

Yaksha Prashna: The Riverbank Episode
Raqs Media Collective
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Yakshi: What distinguishes a current from currency?

Raqs: A current, or whirlpool, or any force at all, acting to agitate a river or any massed body of water is a manifestation of how the push and pull of distant objects affects a liquid. The moon can cause a tidal bore to rush into a river's mouth, agitating it with turbulent currents that flow upstream.

Currency, on the other hand, is the name we give to value in its most liquid and volatile form. It circulates in the bloodstream of nightmares and the vortices of hallucinations. Sometimes, a currency too encounters a strong current. Tidings of remote sentiments, wars, oil leaks and volcanic eruptions cause the sudden appearance of downdrafts of panic or despair. Then, money flows like water.

Yakshi: Why do cities forget rivers?

Raqs: Because when money begins to flow like water, cities – oblivious of how thirsty it makes them, or how parched it makes the ground on which they stand – forsake currents for currency and riverbanks for banks.

Yaksha: What is the difference between the Reserve Bank and the riverbank?

Raqs: The Reserve Bank, at the gates of which you normally stand guard, underwrites each promise to pay the bearer, issues loans, stands guarantee and settles interest-rates.

The riverbank, to which, with our complicity, you make haste in dreams, underwrites the promissory note that only water can make to dry land, accounts for deposits of loam and computes an interest on the time you spend watching waves ebb and flow as you float.

Yaksha: If you can't step into the same river twice, then which water are you stepping into the second time around?

Raqs: The tranquility of a gently flowing river is not anticipated by the exuberance of a waterfall. The tidal eagerness of the estuary's rush towards the sea is not prefigured by the patience of a glacier. The extremities of a moment attach themselves to predecessors (and indeed, to successors) only with the slight adhesive of memory.

When an amnesiac city invades the bed of a reluctant river it accomplishes the conditions of its own demise. When Babylon locks the waters of the Euphrates then, eventually, Euphrates abandons Babylon.

Yakshas are the primordial, aboriginal guardian spirits of Indic mythology. They foster the health and well being of communities, bestow fertility to women and livestock, protect forests and water bodies, guard cities, homesteads, gold and hidden treasure and act as the minions, minders and foot-soldiers of the vast reserve army of Kubera, the Hindu god of wealth. Yakshas are clever, dangerous, fickle, wise, capricious, generous and given to lurk in wait for unsuspecting travellers whom they invariably test with an ordeal of demanding questions.

(See *Yaksas* by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2001)

Yakshas, condemned to long hours of keeping vigil over hoards of money, will do anything to make the passing traveller tarry. Sometimes a solitary Yaksha, serving time in a remote forest, will even inveigle a passing rain cloud into carrying messages to distant places.

(See *Meghadootam* by Kalidasa, in *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*, translated and edited from the Sanskrit and Prakrit by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books India, 1990)

The "*Yaksha Prashna*" or 'Yaksha's Question' is a well-known device for diversion, entertainment and moral instruction in the Sanskrit canon. It usually features a man or a woman providing illuminating answers to a series of riddles posed by a Yaksha as a means to fulfilling a quest, continuing on a journey, passing a threshold, obtaining a boon, clarifying a philosophical or ethical conundrum or resolving a vexed predicament. The encounter with a Yaksha or a Yakshi is often said to take place on the bank of a river or a lake. This is the second set of 'Yaksha Prashnas' that Raqs has had to contend with. Failure to answer a Yaksha's questions usually results in a terrible curse or a horrible death, which we are hoping to avoid as far as possible.

(See *A Hindu Primer: Yaksha Prashna* by A.V. Srinivasan, a Parijata Publication published by IND-US Inc., Connecticut, 1984. Also see, *Yaksha Prashna* by Raqs Media Collective in "Santhal Family: Positions Around an Indian Sculpture", MuHKA, Antwerp, for the first set of Raqs' responses to questions posed by the Yaksha and Yakshi. This, the second, is unlikely to be the last.)

In the *Aranya Parva* (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata for instance, Yudhishtira, the exiled *Pandava* prince has to furnish answers by an enchanted lake to a particularly demanding set of questions in order to win back the lives of his brothers, which, in their haste to slake their thirst with the lake's water, they had forfeited when they had refused to be quizzed by the lake's guardian Yaksha.

(See *The Aranya Parva: The Book of the Forest in The Mahabharata*, Vol. II, edited and translated by J.A.B van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, 1975)

Yakshas turn up. When forests are cleared, roads widened, land surveyed, or a riverbank mined for sand, digs reveal buried Yaksha figurines, often crude, sometimes exquisite, always enigmatic. Each excavated Yaksha brings in its wake a host of questions. Does it foretell an omen? Is there buried treasure? Are there reasons to dig deeper? Do they trigger repressed memories of fertility cults and esoteric magick? Usually, the questions cease when the excavated Yaksha or Yakshi is transported into a museum as an iconic exemplar of 'national treasure'.

(See *The Endangered Yakshi: Careers of an Ancient Art Object in Modern India* by Tapati Guha Thakurta, published in *History and the Present*, edited by Anjan Ghosh and Partha Chatterjee, Orient Longman, 2002)

Ram Kinkar Baij, a celebrated Indian modernist painter and sculptor, who took more than ten years to complete his commission to sculpt the monumental Yaksha and Yakshi figures had to endure his own set of ordeals. Questions were raised in parliament about the propriety of immodest sculptures adorning the streets of the capital. Newspapers campaigned against what they saw as the 'obscenity' of the Yakshi's nakedness. The rumour mill gossiped about the resemblance that the female figure had to a leading woman capitalist of the day. Costs mounted, and the project soon became the most expensive public art commission in Independent India.

(See *Of Art, Central Banks, and Philistines - Anecdotes and Trivia*, The Reserve Bank of India, Miscellany
http://www.rbi.org.in/scripts/mis_anec3.aspx)

Ram Kinkar Baij's Yaksha and Yakshi figures stand guard outside the gates of the Reserve Bank, India's central bank on Parliament Street in New Delhi. Their monumental presence is the secret of their invisibility in the discourse around Ram Kinkar Baij and his so-called subaltern modernity.

They can neither be resolved into a celebration of the mythic category of the 'people', nor be seen as homage to the state. We could speculate that the Yakshi's impassive blank stare, and the Yaksha's barely disguised contempt for what he sees embody Ram Kinkar Baij's own 'Yaksha Prashna' to the Indian Republic. As of now, we do not know of any answers that have a satisfactory purchase on Ram Kinkar's sculpted question marks.

Hence, we have decided to liberate the Yaksha and the Yakshi who stand guard at the Reserve Bank and take them to the place they properly belong, even if only in their dreams - the bank of the river Yamuna, that divides the city of Delhi into two enclaves that have turned their backs to the water.