



# Orissa's Konarak Temple

Home of the Sun God Surya

By Monique Heitmann and Patricia Bjaaland Welch

*Two large gajasingha (lions subduing war elephants) greet visitors*

## Geographical Setting

Orissa sits on the eastern coast of India in the upper part of the 'Indian Triangle' defined by the Mahanadi, Brahmayani and Baitarani Rivers. It was here and in other border regions that India's southern Dravidian and northern Aryan civilisations met, creating a unique cultural stew. The early explorers of Malaysia's Bujang Valley may have set forth across the Bay of Bengal from Orissan ports; we simply don't know.

## Historical and Religious Background

The state of Orissa was formerly called Kalinga and is best known as the site of the final battle of the great Buddhist Emperor Ashoka. He conquered Orissa in 270 BCE, leaving approximately 100,000 dead, carnage that converted the remorseful emperor to Buddhism.

Orissa was always holy ground. In pre-Buddhist times, aborigines used to have their sanctuaries there. Later Buddhists had a sanctum in Puri, where they kept a tooth of the Buddha until it was taken to Sri Lanka. Under King Kharavela (second century BCE), Jainism became the leading religion of the region and the Udaigiri caves were excavated.

From the eighth to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries Orissa was governed by the Bhamukara dynasty, who worshipped Shiva. Bhubanesvara was their capital; a town that at that time was already 1,300 years old. Worshippers of Shiva and his consort Parvati venerate Orissa because parts of Parvati's body fell into the area when Shiva spread them over the country after Vishnu dismembered her. This worship of the wife of a god is to be kept in mind in view of the erotic decorations of Orissan and Khajuraho temples.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Bhamukara dynasty was replaced by the Vishnu-worshipping Codangas dynasty. This takeover is the subject of another legend: Vishnu spreading his emblems over the area – his conch in Puri, discus in Bhubaneswar, club in Jajpur, footprints in Bodhgaya and lotus in Konarak.

## Some Notes on Orissan Temples

The temples of Orissa are built in the Indo-Aryan style, the *Prasada* style, with a *vimana* or sanctuary, a *garbha griha* where the main god dwells, a *shikhara* or ribbed curvilinear spire over the *garbha griha*, topped with an *amalaka* or round stone, surmounted by a golden *kalasa* or pinnacle.

Orissan and Khajuraho temples are generally small compared with South Indian temples because North Indian temples are dedicated to one god only, while South Indian temples may lodge the god and his family. As a result of this difference, Orissan temples tend to rise vertically while South Indian temples spread horizontally in a sequence of courtyards.

Orissan temples are divided into three major groups – early, middle, and late. The temple of the sun god Surya in Konarak falls into the late period (1100 - 1250 CE).

## Konarak

Few temples were as popular with India's early foreign tourists as Konarak. Perhaps it was the combination of the erotic art, or the fact that it wasn't off-limits to non-believers, or just the unbelievable hubris of the site, designed as the



*The view that greets visitors as they arrive at Konarak*



The famous giraffe frieze, apparently a king receiving the tribute gift of a giraffe



One of the 24 (12 pairs) of wheels at the base of Surya's chariot

chariot of the sun god Surya. As the British Director General of Archaeology in India 1902 to 1928 wrote, "There is no monument in Hindustan...that is at once so stupendous...and none which leaves so deep an impression on the memory."

The name Konarak comes from two stem words: *kona* ('corner') and *arka* ('sun'). Its position on India's Bay of Bengal made it an early site of sun worship, long predating the east-facing current temple.

Before the nearby harbour silted up, the temple was known as the Black Pagoda because it was so visible on the sandy coastline. Today, the temple lies three kilometres inland and although resting on sandy soil, the temple grounds have acquired a layer of top-soil to support grass and flowering bushes, making it a popular tourist and picnic site.

Climbing the small hill at the entrance, one can clearly see how the temple has been built in the shape of a massive stone chariot, embellished with 12 pairs of eight-spoked wheels (representing the 12 months of the year) that visually support the temple's base. Each wheel is huge, approximately ten feet in diameter and richly carved.

The 'chariot' was originally pulled by seven magnificent stone horses representing the seven rays of the sun, but only six remain. Some still stand in their original positions in front of the main entrance, between the 30 to 40-metre high assembly hall (*Jagamohana*) and the dancing hall (*Nat Mandir*) or hall of offering (*bhoga-mandapa*); the others have been moved.

A pair of stone lions, *gajasimhas*, guard the entrance to the *bhoga-mandapa*, each subduing a war elephant who, in turn, crushes a human. The main temple tower (known in Orissa as a *deul*) was once 70-meters high, but collapsed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

One visits Konarak not for the temple compound, since much of it is no longer standing, but for the exquisite carvings. There are birds, mythological figures, dancers and musicians, floral motifs and geometric designs. A lower frieze around the base of the *deul* commemorates hunting scenes and features rows of elephants and other animals, which visitors politely linger in front of before turning to the temple's best-known friezes – the erotic carvings known as *maithuna* or 'loving couples'.

These graphic scenes depict amorously entwined couples in a variety of sexual positions, the women with their

grapefruit breasts and the men clearly aroused. A glance skywards brings some relief – the stepped pyramid-shaped roof is decorated with a large stone *amalaka* (representing the celestial world in Hindu cosmology) and gentler, free-standing female musicians carved in the round, positioned to announce the Sun God's arrival. He is represented by three life-size green chlorite statues.

Konarak was begun in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by King Narashimadeva I (1238 to 1264 CE) on the site of at least one former (ninth century) temple also dedicated to the sun god, but was left unfinished. The current temple has been in ruins for at least 400 years.

As for the erotic sculpture for which Konarak is renowned, its inspiration remains a mystery. The two most plausible explanations are that they are representations from the manual known as the *Kama Sutra*, or that they represent steps in the Tantric tradition whereby male and female transform themselves, after significant religious and philosophical instruction, into divine beings through the sexual act, thereby becoming one with the gods and goddesses they worship.



Temple friezes featuring many themes cover the temple walls

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All photos courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch