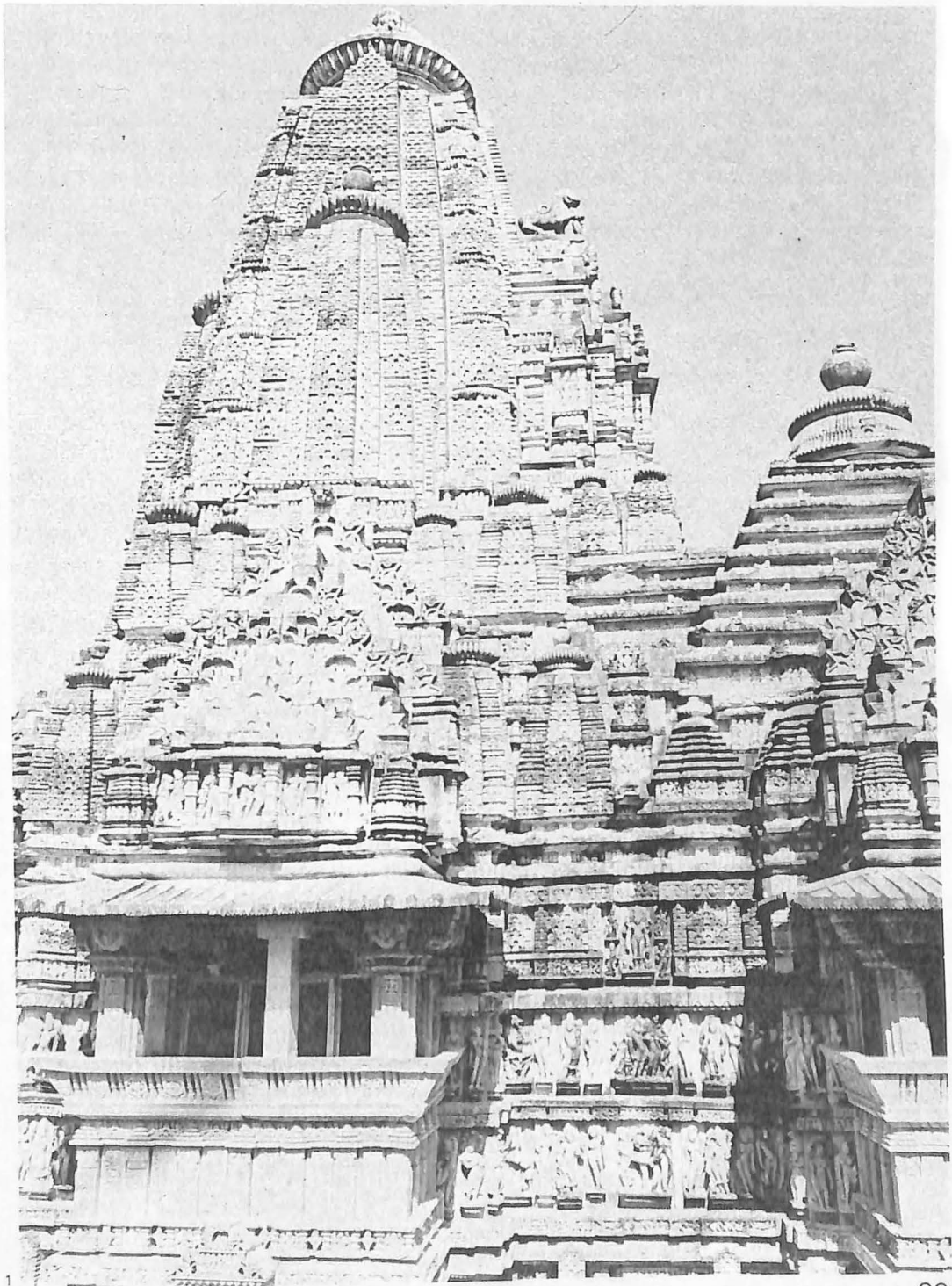


Sculptural Representation on the Lakshmana Temple of Khajuraho
in the Light of *Prabodhachandrodaya*

