

demanding the loyalty of a peasantry which had inherited many Dravidian forms of worship, the Chandela kings absorbed the magical rites and practices of the local population.

The setting for the Khajuraho capital seems to have been paradisaical: Surrounded by low lying hills, in the midst of lush forests with a river flowing past the town, here was the place where the great gods could be invoked and the power of the feudal state protected, against all comers. The capital is said to have been surrounded by walls of which only the vaguest foundations are now visible. The palaces have disappeared, even as eighty of the temples have mixed with the dust and the stones. The populace must have lived in the barest hovels and, presumably, the present squalid, ramshackle village survives on the old site. But many large tanks in Bundelkhand give us a clue to the method by which the Chandels brought prosperity to the land and explains, to some extent, the surplus harvests on which the magnificent temples were raised.

A posthumous panegyric of 1002 A.D. engraved in stone in the Vishwanatha Temple, in one of the surviving seven temples, celebrates King Dhanga, under whose rule this temple was built. So it is clear that the Chandelas endowed all the temples, with their entourage of priests and devadasis. Conjecture, myth and speculation will always, in the absence of historical documentation, weave ever new webs to explain the miraculous appearance, all in a hundred years, of a belief in the life force so potent as is reflected on the walls, as also the presence of so many lovely women, transformed into Surasundaris, by the sensitive chisels of the craftsmen.

Some say that the most beautiful women were brought from Magadha, Malwa and Rajputana to be trained as devadasis in the Khajuraho temples. And it is alleged further that as these devadasis were lonely women, dedicated to the ceremonies of the Gods, there is no evidence of children on the walls. 'So much love, so many lovely flowers but no fruit!' Other people say that the Gods and Surasundaris who cover the interiors and the exteriors of the temples, were taken from real life and put there against the stylised Gods and Goddesses of the higher reaches.

All these suggestions seem naive in the face of the available information about the power of the Chandelas and the public works they built and the plenty that they were able to create during the short century before their dynasty was crushed by a contiguous Rajput rival. And as long as the Chandelas held sway life abounded, and a rich civilisation presumably grew on the pattern of the earlier Gupta court, and poetry, architecture and sculpture flourished, in the wake of Saivism, assembling priests and devadasis and devotees and craftsmen and slave labour enough for generations.

Similarly, the shocked indignation of the present day puritans withers away, if we consider the Khajuraho group of temples as part of the religious and cultural movement, which was already in fermentation under the Guptas and which was only heightened in the early mediaeval period, before entering on a new phase after the Muhammadan conquest. We must remember that, from the Vedic period onwards, the belief in the universe as the outcome of the cosmic union between the male and the female had been a fundamental aspect of the Hindu faith. And, from the Atharva Veda downwards, hundreds of texts had been written on the elaboration of the play function of sex within the scheme admitted by Hindu religion. The Kama Sutra of Vatsayana was only a later recension of previous erotic literature. In the highly charged poetry of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, the warm sensuality of an age, which knew

the quick of the sun and the warmth of human desire, had sunk into the consciousness of the well-to-do nobility and the intelligentsia. The full life, for some at least, was, presumably, the familiar background of existence rather than the aberration which it seems today. That nothing is alone in Nature but must merge with its counterpart to find perfection in Union, being the accepted religious practice, there may have been cults which permitted the initiation of young virgins in the tendernesses of conjugal love. And there is no reason to wonder why, if for centuries afterwards, illustrated editions of books of love could pass from hand to hand, there could not be the carved love poses, mentioned by Vatsayana, on the panels of the main shrines.

There is nowhere among the surviving erotic reliefs of Khajuraho any vulgarity if one brings to the sculptures the warmth of the heart rather than the cold stare of obscene inquiry or the furtive gaze of a later, more cynical and weary, age. Whether it is the withdrawn look on the faces of the modest women attendants, helping in the ceremonies of love, or the unselfconscious embraces of the mithuna couples, the bodies of the persons involved are like the graceful curves of those in whom passion has become incarnate. In most cases, the man is tender and contemplative, folding his beloved with the most devoted protection and love, while the woman is looking up, as though reaching out with all her body and soul towards the gracious bent head of the lover. Seldom do the faces reflect mere animal lust, as though the artisan always remembered the spiritual values of which the naked physical connection was merely the expression.

The miracle of the whole group of the temples, however, is the serene accomplishment of the carvings themselves. Surely the ten or twelve outstanding sculptures of Khajuraho must be numbered among the many masterly sculptures of India. There had been greater carving in the early mediaeval temples of Ellora and Elephanta under the Rastrakutas, and some of the finest sculpture in Utkal was to follow, but there is enough here to go into the imaginary museum of world art of André Malraux. Not all the images are of equal value, except that the whole series seem to be part of a flood of activity which sustained itself on the high watermark for generations. The plastic elements derived from that unnaturalistic tradition, built on the creative image (dhyana mantra), which abstracted from the individualistic characteristics of a figure, a number of traits and recreated them almost as a chrysalis transforms itself into a flower. The formal unity of the temple is maintained here in a compact whole and not through interconnected group of separate buildings. The entrance, the assembly hall, the inner sanctum, are all pre-conceived as a unit, including the sculptures on every tier in the series of ascending planes. Like the Mount Kailas itself, or rather like Mount Meru, the devas and the apsaras stand in an eternity of stone, without the sign of sorrow, except for the figure of death, which also haunts the lower world as an ugly aspect of the same eternity:

There are certain lines of the poet, W. B. Yeats, which tell of men,

'that with a mallet or a chisel modelled these calculations that look but causal flesh put down:
all Asiatic vague immensities.....'

These lines sum up one's feelings about the sculptors,

"who gave women dreams and dreams their looking glass".