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Q1

How will you explain the medieval Indian temple sculptures represent the social life of those days?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · GS I · 10 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how medieval Indian temple sculptures represent the social life of those days
- Treat sculpture as a social document of work, rank, gender, and leisure, not only of gods
- Keep the explanation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Medieval temples carved daily work, music, war, and household scenes beside the gods.

Khajuraho, Konark, Hoysala, and Chola walls show rank, craft, and kama as public facts.

Women, dancers, and donors appear as social actors, not only as ornaments.

The stone favours elite donors, so it is a partial census.

Inscriptions must sit beside the panels for a full social reading.

Introduction

Medieval temple walls were public stone books. Beside gods they carved dancers, soldiers, donors, animals, and household scenes, so the temple recorded how those societies worked, ranked people, and spent surplus.

Body

Sculpture as a social document

- **Khajuraho**, Konark, Halebidu, Belur, and the Chola temples of the **Kaveri delta** show mithuna couples, musicians, and craftsmen, which means devotion sat next to ordinary desire and skill.
- Processions, hunting, war, and royal gifts carved in relief display the court, the army, and the donor, so political rank is as visible as myth.
- Dress, jewellery, hairstyles, and musical instruments fix regional fashion and craft, which later historians read as evidence of textile, metal, and dance guilds.
- Animals, farms, and river boats appear in narrative panels, which ties the shrine to the agrarian and trade world that paid for it.

Groups, work, and gender

- Brahmana priests, temple dancers, drummers, and stone-cutters are shown in their tasks, so jati work is part of the sacred programme, not hidden behind it.
- Women appear as devotees, dancers, mothers, and donors, which records a public female presence even in a patriarchal household order.

- Erotic panels at **Khajuraho** and Konark are not a private scandal; they sit on a royal temple and show that kama was an admitted limb of courtly and householder life.
- Foreign-looking traders and soldiers on some Deccan and coastal temples hint at war and long-distance contact that the locality already knew.

Limits of the stone

- The temple records elite donors and ideal types more than the landless poor, so sculpture is a partial social census.
- Iconoclasm, later plaster, and museum removal mean the surviving wall is not the full medieval street.
- Read the sculpture with inscriptions and land grants, or the social claim stays only visual.

Flow diagram

Temple wall -> Gods myths
Temple wall -> Work rank dress
Temple wall -> Court war donors
Work rank dress -> Social life record
Court war donors -> Social life record
Gods myths -> Social life record

Conclusion

Medieval temple sculpture represents social life because it carves work, rank, music, war, and household love onto a public wall. It is a rich source for dress and occupation, and a weaker source for those who never paid for a panel.

Facts & figures

Khajuraho

Chandela temples whose walls mix deities with musicians, mithuna, and courtly life.

Konark Sun Temple

Eastern Ganga temple whose wheels, dancers, and erotic panels record craft and court culture.

Hoysala Belur-Halebidu

Star-shaped temples dense with jewellery, dress, and narrative social types.

Chola bronzes and stone

Kaveri-delta temples and Nataraja bronzes that show dance, royal gift, and temple service.

Temple inscriptions

Land grants and donor records that name the people the sculpture only types.

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