



## TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION IN THE GOLDEN AGE FOR CENTRAL INDIA: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CHANDELA DYNASTY

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Most of the art and architectural remains that survive from Ancient and Medieval India are religious in nature. That does not mean that people did not have art in their homes at those times, but domestic dwellings and the things in them were mostly made from materials like wood and clay which have perished, or were made of metal (like iron, bronze, silver and even gold) which was melted down and reused from time to time. This chapter introduces us to many types of temples from India. Although we have focused mostly on Hindu temples, some information on major Buddhist and Jain temples too have been mentioned. However, at all times, we must keep in mind that religious shrines were also made for many local cults in villages and forest areas, but again, not being of stone the ancient or medieval shrines in those areas have also vanished. The basic form of the Hindu temple comprises the following: (i) a cave-like sanctum (garbhagriha literally ‘womb-house’), which, in the early temples, was a small cubicle with a single entrance and grew into a larger chamber in time. The garbhagriha is made to house the main icon which is itself the focus of much ritual attention; (ii) the entrance to the temple which may be a portico or colonnaded hall that incorporates space for a large number of worshippers and is known as a mandapa; (iii) from the fifth century ce onwards, freestanding temples tend to have a mountainlike spire, which can take the shape of a curving shikhar in North India and a pyramidal tower, called a vimana, in South India; (iv) the vahan, i.e., the mount or vehicle of the temple’s main deity along with a standard pillar or dhvaj is placed axially before the sanctum. Two broad orders of temples in the country are known—Nagar in the north and Dravida in the south. At times, the Vesar style of temples as an independent style created through the selectivemixing of the Nagar and Dravida orders is mentioned by some scholars. Elaborate studies are available on the various

sub-styles within these orders. We will look into the differences in the forms further on in this chapter. As temples grew more complex, more surfaces were created for sculpture through additive geometry, i.e., by adding more and more rhythmically projecting, symmetrical walls and niches, without breaking away from the fundamental plan of the shrine. SCULPTURE, ICONOGRAPHY AND ORNAMENTATION The study of images of deities falls within a branch of art history called ‘iconography’, which consists of identification of images based on certain symbols and mythologies associated with them. And very often, while the fundamental myth and meaning of the deity may remain the same for centuries, its specific usage at a spot can be a response to its local or immediate social, political or geographical context. Every region and period produced its own distinct style of images with its regional variations in iconography. The temple is covered with elaborate sculpture and ornament that form a fundamental part of its conception. The placement of an image in a temple is carefully planned: for instance, river goddesses (Ganga and Yamuna) are usually found at the entrance of a garbhagriha in a Nagar temple, dvarapalas are usually found on the gateways or gopurams of Dravida temples, similarly, mithunas, navagrahas (the nine auspicious planets) and yakshas are also placed at entrances to guard them. Various forms or aspects of the main divinity are to be found on the outer walls of the sanctum. The deities of directions, i.e., the ashtadikpalas face the eight key directions on the outer walls of the sanctum and/or on the outer walls of a temple. Subsidiary shrines around the main temple are dedicated to the family or incarnations of the main deity. Finally, various elements of ornamentation such as gavaksha, vyala/yali, kalpa-lata, amalaka, kalasha, etc. are used in distinct ways and places in a temple.

THE NAGAR OR NORTH INDIAN TEMPLE STYLE of temple architecture that became popular in northern India is known as Nagar. In North India it is common for an entire temple to be built on a stone platform with steps leading up to it. Further, unlike in South India it does not usually have elaborate boundary walls or gateways. While the earliest temples had just one tower, or shikhara, later temples had several. The garbhagriha is always located directly under the tallest tower. There are many subdivisions of Nagar temples depending on the shape of the shikhara. There are

different names for the various parts of the temple in different parts of India; however, the most common name for the simple shikhara which is square at the base and whose walls curve or slope inward to a point on top is called the 'latina' or the rekha-prasada type of shikara. The second major type of architectural form in the Nagar order is the phamsana. Phamsana buildings tend to be broader and shorter than latina ones. Their roofs are composed of several slabs that gently rise to a single point over the centre of the building, unlike the latina ones which look like sharply rising tall towers. Phamsana roofs do not curve inward, instead they slope upwards on a straight incline. In many North Indian temples you will notice that the phamsana design is used for the mandapas while the main garbhagriha is housed in a latina building. Later on, the latina buildings grew complex, and instead of appearing like a single tall tower, the temple began to support many smaller towers, which were clustered together like rising mountain-peaks with the tallest one being in the centre, and this was the one which was always above the garbhagriha. The third main sub-type of the Nagar building is what is generally called the valabhi type. These are rectangular buildings with a roof that rises into a vaulted chamber. The edge of this vaulted chamber is rounded, like the bamboo or wooden wagons that would have been drawn by bullocks in ancient times. They are usually called 'wagonvaulted buildings'. As mentioned above, the form of the temple is influenced by ancient building forms that were already in existence before the fifth century ce. The valabhi type of building was one of them. For instance, if you study the ground-plan of many of the Buddhist rock-cut chaitya caves, you will notice that they are shaped as long halls which end in a curved back. From the inside, the roof of this portion also looks like a wagon-vaulted roof. Central India Ancient temples of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan share many traits. The most visible is that they are made of sandstone. Some of the oldest surviving structural temples from the Gupta Period are in Madhya Pradesh. These are relatively modest-looking shrines each having four pillars that support a small mandapa which looks like a simple square porch-like extension before an equally small room that served as the garbhagriha. Importantly, of the two such temples that survive, one is at Udaigiri, which is on the outskirts of Vidisha and is part of a larger Hindu complex of cave shrines, while the other one is at Sanchi, which was a

