



THE ETERNAL WOMAN OF GRACE AND BEAUTY

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Abstract:

From the celestial world of the divine, the artists of the Queen's step-well glide into the world of human beings but this has been done with such imagination of grace, beauty and harmony that one is thrilled with their creativities, compositional dexterity and excellence. In between the panels depicting gods and goddesses and humans are the panels of saints and ascetics in meditation and austerity, women in worship and devotion or else engaged in household chores of daily life and women with their children. They are full of grace which is also captivating and inspiring as well. One wonders at the broad vision and insight of artists' peering eyes that reveal every important aspect of life of the ancient and early medieval period with supreme synthesis leading to oneness.

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Matr-Vatsalya Murti: It is a supreme theme which has charmed the attention of men from the most prehistoric times to the medieval and the modern day. It is precisely the human mother who transcends into the divine mother. She not only tames, trains and nurtures men into culture, but all the cultures and civilizations are nurtured in her benevolent laps. In our country motherhood and fatherhood of God come into one integral divinity which is also aptly expressed in all our art creations.

PutraVatsalyaNayika: She is holding the child in her arms diverting its attention from other things and showing him the moon. It is so reminiscent of the famous poet Suradasa who wrote such lyrical poems 500 years later on this subject of maternal love where baby Krishna insists on mother Yashoda to give him the moon and mother looks on at him completely charmed.

“Mother give me the moon for playing.”

Mother holding the child plucking mango from a tree: The baby sees the mango hanging from the branch while mother holds the child high enough for enabling it to pluck the mango. We see the eagerness of the child and compassion of the mother entwined in effusive love.

Mother and Children: Mother enjoying the site of her playing children while she keeps the youngest clinging to her waist. One child is restless and is calling the child on the mother's waist to come down. The younger child is eagerly looking at the calling child. They are all set in a mango grove as bunches of mangoes are shown in the background. This is a very beautiful composition of vatsalya. The mother has put on sparse ornaments. The bhava or expression of the mother and the children, depicted on their faces, is very evocative of tender emotional feelings.

Nayikas or Devanganas: Over 200 panels are dedicated to see these Nayikas which heighten the beauty of the stepwell. It is a superb picturisation in which godhead, gods and humans all mingle in each other to express truth, goodness, and beauty. In these images of maidens to use Jaishankar Prasad's words:

“सुन्दर साकार बना था”

“Beauty has transformed into visual form.” the music and rhythm of life is as it were frozen on the stone walls of the step well to express its eternal joy. Is not Eternity best expressed in stone? Stone is the timeless symbol which lasts the longest.

Darpan Sundari: It is a beautiful figure of a nayika wearing her earring. She is fully dressed donning beautiful ornaments her necklace with inset jewels, a mangala sutra and a long-studded garland which is also bending with little twist of the body, balance with a slight bend on the right foot. Moreover, mekhala or a waistband studded with jewels and rows of ornamented designs cling to it. The sari is neatly folded and hangs between the thighs. Bracelets are worn around her wrist and anklets adorn her feet. It is a very elegant and graceful tall figure. The pointed nose and smiling face express the inner delight of the nayika. Her tender fingers are so artistically sculpted that you are reminded of the graceful fingers of Ajanta paintings. This is a unique figure that is completely preserved with no damage by weather at all. She is seen standing between two decorated pillars. A female attendant is standing near her feet carrying a basket on her head.

In another panel is the same theme of Darpana sundari is expressed with another innovation. In this image the maiden is depicted as lining her eyes, with collyrium, while in other hand she holds the mirror. The whole panel shows a very graceful figure of a maid in lost in the self-admiration of her own beauty and enthralled with it.

Nayika writing letter to her below weight is so well expressed in a standing figure which again has a background of a mango grove with three-three mangos hanging over the head

of the nayika. She stands lost in abstraction with paper in one hand and the other hand holding a pen which she is dipping in the ink pot. It is being carried by a boy in a very eager interesting pose as he is looking towards her. The maiden, however, is looking blank rather absent minded, lost in the reverie of her beloved, knowing not how to convey her feelings of sadness and her agony of *viraha* - separation from him. She has put on usual ornaments. She stands in *tribhanga*. Her bent body is balancing on the right foot. She is standing between two pillars very neatly carved. It is indeed an eye-catching panel of a love-lorn woman a *virahini*.

Nayika teased by a monkey is a very artistic panel. A naughty monkey leaps at her and is tugging and pulling at her clothes. She is very annoyed and is threatening it with her upraised hand and open palm. Her second arm, however, keeps the pulled sari in order before it slides down or gets torn. She is beautifully dressed and adorned. She has decorated her hair in an exquisite hairstyle where in the hair knot is resting on her shoulder. She has put on bracelets round her wrists and her elaborate armlet around her arms. Studded necklace and long garland hanging over her breasts. Waistband has hanging bells girdling around her hips. It has slide down a little due to the monkey pulling at the dress. A dwarfish attendant is also alarmed. The nayika is shown standing between two pillars with beautifully carved designs on the top of a leafy canopy above the head of the maiden. This shows an arboreal setting in the background.

