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Q3

'The sculptors filled the Chandella artform with resilient vigor and breadth of life.' Elucidate.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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

- Place Chandella sculpture in time and in Bundelkhand
- **Show vigour and breadth of life in temple walls:** gods, mithuna, animals, daily work
- Elucidate Khajuraho without reducing it to erotic panels only

Revision summary

The Chandellas built Khajuraho as a **Nagara** temple city in Bundelkhand.

High-relief sandstone figures of gods, dancers, animals and ordinary work give the walls movement.

Mithuna couples are one auspicious register, not the whole meaning of the site.

Kandariya Mahadeva and the Jain group share the same workshop vigour.

The quote is right when the temple is read as a populated cosmos, not as a single theme.

Introduction

The Chandellas of Bundelkhand, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, built a temple city at **Khajuraho** whose sandstone still looks as if it might move. The quote is fair. Their sculptors did not freeze gods in a stiff frontal stare. They filled the wall with **bodies at work and at play**, which is vigour, and with a **whole social world**, which is breadth of life.

Body**Stone that behaves like muscle**

Khajuraho's **Nagara** towers rise in a mountain of shikharas. On the jangha (the wall) figures swell in high relief. A apsara turns to look at her heel. A warrior's belt cuts into living flesh. Elephants, horses, musicians and dancers share the same cornice as Vishnu, Shiva and the Jain tirthankaras of the eastern group. **Mithuna** couples are only one register of that life. They belong to a tantric and auspicious vocabulary of plenty, not to a modern postcard of "erotic temples". The same wall shows a potter, a soldier, a teacher, a woman writing a letter. That is **breadth**: the sacred mountain includes the bazaar.

The sandstone of the region takes a deep cut, so drapery and jewellery can be drilled almost to lace. Compared with the calmer pala faces of eastern India, Chandella work is **restless**. Compared with the later, more schematic temple sculpture of some northern sites, it still looks **observed**. **Kandariya Mahadeva**, **Lakshmana** and **Chaturbhuja** are the Hindu peak; the

Parshvanatha and **Adinatha** temples show the same chisel in a Jain key.

Why the vigour holds

The Chandella court was rich from **trade and agrarian surplus** on the **Bundelkhand plateau**, sitting between the **Ganga plains** and the Deccan roads. Royal piety and a competitive temple boom paid for workshops. Sculptors worked in a shared canon (shilpa texts) but were allowed **narrative overflow**: a hunt, a dance, a myth told in many frames.

To elucidate the quote is to refuse two errors. One error is to see only sex. The other is to see only theology. The Chandella wall is a **populated cosmos**. Gods have hips. Animals have weight. Ordinary people have a place on the temple, which is why the stone still feels inhabited.

Flow diagram

Bundelkhand
 Khajuraho
 Mahoba
 Kalinjar
 Khajuraho -> Nagara shikhara
 Nagara shikhara -> Wall: gods mithuna work animals
 Wall: gods mithuna work animals -> Vigour of body
 Wall: gods mithuna work animals -> Breadth of social life

Conclusion

Chandella sculptors at Khajuraho packed **Nagara** walls with gods, animals, workers and mithuna in a sandstone that looks alive. That is resilient vigour. The breadth of life is the whole social world climbing the same sacred mountain.

Facts & figures

Khajuraho group

A UNESCO World Heritage cluster of Hindu and Jain temples, mainly tenth to eleventh century Chandella work.

Kandariya Mahadeva

The largest Shiva temple on the site, a mountain of shikharas packed with sculpture.

Nagara

The north Indian temple language of a curving tower, which Chandella builders multiplied into a cluster.