

RESEARCH PAPER

Origin, Development and Decline of Monolithic Pillars and the Continuity of the Tradition in Polyolithic, Non-Lithic and Structural Forms

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The present paper deals with one such creations of Man, i.e. the tradition of erecting free standing monolithic pillars - its origin, growth and decline and the continuity of the tradition of erecting such pillars in its changed polyolithic (from Greek word *polloi* = many + lithic = stone), non-lithic and structural forms. No exact reason can be found, pointing it to be the exact cause for the decline in the tradition of erecting monolithic pillar and its transformation. In this paper the authors try to analyse various phenomenon likesocio-political, economic and technical aspects which may have lead to their decline and subsequently their continuity in a changed form in Indian context.

Introduction

Man has evolved to be the only being in this world who has the cognate ability to express ideas and beliefs and to make true their dreams. This exquisite nature of Man is the seed which is responsible for the growth of culture and civilization. When man first came out of his primitive stage necessity of living in the midst of challenging natural conditions has forced them to think and create things by which they could lead a comfortable life. Thus began man's earliest experiments with the available raw materials around them to make life easy. One such raw material used was stone, from which they created stone tools. This is the commencement of man's experiment with stone. Initially the creations of man in stone were utilitarian and gradually he put his imagination, observation and understanding of his surroundings in his creation. Thus we could see that all the artistic forms that have been produced were indeed a reflection of nature and his desire to create things which he marvels at and make them permanent.

Origin

The origin of any tradition has a reason and purpose behind it and it is same in this case as well. When we probe into the archaeological context and inscriptions of these pillars it reveals that all of them were associated either with a sacred place or an important or memorable event, person or act.

We can say that the earliest extant examples of erecting something resembling a pillar can be had from the Iron age period in the form of menhirs (**Fig. 1**) (word *men* = stone + *hir* = long) which were like memorials meant for marking the place where the dead lay buried and later on these memorials were worshipped by the people related to the dead person.

We find the earliest datable pillar in India from the time of Asoka (3rd century B.C.) (**Fig. 2**) and his inscriptions engraved on some of them is a testimony to this. But there were also some pillars which were non-inscribed and bear a similarity with their Asokan counterpart in all aspects like raw material, art, theme and technique. The un-inscribed two pillars are at Kolhua, Muzafferpur and Bodhgaya, Gaya both are in Bihar. So it was also proposed that at least some of the pillars could be of Mauryan or even Pre-Mauryan origin. For this we have the edicts of Asoka himself as a proof. The Delhi-Topra pillar edict no VII (lines 23 and 32) mentions that he ordered to engrave his edicts on the existing pillars and slabs wherever available apart from the pillars he himself erected. Further a study of the extant pillars show that different type of stone was used (Huntington, 1993: 44) and diverse methods had been adopted as foundation for the pillar and even not all the pillars can be regarded as well-polished to meet the 'Mauryan' standards.

Various theories have been put forth in respect of the origin of the technique of making monolithic pillars in India and the outside influence the Indian artists had in executing the pillar and its capitals. Early Indologists like Vincet Smith, Sir John Marshall, Mortimer Wheeler have pointed out Hellenistic inspirations over the artistic production of Mauryan pillars and Susan L. Huntington (1993: 42–44) opines that after the fall of the Achaemenid empire due to Alexander's campaign the craftsmen in search of patronage found shelter in

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Figure 1: General view of the Megalithic site containing Uraskals, Gammawada dist. Dantewada, Chhatisgarh (Courtesy: B. Gartia).

the newly emerging Mauryan empire in India, and as a result has tremendously influenced both technique and art styles. However Sir Arthur Evans in his thesis on 'Mycenaean tree and Pillar cult' has observed the popularity of the tradition of erecting such pillars in several of the West-Asian cultures and in the Mediterranean littoral even since the Neolithic times, and has thus paved way for some scope of regional or indigenous development of the pillar cult. In India we have much literary evidence in support of indigenous origin of this tradition.

