

CHAPTER 6. SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY: THE ROLE OF EROTIC TEMPLES, SEXUAL ENERGY AND SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The provocative subject of sex in society is riddled with taboos, bigotries and short-sighted dogmas across cultures for centuries. Most world religions continue to augment this prevailing psycho-social minefield as they tend to restrict sexual countenance out of value-based spiritual splitting of moral versus immoral, and virtue versus sin scenarios (Endsjo, 2012). Therefore, many religious practitioners suppress their sexual desires out of the obtruded religious restraints stuck on shame, guilt and fear. Although the energy rooted in sex is virtuously natural, it often slips into the shadow-self as labelled by the legendary psychiatrist, Carl Jung long ago, which in turn manifests to mental disorders (Casement, 2012). Besides, experts are of the opinion that when sexuality faces confusion, the conscious awareness detaches itself from the core sentiment of sex (Malkemus and Smith, 2021).

Some even metaphorically consider sexual energy comparable to the metaphysical nuclear energy (Ferlic, n.d.). When the intense sex vigour is not liberated naturally, it may trigger aggression and auto-aggression leading to internal mental conflicts reflected through psychiatric disorders in individuals, and external conflicts expressed in society at large through diverse social conflicts including wars. In fact, quality of life is expressed through sex and for that reason the WHO has stated that sexual health is crucial for the well-being of people, communities and countries (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#>).

Nonetheless, sexual dysfunctions are widespread worldwide and psychogenic sexual disorders are reported to increase anxiety, depression and suicidal attitudes (Rajkumar, 2020). But, is there any spiritual solution to resolve this psychiatric quandary? Several papers have been published on the mental health benefits of spirituality as a whole (Hefti, 2011). But, little is known about India's erotic Hindu temples and deities, and their connection to sexual energy resolving psycho-emotional malaises (Halliburton, 2003). So, this chapter tries to unravel the impending queries on sexuality and spirituality. Why all Hindu temples display some stone cravings of erotic sculptures? Are sexual, spiritual, psychological and philosophical implications allied to erotic deities? Do these erotic deities reveal that the subtler aspect of ancient India's spiritual anthology on how to transform sexual energy for divine growth through temples? An insight into sex temples and erotic deities may shed some light to untangle their connection to sexuality, sexual energy and spirituality.

6.2. HINDU RELIGIOUS PORTRAYAL OF SEXUAL ENERGY

India is a land of temples as it continues to display over two million Hindu temples across its vast landscape. A survey conducted in 1961 showed 10,542 Hindu temples across the south Indian state of Tamilnadu alone and many were aged over millennia (Stein, 1977). During my field trips to Tamil Nadu state of southern India, I visited numerous ancient Hindu temples and was thrilled to observe the amazing stone carvings showing the awesome elegance of erotic art of women and couples (Figure 1). Whether it's the classical music, erogenous dance, romantic art or intellectual discourse on life values, all at the outset began in ancient temples that once served as major community congregation campuses. They were built primarily by influential local kings and landlords as they believed in the doctrines of Hinduism (Michell, 1988).

