

3 Lived Religion in Medieval India

Surasundari on Indian Temple Architecture

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Religious studies have undergone a paradigmatic shift in recent times. Once a domain of religious texts, metaphysical treatises and devotional poems, today religion is more likely to be studied through a material perspective. The growing ranks of religious scholars interested in material religion emphasize that religion exists not only in texts but also in the material world of objects, pictures, images, sculptures and tangible spaces.¹ Examining material remains and iconography allows scholars and theorists to reconstruct the social and mental landscape of the bygone era. However, the move to materiality has allowed researchers to reconsider and broaden the concept of religion itself.² In the absence of texts, material objects provide an interesting opportunity for deciphering past religious practices and experiences.

This chapter aims to analyze medieval Hindu religion-as-lived — that is, religious practices that took shape as individuals progressively engaged with the realities of their everyday existence. Here, the significance of materiality becomes apparent. In this chapter, I focus on the medieval Hindu iconography of *Surasundari* (celestial beauty) that began to gain prominence as a part of Indian temple architecture around the beginning of the ninth century AD.³ By focusing on the motifs of *Surasundari* and the associated physical forms, I attempt to highlight the ritualistic practices and the socio-religious milieu that “breathed life” into these and which, in turn, produced a religious experience for the participant. To do this, I will deploy an organizing framework which I call the “amalgamated good eye.” This is a theoretical proposition that subsumes two different perspectives or knowledge systems: specifically, the gaze of an art historian and an embodied or an experiential perspective that is informed by continuous engagements with material forms on the part of worshippers. There is merit in bringing these perspectives together because such an amalgamation allows scope for de-centring a non-contextualized and a non-embedded interpretation of visual materiality.

The chapter will first describe the concept of material religion and introduce and justify my approach. In this section, Rose’s theoretical proposition, or “the good eye,”⁴ is evoked in the service of interpreting Hindu art forms, particularly the sculptural motifs of *Surasundaris*. “The good eye” is supplemented with hermeneutic reflections, as put forward by Jessica Frazier.⁵ The unique

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contribution of this paper is this combination of approaches that serves to narrow the gap between the perspective of a modern art historian and the perspective of a worshipper for whom the embeddedness of sculptural motifs in the temple space is integral for the sacred experience. The remaining parts of the chapter throw light on the resulting new interpretation and how this enriched understanding of the *Surasundaris* may appear to be qualitatively different from the usual impressions that are drawn. In other words, the readers will be positioned to look at *Surasundaris* from a novel standpoint. Before embarking on the analysis of Hindu sculptures, an explanatory introduction to Hinduism is necessary.

Context of Hinduism

Hinduism, as a term, encompasses a wide variety of South Asian religious thoughts and practices⁶ that originated in a particular geographical region and influenced each other continuously. This intermingling resulted in a diversity of practices, sacred arts and materialities. Thus, Hinduism should not be viewed as static but as dynamically evolving and incredibly syncretic in nature. The continually evolving nature of Hinduism is reflected in the evolution of Hindu deities between the Vedic era (c. 1500–500 BCE)⁷ and the medieval period⁸ (a period that began approximately two centuries after the fall of the Gupta empire in 550 AD).⁹ For instance, *Agni* or the Hindu God of fire became less prominent in the post-Vedic era while new gods, like *Shiva*, came into being. Worship patterns, temple-building styles, sculptural styles and motifs also evolved. As for the term itself, British writers used the word “Hindu” in the late 1700s to refer to people living in North India and the term “Hinduism” to describe their religious beliefs, practices and rituals.¹⁰ Followers of Hinduism, on the other hand, preferred to label their religion as *Santana Dharma*¹¹ — a term that translates into eternal Dharma. The word Dharma does not have an exact English translation, but it could be interpreted to mean duty or righteousness or sustaining a positive order.

Medieval Hinduism is pertinent for this chapter, for this is the period when the temple gradually emerged as a medium of integration, aimed not only at binding together various folk traditions, or disparate communities,¹² but also the reigning kings and their subjects or their communities.¹³ The medieval period was, furthermore, characterized by the rise and prominence of three different Hindu sects — *Śaivism* (with *Shiva* as the principle deity), *Vaiṣṇavism* (with *Vishnu* as the principle deity), and *Śaktism* (with *Shakti* or *Devi* as the principle deity), coupled with a decline in the popularity of Buddhism.¹⁴

The Chandella kings and the temples sanctioned under their reign in the Central Indian region, the focus for this chapter, were followers of *Śaivism* and *Vaiṣṇavism*.¹⁵ The temples that were built under royal patronage were, as such, devoted to the royal patrons’ revered deities, *Shiva* and *Vishnu*. These deities were placed in the innermost chamber of the temple or the *garbh-griha*. For instance, a temple devoted to *Shiva* housed the corresponding

murti (a statue of *Shiva*) in its *garbhagriha*. Other deities or minor deities, demigods, secular scenes and amorous couples were sculpted beyond the *garbhagriha*, in passageways or on the exteriors of temples, implicating a hierarchical spatial demarcation between the primary deities and the other deities. The new framework of analysis, the “amalgamated good eye,” is useful in approaching this complex history and religio-aesthetic orientation. Readers will be positioned to decipher the visual and sacred significance and relational power of these forms together; an outcome that becomes apparent or visible by employing such a framework.

