

THE RELIGIOUS IMAGERY  
OF  
KHAJURAHO

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## VII. Puns and Enigmatic Language in Sculpture

### INTRODUCTORY

**T**he knowledge of words and their multiple meanings was important to the Khajuraho artists, whether poets or sculptors. They displayed their love of puns or *double entendres* (*ślesha*) in both written and visual language. Allegory was also their favourite mode of expression. If we recognize that the Khajuraho artists often expressed themselves through double-meaning language, we may not err in taking them literally, at face value, but try to discover a deeper meaning in their work and design. Perhaps then we will be able to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding erotic and divine sculptures.

Though *ślesha* was employed as far back as the 2nd century A.D. by the poet Aśvaghosha, and its profuse use was favoured in the 6th-7th century works of Subandhu and Bāṇa, it is during the 10th-11th century, when the Khajuraho temples were built, that we come across entire poems, *ślesha-kāvya*s, written in such a way as to read the words with two or more meanings.<sup>1</sup> Two or three stories are simultaneously narrated covering, for instance, themes of Rāma, Kṛishṇa and the ruling monarch. There are also erotic-ascetic poems using the device of punning simultaneously to convey love and renunciation. One of the best-known *dvi-sandhāna* (two-fold) poems is

Hemachandra's *Kumārapālacharita*, also called *Dvyāśraya-Kāvya*, a poem with two intentions: (i) presentation of an account of King Kumārapāla of Gujarat and his predecessors, (ii) illustration of the rules of grammar.<sup>2</sup> The study of grammar and words (*śabdānuśāsana*) received tremendous importance so as to enable display of *Alaṅkāra* (figures of speech) in literature. Special works were written on *Alaṅkāra*, dealing with different figures of speech, including *ślesha*. We can understand in this context why even a religious treatise like the *Agni Purāṇa* (c. A.D. 900), which prescribes rules on image making and temple building among its numerous topics, has special chapters on *Alaṅkāra* and grammar.

### PUNS IN INSCRIPTIONS AND SCULPTURES

Against this background it is interesting to read the Lakshmaṇa temple's inscription (A.D. 954) which specifically mentions (lines 47, 48) that its scribe had studied the Sanskrit language. Its poet Mādhava proudly calls himself the son of a grammarian (*śabdānuśāsana-vidu*). The poet Rāma who composed the eulogy of the Viśvanātha temple (A.D. 999) mentions that his grandfather Nandana was also a poet and he was of the Śabara lineage. The inscriptions of both these major temples of Khajuraho are replete with puns. In fact many verses of the Viśvanātha



185. Surasundarī disrobing on account of a scorpion (=kharjūra). Significantly, the word kharjūra is also related to the town's name Kharjūravāhaka. On the left is the Dikpāla Indra with his elephant mount.

temple inscription can be read in two ways. For instance, punning on the word *dvija* = bird = twice-born, i.e. *brāhmaṇa*, the inscription (verse 33) reads:

“Śibi only gave a piece of flesh to the single bird (*dvija*) who begged it, but the king (Yaśovarman) bestowed millions on all who asked.”

Another verse (43), which C. Sivaramamurti<sup>3</sup> cites as an example of *ślesha*, reads two ways like the *Dvyāśraya-Kāvya*:

“Worshipping Kṛishṇa (the joy of Yaśodā), that best of men, the pure-famed one, born in a fierce race, the destroyer of the joy of the enemy, waged wars”, or

“Like Kṛishṇa, who respecting Yaśodā and Nanda, brought about the destruction of Pūtānā, and who, born in the Vṛishṇi race, annihilated the enemy Kāmsa.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of the love of puns among the Khajuraho artists and their patrons, it seems that the word “Kharjūra-vāhaka”, the ancient name of Khajuraho, mentioned for the first time in Dhaṅgadeva's Viśvanātha temple inscription, had two meanings. The well known meaning of the word “*kharjūra*” is date-palm tree, and “*vāhaka*” means a carrier or bearer. So “*kharjūra-vāhaka*” can mean “date-palm bearer”; a later legend noted by Cunningham (*ASIR*, XXI, p. 55) associates the town with two golden *kharjūra* trees at its gate. But the word “*kharjūra*” also means a scorpion, and “*kharjūra-vāhaka*” could mean “scorpion-bearer”. Now, Śiva in his Aghora (fierce) aspect wears a garland of scorpions, as described in texts such as the *Aparājītaprihchhā* (212, 15) and the *Rūpamaṇḍana* (IV, 6). So “*kharjūra-vāhaka*” can be taken as an epithet of Śiva. Often the town and localities are named after the protector divinities, for instance, Mumbai (Bombay) from Mumbā Devī, Calcutta from Kālī, Baramula (Varāhamūla) from Varāha, etc. We wonder whether the town “Kharjūra-vāhaka” derived its name from Śiva-Bhairava as Kharjūra-vāhaka or Kshetrapāla Kharjūra-vāhaka who guarded the town.

Significantly, there are numerous *surasundarīs* or *apsarās* at Khajuraho with scorpions on their legs (Ph. 185). No other site has so many such *surasundarīs* as Khajuraho. These female figures represent a fertility theme in a subtle manner – they expose themselves on the pretext of removing a scorpion. Exposure of nudity was a powerful rain-making charm.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as the artists were fond of punning, these *kharjūra*-bearing female figures could be associated with the name of the town Kharjūra-vāhaka.

The pivotal image of Khajuraho's Śaiva system, as mentioned in Chapter III, is Sadāśiva, the manifest-unmanifest (*sakala-nishkala*) aspect of Śiva who presides over the five elements. Among the Sadāśiva images of Khajuraho, two are unique.<sup>6</sup> One has been

placed in an important niche of the *mahāmaṇḍapa* of the Kandariyā Mahādeva temple (Ph. 161), and the other, larger in size, with the name "Sadāśiva" inscribed on it is in the Site Museum (Frontispiece, Ph. 57). These Sadāśiva images are unique in having six visible heads topped by a *liṅga*, twelve arms and four legs – *chatuṣpādas*. Two of the legs are in *padmāsana*, and the other two hang down. Iconographically these Sadāśiva images are extraordinary and so far cannot be traced to any texts. The *Rūpamaṇḍana* (IV, 23-24), a 14th century text from Malwa, has a description that is somewhat similar. However, it too does not mention four legs of Sadāśiva.

But if we recognize a pun on *chatuṣpādas* (= four legs or four parts), we get a clue to the religion of Khajuraho also. The Śaiva Siddhānta sect prevalent in central and southern India from the 9th century A.D.<sup>7</sup> has its texts divided into four *pādas* or parts, viz. *jñāna-pāda*, *charyā-pāda*, *kriyā-pāda* and *yoga-pāda*, dealing respectively with knowledge, daily rituals, methods of worship, and *yoga* which teaches meditation. The *Sarvadarśana Saṅgraha* of the early 14th century, which discusses various philosophical and religious movements of the period, describes this Śaiva system as *chatuṣpādamaḥātantram*. Thus the four legs of Sadāśiva refer to the four *pādas* of the Śaiva system. The two legs in *padmāsana* possibly refer to *yoga* and *jñāna pādas*, while those hanging down suggest *kriyā* and *charyā pādas*.<sup>8</sup>

Double meanings can be read in the benedictory verse to Śiva in the Vaidyanātha temple inscription of A.D. 1001 (*Ep Ind*, Vol. I, pp. 147-152): "I bow to the adorable coil of matted hair carried by the handsome Vaidyanātha, (hair) which is irradiated by the expanding terrible hoods of a multitude of hissing broad serpents, hair marked with the *half-Moon* which is excessively shining, more brilliantly than the *Sun*, and yellowish when in contact with the line of flames of *Fire* issuing forth from the tremulous eye." (italics mine)

The reference to the Moon, Sun and Fire points to the Kuṇḍalinī symbolism<sup>9</sup> of *iḍā*

(= *apāna*=Moon), *piṅgalā* (= *prāṇa*=Sun), and the heat of fire of Kuṇḍalinī energy rising in the central *nāḍī* (subtle vein) *sushumṇā*. Śiva is called in the inscription *Sarva-Eka-Kāraṇa-Pati*, the Lord who is the Cause (*Kāraṇa*). Pati (Lord Śiva) is endowed with Śaktis: *Kriyā* (activity), *Jñāna* (knowledge) and *Ichchhā* (will). Sadāśiva, according to the *Īśānaśivagurudeva-paddhati* (III, xii, 31; xiii, 67; xiv, 8) is meditated upon as having *Jñāna*, *Ichchhā* and *Kriyā Śaktis* as his three eyes.

The artist of the Lakshmaṇa temple has employed a pun in his interpretation of the mount of the planet Budha (Mercury). This planet is described as *sarpāsana*, having a snake as his mount, in the texts *Aparājitapṛichchhā* (214, 17) and the *Rūpamaṇḍana* (II, 2). But the artist has shown an elephant as his mount (Ph. 147). This can be understood, if we recognize that he has punned on the equivalent word for *sarpa*, viz. *nāga*, which means a serpent as well as an elephant.

There is a pun on "Ādinātha" in the sculptural representation of the Devī Jagadambā and Viśvanātha temples. Amidst the figures of Siddha-like saints on the *rājasenaka* row of this temple we find a representation of the Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Ādinātha (Ph. 81), the only Jaina image on the Hindu temples. It possibly suggests by way of a pun on the word "Ādinātha", the first teacher Ādinātha, the guru of the Mahāsiddha Matsyendraṇāth.

A significant punning on the word "*digambara*" in a verse of the Viśvanātha temple inscription and in the sculptures of the Lakshmaṇa temple gives further insight into the minds of the Khajuraho artists. The word "*digambara*", *dig+ambara*, means sky-clad or naked, which is an epithet of Śiva and also applies to the Jaina Kshapaṇaka monk. The benedictory verse of the inscription is in the form of a humorous dialogue between Śiva and his wife Pārvatī, in which she intentionally confuses "Śiva-Digambara" with "Kshapaṇaka-Digambara", the nude Jaina monk.

"Who is at the door?" (Pārvatī asks)  
"Digambara". (Śiva replies)

(62)

"Why suddenly Kshapaṇaka?"

"O girl (*bāle*), I am Śuladhara."

"Fie upon this use of the weapon.

You deserve to carry *barha* (peacock-tail feathers)."

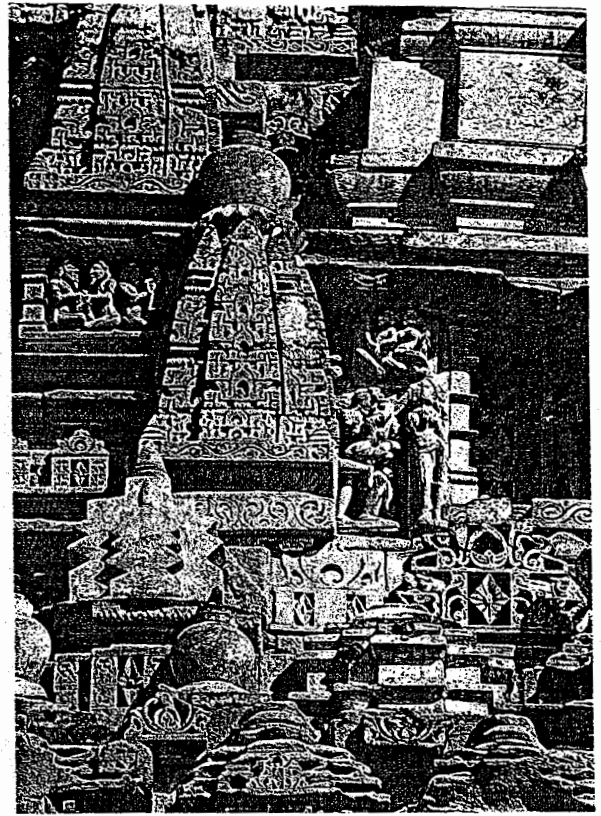
"Know me to be Maheśvara (lit. great lord, sovereign)."

