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Ramnagar Inscription: Making of the Temple and the Queen

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Abstract: *The power of the Gond rulers in Central India, like all the kingdoms, was evident in architectural activities. The Gond rulers shifted their capital multiple times, and each time, they constructed magnificent forts and temples that mark their presence. The Vishnu temple at Ramnagar, located in the Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh, is one such royal temple constructed by the Gonds and is an essential landmark for understanding their architectural style.*

The Gond king Hridayeshvara was the one to establish Ramnagar (22.6115° N, 80.5084° E) as the capital of the Gonds in 1667 CE and constructed a fort here. The fort houses an inscription commemorating the construction of the Viṣṇu temple by Sundari Devi, the queen of King Hridayeshvara. It was Sundari Devi only who got the aforementioned inscription inscribed, which is written in Devanagari script, with the language being Sanskrit. The Ramnagar stone inscription is the only archaeological source having the confirmed dates for the architectural activities of the Gond rulers.

The proposed research paper argues that the architecture of the temple and the style of the inscription, when studied in the more extensive spectrum of the history of Gonds, points toward the possibility that the Viṣṇu temple at Ramnagar augmented the socio-political status of the queen Sundari devi. Moreover, the Ramnagar inscription played a twin role in uplifting Sundari Devi, along with the temple she constructed to the highest alcove in the political hierarchy.

Keywords: *Narmada, Gonds, Inscription, Temple architecture, Iconography, Socio-Political*

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Introduction

Ramnagar (22.6115° N, 80.5084° E) is a village located in the Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh, India, on the left bank of river Narmada. It has the honor of being the fourth capital of the Gond kingdom and has forts and temples that testify to the Gonds' might. During the medieval period, several regional kingdoms ruled over different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Gonds were one such kingdom ruling over parts of the present "Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra" states of India. The area under the rule of the Gonds was known as Gondwana. The fort constructed by Hridayeshvara at Ramnagar is known as Moti Mahal by the locals and stands atop the flood plains overlooking the river Narmada and the dense forest beyond (Fig. 1). He establishes Ramnagar as the capital of the Gonds in 1667 CE. The Viṣṇu temple is in the south-eastern direction of the Moti Mahal fort at about 100 meters, maintaining its position on the left bank of the river Narmada. It was discovered and renovated by the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, Government of Madhya Pradesh, in 1974 (H. Shukla, pers. comm. 2021). The fort houses an inscription commemorating the construction of the Viṣṇu temple by Sundari Devi, the queen of King Hridayeshvara. Considering the available sources of Gond history, the Ramnagar stone inscription is the only inscriptional record having the confirmed dates for the architectural activities of the Gond rulers.

History of the Gonds

As per the available records (Hall 1860, Bhave 1940, 1947; Chatterton 1916, Agrawal 1962, 2005; Agrawal 2003), Yadavrai established the Gond kingdom. But the information about the rule of the Gonds remains scanty till the emergence of Sangram Shah, the mightiest of the Gond ruler, in c. fifteenth - sixteenth century CE. Sangram Shah was a warrior who consolidated the Gond rule by conquering multiple territories and maintaining good diplomatic relations with the contemporary kingdoms. The capital of the Gondwana, under the control of Sangram Shah, was located at Garha, which is currently situated in the Jabalpur district of Madhya Pradesh, India. Sangram Shah had a son, namely Dalpat Shah, who was married to the Chandela princess Durgavati which highlighted the political spectrum of Gonds in Central India. Dalpat Shah, on succeeding his father, shifted his capital to Singhorgarh. He died young and was followed by his son Vir Narayan who was only four years old at the time of his father's death. Hence, Durgavati, the wife of Dalpat Shah and the mother of Vir Narayan acted as the regent monarch for her son. Her kingdom was attacked by Baz Bahadur, the king of Malwa; therefore, Queen Durgavati shifted her capital to Chauragarh, located amidst the hills of Satpura, for better protection against the constant attacks. Later, Asaf Khan, the military general of the Mughal ruler Akbar, attacked the Gond kingdom. He defeated and killed Durgavati and her son Vir Narayan after a mighty battle. Queen Durgavati fought bravely to protect her kingdom and became a legend among the Gonds. After the defeat, Chandra Shah, brother of Dalpat Shah, entered a treaty with the Mughal rulers and restored part of Gondwana under the Gond rule. Madhukar Shah and Prem Narain succeeded him. During this time, the Gond rulers conflicted with the neighbouring Bundela rulers, and finally, Jujhar Singh Bundela of Orchha murdered the Gond ruler Prem Narain and captured Gondwana. Hridayshah, the son of Prem Narain, was in the Mughal court this time and was proclaimed the new Gond king and returned to his kingdom to take charge. Shifting the capitals for defensive purposes was not new for the Gond rulers. Hence, Hridayshah, who had seen the Mughal capital city being protected by the river Yamuna, chose Ramnagar as the site for his new capital, where it will be protected by the river Narmada. Later on, the capital was shifted once again to Graha Mandla by the successors of Hridayshah. Garha Mandla was the final capital of the Gond rulers and was destroyed by the Britishers after the revolt of 1857. Apart from Mandla, all the other

capitals of the Gonds, though abandoned, survived and now can tell us the story of a once mighty kingdom.

The history of the Gond rulers is still incomplete and is riddled with confusion as the Gond rulers seldom kept any record of their exploits. Though there are massive forts, temples etc., in multiple places that stand as a testimony to the legacy of the Gond rulers, the lack of inscriptional or textual records to collaborate with the architectural evidence makes it difficult to get a clear picture. The only direct textual source of the Gond history is Gadeshnripavarnana, a later compilation in the form of a eulogy of the Gond kings written by contemporary court poets. This record also does not provide the complete picture as it begins with Dalpat Shah. Indirectly, the Gond kings have found mention in the record of Mughals, but even this mainly started with the reign of Sangram Shah. In such case, the stone inscription of Ramnagar becomes extremely important as it is the only record providing a complete list of the Gond rulers as well as date of the architectural activity of the Gonds.