Methodology — The Amalgamated Good Eye

The divide between ways of knowing practiced by the art historian and the worshipper is vast. Art historians, impressed by the exquisitely crafted motifs, are likely to concern themselves with the provenance of artworks or their aesthetic value. Furthermore, art historians often adopt a Eurocentric perspective and, as such, classify forms and parts of Hindu temples as non-Western artworks.¹⁶ As a result, contemporary viewers are encouraged to apprise these forms as self-contained aesthetic objects, for their sculptural carvings, and as distinct from other Western artworks. For instance, the carving of *Surasundari* in Fig. 3.1 is likely to be described in terms of the quality of its chiselled features.

For the worshippers, on the other hand, forms and parts of Hindu temples are saturated with sacred meaning. All these forms, carved on the temple walls, have an important function to serve; namely, to facilitate the worshipper's devotional experience. An ultimate aim for the temple visitor, in this case, is to experience the divine in its entirety.¹⁷ The chiselled forms had long existed to prepare all worshippers to experience the divine as they moved closer to the *garbhagriha* or the innermost chamber of the temple that houses the main deity of the temple. As such, these chiselled forms are saturated with meaning through their iconography and their form, even, as we'll see, if they belong to an ancient temple that may currently not be in a functional state.

For a contemporary worshipper, these material forms are valued not because of their aesthetic beauty but precisely because they embody past ritualistic practices and, as a result, help maintain continuity between the present and the past. These are not self-contained aesthetic objects but forms embedded in the temple which, in turn, accords sacred significance to them.¹⁸ The temple itself is a cultural expression as it is deeply embedded in the layers of political, social and religious development of the times to which it belongs.¹⁹ Indeed, when seen without such an elaborate temple setting, the material forms lose their sacred significance even for a worshipper with a long socialization history of temple visits and worship. The weight of this difference is exemplified in the explanation put forward by Davis who states, “[t]he lives of the ... images ... are made and remade through their encounters with differing audiences, who reciprocally bring with them different ways of seeing and acting towards the images they encounter.”²⁰



Fig. 3.1 Surasundari/Apsara. Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India, 13th century.
Photo by author.

To reconcile these perspectives, that of the art historian and that of the worshipper, I've devised a new framework of analysis. I call this the "amalgamated good eye" — a combination of Rose's "good eye" and Frazier's hermeneutic reflections.²¹ The aim is to firstly capture the complexity of perspectives with which the *Surasundari* are approached and interpreted and secondly to centre context rather than aesthetics in the experiencing of the works.

The "amalgamated good eye" is both descriptive and embedded — descriptive for its focus on iconographic details and embedded for its focus on contextual details. The "amalgamated good eye" is also embodied for its focus on phenomenological and experiential narratives. The combination of perspectives allows us to ask important methodological questions that allow a deeper understanding of lived religious practices; for example, should these motifs²² be explained and described as mere examples of ancient Hindu arts, or should these be conceptualized as remnants of ancient religious practices? How can the knowledge systems, one that serves the keen eye of a historian and one that informs the scanning eye of a worshipper, speak to each other?

Part of this theoretical framework is inspired by Gillian Rose's organizing framework referred to as a critical visual methodology (CVM). This framework is built around sites of analysis and explained in this section. It helps to explore the multiple cultural and social conditions in which images came into being and how they are perceived and embodied. The "good eye," as such, emphasizes that art works should be interpreted in the contexts in which they were created and not as isolated forms or as self-contained aesthetic objects.

According to Rose, the meanings of an image are rendered at four different sites; namely, the site of production that places emphasis on how an image was made or the circumstances under which it was made; the site of the image that spotlights the components of an image or its compositionality; the site of circulation that emphasizes the movement of artworks and ideas across locations and time; and, the site of audiencing that underlines human encounters with objects of arts.²³ The concept of the "amalgamated good eye" resonates with both the site of the image and the site of audiencing, as proposed by Rose.

The "amalgamated good eye," subsuming a variety of hermeneutic reflections in this manner, assumes importance in light of the unique functions of Hindu (sacred) art forms. The goal of these art forms is not to beautify but to serve as the meeting point between the visible or the *drista* and the invisible or the *adrستا*.²⁴ The task of an artist accordingly is to visualize or personify aspects of *adrستا*. For instance, Fig. 3.2 depicts the sun, a natural source of energy that might be worshipped by a hypothetical farming community. Whereas Fig. 3.3 depicts a personification of the sun's divinity, an artist's attempt to bridge the gap between *drista* and *adrستا*. Consistent with the peculiar functions of Hindu (sacred) art forms, the "amalgamated good eye" is instrumental in bringing to the fore the experiential, the iconographic and the contextual details of visual materiality, by decentring both an objective eye and an eye that is sympathetic to the Western empirical foundations of art history.²⁵ The present theoretical proposition, in other words, narrows the divide between an art historian and a worshipper.

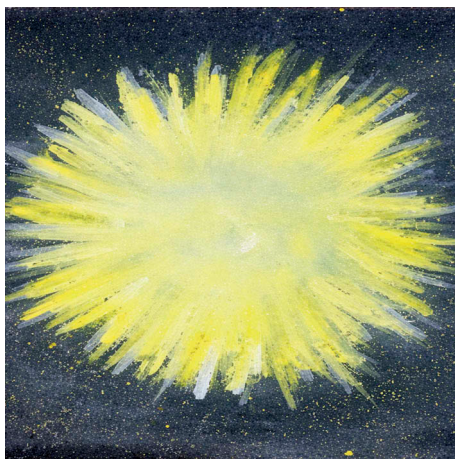


Fig. 3.2 The Depiction of Sun.
With permission of Aanika Vaish, artist.



Fig. 3.3 Personification of Sun's Divinity.
With permission of Aanika Vaish, artist.

