

Explorations at Parkham, Mathura

PRATISHTHA MUKHERJEE

Research Scholar, Dept of Archaeology and Ancient History, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

E-mail: mpratishta@gmail.com

Abstract: Parkham is a small village situated in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh. The recent exploration was undertaken to appreciate the practice of worshipping 'Jakhaiya baba' a contemporary form of Yakṣa. Parkham is the original findspot of the Parkham Yakṣa ascribed to 3rd c. BCE and now housed in the Mathura Museum. Every year a fair takes place Jakhaiyamela, during the Mela people recreate rudimentary forms of the Yakṣa and place them on the village limitations as guardian. The paper highlights the present set-up of the site, the temple complex and the contemporary sculptural representation.

Keywords: Mathura, Yakṣa, *Jakhaiya*, Archaeology, Art, Sculpture

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INTRODUCTION

Mathura became a metropolitan city in the ancient period; hence eventually it yielded the luxuries of art. The indigenous arts were continuously patronized and that can be inferred from the various terracotta artworks from the Maurya-Shunga-Kushana-Gupta period. The art forms in Mathura gained new dimensions after their utilization into making idols for various religious streams such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism as icons are more than expression of staunch religious beliefs if their symbolism and reason behind their features and attributes are analyzed (Krishna 1980). It was the natural propensity of the religious traditions in Ancient India towards polytheism which gave rise to the development of several cults and philosophies in course of time. The concept of the Yakṣa worship is one of worship practices. According to archaeological evidences Yakṣa figures are first represented on the railings of Bharhut and Sanchi who are believed to be divine beings possessing both male violent and benevolent characteristics (Mishra 1987). Yakṣas were the divinities associated with water, richness, trees, the backwoods, wealth and the wild. The Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain literatures represent how significant and boundless they used to be, and gradually were amalgamated in the greater pantheons reducing their positions to attendant deities (Aggrawala 1995). The first Yakṣa figure was found from Parkham village in Mathura and the Yakṣī (female counterparts of the Yakṣa) from Jhingka Nagar also in Mathura.

Mathura along the river Yamuna, is one of the most celebrated archaeological sites. References to the site are found in ancient literature, whether Buddhist, Jain or Brahmanical. The material

evidence from the region comprising a prolific sculptural tradition dating back to at least second century BCE and flourished without any break through any Kushana, Gupta and Post-Gupta periods, underlines the long historical importance of the site. It is however as the eastern capital of the Kushana that the site has attracted the most attention. The art history is based not on the material discovered from the confines of the ancient or modern limits of Mathura city, but refers instead to the sculpture from the Mathura sphere of influence which seems to have extended far beyond the city limits (Singh 2004).

PARKHAM: AN OVERVIEW

Parkham (27.2717 N, 77.7080 E) is a small village situated 22.5 kms south of Mathura. Parkham became a significant site after the finding of the sculpture of ManibhadraYakṣa. On the basis of the paleographic grounds the image was dated to 200 BCE- 50 CE (Luders 1961; Quintanilla dates to 150 BCE (2007)), the badly corroded inscription in early Brahmi script mentions about donation made by eight brothers for the Manibhadra congregation; donated by Gomitaka, pupil of Kunika (Luders 1961). Indicating a popular and important congregation or cult which was practiced during the ancient times.



Map. Location of the temple
Courtesy: Google Maps

PRESENT TEMPLE COMPLEX

The present temple (27.60348234854281, 78.66663021110507) was constructed in 2014 by a wealthy trader from Bombay (after interviewing the locals) who is said to be an ardent follower of the '*Jhakaiya baba*'. The temple is square in plan with no visible superstructure (*Shikhara*), with few flights of steps leading to the main sanctum (*garbhagriha*) where four sculptures are installed of the *Jhakaiya* baba his wife (as told by the villagers who call her *devi*) and two attendants one male and other female on the either side. The complex is enclosed by a boundary also made by the donator (trader). There are other subsidiary shrines of *Shiva* and *Ganesh* which are outside the enclosure of the *Jhakaiya* baba temple.

