
Jwalamalini Cult and Jainism in Kerala

K. Rajan¹

¹. Department of History, Government Victoria College, Palakkad, Kerala, India
(Email: rajanpkd@rediffmail.com)

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Abstract: *Jwalamalini is recognized as one of the Yakshi figures in Jaina iconography. Its origins are traced back to the early medieval period. Historians believe that the cult centred round Jwalamalini evolved in the Tamil lands. It represents the Tantric phase in south Indian Jainism. In Kerala, the most important example of a shrine dedicated to Jwalamalini is Palliyara Bhagavathy temple, near Vadakkenchery in Palakkad district. The four armed deity is now worshipped as a Bhagavathy. Archaeologists and historians have identified this shrine as one of the important remnants of Jaina heritage in Kerala. Located on the trade route linking Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu to Cochin, the shrine must have been prominent in the early medieval period. No inscription has been found in the temple.*

Keywords: Jwalamalini, Yakshi, Yapaniya Sect, Avarana-Devata, Sasana Devata, Vahni Devata, Tantric

Introduction

Jwalamalini forms one of the Yakshis depicted in Jaina iconography. The present paper is focussed on tracing the origins of the cult of this deity in Kerala. Considered as 'avarana-devatas' or 'surrounding divinities', Yakshis are said to be representing *Shakti* (Kramrisch 1976). The figures of Yakshas and Yakshis are found depicted in association with the Jaina Thirthankara images. The worship of Yaksas and Yakshis may be traced back to the pre-Christian era. Buddhist sources indicate that Yakshi was considered as a malignant demon devoted to devouring children before the deity was absorbed into it. Buddhists made Yakshi, the protectress of their sanctuaries. The whole character of this pre-Buddhist, tribal deity changed and Yakshi began to be considered as a giver of children instead (Zimmer 1955).

Iconographic representation of Yakshas and Yakshis started with the Mauryan times as is evident from the Buddhist stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut. These deities were depicted in the Stupas based on stories prevailing in pre-Buddhist times about them. (Zimmer 1955). In Jaina images, both Yaksha and Yakshi are found. Yakshas, according to Zimmer, represent 'the forces of the soil, and the mineral treasures, precious metals, and jewels of the earth. (Zimmer 1972). On the other hand, Yakshi was representing a fertility goddess. (Sherman 1982). Yakshi was a deity that was given a better treatment

in Buddhist iconography when compared to Brahmanism which relegated the yakshas, nagas and other folk gods and goddesses to a sub servient position. Some of them, says R C Majundar, were described as 'so many different aspects of the Brahmanical cult-deities or as evil spirits vanquished by them' (Majundar 1960).

Yakshis in the South

Tamil work Silappadikaram refers to 'yakkini', 'enshrined outside the city gates in the quarters of monks practising dharma.' Women had offered milk to the deity. (Ramachandra 1939). Obviously, this is a reference to the practice of worship of Yakshi in the period when Silappadikaram was composed. South Indian Jainologists trace the beginning of the cult of Yakshi back to the early historic period. (Desai 1957). In period of the Gangas of Karnataka (the 5th-6th centuries A.D), there were shrines dedicated to the Padmavati Yakshi. (Champakalakshmi 2011). Assimilation of folk deities was a process by which new Yakshis were popularised. The Jainas had worshipped Yakshis such as Ambika, Kusmandini, Padmavati, and Jwalamalini. These were depicted in Jaina iconography as *sasanadevatas*. While Mahavira and Parsvanatha were historical figures, the *sasanadevatas* were 'mythical beings.' At the same time, their characteristics indicate that these deities were products of appropriation of the attributes of folk deities such as mother and fertility goddesses. (Champakalakshmi 2011).