To read the Hindu arts, however, the site of audiencing requires further elaboration. The art historian and the worshipper can both be the audience. They both, upon encountering an image, construct their own divergent interpretations necessitating linkages between the site of the image and the site of audiencing in the theoretical sense of the term. The gaze of the art historian is disembodied and de-contextualized while the gaze of the worshipper is embodied, contextualized and experiential. The body plays a pivotal role. The worshipper's body engages with the divine. An artist, while striving to personify the *adrista*, produces artefacts that are also embodied. The temple space is crafted, as such, to prepare the body for an encounter with the divine. Without an emphasis on the body, the Hindu art forms can only be read in a peripheral manner. Without the body, the art forms are decontextualized. This is the gaze of the art historian. In objectifying and categorizing an art form, an art historian concerns herself only with the motif, but a deeper reading of the *Surasundari* can be achieved by situating the motifs within the temple space or the space where it belongs.

Rose's "good eye" concept is therefore supplemented by Frazier who underscored new hermeneutic sensitivities for examining Hindu art forms.²⁶ In other words, hermeneutic reflections that are amenable to distinctive messages that the Hindu art forms are meant to convey. Frazier's reflections, as elucidated below, emphasize the (sacred) art forms for their utility;²⁷ that is, art works for packaging Hindu theological thoughts as well as for channelling all human senses before bringing their focus onto the deity. She outlines four approaches:

- a *The Artefactual Approach* — Objects of art should be understood at the intersections of people, resources, and systems of material production. In other words, pieces of art are embedded in the complicated set of relationships and should be read as such. A scholar, working under this framework, may not be inclined to document the content of the artworks per se but to describe the setup of interactive networks from which the artworks may have originated.²⁸
- b *The Iconic Approach* — Visual arts, within this approach, are viewed as visual theologies but free from aesthetic obligations.²⁹ In undertaking such an endeavour, a scholar drifts away from the embrace of Western referential semantics for interpreting sacred motifs and images.
- c *The Transformative Approach* — Art historians, working within the purview of this framework, understand that art works are created to evoke emotional responses in the spectators or the audience. To put it differently, art works and architecture should cause personal transformation in viewers.
- d *The Embodied Approach* — The very form of an art form is crucial here. The Hindu theological settings granted creative freedom to craftspeople. This resulted in a variety of embodied forms, as craftsmen or craftspeople experimented with their own style, providing scope for many to give material shape to their own personal theology. This is why it becomes pertinent to move away from the weight of Western referential semantics while examining the nature of Hindu art forms or works.

For Frazier, and the present author, these approaches are meant to be brought together to cast light on the distinctive messages that the Hindu art forms convey. Whilst all these approaches are meant to inform Rose's "good eye," the embodied approach enriches Rose's proposal significantly. This enriched proposal is what I call the "amalgamated good eye". Adopting the "amalgamated good eye" compels one to move beyond the mere surface-level descriptions of images, sculptures and motifs and to transcend the boundaries of Western referential semantics. These reflections may encourage onlookers to speak to images as opposed to speaking about images.³⁰

The next section presents *Surasundaris* from the gaze of the art historian in contrast with the gaze of a worshipper. In presenting these different gazes and their concomitant interpretations, the interplay or the linkage between the site of the image and the site of audiencing remains, nevertheless.

Surasundari Motifs

The walls of Hindu temples and stepwells in India are adorned with *Surasundari* motifs; each is associated with different names based on the actions depicted. Some of these include *Darpana dharini* (the one who holds a mirror) (Fig. 3.4), *Dalamalika* (branch holder), and *Padmagandha* (smelling a lotus).³¹ Although this is not an exhaustive list, the essence of these motifs is the depiction of women in different kinds of mesmerizing and erotic poses.³² For the contemporary onlookers and the contemporary passersby, unacquainted with other details of the temple akin to the contemporary art historians, the *Surasundari* motifs — in their myriad forms — may be mistakenly interpreted as space-fillers for temple architecture or as targets of the voyeuristic male gaze.³³

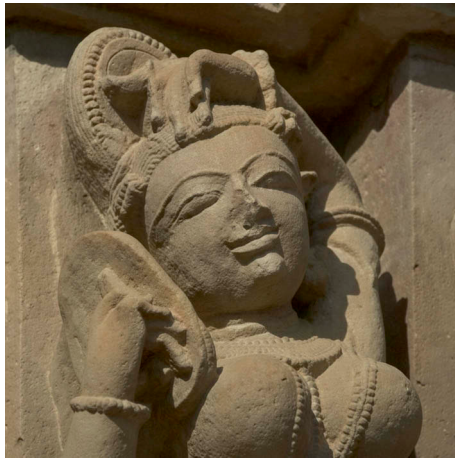


Fig. 3.4 Surasundari with a mirror. Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, c. 10th century.

Photo by author.

