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In his book Immortal Khajuraho (1965), Harinarayan Lal describes the origin of the temples of Khajuraho, and their erotic sculptures which stands in testimony to the sin of a Brahmin woman: “In the narrative of Prithviraj-Raso there is a mention of a fable of a Brahmin woman, Hemavati by name, who had committed a little faux pas with the moon in the human form, and, as a self imposed punishment for her indiscretion, held a Banda Jog, a part of which ceremony consisted of sculpturing indecent representations on the walls of temples, and holding up ones foibles to the disgust and ridicule of the world.”

This is one of many tales and myths attached to the origin of medieval temples such as Khajuraho, with its exquisite and peculiar sculpture. The existence of this erotic element in Khajuraho has thoroughly baffled scholars and historians for generations. The persistent question has been why all these carvings on temple walls? This query stems from a basic assumption that eroticism is a transgression of the taboo over sex. It seems that sex is permissible if it remains in the private domain, but when it is unabashedly rejoiced in public, it unmistakably becomes a violation of the barriers of shame. The question remains, why do we find the transgression being committed within the sacred domain of the temple? What explains the conspicuous incongruity of religious sculptures with erotic ones? This is the question that Shobita Punja seeks to explore in her book, Khajuraho: The First Thousand Years, an updated and abridged version of Punja’s earlier critically acclaimed work Divine Ecstasy: The Story of Khajuraho, published in 1992. She has divided the new version into three parts. She begins with an enumeration of the Khajuraho temple complex’s historical evolution and change. These temples were built about a thousand years ago by the Chandella kings of Bundelkhand. According to Punja, the site of Khajuraho had nearly 84 temples set in a forest area which was located on an ancient pilgrimage route. Therefore, the temples were not only built to meet the ritual needs of the Chandella devotees but to create a temple town, or what she calls a koberta. Such was the sacred geography of the temple complex. With time, this area and the temple complex were deserted and became overgrown with jungle. Today, the tourist industry touts the temples actually celebrate the subjugation of desire, and desire itself, through a close reading of the Shiva Purana. The main subject matter of the Shiva Purana revolves around the myth of Kama (God of Desire)’s loss of his physical body, Kama is said to have been burnt to ashes by Shiva after he tried to compete with him. It is said that this is the reason why there are no temples of Kama in India and that depiction of him in painting and sculpture is so rare. On the other hand, Kama has been written about extensively, by Kalidasa in Kamasutra or by Gosvamides in GoVinda and in the references to eroticism in Vedica literature. Therefore, the Matangeshwar temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is worshipped as the destroyer of Kama. It is said that the eight-foot lingam in the Matangeshwar temple sprang from the ground on its own accord and it is believed to demonstrate the supremacy of Shiva over death and desire; and Shiva freed from the clutches of Desire is empowered to protect his devotees from the sufferings which have their fount in Desire. The Matangeshwar linga at Khajuraho does not pay homage to the birth of Kama but the vanquish of Desire by Shiva. In the Shiva Purana, this story of annihilation of Kama is part of the wider narrative of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. It is this yarn of the divine marriage and the ecstasy that followed it, which is etched on the Khajuraho temple walls. Punja argues that probably the Chandellas had chosen the myth of Shiva’s wedding as the central theme of the temples because it gave equal importance and prominence to all the Gods (as the wedding-guests and friends) and to Shiva in particular. And it is through the festival of Maha-Shivratri which is still celebrated with great fervour that the myth of the divine marriage is re-enacted. In this way Punja quite successfully explains the motives of the rulers who built the temple and the mystery of presence of erotic sculpture. Using an interpretative framework which provides a text narrative (in this case Shiva Purana) and erotic sculpture is merely a rendering of the narrative. And she firmly puts forward the view that these erotic sculptures do not depict human beings, but rather Shiva in union with his divine consort.

In the third part of her book, the Epilogue, Punja deals with the present state of the temple complex, which despite being declared a world Heritage site is still much neglected. Punja describes the need for unscientific restoration and the extensive clean-up operation undertaken by the Raja of Chatarpur in the early 20th century. Many of the sculptures found scattered around the complex “were taken to a palace or put in an open-air sculpture court called Jardine’s garden.” Thus, time and human follies both worked together to degrade this temple complex. In 1997, Punja, with the help of INTACH, students of School of Planning and Architecture and another NGO, Downtown, undertook a conservation project, funded by the Madhya Pradesh State government. Since then they have attempted the conjectural reconstruction of the temple complex.

Khajuraho: The First Thousand Years
By Shobita Punja
Viking Penguin India, New Delhi, 1999, 223 pp., Rs. 295