Devangana Desai



Krishna Mishra's allegorical play *Prabodhachandrodaya* (The Rise of the Moon of Awakening)¹ was possibly staged at the court of the Chandella dynasty associated with the building of the magnificent temples of Khajuraho in Central India. Eminent scholars such as Alexander Cunningham, Stella Kramrisch, Krishna Deva, Pramod Chandra and Hermann Goetz have associated the play with the Chandella court. In the Prologue of the play there is a mention of one Gopala who had helped King Kirtivarman of the Chandra (Chandella) dynasty to regain his kingdom from the Chedi King Karna (Lakshmi-Karna) of Tripuri (Jabalpur area). On several occasions in the Prologue there is a metaphorical use of the words *Kirti* and *Karna*. Kirtivarman's re-establishment of his kingdom took place around A.D. 1065.² To celebrate this victory, the *Sutradhara* was requested by Gopala to stage the play *Prabodhachandrodaya* which was written and given to him earlier on by Guru Krishna Mishra.

तद्वयं शान्तरसप्रयोगाभिनयेनात्मानं विनोदयितुमिच्छामः । ततो यत्पूर्व-
मस्मद्गुरुभिस्तत्रभवद्भिः श्रीकृष्णमिश्रैः प्रबोधचन्द्रोदयं नाम नाटकं निर्माय
भवतः समर्पितमासीत् तदद्य राज्ञः श्रीकीर्तिवर्मणः पुरस्तादभिनेतव्यं भवता ।

A sculptural representation akin to the subject-matter of the *Prabodhachandrodaya* can be seen on the Lakshmana Temple of Khajuraho, the largest Vishnu temple on the site. The inscriptional slab, which is now fixed in the *mandapa* of the Lakshmana Temple, was actually found in the *debris* accumulated at the base of the temple. Even so the date on the slab, V.S. 1011 (A.D. 954), is compatible (as has been shown by Krishna Deva³) with the sculptural and architectural features of the temple.

The fact that some of the features of the sculptural representation evoked memories of the characters in *Prabodhachandrodaya* stimulated a more detailed examination of the play itself. *Prabodhachandrodaya* is a philosophical allegory in six acts, combining the *Advaita* doctrine and *Vishnu-Bhakti*. In the play, the forces of orthodox religion, based on the 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 (*rajakula*-s) of the two sons of *Manas* (Mind). Of the two, one is born of *Pravritti* (Activity) and called King Mahamoha (Delusion); the other is born of *Nivritti* (Repose) and known as King Viveka (Discrimination). The battleground is the town of Varanasi where Mahamoha has spread his influence, through his allies, namely, the Kapalika, the materialist Charvaka, the Jaina Kshapanaka, the Buddhist Bhikshu (or rather the non-Vedic followers termed *nastika*-s by the orthodox schools), and through such mental tendencies as *Dambha* (Deceit), *Ahamkara* (Egoism), *Lobha* (Greed), *Mithyadrishti* (Error), etc. King Viveka's allies are *Mati* (Reason), *Shanti* (Peace), *Shraddha* (Faith), *Saraswati*, *Vishnu-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 *Vidya* (Knowledge). *Vidya* dissolves the forces of Mahamoha. *Purusha* (Man) who was deluded into slumber by the power of King Mahamoha and had forgotten his identity with *Parameshvara* (The Supreme Being) becomes aware of his true Self with the birth of *Prabodha*.

The play can be viewed at least on three levels:

(1) the struggle between the forces of Delusion and Discrimination in the Mind

of Man (*Purusha*), and the defeat of Delusion with the rise of Awakening and Knowledge;

(2) the fight between the heretical, non-Vedic sects and the orthodox, established religion based on Vedic order;

(3) the combat between the forces of the Chedi ruler, King Karna (who is likened to Delusion), and Gopala (who fought him and is called Discrimination). The *Sutradhara* states in the Prologue that Gopala caused the rise of King Kirtivarman like the rise of Awakening by King Viveka who triumphed over Mahamoha.

