

## **Symbolism of Woman and Tree Motif in Ancient Indian Sculptural Art with Special Reference to Yaksi Figures**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tree worship has always been the earliest and the most prevalent form of religion since ages. Through the worship of nature and trees it became possible for man to approach and believe in god. In India tree worship was common even in the third or fourth millennium B.C. Among the seals of Mohenjo-daro dating from the third or fourth millennium B.C., is one depicting a stylized pipal tree with two heads of unicorns emerging from its stem which proves that tree worship was already being followed even before the rise of Buddhism. The trees were regarded as beneficent devatas because they were the only friends of man in case of any environmental danger. Buddhism adopted the cult of tree worship from the older religions which prevailed in the country. The particular trees which are sal, asoka and plaksha. Gautama achieved enlightenment under a pipal tree which was hence forth called the Bodhi tree, and he died in a grove of sal trees. It was on account of these associations with the Buddha that the trees were regarded as sacred by the Indians. The most important concept of tree worship also reminds us of the worship of a woman especially yaksi or queen Mahamaya associated with the birth of Bodhisattava in a sal grove while holding a branch of sal tree. Queen Maya gave birth and while in pain she broke the branch of the tree and the term "Shaalbhanjika" became popular there upon. The concept of 'dohada' or 'Shaalbhanjika' or 'yaksi' is associated with the worship of 'woman and tree' altogether.

**Key Words :** Shaalbhanjika, Dohada, Yaksi, Sal tree, Bodhi tree

### **INTRODUCTION**

The beauty of Indian sculptural art is like a flash of blinding light. The expression in such sculptures has added a certain depth of experience. The beautiful natural form of a 'woman and tree' was first grasped in the realm of the mind of a man and then transferred to stone or other medium by the artists. Indian art has always been a source of expression of religious emotions of the people and their thoughts on the subject of the Divine and Almighty. Indian art represents real men and women who are divine only in name. The main purpose of the artist being the representation of strength, hope and beauty of form. At Mathura the joy of the new religious and social movement expressed itself in a most popular school of sculpture, representing an ideal synthesis of domestic life including favorite female pastimes and garden- sports portraying

life under the sunshine are freely illustrated and present the most pleasing and exciting forms of Indian sculpture. Women standing under asoka trees making it blossom with a kick from their foot, plucking Kadamba buds and sporting with them, sometimes bathing under water-falls, dancing, sporting with parrots and swans and feeding them, and many other similar themes are charmingly depicted on a series of pillars in Sunga, Mathura, Amravati, Sanghol, Nagarjunakonda arts. Worship of the most beautiful form *i.e.* a 'woman' is cultivated in ancient India with a religious zeal and belief. The inspiring ideal before men and women was Rupam (beauty), the consciousness which universally expressed itself through art during this epoch. Sculpture till now stands true to its glorious heritage and mission revealing the typical Indian beauty of an Indian woman in the changing times and changing fashions from one period or one century to another. Of

the great religious sculpture of the Gupta period in which art attained its true spiritual purpose over and above the perfection of aesthetic form, may be mentioned in the splendid series of the standing yaskis. The finely chiselled bodies are cast in form of the highest liveliness and the faces reveal intense religious and emotional feeling. The art of ancient India has always been a purely religious one may it be architecture or sculpture or painting. The sculpture of ancient India, originated to display religious teachings, discourses and incidents and this had an immediate impact on people of all times. Thus ancient Indian sculpture owed its origin to the growth of a religion which has been called in Europe Buddhism from the honorary title of its founders – “The Buddha” “the Enlightened one”.

## METHODOLOGY

In the subjects like visual and non-visual arts, the literature review is an integral part of the entire research process and it makes a valuable contribution to every step adopted by the researcher. In the initial stages of research the literature helps to establish the theoretical roots of our study clarify our ideas and develop our methodology, but later on the literature reviews serves to enhance and consolidate our knowledge base and helps to integrate the findings with the existing body of knowledge.

### Review of the literature:

Literature reviews played an extremely important role in helping me to compare my findings with those of others. It helped me to understand various facts and situations and research to reach to certain conclusion. The higher the academic level of any research the more important it becomes to thoroughly study the findings with existing literature. Reviewing literature can be time-consuming, daunting and frustrating, but it is also rewarding. It is the method which provides a theoretical background to the study. It enabled me to contextualize the findings and as a result brought clarity and focus to my research problem. Going through the literature acquainted me with the methodologies that have been used by others to find answers to research questions similar to the one I am investigating. A literature review told me if others have used procedures and methods similar to the ones that I am proposing, which procedures and methods have worked well for them, and what problems they have faced with them.

