The Philosophical Import of Vedic Yakṣa and Pali Yakkha

THE curious term yakṣa which makes its appearance for the first time in the RgVeda and there seems to denote primarily 'the mysterious' (Wunderding) has in the later Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Upanishads developed several shades of meaning, the most important of which for early Indian thought is undoubtedly its philosophical significance. Commonest sense, however, seems to be the mythological as denoting a species of certain non-human beings, demons, ogres or spirits—a sense found for the first time in the Gṛhya Śūtras and become popular in Pali literature. Several aspects of its Vedic use have been discussed by Hertel, ¹ Boyer, ² Geldner ³ and others, but its philosophical use as found particularly in the Upanishads early Pali literature has heretofore received no adequate presentation. An attempt is made in the following paragraphs for the first time to trace

1. Die Arische Feuerlehre i. 11 ff
2. Journal Asiatique, 1906, i. 393 ff
3. Vedische Studien, iii. 126-143.
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of the philosophical import of this term throughout its long history, starting most probably in the tenth mandala of the RgVeda in a cosmological context and developing in the later Samhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Upānīṣads, it finally assumed its important rôle as occurring in the early Buddhist Sutta Nipāta, and, to appraise its significance for ancient Hindu and for early Buddhism.

The ṚgVeda the word occurs several times as a neuter substantive, and none of these instances can the sense be established with any precision and translators differ widely. Sāyana in his commentary gives the fundamental sense of 'the adorable' as being derived from a root connected with yaj (sacrifice or worship). He explains yakṣa by yajña, pūjā, pūjita and pūjya, following an earlier tradition already in Saṅkara. Even the word yakṣuḥ which occurs as a racial name at Ṛg Veda 7.18.6, 19, he regards as derivable from the same root and by "yajñaśilah." While it is not impossible phonetically to analyse the root as yaj-s-a, the meaning assigned to it by Sāyana is found to be far from in every instance cited, and, Sāyana himself gives it quite a different interpretation at least in one instance, viz. for yakṣa (-drś') at RV. 16, when he comments on it as 'utsava,' spectacle. On philological grounds it seems more plausible to regard yakṣ as a distinctly separate primitive seen in several verbal forms in the Ṛg Veda. It is not improbable that we have an obsolete root yakṣ originally meaning to rush after, hunt, prob. related to OHG. jagōn as has been suggested by Grassmann and supported by Max Müller. This may have developed in the Ṛg Veda sense of stirring or moving (as a living being) that some have seen in it. I saw an original sense of fire or brilliance in yakṣ just as in the word s, but this again is conjectural. Whatever the original sense may have been, what appears likely is that the word meant something like 'mysterious flashing thing' later developing into 'mysterious power (magic)' in the Ṛg Veda, and in this latter sense bearing a striking resemblance semantically.

