

Parvati's Penance as Revealed by the Eloquent Stones of Nepal

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1. The Inspiration of the Siva-Parvati Theme in Art and Letters

The divine romance of Siva and Parvati has eternally enthused the Hindus with its inexpressible ethereal richness. It has inspired the artist and poet alike to depict in their own respective idioms their versions of the theme. In their charm of verse, imagery and feeling, in one case, and of visual grace, in the other, these portrayals have attracted and pleased even the uninitiated and exotic minds alike.

2. The Theme in Mythology and Literature

Sati, daughter of Daksha, had been married to Siva, but was moved to her shocking death at the uncalled for insult to her husband deliberately meted out by her father at a sacrifice to which he, i.e. Siva, had not been invited. She was reborn there after as the daughter of Himavan (Himalaya) and Menaka as Parvati, and was firm in her resolve to have Siva again as her lord and husband even in her reincarnation. Soon after she came of age she repaired to the hills and began her austere penance to gain

the favour and hand of Siva. The story of her penance has come down to us from the Brahma Purana, Kalika Purana and the Varaha Purana, respectively. The quintessence of the event was culled by Kalidasa, as early as the fourth century A.D., and rendered into exquisite poetry in his famed **Kumarasambhavam**, dealing with the events leading to the birth of Kumara (Karttikeya).

As though to anticipate the efforts of Parvati and to force the pace of events as well into a dramatic panorama, destiny had caused the demon Taraka, a staunch devotee of Siva, to appear disturbingly on the scene. Fortified by the blessings of Siva, won by hard penance, and confident that he could not be harmed by any one save a progeny of Siva himself, he launched himself upon a career of sadistically tormenting gods, sages, hermits and Brahmanas alike in all manner of ways. In sheer desperation the gods met in a conference and took their trouble to Brahma, the creator. At the suggestion of Brihaspati, they decided to prevail upon Kamadeva, the god of love, to smite Siva with his floral darts, so that he may be awakened from his meditation,

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in which he was then deeply engrossed, and induced to take a wife and procreate the future saviour of the gods. Accordingly, the god of love was persuaded to shoot his arrow of love upon the meditating figure of Siva. It did indeed disturb his absorption, but he was so enraged at this outrage that flashing flames of fire issued instantly from his third eye and enveloped and consumed the helpless form of Kamadeva beyond redemption in the twinkling of an eye. Nevertheless, the infallible dart discharged had its desired effect, and Siva was indeed smitten with a deep longing for love. And destiny drove him to the spot where Parvati was doing her penance.

The penance of Parvati (Uma) has indeed become a byword for austerity and is a commonplace household word among Hindus in general. At the final stage of her penance, the **panchagni tapas**, she had surrounded herself with five burning fires, and refused all form of food, even the fallen leaves, to which she was wont hitherto and thus earned thereby the name **Aparna**. While Parvati was thus engaged in severe austerities, Siva made his appearance before her in the disguise of an anchorite and decided to test the intensity of her sincerity and devotion. He began to revile Siva, i.e. himself, as a dweller of the burning ghat, a companion of **Bhutas** and **Pretas** (ghosts and goblins), a wearer of the elephant skin, when he was not going about in the nude, as of the snake as his ornament, and an indigent person who had no wealth of his own, and told her that it did not behove her to go to so much trouble for such a person's hand in matrimony. Nothing, however, could shake Parvati from her resolve, and all that the reviler had

said strengthened her love for her divine lord all the more and filled her heart with loathing for the anchorite on the contrary. When the **Brahmachari** went on undaunted, she asked her maid in waiting to prevent the stranger from uttering any more insufferable trash, for it was a sin not merely to speak ill of her lord, but also to hear ill of him. She decided to leave the spot if the anchorite did not desist from his mischievous game. At this Siva was indeed greatly pleased and lost no time in revealing himself, to her great surprise and happiness. In quick succession followed kaleidoscopically the events of their wedding, their divine romance, the conception and birth of a son, Kumara (Kattikeya), who was fated to deliver the gods of the menace created by Taraka. The theme has been suitably modified by Kalidasa and given inimitable expression in his poetry of unfathomable beauty of **Kumarasambhavam**.

