

RESEARCH PAPER

Spatial Study of 'Chandore' in India's Western Ghats – Using Ethno-historic Study and Sculptural Details as Complementary Factors to Spatial Techniques

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The ancient temple complex site at Chandore in the Western Ghats of India was discovered in 2011. Subsequent excavations at the site revealed successive occupation from the Shilahara Period (1100 CE), to the Bahmani, Adilshahi, and Maratha Periods (1500 CE – 1800 CE). A stela like element bearing a motif of a cow suckling a calf were discovered at various locations at the site and its environs. Some of these showed an exceedingly fine level of craftsmanship whilst others were crude and devoid of inscriptions. These stelae/pillars are referred to as Gaay-vaasru (Cow-Calf) pillars. These stelae were found at random locations such as the backyard of a house, abandoned hillslopes, roadside pavements, etc. Understanding the significance of the erection of such pillars at these locations was the main objective of this project. Spatial techniques complemented by textual references, iconographic interpretations, etc. were used to achieve this objective.

Keywords: Cow; Calf; Landgrant; Copper-plate; Shilahara; Konkan; Historical Archaeology; Early Medieval

Introduction

Archaeology in the Indian context is tightly knit with historical as well as present local cultures of the areas. While referencing historical textual material in the form of copper plates, epigraphs, royal records, foreign accounts etc, we often stumble upon the incomplete and inconsistent nature of these sources. This is partly due to the lack of practice of writing history, the way it existed in Europe or Mesopotamia. Another cause of inconsistency is several additions and modifications made to the original text over a period of time, primarily due to the influence of changing political and religious scenarios. Despite this, these materials act as building blocks for writing history. Entire dynasties have been brought to light by the mere mention of kings on coins, or the mention of their names in the introductory part of an epigraphic record.

The present work at the site of Chandore in India's Western Ghats is an example of understanding the ground artefacts in context of the historical text. Texts in this case were in the form of landgrants, mostly issued on copper plates belonging to Shilahara dynasty. The iconographic study of steles, other sculptures, and excavated artefacts assisted in adjudicating the probable antiquity of these steles to the Shilahara period. The aim of this project was to interpret various factors influencing the erection of these steles at particular locations by means of spatial

techniques. It became evident that the changes in landuse and landcover pattern over many centuries had changed the surroundings of the stele. Due to this, spatial observations were aided by historic data upon which conclusions were drawn.

Study-area and previous work

The ancient temple complex at Chandore (18 09' 52" N; 73 11' 02" E) is situated near the hamlet of Chambharpada. Geographically, this is the northern portion of India's Western Ghats popularly known as Konkan (**Figure 1a, b**). The site was discovered in 2011 by a joint team of members from the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies (CEMS), University of Mumbai and the India Study Centre (INSTUCEN), Mumbai (Dalal, 2012). The site was subsequently excavated by a joint team of the CEMS and the INSTUCEN Trust (Dalal, 2013).

The Shilaharas, a royal dynasty ruled over the area from the late 8th cent. to middle of 13th cent. CE. Locally they are known as Shilar/Silar/Selar/Sillara. Three branches of this dynasty ruled different areas viz. North Konkan, South Konkan, and Kolhapur; our study area was part of the North Konkan branch. Once feudatories of Rashtrakuta kings, all three branches traced their descent from the mythical prince Jimutavahana. They all claimed to have previously ruled at Tagara, presently identified as Ter in Osmanabad district in southern Maharashtra. There are mentions of two more capitals viz. Sthanaka and Puri. Sthanak is assumed to be present Thane city, while Puri is yet to be clearly identified. The latter is commonly

