

Yakshas From Adeva To Deva: A Study Of The Rig Veda

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Abstract:

Akin to all other civilizations, religious practices of the Indians date back to pre-historic period. We have several records of people worshipping various deities like objects in the Harappan civilization and during the succeeding centuries, one may come across with the references of different deities and pantheons in the Vedic literature. This paper attempts to explore the transition of a non-significant phantom Yaksha to the position of godhood in the Rig Vedic period. To have a clear overview of the issue, the paper will first attempt to trace the origin of the Yaksha cult in the Rig Vedic religion, approach of the early Vedic Indo- Aryans towards the phantom, and finally attempts to explore the transition of the phantom to the status of a God. Through the study of text, an endeavor will be made to find out the changes, variations, and acceptance of Yaksha by the early Vedic Indo-Aryans, and in an epigrammatic manner, attempts will also be made to trace its historical continuity in the religious spheres of the Aryans in the later Vedic eras.

Keywords: Yaksha, Rig Veda, Mandala, Vedic, early Vedic Indo-Aryans

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I. Introduction:

The term Yaksha has a various connotation and implications in the Rig Vedic and later Vedic literature. According to a few lexicologists Yaksha generally means a class of demigods who are described as attendant of Lord Kubera, the god of riches. In the same manner, the word also indicates a kind of ghost or spirits.¹ Similarly, the meaning of Yaksha is also explained as a living supernatural being and a class of semi divine beings.² The definition of Yaksha varies in the Rig Vedic and later Vedic scriptures. In the Rig Vedic literature, they sometimes are considered as unimportant spirit, and sometimes as deities with a little importance. The etymological interpretation of the word Yaksha is controversial as the scholars engaged unveiling it share different opinions. A. Hillebrandt, regarding the probable meaning of the Yakshas in the Vedas, presumes 'apparition or the opposite'.³ Bailey assumes that, the word Yaksha 'might from context tend to monstrous but it does not seem necessary to introduce magical'.⁴ Hillebrandt, further believes that 'the Yaksha may be good or bad'.⁵ A new input in the context has been substantiated by Bailey with his research on the Sogdian language, which states, the Indian word Yaksha has its connection with an Iranian word Yaxs with a meaning to 'appear'. 'Iranian yaxs- "appear", a word of ordinary life, without magical alliance, can now be brought into connexion with the old Indian Yaks and serve to remove the uncertainty from the interpretation of this Indian word'.⁶ A.K. Coomaraswami, indicating the meaning of Yaksha in the Rig Veda, believes it to be 'something wonderful and terrible' and further considers it as undefinable.⁷ Further, Keith has derived the word from Yaj meaning 'to worship with offering' and 'honour' and Sayana⁸ meaning sleeping or resting. Hence, if we have to consider Keith's observation, for an unpremeditated understanding, we may consider Yaksha as a worshipful sleeping deity. Keith further projects Yakshas as inhabitants of 'relic mounds'.⁹ Nevertheless, majority of the scholars, consider the origin of the word Yaksha through Yaksh meaning 'to move quickly towards' or 'flash upon'.¹⁰ Yaksha, nevertheless, is a masculine representation and the feminine depiction of the word Yaksha appears as Yakshi or Yakshini. Thus, a varied interpretation has been made by various scholars to trace *de-facto* meaning of the term Yaksha, and as it appears,

¹ Apte, Vaman Shivaram (Reprint 2007) The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, p1297

² Williams, M. Monier (17th Reprint 2020) A Sanskrit English Dictionary, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, p838

³ Bailey, H.W. (1958) 'Iranica et Vedica', Indo-Iranian Journal, Vol.2, BRILL, p154

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ Coomaraswamy, A. K. (May 19, 1931) *Yakshas Part II*, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, The Lord Baltimore Press, Washington DC, USA, p1

⁸ Mishra, Ram Nath (1981) *Yaksha Cult and Iconography* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, p9

⁹ Keith, Arthur Berriedale (1925) *The Religion and philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Harvard Oriental Series, Harvard University Press, Volume XXXI, p73

¹⁰ Mishra (1981) op cit., p 10

the process of its decoding is still unsolved. Nevertheless, for the present study, which is related to Rig Veda, we may consider Yaksha as a phantom in the beginning and a pantheon in the later observation.