3. Five Narrative Panels in Kathmandu

And sculptors were scarcely less touched though they often adopted their own versions of the story. But the theme as narrated by Kalidasa caught the imagination of artists in Nepal. In fact Kalidasa's version of the **Kumarasambhavam** has been dealt with very graphically in five disjointed panels of limestone, which anciently formed the veneer stones of a temple, undoubtedly of Siva. Stone temples of the **Sikhara** type, commonly prevalent in India, were obviously not unknown in Nepal even in the early days of the Lichchhavi rule. An exquisite example of a slightly later date stands in the courtyard of the Pasupati temple in Deo Patan, displaying on its rear wall an idealized scene of Siva-Parvati, with Siva as

Nataraja.

These slabs are indeed no longer in situ, nor are they all in one place. Three of them are fixed against the outer wall of a makeshift modern cistern built alongside a road in Naghaltole, not far from Bangemudha. The fourth panel is fixed on the brick wall on the western edge of the passage, from the northern side, into the Stupa and Vihara of Kathesimbu (also called Srigha Vihara), not very far away from those in Naghaltole. The fifth panel is fixed on the exterior facade of the brick-built shrine of Mahishasuramardini in the premises of the Kanke-svari temple, situated picturesquely on the left (western) bank of the Vishnumati, close to Kathesimbu.

All the five, in spite of the differential ravages of time, belong together, forming different scenes of a compact drama, and can be dated to about the fifth-sixth centuries A. D.

The scenery of all the panels is laid amid the hills, the Himalayas, indicated by characteristic grooves used conventionally as a symbol to denote rock.

The longest panel at Naghaltole shows a hilly background within a framework of a flower-bearing tree on either side. This is the scene of Parvati's penance as depicted by Kalidasa in canto V. She is wearing thick garments, suggestive of bark, as described by Kalidasa, and without any substantial ornaments to bedeck herself with. A female figure kneels before her and places a flower on her feet, while the same figure is shown again synoptically approaching Parvati from the rear and offering her food in the form of leaves and flowers gathered in a basket

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held aloft in the hand. She is none other than her maid in attendance to keep her company in her severely lonesome quest. Parvati pushes away the basket in genteel displeasure. Though the poet describes Parvati as wearing matted locks and as having eschewed all jewellery, the artist had his own version of the picture. He did not have the heart to portray a lady of exquisite beauty under the load of unbecoming matted locks, nor could he suffer to show the neck bare, where he has, therefore, aptly put a necklace of **rudraksha** (pl.VA)

The decision of Gauri to perform penance to obtain the hand of Siva is described in the following verse (sloka no. 7 of canto V of *Kumarasambhavam*):

अथानुरूपाभिनवेशतोषिणा कृताभ्यनुज्ञा
गुरुणा गरीयसा ।
प्रजासु पञ्चात् प्रथितं तदाख्यया
जगाम गौरी शिखरं शिखण्डिमत् ॥

The place of penance amid the mountain peaks, which abounded in peacocks, as described in the verse, is clearly indicated by the panel (pl. VA)

Her condition during the penance is described by the poet in the verses numbering 8-12. The three-stranded **mekhala** that Parvati wears in the sculpture is not as coarse, thanks to the solicitude of the sculptor, as the poet had made it in the following verse (no. 10) :

प्रतिक्षणं सा कृत्रोमविकृयां व्रताय
मौञ्जीं त्रिगुणां वभार याम् ।
अकारि तत्पूर्वनिबद्धया तया सरागमस्या
रसनागुणास्पदम् ॥

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But the presence of the ornamental मेखला shows the sculptor's consideration for the affliction of the lady that would otherwise be caused by the मेखला (waist girdle) of coarse मुञ्ज grass, which, according to the poet, had reddened her soft skin at the waist by its friction.

The presence around her of the wild animals at ease comprising a cow and a boar, who confidently fed upon food offered by her, reflects the poet's conception of the scene in the following verse (no. 15) :

अरण्यबीजाञ्जलिदानलालितास्तथा च तस्यां
हरिणा विशश्वसुः ।
यथा तदीर्येन्नयनैः कुतूहलात्पुरः
सखीनाममिमीत लोचने ॥

She is described as having given up all her food, even the fallen leaves of trees, which justified her name of अपर्णा (one, who does not eat even leaves) in the verse (no. 28) :

स्वयंविशीर्णद्रुमपर्णवृत्तिता परा हि
काष्ठा तपसस्तया पुनः ।
तदप्यपाकीर्णमतः प्रियंवदा वदन्त्यपर्णेति
च तां पुराविदः ॥

Here, in the scene, her attendant is seen offering her a basket containing leaves and flowers, and she is pushing it a way without even looking at it, showing her disregard of food of all form.