"It is obvious (that you are Maheśvara) by the absence of clothes."

"May the laughter of Śambhu who was teased by his beloved, be for your welfare (*śubha*)."

### JUNCTURES AND DOUBLE MEANINGS

The *sūtradhāras* (architects) of the Khajuraho temples saw an apt place for punning in the architectural part called the *kapilī* (*sandhi-kshetra, kolikā*), which joins the *mahāmaṇḍapa* (large hall) with the *garbhagriha* (womb-house, sanctum), particularly of the *sāndhāra* temples. The Khajuraho temples can be divided into two broad groups on the basis of their plans: (1) *sāndhāra*, with a built-in circumambulation path around the *garbhagriha* (Fig. 17), and (2) *nirandhāra*, without this ambulatory (Fig. 18). Of the four *sāndhāra* temples at Khajuraho, three are Hindu, and one Jaina. When we examine the ground plans of the three Hindu *sāndhāra* temples, viz. the Lakshmaṇa (A.D. 954), the Viśvanātha (A.D. 999) and the Kandariyā (about A.D. 1030), we can see that the two equal squares of the hall and the sanctum are interlocked, forming a common portion in the *kapilī* or juncture wall. However, the Jaina *sāndhāra* temple, viz. Pārśvanātha (c. A.D. 950-970), has a different ground plan in which there is no interlocking of two equal squares of the hall and the sanctum. The architect has placed one couple on each side, north and south, of the juncture of superstructures of the hall and the sanctum (Ph. 186). Similarly, the *nirandhāra* temples such as the Devī Jagadambā, Chitragupta and Vāmana do not have two equal squares of the hall and sanctum interlocking to form a common wall portion in the *kapilī*. Here the architect has not displayed human couples but has placed single images of deities (Ph. 187).



186. A couple placed on the juncture of the superstructures of the hall and the sanctum, Pārśvanātha temple.

So it becomes clear that it is only the juncture wall of the three major Hindu *sāndhāra* temples where two equal squares of the hall and the sanctum overlap, which can be taken from the side of the hall as well as from the side of the sanctum (as in a pun), "which is here also and there also", that the Khajuraho architects found an appropriate place for employing puns and double-meaning language (Ph. 188). Referring to junctures of time and space Bettina Baumer writes: "These junctures are sensitive and important moments or spaces of transition, taking characteristics from both sides, at the same time separating, thus differentiating the two and uniting them, partly overlapping."<sup>10</sup>

On architectural junctures the Khajuraho architects have employed puns (*ślesha*) by placing human figures in conjunction. It is important for us to note that the dictionary meaning of the Sanskrit word *ślesha*, apart from pun, is "clinging or adhering to, connection, junction, union (also applied to sexual union), embracing." Michael Meister, drawing attention to the punning on the juncture wall (*kapilī*) of

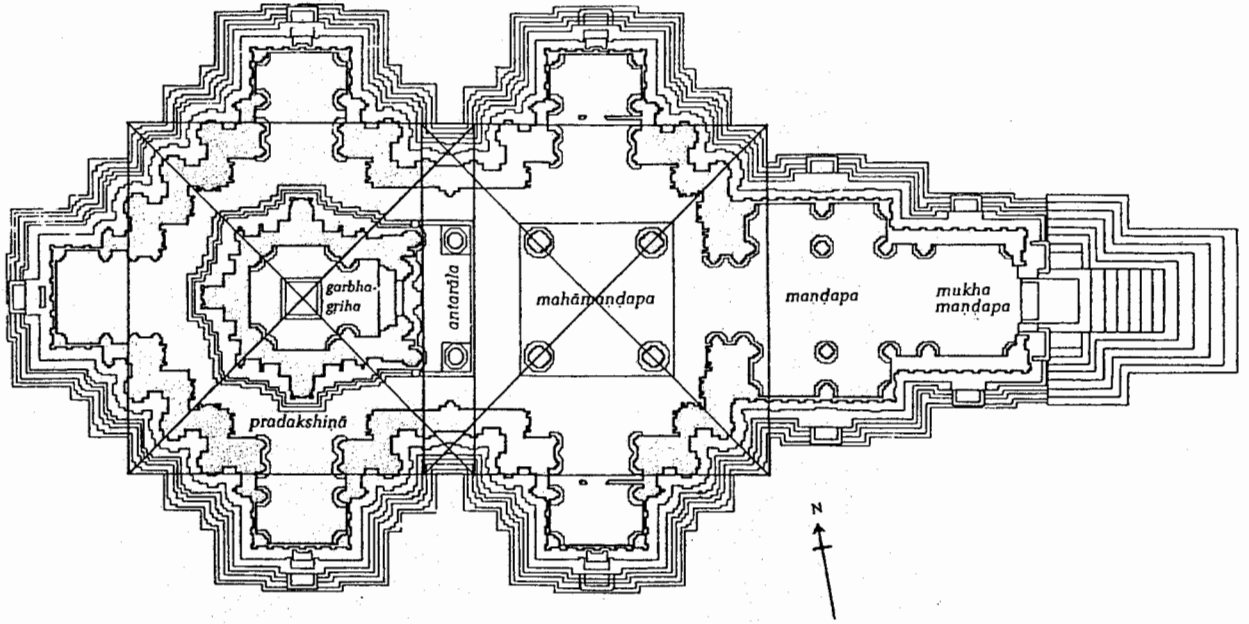


Fig. 17. Plan of the sândhâra temple, (Kandariyâ Mahâdeva), Khajuraho (After ASI)

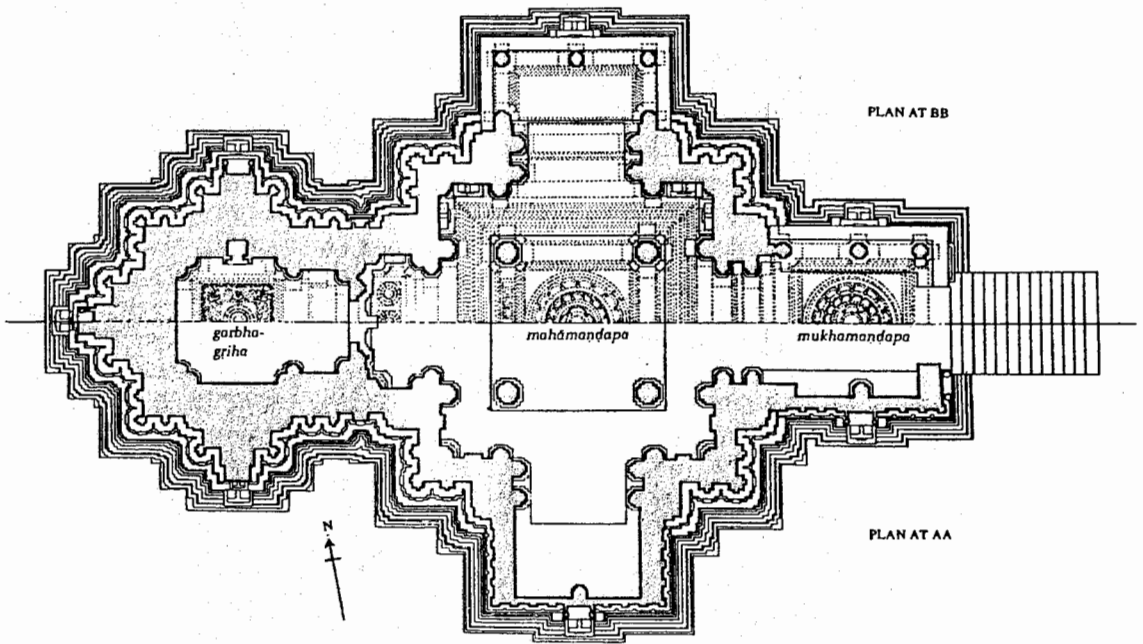
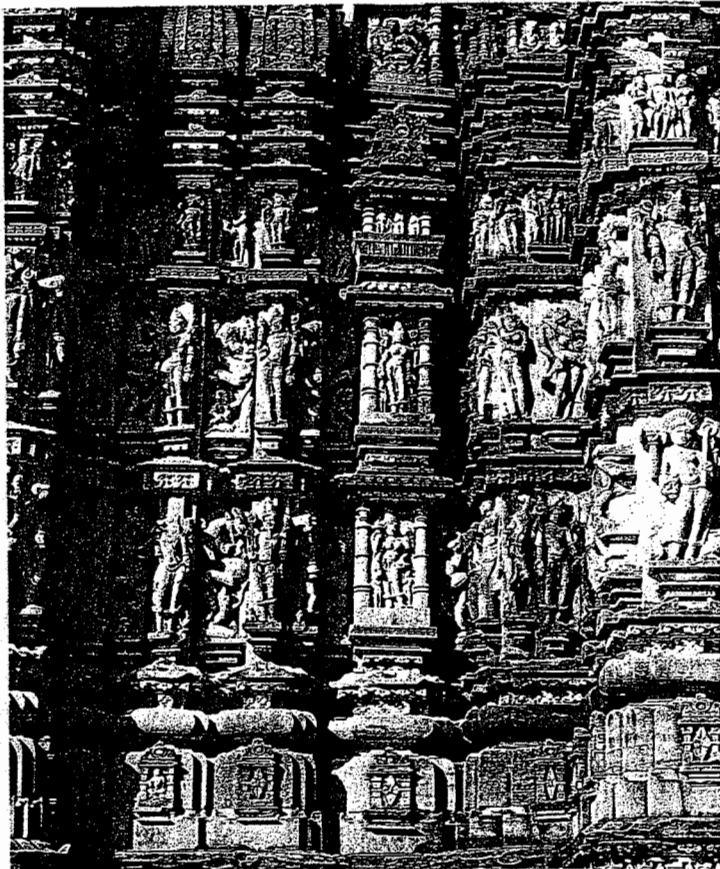
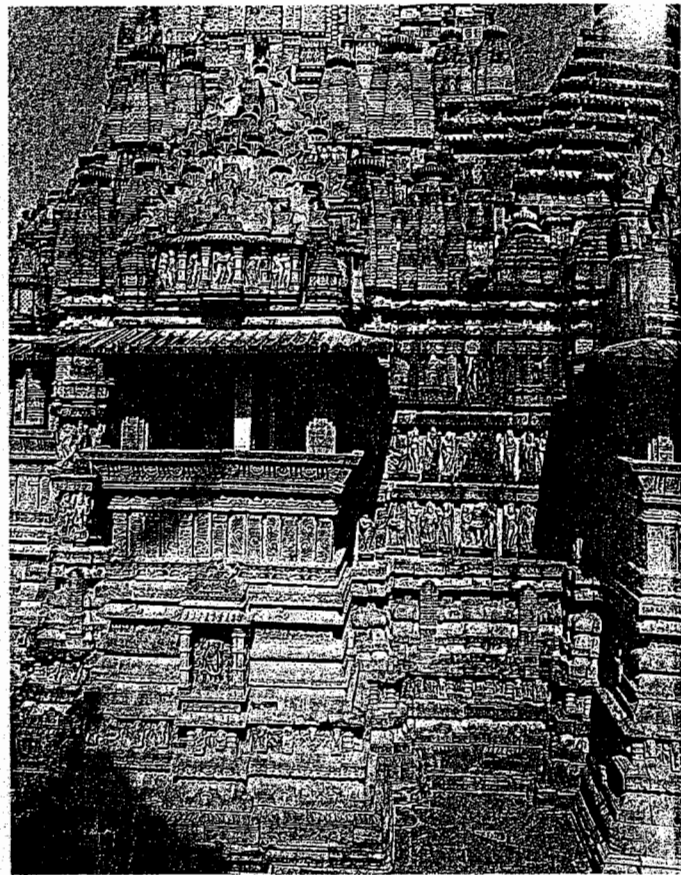


Fig. 18. Plan of the nirandhâra temple, (Devî Jagadambâ), Khajuraho (Courtesy: ASI)



187. Single images of deities on the juncture wall of the nirandhāra temple Devī Jagadambā.



188. Group sculptures on the juncture wall of the sāndhāra Lakshmaṇa temple, south side. The architect of this sāndhāra temple has created space to accommodate sculptural panels with four figures. It is the space common to both the sanctum and the mahāmaṇḍapa (see Fig. 17) where he employs two-fold, *dvisandhāna*, language.

