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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULT OF YAKSHAS-YAKSHINIS IN BHĀRATIYA DHARMA

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### Introduction

Bhārat is a land of hundreds of Gods and Goddesses. Misra calls it as a "natural propensity towards polytheism". These were emerged as their devotees spread, exposed to each other and amalgamated. The story of such rise of deities is nothing but the cultural history of a beautiful fabric, known as Bhārat.

We have (always-used-but-still-significant) terms/models as "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition" at our disposal. Considering Vedic/Hindu religion, loosely speaking, deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma belong to the "Great tradition" whereas mother Goddesses like Lakshmi, Parvati, Sarasvati; and other minor deities, called as 'folk-deities', belong to "Little Tradition". Yaksha and Yakshinis are such folk deities. During the course of time and with the spread of Brahmanical religions (along with their "Great" deities); many folk deities, like Yakshas and Yakshinis were synchronized with their fold due to their strong foothold in popular belief. Hence, they were utilized as "...ideal media of communication with the masses" (Misra). Thus, we can witness a growth of Pantheons or *parivardevatas* of Shiva and Vishnu. This synchronization/amalgamation is clearly reflected in coins, sculptures, temples etc. The growing popularity of Bhakti mode/movement cemented such synchronization. Subsequently, these families emerge as strong cults and; with various streams of philosophies and the Tantric influences, there also emerged a rather complicated aspects of worshipping.

Other religions like Buddhism and Jainism, followed the same suit. Along with occasional instances of sectarian conflicts here and there; no bold differences can separate all these three religions.

So far the assimilation of the Yakshas and Yakshinis into higher religions are concerned, one should take an important aspect of Bhāratīya dharmas into consideration. The Bhāratīya religions have a different kind of approach than the modern religions like Muslims and Christians. The Muslims and Christians; during conversion of people; wipe out their original identity or any system they follow. But, its a remarkable feature of Bhāratīya religions that they do convert; but retain the original systems of populace. It is theorized as 'Synchronization'. However, in these processes, the



guests are treated as subordinates; like, wife (Lakshmi), son-of wife (Ganesh), mount (Bull), servants (*ganas*), disciples, devotees etc.

Although subordinates, the Yakshas and Yakshinis retain their popularity in large populace. In Jainism, they receive a major part of devotion. During Medieval and then Modern times, too; these deities remain popular in common folk of Bhārat; which is still true!

### Concept of Yaksha/Yakshini

The name Yaksha derived from *yaj* i.e. to worship with sacrifice. It is also perceived as 'who moves quickly'. In Persian, there is word *Yax* i.e. to appear. The Yaksha and Yakshini were and are the folk-deities. They were worshipped, mainly for material gains. Before personification and sculpted in anthropomorphic forms; they were worshipped in the natural forms, real and imaginary. They were believed to be resided in trees, water bodies like rivers, ponds, lakes; highways, cross-roads, mountains, like everywhere. They were protector, healers, guardians etc. The cults were emerged around such deities. In due course of time they received aniconic form; then, anthropomorphic. They were huge, magnificent, beautiful, intelligent, rich; and also, cruel, harmful, mischievous, deceptive. They were worshipped in both their aspects, either benevolent or malevolent.

### Vedic/Hinduism and Yakshas/Yakshini

The early Veda i.e. Rigveda records the pre-Vedic existence of the Yakshas/Yakshinis. The pre-Veda people believed in 'soul'/after-death existence. They sought soul/spirits in everything. Consequently, natural phenomena like mountains, lakes, trees became abode of such spirits. The special mention should be the worship of the *banayan/ashvattha* tree as they are supposed to be immortal. Such spirits took form of Yaksha who were heavily popular in masses. Quite later, the *Kailas* mountain (original abode of Yakshas) became the abode of "high God" like Shiva.

The image of *pashupati* tree-worship of Harappa civilization, can be recognized as early iconographic evidence of Yaksha. Such 'idol-worship' receives mention in Vedas also. It should be noted that the tendency of idol-worship was never liked by Vedic people. Hence, the idols of Yaksha and Yakshinis were definitely pre-Vedic and non-Aryan. However, the early Vedic people did recognize the significance of Yakshas and their worship by common people. It is evident by the origin of the name 'Yaksha' from *yaji* i.e. to worship with sacrifice (*Sāyan*) and honor (Keith). Yakshas were used as adjectives to the Vedic Gods, like, "Sun as outlook of Yaksha" (Rigveda X. 37.1 Misra). We find references of Yaksha temples in Rigveda. They also assigned Agni as the lord of the Yakshas. On one side, it is a recognition to the folk belief system as also silent beginning of synchronization which would go to take place 1000 years after!

