

# Biographies of Yakshi in Buddhism from Ancient to Contemporary Era

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## Abstract

This essay examines the evolving nature of cultural artifacts, focusing specifically on historical images of Yakshis, and explores the shifts in their meaning and interpretation across different contexts. The paper traces the constructed histories of these rediscovered images, their recontextualization within religious frameworks and the redefinition of their meaning by official institutions such as museums. Furthermore, it highlights the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between cultural artifacts and the institutions that house them, underscoring the complex web of cultural production. This study centers on the images of Yakshis in the works of Vidya Dehejia's book *"Representing the Body in Indian Art: Gender issues in Indian Art"* (1997) analyzing the changes in their interpretation of power dynamics underlying these transformations.

**Keywords:** Museum, iconography, Meaning, Cultural transformation,

## Introduction

Any artwork or religious image is constituted by a series of biographies, religious and cultural assumptions, political agendas and economic motivations. Even after this, their authority changes constantly and so do their meanings and status. Richard Davis describes the journey of an image as "humans may steal the images, destroy or disfigure them, transport them, buy and sell them, label them, display them in new settings for new audiences, and even sometimes research their history". He calls images as "fundamentally social beings" as their identity is made and remade through interactions<sup>1</sup>. In this essay I attempt to study the images who lost themselves over a period of time and their rediscovery assigned new identities to them. When an image is rediscovered, their so-called authorities scrutinize them to know about them. They might become part of a culture or they become a piece of display in a museum. When they are reinstated in a culture, new political and economic forces decide their position. But when it becomes part of a museum again they enter into a vicious circle of meanings and discoveries. Now, when we talk about the biography of an object we investigate its changing authorities in different phases. However, in this period of its movement there are also changes in definitions of those authorities. Here, in this essay I have spoken about museums as a new authority of an object. These changing definitions are equally important as the changing authorities. Authenticity of an art object is defined by the time and space in which it was made. When there is vague information about that time and space there are more chances of its misinformation and misinterpretation. The 'glorious past' displayed in a museum is also one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Richard H. *Lives of Indian images*. Princeton University Press, 1999. (7)

reasons for the inequalities in the past and construction of social hierarchies. Thus, I will glance through the changing role of museums in modernism and postmodernism.

The following essay studies the Yakshi tradition in Buddhism, myths associated with them, their iconographic interpretations and evolution in it over a period of time. It draws inspiration from ‘*Lives of Indian Images*’ by Richard H. Davis and ‘*Representing the Body in Indian Art: Gender issues in Indian Art*’ by Vidya Dehejia. Since Yakshi images are important in the Indian context of Iconographic development and their journey from engendering to disappearance and then rediscoveries and reinterpretation is very fascinating. My basic interest in exploring Gendered stereotypes in art motivated me to take up the issue. Also, looking into the Yaksha’s life peep into the core essence certain visual art factors. This study not only talks about religion but also the development of art history as a discipline.

The following essay is divided into five sub sections, namely:

1. Myths and Concepts of Yakshi and their Fading traditions,
2. Iconographic Interpretations
3. Rediscovery and Assimilation in modern times
4. Postmodern Explorations
5. Conclusion.

### **Myths and Concepts of Yakshi and their fading Significance**

Commonly called earth spirits, yakshi or yakshini are female fertility spirits and yakshas are male earth warriors. Developed from religious ideas based on animism-based cults, their worship was prevalent since the ancient period which later became part of different religions. The word yaksha literally means any shining person, which can allude to human beings who shine with wealth and fame or virtues. Yakshi is considered the embodiment of feminine beauty. The earliest reference to the word Yaksha is found in the *Jaiminiya Brahmana*, where it means nothing more than a wondrous thing. However, there is a world of beliefs that includes the worship of Yakshas, Nagas, local Genii and powers of fertility which are outside the realm of religion manifested in Vedic literature. In the proto- historic period we see fertility goddesses in the form of Mother goddesses and their cults were often termed as fertility cults. Evidence of plant-bearing females seems to represent a vegetation Goddess which in a way could relate with later Yakshinis along tree branches, though separated by long periods. Beliefs and cults of Yakshas appear to be Dravidian, Non-Aryan or of indigenous origin. A practice that was part of indigenous sections got strength during the Janapadha period, says V.S Agarwal. After the Janapadha period they were assimilated into Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and in the process of assimilation, there was a good deal of mutual borrowing.