There is a lake near the temple which is referred as ‘Kund’ by the villagers and narrates a story that Bheema (one of the Pandava) visited here before the war of *Dharmakshetra* (Kurukshetra). The Mahabharata refers visiting of the Pandava to Nanda Yakṣī, Rajgriha (Rajgir, Bihar) (Mishra 1987) but no literary references mention about Parkham.



Figure 1: The Temple

(Photo courtesy: Author)



Figure 2: The Temple Complex

(Photo courtesy: Author)



Figure 3: Interview of the local priest

(Courtesy: Author)

ICONOGRAPHY

The iconography of the main deity Jhakaiya baba and his wife is not visible as the villagers did not allow to touch, both the deities stand on a raised platform. The male figure wears a turban and earrings. Similarly, the devi holds a lotus in her left hand and the other is in *Varada mudra* (boon giving posture) and she is adorned with a saree. The attendants stand on a pedestal, the male wears a dhoti and a decorated girdle with earrings, layered neckpiece and holds a money bag the indicator of a yakṣa (Kubera is the *yaksaraja* and often holds a money bag) and the other hand holds a *Chakra* (wheel) like attribute, he wears no headdress. The female attendant wears a girdle, with heavily ornated jewellery and headdress. Her hands are not visible because she is covered with a *dupatta*.

COMPARISON OF THE ANCIENT AND MODERN

The Parkham Yaksais a massive 2m tall sculpture of sandstone dated to third century BCE- second century BCE. Looking at the sculptural representation the yaksais not heavily adorned, he wears a neckpiece, with a sash going across the body and joins at the waist with a knot on the right, he wears a simple girdle. Both the hands of the sculpture are broken, possibly one of them must be in *varada mudra* and the other holding a money bag or some other attribute.

The modern sculptures are also made of stone, the sculpture of *Jhakaiya* baba and his consort is about 1.5m tall but their attributes are not visible. The attendant on the either sides share similar iconography to the main deity (as communicated by the villagers). Therefore, the image of the attendant is taken into consideration for the comparative study.

The image of the attendant is similar to that of Parkham yaksa. The attendant image is about 50- 60 cm (approx) and stands on a pedestal. He wears similar neckpiece and sash, he holds an usual money bag in his right hand and a wheel (whose significance is not clear).



Figure 4: View of the main Sanctum Sanctorum

(Photo courtesy: Author)



Figure 5: Attendants to the main deities

(Photo courtesy: Author)

Therefore, from the basis of the iconographical similarities it can be said that this cult was prevalent and had survived from the amalgamations and incorporations of the greater pantheons with few iconographic changes.



Figure 6: Parkham Yaksa, Mathura Museum Figure 7. Attendant Yaksa

(Photo courtesy: Author)



Figure 8: Reconstruction of Yaksa for Jhakaiya Mela

(Photo courtesy: Author)

JHAKAIYA MELA

Every year in the month of *Magh* (January) a “*Jhakaiya Mela*” which translates to Yaksafair takes place every year and people from the surrounding villages congregate at Parkham to worship *Jhakaiya*. The villagers produce crude form of the yakṣa and are placed on the boundaries of the village and the water body. The Parkham yakṣa was probably raised in the *abhaya mudra* (Singh 2004). The present image raises his left hand and looks like a jolly greeting rather than protection granting posture.

CONCLUSION

From the exploration which was undertook in December 2021 revealed a cultural continuance of the practice of yakṣa worship which was prevalent during the ancient times. Presently only the modern temple stands with the diminutive representation of the cult. After interviewing the villagers, it was observed that, yakṣa was much more significant than the other popular deities like shiva and Vishnu (even though the region of Mathura is known for the Krishna cult). Villagers called Jhakaiya baba with other names such as *Jakkho baba*, *Jakhiya baba* and *birbaba*.

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