THE YAKSAS AND NĀGAS

The Yaksas and Nāgas of the Vedic literature are generally regarded as the representatives of ancient indigenous tribes, which had settled in India before the advent of the Vedic Aryans.¹

A. YAKSAS:

The cult of Yaksas and Yakṣīs was very popular in ancient India. They were regarded as 'of considerable folklorist interest, because in them the old animistic beliefs were incorporated'.²

The word Yaksa occurred in the Rigveda and the later Vedic literature. It is used for Brahmā, Varuna and Agni, sometimes as neuter and sometimes as masculine. During the later Vedic period it assumed the character of a personified deity.

The position of the Yaksas was lower than the Vedic gods, Agni, Varuna, etc. They were regarded as folk deities.
The people at large worshipped them in order to obtained protection from the evil forces.

In the Atharvaveda (XI.6.10) the protective force of the Yaksas is mentioned. In several other works they form a kindred group along with the Gandharvas and the Nāgas.

The great epics, the Rāmāyanā and the Mahābhārata, contain copious references to Yaksas indicating the popularity of Yakṣa folklore and mythology. The Yaksas are said to have originated from the Primordial egg.

Several Purānas call the Yaksas as Devas. References are found to their divine or semidivine nature.

Kurukshtreta, Mathura, Vidisha, Rajagriha and several other towns were important centres of Yakṣa worship. The Buddhist and Jaina literature contain interesting account of Yaksas and Yaksīs.

In the Jaina works Yaksas assume different roles in relation to human beings. They were put into three categories: (i) benevolent, (ii) malevolent and (iii) converted. The twenty four Jaina Tirthankaras have each a pair of Yakṣa and Yaksīni, who wait upon them. The names of their Yaksas and Yaksinīs are enumerated in different texts such as the Aparājitaapriccha (T.P. IV. Ch. 221.10-53) and the Trilokaprajana-pati (T.P. IV. 4963 ff).
During the Maurya-Sunga Period, the Yaksas enjoyed a sort of supreme position as the popular deities. By that time the forms of Brahmical gods and goddesses and also the Buddha or Tirthankara images had not yet been crystallised. It may be surmised that the monumental stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi owed a great deal to the dedications of a community devoted to the Yaka deities, whose figures are carved on the gateways and the railings of the monuments at these two places.

In the Kushana art of North India we get hundreds of images of Yaksas and Yakṣis.

In the Gupta art and literature Yaka worship finds a prominent place being represented at Ajanta and several other sites. The work Chaturbhavi mentions Rathya-Yaksas (Yaksas of the street).

From a very early time Yaksas came to be associated with long life and wealth. This was an important factor in their cult becoming so popular. They were worshipped by followers of different faiths.

KUBERA:

Kubera is said to be the lord of the Yaksas. His association with Yaksas was not established till the period of the Grihyastra. In the beginning Kubera was the master of Rakṣasas. In the Atharvaveda (VIII.10.28) he is associated with the Śuhyakas.
In the Mahābhārata Kubera shares several roles with Indra, particularly the guardianship of a direction. According to the early Purāṇas Kubera was made the lord of Yaksas by Siva after Kubera performed great penances.

One important aspect of the mythology of Kubera is his lordship of wealth which he shares with Skanda and the Mothers.

The family of Kubera seems to have been large. The epics refer to Riddhi and Bhadra as his wives. In ancient art Harite and Laksmi are shown with him as his consorts.

One of the most important function of Kubera was his guardianship of the northern quarter. This is referred to in the Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina cosmology.

Besides India the worship of Kubera manifested itself in various forms abroad.

The Vismudharmottara Purāṇa prescribes the iconography of Kubera thus. Kubera should be pot-bellied, four handed, wearing udīghravēṣṭha (northern dress) with an armour over the body. He should hold mace and spear in the right hands. In the left hands he should hold jewels and a pot of riches. Riddhi his consort, should be shown seated on his left lap. The attributes of Riddhi and the Śaṅkha and PādāṬe niḍhiśi have also been described.