Khajuraho temples, says: "It may seem facetious to suggest that placement of scenes of ritual copulation on walls which functionally are walls of architectural conjunction was an intentional pun, yet the iconography of certain images both at Khajuraho and on earlier temples would suggest that such a conjoining of meanings was indeed the case." Meister brings to our notice an earlier example at Chittodgadh, where architects have placed on the *kapilī* conjoint images of deities, viz. Śiva-Pārvatī (Ardhanārīśvara), and Śiva-Vishṇu (Hari-Hara) on double lotuses "one for each foot and therefore one for each of the two deities conjoined."<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that the depiction of erotic figures was restricted to the *kapilī* walls of the temples. The Khajuraho architects have assigned various places in the temple's sculptural scheme to the erotic motif, considered to be auspicious and magico-protective: the door-jambes of the shrine (Phs. 1, 5), *narathara* row of the plinth, small niches flanking the Mātrikās on the *vedibandha* of the two Śiva temples (Ph. 177), projections and recesses of the *jaṅghā* (Phs. 2, 151, 169), niches of the *śikhara*, and so forth.<sup>12</sup> But hardly any punning can be noticed in their depiction of the erotic motif in these parts of the temples. It is the juncture, *sandhi-kshetra*, of the hall and the

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sanctum of the *sāndhāra* temples that seems to have been considered an appropriate space for the employment of *dvi-sandhāna* or two-fold language.

### Juncture Wall of the Lakshmaṇa Temple

The architect of the Lakshmaṇa temple has very consciously expressed on the juncture wall the union of the sanctum and the hall by actually replicating in miniature form the joining of the two units, one with curvilinear *śikhara* representing the sanctum and the other with a pyramidal roof, standing for the hall, (Phs. 189, 190). He has placed on the south side of the juncture a four-armed ascetic god with *jaṭā*, and on the north side a two-armed ascetic with *jaṭā*. To these crucial figures we shall return later.

The idea of placing conjoint figures on architectural junctures was first conceived at Khajuraho by the architect of the Lakshmaṇa temple. The temple is dedicated to Vaikuṇṭha-Vishṇu, a conjoint form of Varāha, Narasimha, Saumya (placid) and Kapila<sup>23</sup> aspects of Vishṇu. The inscription of the temple states in its verse that Vaikuṇṭha assumed the conjoint form to kill the three terrible *asuras* (demons) "who possessed one body" and were difficult to destroy. They could be killed only by an identical conjoint form. This verse embodies the belief in the magical power of conjoint bodies. A similar belief is also associated with Narasimha, who kills the demon-king Hiranyaśipu with the conjoint body of man and lion on the threshold which is "neither here nor there" and at the time when there was "neither day nor night", that is *sandhyā*, twilight.

The Lakshmaṇa temple's architect not only puts conjoint (*sandhi*) figures, i.e. erotic figures on the architectural juncture (Phs. 191, 192) and puns thereby, but he also puns on "*digambara*" by placing the sculptural figure of a naked Kshapaṇaka monk with *pichchhakā* (peacock-feathered stick) in his hand exactly on the row bearing Śiva images on the buttresses. By placing a Digambara-Kshapaṇaka figure on the row associated with Śiva, the artist is referring to Śiva's epithet "*digambara*", quoted by us earlier from the Viśvanātha temple inscription.

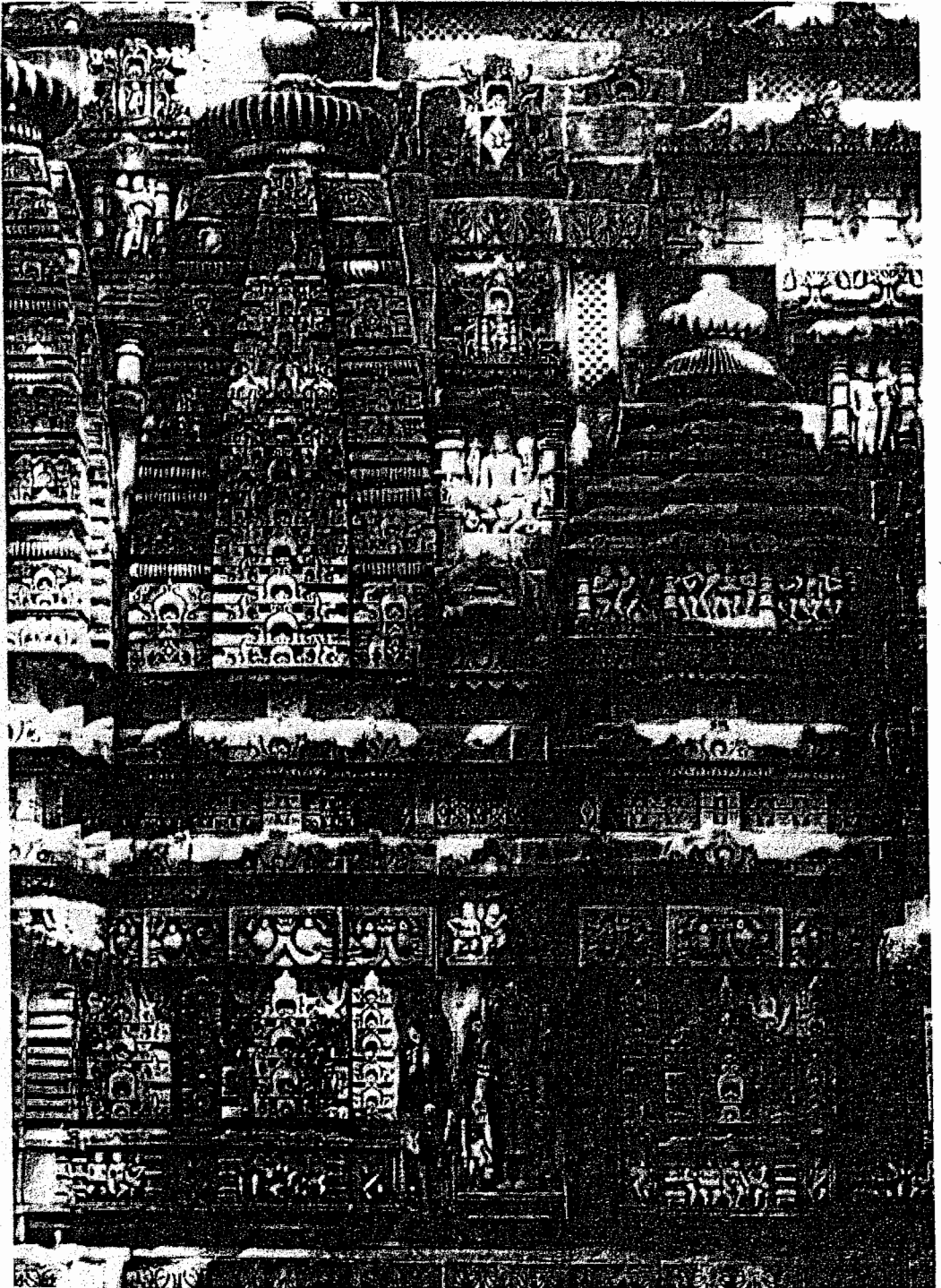
He has represented a Digambara figure on both the south and north juncture walls of the temple.