However, during later Vedic period, the "texts" maintained negative perception of the Yakshas. Those were time of, on one side, the rigid religious system and on the another, the proliferation of deities. The Yakshas were perceived in brotherhood with other demi-gods<sup>1</sup> like *Gandharvas* (beautiful wise, music lovers), *Apsaras* (residing in water bodies > *ap sārini*) and forests), *Kinnaras* (singers), *Rakshasas*<sup>2</sup>, *Guhyaka* (guardian of hidden treasures), *Kumbahda* (with large huge stomachs as genitals). Thus, Yakshas were regarded as *devajati* (Amarkosha 1.1.6, in Misra).

<sup>1</sup> Atharvaveda (XI.6.10), Maitrayniya Upanishad (I.5), Maitri Upanishad (VII.5.8.), cited in Misra

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that both the words Yaksha and *Rakshas*, have the same word as '*Ksha* or *raksha*' i.e. to protect. It is obvious that *Rakshasas*, before their demonization; were earlier considered as 'Guardians'.

Attributes of all these demi gods were "matured in Yaksha". Hence, we find, the benevolent and malevolent nature of Yakshas and Yakshinis. The abodes of Yakshas were identified as 'tree', 'river bodies' (Atharvaveda, Misra), 'Sky'. According to Misra, "earlier the abode of Yakshas were perceived as 'cosmic', but gradually it became more terrestrial." It indicates the purposeful degradation of their status by later Vedic texts. It shows that the later Vedic texts looked Yakshas in contempt. The lordship of Vedic Agni on Yakshas were removed. And Kuber was perceived as their Lord; indicating the demonization of Yaksha. Because, though Kuber known as wealthy; it was related to Ravan, the *Rakshasa* as the sons of Pulastya sage. Now, we find them troubling the thirsty people with riddles (*Yakshaprashna* in Mahabharata) and destroying the rituals (*Tratika* in Ramayana). *Maitrayani Samhita* called them as 'thieves'.

However, we find mention of the Yakshas' temples in these texts, especially in the Sutras. *Ashvalayan Gruhyasutra* (1.12.1.3) mentions offerings and sacrifices were made in these *Chaityas*. Thus, we come to know that, despite the demonization of Yakshas by later Vedic texts; the Yakshas were worshipped by the people in those times. The guardian aspect of Yaksha became powerful during this period.

During and after 6th century BC, the Yakshas remained 'point of contempt' in the belief system of Vedic religion, or specifically speaking, "later Vedic text". In the same period, Buddhism and Jainism emerged. These religions were "new religion" as they were based on missionary approach of proselytization. To tune with the masses, and in turn to convert them; these religions provided space to the belief systems of the masses in their fold. The subsequent growing popularity of these religions compelled Vedic people to introspect.

Thus, from 1-2 c. AD onwards, the Vedic followed methods of these new religion and, thus we witness the 'synchronization' in Vedic religion; developing it into Hindu religion. The Yakshas and Yakshinis were incorporated in the Vedic belief system. Those were the days of Bhakti worship which gave birth to various cults centered around high gods. The Yakshas received space in their folds in various forms, like, attendant, guardians, servants with abodes at mountains, waterbodies, trees etc. In one way it was a beautiful assimilation, but it should be noted that, these folk-deities received only subordinate position in this system. However, some Puranas like *Vayu Purana* (Ch. LXIX, Misra) maintained the malevolent branding of Yakshas.

During Early Medieval period, the Tantra influenced all the religions. We witness such influence in temples of Madhya Pradesh, like 64 *Yogini* Temple (Bheda Ghat, Mitavali); temples at Khajuraho. Here, numerous sculptures of Yaksha and Yakshini indicate their significant position in major religions as also popularity in general population.

