

Manifolds of Yakshi Myth: An Inquiry into the Narrative Capability of Mural Art

Sethulekshmi P S¹

Dr Saraswathy Selvarajan²

ABSTRACT

The human race is accustomed to a multitude of narratives, which shape perspectives and minds, and it is debilitating to know that narratives in general are confined to textual forms and other modern media. Inquiry into the history of the human race opens up a wide arena of narrative possibilities that are significantly capable of shaping the collective consciousness of the people, and visual narratives are one such. Visual narratives, beginning with the cave paintings or murals, are considered a significant source of knowledge dissemination from the past. The derivations traced from the anthropological and archaeological documents are examples of this. Different regions of the country have diverse muralist traditions, and the Kerala murals are one such artistic tradition seen in the temple sanctuaries. They were primarily used to propagate spiritual, mythological, and cultural notions of the region. Among the mural arts of Kerala, yakshi murals are the least popular and can only be found in certain temples of Kerala that worship the femme fatale. Inquiry into the cultural relevance and popularity of yakshi myth shows that there are multitudes of readings and adaptations available based on the lore, but very few based on yakshi murals. Unlike modern readings, Yakshi murals provide a fresh idea regarding the relevance of yakshi in the cultural canvas. So, based on the decodings of the visual and cultural artefacts, this paper attempts to delve into the narrative possibilities of the mural arts medium for knowledge dissemination. In the examination, it was found that colonial intrigues and the advent of modern media have impacted and subdued the regional art forms from serving their purpose. Therefore, this paper also aims to examine the potentiality of mural artworks in interdisciplinary endeavours.

Keywords: Mural art, yakshi myth, chromatics, iconographies, visual narratives etc.

Introduction

The human mind is accustomed to a manifold of narratives, ranging from the visual to textual accounts. Although the medium of narratives has shifted over time, the primary idea remains the same: the dissemination of knowledge, information, values, and ethics. An examination of the narrative paths from the beginning of human history to the present reveals the relevance of myths in human life. Derived from the Greek word 'mythos', myths are the stories, fictions, or quasi-historical narratives about the fantastic events that happened in the lives of people (*Myth | Definition, History, Examples, & Facts | Britannica*). In other words, it can be learnt as the popular beliefs or traditions, encompassing ideals and norms of the society. They are significant in moulding the individuals to fit into the social niches that they are a part of. Like the oral traditions and literature, visual narratives also played an important role in the dispersion of myth. Ranging from the ancient cave paintings to the mural paintings of the diverse regions, they are considered a powerful source of information in the understanding of the evolution of the human race, specifically, mural paintings. Mural paintings are commonly found in temples, which hold a twin purpose of beautifying the sacred sanctum as well as communicating the mythological stories and

messages to the worshippers. Mural paintings can be defined as artworks created on the wall directly or in any other permanent space, which usually narrate episodes from the epics or folklores.

The yakshi murals of Kerala elucidate myths and lore associated with the femme fatale figure known as 'yakshi'. Yakshi tales are popular folklore of Kerala and have been translocated into diverse media in the course of time, ranging from sculptures, paintings, drama, and cinema. Among these adaptations, mural artworks based on yakshi tales are the least popular, which is due to the impact of colonialism. With the introduction of Western art and art techniques in India, the regional art forms began to be hampered, resulting in a decline of interest. Eventually, with the end of the 1900s, and now with the new media interference, these artistic traditions shrank to the documents of art history (Todkar and Shirke). Therefore, based on the yakshi mural paintings, this study

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

<https://josd.info>

DOI: To be assigned.

1. Research Scholar, Department of English, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore-632014, India, sethulekshmisputhenpurayil@gmail.com
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore-632014, India, saraswathy.s@vit.ac.in

attempts to explore the potentiality of visual narratives to disseminate knowledge and myths through the examination of visual semiotics and chromatics. It also traces the trajectories and relevance of myths and the significance of sustaining traditional artistic mediums in the modern world. Moreover, this delves into the deeper understanding of yakshi murals and their unpopularity. Further academic interventions into the symbolic intricacies and chromatic arrangements employed in these artistic creations enable the interdisciplinary endeavors and the revitalization of the cultural identity and the rich artistic traditions of the country amidst the AI domination.

