

Tribhuvan University

Eroticism and the Sacred: A Semiotic Study of Tudal in Uma-Maheshwara
Temple, Kirtipur

A Thesis submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in
English

By

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Dev Saru has completed his thesis entitled, “Eroticism and the Sacred: A Semiotic Study of Tudal in Uma-Maheshwara Temple, Kirtipur” under my supervision. He carried out his Research from February 2024 to January 2025. I hereby recommend this thesis to be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled, “Eroticism and the Sacred: A Semiotic Study of Tudal in Uma-Maheshwara Temple, Kirtipur” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Dev Saru has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled “Eroticism and the Sacred: A Semiotic Study of Tudal in Uma-Maheshwara Temple, Kirtipur” is an original piece of work under the supervision of Mr. Mahesh Paudyal, Assistant professor, University Campus, Central Department of English, Kirtipur. And it is submitted in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English. This thesis report has not been submitted to any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

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Abstract

This paper explores the epistemic, philosophical, aesthetics, historical, religious and spiritual motifs of Uma-Maheshwar's nude sculptures, particularly using Barthean Semiology. It examines how nudity in Nepali sculpture transcends eroticism to symbolize purity, transcendence, and spiritual enlightenment. Drawing on Barthean semiology, the paper contends that these sculptures offer deeper meaning beyond their visual representation of sexual acts, reflecting societal openness and metaphysical knowledge. Furthermore, it situates the erotic imagery within Hindu and Buddhist philosophical frameworks, suggesting that these carvings represent sacred unions and cosmic balance rather than mere physical desire. Through a visual and epistemic analysis, the study emphasizes the sculptures' role in communicating spiritual truths and cultural values.

Nepali sculpture has been a source of mesmerizing eyewitness in Nepalese temples and historical monuments. From depicting deities to everyday people, different animals to monstrous mythic figures, Nepali sculpture stands as an expression of the country's rich cultural and religious traditions. The craftsmanship of highly efficient artists seems so praiseworthy and realistic in the form of different avatars depicted either on stone, metal sheet or wood log. Each sculpture is created with accurate precision and specific measurements, adhering to established rules and guidelines. What makes this particularly unique is its symbolic use of nudity. This nudity allures the eyes of the passers inevitably. No matter how the erotic arts of struts (Tundal) look but they indicate to "the interrelationship between sex, nudity, arts of sex with fertility that are acts as the mechanism to maintain the socio-cultural order or equilibrium through the offerings of various cultural events and celebrations both manifestly or sometimes latently"(Dahal 1).

One of the religious temples that is rich in such nude sculpture is Uma-Maheshwar of Kwacho, Kirtipur. This temple stands firmly in three tiers amidst the scenic viewpoint offering a serene platform for the local and outsiders to relax their mind. It not only surprises the visitors with the scenes but it also offers with the nude arts carved on its tundal [beam/strut]. The record on the website of Kirtipur Municipality says, "All the three roofs are finished with jhingati tiles and supported from below by decorative timber struts. The struts

consist of images of gods/goddesses” (np). Besides these images of god/goddesses, “erotic figures are also carved in wooden beams and according to archaeologists, these figures on beams have tantric values” (Flickr np).

Despite the aesthetics and artistic value, the erotic naked sculptures remain problematic to the sight of some visitors.

On the other hand, some other people enjoy the craftsmanship and appreciate the artist’s contribution in the field of epistemology. It is upon viewer’s sight and insight for the appreciation or denouncement of such carvings.

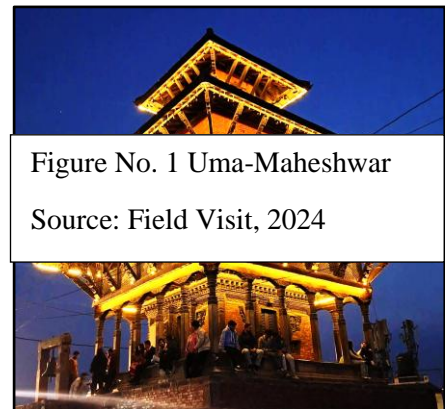


Figure No. 1 Uma-Maheshwar

Source: Field Visit, 2024

Sometimes, the erotic carvings connote to the luxury and romance of elite and spiritually enlightened people. “The erotic sentiment was for them the vehicle to the highest realization” (Davidson 217). Sculpting in Nepal did not compulsorily start with the motif of nudity. According to Pratapaditya Pal, a leading art historian and curator of South Asian art, the earliest known sculptures from Nepal date back to the Licchavi period (c. 400-750 CE). During this period, sculptures were primarily made of stone and often depicted the Buddha and other Buddhist deities in a seated or standing position. These sculptures were typically fully clothed and adorned with jewellery and other decorative elements (21-22).

However, the use of nudity in Nepali sculpture began to emerge in the later medieval period (c. 750-1750 CE), particularly within the context of the Tantric tradition. As noted by Mary Slusser, a prominent scholar of Nepali art, Tantra is a “mystical and magical aspect of Hinduism” that emphasizes the use of physical and sexual practices to achieve spiritual transformation (1). Tantric art often depicted deities in a state of nudity or engaged in sexual acts as a means of conveying this transformative power (1-2). As the time progressed, people got more oriented on spiritual liberation. Sex and sexual orientation became open topics for discussion. Conjugal life, sexual affairs, sexual gossips and criticism were naturalized. It was not a rocket science issue to represent such openness in the form of art and literature. Different poets like John Donne (To his Mistress Going to Bed) composed poems on eroticism so openly. In Nepal, artisans carved the nude pictures on the wooden structures ranging from ‘Tundal’ to ‘Aakhijhyal’. Because Nepalese people have developed such openness and acceptance, “the portrayal of erotic carvings with males and females copulation along with other erotic images show the open attitude of people at the contemporary times” (Yogi 24).

Since the sculptures in nude form have a religious and spiritual connections, they were not intended to be interpreted as erotic representation. Ulrich von Schroeder in *Nepalese Stone Sculptures*, also says, “In traditional Nepalese sculpture, nudity is often used to depict deities and other spiritual

beings, who are seen as transcending human concerns about modesty and shame” (53). These sculptures are not intended to be erotic or titillating, but rather to convey a sense of divinity and purity because “the nudity of the gods is, first and foremost, a symbol of their transcendence of human concerns about modesty and shame”(Schroeder 53). Firstly, the artists were influenced by the “religious iconography” so that they made “compositions represent the Buddhist and Hindu deities and their various activities as narrated in the mythologies” (Sharma YP 86).

