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# The Lady with the Mirror: A Study of the Wrong Provenance and Significance of the *Darpana Dharini* in Indian Art

Shriya Gautam<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Speaking Archaeologically, Kshitij Krishna Niwas, Shilly Road, Solan – 173 212, Himachal Pradesh, India (Email: [shriya.gautam@arch.oxfordalumni.org](mailto:shriya.gautam@arch.oxfordalumni.org))

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**Abstract:** Indic art is vastly different in terms of aesthetics as well as in the way it projects reality, when compared to the Western canon of art. The Indian view of aesthetic often combines the material aspects with the spiritual aspects of life (Coomaraswamy, 2015). Consequently, secular sculptures, which range from a procession to erotic imagery, are often found in the relief carvings of stupas and temples. While studying the relief sculptures archaeologically, it is evident that the Indian artists, throughout the ages, exploited what can be termed as the “common pool of motifs.” These motifs, that first appeared in Buddhism, were, then, later applied to the Jain and the Hindu art and subsequently acquired their own religious and social connotations (Harle, 1994). One such motif is that of the *Darpana dharini* figurine, or the woman holding a mirror. Although more common to the temples of South India, the figurine is not absent from the three major Indic religions of Ancient India and can be traced back to the Gandhara School of Art. The purpose of this paper is to study the lady with the mirror, to attempt to trace its prototype and highlight the myths associated with it not just in the Indic context but also in the parallel cultures, from where the figure might possibly have penetrated into Indian art. For the purpose of this, the study employs an extensive comparison with the Hellenistic parallels of the figure, housed in some of the major museums of the world and presents a quantitative database listing some of the significant samples that were studied closely. It, then, attempts to address the debate of identification and significance of this figure, which seems compounded by the multiple labels the figure seems to acquire in different museums, where it has been housed and tries to evaluate whether the figure is a *yakshi*, an *apsara* or a *surasundari*.

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**Keywords:** *Darpana Dharini*, Secular Sculptures, Artefact Analysis, Indian Art, Faulty Provenance, Iconography, Hellenistic World

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## Introduction

The study of iconography enables archaeologists to reconstruct the social and mental landscape of the period that the artwork belongs to (Kinnard, 1999). This is particularly true in the case of the figure in question: that of the lady holding a mirror, known in Sanskrit, as the *Darpana dharini*. The term, “*Darpana dharini*,” etymologically means “she who holds the mirror,” thus, aptly describing what the sculpture essentially represents.

In all of its contexts in the Indian art, the sculpture is usually the part of a relief, carved on the railing or the pillar of the parent building and depicts a woman, usually standing in the *tribhanga mudra*, a three-fold pose consisting bends in body at the knees, waist and neck. Also, almost all the depictions of the *Darpana dharini* usually hold a handheld or a box-mirror, where the figure in question almost always points to its head or appears to be coiffing its hair. Although, these are the general features that define the *Darpana dharini*, there are several variations in both the posture and what the figure seems to be adjusting or correcting in the mirror. However, based on the majority of samples that were studied for the purpose of this paper, Figure 1 shows the most generalised reconstruction of the sculpture for diagrammatic and illustrative purposes.

