



Hidden Symbolism in the Sexual Imagery of Khajuraho's Temple Sculptures

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Abstract

The erotic sculptures of Khajuraho have long been read either as scandalous curiosities or as evidence of unrestrained medieval licence. This paper argues instead that the imagery encodes a coherent symbolic language in which sexual union signifies auspiciousness, cosmic completeness and spiritual realisation. Drawing on art-historical scholarship, Sanskrit textual traditions, and temple theory, it examines how the representation of women's bodies and of intimacy between persons of the same-sex fits within an Indic worldview that, in many contexts, treated desire as a legitimate human aim rather than a source of shame. The paper also acknowledges the limits of the evidence and the tensions within the textual tradition.

Keywords: *Khajuraho, Maithuna, Chandela Art, Indian Temple Symbolism, Gender and Sexuality.*



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1. Introduction

Khajuraho's temples, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1986, rank among the finest achievements of north Indian temple architecture. Their outer walls carry dense bands of figural sculpture, including gods, musicians, dancers and amorous couples. The last category has dominated popular and colonial-era commentary. Nineteenth-century British observers frequently described such imagery as evidence of moral decline, a judgement that shaped both tourist perception and some Indian responses to the monuments (Desai, 2005).

Modern scholarship has moved well beyond this view. Desai (1996) demonstrated that the erotic panels are integrated into a carefully ordered iconographic programme rather than scattered at random, and that they must be read alongside the religious imagery surrounding them. This paper builds on that approach. It asks what the sexual imagery symbolises, and how its treatment of women's bodies and of intimacy outside the heterosexual couple reflects cultural attitudes toward the body and desire.

The central argument has three parts. First, the erotic imagery draws on the old Indic

concept of *maithuna* (the paired couple) as a sign of fertility, prosperity and wholeness. Second, the sensuous depiction of women reflects an aesthetic and religious valuation of the female body rather than its objectification or concealment. Third, the sparse but discernible traces of same-sex intimacy suggest that such desire was within the range of what the culture could represent, even though it was never uniformly endorsed.

2. Historical and Religious Context

The Chandela rulers of central India patronised Khajuraho's major temples, including the Lakshmana (c. 954 CE), the Kandariya Mahadeva (c. 1030 CE), and the Vishvanatha. Only about twenty-five of an originally larger group survive (Deva, 1990). The temples serve Shaiva, Vaishnava and Jain traditions, which indicates that sensuous imagery was not confined to one sect.

Interpretation is complicated by the temples' relationship to Tantra. Early commentators often attributed the erotic panels to Tantric ritual practice. Urban (2003) cautions that "Tantra" has long been burdened by Western fantasies of exotic sexuality, and that the category must be handled with care. The westerners misunderstood ancient Hindu practices and misinterpreted them as promiscuous and demonic. This is not only ignorant but also misleading. Desai (1996) similarly argues that the sculptures are better understood through broader concepts of auspiciousness and devotional allegory. A balanced approach treats Tantric currents as one influence among several.

The cultural background is also rooted in much older texts. Sexuality was not absent from Vedic and Upanishadic thought. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* treats sexual union as a ritual act, comparing it to sacrifice and uses the image of embrace to describe the experience of oneness with the self (Olivelle, 1998). Classical Sanskrit literature continued this tradition. Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* names *kama* (desire and pleasure) as one of life's four legitimate aims, alongside *dharma* (righteous duty), *artha* (material prosperity), and *moksha* (liberation) (Doniger & Kakar, 2002). Khajuraho's builders inherited this framework.

The point is not that Khajuraho is "Vedic," but that a long Indic tradition gave them a vocabulary in which erotic imagery could be meaningful and respectable.

3. Mithuna and the Symbolism of Cosmic Union

The auspicious couple- The *maithuna* motif long predates Khajuraho, appearing in Buddhist and Hindu art from early periods as a marker of fertility and good fortune. Couples on temple thresholds and walls function as signs of auspiciousness, welcoming the worshipper and affirming the generative power of the sacred (Desai, 2005). In this sense, the erotic panels belong to the same symbolic family as images of overflowing vessels, flowering vines, and celestial nymphs. They proclaim abundance.

The temple as a cosmic body- Temple theory offers a further layer. Kramrisch (1946) described the Hindu temple as a diagram of the cosmos and as a body, with its architecture corresponding to the cosmic person (Purusha). Mitchell (1988) similarly emphasises the temple's role as a place where the divine becomes accessible through form. On this reading, the layering of Khajuraho's walls is meaningful. Outer surfaces display the world of desire, society, and sensory experience, while the interior sanctum (*garbhagriha*) is austere and free of erotic imagery. The worshipper moves inward from the world of embodiment toward stillness.