A deeper interpretation reveals a more nuanced understanding, though. This is demonstrated by *Dalamalika*, which first appeared as *Salabhanjika* in Buddhist art during the second century BCE. Due to the association with trees, *Salabhanjika*³⁴ signifies fertility.³⁵ To put it differently, *Salabhanjika* emphasizes the role of a woman as *prakriti* (nature), breathing life into *purusha* (man) and eventually giving birth or giving way to new life through their union. On parallel lines, the origins of *Darpana dharini* is traced back to a minor or a lesser-known cult of the Tree Worshipers who may have entered the Indian subcontinent with the Alexandrian Army.³⁶ It becomes apparent from the literature on Hindu studies that other terminologies (e.g., *apsaras*,³⁷ *yakshinis*³⁸ and *naginis*³⁹) were also used for various incarnations of *Surasundaris*.⁴⁰ Despite the disparate labels, *apsaras*, *yakshinis* and *naginis* were understood to occupy positions that were midway between humans and divinities.⁴¹

Over a period of the next few centuries (after the motifs first appeared), the meaning of *Salabhanjika*, *Darpana dharini* and other *Surasundari* motifs underwent a change, and the associated carvings became utilized for decorative purposes. However, it should be underscored that despite the plethora of interpretations attached to the motifs, *Surasundari* may be treated as incarnations of the broader concept of female divinity. A more nuanced interpretation of *Surasundaris*, however, can only be gleaned by placing her back into the space of her origin, under the framework of the “amalgamated good eye.”

Surasundaris as Sculptural Arts in Indian Temple Architecture

A typical *Surasundari* motif, as sculptural art, is carved with full-rounded breasts, narrow waists and curvaceous hips paired with scant clothing and heavy ornaments. They bear resemblance to excavated finds, popularly defined as figurines of cult goddesses, and linked to the Harappan religion.⁴² As sculptural art forms of the medieval period, the *Surasundari* motifs are highly visible and discernible on the walls of the Khajuraho temples in the heart of Central India that were built during 950 to 1050 AD under the patronage of the Chandella dynasty (Fig. 3.5). Besides being carved as though immersed in different actions, these also adorn the temple walls in various dance postures, or postures that are interpreted as “movement” in the latter part of this chapter (Extending the Concept of Embodiment to the Temple Architecture).

Interestingly, the word *sundari* means a beautiful woman in the Sanskrit language. The prefix *su*, which itself signifies the concepts of good or beautiful, is deployed to transform words like body and eyebrows.⁴³ These words, collectively, accord primacy to a beautified body. Consistently, the concept of *Surasundari* signifies a beautiful woman. This concept may have been utilized in the medieval past, when temples were constructed under the patronage of the Chandellas, to embody female divinity. I propose to qualify the usage of female divinity with the help of other words that one can often expect to find

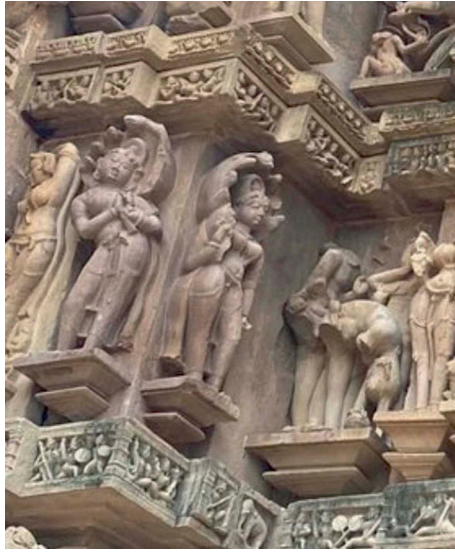


Fig. 3.5 A temple wall bearing a *Nagini* figure. Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India. c. 10th century.
Photo by author.

in the Indian literature and in the (temple) contexts, wherein, *Surasundaris* may appear. These include the word pairs, *laukik* (ordinary perception) versus *alaukik* (extraordinary perception) and *drishtartha* or *drista* (revealed) versus *adrishtartha* or *adrista* (unrevealed). The use of these word pairs makes it difficult to mark a distinction between sacred and profane.⁴⁴ Consistently and linguistically, the perceptible manifestation of *Surasundari* appears to mark the liminal zone between the sacred and profane, especially when these appear as a part of the temple (sacred) architecture.

As the interpretive context for the motifs is the Indian sub-continent, it is worth reiterating the functionality and the purpose of Hindu (sacred) art. An artist, working within the Hindu tradition has always grappled with the complexity of depicting the invisible or imperceptible divine in a concrete form. For most Hindus, their art is both embodied, a personification of the divine in a human form, and abstract. As such, Hindu artists have rendered the divine in a variety of formats. For an art enthusiast or a contemporary historian trained in the Western tradition, on the other hand, the domain of interpretative focus could be comparatively narrow.

The Embodied Approach and Lived Religion

I begin this section by asking a pertinent question. What can we learn about the ritualistic practices associated with the *Surasundaris*, by employing the “amalgamated good eye”? This question is closely intertwined with another

important one. What is the motivation for adopting an embodied approach? As alluded to before, the artists both worked to visualize or personify aspects of *adrista* with the help of the temple architecture and its adornments. The temple itself served as the embodiment of the deity's presence. In other words, both the art forms and architecture served to narrow the divide between a human body and a divine body.