Vedic literature such as the Apastamba Srautasutra (VII. 2. 13–15), mentions that a sacrificial post called *yupa*, which should be as high as the person who is sacrificing, standing with or without raised hands or standing on a chariot has to be erected at the eastern side of the altar and the animal to be sacrificed was tied to this *yupa*. The text also says that the *yupa* has to be eight cornered and tapering at the top. (Sen, 1976: 101) But here the purpose is restricted to the Vedic sacrifice and it could not be said with certainty whether the same concept of *yupa* developed into a pillar associated with a sacred spot. Further the text speaks of an octagonal shaft whereas the earliest example we get from Asokan times is circular and smooth in form.

The great epic Mahabharatha states that the *dvaja* was worshipped by the warriors before the commencement

of battle in the belief that the deity manifests in it and brings victory. Small standards were also taken to the battle field by the kings and it is believed that the destruction of the enemy's *dvaja* brings misfortune to their opponents. Artistic evidence for such practice can be found from a bas-relief panel on a railing from Bharhut (Fig. 3), portraying a queenly personage on horseback carrying a *Garudadhvaja* (John Irwin, 1974: 715), datable to 2nd century B.C. Alexander Cunningham in his reports also hints this association of the *dvaja* with the warriors. He says that, in the adjacent of many of the so called Asokan pillars he has noticed the existence of ancient tumulus nearby, which he prefers to refer them by the term 'barrow' instead of 'stupa'. He further opines that they could be dated between 600 B.C.E to 1500 B.C.E and believed them to be sepulchral tombs of early kings. (Cunningham, A.1871: 69).

The excavation conducted at Lauriya-Nandangarh in 1904–05 has proved that two out of the four mounds were pagan funerary burials and only later on they were converted into as this not same whether these are Brahminical, Buddhist, Muslim and Jaina affinity. The most important find in support of this claim were gold images of nude female deity. (Bloch, T. 1909: 19–26.). The Sathapatha Brahmana (part, IX, 4) also shows that



Figure 2: General view of the pillars. (A) Asokan pillar –Koluha, Bihar, 3rd century B.C. (B) Obelisk of Axum–Ethiopia, 4th century A.D. (Courtesy: Wikipedia). (C) Vatican Obelisk—originally from Egypt, 1st century A.D. (Courtesy: Wikipedia). (D) Pompey's Pillar.

(i.e. circa. 8th century B.C.) the burials of the kings were four cornered or circular in shape. (John Irwin. 1973: 718). So now the question arises as to what is the significance of these pillars attached with the king's burial. From this it can be seen that *dvaja* worship has been closely linked with fortunes of the kingdom and so they were

associated with the king's burial, which is again a sacred spot for the people as kings were regarded as divine incarnated. So it should not be surprising to find that, such pillars were erected along with the stupas as well and it also became a object of veneration as can be seen from the bas-relief panels of the railing at Bodhgaya (Fig. 4)



Figure 3: Horse-rider with sacred standard (dhvaja), relief from Bharut Stupa, late 2nd century B.C.E (Indian Museum, Kolkata) (Courtesy: John Irwin, 1974: pl.3).

and Sanchi stupa (**Fig. 5**) which portrays several examples of worship of pillar sometimes individually and in cases in front of the *Chaityas*. (John Irwin. 1973: 715–16). D.D. Kosambi opines that “before cities existed in northern India, crossroads were synonymous with *caityas* or ‘sacred spots’, and also with the sites of festivals, because prior to urbanization, crossroads were places where people met and had their markets and celebrations”. (Kosambi, D.D. 1960: 17–31 and 135–44.). This hypothesis can be proved by noting the distribution of the Asokan pillars, in a line north-west from the Ganges through Vaisali, Lauriya-Areraj, Lauriya-Nandangarh, Rampurva, Rummindei and Sravasti. These places were situated along the great northern trade route which, at least from the 6th century B.C.E, linked the eastern Ganges basin with the Achaemenid empire of Persia and other civilizations of the ancient Near East. (John Irwin.1973: 717).

There could be various reasons for the beginning in the tradition of erecting pillar like:

- Memorial for the dead.
- Pillar marking the sacred spot or place or event.
- Pillar erected in honour of God.
- Pillar representing the royal staff crowned with their insignia or totem like the *dvajastambha* and *kirtistambha*.



Figure 4: Couple worshipping a pillar—Bodhgaya railing.



Figure 5: Worshipping of the pillar—Sanchi railing.