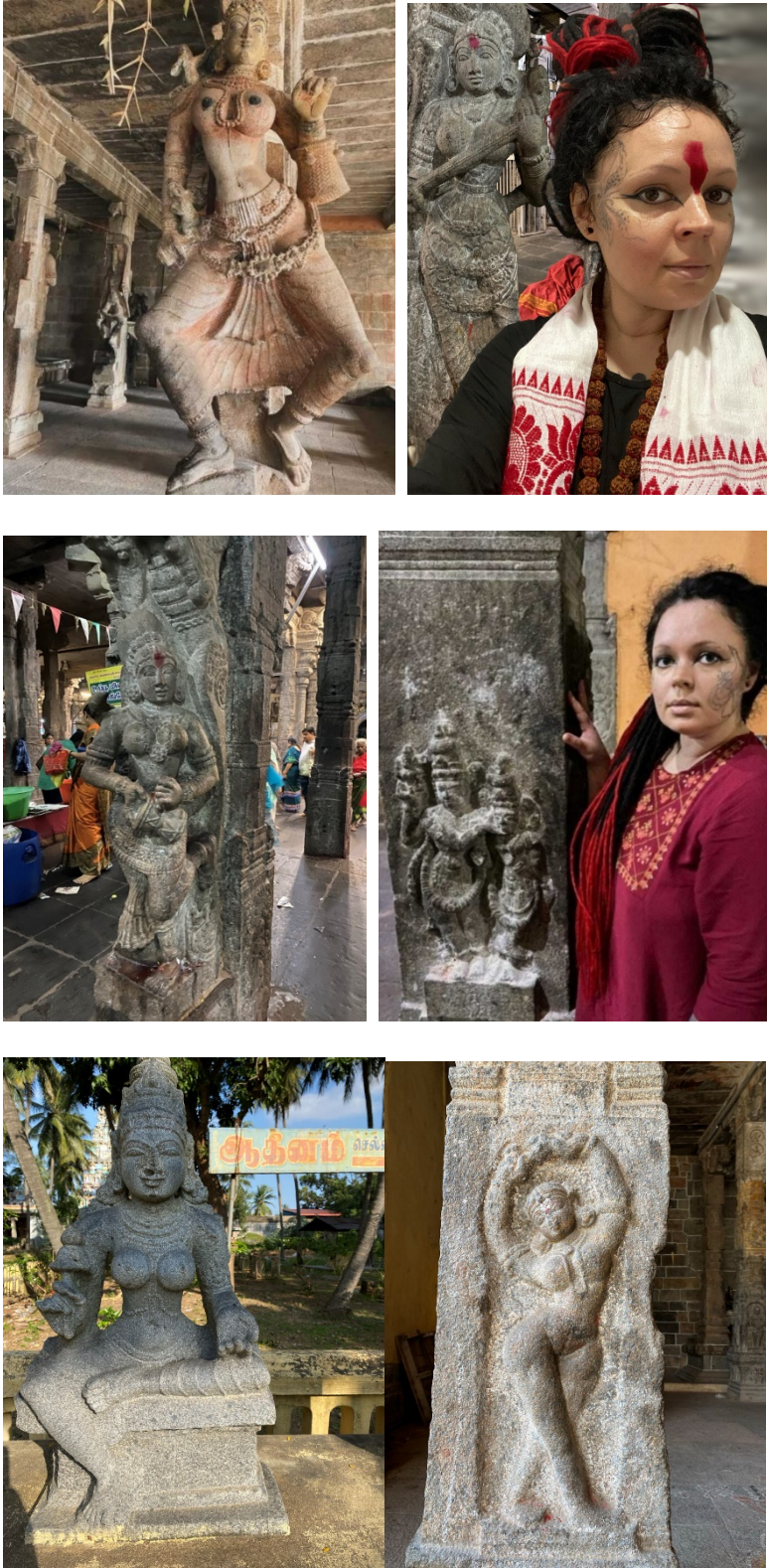


Figure 1. Several ancient Hindu temples that I visited in Tamil Nadu displayed amazing stone carvings on the elegance of erotic art of women and couples (Photo by Anastasia Mikheeva).

The ideology of sexuality in Hinduism has been embedded on the contemplative teachings by revered rishis and sages passed on from ancient treatises. Hence, sex has become a part of public awareness in Hinduism traditionally. Be it the prevailing primeval nude paintings of Ajanta and Ellora caves or the erotically outrageous stone-carved sculptures of Khajuraho temple complex, they all have a propensity for depicting sexual acts profoundly while portraying proofs of tantra sastra lifestyle that are indeed advantageous for mental health (Fields, 2001). The tantric sex is considered as the highest form of yogic meditation to connect the body and mind with the eternal spirit by moving the sexual energy towards the path of enlightenment (Fields, 2001). When the spiritually-heightened couples engross in erotic acts to generate sheer and intense sexual energy, it can excel into the abyss of meditation with unlimited potential to amplify absolute unconditional love with divine surrender which ultimately transcends in eternal bliss.

The world's first sex treatise, Kama Sutra apparently narrates all about the hard-core physical longings of sexual relations casually. But, experts believe that it deeply promotes a subtler sense of mental health by prescribing approaches on how to harness the advanced cognitive faculties to regulate the raw instinctual sex vigour to access instant gratification initially with a more persistent state of mental well-being ultimately (Dasgupta and Datta, 2024). The sex energy progresses through the matching of the two extremes in experience, corporeal pleasure and eternal bliss.