We cannot interpret these art forms according to our basic assumption because “without considering religion and philosophy as a foundation, no genuine evaluation can be made of the basic character of Nepali Art. The symbols of art here voice the same truth as philosophy and myth” (Ray 11). Since they carry such cultural significance, nude sculpting is never a legal issue. Because “Nepalese legal system does not define obscenity and there is no specific law that addresses it” (3) such naked sculpture remains unquestioned and neutral. Nepali nude sculptures have now transformed into a beautiful art form. In the context of Buddhism, the depiction of nude figures in sculpture can also be understood as a representation of the enlightened state. As Buddhist practitioner and scholar Robert Beer writes, “the Buddha is often depicted naked or wearing only a monk’s robe, signifying the freedom of his enlightenment from all worldly concerns, possessions, and attachments”(Beer 34). Art represents a symbolic connection rather than a set of eroticism.

In contrast, some scholars also link nudity to the gender issues. For instance, nude carving is often accused of flashing women nudity. But, this study explores nudity regardless of gender and divine position. Yogi says, “The women in the erotic carvings seem to cause the most anxiety, not only because they have traditionally been portrayed as a-sexual beings easily victimized by the sexual messages presented in advertising, clothing, movies, and other leisure activities” (4). But this study explores the nudity of male divine figures too including animals’ sexuality. The question remains if the animals were glorified as a divine character or it is just a personification.

Some other scholars associate the erotica to the mere art of ‘Eros’. Farouk Seif writes, “The term erotica etymologically derives from the Greek word *Érōs*, which associated love with desire; for this reason, the perception of Eros has been focused mainly on sexual love and mere erotic sensation” (264). In a similar note, Calame mentions the historical background of Eros in his book and says, “In ancient Greece, love was essentially eros, a force tended to objectivize” (13). Instead of looking at Eros or the art form of erotica as a love and desire, this study looks at other possible aspects that erotica has to offer. So, the tondal carvings of deities and animals in nude and sexual positions can offer a distinct meaning rather than a mere expression of love and desire.

Nepali sculpture has a variety of art forms ranging from a lively Kumari to different deities, heroes, and ordinary people in their natural [naked] form, untouched by clothing. But the question is why so? Is that the mere work of a pervert artist? Or, is it one of the most used art forms humans ever invented? Or, does it have any religious and spiritual connections? Does it correlate to any history or epistemology of erotic art? Or, is it just an expression of love and desire? Visiting the historical places or cultural heritages and discovering such naked sculptures in different erotic postures often make people embarrassed and ashamed but yet highly attracted. Despite its beauty and significance, the motif behind nudity in this art form remains as a mystery. This research attempts to explore the possible etymological, cultural, spiritual, historical, and religious reasons behind the use of nudity in Nepali sculpture. By analysing the historical, social, and religious contexts surrounding the creation of these sculptures, this study aims to present ideas regarding the motif associated with nudity. The objectives of the study are to explore the etymological origins of nudity in Nepali sculpture, analyse its cultural and spiritual significance, examine its historical and religious correlations, and investigate the broader epistemological implications of erotic art in this context. Through a comprehensive visual analysis of these elements in the tandal of Uma-Maheshwor temple, this research aims to discover the underlying motifs behind the portrayal of nudity in Nepali sculptures.

Simply, one can ascend approximately two kilometres westward from Tribhuvan University to the Kirtipur hill called Kwacho either by a vehicle or on foot. Towards the entrance, s/he has to have an exhausting climb upstairs. Then, s/he can get an entry through the stone structure attached to the wall. Looking at a QR scan image appears. Scanning it, one would get a redirection to the website of Kirtipur municipality where most of the information about the temple is uploaded with some pictographs.

Fig. No. 2 Physical Attributes of Uma-Maheshwar, Source: Field Visit, 2024

Immediately after one ascends to the premises climbing 17 staircases in and out, it feels like the temple locates in an elevated heap. Towards the main gate of the temple, one can encounter a couple of giant elephants made out of multiple pieces of stones grinded and attached as artfully as the real ones. Each of them seem to be crushing a figure by their feet inferring that they are safeguarding the temple. Ascending other 13 staircases to the top where the base of the temple is built, one can see a serene and spectacular view of whole Kathmandu valley. The temple itself looks majestic and rich in wood carvings. But its name seems confusing to the visitors. Asian Historical Architecture clarifies, “The



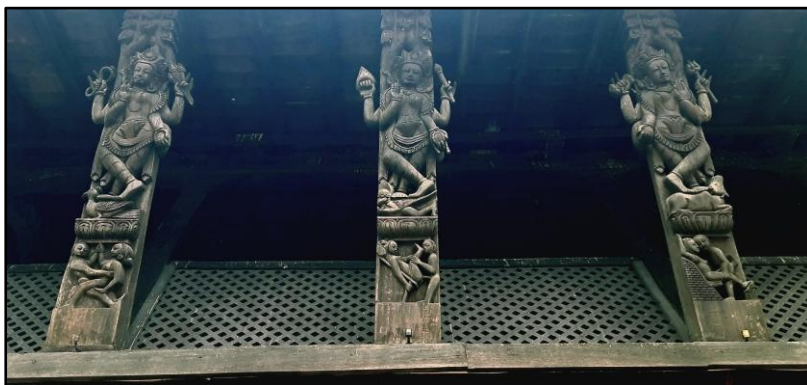
temple's name derives from the stone icon at its centre, depicting Shiva and his wife Parvati in the Uma Maheshwar pose, with Shiva sitting cross-legged and embracing his wife, Uma [Parvati]" (np).

Sitting on the patio surrounded by 20 wooden pillars, one can gaze up onto the tundals fully made up of wood which contain nude carvings, a form of three-dimensional sculpture.

It was found during the field visit that there were 28 tundals altogether. All the

Figure No. 3 Uma-Maheshwar, Source: Field Visit, 2024 monstrous look, some deities, and personified birds. Most importantly, each of them had at least one nude carving portraying a sexual intercourse or if not a naked body.

The temple is surrounded by bricked wall containing several aankhijhyal commonly known as peacock window or eye window and four different doors.



