



I · S · O · A
SURASUNDARI



PHOTOGRAPHS

by Raymond Burnier

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SURASUNDARI, which means Celestial Beauty, is the name of a particular class of angels (deva).¹ Their form exists in the archetypal plane from eternity before becoming concrete by art and displayed on the walls of the Hindu temple. The Hindu temple is the house and seat of God. It is the place where his glory shines forth in the exposition given to his name by the many forms of the carved symbols on the walls.

The majority of the temples in Khajuraho, in Central India, were built in the 10th and 11th Centuries A.D. Some are dedicated to Shiva, others to Vishnu, and one group are Jain temples. They are cognate in type and their walls step forth from the massive pile of the building in many buttresses, on graded levels. On the Kandariya Temple, of which some images of Celestial Beauties are shown on Plates I—VI, the single buttresses of the temple itself, the Prasada, and its hall, the Mandapa, once more protrude on each side in one central projection. Against each leans the image of a divinity, standing on his own pedestal, carved along with it in high relief. In the recesses, to either side of it, a Surasundari looks into a mirror, or her palms are joined in worship; she raises her arm, or holds a lotus flower, or a branch of fruits, a bowl, or she plays ball, or touches her breast, or paints the sole of her foot with crimson red lac juice; these and other typically recurrent gestures she shows with unconcern for the divinity represented on the higher face with whom her relation is one of propinquity and symmetry, whereas her actual reference stays within herself, in her application to her particular activity. Absorbed in it, she looks inward and beyond it, into a further profundity, when, as she often does, turns away from the figure of the god next to her, turns her back also on the world outside and faces towards the wall of the temple. For there she is closer to the centre of the temple and its indwelling Essence, but with whom she has no other relation. Her only relation is with God, the central and only theme of the temple and all its images.

The middle figure on each buttress is a male divinity and belongs to one of several groups. The Ashtadikpalas preside over the eight regions of space; others again are Pratiharas, guardians of the doors which lead to God. These and further divinities, flanked by the Celestial Beauties in the recessed parts of each buttress, form a belt, and sometimes more than one by which the body of the temple is held in a triple enclosure identical in plan (Kandariya Temple; Vishvanatha Temple reproduced on the Cover).²

The plan, with the fretted outline of the buttressed fort of the temple is akin to a yantra or linear diagram used by the worshipper for a localisation of each of the aspects and powers of God in their hierarchy with regard to the centre, the immovable Principle. In the Shri-yantra, the various positions are held by goddesses or powers who are known as Yoginis,³ conjoint energies by whom is effected the work of the Transcendental Power, Maha-Shakti. They are placed in the yantra in a hierarchy of position, proceeding inward and corresponding to an increasing secrecy and sacredness until the centre is reached where is the Supreme Yogini, the Maha-Shakti. Close to the perimeter, yet secret in their power, are a group of Yoginis; where they reside is the Place of Fulfilment of All Hopes (sarvashaparipuraka-cakra). They are the Attractions (akarshini) of and by the intellect (buddhi), of and by the sense of "I"ness (ahankara), of and by the faculties of knowledge and action who, decked in love provoking fashion, draw towards themselves the intellect, the notion of "I"ness, all the faculties of knowledge and action, the senses and the body, thought and memory and while they overwhelm them and fulfil their desire they leave them, increased in power, in the region where hopes and desires attain their multifarious objects. With the help of these Shaktis a transformation is then effected of the mind (manovikara), the faculties and the rest; they approach the centre in which there is no separateness.

It is in this sense that a further group of beauteous Shaktis is described as Maids (paricarika) and others are called Messengers (duti) of the Transcendental Power, the Maha-Shakti. In their lotus-hands they carry, each of them, a flower, a raiment, a mirror and various kinds of caskets.⁴

The Shaktis or Yoginis are working energies subservient to the Great Shakti. On the walls of the temples they are figured in all directions as Celestial Beauties. They perform this work by the side of the gods whose activity their presence releases. Indian astrology knows the Yogini as a cosmic power. It moves from day to day, from place to place in all directions.

By the side of the eight Regents of the directions of space, by the side of each of the several groups of gods, the Celestial Beauties are placed embodied in their archetypal forms. They display them in rhythms and gestures and by their attributes which they have in common with the Yoginis.

In the macrocosm they operate as branches and part aspects of the Transcendental Power, conjointly with the Supreme Principle as Yoga-maya, the manifestation of the Universe. In the microcosm, with reference to man, Yoga-maya is the power of reintegration; the Yoginis are maids and messengers, the 'angels' of the Transcendental Power. The Attractions in the outer circle of the yantra, the Celestial Beauties on the walls of the temple, serve man, the devotee; they satisfy his response to them so that, increased in power, released from their attractions and transformed he proceeds in his devotion (pra-karana) towards God in the innermost sanctuary of his heart and in the temple. They help man towards reintegration, akin to those celestial damsels (apsaras) who appear at the time when he, a knower of Brahman departs from this world: "Him approach 500 celestial damsels, 100 carrying scented powders, saffron, turmeric and the like, in their hands, 100 carrying fruits, 100 carrying various ornaments and 100 carrying garlands. They adorn him with ornaments befitting Brahma himself. Thus adorned with Brahma ornaments and knowing Brahma he goes to Brahma."⁵