Archeological findings additionally exemplify how ancient civilizations, namely Mayan, Harappa, Greek, and Egyptian cultures worshipped deities allied to sexuality, sex and fertility long ago (Neto et al., 2019). Even now, human sex organs are still revered across cultures. In

Bhutan for example, a famous fertility temple located at the Chimi Lhakhang monastery where male genitals carved in timber are worshiped by thousands of devotees (Iyer, 2022). Moreover, the phallic symbols are painted widely in houses, shops and public places across Bhutan. Similarly, China has a history of worshiping fertility deities in the form of genitals (de la Cruz et al., 2007). In India, Hindu temples continue to serve as straightforward storehouses of sexual wisdom. The Hindu trinity is symbolized by the creator Brahma, protector Vishnu and destroyer Shiva; they form the crux of religiosity (Agoramoorthy, 2014). Shiva being the Supreme Lord, there are more Shiva temples, and they all display various varieties of Shiva Lingam exemplifying the male and female genitalia. Lingam in effect symbolizes the erotic and endless sexual union of consciousness or *Purusha* in Sanskrit with nature or *Prakriti*, which is revealed as feminine creative energy (Banerji, 2008).

6.3. EROTIC TEMPLES

I have visited numerous ancient Hindu temples in India over the last decade; I always ended up in seeing some erotic sculptures in all temples. They are certainly spiritual, artistic, emotional and philosophical in characteristics and they appear everywhere, be it the outer temple walls, gateways, walkways, and deep inside closer to divine deities (Rabe, 2000; Danielou, 2001). A paper published in early 1970s cataloged eighteen popular erotic Hindu temples that start with the splendid sex temple in Khajuraho, located in central India (Krishan, 1972). It has preserved stunning erotic sculptures. The artistic beauty of Khajuraho is all about the erogenous female nudity and explicit depictions of sexual intercourse, sexual expressions and intimacy through astonishing stone carvings (Figure 2). Some suggests that the explicitly exhibiting sexual acts through sculptures in Hindu temples show how the ancient society perceived sex as a natural spiritual path to divinity (Darlymple, 2004). Others on the other hand

advocate that the kings who ruled the region around Khajuraho followed the tantric yoga path that promotes the concept of sexual energy for divine progression (Biernacki, 2013).