### Interpretation in the Light of the Prabodhachandrodaya

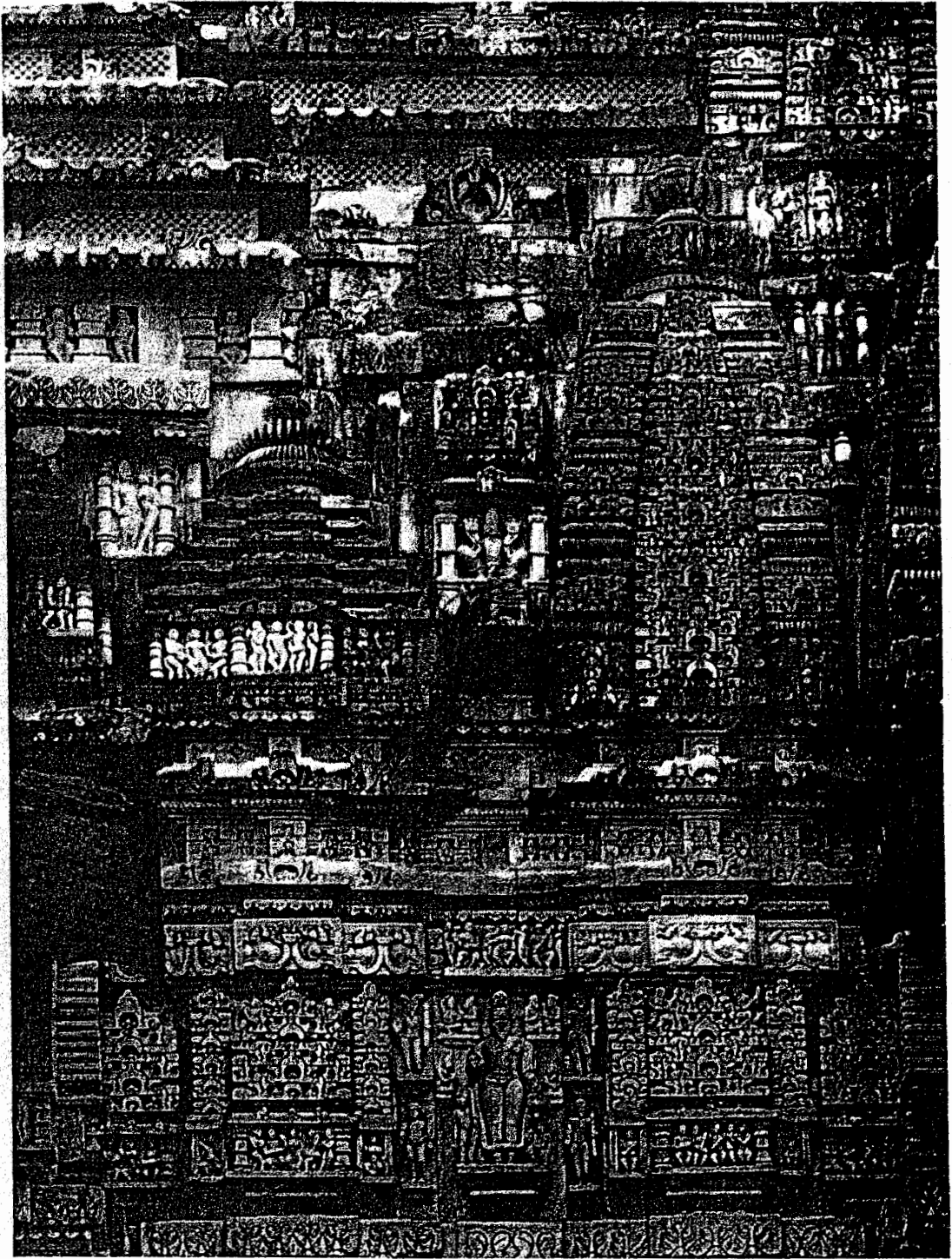
But in addition to the use of the pun (*ślesha*), the architect of the Lakshmaṇa temple seems to have presented the characters of an allegory, the play *Prabodhachandrodaya* or its prototype (see Appendix C) on the juncture wall. To put it briefly, the *Prabodhachandrodaya* (Moon-rise of True Knowledge), written by Kṛishṇa Mīśra, is a philosophical allegory in six acts combining the Advaita doctrine and Vishṇu Bhakti (Devotion to Vishṇu). In the play the forces of orthodox religion based on Vedic order unite to re-establish the ancient order against those non-Vedic heretical forces which had earlier gained ascendancy. This theme has been presented in the play in the form of a contest between the royal forces (*rājakulas*) of King Viveka (Discrimination) and King Mahāmoha (Great Delusion) (see Table V). The battleground is the town of Vārānasi where King Mahāmoha has spread his influence through his allies, namely the Kāpālika, the materialist Chārvāka, the Jaina Kshapaṇaka, the Buddhist Bhikshu of the Vajrayāna sect, and through personified mental tendencies such as Dambha (Deceit), Ahaṁkāra (Egoism), Mithyādṛiṣṭi (Heresy), etc. King Viveka's allies are Mati (Reason), Śānti (Peace), Sarasvatī (Goddess of Learning), Vishṇu-Bhakti, etc. These allies seek to bring about the union of Viveka and his estranged wife Upanishad — a union which leads to the birth of Prabodha (Awakening) and Vidyā (Knowledge). Vidyā, conceived of as a Yoginī, dissolves the forces of Mahāmoha. Puruśha who was deluded by the powers of Mahāmoha and had forgotten his identity with Parameśvara (Supreme Being) becomes aware of his true self with the birth of Prabodha.

The architect of this temple has a well-planned scheme of two sculptural bands, the lower with images of Śiva on the buttresses and similarly the upper with images of Vishṇu. On the lower band of *kapilī* wall he has placed a royal pair in an erotic attitude and a Kshapaṇaka



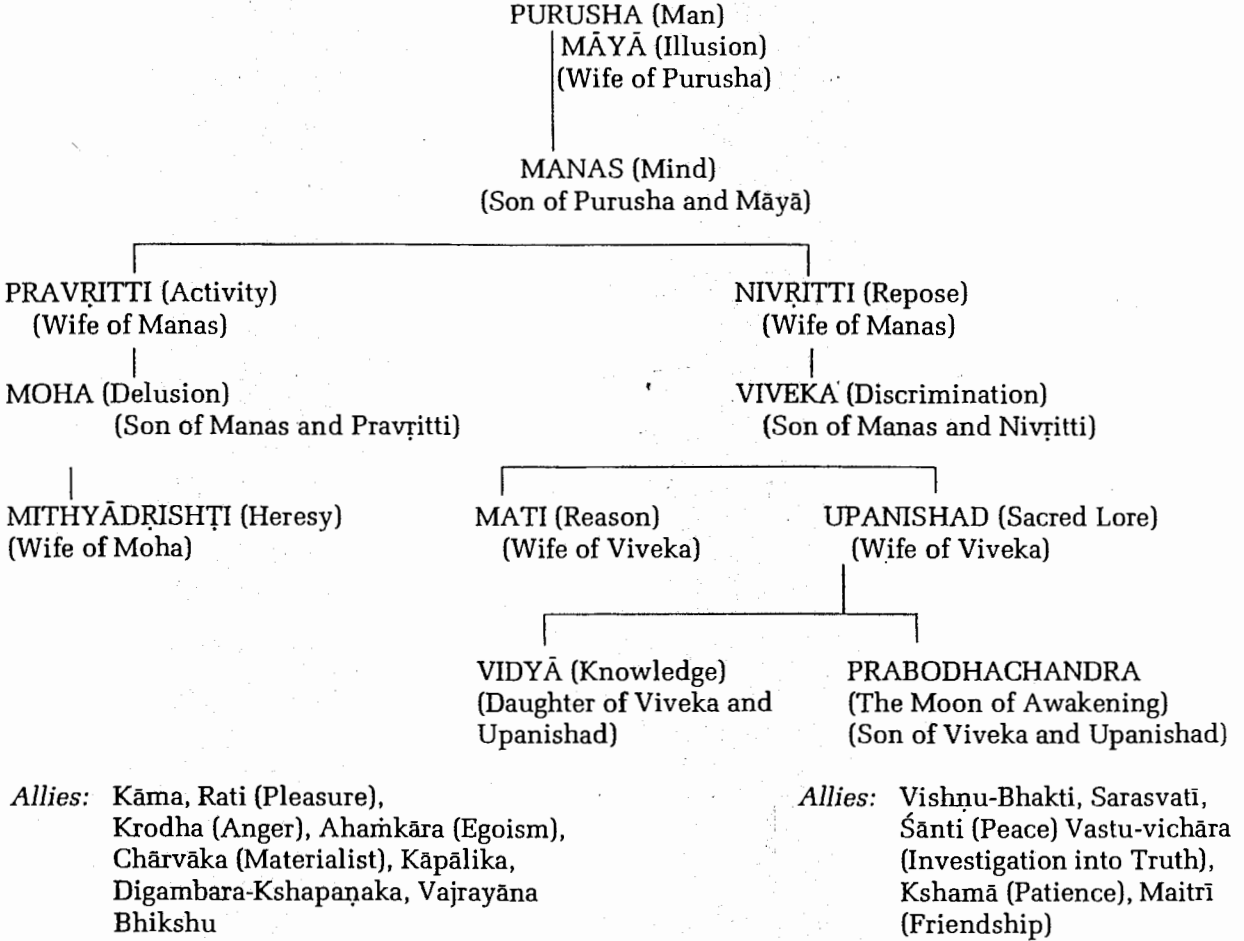


189. Detail of Ph. 188. Miniature representation of the joining of the two units: the sanctum having curvilinear roof and the hall having pyramidal roof. Above the water chute we see garuḍāsana Viṣṇu, and below at the wall level a figure of Agni.



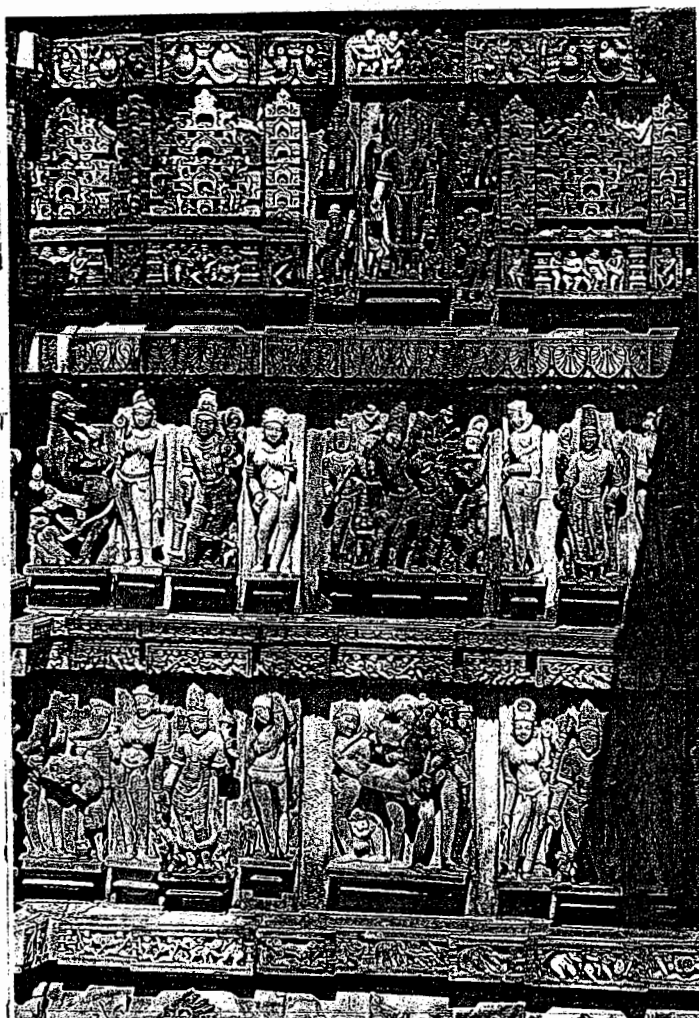
190. 'Matching design on the north juncture, Lakshmana temple. The placement of couples, dancing figures, kirtimukha and other decorative motifs correspond to their southern counterpart of Ph. 189. Sūrya, positioned above the water-chute, is paired with garuḍāsana Viṣṇu, and Muni (ascetic) with Agni of the south juncture. Today, with the aid of photography we can discern the almost exact complementary patterns of the south and north junctures which the architect has so meticulously and intentionally worked out.

Table V

Characters of the Allegorical Play *Prabodhachandrodaya*

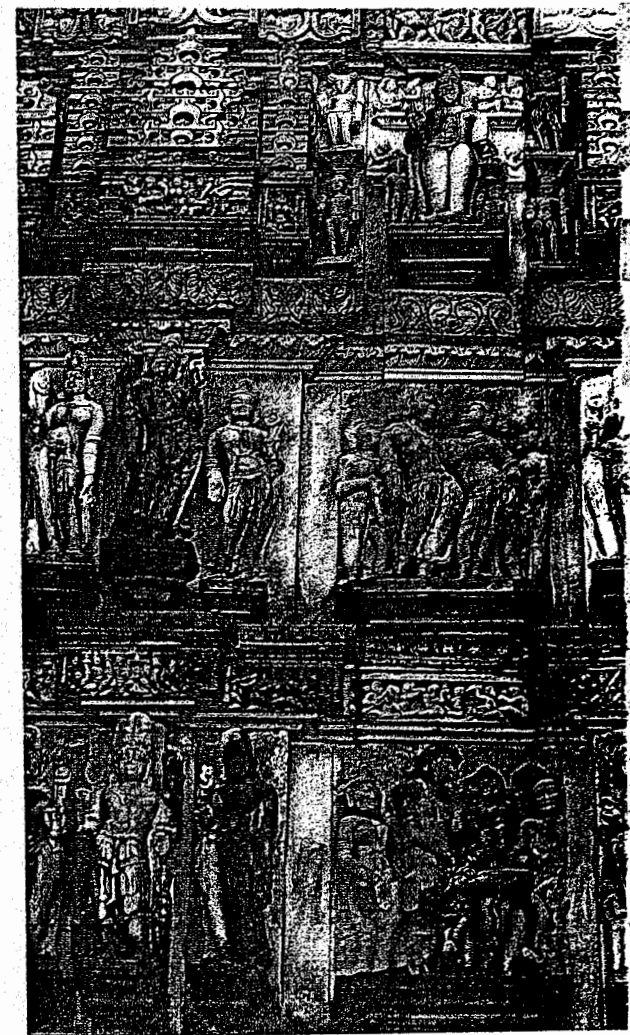
monk on the left (Phs. 191, 192). This group reminds us of King Mahāmoha and his beloved Mithyādrishṭī who are shown in an intimate embracing posture which is similar to the description in Act II, verse 35, of the *Prabodhachandrodaya*. Mahāmoha tells Mithyādrishṭī to sit on his knee and embrace him, imitating the sport of Pārvatī seated on the lap of Śaṅkara. The scene on the north juncture wall particularly fits in with the above-noted verse of the play (Ph. 192). Nearby is shown the Digambara-Kshapaṇaka who is their ally in the play.

