

Visual representations of aphrodisiacs in India from the 20th to the 10th century CE

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Kenneth Zysk has examined in detail what the Sanskrit medical treatises of Caraka and Suśruta, and the commentaries thereon, have to say about aphrodisiacs that promote male sexual potency.¹ He begins by pointing out that virility and potency are of universal concern, since ‘they lie at the very basis of the survival of the species’, and he also provides modern context for his historical investigations by mentioning that ‘the promotion and sale of aphrodisiacs are highly visible in India’: ‘Nearly every Indian newspaper routinely carries advertisements about wonder drugs that promise male potency and assure male offspring’. Apropos of the universality of aphrodisiacs, Zysk recalls the 1959 hit song of The Coasters, ‘Love Potion No. 9’: (‘smelled like turpentine and looked like Indian ink’) that made the man who took it kiss ‘everything in sight’, even ‘a cop down on Thirty-Fourth and Vine’, who then broke the ‘little bottle of Love Potion No.9’ and stopped the rot.²

In this paper, I restrict the large field of aphrodisiacs to a very small area, namely the visual representation of aphrodisiacs, where in fact there is only one well-known candidate for discussion. I refer to the Khajuraho orgy scene on the plinth of the Lakshmana temple with at its centre the cooking of an aphrodisiac substance. Apropos the broken bottle of Love potion No. 9, I shall consider the possibility that the Lakshmana orgy substance was a liquid that was put in water bottles. To be more fully understood it is desirable that the Khajuraho sculpture be presented in a wider context, and to that end, I preface its discussion by working back in time from the 1950s, when photographs of that

1. Zysk 2005. I follow Zysk in restricting aphrodisiacs almost entirely to products that increase male potency (*vājīkaraṇa*). My first example, which parallels his playful instance of Love Potion No. 9, is an instance of an aphrodisiac that works on men and women equally by removing inhibitions. We may note in passing that *kāmasāstra*, in contradistinction to medical texts, has little to say about *vājīkaraṇa*; for details from main texts, see Schmidt 1922³, 603-16.

2. Zysk 2005, 101.

sculpture were first published, working back to the tenth century through other visual representations of aphrodisiacs, whether real or implicit.

My material, though limited, is diverse, reflecting the diversity of its subject. Of the seven images discussed, two do not directly represent aphrodisiacs (fn. 9 and Fig. 5b), but are clearly intended to have an aphrodisiac effect, and perhaps imply that the participants have taken aphrodisiacs. Fig. 2 alone shows the condition of someone in need of an aphrodisiac. Figs. 4 and 8 show the actual cooking process. Figs. 2 and 5 show a producer-salesman in action; Fig. 9 conceivably so, but unproven.

Zysk's reference to Love Potion No. 9 points to the special significance of the late 1950s in this area. At that time the sexual revolution of the west took special interest in the *Kāmasūtra* (first mass-market publication of English translation 1961), and the sculpture of Khajuraho (1950s and -60s); ancient and medieval India was admired for a decade or so as a shining example of sexuality as it should be.

The cover of Alex Comfort's 1961 novel *Come Out to Play* (Fig. 1) whereon two South Indian style statues cavort, the man wearing a bowler hat, and the woman a stylish contemporary hat, refers to the imagined action in England of a fictional aphrodisiac – though a fragrant perfume, rather than a drink smelling of turpentine like No. 9 – that removed all inhibitions (in a context of *kāmasāstra* terminology given in untranslated Sanskrit). The male figure has four arms, and holds a neatly furled umbrella to his lips as Kṛṣṇa would his flute.