The primary and central theme of the play, namely, the fight between Delusion and Discrimination, is a recurrent theme in Indian culture and philosophy. The names of the persons or forces associated with these abstractions would be changed according to the different contexts or patrons and these, in turn, would introduce variations in the second and third levels mentioned above. It is also interesting to note that the Chandella King Dhanga, who consecrated the Vishnu-Vaikuntha (Lakshmana) Temple at Khajuraho, was praised in inscriptions for the qualities of *Viveka* (Discrimination), *Prajna* (Intelligence), etc. The imagery of the attributes of *Viveka* and *Mahamoha* was also used in the service of Jaina religion in the allegorical play *Mohaparajaya* (Conquest of Delusion) staged in the royal court of Gujarat in the 13th century.

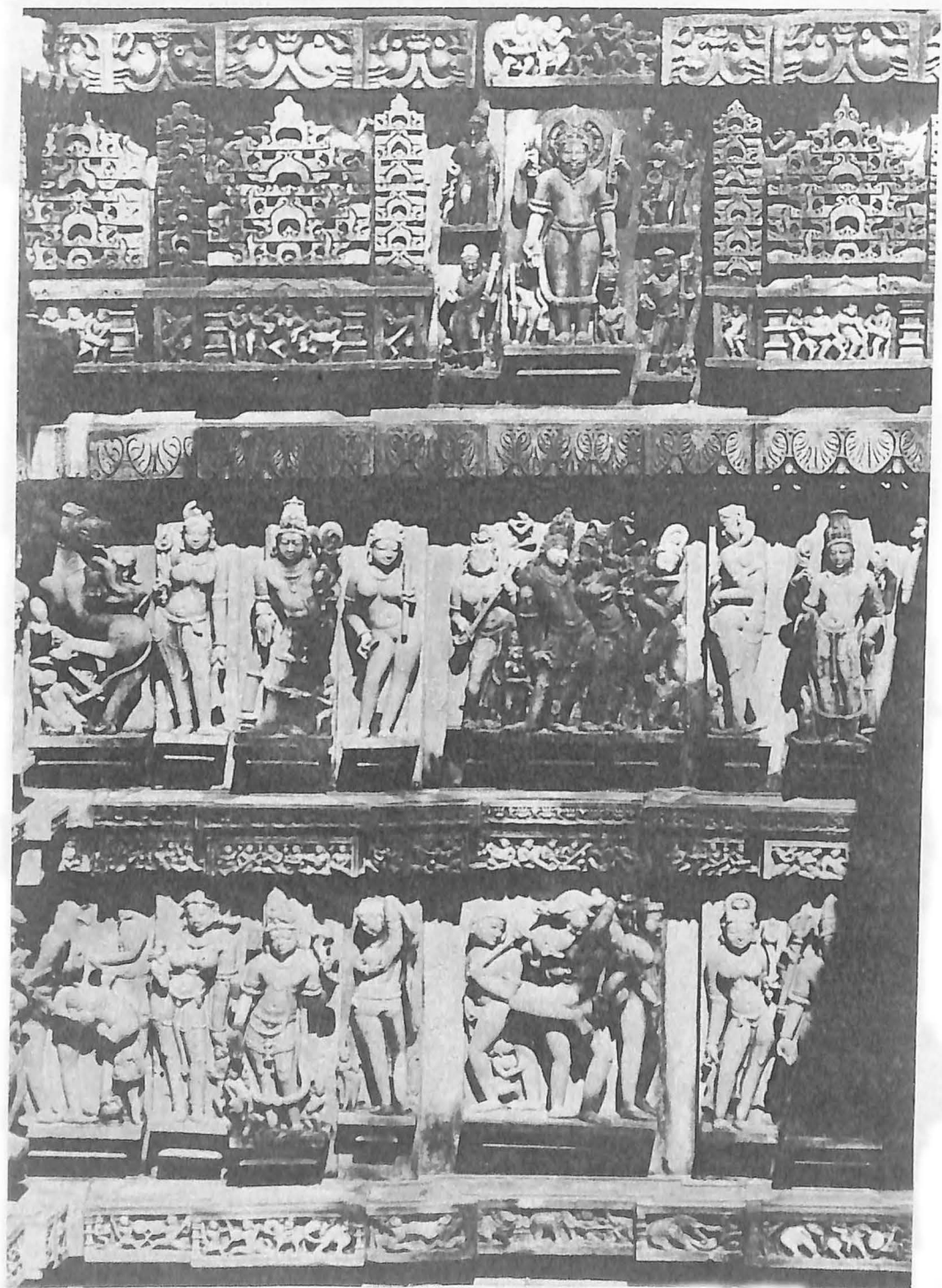
The tradition of allegorical drama was not unknown before Krishna Mishra. As early as the 2nd century A.D., we have an allegorical Buddhist play called *Sariputraprakarana*, generally attributed to Ashvaghosha, with personified figures of *Buddhi* (Wisdom), *Kirti* (Fame), *Dhriti* (Firmness), etc. Commenting on the allegorical genre of drama, A. B. Keith remarks, "It must remain uncertain whether there was a train of tradition leading from Ashvaghosha to Krishna Mishra, or whether the latter created the drama afresh; the former theory is more likely."⁴