Ramnagar Inscription

A local history enthusiast, Mr. Rambharosa Agrawal, found the inscription on the premises of Vishnu temple being worshipped as a deity by the local people. The inscription was in complete disarray as people covered it with vermilion and performed various rites and rituals. Mr. Agrawal contacted the Mandla branch under the Jabalpur division of the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, Government of Madhya Pradesh, to preserve the inscription (Agrawal 1962:107). The Mandla branch acquired the inscription, restored it, and kept it in the Moti Mahal fort premises (H. Shukla, pers. comm. 2021). But the people were still trying to worship the inscription, and hence it was later covered with a fine mesh to protect it (Fig. 2). Currently, the Ramnagar stone inscription is attached to the east wall in the open sky courtyard of the Moti Mahal fort and is still in worship (Fig. 3). The inscription is inscribed on a sandstone slab with the language being Sanskrit and the script Devanagari. The



Figure 1: Google Earth Image of Ramnagar Highlighting the Fort, the Temple, and the River (Courtesy – Google Earth)



Figure 2: Ramnagar Stone Inscription, Close Up



Figure 3: Location of the Inscription in the Fort

sandstone slab is 68 inches in height and 29 inches in width. The inscription is broken in the middle and has been restored, but there remains a seam that divides the inscription into two equal parts, both 34 inches in height and 29 inches in width. There are 65 lines in the inscription, 30 in the upper slab and 35 in the lower slab. No margin has been provided while engraving the inscription. The size of the letters on the inscription is $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, while the letters on the lower 11 lines are $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in size which might have been due to space constraints (Agrawal 1962:111). The inscription has 52 verses in total in the eulogy style (Fig. 2). Out of the 52 verses, the first verse is a salutation to the Gods; 22 verses from the 2nd to 23rd provide the details of the genealogy of the Gond rulers from the first ruler Yadava Rai to the contemporary ruler Hridayeshvara; the eulogy of the ruling king Hridayeshvara is provided in 8 verses from 34th to 41st; the further four verses from 42nd to 45th appreciates the queen of Hridayeshvara that is Sundari Devi; the construction of the royal temple and the establishment of the icons has been discussed in 6 verses from 45th to 51st and the final verse of the inscription; the 52nd verse provides the date of the inscription.

Previous Work

Some scholars have already deciphered and translated the Ramnagar stone inscription (Fell 1825; Hall 1860; Pathak 1906; Chatterton 1916; Bahadur 1932; Agrawal 1962, 2005). The inscription was first discovered by British Captain E. Fell (1825:437-443) during his exploration of the Central Provinces. He identified that the inscription was written in the Sanskrit language and contained a record of the genealogy of the Gond rulers. Unfortunately, the Captain passed away unexpectedly. Before his sudden death, Captain Fell had sent a transcript of the translation of the inscription to the Asiatic Society, who posthumously published it. After this, Fitz Edward Hall (1860:4-17) published the inscription's decipherment and translation with an additional verse. Considering the content and the context, he placed the newly discovered verse after verse number 48. The reading provided by Hall is the first publication of the text of the inscription in its original language and script. In 1906, a local historian Pt. Ganesh Dutt Pathak (Pathak 1906:40-43), with the help of some experts in the Sanskrit language, deciphered the inscription anew. In addition to the decipherment and the translation, he also proposed a timeline for the Gond rulers with their genealogy, which occupies the major content of the inscription. A local history enthusiast, Mr. Rambharosa Agrawal, went to Ramnagar to read the inscription in 1962. He found the inscription at the premises of the Viṣṇu temple at Ramnagar. He made one more attempt to read the inscription but was unable to do so as, according to the local elders, between 1920-22, someone had fired a bullet into the inscription, which had destroyed a big part of it. Thus, Mr. Agrawal took the help of some Sanskrit experts to read the decipherment of the inscription as provided by Pt Ganesh Dutt Pathak. Additionally, Mr. Agrawal translated the inscription into Hindi (Agrawal 1962:114-124), which is the widely accepted translation of the inscription. In 2005, after the death of Mr. Rambharose Agrawal, a compiled collection of his works was published in which the inscription and the translation appeared once more with some changes in the reading of the inscription (Agrawal 2005:312-319).

Apart from the decipherment and the translation, earlier scholars focused heavily on the genealogy part of the inscription to support the history of Gonds. The Ramnagar stone inscription has many other facets apart from the genealogy. The inscription is a eulogy of the Gond ruler Hridayeshvara and queen Sundari Devi; it commemorates the construction of the royal temple at Ramnagar and provides details about the architects of the temple and the continuity of the royal legacy. Considering all the data that could be gleaned from the Ramnagar stone inscription, there is a need to relook at this inscription.

Hence, the proposed research paper argues that the architecture of the Viṣṇu temple of Ramnagar and the style of the inscription, when studied in the more extensive spectrum of the history of Gonds, point toward the possibility that the Viṣṇu temple augmented the socio-political status of the queen Sundari devi. Moreover, the Ramnagar inscription played a twin role in uplifting Sundari Devi, and the temple she constructed to the highest alcove in the political hierarchy.

The proposed statement is justified with the help of specific crucial archaeological data collected during the fieldwork, 1) the architectural style of the Viṣṇu temple and 2) iconographic and iconometric analysis of the deities mentioned in the inscription.

Verse Numbers 42 to 53, The Ramnagar Inscription (RI)

Verse numbers 42 to 53, which explain the major content related to the research statement, are reviewed for the current study. The additional verse that Mr. Hall provided has also been considered for the present research paper. Considering the condition of the inscription due to vermilion application, the bullet mark, the breakage, and the mesh protection, all the previous readings as well as the translations of the inscription contain specific differences. The decipherment provided by Hall (1860) can be considered the most authentic one. But the translation provided by him in archaic English also lacks the context in certain cases. The present research paper has considered the decipherment of the inscription by Hall (1860) for the reference. Additionally, the attempt has been made to provide the appropriate translation of the aforementioned verses.

abhavatsundarī devī rānī tasya mahīpateḥ |
saubhāgyasadanam puṇyasampadeva svarūpiṇī ||RI.42||

Translation – That king had a beautiful queen, Sundari Devi, who was the abode of good fortune, and virtues were her bounty.

daridraduḥkhaughanidānavāribhir nirantaraprastutadānavāribhiḥ |
gajāghanābhāadhanadānavāribhir yataḥ sadāptāḥ kṣitidānavāribhiḥ || RI.43||