It was in this period, that the Khajuraho frieze (see below, Fig 8) was first published. I believe that the very first publication was in Mulk Raj Anand's *Kāma Kalā*, in 1958, pl. XXXI,³ though the frieze is not shown completely, and the cooks are denied their centrality by being cut off to the right; little of the third cook can be seen. Although this frieze soon found a place in almost every illustrated book on Khajuraho, it has received almost no detailed discussion, though the same year, 1958, Herman Goetz referred to it in vague terms:

the Indian Sakta-Tantric adepts had, like their Taoist colleagues in China, certain rather unsavoury practices which came down to a sort of primitive hormone treatment and which, as far as informations are available, seem to have been quite effective. If I rightly interpret certain subsidiary scenes to the minor erotic friezes at Khajuraho, they describe also the preparation of that hormone elixir.⁴

Goetz belonged to an earlier generation, subject to some extent to the sexual anxiety that Comfort and Mulkh Raj Anand claimed could be removed. To that

3. It is not among the photographs in the 1957 issue of *Marg*, *Homage to Khajuraho*.

4. Goetz 1974 (1958), 118.

earlier period my next two examples, newspaper advertisements, belong. In India, in the early decades of the last century, both the colonial power and growing nationalism opposed advertisements for aphrodisiacs, the revenue from which was, however, vital for the newspapers' financial health. Douglas Haynes in discussing the prominence of aphrodisiacs in Indian newspaper advertising notes that 'until the 1930s, many papers had considerable difficulty in attracting businesses to run other kinds of ads and had to rely on sellers of medicines, especially tonics, for a significant portion of their revenues'.⁵ He claims that in the 1940s such advertisements came to stress the critical importance of a husband's ability to provide his wife with sexual pleasure; and show the unhappiness of both partners when the man fails to perform, and their joint happiness when he does succeed. Earlier advertisements are more male-centred.

A feeble young man features in the most interesting and complex advertisement that Haynes discusses (Fig. 2). This advertisement for a multiple product called *Jadibuti Manliness Set* appeared in *Mumbai Samachar*, 6th Jan. 1928. It shows a sage seated on a mountain peak, a sacrificial fire beside him. Before him stands a knock-kneed young man in suppliant posture, around whom is wrapped a cobra. The cobra's coils are labelled in English, 'masterbation (*sic*), spermatorrhea, premature ejaculation and nocturnal emission'. Coming out as five tongues from the snake's mouth are the phrases 'no health, no happiness', 'shyful disgrace', 'anxiety', 'no enjoyment', 'dead life', and 'dishonour of family'. Poking into the middle of all these labelled tongues, the sage holds up in his left hand a massive syringe, its cylinder bearing the name Jaribooti Mardai Set. The arm that holds the syringe is labelled 'sharp spear', but the object is clearly a syringe. In my view this raised object signifies the erect penis of the man who takes this aphrodisiac package, and in addition the powerful force with which the reinvigorated semen will shoot forth in large quantity. The sage's right hand points downwards to the labelled box in which the product – a powder, an oil, and a pill – will arrive; the accompanying text of the advertisement assures the buyer that the postal package will contain no indication of the contents. One of three angels carries at the top of the picture the guarantee: 'Guaranteed extirpation of impotence'; the angels have moustaches, demonstrating their own special virility.

In the body of the advertisement, written in Gujarati, S. H. Hussain, the producer of the aphrodisiac tells how, being unfit for marriage, he travelled to Kashmir and found the *mahātma* who gave him the herbs to treat his problem. Haynes notes that the advertisement, which claims to be a 'service for the motherland', was drawing upon 'a longstanding logic deployed through much of the nineteenth century that linked physical capacities diminished through masturbation to weakness of the nation'.⁶

5. Haynes 2012, 790.

6. Haynes 2012, 800-2.

Charu Gupta shows how nationalist *brahmacārya* – male sexual restraint to strengthen the nation – coincided with the widespread appearance of advertisements for aphrodisiacs in Indian newspapers. She includes in her discussion an advertisement from the Allahabad *Leader* in 1911 (Fig. 3): a powerful Hindu young man, bare-chested, clad only in a dhoti, walking over a passive lion and carrying on his broad shoulders an elephant; his right hand grasps its trunk, his left its rear-quarters. Gupta notes that ‘the lion, widely recognised as a symbol of British masculinity, was an icon frequently used in aphrodisiac advertisements at this time, showing the animal’s subjugation by the virile Indian male’.⁷ Moreover, as Zysk shows, the elephant was renowned for his abundant semen.⁸