Simultaneously there were stories from the same indigenous traditions, where Yakshas were not considered auspicious. A story from a Tibetan source from Buddha's period is about the gatekeeper of Vaishali, the gatekeeper was reborn as a spirit in the lifetime of Buddha and requested Vaishali's detractors to grant him the status of a yaksha, he also warned them about any danger if not given the status of Yaksha. There is another practice from South India, made popular by Brihadratha, this one is about Yakshini – a blood thirsty demonic who hid children and was worshiped in threat. Buddha concealed her child and made her heart filled with motherly affection. Buddha preached to her and she was converted into a protectress of children in the Buddhist order. And shrines of this Yakshi are found wherever the Buddhist monks traveled including Rajagriha. Hariti achieved the position of deity in Buddhism while others were accommodated as decorative motifs. It might be a negative aspect or popularity but Yakshas and Yakshis

were welcomed into Buddhism, though it originated as a challenge to existing religious practices. At the beginning of the 1st century AD, the colossal images of yakshas and yakshis disappeared: smaller idols are worshiped in the domestic sphere. Worship of abstract deities of priestly theology reduced their importance. Yaksha disappeared when iconography of Buddha came into existence. Life size image of Kubera in Buddhism was later converted into an ugly dwarf in Hinduism. Buddhism, Hinduism placed the yaksha Yakshi as guards of temples. These too were later replaced by River Goddesses. Yaksha Yakshi almost disappeared from the minds of people.

### Iconographic Interpretations

Prior to Yakshi Images, the cult of the mother goddess was popular hence we find the images of it. Yakshi and Mother Goddess both are associated with fertility. Thus, it is possible that the cult of the mother goddess slowly evolved into a cult of Yakshi practice<sup>2</sup>. Hence the iconographic traits also seemed to be borrowed from it. Images of Yakshas and Yakshis are found in numbers in Bharhut, Sanchi and Mathura. Stella Kramrisch talks about the unity of all creation and great harmony in early Buddhist art. She states that the Bharhut reliefs are primarily a picture of the spiritual state and secondary to this represent a particular subject, the figures are not always full of life or move but they are full of occult dynamics. The figures of Yaksha and Yakshini are flat and snake-like, clinging to the pillars like pillars. Their elbows and knees are visible as the joints of a tree.<sup>3</sup> Although these religious motifs are subsidiary to the Buddha's stupa which is only symbolic, they are the one that communicate the religion to the worshippers. One of the most decorative motifs in the form of Yakshi in Buddhism is *Shalabhanjika*. Yet there are other images that carry the idea of decorative motive as well as cultural significance.

Figure of "*Chanda Yakshi*" (fig-2) belonging to 100 B.C from Bharhut, which is now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. Its iconography is based on the ancient belief that a woman by her touch could cause a tree to blossom or bear fruit and in turn she too may become more fertile. This theme has also been explored in later literature. Kalidasa introduced it in his works *Meghduta* and *Malvikagimitra*. Another figure of "*Sirima Devata*" (fig-3) of 100 B.C. from Bharhut was rediscovered during the archeological excavation at Bharhut and was placed in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. It is a relief sculpture of a woman with ornamentation, standing in a relaxed position with one hand near shoulder and another going down to the thighs; her protruding breasts and heavy body associate it with fertility. Siri is considered the goddess of luck, of plenty and success and her heavy breasts are considered as her sign of productivity. Siri(sri) is mentioned in the *Sirikalakanni Jataka* and suggests the acceptance of her cult by Buddhists<sup>4</sup>. The most common form of representation is Sri flanked by two elephants who keep her moist by pouring water on her which is a symbol of fertilizing females. This iconographic interpretation of Siri is similar to the depiction of *Gaja-lakshmi*. She is also associated with *mithunas* on the railing pillars of Sanchi Stupa II.

### Rediscovery and Assimilation in modern times

Besides archaeological excavations, provenance studies, though directly concerned with politics, study a variety of significant contexts. It contemplates every aspect of it, whether it is an object of faith, a memento

<sup>2</sup> Parker, Deidre C. *Tracing Buddhism in the British Museum: Biographies of Select Buddhist Objects acquired by the British Museum in the 19th-20th c.* Diss. SOAS University of London, 2019: 128

<sup>3</sup> Kramrisch, Stella. *Exploring India's Sacred Art*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishe, 1994: 123-126

<sup>4</sup> Unnikrishnan, Sandhya M. "Visualizing Yakshi in the Religious History of Kerala." *Heritage: Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 5 (2017): 757-777.