The second panel at Naghaltole shows two figures, one of whom is undoubtedly Parvati, who is about to stand up and go away, while the other is no other than Siva in the disguise of a young anchorite wearing a deer-skin and holding a flower in his hand, exactly as the poet has des-

cribed the scene in canto V, and reviling himself (pl. VI).

The scene conveyed by pl. VI is reflected in several verses of canto V. The dwarfish young figure on the right is of none other than Siva in his disguise of a young brahmachari, standing before Parvati. The sculptor's portrayal is faithful to the description of Kalidasa in verse no. 30:

अथाजिनाषाढघरः प्रगल्भवाग्ज्वलन्निव
ब्रह्ममयेन तेजसा ।
विवेश कश्चिज्जटिलस्तपोवनं शरीरबद्धः
प्रथमाश्रमो यथा ॥

He is made to wear a deer-skin garment, and is indeed resplendantly the epitome of youthful penance in the first stage of life, with handsome locks of hair replacing the severity of the jata (matted hair), described by the poet.

His denunciation of himself in the course of his indirect conversation, related in the subsequent verses, with Parvati was very much disliked by her. She tried to dissuade him from speaking ill of her lord, and this is narrated in verse no. 83:

निवार्यतामालि किमप्ययं वटुः पुनर्विवक्षुः
स्फुरितोत्तराधरः ।
न केवलं यो महतोऽपभाषते श्रृणोति
तस्मादपि यः स पापभाक् ॥

When he insists on continuing, she firmly says in desperation that she would go away from the place in view of the brahmachari's insistence to continue to speak ill of him.

Verses 84 & 85 which have the following words describe this stage of the drama that gradually unfolded itself:

इतो गमिष्याम्यथवेति वादिनी

चचाल बाला स्तनभिन्नवल्कला ।

स्वरूपमास्थाय च तां कृतस्मितः

समाललम्बे वृषराजकेतनः ॥

तं वीक्ष्य वेपथुमनी सरसाङ्गयष्टिनिक्षेपणाय

पदमुद्धृतमुद्वहन्ती ।

मार्गाचलव्यतिकराकुलितेव सिन्धुः

शैलाधिराजतनया न ययौ न तस्थौ ॥

The sculptor has faithfully perpetuated the moment of her rising up and putting forth her first step to move away from the spot, just a split second before Siva assumes his form as described by Kalidasa.

The third panel from Naghaltole shows, even in its damaged condition, a couple in ecstatic intimacy and dancing in joy. This is no doubt a picture of the divine couple in their ecstasy as they have found out about the portending birth of Kumara, whose forthcoming advent is indicated by the delineation of his mount, the peacock, at the right of the couple (pl.VB). This is reflected in the verse no. 4 of canto XI which runs as follows:

अत्रान्तरे पर्वतराजपुञ्यासमं शिवः स्वैरविहारहेतो ।

नभो विमानेन विगाहमानो मनोतिवेगेन जगाम तत्र ॥

The delightful conduct of the divine couple is anticipated in verse no. 46 of canto IX as follows:

देवोऽपि गौर्या सह चन्द्रमौलिर्यदृच्छया

स्फाटिकशैलशृङ्गे ।

श्रृङ्गारचेष्टाभिरनारताभिमनोहराभिवर्त्यहरच्चि-

राय ॥

The intermediate scene of their wedding, which has inspired many a fine piece of sculptural representation in India is unfor-

tunately not found.

The panel in Kathmandu portrays Parvati and Siva against a hilly backdrop, each carrying a basket of flowers intended as an offering to the creator, while the infant son, no other than Karttikeya, is playing with his peacock. In fact, as the poet describes in canto XI, the two parents were so much overjoyed with the new born baby that they spent all the time showering all their affection on him, forgetting the purpose for which he was created, until Indra, deputed by the gods to remind them of the role Kumara had to play, shook them up from their preoccupation. The scene (pl.VII) suggesting the grateful celebration of the birth of Kumara is reflected in verse no. 30 of canto XI. It runs as follows:

अधिष्ठितः स्फाटिकशैलशृङ्गे तुङ्गे निजं ।

धाम निकालरम्यम् ।

महोत्सवाय प्रमथप्रमुख्यान् पृथून्गगाञ्छंभुरथा-

दिदेश ।

The plate shows the young Kumara with his peacock and his parents, each with a basket of flowers in the hands, in the act of offering to the Supreme Being in gratitude for the gift of a son (pl.VII).

