

# From *Sasanadevathas* to *Upadevathas* : Exploring the Transformations in *Yakshi* Cult

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## Abstract:

The cult of *Yakshi* represent a profoundly syncretic religious tradition that evolved through successive phases of assimilation across different religious systems. Originating within pre-Brahmanical Dravidian folk religion, *Yakshi* worship was subsequently absorbed into Jainism, where *Yakshis* occupy a significant position as *sasanadevathas*-attendant guardian deities associated with each *Tirthankaras*. In South Indian context, *Yakshi* worship further absorbed elements of regional mother –goddess traditions. With the later expansion of Brahmanical hegemony, *Yakshis* were appropriated within the Hindu pantheon as *upadevathas* illustrating a broader pattern of religious transformation and hierarchical incorporation.

**Key words:** *Sasanadevatahs*, *Upadevatahs*, Sramanaic, *Tirthanakra*, Hegemony, *Rakshadevatahs*, *Gramadevathas*

## Introduction

In Jainism, *Yakshi* occupy a significant yet subordinate position as *sasanadevathas* or the attendant guardian deities associated with each *Tirthankara*. Originally these spirits are rooted in pre-Jain folk religious traditions, *Yakshi* was gradually assimilated into Jain pantheon through the process of accommodation rather than rejection. This incorporation allowed Jainism to address the devotional and worldly needs of lay followers without compromising its ascetic doctrine. Overtime, *Yakshi*, particularly figures such as Ambika and Padmavati assumed a prominent cultic role, often eclipsing their male counterparts, the *Yakshas* in popular worship due to their perceived efficacy in granting boons related to fertility, protection and prosperity. In South Indian context the *Yakshi* cult further absorbed attributes of local mother-goddess and folk traditions, blurring sectarian boundaries and facilitating the localization of Jainism within the religious landscape.

The cult of the *Yakshi* as the *sansanadevatahas*, was consolidated by the efforts of Jain teachers from Karnataka in attempt to revitalize the religion as a counter tradition. The concept of attendant divinities centered around Parsvanatha and Mahavira and the attendant deities who are mythical beings newly created by assimilating from folk traditions such as Ambika (Kusumandini), Padmavathi and Sidhayika appropriated many of the attributes of folk deities, particularly mother and fertility goddesses. Indra is the chief of the *Yakshas* and he assigns one *Yaksha* and one *Yakshini* to each *Tirthankaras*. They represented the right and left of *Tirthankara*.<sup>1</sup> The Jains considered the *Yaskshinis* all auspicious as the protector deities of the *Tirthankaras* and the *Yakshinis* were considered to be *sarvamangaladayinis* and *Sakalakshemaprada*. Later the Jains gave a higher position to the *Yakshi* than the *Tirthankaras*. In Jain iconographic and devotional traditions, each of the twenty-four *Tirthankaras* is accompanied by a *Yakshi* who functions as his *sasanadevatha* embodying protective and beneficent attributes while remaining within the bounds of sramanic existence. These *Yakshi* are distinguished

by specific names, symbols, vehicles and iconographic features. For instance, Rishbhanatha is attended by Chakreswari who holds the discus and symbolizes sovereignty and cosmic order, while Ajithanatha's *Yakshi* Ajitabala represents victory and protection. Jwalamalini *Yakshi* is a prominent guardian deity of eighth *Tirthankara*, Chandraprabha. She is renowned for her association with fire and is invoked for protection and curing ailments. Parsvanatha's *Yakshi*, Padmavati, one of the most widely worshipped figures is associated with serpents and fertility. Neminatha's *Yakshi* Ambika embodies maternal abundance, tree symbolism and prosperity. Mahavira's *Yakshi* Siddhayika or Trishala in regional traditions signifies spiritual assistance and protective grace. Across the Jain pantheon, these *Yakshis* serve intermediaries between the transcendental ideas of the *Yakshi* and the everyday devotional needs of lay communities. Their attributes revealing a synthesis of Jain cosmology with localized goddess tradition.