My next image concerns not the man in the street, but a king, and although only a few decades earlier than the two advertisements considered above, it belongs to a very different world. A court painting from Kotah, in Rajasthan, it was almost certainly not meant to be seen outside the private quarters of the Maharaja. It is known as *The Great Orgy of Maharao Shatru Sal II*. This raja ruled in Kotah from 1866 to 1889. The painting is now in the Sackler Museum at Harvard; I am not able to reproduce it here.⁹ There is no direct representation of aphrodisiacs, although it is well known that kings even in their physical prime often used aphrodisiacs to enable them to service their harems. Another solution to the problem of numerous wives was to pleasure several wives at the same time with hands and even feet, as can be seen in some court paintings as well as, most notably, in the most publicised erotic sculpture at Khajuraho.¹⁰ Such manipulation features in the image, but that is not an aspect of the painting that makes it relevant here. The royal intercourse is set, even lost, amid a whole panorama of sexual copulation. No aphrodisiac usage is shown, but there can be no doubt that the painting was intended to have an aphrodisiac effect. Extravagant, even overwhelming, in design and intention, it is a rare extant example of what quite probably was a favourite *topos* in court circles, namely universal copulation seen as centred in the monarch with his women.

In the top half, on a green plain rising to a mountain, a variety of animals copulate in pairs. Below on a white flat level is an even greater variety of sexual coupling and sexual contact. Slightly to left of centre, the great king lies, satisfying no less than five women at once, four of them with his hands and feet. Around them, male animals, a bull, a horse, a ram, a monkey, copulate with

7. Gupta 2002, 79.

8. See Zysk 2005 and 2009, with references to *Caraka Saṃhitā*.

9. Mid-19th century water colour painting, *The Great Orgy of Maharao Shatru Sal II* (c. 1866–1889 in Kotah, Rajasthan), Sackler Museum, Harvard University (formerly in S. C. Welsh collection). Published Finch 1997, 3.

10. The bottom erotic panel on the south *antarāla* wall of the Kandariya temple, where a rather majestic male stands on his head while copulating with a woman seated above him and pleasuring with his hands the two women who keep the pair upright.

other women. Lastly, at the lower left and right edges of the foreground, three large ascetics, grey white in colour no doubt because of the excessive semen that have stored within themselves, and with gigantic erections, are fondled by women. There can surely be no doubt that the painting was intended to have an aphrodisiac effect on its royal owner, to spur him on. The painting is certainly a representation of the universality of sexual love, where even asceticism denotes sexual power in a universe that is overwhelmingly sexual.

I turn now to explicit recipes for aphrodisiac foods, and a representation of the cooking of such food (Fig. 4).

The *Nīmatnāma*, *The Book of Delights*, is a beautiful illustrated manuscript cookery book attributed to the 15th century Sultan of Mandu, Ghiyath Shahi, and which subsequently belonged to Akbar and then Tipu Sultan. The world of common man is again far behind us here. The many illustrations show the sultan out of doors supervising his numerous female cooks, and the page shown here (folio 133b, Fig. 4) is formally like all the other pages of the book. Only from the text on the page do we know that there is an aphrodisiac in the cooking pots. The accompanying recipe, which begins on the preceding folio, is as follows:

Cook meat of every kind and hens' eggs and pigeons and birds of every kind and onions and fat young pigeons. Cut them into tiny pieces and fry them in duck fat, add salt and roughly minced white chickpeas. Make it produce enough liquid to cook it thoroughly, then seal the lid of the cooking pot and cook for long enough to cook the pigeon and chickpeas. Then add one *dīram* [approximately 3 grams] [folio 133b now starts] of cassia and half a *dīram* of galingale (*khūlanjān*) and add the acid juice of citron (*karnā*). Eating this food makes the semen flow, increases strength and increases sexual desire making it much stronger.¹¹

There are many other recipes in the book for which similar results are claimed. Such recipes are frequent in many texts; it is the combination of text and picture that make this page worthy of note.