According to the Brihatsamhitā Kubera should be shown mounted on a human being, pot-bellied and having a crown placed on his head.
According to the Matsya Purāṇa Kubera should be of a stout body, and pot-bellied holding mace, attended by the Ghyrakas and eight Nidhis. He should be adorned with various ornaments. 14

In the Buddhist mythology Kubera is the god of the riches and the guardian deity of the Northern direction.

He has another name Vaisrāvana (Prakrit Vasāvana). He is also called Jambhala.

The Āgamas recognise Kubera as the master of the Yaksas and describe his figure as follows: The colour of Kubera should be golden yellow or crimson. He should be adorned with all ornaments, including a Kirita, Kundalas and necklace composed of a series of golden coins. He should be good looking, or even terrific looking. He should be shown with two or four arms. If the arms are two, the hands may be kept in the varada and abhaya poses or the left hand may keep in it a gadā. Kubera should be shown with a protruding belly. 15 He may be seated on a Padmāpitha or be driving in a chariot drawn by men.

The Amśumadbhādāgama states that the vehicle of Kubera is a ram.

In the Buddhist mythology, Kubera is sculptured exactly as in the Hindu representation. He is easily recognised as Kubera by a mongoose which is generally shown either as sitting upon his left lap or placed on his left side. 17
The Yakṣas, over whom Kubera rules are symbols of power. In the early phase they were usually carved in the round (chaturmukha-darsana) and therefore free-standing. The main effect of their images was frontal as if they were intended to be seen mainly from the front. Their size was colossal (Mahākāya, Maha-Pramāna). Their figures were built with pronounced emphasis on muscular strength.

The drapery consisted of a turban, an upper scarf (thrown on the shoulders and arms or tied around the chest) and a dhoti hanging below, up to the ankles and fastened with a girdle. Their ornaments were heavy ear-rings and torque (Kantha) and a flat triangular necklace, besides armlets with feathered projects.

The colossal Mathura Yakṣa images from Parkham, Baroda and Moh and that of Mambhadra Yakṣa from Pawaya are true representations of the early Yakṣas. These images are marked by a distinctive style which is the earliest in the history of Indian sculpture.

The dominant character and almost country-wide extension of the Yakṣa cult is proved by the discovery of Yakṣa images from Mathura to Orissa and Pataliputra to Bombay.

As regards the position of the Yakṣas in the evolution of Indian art the most natural suggestion seems to be that their figures were made during the third century B.C. Stone was used for architecture and sculpture under the direction
of the Mauryan emperors Chandragupta and Asoka. With the making of these images a style of art was established which the artists of the subsequent period regard as their model.

The Yakṣa image carved in the monuments of Bharhut and Sanchi are the proof of the continuity of the Yakṣa tradition both in iconography and in the style of art.

From the Sunga Period onwards the carving of Yakṣi figures gained a momentum. These figures were made for worship and also for decoration. In the art of Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura and other ancient sites numerous Yakṣi images have been found. They furnish a lot of material for the cultural studies.

The dress usually consisted of a pair of upper and lower garments. The dhoti is tied with a heavy waist band or Mekhala. Prominent turbans are invariably present in the early images or reliefs.

The right hand of the Yaksas and Yakṣis was usually shown held in abhaya mudra, a divine feature which was later accepted for Buddha, Bodhisatva and for other deities. Sometimes the flywhisk was shown as a distinguishing emblem of Yaksas and Yakṣis. The Didarganj Yakṣi holding a flywhisk furnishes a good example of this. The idea behind this was that the Yaksas and Yakṣis were attendants on their King Mahāraja Kubera. Holding of a flywhisk was the mark of honour proclaiming the relationship of the Yaksas with Kubera, the god of wealth and immortality.
It was believed that an auspicious jewel (Bhadra-Mani) was in the custody of Yakṣa Manibhadra, a close associate of Kubera and the master of his treasures. A rare inscribed image of Manibhadra has been found at Pawaya (ancient Palmarvati) in the Gwalior district. According to the Brahmi inscription on its pedestal, it was donated by the devotees of Manibhadra.

The description of Yakṣas in early Indian art has been exhaustively discussed by Anand Coomarswamy, B.M. Barua, V.S. Agrawala and others.