*Yakshi*, the female goddess of love, beauty and fertility originated in the early Dravidian have subsequently been absorbed into Jain, Buddhist and Hindu tradition. The cult is closely interlinked with the *gramadevatha* concept and with the folk deities and later Jainism accepted this cult as protective deities of *Tirthankaras*.<sup>2</sup> *Yakshi* is one of the sub deity originated as a nature spirit or tree deities in the ancient animistic Dravidian tradition. Later, when Hinduism absorbed the local deities, *Yakshi* was also absorbed into it. *Yakshis* were softened into benevolent female figures. Sometimes they are seen as protectors of wealth and fertility and linked with Kubera. *Yakshi* took divine attributes, sometimes even becoming consorts of powerful male gods or spirits like Chathan. The expressions *Rakshi*, *Yakshi*, *Rakki*, *Yakki* make it clear that *Yakshi*, is the protector deity or *rakshadevathas*. The *Yakshi kolams* in *Padeni* starting with *Antara Yakshi*, *AkashaYakshi* and *KaalaYakshi* make it clear that they are flower deities, water deities, winged beings capable of flying through the air carriers of celestial spirits and dwellers in fire and spirits residing in the trees.<sup>3</sup>

With the decline of Jainism it got engulfed by the larger brahmanical tradition and thus emerged syncretic cult. As a later development, the *Yakshas* attained greater veneration from lay devotees and we find large and independent images of *Yakshas*. Many Jain centers have strong brahmanical influence suggesting the fusion of Brahmanism with a declining Jainism in Medieval Kerala. By the time of *Kalpasutra*, *Yakshas* acquired the status of gods and sub-gods. In the Rig Vedic mantras, the attitude towards *Yakshas* is generally one of hatred and fear. In *Rigveda* there are prayers in order to avoid encounter with *Yakshas*. In some mantras that are assumed to be of later times, a different attitude of respect mixed with fear is seen. By the time of *Atharva Veda* the sages did not hesitate to connect the concept of *Yaksha* with their deities.<sup>4</sup> The Vedic people were ready to accept the deities of the natives due to a number of reasons. Following the extensive agricultural activities, that required enormous human effort, The Vedic people utilised the labour of uncivilized tribal who were less sophisticated than themselves for resource production. This may have led to the absorption of that primitive society's beliefs and the subsequent process of cultural evolution and assimilation. It seems that the penetration of many non-Vedic ideas like the fertility cult into Vedic culture happened in this phase.<sup>5</sup>

The Vedic Brahmins equated the all auspicious Ambika with Durga. The Brahmins accepted Ambika as the synonym of Durga and *Ambikakshetras* became the place of worship for both the Jains and the Saivas. The *Bhagavathy* temple at Chitalar is an example for this. Padmavathy is personified as standing in the lotus flower. Buddhists worship Padmavathy as *Pathini* Devi or Padmini and as the wife of Mahavishnu, -Lakshmi by the Vaishnavites. It is said that the Jain temples mentioned here became Hindu temples from the medieval period onwards No documents are available explaining the reason for this change. However it can be inferred from the circumstantial evidence that due to the similarity in practice and concepts there was no great difference between these centers in the eyes of the worshipping community, so this change was just natural and smooth.<sup>6</sup> Like the Saiva-Vaishnava movements, the Jains were also ready to make individual deities in separate temples and make them centers of worship and adopt practices like the popular mother goddess worship. The idols of Ambika *Yakshi* installed by Achananthi in many places show this.<sup>7</sup>

The acceptance of *Yakshi* as *upadevatha* in structural temples of medieval Kerala points to the fact that the popular cult of *Yakshi* has been accommodated and assimilated to the elite Sanskrit tradition. But only four *Yakshi* among them is commonly worshipped in Kerala namely Ambika, Padmavati, Chakreswari and Siddaika. Other *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* are not seen propitiated in Kerala.<sup>8</sup> In the medieval period, the confluence of Saivas and Vaishnavas with the Jains paved the way for the assimilation of the *Yakshi* and *Yakshas*. This is how these deities found entry into Hindu temples. There is ample evidence that such incidents occurred outside

Kerala as well. A good example is *Yaksha* Khandakan of Prathishtanapuri became Khandoba and worshipped as Siva in Maharashtra. The presence of *Yakshi* in many temples of Kerala is such kind of appropriation of Jain cults. The *Yakshi* in the Brahmin centers have converted to Hinduism as *Bhagavathis*.<sup>9</sup>