### Procedure for reviewing the literature :

At the first step I searched for existing literature in my area of study. Then the selected literature was studied thoroughly. After which I developed a theoretical framework and then a conceptual framework. The problems involved in the process of historical research is a somewhat difficult task. Because historians may have not lived during the time they studied, so they depended on the inference and logical analysis, using the recoded experience of others rather than direct observation. To ensure that the information is as trustworthy as possible, I had to rely on firsthand accounts. Finding appropriate primary sources of data acquired lot of imagination, hard work and resourcefulness.

### Sources of data:

– Primary sources are basically eyewitness accounts. These incidents are reported by an actual observes or participant. The most important aspect of primary source included documents in my research. I had to go through most of the autobiographic, catalogues, sculptural pieces, inscriptions, recordings and various archaeological and historical research reports. I had to examine certain Relics and Remains which are the objects associated with a particular person or particular period of time. These relics included clothing, buildings, coins pictures, portraits, art pieces, utensils etc. Such contents revealed a great deal of information about the way of life of the people, king’s courtiers and the common man.

– Secondary sources are the reports of a person who relates the testimony of an actual witness of, or participant in, an event. Actually secondary sources of data are usually of limited worth for research purposes because of the errors that may result when information passes from one person to another. For my research the history books, encyclopedias acted as the sources of secondary data. Sometimes certain books and journals, magazines, articles acted as secondary source while at times they also acted as a primary source. Most trustworthy, unusable date in my research was the historical evidences as mentioned earlier. Such evidences helped me to understand the past and to some extent , to predict the future. Such a research programme was quite challenging at every step due to some inadequate primary sources of data, poor logical analysis, improper recording of the events and incidents in certain cases. But I accepted the challenge and did my best to reach up to

certain conclusions depending on history and archaeological excavations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Historical findings and archeological excavations:

Discovery of India's past before the coming of Islam is the work of British scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This work received encouragement from Warren Hasting, the first British governor-general of India (1772-1785) who was a scholar, and a patron of learning. There were four men who gave him great help in his literary pursuits, viz.. sir William Jones, Sir Charles Wilkins, Nathaniel Halhead and H.T. colebrooke . The most remarkable of this group was sir William Jones, a born linguistic and scholar. In co-operation with Worsen Hastings he founded Asiatic society of Bengal in January 1784 and was elected its first president. A great event in the preservation of antiquities of India was the founding of the Archaeological Survey of India by Lord Canning in 1861. I have identified the sites of many of the chief cities and most famous places of ancient India and cities like Kausambi, sravasti and other places all connected with the history of Buddha. Among other discoveries the mention has to be made of the great stupa at Bharhut and Sanchi, Sanghol on which most of the principal events of Buddha life were sculptured and inscribed.

James Burgess follows Cunningham and was Director-general of the survey from 1886 to 1889. He explored the Buddhist stupas of Amravati and Jaggayyapeta, and the Rock cut temples of Ellora and wrote monographies on them. Burgess had the collaboration of James Ferguson the first historian of Indian Architecture on "Tree and serpent worship" (1875). They jointly published a book entitled Architecture of India (1880).

In 1901 Curzon appointed Sir John Marshall, Director-general of the survey. His main work in India was on Taxila and Sanchi. His three volumes on the Monuments of Sanchi (1939) written in collaboration with Alfred Foucher, has been of a great help to all the present researchers and students all over the world as even for myself.