We may mention in support of Keith's view that Jayanta, the author of *Nyayamanjari*, who lived in the 9th century, wrote an allegorical play called *Agama-dambara*.⁵ Krishnamacharya and S. K. De also draw attention to the concept of philosophical allegory as embodied in the story of Puranjana in the *Bhagavata Purana* (IV, 25-28) which "might have suggested the method."⁶

The artists of the Lakshmana Temple were not unfamiliar with the *Bhagavata Purana*. Twelve *Krishna-lila* scenes, partly based on the version of this *Purana*, have been represented on the sanctum wall,⁷ and the *avatara*-s (incarnations) of Vishnu are represented on the door-jambes of the sanctum as also in the principal niches of the temple. The temple enshrines an image of Vishnu-Vaikuntha, a composite deity combining Narasimha, Varaha and the *Saumya* (placid) aspects of Vishnu. It is significant that the play *Prabodhachandrodaya* as well as the inscription of A.D. 954 found near the base of the Lakshmana Temple have verses of prayers addressed to Vishnu-Vaikuntha. The play as well as the inscription support Trayidharma or religion based on the Vedas.⁸

||

The well-planned yet distinct sculptural scheme of the juncture (*sandhi*) wall of the Lakshmana Temple deserves close attention. This is the wall which connects the sanctum (*garbhagriha*) and the great hall (*mahamandapa*) of the temple and



which on the ground-plan can be seen as formed by an overlap of two equal squares of the sanctum and the great hall. At Khajuraho, only three *sandhara* temples, with an inner circumambulation path (*pradakshina-patha*), have their juncture walls formed by an overlap of two equal squares, whereas the *nirandhara* temples, without an inner ambulatory, do not have an overlap of two equal squares on the juncture walls.⁹

On this overlapped portion, the juncture, which can be taken from the side of the hall as well as the side of the sanctum, the architects (called *Sutradhara*-s in Khajuraho inscriptions) of the three *sandhara* temples, viz. the Lakshmana (A.D. 954), the Vishvanatha (A.D. 1002) and the Kandariya Mahadeva (about mid-11th century), employ puns, and a double-meaning language.¹⁰ The architect of the Lakshmana Temple is the first at Khajuraho to conceive the idea of placing erotic figures on architectural junctures. As Michael Meister has observed,¹¹ puns are used here by placing conjoint (*sandhi*) figures on an architectural juncture (*sandhi-kshetra*).