### **Buddhism and Yakshas/Yakshinis**

Two methods were adopted by the Buddhism to resolve the issue of Yakshas and their importance in popular belief; "assimilation" and "suppression".

To spread the religion in the masses, it was perceived as mandatory for Buddhism to understand the belief system of the former. Not only that; they had to incorporate the deities of masses into their fold. Such conversions became a considerable part of Buddhist texts. Such anecdotes/stories run in a typical story-telling method. The Yaksha and Yakshini are creating troubles. Then, Buddha encounters them. He defeats them. Then, he welcomes them into the fold of Buddhism. Then they are assigned various duties. In the end, they emerge as ardent devotee of Buddha, etc. e.g. story of Suchiloma, Alavaka. The Yakshas also perceived as "fallen angles" (Misra) who sought Buddha's blessings.

Though once-upon-a-time, the Yakshas/Yakshinis were major deities of masses; as mentioned earlier; after conversion, they became subordinates in Buddhist system. Thus, we find mention of 41 Yaksha chiefs in Buddhist pantheon (*Atanatiya Sutta*). These chiefs, not only helped Buddha's followers but also defeated 'wicked Yakshas'! The conversion of these Yakshas to Buddhism means the conversion of the people who used to worship Yakshas. The method also included the conversion of Yaksha temples into Buddhist temples. For example, *Anand Chaitya* of Bhoganagera and *Udena Chaitya* of Vaishali converted into Buddhist Vihara.

So far the subordination to Yakshas are concerned; it is ironical that, the earliest human figure of Buddha was sculpted on the model of Yakshas' sculptures! It should be noted that the "Yaksha sculptures are the earliest known Indian iconic representation", followed by Gandhara-Buddha figures. *Banyan/ashvatthatree* (abode of Yakshas) received importance in Buddhism and its early depiction as symbol of Buddha himself in Hinayana cult.

Thus, the Yakshas adorn the gateways of Buddhist stupas (Yakshas, *Shaalbhanjikain* Bharhut, Sanchi). They accompany Buddha in various sculptures. They guard Buddhist monasteries. They mark their presence in the beautiful paintings in the Buddhist caves (Ajanta). They were made monsters in the Buddhist stories to highlight Buddha's exploits (the attack of Mara). They were made as comic objects to stand at the gateway and hold flower-baskets on their heads (*Mālādhara*, Pitalkhora) or attendants (*Jrimbhaka*).

### Jainism and Yakshas/Yakshinis

The Jain texts are full of Yaksha/Yakshini stories. Similar to Buddhism, the pattern is the same. The atrocities of Yaksha/Yakshini, their encounter with Tirthankaras, their reform and their entry in Jain pantheon.

It is told that the tirthankaras never give any boon to their devotees. They are role models to whom the devotees must follow. However, such higher/abstract concepts never really grasped and hence liked by the masses. The common people have their material needs and they need someone to satisfy them. Hence, in Jainism, each Tirthankaras were provided with Yaksha couple, i.e. Yaksha and Yakshini. They were powered to fulfill the material expectations of the devotees. Hence, the sculptures of tirthankaras are accompanied with Yaksha couple.

Similar to later Vedic texts, the Yakshas also considered in connection with other demi-Gods by terming them as *vyantara/vanamantara*. There were 12 chiefs of Yakshas with Kuber/Manibhadra/Purnabhadra as their lord. The malevolent nature of Yakshas was still maintained by the Jains. But at the same time, their benevolent aspect; especially as 'Guardian' was highlighted. Like, Kuber was perceived as *Lokapala*. The Jain literature also mention the temples of the Yakshas at the outskirts of the cities, highlighting their protective aspects, e.g. Manibhadra saved the city of Samilla from small-pox epidemic. Punyabhadra Yaksha was the guardian of the Champa, who has a temple over there. A detailed list of Yaksha shrines and specific cities is given in *Vipaka Sutra*.

Highlighting their guardian aspect and, in course of synchronization/capturing the masses; the Jains incorporated Yakshas in their pantheon. Each tirthankara was assigned with Yaksha couple as their guardian; like *Gomukha* and *Chakreshvari* to Rishabhdeva; *Parshva* and *Padmavati* to Parshvanath, *Matanga* and *Siddhayika* to Mahavira, etc. (*Roopamandana*).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that, in due course of time, the worship of Yakshini became so popular that separate shrines were established to enshrine these Yakshinis, e.g. shrine of Ambika at Karanthai (Tamil Nadu)

stated earlier, the worshippers used to expect material boon from these Yakshas. Thus, the long tradition of 'Yaksha worship by the people' still remained continued in the Jains too!