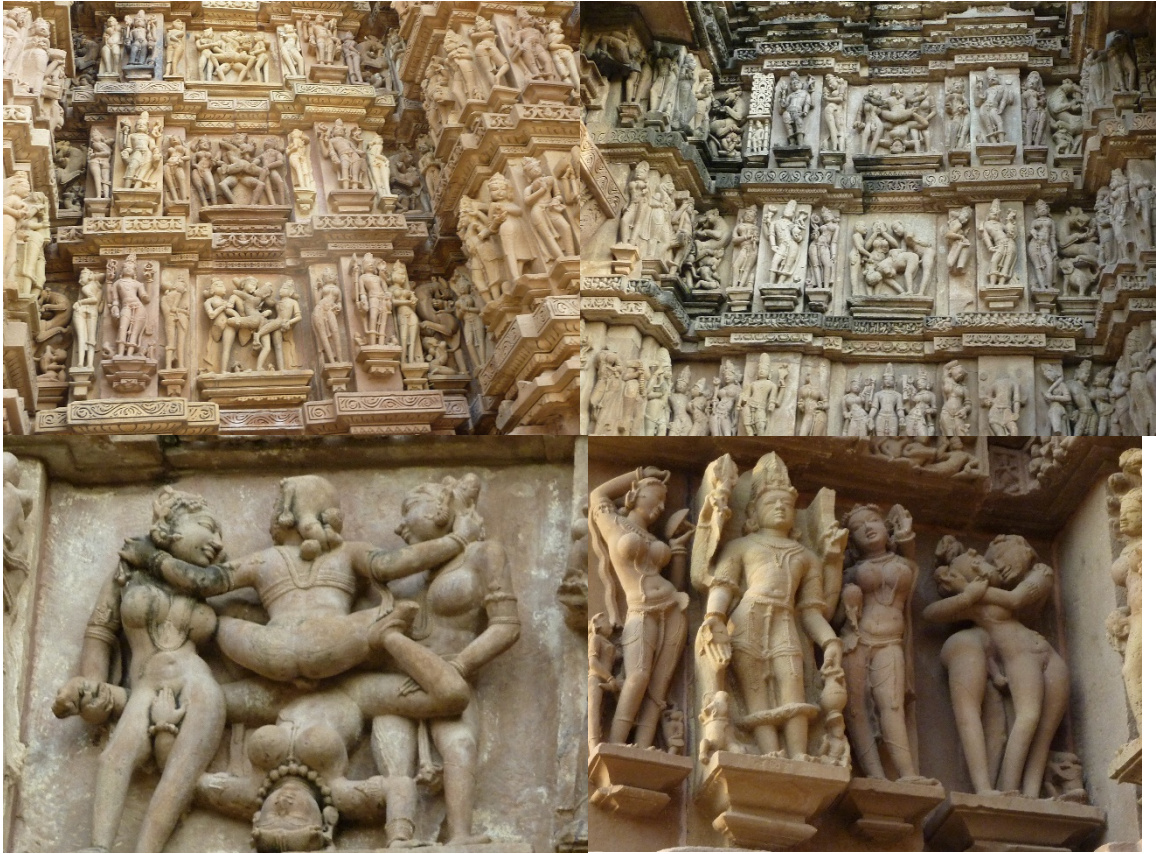


Figure 2. The erotic carvings of nudity and sexual acts vividly displayed at Khajuraho temple in Madhya Pradesh, India (photo courtesy Professor G Agoramoorthy)

6.4. SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION AND TRANSFORMATION OF SEXUAL ENERGY

Being the Land of Kama Sutra, India became a shining star of sexual energy ages ago. Critics however argue that sexual repression has become a normal practice in modern India (Stevens, 1983). Irrespective of the conservative repression constrained by ignorance, sex is considered sacred and curative inwardly, so it plays an integral part in the outward life of millions of ardent

devotees. Seductive stone carvings and erotic deities are still preserved in temples that continue to sustain the portrayal of cultural uniqueness through the display of divine deities, erotic dancers, and adoring devotees. One among such sexually-stirring and salubrious temple deities is the legendary goddess Kamakhya, located in Assam state of northeast India (Mahanta, 2018). Kamakhya is considered as the most powerful temple for sexuality, sexual energy and fertility where the goddess's sex organ is adored and worshipped (Dobia, 2023). The titillating deity is worshipped in the form of a vagina-shaped stone where an underground spring naturally flows. Thousands of women, men and third gender congregate to immerse in sexual-spiritual ecstasy (Figure 3).



Figure 2. During my field visits, I explored the goddess Kamakhya temple twice; it's located on the Nilachal Hills along the holy river Brahmaputra near Guwahati (Assam). I got initiated into the Vamachara Tantra Marga by a senior Kamakhya tantric guru, Kamala Ranjan Bhattacharya / Axa Baba at Kamakhya (photos Anastasia Mikheeva).

Similarly, Lord Shiva has been adored in the form of a phallus in the sacred shrine of

Tiruvannamalai located in Tamilnadu, south India. On the full moon day of December each year, thousands of pilgrims congregate to witness the illumination of a large fire on top of Mount Arunachala where Shiva mythically manifests as a prodigious blazing phallus (Stewart, 2022). Shiva Lingam as a whole embodies the union of masculine and feminine energy expression that devotees utilize to fulfil their longings encircling sex with a pure purpose to precede in pleasant life through spiritual progress.

The awareness of sexual transcendence happens at times extemporaneously (Ohso, 1989). Nevertheless, such experiences can also be consciously initiated, nurtured, trained and refined through various procedures, practices and rituals highlighted in tantra yoga and Taoist sexual initiation treatise (Urban, 2009). It also has implications in transpersonal psychology or spiritual psychology since the erotic aspect of sexuality is imperceptibly concomitant to spiritual, social and transcendental aspects of the individual human developmental psyche.

When it comes to Hindu temples and tantra practice, Kamakhya is considered one of the most momentous tantric goddesses, and the temple played a historic role to disseminate progressive tantric practices long ago (Urban, 2009). The legendary Kamakhya sexual energy temple is strongly associated with tantric scriptures namely Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra. The phrase tantra has been widely used in spiritual literature. The Sanskrit word Tantra means woven together or interlinked. The tantric practice apparently interlinks sexuality and spirituality through intimate sexual experience.

But then, what's tantra anyway as stated in scientific literature? A straightforward definition has been specified by Padoux (1986) where the author states clearly that tantra is an attempt to place "kama" (desire) within the perspective of salvation. It further adds, "This use of kama

and of all aspects of this world to gain both worldly and supernatural enjoyments or offering and powers (siddhis or fulfilments), and to obtain liberation in this life (jivanmukti or the state of living with liberation) (Padoux, 1986; White, 2000).”

