

## WHO BROUGHT THE KHAJURAHO APSARAS TO THE ASIATIC SOCIETY?

Devangana Desai

Four *apsaras* (celestial beauties) and two *vyalas* (griffins) of Khajuraho were gifted to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later transferred to the Indian Museum when it was set up in 1875. The four *apsaras* are:

- 1 *Putravallabha*, woman fondling a child (Br 1/ A25230).
- 2 Woman (disrobed by monkeys) adjusting her garments. The depiction of monkeys on the tree above is suggestive of their teasing her by pulling her garments - a favourite motif of medieval sculptors. (Br2/ A25228, Plate 1).
- 3 *Darpana* woman looking into a mirror (Br 3/ A25229);
- 4 *Patralekha*, woman writing a love letter. Nail marks shown near her shoulders are indicative of love play (Br 4/ A25231, Plate 2).

These sandstone sculptures are believed to be gifts of Captain Markham Kittoe (1808-1853) of the Bengal Native Infantry, who was on special duty conducting archaeological inquiries in Bihar and Benaras from 1848 to 1853.<sup>2</sup> The sculptures were believed to have been brought from Cuttack and were classified under Bhubaneswar, Orissa. John Anderson in his catalogue of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, 1883,<sup>3</sup> puts the figures under Bhubaneswar. Referring to Rajendralala Mitra, *Antiquities of Orissa*, vol. I, p.101, Anderson says that these sculptures are numbered 805–8 in Dr. Mitra's catalogue and designated as "Ornamented figures in alto relievo, standing under trees; brought from Cuttack. Donor: Captain Kittoe". Describing a sketch of the sculpture of the lady writing a letter Mitra says that the original is from Bhubaneswar and is now preserved in the Indian Museum.<sup>4</sup>

Anderson says<sup>5</sup> that after Dr. Mitra visited Bhubaneswar, he spoke of Br. 3 of this series (woman looking into a mirror) as a sculpture from Bhubaneswar, "but he does not give his authority for so doing, so that some doubt still attaches to the history of these sculptures which are placed only tentatively under Bhuvaneshvara". Describing sculpture Br. 1 (mother and child), Anderson enters it as from Bhubaneswar and says, "brought from Cuttack. Donor: Captain Kittoe". Mitra gave the reference as the source for

this however, Anderson in spite of his search for this reference could not find it.

In the collection of the Asiatic Society, we can see the exact date of presentation to the Society. For instance, Col. C. Mackenzie (1754-1821) presented sculptural fragments to the Asiatic Society (of Bengal) on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1815. Major General Alexander Cunningham (1804-93) presented Sarnath objects to the Asiatic Society on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1836.<sup>6</sup> But in the case of these sculptured bracket figures no date of acquirement is mentioned, only the donor's name Markham Kittoe is given.

When C. Sivaramamurti compiled his catalogue of the Indian Museum in 1954,<sup>7</sup> and H. Zimmer published his famous volume *The Art of Indian Asia* in 1955,<sup>8</sup> a doubt was expressed in assigning these sculptures to Bhubaneswar. These were put as "Bhubaneswar or Khajuraho". Sivaramamurti writes: "The Jajpur Matrikas, the Bodhisattvas from Lalitgiri and decorative female figures from Bhubaneswar, recalling similar but distinctive charming figures from Khajuraho and elsewhere in Vindhya Pradesh, are excellent examples of medieval Orissan work." When illustrating one of these female figures (Plate 2), he gives the caption: "Woman writing love letter suggested by *nakhakshatas* (nail marks) on her body, Bhubaneswar, Orissa or more probably Vindhya Pradesh".

However, these sculptures in the Indian Museum, though earlier classified under Bhubaneswar, stylistically belong to Khajuraho and were identified as such by Krishna Deva in his first definitive article on Khajuraho in *Ancient India*, No. 15, published by ASI in 1959. In fact, these figures executed in high relief, are similar to the bracket figures on capitals of pillars (Plate 3) in the interior of the Lakshmana temple (AD 954) of Khajuraho<sup>9</sup>. Krishna Deva clarifies that the *apsaras* "which were erroneously believed to have come from Bhubaneswar but which, from identity of style, material, dimensions and inscribed graffiti, may now definitely be ascribed to the Lakshmana temple at Khajuraho". The Indian Museum has now changed the classification of these *apsaras* and *vyalas* from Orissa to Khajuraho.