Further observations reveal a pun on the word *Digambara* through the placing of the figure of a naked Kshapanaka monk,¹² holding a *pichchhika* (peacock-tail feathered stick) in a row which has Shiva images on buttresses (Illus. 2) *Digambara* (clothed-in-the-skies) is an epithet of Shiva and also applies to the Jaina Kshapanaka monk mentioned mockingly in the *Prabodhachandrodaya* and other literary works of the period. That the Khajuraho artists were familiar with the pun on *Digambara* can be further supported by the invocatory verse in the inscription of the Vishvanatha Temple in which Parvati teases Shiva (*Digambara*) by confusing him with the Kshapanaka (*Digambara*) who carries peacock-tail feathers.¹³

But the architect of the Lakshmana Temple has not only used (on the architectural juncture) the device of pun (*shlesha*), a literary *alamkara* (figure of speech), but also attempted to present characters of a play, possibly *Prabodhachandrodaya* or its prototype. He has a well-planned scheme of two sculptural bands, the lower with images of Shiva on buttresses and similarly the upper with images of Vishnu. On the former band he has placed a royal pair in an erotic attitude and a Kshapanaka monk on the left. This group reminds us of the characters in *Prabodhachandrodaya*, King Mahamoha and his beloved Mithyadrishti, and the Kshapanaka who is their ally in the play.

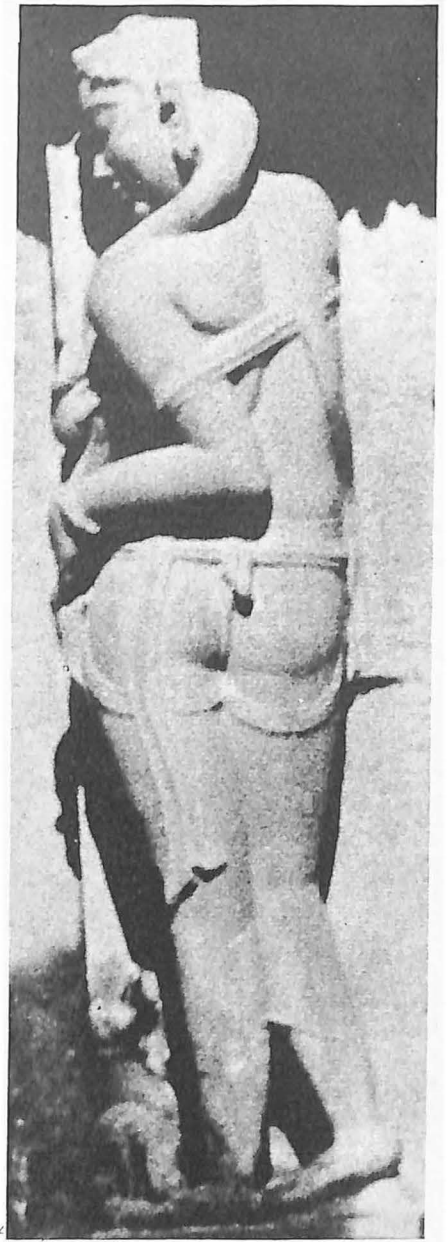
In contrast to this group, the architect has placed, on the upper row, a dignified royal couple representing, as it were, King Viveka and his wife Upanishad. Their union is celebrated by two female figures playing music: on the left, the figure playing a vina might well represent Sarasvati who assisted Vishnu-*Bhakti* in bringing about the union of King Viveka and his wife Upanishad.

It is not merely the contrasting features of the two groups associated respectively with Shiva's and Vishnu's rows that strike one as representing the two royal forces of the play. The identification is further supported by two *surasundari*-s (divine damsels) on the side buttresses.

The *surasundari* near the erotic group on the lower row is arranging her necklace or the upper garment by raising her arm (Illus. 3). There is an almost



3



similar description of Mithyadrishti in the *Prabodhachandrodaya* (II-34) where King Mahamoha describes her as one who "exhibits sportfully rows of nail-marks on her arms on the pretext of keeping in place the garland (*mala*) which has slightly slipped from its place." King Mahamoha also tells her that she shines like a *shalabhanji* (statue) on the wall of his mind (II. 37).

मञ्चित्तभित्ति भवती शालभञ्जीव राजते ॥३७॥

This imagery has further implications. It suggests the influence of sculptural depiction on literature.