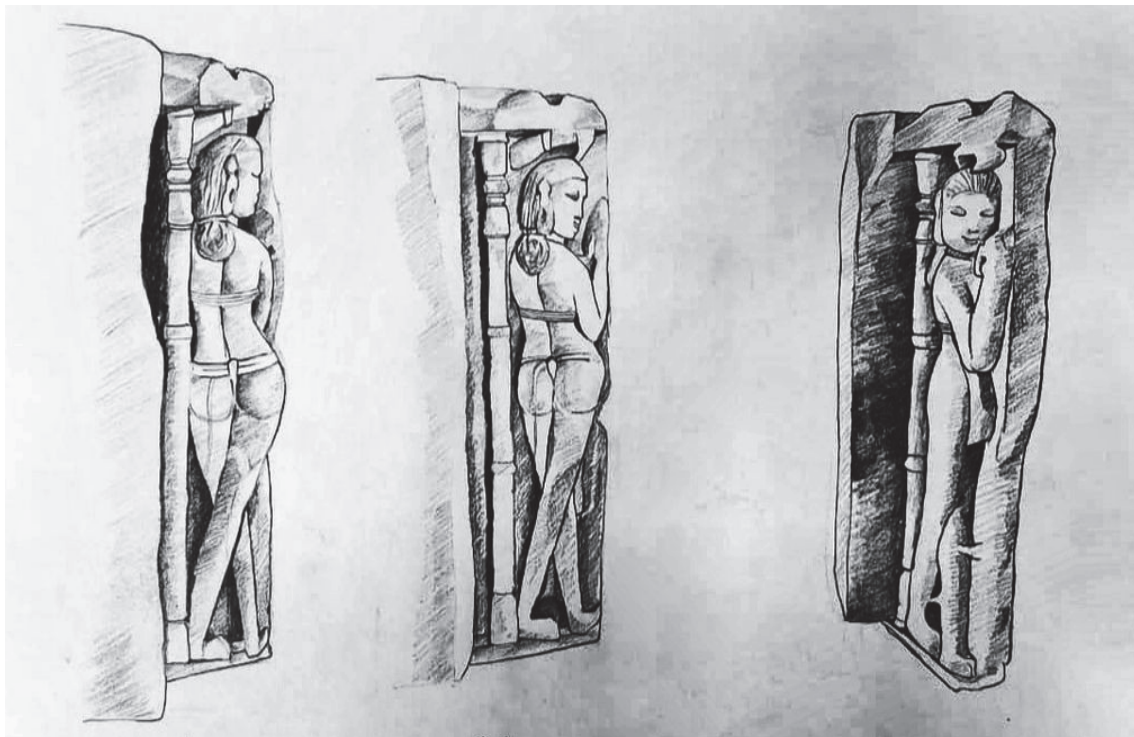


Figure 1: The Basic Diagram of the *Darpana dharini*

Before delving deeper into the details of the figure and its prototypes, it is important to note that though fairly common in *stupas* as well as in the Jain and the Hindu temples, very little research has been conducted on the relevance or the associated myths regarding the *Darpana dharini*. Consequently, this research had to rely significantly on primary observations made by the author as well as the cursory mentions and museum catalogues of the figure, wherever it was correctly provenanced. It was observed that the figure has been marked as a *yakshi* in some cases and an *apsara* in the others, intermittently and without any clear demarcation regarding this distinction.

Due consideration was also given to primary religious texts of the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu pantheon, in order to understand the origin and the eventual percolation of

these figures in Indian art, from as early as the 1st-2nd century CE in the north to as late as the 13th century CE in South India. However, before establishing this connection, similar figures from the Hellenistic art forms also were also studied and considered. Since Gandhara school of Art is usually understood as a product of fusion between existing Indian artforms with that of the Greek art (Härtel, Laing, and Yaldiz 1982), it appeared necessary that the material evidence retrieved from the Graeco-Roman period be juxtaposed with the samples from the Indian context to understand its origin better. The following section will begin with stating some of these observations based on the study of the prototypes of the figure in Hellenistic art and attempt to understand its significance therein. It will then move on to understanding its connotations in Buddhist art, before progressing to evaluate its place in Jain and Hindu traditions.