Literature review

The word 'mural', derived from the Latin word 'murus', meaning 'wall', is a popular artistic form used to convey a message, information, or even advertisements (Merman et al.). The idea of mural painting varies from culture to culture, but the primary objective of the art remains the same. In Kerala, they are known as 'chuarchitrangal', in which 'chuar' is wall and 'chitram'/ 'chitrangal' are paintings. Essentially, mural paintings are artworks created on walls or other permanent surfaces. A review of existing scholarship reveals that there is a wide range of research works conducted on the significance of mural paintings and based on the popularity of myth, specifically the 'yakshi myth', throughout the period. Still, no studies could be identified on the narrative potentiality of mural paintings in the dissemination of myths like the 'Yakshi myth'. Analysis of the research works based on the 'yakshi' cult reveals a recurring interpretation through a gendered perspective. The 2025 article primarily focuses on the patriarchal influence in the renderings of yakshi as a monstrous feminine who lures and devours men. The yakshi figure in this lore was praised for their breathtaking beauty and the dual traits of being immensely benevolent and terrifyingly malevolent. The article underlines and unveils the idea of yakshi heard and disseminated over the period (Harikumar).

Further analysis of literature indicates that the readings of Yakshi through the dimensions of gender remain stagnant, which commonly share a tendency to perceive Yakshi as a diabolical, monstrous female figure, who symbolises the victim of patriarchy. The article entitled "The Haunting of Historical Memory: Marking Colonial Trauma in Tales of Athiranippadam" integrates the myth of yakshi with the colonial scenarios, opening the lens to a wider vision, indicating myths as collective and cultural constructions. The paper initiates a nostalgic rewinding of the heard tales from the past and their impact on the individual as well as the collective memory (S and Jha). Though "The Yakshi as a Monstrous Feminine: Some Representation from the Malayalam Speaking Region", published in 2023, scrutinizes the popularity of

the 'yakshi' myth in the region's art forms, it also underpins the gender politics available. The article unveils how yakshi is represented in various art forms, such as myths, folktales, songs, novels, and cinema, and stresses the paramountcy given to the beauty of the femme fatale. It reflects the horrifying and seductive, imaginative dreams and fantasies of men (Karollil and Bindhu).

After an extensive survey of the literature, it is identified that the studies conducted so far on the yakshi myth focused mostly on the translocation of the myth into modern media like novels, movies, songs, etc. None of the works has focused on the representation of the yakshi myth in paintings. "The Aphrodisiac Ghost of Kerala: Tellings and Retellings the Yakshi Tales" exemplifies the popularity of the mythical narratives when retold in the contemporary Kerala context. It analyses the retellings of the yakshi myth in different media except paintings (Neethu). Although the myth, tellings, and retellings have been widely discussed in previous studies, no works could be traced on the representation of the yakshi myth in paintings, leading to a potential gap in analysing the narrative capability of paintings in the dissemination of folklore and the cultural heritage. Even when the Kerala murals are popular, the modern-day research on the topic has only analysed the representation of yakshi in movies, performing arts, and a few in sculptures, but no works could be traced focusing on 'Yakshi murals'. So, based on the conventional Kerala mural art, this paper aims to analyse the potential of mural paintings as a narrative. It explores the visual semiotics and the socio-cultural aspects underlying this visual narrative, and also examines the unpopularity of mural paintings based on the yakshi myth.

Findings

The significance of visual arts, especially paintings, in Indian cultural history can be seen in the ancient texts like the *Natyashastra* and the *Vishnudharmottarapurana*. Still, visual arts or mediums as a narrative technique gained popularity recently, with the advent of modern visual mediums like photography, movies, and graphic novels. Primarily, a visual narrative is the story told through the use of visual media, such as graphics, photographs, and illustrations, which have the social, environmental, or spiritual values to impact and transform the attitude and behaviour of society (Srivastava). When the focus is on the modern media, the conventional visual arts, like paintings, have also been doing the same. The ancient cave paintings from the Paleolithic ages are examples, showing