I turn now to temple sculpture, and firstly to a remarkable representation of the velocity of ejaculation of semen. There is no direct reference to aphrodisiac, but the exaggerated power that is portrayed is suggestive of aphrodisiacs. The complex imagery is best introduced by referring first to an image in Anand Patwardhan's 1995 documentary film, *Father, Son and Holy War*, a film which, as Charu Gupta says, connects 'male sexuality, patriarchy, and the militant politics of Hindutva' (Fig. 5). Gupta singles out the point in the film when 'an aph-

11. Titled 2005, 55.

rodisiac seller's sales pitch rhapsodising semen "shooting like an arrow from a bow" is juxtaposed with an iconic arrow glistening in the night sky at a Shiv Sena rally.¹² From here I jump to the twelfth century, to the Kalleshvara temple at Bagali in Karnataka. On this Chalukya temple are instances of erotic sculpture in a style that Desai characterises as 'nearer folk than classical'; and which she sums up as 'crude and gross'.¹³ Desai's plate 104, labelled 'Sexual scenes on the wall below the *sikhara*, Bagali', includes several groups of figures, one of which is the most remarkable of any in her book, or of any that I have seen, for its originality, complexity, and humour.

The scene in question has two main elements, a man with a very long horizontal penis directed towards a seated woman who exposes herself (Fig. 6). The man faces the woman; she faces outwards, her body and exposed vulva directed at right angles to the man, but her face is turned towards the man, and there is no doubt that it is at her *yoni* that he is aiming. In erotic temple sculpture, it is not at all unusual for a man to direct his erect penis towards a woman, nor for a woman to sit exposing herself. Two features make it altogether remarkable. One is the extreme distance between the two principals; the other is the other people involved in this event. There is indeed what can only be a band of enthusiasts to celebrate the extreme projection of the seed, and a naked woman dancing beside the target woman holds a kind of flag, reminiscent of a caddy holding up the flag above the hole for a distant golfer making a long shot. The pole she holds, however, has at its top what seems to be a set of strings and two egg-shaped balls, possibly representing testicles. Beneath the man's penis are four small men, diminishing in size so as not to interrupt his organ's field of fire. The largest holds a drum, the middle two hold cymbals, and the smallest a trumpet. All of them are bent at the knees, perhaps again simply to lower them and keep them from getting the way. But the principal man's knees are also bent. Does the sexual effort require this pose, or are they all symbolically marching forward? However, anticlimatically, the seed emitted immediately curves downward over the second largest small figure. Is there then a planned contradiction between intention and result?

At all events, we may finally note that the principal man seems to hold up or restrain his erect penis with an elephant goad, the curved spike of which reaches down to the glans. As distinct from the convolutions of the phallic monstrosities that are to be found elsewhere on the same temple, this sculpture seems to make a direct statement parallel with the arrow-like semen claim of the aphrodisiac seller in Patwardhan's film, and with the large syringe held by the sage in Hussain's Jaribhooti advertisement discussed above. The elephant goad relates to the elephant as pre-eminent source of semen, as noted above; and also as controlling and directing the elephantine power of the penis. As

12. Gupta 2002, 82.

13. Desai 1985, 68.

with the painting from Kota, there is no reference to aphrodisiacs here, but in the case of the temple a triumphant and grinning resolution of male fears, with the implication that worship at this temple solves your problems.

My final example brings us to Khajuraho, to well known sculpture, and also to cooking; to the clearest representation possible of the preparation of an aphrodisiac, since the production team are surrounded by the effects of their labours, in the frieze at the eastern corner of the south side of the plinth of the Lakshmana temple (Fig. 7 for overview; Fig. 8 for the cooks). Goetz, cited above, refers to ‘certain subsidiary scenes to the minor erotic friezes at Khajuraho’, but I have been unable to find any other scenes than this at Khajuraho or elsewhere – this, and this alone, is the scene Goetz is referring to. Desai quotes Goetz, but adds nothing herself in the discussion of this frieze. Indeed she refers to ‘three persons pounding something in a special type of vessel’,¹⁴ when in fact two are naked men pounding in a large pestle, or churning in a churn, and a third man is stirring a pot that might be cooking on a fire. All three are men. The two standing pounding have had their heads broken off, but are men, for their penises are prominent above the bowl of the pestle/churn.

