



Yakṣī and Their Association with Plant Life

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Abstract: Nature has been an integral part of anthropological developments, and women have been closely related to the same as they gave birth to and nurture humans. Since prehistoric times, women have been depicted in rock art, depicting their importance in society. With the further expansion of society and settlement patterns, the idea of women was brought into terracotta art forms reported from various sites of Indus Valley Civilisation, depicting life closely with nature. Women and trees came closer in a number of interesting rituals and socio-religious customs, and this is reflected in their depiction together in extremely alluring forms and motifs. Historically, Indian sculptors fully identified the woman with nature and represented her in art. This idea was further concretized in the form of voluptuous sculptures during the early historical period, representing them in various forms such as *Asoka-Dohada*, *Vrikshadevata*, *Śālabhañjikā*, etc. *Yakṣī* is believed to be nature spirits who are extensively described in the Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jain literary sources as attendant deities and sometimes individual divinities (in the later periods). They have been depicted in many postures and characters. One of the natures associated with ancient fertility rituals was sporting with trees and flowers in forest groves and gardens on the outskirts of the city. The artistic representation illustrates the environmental setting, types of vegetation, etc. The present paper tries to highlight the sculptural themes and portrayal of *Yakṣī* in relation to the environment and their social and philosophical implications. For the present study, the plaques from Chandraketugarh (West Bengal) and the sculptures of Mathura are being taken into consideration.

Keywords: Archaeology, Art, Sculpture, Trees, Women, *Yakṣī*

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INTRODUCTION

It polytheistic orientation of ancient Indian religious traditions led to the development of several cults and philosophies over time. The popular deities enjoyed their own world and position; similarly, the *Yakṣa*/*Yakṣī* also occupied an essential status. The concept of *Yakṣa* and *Yakṣī* was quite widespread as evident from the archaeological evidences in the region of the Ganga Valley and its adjoining regions.

They are often represented as doorkeepers and spirit gods related to fertility and wealth living in trees and water bodies (Mishra 1981:1). Art and sculpture have always been a medium of depiction of the past lifestyles, natural settings, societal set-ups, etc. Therefore, the Indian sculptor has always used their imagination and cognitive understanding to illustrate the same in the stone (Havell 1908: 4).

Since prehistoric times, women have been depicted in rock art in various forms and moods such as participation in hunting (Panchmarhi), social gatherings (Bhimbetka; Jaora), combating (Adamgarh), mother goddess (Panchmarhi) etc., depicting their significance in the culture (Pathak 2020: 20-24). With the further expansion of society and settlement patterns, the idea of women was brought into terracotta art forms reported from various sites of Indus Valley Civilization such as the celebrated mother goddess figurines with elaborate ornamentation and drapery reported from the notable sites of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Nausharo, Damb Sadaat etc., depicting life closely with nature (Sharma 2003; 10).

INHABITING THE SACRED SPACES

Women and trees came closer in a number of interesting rituals and socio-religious customs, and this is reflected in their depiction together in extremely alluring forms and motifs. Historically, Indian sculptors fully identified woman with nature and represented her in art (Varadpande 2006: 22). This idea was further concretized in the form of voluptuous sculptures during the early historical period, representing them in various forms such as *Asoka-Dohada*, *Vrikshadevata*, *Śālabhañjikā*, etc.

Yakṣī is believed to be nature spirits who are extensively described in the Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jain literary sources as attendant deities and sometimes individual divinities (in the later periods). They have been depicted in many postures and characters. One of the nature associations with ancient fertility rituals was sporting with trees and flowers in forest groves and gardens on the outskirts of the city. The artistic representation illustrates the environmental setting, types of vegetation, etc.

The *Yakṣa/Yakṣī* of all their abilities managed to retain a fine status within the space they were provided. The ancient literature such as the Epics — *Ramayana & Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, *Jatakas* etc., refers to several spaces that are considered sacred as they are inhabited by the divinities. These spaces were occupied by *Yakṣa/Yakṣī* as well, defining their sacred status in the tradition. For instance, trees often act as mystical abodes of divinities, saints and demi-gods, which are worshipped by humans for fulfilment of wishes, especially birth of children (Hopkins 1915: 6-8). In the *Vanaparva*, *Satyavati* and her mother embrace the *Aśvattha* and fig tree to bear children (Smith 2009: 527). Certain trees and groves were designated "*chaityavrikshas*" which were considered sacred and were not meant to be harmed in any way as they were housed by divinities like the *Yakṣa/Yakṣī*, *Apsara*, *Naga* etc. (Coomaraswamy 2001: 7). Such instances evoke the identification of *Yakṣa/Yakṣī* as fertility deities. Hence, the forest made up significantly a sacred space where they can be found (Hopkins 1915: 10).

YAKṢĪ — NATURE SPIRIT

The *Yakṣī* was/is often referred as a benevolent being possessing exceptional strength. Due to which they are often regarded as guardians of wealth, territory, forests, water bodies, humans etc.; but occasionally as malevolent causing commotion or possessing humans etc. (Coomaraswamy 1993: 2-3). The literary traditions often connect *Yaksi* with water, fertility, trees, plants etc who often inhabit these spaces. However, *Rigveda* describes *Yaksi/Yaksa* as plant/ water dweller spirits; *Atharvaveda*

describes them as a medium between the mortal world and heaven. Therefore these ideas developed over time and they are venerated as deities of trees/ plants (Coomaraswamy 1993: 4).

Trees have always played a central role in the ancient Buddhist and Jain texts. Buddha, he was born under a Sal tree (*Shorea Robusta*), enlightened under the Pipal tree (*Sacred Fig*) and left his mortal body under the Sal trees in Kusinagara. Due to such sacred incidents, the tree dwelling deities were eventually linked to Buddha (Shaw 2006: 62). Similar instances are also noted in the Jain traditions which had incorporated the *Yakṣa* and *Yakṣī* as *Śāsanadevatā* to twenty-four Tirthankara who are often associated with a chaitya tree. Sir John Marshall mentions in his works that the a tree/ plant itself is sacred and is an embodiment of a deity. He also mentions that several divinities in the Brahminical/ Buddhist/ Jain pantheons were originally related to nature (Marhsall 1926: 15).

The abovementioned discussions provides a succinct understanding of the Yakṣi/ Yakṣa. With the development of society and traditions, these divinities were incorporated in the larger pantheons maintaining the sacrality of nature.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Women has always been a vital thought of the Indian sculptors and they have used their imagination and the understanding of the society and epitomized the same in art. Therefore, the concept of *Yakṣī* and plants/trees have survived till date in the form of marvellous sculptures. These figurines showcase the versatile depictions of nature, physical attributes, ornamentation and the methods of worship. This paper explores few of the marvellous terracotta plaques from Chandraketugarh (West Bengal) and figurines from Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) found during the various seasons of excavations and explorations.

TERRACOTTA PLAQUES FROM CHANDRAKETUGARH (WEST BENGAL)

1. The following terracotta plaque (Plate I) depicts a *Yakṣī* or a female tree spirit/deity. The plaque showcases the beautiful blossoming of the honey-suckle; from behind her right leg we can see the trunk of the tree. She stands in *samapadasthanaka* (erect) posture with hands over her waist (akimbo). She is adorned in an unique headdress which looks like a hat and points towards an influence of a foreign region. The hat is decorated with a ribbon with four threads and a flower motif. The hair looks wavy in texture with large dangling circular tassel earrings. She wears a choker and a long necklace along with body jewellery which goes around her waist and shoulders and joins like a belt just above her navel. In the later periods (seventh–ninth century CE) such body jewellery is termed as *Chhanavira*, often worn by the goddess Lajja Gauri (deity of fertility and sexuality). The *Yakṣī* is adorned with intricate armlets with strings flowing. She wears *Bala* (bangles) and *Chur* (thick bangle) in both hands. Looking at her waist, she dresses with an ornate belt with three thick strings joined with a rectangular buckle with small circular pellet designs. Her skirt/*dhoti* is decorated with pleats and tassels. She also wears heavy anklets. From the elaborate depiction it is quite evident that this was a *Yakṣī*/natural deity, based on the extravagant depiction of vegetation which must have been an artistic exhibition of *Palash* flower (*Butea Monosperma*, also known as flame of the forest and bastard teak) which is found abundantly in the region. The region must have been a significant trade centre; traders coming from different regions must have offered such hats and ornaments to the deity and hence the sculptor executed the same on the plaque.



Plate I: Yakṣī (Courtesy: Asutosh Museum, Calcutta)

2. A beautiful *Yakṣī* or a nature spirit has been depicted in the terracotta plaque (Plate II), but it is unfortunately broken. The plaque showcases the *Yakṣī* adorned with jewelleries; she holds one of her *Jhumkas* (earrings) with intricate design and peculiar shapes. She also wears elaborate necklaces, tasselled *Bajubandha* (armlet) and bangles also called *Bala* and *Kheel Chood* in the region of Bengal and adjoining areas. She appears to be a woman of high status or a nature spirit, since she is depicted along with the honey-suckle motif which was quite repetitive in the art of

Sunga period and specifically in the plaques of Chandraketugarh. The analysis of this plaque brings out the importance and association of women with nature.