Of these reasons listed above it is difficult to say which one of them is the earliest. A glance into the history of development of human society shows that belief in supernatural or ancestor worship and life after death or fear of death has developed much earlier. We find evidence for this in the form of human burials, objects of worship and rock art right from the Upper Palaeolithic period and perhaps the desire to mark their habitation areas or sacred places could have also emerged and a long pillar like pole with totem symbols could have helped them to identify and remember their places. This primitive belief system or the practical need to identify their places or their particular achievements might have continued into the historical period and it assumed different forms to meet the need of those times.

Now a question which would arise naturally in our mind is why the artisan or the patron have selected to erect a pillar made from a single stone and not multiple stones as the latter would make their effort easier? The answer to this can be assumed that just as we find imitations of timber architecture in many of the earlier rock-cut cave temples and structural temples, here also the artisan attempted to imitate the wooden pillar, which normally used to be a long pole and thus continued the tradition of erecting pillar made of single stone.

Development

The monolithic pillar which had its origin from the wooden counterpart has a long tradition of development and witnessed changed purpose, contextual and artistic features. The earliest extant example of a Monolithic pillar comes from the time of Asoka (273–236 B.C.) as revealed by the

inscriptions engraved on them and they were erected to propagate the code of laws (*Dhamma*) in such sites sacred to the Buddhist creed. However as discussed above it is proved beyond doubt that even prior to Asoka there was the tradition of erecting monolithic pillars and we find Asoka himself instructing that his edicts be engraved on pillars already existing as well. Further evidence from literature shows that this practise prevailed in India from the Vedic times (*circa* 1500 B.C.) and as they were made of wood they got perished due to the vagaries of nature. We have a sole example of wooden pillar from Kirari having an inscription datable to *circa* 200 A.D.

Next to the Mauryan period we find the pillar erected by Heliodorous, a Greek ambassador at Besnagar, Vidisha district, Madhya Pradesh (**Fig. 6**) datable to *circa* 2nd century B.C., and the inscriptional evidence refers it as *garudadvaja* erected in honour of God Vishnu (Sircar, D.C. 1991: 88). Many of the depictions on the relief panels of the railings at Bharhut and Sanchi belonging to the Sunga period (2nd century B.C. to 1st century A.D.) and from the *toranas* at Sanchi of the Satavahana period (*circa* 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D.) shows that the pillars were held in veneration and became objects of worship. Near the entrance into the *Chaitya griha* at Karle of *circa* 1st century A.D. (**Fig. 7**) is a rock-cut pillar, which belongs to a class of sculptural art where both the entire structure including the sculptures in them was carved out of the rock *insitu*. Perhaps the only other example of this kind of pillar is within the precincts of Kailash cave temple at Ellora (**Fig. 8**) executed under the Patronage of Rashtrakuta king Krishna I in 8th century A.D.

During the time of the Kushans (*circa* 1st to 3rd century A.D.), so far we could not find much evidence of a monolithic pillar except a pair of monolithic sacrificing pillar (**Fig. 9**), which was discovered by Rai Bahadur Pt. Radha Krishna in 1910 from the bed of river Yamuna near village of Ishopur, opposite Vishrant Ghat, Uttar Pradesh now displayed in Mathura state museum. The inscription on the base of the *yupa* gives the date as year 24 i.e. 102 AD of the Kushan emperor Vashishka. On the basis of the inscription it is known that the *yupa* was erected by a Brahmana at the end of the Dwadasa-sattra sacrifice (a Vedic ritual lasting for 12 days symbolising the yearly course of the Sun) (Agrawala, V. S., 1939: 25–26). Probably the reason for the rare availability of such pillars in this period is they were foreigners and they have their own unique tradition of erecting portrait images of the kings in specially built temples (*devakula*). Thus these images served the purpose of memorials and as the Kushans believed in the divine origin of their kingship, they probably worshipped them.