Manifolds of Yakshi Myth: An Inquiry into the Narrative Capability of Mural Art

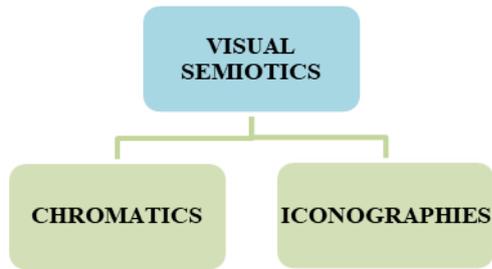


Figure 1: Components of visual semiotics employed

the possibilities of adopting paintings as a source of information. The visual codings used in those paintings provide a cue to the anthropological shifts that have happened in the life and lifestyle of the human race. The mural paintings popular in different parts of India also serve the purpose of information dissemination. In India, the origin of the Mural art can be traced back 2,000 years, but it varies from region to region (Ashraf T). Any painting painted on a fixed space or background can be called mural art. The graffiti are modern examples of mural artworks, which intend to convey information, point out injustices, and sometimes use them as advertisements. In Kerala, mural paintings are perceived as a religious art form, which can be seen profoundly in the temple sanctorum, and therefore, the paintings are primarily episodes extracted from the Hindu mythologies and the regional folklores. Innumerable murals can be seen across the temples of Kerala. Gods, Goddesses, sub-deities like 'yakshi', historical characters, events, folklore, traditional cultural practices, and performing arts associated with Kerala's cultural topography are some of the imageries that can be traced in Kerala mural arts (Kolay). Apart from the imagery, Kerala mural artworks, particularly 'yakshi' murals, are rich in visual semiotics, specifically chromatic arrangements and cultural symbols aligning with the region's cultural landscape.

Visual semiotics in paintings are the integral elements that helps in deriving meaning from the image portrayed. It includes icons, symbols, and visual elements within an artwork, which create meaning and communicate messages that are associated with culturally specific assertions (Curtin). In the analysis of Yakshi murals, the visual elements contributing to the semiotics can be designated into two: chromatics and iconographies. "Chromatics or chromaticism is the use of colours in art that emphasizes hue variations and intensity rather than just the depiction of forms or composition. The technique creates depth and emotions in artwork, allowing artists to convey feelings and atmosphere through colour choices"(Becky). Kerala murals mainly use five colours extracted from natural materials such as herbal dyes, fruit juices, etc. These five colours are collectively called 'panchavarna', which includes red, yellow, green, black, and blue (Ashraf T). Among the varied folklores, Yakshi tales are popular and widely accepted in Kerala, though

the narratives and beliefs change from region to region, the myth of 'yakshi' holds a major part of nostalgia. The 1968 work by the Malayalam writer Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, named *Yakshi*, was able to impact the darker fantasies and wistful apprehensions of Kerala society, creating a visual archetype of the yakshi figure. Though from the oral lore to the contemporary movies and generative arts, the myth of yakshi has many renderings, the prime idea regarding the existence of this femme fatale remains the same, linking with erotic transgression, which is extremely different from what could be seen in yakshi murals.

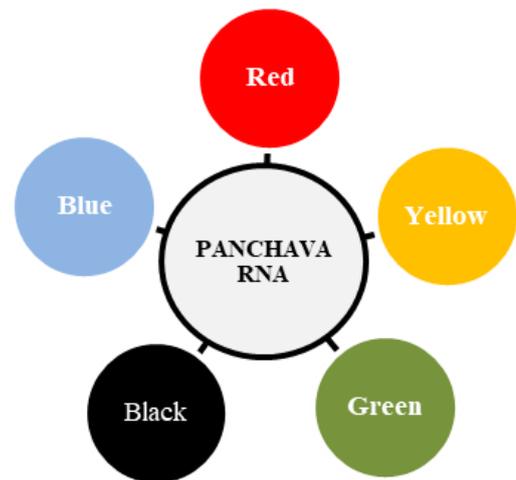


Figure 2: Primary colours of Mural art



Figure 3: Sandstone sculpture of yakshi

Yakshi murals are the typical wall paintings found in temples and other heritage centres based on the yakshi myth. Unlike the modern media representations, yakshis in the mural paintings are beautiful and calm, reflecting a gracious charm. The 2022 article, based on the representation of Yakshi in the Malayalam cinema from 1967 to 2017, sheds light on the normative accounts of visual media that have denigrated the idea of Yakshi to a monstrous feminine figure who lures men using titillating undertones(V. S.). The visual archetypes that can be