Union as spiritual metaphor- The Upanishadic comparison of embrace with self-realisation (Olivelle, 1998) provides a conceptual model for reading the couples as allegories. Erotic union stands for the dissolving of boundaries between self and other and ultimately between the individual and the divine. Devotional poetry in the medieval period made this metaphor explicit, representing the soul as a lover seeking the divine beloved (Doniger, 2009). The suggestion is not that every panel is a coded sermon, but that the culture possessed a ready symbolic key by which an observer could read an embrace as more than an embrace.

4. Women's Bodies: Celebration within a Symbolic Order

Women dominate Khajuraho's walls. They appear as *apsaras* (celestial maidens) and *surasundaris* (divine beauties), shown dancing, adorning themselves, writing letters, removing thorns from their feet, and playing with children. Many of these figures are rendered with sinuous grace, full forms, and elaborate jewellery, and they are shown as active, self-possessed subjects rather than passive objects.

This should be read against the aesthetic culture of the period. Classical Sanskrit poetics and the *Kamasutra* give careful attention to women's adornment, accomplishments, and erotic agency, and Vatsyayana's text addresses women as readers and participants in its discussion of the arts (Doniger & Kakar, 2002). The female body in this setting carries multiple meanings. It signals fertility and auspiciousness, expresses beauty (*sringara rasa*, the aesthetic mood of love), and in the Shakta and Tantric currents is associated with divine female power (Shakti) (Urban, 2003).

Two cautions are necessary. First, celebration of the female body in art does not mean that women's lived social position was one of equality. The sculptors and patrons were overwhelmingly male, and the gaze embedded in the imagery may reflect male perspectives. Second, the sensuous treatment of the body is not the same as the absence of social regulation. Nevertheless, the sculptural evidence does indicate that the female body could be displayed in sacred architecture without it being considered polluting or shameful, which is striking in comparison with later colonial-era moral frameworks that shaped modern attitudes (Doniger, 2009).

5. Same-Sex Intimacy: Traces and Tensions

The question of same-sex intimacy requires careful handling. The textual tradition shows that same-sex desire was known and discussed in classical India. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) assemble Sanskrit and vernacular sources that refer to same-sex love, from the legal and medical literature to poetry and narrative, and demonstrate that Indic culture did not possess a single, uniform condemnation. The *Kamasutra* discusses same-sex practices matter-

of-factly, including the category of the "third nature" (*tritiya prakriti*), without treating them as unspeakable (Doniger & Kakar, 2002).

At the same time, the tradition was not uniformly accepting. Dharmashastra literature prescribes penances for certain sexual acts, including some between persons of the same sex (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). The more accurate picture is one of plurality: acknowledgement and even literary celebration in some genres, regulation and disapproval in others.

Within Khajuraho's sculpture, representations of same-sex intimacy are few and their interpretation is debated. A small number of panels, including intimate scenes between women and some group scenes in which figures of the same sex are in contact, have been read by some observers as suggestive of same-sex desire. Others interpret these as companionship, attendance, or conventions of the larger composition. Because the panels carry no inscriptions, the evidence is open to more than one reading. The claim supportable by the evidence is therefore modest but significant: Khajuraho's artists worked within a culture in which same-sex intimacy was imaginable and could appear, at least ambiguously, in sacred sculpture without being excluded from the artistic repertoire.

6. Limitations and Scholarly Debate

Three limitations deserve acknowledgement. First, no contemporary document from Khajuraho explains the programme, so every interpretation is inferential (Desai, 1996). Second, the competing readings (auspiciousness, Tantric ritual, devotional allegory, satire, and royal display) are not mutually exclusive, and different panels may serve different purposes. Third, the application of modern categories such as "same-sex identity" to medieval material risks anachronism. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) emphasise that premodern Indic cultures understood desire through frameworks different from modern identity labels. Scholars should therefore avoid both the erasure of same-sex imagery and the overstatement of its prominence.

7. Conclusion

Khajuraho's sexual imagery is best understood as part of an intricate symbolic system rather than as isolated erotic display. The *maithuna* motif signals auspiciousness and abundance; the layered structure of the temple moves the worshipper from the sensory world toward the sacred centre; and the metaphor of erotic union gives expression to spiritual realisation. The sensuous representation of women reflects an aesthetic and religious culture that could treat the female body as meaningful and sacred, while the faint traces of same-sex intimacy indicate a cultural repertoire broader than later moral frameworks assumed.

This does not amount to a simple claim that all desire was uniformly celebrated. The textual tradition contains both acknowledgement and restriction, and the social realities behind the art remain only partly recoverable. What Khajuraho does demonstrate is that, in at least one major strand of Indic culture, the body, desire, and the sacred were not treated as opposites. Further research, particularly systematic documentation of panel-by-panel iconography and comparison with other medieval temple sites, would help refine these conclusions.

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