The Gupta period (*circa* 3rd to 6th century A.D.) known as the age of Brahmanical revivalism witnessed a profuse in the tradition of erecting free standing monolithic pillars. They were found in different places in northern India like Bhitari (Ghazipur dist. Uttar Pradesh), Bihar Sharif (Patna, Bihar), Sanchi (Raisen dist. Madhya Pradesh), Kahaum (Deoria dist. Uttar Pradesh) (**Fig. 10**), Supia (Madhya Pradesh), Rajghat (Bihar-Now in Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi), Eran (Sagar dist. Uttar Pradesh)

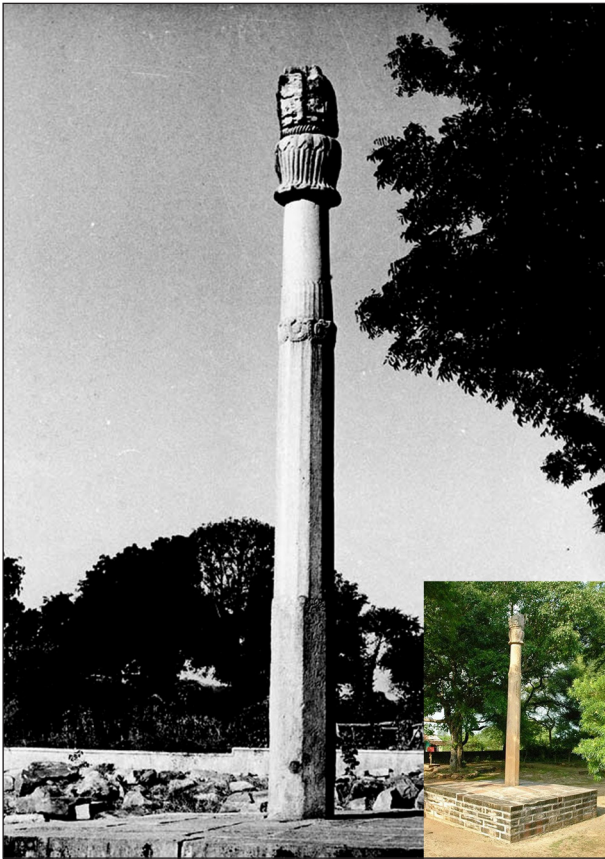


Figure 6: Heliodorus pillar at Besnagar, (circa. 2nd century B.C.) present image of the pillar on right lower corner, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh (Courtesy: American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi).



Figure 7: Rock-cut *insitu* pillar at Karle. 1st century A.D.



Figure 8: Rock-cut *insitu* pillar at Kailash temple, Ellora., 8th century A.D.



Figure 9: General View of the monolithic pillar belongs to Kushana period, Mathura (Courtesy: Pataru Maurya).



Figure 10: General view of the pillar, its capital, inscriptional part and its transcript, sculpture of Jaina tirthankar on the base of the pillar, Kahaum, Deoria.

(Fig. 11A), Lathiya (Ghazipur dist. Uttar Pradesh) (Fig. 11B), Prahaladpur (Varanasi dist. Uttar Pradesh), Udayagiri (Raisen dist. Madhya Pradesh), Umrao Dullah's garden (Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh) (Fig. 11C) and Santipur Fort (Rajasthan). A solitary example of an Iron pillar dated to Gupta period is found from Meharauli (Qutub Complex, Delhi).

A study of these pillars shows that they were erected mainly for three purposes: to get religious merit for oneself or to their kin or to their preceptor; to proclaim their victory and to commemorate some person or event. Most of these pillars are found in a context associated with a religious structure/a sacred place/place having political significance for the erector of the pillar (Tiwary and Krishnamurthy, 2012: 357–363).

Coming to the post-Gupta period we find stray evidences of monolithic free standing pillar like the Mandsor pillar of Yasovarman, Bhagalpur lat in Uttar Pradesh of circa 11th century A.D., Pillar near Teli Jina temple in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh of 11th century A.D. (Fig. 12A), Pakari pillar of 11th–12th century A.D. (Azamgarh district, Uttar Pradesh) (Fig. 12B), Belkhara pillar of Lal Khan Deval of Kannauj (dated 1196 A.D.) (Fig. 13) in Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh), etc. Apart from these we also have other examples where the pillars were erected either as *dvajastambha* or *dipastambha* in front of the temples like – Chennakesava temple at Belur of 12th century A.D., belonging to the time Hoyasala in Karnataka (Fig. 12C), the Aruna stambha (Originally erected in front of the Sun temple at Konark, datable

to 13th century A.D.) and Garuda Stambh in Jagannath temple at Puri of mid 12th century A.D., the Subhastambha at Jajpur dated by James Fergusson to 10th–11th century A.D. both in Odisha, etc.