traced from these representations are the long hair, the white saree, and the long fangs. The iconographies common in the modern media are totally different from those that can be understood from the mural paintings. Iconographies are a specific set of visual symbols and images that contribute to the meaning-making process of a painting or visual art, which may be related to the socio-cultural aspects and norms of a region or country. The popular visual icons used in the representation of yakshis in art forms are generally associated with sexuality and patriarchy. Inquiry into the artworks shows that this nature spirit is known for its monstrous and seductive beauty, and thus the recreations of the further works focused mainly on the physical appearance of the mythical character, and not least on the myth. Enlarged breasts, thin waist, thick thighs, ornamentation, subtle emotions, and the presence of nature are the common icons that can be seen in yakshi's representations. With the change of time and regions, the iconographies were also subjected to changes, but the fundamental symbols used remained the same. Review of the visual semiotics seen in the yakshi mural paintings indicated the potentiality of it as an impactful source of folklore dissemination. The colours chosen in the paintings and the icons employed are indicative of the rich visual tapestries of India.

Discussion

Inquiry into the narrative possibilities of mural paintings as an effective medium of mythological dissemination indicated that, though Kerala murals based on the epics and stories of yakshi are popular, the mural artworks based on yakshi lore are least known. Therefore, it can only be seen in a few of the temples and heritage sites of Kerala. The cult of yakshi was adapted by the Hindu belief from Jainism, who is considered to be the goddess of fertility named *Sansanadevatha* (Jose). In Hinduism, yakshis are not just damsels; they are worshipped as *upadevatha* or sub-deity. The stories and belief patterns vary from region to region. It was with the advent of modern media that yakshi was subdued to a diabolical figure, mostly targeting men. When a large number of films and literature focused on the anxious encounters, sensual elements, and dehumanizing yakshi, the mural paintings on yakshi myth stood apart. Yakshi murals are similar in their construction to the murals based on gods and goddesses. The subtle colours and the intricate detailing given to the yakshi murals make the character and its existence less monstrous. Examination of yakshi murals in the light of chromatics, paralleling it with oral traditions, opens up a narrative possibility of reading the meanings hidden. In Indian art, colours used are symbolic of the emotions that the artist intended to convey. According to the *Natyashastra*, each of the nine rasas has nine different chromatic renderings. For example, the colour white is symbolic of shanta rasa, deep or dark red

is symbolic of raudra rasa, etc (Ghosh). Accordingly, in yakshi murals, colours like deep red, golden yellows or oranges, black, and green appear repeatedly, and each of these colours carries interpretive and narrative potentiality. In the Yakshi murals, green colour is used as the skin colour and to represent the natural elements, golden yellow or orange colours are used for the background and for the ornamentation, black shade is used to paint the long hair of the figure, and deep or burnt red are used for detailings and sometimes to add hues to the ornaments and other visual elements incorporated. In ancient treatises on Indian art, green colour is used to indicate the karuna rasa, black indicates bhayanaka, and the yellow, orange, and deep red are indicative of veera rasa.



Figure 4: Example of Yakshi Mural Painting

The iconographical interventions in the yakshi murals also trace back to the visualistic narrative traditions of the country. The idealisations seen in the other mural faces converge with features in yakshi figurisation; also, they include 'wide open eyes', 'wide and curvy eyebrows', 'elongated lips', 'enlarged breasts', etc. (Ashraf T). Apart from this convergence, the yakshi figure and her physical beauty are highlighted with green colour, which is chromatically symbolic of the karuna rasa. This colour can be seen in the depiction of nature symbols, also, which is interpretative of the connection of femme fatales with nature. A 2025 article on the yakshi cult speaks about the intrinsic connection of yakshi with nature, and explains that they reside in ancient trees, especially in the Asoka and Sal trees (Harikumar). The incorporation of the tree symbols in the yakshi murals is a significant icon used to differentiate the mural figure from gods and goddesses. The placement of tree symbols alongside the superhuman figurine is suggestive of the oneness and the protective imagery of yakshis / feminine as the guardians of nature. The equation of Karuna Rasa, along with green, aligns with this concept as it is different

from the modern narratives of yakshi as a monstrous figure. Green colour is again indicative of the difference between deities and sub-deities. Further readings of the yakshi mural associating the visual semiotics with the cultural beliefs align with this idea of yakshi as an embodiment of sacred yet ferocious femininity.