The architect has contrasted this group by placing on the upper row a dignified Rājāriṣhi (ascetic king) and consort, representing as it were King Viveka and his wife Upanishad. King Viveka had practised penance in order to gain reunion with Upanishad. Their union is celebrated by two female figures playing music (Ph. 193): on the left, the figure playing a *vīṇā* might well represent Sarasvatī who assisted Viṣṇu-Bhakti in bringing about the union of King Viveka and his estranged wife Upanishad.

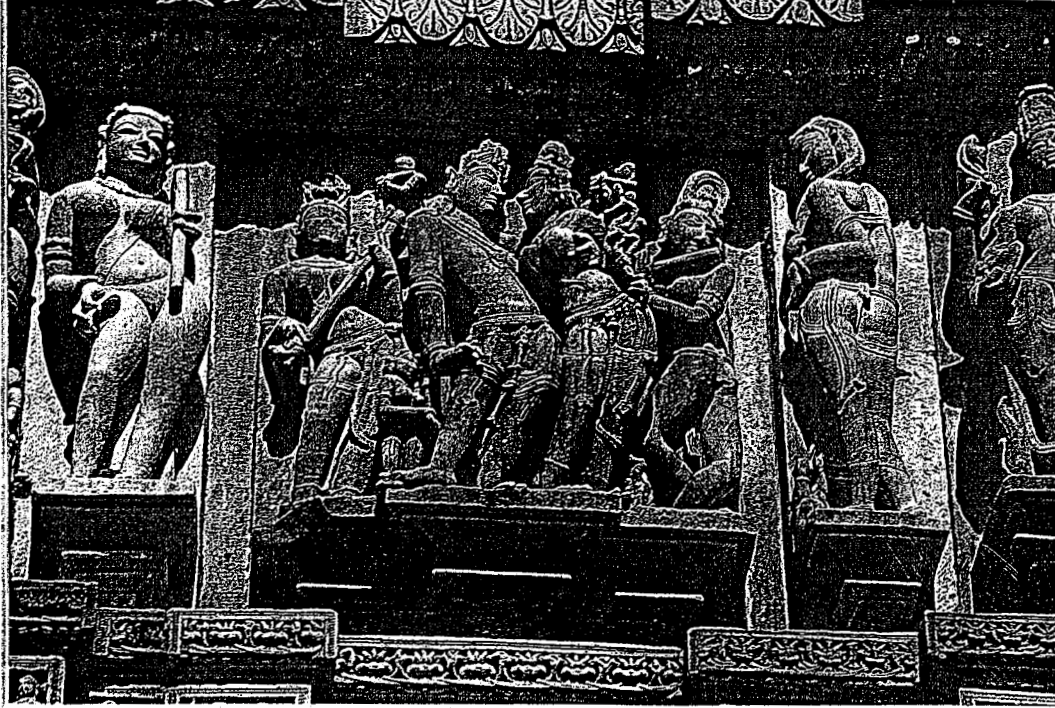


191. The two sculptured groups topped by the ascetic god Agni, south juncture wall, Lakshmana temple. The lower row which has Siva images on the side buttresses displays an erotic couple and a sky-clad Kshapanaka monk. The upper row which has images of Vishnu on the side buttresses has a dignified couple flanked by women playing musical instruments. Like the Sanskrit *dvisandhāna* poems of the period, these sandhi wall panels can be read on two or more levels. One of the interpretations is to see in the two contrasting sculptural panels a symbolic depiction of the two conflicting groups of Discrimination (*Viveka*) and Delusion (*Moha*), a significant theme in Indian religious literature, allegorized into characters of the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhachandrodaya*, which was staged in the Chandella court.

192. The two sculptured groups topped by a figure of an ascetic, north juncture wall, Lakshmana temple. Here also the architect has depicted two groups with contrasting characteristics on the rows associated with Vishnu and with Siva.



It is not merely the contrasting features of the two groups associated respectively with Siva's and Vishnu's rows that strike one as representing the two royal forces of the play. The identification is further supported by two *surasundaris* on the side buttresses. The one near the erotic group on the lower row is arranging her necklace or the upper garment by raising her arm (Ph. 194). There is an almost similar depiction of *Mithyādṛṣṭī* in the *Prabodhachandrodaya* (II, 34) where King Mahāmoha describes her as one who "exhibits sportfully rows of nail-marks on her bosom on the pretext of keeping in place the garland (*mālā*) which has slipped from its place." In sculpture the artist has actually shown



193. The upper panel, south juncture wall, Lakshmana temple. The surasundarī on the right illustrates the motif of Karpūramañjarī known to Vāstu texts. A haṁsa (goose) drinks water dripping from her wet hair. The haṁsa is said to discriminate between water and milk, nīra-kshīra-viveka. The figure is placed near the dignified royal pair (Ph. 191).



194. Surasundarī raising her arm, as if to display the nail-marks on her body. The nail-marks are actually incised by the sculptor. This figure is placed near the erotic group on the lower row, south juncture wall.

nail-marks on her underarm. King Mahāmoha also tells her that she shines like a *śālabhañjī* (statue) on the wall of his mind (II. 37). The imagery suggests the influence of sculptural depiction on literature.

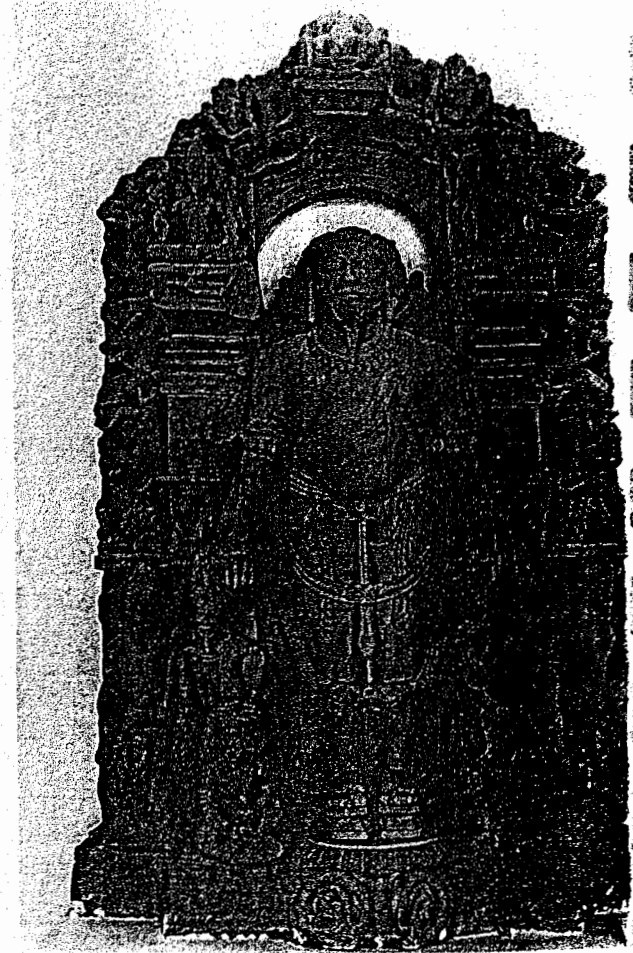
The identification of King Viveka can be further supported by the *surasundarī* with *haṁsa* (goose) on the right buttness (Ph. 193). This beautiful damsel represents the motif of Karpūramañjarī, freshly bathed and arranging her hair. The name "Karpūramañjarī" is given to this type of female figure in the labels of the Kirtistambha at Chittodgadh and in the 15th century western Indian text *Kshīrārṇava*.<sup>14</sup> The water dripping from her hair is drunk by a *haṁsa* seen near her left foot. The *haṁsa* in Indian culture is symbolic of the quality of discrimination (*viveka*). It can discriminate between water and milk (*nīra-kshīra-viveka*).

The artist has thus subtly made a suggestion (*dhvani*) through the figures of Mithyāḍṛiṣṭhī and Karpūramañjarī. These *surasundarīs* as well as *mithunas* observed independently of their context are motifs of Indian temple art. They are auspicious *alāṅkāras* (ornaments) familiar to Indian artists from the 2nd century A.D. onwards. But perceived in configuration and in the context of other sculptural figures they may be seen as part of the plot of the play.



195. The ascetic god Agni, top panel, south juncture, Lakshmana temple. Unlike the Dikpala Agni, the ascetic god does not have a ram mount. He wears kaupina, sandals, and rudraksha-like beads. He is surrounded by lean ascetics. Significantly, Agni occupies a crucial position on the juncture walls of the sandhara temples at Suhania and Modhera.

On the top panel on the south, the architect has placed a hieratic image of an ascetic god with beard, standing in *samabhanga* who holds clockwise from lower left: (1) rosary along with *varada* (boon-giving gesture), (2) sacrificial ladle, (3) manuscript, (4) water-pot (Ph. 195). He represents Agni as suggested by R. Awasthi.<sup>15</sup> There is a similar figure (Ph. 196) in the Site Museum with a subsidiary image of Brahma in its *parikara*, which rules out the main figure's identification as Brahma, but reaffirms its identity with Agni. It may be noted that two images of Agni on either side – south and north *kapili* walls – are represented on the Kakanmath temple at Suhania (c. A.D. 1025) near Gwalior (Ph. 197). The ascetic god Agni on the Lakshmana temple's *kapili* wears *rudraksha* (?)