### ***Darpana dharini* in the Hellenistic World: Origin and Prototypes**

Having explored in detail the meaning of the term '*Darpana dharini*' and established the context of this research, the present section seeks to explore the origins of the *Darpana dharini* figurine in Indic art and possibly also trace its origins from outside the subcontinent. As mentioned earlier, several prototypes of a woman holding a mirror are found in the Gandhara Art. While their significance and purpose shall be explored in the subsequent sections, it is clear that the figure was most likely inspired by Greek prototypes, the earliest of which can be traced to *circa* 4th-3rd century BCE (Table 2). Its appearance in Indic art was, therefore, probably a consequence of the *Hellenistic interfusion* in Indic Art that resulted, primarily, as a consequence of Alexander's invasion (Boardman, 2006). A close evaluation of female figurines in early Indian Art show that most secular figures, that appeared in the Gandhara and consequently in the Mathura art, can be easily juxtaposed with figures in the Grecian urns and free standing sculptures, including the representations of tree nymphs (*dryads*), the Muses and the *Caryatids*. Much like their representation in Indic art, these sculptures were a part of pillar reliefs or formed the pillar itself in architectural columns (Dillon, 2003). Accordingly, figures such as Leda and the swan, nymphs with baby Dionysus and the aforementioned *dryads*, find close parallels in Indic counterparts, such as *Hamsi*, *Shalabhanjika* and *Ashoka Dohada*, and the Mother and Child figurines, although, the myths associated with each figure vary drastically.

As far as the figure of a lady with a mirror is concerned, however, no separate myth or mythological significance can be associated with it in the Greek mythology, although it is a recurring motif, especially among figures of women depicted in vases. Towards the 3rd-2nd century BCE, free standing statuettes of this figure also became common in Hellenistic art. A common observation regarding this is, she is one of the many representations of women engaged in "the ordinary business of life" (Hemingway, 2004; Wunderlich, 1951).

It may be noteworthy in this regard, that Etruscan hand mirrors generally had the figure of a female instead of the mirror handle, something that has been termed as

“caryatid mirrors” by the classical archaeologists (cf. Congdon, 1963). These, in turn, go back to Egyptian times, around the Period of the Dynasty 18 (circa 1540-1296 BCE), further suggesting that the association of women with mirrors, especially in art was a borrowed motif, that travelled gradually due to socio-political contact of one set of population with another.

It is, thus, very likely, that the idea of *Darpana dharini* as well as other female figurines initially penetrated the subcontinent through a minor, lesser known cult, that may have originated as a result of contact with the Greeks, who followed the Persians into the Indian subcontinent, under the Alexandrian Army. Many historians also assert that this was the *Yaksha* Cult or the Cult of the Tree Worshipers, which, although too small to be considered as a separate sect, was governed by a separate sect of beliefs that were eventually assimilated into Buddhism (Chopra, Puri, and Das 1974; Agrawala, 1966). However, this theory is equally applicable to the figurines of *apsaras*, which in turn also happen to be influenced by the Muses of Ancient Greece (Woodard *et al*, 2007).

Keep this point of view in consideration, along with the associated archaeological evidence presented in Table 2, the next section will discuss the depiction of the *Darpana dharini* in Buddhist art and seek to evaluate whether or not there were any myths attached by the Buddhist pantheon to this particular figure and also compare how its depiction varies from the Gandhara style to the Mathura style.

### ***Darpana dharini* in Buddhism: A *Yakshi* or an *Aprasara*?**

Although this section, and the ones that follow it, study the genesis and the variations of the *Darpana dharini* in each of the three prominent Indian religions, *viz.* Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, separately, it is, nevertheless, to be borne in mind that the figure of the lady holding a mirror probably first appeared in all the three cases, roughly around the same time. Boardman (2006) is of the opinion that the emergence of figurative arts in the Indic religion occurred between the 3rd to the 1st century BCE, and was affected equally by a fusion of the Greek and the Persian art, which was carried forward into north-west India as the consequence of Alexander’s Invasion. This claim is supported by the account of Megasthenes, who describes the Mauryan architecture in Pataliputra, under the aegis of Chandragupta Maurya in detail, pointing out the similarities between architectural columns and iconography of Mauryan Art with its contemporary Greek and Persian counterparts [Indica, LVI. 4-11]. It is, therefore, evident as to how the female figurines, which were stylistically and iconographically similar to Hellenistic art, may have first found their way into the sphere of Indic art.