Historians have argued that a theistic cult centring round the worship of Yakshis had started in the south from the 10th century onwards. There were some important Jaina preceptors – Naganandi, for instance—who played a leading role in the spread of the cult of the attendant deities. In the early phase, Ambika and Siddhayika were the Yakshis popularised in the Tamil lands. At a later stage, the Jaina Yakshis Padmavati and Jwalamalini got more popularity. (Desai 1957). During the reigns of ruling families Silaharas and Rattas, Padmavati Yakshi became very popular in Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, the cults centring round Padmavati and Jwalamalini became popular under Ajanandi.

Tantric Influences and Iconographic Depiction of Jwalamalini

The Shasanadevatas of Jainism are represented as a manifestation of Tantrism in Jainism (Bhattacharyya 2006). As in the case of Brahmanism and Buddhism, Jainism also promoted the worship of Tantric deities. Padmavati and Jwalamalini were deities of the Tantric phase. That was also a period when Bhakti spirit influenced Puranic Hinduism. Padmavati Yakshi came to have four hands, each carrying a goad, a rosary, a noose and a fruit. This was true in the case of Padmavati depicted in Jaina shrines in Chalukyan times. Jwalamalini was also depicted in a similar manner. The image of the Yakshi on the hillock Kanakagiri in Ponnur in Tamil Nadu bears eight hands. Seven of these hands carry objects such as disc, mace, spear, conch, shield, skull, and book (Desai 1957). One of the hands is in *abhaya* pose. Another image shows the deity seated on a buffalo. It carries a disc, arrow, noose, shield, trident, sword, and bow. The deity is seated on a bull in another instance. (Desai 1957). At Edehalli or Narasimharajapura in the Kadur district is found a temple dedicated to Jwalamalini. The deity has eight

arms. The attributes carried are of dana (gift), double arrow, chakra, trisula, pasa, flag, bowlet and kalasa (Desai 1957). It belongs to the Vijayanagar period and forms part of the Yapaniya sect, 'a branch of the Mula Sangha originating around the sixth-seventh centuries A.D' (Champakalakshmi 2011).

The ideas of the sect influenced Tamil lands. Householder women were also attracted to it (Desai 1957). Although Yakkini was known to the south at a very early date, the Yapaniya sect contributed to the spread of Yakshi cult (Desai 1957). Champakalakshmi states that the sect 'followed Tantric forms, exorcist rites, (*Brahmarakshasa* and *Tantra Vidya*), alchemy, miracles, and are called Rasasiddhas' (Champakalakshmi 2011). The very legends regarding the origin of the cult of Jwalamalini tells us the links between Jainism and Brahmanism. The goddess, also known as *vahnidevata*, originated as a result of the propitiation of the Vahni devata (the goddess of fire) by the Jain monk of the *Dravida gana* Helacharya to release his lady disciple from the clutches of *Brahmarakshas*. Helacharya belonged to the 8th-9th centuries A.D and therefore, the date of the origin of the cult can also be traced back to this period. Helacharya is said to have lived after the 6th-7th centuries A.D and before A.D 900 (Champakalakshmi 2011).

Jwalamalinikalpa, written by Indrananda Yogindra in A D 939, is one of the textual sources for understanding the cult of Jwalamalini. The author lived during the reign of the Rashtrakuta king Krishna III (Desai 1957). The 11th century Jaina scholar Mallisena had written the work Jwalinikalpa. During the 10th-11th centuries, Jwalamalini had been transformed into a prominent goddess in Jainism in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The cult of Jwalamalini as an independent deity got more prominence in Karnataka (Desai 1957). The emergence into prominence of Jwalamalini and other Yakshis is important given the fact that there is no concept of goddesses in Jainism. Instead, the faith had promoted the worship of Yakshis. It was Tantric cult that transformed the religious beliefs of the people in India. It affected all faiths, including Jainism. Jain monks took pride in being called Mantravadins (Desai 1957). The evil spirits exorcised included Sakini (Desai 1957). Jaina deities were taken in procession. The deities thus taken out were well decorated. Desai has cited the holes on the sides of the sculptures of the deities at Kalugumalai as evidence for the practice.