In several belief systems, black colour is identified as an ill omen, and therefore, people avoid indications of black in auspicious events. In yakshi murals, black represents the thick, long hair, which can be considered as a symbol of identity, femininity and power. It not only conveys the feminine beauty or allure, but also a symbol showing the connection with nature, as the hair is equated to the inflorescence of the palmyra tree and cascades, which is again considered as a feature needed for an 'ideal' woman according to the scripts of Manu. Instead of presenting the long black hair as terrifying imagery, the mural painting points out the patriarchal expectations of a woman and also presents the gracious characteristics of yakshi as the caretaker of nature, in which others reside. The other mostly used colour in mural paintings, and specifically in yakshi murals, is yellow, orange and red. All these colour-varied hues refer to heroism or *veera rasa*, mentioned by sage Bharata in *Natyasastra*. These colours are usually used to paint the figurines of Gods and goddesses along with blue shades. In the Yakshi murals, these colours are mainly used to paint the backgrounds and the ornamentations attributed to the yakshi figures. The integration of this shade also speaks about the significance of yakshi in the regional culture. Yakshis are not gods or goddesses, but are believed to be a part of the indigenous belief system and lately in mainstream religious frameworks. In Kerala, temples worship yakshis; the Manjeswaram temple in Kasargode is one example (Unnikrishnan).

The unavailability of yakshi murals and the popularity of the modern renderings of yakshi myths subdue the academic endeavours on yakshi murals as a classical narrative technique. In a world of generative AI and other popular media initiating diverse narratives on myth and folklore, it is also important to have an underlying premise on the yakshi cult. The newer generations who perceive Yakshi as a demonic feminine figure should also initiate in the learning of Yakshi as the protector of sacred groves or nature, or as symbolic of feminine autonomy, who is out of the patriarchal expectations. Regarding the ability of mural paintings as a narrative medium, it is not just the portrayal of an entire idea, but it is a culmination of the visual semiotics with other societal artefacts. Eliminating the re-readings of the yakshi myth in different media, its composition in mural paintings can be considered a religiously oriented depiction. As the religious texts put forth, yakshi myths are also based on the duality or the coexistence of good and

bad, light and darkness, mortal and immortal and also myth and reality. In the deeper understanding of the unpopularity of yakshi murals, two reasons have been identified. Yakshi murals are confined to temple sanctuaries, and the conventional myth associated with yakshis also revolves around the sacred groves and liminal spaces; therefore, the modern artists may find it sensitive or controversial to bring forth the idea of yakshi murals to a public realm. Another scenario is regarding the unawareness of the cultural past, as modern readings are more popular than the original renderings, the majority of people associate the yakshi figure with malevolence, which became popular after the colonial invasion. With the colonial intrigue, the regional culture and the indigenous belief system have faced a major decline, and the rest of the narratives were initiated based on modern reading.

The relevance of knowing and preserving mural paintings, specifically the yakshi myth, begins with the knowledge that each element used in the production and the icons incorporated are symbolic to Indian culture and the regional belief system, in which the ancestors are part of. The colours or *panchavarna* are indicative of the connection of the human race to nature. The icons employed are the surrealist representations of reality, merging beliefs, lore, and imagination with fantasy. Another important aspect is that the colours incorporated and the idealisation of human figures with highlighted bodily features are based on the ideals mentioned in the "Chitrasutra" of *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. Therefore, myriad ways Mural paintings offer narrative capacity to learn, unlearn, and understand the cultural compositions and the objective of classic visual art.