Another unique example though slightly of a different context, is a 12 meter commemorative pillar bears a long Persian inscription recording the erection of mosque in Jaunpur Fort in Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 14). A mention has to be made of the unique inscription which declares the fort as a place for “Hindus to read the Gita and Muslims to read the Koran and Christians to read the Bible”, reflecting the religious tolerance of those times.

Decline

Before discussing on this topic, the authors like to repeat that only the art of creating pillars from a single stone has declined and the tradition of erecting the pillars as such has continued even into the modern times. The following could be the various points that led to the decline of erecting monolithic pillars. But no conclusion can be made and the reasons can be inter-related as well.

As seen above till the period of Gupta Empire there was profusion in the creation of free standing monolithic pillars. After the fall of the Gupta Empire there was an overall disintegration and lack of strong centralized power. Many small independent kingdoms ruled by feudal lords and chieftains have sprung up and as a result constant wars for territorial expansion and monetary gains has become the

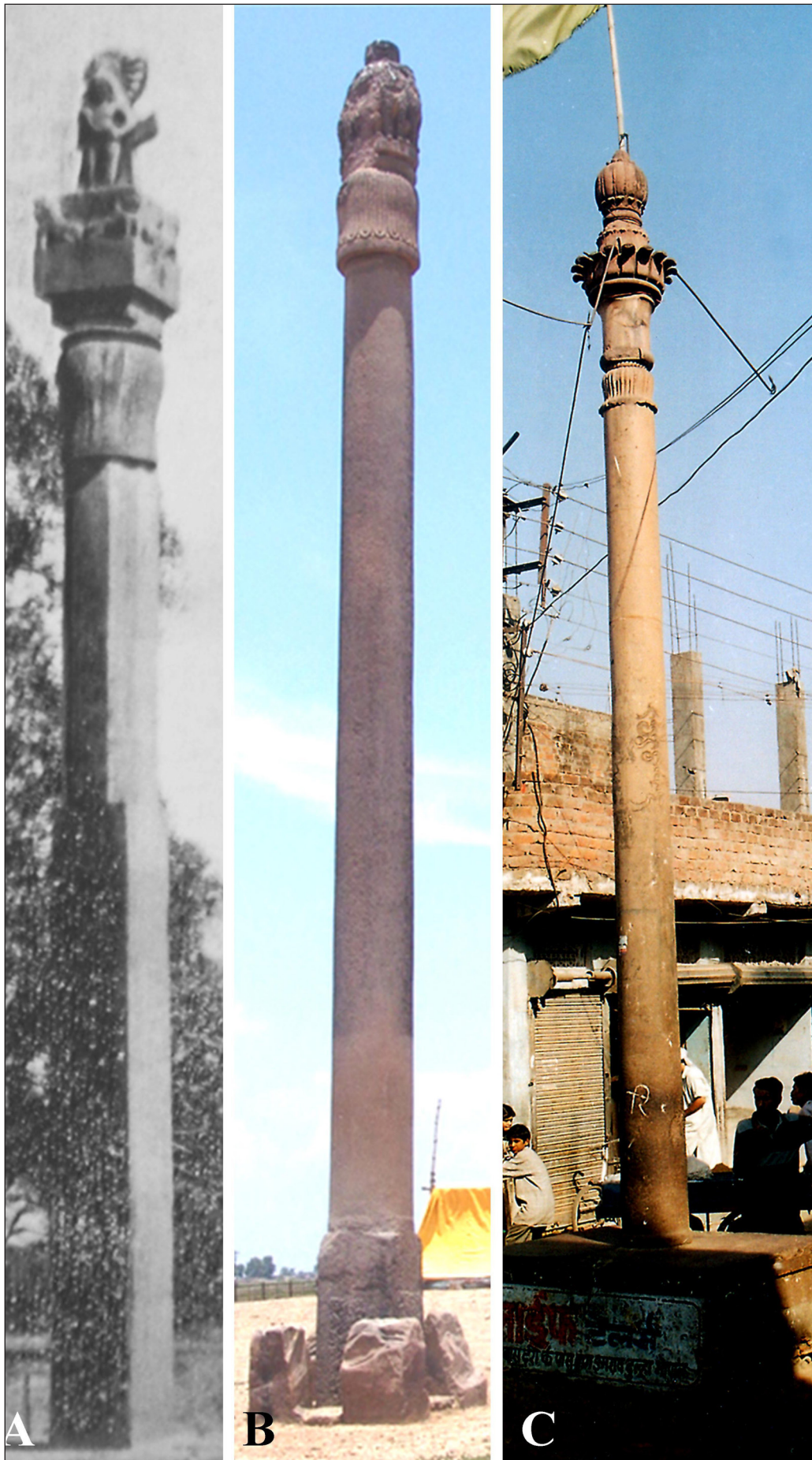


Figure 11: General view of the pillars, (A) Eran Pillar (B) Lathiya Pillar (C) Pillar in Umraih Dullah's garden, Bhopal.



Figure 12: General view of the pillars. (A) Pillar near Teli Jina temple in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh of 11th century A.D. (B) Pakari pillar of 11th–12th century A.D. (Azamgarh district, Uttar Pradesh). (C) Chennakesava temple at Belur of 12th century A.D., Karnataka.



Figure 13: General view of the Belkhara pillar. (A) Close view of the inscription engraved on the pillar. (B) General view with highlighted the location of the inscription and image of lord Ganesha in relief. (C) Image of Ganesha in relief on the lower part of the pillar.



Figure 14: Commemorative pillar recording the erection of mosque in 1376 A.D. by Ibrahim Naib Barbak of Sarquis dynasty in Jaunpur Fort in Uttar Pradesh.

rule of the day Thus under such an inharmoonious environment it is difficult to imagine that art and culture would have flourished. Especially the work of making such a

huge monolithic pillar and transporting them from the place of quarry to the place of erection requires cooperation among the people of various villages. Indeed recent

