian artists often refer to these statues as human symbols for convenience. This article discusses the vivid forms of Yaksha depictions, with a special focus on Khajuraho art.

Keywords- Shilpa shastras, Itarjana, Vyantardeva, Brahmamaha, Shasandevs, Dikpalas.

Introduction - The mention of Yaksha-Yakshis is found in literature from the Vedic era, although the Vedic Aryans did not recognise the Yaksha gods. In Vedic literature, Yakshas have been named '*Itarjana*' or '*Punyajna*'.¹ There are some references to Yaksha worship in the Rigveda. Mitra and Varun have been prayed to remain free from the influence of Yakshas.² At one place in Rigveda, Agni has been forbidden from going where people who worship Yakshas live.³ It is clear that the worshippers of Yakshas must have been those who did not believe in the Vedic religion and tradition. By the time of the post-Vedic period, the importance and influence of Yakshas had increased. The Atharva Veda mentions that all the prominent persons of the state went to pay their respects to the Yaksha-devas.⁴ In this way the Yaksha beliefs and idols must have gradually found their place in the ancient society.

In the last phase of the Vedic period and the beginning of the Sutra period, there seems to be an increase in Yaksha beliefs and imaginations. Detailed descriptions of Yaksha worship in the Mahabharata and the Ashtadhyayi are also proof of this. At this time folk beliefs and literature were establishing Yakshas in different forms, and festivals related to them had also started. In the Gita, Yakshas have been described as the deities worshipped by people of royal nature.⁵ In the Mahabharata, a festival called *Brahmamaha* has been mentioned which was related to Yaksha worship and in which people of all four *varnas* participated.⁶ There is also a mention of pilgrimage places like Rajgriha where

Yakshas were worshipped daily. In the Ashtadhyayi, Yaksha names like *Sheval*, *Supari* and *Vishal* have been enumerated while mentioning the naming of a son.⁷ In the Ramayana, there is a reference to the boon 'Yakshatva Amartvach' given by the gods.⁸ It is clear from this that Yakshatva and immortality were considered the same. According to Zimmer, in this era, Yakshas were considered representatives of underground mineral reserves, precious metals and the great powers of the earth.⁹ The social status of Yakshas kept increasing and in the Puranic era, Yakshas were recognized as semi-gods who punished the sinners and fulfilled the wishes of religious people.¹⁰

The worship of Yakshas in literature had been present in society since the Vedic era, and Yaksha sculpture found a place in art only from the Maurya-Sunga period. Two forms of art can be seen during this period - royal and folk art. The folk artists of the Maurya period started making huge, bulky Yaksha-Yakshi sculptures to fulfil the religious sentiments of the common people, examples of which are the Parkham Yaksha, the Yakshi of Didarganj and other Yaksha-Yakshi artefacts found from Besnagar. The portrayal of Yaksha significantly increased in the Buddhist art of the Sung period. There is an abundance of Yakshaon the stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi. Yakshas have also been found in large numbers in Mathura art during the first and second centuries. Thus, Yakshas continued to have a place in folk and royal art till the Gupta period.

From the post-Gupta period, Yakshas were given a classical form, their iconographic characteristics were determined and from the sixth century AD, they started being depicted as *Shasandevs* (attendants) with the images of the Jaina Tirthankaras. In the early medieval period, Yakshas had attained their ultimate importance in temple architecture, they were given place in temples in various forms, such as *BharvaahiKeechak* (load bearers), *Kuber Dikpal* (the guardian of the north), *Jain Shasan Devas* (attendants of the Tirthankaras) etc. But at this time, Yakshas were not recognised as the main deity anywhere, they were always depicted as *Vyantar Devas* (demigods) only. Independent idols of Yakshas have been found very rarely under the art of Brahmin religion. Mainly the depiction of *YaksharajKuber* is found, who is usually depicted as a *Dikpal*. Some independent *Madhupayi Kuber* images have also been made. Here this subject has been explained mainly in the context of the art of Khajuraho.

