

Chandella Period

(Academic Script)

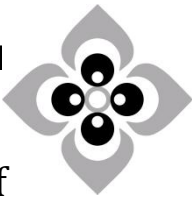
Hello everyone!!!

I welcome you all to this episode where we would study the art of the Chandella period. In this lesson, our focus would be on the architectural and sculptural art of the Chandella dynasty, who ruled at Jejakabhukti or modern Bundelkhand, the region where Khajuraho is located, from 831 to 1308 A.D. The dynasty patronised magnificent temples at their religious capital Khajuraho, which are said to have been built between 950 and 1100 A.D. The lesson would also focus on the various theories proposed by scholars to explain the purpose and meaning of the erotic sculptures that adorn the temples at the site.

Medieval India - Debates on Periodisation

In recent years, the lineal periodisation of Indian history into ancient, medieval and modern has been challenged on the basis of the character they gave to the periods—in particular, their emphasis on changelessness. Hence, historians now prefer to use the terms 'early historical' till A.D. 500 (the Guptas) and a transitional phase called 'early medieval' for the period after A.D. 500 till 1300. ('Medieval' term is now used for the phase that begins with Turkish rule or the Sultanates and ends with the decline of the Mughals.)

Thus, of late, the use of the term 'early medieval' for the post-Gupta period has gained currency. The phase represents a period of major socio-political change and is marked by features like: political decentralisation; emergence of landed intermediaries;



naturalisation of economy; proliferation of castes; subjection of the peasantry; formation of regional cultural units; and feudal dimension of the ideology and culture of the period.

Emergence of Chandellas

In the post-Gupta period, Kannauj, on the bank of Ganga, near Kanpur in UP, became the centre of political activities in North India. After Harsha's death, the political unity in the region crumbled and numerous centres of power emerged in different parts of North India—leading to multi-state system. The story of rise and growth of Chandella state is similar to numerous other states spread all over the country during this period.

The Chandellas, who ruled at Jejakabhukti or modern Bundelkhand, are believed to have been a clan of aboriginal chiefs who were promoted to the rank of Kshatriyas and came into prominence in the early ninth century. They were the feudatories of the powerful Gurjara-Pratiharas (who ruled from Kannauj for nearly two centuries) and ruled from the most impregnable ancient fortress-city of Kalinjar (Banda district, UP).

A dynastic struggle among the Pratiharas allowed the Chandellas and other feudatories to assert their independence. In a bold move, Yashovarman Chandella (reigned A.D. 925-50) appropriated an important statue of Vishnu from his Pratihara overlord and built a sandstone temple to enshrine it at his capital city, Khajuraho (Chhatarpur district, MP). This temple, known today as the Lakshmana and completed by his son Dhanga in A.D. 954, was Yashovarman's defiant gesture to establish the sovereignty of his new dynasty.

The size of the Chandella kingdom was never really great. The main sites and capitals were concentrated within a small area and



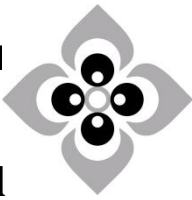
besides Khajuraho (ancient Khajjuravahaka) and Kalinjar, it also included Mahotsavanagar (Mahoba, Hamirpur district, UP).

More than sixty-five inscriptions of the Chandellas speak about their regime, political achievements, religious beliefs, territorial conquest, and the grants made towards different religious activities. These inscriptions also trace their descent from the mythical sage, Chandratreya and point towards the family worship of a tribal deity called Maniya Devi, thus, hinting at their association with the tribal Gonds and Bhars. Like other Rajput families, the Chandellas also tried to legitimise their social status by building temples and tanks and by giving gifts to priestly Brahmins. Although, Chandellas ruled the region of Bundelkhand from 831 to 1308 A.D., their greatest period of ascendancy occurred in the tenth and eleventh centuries when they not only expanded their kingdom to its greatest extent, but also erected numerous temples at Khajuraho, which are famous all over the world for their exquisite craftsmanship and lofty proportions.

Within the Chandella capitals, culture flourished with the patronisation of poets and dramatists, one of whom was Krishna Mishra, the celebrated author of the *Prabodhacandrodaya*. This drama, performed before the Chandella king Kirtivarman, celebrated a then-recent military victory over the Kalacuri dynasty. Apart from patronising erection of numerous temples, other civil works, including the excavation of tanks, and the building of dams, fortresses, and palaces, were also commissioned by the Chandella kings—thus, providing plentiful employment for skilled craftsmen in the kingdom.