fieldwork done by the author Dr. Sachin Kr.Tiwary around the ancient quarry site of Chunar revealed that huge stone objects like sugarcane crushers were transported with active cooperation among the neighbouring villagers (Tiwary, Sachin Kr. and S. Krishnamurthy, 2014: 28). So if the same was the case with the monolithic pillars also, then in an environment torn by war and strife it is difficult to imagine how they could be transported. So due to lack of transportation facility the artisans might have switched over to the use of multiple stones instead of a single stone.

Economic constraints could be also another cause. Carrying a big and challenging task like carving out a long pillar out of a single stone requires lot of skilled labour and even a slightest mistake might make the entire work useless. So in order to maintain such a skilled labour and to give them patronage might be too expensive for the petty chieftains and small kingdoms. Adding to the political disunity, the foreign invasions also lead to economic bankruptcy.

From the artistic and architectural point of view we see that from the Gupta period there was a steady increase in the construction of stone and brick temples and so more artisans gradually got concentrated in the art of constructing temples and carving of sculptures to decorate the temples. Further the temples and its associated sculptures gave the artisans more space to exhibit their skills of imagination and carving and thus the technique of carving a

monolithic pillar could have faded from the memory of the artisans.

Continuity of the tradition sans the monolithic form

We all know that traditions die hard and there are many such practises which continue to thrive even in the present modern world, just for the sake of tradition without giving any scope for a rational insight into it. In the medieval period or late-medieval period and even in the modern times the concept of erecting pillars continued but the form of such pillars and the technique employed in its making has changed. The pillars were no longer made of a single stone and they were actually constructed by riveting together various pieces of stone or simply built in masonry style. The best example being the Vijay Stambha, erected by Rana Kumbha between 1458 and 1468 A.D. to commemorate his victory over Mahmud Shah I Khalji, the Sultan of Malwa (Fig. 15).

Another example is the minars like Chand Minar in Daulatabad fort, district Aurangabad, Maharashtra and Qutub Minar in Delhi. The Chand Minar according to one account was constructed in commemoration of the first conquest of the place by Alauddin Khilji, who conquered the fort in the year 1294 A.D. when the Yadavas king Ramchandra was the king of Daulatabad or Devgiri. This can be regarded as variety of structural



Figure 15: General view of the structural pillar known as VijayStambh, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan.