There are other pertinent reasons for paying particular attention to the embodied approach, and these reasons assume importance as one considers the structure of a Hindu temple that serves as a storyline, a medium for artistic expression and a space for bringing people closer to divinity. As a space for narrowing the divide between humanity and divinity, the structure of a Hindu temple is based on the dictates of ancient Sanskrit texts (e.g., the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*) and other ancient Sanskrit treatises on architecture (e.g., *Brhat Samhitā*, and *Vāstu Śāstras*). The *garbhagriha* or the innermost dark chamber of the temple, housing the main deity to which a temple is dedicated, is deprived of art works except for the *murti* or the statue of the main deity. Herein, the statue serves as the embodiment of divine power. The exterior, however, is highly decorated and serves as a medium for visual story telling. Here, artists in the past have exhibited extraordinary creativity by carving motifs for the sake of narrating visual tales. For instance, the outer walls of the Hazara Rama Temple in Karnataka depict scenes from the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. This artistic creativity has not been merely restricted to visual narration of epics; artists in the past also carved other minor deities or demigods on temple walls. Temple artists and craftsmen, in this manner, utilized the physical space beyond the *garbhagriha* (reserved for deities associated with the prominent Hindu sects of the times) for embellishment and decorations. As mundane as the embellishment and decorations might appear, these also had a role to play. In this regard, they allowed worshippers to decipher divinity in a myriad of shapes and forms. These elaborate carvings were abruptly interrupted at the entrance to the *garbhagriha* to help worshippers direct their attention exclusively to the main deity. Therefore, the temple has not merely been a space for worship but has also served as an object of worship, wherein divinity could be perceived with the help of various built features. Or, in the words of Diana Eck "[t]he day-to-day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world."⁴⁵ Deploying this embodied perspective helps one to decipher the lived religious practices of the times. The next sub-section spotlights folk traditions of the medieval period to explicate this issue.

The Folk Traditions of Medieval Times

The artisans working to beautify the temples during the medieval period⁴⁶ were most likely prevented from engaging with the literature and the written texts that were considered the domain of the privileged Brahmanical

practice.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the craftsmen apparently took inspiration from both their folk practices and the Brahmanical prescriptions for their professional creative expressions.⁴⁸ As such, it is highly likely that the manifestation of the main deity (*Shiva* or *Vishnu*) in the central temple complex was consistent with the then prevalent or gradually strengthening Brahmanical practices, whereas the minor divinities, sculpted on the temple walls, were revealing of the folk or indigenous traditions and practices. The placement of minor divinities beyond the main complex therefore also reflects the subservient nature of folk tradition of the times.

Ultimately, the culmination of temple architecture under the patronage of the Chandella dynasty can be treated as a complex negotiation between indigenous practices and the Brahmanical order.⁴⁹ This is because the Chandella kings, originally belonging to a non-Hindu tribal clan, gradually adopted the Brahmanical tradition.⁵⁰ Therefore, the reverence for female divinities, reminiscent of the tribal or folk traditions, likely took hold under their patronage alongside the reverence noted for other major deities. For the followers of the folk traditions, the worship of nature and fertility was closely associated with the female principle. Under this belief system, a semi-divine status was accorded to women. Thus, the artisans and sculptors carved or rather embodied the fertility of their revered female principle in the form of beautiful women or *Surasundaris* in conjunction with working on other aspects of temple architecture, apparently under the close supervision of the priestly class.

The expression of folk practices receives further support in the context of other iconographic features that also appear as a part of Khajuraho temples. A striking example includes the Lakshmana Temple that was built under the patronage of king *Yasovarman*, who is known to have honoured the *Brahmans*. According to Desai, the artistic work on one of the walls of the temple represents a power struggle between Brahmanical religion and the other sects.⁵¹ This sculptural representation is inspired by “Prabodhachandrodaya,” a staged performance that was played out during the Chandella reign. The “Prabodhachandrodaya” depicts a power tussle between the Brahmanical order and the non-Brahmanical sects. The artists of the Lakshmana Temple have, thus, carefully sculpted the characters from the play on one of the temple walls, right before the entrance to the central part of the temple that housed the main deity. Strikingly, *Surasundaris* and other erotic carvings⁵² replace the central characters of the play.⁵³ A faint inscription *Shri Sadhunandi Khapanaka* on the south wall of the Lakshmana Temple offers further theoretical support for this interchangeable depiction. The inscribed name (*Shri Sadhunandi Khapanaka*) appears to refer back to one of the characters from the play.

In sum, the sculptural motifs of *Surasundari* are the least explained despite their beauty and aesthetic grandeur. By adopting an embodied approach and by interspersing the embodied framework with the socio-cultural and socio-religious milieu of the medieval period, I underscore that *Surasundari* within the temple complex, embody female divinity in a liminal manner. This liminality is evident from the associated linguistic terminology, spatial

placement of the sculptural motifs and the way these motifs become a part of the temple storyline. Their placement on the exterior temple walls, beyond the central complex of the temple, further reinforces not only their sacred liminality but also the subservient nature of the folk traditions associated with the artists who sculpted these motifs. Furthermore, the significance of the folk traditions was preserved for their followers with the help of these temple decorations even though their supremacy may have been taken over by the popularity of the Brahmanical tradition within the reigning kingdoms. Additionally, the motifs paid reverence to the Brahmanical tradition and those who could afford to fund the construction of elaborate temples.⁵⁴

Extending the Concept of Embodiment to Temple Architecture

In this section, I deploy the concept of embodiment, as borrowed from Frazier, in a broader manner to include the entire temple architecture, as it is the holistic temple construction deeply embedded in the layers of political, social and religious development that embodies not only the divine but also the semi-divine or the *Surasundaris*.

The starting points for this discussion are two representative sculptural forms that signify movement. The first of these is a sculpture of an *apsara*,⁵⁵ made of sandstone, that has been a part of Khajuraho temples but is held by the Auckland Art Gallery (Toi o Tāmaki) in New Zealand.⁵⁶ Here, the *apsara* appears in a *tribhanga* pose (see also Fig. 3.5). This is an S-shaped curve that is characterized by three bends in the body: hence the term *tribhanga*. The bends are observed at the neck, waist and knee. The second is a relief of an eight-armed “Dancing Shiva” originating from Khajuraho and placed in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 3.6).⁵⁷ The relief, just like the sculpture of the *apsara*, is chiselled in a *tribhanga* pose. He is recognized as Lord Shiva based on two of his distinguishing symbols, the trident and the drum. The Lord is adorned with heavy jewellery and is identified as a Brahmanical deity with the help of a carved sacred thread, placed across his chest. The most common interpretation of these sculptural forms suggests that the signifying movements reflect dance poses.⁵⁸ Such an interpretation assumes plausibility from the perspective of an art historian who puts emphasis only on the iconographic features without referencing these features back to the context to which they belong. Using the “amalgamated good eye,” I propose a different interpretation that instead emphasizes movement. This interpretation surfaces when one takes into account the embeddedness and the contextualization of these forms.