Translation - The queen took care of the sorrows of the destitute and sad people of the kingdom. Her hands were always damp due to the ritual water of donation. She donated money like the elephant-sized (huge) clouds giving water to the earth.

aviratamuttarottaranivandhyavadāmkṛtair mitamavakāśmettya bhuvaneṣu gatair ghanatām |
śaradijaśītaraśmiśatasādhyavikāśakarair jagati yādīyapeśalayaśobhiraśobhitarām || RI .44||

Translation – Just as the continuously increasing moon in the *śarada* month fades the lustre of others in the sky, similarly, the queen fades the fame of others in this world (by her fame)

dīrghikārāmakāsārapramukhair bhūridakṣiṇaiḥ |
pūrtairanantair yā dharma nirantaramapālayat || RI.45||

Translation – By constructing large ponds, gardens etc., by giving multiple donations, the queen continuously followed the *dharma*.

viṣṇoḥ śm̐bhor gaṇeśasya durgāyāstaraṇeśca yā |
vyadhita sthāpanamide vidhāya vivudhālayam || RI.46 ||

Translation - The queen built a temple and re-established the idols of *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Durgā* and *Sūrya* with rituals and ceremonies.

tasyāḥ stavāya kaḥ śaktaḥ śankaraśrīdharāyaḥ |

suvarṇo 'pi mudritāḥ pratiṣṭhām prāpitā yayā || RI.47 ||

Translation - Who can praise such a great queen who established (idols of) *Śiva*, *Viṣṇu*, etc., by spending gold coins.

tatra niyuktair viprairūpahārairutsavair dhanairamitaiḥ |
yā sundaratrivikramamukhyāndevānsadārcayāncakre || RI.48 ||

Translation - The queen worshipped the main deity *Trivikrama* (*Viṣṇu*) by giving immeasurable money to appointed Brahmins for festivities.

rājñājñyā mṛgāvatyā śyāmayā ca muradviṣe |
naikanaivedyasāmagrī samānīyata nityaśaḥ || RI.49 ||

Translation – By order of the king, a doe-eyed woman with peculiar characteristics (*Sundari Devi*) would every day collect and bring the ingredients for the oblation of the God *muradviṣa*, i.e., *Viṣṇu*.

hrdayeśamahīpālo jigāya nitarām tayā |
śaktiprakaśaḥ kṣamayā candraścandrikayā yatha || RI.50 ||

Translation - Just as forgiveness wins over the power and the moonlight outshines the moon, queen *Sundari Devi* won the heart of King *Hridayeśa*.

sukīrter mīmāmsāvivarāṇagurostarkajayinaḥ sutena cchandaugapravacanapaṭor
maṇḍanakaveḥ ||

tadīyādeśena vyaraci jayagovindaviduṣā samāsāttadvamśakṣitipaviṣaye varṇanamidaṁ || RI.51 ||

Translation - With the permission of the queen, this eulogy and genealogy of the kings are briefly composed by a scholar, namely *Jayagovinda*, the son of the poet *Mandana* who was the expert in explaining the *mīmāmsā*, winner of the *tarka* debates and expert in the discourses of prosody.

simhasāhidayārāmbhagīrathasamāhavayaiḥ |
śilpibhir nirmitamidaṁ nipuṇair vibudhālayam || RI.52 ||

Translation - The temple was constructed by expert architects named *Simhasahi*, *Dayarama* and *Bhagiratha*.

vedanetrahayendvabde jyeṣṭhe viṣṇutithau site |
sadāśivena likhitamutkīrnataiḥ suśilpabhiḥ || RI.53 ||

Translation - This inscription was engraved by *Sadashiva*, who was a scribe and good architect, on the *śukla ekādaśī* (*Bhīmasenī ekāśaśī*) of the Hindu month of *Jyeṣṭha* in 1724.

The Viṣṇu Temple

As per the Ramnagar stone inscription, the queen constructed a temple and re-established the idols of *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Durgā* and *Sūrya* with rituals and ceremonies (RI.46). The three architects of this Viṣṇu temple were *Simha Sahi*, *Dayaram* and *Bhagiratha* (RI.52). The Gond architectural style shows a profound influence of all the varieties they were exposed to. This temple shows a noticeable influence of the Indo-Persian architectural style (Fig. 4). The temple is open from all sides with five doorways on each side, which makes it impossible to discern the main doorway or the face of the temple. The temple's outer walls are devoid of any decorations or motifs, consisting only of the archways and the *chajja* roof with hanging parapet.

The Viṣṇu temple has a square ground plan (Fig. 5). It has one central *garbhagrha* (Sanctum-sacrum) and four subsidiary *garbhagrha-s*. All the *garbhagrha-s* are square in shape and have multiple



Figure 4: Viṣṇu Temple, Ramnagar

doorways. The central *garbhagr̥ha* is bigger and has four doors in each cardinal direction connecting it to the rectangular verandahs running parallel to the central *garbhagr̥ha* on each side. These verandahs link to the smaller subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha-s* located on either end of the verandahs. Looking at the base plan of the temple, it is evident that the subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha-s* are situated adjacent to the central *garbhagr̥ha* in each direction. These subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha-s* are not directly connected to the central *garbhagr̥ha* and can only be accessed through the verandah. The four subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha* and the verandah together create a kind of *pradakṣiṇā patha* (circumambulatory path) for the central *garbhagr̥ha*.

The temple has a total of twenty doorways, five on each side (Fig. 4). Out of these five doorways, the extreme left and right doorways are the entrances to the subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha-s*, while the middle three doorways are the entrance to the verandah. The entrances to the subsidiary *garbhagr̥ha-s* are rectangle in shape, while the three doorways leading towards the verandah are constructed in the shape of the arches on each side of the temple (Fig. 6). Like the earliest examples of Indo-Persian architecture, these arches are noticeably trabeated or corbelled (Brown 1956; Koch 1991; Asher 1992). These arches are made of bricks, and instead of tapering towards the top, a square plinth is placed to provide the illusion of an arch while providing sturdiness to the structure.