APARNA VAIDIK

Outing the sexual taboo

Punja arrives at the conclusion that the temples actually celebrate the subjugation of desire, and desire itself, through a close reading of the Shiva Purana. The main subject matter of the Shiva Purana revolves around the myth of Kama (God of Desire)’s loss of his physical body, Kama is said to have been burnt to ashes by Shiva after he tried to compete with him. It is said that this is the reason why there are no temples of Kama in India and that depiction of him in painting and sculpture is so rare. On the other hand, Kama has been written about extensively, by Kalidasa in Kamasutra or by Gosvamides in GoVinda and in the references to eroticism in Vedica literature. Therefore, the Matangeshwar temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is worshipped as the destroyer of Kama. It is said that the eight-foot lingam in the Matangeshwar temple sprang from the ground on its own accord and it is believed to demonstrate the supremacy of Shiva over death and desire; and Shiva freed from the clutches of Desire is empowered to protect his devotees from the sufferings which have their fount in Desire. The Matangeshwar linga at Khajuraho does not pay homage to the birth of Kama but the vanquish of Desire by Shiva. In the Shiva Purana, this story of annihilation of Kama is part of the wider narrative of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. It is this yarn of the divine marriage and the ecstasy that followed it, which is etched on the Khajuraho temple walls. Punja argues that probably the Chandellas had chosen the myth of Shiva’s wedding as the central theme of the temples because it gave equal importance and prominence to all the Gods (as the wedding-guests and friends) and to Shiva in particular. And it is through the festival of Maha-Shivratri which is still celebrated with great fervour that the myth of the divine marriage is re-enacted. In this way Punja quite successfully explains the motives of the rulers who built the temple and the mystery of presence of erotic sculpture. Using an interpretative framework which provides a text narrative (in this case Shiva Purana) and erotic sculpture is merely a rendering of the narrative. And she firmly puts forward the view that these erotic sculptures do not depict human beings, but rather Shiva in union with his divine consort.

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Punja’s work argues against an earlier historiography on the Indian sculptures, specifically the work of Devangana Desai, Art under Feudalism in India. Desai subscribes to the genre of historical writing which has conceptualised the period as a ‘feudal’. Medieval Orissa’s feudal system and the important place given to tantricism were the main causes of the creation of erotic motifs. Desai feels that the art and the architecture of pleasure-loving aristocracy were bound to have been affected by opulence and eroticism, especially where the dominant enterprise of the ruling aristocracy and its hanger-on with their wealth and sex. Desai’s interpretative framework reckons self-restraint and renunciation as the norm. Thus, the medieval lifestyle and sculpture look as though violating a taboo has been accorded aesthetic status. Desai’s view of the early medieval art as ‘feudal’ is informed by a genre of historical writing which has conceptualised the period as such.

Punja claims to be distancing herself from such a view of history. However, in arguing a case for Shiva Purana as being the text chosen for sculptural representation and in seeking to validate the idea that it is not human beings but Shiva and his divine consort that one sees in union in the erotic motifs of the temple, Punja also unwittingly re-asserts the idea that eroticism if represented in the public domain is transgressive. Her need to continue to assert that it is not the celebration of Desire but the subjugation of desire to and accord a divine status to the erotic motif somehow makes the whole thesis appear an apology for transgression that these motifs seem to commit. Why couldn’t the sculptures in union be representations of ordinary humans?

There are also some conceptual problems that Punja’s work throws up. Khajuraho needs to be seen as part of a huge inventory of early medieval North Indian temples, which were built around the same time. For instance, the erotic sculptures of the Sun temple of Konark in Orissa, easily outnumber the ones in all the temples of Khajuraho taken together and no other medieval temple has such a copious erotic representation. Moreover, there is no literary text that can be superimposed on the erotic sculpture of Konark. All these temples are marked by intricate sculptural work displaying unabashed sensuality, which is quite distinct from the earlier ‘classical’ temple architecture.

Punja’s work does not tell us what is the theoretical and conceptual tools with which a historian should be equipped to study such sculptures are, nor what the methodology for analysing their location in the temple architecture of the period and studying their visual and stylistic range is to be. While she successfully presents a package for understanding the sculpture of one, this leaves us clueless about the method of understanding the other contemporaneous temples. Is it not possible to have some sort of an Indian methodology for comprehending North Indian temple architecture and sculpture?

Perhaps it is possible to locate these temples in one socio-political continuum by looking at the history of early medieval India and the changing forms of patronage of art in the period. The early medieval period was the age of formation of many regional and local kingdoms which had hitherto been the bases of tribal societies. For instance, the Chandella rulers of Jajjubabuki came from the Central Indian tribal ethnic pool of the Gonds. The primary concerns of the contemporary rulers was to seek legitimacy for their temporal power. This was done essentially by two means. Firstly, by constructing myths about their origin and descent and secondly, by giving land grants to the Brahmins, who were the highest caste in the varna order. The Brahmins, through their monopoly of religious texts and knowledge, held the power to sanctify the rule and obscure origins of these new rulers. Both these processes had a direct impact on the patronage that the temples received in the region and led to the exceptional temple building activity of the period.

Punja sees this process, quite incorrectly, as colonisation by Sanskrit-speaking families, and ensuring of allegiance for several generations and sufficient wealth to support temple building activity and religious practice. Furthermore, these temple complexes and religious centres were the nucleus of numerous non-religious activities. For instance, temple architecture included a nataranda at the entrance of the temple, a place for dance and music, and they also took part in trade and commerce. This meant that there existed a “nonexclusivity of the sacred space”, where other sectors of different affiliations could co-exist. For instance, in Khajuraho, several Jain images have been found. However, Punja explains the presence of Jain images as a result of the settlement of Jain communities in the region, either due to war and immigration, or trade.

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Some distinct aspects which the temple building acquired as a result of this changing nature of society, and creation of new political linkages, was the merging of many local cults into the supra-regional Puranic Hinduism. In a similar vein Tantric practices began to make roadways not only into Hinduisim but also Buddhism and Jainism. Another aspect of the process was the growth of sacred temple complexes run by Brahmins as ashraya or guru, who had royal patronage, developments during this period. The approach that one needs to adopt in the study of early medieval structure, is to locate the sculpture and temple building activity in those historical processes which had a close bond with the development of local and regional kingdoms. Seen in this context, the choice of the Chandella rulers to sculpt the Shiva Purana narrative on the temple walls makes good sense.

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Devangana Desai, Art under Feudalism in India.