Among the four doors, three remain half closed but contain statues of different deities inside a shallow wall; Devi (south),

Durga (west), and Saraswati (north). Only the east entrance is completely open that leads to the main statue of Uma Maheshwar [Shiva Parvati]. But the most surprising thing is that these wooden platforms do not contain any nude arts, only the tundals do. So the question 'why only on tundals' is obvious. All the 28

tundals of the first tier contained such carvings. But the other two upper tiers did not have a systematic installation of fixed number of tundals. And most of them were also found not having such carvings on them. The locus of this study revolves around only on those tundals of the first tier.

Almost all the carvings portray sexual activities copulated by at least one or more male or female. If not, a single lady is displayed in a nude and erotic posture that seems to be a stimulant to arousal. The most surprising sight is that we can see animals too in naked form stretching on the corner tunda [strut].

Not only this, there is a side to think spiritually as there are divine figures in a fine posture, clothed and asexual. Some owl-looking birds are shown in an aggressive appearance. Moreover, the carving compels one to appreciate each and every detail, depth and intensity of the pictures. The carvings also push one to the world of imagination and

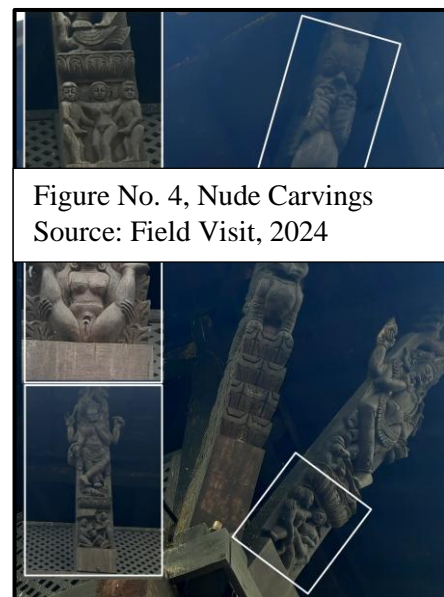


Figure No. 4, Nude Carvings
Source: Field Visit, 2024

make them fancy of knowing the reason or motif behind such nudity in a religious place. They may come up with a question as well, “Why such vulgarity in a holy place?” People may doubt on the credibility of Gods as well because seeing those carvings, they may question over the divinity and their character too.

Roland Barthes argues that signs are not isolated entities but rather function as components of a meaning-making system that is constructed by society, wherein denotation—literal meaning—and connotation—cultural associations—play crucial roles. While applying this sense in discovering motif behind nudity in Uma-Maheswar’s Tundal carvings, we can be redirected towards some other connotations farther from those visual denotations. Barthes argues that any “materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” (113).

A nude body in an erotic posture, or an image that portray sexual intercourse can mean far beyond than one’s imagination. So, let’s put this combination into the

Barthean Semiology:

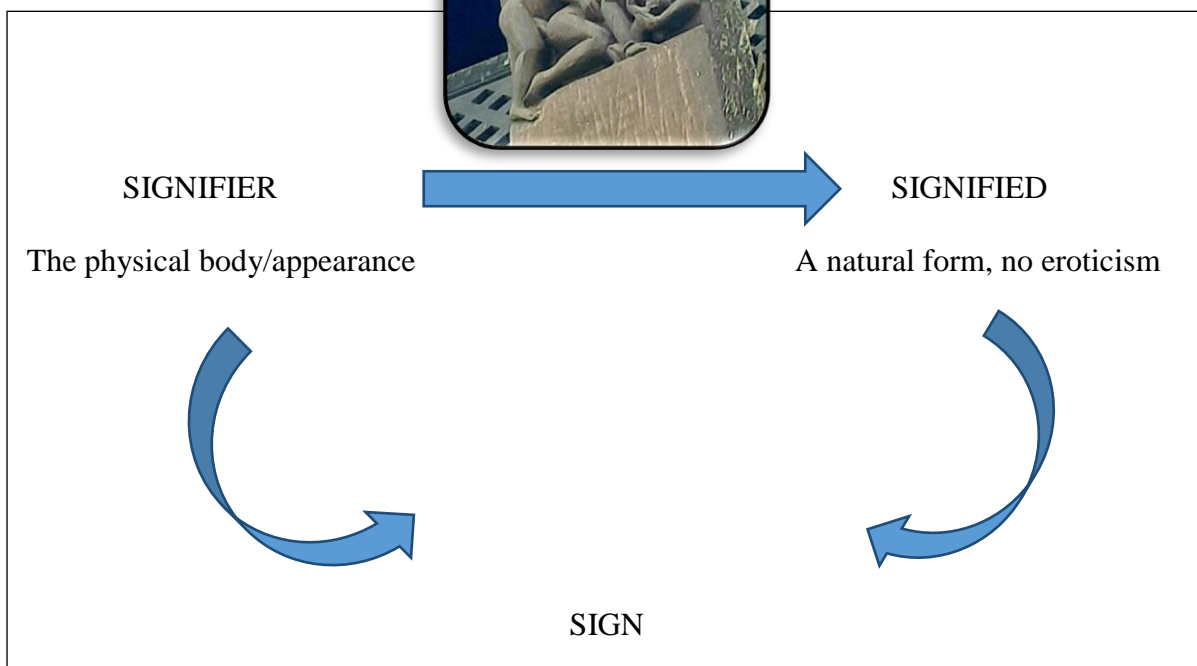


Figure No. 5. Signification process in Barthean Semiology

As said by Barthes, language “is a second-order language system” (Barthes 11), the signification lies in the heart of myths or meaning in a camouflage. The picture above shows a naked lady which seems as if she is inviting a male counterpart. The body

itself can be an erotic semiology seeks for And this perspective a different ‘signified’,



form. But, Barthean second order meaning. would derail us towards that is a natural form of

‘birth and death’ of living being. This signified can heavily be influenced by the social environment because “it is the social part of language, the individual cannot by himself either create or modify it. It is essentially a collective contract which one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to communicate” (Barthes 14).

