



“Chandel Sculpture and Iconography: Artistic Traditions, Religious Symbolism, and Cultural Context”

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Abstract

Chandels were the native rulers of Jejakabhukti (present day Bundelkhand), who ruled between mid- 9th century to 13th century effectively. They have great influence in the regional politics in this period. Initially, they were subordinate to the Gurjara Pratiharas of Kannauja but later on, during king Yashivarma and Dhanga, they turned to be sole authority in the region. Their influence was effective among the local chieftain and sardars. All of them obey the Chandelas and paid tribute to their masters.¹

Chandel has not only influenced the politics of then Jejakabhukti, but imprinted footprints of their visionary role in protecting the artwork in the region. They build temples, Tadagas, Sarovar, dams, and non- religious public utility infrastructures in the region.² But, most resonating art work comes from architecture, enriched by the marvellous artwork of sculptors. The Chandela period sculpture was a panorama of Indian culture and spirituality, which was carved with almost perfection. These sculptures found in two forms, **one** was on the walls and Mandapas etc. of the temples and **another** was independent artworks, which developed outside any laid structure and rather they built independently. The Chandela's sculpture was one of the best art-work in the Indian history, which has a wide variety in the form and themes of the arts. These images were not only for decorative purposes but they had great meaning, that furnished the essence of Indian culture and supplement the temples structural strength. The exotic imagery was a striking feature of these temples, which may have ritualistic or metaphysical meaning.

Objectives, methodology, and key findings. In this research work I will strive to find out the themes and subject of sculpture and also look into the technical aspects like- carving methods, used materials,

¹ Ray, HC, DHNI, pp 665-666 & Bose, NS, 1956, History of the Chandellas of Jejakabhukti, p 171

² E.I. vol 1, p144, verse 38 & Abid, p 328, v 18-20

placement and hidden meaning of idol. The outcome is expected to furnish a deep overview of this artwork. This will include my own observation in the field.

➤ **Research Objectives**

- To examine the stylistic features of Chandela sculpture.
- To analyse themes and symbolism in the sculptures.
- To understand the social and religious background being these figures.

➤ **Research Questions**

- What are the unique characteristics of Chandel's sculpture?
- How are religious and secular forms represented?
- What do the sculptures represent about Chandela society?

➤ **Methodology**

- Art-historical approach.
- Iconographic and iconological analysis.
- Use of archaeological, epigraphic, and secondary sources.

Keywords: Sculpture, Khajuraho, Chandelas, exotic sculptures, Kandariya Mahadeva

1. Introduction:

The Chandel dynasty ruled the modern day Bundelkhand region between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE, which occupied distinguished place in the history of India's art and architecture. Under their patronage, sculpture attained exceptional artistic refinement, particularly in the temples of Khajuraho. Chandela sculptures reflect a unique blend of religious devotion, aesthetic beauty, and cultural expression. Through their diverse iconographic themes, technical skilfulness, and architectural integration, these sculptures provide valuable insights into the religious beliefs, social life, and artistic features of early medieval India.



Figure 1: Jejakabhukti of Chandelas (pic credit: google.com)

Initially feudatories of Pratiharas were shadow rulers in the region, later the Yashovarman and Dhanga established an independent and powerful kingdom between the 10th and 11th centuries.³ The Chandelas made significant cultural contributions in the form of temple architecture, sculpture, and religious growth. The magnificent Khajuraho temples, famous for its complex carvings and artistic excellence, represents the climax of Chandela cultural achievement and reflects the dynasty's contribution to art, sculpture, and architecture.

2. Concept of Sculpture and Iconography:

In the context of Indian art, sculpture (Murtikala) is the artistic creation of idols in human like forms that embody spiritual, emotional, and cultural traits. It serves as a medium to show divine ideals, philosophical thinking, and moral norms. Indian sculpture stresses on symbolism, devotion, aestheticism and the harmonious bond between humanity, nature, and the divine.⁴

Iconography is the field of study that interpret the forms, symbols, attributes and visual display of deities, religious idols, and sacred themes in art. In Indian art, it helps identify and understand the spiritual, religious, and cultural meanings embedded in sculptures, and temple architecture.

The scope of iconography includes the examine of divine figures, symbols, mudras (gestures), vahanas, ornaments, and Puranic narratives. It also examines the set standards found in texts such as the *Shilpa Shastras*, *Agamas*, and *Puranas*, that guide the creation of divine images. Thus, iconography helps us to understanding the religious beliefs, art traditions, and cultural traits of Indian civilization.