Khajuraho: The City of Temples

Khajuraho, owing to its location in the central part of the Vindhya hill ranges, developed a separate and unique culture from the early historic period onwards. Moreover, apart from



being protected, from external invasions, by hills and rivers on all the sides, it was its strategic location on an ancient trade route connecting Kausambi and Ujjain that made it an ideal choice for the Chandella's new religious capital. Apart from the unique geographic features, it was the sacred geography of the region that largely influenced the birth of the magnificent Chandella temples and the settlements around it. P.B. Rana Singh, who has done extensive research on the sacred geography of Khajuraho, is of the opinion that the alignment of the temples followed an embedded geometry and alignment with the sacred hills in its vicinity.

Traditionally, more than eighty temples are said to have been built by Chandellas at the site of Khajuraho. These are said to have been built within a century and a half, from 950 to 1100 A.D. Although only about twenty-five of these survive today, they represent a strikingly homogenous group and share certain conceptual and stylistic features, regardless of whether they are Saivite, Vaisnavite, or Jain. Their Nagara architectural style, not only link them together but also distinguish them from other temples of the northern style at other sites throughout South Asia. The fact that these temples are dedicated to a range of Hindu deities—Shiva, Vishnu, solar god Surya, and the Goddess—as well as to the saviours of the Jain faith, further suggest that possibly the Chandella monarchs intended their capital to be a major sacred centre.

The twenty-five surviving temples are classified into three groups: 1) the western group (consists of most important and magnificent temples) 2) the eastern group (these are about 4-5 km from the western group of temples) and 3) the southern group.

Hindu temples are quite simple in plan, which consists of a square sanctum fronted by a square hall; larger temples may have a

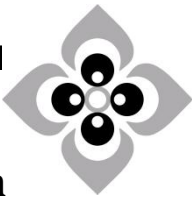


second hall as well as a porch. The Khajuraho temples sit on very large platforms, and originally stood in their grandeur along the borders of a lake of irregular outline. Among the surviving temples at Khajuraho, there are three large *sandhara* temples in which an inner circumambulatory passage encircles the shrine. The earliest of these *sandhara* temples is the Lakshmana, the creation of the first Chandella ruler Yashovarman, completed in 954 A.D. and dedicated to Vishnu. It was followed by two Shiva temples, the Vishvanatha temple of King Dhanga, completed in 999 A.D., and the Kandariya Mahadeo temple patronised by King Vidyadhara. All three temples display an incomparable gracefulness in the manner in which the superstructures of their four units, with the lowest pyramidal roof over the entrance porch and the successively taller pyramids above the two halls, sweep up to the elegant tower above the shrine.

In the last twenty-five years, since tourism has become a priority in India, Khajuraho has acquired fame as the erotic temple capital of India. But there is much else to admire at Khajuraho, not the least being the exquisite architectural conception of the temples. Equally beautiful are the sinuously elegant forms of the world of humans and immortals who decorate the walls of these temples.

Caunsat yogini temple

Majority of the scholars, by and large, accept that the earliest extant temple at Khajuraho is the Chausath *yogini* temple, or, the temple of the sixty-four *yoginis*. Although, there is no positive evidence to assert its presumed ninth-century date, certain features that suggest an early construction include: stark simplicity; the use of granite as a building material; and the use of large, boulder like blocks of masonry—roughly cut and boldly

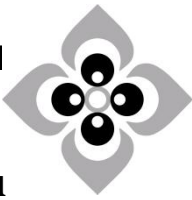


articulated. This last feature is generally associated with formative stages of stone architecture in South Asia.

Yoginis or female ascetic-sorceresses or *yogins* were feared because of their association with Tantric practices. *Yogini* temples are generally circular and became widespread in north India from the tenth century CE. Their distinct circular structure, open to the sky, possibly suggests a spatial translation of the *yogini cakra* (ritual circle) or the female vulva. *Yogini* temples are rare in India, and therefore the one at Khajuraho has a distinguishable place among a handful of similar such temples in other parts of South Asia. Its exceptional form and special subject matter, not only distinguishes it from the other temples at Khajuraho but also makes it a fitting beginning for a discussion of Chandella art.