Sadya-snata Nayika: is the name given to the panel in which is carved a very beautiful image of a maiden just returning after bathing. She has put on a sari clinging to her body. There are no ornaments except a necklace of beads around her neck. She is shown squeezing her long hair from which drops of water are falling on the ground. A swan sitting on a small pedestal is drinking these falling drops, taking the droplets to be pearls. This one is famous for having pearls as its food. The slim and graceful figure of the maiden is set between two nicely carved pillars in a leafy groove. This figure is found in perfect condition. The weather has not inflicted any erosion of disfiguring the image. In the background is a tree with mangoes dangling over the head. Over the pillars are highly decorative clustered leaves. All enhance the beauty of the composition. It is also described as maiden squeezing her hair.

Suka Kanya or the maiden with a parrot is a very attractive panel. The slim, tall, and graceful figure is slightly bent, balancing the body on the right leg. The figure is moderately ornamented, a necklace, long garland, bracelets, armlets, waistband, and anklets. Her right hand is raised holding the branch of the mango tree. On the left hand is seated a very cute parrot looking at the maiden with great earnestness. The maiden is also fondly looking at her pet bird, the long-tailed parrot. Her upper garment or the mantle or the *uttariya* is hanging from her shoulders, with very neat folds. It is shown in the background. As usual the figure is placed in between two beautiful carved round pillars with dangling clusters of mangoes and decorated mango leaves at the top. The whole image has suffered no erosion. The warm feelings of maiden for her pet are well expressed in the image. It faithfully depicts the *vatsalya* of the maiden for the pet bird.

Nayika admonishing a bearded man who is infatuated by her beauty and charm. The maiden is well dressed and adorned with all the ornaments. Her hair is well groomed with a rounded coiffure over which is shown the studded earring. The nayika is holding the beard of the man making advances towards her, as he looks at her completely spellbound. Her left hand with open palm is restraining him while he is holding her leg. What is interesting to notice that the enchanted man has lost his height and stature and has become dwarfish. The restraining palm, the admonishing looks, the tugging at the beard and the charmed man all creates a scene of emotional tenor whereby the artist is as it were giving a message that the infatuated man loses his stature. It has erotic tones instead of invoking

srngara rasa it evokes *hasya rasa* wherein the bearded love lorn man becomes an amusing person evoking laughter.

Nayikas in worship and devotion is depicted in several panels. They are shown in between the panels of divine images. Thus, creating the serenity which shows maidens moving towards the gods and goddesses for offering prayers. We have the maid in holding the chowrie or the flywhisk which she waves in honour of the divinity.

Another panel depicts a maiden going to the temple, carrying a bell in one hand and a censer in the other hand. It spreads aromatic smoke for sanctifying the atmosphere.

Again, in one panel we have a maiden going to the temple for evening worship, holding a lamp in one hand and flywhisk in the other.

In another panel is a maiden going to the temple holding a garland of Flowers for offering to the deity. There are many more panels with devotion fervour. As one looks on these beautiful and elegant figures in various moods of worship and self-abnegation, the whole atmosphere of **srngara** or romance of several other panels is transformed in a devotional mood of prayers, worship, and self-surrender to the divine. Endless description of these lovely images could be extolled, as over 200 images of Nayikas have been chiselled by the great artist of the Queen's stepwell. All these images give full expression of the dedication and devotion of the Masters.

When we behold so many images of devout women, we wonder whether the artist wishes to convey to us that women are the true custodians of Dharma. In their fondled laps the culture and civilization are cradled and nurtured, for fulfilment of life's objective. All these Nayikas sculpted on the walls of the Queen's stepwell present before us one eternal woman of grace and beauty in endless variations of exquisite charm.

Nayikas in several moods are depicted in so many panels that embellish the walls of the Queen's stepwell. In one panel an ornamented maiden is shown stretching her graceful slim body popularly called **Alasa Kanya** taking *angadai*, while an admiring bearded man standing near the feet of the maiden is swaying the flywhisk or **chowrie**.

In another panel we see a maiden who has put on all the ornaments and is enamoured and lost in the admiration of her own beauty is pointing to her breasts.

In another panel we have the figure of a maiden who curiously looks at the camel sitting near her feet while a female attendant standing nearby holds a pitcher of water.

In one panel the maiden is shown to be frightened and irritated and starts removing her clothes to ward off the Scorpio that starts crawling on her body. It shows the haste with which she is casting away the scorpion before it strikes its sting. Yet she is shy of revealing her beauty, looks down.