Figure 16: Buddhist prayer flag changing ceremony observed in Lhasa - Xinhua, Tibet.

Kirti Stambha. (Qureshi, 2004: 57–60) The purpose of building the beautiful monument of Qutub Minar of Delhi has been speculated upon, apart from the usual role of a minaret—that of calling people for prayer in a mosque—in this case the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque to the northeast of minar in AD 1198. It is the earliest extant mosque built by the Delhi Sultans. Other reasons ascribed to its construction are: a tower of victory; a monument signifying the might of Islam or a watch tower for defence. Controversy also surrounds the origins for the name of the tower. Many historians believe that the Qutub Minar was named after the first Turkish sultan, Qutub-ud-din Aibak but others contend that it was named in honour of Khwaja Qutub-ud-din Bakhtiar Kaki of Ush, a saint from Baghdad who came to live in India, who was greatly venerated by Iltutmish, the successor of Qutub-ud-din-Aibak. The erection of pillar cover with cloth is still continuing even in the Islamic living monument. The best example is from Makka, Saudi Arabia (**Fig. 20B**).

The Buddhists also continue the practice of erecting pillars in the form of wooden posts decorated with Buddhist symbols on various occasions (**Fig. 16**). The best example for this practice can be seen in the Buddhist monastery at Leh in the Himalayan region. Similar posts were also erected in front of the various Islamic religious edifices on different occasions. One

such flag is known as the Black Flag (*al-riya*), which traces its roots to the very beginning of Islam. It was the battle (jihad) flag of the Prophet Muhammad, carried into battle by many of his companions, including his nephew 'Ali ibn Abi Talib. The flag regained prominence in the 8th century A.D. with its use by the leader of the Abbasid revolution, Abu Muslim, who led a revolt against the Umayyad clan and its' Caliphate. In Shiite belief, the black flag also evokes expectations about the afterlife. In the contemporary Islamist movement, the black flag is used to symbolize both offensive jihad and the proponents of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate. (Nvchar, http://ctc.usma.edu/imagery/imagery_warfare.asp, 06.06.14). In Hinduism the erection of pillar or flag in the form of wooden post or bamboo or some time metal pipe is still a continued tradition and they were erected in front of the modern temple. Even the same tradition is continued at such places other than temples such as ceremonial grounds used for various occasions such as festivals (**Fig. 20A and B**).

The Manastambha erected in front of Mahavirji temples (**Fig. 17B**) is another example to show the continuity of the practice, this was also in historical times, as we have the evidence of Jain Kirti Stambha (**Fig. 17A**) 75 ft high seven storied pillar in 12th century AD and dedicated to Shri Adinathji, Chittaurgarh, Rajasthan. We find such a tradition of erecting similar pillars even