These Yakshis are represented in association with some animals. They are given attributes similar to the war-goddesses of Puranic Hinduism. The usual manner of representation of the Yakshis was as chauri-bearing attendants to the Thirthankaras. Except in the case of the Yakshis of Neminatha and Mahavira, all others are depicted as having four hands. Ambika, the Yakshi of Neminatha and Siddhayika, the Yakshi of Mahavira have two hands only (Desai 1957). Ambika's representation is interesting. The deity is riding a lion. A bunch of mangoes and a child are in her hands. Their representation is different from that of the Jaina Thirthankaras. They are represented as wearing head dress, bands on hands and necklaces. Garment is found in the lower part of the body. The deities such as Yakshas, Vidyadharas, Gandharvas, and Kinnaras are 'semi-divine beings (Acharya 2001).

They are said to have two arms and two eyes... they assume a purely human appearance. They are adorned with the crown known by the name of karanda. ... The Yakshas are distinguished from the Rakshasas, the latter being evil-spirits, while the former are regarded as supernatural beings of a benevolent and inoffensive disposition. The Yakshas act as attendants (anuchara) and chowry-bearers of the gods' (Acharya 2001).

Tamil Lands as Centres of Jwalamalini Cult

In addition to the Sastraic prescriptions, the local myths also influenced the depiction of the idols of the deities such as Ambika, Kusmandini, Padmavati, and Jwalamalini (Champakalakshmi 2011). Yakshas and Yakshas are supposed to be the attendants of Jaina Thirthankaras. As a consequence, Jaina iconography gives prominence to these deities. All the 24 Thirthankaras are supposed to have separate Yakshis and Yakshas. In the south, some of these Yakshis attained the status of independent deities. The specific conditions in the Dravidian land which favoured the worship of more female deities are cited as a reason for the rise of such deities. The other leading religions including Brahmanism and Buddhism had also absorbed the tribal religious systems in order to popularize their religious beliefs. However, the cult of Yakshis such as Jwalamalini was very popular in Tamilakam. It is said the cult's origin itself was in the Tamil lands. Temples dedicated to Jwalini had come up in Karnataka (Desai 1957). There, the Jaina faith was popular on account of the massive support it got from among the leading ladies of the land. Jainism that had initially not approved of the woman's right to attain salvation, attracted large number of women. There were many Sanyasinis who promoted the cause of the religion by erecting temples and installing Thirthankara images. Women lived in nunneries. Jaina faith was noted for its rituals such as Sallekhana. Epigraphic records speak of the observance of the custom by many women.

Jaina Yakshi Figures in Kerala

As in the case of Puranic Hinduism, Jainism too had a ritualistic, Tantric and temple-oriented bhakti phase (Varier 2012). Yakshi cult and other forms of worship of the Jaina Thirthankaras form part of this trend. The transformation of these shrines into Hindu temples later was not an unusual occurrence in that sense. In Kerala, Yakshi cult was popular. Some of the specimens of the Yakshi figures have been found at several places. The approximate date of all these is around 10-11th centuries A.D. The cult seems to have been popular in the whole of the Tamil country, including Kerala. In the later centuries, Yakshas and Yakshis were treated as evil spirits who would enter the body of human beings and cause mischief. They were supposed to have been created by Brahma. Through the navadwaras, they enter the humans (Thomas 1995).

Prominence was given to the worship of Padmavati Yakshi in south Kerala and north Kerala. However, the cult of Jwalamalini seems to have been popular in central Kerala. Generally, the chauri-bearing Yakshas have been found carved along with the Jaina Thirthankara images across the State. On the other hand, independent status was given

to the Yakshis such as Padmavati, Prabhavati, Ambika and Jwalamalini. The images of Padmavati and Prabhavati were found carved on both sides of the Parsvanatha image at Manjeswaram (Poduval 1996).