That both the parents lost themselves in lavishing their love upon the offspring is delineated in a number of verses beginning with verse no. 40 of canto XI, which runs as follows:

ततः कुमारः सुमुदां निदानैः स

बाललीलाचरितैर्विचित्रैः ।

गिरीशगौर्योर्हृदयं जहार मुदे न हृद्या

किमु बालकेलिः ॥

This scene has been interpreted by Professor Stella Kramrisch as pilgrims in the

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hills. Though the divine couple would fit the description, the presence of the little child in the nude would not justify such an interpretation. In the context of the other scenes dealt with here, all reflecting various stages in the dramatic presentation of the events of **Kumarasambhavam**, and taking the size and material of the slab and the style of sculptured figures, it can be said that they belong together. The presence of the child with the peacock would justify its interpretation as Kumara and as part of the narrative panels of **Kumarasambhavam** in Nepal.

The fifth panel, at the Kankesvari temple, portrays the prelude to the love-play of the divine couple, which forms the subject matter of the eighth canto of **Kumarasambhavam**. The female figure on the proper right is no doubt Parvati, who has been persuaded by Siva, sitting reassuringly to her left, to remove her upper garment. She has done so and in the process has bared her maidenly bosom to the gaze of her lord. But she cannot discard the veil altogether and is vainly holding it aloft over her head as though to cover her face in shame. She is also holding on to the waist band of her lower drapery, which is about to fall loose. It is a pity that the face of Parvati is damaged, but enough remains to indicate the obviously bashful and downcast glance. Siva is sitting apart and is looking somewhat detached even though he has cast a hypnotic spell on the spouse. As Parvati is naturally abashed by the strangeness of the situation, Siva hastens to allay her fears with his upraised right hand as a mark of **abhaya** (reassurance) and has at the same time placed his own hand on the waist band of his lower

garment (pl.VIII).

The scene of the love-play of the divine couple is graphically described by the poet in the following verses, nos. 4 and 5, of canto VIII :

नाभिदेशनिहितः सकम्पया शंकरस्य रुद्धे
तया करः ।

तद्दुकूलमथ चाभवत्स्वयं दूर
मुच्छ्वसित नीविबन्धनम् ॥

She could but offer only a feeble resistance, on account of her bashfulness, to the hands of Siva, which removed her upper garments, and as a result of the growing intimacy, the waist band of the lower garment fell off by itself. The sculptured figure has vividly recaptured the pathos and grace of the scene, though out of decorum, the sculptor has removed Siva to a distance, and has portrayed him with a gaze of detachment characteristic of a **yogi**, though, more mundanely he is simultaneously engaged in disrobing himself. The **sarpa** ear ornament of Siva has slipped away, out of decorum, from its allotted place, and has entered into a hole to the proper right of Parvati, but cannot help raising its head to peer curiously into the scene of intimate privacy that is to follow.

The next verse (no. 5) describes the helpless condition of Parvati who, in the excitement of the affair, completely forgot the instructions of her friends on her behaviour in such a situation. The sculptor has succeeded in recapturing the helpless state of Parvati, as described by the poet.

एवमालि निगृहीतसाध्वसं शंकरो रहसि
सेव्यतामिति ।

सा सखीभिरुपदिष्टमाकुला नास्मरत्
प्रमुखवर्तिनि प्रिये ॥

4. Conclusion

The portrayal achieved in the five panels of Kathmandu do indeed approximate very closely to the conception and imagery of Kalidasa, with such minor differences as the story medium permitted or required. They serve also to show the religious-cum-legendary inspiration of art in Nepal, as in many countries elsewhere.

In the actual execution of the panels, the artist has submitted himself to the dictates of decorum and has succeeded in producing a harmonious balance of proportion and dignity, charm and effective composition.