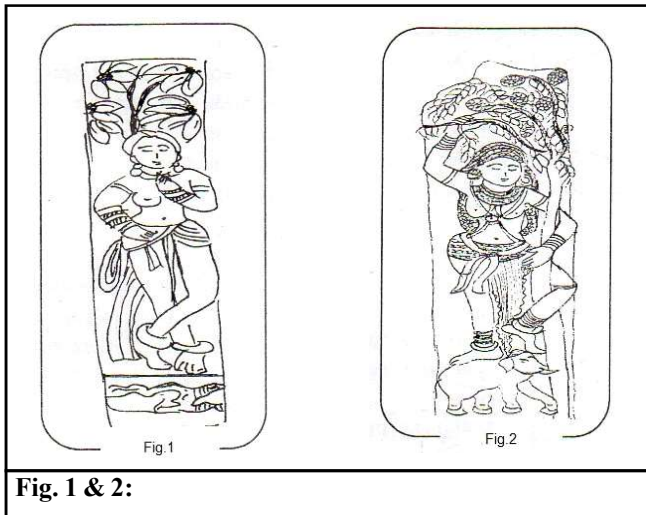
I would like to say that photography has played an important role in bringing the beauty of Indian sculpture within the reach of lovers of art as book illustrations. In the books published before 1850 the authors had to depend upon the hand drawings of sculptures. The photography

has thus given its best possible records for all art lovers. There are many art historians and art critics and scholars who have made possible for me to understand the concept of beauty in ancient Indian sculptures like William Rosenstein, A.K, coomarswamy, Vincent A. Smith, Benjamin Rowland, Henrich Zimmer, Stella Kramrisch. This survey of literature on art would be left incomplete without mentioning the works of C. Sivaramamurti who had a unique knowledge of the cultural background of Indian sculpture. His works have treated and acted as encyclopedias and reference books to complete the research and reach to some conclusion.

### Woman and tree worship since Ancient India:

Indian sculpture, is always synonymous with iconography. I have found that the genius of India reflects its greatest power nowhere else than in its philosophy, literature and sculpture. And nowhere except in sculptures has it been expressed with such unbroken continuity to display the ageless spirit of the Indian culture. The various examples in sculptures display symbolism through curving beauty of the foliage and the grace of the nudity of the yakshi, the ecstatic embrace of amorous lovers and the perfect calm of the liberated soul and the terrific cosmic dance of Shiva. There is not one great temple in India, nor a country shrine, that would not portray the goddess in one aspect or another. Most of the central Indian sanctuaries display walls girded by dozens of her various countenances and roles. These female divinities have been worshipped in various forms like Saraswati, Lakshmi, nagini, yakshi, apsara etc. They are divested of their evocative powers being the skakti in whatever aspect of form they are worshipped. The universality of female character and function, inherit in each image of goddess whether in the role of nursing, child-bearing mother, mother goddess. Typically the mistress of trees and plants is a yakshi, often worshipped as a tree goddess, all evidence suggests that she has been the mistress of vegetation and fertility since early second millennium, BC. At Bharhut Sanchi she is identified as yaksi or alternatively a vrikshaka a term synonymous with vriksha devata, "tree goddess " and vana devata, " forest goddess". These lovely women are seen to appear everywhere in the forests as if growing out of trees and creepers, themselves like delicious flowers and vines, often holding on to branches of trees and decorated with ornaments from head to toe. They are the dryads and nymphs, the spirits who live in trees and shrubs and

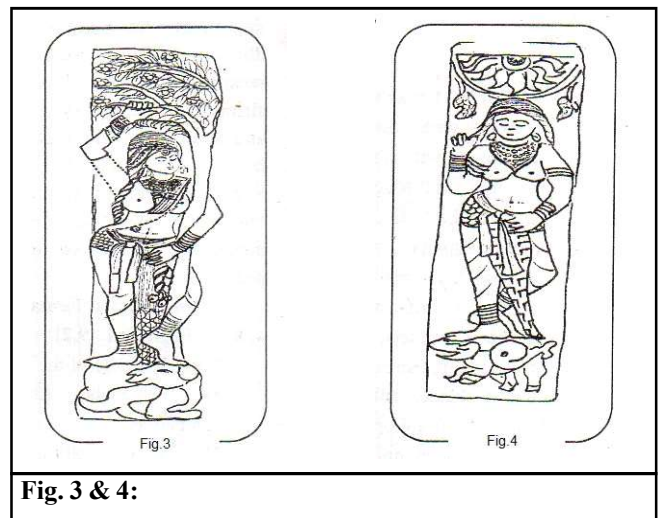
animate them, a belief that is a living faith in many parts of India even to the present day. Such lovely females have been represented almost nude revealing their graceful bodies and highlighting their power to bring forth. In India, familiar belief that the touch of a beautiful woman's foot is needed to bring about the blossoming of the tree seems to be equally a form of the yakshi dryad theme, one of the railing pillar, J55 in the Mathura Museum, represents a woman or yakshi performing this ceremony (Fig. 1). In the Sunga period also there is a representation of the Ashoka tree in association with a yakshi (Fig. 2). Here chulakoka yakshi is depicted with one hand raised touching the flower covered branches of the Ashoka and her left hand and left leg entwined around the trunk of the tree. This is the famous dohada pose when a beautiful maiden awakens Ashoka flowers by the mere touch of her foot. The buds of the tree suddenly open and this feature has possibly given rise to the poetic fancy of its flowering when kicked by a beautiful young woman. Its bark is supposed to have certain medicinal properties and is given to women for menstrual ailments. In this composition we see a very realistic representation of the Ashoka tree which is carved with a sensitive feeling and symbolic concept.



