

## The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple

By Amy Sedivi

Roy C. Craven, author of *Indian Art: A Concise History*, translates Khajuraho, a town in North Central India, as “the City of the Gods” (187). Khajuraho can indeed be considered divine upon viewing the Kandariya Mahadeva temple, an exquisite gem that stands in this town in the Indian region of Madhya Pradesh. While no longer in use and “maimed by time,” Kandariya Mahadeva is “still among the greatest examples of Medieval Hindu architecture and sculpture in North India” (Craven, 188).

Kandariya’s location remains a mystery in that “the precise status of Khajuraho is not clear. It was at least the religious capital of the realm; perhaps it was even regarded as a holy city” (Alles, 29). Dedicated to Shiva, Kandariya Mahadeva is not the only temple in the town by any means. The area contains a number of different temples that were used as places of worship devoted to different religions, such as Jainism and the Vaishnavite sects of Hinduism. Interestingly enough, even though the many temples were used as places of worship for a variety of groups, it is hard to “differentiate a Jain style from a Hindu one” (Lee, 238). It would seem that the stunning style of the region overpowered any style specific to one religion.

Built between 1025 AD and 1050 AD, Kandariya has a truly ancient beauty. Its breathtaking *shikara*, constructed from cream sandstone, a popular medium of the region, soars to a striking 118 feet. The base of the temple occupies a space 102 feet long and 67 feet wide. Overall, the temple is made up of five inner sections: the *ardhamandapa*, the *mandapa*, the *mahamandapa*, the *garbha-griha*, and the *anta-rala*. The *ardhamandapa* and the *mandapa* make up the entrance porch. The *mahamandapa* is the assembly hall, while the *garbha-griha* is the “womb chamber,” which contains the marble Shiva linga. The *anta-rala* is the antechamber that

precedes the *garbha-griha*. This is surrounded by an ambulatory used for the practice of *pradakshina*, or circumambulation.

A number of techniques were used to build the temple. For the structure itself, a post and lintel technique was employed. The sculptures adorning the temple were made by using intricate carving techniques. “Tendrils scrolls or arabesques [were] cut sharply and deeply into the flat surface of the sandstone” (Lee, 244). These carving techniques gave the building a gemlike look. When the carving was completed, the cream-colored sandstone was covered by white gesso, which has since worn away due to weathering and age.

Most of the subject matter found at the Kandariya Mahadeva temple derives from the sculptures carved out of its walls. Many beings are depicted in these sculptures, including “single figures of celestial beauties (*sarasundari*), lions, amorous couples, and single images of deities” (Lee, 244). Over 900 sculptures cover both the inner and outer walls of this temple. The figures tend to stay true to Indian style in that they are depicted as being filled with *pranah*, or breath. Continuing with the Indian style, “the figures of the Kandariya are notable for...necklaces, bangles, threads, belts – in a word, the jewels and ornaments without which it is often said Indians feel unfinished and undressed” (Alles, 10). Scholars find Kandariya Mahadeva particularly interesting due to the number of erotic sculptures that cover the outside of the temple. It is believed that these erotic sculptures reflect the Tantric cults that supposedly inhabited the region (Craven, 189).

Kandariya Mahadeva was created in a specific North Indian medieval style of architecture, called the Nagara style. The two main aspects of a Nagara style temple are the presence of the curved, organically-shaped *shikara* and the cog-wheel-shaped *amalaka*, which crowns the *shikara*. At Kandariya, “the central *shikara* is buttressed at various levels on its sides

by many lesser editions of itself. These lesser towers (*urushringas*) grow from the body of the temple below, where in multi-layered bands sculptures writhe in a pulsating tableau of human and divine activity” (Craven, 188). The *shikara* gives a vertical aspect to the temple. This verticality is accentuated by the addition of the *amalaka*. “This *amalaka* adorns the point toward which all verticals tend and draws our eyes to the very summit of the structure, the culmination of the vertical thrust” (Alles, 18). The Kandariya Mahadeva temple also has a plinth which “emphasizes the verticality” and the “*mandapa*... which in the southern style was clearly separated from the tower over the shrine, is integrated with the tower and appears to lead up into its heights” (Lee, 239).

While the formal qualities of the temple give it a highly vertical aspect, they also give it a massive, closed quality. The steps leading up to the main entrance “combine with the solid mass of the superstructure to give the impression that, in order to make an entrance, the builders had to excavate in solid rock (India, of course, has a particularly brilliant tradition of cave temples)” (Alles, 6). Indeed, the name of the temple itself suggests massive, cave-like aspects. “Kandariya” derives from the word *kandara*, meaning “cave,” while “Mahadeva” is another name for the god Shiva. This “Shiva cave” is made to seem even more massive by its unified quality. Kandariya, “unlike the multi-unit temples of Orissa, [consists] of one compact architectural unit standing on a high plinth” (Craven, 189). This singular aspect was also central to the Nagara style of the region.