The identification of King Viveka can be further supported by the *surasundari* with *hamsa* (swan) on the right buttress (Illus. 4). This beautiful damsel represents the motif of Karpuramanjari, freshly bathed and arranging her hair. The name Karpuramanjari is given to this type of female figure in the labels of the Kirtistambha at Chitorgarh and in the 15th century Western Indian text *Kshirarnava*.¹⁴ The water dripping from her hair is drunk by a *hamsa* (swan) seen near her left foot. *Hamsa* in Indian culture is symbolic of the quality of discrimination (*viveka*). It can discriminate between water and milk (*Nira-kshira-viveka*).

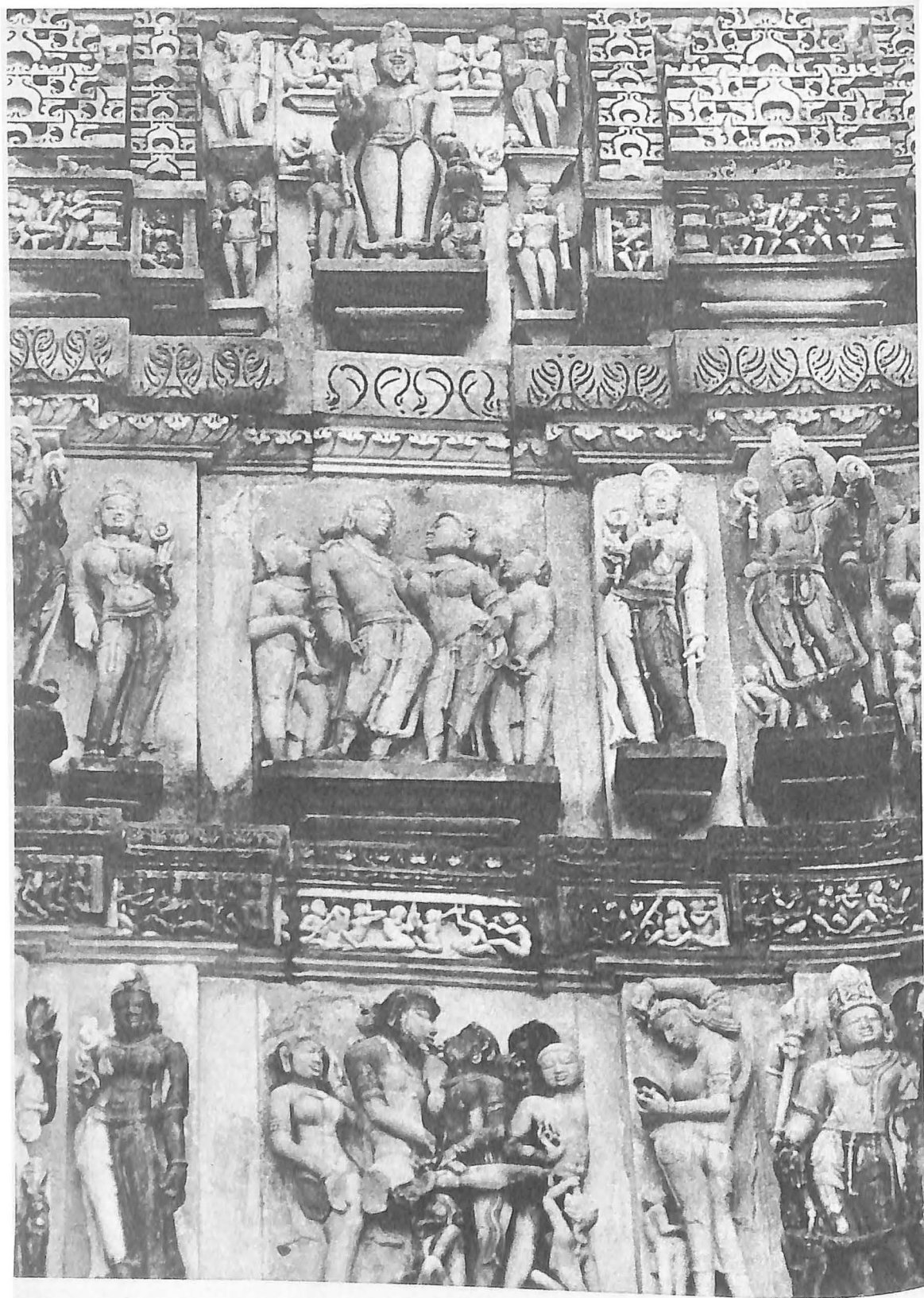
The artist has thus subtly made a suggestion (*dhvani*) through the figures of Mithyadrishti and Karpuramanjari. These *surasundari*-s as well as *mithuna*-s (couples), observed in isolation, are motifs of Indian temple art: they are auspicious *alamkara*-s (ornaments). But perceived in configuration and in the context of other sculptural figures they are revealed as part of the plot of the play.