Buddhist site. This means that similar developments were being incorporated in the architecture of temples of both the religions. The patrons and donors of the temple at Deogarh (in Lalitpur District, Uttar Pradesh) are unknown; however on the basis of both architecture and imagery, it is established that this temple was built in the early sixth century ce. That is, about a hundred years or so after the small temples we just learnt about in Sanchi and Udaigiri. This makes it a classic example of a late Gupta Period type of temple. This temple is in the panchayatana style of architecture where the main shrine is built on a rectangular plinth with four smaller subsidiary shrines at the four corners (making it a total number of five shrines, hence the name, panchayatana). The tall and curvilinear shikhara also corroborates this date. The presence of this curving latina or rekha-prasada type of shikhara also makes it clear that this is an early example of a classic Nagar style of temple.

The Khajuraho temple complex is a series of beautifully built and decorated buildings in Madhya Pradesh. Of the 85 temples originally built by the Chandela dynasty between 900 AD and 1130 AD, only 25 remain. Khajuraho has been designated as UNESCO World Heritage site and is highly worthy of tourist attentions. Yet what really sets Khajuraho apart from other temples is the numerous erotic carvings, both inside and outside the temple, that depict men, women, and even animals engaging in lovemaking, orgies, and bestiality under the benign smiles of divinities. The Khajuraho temples were commissioned almost as soon as the Chandelas came to power a region in Central India. They were dedicated to two Indian religions, Hinduism and Jainism, suggesting a culture of acceptance and respect for differing religious traditions. In a space of about 20 square kilometers (7.72 square miles), 85 temples were built by successive Chandela rulers. This was a golden age for Central India.

It came to an abrupt end at the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Sultanate of Delhi invaded the Chandela Kingdom and seized the capital city Mahoba (located about 35 miles (56 kilometers) from Khajuraho). Up until the invasion, the Khajuraho temples were actively worshipped. However, upon the arrival of the Muslim Delhi Sultanate, the temples were desecrated or destroyed. The Islamic rulers had a 'policy of intolerance for worship [sic] places of other religions so all the citizens of Khajuraho

left the town with a hope that its solitude would not attract attention of the Muslim invaders into the temple area and in this way both temple and they themselves will remain unhurt'

It was only the relatively isolated temples that managed to survive the various Islamic dynasties that ruled the area from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yet even these suffered as the forests and vegetation slowly overgrew the neglected buildings. It was not until 1838 that Khajuraho temples were made known to the world. British explorer T.S. Burt had heard rumors of a sexually explicit temple deep in the Indian jungle but 'had to be persuaded by his Indian attendants to make the journey; he didn't believe anything of interest would be found at the remote spot' (Ramadurai, 2015).



*Erotica at Khajuraho temples*

### **The Erotic Carvings of Khajuraho**

In addition to architectural brilliance and masterful sculpting, the Khajuraho temples have become well known for their erotic carvings. Little is known for certain about the intent of the sexual imagery but it is widely believed that the temples were meant to celebrate all aspects of human life, including sex. Only about 10 percent of the



temples' artwork is sexual in nature, however, these attract the most attention. The temples depict the many different manifestations of Shakti and Shiva, the female and male divine principles. Yet, human figures are the ones engaged in the *mithunas* (a Sanskrit term used in Tantra to describe the ritual context of sexual unions).

### **Tantric Principles**

Believed to be followers of Tantric principles, the Chandela rulers may have created the temples to help foster the balance between the male and female forces, as expressed through the mutual enjoyment of physical union. Indeed, the temples portray women so openly and so freely enjoying sexual pleasures that some scholars believe that the temples are meant as a celebration of the female power: 'It is considered that these temples are a celebration of womanhood as they depict sculptures of heavily ornamented broad-hipped and busty but well-proportionate women (*apsaras*) adorning the temple walls. The well contoured bodies of the nymphs grab attention and they can be seen engaging in activities like putting on make-up, washing their hair, playing games and knotting and unknotting their girdles' (Cunningham).

In contrast with many other cultures, particularly the Islamic one that took over the region shortly after the Khajuraho temples were built, the Hindu and Jain cultures did not frown upon women for enjoying sex. Sexual pleasure was considered an art form, the Kama Sutra, to be practiced and perfected by both genders. 'Hinduism has traditionally considered sex an essential part of life, which could be why the carvings are casually interspersed between others that portray activities as varied as prayer and war. The fact that they are set in plain view and not tucked away in an obscure corner seems to suggest that their creators meant for them to be seen by all.' (Ramadurai, 2015) The difference is especially striking considering how conservative Indian society has grown over the last few centuries.

### **References:**

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