Tripathi in 1960 pointed out the remarkable fact that the naked men in erotic and other poses on the Lakshmana and other Hindu temples are Digambara ascetics, *kṣapaṇakas*, since they carry peacock feather brooms (*picchikās*), just as they do on the Jain Parshvanatha temple.¹⁵ The man sitting stirring the pot or cauldron is clearly a naked Jain monk, like the older figure on the bed to his left who seems to be in charge of the whole orgy, without ornaments, and shaven head with slight growth of hair. The prominence of the penises of the two men pounding is not surprising given that they are in the very heart of the orgy, which Desai calls ‘One of the most frantic orgiastic scenes in Indian art’,¹⁶ but the penises are in some danger from the action of the pestles. Could it be that the penises are an essential part of the process, providing semen as part of the ingredients? As is well known, consumption of mixed male and female sexual fluids is a part of Kaula ritual. Indeed, there is, Tucci suggested, a specific vessel associated with this ritual, namely ‘a kind of three-faced stand with a rectangular empty cavity on top, each face of the stand a sitting male personage, one of whom is masturbating’.¹⁷ It should also be noted that animal semen does feature in some Indian aphrodisiac preparations.¹⁸ However, there is nothing on

14. Desai 1985, 49.

15. It should be noted that Hegewald 2006 has shown that the Parshvanatha temple was originally a Hindu temple, later converted to Jainism, and the *kṣapaṇakas* Tripathi refers to are part of the reconversion. However this does not affect his argument. Desai almost entirely neglects to follow up Tripathi’s discovery; Rabe 1996 does briefly mention it.

16. Desai 1985, 49.

17. Tucci 1968, 289.

18. E.g. the semen of buffaloes, bulls, and rams (*Suśruta Saṃhitā*, *Cikitsāsthāna* 27ab); and see Zysk 2005, 12 and fn. for other animals.

this frieze to directly indicate that masturbation is involved in the preparation of the substance in the pot and pestle/churn (though masturbation features on the Lakshmana temple in other scenes as part of the erotic activity). And we have to do with ostensibly Jain monks, not Kaulas.

It is certainly more likely that an aphrodisiac is being prepared by the cooks than that the scene pertains to a Kaula-type of ritual substance. What the ingredients are, I cannot say. There is one mention of a churning stick in the *Nīmatnāma*, though no illustration of its use. ‘Cooked rice gives strength and makes semen flow. Boil bananas or jackfruit (...) or honey (...) as well as saffron, camphor and musk, in water and beat it with a churning stick (...) and cook (...) [rice] in the liquid’.¹⁹ But the possibilities for the vessels and processes shown in Fig. 7 are unlimited.

Apropos Love Potion No. 9, we might note that in the case of *kṣapaṇakas* engaging in sex acts on the Lakshmana and the Vishvanatha temples, a water-vessel hanging in a net from their shoulder is emphatically present – well sculpted and close to their genitals. On the orgy frieze, there is only one instance among the several monks, but a particularly significant one. With his *picchikā* broom in his left hand held over his head, with his right hand he lifts up dramatically, triumphantly even, a particularly large flask (Fig. 9). I have not been able to find instances anywhere else of such hanging flasks. Could it be that these containers hold an aphrodisiac liquid? In the absence of any other evidence, the answer must be that this is unlikely. At all events, a complete account of the representation of *kṣapaṇakas* at Khajuraho is much to be desired.