The figures measure more than 3 feet. The sculpture representing mother and child (Br.1/ A25230) is 36.50" high, woman writing a letter (Br. 4/ A25231, Plate <sup>10</sup> All these have a peg affixed on the top and flat slabs serve as 2) is 41" high, and the *vjala* with a warrior (Br.6/ A25293) is 43.50" high.their pedestals. All the women stand under the canopy of a tree. Their

sumptuous ornaments and elaborate coiffures are typical of Khajuraho sculptures. The floral-geometrical motifs on the garments of the figures are identical to those on the garments of the *apsaras* in the Lakshmana temple of Khajuraho. These figures are carved by skilled *silpis*, who express the moods of women through their postures and gestures. The artist conveys the bashfulness of the woman, whose garments have slipped on account of mischievous monkeys, through her nervous feet (Plate 1). Her nudity is accentuated by the extra jewellery on her limbs, including the rings on the five fingers of her hands. The movement of the mother, fondling the baby, is expressed through her gait. Short inscriptions such as “*Gangata*”, “*Radhuta*”, and “*Kavata*” on the pedestals seem to be sculptors’ names.

The interior of the major temples at Khajuraho reveal pillared halls. Originally the pillars were mounted by eight bracket figures, four of which had four *apsaras* and four are *vyalas*. Additionally, there are seven smaller figures on top of the brackets. In the Lakshmana temple, four out of the six pillars, of the *gudhamandapa* (closed hall) two of the *antarala* (vestibule), and two pilasters of the vestibule there would have been a total of 26 *apsara* figures. But now only 17 figures survive. The four *apsara* sculptures, now in the Indian Museum, are from among the nine missing figures of the Lakshmana temple. One such *apsara* figure is in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, (inv. No. AK-MAK 185).

The question arises: how did sculptures from Khajuraho in central India reach Calcutta at this early time?

Rajendralala Mitra’s associating the sculptures with Bhubaneswar, perhaps, led him to attribute these to Captain Kittoe who brought objects from eastern India to the Asiatic Society of Bengal and particularly those of Kurkihar to the Patna Museum<sup>11</sup>. Now that we know, for sure, that these sculptures under discussion are from Khajuraho, do we have any evidence of Markham Kittoe’s visit to Khajuraho?

Captain Markham Kittoe (1808–1853) was in India from 1825 onwards. He traveled widely in northern and eastern India, prepared drawings of monuments and sculptures, and published these in 1838 as *Illustrations of Indian Architecture from the Muhammaddan Conquest Downwards*.<sup>12</sup> These contain drawings of buildings at Agra, Delhi, Jaunpur, Benaras, Chunar and numerous places in northern India. His illustrations also depict ruins of temples in Bundelkhand. One of the drawings illustrates a sculpture from

Jhansi in Bundelkhand region. His drawings prepared in 1847 are preserved in Albums in the India Office Collection in the British Library.<sup>13</sup> These illustrate monuments and sculptures of Bodh-Gaya, Kurkihar, Sarnath and Benaras. I went through the boxes and albums containing drawings by Captain Kittoe,<sup>14</sup> and also his published material in the British Library, London, but could not find any drawing of Khajuraho sculptures or temples by Kittoe. This makes us wonder whether he visited Khajuraho at all, though he did visit the region of Bundelkhand, and if he did visit Khajuraho, whether his drawings of this site are still remaining to be discovered.

But, if Kittoe did not visit Khajuraho, could he have acquired these *apsara* sculptures from some other officer who visited this site prior to 1852? Or did someone else bring these figures from Khajuraho to Calcutta?