or a financial asset.<sup>5</sup> When an object is rediscovered it either becomes a part of culture or most probably goes into a museum space. Literal meaning of museum as mentioned in Oxford Dictionary is ‘a building in which objects of artistic, cultural, historical or scientific interest are kept and shown to the public’. Generally, the museum objects are viewed as a glorious past. A display in a museum on a pedestal is guided by lighting, labels, surrounding objects and even the type of building, which Richard Davis called the “frame” of the object. Its importance in a museum is decided by its authority and not its cultural perspectives. “*Didarganj Yakshi*” (fig-4) when rediscovered in October in 1917, was placed in an incipient shrine by some local persons under the mistaken notion that the figure was Hindu Deity. D.B. Spooner (then curator of Patna museum) and E.H.C. Walsh (President of the Patna museum's Managing Committee) when came to know about this brought the Piece into Patna museum by showing those local worshipers that the figure was merely an attendant as she had the *chowri* in her hand. Here the image has been assigned to the third century B.C.E. partly on the basis of her finding spot and partly because of the so-called Mauryan polish. Her original context is unknown and also the fact that how and why it was lost. It is called "yakshi" because of her fertility symbols and attendant because of the fly whisk she is holding. *Didarganj Yakshi* exhibited in a different light in a bamboo sanctuary becomes different in a museum hall.<sup>6</sup> The picture that I have taken here shows the *Didarganj Yakshi* as a centerpiece of a museum gallery. The statues surrounding her might hold higher value in cultural context. I wonder if it is the aesthetic appeal of the image that is deciding its position in the space or the authority of it.

Rediscovery of an object is its rebirth. In this rebirth their authority and placement are decided by the political powers. There is archeology, there is art history, there is museology studies. Archaeology was a colonial project in India, and so as was art history. Museum objects also become part of historical documentation and studies. One Of the art history books “*A Concise History of Indian Art*” by Roy C. Craven describes the above discussed Yaksi Chandra of Bharhut as- ‘She sensuously clings to a flowering tree. Her regal bearing is complemented by her elaborate head-dress, her braided hair, her ankle and arm bracelets, her multiple necklaces, her girdle, and the auspicious marks tattooed on her cheeks’. She is in fact portrayed as queen of the Shunga period, but she is primarily a queen of fertility. Her languorous pose and her leg embracing the tree- trunk identifies her with the *shalabhanjika*.<sup>7</sup> Such an interpretation is guided by the aesthetic appeal and is a colonial interpretation of Indian antiquity.

Yaksha -Yakshi (“*Yaksha n Yakshini*”, fig-5) images were also exercised as a part of the Modern art movement. After Independence, several institutions of national and public importance were housed and constructed. Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister of India encouraged Indian artists to decorate these buildings. The Reserve bank of India also came into existence in Delhi. The constituted committee for the project said that two sculptures could be made at the RBI building depicting the idea of prosperity and agriculture and Carl Khandalawalla, an eminent critic and connoisseur of art suggested the images of Yaksha and Yakshi for the purpose. Ram kinkar bajj’ s proosal was accepted, the models derived from Parkham yaksha and Besanagar Yakshi were created in the modern approach. As in Hindu mythology yaksha yakshi are presented as guards and were made on the entrance of the Reserve Bank of India to guard it. Yaksha image carries the money bag in his hand while the Yakshi is holding paddy grass in one

<sup>5</sup> Ahuja, Naman P. "Discourse on a label: exposing narratives of violence." (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Richard H. *Lives of Indian images*. Princeton University Press, 1999: 3-15

<sup>7</sup> Craven, Roy C. *A concise history of Indian art*. Vol. 458. Thames and Hudson, 1976: 64-65

of her hands, while the Yaksha image was influenced by the Kubera, Yakshini 's paddy grass must have been influenced by Bharat Mata<sup>8</sup>.

### Postmodern Explorations

Postmodern era not just inspects the 'academia' and 'positions' but also constantly redefines the power structures. Definition of the museum now is not the same as its modern definition, so is their role. During modern times an Indian object in a British museum was an 'Indian Antiquity' from their colonial cultural perspective however in an Indian museum it is their 'Glorious past' moreover in a regional museum say Patna museum it may be both a 'glorious past' or cultural object of a particular area or religion. In contemporary museum settings, to position material things in the context of others are determined by a number of factors including the existing divisions between objects, the particular curatorial practices of the specific institutions, the physical condition of the material object, and the interests, enthusiasm, and expertise of the curator in question. object in a museum location on a pedestal with lighting, labeling and surrounding objects.<sup>9</sup> Besides its lighting and labels, it is important here to understand its historical interpretation by dominant authorities over a period of time.<sup>10</sup> Such Historical interpretations are challenged by postmodern academic ideologies such as Feminism, deconstruction, Post structuralism that warns its users to carefully grasp the language as knowledge is directly related to power system.