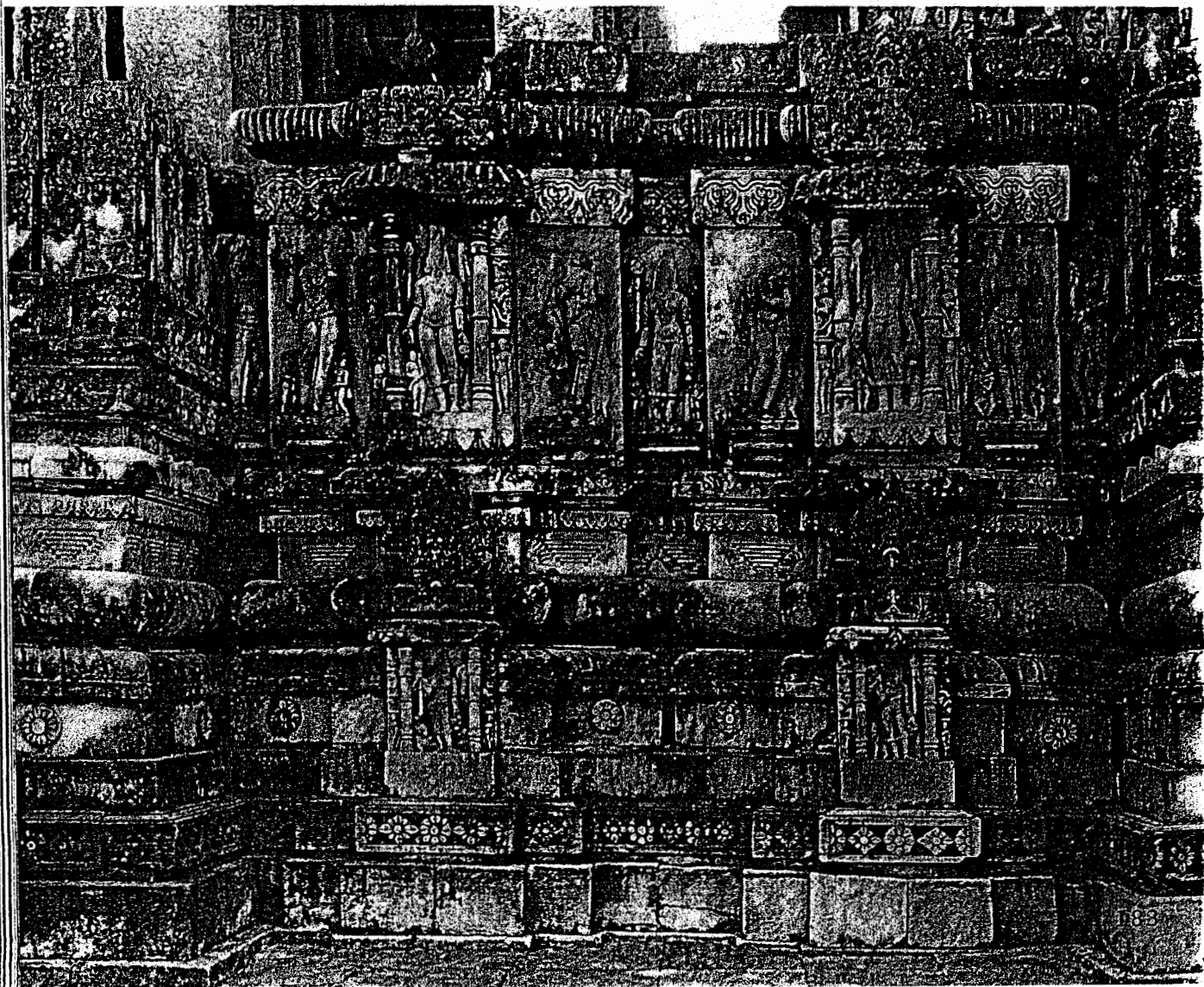
196. The ascetic god Agni, surrounded by hermits with *danḍa* (staff). He wears sandals, like Agni of the Lakshmana temple. Brahma and Siva can be seen as subsidiary figures near the nimbus, indicating the Vaishnava aspect of the principal figure.

beads on arms and neck and wooden sandals on his feet unlike the Dikpāla Agni images, adorned with rich jewellery and standing at ease generally in *tribhaṅga* along with their ram *vāhana*. Agni is the priest of gods, as well as the god of priests.<sup>16</sup> He is flanked by four Tridaṇḍī ascetics holding three sticks (*daṇḍas*) in one hand. In the other hand, one of these ascetics holds a sacrificial ladle, another displays rosary-cum-*varada*, while the other two make a gesture of preaching. These Tridaṇḍī ascetics are

supposed to have command over mind, speech and body.<sup>17</sup>

The group could, at one level, stand for the Vedic order which is upheld in the inscription of the Lakshmaṇa temple and also in the play *Prabodhachandrodaya*. At another level, Agni could also represent Śānta Jyoti, Nitya Prakāśa (Tranquil Light, Eternal Luminosity) mentioned in the play in connection with the state of self-realization by Puruṣa (VI, 27).

197. Juncture wall, north, Kakanmath temple, Suhania, c. A.D. 1025. It is significant that Agni is paired on two sides of the goddess Svāhā. The southern juncture wall of the temple also has the same theme of two Agni figures flanking the goddess. At Khajuraho we see the reverse — Agni is flanked by two female divinities (Ph. 200).



The top panel on the north juncture wall (Ph. 192) represents a two-armed ascetic (*muni*), with *jaṭā* and beard, standing confidently in *samabhaṅga* with an expression of repose on his face. The lotus-designed halo surrounding his head deifies him. His right hand holding a rosary is in the gesture of *abhaya* (fearlessness) and his left hand carries a water-pot.<sup>18</sup> In the *Prabodhachandrodaya* when Purusha (Man) has realized his identity with Parameśvara on the birth of Prabodha (Awakening), he says (VI, 31), "Now I shall be a sage (*muni*) who is in a house only at night, who is not attached to anything, who does not ask for anything, who wanders in any direction without aiming at any fruit, tranquil, free from fear, sorrow, impurities and delusion."

The identity of Purusha and Parameśvara (Man and Supreme Being), the central concept of the philosophical play, has been suggested through the figure of the ascetic. Like the figures in conjunction (*mithuna*), the figure of the ascetic in the context of the play represents the fusion of the human and the divine, and is placed by the imaginative architect on the juncture which joins the hall for devotees and the womb-house of divinity.

The narrative mode in presenting the allegorical play is different from that used in presenting myths and legends. Indian artists, at least from the 8th century sites of Pattadakal and Ellora, seem conscious of the distinction that is to be made when myths are narrated in cosmic time and when stories are related in linear time. The Khajuraho artists of the 10th-11th centuries, unlike their contemporaries in the South (Chola and Chalukya artists), were not engaged in projecting stories in linear time. They were more concerned with the symbolic presentation of an idea or concept, influenced as they were by the views on *Dhvani* (overtone of meaning) discussed by Ānandavardhana and others, which gave importance to the "suggestive expression" rather than to direct or ordinary meaning of a work of art.<sup>19</sup> The *surasundarīs* (originally fertility figures) can represent Karpūramañjarī, Līlāvati, Darpaṇā, etc. mentioned in the Śilpa texts. But viewed in the configuration of other sculptures of the

Lakshmaṇa temple, each seemingly discrete figure or motif can be transformed into a character of the play. This is a unique mode of narration in which instead of a long frieze format or a vertical format we see the discrete figures as on a game-board, forming two opposite groups of the allegorical play, whose goal is seen in the self-realized Purusha standing above the rest like a *muni*.

At another level, as in the *Dvyāśraya-Kāvya* which can be read two ways, the two figures – ascetic god and ascetic – who form a pair, can be interpreted as Nārāyaṇa and Nara,<sup>20</sup> the two eminent ascetics of Indian mythology, who practised severe penance in the Himalayas. They are regarded as manifestations of Viṣṇu in the Pāñcharātra literature and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>21</sup> They are depicted together seated under the Badarī tree at Devagadh and Abichchhatra in the 6th century A.D. In the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (III, 76, 1-5) Nara is described as having two hands and Nārāyaṇa as having four hands. Both of them carry rosary, wear black antelope skins, and have *jaṭā-maṇḍala* over their heads. It is significant for us to note that the word "Nara" means Man, the Supreme Spirit, Purusha. The ascetic figure (*muni*) of the northern *kapilī* can be interpreted as sage Nara = Purusha = Man of the play *Prabodhachandrodaya*.<sup>22</sup>

### Juncture Walls of the Viśvanātha and Kandariyā Mahādeva Temples

The logic seen in the hierarchical placement of panels and deities on the juncture wall of the Lakshmaṇa temple cannot easily be followed on the two *sāndhāra* Śiva temples. Perhaps it has been "intentionally" mixed up to misguide non-initiates.

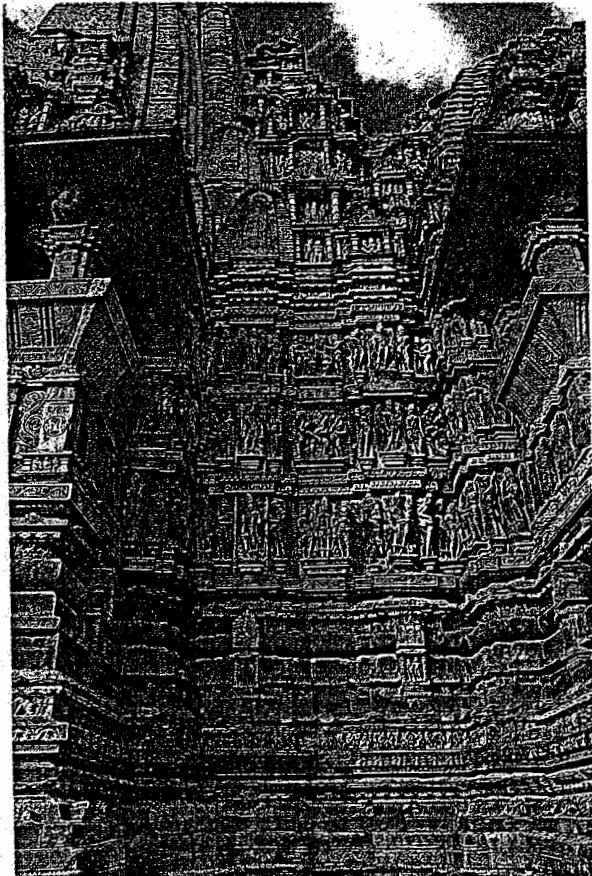
On the two Śiva *sāndhāra* temples, the Viśvanātha and the Kandariyā Mahādeva, there is a progressive replacement of divine figures by erotic human figures on the juncture walls. The exterior walls of these two Śiva temples are divided in their elevation into three sculptural zones, giving the artists a total of six compartments on the *kapilī* walls of the south and north sides (see Table VI). The divinities



associated with the top and bottom rows of the Lakshmaṇa temple, that is, Agni and Śiva, are fused in one figure on the lower register of the south wall of the Viśvanātha temple (Phs. 198, 199): the deity wears *jaṭā-mukuta*, stands in *samabhaṅga* and has *varada*-cum-rosary and a trident in his right hands, and a manuscript and water-pot in his left hands, combining the attributes of Śiva and Agni. A Nandi bull sits on the (Śiva's) right side. Two female figures, almost of the same size as the deity, holding a *chauri* and lotus stalk are seen flanking the god.

On the north wall, the lower register represents a similar but slightly different deity with four arms, standing in *samabhaṅga*, wearing *jaṭā-mukuta* and displaying *varada*;

198. Three zones of the juncture wall, south, Viśvanātha temple. The upper two rows display erotic groups, and the lower has a composite image of Agni-Śiva (see Ph. 199).



sacrificial spoon, manuscript, and in the low left hand possibly a water-pot (Ph. 200). Unlike the southern *kapilī* figure, this god does not have a *vāhana*, but has a seated devotee on either side. Two female figures, carrying *chauri* and lotus stalk, as on the south register, flank the god. Though he has no beard, by his attributes he seems to be Agni. But he is not Agni surrounded by ascetics as we see on the Lakshmaṇa temple (Ph. 195). The Purāṇas mention 49 Agnis. The Agni on the juncture here seems to represent Vaiśvānara Fire,<sup>23</sup> well united (*saṁyukta*) with the two in-going and out-going breaths – *prāṇa* and *apāna* – assimilate food in all sentient beings. The well-known verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (XV, 1) reveres the Vaiśvānara Agni. The name “Vaiśvānara” seems to be ingeniously suggested by the artist of the temple through word-play: placing on the right the motif of *surasundarī* woman teased by a monkey (*vānara*).