As to the date suggested above, it can be stated that the panels belong to a phase when narratively eloquent scenes appear to have predominated over individual figures. Compositionally the synoptic method has been used but sparingly. Stylistically they are close to the narrative scenes of Vishnu from Lajimpat and Tilganga areas in Kathmandu as humbling the pride of the demon king Bali, in his synoptically portrayed dual form of the dwarf transforming himself into a gigantic figure of Vishnuvibrantamurti striding across the three worlds. Both of them are dated to Samvat 389 or A.D. 467 in the inscriptions engraved on their pedestals. The one at Tilganga was a later (7th-8th centuries) copy. A piece of similar style is seen in the premises of the Kumbhesvara Temple at Lalitpur, where an early specimen of Uma-Mahesvara shows the infant figure of Kumara on the lap of Uma. Like the others it is in bluish sandstone and should belong

to the group in theme and style. In view of this, and other stylistic features, commonly met with in India in the late Gupta period a date of about the fifth-sixth centuries for the **Kumarasambhava** panel would be appropriate. The achievement of such expressive fineness in stone at this early date is at once a tribute to the artists' skill and the poet's wizardry, not to speak of popularity.

That these panels originally belonged to a single temple is clearly indicated by the uniformity of the stone used, which in each case is a slab of limestone, as also by the connected nature of their theme, besides of course the uniformity of their width, which but varies from 15 into 16½ in; the length being determined by the scope of the particular scene, and the smallest of them measures 21 in. and the longest 37 in. In sheer plastic mobility, depth and variety of expression and proportion of limbs and ornaments, these pieces have reached a maturity which speaks of much earlier beginnings though, almost out of habit, they still cling to the synoptic presentation. The measure of success achieved by the fragments should have led to the production of more such relics. An informed and painstaking search might bring to light many specimens of earlier endeavours, as well as, perhaps, more advanced examples in ample measure both in the valley and outside, and would be well worth our endeavour to find. The fragments in question, which can be classed as among the best of Nepal's artistic creations, deserve much better preservation than they now enjoy in uninformed private possession.

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From the point of view of sculptural style mention may also be made in this context of a stone panel showing the figure of seated Buddha with two attendant figures flanking him, one on either side, standing in the courtyard of a house at Chapatol Ilanani, Lalitpur. This sculpture has an inscription¹ in the Lichchhavi script en-

graved on its pedestal, part of which is embedded in the earth. The artist has delineated some of the decorative features suggestively with thin and faint lines. This would lend support to the possibility of finding many other pieces of the same sculptural style and theme in Nepal, particularly in the valley of Kathmandu²

1. *Abhilekha Samgraha*, Part V, V. S. 2019, p. 8.

2. I had earlier identified a stone panel from Cambodia for the Musee Guimet, Paris, as portraying the scene represented here by pl. VI, in 1961, and my article on the subject was published in the Museum's journal entitled *Arts Asiatiques*, Vol. X, 1964, under the caption, 'An Unidentified Sculptural Panel at Musee Guimet, Paris'.

Soon after my arrival in Nepal, early in April 1966, I began writing a paper on the subject bringing therein for consideration several other sculptural panels from different parts of the world. When I had read out the preliminary draft of my article to Shri Taranand Mishra, my young friend and colleague and Exploration and Excavation Officer, in the Department of Archaeology, H.M.G., Nepal, he at once brought to my notice an enlarged photograph of the panel from Naghaltole illustrated here in pl. VA, of Parvati's penance. This excited my curiosity and I visited the locality in August '66 in the company of Shri Janak Lal Sharma, Chief Research Officer of the Department, and found that there were three panels there, all of which appeared to me to reflect different stages of the dramatic events narrated in *Kumarasambhavam*. Shri Sharma also showed to me the panel of Katesimbu and Kankesvari, respectively.

The suggested identification was first briefly indicated in 'An Introduction to Nepalese Art' in *Nepalese Art* 1966, wherein pls. VII and VIII were also published, and subsequently in a couple of newspaper articles and also in 'A Note on the Iconography of Uma-Mahesvara in Nepal', *Ancient Nepal*, no. 1, oct. 1967, pp. 24-25. The blemishes of the interpretation are all my own.