On the top panel (south wall), the hieratic image of Agni holds a book, water-pot, rosary and a sacrificial laddle. He is flanked by Tridandi ascetics holding three sticks (*danda*-s). These ascetics are supposed to possess control over mind, speech and body. The group could, at one level, stand for the Vedic order which is upheld in the inscription of the Lakshmana Temple and also in the play *Prabodhachandrodaya*. At another level, Agni could also represent *Shanta Jyoti*, *Nitya Prakasha* (Tranquil Light, Eternally Luminous) mentioned in the play in connection with the state of self-realization by *Purusha* (VI-27).

Sculptures on the outer wall of a temple are viewed by a devotee on circumambulating the temple, keeping the temple on the right. The south juncture wall scenes come first in the *pradakshina* and those on the north juncture wall towards the end of the round. So the north juncture wall represents the concluding part of the play, a drama intended to evoke *Shanta Rasa*, as stated in the Prologue

The top panel on the north juncture wall represents an ascetic (*muni*) with an expression of repose on his face. He holds a water-pot in his left hand and his right hand is in the gesture of *abhaya* (Illus. 5). In the *Prabodhachandrodaya*, when Purusha has realized his identity with Parameshvara 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 Parameshvara, the central concept of the philosophical play, has been suggested through the figure of the *muni*. Like the figures in conjunction (*mithuna*), the figure of the *muni* in the context of the play represents the fusion of the human and the divine, and is placed by the imaginative *Sutradhara* of the temple on the juncture which joins the hall for devotees and the wombhouse of divinity.



The narrative mode in presenting the allegorical play is different from that used in presenting myths and legends, for instance those representing Shiva Tripurantaka as the Destroyer of the Three Cities of Demons or Shiva as the Killer of the Blind Demon Andhaka. 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. They were influenced by the views on *Dhvani* (suggestion) discussed by the rhetoricians of the period. The *surasundari*-s (originally fertility figures) can represent Karpuramanjari, Lilavati, Darpana, etc. mentioned in the Shilpa texts. But viewed in the configuration of other sculptures of the Lakshmana 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*.

The gap of about a hundred years between the sculptural representation of the theme and its presentation in Krishna Mishra's *Prabodhachandrodaya* could perhaps be accounted for by the possible existence of a play, now lost, but one which could have been the source for both. Many plays and poems mentioned and quoted by commentators and rhetoricians cannot be traced.¹⁵ V. Raghavan had examined such lost Rama plays among which the play *Ramananda* had a Kapalika and a Kshapanaka paired together as characters.¹⁶

The support for this hypothesis of a lost play of the Khajuraho region is provided by a small inscription under the corner sculpture on the south wall of the Lakshmana Temple. The sculptured figures (now damaged) represent a monk and a woman, and the inscribed label below reads "Shri Sadhunandi Khapanaka."¹⁷ Who can this Sadhunandi Kshapanaka be but a character in some play known to the artist of the Lakshmana Temple?

This period saw several plays which ridiculed religious teachers of rival schools. In the 12th century, the Khajuraho region (Kalanjara) had a *prahasanam* (farce) called *Hasyachudamani*¹⁸ written by the Chandella minister Vatsaraja. The names of the characters of this play are Kapatakeli, Jnanarashi, etc. Another farce, *Lataka-melaka*¹⁹ (Conference of Rogues), staged in the court of Kanauj in the 12th century, has characters such as the Kapalika Ajnanarashi (Heap of Ignorance) and the Digambara Jatasura. The "Sadhunandi Khapanaka" of the Lakshmana Temple could possibly be a name of the character in a play which is now lost, and which could have been the prototype of the *Prabodhachandrodaya* and a source of inspiration to the artist of the Lakshmana Temple. In any case, despite a gap of a hundred years, there is structural similarity between the *Prabodhachandrodaya* and the Lakshmana Temple's sculptural representation. Both have for their core a preoccupation with identical metaphysical concepts and their transmutation into the language of the plastic and performing arts.