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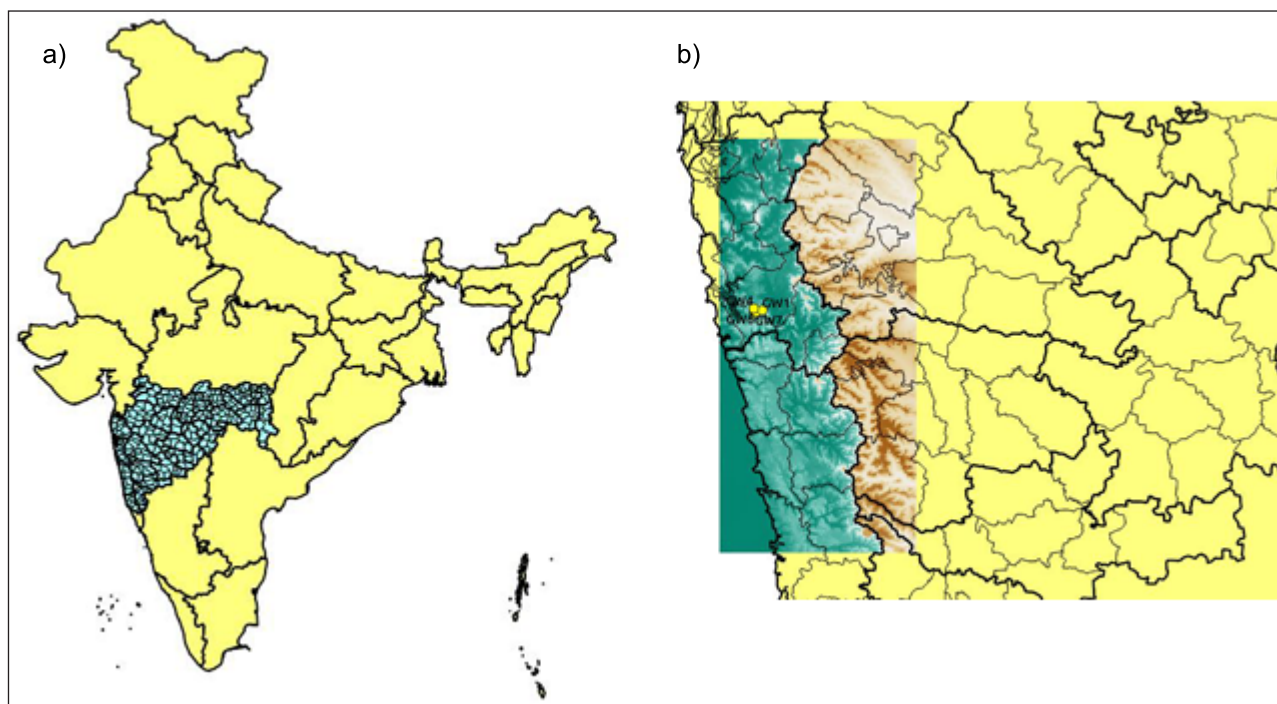


Figure 1: Location of Chandore within Maharashtra, India.

considered to be either the Gharapuri Island (Elephanta Island) close to Mumbai or Rajpuri, an ancient port close to study area.

The main sources of information for the Shilahara dynasty are few pieces of literature, a popular drama from the 10th cent. CE, several copper plates, and many stone inscriptions. These provide detailed information about genealogy, territories, administration, religious beliefs, etc. The main content of these copper plates and palaeographs dealt with land grants, or donations given to Brahmins, Hindu temples, Buddhist caves, etc. These have been discovered, read, and published since the mid 19th century. This initial effort was mainly by British scholars who were ruling in India at that time. Later, Indian scholars viz. A.S. Altekar (1934), R.G Bhandarkar (1975), and V.V Mirashi (1977) made detailed contributions to the study of these sources. An important piece of work which proved useful for this paper was a doctoral thesis (1989–90) by Binda Paranjape, Deccan College, Pune.

Gaay-vaasru iconography and it's antiquity

During the course of explorations and excavations at Chandore, the team came across a number of unique sculptural elements found at the site and its general vicinity (**Figure 2a–g**). These sculptural elements comprised of a basalt slab/pillar, squarish in section, and with a flat rectangular front. It had a sun and a moon symbol with either a protruding or low relief kalasha at its apex, and an inset bearing a medium to high relief image consisting of a cow suckling a calf. They are devoid of any inscriptions.

Some of these show exceedingly fine craftsmanship whilst others were crude. They appear to be cousins of the Hero and Sati stones, a tradition which is commonly seen in Western India as well as in parts of Karnataka. Only one of these examples (of particularly fine workmanship)

had a second panel depicting a seated man worshipping a shiva-linga, and an attendant (with folded palms) standing behind him.

These pillars were named Gaay-vaasru (Cow-Calf) pillars, and the only other example (i.e. outside Chandore) was seen on the Bassien (Vasai) stone inscription of the Shilahara King Anantadeva II (dated Saka 1120) found at the Trivikrama temple within the confines of the Bassein Fort (Mirashi 1977: 163–5; Plate LXXI).

Similar depictions, albeit on a smaller scale were also seen on the Talale Copper Plates (first plate) of the Shilahara King Gandaraditya, dated to Saka era 1032 (Mirashi 1977: 207–14; Plate XCII) and in his Kolhapur Stone inscription dated to Saka era 1058 (Mirashi 1977: 229–35; Plate CII). An identical depiction was also seen on his successor King Vijayaditya's Kolhapur stone inscription dated to Saka era 1065 (Mirashi 1977: 246–50; Plate CVII). A cow without a calf shown alongside a seated figure worshipping a Shivalinga (and the Sun & Moon signs) was seen on the Miraj Copper Plates of Marasimha dated to Saka era 980 (Mirashi 1977: 200–6; Plate XC iii b).