The sculpture at Kandariya Mahadeva also has its own specific formal qualities. The female figures on the walls of Kandariya have “abnormally full, hemispherical breasts, delicate waists and hips, and thin, gently tapering legs” (Alles, 10). This sort of depiction of women is not specific to Kandariya. It is reminiscent of other figures found throughout India in different

periods. In particular, woman such as these were often depicted as yakshis in monuments such as the Bharhut stupa. The figures at Kandariya, however, “are tall and slim, and some have much elongated legs. The effects are linear, the poses exaggerated” (Lee, 244). Indeed, the more mannered aspects of the Kandariya figures separate them from earlier sculptures, like the Bharhut stupa yakshi. The poses are more advanced and many of the female figures show high levels of creativity in their twisted poses.

The main use of the temple was as a place of worship to Shiva. At Kandariya, as with other Hindu temples, worship was directed towards the Shiva linga. This is shown through some of the formal qualities of the building. According to scholar Gregory D. Alles, “the superstructures form a series of concentric parabolas, almost concentric triangles, that surround the entrance of the temple, and rivet our eyes to it” (20). The entrance, of course, leads directly to the Shiva linga. Thus, the structure of Kandariya Mahadeva directly relates to its function in that it leads the eye to the inevitable place of ritual. The importance of the Shiva linga and the *garbha-griha* is also made apparent by its position and the fact that it is positioned so high above the ground as a result of the plinth (Alles, 17). The *garbha-griha* is ultimately used for the process of circumambulation, an important Hindu practice.

More indirectly, but still apparent, was the use of the temple as a reminder of the power of the ruler. It is believed that the temple was “intended to glorify... the rule of the Candellas in Central India around 1000 CE” (Alles, 4). The Candellas were a dynasty that became a major power “by gradually expanding their territory and faithfully repulsing foreign invaders” (Alles, 28). The construction of temples was part of the policy of the Dhanga, a Candella ruler. Much like Emperor Ashoka and his construction of pillars throughout India as a reminder of his power, Dhanga enforced his rule by the creation of such massive monuments. Indeed, the influence of

the Candellas in the creation of the Kandariya Mahadeva temple is made even more evident by the knowledge that “the Candellas [had]... a special preference for [Shiva]” (Alles, 29).

Despite the possible use of the temple as a political instrument, it was immersed in traditional Hindu beliefs. Rituals such as *pradakshina* and *puja* would have surely taken place there, as well as possible Tantric cult rituals. In the Hindu mind, however, the temple was potentially more than just a space used for various practices. Alles states that “the temple may have housed the god, but in another sense, the temple *was* the god. Stella Kramrisch has demonstrated in masterful fashion that the temple *was purusa*, the cosmic person, the physical embodiment of divine power” (29). It is not difficult to consider Kandariya as a “physical embodiment of divine power” with its soaring *shikara* and elaborate carvings.

These beliefs would have been held by Hindus in the southern regions of India, as well. Their temple style, however, was considerably different. Kandariya Mahadeva can easily be contrasted with the Shore Temple in Mamallapuram, an area in South India. This temple, constructed in the eighth century during the Pallava dynasty is a shrine dedicated to Shiva, even though many of its aspects are different from those of Kandariya. For one, “the crown on each of [Kandariya’s] little towers and on the large, bulbous, mushroom-like tower is more organic than the capstone used in the southern style” (Lee, 239). The *amalakas* of the northern style are indeed more cog-shaped than the rounder version of the *amalaka*, the *stupika*, of the south. The main difference, however, between the temples is the emphasis on verticality. Kandariya Mahadeva emphasizes verticality with its organic, curvilinear *shikara*. The Shore Temple, in contrast, emphasizes horizontality due to its tower, which is shaped more like a pyramid with its stacked, box-like levels. Despite these differences, both the Kandariya Mahadeva temple and the Shore temple are stunning structures that reflect the beauty of the culture.

In summary, Kandariya Mahadeva is a temple shrouded in mysteries about its rituals, cults, and its surrounding town. It is evident, however, that great care was put into the construction and decoration of this place of worship. It is “matched in excellence only by the Jain temple dedicated to the twenty-third Tirthankara, Parshvanatha” (Craven, 189). Indeed, even though it is no longer in use, Kandariya Mahadeva remains a monument to be appreciated throughout the ages.



Kandariya Mahadeva, Khajuraho, Candella, c. 1025-1050, Image from [www.damisela.com](http://www.damisela.com).

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