Among some known visitors to central India by the year 1852 were: 1] Col. C. Mackenzie (1754-1821) who has made drawings of places of his journey in Upper Provinces of India, in 1815; 2] General R. Tytler who presented to the Asiatic Society a sculptured *chakra* from Banda district in 1820; 3] General Charles Stewart who presented on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1824 inscribed stone slabs from Kalanjar, Ajaygadh and Mahoba in Bundelkhand; 4] General O'Hallorn who visited Bheraghat in November 1832.<sup>15</sup>

But evidence of any of these officers' visit to Khajuraho is lacking. General Charles Stewart was in the Bundelkhand area and could have acquired these figures on his travels. This 'General Charles Stewart' referred to in 1824 is the same as 'General Charles Hindoo Stuart', whose name was some times written as Stewart in Asiatic Researches.<sup>16</sup> General Charles Stuart, known as Hindoo Start, of the East India Company had assembled many sculptures from central India such as Hari-Hara, Vishnu, Mother with divine child, and others, and maintained a "museum" in his house at Chowringhee in Calcutta. After his death in 1828, a considerable part of his collection was purchased by John Bridge in an auction held in London in 1830, and is now with the British Museum.<sup>17</sup> While the Vishnu image (OA 1872 7-1,41) has stylistic affinities with Pratihara figures of 10<sup>th</sup> century Kanauj, Hari-Hara (OA 1872 7-1,75) of the British Museum of the British Museum reveals close stylistic similarities with the Hari-Hara image of the Khajuraho Museum, No. 558, and has distinct Chandella features.<sup>18</sup> It would, thus, appear that General Stuart acquired the Chandella objects before 1828.

It is not insignificant that Rajendralala Mitra himself, while writing in 1885 on the Museum of the Asiatic Society in the “History of the Society”, says, “The collection was greatly enriched by contributions from Colonel Stuart, Dr. Tytler, General Mackenzie, Mr. B.H. Hodgson...and others”.<sup>19</sup> This clearly indicates that about 50 years before Rajendralala wrote his account, Charles Stuart had gifted some objects to the Asiatic Society. One is tempted to ask whether some of Stuart’s gifts to the Asiatic Society were unrecorded.

Among the definite visitors to Khajuraho by the year 1852 were: military surveyor Cornet James Franklin (1819).<sup>20</sup> Captain T.S.Burt (1838),<sup>21</sup> Lieut. F. Maisey (between 1845-1852)<sup>22</sup>, and Major A. Cunningham (in 1852 and even later). We know from Captain Burt’s vivid account that he did not carry with him any sculpture of Khajuraho. His main interest was in copying an inscription, which he did. He showed the copy of Dhangadeva’s inscription to the eager Chhatarpur Maharaja Pratapsingh, as described in detail in his *Narrative of a Late Steam Engine Voyage from England to India*, Calcutta 1840. If Maisey or Cunningham presented the *apsara* sculptures to the Society, these could have been listed against their names, unless Captain Kittoe received these from either of them.

However, in the absence of any other name except Captain Kittoe mentioned by Rajendralala in his Catalogue, we may with some hesitation continue his name as the donor of the six Khajuraho sculptures to the Asiatic Society, though indirect evidence points to General Charles Hindoo Stuart as the donor.

Notes:

- The author thanks Franco-Indian Research, Mumbai, for sponsoring her project on Khajuraho museum images.

1. The Asiatic Society’s Museum was transferred to the Government of India in 1866 for converting into the Indian Museum. *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society 1817-1832*, Vol. III, Book I, ed. P.Thankappan Nair, p. 42.
2. *Officers of the Bengal Army, 1785-1834*. Also A.F.R. Hoernle, Chapter I, “Archaeology, History, Literature, &C.” in *Century Review of the Asiatic Society 1784-1884*, published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1885, Reprint 1986, Part II, pp. 14-16.
3. John Anderson, *Catalogue and Handbook of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum*, Part II, Calcutta, 1883, Pp. 216- 221.