From Vidisha and its vicinity have been obtained several important figures of Yakṣas and Yakṣīs. Their aesthetic excellence is remarkable. According to K.D. Bajpai, their mellowed modelling marks a gradual development from the archaistic figures of the Maurya and early Sunga Age.

The newly discovered images of a Yakṣa and Yakṣi from the bed of river Betwa are unique in this respect.

The free-standing statues of Yakṣas and Yakṣīs of the Sunga Satavahana Period found at Besnagar, reflect primitiveness of Indian art.

YAKSA - Plate XVII, Fig. No. 63-64
Front and Back Height 12', Time about 100 B.C., Vidisha:

The statue of Yakṣa was recovered in 1987 from the river Betwa, near the Heliocorous Pillar. It is now placed
in the Archaeological Museum, Vidisha. According to R.C. Agrawala, 22 "It is an exciting specimen as the tallest Yakṣa statue discovered so far". This statue emphasizes muscular strength, it is carved in the round. The Yakṣa is standing in the Samapada pose wearing a dhoti tied with a heavy waistband, the pointed ends of which can be seen falling on the left.

The Yakṣa figure has a protruding belly. Dhoti is tied up with a heavy waistband or rope like girdle. It is knotted in the centre, the two ends which terminate in knobbed tassels are allowed to fall over the legs. The dhoti reaches to the calves, clinging to the right leg so as to reveal its shape clearly, and falls over the left leg in two narrow, pleated projections. A third projection, apparently the end of the dhoti drooping from behind, touches the ground between the feet of the image. The upper part of the body is carved with an uttariya. The gathered scarf, crosses the back, and falls almost to the knees forming a knot over the left shoulder.

The figure wears several ornaments. The necklace forms a broad loop over the chest. A smaller rosette is seen in front. The shoulders are heavy and broad, the clenched fist of the left hand touches the thigh where it holds a large bag. The right hand is broken off at the wrist which is the only damage. The fore-arm is decorated by five bracelets, each consisting of cylindrical beads alternating with two rosettes. The neck is short. The eyes bulge outward from the sockets beneath the shadowed brows. Thick lips present a ghostly look.
The Yakṣa wears heavily earrings in the lobes of both ears (the ears are of peculiar shape; the top portion being animal rather than human). The hair is gathered up and tied into a massive but simple lateral knot, placed slightly to the left side of the forehead. The flat torque is tied at the back with the help of a flowered button inserted into a hole. The back also depicts parallel curved incision, suggesting the existence of drapery in the Besnagar statue. This colossal Yakṣa image is indeed a remarkable acquisition both from the aesthetic and iconographic points of view. A Yakṣa statue (height 6'10") was also discovered from the Betwa bed along with the Yakṣa figure described above. The details of this Yakṣa are given on page 203.

**YAKṢA TORSO - Plate XVII, Fig. 65**
3rd Century A.D., Vidisha:

Of this statue both the hands and legs below knees are broken. The head is also missing. It's chief traits are akin to those of the Yakṣa figure described above. The archaic heaviness and massive thighs can be noticed here. The figure wears a waist cloth and a scarf coming down to the knees, dropping down from both the sides.

**YAKṢA - Plate XVIII, Fig. 66**
1st Century B.C., Vidisha:

This forms part of some structure here. The Yakṣa is standing in front of a decorated lintel. He holds a
bunch of lotus buds in his right hand. The left hand is placed on the waist. The figure wears a turban, heavy earrings, a necklace of five strings and wristlets. The dhoti is tied with prominent waistband. His long uttariva is shown in wavy lines. It passes through his two arms and the back and then its ends fall on the ground. The image is carved in round.

KUBERA

The labels incised on several reliefs at Bharhut have given the names of several Yaksas and Yaksis. These have given important clues to identify the figures precisely. On one Bharhut sculpture the name of Kubera is written as "Kupira". 25

In Madhya Pradesh several images of Kubera have been found at different sites, e.g. Besnagar, Tumain, Badoh, Sirpur, etc. Besides the colossal statue of Kubera described above, an interesting image of Kubera from Besnagar is described below.