Yakṣam, RV. 4.3.13; 5.70.4; 7.61.5; yakṣasya 10.88.13; yakṣin 7.88.6:
1.190.4; yakṣadrś 7.59.10.
7. On RV. 4.3.13.
7. On RV. 4.3.13.
7. On RV. 7.88.6.
7. On RV. 7.61.5.
7. On RV. 1.190.4; 5.70.4.
7. On RV. 2.5.1; 10.88.13.
7. On Kena Up. 3.2; Brhad. Up. 5.4. "pūjyam."
Prayakṣam (pada text: pra'yakṣam) RV. 2.5.1; prayakṣe RV. 3.7.1; 3.31.3;
"Yakṣatīk pujaṁthah, prayakṣanityādau dars'vanāt," bhāṣya on RV. 10.88.13.
also prayakṣu, RV. 5.55.1 which may stand according to Max Müller for an
form prayakṣuṇa (S.B.E. Vol. XXXII, p. 335).
Vedic Hymns S.B.E. XXXII, p. 335.
See Petersburger Wörterbuch, s.v., and Monier Williams, Skt.-Eng. Dict., s.v.
See Keith, Jhā Commemoration Volume, p. 201.
to the word māyā\(^{15}\) and to Vapus\(^{16}\) and Kṛatu\(^{17}\) of the RgVeda. Just as this word māyā signifying 'occult power' is applicable in the RgVeda in a good sense generally to gods like Mītra and Varuṇa, or in a bad sense to devas and asuras,\(^{18}\) so does the word yakṣin (RV. 7·88·6) seem to refer to Vapus as 'master of magic'\(^{19}\) in a laudatory sense, while at RV. 7·61·5 the term is most probably used for 'mystery' in the sense of 'deceit' or 'wile.'\(^{20}\) Often it is this same significance of 'magic power' in the bad sense that is found for yakṣam at RV. 4·3·13, and RV. 3·70·4 though Oldenberg and Petersburger Wörterbuch suggest with equal plausibility 'the spirit of a dead person.'\(^{21}\) The compound forms yaksā-drṣ (RV. 7·56·16) and yaksā-bhṛt (RV. 1·190·4) are found in verses of too obscure a meaning to yield any clear connotation. The only occurrence in the RgVeda of yakṣam with any kind of philosophical sense is found in the comparatively late manḍala where is found the expression yakṣasyādyahyakṣam.\(^{22}\) This is undoubtedly to be taken as referring to 'Yāisvānaraṅam' (Sāv. 'sāryāmānānāgīnim'), as Griffith\(^{23}\) has construed the verse, and yaksā must in that sense not refer to Hiraṇyagarbhā of which the visible manifestation (adhyakṣam) cosmogonically conceived as the Sun.\(^{24}\) This application of yaksā to the Hiraṇyagarbhā (Golden Embryo) is clearly found in the Atharva Veda (1·1) as may be seen from the ensuing paragraph.

In the Atharva Veda the word is used with a marked philosophical sense. That it generally refers to the Hiraṇyagarbhā of the RgVeda its description. Reference is made\(^{25}\) to the great yakṣa in the distance,\(^{26}\) striding in penance,\(^{27}\) on the surface of the water.\(^{28}\) The yakṣa with Skamba, the Frame of Creation (AV. 10·7·39), and AV. 10·8·13; 10·7·17. It is called the eldest Brahma (yevṣṭha 7·7·36).\(^{30}\) It is said to become active (eṣṭi, stirs) in the impulse of Virāj in the highest heaven (AV. 8·9·8). It is to note that the preceding verse (8·9·7) calls Virāj 'the father of which suggests that yakṣa is Brahma. With the same spirit of seen in the poet's search for the highest principle at RV. 10·29·1, 'Who is he, the yakṣa on earth, single existent (ekṣyati), single in 4\(^{31}\) (AV. 8·9·25). The last two epithets implying its monistic sense of womb,' the place of the embryo. This distinction is in all later texts. Chāndogya Upanishad (13·19) clearly dis the shell (ānīda-kapāla) from the germinal egg (āṇīdam).\(^{32}\) The kośa of AV. 10·2·32 is microcosmically regarded as the city of brahma-pūra) after which man is said to be named (ibid. 10·2·29). This is clearly carried out in the Upanishads.\(^{33}\) Mahāyakṣaṃ bhuceasasya madhye tapasi hṛtām satilasya yata... AV. 10·8·15. Tapaṣ at RV. 10·129·3, whence Ekham was born. 'You velaṣau hiranyayam indakaṃ satilasya cāt vasi hiyoḥ Prajāpātik.'\(^{34}\) Similarly AV. 11·2·24 the yakṣa (of Rudra) is said to be inside the waters. Rudra as 'the lord (īśana) of this vast world' (2·33·9) and as the word 'ānīda-kapāla (ibid. 10·2·29) as also 'aprahaṃ satilasya' at RV. 10·129·3 whence Ekham. Dadasvā prakāram āyamānau RV. 1·104·4. Mārakār, Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 105. This idea of reciprocating is uncommon in the RV. ced Mythology, pp. 12, 122. Min hiranyayame khaśe tryayā trirupātikriti tasmā yod yakṣamānūntat tad vidūḥ AV. 10·2·32. cp. AV. 10·7·41, 'velaṣau hiranyayam.' RV. garbha always means germ or offspring. Cp. RV. 5·8·1; 7·6·5·21·17, 6·5·26·4. Hiranya pātra covering the face of satya, Bphad. Up. 5·15. Chānd. 25·18. Svet. 3·18. Kaṭha. 5·1. Mund. 3·2·1·4; 'brahmaṇa-pūra' at equated by Śaṅkara with 'the body.' The statement at Chānd. 8·1·5. brahma-pūra is the ātman looks like a late correction.'
Along with the tendency to separate the golden kūsā from the garbha, we find in these passages the important conception that the yakṣa in the microcosmic existence, that is to say, the Cosmic Being comes to be 'individualized' with the human body, 'the city of Brahma' just referred to. In real Upanishadic fashion it is said that the 'knowers of Brahma (brahma-vidyāḥ) know themselves'; self-ed39 yakṣa there is in that golden vessel, three spoked, having three ports' (AV. 10.2·32). Even more advanced is the conception at AV. 10.4·13 where in similar terms the mystic poet says 'the knowers of Brahma know what self-ed yakṣa there is in the lotus flower37 of nine doors38 covered by three strands.9 This is important to observe that yakṣa in these instances refers to the macrocosmic Soul (Ātman) described in the preceding verse as 'the young.'41 This undoubtedly is the (empirical) brahma said elsewhere to be in man.42 Thus it is seen that in the Atharva Veda the word yakṣa is used generally for the macrocosmic Soul or Person (Brahma in its material aspect) and not directly as a term for the microcosmic person, though incipient pantheism is seen in the last two instances cited.