The temple roof has five domes, one in the centre and four adjacent to it (Fig. 4). The central dome is more significant than all the other domes. Apart from their size, the domes are identical in their architectural style. The domes have six components (Fig. 7). The base is a square plinth. Upon the square base, there is a narrow octagonal plinth. The decorative bud-fringed arches rest upon the octagonal plinth and are enclosed on top by a narrow circular band. The dome rests upon this circular base. As with the arches, it could be seen that the dome is also not a true dome. Though at first glance it could be termed as a ribbed dome, by further observation, it becomes apparent that the top is flat, and the ribbings of the dome are not real but are made of stucco and are attached afterwards. The flat portion on the dome's top is creatively hidden by constructing an inverted lotus shape. This inverted lotus not only hides away the flat top of the false dome but also provides the dome with a pointed top, creating a distinct illusion of the perfect dome.

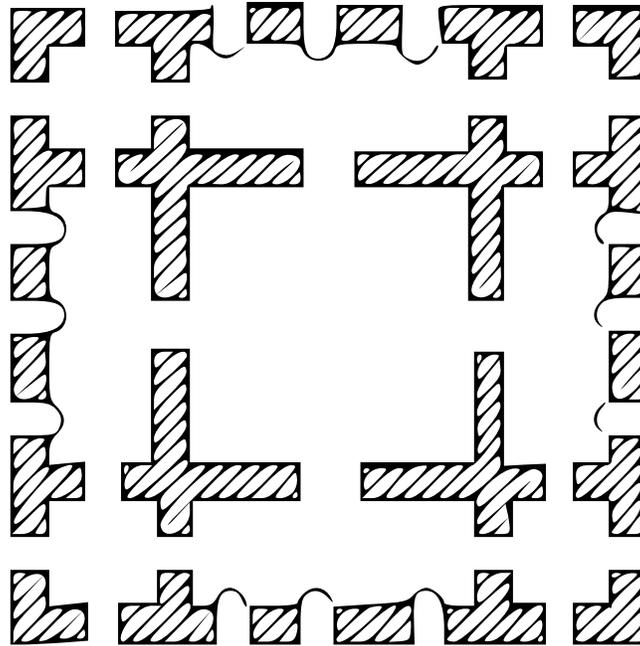


Figure 5: Ground Plan of the Viṣṇu Temple (Credit – Suhas Veluguri)



Figure 6: Arched Doorways



Figure 7: The Dome

The interior of the temple, though plain, has certain architectural components that need careful attention. The *garbhagrha* of the temple is divided into two parts - the lower and the upper and is covered in twin arch netting on both parts. The lower arch netting contains wider well proportionate arches (Fig. 8). Comparing it to the earliest specimens of Indo-Persian architecture there remains no doubt that the purpose of this lower arch netting was to make the *garbhagrha* look bigger than it is (Brown 1956; Koch 1991; Asher 1992). The lower arch netting also creates the illusion of the *garbhagrha* being circular or octagonal in shape instead of the square as it is visible in the plan. The upper arch netting, on the other hand is more compact and concentrated (Fig. 9). The arches of the upper arch netting are narrower and elongated. It seems logical that this elongated shape of the arches was done purposefully to provide an illusion of extended height to the interior of the *garbhagrha*. This arch netting once again creates an illusion of the *garbhagrha* being octagonal or circular in shape. But it seems that the main purpose of the upper arch netting was to provide a base for the dome to be constructed upon. (Brown 1956; Koch 1991; Asher 1992).

Apart from the *garbhagrha*, the other component in the temple's interior is the verandahs (Fig. 10). The temple has four verandahs running parallel to the central *garbhagrha* in the North-South and the East-West directions. These verandahs are rectangular in shape and act as a portal from the outside to the inside of the temple and between all the *garbhagrha*-s. Each verandah has six doorways, three opening to the outside of the temple, two on either end opening in the subsidiary *garbhagrha*-s and one in the middle of the posterior wall opening into the central *garbhagriha*. It is visible that the architects made a point to create trabeated arches on the outside of the temple for visual aesthetics but did not bother to extend the symmetry to the interior of the temple. Apart from the doorways, the walls of the verandah have no other decoration. The noteworthy point here is the ceiling of the verandah, which is vaulted or coved, a vital component of Indo-Persian architecture. These ceilings act as a companion to the domes and provide symmetry to the architectural style. Noticeably, the vaulted ceilings also create an illusion of extended space, thereby making the verandah appear larger than it is (Brown 1956; Koch 1991; Asher 1992).



Figure 8: Lower Arch Netting



Figure 9: Upper Arch Netting



Figure 10: Verandah

The plan of the Viṣṇu temple contains a resemblance to the philosophy of *Viṣṇu Pancāyatana* style of temple architecture prevalent in central India during the early medieval period. As per the philosophy of the *Viṣṇu Pancāyatana*, the temple at Ramnagar contains five *garbhagrha*-s, with one being central and four subsidiaries, the central *garbhagrha* housing the icon of *Viṣṇu*, which is explained further in the article (Fig. 5).

The Icons

Currently, the temple is a living temple with its central *garbhagrha* housing, not an idol but some abstract symbols in the form of clay pots and *triṣūla* (Fig. 11). The queen Sundari Devi constructed the temple at Ramnagar to re-establish the idols of *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Durgā* and *Sūrya* (RI.46). When the Mandla branch of the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums, the Government of Madhya Pradesh went to Ramnagar to preserve the temple, the team found the idols of *Gaṇeśa*, *Sūrya* and *Devī* in the temple premise (H. Shukla, pers. comm. 2021). These icons were brought to the District Archaeological Museum at Mandla to be preserved and protected, and they are currently housed in the same place. The iconographic representation of *Śiva* was not found, and hence it is assumed that *Śiva* was represented as a *Śivaliṅga* that either was broken or re-established.