**Fig. 1 & 2:**

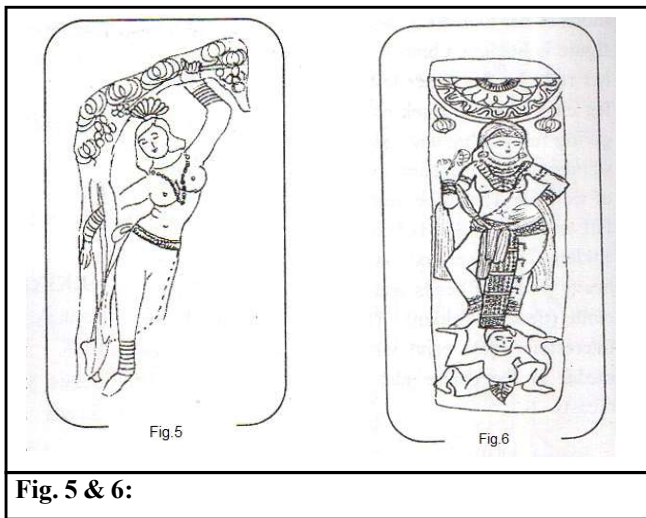
The tree depicted in the figure of Chandra yakshi (Fig. 3) is Mesua Ferea probably known as Naga tree. These yakshinis or vrikshakas are undoubtedly the auspicious emblems of vegetative fertility. These tree goddess with their broad pelvis and bulging breasts are the symbols of the fecundity of nature. The famous shaalbhajika pose in which a woman is shown plucking flowers as mentioned above seems to have provided the

basis of woman and tree motifs which are frequently seen in Buddhist sculptures of Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura, Amravati. From its association with the birth of the Buddha, the vrikshaka motif became a symbol of gifts of children. The Mahabharata also speaks of dryads (Vrikshaka and Vrikshi) as “goddess born in tree, to be worshipped by those desiring children”, states Coomarswamy. In the ancient city of Sravasti, salabhanjika festival was celebrated with great zeal when the sal tree flowered. The posture of a woman stretching her arm to catch the flowers of a tree is beautiful (Fig. 4). It displays to best advantage the rounded contours of a lovely woman. It provided the sculptors an opportunity to portray female beauty with skill and feeling. In these vrikshakas the tree in blossom lends charm to the beautiful

