

Recently Explored Architectural and Sculptural Remains in the Upper Baitarani Valley, Keonjhar District, Odisha: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract: The Baitarani River Valley, similar to other river valleys in Odisha, has served as a focal point for architectural and sculptural endeavours in Eastern India. The river valley is renowned for its remarkable antiquities and religious sanctuaries located in the northern part of Odisha; it has garnered significant attention from scholars due to the abundance of images from various sects dispersed throughout its expanse. This paper focuses on a comprehensive account of the Brahminical and Buddhist sculptural and architectural remnants recovered in the Upper Baitarani River Valley, specifically within the Champua and Hatadihi Blocks of the Keonjhar district. These preserved sculptural artefacts, all attributed to the artisans of the Kalingan School in Eastern India, provide insight into the iconographic elements of classical Odishan art during the early medieval and medieval periods.

Keywords: Poly-religious, Brahminical, Buddhist, Sculpture, Lokeshvara, Janardana, Kirtimukha, Architecture, Khijjinga Mandala, Vijaya Kshetra, etc.

Received : 08 January 2025

Revised : 20 February 2025

Accepted : 24 February 2025

Published : 29 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Dwibedi, N., & Puhan, R. (2025). Recently Explored Architectural and Sculptural Remains in the Upper Baitarani Valley, Keonjhar District, Odisha: A Preliminary Report. *Journal of History, Archaeology and Architecture*, 4: 1, pp. 13-26.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahmanical temples and cults emerged and expanded in the Keonjhar district from at least the period of the Guptas in the 4th century CE onward. The Asanpat Nataraj Image inscription of King Satrubhanja of the Naga Kula, dated to the 5th century CE based on paleographic evidence, indicates the presence of Saivism in Keonjhar and suggests a greater understanding of India's extensive sacred geography. This expansion of Brahmanical culture accelerated in the tribal-dominated Keonjhar district, most likely beginning during the reign of the Bhanjas of *Khijjinga mandala*, who ruled the Keonjhar area from the 9th century CE onward. The Bhanja origin myth, as depicted in the Bhañja epigraphs, highlights their tribal autochthonous lineage, stating that the first Bhanja, Virabhadra, emerged from the egg of a *pea-hen* (Mayura). The Brahmanical acculturated Bhanja kings patronized both Buddhist and Brahmanical religions, worshipping Siva and Visnu. This political context explains the significant presence of Brahmanical sculpture in the Keonjhar district from the 9th century CE

onward. The Brahminical acculturation of the ruler, the people, and the region is also represented in the *Virajaksetra Mahatmaya*. According to local tradition and the *Vijara Kshetra Mahatmya*, the etymology of the name "Jajpur" traces back to "Yajñapura," signifying the place where *Brahmā* is said to have conducted a Vedic sacrifice. According to the *Viraja Ksetra Mahatmya*, Jajpur was the centre from which Brahmanical cults spread to Keonjhar. The iconographic similarities between the Jajpur region and the sculptures of the Keonjhar region near the Anandapur plain are quite evident, particularly in sites like Bancho, Podasingidi, and others. The northern region of the Keonjhar district, especially the Champua and Jhumpura block, borders Singhbhum and may encompass a significant *Gaya-Magadha* Cultural zone. It includes the notable historical site of Benisagar in the Singhbhum district. It is important to note that a sthanaka image of *Adi-Vasudeva*, possibly dated to the 7th century CE, was discovered in Benisagar, which is now housed in the Patna Museum. This early form of the *Adi-Vasudeva sthānaka* image in sandstone is flanked by *Cakrapurusa* and *Gadadevi*. The crown of *Vasudeva* is not a kiriti image but resembles a metrical crown instead. Furthermore, the *kirtimukha* is integrated into the crown. In addition to the large crown, the figure features considerable ornamentation, including a *necklace*, *vanamala*, and *yajnopavita*. Certain aspects, such as the disproportionately large back arms, the poorly executed faces of the *ayudhapurusas*, and the inexplicable cloth ends clinging to the legs below the lower garment, clearly indicate the sculpture's provincial character, despite its influence from the *Gaya-Magadha* cultural zone which diffused into the Keonjhar district in the post-Gupta period (Asher 1980: 59). Conversely, the religious and cultural landscape of coastal Odisha, particularly that of the Jajpur district, influenced the cult and iconographic programs in Keonjhar's Anandpur plain region. Khiching also emerged as a significant centre of cultural and religious activity in the 10th century CE and may be the third centre that influenced the iconographic programs in upper Keonjhar.