KUBERA - Plate XX, Fig. 72
42"x30"x10", 5th Century A.D., Besnagar:

Kubera is standing in Sambhanga pose. He wears round earlobes, a heavy torque, armlets and wristlets. His right hand is broken, probably it was raised in the abhaya mudra. In the left hand he holds a heavy purse with a prominent neck.
He wears a Ghuti tied with a waistband. The Uttariya falls up to the knees. His armlets are embossed with the bird design. His long tresses of hair hang down to the shoulders. The image is now exhibited in the Gwalior Museum.

YAKSI - Plate XVIII, Fig. 67
1st Century B.C., Vidisha:

The figure is slightly damaged in the face and the left breast. She is standing in a graceful pose. In the raised right hand she holds a bunch of lotus flowers and buds. To her left the buds and flower are shown in a pot. The left hand rests on the waist. She wears ear ornaments resembling the leaves. Her head is decorated with pearl festoons. The necklace with a pendant shows between the breasts. The Yaksi is shown nude with a stringed girdle which is tied with a scarf. She wears heavy wristlets and anklets. The Uttariya is gracefully shown passing through her arms. The image is carved in the round.

YAKSI - Plate XIX, Fig. 68
14" x 2" x 11", Besnagar, 1st Century B.C.

This is upper part of a Yaksi figure from Besnagar. The mellowed modelling and the heavy ornaments are remarkably shown.

The statue is much weather-worn and its nose is broken. The posture is frontal with an ovoid face and heavy breasts. The neck is profusely adorned with twelve concentric strings
of heads. Over them is thrown a long necklace reaching below the breasts. This necklace consists of eight strands secured by two rectangular clasps. The ears have heavy earrings.

The hair arrangement is worth notice. It is tied with plain cloth, which covers the back of the head and the nape of the neck entirely. Over it is flung a decorated band that passes over the shoulders and is looped over the back. From this head-dress two plaits are seen.

The image is distinctly a work belonging to the early Indian school of sculpture. The ornaments both of the head and the neck are akin to those found at Bharhut.26 The gentler contour of the face, with its soft, swelling form are carved successfully.

Dr. Pramod Chandra has rightly assigned this torso to the intermediate stage of development between the period of Sanchi Stūpa II and Stūpa I.27

YAKŚĪ - Plate XIX, Fig. 69
Height 6'10", 1st Century B.C., Vidisha:

This is the new Yākṣī image from the Betwa river. It is preserved in the Vidisha Museum. This figure amply to show that the artists of Central India were masters in overcoming rigidity by a fine sense of grace and suppleness. These traits were carried on by their successors also in the Gupta and early Medieval Period.
The face of this figure is weatherworn. There was a break below the waist and another at the knees. It has been roughly reconstructed. The legs are slightly apart. The left hand rests on the thigh holding a mango branch with leaves and fruits. The right hand is clenched near the breasts and holds the handle of a Chauri. The upper part of which is broken.

The Yaksī wears numerous ornaments. These have been graphically described by Dr. Pramod Chandra. The rows of bracelets consist of the flower and bead motif. The transparent lower garment is secured at the waist by a girdle consisting of several strands of beads. A sash is also tied loosely over the waist and knotted in the centre, the loose ends falling over the beaded girdle and the thigh. Between the legs must have been a narrow projection of cloth with conventional folds. On the feet are several rows of beaded anklets fitting tightly to the legs. Over them is a heavier circular anklet, worn more loosely and adorned with a boss to the side. The armlets are simple bands with a circular medallion in the centre.

The necklace is secured by a large stud in the form of a ressette seen over the left shoulder. It falls between the breasts, the two sides having been connected by several strands and beaded loops which cover the chest. A circular pendant is seen near the neck, below which is a large bead flanked by two other ornaments of peculiar shape. The neck and the waist are marked by conventional folds of flesh.
The face is round and has protruding eyes. The distended ear lobes seem to be adorned with bead-shaped earrings. The hair is combed back in strands and braided into a large pigtail falling over the shoulder. It is decorated by a circular band of cloth draped over the forehead, reaching barely to the nape of the neck. The line of the hair on the forehead and over the ears is bordered by a thick braid that swings downward to form a loop over the ears and falls over the pigtail. It is clearly visible over the left ear but damaged and indistinct on the right.

This newly discovered Yaksi image undoubtedly is a very welcome addition to the earlier Yaksi images known from Central India.