The emphasis placed on movement follows from an anthropomorphized conceptualization or understanding of the temple form, which once hosted the “Dancing Shiva” and the *apsara* sculpture; a form that is meant to be a living and dynamic body.⁵⁹ In other words, these represent the bodies of the God. Interestingly, archaeologists, theologians and historians have discovered correlations between the plan of a temple (its spatial layout) and the human body.⁶⁰ Expectedly, movement is not only depicted in the sculptures but also



Fig. 3.6 *Eight Armed Shiva Dancing Between Two Pillars*, Cleveland Museum of Art, 10th–11th century. James Parmelee Fund 1958.288. Public Domain.

becomes an important part of the structure — the temple complex itself — that houses the sculptures and the main deity. While the sculptural movement is directly observable, the implied movement of the temple complex can only be gleaned by visually engaging with the Khajuraho temple architecture from the outside (Fig. 3.7).⁶¹ Scanning this part of the temple from the base, it becomes apparent that the complex structure swells upwards, with the help of expanding repetition, and the constituent parts proliferate outwards.⁶² In other words, a by-stander has the possibility to experience a potential for movement by looking at the static form of architecture. A glance from the bottom to the top leads to an experience of an expanding movement in the same direction while glancing at the structure laterally builds up an experience of lateral expansion.

The nature of construction supporting apparent movement is also consistent with prescribed Sanskrit texts on architecture (*Vastu Shastra*) and traditional philosophical thought, both of which emphasize the manifestation of the universe from an all-containing point with the help of progression (or movement from one to many).⁶³ At this juncture, readers may grant scope for



Fig. 3.7 The main temple tower, Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, c. 10th century.
Photo by author.

the possibility that the medieval artists took inspiration from the capabilities of human bodies; especially, the body's potentiality for movement; a movement that is essential for bridging the gap between *drista* and *adrista*. Stimulated by the spatial, architectural and visual prompts embedded in the construction of the temple, the embodied movements of the participants helped bridge this gap and facilitated making the unknown discoverable. The sacred movement towards the divine, as such, was analogically meant to be reflected not only in the sacred architecture or the built space⁶⁴ but also in the poses of the sculptures (i.e., *tribhanga* pose) that adorned these sacred spaces.

Scholars of religion, art enthusiasts and archaeologists can hope to learn more about ritualistic practices and locally prevalent epistemological views with the help of the "amalgamated good eye" that resonates with both the site of the image and the site of audiencing, as proposed by Rose, and is coupled with the hermeneutic reflections offered by Frazier; that is, the embodied approach. Whilst integrating the embodied approach within the offered amalgamated framework, I also underscore the necessity to shift our focus from an emphasis on bodies as a source of symbolism to using our embodied capabilities and the associated materialities to decipher how the imperceptible or the unknown becomes perceptible or known — discoverable by the embodied praxis of worshippers.

Conclusions

The motifs of *Surasundari* have long been deciphered as self-contained aesthetic objects within the Western art historical tradition. Such an understanding typically describes the images as the epitome of feminine (erotic) beauty or significant outputs of Indian craftsmanship. Theorists, from the non-Western traditions or those familiar with the Indian traditions, have consistently questioned and criticized the imposition of Western aesthetic categories on Hindu sacred objects. This sentiment is, for instance, reflected by Rajguru, who writes "[t]he display conventions employed in the exhibition of Hindu deities in art galleries, clearly reveal their status as art objects. They demand to be received aesthetically within the visual artistic realm."⁶⁵ Her argument reinforces that idea that the aestheticization of religious artworks in art galleries and museums is highly problematic. When it comes to museum settings, Rajguru further argues,

In practice, the deity's interpretation as a work of art, or as a symbol of its culture, becomes unavoidable, and its material characteristics take precedence. Hence, the accurate interpretation of worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses in the secular setting is problematic and challenging, as the focus remains on its material existence, which is of secondary importance in its religious context.⁶⁶

As such, the museological and the temple context appear to offer two distinct platforms for applying "two antithetical aesthetic standards."⁶⁷

Several of these interpretations, put together, triggers the need for adopting better suited frameworks for interpreting Hindu religious artworks. As noted in this chapter, consistently, the interpretation of Surasundaris diverges depending upon the analytical lens that we adopt — the decontextualized lens of the art historian or the embodied and the embedded lenses of the worshipper. Theoretically, the “amalgamated good eye,” as an organizing framework, will play an instrumental role in opening analytical opportunities that will potentially enrich the interpretations of art historians. The enrichment, in this case, helps an interpreter to move beyond mere iconographic details and apprise artworks for their utility as well. In other words, this framework enhances the opportunity for seeing the relevance of these artworks in bridging the gap between *drista* and *adrasta*.