4. Rajendralala Mitra, *The Antiquities of Orissa*, Volume I, 1875, p. 178.
5. Anderson, *op cit.*, p. 218.
6. Anderson, *op cit.*, pp. 35-37, 306.
7. C. Sivaramamurti, *A Guide to Archaeological Galleries, Indian Museum*, Calcutta, 1954, reprint 1976, Calcutta.
8. H. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, Bollingen Series, 1955, Two volumes, plates, 344-347.
9. Krishna Deva, *Ancient India*, No. 15, ASI, New Delhi, 1959, p. 54; *Temples of Khajuraho*, ASI, 1990, Figures 30-35.
10. Vyala Br 6/A 25293 of the Indian Museum is illustrated in *Gods, Guardians and Lovers*, ed. Vishakha Desai, Darielle Mason, New York and Ahmedabad, 1993, Fig. 47, p. 218.
11. *Guide to the Patna Museum*, Patna, 1955, pp. 35-38.
12. Published by Thacker & Company, Calcutta, 1838.
13. Mildred Archer, *British Drawings in the India Office Library*, Volume II, 1969, pp. 466-468.
14. Album of 44 drawings of sculpture on the *stupa* rail at Bodhgaya (Bihar), January 1847.
- 15 John Anderson, *op.cit.* Pp. 287ff, 291, 306.
16. There was Major Charles Stewart (1764-1837), the Orientalist, who was a professor at Haileybury from 1807 to 1827. The Major-General Stewart or Stuart mentioned from 1815 onwards in the *Asiatic Researches* and elsewhere is undoubtedly Charles Hindoo Stuart “as there was no other Stuart or Stewart either in Bengal or in the King’s army at that time”. Jorg Fisch, {“A Solitary Vindicator of the Hindus: The Life and Writings of General Charles Stuart (1757/58 –1828)”, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1985, endnote 47.
17. Michael D. Willis in A.W. Franks, *Nineteenth-Century Collecting and the British Museum*, Marjorie Caygill and John Cherry (Ed.), British Museum, London, 1997, pp. 252-254.
- 18 Based on my study of Hari-Hara image in the British Museum, originally from General Charles Stuart collection, and the Hari-Hara image in the Khajuraho Museum, No. 558, reproduced in Krishna Deva and B.S. Nayal, *Archaeological Museum Khajuraho*, ASI, Delhi, 1973, Plate II.
19. Rajendralala Mitra, “History of the Society” in *Century Review of the Asiatic Society 1784-1884*, published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1885, Reprint, 1986, Part I, p. 35.
20. Mildred Archer, “Early Contributions to Indian Archaeology by British Amateur Artists”, in *Makaranda*, Essays in Honour of James C. Harle, Delhi, 1990, p. 241.

21 Account of Captain T.S. Burt's visit to Khajuraho in February 1838, in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Calcutta, Vol. 8, March 1839.

22. Mildred Archer, *British Drawings in the India Office Library*, Volume II, p. 468. Maisey's drawing of the panorama of Khajuraho temples is in the collection of the British Library, and is reproduced in D. Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai, 1996, on p. xxx.

Illustrations    Courtesy: American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon

1. 1. Woman (disrobed by monkeys) adjusting her garments. The mischievous monkeys are shown on the mango tree under which the figure stands. Bracket figure from Khajuraho, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Acc. No. Br 2/A25228, mid 10<sup>th</sup> century.
2. 2. *Patralekha*, woman writing a letter. Nail marks are seen at the back of her arm. Bracket figure from Khajuraho, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Acc. No. Br. 4/A 25231, mid 10<sup>th</sup> century.
3. 3. Pillar-brackets, displaying figures of *apsaras* under trees alternating with *vyalas*, in the interior of the *gudhamandapa* (closed hall) of the Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho, AD 954.

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<sup>2</sup> *Officers of the Bengal Army, 1785-1834*. Also A.F.R. Hoernle, Chapter I, “Archaeology, History, Literature, &C.” in *Century Review of the Asiatic Society 1784-1884*, published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1885, Reprint 1986, Part II, pp. 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> John Anderson, *Catalogue and Handbook of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum, Part II*, Calcutta, 1883, Pp. 216-221.

<sup>4</sup> Rajendralala Mitra, *The Antiquities of Orissa*, Volume I, 1875, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup> . Published by Thacker & Company, Calcutta, 1838.