Figure 1: Palliyara Bhagavathy temple, Palakkad District



Figure 2: Jwalamalini Idol
(Courtesy: Krishnaraj)



Figure 3: Image of Chandra Prabha Thirthankara
kept outside

The notable instance of the cult of Jwalamalini in Kerala is found in Palakkad. A temple, now known as Palliyarakkavu (Figure 1), was constructed in the early medieval period for the worship of Jwalamalini (Figure 2). In many parts of the south Jain temples were converted into Vaishnava or Siva temples. In recent years, Jaina

images have been recovered from the sites of Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu. This has prompted historians to believe that Jainism was once a widespread religion (Champakalakshmi 2011). The same thing can be said of the presence of a temple dedicated to Jwalamalini in Palakkad. Also, it is significant to note that a temple was specially dedicated to the deity Jwalamalini in Palakkad. It may be kept in mind that the independent shrines dedicated to such deities began to be constructed only from the early 10th century onwards even in Karnataka (Champakalakshmi 2011). The date of the temple, in that, sense, can be 10th century or after. In the south, the carving of the Jwalamalini idols occurred during the 6th to 9th centuries A.D (Kannan and Lakshmi 2001). No inscription has been recovered from the site. The temple, as it exists now, has undergone some modifications. However, the original sanctum remains. It is a rectangular sanctum having an antarala. The other structures around could have been of a later period. The face of the seated Yakshi has deteriorated. The idol has four pairs of hands. The Yakshi figures having more than two hands is not unusual. Padmavati sculpture at Kazhukumalai has four hands (Kannan and Lakshmi 2001). Three of her raised right hands hold a severed human head, a pole, and a trident. The lower right hand holds a sword. The lower left hand holds a fruit in the palm. One of the upper hands holds a bell. What the other hands hold is not clear. One of them seems to be a noose. Her right leg is hanging down. The left leg is placed on the lap. Her head gear is in the shape of a karanda makuda, though in a bulged form. It is sheltered by a five-hooded serpent. Total height of the idol, including the pitha, is about six feet.

The image of Chandraprabha Thirthankara (Figure 3) is kept outside. The deity in the temple is worshipped as Vaishnavi of the Saptamatrikas. Thus, on both sides of the idol are kept the miniature forms of the other matrikas. The wooden figures are said to be a little over one feet in height. It is said a fire had broken out early in the last century resulting in the replacement of the idol with the present one (Namboothiri Sankaran). The idol is facing north while the mulavigraha, a small granite piece, is used for rituals. It is facing west. The Yaksi image is applied chant (kunkum or) once in a year. On other occasions, it is not used for abhisheka, though the worshippers come to the temple to have a glimpse of the same deity. This itself is an indication that the idol had a very different religious background. The surface of the adhishtana of the shrine has been painted completely. No carvings are visible. It is a raised basement, characteristic of the 10th – 11th centuries shrines in Kerala.

In Kerala, the shrines of the Yakshis Padmavati and Jwalamalini were transformed into Bhagavati temples. Kallil, Chitral and Paruvasseri are examples. The first two were those where Padmavati Yakshi images are found. It is not clear how a temple was dedicated to this deity at Paruvasseri. A notable example of an early medieval Yakshi figure found in south Kerala is that of Padmavati in the Chitral temple. The standing figure is dated to the 9th century. It is a two-armed deity in a benign pose. The deity wears two big kundalas in the ear lobes (Poduval 1996). Another Yakshi, Ambika, is beautifully carved on the wall of the shrine. It is also having two arms. Yet another image of Padmavati in relief is also found. On the other hand, the figure of Jwalamalini

is four armed. She is also holding arms. There is no doubt that the Jainas had worshipped Yakshis such as Padmavati and Jvalamalini on an independent basis. The Yakshis had assumed a separate identity of their own. Temples were specially dedicated to them in parts of the south including Kerala.

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