Historical interpretations such as by Roy C. Craven are revisited to understand their relevance and authenticity. Interpretations of women are challenged by feminist and Gender perspectives. Drawing from western perspective Vidya Dehejia tried to understand women's agency in the Indian language with a brief excursus into the gendered language of official documents and the actual position of ancient women. She looked at the patronage of the art works and found that the figures of "*Sirima Devta*" and "*Chanda Yaksha*" from Bharhut were not commissioned by man. '*Siri*' was commissioned by a woman who was a buddhist nun; and the second figure of '*Yakshi Chandra*' was commissioned by a buddhist monk *Budharakhita* who "has abandoned all attachment". And over two thirds of the donations at Bharhut are from women, both nuns and laywomen. Thus, in the Indian context we see a shift from the spectatorship model of the west. Also, the Bharhut images were neither necessarily commissioned by men, nor intended to be viewed by them.<sup>11</sup> Certainly there is a shift but interpretation and depiction of women were at discomfort. They are there as patrons rather than practitioners of art, although there is shadowy knowledge of women painters in the Mughal age. When women artists announced their presence in 1920s with Amrita Shergil, they especially in their interpretation of women, worked against the erected edifice of women as subjects in Indian art.<sup>12</sup>

Exploration of women's depictions also led to the study of male depiction. Vishakha Desai Survey the significance of male sexuality in Indian Art from the Kushana period in Mathura. There are changes in the depiction of male figures in early phases, they have transformed into more idealistic interpretations. Coomaraswamy talked about the role of yaksha images in the formation of Buddha images. The Kushana images from Mathura display great vigor and physicality, Pratapaditya Pal noted that "the prominent delineation of genitalia of male and female, is one of the characteristic features of Kushan period sculpture

<sup>8</sup> [https://m.rbi.org.in/scripts/mis\\_anec3.aspx](https://m.rbi.org.in/scripts/mis_anec3.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> Greenhill, Eileen Hooper. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. Routledge, 1992: 1-23

<sup>10</sup> Greenhill, Eileen Hooper. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. Routledge, 1992: 1-23

<sup>11</sup> Dehejia, Vidya, ed. *Representing the body: gender issues in Indian art*. Kali for women, 1997: 1-21

<sup>12</sup> Sinha, Gayatri, ed. *Expressions & Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*. Vol. 42. Marg publications, 1996. 9

of Mathura". In comparison with the early standing figures, several differences are obvious in the Kushan standing male images. Shunga figures are extensively rounded whereas Kushana figures are articulated with a greater sense of physical athletic energy. In the second century male body began to acquire a heroic chest. The Gupta sculptures are more abstract and spiritual. By the sixth century, the sexual organ of male anatomy is quite abstracted. This is very much not the case of female figures, there is always an erotic suggestion in their depiction and interpretation. In the *Lalitavistara*, it is mentioned that there should be no indication of sexuality in the visualization of the chakravartin or the Buddha. Another text *Chitralakshana* of Naganjit there are also specific references to the size and appearance of male sexual organs. *Lakshanas* of a *chakravartin* does not accord with early descriptions of the Yaksha.<sup>13</sup> They have been changed over the period through male centric culture.

## Conclusion

In each historical period, a society defines objects of spiritual identity in its own cultural framework. From being a major spiritual tradition, Yaksha -Yakshis first became a part of various religious practices and eventually disappeared from the minds of the people. But their iconographic interpretations still remain as an important part of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Later on, when such figures were rediscovered they were kept in a museum setting where they became part of historical and colonial narrations. Nevertheless, when an object is discarded from its original context its reading and relocations becomes authority of the person or institution who holds it; such interpretation is biased on the basis of that person or institution's own political and cultural environment. In postmodernism micro aspects of these museums or historical images are explored from diverse angles. Every ideology or scholarship studies from their own vantage point. Here Vidya Dehejia searched for the patrons of the women's images and affirmed that the Indian context is different from western context. But on Indian context too we cannot ignore the fact that women have always been a "second sex" however, the imagery of first century B.C. is likely to have sent out a positive message and been viewed by woman as a powerful affirmation and a sign of affirmative gender. The problem is that Dehejia sees a direct relationship between patronage by women and their agency. Such patronizations in history tell us that women of particular class, community and religion have greater access to funds and decision-making power. In terms of power of visual representation and control of meaning, woman patronized art may not significantly differ from the standard modes of representation.<sup>14</sup> Also, it is constantly invoked to connote secondary signification.