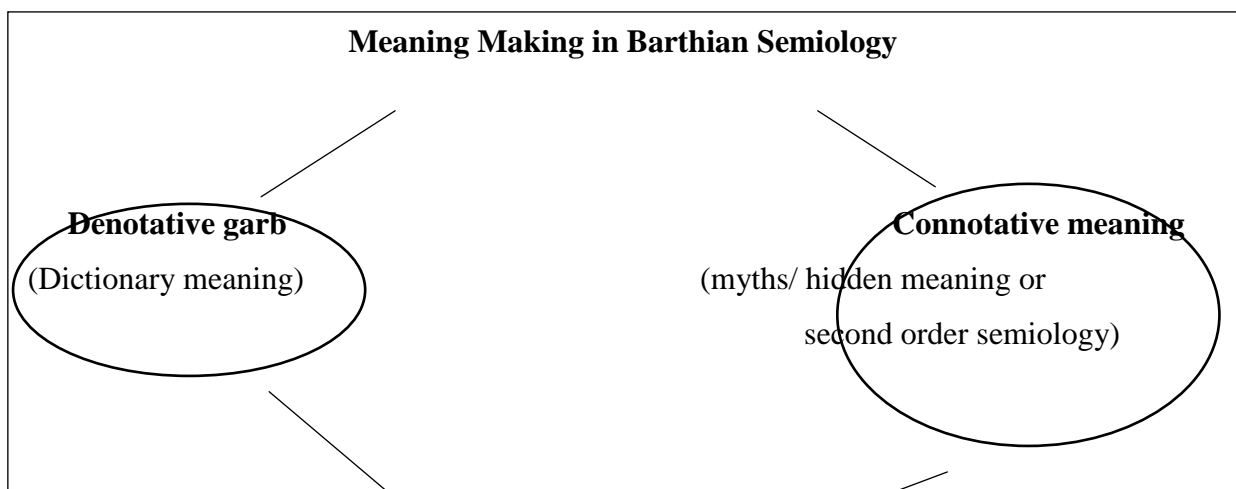


Figure No. 6. Signification process in Barthean Semiology

Similarly, the above picture shows an intercourse when the mother does a breastfeeding. The erotic sense or let's say Barthean denotation can stand here as eroticism. As Bataille defines eroticism, "the starting point would certainly have to be sexual reproductive activity, of which eroticism is a special form" (11). In a similar note, the sexual intercourse between multiple males or females at once might sound bizarre and unnatural. The semiological denotation shows it as a break away from social convention and an adaptation of modernization. But, its connotation stretches far beyond. Kerwin Kaye views intercourse as "an entirely 'natural' act, the central biological function which links humans with non-human animals. And of course, in some sense this is true: if at least some humans had not been engaging in heterosexual, reproductive intercourse throughout history, our species would never have survived" (129). The picture depicting sexual scenes can be viewed as a natural process that each of parents do to reproduce a baby.

When a Barthean signification of a nude sculpture goes beyond eroticism, my first question 'is this an art of a pervert artist?' gets its answer. For him/her [artist], there is nothing personal. Because he does what the religious treatises instruct him. "He needs to be a decent, well-made man who is free from jealousy. He must have been initiated into the magical sciences and come from a respectable household. He needs to be knowledgeable in history, math, painting, and mythology" (Manusamhita 7. 47-48).

I have examined the motif of nudity in the Uma-Maheshwar temple's struts using Claude Levi-Strauss' theory as well. According to Levi-Strauss, myths and artistic representations are examples of cultural expressions that function within formalized systems of binary oppositions. "Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation," he says (224). I have examined the motif of nudity in the Uma-Maheshwar temple's struts using Claude Levi-Strauss' theory. According to Levi-Strauss, myths and artistic representations are examples of cultural expressions that function within formalized systems of binary oppositions. "Mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation," he says (224). In these instances, the erotic imagery mediates between dichotomies like nature and culture, sacred and profane, and constraint and indulgence. Its function goes beyond simple aesthetic or spiritual reasons. According to this interpretation, the naked figures serve as structural mediators, resolving conflicts between social rules and human instincts.

In addition, Lévi-Strauss asserts that "myth serves as a logical model that can resolve a contradiction" (229). It is possible to interpret the overt sexual imagery on temple struts as a narrative technique that addresses the tensions between morality and sensuality, as well as between spirituality and physicality. By incorporating human desires into hallowed locations, these pictures subvert

puritanical interpretations of religious art and represent society's effort to balance the conflict between divine order and bodily pleasure. Using this theoretical framework, I understand the naked figures as structural elements of a larger cultural logic rather than as standalone creative creations.

Historically, the representation of naked human bodies in sculptures can be traced back to centuries. But, particularly, we find the stone/metal inscription in temples that mention the date of the existence of such art forms as medieval period. The inscription of Uma-Maheshwar also shows the date of its establishment in 1655 AD. From then, the wood carvings can be dated as ancient art forms. But, the question is 'were the people that much open towards sex in that time too?' It becomes especially challenging when the sculptures represent more than just heterosexual sex practices. Some of these centuries-old erotic carvings depict intercourse outside the heterosexual concept of sex, despite the overwhelming societal, cultural, and political hostility towards acknowledging homosexual and other queer representations. The broader perspective of the sculpting artists is reflected in various depictions, such as males showing off their phallus with other men, women profoundly involved in sexual activities with each other, and several participants in a single sexual interaction. Whether they were merely products of their imaginations or a reflection of the society of the time is up for debate.

From then to now, the struts hang with such erotic images. Barthean semiology does not view it as a mere form of eroticism. Rather, it suggests to seek a deeper meaning in it. So, one most common belief is that “it was carved as a means of sexual education for the common folks” (Khadgi np). Though there is no concrete evidence about the belief but the local people told during the field visit that such nude carvings were kept in tundals to arouse people therefore to procreate and reproduce in order to raise population. In fact, these carvings are accredited for making the men ready for ‘love’. Dahiya says, “if a man does not attach with his wife or beloved emotionally and with true feelings of love, his physical encounter can never satisfy her. She can betray him for real pleasure” (201). This opinion supports that the nude tundal carvings of Uma Maheshwar served as a tool to make people involve in intercourse. Those carvings worked as a divine symbol to make people engage in preserving the divine creation.

But, there are still places to dig deep into that history. The medieval Nepal was purely a patriarchal nation running into smaller kingdoms then. The male gaze towards women can be imagined so easily. Women’s portrayal, having two men aside, or a beast mounting over or fore-playing herself, can be linked to the then patriarchal mind-set of artist. Shivaji Das elaborates those erotic carvings as “relatively crude, made more with humour than dedication. Elephants turn missionary, beasts love men, and every taboo is violated. The

attitude of naughtiness is implausibly similar to that of the Mochica erotic pottery of Peru” (2). Ankit Khadgi mentions, “In Das’s book, Dinesh Saru interprets that depictions of bestiality represents the sexual fantasies of the artists, who were mostly men. . . . Saru believes that the women in such art can also reflect their oppressed state—as many men still consider women as an object who should always be dominated” (Khadgi np).