The earliest sample of the *Darpana dharini*, which was studied for the purpose of this paper, belongs to the Gandhara School of Art and is housed at the Indisches Museum at Berlin. Although several other samples do exist, hardly any of these are recorded or housed in a museum and mostly, belong to private collectors. The figure at Berlin depicts a woman dressed in a toga, standing in what may be described as the *tribhanga*

*mudra*, and holds a handheld mirror in its left hand, while pointing to either her ear or her head with her right. Artistically, it bears the typical features of Gandhara art, exhibiting a blend Graeco-Roman features in terms of its coiffure and attire but incorporating the Persian influence in terms of the jewellery worn by the figure (cf. Gates, 2002). Of particular interest are the anklets, which are typical of the Persian style and material evidence of which have been found and authenticated both from the ancient Achaemenid sites as well as from Taxila (Khan, 2013).

In contrast to this figure, the *Darpana dharini* figurines of the Mathura style are remarkably different in terms of their attire, ornaments and depictions. Perhaps the key distinction between these is the presence of a pedestal in case of the Mathura parallels, which is missing from its Gandhara counterpart. These vary from one figure to another and range from a dwarf to a mythical creature, with the head of a crocodile but the tail of a fish, identified as the *Simsumara* sirah by V.S. Agrawala (2003).

Although belonging to the same chronological period, the Mathura sculptures are much more Indian in appearance and iconography and depict a semi-naked figure of a lady, with a slightly more pronounced posture. The figures wear a waistband or a girdle (*mekhala*) and hold circular or box mirrors, often pointing towards their heads and occasionally to their cheeks. It is to be noted that those figures that point to their cheeks have scratch-marks on them which have been interpreted by some art historians as nail or teeth marks, implying that the figure in question is a woman, looking at herself in the mirror in the aftermath of performing a sexual act or *paribhoga* and has, therefore, been labelled as *Paribhoga Darshini* (Ray, 2016). The jewellery worn by these figures is also identified as contemporary to the Indian ornaments of the time, especially the beaded bangles or *kankana* and heavy anklets with bells (*nupur*).

It is because of these associated motifs that these figures have been labelled as *yakshis* although it is worth noting that none of the primary Buddhist texts referring to the *yaksha-yakshi* mythology, describes a female holding a mirror as one. This is not true of other female figurines such as the *Shalabhanjika* (tree deity) or the *Chanwar dharini* (female holding a fly-whisk), who although also seemingly derived from the Hellenistic art, do happen to have myths associated with their depiction and consequent significance in the Buddhist pantheon. It is, therefore, very likely that the *Darpana dharini* was wrongly identified and labelled as a *yakshi*, an error that percolated subsequently into all the secondary literature and research.

