



# INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

( Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal )

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.828 (SJIF 2022)

## EVOLUTION AND ICONOGRAPHY OF LORD KUBERA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MATHURA ART

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/05.2022-64158693/IRJHIS2205001>

### **Abstract:**

*Kubera is the 'lord of wealth'. Among all the Gods Kubera is very interesting personality, from being the chief of evil spirit he went on to become the lord of wealth, king of Yaksha, regent of north and a protector of the world (Lokpal). His personality encompassed every characteristics one can think of, that's why he commands such a sacred place in the heart of many. Kubera is also represented in art and sculpture. There is wide distribution of the image of this deity throughout the length and breadth of the country.*

*The present paper will deal with the evolution and the iconographic representation of Kubera, with special reference to the Mathura school of Art.*

**Keywords:** Lord Kubera, Evolution of Kubera, Iconography, Mathura Art.

### **Introduction:**

Lord Kubera is the treasurer of the Gods and the king of *Yaksha*. He is true representation of wealth, prosperity and glory. Lord Kubera not only distributes but also maintains and guards all the treasures of this universe hence, he is known as the guardian of wealth. His many epithets extol him as the overlord of numerous semi-divine species and the owner of the treasures of the world. Due to his popularity various myths have been developed to glorify the different traits of his character. He is God of fertility and productivity. Through his relationship with various deities he's elevated to a higher status. It may be pointed out that for evolving this character the mythologists have combined in him the functions and qualities of various deities. He inherits the guardianship of wealth from

Vedic Agni and Indra, the lordship over the 'nidhis' from Agni and Prajapati, the over lordship of the Yakshas from Agni and Varun. His three legs reminds us of the three strides of Vishnu. From Soma he usurps the guardianship of the northern quarters. He has a long array of names such as *Vaisravana*, *Naravahana*, *Sivasakha*, *Yaksarat*, *Ekaksipingala*, *Dhanapati*, *Dhanda*, etc.

### Evolution of Kubera as a deity:

The Rig Veda does not mention the concept of Kubera as the lord and giver of the wealth but instead different deities are invoked to bestow wealth on the sacrificers. Indra and Agni<sup>1</sup> are chiefly the deities recognised as the guardian and giver of wealth. It is only the Atharva Veda<sup>2</sup> that probably records the folk tradition and, for the first time it traces the origin of *Kubera-Vaisravana*. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*<sup>3</sup>, he is styled as a king. His subjects are the *Rakshshas* who are indigenous pre-aryans. Evil-doers and robbers gather around him. The invading Aryans designate the indigenous *rakshshas* as evil beings. Due to his association with the *rakshshas* his malevolent aspects is hinted at, but offerings are made to him in the same manner as to the sacrificial deities of early-Vedic pantheon.

It is only during the *Aryanaka* period<sup>4</sup> that Kubera's importance is observed; He becomes an important God in possession of wealth and food. The development of Kubera from the Atharva Veda to the *Aryanaka* period may be said to be representative of a typically assimilative trend in Indian religious thought. Though he primarily belongs to the pre-Aryan indigenous religious strata, with the cultural assimilation he is transformed from mortal to godhead. In the Sutra literature, Kubera as a god is invoked with devotion in connection with various domestic rites and ceremonies. He is prayed to bestow wealth, prosperity and progeny. His association with *Isana* (Shiva) is given in the *Sutra* literature for the first time. The worship of Kubera became widespread during the time of Panini, Patanjali, Kautilya and Bharata. Owing to his rising popularity, he is revered by the Buddhist and the Jaina as well.

His godhead is unquestioned in the Epics and the Puranas<sup>5</sup> where one can come across a well woven mythology. All his characteristic traits are well developed. In these texts, his origin is traced to the creator Lord Brahma. He becomes the son of *Visharavana*, a great ascetic. He comes out of his evil associations gradually and becomes a benevolent God. He subsequently comes to occupy the dominion over one of the heavenly worlds along with other Gods. In course of time he comes to occupy the guardianship of the northern quarter. He has his own heavenly world, provided with prosperous capital city *Alka*.

With the rise of Kubera into prominence, religious observances came to be performed in his honour. He is associated with many *tirthsas* and in folk rites and beliefs. He is still worshipped on all auspicious occasions including rituals. In the tantric practices he's worshipped in yantra that yields desired objects.

### Iconography:

Thought it is difficult to ascertain the exact time of the origin<sup>6</sup> of icons of Hindu deities in general and Kubera in particular, Panini<sup>7</sup> (6th CBC) seems to allude to the worship of deities in concrete forms. The tradition of image making and image worship continued unabated from Panini's time and the knowledge of the making of images of various gods became very popular. The worship of the image of Kubera was prevalent during the time of Panini, Patanjali and Kautilya. Kubera is usually portrayed as dwarf-like plump man, with a large paunch. The *asvalayan-griha-parishista* describes Kuber as having spear in hand and as seated on a horse. The *Vayu Purana*, while describing the birth of Kubera gives some iconographic traits- Kubera is having three legs, huge body, big head, eight teeth, spike like ears, small arms, etc.