The temple is built on a natural, rocky elevation, which is about seven meters above the plain. Usually the Chausath *yogini* temples are circular in form, but the temple at Khajuraho consists of a large, rectangular open courtyard surrounded by a cloister of sixty-four cells which measure only about a meter in height and depth. Each cell is like a miniature temple, having a simplified tower of the *nagara* style. Each would have once housed a sculpture of a *yogini*, only three of which have survived to modern times. One another cell, larger than the others and located directly opposite the main entrance to the complex, may have enshrined the main image of the temple.

Although many other architectural examples exist in India, which are characterised by an enclosure of cells, *yogini* temples are unusual because here the perimeter, rather than the central shrine, receives the greatest emphasis. This means that the temple would have sixty four sculptures or images of the *yoginis* arranged around the inner circumference of the temple—thus, making the perimeter important and not the central shrine.



The purpose and meaning of the *yogini* temple is related to Hindu Tantric practices, which seems to have been prevalent in the region—as manifested in the sculptural programs of the majority of the Khajuraho temples. Brahmanism faced two major challenges from within the Hindu religion: Bhakti and Tantra. Bhakti offered direct access to God without the intervention of Vedic rituals. The rival to Bhakti was Tantra, which developed a set of esoteric rituals including sexual practices, which were at once a parody of and a challenge to Brahmanical rites. Thus, there are interesting connections between Tantra and sacred eroticism.

It is by no means an accident that women played a dominant role in the particular type of Tantricism associated with Khajuraho, which is Kaula and Kapalika cults. In particular, the Kapalikas are associated with *yoginis* and various sexual practices in which the female was given great importance as the "seat" of the Self, and thereby the realisation of Self was located in the *yoni*, or vulva. While the ultimate aim of the Kapalika was to transcend the sensual, the participation in rituals in which sexual relations with women were a major aspect must have been looked down upon—forcing Tantric followers to pursue secretism and esoterism.

Lakshmana Temple

One of the best-preserved monuments at the site is the Lakshmana temple. It is an apt example of the developed phase of architecture at Khajuraho. It also defines many of the major characteristics of Chandella style. Resting atop a plinth, its 954 A.D. date has been fixed by an inscription left by Dhanga; the son of Yashovarman. It reveals that Yashovarman, erected a "charming splendid home of Vishnu which rivals the peaks of the mountain of snow". Thus, Yashovarman, who is credited with consolidating the Chandella empire, must have also established the Chandella building tradition at Khajuraho.



The Lakshmana temple is of the *pancayatana* variety. There are four subsidiary shrines, dedicated to different forms of Vishnu, at the corners of the temple plinth. Each of these four virtually identical shrines has a small *garbhagrha*, preceded by a small flat-roofed pillared porch.

The profile of the temple as well as its plan reveal that the main architectural components are placed on an axis from east to west: beginning with first porch (*ardhamandapa*), the second, larger porch (*mandapa*), the great hall (*mahamandapa*), and finally the *vimana*, with its characteristic *sikhara*. These elements are clearly distinguished by their separate roofs, each successively higher from the eastern to the western end of the temple and culminating in the high *sikhara* over the *garbhagrha*. The roofs over all the three *mandapas* are pyramidal in form, rather than domical. The *sikhara* of the main shrine has rounded contours, as is normal in the northern Indian style, although here it is more pointed and flanked by *urusingas*, creating a clustered effect.

The interior of almost all the *mahamandapa* at Khajuraho is rather modest and normally porches are used to partially illuminate the ornately sculpted interiors. The main shrine inside is entered through a heavily decorated doorway, where a moonstone and high threshold mark the transition into the *garbhagrha*, creating both a physical and psychological demarcation for the visitor. The *garbhagrha* icon is that of Vishnu Chaturmurti, who has a human face on the front or east, a lion's face on the south, a boar's face on the north, and a demon's face on the west. Iconographically, it is comparable to its Kashmiri counterparts.