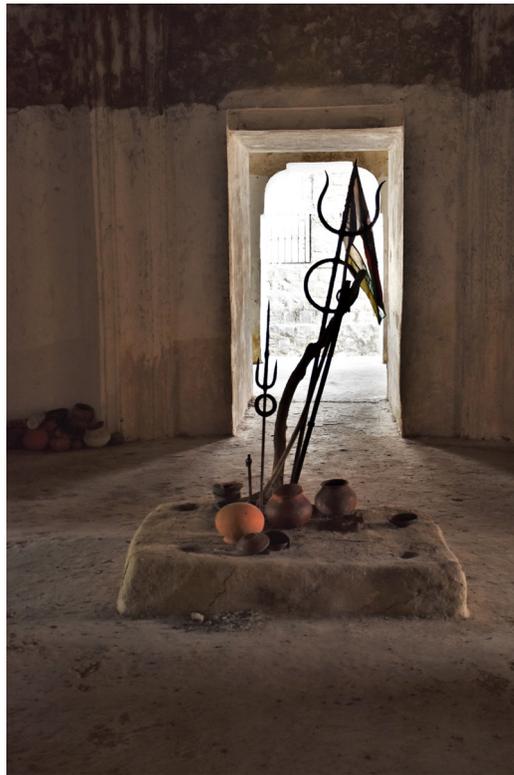
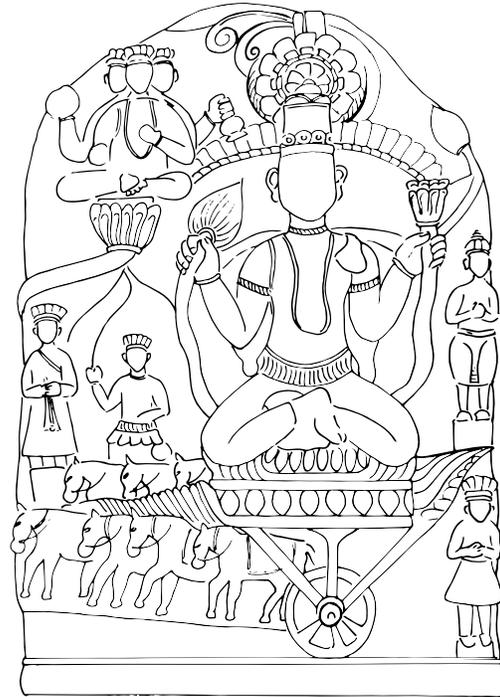


Figure 11: Current *garbhagriha* of the *Viṣṇu* Temple

Sūrya

The icon of *Sūrya*, or *Taraṇi* as he is called in the inscription, is identified by the museum to be from the seventeenth century CE (Fig. 12, Fig. 13). It is made of granite. The deity sits in *padmāsana* on a single-wheel chariot driven by seven horses. He is holding a lotus flower in both hands, one of which is a bud while the other has bloomed. He has a *mukuṭa* on his head and a small *kundala* in his ears. There is the presence of an *ābhāmaṇḍala* behind the top portion of the *mukuṭa*. The upper body is bare except for a simple *mālā* (necklace). There is an *aṅgavastra* delicately draped on the shoulders of the icon. The two arms have *bājubanda*, and the wrists are adorned with *keyūra*. The lower body is covered in *adhovastra*. It seems as if an attempt has been made to cover the feet of *Sūrya* with the knot of his *adhovastra*. The deity is surrounded by various devotees on either side. *Aruṇa*, the charioteer of the *Sūrya*, is present on the immediate right of the main icon with a hunter in his hand.

Figure 12: *Sūrya* IconFigure 13: Line Drawing of the *Sūrya* Icon (Credit – Tarannum Caur Sodhi)

Most interestingly, there is a small icon of *Brahma* sitting on the *padma pīṭha* in the top right corner of the principal icon. The lotus on which *Brahma* is sitting appears to be emerging from behind the icon slab itself. *Brahma* is depicted with three heads and four hands and is sitting in *padmāsana*. He is holding a *kalaśa* and the *Vedas* in his upper and lower left hands, respectively and has *śaṃkha* in his upper right hand while the lower right hand is in *Abhaya Mudrā*. The icon is decorated with an *aṅgavastra* and a *rudrākṣa mālā* in his upper body, while the lower body has an *adhovastra*. No margin is left on the slab on which the icon has been carved.

The placement of the *ābhāmaṇḍala* not being at the centre but at the top portion of the *mukuta* is a distinctive feature of the Gond iconographic style. The shape of the lotuses, the sitting style, the crude way that the icons hold their respective *āyudha*-s, the cramped placement of the seven horses, the placement of *aruṇa* and the lack of margin all point towards the fact that the icon belongs to the later Gond iconographic style.

Gaṇeśa

The icon of *Gaṇeśa* is identified by the museum as of twelfth century CE (Fig. 14, Fig. 15). It is made of granite. The deity is sitting in *sukhāsana*, with *mūśaka* (rat) as his *vāhana*. The icon has four hands, he is holding an *ankuśa* in his upper left hand, *bijā pūraka* in his lower left hand, *modaka* in his lower right hand, and *pāśa* in the upper right hand. The upper body is bare and is adorned with *mālā* (necklace), *paṭṭa* and *yajñopavīta*. He is wearing *Bājūbanda* in his arms. The lower body has an *adhovastra* and a *pādvalaya* (anklet) on his feet.

The icon bears some of the components of the Gond iconographic scheme. The cramped placement of the upper two hands of the icon, the way of holding the *āyudha*-s, the shape of the *āyudha*-s, the shape of the toes and the lack of margin are again suggestive of the early Gond origin of the icon.



Figure 14: Gaṇeśa Icon



Figure 15: Line Drawing of the Gaṇeśa Icon (Credit – Tarannum Caur Sodhi)

Devī

The icon of the goddess found in Ramnagar is identified as *Kaumārī* and dates to the tenth century CE (Fig. 16, Fig. 17). The icon, when found was heavily damaged and bears the signs of restoration. The icon is made of sandstone. The deity is three-headed and has *mayūra* (peacock) as her *vāhana*. Half of the icon, including her hands, is completely broken; hence the *āyudha* cannot be identified, but it is clear from the remains that she is holding a *kalaśa* in her lower left hand. The goddess is wearing a *mukūṭa* on her head which is half broken. The upper body is bare except for the *mālā* (necklaces) adorning her. The upper body is slender, with voluptuous breasts, a narrow waist, and broad hips. The deity is sitting on the *padma pīṭha* in *Savyalalitāsana* with the right foot being placed on a lotus flower which is being bored by her *vāhana*. The *pīṭha* has decorative motifs and contains four devotees sitting below the icon. The *pīṭha* of the icon is of the *eka-ratha* variety. Even though the icon is



Figure 16: *Kaumārī* Icon



Figure 17: Line Drawing of the *Kaumārī* Icon (Credit – Tarannum Caur Sodhi)

broken, the remains of a pillar and a standing devotee are still visible on the left side. It is very much possible that a similar pillar and devotee adorned the right side of the icon to maintain the symmetrical proportions. The presence of decorative pillars flanking the deity, the elongated shape of the fingers and the other decorations suggest the Chandela origin of the icon.