While Agni is associated with the concept of the Vedic *yajña*<sup>24</sup> on the Lakshmaṇa temple, Agni or Agni-Śiva on the Viśvanātha temple is a symbol of Kuṇḍalinī. In the text *Ānandalaharī* (33), for instance, Śivagni is the mouth of Kuṇḍalinī. What we may call Śiva's row with an erotic depiction on the Lakshmaṇa temple has been substituted on the Viśvanātha by Agni-Śiva and Agni (Vaiśvānara), and the place occupied by Agni on the Lakshmaṇa temple is replaced by an erotic group on the Viśvanātha. On the Kandariyā Mahādeva temple, built about 30 years later, orgiastic groups replace divine figures on all the compartments of the *kaṭa* wall (Ph. 202). Interestingly the figures of Agni and Indra as guardians of directions (Dikpāl) are placed on the left and right of the famous head-down union scene on the south wall.

Examining the theme of erotic scenes on the juncture walls of these two Śiva temples, the Viśvanātha and the Kandariyā Mahādeva, we notice that except for one scene on the north wall of the Viśvanātha temple depicting “sky-clad” ascetics, all other scenes on both temples represent an orgiastic group in which the attendants, while helping the central aristocratic couple, are also themselves part of the erotic activity. The presence of the m

Table VI

## Juncture Wall Panels

Lakshmaṇa Temple		Viśvanātha Temple		Kandariyā Temple	
Agni	Muni	Erotic	Erotic	Erotic	Erotic
Royal Couple	Royal Couple	Erotic	Erotic	Erotic	Erotic
Erotic	Erotic	Agni-Śiva	Agni	Erotic	Erotic
<i>south</i>	<i>north</i>	<i>south</i>	<i>north</i>	<i>south</i>	<i>north</i>

attendants indicates that the scenes do not represent *antahpura* (harem), where only female and eunuch attendants could be admitted. Moreover, a preceptor is shown seated in one panel (south wall, Viśvanātha) as if chanting *mantras* and conducting an orgiastic ceremony. The scenes seem to represent religious rituals in which kings and Tāntric ascetics participated, accounts of which are given by Kshemendra, Somadeva, Kalhaṇa, and so on.

But should we merely take the scenes literally, at face value? We have to be cautious of interpretation, particularly when the panels are placed on the *kapili* or *sandhi* wall, where *double-entendres* had already been used by the artists of the earlier Lakshmaṇa temple.

We have seen that the hierarchy of arranging Śiva-Vishṇu-Agni in ascending levels on the Lakshmaṇa temple was not followed in the two Śiva temples. However, the conjoint image of Agni-Śiva (Ph. 199) on the lower register of the south wall of the Viśvanātha temple gives us

some clue to the arrangement of the other two rows.

How does Agni-Śiva help us to solve the riddle? It will be recalled that Sadāśiva (Frontispiece), manifest-unmanifest, is the pivotal image of Khajuraho Śaivism. In the meditation formulae (*dhyāna-mantras*) of Sadāśiva as given in the Śaiva Siddhānta text *Īśānaśivagurudeva-paddhati* (III, 13th *paṭala*, 65-66), we read that Brahmā presides over the *bimba* (disc or sphere) of Sūrya (Sun), Vishṇu presides over the *bimba* of Chandra (Moon), and Rudra (Śiva) presides over the *bimba* of Agni (Fire).

Brahmā presides over Sūrya.  
Vishṇu presides over Chandra.  
Rudra (Śiva) presides over Agni.

As we have Agni-Śiva on the lower row of the Viśvanātha temple, the other two rows could be that of (Brahmā) Sūrya and (Vishṇu) Chandra. But does this make any sense to us?



199. The composite god Agni-Sīva or Rudra-Agni stands in samabhaṅga flanked by goddesses, on the south juncture wall, Viśvanātha temple. The Nandi is seen near his right leg. The god displays varada and trisūla in his right hands, and a book and water-pot in his left hands, combining the attributes of Śiva (Rudra) and Agni.

200. Agni stands in samabhaṅga, on northern juncture wall, Viśvanātha temple. A sacrificial spoon in his upper right hand, as also the absence of Nandi, distinguishes this figure from his counterpart on the southern wall. Remarkably, it is the female divinities, almost of the same size, and not ascetics, who attend on him with chauris.



“Sūrya” and “Chandra” have hidden meanings in the enigmatic language used by the Tāntrikas. Genuine Tāntrikas never expose their doctrines and practices to the general public but use *sandhyā-bhāshā*, twilight intentional language which has more than one meaning. If taken literally the language may sound absurd like some acrobatic sexual poses. This enigmatic language is used by them not only to conceal their doctrines from the non-initiate, “but chiefly to project the yogin into the ‘paradoxical situation’ indispensable to his training.” Intentional language forms an integral part of *sādhana*. As Mircea Eliade says,

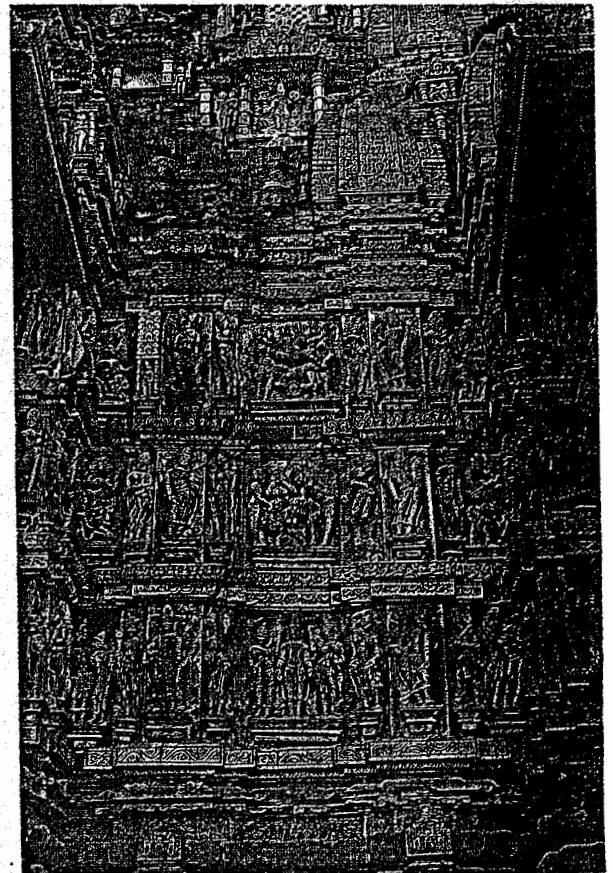
“In this ‘intentional language’, any erotic phenomenon can express a Haṭha-yogic exercise or a stage of meditation, just as any symbol, any ‘state of holiness’, can be given an erotic meaning. We arrive at the result that a tāntric text can be read with a number of keys: liturgical, yogic, tāntric, etc. The commentaries especially stress the two last. To read a text with the ‘yogic key’ is to decipher the various stages of meditation to which it refers. The tāntric meaning is usually erotic, but it is difficult to decide whether the reference is to a concrete act or to a sexual symbolism.”<sup>25</sup>

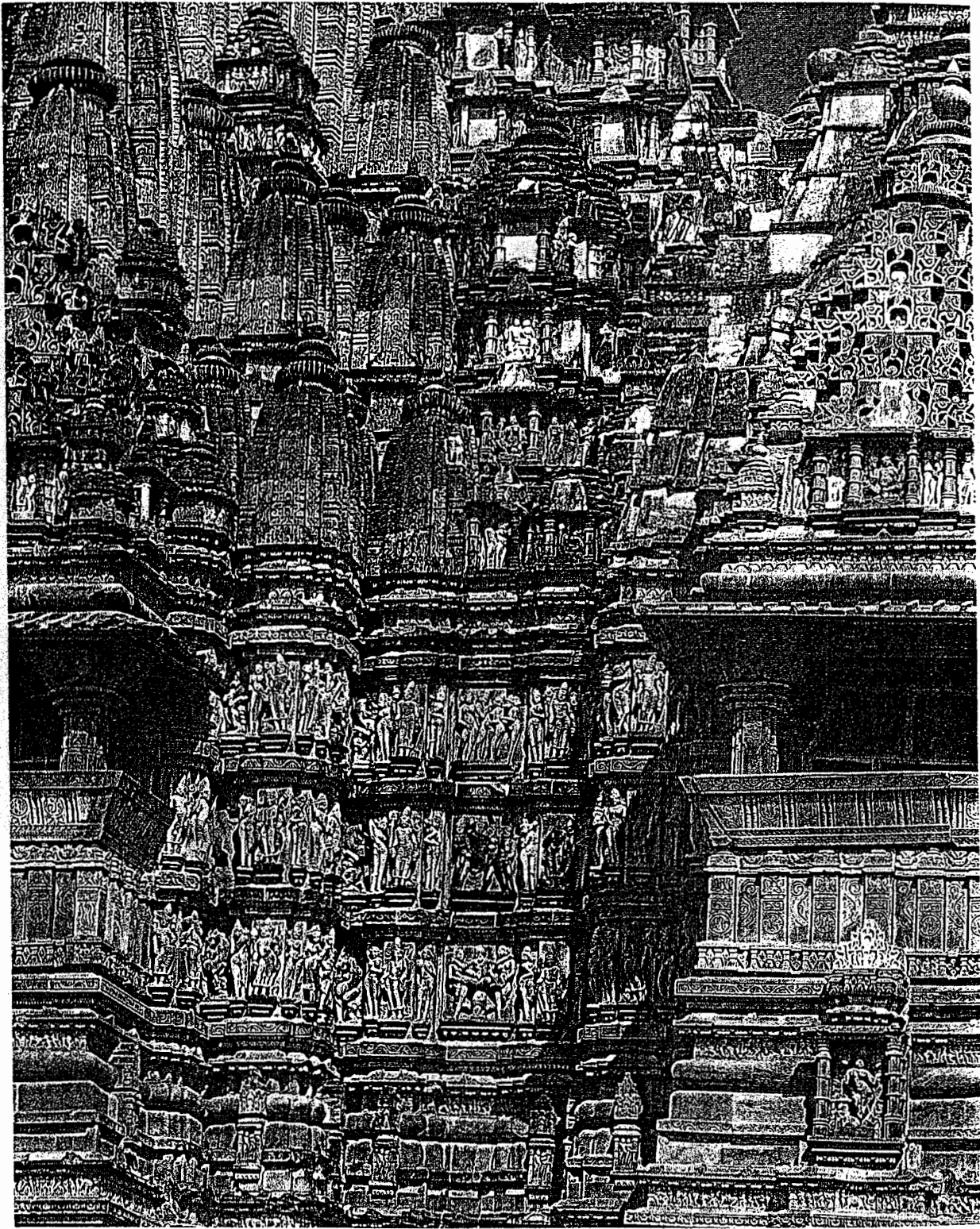
*Sandhyā-bhāshā* has been used by Tantras at least since the 5th century A.D. The *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra*, devoted to the *śaṭ-chakra-bhedana* (penetration of the six *chakras* in the subtle body) employs “an extremely concrete vocabulary to describe spiritual exercises.”<sup>26</sup> For example, the ascent of Kuṇḍalinī energy through the Yogī’s body is compared with the dance of a washerwoman (*ḍombī*). “With the *ḍombī* on his neck, the Yogī passes the night in great bliss.” If taken literally, this sounds erotic. But the Tantra intends to suggest that “*ḍombī*”, which is an equivalent word for Kuṇḍalinī in Tāntric *sandhyā-bhāshā*, has ascended to the fifth *chakra*, the Viśuddha *chakra* in the neck. S.B. Dasgupta<sup>27</sup> has drawn attention to several enigmatic metaphors in the songs of Gorakhnāth and of the Sahajīyā saint Kānha-pāda. For instance, “Kānha has killed the mother-in-law (*sāsu*), and sisters-in-law (*naṇanda*) of the house, and killing the mother (*mā*) has become a Kāpālī.” This does not mean

that he actually was a Kāpālīka, but he makes a symbolic use of language and words to refer to the arrest of the vital winds and the control of the mind.