The chapter deploys Rose’s conceptual framework of the “good eye” for interpreting medieval Hindu artworks. These artworks, furthermore, require hermeneutic sensitivities particularly from the ontological standpoint (or, what comes into being within our experience of art). As such, the “good eye” is supplemented by Frazier’s embodied approach. In doing so, the divide between the interpretations that an art historian would draw and the interpretations that a worshipper would draw are significantly narrowed. Furthermore, narrowing the divide between hermeneutics and art theory helps address a theoretical lacuna: the obscurity of relation between hermeneutics and art theory. What do we gain from such an exercise? Such a theoretical endeavour awards autonomy to artworks. They no longer serve as products of or as evidence for historical socio-religious and political processes. Instead, artworks seen and interpreted in their own right serve to represent the past as it was experienced. The consequent impressions that are drawn situate an individual’s aesthetic experience within a shared historical discourse as far as the embodied realization of meaning is concerned.⁶⁸

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Notes

- 1 Houtman and Meyer, “Introduction: Material Religion: How Things Matter,” 1–26.
- 2 Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom*.
- 3 The focus will be on the Khajuraho temples built during the rule of the Chandella dynasty. Out of the several temples built (approximately eighty-five), only twenty exist today. These temples are under consideration, as these are characterized by the highest number of *Surasundari* carvings.

- 4 Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 117–146.
- 5 Frazier, “Arts and Aesthetics in Hindu Studies,” 1–11.
- 6 Grimes, Mittal and Thursby, “Hindu Dharma,” 31–102.
- 7 Jamison and Witzel, “Vedic Hinduism,” 65–113.
- 8 There have been debates about the scheme of periodization as far as Indian history is concerned. Despite those debates, historians construed the ancient Indian period as comprising of the prehistoric times and the Vedic age, but there appears to be no agreement on what constitutes the end of the ancient period and the beginning of the medieval period.
- 9 For some scholars of Indian history, the medieval period coincides with the Turkish or Mughal rule in India, that is, the close of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century. Anjum, “‘Medieval’ in the Eyes of the ‘Modern’,” 64–74. From the perspective of this chapter, the fall of the Gupta empire marks the beginning of the medieval period, as the emphasis is placed on the sociocultural milieu, as opposed to mere political milieu, characterizing the establishment of the Sultanate in Delhi. In other words, a period that is not only distinct from the previous ancient age but could also be distinguished from the period in which the Sultanate came into being. The thrust is on the transformation of classical heritage and culture into medieval culture and heritage that happened gradually in the centuries between the demise of the Gupta empire (c. 550 AD) and the establishment of the Sultanate (c. 1206 AD). Goyal, “Rise of Medievalism in Indian History,” 13–40.
- 10 Grimes, Mittal and Thursby, “Hindu Dharma,” 31–102.
- 11 The term is open to various connotations even in contemporary times. Dimitrova, “Development of Sanātana Dharma,” 89–98.
- 12 Durga and Reddy, “Kings, Temples and Legitimation of Autochthonous Communities,” 145–166.
- 13 Sears, “Constructing the Guru,” 7–31.
- 14 Or a renewed focus as compared to the ancient times.
- 15 Singh, “Religious Life Under the Chandellas,” 220–231.
- 16 Sridharan, “Negotiating the ‘Living’ with the Historical,” 149–170.
- 17 Khetrapal, “Ancient Olfactory Materialities.”
- 18 In contrast, people acquainted with Tibetan religious objects may mention that these objects would retain their sacred character in all kinds of contexts. See Cotte, “Reflections Around the Conservation of Sacred Thangkas,” 1–12. This statement, though, is not intended as a contrast between Hindu sacred forms and Tibetan religious objects.
- 19 Chugh, *Karnataka’s Rich Heritage*.
- 20 Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 263.
- 21 Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 117–146; Frazier, “Arts and Aesthetics in Hindu Studies,” 1–11.
- 22 Motifs and sculptural forms are used interchangeably, here.
- 23 Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 55–68.
- 24 Chugh, *Karnataka’s Rich Heritage*.
- 25 Rose and Tolia-Kelly, *Visuality/Materiality*.
- 26 Frazier, “Arts and Aesthetics in Hindu Studies,” 1–11.
- 27 Frazier, “Arts and Aesthetics in Hindu Studies,” 1–11.
- 28 Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*.
- 29 Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*.
- 30 See also Rogoff “Studying Visual Culture,” 14–26. In line with similar conceptualizations, I treat images and sculptures on par for the purpose of the current analysis.
- 31 Sharman, “Secular Female Imagery,” 1–10.
- 32 The Khajuraho temples in Central India and temples in Orissa in Eastern India bear a high number of *Surasundari* motifs in sculptural forms.
- 33 As conveyed to the author by several tourists visiting the temples of Khajuraho.