STUDY AREA

The present study area, namely the Upper Baitarani river valley, comprises the northeastern and southeastern parts of the Keonjhar district. This district is predominantly covered by dense forests and extensive hilly terrain. The landscape is defined by undulating topography, which showcases numerous fertile valleys and a variety of soils ranging from rich loam to the gravelly detritus of the hill slopes. Keonjhar district encompasses valleys, lowlands, and mountainous highlands, featuring a prevailing slope from north to south. The focus of this research work is the region in and around the upper Baitarani River valley, extending from the Bansapal block to the Hatadihi block of the Keonjhar district. It includes the Champua, Keonjhar Sadar, and Anandapur subdivisions, along with the Bansapal, Champua, Jhumpura, Patna, Saharpada, Ghatagaon, Anandapur, Ghasipura, and Hatadihi blocks of the Keonjhar district (Figure 1). The Baitarani River, a prominent river in Odisha, originates from the Guptaganga hills near Gonasika village in the Kendujhar district. The upper Baitarani valley spans a latitude of 20°35' to 22°15' N and a longitude of 85°10' to 87°03' E. The Anandapur gauging station is situated at approximately 21°34' N latitude and 86°07' 23" E longitude.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The historical archaeology of the upper Baitarani valley is illuminated by the presence of inscriptions in the cave shelter of Sitabinjhi, providing valuable insights into the historical archaeology of north Odisha. The inscription, in Brahmi script, belongs to the 5th Century CE and refers to Maharaja Sri

