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Erotic Sculptures in Indian Art

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Abstract: edieval Hindu temples all over India are replete with sexual motifs, not only renowned temples like those of Khajuraho, Konark and Bhubaneswar but also temples lesser known sites that have portrayals of erotic figures. We had better trace it back to the presentations of sex such as phallic stones, plant bearing temples on seals and so on in early Indian Art. The erotic images appear on all the temples, including those that are poorest in decoration, even when other decorative motifs are omitted. Many erotic sculptures are profusely depicted in the Lakshmana temple, Parsvanatha temple, Visvanatha temple and so on. The Tantras play a vital role in the prevalence of erotic sculpture in temples. The fertility function of these erotic sculptures is also associated with the decoration function. The erotic sculptures might be meant to be the outside world of everyday life, while the deities inside the temple might be meant to be the inner world of Gods.

Keywords : Khajuraho, Konark, Bhubneshwar, Deities, Whims, Fertility, Motifs, Mithunas, Harems.

Introduction - India is famous for its various religions and temples, as well as the eroticism in its art history. Devangana Desai has observed that medieval Hindu temples all over India are replete with sexual motifs, not only renowned temples like those of Khajuraho, Konarak and Bhubaneswar but also temples lesser-known sites that have portrayals of erotic figures. Khajuraho temples are famous for erotic sculptures. It is true that the temples of Khajuraho represent one of the most refined and complete manifestations of Indian architecture and are noted for their "elegant proportions, graceful contours and rich surface treatment." The erotic motifs in temples of Khajuraho play a significantly important role in Indian art. The temples are usually considered as the sacred places where the deities should stay, but why are these erotic sculptures set in these temples? In the highest thought and wisdom of Indian culture, sex was considered a distraction of self-realization, but why was it depicted in the religious architecture? In this paper, I will summarize the different explanations for the prevalence of erotic sculptures in Indian temples by examining the temples in Khajuraho.

Description: Sex in the religious art of Indian culture presents an exciting way for us to study Indian art and culture. As Devangana Desai mentioned, "Such widespread and riotous sexual depiction throughout India could not obviously be the creation of the whims and caprices of a few individuals but must be the reflection of the social reality of the period. Its spread and variety could not have been fortuitous, bearing no relevance to the socio-cultural background." Actually, according to Thomas Donaldson, there have been numerous and sundry explanations as to the origin and significance of erotic images appearing on the temples of India, ranging from the belief that they were placed there to induce the war-torn and decimated populace to "indulge freely in sexual activity so that soldiers should be available to the king" to the notion that they "are the touchstones by which the man of renunciation can test if his will to chastity is genuine."

Even though the prevalent depiction of sex on medieval temples rests on numerous other factors, it is also embedded in art tradition. Thus, talking about erotic sculptures in Indian temples, we had better trace it back to the presentations of sex such as phallic stones, plant-bearing females on seals and so on in early Indian art. Interestingly, O.C. Gangoly suggests that it is necessary to relate the erotic motifs in early Indian art to medieval art and considers these mithuna as architectural motifs. The erotic motifs play an essential role in religious art such as Buddhist, Hindu and Jaina art. One could say that the representation of sex and eroticism was one of the "pan-India" cultural characteristics. This cultural feature was adopted into religions; thus, we could see these sexual representations in those beliefs and practices show the connection between religion and sex.

Many scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mircea Eliade, E.O. James, D.D. Kosambi and others hold the idea that the reason for the prevalence of sex in religion is sexual magic and fertility, which rites in Indian culture. And this cultural tradition has been continuously carried out in Indian art history. According Gonda, the word "fertility"

has been used in wide application to include its primary purposes of multiplication and revitalization of animals, vegetation, earth and mhuman beings as well as its connotations for both aversions of evil, death, etc. and promotion of happiness, life, etc.

Thus, in a certain sense, the depiction of sex, no matter mithunas or maithunas, is one of the magical devices for fertility. The fertility symbolism can be seen in the naked and seductive nagas in the temples of Khajuraho. It is well known that both Indian mythic and actual snakes are always associated with fructifying waters that could bring fertility to the earth. Religions extracted sex form India's local tradition and combined it with their own doctrine in the actual depiction of sexual motifs on the temples.

Interestingly, Devangana Desai put up an idea that the erotic motifs could be considered as decorative devices. Actually, "erotic motifs at these Buddhist caves which are mainly confined to door-frames, lintels, pilasters, and the sunken panels on shafts and capitals of pillars served as an ornamental function. Furthermore, the ornamental use of the erotic motifs is even more evident in the painted ceiling. These depictions of the mithunas and the group with attendants in Ajanta, Ellora, Badami and so on. are ornamental in function. Desai suggests that the subdued couples were the exception, presented as gods' devotees but not for decoration function.