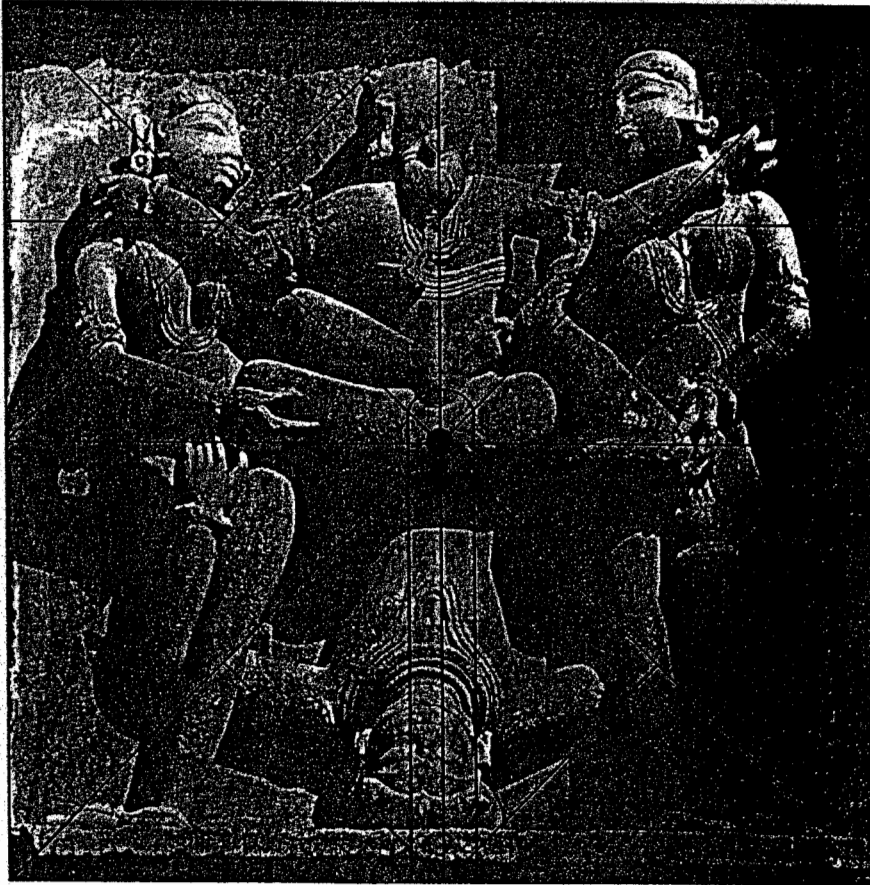
Mircea Eliade<sup>28</sup> has given equivalents and homologies of several words used in the ciphered texts. We mention below the

201. *Juncture wall, north, Viśvanātha temple. A female ascetic, avadhūti, in head-down pose, in the top register of the jaṅgha, possibly embodies a hidden symbolism. Still above, in the superstructural niche, Hari-Hara reiterates the theme of conjunction, here of Viṣṇu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara).*





202. *Juncture wall, south, Kandariyā Mahādeva temple. All three zones of the jaṅghā display figures in conjunction. Agni, who plays a significant role in the kapilī imagery of other temples, is not visible here except as a regent of space.*



*203. Going beyond the erotic, the head-down pose, south juncture wall, Kaṇḍariyā Mahādeva temple. The Kāmakalā Yantra is superimposed here to show the possibility of this sculpture as composed on the lines of the yantra. The Śilpa Prakāśa enjoins the sculpting of erotic figures on the lines of the Kāmakalā Yantra in order to hide the actual yantra from the gaze of the uninitiated and to give delight to laymen. The head-down pose also seems to embody, through enigmatic sandhyā-bhāshā, the yogic-philosophic symbolism of the unification of the two breaths, the polar opposites, in the middle path of the sushumṇā in order to lead the yogī beyond the phenomenal world.*

equivalents of some words which may perhaps help us in deciphering the hidden meanings, or at least make us aware of the possibility of the use of some secret or intentional language behind the physical acts portrayed on the Khajuraho temples. For the three important *nāḍīs* (subtle veins) in Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, namely *iḍā*, *piṅgalā*, and *sushumṇā*, we get a series of equivalents:

*iḍā* = left nostril = *chandra* (moon) = *apāna* = *nāda* = *prakṛiti* = *tamas* (one of the three *guṇas*) = Gaṅgā, etc.

*piṅgalā* = right nostril = *sūrya* (sun) = *rajas* of woman = *rajas* of the three *guṇas* = *puruṣa* = *prāṇa* = tongue (*rasanā*) = Yamunā, etc.

*sushumṇā* = *avadhūti* = female ascetic = *nairātma* = *smaśāna* (cremation ground), etc.

The above code language may reveal the hidden meanings behind the physical act portrayed on the juncture wall scenes of Khajuraho temples or at least make us aware of the possibility of the use of some secret or intentional language. For instance, the female figure with *rudrākṣa* beads in the head-down pose on the north wall of the Viśvanātha temple is an ascetic (Ph. 201), that is, *avadhūti*, and perhaps could have been portrayed to refer symbolically to *sushumṇā*, as per the homologies given above. She could perhaps symbolize *smaśāna*, which literally means cremation ground, but in Tāntric *sandhyā-bhāṣā* refers to the state of body when it rests on the two movements of vital air = *nivṛitti* = night = moon. The depiction of the "sky-clad" ascetics and the unwilling woman with her eyes closed (on the middle row) may symbolize some stage in yogic *sādhana*, just as "Kāpālī" of Kānhapāda's song does. "When the Yogin becomes free from the influence of illusion (*avidyā*), he is called naked."<sup>29</sup>

The point of this exercise is to suggest that there may be a deeper significance or meaning, different from the outer *sthūla* (gross) appearance of the erotic scenes. The erotic

imagery on the juncture wall of the Khajuraho temples seems to be metaphoric and only the *mūḍhas* (dull, stupid, as the Tāntric texts would say) would interpret it in a literal sense.

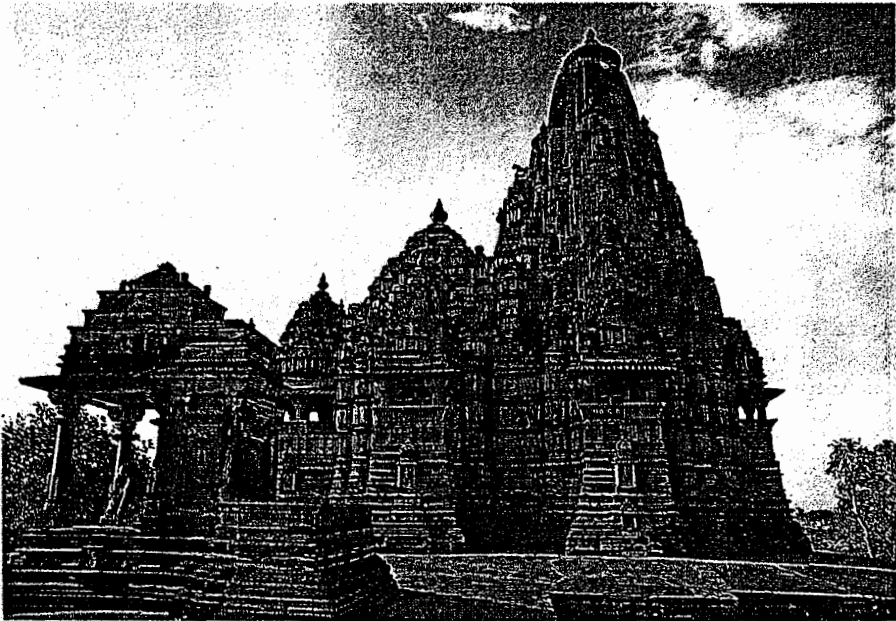
Some *yantra*-like geometry seems to underlie the head-down poses of the Viśvanātha and the Kandariyā Mahādeva temples, as the lines of their compositions would suggest (Ph. 203). This reminds us of the Kāmakalā Yantra given in the Orissan text *Śilpa Prakāśa*,<sup>30</sup> assigned to the period between the 9th and 12th centuries A.D. The text points to the magico-protective and propitiatory aspects of sexual symbolism underlying this *yantra*. The Kāmakalā Yantra is offered *pūjā* for success in Śakti *sādhana*. The evil spirits "will flee far away at mere sight of the *yantra*....In the best temples dedicated to Śakti and to Rudra, this *yantra* must certainly be placed. Then the monument will stand unmoved forever....This *yantra* is utterly secret, it should not be shown to everyone. For this reason, a love-scene (*mithuna-mūrti*) has to be carved on the lines of this *yantra*....The *kāmabandha* is placed there to give delight to people." Thus, the portrayal of human sexual poses, *kāmabandhas*, according to this Tāntric Śilpaśāstra, was for giving "delight to people" from whom actual *yantra* symbolism was to be hidden.

In the light of this, it seems that the sexo-yogic scene of the Kandariyā Mahādeva as well as the Viśvanātha temple had multiple functions: (1) It was meant to be magico-defensive, protecting the monument, by its placement on the juncture which is the most vulnerable part of the temple where the corners of the hall and the shrine meet. (2) It probably conceals a *yantra*, similar to the Kāmakalā Yantra which could have been offered worship. (3) It could give "delight to people", the lay devotees or non-initiated who visited the temple. (4) But over and above these, the erotic scene embodies through *sandhyā-bhāṣā* some yogic-philosophic concept. One wonders whether in terms of Yoga it symbolically represents the process of unification of the two breaths, *prāṇa* and *apāna*, *piṅgalā* and *iḍā*, the opposites Sun-Moon, into the central *nāḍī sushumṇā*. It is believed that by this process of combining the polar opposites and unifying them in the *sushumṇā*, the Yogī

can transcend the human condition and go beyond the phenomenal world and pass into "that non-conditioned and timeless state in which 'there is neither day nor night'."<sup>31</sup>

On the *sandhi* juncture of the hall for devotees (*jīvas*) and the womb house of the divinity (Śiva), on the juncture of the phenomenal and transcendental worlds, the

juncture "which is neither here nor there," where the opposite energies of two architectural *yantras* meet, the architect-priest of the grand Kandariyā Mahādeva temple has imaginatively and intentionally placed the scene of physical union to project the non-communicable experience of the Non-dual state through the homologies and equivalents of *sandhyā-bhāshā*.



203 A. Kandariyā Mahādeva in the twilight