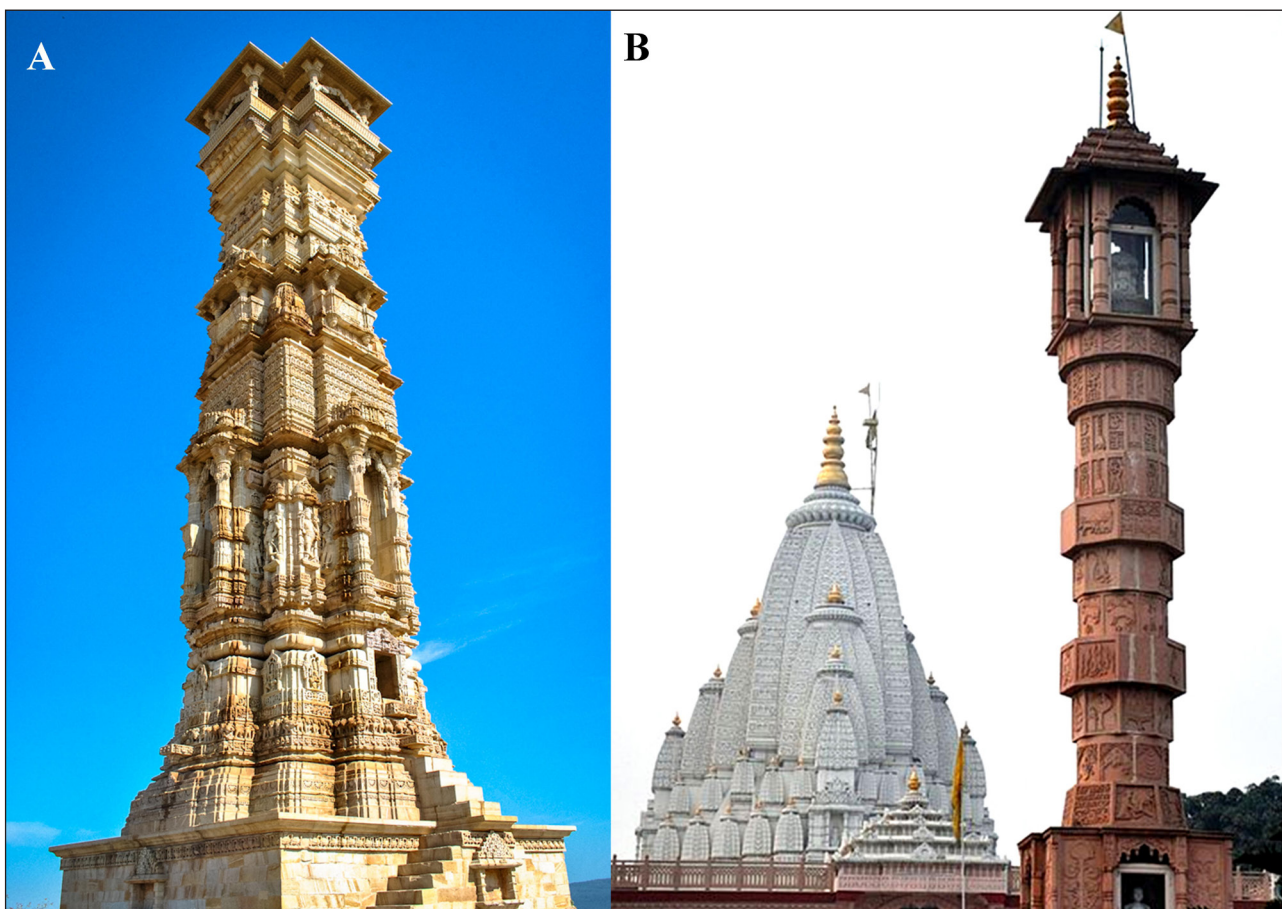


Figure 17: (A) Jain Kirtistambha dedicated to Shri Adinathji, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan. (B) Manastambha in front of Mahavirji temple, Gaziabad, Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 18: Vaisakhi, Raising the Nishan-Sahib, Chicago, USA.

in the Gupta period (Kahaum, Deoria district, Uttar Pradesh). The flag posts in front of Gurudvars (Fig. 18) can also be regarded as a continuity of the pillar tradition, though in different material and context. In many of the South Indian temples the pillars known as *dvajastambha* erected in front of the temples (Fig. 19A) were actually made of wood and they were covered with the metal sheets externally, which were mostly bronze. They were mainly used to hoist the flag of the deity or to raise the cloths donated by the devotees in the form of flag, marking the beginning of the temple festival known as *Brahmotsavam*.

Another example of continuity of this tradition, though of recent origin is the pillar known by the term as *Jaitkhamb* (Fig. 19B). This highlights the fact that the erection and construction of free standing pillars on the side of roadways and on the cross road of the main city or village still continues, and is practiced by the newly formed community known as Satnami. On the occasion of the anniversary of the birth of Guru Ghasidas, the Satnami community perform their traditional dance Panthi around a *Jaitkhamb* set up for the occasion, made of cement to songs eulogizing their spiritual head. The songs reflect a view of *nirvana*, conveying the spirit of their guru's renunciation and the teachings of saint poets like Kabir, Ramdas and Dadu. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chhattisgarh#cite_note-42, 06.06.14) Thus we see the continued tradition of erecting free standing pillars, though they were no longer monolithic and were made of several stones.



Figure 19: (A) Dvajastambha, in Vaikunthaperumal temple at Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. (B) General view of a pillar made of cement and iron at Raipur, Chhattisgarh.



Figure 20: (A) General view of the flag erected on the occasion of the religious days. (B) General view of the Black flag erected at Makka, Saudi Arabia (Courtesy: Wikipedia).

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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