- 34 These could also appear, sculpted in *tribhanga* pose. See Krishnan, "Nature goddesses," 23–34. See the latter sections for the description of the *tribhanga* pose.
- 35 Chowdhuri, "Reflections of Plant Life," 78–82.
- 36 Gautam, "The Lady with the Mirror," 301–313.
- 37 With the nomenclature of *apsara*, the associated sculptural forms are considered the manifestation of female spirits of the clouds and waters within the Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Several theorists use the words *apsara* and *Surasundari* in a synonymous manner. The English translation for *apsaras* includes words like celestial nymphs and celestial maidens.
- 38 A *yakshini*, discernible with sculpted features like wide hips and full breasts coupled with elaborate accessories, is considered the embodiment of prosperity and fertility. She is also considered to be the guardian of treasures that may have been hidden in the roots of the trees. Theorists may use the term "female nature spirits" to describe *yakshinis*.
- 39 A *nagini* is a snake or a serpent goddess, usually identified with the help of a snake hood placed over her sculpted head.
- 40 Or, rather all are incarnations of Mother Goddess; this is plausible for two reasons: first, Hindus consider all Goddesses as different manifestations of the Great Goddess, *Devi*; second, this Great Goddess is both multiple and singular. See Wangu, *Images of Indian Goddesses: Myths, Meanings, and Models*, 18.
- 41 Veliath, "The Mother Goddess in Indian Sculpture," 159–174.
- 42 As the Harappan dates precede the medieval era, it may be argued that the aesthetics of depicting female divinity in an anthropomorphized form evolved with time. See Mann and Singh, "Yakshi: The Journey of the 'Mother Goddess'," 1–3.
- 43 Dehejia, *The Body Adorned*.
- 44 Dehejia, *The Body Adorned*.
- 45 Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 11.
- 46 The Chandella patronage of arts and architecture is considered a significant period in medieval Indian history. See Gill, *Comparative Analysis of the Temples*.
- 47 The early medieval period or the late Vedic period was characterized by an increasing popularity of Vedic sacrifices, conducted by sacrificial priests or the Brahmins, for royal or powerful patrons. With their increasing popularity, Brahmins gained privileged access to the *garbhagriha* while devotees had to wait beyond this central temple complex for a vision (*darsan*) of the main deity, as may be discerned from the construction of the pillared halls or *mandapa* that served as waiting rooms for devotees. Perhaps the construction trend of temples reflected the socio-religious changes of the times. These changes entailed the strengthening of the Brahmanical ritualistic prominence paired with the increasing reverence for the three major Hindu deities associated with the three major Hindu sects (*Vishnu*, *Shiva* and *Devi*). These changes may have gradually subsumed a variety of folk beliefs and practices. See Sahu, "Brahmanical Ideology," 3–18; Bronkhorst, "The Rise of Classical Brahmanism," 49–56; and Jaiswal, "Semitising Hinduism," 20–32 for associated ideas.
- 48 Elgood, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*.
- 49 This discussion excludes the temples devoted to Jainism.
- 50 Brahmanical religion entailed conducting religious rituals with the help of *Brahmans* or the priestly class. Hinduism, as an elaborated framework, evolved with the Brahmanical reforms. Those who opposed the Brahmanical reforms created their own philosophical ideologies and groups. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*; Urban, "The Womb of Tantra," 231–247.
- 51 Desai, "Sculptural Representation on the Lakshmana Temple," 99–108; Desai, "Social Dimensions of Art in Early India," 3–32.
- 52 For Tripathi, the depiction of nude monks or their depictions as a part of erotic imagery that appears in some parts of the Khajuraho temples is explained as an artistic way of ridiculing the Brahmanical order.

- 53 Desai, "Sculptural Representation on the Lakshmana Temple," 99–108.
- 54 The embodied approach, in this regard, bears similarity to the description of lived religion that is offered by Ammerman, "Finding Religion in Everyday Life," 189–207. The essence of her definition entails a focus on everyday practices and enacted forms of spirituality as opposed to an official organization or affiliation.
- 55 Visually, it is difficult to make a thorough distinction between *apsaras* and *surasundaris*. The former are more likely to be depicted in dancing postures. As far as their placements are concerned, both motifs are spotted on the outer or inner walls, pillars and ceilings of temples. See Shrivastava, "Bundelkhand–Historicity and Its Rich Decorative Ornamental Features," 66–73.
- 56 To view image, see: <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/artwork/3665/apsara#:~:text=This%20sensual%2C%20sandstone%20figure%20came,the%20neck%2C%20waist%20and%20knee.>
- 57 Marcus, "Two Indian Stone Sculptures," 164–167.
- 58 Dance and music played an important role for temple rituals during the Chandella dynasty. This is not only evident from the carvings of *apsaras* but also various celestial musicians (*gandharvas*) that are often seen along with the *apsaras*. Refer to Kulshreshtha, "Introduction to Temple Rituals."
- 59 Indorf, "Interpreting the Hindu Temple Form," 177–211.
- 60 Narayanan, "Embodied Cosmologies," 495–520.
- 61 Akin to Kramrisch *Painted Delight* who also explains that visualizing the temple from the outside is a part of *darśana*.
- 62 Hardy, "The Dance Performed by the Temple."
- 63 Hardy, "Hindu Temples and the Emanating Cosmos," 112–134.
- 64 Hence, it is also important to place isolated artworks (as found in museums) within their original context to decipher the prevalent ritualistic practices of the times.
- 65 Rajguru, *From Shrine to Plinth*, 12.
- 66 Rajguru, "From Shrine to Plinth," 114.
- 67 Mitter, "Ernst Gombrich and Western Representations of the Sacred Art of India."
- 68 See Davey, "The Hermeneutics of Seeing," 3–19, for a comparable proposal on hermeneutic aesthetics that accords importance to the experience of art as a means of experiencing certain truths. These truths that are seemingly experienced subjectively are not subjective per se but are grounded in historical and cultural ideas.

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Eight-Armed Shiva Dancing Between Two Pillars. 10th–11th century. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland. James Parmelee Fund, 1958.288. Public Domain. <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1958.288>

The Depiction of Sun. With permission of Aanika Vaish, artist.

The main temple tower, Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, c. 10th century. Photo by author.

Personification of Sun's Divinity. With permission of Aanika Vaish, artist.

Surasundari/Apsara. Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, India, 13th century. Photo by author.

Surasundari with a mirror. Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, c. 10th century. Photo by author.

A temple wall bearing a Nagini figure, Khajuraho Temple, Madhya Pradesh, India, c.10th century. Photo by author.

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