There are some mythical connotations as well. The nude carvings can function as some symbols rather than a stimulus and eroticism. Das believes that the nude carvings are kept on those struts to “protect the temples from the goddess of lightning who happens to be a shy virgin” (2). But, this viewpoint can be questioned presenting the evidence from other Hindu temples, particularly Shiva temple, because only few temples do possess such nude carvings and many do not. The ancient traces of Hinduism show that there are four qualities of men; dharma, artha, kama and moksha, commonly known as ‘purusharthas’. Among these four qualities, kama or pleasure is associated with the sexual gratification that influenced the nude sculpture naturalizing sex.

The tantrism also supports the prevalence of nude carvings. There are five qualities in tantrism; Madya – wine, Matsya – fish, mamsa – meat, Mudra, parched grain, and Maithuna – sexual intercourse. This maithuna always seeks for ‘mahasukha’ [extreme pleasure] through the means of copulation. Hindu temples are believed to be awakening people about the extreme pleasure

of life. Kath Albury writes in his article, “Feminist tantra (or sacred sex) emphasizes practices which produce intense pleasures, while de-emphasizing conventional sex/gender roles” (202). With this sense, Uma Maheshwar’s nude carvings give a historical connotation rather than a mere eroticism. The lady copulating with a single or multiple male(s) either mating or fore playing serves as a boon of God that all living beings can rejoice. Sex acts have been naturalized not as a taboo but a great source of pleasure which was practiced by divine figures as well. I mentioned sex acts as being done by divine figure. By this, I mean that the carvings had a political value to energize living beings to be involved in sex without a shame or hesitation. Seeing their master [God] being involved, people will view it as something pleasurable, not sinister.

Erotic symbolism is found in all religions. This is to represent the creator’s method of creation. “Woman is the hearth, her vagina the fuel; man’s approaches are the smoke; the vulva is the flame, penetration the fire- brands, pleasure the sparks. Onto this hearth, the gods pour the seed. From this offering, a living being is born” (Chhandogya Upanishad 5.8.1-2). Erotic carvings of Uma-Maheshwar can be normalized as a natural process of creation. This section of Upanishad also mentions upper lip as vulva and lower lip as phallus. It says, “The symbolism of the sacred syllable AUM is the same as the union of the sexes. As in the union of the sexes indeed, it is a copulation in which each part accomplishes the desire of the other” (Chhandogya Upanishad 1.1.6).

Through these instances, we can say that copulation is not a taboo. It is a God's design to run this universe. The carvings are the God's message carried out by human artisans.

For centuries, nudity has been the ultimate symbol of innocence, austerity, and disengagement from the material world. However, as time went on, this motif slipped into artistic practices through a way of depicting the inherent simplicity and primality in humans. Uma Maheshwar's carvings depict nudity as something pure, tender or a way of acknowledging the beauty of human body. Nudity as an art form can be an appreciation of beauty and the natural bliss that we, as human beings, have a very deep relationship with. Let's see through Viktor Shklovsky's idea of form and content to explore the aesthetics in Uma Maheshwar's tondal carvings. For him, "the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important..." (9). The sexual objects we see in Uma Maheshwar's tondal carvings are not significant to be observed. Their artistic value and aestheticism has much more to do. Though the general public may not know about the dynamics of form and content, but at least the literary scholars can acknowledge its profound value. "After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we

do not see it” because he says “art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways” (Shklovsky 9). This is how, the aesthetics of the object is important rather than the representation of eroticism.

Here, the content [nude carvings] is there, stationary since centuries. But its form [art] must have travelled the world surpassing millions of gazes, thousands of curiosities and hundreds of appreciations. Madeline H. Caviness argues, “form rather than content is iconographic, yet it claimed the pleasure of viewing to be purely aesthetic rather than erotic” (267). With this sense, the nude carvings of struts can be viewed through the aesthetic gaze. The image they represent, the perception they deliver and the world they drive the viewers to all might seem as the world of eroticism but in fact it is the world of art where nothing [no objects] but the art survives.

Fertility and reproduction are the other aesthetic parts all the living beings are destined with. For that sake too, the sexual images can refer to a beautiful process that initiates a life afterwards. It is upon individuals either to charge those images as the obscene visuals or an art form. David Hume says, “Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty” (5). My second question ‘is this one of the most used art forms humans ever invented’ gets its answer here. Of course yes, humans invented different forms to express the beauty of life. Among them, the nude arts can be one of the finest forms to show human potentialities and delicate thoughtfulness.

People are born naked. They will receive a farewell naked. From an aesthetic standpoint, the nudity emphasizes purity and rawness that strips away societal layers to reveal the initial human form in its most unadorned but authentic state. It also reflects a timeless aesthetic principle found in many cultures in which nudity in art represents an idealized form of truth, creation, and life cycles. The sculptures on the struts of Uma Maheshwar temple are not designed to evoke sensuality in a profane sense but to embody the fullness of human expression and existence. The artistic expression through the means of sculpting can be also acknowledged as the artist's magical spells. Though the images of sculpture seem vividly naked, the meaning can be different to individuals. "Sculpture's three-dimensional molding might seem the most faithful vehicle for presenting a sensuous appearance confronting humanity with its own truth" Richard Dien Winfield says "individual arts may be differently able to configure the meanings reflecting distinct world views and the artistic styles that correspond to them" (444).

Similarly, we must also acknowledge how art can redefine our perception of the body and nudity. Art, in all its forms, has the power to defy traditions and pre-imagined ideas about the human body. Uma Maheshwar encourages viewers to reconsider their perception of nudity with its beautiful, graceful, emotional expressive approach. Through which a more expansive view of bodily representations and beauty that defies norms could be embraced.

Viewers of the work are invited to challenge their own prejudices, and in turn a deeper conversation around our shared humanity. “The erotics are more concerned with country folk, drawing on a number of stereotypes: of a rugged, rustic naivety, or of animalistic hypersexuality; of sauce or of raunch – but always as closer to nature” (Bell 83). The nudity expresses the intimacy to the nature or natural form. Jon Ward also writes, “there is a particular link between sex and nature” (145). Art through its various forms, has the capacity to challenge societal norms and preconceived notions about the human figure. This reframing can lead to a broader acceptance of diversity in bodily representations, allowing for a more inclusive understanding of beauty that transcends conventional standards. The nudity emerges as a multifaceted motif that transcends simplistic interpretations of eroticism. Instead, it becomes a celebration of life in all its forms—an exploration of our shared humanity that encourages us to look beyond the physical and engage with the deeper narratives woven into the fabric of artistic expression.