The tantric scriptures state that when Lord Shiva was belligerently dancing with the dead body of Sati, her body parts fell at 51 locations across India, and at Kamakhya, her vagina fell. Those who observe the tantric tradition adopts following the Vamachara or left-hand path with the use of five constituents for the ritual to invoke sexual energy that includes sex plus the consumption of fish, meat, alcohol, and roasted grains (Odier, 2016). In tantra, divine energy of creative power is represented as Shakti (Lord Shiva’s wife). The tantric scriptures narrate the dialogue between Shiva and Shakti; they are also represented as Kala and Kali or Bhairava and Bhairavi (Odier, 2016). The tantric tradition in India has long been following a more sexualized ritual practice as a distinctive attribute that enhances and unites the couples’ sexual and spiritual energy leading to ultimate bliss as shown in Figure 3.

On the other hand, when individual devotees pray and meditate upon their favorite deities in erotic temples, they develop the potential to enrich spiritual growth while enhancing mental health as displayed in Figure 3. Passionate prayers involve positive thoughts that promote mental concentration succeeded by mindfulness. When they are devotedly immersed in rituals, chants, dances and prayers, deep-rooted memories of the moral-sinful psychiatric split emerge from shadow-self (Figure 3). Sexually deep-rooted negative memories of shame, blame arise initially, and later fritter away through spiritual vibrations of erotic deities combined with devotees’ mindfulness state transforming them into bliss, melting apparently of all emotional miseries (Nachimuthu et al., 2006). It is not surprising to witness why devotees often pray, chant, sing, dance, jump, run, cry, scream and slip into self-absorbed trance in delight around

deities as they feel healed from repressed mental disorders through the supremacy of mindfulness in the sacred ambience (Alexander et al., 2014).

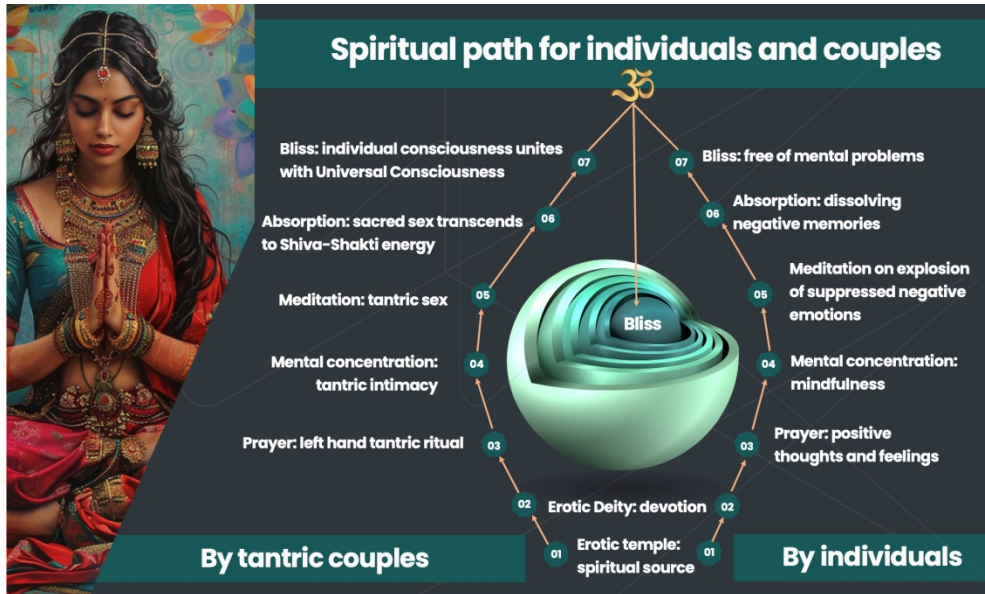


Figure 3. When individual devotees and tantric couples meditate on their favorite erotic deities, they develop great potential for spiritual growth leading to bliss while enhancing mental health.