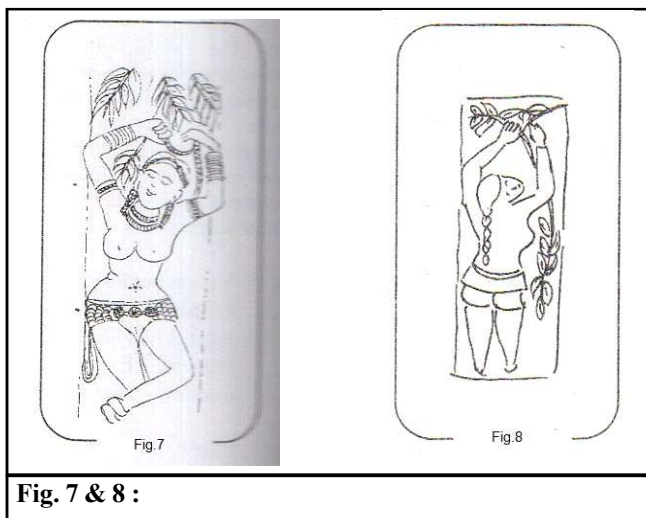


**Fig. 3 & 4:**

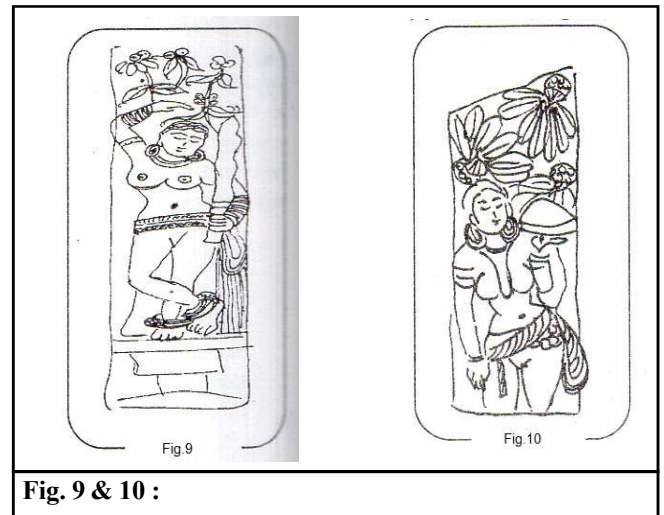
female figures. Have we seen the beauty of vegetation combined with the beauty of a woman and the result is enhancing and naturalistic indeed. The stupa of Sanchi bears the graceful vrikshakas acting as supports to the projecting ends of the lowest architraves on the gateway. On the front of the eastern gateway (north-end) is a graceful female figure, carved in a naturalistic manner (Fig. 5) swaying gracefully from the branch of the tree, the vrikshaka is singularly beautiful. “Holding with both hands to the arching bough of a mango tree, the salabhanjika curves the woodbine of her body in an attitude which brings out her breasts ‘like urns of gold’”. Another example shows a vrikshaka under a flowering ashoka tree (saraca India) again depicting the dohada motif (Fig. 6). Similarly the Mathura sculptures display a number of exquisitely carved railing figures and bracket figures of woman and tree (salabhanjika) motif before



us. We find numerous sculptures in Mathura and Lucknow museums where Ashoka tree is shown associated with female figures. On a railing pillar we see a woman standing under a flowering Ashoka tree. Among these we see a woman with a smile on the face standing cross-legged on a crouching dwarf, fastening a lotus garland on her head. Behind her we see an exquisitely carved branch of *Saraca Indica* with its characteristic lanceolate leaves and *Ixora*-like florescence which are so true to nature (Fig. 7). In another we see a woman gathering Ashoka flowers (Fig. 8) – These used to be a favorite festival celebrated in spring known as Ashoka “pushpaprachayika” the gathering of Ashoka flowers, when young women collected Ashoka flowers, decked themselves in gorgeous cloths and inserted orange-scarlet bunches of its flowers in the mops of their glossy jet-black hair. The Ashoka tree is associated with young



and beautiful women, and a tree was supposed to flower only when its roots were pressed by the foot of any charming young girl. Apart from Ashoka we find other trees depicted in these sculptures. In one of these we see a woman under a kadamba tree (*Anthocephalus Indicus Rich*) displaying sword dance and touching its ball-like flowers (Fig. 9). The next type of tree which we find appears to be champak (*Michelia champaca, Linn*) forming a background to a beautiful female figure wearing a peculiar head-dress. Another tree with leaves like Ashoka and comparatively smaller auxiliary flowers, we can see in a sculpture behind a woman treading over a dwarf resembles *Mesua Ferrea, Linn* (Fig. 10) the well-known Naga tree of Bengal and Assam.



**Conclusion :**

This it can be rightly said and concluded that the yaksi figures dominated the sculptural representations at Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura, Amravati Nagarjunkonda. These sculptures display the tree symbolism quite common and significant since ancient India. These shaalghanajikas usually naked, the costume consisted only of jewellery and ornamental girdle around the hips highlighted the most graceful forms worshipped as tree spirits. They are charmingly natural full of feminine grace. Their opulence of form conforms to the Hindu ideal of female beauty. There is an endless variety of these beauties in curvaceous attitudes and baroque poses, holding branches of trees showing that they are fertility symbols. All through Indian art, from the earliest period, woman formed so important an element in art that there is probably no other country in the world in which it occurs as frequently in sculpture and painting as it does in India.

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