In such a society where sex and sexuality is still a taboo, these nude sculptures of temple invite a lot of questions and curiosities in people’s mind either they are general visitors or a pure devotee. Though the devotees’ concern is solely on praying and worshiping, they also may not know why such sculptures are carved in their most-trusted master’s residence. In the beginning of human civilization, Bataille pinpoints “men” for inventing tools to survive.

And among them was the sexual intercourse. But animals also do that. Humans distinguished themselves from animals by imposing “a restriction, called taboos”(Bataille 30). But, what about taboos in religions? He further adds, “Eroticism is primarily a religious matter” (31). If religions do not see eroticism as a transgression, then there is nothing wrong to see nudity in master’s home. The essence of Bataille’s argument is that the concept of ‘unholy’ is the matter of cultural framing, not the object itself.

In Nepali temples, particularly from the medieval period, the presence of erotic art and nude figures has deeper symbolic meanings, often linked to fertility, the cycle of life, and the balance between earthly and spiritual realms. These depictions are typically part of tantric traditions, where physical expressions like sexuality are viewed as a path to spiritual enlightenment. The carvings may symbolize the union of opposites—male and female, spirit and matter, life and death—rather than a literal encouragement to procreate. If we analyse a Hindu cremation, the dead body is unclothed before it is burnt. It is believed that the cloth is a material possession that prevents the liberation of soul from getting eternity or the reincarnation. That’s why, the nudity has a spiritual significance rather than a transgressive. In this sense, Uma Maheshwar’s nude carvings on struts has a connotative garb.

Hindu people often wear a very small white piece of cloth [dhoti or lagauti] to cover their vital part while worshipping their god. They have set a

rule to take off the shoes and enter into a temple barefoot. These sights are also the evidence that nudity has spiritual value rather than an erotic representation. This is how, my third question ‘does it have any religious and spiritual connections?’ gets its answer. But, there is a slight difference in the theological belief between Hinduism and Christianity on defining nudity. On one hand, as I already said, nakedness is a preparation for the liberation. On the other hand, Christianity sees it as a shame. Revelation 16:15 states, “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.” Here, clothing serves as a metaphor for moral rectitude and righteousness, cautioning believers to keep up their spiritual attire in order to escape the stigma attached to moral and spiritual insolvency. When speaking of personal adversity, Apostle Paul lists his hardships in nude detail. Paul describes these experiences in 2 Corinthians 11:27: “In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” Here, nakedness is a tangible reflection of poverty and actual misery. But yet, John Paul states, “The man [Adam] and his wife [Eve] were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). These contradictions, however, can be correct on their own. When we talk about Uma Maheshwar’s nude carvings, we can go with Hindu version of nakedness that shows a heavenward journey rather than a painful suffering.

If the theology itself defines nakedness as purity, we can see the clear motif behind nudity in Uma Maheshwar’s tundals. The straightforward

interpretation of nude carvings might seem a bit vulgar and ungraceful, but looking through Barthean semiology leads us to a different discourse of interpretation. The theological sense sees the nakedness and vulgarity normal. In Hinduism, most of the Sadhus [sages] of Naga sect remain naked or if not - semi-naked with a loin cloth covering the genitals. And the religiosity has no opposition on their attire and physical appearance. Rather, the religious philosophy, as said before, apprehends that appearance as a holy and natural form. The nudity is seen purely as the detachment from 'maya' [illusion]; the illusion of shame, prestige and material representation.

Looking through Barthean semiology, one could find philosophical and epistemic value in nude carvings of Uma Maheshwar temple. Because they provide a lens through which to examine the interaction of cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic knowledge, these carvings provide an important contribution to the field of epistemology. These sculptures, which represent ideas of transcendence and purity, act as a metaphorical bridge connecting the divine and human realms. As Pratapaditya Pal notes, "Nudity in Hindu and Buddhist art often symbolizes a return to a primordial state, an ideal form that predates cultural contamination" (Pal 143). In this sense, the carvings are epistemic artifacts that communicate deeper spiritual truths through visual form, challenging the Western epistemological association of nudity solely with eroticism.

Additionally, these carvings reflect the Tantric philosophy prevalent in Nepal during the temple's construction. Tantric traditions emphasize the importance of the body as a vehicle for spiritual experience. As David Gordon White explains, “Tantric art often uses erotic imagery not to provoke desire, but to symbolize the unity of opposites—male and female, spirit and matter, life and death” (White 85). This dualistic unity, embodied in the nude figures, reflects an epistemological stance that embraces paradox and contradiction as central to spiritual understanding. By engaging with these motifs, the carvings invite viewers to see beyond the surface and recognize the metaphysical knowledge they encode. In this way, my fourth question ‘does it correlate with some philosophical and epistemic value’ also gets its answer.

Whatsoever said, we can still interpret the nude carvings as the representation of love and desire. The love making or let’s say copulation is often associated with heavenly pleasure along with reproduction. Scholars argue that in Hindu philosophy, sex is not merely physical but deeply tied to the concept of ‘kama’, one of the four ‘purusharthas’ or aims of life. According to Wendy Doniger, “sexuality in Hindu thought is deeply connected with fertility, creation, and the cosmic union of male and female forces” (Doniger 112). This understanding goes beyond the physical act of sex and symbolizes the spiritual and emotional bonding between individuals. Love and desire are seen as integral to human life, offering a pathway not only to pleasure but also to divine

experience, making erotic imagery in religious contexts a representation of sacred union. As Stella Kramrisch notes, “the erotic sculptures represent the union of ‘shakti’ (female energy) and ‘purusha’ (male spirit), embodying creation and the cycle of life” (Kramrisch187). The depiction of nudity in these carvings is symbolic, portraying the divine essence of human sexuality as part of the broader cosmic order. These carvings serve not merely as artistic expression but as sacred representations of the intertwined nature of desire, spirituality, and the divine.

The entry point begins with two giant elephants. Back to them is a set of parallel beams called *tundal* in Nepali. The nude carvings in *tundals* signify differently. As I referenced before, all these carvings have a historical and mythical connotation, artistic and aesthetic connotation, spiritual, theological and material connotation, philosophical and epistemic connotation. These connotations are not merely my fancy imaginations but evidenced with facts. Instead of being solely a form or source of sexual profanity, these carvings reflect the actual pragmatics that correlates with ‘the then’ societies and time. They have significance in today’s time and societies as well.