Conclusion

An examination of the trajectories of mural paintings and adaptations of the yakshi myth in these paintings reveals the absence of academic interventions. Among the Kerala murals, which are primarily narratives driven by ancient epics and myths, yakshi murals are the least popular, as they are confined to the walls of certain temples in Kerala that worship yakshi as a sub-deity. Most of the studies conducted based on the topic either focused on the history and production of mural paintings or focused only on the myth of yakshi and its trans-textuality with other popular media, except for nature. Analysis of the relevance of Kerala murals at an economic level showed that they are in great demand. As a result, many artists have initiated recreating them into clothes and many apparel items, from which they could generate an income. It is also popular as a part of the regional artistic tradition and is widely used in tourism advertisements. Apart from all these interventions, no attempts have been identified based on the narrative capacity of such artworks, contributing to a major gap for further studies. The unavailability of yakshi murals compared to the

murals based on gods and goddesses has been a limitation in tracing out the deeper meanings and cultural interpretations possible. In general, every art form in India is created to educate, liberate, and disseminate cultural consciousness and past incidents from one generation to another, as an initiative to revamp identity and traditions, as the world is moving into a phase where generative AI and technologies are ruling.

Works Cited

- Ashraf T, Sana. *Kerala Mural Art and Its Traditional Procedures to Paint on Walls by Using Natural Materials*. vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 4–8.
- Becky, Bahr. “Chromaticism – Art History II – Renaissance to Modern Era.” *Fiveable*, 2024, <https://fiveable.me/key-terms/art-renaissance-to-modern-times/chromaticism>.
- Curtin, Brian. *Semiotics and Visual Representation*. 2009, p. 53.
- Ghosh, Manomohan, translator. *The Natyasastra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*. Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951.
- Harikumar, K. *Yakshi: Unbelievable Folklore & Supernatural Duality*. <https://theharikumar.com/yakshi-unbelievable-folklore-supernatural-duality/>. Accessed 18 Sept. 2025.
- Jose, Anugraha. *An Ecocritical Reading of the Concept Yakshi*. vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–11.
- Karollil, Mamatha, and K.C. Bindhu. “The Yakshi as the Monstrous Feminine Some Representations from the Malayalam-Speaking Region.” *The Gendered Body in South Asia*, 1st ed., Routledge India, 2023, p. 14, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003407195-14/yakshi-monstrous-feminine-mamatha-karollil-bindu>.
- Kolay, Saptarshi. “Cultural Heritage Preservation of Traditional Indian Art through Virtual New-Media.” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* [Luxor], 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.06.030>. Conservation of Architectural Heritage, CAHLuxor.
- Merman, Hairulnisak, et al. *Exploring the Impact of Mural Arts on Information and Communication: A Recent Comprehensive Structured Review*. vol. 9, no. 13, 2025, pp. 81–97, <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.913COM009>.
- Myth | Definition, History, Examples, & Facts | Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>. Accessed 23 Sept. 2025.
- Neethu, Das K. *The Aphrodisiac Ghost of Kerala: Telling and Retelling the Yakshi Tales*. vol.. 7, no. 4, 2021, http://tlhjournal.com/uploads/products/19.neethu_da_s-k-article.pdf.
- S, Sethuparvathy, and Smita Jha. “The Haunting of Historical Memory: Marking Colonial Trauma in Tales of Athiraniippadam.” *Ilha Do Desterro*, vol. 77, 2024, p. e99936. *SciELO*, <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2024.e99936>.
- Srivastava, Vartika. “Graphic Novels: Visual Narrative Theory and Its Pedagogical Relevance.” *KY Publications*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2016, p. 593.
- Todkar, Netra Ashish, and Mukta Avachat Shirke. “Emerging Trends in Chuararchitralangal - Traditional Mural Art of Kerala.” *Granathalayah Publications*, <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.ilCETDA24.2024.1337>, 2024.
- Unnikrishnan, Sandhya M. *Aestheticization of Yakshi Cult: Iconographic Representation of Yakshi Through Ages*. 2020, <https://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/JournalPDF/Volume8.2/31.pdf>.
- V. S., Chitra. *Theorising the Politics of Yakshi in Malayalam Cinema*. <https://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/257391/?isxn=9781799835110>.

Figures

Figure 3: Sandstone Figure of Shalabhanjika Yakshi — Google Arts & Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/sandstone-figure-of-shalabhanjika-yakshi/OAHTrqO6UNB_Pg?hl=en. Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.

Figure 4: PB, Naveen. *The Goddess Files – First Glimpses – Mural Paintings of Kerala*. <https://www.keralamurals.in/the-goddess-files-first-glimpses/>. Accessed 25 Sept. 2025