Before the final *darsan* of the enshrined god, the devotee has encountered a barrage of sculpted forms. Unlike the earlier temples, the Chandella temples are lavishly sculpted both inside and out. Around the exterior of the plinth, the devotee is greeted by the scenes of daily life, war, and love. These reliefs represent



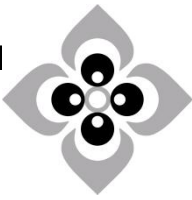
the external world—the world of form (*rupa*). Some of these scenes might depict actual historical events of the Candella period.

Once the devotee climbs up onto the plinth (*jagati*), s/he meets an array of figures adorning the exterior of the temple. The scheme is highly ordered according to vertical and horizontal divisions, with sculpted ground lines defining the positions of the individual figures. Major icons are placed in niches located directly under each porch of the temple, punctuating the *ardhamandapa*, *mandapa*, *mahamandapa*, and the sides of the shrine and emphasising each element of the whole as the devotee circumambulates the temple. Here, a clockwise direction is indicated by the placement of Ganesa on the south and Durga on the north. The very active poses of the figures on the exterior of the temple provide a feeling of movement and change, although strictly controlled by the rigidity of the architectural scheme.

A large and ambitious project, such as the Lakshmana temple, would certainly have taken longer, but still, it may be assumed that work proceeded at a rapid pace with great numbers of workmen carrying out the tasks.

Kandariya Mahadeva Temple

The largest, tallest and most ambitious of all the surviving temples at the temple site of Khajuraho is Kandariya Mahadeva. It is dedicated to Shiva, who is represented in the form of linga in *garbhagrha*. It may have been erected by Vidyadhara, who ruled from around 1017 to 1029 A.D., and was, according to the Muslim chronicler Ibn ul-Athir, the most powerful Indic ruler of his time. Chronologically, the structure represents one of the last major achievements of the Chandellas, because after Vidyadhara, whose rule was threatened by other Rajput clans as well as the Muslims, the line was weakened.



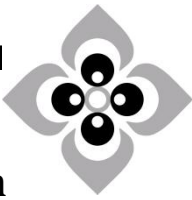
The Kandariya Mahadeva temple shares a high plinth with two other temples, a much ruined and heavily restored small shrine called the Mahadeva temple and the Devi Jagadamba temple, which originally may have been dedicated to Vishnu. This temple group possibly represents a syncretistic ideal, though the imposing nature of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple emphasises the Saivite aspect.

The emphasis on height and verticality, in the temples of Khajuraho, is suggested by the steep plinth, staircases, and tall *sikharas*, but nowhere it is more perfectly portrayed than in the Kandariya Mahadeva temple, whose *sikhara* rises over thirty meters above the level of the *jagati*. Its profile, thus, epitomises the symbol of the temple as mountain.

Like the Lakshmana temple, the Kandariya Mahadeva temple is also cruciform in plan, though its plan shows a greater sense of mass—leaving less space in the interior.

There are over six hundred sculptures on the exterior and two hundred on the interior. Sculpture now completely dominates the architectural form. Even though all the carvings are strictly relegated to precise locations on the monument, the effect of the sculpture is more overwhelming. Posed in accentuated postures, twisting and turning in space, the figures embody great movement and dynamism. The hardening of facial features, elaboration of jewellery and headdresses, and deeper carving reaches its final form at this monument. Indeed, the pantheon carved on the walls of this monument represents the culmination of a style in Hindu temple art that is traceable from the Gupta period.

The Kandariya Mahadeva temple is approximately contemporary to other major monuments such as Rajarajeshvara temple at Tanjore, the Lingaraja temple at Bhubanesvara, and the Sun



temple at Modhera. Like them, it too represents the climax of an important regional variant of Hindu architecture.

Erotic Imagery and the Sacred Program

An intriguing aspect of the sculptural program at Khajuraho is the profusion of *mithunas* (amorous couples) and sexually explicit figures adorning the walls of the temples. These figures too, like the Sun temple at Konarak, have received much attention. Many a times their purpose and meaning has been studied out of context. These figures of both men and women are long-limbed, slender, and sensuous. Their eyes are elongated, limbs are smooth, jewelry is elaborate and abundant and their long hair is styled in a great variety of ways. It is clear that Chandella sculptures are marked by an increased complexity of form and iconography as well as an ambitiousness of scheme that represents the culmination of trends that had been developing for centuries. The sculptor's art had clearly reached a stage of great fluency and perfection. Yet we do not know anything about the sculptors who worked on the temples. We can assume that, like elsewhere in ancient and medieval India, a workshop system was in effect and an entire guild worked jointly on each temple. In such a scenario, individual names were considered somewhat irrelevant.