Besides, Thomas believes that erotic images appear on all the temples, including those that are poorest in decoration, even when other decorative motifs are omitted. Thus erotic imagery seems to be an obligatory decorative device. Since the decorative function of the erotic images has been applied to the religions for a long history. Desai mentioned that the decorative role of erotic motifs continued in the medieval period. Larger and more magnificent temples were built, which led to an expansion in the size of temples, thus, making available more space for decoration. Therefore, one could say that the erotic sculptures in Khajuraho could also serve as the decoration of the temples.

In addition to the fertility, different varieties of erotic motifs are seen on the Lakshmana temple, and they are set in "manifold forms on the prominent as well as the recessed parts of the temple, e.g., on the exterior of the temple on its jangha, adhisthana, sikhara and in the interior of the temple on its pillars, lintels, door-jambs, cornices, garbhagriha wall, etc."The erotic motifs in Indian temples became quite popular from the 9th century A.D. onwards to the 14th century A.D. and were represented on both the exterior and interiors of the temples. The orgiastic theme is portrayed without much restraint. Even one could say that erotic images became the rule in medieval Hindu temples and are not restricted to a few isolated sites. The phenomenon is widespread, covering most of northern India, central India, and Mysore in the South, Thomas states, and is not confined to a limited period but covers almost the entire period of temple construction from the Gupta period to modern times. Again, he suggests that erotic images appear on temples where other decorative motifs are omitted indicates that eroticism has an auspicious sign of some kind, as do most motifs appearing on Hindu temples. It is said that mithunas representations were recommended "as guarantees of good fortune and happy augury".

According to Thomas, erotic imagery, such as maithunas, serves the same auspicious function as most auspicious motifs, may be either propitious or apotropaic or both. "Erotic images may likewise function in a dual capacity". On the one hand, functioning as the decorative motifs on the doorway or entrance to a temple or sacred compound since it is enjoined in the Agnipurana that the doorway of shrines should be decorated with mithunas. On the other, they could protect people from evil forces, whether real or invisible. Desai agreed that auspicious function was attributed to erotic motifs that were also accepted as alankara (decoration, ornament) in the art conventions of medieval temples. Thus, there is no surprise that many erotic sculptures are profusely depicted in the Lakshmana temple, Parsvanatha temple, Visvanatha temple and so on. The profusion of the mithunas and erotic sculptures decorating the walls of the buildings have received much attention, such as those in Khajuraho and other mainly northern temple sites of the post-Gupta periods. In general, however, their purpose and meaning have been studied out of context. Some of the interpreters like Boner have associated the erotic figures on temples with some certain cults, and suggested: "Physical desire (Kama) could be transformed into the prema, self-surrender that cannot be achieved by denial but only through transformation and sublimation. Thus, the mithunas would represent both the union and the transformation.

"In "History of the Kamasutra", James McConnachie considered the sexual-themed Khajuraho sculptures as the apogee of erotic art. Some scholars like Desai stated that the erotic arts are part of the Hindu tradition of treating the Kama as an essential and proper part of human life and its symbolic display is common in Hindu temples. Desai states that scenes representing lovers are often influenced by Kamasustras and suggests that the group erotic sculptures could be related to the practice of Vatsyayana's Kamasutra. According to Desai, this phenomenon could be accounted for by the social climate of the time since the erotic sculptures in temples are used and portrayed so profusely. In this case, this social climate might encourage Vatsyayana to compile his Kamasutra for the guidance of cultured citizens in the methods and techniques of love.

It is said that maithunas appear on stone monuments making a turning point in the presentation of erotic motifs. Scholars like Desai observe Tantric influence in Khajuraho and suggest that there are two chief aspects of Tantrism in connection with sex. One aspect is the practice of yogic

poses e.g. "the medieval Kamasastras had adopted some of the yogic asanas to enable participants with different sized sex organs to have pleasurable union". In Sculputres the male's legs are bending in a yogic pose, and the female's pose. Another is the practice of maithuna, "based essentially in the concept of magical power of sex and sheds significant light on the problem of sexual depictions... Without their practice, no Tantric sadhana is considered fulfilled." Susan Huntington also claims in her book that the purpose and meaning of the yogini temple is related to Tantric practices, which "must have been prevalent in the region as manifested in the sculpture programs of the majority of the Khajuraho temples", and "the particular type of Tantrism may have been related to Kaula or Kapalika practices".

