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YAKSHI: THE JOURNEY OF THE 'MOTHER GODDESS' IN INDIAN ART TRADITION

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Yakshi: The Journey of the 'Mother Goddess' In Indian Art Tradition

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Abstract – The present paper points out the variable forms that an image can assume, from the form of living divine being, as symbol of sovereignty, war trophies and as object of sculptural art, depending on the changing context, setting, presentation and most significantly on the perceptions of a viewer. The paper shall deal with female forms of idols particularly of Yakshi and would seek its transition from an independent powerful deity whose worship was widely spread once, to its eventual absorption and marginalization by the dominant religious traditions in ancient times and finally its coexistence with the Brahmanic deities among the rural communities in present times. Further, it will emphasize on the changing perceptions towards "Once Goddess Yakshi" in contemporary period and how she is perceived, experienced and interpreted by various communities and by different people.

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THE JOURNEY OF THE YAKSHI

The beginning of civilization in India goes back to third millennium B. C., with its widespread terracotta tradition. One of the earliest characteristic of human religious behaviour is the worship of Goddess. Linked to Harappan religion are large number of clay figurines representing nude females that have been found at the sites in Baluchistan, Afghanistan and Indus region which depict them as cult Goddess. The 'mother' aspect of this Goddess is represented in terracotta art where they are primarily associated with the fertility and motherhood. Some figurines from Harappa period show the pregnant mother Goddess with extended abdomen. As fertility idols, they were generally delineated with certain special features such as the essential central portion with the exaggerated breasts, the belly, the sexual organs and the hips which were always enlarged. These figurines were often adorned with bracelets, pendants and necklaces. In Chanhudaro, mother Goddesses are like round pots with heads attached to them. Even on seals, the fertility aspect of a woman was shown with a plant coming out of her womb. These images certainly indicate that the earliest concept of divinity was mainly related to the form of mother creating and nourishing though, not every figure can be hailed as "mother" such as the renowned bronze image of "dancing girl" from Mohenjodaro. This aspect of nudity linked to fertility was not only common to Harappans but also Sumerians as well as Aegeans.

During the Vedic age (1500-600 B.C.) the Aryans had in their pantheon various Goddess such as *Usa*, *Aditi*,

Prithvi etc. The Aryan culture initially stood apart from those who were the worshippers of *Linga* and *Yoni* representing the generative organs of male and female to symbolize fertility. But gradually more powerful, at the same time popular elements of mother Goddess cult, as cherished by the Harappans wrapped the Vedic concepts of fertility and abundance. This process of transformation was through the concept of duality where both male (*Purusa*) and female energy (*Sakti*) are the creator. Thus, the worship of mother Goddess received Brahmanical sanction by interpreting them as manifestations of *Sakti*. An anthropomorphic representation of Vedic Goddess was found in Lauriya Nandangarh representing a nude Goddess found from a Vedic burial. The large number of terracottas were found in Mathura, most conspicuous iconographic features of these are enormous breasts and hips and figures showing child sucking the breasts. Besides huge number of ringstone discovered from the historical sites of Mathura, Rajghat etc as objects of worship of mother Goddess associated with the popular belief particularly non-Aryans, signified the continuation of tradition of symbolic worship of mother Goddess.

Yakshas or *Yakshis* (female counterpart) were the deities connected with water, fertility, trees, forest and wilderness. *Yakshis* were regarded as being who were supra human in strength, power and energy, generally gentle and benevolent but also capable of being malevolent, sometimes even acting as Guardians of individuals, group and communities of people. But, as originally *Yakshi* remained benign

deity, connected with fertility. The Grammarian Panini mentions in fifth century B.C. worship of *Yakshi* as female tree spirits. In Mahabharata they are referred to as ambivalent protectors. Indeed all over the Ganga Yamuna valley these deities had strong sway which can be seen on the relief of Barhut and Sanchi where they are conspicuous for their bewitching nudity and bareness. Cult images with elements of Brahmanization became increasingly anthropomorphized. Besides the evidence of sculptures illustrates that Buddhism incorporated and integrated these popular deities into its pantheon of lesser Gods of lesser importance. The literary image of the *Yakshi* in the texts of the Brahmanical Buddhist and Jain tradition was generally demonic and frightening. *Yakshis* were given semi-divine form and were classified as subordinate divinities. Notion of fertility, prosperity and protection was linked to larger Goddesses.

Shalabhanjikas, a generic term for sensuous sculptural representations of women grasping the branches of a tree were also *Yakshis*. Women holding the branch is again, a symbolic representation of fertility aspect, where with just a touch by *Yakshi* made the tree blossomed. There was a significant change in iconographic formulae of the terracotta tradition. The aspect of nudity was subdued and the body of the fertility figures were much concealed with ornaments. Despite that particular care was taken to show the details of the sex very clearly. In the figures of Mathura rail pillars, the sexual parts were clearly shown to emphasize the source of fruitfulness and productivity. In the Kushana art female as well as mother aspect of the Goddess found popularity in the sculptures as well as in terracotta art. The mother Goddess figurines have been found in phenomenal numbers from Taxila, Mathura, Kausambi, Pataliputra etc. Following the features of early tradition, when representing mother Goddess, some of the figures marked absolute nudity.