### ***Darpana dharini* in Jainism**

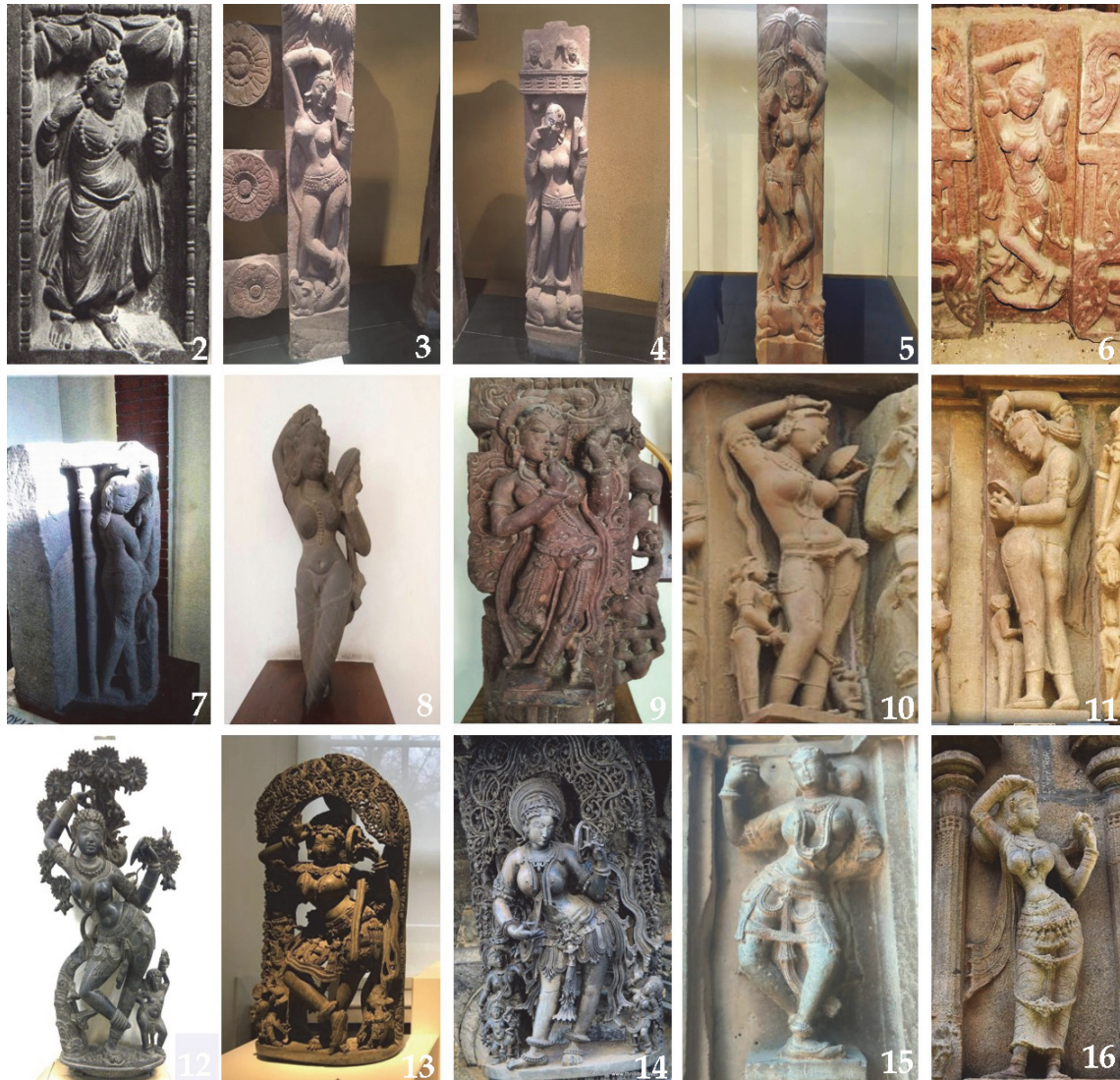
Similar problem persists as far as locating a myth associated with the *Darpana dharini* is concerned in the Jain pantheon. Unlike Buddhism, which provides a rather vague identification and classification of its *yakshis*, Jainism lists twenty-four *yakshis* along with their identifying features (Cort, 1987; 2010). However, the lady holding a mirror is not among them, even though she appears just as frequently in Jain art and is labelled as one wherever she has been studied by modern scholars.

Table 1: *Darpana dharini* Figurines in Indic Art

Title	Accession Number	Provenance and Present Location	Dateline	Material	Figure No.
Yakshi with a mirror	AKG380464	Gandhara, provenance unknown. Located at the Indisches Museum, Berlin, Germany	<i>circa</i> 2nd-3rd century CE	Grey schist	2
Rail Pillar (Lady holding Mirror)	31	Sanghol, Fatehgarh, Punjab Located at: The Sanghol Archaeological Museum	Kushana Period, (c. 1 <sup>st</sup> Century CE-3 <sup>rd</sup> Century CE)	Red Sandstone	3
Rail Pillar (Lady holding Mirror)	25	Sanghol, Fatehgarh, Punjab Located at: The Sanghol Archaeological Museum	Kushana Period, (c. 1 <sup>st</sup> Century CE-3 <sup>rd</sup> Century CE)	Red Sandstone	4
<i>Darpana Dharini</i> from Sanghol	114	Sanghol, Fatehgarh, Punjab Located at Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh	Kushana Period, (c. 1 <sup>st</sup> Century CE-3 <sup>rd</sup> Century CE)	Red Sandstone	5
<i>Darpana dharini</i>	GM-GMK-RJ-863875	Vilasgarh, Rajasthan Located at: Government Museum, Kota, Rajasthan	Unknown Although retrieved from a monument believed to be Jain	Red Sandstone	6
Lady with the mirror	N/A	Bhima Temple, Haryana Located at: Bhima Devi Temple Complex	Gurjara Pratihara, 8th-11th century CE	Grey Sandstone	7
<i>Darpana Dharini</i>	66.221	Gwalior, Pradesh Located at: National Museum, New Delhi	Gurjara Pratihara, <i>circa</i> 10th century CE	Red Sandstone	8