3. Religious Environment of Bundelkhand

The contemporary Chandela state exhibited a multi factious religious nature, with strong patronage of Shaiv sect, Vaishnava sect, Shaktism, and Jainism. Temple inscriptional record and monuments at various place reveal religious cohesion, Tantric effect, and the coexistence of different sectarian traditions within a shared cultural domain.

The Chandelas built temples for religious, political, social, and cultural purposes. They sought to express faith to Hindu and Jain divinity, gain religious merit, and legitimize their royal power

³ Bose, N.S, History of Chandellas, pp 91-92

⁴ Varma , Mahendra, Bundelkhand ki Vastukla, pp 110-112

through divine association. Temples were also symbols of political suzerainty, economic prosperity, and artistic milestone.

4. Development of Chandela Sculptural Art

Temple sculptures were necessary for conveying religious, cultural, and spiritual discourse. They visually represented deities, myths, and sacred narratives, making religious teachings to expand masses. Sculptures on temples have aesthetic value as well. Particularly, at Khajuraho Group temples, sculptures depicted both spiritual and material life, reflecting the Indian ethos; ie harmony between **Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha**.⁵ Thus, they served as religious, educational, and artistic functions.

→ Phases of sculpture development in the Jejakabhukti;

1. **Early Phase (c. 9th–10th Century CE):** Sculptures were relatively simple, balanced, and less ornate. Religious subjects dominated, with emphasis on divine icons.
2. **Mature Phase (c. 10th–11th Century CE):** Sculpture reached its artistic peak. Figures became more graceful, dynamic, and heavily decorated. Temples at Khajuraho display exceptional craftsmanship and aesthetic enhancement.
3. **Late Phase (c. 12th–13th Century CE):** Sculptures now became comprehensive in detailing and decoration. At the same time technical skill remained high, artistic vitality relatively declined due to political instability and infirmity in the kingship.

These phases reflect sculpture development from simplicity to artistic excellence and ornamental dynamism.

5. Material and Techniques Used in Chandela Sculptures

Fine-grained **sandstone** (grey, pink, and yellow) was the main building material. In some places, **granite** was used for structural and sculptural purposes combinedly. Sandstone has durable property and easy to carve with chisel to give intricate patterns and flow on the idols.

⁵. Mahendra Varma, Bundelkhand ki Morrtikala, pp 26-32



Figure 2: Different patterns and figures on the temple's walls at Khajuraho

➤ Techniques:

- **Stone Carving** – Sculptors chiselled[carved out] figures from stone blocks using iron tools.
- **High-Relief Sculpture** – Figures projected majorly from the background, creating depth and realism.
- **Deep engraved cutting** – Deep cutting technique used for visualising ornaments and bodily curves and bulges to give a three-dimensional effect.
- **Polishing and Finishing** – Surfaces of the figures smoothly finished that appears glossy and reflective as well as appealing to human connection.
- **Modular Construction** – Sculptural created on the separate block and integrated smoothly on the temples wall to give a wholesome experience of subjects and themes.
- **Shilpa Shastra Principles** – Artists followed standard measurements and iconographic principles to adhere the sacred text spirit.

The combination of sandstone, excellence carving techniques, and adherence to artistic values enabled Chandela artists to produce some of the finest masterpieces of medieval Indian art.



Carving methods: the sculptors primarily used stone carving techniques on fine-grained sandstone, making them easy to produce detailed and expressive images. The process followed by them was – 1. rough shaping of stone blocks, 2. cutting the block using chisel to define figures and decorative part. 3. High-relief carving to give three-dimensional effect of ornaments, garments, and body shape. Fine tools were used to reveal facial expressions, jewelry, and decorative patterns. 4. The finished figures were then polished to achieve a smooth and seamless surface. These efforts come out with the aesthetic sensitivity, remarkable realism, and ornamental

precision. Sculptors cut out large amounts of covering stone by scraping and rubbing the surface with abrasives tools ie. Sandstone pieces, quartz sand, and other polishing items. Allowing figures to project enough to appear three-dimensional. This method also enhanced depth, movement, and visual effect.