The culture of staying in a divinely secured spiritual atmosphere has been reported to influence devotees to change their distressed mental status leading to reduction in psychiatric maladies (Chokkanathan et al., 2020). Some Hindu temples in India are known for their mental health healing qualities (Khosla et al., 2020). A report for example shows that mental health healing processes witnessed in Hindu temples in south India to be pleasant in a serene spiritual atmosphere (Halliburton, 2003). Similarly, scientists have described that when patients with psychotic disorders stayed in temple, they did not have any medical or psychopharmacological interventions, yet they showed psychiatric improvements. But, they were unable to rationally

comprehend the psychiatric puzzle witnessed in the therapeutic temple. They acknowledged however that the mystical healing power of temple deity might have played a role in reducing the severity of psychotic symptoms expressed by their patients in the end (Raguram et al., 2002). Therefore, studies are urgently needed to assess the potential psychiatric benefits of temples, especially erotic temples in resolving the psychosexual disarrays affecting many in contemporary society.

Be it an active yoga practitioner or an ardent meditating devotee in erotic temple, they all may experience a variety of spiritual pleasures due to mental stimulations from various areas of the brain (Heilman and Donda, 2014). A recent experiment has confirmed the existence of the so-called God spot rooted in the neural circuits of the periaqueductal gray area of the brainstem, which is also implicated in anxiety conditioning, pain regulation, and expressing altruistic behavior (Ferguson et al., 2022). Mental activation of this sacred spot in brain appears to lead to blissful magical experiences. The triggering can lead to profound changes in consciousness as often described as enlightenment or Samadhi in scriptures. The God spot activation is less about direct stimulation and more about engaging in practices that foster spiritual experiences and altered states of consciousness that include meditative prayers, chanting, worshiping deities, etc. Devotees achieve a sense of transcendence, unity, and profound peace, potentially activating the regions of the brain associated with spiritual and mystic experiences.

In the same way, extreme erotic sensations of exciting pleasure can be done by sexually stimulating the G-spot in women and prostate in men. For example, studies have revealed the presence of 85 different types of psychological effects and altered states of consciousness

triggered during sexual orgasms in females connected to G-spot (Sayin, 2011, 2012; Sundahl, 2014). Similarly, the prostate, which is sometimes labelled as the male G-spot, showed enormous sexual pleasures during stimulation (Rosenthal, 2012; Levin, 2018). Besides, the peak sexual experiences outlined in Hindu scriptures, tantra sastras and Taoist scriptures can be scientifically compared to the expanded sexual response reported by Sayin (2017). But, is there a connection linking the pleasures of the God spot and G-spot?

The G-spot stimulation combined with spiritual awareness meditating on the devotees' favorite deities, an association might form between sexual pleasure and spiritual awakening. This coincides with the Pavlovian theory (Clark, 2004) and the repeated pairing of two experiences, pleasure from G-spot stimulation and spiritual experiences or sensations associated with the God spot, could lead to a form of classical conditioning. The Russian Nobel prize winner Ivan Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning was based on learning through association as shown in his legendary experiments on trained dogs and how they associated sound of a bell (neutral stimulus) with food (unconditioned stimulus) that triggered natural salivation (unconditioned response) (LoLordo, 1979). Over time, the dogs began to salivate as a conditioned response just by hearing the sound of the bell in the absence of food. So, it can be hypothetically extrapolated that the G-spot stimulation acts as an unconditioned stimulus, a physical action that provokes pleasure. Spiritual practice or God spot represents the new stimulus perhaps through meditation, prayer, or spiritual awakening. When the practice continues over time, the mind will naturally associate sexual pleasure with spiritual experiences. The connection between sexual energy and spiritual progress has been vividly expressed in Upanishads, tantra sastras and Pariyanga Yoga as discussed earlier.

It is hard to escape from mental conditioning as a mechanism since human neural systems are fundamentally designed for that function to promote species survival. So, they may have the choice of choosing spiritual sex to pursue divinity as shown in scriptures or slip into the self-created disaster of immoral actions in society. The scriptures apparently showed the righteous way of choosing, training and conscious conditioning of sexual function to reach divinity through tantra. If humans fail to connect to divinity, then they are left with two options: either inevitably dive into sinful acts triggered by individual greedy desires propelled by idiosyncratic upbringing or pursue a sexually unmanageable dangerous way of life to destruction.

6.5. Conclusion

The association between the role of erotic temples where devotees visit to express their devotion to divine deities and mental well-being advantages actually falls within the global mental health literature that considers religious-spiritual facet as a predictor variable (Koenig, 2009). As reflected in this chapter, devotees have great potential to achieve better mental health in effect with a focus on sustaining a resolute sexual life, which is a critical element of positive psychology. Hence, there is more to explore the ancient Indian sexual and spiritual wisdom buried in erotic temples so that its applicability to modern psychiatry can be fully recognized in all respects.