The only other reference to the term yakṣa with philosophical significance in the Śaṅhitā literature is found in the Vājasaneyi Śaṅhitā of the White Yajur-Veda in an important hymn to Manas in six verses.43 The significance of this hymn lies in the fact that here for the first time in the whole of manvā portion of Vedic literature the cognitive, affective and volitional aspects of Consciousness (Manas) are conceived indicating a power of psychological analysis surprisingly advanced for this period.44 What is important is

39. Ātmana is undoubtedly the same as ātman. Cp. Death (as prototype cosmic Being) desires 'would that I be selfed (ātman)!' S. Br. 10.6.5.1, 7=Br. 1.2·1, 7; Brahma is called ātman or 'embodied one' at S. Br. 14.5.11·13=Br. 2·2·13. Coomaraswamy sees the same idea of the embodiment of the macro-cosmic in ātmanavat at RV. 1.164·4, New Approach to the Vedas, p. 58, implying that 'ātman is here = body, but ātman may even mean jīvātman which invests the body.'

40. 'tāveda sarvātmāstvā yat prah yathvan anu = having life' (S. Br. = Satapatha Brāhmaṇa).

37. Cp. Chānd. Up. 8·1·1, 'a small lotus flower within the City of Brahmas and Maitri Up. 6·1, 'person within the lotus of the heart' (identical with the Person in the Sun.)

38. Cp. navādeśram, (AV. 10.2·31) applied to the same ("city of gods") indicating that the human body with its nine orifices is meant. (see Whitney, Atharvasaṃhitā, Trans. H.O.S. VIII. p. 601.)

39. Probably the prototype of the 3 gānas. (see Whitney, op. cit., p. 601.)

40. "ātmanaḥ dhīram ajāram yuvānām", AV. 10.8·44.

41. Cp. "prathamaṃ jāyamānānu", RV. 1.164·4: yuvānā may also refer child (garbha) as implied in "Hiranyakagarbhā." (ibid., verse 3).

42. "Purāne brahma,", AV. 10.7·17.

43. Vājasaneyi Śaṅhitā, 34.1·6 (= VS.)

44. "yat prajñāyanam uṣa cetā dhīrast ca," (ibid. verse 3).