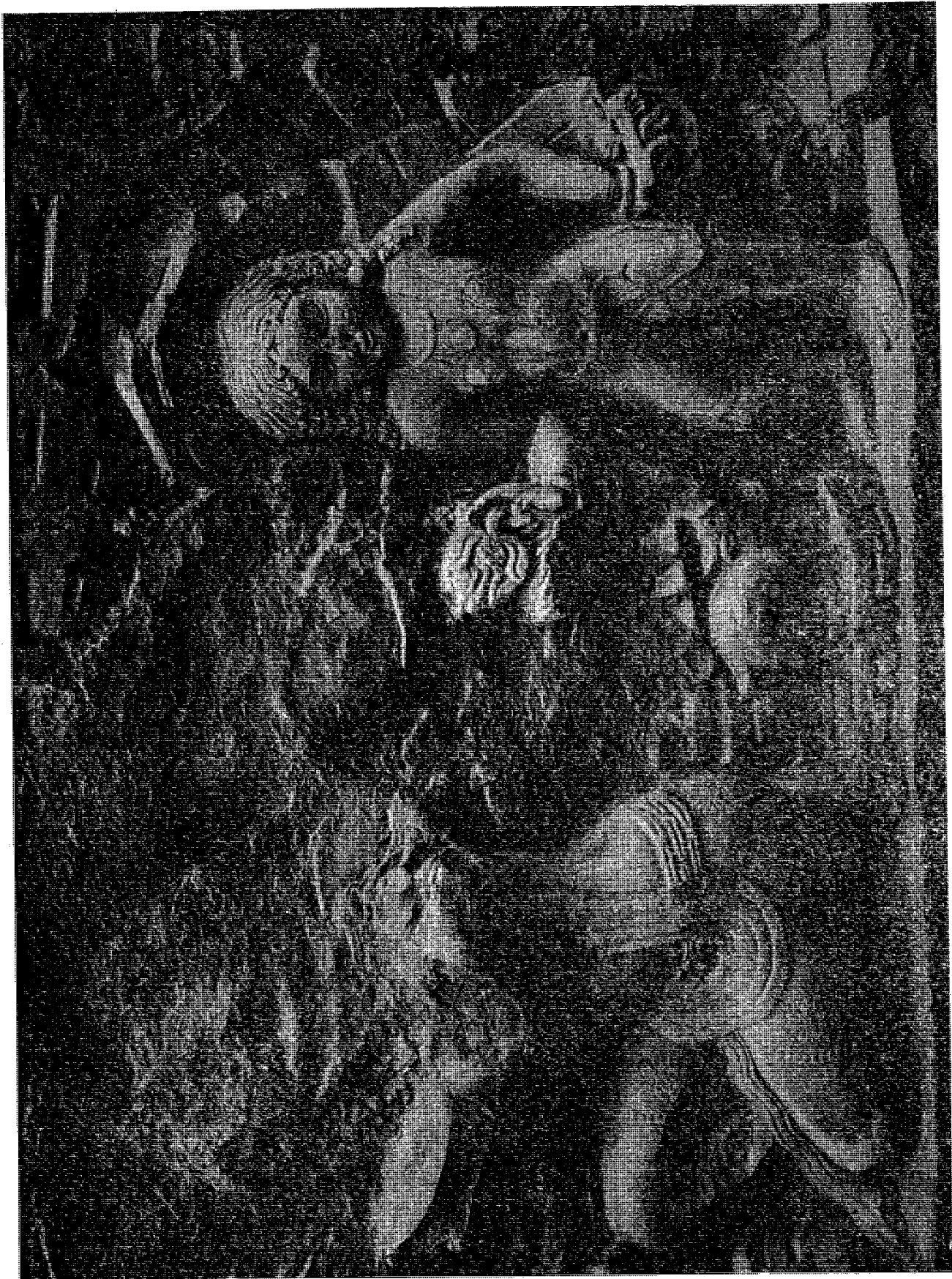
The Cambodian piece is of the twelfth century, and indicates the popularity of the theme, as related by Kalidasa, over a considerable expanse of time and space.



क. अपर्णाको रूपमा रहेकी पार्वतीको प्रस्तरमूर्ति । हेर्नुहोस् पृ. २९-३० ।
A. Parvati in penance as Aparna. See pages 29-30.