During the Sunga and Kushana period, the figures of *Lakshmi* and *Yakshi* continued the tradition of nudity with developed breasts and defined productive organ. The lower part of the body of some of these images were covered with a garment, which perhaps was due to Hellenistic influence in Gandhara art which gave *Yakshi* more sensual appeal in their appearance. In Post Mauryan period, they were increasingly given anthropomorphized form and also their nakedness was subdued, when the lower body was covered due to Hellenistic influence in Gandhara and Mathura school of Art. "Patriarchal Brahmanism" also had effects on the iconographic representation on Goddesses where despite having independent identity and dominance, they were coinciding with "Male Gods" as their consorts. Even within Buddhism, *Yakshi* was depicted as subservient to Buddha.

The Mauryan female Goddesses share a pool of common attributes with *Yakshi* such as attendants carrying fans, mirrors, *Chatris* and *Chowris*. Female figure showing coins were associated with *Lakshmi*,

though the weapons in her hair suggest some precursor deity now assimilated into the orthodox identity of *Lakshmi*. *Lakshmi* was associated with the Lotus, vegetation and thus by extension with the Yakshas and Yakshini fertility cults. Thus, the mother cult of prehistoric communities in her fertility aspect emerged as the Goddess *Sri* or *Lakshmi* and thus became popular as the Goddess of prosperity and represented the Goddess in her generous aspect. By Gupta period divine elements of *Yakshis* were incorporated into pantheon of larger Goddesses and were left in her semi divine forms as beautiful protectors of the Sanctuaries. During Gupta period various icons of *Gajalakshmi* have also been found where she is anointed by two elephants. It should also be noted that various names given to the Goddesses. *Sri*, *Lakshmi*, *Gajalakshmi* and *Durga* in due course adopted different forms, character and attributes. The theory of incarnations also influence in the course of development of *Sakti* pantheon. The representation of various Goddesses on coins and seals is an interesting testimony of the development of cult of *Sakti*.

Descendants of the *Yakshis* were the *Surasundaris*, heavenly beauties whose images are still found on outer walls of early medieval Hindu temples which were linked to sexuality and eroticism. They can be seen just as "sculptural art" where they were not bound or defined to any religion. Nudity which was depicted in religious iconography simply symbolized fertility whereas by the second half of the 1st millennium A.D. *Yakshi* who originally connected to fertility cult was transformed into humanized form of sexuality and eroticism in the form of *Surasundari* where they were human personification of human love. Divine elements of *Yakshi* was incorporated by the larger Goddesses giving them place in one corner in the hierarchy and in this semi divine form Goddesses were transformed into mere sculptures by urbanized dominant religious cult.

Nakedness in religious iconography was not given prominence from post Gupta period onwards. The upper part of the female images remained uncovered, to highlight the maternal aspects of all feminine form. There was a gradual shift of nudity from religious icons to humanized form of images evident in sculptural art depicted on walls of temples of early Medieval India which was a criterion to depict feminine beauty. Though nudity never completely disappeared from religious iconography, it became human prerogative to define sexual motive through images. The sculptures of Khajurao temples represent *Nayakas* of *Maithuna* couples - the human personification of notion of human love. Besides these explicit sexual form of images were considered auspicious in temple architecture.

It has also been noted that *Yakshi* in the form of local Goddess in village religion survived as cult deities unlike in puranic temple Hinduism. Reema Hooja in her study of Rajasthan culture pointed out that building

of shrines to local goddess continued well up to fourteenth to fifteenth centuries A.D. Sites such as trees, sacred groves and stones showed remarkable continuity as sacred centres in rural communities where the principal deity most often has been Goddesses. The Concept of "Interpretive communities" is applicable to both changing forms of worship of Goddesses particularly *Yakshis* and nudity in religious iconography. *Yakshi* represents a powerful independent deity who was Goddess of fertility and childbirth and as a guardian deity by rural communities. With the developments of 'Urban Brahmanic religion' these popular folk idols were subsumed into mainstream Brahmanism where these local Goddesses were assimilated into Brahmanical goddesses such as *Shitala* or *Olabibi* currently worshipped as manifestation of Goddess *Durga* and are immensely popular among the rural as well as urban villages. For instance in village Alipur of Delhi, the worship of *Shitala* or the 'the cool one', a goddess associated with small pox is widespread among all the rural communities. However, now completely covered in clothes with a veil on her head, the iconography of the goddess also underwent a complete change. Similarly, the terracotta statuettes of *Yakshi* found in Mathura indicate the importance of the *Yaksha* cult both in public and the domestic domain in ancient times. In present times the images of *Yakshis* eventually become so central in the religious arena is evident from the village of Parkham. The image of the *Yaksha* once stood next to the village tank and was later removed by Mathura Museum. But in the month of January, a *Jakhaiya mela* (i.e. yaksha fair) is held in the village, where a small *Yaksha* image, a substitute for the original is worshipped by hundreds of people from surrounding villages.

One another such example can also be seen in the perceptions of various communities towards the image of Didarganj *Yakshi* also signify the trajectory of *Yakshi*. Discovered in 1917 the miraculous origin of the image at Didar Ganj village convinced and invoked the local villages to claim it as religious icon; object of worship. With the intervention of archaeologists and Museum officials, the image was finally shifted to the provincial museum. The shift in its settings and presentation, the divine elements of images completely disappeared and it acquired new meaning and value. Over a period of time, it became proudest possession as antique treasure in international market. The context of image changes from divine imagery to "high water marks of Mauryan sculptural art". With the origin of "Indian nation", the image was categorized under masterpieces of Indian art recognizing India's cultural achievement. Thus, to conclude one can assert that it is on the interpretation of the audience that the context of the image is defined and appropriated.

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