It is important to note that with the exception of Anantadeva II, a scion of the North Konkan branch of the Shilaharas, all the other aforementioned rulers belong to the Kolhapur branch of the Shilaharas.

Methodology

To understand the spatial importance of these Gaay-vaasru pillars, accounts of local villagers formed the first source. The stones were discovered at random locations like on hill slopes, farms, backyard of a house, etc. (**Figure 3**). The locals knew about these for years and did acknowledge them as a part of their landscape. Some stones were intact in their location, while others had to be dug out and laid on the ground. However, no local



Figure 2: Gaay-vaasru stones at various locations.



Figure 3: Gaay-vaasru stone on a hill slope.

account could pinpoint the antiquity of these stones nor assert their purpose.

Initial observations were made with respect to their morphological details, directions, engravings, etc. None of which were conclusive enough. The stones are roughly uniform in size, and all except one were placed at around 200 mt (ASL) with slight variation. Each stone had a depiction of 'cow and calf' and a 'sun and moon', with some variations in detailing, directions, facing, etc. Some stones had a kalasha like engraving on top which is a traditional icon for auspicious events.

The locations of these stones were recorded using a handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) device (Figure 4). The land grants were cross referred and efforts



Figure 4: Gaay-vaasru stone locations in Chandore.

were made to understand the significance of these stones with respect to the grant. These were supported by some spatial analysis with limited scope. To observe overall relief, Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM)'s Digital elevation model (DEM) and the generated contours were used. Around each of the stones, probable farming area (roughly 20 acre i.e. 80932 sq.m.) was demarcated. This was not necessarily around the stone but in the vicinity of the stone with respect to relief. This was performed in open source GIS applications.

Observation I

Due to the variation in directions, facing, etc., it appeared that they might serve as route markers for historical roads which might not be necessarily visible on today's landscape. So the exact locations of these stones were plotted along with the schematic of above mentioned variations in overall appearance (Figure 5).

Following observations were made based on this plotting:

- About 3 stones are identical in their direction, feature detailing and cow directions (GW1, GW3, GW6).
- Other stones do not seem to follow any particular standard (GW2-fallen, GW4, GW5).
- One stone cannot be interpreted at all since it is lying on the ground and cow-calf engraving is heavily eroded (GW7).
- The sun and moon do not seem to relate to an East/ West orientation.
- In terms of these being markers for road directions, there is not enough data; the present data does not indicate any such trend.
- For these to be treated as demarcation for boundaries, no area could be enclosed with all or a subset of these stones. Further explorations are needed for this.
- There could be more such stones.

Spatial relation

It was observed that the lands on which these stones were found were either existing or old farm lands (Figure 6a, b). When observed carefully, two pairs of stones belong to two settlements but have different names indicating a farm/orchard (Mal) in Nalephodi, Dhasacha Mal (GW4) & Wadacha Mal (GW5) and in Chandore, Vetalacha Mal (GW6) & Athavanich Mal (GW7).

Observation II

Due to above mentioned limitations, the visual interpretation of the stones was not fruitful. Hence another approach of comparing these with references of land grants mentioned in the copper plates was used. Besides the specific details of the donor, beneficiary, descriptions of the land, some generic information was observed in the majority of grants. Special days like eclipse, full moon, and solstice were chosen for giving grants. These were generally given to Brahmins (generally 20 acre), temples, caves for different purposes. It was generally given in different forms like fields, villages, orchards, etc. The perfect boundaries of the donated land were called out i.e. river channels, hills, group of trees, houses within and outside the properties, etc.

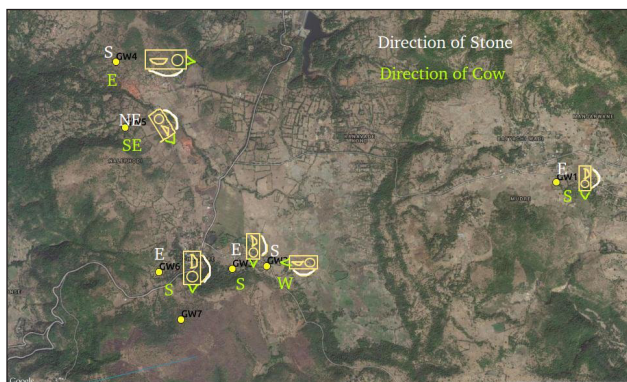


Figure 5: Schematic details of Gaay-vaasru stones.