There is another pose depicting the maiden as unrobing before going for the bath and covering her face with the palm of her hand due to bashfulness. There is yet another pose in which she returns from the bath and is shown as putting on her dress.

One panel depicts a well-dressed maiden after putting on all the ornaments is applying a herbal stick of red colour on her lips. This shows the love of ancient women for dress, ornaments, and cosmetics. Come across one panel in which one young maiden is putting on of Vermillion in the parting of the hair the age-old custom which shows that the woman is married and prays for the long life of her husband.

Yet in another panel woman is shown playing with the falls *Kanduka Krida*. Dancing *Apsara* is another graceful dancing pose in which the dancing maiden is fully dressed and has put on all ornaments and while dancing slightly bends to point to her toe. This reveals the profound knowledge of the art of dancing by ancient sculptures.

In one panel dedicated to music we see a maiden playing on flute. The whole pose is so graceful that we see her fully absorbed in the scintillating tunes of her celestial music. Sculptor has so faithfully represented the emotion or *bhava* of the musician.

Thus, in panel after we are spell bound to behold how the abstract beauty is transformed into most sublime graceful and enchanted consecrate forms on the walls of the sacred well. All these poses and compositions present the grace and beauty of human body charmingly chiselled by the great artists of profound insight and vision.

Naga-Kanyas, Yoginis and Tantra

Naga-Kanyas, Yoginis and Tantric influences are aptly dealt with by the artists with equal zeal and insight. There are so many panels that depict in various poses, tantric ethos. Just two representative panels are indited to show the death with which the masters have given vent to their creative genius. Tantric depictions are often treated with erotic expressions, but the artists of the stepwell have not overstepped the moral constraints in their compositions which would vitiate the devotional and spiritual serenity of this underground shrine. The balance of the Corporal and the spiritual has been sadly missed by the artists of Konark and Khajurao though their creations in themselves are of the great artistic merit.

Nagakanya with a fishbowl is an extraordinary composition which has drawn the attention of connoisseurs of art. it has its own subtle message to give. probably through this image the artist wished to convey how the *Kama* aspect of the four *purushartha* is to be judicially handled. Lord Krishna tells us in Gita that he himself is Kama within the constraints of Dharma or moral righteousness. This is aptly expressed in this fascinating panel.

A nude Nagakanya is holding a fishbowl in her right hand. Her slim and graceful body is slightly bent and balanced on the left leg. A snake is coiling around her left thigh to reach the fishbowl, encircling from behind the back. Her left hand is raised restraining the serpent from further advances. Her figure is elegant and has very few ornaments - a necklace of beads around the neck, an armllet end bracelet and anklet around the ankles, earrings in her ears. The rest of the body is bare, carved very realistically giving all anatomical details and contours. The image hey stands between two round decorated pillars. On the top of the image is the pedestal which three owls are sitting. A Peacock seated below is looking towards the coiling snake. This peculiar composition is a reconciliation of the paradoxes of life which often baffle mankind.

The three owls on the top of the Naga-kanya panel convey that this composition depicts the scene at night, the period when the owls are awake and active. The bowl with fish or *matsyais* a tantric depiction. Fish is one of the constituents of the file *makaras*. Arthur Avalon interprets *matsya* by explaining the *samasa* or the compound ask *mat* meaning the ego. The serpent is the symbol of *Kama* or the *libido* in the Freudian terminology. It shows tendency of the passions to beguile the ego towards licentiousness. The Nagakanya raises the palm of the right hand to caution the snake. "Thus far and no further" rather restraining its further advances. The Peacock in between the legs of the Nagakanya further affronts the snake from transgressing its limit. Peacock is a natural enemy of snake. Peacock is often taken as a symbol of non-attachment not moved by passions. Apart from layman, this panel cautions the tantrics also to restrain the limits of their *sadhana* with spirit of non-attachment or else it would become preserved and land the aspirants or *sadhakars* in disgrace.

Naga kanyas are chiselled in several panels of the Queens's step well. They are all nude and a snake is coiling around. These have tantric representation. In the gross stage, the snake represents the gross wild passions that surge in the heart of the man, seeking transient carnal delights. But in the sublime form the snake is the repository of great spiritual power of *kundalini* the coiled snake residing in the pelvis of the man and when awakened by spiritual *sadhana* it passes through the spinal cord and reaches the Apec of the brain which is like thousand petalled lotus *sahasrarathe* aboard of infinite bliss of Shiv

the epitome of the Divine Godhead who grants him endless bliss akhanda-ananda. This is experienced by Saints absorbed in deep meditation.

The Nagakanya, however, represents the initial stage of tantras which is more corporal. In one panel a snake has coiled around the leg and arm of the nude Nagakanya, while she is threatening by her other free hand preventing it to advance any further.