YAKSI - Plate XIX, Fig. 70
Height 6 ft 7 in. 1st Century A.D. Besnagar

This remarkable image of a standing Yaksi was discovered more than 40 years ago. It is now preserved in the Indian Museum at Calcutta.

Both the hands of the Yaksi are missing and the face is much wornout. This sculpture exhibits more rounded features, including the arms, breasts and abdomen. The linear contour at the sides shows a smoother movement. The figure is wearing a net-like necklace, including the peculiar pronged beads. The figure is more lavishly adorned with necklaces crossed at the front and back. The edges of the dhoti flare out gently
at the knees. The drapery is given separate volumes where it
does not cling to the body, but is indicated by parallel
ridges of folds.

YAKŚĪ - Plate XIX, Fig. 71
Height 6' 10", Vidisha, 1st Century B.C.

Both the hands of the Yakṣī are broken. The right
breast is mutilated. The face and one foot are also damaged.
The two plates of hair are nicely shown.

The figure wears heavy earrings. The head is covered
with plain cloth and over this cloth an embroidered ribbon is
arranged in two folds.

The neck of this Yakṣī is decorated with two sets of
necklace. The outer one is a broad necklace covering the
inner half of the breasts and going a little above the naval.
It has two prominent round pendants, one below the other. The
inner necklace has twelve of beads chain.

She is wearing Sari which reaches up to the knees. A
sash is seen over the thighs. Sari's front plates are tastefully
done. The broad ornamental girdle is prominently indicated

THE NĀGA CULT

Vidisha and the region around was a centre of Naga
worship also. A dynasty of the Nāga Kings ruled here after
the Sunga - Sātavāhanas. It continued to rule over Vidisha
and Eran till about the middle of the 4th century A.D. The names of the Nāga Kings are known from the Purāṇas and from their coins found here in large numbers. These rulers were Śaivites and they also worshipped the Nāga deities, statues of Nāgas and Nāgis, both in the human and the serpent form, have been found at Vidisha and round about several of these can be assigned between the first and the third century A.D. It appears that during this period there were some temples of Nāgas at Vidisha like the temple of the temple of Dadhikarna at Mathura.

References to the Nāgas and their worship abound in the Brahmanical Jaina and Buddhist literature.

The literary evidence concerning the popularity of the Nāga Cult is confined by the numerous representations of the Nāgas in ancient Indian Plastic and Pictorial Art.

The Purāṇas, the two great epics and several other works give the origin of the Nāgas. Vasuki was their ancestor.

The popularity of the Nāga cult can be ascertained from the fact that till today the Nāgas are worshipped in one or the other throughout the country.

A description is found in the Amśumadhdāgama about Nāgadeva, which appears to be that of the chief of the Nāgas. It states that the image of Nāgadeva should have three eyes, four arms, a beautiful countenance and it should be of red colour.
The image should be adorned with a Karandamakūta on its head and all other ornaments. The Naga deity should stand upon a Padmāpittha. It can be the four handed image. The hands of the front arms should be kept in the varada and abhaya poses. The other two hands should each hold a snake. Over the head of Nagaraja should be the hood of a five headed Cobra.

According to the Silpaśatra stone Naga images can be half human and half serpentine in shape, the lower part below the naval being that of snake. Their head must be covered with hoods having one, three, five or seven heads and they should have split tongues. In their hands they should carry a sword and a shield respectively.

The Maya Silpa gives detailed accounts of the seven great Nāgas, Vāsuki, Taksaka, Kārkotaka, Pāmadā, Mahā-Pāmadā, Śankhapala and Kulika. The brief descriptions of these are as follows:

All these seven serpent should have two tongues, two arms and a head with seven heads. They should bear gems in their human heads. They must all be clad in one or three coats and carry in their hands an aksamāla and a kamandalu.

Some interesting statues of the Nāgas and Nāgis, both in human and serpent forms have been found at Vidisha, Sanchi, and several other sites in the region.