There were some mentions which were important as they were about the legality of the land, administrative/royal regulations related to the grant. The basic translations read as mentioned below:

- The claim under charter is allowed when it bears, royal signature, possesses seal with royal insignia, properly drafted and accompanied with the possession.
- Donated lands are perpetual grants, soldiers' entry is prohibited.

These pieces of information from the grants gave rise to new questions which were crucial in understanding the nature of the land when it becomes a royal grant. These questions and their subsequent interpretations are discussed in following section.

The Royal insignia

The 'sun and moon' were observed on copper plates as well as other steles such as Hero Stones, Sati Stones, Gadhegals so they are not necessarily a unique part of Royal insignia (Figures 7, 8). 'Cow and calf' type steles were first observed in Karnataka as evident from the Rashtrakuta inscriptions of the 9th cent. CE, then in Kolhapur in the 11th cent. CE. Subsequently, they feature in the North Konkan around the 12th cent CE. This can be interpreted as adoption of iconicity from the original imperial power i.e. the Rashtrakuta Dynasty and its movement to the farthest area by its feudatories i.e. the Shilaharas.

Significance of cow & calf

In some interpretations, the king is compared to a cow caring for its subjects i.e. a calf. Another interpretation is that the cow indicates a grant i.e. land; milk is the produce of the land and the calf is a recipient of the grant. In



Figure 6: Gaay-vaasru stones in existing or old farmlands.

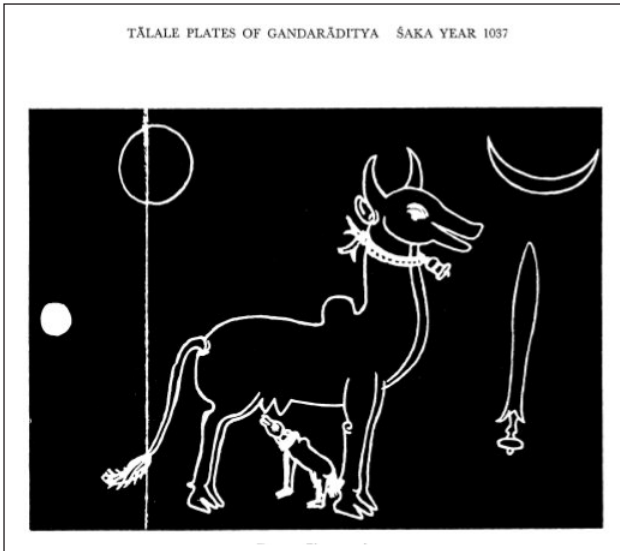


Figure 7: Shilaharas Royal Insignia.

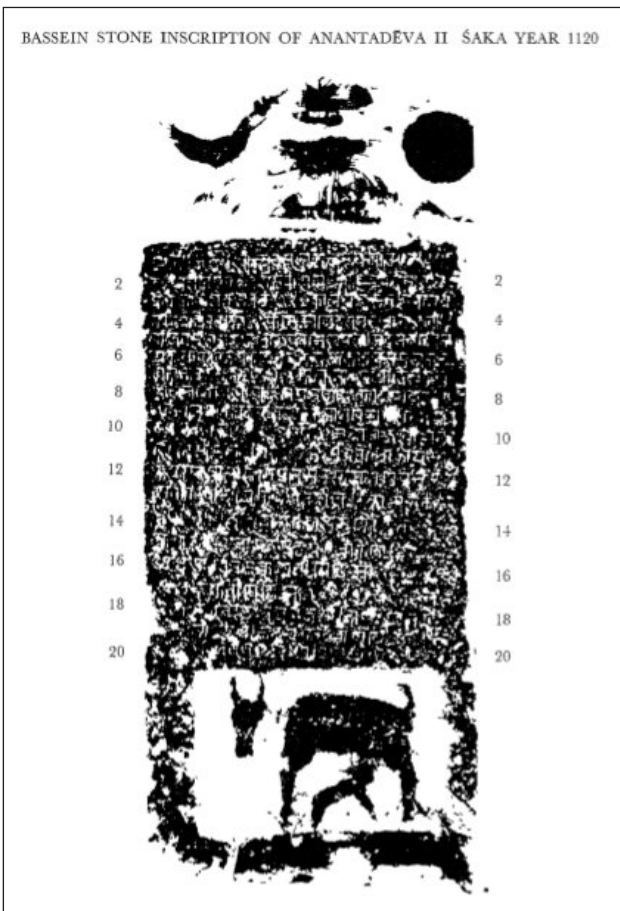


Figure 8: Copper plate with Shilaharas Royal Insignia.

the later case, a stone with this symbol being erected on the beneficiary's land is logical. This also creates a copy of grant for the beneficiary.