Yaksha, that occupies an important podium in the religious universe of India has a mysterious and shadowy origin. In the Puranic Hinduism, Yakshas plays a vital role as the assistants and attendants of higher Gods like Shiva, Vishnu, Varuna, and even among the Buddhists and the Jains Yakshas are regarded as the attendant deities of Mahavira and Bodhisattvas. In the local context to the Himalayan Civilization, the Yakshas and Yakshis are considered as sacred spirits who are associated with nature, trees, water, rivulets, and the water sources. Further, among the tantric form of worship, they have a crucial role to play as the tutelary gods. However, in the beginning of the Rig Vedic commentaries, they have been placed with insignificant demigods like Gandharva,¹¹ Daksha¹² and during the epic era they share a position akin to Gandharva¹³ and Kinnar who more or less appears to be attendants of the most popular and reverend gods. It is because of their lower positions among the Devas, has probably led Prof. E.B. Cowell to allied Yakshas with the Pisachas, and Daityas, meaning the evil spirit or demons.¹⁴ Considering the unhinged position of the Yakshas, Mishra observes 'There will not be found many deities who had such a diversity of functions and such spectacular ups and downs as the Yakshas'.¹⁵

The clearest mention of Yaksha, in either form, in the Rig Veda is in Mandala IV wherein they have been portrayed as injuring or harming entities. The hymn¹⁶ composed by sage Vamadeva in admiration of Agni, following Tritupa metre states 'Go not ever Agni, to the sacrifice of anyone who injures us; nor to that of a malevolent neighbour, nor to that of an (unnatural) relation.'¹⁷ It is followed by another mention in Mandala V in a hymn by sage Uruchakri, composed following Gayatri metre, in the praise of twin gods Mitra and Varuna, indicates Yakshas as illustrious and bountiful but are considered as 'others'.¹⁸ The hymn explains:

'Oh twin lords, workers of wonderous deeds, let us not depend upon the bounty of any other (than you), may we, our sons and grandsons, all rely on our own efforts'.

The hymn has been further translated by Coomaraswamy as 'Let us not, O ye gods of great power, encounter a Yaksha'.¹⁹ If we consider these illustrations, the Yakshas appear to be deadly and fatal in the beginning and, in all possibility, they were hostile to the Rig Vedic Indo-Aryans. The hostilities among them, as it appears, was due to the least importance given by the Aryans to these pantheons and being apprehensive, the Indo-Aryans assumed all the adversaries before them were posed by the Yakshas. It may also be noticed that, in such imperceptible hostilities, the Rig Vedic people were defeated by the latter, and therefore, through these hymns they seem to be imploring before Varuna and Mitra to avert them from the impending wrath of the Yakshas. The hostilities, in any sense, here is not related to a direct conflict, rather it is an explanation to the presumed retaliation against discounted attitude of the early Vedic Indo-Aryans towards this natural being, which according to some verses of Rig Veda, was invisible. In a delusory tribal society, such supposed retaliation may appear in any form like natural calamities, diseases, uncertain death of an individual etc. All such natural developments were possibly considered as the expletive and retaliation of the Yakshas, and they were held responsible and began to be regarded as enemy.

Mandala VII incorporates a word 'Yakshadrsho'²⁰ having two variables Yaksha and drsho which can be translated as 'sighting of the Yakshas'. Coomaraswamy has translated the word as 'espionage of the Yakshas' and considers them as 'invisible enemy to what is being undertaken'.²¹ This commentary by sage Vasistha, besought Marut (Wind) to keep watch on the them who too seemed to be invisible like the latter. This illustration makes us to believe that, the Yakshas were invisible spirits dwelling around in the Saptasindhu region precipitating their wrath and ire among the Aryas. Mandala VII further gives us insight about another etymology pertaining to these variety of entities as Shishnadeva²² meaning a lustful or unchaste man.²³ Shishnadeva, as Keith, while illustrating the term Deva, illustrates as the people who were phallus worshippers.²⁴ Further, Banerjee considers such certain

¹¹ RV 1.22.14

¹² RV. 1.89.3

¹³ They are considered as celestial singers in the epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and others. But they have not been assigned any major cosmic role in the Vedic literature.