Nāgaraja, Plate XX, Fig. 73
Time about 300 A.D., Sanchi:

This statue of Nāga was found at Sanchi. The Nāga King
is in the human form. The Nāgaraja is standing. He holds a stalked lotus in the right hand and a flask of money bag in the left. He wears a beautiful Kiritamukūta, Karna Kundalas and a torque. His dhoti is tied with a waist band. At the back there is a long coil of snakes. The seven hoods are shown on the head like canopy. Each hood has two tongues.

NĀGARĀJA, Plate XX, Fig. 74

Time 4th Century A.D., Vidisha:

This image is similar to No. 73 described above. It was found at Vidisha and is now preserved in the Vidisha Museum. The image is mutilated. The face is mutilated and the canopy of snake-hoods is broken. The figure wears a Kiritamukūta and Ekavali. In the right hand the Nāga deity holds flowers. In his left hand he is holding a flask of riches. Below the naval the dhoti is tied with a waistband. Here the image, apart from the Uttariya, wears a heavy Vanamāla.

SALABHANIKKA FROM GYARASPUR

Plate XX, Fig. 75 Time 10th Century A.D.:
Plate XXI, Fig. 76

This is a master-piece from Gyaraspur. The figure of the Sala-bhaniika is in the true tradition of the early images of this type which we find right from the early Sunga Period. It is carved in relief. The lady wears a short printed garment around her hips to cover the nudity. The tassel drops from it between her thighs. Her hair style is most artistically done with coiffure at the back. The head is decorated with beaded
strings in loop. She wears round Kundalas and a close fitting necklace in three strands. From the lower strand drops a pendant between her breasts. The upper part of the jewellery is still but the last necklace moves freely between the full breasts. One ornament plays on the left hip apparently due to a violent movement. Another loose necklace covers her breasts. The hands and the feet below the knees are broken.

The figure's happy smile is worth notice. She fulfils the poetic descriptions of the ideal Navikas, who were designed as "moon breasted, swan-waisted and elephant hipped".

It can thus be seen that the Satavahana Age brought a congenial atmosphere in Central India for the development of plastic art. The robust art tradition of the Vardhamana region continued throughout the Gupta and early Medieval Periods.

It was believed that Kubera and his Yaksa were masters of wealth and long life. Similarly the worship of the Nāgas was believed to ward off evils and bestow the pleasant things of life to the devotees.

These factors were responsible for the great popularity of the Yakṣa and Nāga cult. In Central India, particularly in the Vidisha - Sanchi region, these cults gained much fillip for quite a long time. The profuse relics of the Yakṣas and Nāgas in this area bear testimony to this.
REFERENCES TO CHAPTER: VII


2. N.P.D.; SV. Yaksha.

3. Mahābhārata, i.1.33.

4. Vārāha Purāṇa, Ch. 2. p. 106.

5. Coomaraswamy has remarked that "Jainism and Yaksha worship could be as closely interrelated as Buddhism and Hinduism have been often been". Yaksha, 1. p. 27.

6. S.B.; XIII, 4.3.10.

7. Mahābhārata, III, 162. 45; also Hopkins op.cit., p. 142.


9. Ibid.; III, 140.7; V. 115.9.

10. Ibid.; l. 198. 6.

11. As Lokpala his worship spread to Khatau with the spread of the Buddhism. Cf. Stein, A., For his worship in China, Japan, Tibet and Nepal, See Clark, W.E.


13. Brihatasamhitā; LVIII, 57.


17. Smiths, V.A.; History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon; Fig. 196, 199.

18. Agrawala, V.S., Indian Art; p. 113.


23. Pramod Chandra; Yakṣa and Yakṣī from Vidiśā; Art Orientalis; VI, 1966, pp. 157-63.

24. It is this top knot that finally evolves into the Karpata like Udbhiṣṇa of the Buddha, see J.E. Van Lothuisen de Leeuw, The Sākyan Period, (London, 1949), pp. 166 ff. It is also apparent in the Parkham, Baroda, and Noh Yakṣas, where it is flatter and worn just above the right ear. The earliest example Pramod Chandra traced is a fragmentary head from Sarnath, possibly of the Maurya date. See A.S.I.A.R.; 1914-15, p. 112.


26. Cf. Ananda Coomarasamy; La Sculpture de Bharhut; Figs. 44, 49.


29. The Monuments of Sanchi; p. 244.