Numerous myths exist regarding the meaning and purpose of the erotic sculptures. Despite abundance of academic explorations, questions on the purpose and significance of these sculptures still remain unanswered.

Some opine that the Chandella rulers were followers of a Tantric cult which believed sexual gratification to be an essential part of spiritual attainment, and the sculptures are reflecting this thought. Others bank on mythological stories such as Moon god ascending to earth to be with the woman he had fallen in love with, and the sculptures to be telling the story of their courtship.



Chadravarman, the founder of Chandella dynasty, is said to be the offspring of this courtship. Scholars like Shobita Punja sanctify the sculptures by proclaiming that they depict scenes from the wedding night of Shiva and Parvati, as the entire universe was celebrating their union. While some are preposterous and claim that the temples were built in four days by a divine architect, others claim that the sculptures were carved to arouse sexual desires among the dwindling populations of Jains and Hindus in the area.

One of the theories that several scholars have proposed—that the Chandella rulers were followers of tantric traditions, and built the temples to propagate the principles and beliefs of the sect (right-handed [*dakshina*] tantra) they were following—seems to be the most plausible. Moreover, the timing of these temples' construction coincides with the rise of several tantric sects in central India. Tantrics believed in the removal of distinction between good and evil. Their philosophy teaches that one should not be perturbed in their pursuit of God despite abundance of sexual arousal in their vicinity; hence, the presence of abundant erotic sculptures. The sculpted love imagery on the walls of the temples may also be interpreted as the substitute for the physical performance of sexual rituals by the right-handed tantrics, whether followers of the Vaishnava Pancharatra system or the Shaiva Siddhanta systems—ideologies underlying the Lakshmana and the Kandariya Mahadeo temples.

In ancient and medieval India, sexuality and love were not treated as private and personal matters; rather, sexuality was a valued attribute of a leader or monarch, which should be celebrated in official charters and inscriptions. It was required from a ruler that he strike a balance between sexual vitality, which implied imperial power, and control of the senses, which spoke of yogic power. According to Devangana Desai, it is in this context that the Khajuraho temples and their erotic imagery must be examined. She contends that erotic sculptures around places of worship of



any society would require an explanation and clearly any assessment of erotic temple imagery will have to take into account the sacred programs and religious functions of the shrines as well as the cultural milieu.

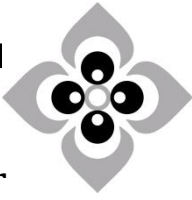
One of her arguments is the location of the most explicit scenes, which are invariably carved on the *antarala* (vestibule), the transitional zone separating the outer part of the temple and the inner sanctum. She points out that ancient *silpa* (art) texts written for practicing architects and sculptors, speak of the sanctum as the bridegroom and the main hall as the bride and refer to the juncture wall between them as the *milana-sthala*, or meeting-place. According to her it is on the exterior of these juncture walls of the Khajuraho temples that we find the erotic imagery. It was here at the very center of this joining wall that the temple builders carved a panel of entwined couples, positioned on two or three levels according to the scale of the temple.

An excellent explanation of eroticism in the context of temples has also been given by Bettina Boner, who says that in the search for the Truth, *kama* (physical desire) could be transformed into *prema* (love), the self-surrender that cannot be achieved by denial but only through transformation and sublimation. Thus, the *mithunas* ((amorous couples) would represent both the union and the transformation.

Conclusion

This episode has made clear the political history of the Chandella dynasty. The episode also focussed on the architectural style of the Chandella temples—built by them at their religious capital city, Khajuraho.

We also noted how the erotic imagery on the temple walls can be read on a number of levels, depending perhaps on the level of



cultural and spiritual sophistication of the viewer. *Mithunas*, or loving couples, stood for growth, abundance, and prosperity and were an auspicious and accepted decoration on temple walls. They also made reference to *kama*, one of the four goals of life in ancient India. Erotically entwined "joining" images were placed on the *antarala* walls i.e. the wall that connects the *garbhagriha* and the *mahamandapa*. If the sanctum is likened to the bridegroom, and the hall to the bride, the artists were quite successful in creating both a visual as well as architectural pun.