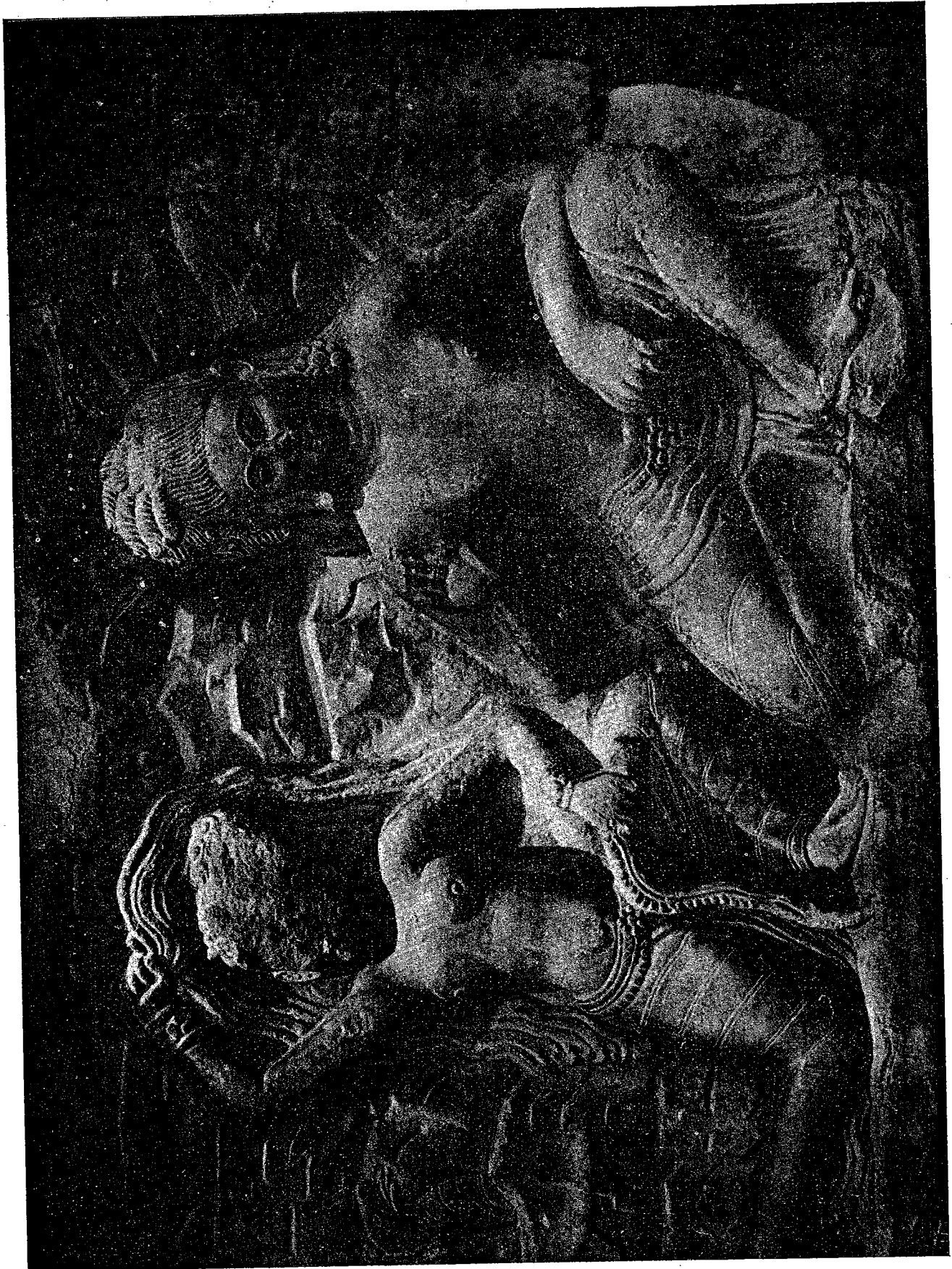
ख. आनन्दपूर्वक नाचिरहेका शिवपार्वती । हेर्नुहोस् पृ. ३१ ।
B. Siva and Parvati dancing in ecstasy. See page 31.



क. तपस्या गरिरहेकी पार्वतीलाई ब्रह्मचारीको रूपमा शिवको छल । हेतुहोस् पृ. ३०-३१ ।
A. Siva in the disguise of a young brahmachari before Parvati. See pages 30-31.



ख. कुमारको जन्मोत्सव मनाइरहेका कुमार सहित शिवपार्वती । हेनुहोस् पृ. ३१ ।
B. Siva and Parvati with infant Kumara, celebrating his birth. See page 31.



क. शिवपार्वतीको शृंगार । हेनुहोस् पृ. ३२-३३ ।
A. Siva and Parvati in amour. See pages 32-33.