Plate II: Yakṣī (Courtesy: Asutosh Museum, Calcutta)

SCULPTURES FROM MATHURA (UTTAR PRADESH)

Śālabhañjikā

Śālabhañjikā was once a popular *udyanakrīdā* (women's garden game) in eastern India, where Shala trees were a common sight. When trees were fully bloomed, women would collect Shala blossoms. According to the *Kaśhika Vṛitti*, commenting on a grammatical rule in the *Ashtadhyāyī* (VI, 2, 74) by Panini in the fifth century BCE, this and other garden sports, *udyanakrīdā*, were popular in eastern India (Agrawala 1965:136). *Uddalaka pushpabhañjika*, *Talabhañjika*, and *Viranapushpaprachayika* are the other games described. The *Śālabhañjikā* festival is described in early Buddhist literature as being widely observed in Sravastī (Agrawala 1965: 133).

One of the forerunners in the study of the *Śālabhañjikā* motif in art, J. Ph. Vogel, noted in 1929 that the motif "is a truly indigenous element of decorative art" and that its roots are in a flower festival practiced in ancient India (Vogel 1929: 201). According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, "There is no motif more fundamentally typical of Indian art from first to last than that of the Woman and Tree." The following part discusses a few of the types such as *Śālabhañjikā*. The term *Shala* is used for tree in general associated with the sculptural representation. *Bhanjika*, from the root *bhanj*, means to break or shatter (Desai 2010:4). The following sculpture (Plate III a) now housed in the Mathura Museum represents the *Śālabhañjikā*. The lady stands in *tribhanga* posture and is holding/breaking the branch or *Shala*. She is wearing a single strand *Ekavalli* (necklace), *Bajubandha* (armlet) and series of bangles. The waist is draped with a *Mekhla* which appears to be quite flowy and the beautiful knots are depicted with such perfection that it appears in movement. She stands with her legs crossed and the presence of a serpent around her ankle portrays certain associations with the Naga. She stands over a *Guhyaka Yakṣa*.

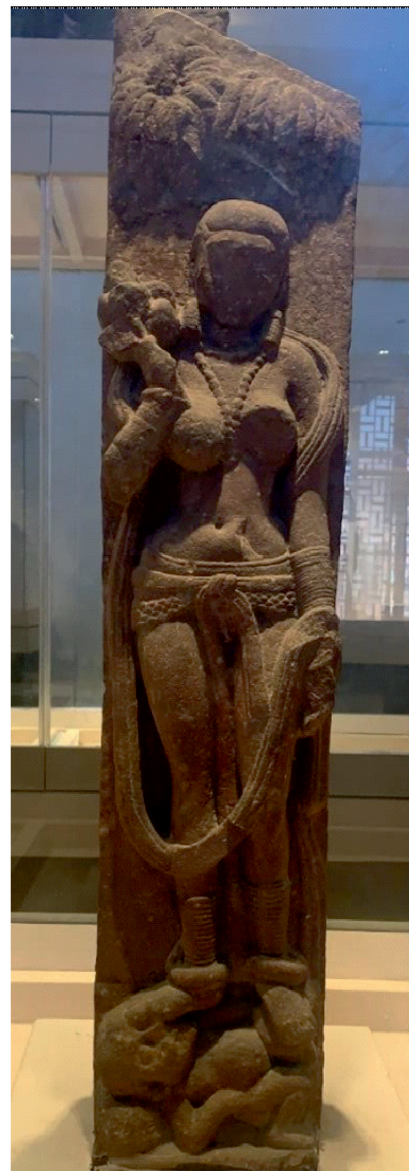
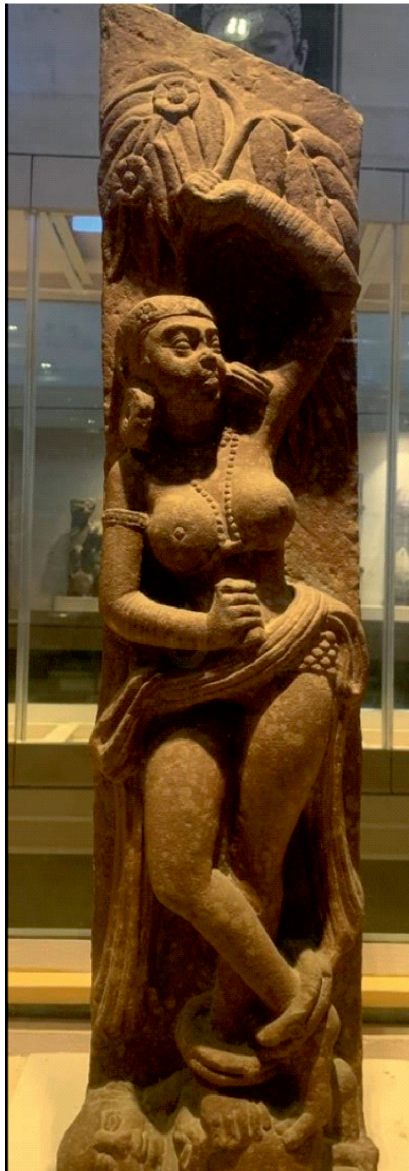