5. Stylistic Features of Chandela Sculpture

The sculpture development in Jejakabhukti in the Chandela period, is world famous for its

artistic excellence and aesthetic outcomes. Its distinctive features include:

Figure 3: Deep carving and glazing polished

1. Graceful Human Figures – Sculptures display human figures in elegant proportions, living sense, and naturalistic style. Sculptures portrayed serenity, devotion, joy, love, Dhyana, and sensual emotions through their subtle facial moves and gestures.
2. High Relief Carving – Figures are deeply carved, to give a strong three-dimensional effect.
3. Sensuous Beauty – Depictions of *surasundaris* and compassionate couples emphasize beauty, emotion, and reality.
4. Dynamic Movement – Tribhanga (three-bend posture) and emanating gestures give a feel of rhythm and moving figures.
5. Religious Diversity – Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist related mythological subjects carved in the same temple complexes shows the religious tolerance of patron rulers. Jain iconography in Chandela art has a depiction of the 24 Tirthankaras in *dhyana* or *kayotsarga* postures. The emphasis is on asceticism, tranquillity, and *nirvana*.
6. Rich Ornamentation – Jewelry, hairstyles, clothes, and decorative motifs are intricately carved on the sandstone blocks. Common ornaments identified were crowns (*mukutas*), necklaces, earrings, armlets, bracelets, girdles, anklets, and finger rings.
7. Narrative Content – mythical scenes, daily life, group music dance scenes, war scenes, and courtly activities are chosen to depict.
8. Integration with Architecture – Sculptures are seamlessly placed according to the structural setting of the walls, pillars, entrances and Mandapas. Sculptural elements focuses on architectural divisions, symbolic meanings, and creating a harmonious unity between artistic expression and temple architecture.

9. Spiritual and worldly Balance – Divinity combined with the worldly life, reflecting a holistic viewpoint of human life.

These characteristics make Chandel sculpture one of the greatest achievements in the Indian art and an important source for understanding the cultural and religious life of the contemporary period.

In Chandela sculpture, figures were represented in **several different forms**, that can be classified into the following categories:

- **Divine Figures** – Gods, goddesses, and celestial beings[associated being].
- **Surasundaris (Celestial Maidens)** – attractive female figures engaged in everyday and decorative acts in the light of order of god.
- **Mithuna Figures** –Engaged couples that can be symbolized as fertility, prosperity, and union of two world.
- **Royal Figures** – Images of Kings, queens, court men, and attendants.
- **Devotees**– who are worshippers, sages, and faith followers.
- **Musicians and Dancers** – Figures depicting humans performing in single and in group and cultural life.
- **Warriors and Dvarpalas** – Soldiers, hunters, and protectors.
- **Common People** – Art workers, servants, and individuals engaged in daily routine work.

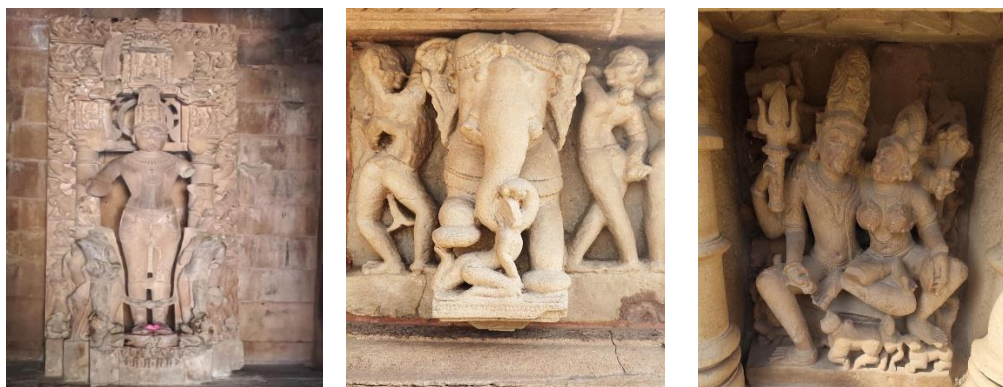


Figure 4: Chief deity, Elephant with human and Shiva Parvati

These varied depictions reflect the artists' holistic vision of society, combining divine, royal, and ordinary human life.

7. Erotic Iconography and Its Interpretations:



Figure 5: Sexual activities displayed at Kandariya temple

in the context of temple.