Interpretation of sun & moon

Sun and moon are mentioned in almost all inscriptions as indicators of perpetuity. Since the present orientation on stone are not necessarily East–West, relating it to the solstice can only be confirmed when we

find a correlation between the locations mentioned in land grants and existing lands with these stone markers.

Physical existence in the landscape

According to narratives on grants, as mentioned in previous section, for a claim to be accompanied with possession, the royal charter should be present on the land. Copperplate, a valuable item, can be under Royal possession, but stone, which is practically worthless for anyone else may now acts as proof of possession which resides with the beneficiary. However there have been instances, where many of these copperplates have been recovered from descendents of the original recipients of the grants. It was based on traditional knowledge of the family from whom the plates were recovered. So it is quite possible that the copperplate was also under the beneficiary's possession. Another commonly found narrative about a soldier's entry could also be interpreted in this context. Since it is a visible marker right on the land, access restriction for soldiers could have been easily implemented.

Conclusions

From the explorations and analysis done till date, it appears that these stones being the land markers of donated land, are on the donated land itself. The stone in this case, acts like a two-factor authentication bearing Royal insignia and having its location on the granted land i.e. beneficiary's proof of grant. Interpretation of the sun & moon symbols beyond perpetuity i.e. relating them with the solstice etc. needs a more in depth analysis. In addition, very few physical places from the grants have actually been traced. However, using such stone markers for identifying locations from the inscriptions might provide a fresh perspective.

These carved steles have a potential to bridge the gap in the early medieval history of Maharashtra due to their undoubted relationship with land grant records as described in the present research paper. These markers can assist in correlating the places mentioned in land grants and hence help in building historical geography of India's Western Ghats.

Further clues

Upon conclusion of the last season of excavation, we learnt of a tradition of a yearly religious fair held in the village which happens on first full moon of the Hindu calendar year. A representation in the form of a decorated stick is sent from surrounding hamlets (Wadis-based on cast) to the main village at Chandore. A total of 7 such representations gather coincidentally from 6 locations from where these stones have been identified. Though these wadis have relocated over a period of time due to geographical and/or political reasons, the continuity of social stratification is evident.

In another independent research, Dr. Jogalekar from Deccan College found identical stones near Ghanagad, Mulashi, about 85 km NE of present study area (**Figures 9, 10**). This area is the geographical border of Konkan/Western Ghats from where no existing records of

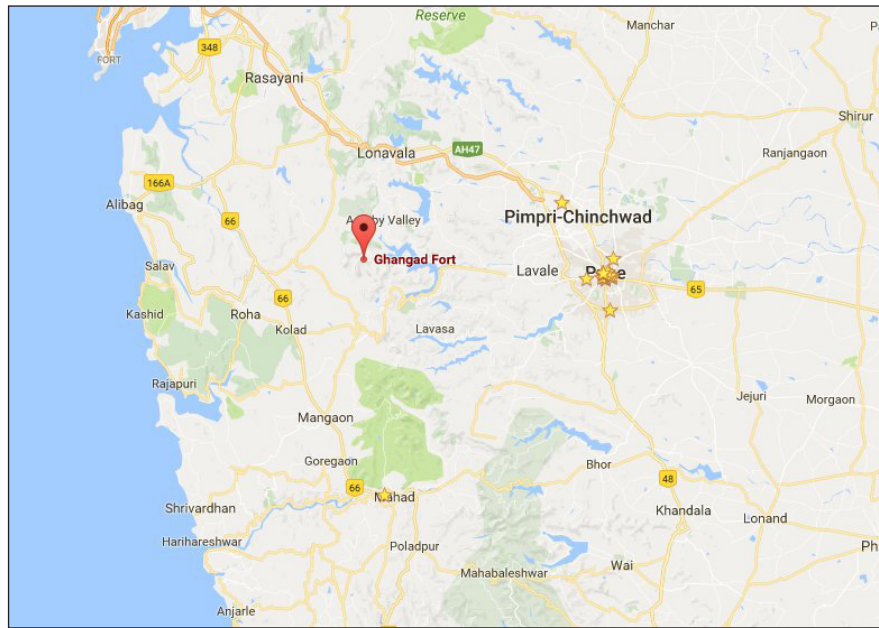


Figure 9: Location of Ghanagad Fort within Maharashtra.



Figure 10: Gaay-vaasru stone at Ghanagad Fort.

Shilaharas with regard to art/architecture have been discovered so far.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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