Spirituality has always been the part male dominant sphere, for instance, Jain tirthankara *Mallinatha* has been converted into male over a period of time. The image of Mallinatha of the thirteenth century from Unnao, is a beautiful figure in Black stone. The figure by itself neither carries any cultural identification marks nor exaggerated women features. The image is called Mallinatha and appears to be an image of Sati. The possible reasons for this could be, firstly, women images from Jainism too represented with ornaments and hardly they are completely nude. Secondly, if looked from a perspective of Sati, there is no exaggeration because Sati were not divine beings. Thirdly, the very posture of the image is similar to sati. Lastly, the Jain nuns do not possess hair but this figure has a long hair plait falling down and sati practices were prevalent during the period. Talking about the patriarchal notions, this image of Mallinatha suffers the conflicts of two sects of Jainism. The Digambaras do not believe that a woman can attain

<sup>13</sup> Dehejia, Vidya, ed. *Representing the body: gender issues in Indian art*. Kali for women, 1997.42-55

<sup>14</sup> Panikkar, Shivaji, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar, eds. *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art: Essays Presented in Honour of Prof. Ratan Parimoo*. DK printworld, 2003.122-132

Moksha, for them the tirthankara Mallinatha is a male and they believe that the women can aspire to be reborn as male to achieve moksha. While the svetambaras maintain Malli was born a dark blue female who became a renunciate. But the Shvetambara tirthankaras and nuns are clothed, which makes the identification of this image complicated<sup>15</sup>.

Not only in ancient and medieval periods, after independence too, even after women's question being an important part of the freedom struggle women were depicted in similar ways. The Yaksha Yakshi images reimagined and reinterpreted by Ramkinkar Baij carries the ancient load of gendered stereotypes; though seemed to offend the prudish sensibilities of parts of the populace.<sup>16</sup> Post modernism then certainly looks into every aspect, it did not only put women's sexuality in question but the male sexuality as well; as consequence, the literal interpretation came into question. In Kushana iconographies representation of genitals is an important aspect of both male and female, where there is a description of women's sexuality in length, male interpretations are comparatively vague. Benjamin Rowland describes female images in early Indian art as:

*"The implication of the Indian Goddess' procreative is contained in the exaggeration of the globular pendulousness of the breasts which appear like "golden jars," and there is a corresponding frank emphasis on the widespread hips and pudenda. . . the interlocking of the subtly swelling convex plane that defines the blossom, abdomen and pelvis serves to demonstrate, in appropriately abstract terms, the roundness and fullness and warmth of an actual body without in any way negating the nature of the medium."*<sup>17</sup>

Whereas his interpretation of male images is:

*". . . this statuette is completely Indian in the sculptor's realization of the essential image, a symbolic rather than descriptive representation of anatomy, in which the articulation of the body is realized in broad convex planes of modeling. . . the fact that the figure appears potbellied is therefore, iconographically completely right and truthful. . . this is not a literal imitation, such as one finds in western sculpture, but a suggestion of fleshiness by such properly sculptural and abstract devices as the interlocking of the smooth and softly modeled convex plane of the torso and the exaggeration of the depth of the navel."*<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in writing the object becomes a medium for the writer's objective; thus, lacking its aesthetic and ethical value. All that is studied about historical evidence, particularly religious, I envisage, although these efforts are to find its original context but only as an object and its artistic aura diminishes. They are limited to their functional value in the political environment.

<sup>15</sup> Ahuja, Naman P. "Discourse on a label: exposing narratives of violence." (2021).

<sup>16</sup> [https://m.rbi.org.in/scripts/mis\\_anec3.aspx](https://m.rbi.org.in/scripts/mis_anec3.aspx)

<sup>17</sup> Dehejia, Vidya, ed. *Representing the body: gender issues in Indian art*. Kali for women, 1997:44

<sup>18</sup> Dehejia, Vidya, ed. *Representing the body: gender issues in Indian art*. Kali for women, 1997:45

Plates**Fig. 1.***“Mother Goddess”*

Terracotta

Indus civilization

Source: <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/kefa102.pdf>**Fig. 2***“Sirima Devta”*

100 B.c.

Bharhut

(source: <https://www.ahg-images.co.uk/archive/-2UMDHUWH1SIAP.html>)



**Fig. 3**  
“Chanda Yakshi”  
100 B.C  
Bharhut

(source: <https://www.akg-images.co.uk/archive/-2UMDHUWH1SIAP.html>)



**Fig.4**  
“Didarganj Yakshi”  
Sandstone  
Patna Museum

(source : <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-didarganj-yakshi-conflict-between-myth-and-history-2510926>)



**Fig. 5**  
“Yaksha n Yakshini”  
Ramkinkar Baij  
Reserve Bank of India

(source: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/people/remembering-ramkinkar-baij-the-vanguard-of-modern-indian-sculpture/cid/1695703>)

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