Viṣṇu

The inscription denotes *Trivikrama*, or *muradvīṣa*, as the main deity (RI.48-49). Since *Trivikrama* is a form of *Viṣṇu* and *muradvīṣa* is one of the epithets of *Viṣṇu*, it could be assumed that the main deity in this temple was *Viṣṇu*, and it was the icon of the *Viṣṇu* that was housed in the central *garbhagrha*.

The icon of *Viṣṇu*, currently housed at the Rajarajeshvari temple of Mandla fort, the last capital of the Gonds, is a fine example of the Chandela iconography and could be dated to c. tenth century CE (Fig. 18, Fig. 19). The icon is carved in sandstone and bears the hallmarks of the Chandela iconographic scheme. The deity is standing in *samapādāsana* and is holding *gadā* (mace), *cakra* (discus) and the *śaṅkha* (conch) in his three hands while the fourth hand is in *varada mudrā* and has a decorative motif on the palm. The icon is wearing an elongated *Kirīṭa mukuṭa* on his head. The *kunḍala* in his ears hangs onto his shoulders. The upper body of the deity is slender with a broad chest and narrow waist, and is naked except for *mālā* (necklace) and *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread). The lower body of the deity is covered with *adhavastra* and a *vaijyanṭī mālā* hanging below his knees. The arms are adorned with *bājubanda* and *keyūra*. The fingers are slender and elongated and hold the *āyudha-s* beautifully.

The deity is flanked by pillars on either side. Both pillars have small *koṣṭha* niches on the top with a *śikhara*. The *koṣṭha* niche on the pillar located on the left side of the principle icon has the icon of *Narasimha*, while the *koṣṭha* niche on the pillar located on the right side has the icon of the *Varāha*. Both *koṣṭha* niches are adorned with *śikhara* of *phāmsanakāra* variety. There are various decorative motifs on either side of these pillars, but they are heavily eroded and cannot be identified. The top portion of the icon has *mālādhārī-s* flanking a *koṣṭha* in the centre. The icon on the centre *koṣṭha* is eroded; it shows a figure sitting on a *pīṭha* in the *savyalalitāsana* and holding some *āyudha-s* in both hands. The identity of the figure is not clear. The *pīṭha* of the icon is of the *tri-ratha* variety; each *ratha* contains two figures of the devotees, one in the standing position and the other in the sitting position.

The design of the *āyudha-s* that the icon is holding and the way they are being held provides further claim to the icon belonging to the Chandela iconographic scheme (Desai 2009: 177-183). Further, the elongated shape of the fingers and the scheme of decorative pillars flanking the icon is most prominently identified with the one belonging to the Chandela iconography.

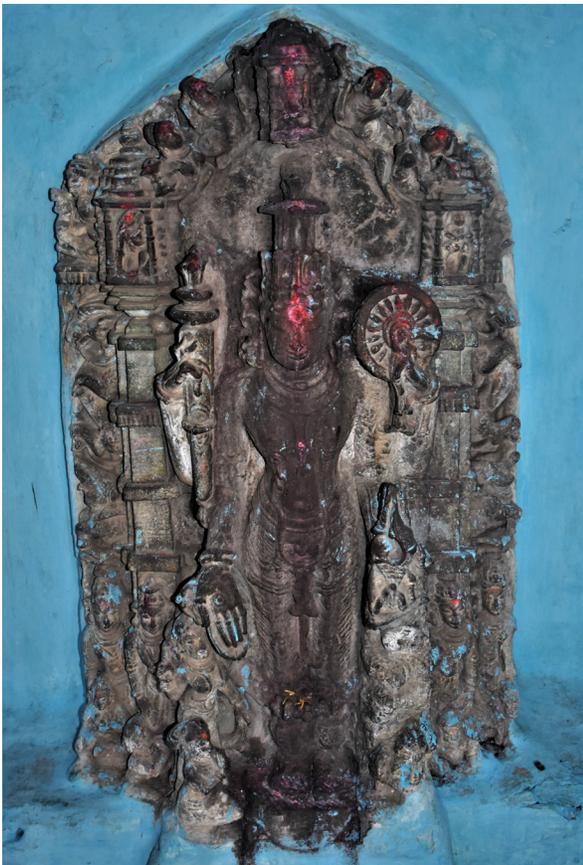


Figure 18: Viṣṇu Icon

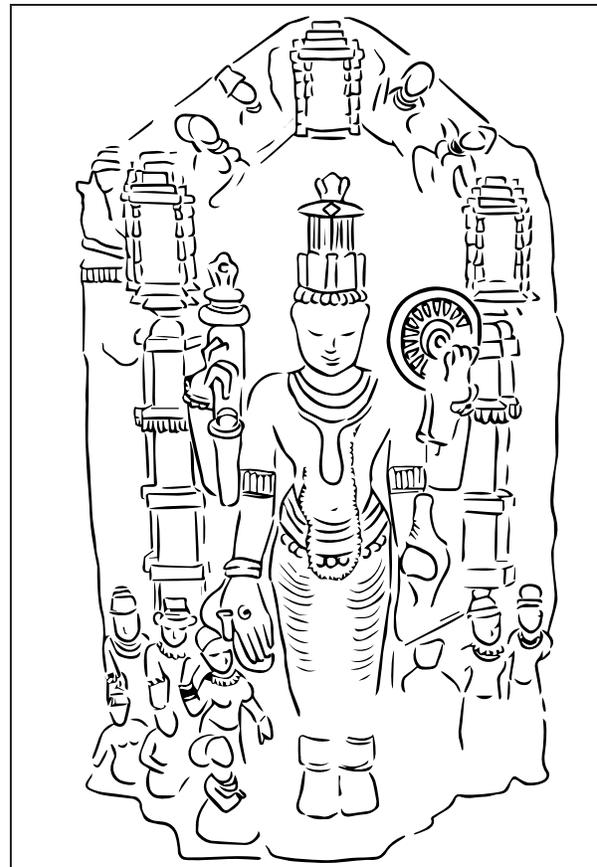


Figure 19: Line Drawing of the Viṣṇu Icon (Credit – Tarannum Caur Sodhi)