### Assimilation of "little tradition" to "great tradition"

The assimilation of Yakshas into the fold of higher-cults have already been mentioned earlier. Here are some examples of such process of synchronization.

<b>Yakshas/Yakshinis</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Changed Nature</b>
Ganesha as trouble-maker	Hinduism	Son of Parvati and trouble-solver
Garuda	Hinduism	Mount of Vishnu
Mount Kailas as abode	Hinduism	Abode of Shiva
Individual deities	Hinduism	Ganas of Shiva
Yakshini standing of Lotus	Hinduism	Lakshmi
Yakshini standing on crocodile	Hinduism	River Goddess
	Hinduism	Bhairava
human form	Buddhism	Earliest anthropomorphic idol of Buddha
tree-spirit	Buddhism	a. As Buddha in Hinayana sculptures, b. as <i>shalbhanjika</i>
<i>maladhara</i>	Buddhism	dwarf attendant (Pitalkhora)
<i>Vajrapani</i>	Buddhism	One of the Bodhisattvas
Chaitya-worship of Yakshas	Buddhism	Buddhist Chaitya-worship
tree-spirit	Jainism	Ambika
Individual deities	Jainism	Guardian pairs to each tirthankara

### Modern and Contemporary period

Today, Hinduism is the major belief system of Bhārat. The Jainism is mainly concentrated in, mostly mercantile communities in Western and Southern India. Buddhism disappeared. But, across this vast nation and people from various languages; we find the worship of Yakshas and Yakshinis are widely prevalent<sup>4</sup>. They, not necessarily have a specific iconography; but they are worshipped in aniconic forms. They have independent shrines/temples. They have annual pilgrimages, crowded with lakhs of worshippers. As Misra aptly puts, "Yaksha worship, therefore, is not a dead relic of only historical record but a fossilized faith which, by and large, is of contemporary interest"

### CONCLUSION

Since time immemorial, Yakshas and Yakshinis were existed and important part of folk-belief system. Thus, in a true sense; they do not have beginnings i.e. *anādi*. They were perceived as Guardian/Protector deities and their abode was believed to be in trees, forests, mountains or waterbodies. These Gods were heroic, beautiful, intelligent, healers, redeemer etc. People have built temples/shrines for them where they were worshipped, earlier in aniconic form. The Early Vedic people noted that and took respectful cognizance of Yakshas and Yakshinis. However, during later Vedic period, in the context of growing rigidity; the Yakshas and Yakshinis were perceived as

<sup>4</sup>A. Recently discovered a standing image of Yaksha at Haigunda, an island in Sharavati river (Karnataka). It is dated to 2nd to 3rd century AD and holds iconographical resembles with Yaksha. The villagers call him as *Bobari* and perceived as the protector of the island. B. There is a famous pilgrimage in Tamil Nadu devoted to worship of *IsakkiAmman*.

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demi-Gods, various malevolent attributes were assigned to them and looked with contempt. After 6th century BC, with the need of proselytization, Buddhism and Jainism incorporated these popular folk Gods and Goddesses into their fold; however, with giving them subordinate position. The conversion of people into their folds initiated the conversions of their Gods and their abodes. Pantheons of both these religions filled with numerous types of Yakshas/Yakshinis. After some centuries, the Vedic religion followed the same suit. Due to growth of Bhakti concept and need to contest Buddhism/Jainism, Vedic also incorporated popular deities into their fold. Like others, these deities received subordinate position in their fold. Then, the tantra emerged, spread across the belief system of all the higher cults. The power of magic, intelligence, beauty of the Yakshas and Yakshinis attracted Tantra belief system which is reflected in their temples/shrines. Thus, throughout the centuries, higher cults and Gods developed with occasional ups and downs. This can be witnessed through the iconographic development of these cults. However, except Hinduism, other higher cults were, either disappeared or concentrated in some cultural/geographical pockets. But, Yakshas and Yakshinis always remained constant and popular in vast majority of our society.

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