Jainas are known for their puritanical attitude to sex and inhibition of instincts are supposed to be advocated. Interestingly, in medieval period, Jainism had been influenced by the Tantras, too. Parsvanatha, a Jaina temple, with the depiction of erotic figures, as Desai mentioned, is a good example. "It is quite significant that even Jain sanctuary has love-making and copulating couples". One could say that the Tantras play a vital role in the prevalence of erotic sculptures in temples.

"The art also reflects 'the disposition and attitude of a mercantile social economy which manifests preference for transient pleasure and temporary values, exuberant expression of joy and passion and courtly elegance and sophistication'". And Desai held the point that these erotic sculptures in temples also might be the depiction of the patrons' luxurious life and leisure. Since it is clear that there are not only erotic deities in the temples but also numerous erotic sculptures depicting the common people, thus it is quite possible that these erotic sculptures depict the daily life of these people who sponsored the temple. "Trade and the consequent urban development in the early centuries of the era created leisure and encourage a taste for luxury." The abundant leisure in the life of these cultured citizens pushed them to have their luxurious life portrayed.

One more point cannot be neglected is that there are lots of peeper-like figures shown on the temples, from my own point of view, no matter male or female, it might be a gaze that represents the males' sexual desire, as both the physical and spiritual desire in that period is quite popular. Cousens and Zimmer believed that some of the sculptures of aristocratic lovers are portraits of the donors who might be the kings, wealthy merchants and others.

Desai has suggested that these erotic scenes on temples might represent harem (antahpura) scenes where the royal couple takes the help of attendants or they might also represent some religious ritual in which royal patronages participate. Or one could say that the patronage and religious ritual fused together and the life of the royal people was associated with religious ritual practices. The erotic scenes of royal couples in harems might be considered highly private; would the royalty allow their own sexual activities to be depicted and shown to the public? In ancient times of India, apart from the male royal family members, were male commoners allowed to enter harems? In some countries like China, only female attendants and eunuchs were allowed into an emperor's harem, and other men were strictly forbidden in ancient times. Could this case be applied to ancient India? However, one could say that the male with the scrotum is apparently not a eunuch. Does it mean that the male figures of the erotic sculptures most probably were kings or princes, and the Khajuraho erotic groups might present religious rituals in which royal families and Tantric ascetics participated? It will be rewarded if one can study these questions in the future.

Actually, to a certain extent, these explanations given above affected and related to each other mutually. For instance, the fertility function of these erotic sculptures is also associated with the decoration function. These motifs decorated with mithuna figures on temples, more or less, represent the builder's and the owner's wishes for spiritual good, prosperity, vigor, wealth and offspring, which, in a sense, stand for fertility. In addition, the life of patrons was also influenced by these tantric practices. In return, the tantras were also accelerated through the support of these royal families. One could say that the religious and secular aspects of sex have fused together in the actual depiction of sexual sculptures on temples.

Apart from these main explanations given above, many other views are also noteworthy. As mentioned at the beginning, Alain Danielou held the notion that these erotic sculptures in temples might be a test for measuring whether a man's will of renunciation is true or not, or whether he will be influenced by these erotic motifs. Another explanation, seemingly more realistic, suggests that these erotic images placed in temples could be for the sexual education of young and ignorant people or served as a tool for illustrating the initiating ceremonies of young Hindu brides as part of marriage rituals.

Some scholars have assumed these sculptures might be the illustrations of the erotic activities of temple courtesans (devadasi) who always perform dances in temples. The story of a courtesan regarding Charudatta and Vasantasena was quite famous and became a favorite theme as witnessed by the plays of Bhasa and Sudraka, which flourished in this period. Besides, these erotic images were carved on a social center visited by many people. They might be the illustrations for attracting grosser-minded people to "come to church", because the temples could not run without people's visiting. Prof. Naman Ahuja also mentioned in his class lecture that some scholars have noted that these erotic sculptures in temples of Khajuraho might be meant to be the outside world of everyday life, while the deities inside the temple might be meant to be the inner world of gods, he again stated said, once you enter inside the world, you have to leave the outside world in reality behind. However, would the patrons who financially

support the construction of the temples and the priests who are the spiritual leaders of temples allow the erotic scenes of courtesans or other the commoners' daily sexual life to be represented on their sacred temples? Or are these courtesans and ordinary people qualified to be presented on temples though they might have not financially supported the temples' constructions?

Conclusion: However, there might be no motives behind these images. According to Coomaraswamy, these erotic sculptures are just "innocent depictions of human activity, that voluptuous ecstasy also has its due place in life." Numerous explanations of the prevalence of the erotic sculptures in temples from Khajuraho makes it challenging to list all reasons and interpretations, and there might be some other new explanations that need to be explored and discovered. One cannot deny that erotic sculptures occupy an irreplaceable position in Indian art and even the world's art.

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