The Gond rulers had a matrimonial relationship with the Chandela Rajputs of Mahoba. Durgavati, the wife of the Gond king Dalpati Sahi was a Chandela princess (Pathak 1906; Bhave 1940; Agrawal 1962, 2005; Agrawal 2003). It is very much possible that she brought the *Viṣṇu* icon with her from her maternal home. Though the Gonds had become militarily powerful during the reign of Sangram Sahi, they were still relatively new on the political stage of Central India. The Chandelas of Mahoba, on the other hand, could trace their lineage further back in history and thus were placed on a higher social stratum in the political spectrum of Central India. The marriage between the Chandela princess

Durgavati and the Gond prince Dalpati Sahi must have raised the Gond rulers' socio-political profile. This icon was a symbol of that social and political upliftment, a symbol of their prosperity. The Gond iconographic style was still in its developmental stage, and hence this icon, with its intricate and beautiful details, must have held a place of honour among the Gonds. The marriage of Dalpati Sahi and Durgavati took place in 1522 CE (Bhave 1940, Agrawal 2003). Durgavati was the princess of the Chandelas of Mahoba. The Chandelas were a venerable royal family of Central India, but their power had diminished and was only limited to the area in and nearby Mahoba. Durgavati was a daughter of this prestigious lineage belonging to the higher social strata of the Rajput clan. She was also very beautiful and hence many Kings and princes wanted to wed her. In such a situation, Durgavati's father decided to hold a *swayamvara*. Dalpati Sahi was a Gond prince. With the military campaigns of Sangram Sahi – the father of Dalpati Sahi - the Gonds had recently emerged as a politically powerful kingdom in Central India. But they lacked the royal lineage and did not belong to the Rajput clan. Hence, they were not invited to the *swayamvara* of Durgavati. Dalpati Sahi rode to Mahoba with an army and abducted Durgavati and married her. The King of Mahoba and the other Rajput clans were afraid of the military prowess of Sangram Sahi. On the other hand, the ruler of Mahoba was also pleased to marry his daughter in such a powerful royal house and hence the union went unchallenged (Beveridge 1907).

Apart from this, the valour of Durgavati and her dedication to the Gond kingdom provided her with an exceedingly high reverence among the Gond rulers. It could be assumed that this reverence towards her sacrifice transferred to her personal effects, of which the icon was one. The icon was probably kept safe by generations of Gond rulers in remembrance of their brave queen who sacrificed her life protecting them. Due to all these reasons, the *Viṣṇu* icon might have become symbolically important for the Gond rulers and hence must have been carefully shifted with the shifting capitals. It was the same icon that was established by Sundari Devi as the presiding deity in the royal temple of Ramnagar, once again proclaiming the legacy and the might of the Gonds. When the capital was again shifted to the Garha Mandla, the next capital of Gonds, the icon was taken along and kept on the premises of the royal temple of Rajarajeshwari.

There emerges a possibility that the *Kaumārī* icon was also brought by Queen Durgavati from her maternal home and was kept safe as her legacy. Probably sometime between its establishment at the Ramnagar temple and shifting the capital to Garha Mandla, the icon was broken and hence was not taken to Garha Mandla like the *Viṣṇu* icon.

The Date

The last shloka of the inscription has a chronogram as; *vedanetrahayendvabde jyeṣṭhe viṣṇutithau site* | (RI.53). It claims that the inscription was engraved on *Veda* (4) - *netra* (2) - *haya* (7) - *indu* (1), i.e., 1724, on the *śukla ekādaśī* of the Hindu month of *Jyeṣṭha*. This *ekādaśī* is also known as the *Bhīmsenī Ekādaśī* or the *Nirjalā Ekādaśī*. *Ekādaśī* is considered as an auspicious day by the devotees of *Viṣṇu*. It is celebrated on the 11th day of the cycle of moon and falls twice a month with waxing and the waning cycle. There are approximately twenty-four *Ekādaśī* in a year. The devotees of *Viṣṇu* fast on this day and perform rites to please the God. Of all these *Ekādaśī*, the one occurring during the waxing phase of moon on the Hindu month of *Jyeṣṭha* is considered the most auspicious. It is also known as *Bhīmsenī Ekādaśī* or *Nirjalā Ekādaśī*. The devotees of *Viṣṇu* observe a fast without the intake of water on this day and perform the required rites. It is believed that fasting without water on this day is equal to the fasting of all the *Ekādaśī* -s of the year put together. Choosing this date for engraving the inscription testifies to the assumption that the central *garbhagrha* housed the icon of *Viṣṇu*.

It is not specified in the inscription as to what era the date is referring to. Hence, a need emerges to look at the other sources of Gond's history to understand the date. A similar date of the inscription is also recorded by *Gadheśanripavarṇana*, the only other primary source of the early Gond history (Bhave 1940; Bhave 1947; Agrawal 2003). This Sanskrit manuscript is a compilation of the eulogies composed by various poets residing in the court of the Gond kings, with multiple dates recorded as chronograms. But once again, no era has been provided. Further, the *Gadheśanripavarṇana* provides 1578 (*adveṣṭāśvatithau*) as the chronogram for the wedding of Dalpati Shah and Durgavati, the famous Gond queen, without giving any era. But the *Akbaranāmā* of Abul Fazal, an indirect source that could be used for the Gond history, records 1564 as the date of the subjugation of the Gond kingdom to the Mughal rule as well as the date for Durgavati's martyrdom (IS.2:36-1896). Historians agree that this date is confirmed and belongs to the Gregorian calendar (Smith 1917:69). If the date provided in the *Akbaranāmā* is taken as the landmark, it could be argued that the date of the wedding provided in the *Gadheśanripavarṇana* could only be possible if it confers to the *Vikrama Samvata*, that will make it 1522 CE. It could be presumed that if one date from the text is conferring to a certain era, all the other dates will follow the same methodology. Hence, according to *Gadheśanripavarṇana*, the date of inscription becomes *Vikrama Samvata* 1724, i.e., 1667 CE. Since the inscription claims the same date as given in the *Gadheśanripavarṇana*, it could be convincingly argued that it is using the same era. Thus, the date of the inscription becomes *Jyēṣṭha śukla ekādaśī* 1667 CE, which makes it June 3, 1667.