The *Yaksha* tales of *Jathaka* stories and Suthanipatha gives information about the assimilation of the two religions. Once the outer layer of legends are removed, what remains in the stories are indirect references about this the mixing up of the two cultural streams. In this cultural fusion, it is not the ultimate victory of one over the other could be seen, but the mutual give and take could be seen. On one side in the Buddhist story we can see the man eating *Yaksha* while on the other there are *Yakshas* who forbid the devotees who are preparing for blood sacrifice from doing so. These stories indicate this transformation.<sup>10</sup> If we examine carefully we can see that many of these *Yakshis* were old mother goddesses and fertility goddesses. The best example is Ambika or Kushmandini, the protector of Neminatha Thirthankara. Ambika must have been an old mother goddess as her name suggests. The fact that Ambika is worshipped for the protection of children and her appearance of carrying children is a strong argument for such myth. Padmavathi, the *Sasanadevatha* of Jain Parshwanatha is clearly related to the goddess of wealth like Goddess Lakshmi. Although all the Tirthankaras have *Yakshi* and *Yakshas* as *sasanadevathas*, the reason why only some of them are more popular can be explained in this context. The people accepted those who are more similar in appearance to their mother goddess. Even if we look at their worshipping methods, we can see the similarity of these deities to the old deities of Dravidian religion. Regarding the places of worship of Jwalamalini is worshipped under the foot of a tree or in the burial site like the Dravidian folkdeities.<sup>11</sup> (Mithum Samoohavum, Raghava Varrie and Rajan Gurukkal, Jalakam Publication, 1994:128).

*Antara Yakshi* (inner *Yakshi*) is invoked in *Patayani* songs as the illusion (*maya*) of Siva. Some of the *Yakshi* were eventually asked to leave the place after the ritual is over, where as some may become permanent protective powers. There are permanent shrines dedicated for *Yakshi*. In some temples the *Yakshi* is figured by pebbles, she may get consecrated as a full-fledged goddess, *Yakshiamma*, with her own iconography.<sup>12</sup> There is the tradition of worshipping *Yakshi* with *kalamezhuthum paattum*. Here also *Yakshi* is *Yakshiamma*. Every year *Kalam paattu* is performed for *Yakshi* Amma at Durgambika temple at Madayi in Northern Kerala. Many temples and kavus can be found in different places of Kerala where *Yakshi* is worshipped. Temples solely dedicated for *Yakshi* are quite rare At Vadakkunnathan temple, though there isn't a separate idol of *Yakshi* installed as a principal deity, there is a significant mural portrait of a '*Sundara Yakshi*' (beautiful *Yakshi*) located near the sopanam (the main stair way) According to local belief, if one touches and prays before this mural it is said to help in finding a suitable husband. This beautifully detailed painting portrays a charming *Yakshi*. *Yakshiyamma* Temple in Vallachira, Cherpu is one where *Yakshi* is the main deity. Velupilli Dharmasastha temple, Annanad, Chalakudi, though a temple of lord Ayyappa, *Yakshi* is one of the sub deity.

From the characteristics of the idol enshrined in Pallibhagavathi temple in Paruvasseri in the Thrissur Palaghat road is believed to be a *Yakshi*. Anandakumaraswami states that some idols of the *Yakshas* and *Yakshis* as holding a bell in their hands indicating that they have bell like sound. The goddess idol at Paruvasseri also has a bell in one of the hands. The idol of Chandraprabha *Tirthankara*, which was in the sanctum sanctorum in this temple is now installed outside and worshipped as Ayyappa. This fact leads us to believe that the *Yakshi* inside the sanctum sanctorum is Jwalamalini, the protective deity of Chandraprabha *Tirthankara*. There is also a *Yakshi* in the Kallil temple Peurbavoor. Since the *theerthakara* idol of here with the lion symbol is that of Mahavira, it is clear that the *Yakshi* installed next to is Siddhayika, the *sasanadevataha*. *Yakshi* Pooja is performed in temples like Muppathadam and Chengamanad in Aluva. The goddess in the Bhagavathi temple in the Neelamperoor near Kottayam is also a *Yakshi*. This idol is now worshipped as Parvathi. The wooden idol of the goddess that is worshipped during the festival has a snake shaped umbrella on its head. This is the symbol of Padmavathi, the protective deity of Parsvanatha *Yaksha*. The bhagavathi in Chithral hill, in South Travancore was also a *Yakshi*. Chithral was a famous Jain centre in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> C has statues of Ambika also known as Kushmandini, the *Yakshi* of Neminatha *Tirthankara*. *Yakshis* are enshrined as sub deities in many temples of Central Travancore. In Thiruvalla temple, there is place for the *Yakshi* in the mandapa itself. Thiruvalla Cheppedu gives information about the offerings to this *Yakshi*. There is the presence of *Yakshi* in Panayannar Kavu There

