

What do the statues stand for?

The Temples of Khajuraho



By Mitron Paniqui

AFTER THE Taj Mahal, probably the most popular tourist attraction of India are the temples of Khajuraho. This spot attracts thousands of tourists every year. So lucrative is the business that the government is compelled to keep the roads of Khajuraho well-maintained so that the visitors might arrive relaxed and comfortable. The Circuit House, a hotel built solely for the Khajuraho patrons, does not lack in guests the year round. There are already plans to increase its number of rooms and install air-conditioning.

The village of Khajuraho is a dead village sunk in dust and poverty. The villagers lead a sub-standard life. The whole area is flat and rather forbidding. There are a few fields cultivated in a rather indifferent manner and stunted date

palms from which the village probably took its name. This site was chosen during the tenth century by the ruling family to build a series of temples dedicated to the worship of Shiva.

The temples are less than a thousand years old and most of them are reasonably well preserved. Most of the statues are still recognizable. Some of the temples, however, have been destroyed but the pieces of sculpture have been gathered together and are now on exhibit near the intact ones. There are no radical differences between the temples so there is really no reason to decry the destruction of some of them.

The temples are plain; they are hardly architectural masterpieces. In some of them balconies have been added but on the whole the temples look plain and uninteresting.

It is the decorations that attract attention. The decorations are overwhelming in both number and exuberance. They cover nearly all the wall space—internal and external—of the temples. The sides of the temples are covered with perpendicular ribs which run from the top of the spire to the base. Horizontal lines encircle the width. Thus each sculptural grouping, however free in composition and conception has its own geometrical position. In some of the bigger temples every panel of figures is alternated with one of Sardula, thus conveying a sense of completeness.

IT HAS been said that most of the sculptures at Khajuraho depict every fact of life. However, most of the facets of life have been assigned to the corners of the less visible areas. The most prominent pieces depict an almost unbridled eroticism. There are pieces depicting men and women copulating in every conceivable position; there are men embracing two women at the same time; there are women in an attitude of love with one man.

The contortions of love did not seem so numerous as at Khajuraho. For this reason probably no complete pictorial book on Khajuraho has yet appeared. The coldness of the stone figures is lost in a photograph and only their porno-

graphic brilliance seems to be recorded. Also, most of the Khajuraho figures are more than life-size which accounts for a rather emetic effect. The same figures when reduced to the intimacy of a postcard become terrifyingly erotic.

There are a number of theories regarding the intention of these art objects. One theory says that it is an illustration of phallic worship. Another says that it is an illustrated Kama-Sutra for the illiterate. Another maintains that they are intended to depict the last phase of the Kaliyuga when women lose their modesty and the world is plunged into every kind of misery.

The kaliyuga theory loses its relevance when one examines the figures closely. In their faces and contortions, one could not discover any trace of misery.

The puzzling aspect of Khajuraho is its religious intention. Are these decorations on the temples intended to arouse feelings of reverence and worship?

It would probably be closer to the truth to say that these sculptures are secular rather than religious in intention. The repetition of the various postures were meant to exhibit the technical skill of the artist rather than to arouse a feeling of reverence.

THE INNER walls of the temples are covered with work that is conventional and comparatively tame. Only the ceilings are covered with decorative motif that is not human. Here again the artist displayed his mastery of geometric forms.

The Jain Temples which are about a mile away are also covered with the same motifs. But here one gets the impression that the figures are less lush, the workmanship inferior. Probably a less gifted artist worked these stones.

One detail about the Khajuraho temples puzzles the art commentators. In all the panels the artist has exhibited complete mastery over the proportions of the human form but he did not know how to make a child. There are a few children in the panels and all of them are completely out of proportion to the adult figures. The

suckling children are no bigger than the palms of their mothers' hand. One fellow seated with his parents was no bigger than his father's fist and a child standing beside his mother looked like an utter dwarf.

Serious students of art are going over these temples in detail. We expect to hear from them soon. In the meantime the government of India is more interested in the dollars that these temples bring than in their strictly artistic value. Thus the attempts of the government men to restore these temples result in pathetic errors. The refitted figures look startlingly distorted. Heads and arms do not go where they broke off. These errors, however, can be remedied later as we get to know more about these temples—gems of art set in one of the unlikely spots in the world.

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Unlucky Day

A MAN walked into police headquarters in Hackensack, New Jersey, and applied for a job on the force.

Detective Sergeant Leo Liberali gave him an application to fill out. The man wrote James P. Stagg, 30.

That sounded familiar. Liberali looked over a warrant and found the same name. Stagg was wanted for passing a bad check for 70 dollars.

He was released on 100 dollars bail for a hearing.

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