Discussion & Conclusion

According to the inscription of Ramnagar, the construction of the temple was patronised by queen Sundari Devi, the wife of King Hridayeshvara. The inscription alludes to great details about the various qualities possessed by the queen, that she was incredibly beautiful (*svarūpiṇī*), the abode of good fortune (*saubhāgyasadanam*) and virtues were her bounty (*puṇyasampadā*) (RI.42). But the social background of the queen is not mentioned in the inscription. According to Pt. Ganesh Dutt Pathak (1906:26), Sundardeva Patura, i.e., Sundari Devi was a prostitute at the Mughal court where King Hridayeshvara encountered her. Eventually, he developed affectionate feelings towards her and hence brought her to his kingdom. Further, G.V. Bhave (1947:251) confirms through the ethnographic survey that Queen Sundari Devi was a Khatri wife of the king. In the local dialect, the word Khatari, the closest word to Khatri, means concubine (M. Dixit, pers. comm. 2022). This information compels us to look at the whole inscription from a new perspective. Her maternal heritage not being mentioned in the inscription supports this argument. Also, it could be assumed that she was not the mother of the heir apparent. In such circumstances, Sundari Devi needed to create her niche to find her rightful place in royalty. One of the earliest ways of securing the royal identity for women as queens was to have a prestigious maternal lineage and be the mother of the heir apparent. This allowed them to influence the social and political spectrum and gave them minute control over the economic resources. Sundari Devi did not have this option. The only advantage she must have had was that she was adored very much by the king, as is alluded to in the inscription. The intimacy between the king and the queen is explained in the inscription with the use of simile, just as forgiveness wins over the power and the moonlight outshines the moon; the queen Sundari devi won the heart of the king Hridayesha (RI-50). Making use of her place as the beloved of the contemporary ruler, Sundari Devi worked towards creating a place in royalty for herself.

Historically, the queens used to cement their position among the general masses by making donations and taking care of the destitute. The queens also sponsored and donated to many religious structures, and through these donations that they found a place for themselves among the royal power

as well. It seems that Sundari Devi followed the same pattern. As provided in the inscription, she started by winning a place in the heart of the populace through her altruistic actions and donations. This religious generosity of the queen is explained by using the simile that her hands were always damp due to the ritual water of huge donations like the clouds giving water to the earth (RI.43). The popularity gained by the queen because of the donation is compared to that of the moon in the month of *śarada*. The queen was outshining the fame of others in this world (by her fame) just as the continuously increasing moon in the *śarada* month (RI.44). From this; we can glean that it is very much possible the people of the kingdom loved and respected her. She continued strengthening her place by commissioning various construction activities for beautification and the benefit of her kingdom. The queen also commissioned the construction of multiple gardens, large ponds, etc., as a part of her duty (RI.45).

The culmination of this power-gathering activity came in the form of the construction of the Viṣṇu temple (RI.46). This was one big hurdle, as the people might have accepted her royal connections, but still, there was no way that the royal household or the people attached to the royal household would legitimize a temple patronised by a concubine. According to the inscription, Sundari Devi circumvented this hurdle in three ways. Firstly, she invited Brahmins to perform various rites and rituals, thereby granting religious legitimacy to the temple as was done by the kings through the ages (RI.46). Secondly, she also made provision for the regular worshipping of the icons and the upkeep of the temple by emptying her coffers even more (RI.48-49). This regular worship in the temple might have slowly attracted the people to the temple. Lastly and most importantly, she made the temple both royal and legitimate through her clever selection of icons. As is already explained, Sundari devi collected the icons inherited from her predecessor, indicating their past glory and alliances and re-established them in the temple (RI.46-47). There was no way anyone could repudiate the use of these icons without repudiating their royal legacy. The royal people had to accept these icons, and with this, they had to accept the temple where the icons were placed. In this way, Sundari Devi made sure that the temple patronised by her became the royal temple and continues as a testament to her royal legacy. As a result, Sundari Devi not only preserved the royal heritage but also secured her place in the royal niche of the Gond kingdom.

Only two women of the Gond kingdom have been found mentioned in the official records of the Gonds- inscription and the *Gadheśanr̥pavarṇana*- one being Queen Durgavati, the wife of King Dalpati Shah and the regent queen during the reign of her son Veer Narayana. Queen Durgavati defended her kingdom from the Mughal invasions and became a legend. In this light, it becomes even more commendable that the only other woman worth mentioning in Gond history is Sundari Devi. Looking at the sources, it could be inferred that while Durgavati protected her kingdom, Sundari devi protected that kingdom's heritage and legacy by re-establishing the icon and hence deserve her place in the royal strata.

The inscription in Sanskrit, the non-native and classical language, was just one more way to solidify her royal placement and that of the temple she constructed. The inscription helped in providing credence to the temple and made it the royal temple. In turn, as the royal temple's patron, Sundari Devi automatically found a place in the royalty. The inscription mentioning her various virtues further made her famous and immortalised her and her royal status. This justifies the research statement that the architecture of the temple and the style of the inscription, when studied in the more extensive spectrum of the history of Gonds, makes it apparent that the Viṣṇu temple at Ramnagar augmented the socio-political status of the queen Sundari devi. Moreover, the Ramnagar inscription played a twin role in uplifting Sundari Devi along with the temple she constructed to the highest alcove in the political hierarchy.

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Statements and Declarations

The authors of this paper have no competing interests to declare.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data i.e. inscription analysed in this research paper, is available within the articles cited in the manuscript. Images data was taken by the first author during the on-field survey.

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