is a place called Makshi (*MahaYakshi*) in Nooranadu in Kollam district. The place name might have developed from the *Yakshi* in the kavu situated there.<sup>13</sup>

In later times Ambika, the Jain goddess was worshipped as Durga. Ambika was the protector deity of Neminatha Tirthankara and Padmavathi was the patron deity of Parswanata *tirthankara*. But in the later period the *Yakshi* Ambika and Padmavathi gained an independent status and they became more popular and worshipped more than the *Tirthankaras*. Because of their growing popularity, the Brahmins accepted and transformed Ambika as Durga, the wife of Siva and Padmavathi as Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu. That's how Ambika temples became Durga temples. In Jain temples Padmavathi *prathishta* is still seen but in Hindu temples Padmavathi is seen associated with Vishnu as his wife.<sup>14</sup>

Kallil Bhagavathy temple in the Ernakulam district is located close to Perumbavoor is a cave temple that was most likely a Jaina rock-cut temple. It is possible that the goddess *Bhagavathy* was formerly a *Yakshi* in the Jaina religion. There are icons carved on to the rock face, and one incomplete image of Mahavira grabs our attention in particular. Chitraral, sometimes referred to as Tiruccaranattu Malai, or the hill of the *chanaras*, is a temple containing numerous Jaina structures. Some significant icons, including those of Vardhamana Mahavira, Ambika *Yakshi*, and Parswanatha, are carved out of the rock. Similarly. The images of Padmavathi, Parsvanatha, and Vardhamana may still be found in the Nagaraja temple in Nagercoil.<sup>15</sup> At Tiruccaranattu Malai, the triple umbrella of Mahavira and the three headed cobra of Parsvanatha are clearly noticeable. The figure identified as Padmavathi also has a makuta on her head and two big kundalas in the ear lobes. Presence of a lion and two children in this complex would according to some scholars indicate that this figure is not Padmavathi devi as suggested by Travancore archaeologists, but Ambika, the *Yakshini* who attends the 22<sup>nd</sup> *Tirthankara* called Neminatha. In that case the seated male figure to the proper right of this female deity must be identified as Neminatha.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Tantric texts on *yakshi* worship and the concept associated with them are the basis of many stories and beliefs about *yakshi*. The Jains who were non-violent endowed the *yakshi* and *yakshas*, the protective deities with supernatural powers in order to protect the *Tirthankaras* and through them their followers from enemy attacks. Based on these concepts non-Jains began to describe the *yakshas* as cruel beings.<sup>17</sup> *Yakshis* have a negative connotation also. *Yakshi* is well known in Kerala where they are commonly identified with the ghosts of young women who died an untimely death, and imagined as beautiful damsels wandering at night who may seduce a traveler and then transform themselves into terrifying ogresses and devour him. They usually reside in some tree, and may be placated by offerings placed at its root. They may also be invoked by magicians in crude drawings that will work as charms.<sup>18</sup> We do not get any indication from the *yakshi* concept of any possible identification with the old or new idols. This may be because the old and new deities have completely merged into the original forms of the *Yakshi* concept and have gradually become irrelevant.<sup>19</sup> *Yakshi* acquired a negative connotation not because she was originally malevolent, but because of historical processes of religious restructuring. In the Dravidian folk, Buddhist and Jain traditions, *Yakshis* were fertility spirits, tree deities and guardians. *Yakshi* did not become negative because she changed- but because the framework interpreting her changed.

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