The material discussed in this paper is diverse, but at the same time closely interconnected. At Khajuraho the cooks are a familiar certainty amid the wild tumult of the orgy, except that the cooks are monks not women, and their food or drink not ordinary. The uplifted flask almost suggests an advertisement. Tripathi would see the *kṣapaṇaka* scenes as ‘stone posters’ to arouse hatred of ‘morbid behaviour’, but an alternative view would take them as just a variation of the pervasive eroticism of Khajuraho, transgressive but complementary. At Bagali and Kota, reality is altogether transcended; the quality of imagination in the artwork is of a higher order, but the aphrodisiac element is imaginary or symbolic. The miserable young man in Hussain’s advertisement is the one example of a person shown needing an aphrodisiac, and he is promised that the aphrodisiac will be sent in concealing packaging. This is the closest we come to the everyday world. In sum, each of the examples throws light on all the others, and enhances our understanding of the place of aphrodisiacs in a wide range of Indian culture.

19. Titley 2005, 70.

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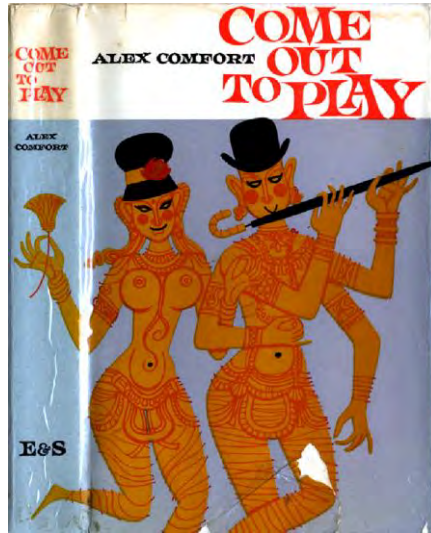


Fig. 1. Cover of Alex Comfort's 1961 novel, *Come Out to Play*, referring to orgiastic results of an aphrodisiac perfume.

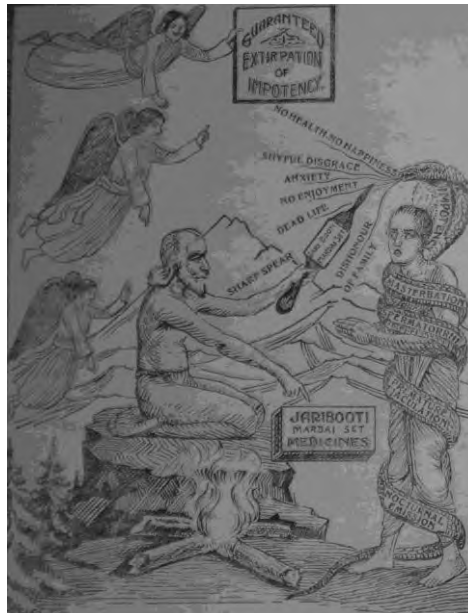


Fig. 2. Aphrodisiac advertisement in *Mumbai Samachar*, 6th Jan. 1928, showing an ascetic providing cure for a sexually weak youth.



Fig. 3. Aphrodisiac advertisement in *Allahabad Leader*, 8th Jan. 1911, showing sexually strong man (from Gupta 2002, 76).



Fig. 4. Illustration from *Nīmatnāma*, 15th century Cookery Book. Sultan of Mandu watches preparation of aphrodisiac food (British Library IO Isl 149, f. 133b).



Fig. 5. Stills from *Father, Son and Holy War*, dir. Anand Patwardhan 1995; Part 2: Hero Pharmacy; from above, a, b, c (courtesy Anand Patwardhan).



Fig. 6. Relief sculpture from south wall of *śikhara*, Kalleshvara temple (12th century), Bagali, Davangere District, Karnataka (photo D. Smith).



Fig. 7. Overview of orgy frieze on southeast end of south side of plinth of Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho (10th century) (photo D. Smith).



Fig. 8. Detail of Fig. 7: three naked Jain monks cooking in the centre of the orgy frieze (photo D. Smith).



Fig. 9. Detail of Fig. 7: naked Jain monk lifting up an oversized water-vessel in a containing net (photo D. Smith).