To the left of the entrance, on the third number, this carving stands still causing some motions on viewers’ mind. It represents two meanings here:

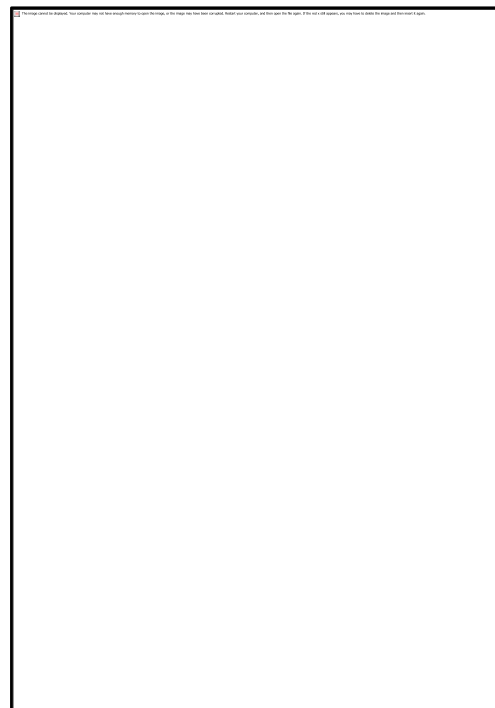
Denotative: The carving on the strut represents two distinct figures: a divine figure on the upper part and a couple (a male and a female) engaging in a sexual act in the lower section. The male and female are involved in a sexual act described as a handjob, a specific form of intimate interaction. The carving is from the medieval period, which provides historical and cultural context for its creation.

Connotative: In Barthean terms, connotation refers to the cultural and societal meanings attached to the carving, moving beyond its literal depiction. The presence of the divine figure and the sexual scene suggests a contrast that invites deeper interpretations. In many medieval carvings, divine figures were used

to signify protection, moral guidance, and the order of

the built environment. According to Barthes, the divine imagery could serve as a 'myth' that naturalizes certain ideologies about divinity and moral hierarchies in the socio-cultural context. The divine figure represents a coded message of sacredness. In many medieval traditions, sexual representations in art were often linked to life, continuity, and cosmic harmony, rather than being viewed as

Figure No. 7 Meaning Making of Hand Job, Source: Field Visit, 2024



profane. In Nepalese art, erotic imagery is sometimes considered a metaphor for creation and union. As Barthes suggests, a sexual scene like this could carry the signified of human desire, but its connotation might be shaped by the cultural norms surrounding sexuality and its place in spiritual or communal life and different ideology because he says that connotation “is a fragment of ideology” (Barthes 89).

This carving depicts a woman engaged in a threesome with two males, showcasing an intimate sexual interaction in a highly explicit manner. The physical positioning of the figures suggests a sense of mutual involvement, with the woman as the central focus. From a connotative perspective, the image could represent different meanings depending on cultural contexts. In modern times, the notion of a threesome might be linked to evolving concepts of sexual freedom, non-monogamous relationships, and the breaking of traditional sexual norms. Contemporary discussions on polyamory and consensual non-monogamy have broadened the understanding of sexual practices, reflecting an increasing openness towards diverse expressions of sexuality. Moris et al. defines monogamy as “the act of being married to one person at a time or being sexually or emotionally committed to one person at a time” (62) in their paper and discovered that “Fifteen percent of the sample reported having engaged in a threesome. Men evidenced more interest in having a threesome than women” (63). This is the modern sense of what the picture demonstrates. This ancient masterpiece can be taken as a prophetic symbol of coming societies. In general

sense, the woman of this carving can represent a pervert woman who is having two males at once defying the social norms of possessing a single partner. But, connotatively it can depict the power of women they needed at that time in order to show the ability to make people or society running after them. The feminists define it as a 'sexual freedom'.

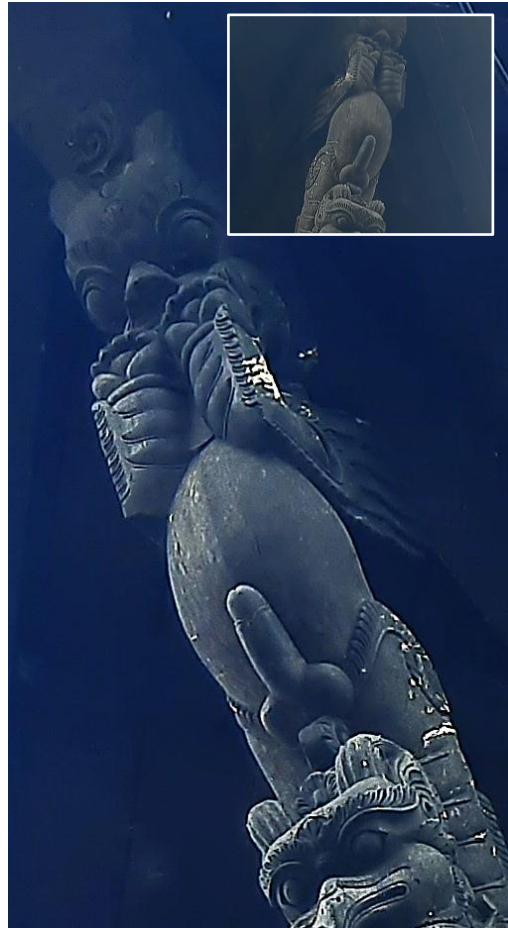
These carving portray two women engaged in a sexual act, their bodies entwined in an intimate embrace. The detailed depiction of their closeness, with a focus on mutual affection and desire, indicates an understanding of female homoeroticism in the time period the artwork originates from. The tenderness captured in their physical interaction can symbolize a broader notion of emotional and sexual bonding between women, beyond the conventional roles assigned to them in patriarchal societies. In many traditional art forms, such depictions were not uncommon, as they reflected a wider exploration of human relationships and desires. From a connotative perspective, this image could be linked to modern discussions on female sexuality and the evolving recognition of LGBTQ+ relationships. In contemporary discourse, female same-sex relationships are



Figure No. 8 Homosexual Women

Source: Field Visit, 2024

celebrated as part of a broader recognition of diverse sexual orientations. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, such depictions challenge heteronormative structures by highlighting the fluidity of desire and the socially constructed nature of gender roles (Butler 136). The carving can be interpreted as an early representation of same-sex relationships, reflecting the idea that eroticism and intimacy between women have always been part of human sexuality, even if suppressed or marginalized in historical narratives.