The Celestial Beauties belong to the Avarana-devatas, "surrounding divinities". Their number is large. Their figures are repeated on the temples, all round the walls, to either side of each god, and as on the Kandariya and Vishvanatha Temples, in all the three belts of sculpture. Such supererogation in carving their figures, alike in type yet indefinitely modified in each instance by a particular rhythmical consistency, shows repetition itself as a power in whose comprehensive rhythm are interwoven the images in rows and storeys. It is made concrete by art in the figures of the gods and the celestial women who, though they resemble the human shape, are unlike it. For the divine (daiva) and the human form "are born from one parentage. The divine form is endowed with more intellect (buddhi). The human form is not so endowed with intellect."⁶

The form of the Celestial Beauties is of embodied intellect; by art this intellectual (paramarthika) body is made concrete.⁷ It is different from the physical body of flesh and bones and which is of the earth. The qualities of the celestial body are those of the atmosphere, pervaded as it is by the light of the sun and where blows the wind and the gale of the Spirit. It is the region of movement; the celestial bodies are built up by movement only. In the "air-world" (bhuvās; antariksha) the gods dwell; man moves in it and breathes. In its movement, his living body is of the air-world and one in nature with that of the gods. Indian sculpture, whose subject is the gods, knows only of this, celestial body. It consists of movement and is resilient with the breath that courses in its smooth channels.

India thinks in images; the image (murti) itself is beheld as a divinity. "Murti (image), the wife of Dharma (the order of things in the cosmos and righteousness in man) is Form, luminous and charming (manohara). Without her, the Supreme Spirit (Paramatman), whose abode is the whole universe, would be without support."⁸ Her charm and attractions are those of the Anima Mundi, cosmic vitality, active in the middle region (antariksha), in space. There the temple has its extension. In some of her representations she is seen ball-playing; this also Vishnu did when he assumed the form of Mohini, the Enchantress, and succeeded in cheating the Titans of their share of immortality.⁹ Beauty, absorbed in herself, holds the ball, touches its roundness as part of herself (Plates V, VI). Her body and limbs are wreathed close to its anticipated fall and around the very axis of her shape. This power of absorption in her own being and play is the sense of "I" ness (ahankara) which causes delusion and by which the Enchantress, self-enchanted, made forgetful of their egoity, even the Titans. But when Celestial Beauty looks into a mirror, curved like her own appearance, she beholds, in its stainless surface, pure knowledge (nirmala jnana)¹⁰ in which Consciousness is reflected and looks back at her in her own likeness, which is that of the intellect in its attractions and aspirations (Plate II). They are met by a consonance of plastic shapes in an identity of image and form. Untouched by allegory, the form of Surasundari is a concrete symbol made by art.

¹ The Celestial Beauties, the lovely women of the gods (suranam sundaryah) are enumerated in the "Samaranganasutradhara" (ch. LVII, verse 645), a treatise on architecture by King Bhoja, who ruled over Malwa in the first part of the Eleventh Century. They belong to the host of superhuman figures carved on the walls of Meru, the foremost type of all temples (prasadaraja).

² Surasundari is also the name of one of the 36 Yakshinis; "Tantraraja-Tantra," ch. XVII, 53.

³ A posthumous panegyric, dated A.D. 1002, engraved in stone in the Vishvanatha Temple (seen from SSW in the photograph) celebrates King Dhanga, under whose rule this temple was built. The images on this and the Kandariya Temple are carved in high relief and partly in the round in fine sandstone of light buff colour. Their height is below 4 feet. The carved belt of figures around the temple is broken by open balconies projecting (bhadra) in the middle of the south, west and north sides of Prasada and Mandapa and from the entrance halls in the east. Seen from the angle of the photograph on the Cover, these partly hide from view the belt of images.

⁴ "Tantraraja-Tantra," ch. IV, 72-73; in the Shri-yantra, 16 Shaktis (gupta yoginis), the Attractions, are stationed on the 16 lotus-petals near the circumference of the circle. Outside the circle, and within the square enclosure of the yantra are the Dikpalas, the guardians of the regions and other groups of divinities. The Avarana-devatas, the surrounding divinities, in both these zones, have their images and correspondences on the walls of the temple.

⁵ In the yantra of Bhuvaneshvari, the Maids (paricarika) have their place outside the lotus-petals; "Sharadatilaka," ch. IX, 38-40; the Messengers (duti) surround the Primordial Shakti imaged as Tripura (ch. X, 92).

⁶ "Kaushitaki Upanishad", I, 4. ⁷ "Matsya Purana", ch. CXLV, 14-16. ⁸ "Garuda Purana", ch. XV, 45-53. ⁹ "Brahmavaivarta Purana", Part II; I, 145.

¹⁰ Playing ball, Putana, the demoness, in the shape of a beautiful young woman, enters the village from where she is going to kidnap the infant Krishna in order to suckle him to death. This part is acted in Kathakali with an effortless unconcern and grace, an expression of the power (siddhi) which the demoness is going to exert over the people there.

Contemporary interpretation sees Maya, playing with the globe (anda) of the world, in sculptures like the one shown on Plates V and VI.

¹¹ "Vishnudharmottara", Part III, ch. XLVIII, 16.

The diacritical marks on the transliterations of Sanskrit words had to be omitted, for typographical reasons.











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