Erotic iconography in the Chandela especially at Khajuraho Monuments, include depictions of *mithuna*⁶ (amorous couples) and intimately engaged. Some of the engaged figures have group intimacy and even with animal. Scholars have different viewpoints in this. Some sees them as ‘representations of fertility, prosperity, and the creative forces of nature.’ Others link them with ‘Tantric traditions, where symbolizing the union of male and female. But fact is that being merely erotic, these images comprise broader, religious, philosophical and cultural meanings

8. Major Centres of Chandela Sculpture

Besides, Khajuraho temple complex, Chandela sculptures can be found traced in the ruled territory (Jejakabhukti or Jujhauti) at several places. Most of these places today located in the present day Bundelkhand region spread across the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh :

- Kalinjar Fort – Temples, rock-cut images, and Shaiva sculptures.
- Mahoba – Early Chandela capital with temple remains and sculptures.
- Ajaygarh Fort – Sculptural fragments and temple architecture.
- Dudhai Temples – Noted for early Chandela-style sculptures.
- Madanpur Temples – Important late Chandela temple complex.
- Deogarh – Contains sculptures showing the influence of Chandela artistic traditions.
- Nachna – Important for the development of central Indian temple sculpture.
- Bateshwar Temples – Exhibits stylistic affinities with Chandela art.
- Chanderi – Preserves medieval sculptural remains influenced by Chandela traditions.
- Garhkundar Fort – Associated with later Chandela rule and sculptural remains.

8.1 - Khajuraho Group of Monuments

⁶ ‘Mithuna’ word used for loving couples.

The Khajuraho Group of Monuments is the most iconic artistic site of the Chandela dynasty. Originally, Khajuraho have about **85 temples**, of which around **25 temples** survive today.⁷ These temples are dedicated to Hindu and Jain faith and are unique in its exquisite architecture, intricate carvings, and sculptural richness.

The monuments are divided into three groups:

8.1.1-Western Group

- Kandariya Mahadeva Temple
- Lakshmana Temple
- Vishvanatha Temple
- Chitragupta Temple
- Matangeshvara Temple

8.1.2-Eastern Group

- Parshvanatha Temple
- Adinatha Temple
- Ghantai Temple

8.1.3-Southern Group

- Duladeo Temple
- Chaturbhuja Temple

Most of the temples constructed in this period follows Nagara style and Khajuraho was the zenith of the **Nagara style**⁸ of North India. The temples here are famous for their depictions of deities, celestial beings, dancers, musicians, commoners' life, and erotic imagery. They reflect the Chandela rulers' facilitation of religion, art, and architecture and provide valuable picture of then society and cultural.

9. Comparison with contemporary art and sculpture forms

The Chandelas sculpture differs significantly from contemporary sculptural traditions of the Pala, Chola, and Paramara. While Pala sculpture of eastern India focuses on spiritual calmness and Buddhist figures, Chandela art displayed greater dynamism, sensuality, and decorative excellences.

⁷ <https://www.historyhit.com/locations/khajuraho/>

⁸ Varma Mahendra, Bundelkhand ki Vastukala, 111

Chola's bronze icons from South India, focused on ideal tradition of divine forms and body movement, whereas Chandela sculptors mastered the excellence in sandstone carvings and integration sculpture with temple structure. Compared to the Paramara's restricted art innovation, Chandela art exhibited more profound display of ornamentation and themes diversity. Its distinctive combination of spiritual representation, aesthetic properties, and realistic human forms makes it one of the most accomplished sculptural forms in the Indian art traditions.

9. Impact on Later Indian Art

Chandela art sufficiently influenced later temple architecture and sculpture North India. Its refined Nagara architectural style, intricate ornamentation, dynamic human figures, and sculptural integration inspired upcoming regional traditions. The artistic innovations of Khajuraho became set models for medieval Indian temple design and decoration.

10. Conclusion

The Chandel dynasty (9th–13th centuries CE) of Jejakabhukti made invaluable contributions to Indian art, architecture, and sculpture. Their sculptures are distinct in sprouting graceful human forms, dynamic movement, intricate ornamentation, and the harmony of spiritual and secular themes. Crafted primarily from sandstone using skilled carving, undercutting, and polishing techniques, these works showcase exceptional artistic skill. The iconography encompasses Hindu, Jain, and Tantric traditions, demonstrating religious tolerance and cultural richness. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, the sculptures unintentionally acted as the source of religious, educational, and architectural functions. Their influence extended beyond the Chandela period, shaping secondary developments of architecture in medieval India.

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