In Jain texts, Sarvanubhuti and Ambika are first mentioned as a Yaksha-Yakshi couple in around the sixth century AD. These pairs were the most popular everywhere in depictions. In the texts of the eighth-ninth century, a list of twenty-four Yakshas and twenty-four Yakshis of twenty-four Tirthankaras is found. The independent characteristics of these Yakshas and Yakshis have been determined by the eleventh-twelfth century AD. Statues of Tirthankaras with Yaksha-Yakshi pairs are found in sufficient numbers in the art of Devgarh and Khajuraho.

Yakshas and Yakshis have been given special importance in the early medieval Jain art. They are mainly depicted in the entourage of the Tirthankara under the *ShasanDev*. In independent statues, they are usually shown sitting in *Lalitasana*, and with a small Tirthankara figure at the top. The characteristic features are depicted as per the instructions of the Digambara scriptures.¹¹ Some statues with independent features are also found, for example, *Matanga* and *Siddhayaika* of Tirthankara Mahavira have been carved with independent features.

In Jain art, the *ShasanDevas* (Yaksha-Yakshi) have been placed on the right and left sides of the throne of the Tirthankara respectively. These Yaksha-Yakshi are generally two-armed or four-armed and are seated in *Lalita Mudra*. Among the Tirthankara idols with which the Yaksha-Yakshi couple is depicted, the most popular is Rishabhdeva, the first Tirthankara. The *Shasan-Devas* of Rishabhdeva are Gomukh Yaksha and Chakraeshwari (Apratichakra) Yakshi.¹² Chakraeshwari and Gomukh have been depicted as four-armed. Along with Gomukh Yaksha, a bull vehicle is also displayed. Gomukh has a mace and a fruit in its two hands. Chakraeshwari has Varada mudra, mace and conch in her three hands. Only two idols of Tirthankara Abhinandannath have been found in Khajuraho. Their Yaksha-Yakshi are Yakshaeshwar (or Ishwar) and Kalika (or Vajrashrikhala). In one example, the two-armed Yaksha-Yakshi has Abhaya mudra and fruit in his hands.¹³ In another

example, the Yaksha-Yakshi are two-armed and equipped with Abhaya mudra and fruit.

The Yaksha-Yakshi of Tirthankara Chandraprabha are Vijay (or Shyam) and Bhrikuti (or Jwala). In the Chandraprabha idol obtained from Parshvanath temple, the two-armed Yaksha-Yakshi has Abhaya mudra and fruit in his hands.¹³ In another example, the Yaksha is two-armed and the Yakshi is four-armed. The Yaksha has fruit and a money bag in his hands and the Yakshi has Varada mudra, book and Kamandalu in her three undistinguished hands.¹⁴

The sixteenth Tirthankara is Shantinath, his Yaksha-Yakshi are Garuda (or Varah) and Nirvani (or Mahamanasi). The Yaksha-Yakshi statues on both sides of the huge statue of Shantinath in Kayotsarga Mudra installed in the Shantinath temple were probably installed later.¹⁵ These Yaksha-Yakshi statues with common characteristics do not have any classical specialities.

The Yaksha-Yakshi of Tirthankara Neminath are Gomedh and Ambika (or Kushmandi). In the Neminath images obtained from Khajuraho, Ambika is always depicted as the Yakshi, but the Yaksha Sarvanubhuti (Kuber) has been depicted. The Yaksha-Yakshi of Tirthankara Parshvanath is Dharnendra and Padmavati. Dharnendra and Padmavati have been shown on the ends of the throne in some Tirthankara images and other examples, they have been depicted nearby in Sthanaka Mudra (standing position) with a snake hood.

The Yaksha-Yakshi of the last Tirthankara Mahavira are *Matang* and *Siddhayaika*. Yaksha-Yakshi couples have been depicted only in a few examples. In the Mahavira sculpture in the sanctum of the Parshvanath temple, the Yaksha-Yakshi are two-armed. In another example, the Yaksha-Yakshi are four-armed. The vehicle of the Yaksha is a lion and a bag of money, a spear, a lotus and a stick are depicted in his hands. Yakshi is also riding a lion and has a chakra, lotus and conch in her hands.