<i>Stambha Nayika holding a mirror</i>	502	Damoh, Madhya Pradesh Located at: Rani Durgavati Museum, Jabalpur	11th century CE	Red Sandstone	9
<i>Darpan sundari</i>	N/A	Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh	Chandela Period. 10th- 11th century CE	Sandstone	10
<i>Darpan sundari</i>	N/A	Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh	Chandela Period. 10th- 11th century CE	Sandstone	11
<i>Mohini with mirror</i>	50.190	Gadag, Karnataka, Located at: National Museum, New Delhi	Western Chalukya, 12th century CE	Schist	12
Bracket figure of a female dancer using a mirror in her left hand	1962,0721.2	Karnataka, India Located at: The British Museum, London	Hoysala, 12th century CE	Schist	13
Darpana Sundari	N/A	Chennakeshava Temple. Belur, Karnataka	Hoysala. 12th century CE	Schist	14
Untitled	N/A	The Jain Temple at Khiradpur, Kolhapur, Maharashtra	Silhara Dynasty, possibly 12th century CE	Unknown	15
Untitled	N/A	Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, Trichy, Tamil Nadu	Various influences as site was under constant occupation from the Sangam Period to the decline of the Vijaynagar Empire		16





Figures 2-16: *Darpana dharini* Figurines in Indic Art

One such figure is housed at the Government Museum in Kota, Rajasthan, although its provenance and exact dateline is unknown. Another and a much later parallel studied for the purpose of this research, hails from the lesser known Jain Temple from Kharagpur in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra. Although semi-naked like the Mathura parallels, these figurines are shown wearing longer girdles, several necklaces, armbands, anklets and even a stole. They stand in the *tribhanga mudra* on an unornamented pedestal and are more similar to the Gandhara *Darpana dharinis* than the Mathura ones (Table 1 and Figures 2-16).

### ***Darpana dharini* in Hindu Art**

It is not until these figures are portrayed in the Hindu art, that some sort of belief system or significance seems to be applied to their depiction. Although it is entirely plausible that these figures may have existed in Hindu art before 8th to 9th century, it is only in this period that a mention has been made to their relevance for the temple or



the monument. The lady holding a mirror is, therefore, described as the *Darpana dharini* for the first time in the Tantric architectural treatise, *Śilpa Prakāśa*, as one of the *Surasundaris* or the celestial beauties. According to this text:

*As a house without a wife, as a frolic without a woman, so without the surasundari, the monument will be inferior and bear no fruit* (*Śilpa Prakāśa*, I.392-393).

Table 2: Prototypes to *Darpana dharini* Figurines in Hellenistic Art

Title	Accession Number	Provenance and Present Location	Dateline	Material	Figure No.
Oil Jar with a Woman at Her Toilette or Attic Red Figure Lekythos	86.AE.250	Athens, Greece Located at: J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA	<i>circa</i> 450 BCE, attributed to Circle of Phiale Painter	Terracotta	17
Seated Woman Holding a Mirror	1624	Velanideza, Greece Located at: National Archaeological Museum, Athens	<i>Circa</i> 470-460 BCE attributed to the Sabouroff Painter,	Terracotta	18
Woman holding a Mirror	E 106-2	Tanagra, Athens, Greece Located at: Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon, France	<i>Circa</i> 4th-3rd century BCE	Terracotta	19
Terracotta statuette of a woman looking into a box mirror	12.229.19	Possibly Centuripe, Sicily, Italy Located at: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	<i>Circa</i> 3rd-2nd century BCE	Terracotta	20