According to *dhyamantra* of Kubera from the *Narada Puran*<sup>8</sup> it is learnt that Kuber rides on a horse, he has two hands and holds a pot in one hand, he is of golden colour. From other *dhyamantra* we can pick out certain iconographic traits of Kuber - he is to be decorated with ornaments like *kundla*, *hara*, *kayura* and dressed in yellow clothes. He is to be two-handed, holding *gaya* in one hand and *varda mudra* in the other. He is to wear golden crown. Besides these iconographical features from the *dhyamantras*, some treatise which deal with the iconography of deities in a casual manner, the iconographic prescription of Kubera images present a considerable variety. Kubera is usually two-armed and rarely four-handed. He holds different weapons like *gaya*, *sakts*, spears, etc. in his hands. The colour of his body is to be golden, yellow, white or blue or crimson. His garments should also be white or blue. His person should be decorated with various kinds of ornaments.

In the Buddhist mythology, Kubera known as *jambhala* is sculptured exactly as in the Hindu representation- golden colour, big bellied with a citron in the right hand and a she-mongoose in the left and decorated with all ornaments<sup>9</sup> (see Appendix- Fig.1). A Buddhist Kubera image is immediately recognised by the mongoose which is generally shown either as sitting upon his left lap or placed on his left side. A Jaina Kubera image too, never varies much from the brahmanic Kuber. Kuber is variously worshipped as *dhanada* or *yaksharaja*.

### Representation in Mathura Art:

The earliest representation of Kubera is found sculptured on the inner face of railing pillar of Bharhut<sup>10</sup> belonging to 2nd century BC. Mathura, as a single important centre of art, has yielded the largest number of Kuber images<sup>11</sup>. Mathura was an active centre of trade and commerce in Ancient India, naturally, the image of the 'god of wealth' might have been in great demand by the mercantile community, who worshipped him for wealth and prosperity. These images of Kubera from Mathura are now mostly deposited in the local museum and the time span of these images ranges from the Kushana period onwards.

A Mathura image of Kubera is represented as a tree deity, standing under a Kadamba tree. In his right hand he holds an object which has lines in a square-board pattern in the appearance of a *caupada*- 'game of dice'. He holds a purse in his left hand. A simpler version of this is found in another free standing image which has Kubera having the right hand in the *abhaymudra* and carrying a purse in the left hand (see Appendix Fig.2). In the Mathura relief which is a part of a *torana*, Kubera is shown offering prayers. A dwarfish attendant is carrying the basket full of flowers meant for offering. In the *Padmapurana* version of the story, it is learnt that Kubera used to worship Lord Shiva and Yaksha attendant was employed to bring flowers for the said worship. Probably a representation of this theme is to be seen in this relief. Another image of Kuber without his usual corpulent belly is found in a Kushana relief. It is a panel representing the figures of *Ardhnariswara*, Vishnu, Gajalakshmi and Kubera (see Appendix-Fig.3). An inscribed sculpture of Kubera from Maholi near Mathura gives epigraphic proof of his worship. Kubera here holds in the right hand a lemon and in the left a goblet. A halo is shown behind his head and prominent moustaches are also shown (see Appendix Fig.4). The representations of pots of treasures in association with Kubera probably begins from the Gupta period and continues to be depicted in subsequent ages. One icon of the god Kubera belonging to the post Gupta period is also deposited in the Mathura museum.

In the early phase Kubera image is characterised by *Narvahana* without a corpulent belly. He is shown to have little abdominal development in the next stage. Later he is invariably sculptured as pot-bellied. In Mathura Art, Kubera is without the accompaniment of *nidhis*. But from the Gupta period onwards we come across Kubera being accompanied by *nidhis* (in the pots symbolising *nidhis*). The development of the image to a greater extent coincides with the development of his form recorded in the Puranas and the other iconographical texts.

#### References:

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7. Ram Gopal, India of Vedic Kalpasutras, pp- 86-89
8. Narada Purana (1.56.692)
9. Sadhanamala Sadhana nos. 284, 285, 287
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12. V.S. Agarwal, Catalogue of Mathura Museum.

Appendix



Fig.1. Jambhala, the Buddhist Kubera, depicted similar to Kubera.

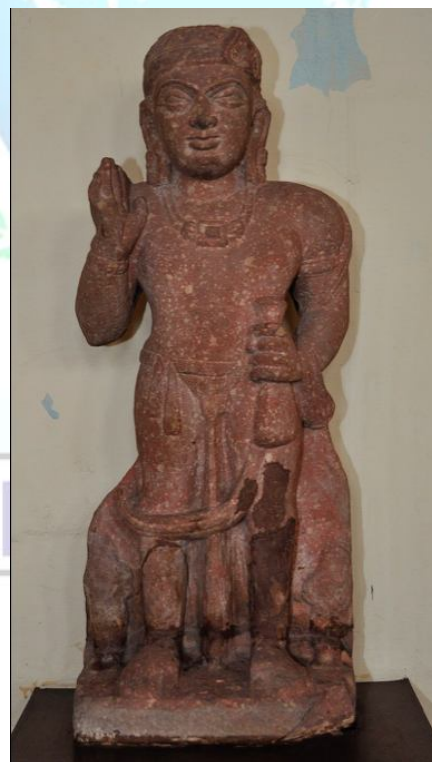


Fig.2. Kubera, 1st century CE, Mathura Museum.



Fig. 3. Stela representing, from the left, Ardhanaṛīśvara, Vishnu, Gajalakṣmī and Kubera. Spotted red sandstone. Mathura Museum



Fig.4. Kubera - Circa 1st Century CE, Maholi (Mathura museum)