Apart from the combined Yaksha-Yakshi statues described above, independent Yaksha-Yakshi statues have also been shaped in the art of Khajuraho. The prominent ones among these are *Manovega*, *Ambika*, *Padmavati* and *Siddhayaika*. A brief description of these independent Yaksha-Yakshi statues is as follows-

Sarvanubhuti Yaksha - This Yaksha must have been the most popular in Khajuraho. Its clear influence is visible in other Yaksha depictions as well. Sarvanubhuti Yaksha is the Jain form of *YaksharajKuber*. In two of its hands, lotus and the other two hands, *Kalash* and a bag of money are displayed. The other two statues are engraved on the pillars near the Shantinath temple. Out of these two statues, one has *Abhayamudra*, a lotus and a bag of treasure in its three remaining hands. Two treasure pots (*Nidhi-Kalash*) are also engraved near his feet.

Chakraeshwari Yakshi - This is the Yakshi of Tirthankara Rishabhdeva. The Chakraeshwari found in Khajuraho are generally adorned with crowns. In Khajuraho,

Chakraeshwari has been depicted in various forms such as *Dwibhuja*, *Chaturbhuja*, *Shatbhuja*, *Ashtabhuja*, and *Dashbhuja* etc. The depiction of *Garudvahan* and *Chakra* is according to tradition, but the depiction of conch and mace in hands shows Vaishnava's influence.¹⁶ Thirteen independent idols of Chakraeshwari are available in Khajuraho, out of which nine are depicted on the door parts.

Manovega - An image of Manovega Yakshi is preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Khajuraho.¹⁷ Her vehicle, a horse, has also been depicted. Three hands of the four-armed Yakshi standing in a *Tribhanga* posture have been broken, and one remaining hand holds a lotus in a circular shape. Attendants are carved on both sides.

Ambika - Ambika is the Yakshi of Tirthankar Neminath. Jain texts mention her vehicle as a lion and a child in her left hand.¹⁸ In Khajuraho, more independent images of Ambika have been found than those of other Yaksha-Yakshi.

Padmavati - Only three independent images of Padmavati, the Yakshi of the twenty-third Tirthankara Parshvanath, have been found. In the sculpture obtained from the Adinath temple, Padmavati, in *Lalitasan* pose, has Abhaya mudra, and lotus in her hands, and *Kukkuta Vahana* is also depicted.

Kichaka - Apart from the Jain *Shasandeva* Yaksha idols, a special class of Yakshas is seen on the pillars of the temple, which appear to be supporting the roof of the temple with their arms. Mention of this load-bearing form of Yakshas is found in the Ramayana period.¹⁹ As load-bearing, Yakshas indicate labour, devotion, patience and courage. According to Kumaraswamy, dwarf Yakshas are related to the earth. Yakshas are meant to bear the weight of the earth. The initial form of their depiction in art is found in the architecture of the Sanchi Stupa of the Shunga period, where these Yakshas bear the weight of the door arches on their strong shoulders. In art, these load-bearing Kichakas are presented with the facility of four-sided viewing. This is the form of these load-bearing Kichakas shown in Khajuraho. In temples, these load-bearing Kichakas have been carved on the top of pillars supporting the roof with their arms. The main feature of these Yaksha figures is their various forms. They are shown as two-armed, four-armed and six-armed. In all the depictions the upper arms have been used to support the roof but the postures of the remaining arms are different. Usually conch, sword, mace, fruit, garland, snake etc. are shown in their free hands. In most depictions, they are blowing the conch by holding the conch in two hands. Most examples of snake depictions in hands are found in Vishwanath temple. In some depictions, the

namaskar posture is also shown. The depiction of figures in special attractive postures is found in the Parshvanath temple. There, in the Chaturbhuj (four-armed) idols, Abhaya mudra and fruit are shown in two free hands. These are the postures of flying Kichaka. On one of the pillars of the Parshvanath temple, there is also a figure of a six-armed female Kichaka. A conch is shown in its hands. In almost all places, the symbol of Shrivatsa is marked on the chest of these bearers. Strange expressions are also shown on their faces. Mostly all of them are shown smiling. But in some places, they can also be seen in a fierce form and deformed or ugly.

Thus, various auspicious forms of Yakshas are depicted in art. According to Kumaraswamy²⁰, Yakshas, in all their forms, create an auspicious atmosphere and directly provide prosperity and happiness to their worshippers. By the time art began adopting multiple forms to depict demigods like Yakshas, folk traditions had gradually abandoned the belief in these deities.

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