The *Darapanadharini* finds a mention among the various *surasundaris* described in the text along with specifications for their associated iconography and is described as the beauty admiring herself in the mirror [I.391-480]. It is this association of the figure,

both with the feminine cosmic energy (that was essential to tantrism) and aesthetic, that then translates into all early and late medieval temples in the north as well as south. Despite this, however, in most museums where these figurines can be found, they are only referred to as either *Yakshis* or *Apsara* and occasionally, even *Stambha Nayikas*. Very rarely are these sculptures correctly provenanced as Darpan dharinis and more often than not, museums attach their own interpretations to the figures. Table 1A shows a Western Chalukya sample labelled as Mohini, the feminine form of Vishnu and the museum catalogue proceeds to talk at length about Lord Vishnu taking the form of a woman, oblivious to how none of the associated motifs with the figure separate it from a similar Gurjara Pratihara parallel, housed in the same museum or enable the identification of one as Mohini and the other as just a lady with a mirror.



Figures 17-20: Prototypes to *Darpana dharini* Figurines in Hellenistic Art

## Conclusion

One of the key problems in the study of this figure arises from the wrong interpretation as well as labelling of the figure as well as the colonial understanding of the terms "*yakshi*," "*apsara*" and "*surasundari*" (Breckenridge, 1989). All the three terms, when translated to propound a definition in English, refer to them as "celestial beauties," or "celestial demi-goddesses and nymphs." Consequently, many parallels, which were acquired and provenanced in the West before they were housed in museums in India, labelled the figures with any one of the three terms, without looking into the primary details that the Indic texts would have provided. It must be mentioned here, that while the definition of *surasundari* that was expounded upon in this paper is derived from a ninth century, Hindu text, the concept of these was very much always present in Jain and Buddhist texts also.

While conducting this research, the problem of labelling made the process of locating samples more complicated. This failure to differentiate between three seemingly synonymous terms which happen to have drastically different meanings, compounded with faulty term association in recent research is perhaps the main factor hampering

extensive research of secular sculptures in ancient Indian Art. Also affixing the names such as *prasadhika* or *nayika*, without fully understanding their etymological connotations and heavy reliance on secondary sources instead of consulting primary sources and juxtaposing it with archaeological significance makes the recent research on secular sculptures both misleading and confusing.

Another shortcoming, although seemingly minor in nature, but having huge repercussions on the scientific study of such sculptures is the Indo-centric or nationalistic approach of Indian archaeology, which often overlooks the position of Ancient India in the broader, global picture. In focusing the entire attention on the “advanced state of decay of the once glorious Ancient India,” most archaeological researches fail to remember that no civilisation survived or existed in isolation. Cultural contacts in terms of trade, political conquests and cultural assimilation would have affected all aspects of life in the ancient society in the same fashion as popular culture governs the present-day tastes, cuisine, attire and art. The incorporation of architectural and aesthetic elements from a foreign culture at a time when the trade was at its peak (Frankopan, 2015), would therefore, have been highly probable. The figure of *Darpana dharini*, though a small and supposedly insignificant figure, with respect to its implications on Indian art, is no exception to this case.

The study of secular sculptures in Indian Art is an interrelated study that cannot be done in isolation of India’s position and socio-political structure with respect to the rest of the world or the common pool of motifs and the interrelated mythologies of the three main Indic religions. In order to understand the archaeological history of India, a scientific study that encompasses all aspects, including trade, economy and art and culture of the ancient world has to be studied in relation to the larger picture. Using qualitative methods of artefact analysis, similar studies can also be attempted for other secular sculptures. In conducting this particular research, the researcher hopes that it will hopefully provide a new framework for future projects that attempt to conduct a similar study and help to correct many faulty labellings and provenances, that currently hamper research work.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> All pictures are the Copyright of Speaking Archaeologically, an archaeological education group owned and managed by the Author and were clicked by the author or her team. The author has full rights to publish these.

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