The animal in nude image also upholds something to express. Up to now, I explained what do the nude pictures of human beings portray. They stood for different signification. And here we have the animal nudity in the following figure:

The exaggerated portrayal of the animals' sexual organs suggests a connection to the raw, untamed aspects of life and reproduction. In many early societies, animals with pronounced sexual features were seen as symbols of vitality, strength, and the cycle of life. This carving could represent the natural order,

where sexuality plays a fundamental role in survival and continuity, tying human and animal existence to the broader forces of creation and procreation.

From a modern perspective, this image can be analyzed through psychoanalytic and philosophical lenses. Freud's theory of the unconscious, for example, interprets sexual symbols—such as erect penises—as manifestations of repressed desires and primal instincts (Freud 58).

The animals in the carving can reflect the unres Figure No.9 Exaggerated Animal sexuality, Source: Field Visit, 2024 sexuality that persist beneath the surface of human consciousness. Additionally, the erection of animals could be linked to the Nietzschean idea of the “will to power,” where sexual desire is not just for reproduction but also for asserting dominance and control over life itself (Nietzsche 143). This carving connects ancient ideas of fertility and strength with modern notions of the subconscious and the existential drive to assert one's power through sexuality.

While animals also possess some sorts of sexual freedom, it does not make a bigger sense as the sexual activities of human make. Despite of measurable significance, humans crafted the wood carvings with animal nudity. And this has at least some business as we say ‘art for an art sake’. Bataille says,

It appeals to the infinitely complex inner mobility which belongs to man alone. The animal itself does have a subjective life but this life seems to be conferred upon it like an inert object, once and for all. Human eroticism differs from animal sexuality precisely in this, that it calls inner life into play... Animal sexuality does make for disequilibrium and this

disequilibrium is a threat to life, but the animal does not know that.

Nothing resembling a question takes shapes within it. (29)

The animal nudity, although has no bigger matter, has become the most-preferred subject in art and aesthetics. The similar temples of Kathmandu even portray the animals having an intercourse with humans or we can see humans making love with animals.

The portrayal of animals as equally nude as people is one powerful example. According to structuralist theory, this supports Lévi-Strauss's claim that "animals are good to think with" (89), which states that they are cognitive aids for establishing human identity. The depiction of naked animals next to people implies a symbolic blending of society and nature, making it harder to distinguish between social order and instinct. These artworks problematize the traditional dichotomy between civilization and primordial urges by equating animalistic and human sexiness, challenging the idea that sexuality is solely a cultural construct and instead portraying it as a natural force.

The representation of ladies playing threesomes or foursomes is another notable pattern. According to Lévi-Strauss, "the relationships between elements



lie at the heart of structure" (137). Here, the diversity of female bodies subverts the traditional man-woman dichotomy, resulting in a relational dynamic that goes beyond heteronormative pairings. By showing a different model in which fluidity and plurality undermine monolithic, restricted narratives of desire, such imagery may help to dismantle inflexible cultural systems surrounding female sexuality. The idea of abundance in holy depictions is further reinforced by the

inclusion of numerous women in sexual interactions, which also alludes to the mythological role of excess and reproduction.

Finally, the portrayal of masturbation provides an additional perspective that makes structuralist analysis pertinent. In contrast to relationship eroticism, self-pleasure in mythological or artistic imagery frequently denotes independence, self-reliance, and the ability to transcend social norms. "Meaning is not inherent in an object but in the differences and oppositions it constructs," according to

Levi-Strauss (245). Individualism against collective experience can therefore be

Figure No.10Threesome +
Materbation, Source: Field visit,
2024

dichotomy between lonely and social pleasure

within the struts. The picture of masturbation further demonstrates how cultural expressions attempt to reconcile ingrained inconsistencies by highlighting the paradox of self-satisfaction within a building intended for collective worship, in addition to challenging restricted sexual standards.

In conclusion, it can be said that the core motif of nudity in Nepali sculpture is multifaceted. Simply, it represents some erotic glimpses that stimulate the curiosity of the visitors to question ‘why nude in a holy place?’ After a rigorous study, I found that the nudity has a web of signification. The denotative signification can stand as a mere erotic form of art that can cause some goosebumps and pulses on spectators while the connotative garb transcends beyond the physical representation. Applying Barthean semiology, it is found that the historical connotation of nude sculptures on the struts of Uma Maheshwar Temple reflect normalization of the natural process of procreation and reproduction. These carvings, influenced by ancient practices such as tantrism and supported by sacred texts, convey cultural, religious, and philosophical messages about the naturalization of sexual pleasure and the continuation of life that had been a divine practice in the history. Rather than being interpreted as taboo, they are normalized as expressions that divine figures allowed the humans. Ranging from *purusharthas* to *mahasukha*, the sexual portrayals convey that such activities are natural and essential since the time of god. Eroticism, in this context, becomes a celebration of the cycle of life and creation, aligning with the Hindu understanding of *kama* (pleasure), one of the four goals of human life (*purusharthas*), which is not considered sinful but a natural and divine aspect of existence. Similarly, if we look at those arts through the aesthetic lens, we see a perfect combination of artisan’s prophetic concept of modern societies. By disrupting the automaticity of perception, the nude

sculptures extend the experience of viewing, urging us to appreciate their artistic depth rather than their literal representation of sexuality. Birth is beautiful, the one after birth is also beautiful, then why do not we appreciate the process of birth.

Those carvings also suggest some religious and spiritual connotations. The nudity symbolizes a detachment from worldly possessions and illusions (*maya*), positioning them as spiritually pure and closer to divine truth. The sages of the Naga sect, who often remain nude or semi-nude, embody this philosophy of disengagement from the material world, and their nudity is revered as a holy state, representing a profound connection to the divine rather than shame or vulgarity. Philosophically, the male-female union has a signification of a fine cart running perfectly when both are engaged. So, the nudity depicted in those carvings represents not just the physical form but the integration of opposing forces that drive the universe. Similarly, by portraying the sexual acts, the carvings point toward a sacred union, suggesting that love and desire are not only fundamental to human relationships but are also pathways to divine experience. In a nutshell, we have no clue to point the nude carvings as a taboo. It has been historically, philosophically, spiritually proven that the sexual acts are normal. The representation of such acts through different art forms, for example wood carving, can be seen with different perspectives and purposes, not merely the eroticism.

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