Plate III: (a) *Śālabhañjikā* (b) *Pushpadharini*

Another very interesting and romantic belief is related to the flowering of the Ashoka tree. It is believed that the obstinate Ashoka tree flowers only when it is touched by the delicate feet of a beautiful girl or when she sprinkles wine from her mouth on it. This belief led to a great ritual ceremony known in ancient Sanskrit literature as *Ashoka-dohada* (Varadpande 2006). *Dohada* refers to the sacred contact of the Yaksi which makes the Asoka tree (*Saraca Asoca*) bloom. Similarly, the *Priyangu* tree (*Callicarpa Macrophylla*) blooms with the gentle touch of the Yaksi and *Karnikara* (*Pterospermum acerifolium*) and *Kadamba* tree (*Neolamarckia Cadamba*) blooms when the Yaksi dances and sings (Varadpande 2006: 21)

DISCUSSION

The sculptural representations of *Yakṣī* examined in this study reveal a deep and enduring association between feminine divinity and the natural world in ancient Indian religious thought. The terracotta plaques from Chandraketugarh and the sculptures from Mathura demonstrate that *Yakṣī* were not merely decorative figures but embodied symbolic concepts related to fertility, abundance, protection, and regeneration. Their repeated association with flowering trees, creepers, and sacred vegetation reflects a worldview in which nature was regarded as animate and sacred, inhabited by divine forces capable of influencing human prosperity and well-being. The visual motifs of *Śālabhañjikā*, *Vṛkṣadevata*, and *Aśoka-dohada* illustrate the cultural perception of women as life-giving agents whose presence could stimulate growth and fertility within the natural environment. Such imagery should not be understood solely in aesthetic terms; rather, it reflects broader socio-religious beliefs concerning the interconnectedness of humans, divinities, and nature. The depiction of *Yakṣī* in association with sacred trees further suggests the continuity of earlier tree cults and fertility traditions that were subsequently assimilated into Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical religious frameworks. The examples discussed in this paper also highlight the role of regional artistic traditions in shaping the iconography of nature spirits. While the Chandraketugarh plaques emphasise elaborate ornamentation and floral motifs characteristic of eastern Indian artistic traditions, the Mathura sculptures demonstrate a more developed sculptural vocabulary that integrates *Yakṣī* imagery into monumental religious art. Despite these regional variations, the underlying symbolism remains remarkably consistent, emphasising fertility, prosperity, and the sacred character of vegetation. The persistence of these motifs across different religious traditions and geographical regions indicates that *Yakṣī* worship represented an important cultural mechanism through which local beliefs were accommodated within emerging institutional religions. The artistic representations therefore provide valuable insights into the ways in which popular religious practices, environmental perceptions, and concepts of femininity were negotiated and expressed through visual culture in ancient India.

CONCLUSION

The present study has examined the association of *Yakṣī* with trees and plant life through selected examples from Chandraketugarh and Mathura. The analysis demonstrates that *Yakṣī* functioned as important nature spirits whose iconography was closely connected with fertility, abundance, and the sanctity of the natural environment. Their frequent representation alongside trees, flowers, and vegetal motifs reflects the continuation of ancient fertility cults and tree worship traditions that became integrated into Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical religious systems. The motifs of *Śālabhañjikā*, *Vṛkṣadevata*, and *Aśoka-dohada* reveal how sculptors visualized the dynamic relationship between feminine power

and nature, transforming religious beliefs into enduring artistic forms. These representations not only served decorative purposes but also communicated cultural ideas concerning regeneration, prosperity, and the sacredness of vegetation. The study further highlights the role of art as a medium through which environmental consciousness and religious symbolism were articulated in ancient India. The continued presence of similar beliefs and practices in several regions of contemporary India suggests the remarkable longevity of these traditions. As a result, the study of Yakṣī iconography contributes not only to the understanding of ancient Indian art and religion but also to broader discussions concerning cultural continuity, sacred landscapes, and the historical relationship between humans and the natural world.

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