¹⁴ Fergusson, James (1868) Tree and Serpent Worship: Illustration of mythology and art in India, W.H. Allen and Co., London, pp229-230

¹⁵ Mishra (1981) op cit., p1

¹⁶ मा कस्य यक्षं सदमिदधुरो गा मा वेशस्य प्रमिनतो मापे: IRgveda, Mandala IV.3.13

¹⁷ Wilson, H.H (2nd Edition 1946) The Rig Veda Sanhita, A collection of Ancient Hindu hymns of the Rig Veda, The Oldest authority for the religious and Social Institutions of the Hindus, translated from the original Sanskrit, The Bangalore Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd, Bangalore, India, Mandala V.14.4, pp266-267

¹⁸ मा कस्याद्भुतक्रतू यक्षं भुजेमा तनूभिः मा शेषसा मा तनसा । Rgveda Mandala V.70.4

¹⁹ Coomaraswamy (1931) op cit., p2

²⁰ अत्यासो न ये मरुतः स्वन्वो यक्षदृशो न शुभयंत मर्याः । RV Mandala VII.56.16

²¹ Coomaraswamy () op. cit., p2

²² स शधरदर्यो विशुणस्य जन्तोर्मा शिश्रदेवा अर्थि गुरुततं नः । RV Mandala VII.21.5

²³ Apte () op cit., p1555

²⁴ Keith (1925) op cit., p 75

class of beings as Muradevas.²⁵ The epithet of Muradeva occurs for the first time in Rig Veda in Mandala VII in which Lord Indra is pleaded to kill them.²⁶

‘Slay Indra, the Yatudhana whether in the form of man or of a woman doing mischief by her deceptions: may those who sport in murder perish decapitated; let them not behold the rising sun’.²⁷

The use of the appellation of Muradeva to the beings unknown to the early Vedic Indo-Aryans indicates seclusion of Yakshas from their spheres, and as it manifests, they were yet to get holy position of the Devas in the Rig Veda.

Similar to these illustrations, hymn 62.5 Mandala VII again uses a similar word to 56.16 but in a bit different manner. Here it comes as *nâ yâsu chitram dadrishe na yaksham* also indicates towards the invisible nature of the Yakshas.²⁸ An important development occurs in the part of the Yakshas in VII.88.6, a prayer to Varuna by hymnist Vasishta in Tritupa metre. The hymn projects Yaksha as a true ally and as it appears, some sin seems to have been committed by the Yakshas and the hymnist seeks their forgiveness and also asks for a secure abode to them.²⁹ The ‘secure abode’ reflected in the text, which Bailey considers as ‘Varuna receiving the epithet of Yakshin’³⁰, provides us a space to assume the first attempts of the early Vedic Indo-Aryans to acknowledge godliness of the Yakshas and can also be considered as the first instance of the Indo-Aryans accepting Yakshas as a Deva. The word Muradeva, as observed above, through Mandala VII.104.24 in the commentary of Vasishta composed following Tritupa metre, indicates it to be not in the connection with the Yakshas, rather the terminology is used to indicate Yatudhana, who appears to be a Rakshasa.³¹

Another word Yakshaya: occurs in Mandala VIII.60.3 also does not appear to be demeaning and belittling. Composed by sage Bharga, son of sage Pragatha, following Pragatha metre, the hymn seeks blessing from Agni and regards Yaksha as the showerer of wealth and benefits. If we can consider the word Yakshaya: with the wealth, by the time Mandala VIII was composed, Yakshas, as it appears, had already been acknowledged in parallel to prosperity by the early Vedic Indo-Aryans.