45. The significance of this hymn is discussed in detail by Jwala Prasad, Indian Philosophy, pp. 152-3.
portion it is used for the actualized (satya) Brahma which as we shall see in the following paragraph is its application in the Upanishads.

Of the two references to yakṣa in the Upanishads the earlier is undoubledly in the Kena Upanishad, 3.2.12. where in the allegory of the Vedic sacrifice ignorance of Brahma it is narrated that when ‘it appeared to them they did not understand It. ‘What wonderful Being (yakṣa) is this!’ they said. It is needless to point out that the legend is strongly reminiscent of the jātaka—here in the Kena allegory it is ultimately to Indra that the ‘Spirit’ just as the simple bhūta (pl.) are the ‘spirits.’ The Upanishadic Sattvika Being (metaphysical) is ‘sat’ as at Chānd. 6:2.

The common rendering of ‘bhūta’ by ‘Being’ is dubious. ‘Bhūta’ is ‘thing’ or ‘being’ in a physical sense while ‘bhūtaka.’ ‘Bhūta’ as at Chand. 6, 256 ‘bhūtikā’ of Pali Pāli Propul Names Diet. (s.v.) ‘bhūtika’ with a philosophical meaning in Pali or ‘mass of intelligence’ (vijñānahāna) or ‘mass of knowledge’ (vijñānahāna). It is this idea, pure consciousness that seems to lie at the basis of its Upanishadic usage.

yakṣa is breathed forth (nīvāsita) all creation. According to Śaṅkara highest Self, identical with the One without a second. These phrases make it clear that yakṣa is used in the Upanishads as synonymous with a macrocosmic Person, the universal Spirit or Atman which is the Bhūta or vitalized Being. It is macrocosmic in the original transcendental use and is applied to the individual self if at all only as a result of the bhūta correlation, the tendency which ultimately leads to the identification of the Cosmic Soul with the individual.

In the foregoing paragraphs we have endeavoured to present the philosophical sense of yakṣa in something like its historical sequence. We have started from the idea of, ‘sudden flash of light,’ ‘mystery,’ ‘magic,’ ‘power’ in the earlier books of the Rg Veda it developed in the late yadalas and the Atharva Veda into the sense of the great, wondrous ‘deity’ as was applied to Hiranyakagāru, the (Cosmic) Golden Embryo, the ‘Puruṣa,’ ‘the living force enveloped in a shell.’ The Atharva Veda the further development of the term in its application to Skambha, 9, or Prajāpati (10.8) which is manifest Brahma. These two hymns are described as leading up to the conception of Atman, the macrocosmic aspect of Brahm the fundamental doctrine of the Upanishads. It is important the use of the term in the Yajur Veda (VS.) where it is due to the Manas or Universal Consciousness as macrocosmic Psycho, also ‘inside of men’ from the microscopic viewpoint. It is this last to Consciousness that seems to lie at the basis of its Upanishadic usage.

yakṣa connotes Bhūta or Atman described as a ‘mass of intelligence’ (vijñānahāna) or ‘mass of knowledge’ (vijñānahāna). It is this idea, pure consciousness that seems to be antecedent to the idea of Pali yakkha (=Skt. yakṣa) in early Buddhism, to an examination of which I may now turn.