In other panel the snake has coiled around the thigh of the Nagakanya and is trying to reach the fishbowl in her hand while she is admonishing it with her free hand commanding it to start uncoiling at once and not define her yogic or tantric *sadhana*.

One panel depicts a nayika fully adorned with precious ornaments, threatening a snake that is coiling around her leg. There are several panels portraying various poses conveying tantric thoughts for the aspirants of Tantra.

Yoginis are the devotees of Bhairava - Rudra and Bhairavi, the dreaded aspect of Shiv and Shakti. This is essentially described in the tantric *sadhana*. There are several panels devoted to yoginis.

In one of the panels, we see a **Dancing Yogini** absorbed in herself. She is nude and in her left hand she holds a staff on the top which is a human skull or *Khatvanga* while her right hand is in a dancing pose holding a fishbowl overhead. She wears necklaces and a garland swaying over her breasts. Yet she is in a graceful pose with her bent right leg on the ground, while her left leg is raised. Below it, a goblin is engaged in devouring a severed limb of a corpse stop she is shown in dancing pose between two round decorative pillars. Her hair is matted jata-juta and the round earrings are like that of an ascetic. Her nose is pointed, and her half-closed eyes seem to be concentrated on its tip. From her shoulder hangs a noose. It circles around her implanted leg. This is a well-preserved panel as there are no erosion marks disfiguring the image.

There is another image of Yogini wearing bone ornaments. She holds a skull-bowl with fish where a dog - the vahana of Bhairava is seen leaping at it. Three birds are shown as perching on the edge above.

Yoginis in there several other poses are depicted on the walls of the well emphasising the tantric rituals of *sadhana*.

Tapasvis, Tapasvinis and Ascetics occupy many panels of the step well. In this grand picturisation that are beautiful evocative sculptures depicting the worldly and the spiritual aspects of life. There are images of devotees performing penance. There are ascetics standing with folded hands. Tapasvis standing with both the hands raised above the head, ascetics standing on one leg while hands are held above the head. Rsis absorbed in deep meditation or again the recluse sitting or standing midst five fires lit in four directions and blazing sun above head called the *pancagnitapascarya*. Besides these panels are ascetics in various forms of penance and meditation. Moreover, as stated earlier there are several panels depicting Uma or Parvati as *tapasvinis* penancing midst *pancagni* standing on one foot in the attire of an ascetic. All these aesthetic panels are in the midst of panels of gods and goddesses, nayikas and nagakanyas, yogis and yoginis signifying in the world the spirit of non-attachment or *anashakti* midst the vast turmoil of attractions pervading all around. The multifarious aspects of life are given full expression in this unique step-well by the master artists of those days.

Narrative lores from the Indian classical folklores, Puranas and Sahitya literature, are engraved in horizontal rows in between the place above and below the panels, depicting the bigger size images of gods, goddesses, and others.

The narratives from Ramayana, depict life of Rama, the battle of Lanka between Rama and Ravana, the battle scenes of monkeys fighting for Rama, the duel between monkeys and Ravana's soldiers etc.

The several popular stories of Mahabharata are well engraved in the horizontal rows of the stepwell. Besides these, there are rows of elephants in various playful poses, camels, deer, swans, and birds, leaves and lotus flowers. These carvings animate the hard stone walls of the well and create an exquisite harmony of gods and goddesses, men and women, birds and animals, goblins and kinnars, flowers and fruits, forests and groves. All these enliven in the beauty of the step-well. The rows of narratives look like embroidery of lovely tender designs engraved on the hard stone walls of the step-well.

Vanasthali or Forest of pillars decorates the seven storeys of the Queen's stepwell. There are 212 pillars, four pavilions and branching structures. They are so dense that at the first sight they appear as a dense forest or Woodland of pillars. It is an experience to behold these pillars so well carved in most beautiful patterns. The rhythmic floral designs are engraved with such innovative skill that one is astounded to behold such lyrical expression of artistic sensibility. Apart from arboreal designs they embody popular episodes of monkey and the crocodile, where the monkey gets rid of the crocodile by telling it that he had left his heart on the tree, or the story of the elephant and the alligator, which is taken from the Bhagavata, known as the episode of *Gajendra Moksha*. We have the scene of Shakuntala's son *Bharata* counting the teeth of a lion. Besides these there are engravings of quarrelling monkeys, pair of birds in cajoling love, the pair of dancers, the playful kinnars or fairies the hybrid *vyalas*, a united form of a lion and an elephant, lion faces, goblins with rounded eyes and decorated caryatids. The whole planning of these pillars is simply fascinating and brings to the fore the great insight, imagination and skill with which these creations of artistry adorn the Queen's stepwell.

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