Later composed Mandalas like Mandala I and X provides ample evidences of Yakshas being elevated to the position of gods along with their partners Yakshis. In Mandala I 190.6 they have been placed as ‘prithvyamatyo na yangsadhyakshabhrividichetah.’ which can be roughly considered as wise worshipper. ‘His song of praise pervades the earth and heaven let the wise worshipper draw it like a courser’.³²

As stated before, Mandala VII hymn 88.6 the Yakshas had been provided with ‘secure abode’, and also provided with epithet of Yakshin, Mandala I,³³ which is a later composition mentions about the spies of Varuna. These spies, as we can assume, were the Yakshas who were now raised to a position of ‘lesser god’. Further, in Mandala I itself, they have been considered as worshipful and reverential.³⁴

Apart from the nasty illustrations in the beginning, some acceptable epithets to the Yakshas are available in the text. In Mandala I, a word that looks quite similar to Yaksha has been placed as *Prayakshatamam asya Karma dasamasya*³⁵ and another as *dhâne hitê tarusanta sravasyâvah prâ yaksanta sravasyâvah Prayakshanta Sravasyavah*³⁶ The word *Karma dasmasya* in 62.6 of the same Mandala indicates exceptional act. The exceptional act of Yaksha, as per the commentator Madhuchhandas, son of sage Vishwamitra, appears to be the role Yaksha played in identifying Angiras with Angara a live coal who later, in a passage of Aitriya Brahmana, got assimilated with Angiras.³⁷ The word dhane mentioned with Yaksha in hymn 132.5 in Mandala I, indicates wealth, that probably was protected by the Yakshas during an ambiguous struggle. Likewise, in hymn 2.1 of Mandala II, *Prayakshanjenyam*, a word pertaining to Yakshas have been mentioned and a similar looking word *Prayakshe* is maintained in Mandala III.7.1. All these four sentences of the different Mandalas carry the word Yaksha in between, but, in different context and setting. According to Bailey, the words ‘*Prayakshanjenyam Sakema vajino yamam*’ in the hymn indicates Yakshas ‘displaying guarded treasure’ and ‘*prâ sarsrâte dirghâm ayuh Prayakshe*’ is associated with Yaksha ‘extend long life in a display’.³⁸ These illustrations provide an acceptable and satisfactory space for the Yakshas in the Rig Vedic text.

²⁵ Banerjea, Jitendra Nath (1941) The Development of Hindu Iconography, University of Calcutta, p71

²⁶ इन्द्र जहि पुमांसं यातुधानमुत स्त्रियां मायया शाशदनम।

विप्रीवासो मूर्देवा ऋदन्तु मा ते दृशंतसूर्यमुञ्चरन्तम RV VII.104.24

²⁷ Wilson, RV VII. 6.15.24

²⁸ RV.7.62.5

²⁹ RV.7.88.6

³⁰ Bailey (1958) op cit., p154

³¹ See Wilson, RV VII. 6.15.24

³² Griffith, I.190.6

³³ RV. I.25.13

³⁴ RV I.62.6

³⁵ RV I.132.5

³⁶ RV I.62.6

³⁷ *Ye angarah aasanste angiraso abhavan* (for details see Wilson Note on Mandala I p207)

³⁸ Bailey (1958) op cit., pp 155-156

Thus, the journey of Yakshas from Adeva to Deva has many diverse twists and turns. In the beginning of the Rig Vedic commentaries, as it comes to the purview that, the Yakshas have been projected as a hurting and disturbing entity. Therefore, considering its fatal nature, in all probability, no hymns have been composed in the name of Yakshas except with a few orientations. In the beginning of the text, the word Yaksha have been found in the Rig Veda, but, not with the attributes of gods and godly beings. The inconsequential and trivial information in the earliest commentaries of Rig Veda make us to postulate its non-Aryan origin that appears to be non-Aryan divinity which was later incorporated into the Rig Vedic fold. The study reveals that, Yakshas were considered as unholy and disturbing entities and therefore, they were kept along with Pisacha, and Daityas. However, with the span of time, and possibly because of the troublesome nature of the Yakshas, they were accorded with a bit escalated position of divinity. In the course of their divinity, at first, they were associated with Varuna and with the march of time they began to be treated with kindness and sympathy. The earlier epithet of Muradeva was transferred to Rakshas and in the same manner the explanation to Shishnadeva was also altered with the inclusion of other elements into it. The diminutive role in the beginning also began to be expanded and some important works executed by the Yakshas began to get highlighted in the text. Hence, placed in a satisfactory position of divinity, the fatal Yakshas once considered as Adevas, began to get acknowledgements and appreciation as Devas in the later part of early Vedic period. With the advent of later Vedic era, their roles got magnified and in the epic age they were made an inseparable part of the Puranic Hindu society with more roles and responsibilities.

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