The unique occurrence of yakkha with a philosophical meaning in the Sutta-Nipāta in a quasi-technical phrase ‘yakkhasa sūdhi.’
It is to be noted, however, that apart from the popular mythological (mentioned at the beginning) denoting the species of demons known by name, the word is also used for ‘wonderful being’ recalling its Vedic mythological application, or ‘adorable, holy person.” It is in the Aṭṭhakavagga of the Sutta-Nipāta (Sutta II) that the Pāli word yakka (in the above phrase) is used in a purely philosophical context, the other instance occurs in the obviously later Sundarikabhāravāja Sutta of the Mahāvagga appearing to be only an echo of the former. In the Kaladhivīdā Sutta the Buddha after explaining the process of eliminating the conditioning factors of the manifold experience of empirical existence (pāpāsīta = Skt. prāpañca) is made to reply to the interlocutor (curiously the Buddha himself!) that “form, happiness and sorrow cease” for one who is “of neither normal nor abnormal consciousness, neither unconditioned consciousness, nor with consciousness ceased.” Then the inquiry is made whether there is “a purity different from that,” to which the Buddha replies that there are some who hold that that state of the consciousness-entity is the highest purity (sasātta), while others hold that the annihilation of that consciousness-entity is the goal (uccīceta), but that the true sage (i.e., knowing that all are inclined to extremes) does not go into dispute and does not go into renewed existence (i.e., samsāra). No more analysis of this context leads one to the conclusion that yakka is used with reference to that state of consciousness (vinnānā-sāttva) which is not normal (sattvasāttva) nor yet attained to that higher state which is the ceasing (nirodha) of consciousness, that is to say, the nirodha state of both sāttva and vedanā, the threshold, so to say, of Nibbāna. Nibbāna implies the absolute and inherent purity of that final sammāpatti consciousness, which is the state of the tathāgata.

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Arahat,) and is therefore described as the state in which the yaksha of purity. Hence the word yakṣa refers to the formless (arūpā) state of consciousness as characteristic of the last three states of consciousness (infinitudes) and also in the subtler state of nevasāsāntatana, but not yet reached parinibbāna or complete emancipation which is nirvāṇa or perfect purity. That this is the correct interpretation when we cast a retrospective glance at the last meaning of yakṣa reached by Upanishads which we have discussed above. It is well known that the individual Soul in its highest purity is identified with Being, Infinite Consciousness and Infinite Bliss. This human consciousness when pure is identifiable with Brahma or Atman which is infinite (anavasthitam) and is the ‘mind-made person’ (manomaya-pūrṇa) said to be the nature of light, i.e., radiant (bhāsāyām).

It is to be noted, however, that apart from the popular mythological indication of the formless, there is another meaning of the term ‘yakṣa’ which is the idea found in early Buddhism, identical with mano or (mano-) viṇṇāṇa,93 is radiant (pabhassarā) and loses its radiance when defiled.101 The mano-yakṣa passing the fourth jhāna when it divests itself of sense-functions as pure (parisuddhā) and this infinite viṇṇāṇa is definitely to be completely radiant (viṇṇānaṃ viṇṇāyate samanantam satkata). This is therefore the purity of viṇṇāṇa with the consequent radiance mainly implied in the application of the term yakṣa. This, however, is mean for Buddhism the ultimate stage of spiritual evolution, for, to attain final state the cessation (nirvāṇa) of viṇṇāṇa has to take place.94 why the phrase ‘yakkha’ is serenely employed to imply ‘yakṣa’ is also to be purified further if final deliverance (vimuttī) is attained.

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"Kathamametassassā vihūto rūpasā sukhāh dhammāṃ āpi kañci kathā nāca{(3) 122, 205.}

"Atha ko nāna so yaksha yam anumānā nābhinandatā. Sānyutta Nikāya I., 224."

"Parāśīrṣā, [H. de A. Wijesekera], A History of Indian Literature, Vol. II., p. 92.

"Sunnāpaddhāta, Surat-Nipāta, according to the Paramatthajotikā.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka II., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka III., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka IV., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka V., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka VI., 233.

"Vidhāna, 3.14.2. (Sankara: ‘bhāsāvata’).

"The Buddha, 1.6.1.

"See Dīgha I., 21; Buddhaghoṣa takes ‘viṇṇāṇa’ as ‘citta.’ Papāccha-

"Sānyutta Nīkāya, I., 233, 294.

"Dīgha Nīkāya, I., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka IV., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka V., 233.

"Saddharmapuṇḍarīka VI., 233.


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