* * *

References:

1. *Prabodhachandrodaya of Krsna Misra*, Sanskrit text with English translation by Sita Krishna Nambiar, Motilal Banarsidass, 1971; English translation by J. Taylor, Tookaram Tatya, Bombay 1886; Sanskrit text edited with the commentaries *Chandrika* and *Prakasha*, Nirnayasagara Press, 6th ed., 1935; Sanskrit text with the commentary *Natakabharana*, Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, 1936.
2. R. K. Dikshit, *Chandellas of Jejakabhukti*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 102 ff.
3. Krishna Deva, "The Temples of Khajuraho in Central India," *Ancient India*, No. 15, 1959. However, S. K. Saraswati (in *The Struggle for Empire*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1957) suggested that all the mature temples of Khajuraho, including the Lakshmana, were built not before the middle of the 11th century. If we accept this hypothesis, the Lakshmana Temple and the play *Prabodhachandrodaya* belong to the same period.
4. A. B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice*, Oxford, 1924, p. 84.
5. S. K. Nambiar, *Prabodhachandrodaya of Krsna Misra*, p. 2.
6. S. K. De, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Vol. I, University of Calcutta, 1977, p. 480.
7. Krishna Deva, "Krishna-Lila Scenes in the Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho", *Lalit Kala*, No. 7, 1960.
8. Khajuraho Lakshmana Temple inscription of V. S. 1011 (A.D. 954) in the *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. I, pp. 122-35.
9. For details, my paper, "Placement and Significance of Erotic Sculptures at Khajuraho" presented at the "Discourses on Siva" Symposium held at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, April 1981, and under publication in the Proceedings of the Symposium, ed. Michael Meister, University of Pennsylvania Press.
10. Devangana Desai, "Puns and Intentional Language at Khajuraho" in the forthcoming Felicitation Volume in honour of Shri C. Sivaramamurti, ed. by Nagaraja Rao.
11. Michael Meister, "Juncture and Conjunction: Punning and Temple Architecture", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XLI, 1979, pp. 226-28.
12. This and similar figures were called Kapalikas by Pramod Chandra in his article, "The Kaula-Kapalika Cults at Khajuraho", *Lalit Kala*, Nos. 1-2, 1955-56. However, L. K. Tripathi has convincingly identified such naked shaven-headed monks (holding the *pichchhika*) as Kshapanakas ridiculed in the literature of the period. See his article "The Erotic Scenes of Khajuraho and their Probable Explanation", *Bharati*, Vol. 3, 1959-60.
13. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. I, p. 140, verse 3.
14. Krishna Deva, *Ancient India*, No. 15; R. Nath, "A Study of the Sanskrit Texts on the Inter-relationship of the Performing and the Plastic Arts", *Journal of the National Centre for the Performing Arts*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 1979.
15. S. K. De, *History of Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 494 ff.
16. V. Raghavan, *Some Old Lost Rama Plays*, Annamalai University, 1961.
17. L. K. Tripathi, *Bharati*, Vol. 3, 1959-60.
18. C. D. Dalal, *A Collection of Six Dramas of Vatsaraja*, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Vol. VIII, 1918.
19. Ed. Durgaprasad and K. P. Parab, Nirnayasagara Press, Bombay, 1889; S. K. De, *History of Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 496-97.

* * *

Illustrations:

1. Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho, from the south.
 2. South juncture wall, Lakshmana Temple.
 3. *Surasundari*, Lakshmana Temple.
 4. *Surasundari* (Karpuramanjari), Lakshmana Temple.
 5. North juncture wall, Lakshmana Temple.
-