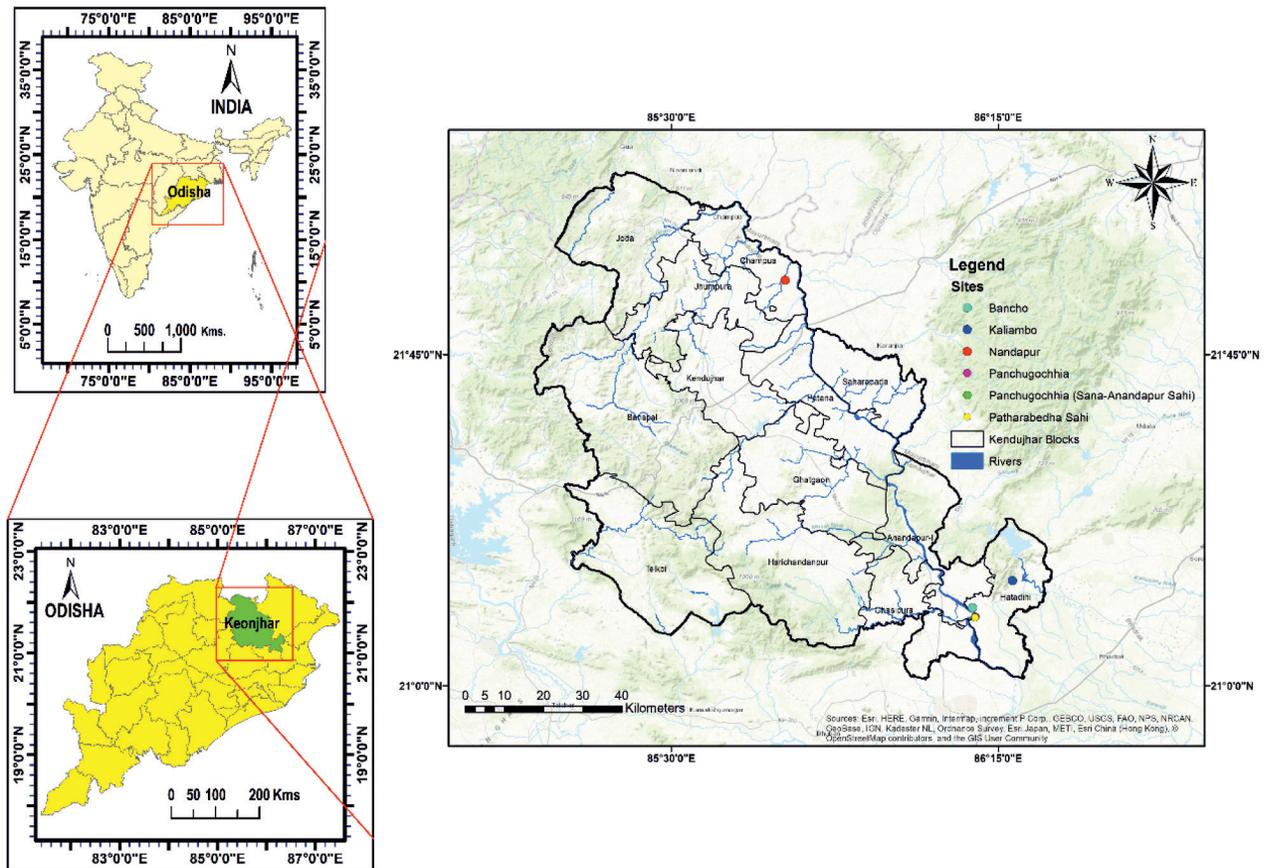


Fig. 1: Map showing the find-spot of newly reported early-medieval and medieval sculptural remains in the Upper Baitarani Valley.

Disabhanja (Senapati et al. 1986). A natural rock shelter locally known as ‘Ravanachhaya’, contains an ancient rock painting depicting a royal procession. Other archaeological finds on the site include female figurines, bronze ornaments, beads, ear studs, terracotta, copper cast *Puri-Kushana* coins, lamp stands, elephant figures, and burnt bricks. The *Chaturmukha* Sivalinga is another critical piece of evidence from the site, showing the ancient Shiva shrine at that location (Ramachandran 1951:5-25; Panigrahi 1981:369, Mohanty 1988; Senapati 1986: 42; 433-434; Mohapatra 1986: 173-174). Moreover, the Keonjhar district is famous for its Jaina heritages in Podasingidi, Ramachandi, Baidakhia, Ana, and Kupari in the Balasore district, which is located very close to these areas.

RECENTLY EXPLORED ARCHITECTURAL AND SCULPTURAL REMAINS

The Baitarani River Valley, located in the northern part of Odisha, is renowned for its remarkable antiquities and religious sanctuaries, similar to other river valleys in the state. The valley has fostered a notable trend of sculptural activities, much like those in other river valleys in Eastern India and Odisha. Numerous images from various sects have been discovered in different parts of the Baitarani River Valley, making it a centre of attraction for scholars. Recent field investigations in and around the Upper Baitarani Valley have uncovered many Brahminical and Buddhist sculptural and architectural remains across the valley (Figure 1). The rare images found in the Baitarani Valley showcase the iconographic features of classical Odishan art from the early medieval period, spanning the 7th to 12th centuries CE. Aside from a few specimens, there is limited information about the religious developments in the

Keonjhar district during the historical and early medieval periods (Table 1). Nevertheless, the discovery of archaeological sites, monuments, and sculptural remains in and around the Upper Baitarani Valley may provide new insights into the mapping of the cultural landscape of this region.

Table 1: List of Explored Early Medieval Sculptural Remains in Upper Baitarani Valley

Sl No.	Site Name	Geo-Coordinates	Block	Remains
1	Kaliambo Village	Lat:21°14'15.03"N Long:86°16'58.64"E	Hatadihi	Khasarpana Lokeshvara Sculpture
2	Panchugochhia (Sana-Anandapur Sahi)	Lat:21°9'22.76"N Long:86°11'53.03"E	Hatadihi	Standing Vishnu, Trivikrama and Narasimha sculpture
3	Panchugochhia Village	Lat:21°9'18.16"N Long:86°11'50.91"E	Hatadihi	One Narasimha Sculpture & Broken Viyala
4	Nandapur	Lat: 21°55'4.54"N Long: 85°45'42.40"E	Champua	Architectural fragments and four Vishnu sculptures found in the Kapileswara Temple complex

KHASARPANA LOKESVARA SCULPTURE AT KALIAMBO VILLAGE

The *Khasarpana Lokeshvara* sculpture was found in the village of Kaliambo, near the Chhenapadi to Hadagarh Dam Road, in the Dhenka Panchayat of Hatadihi block. It is worshipped as *Budhima Dei* by the local tribal people. The *Lokeshvara* sculpture, made of blue chlorite schist stone, stands 3 feet 10 inches tall and 2 feet 8 inches wide. The sculpture depicts a richly adorned deity, *Lokesvara*, seated on a full-blown lotus petal in *Lalitasana* (Bhattacharya 1958: 128). This two-handed image shows *Lokesvara* holding a full-blown lotus in the left hand while displaying the *Varada mudra* with the right hand. The back-stone slab features four images of Buddhist deities, with *Lokesvara* flanked by *Tāra* and *Sudhanakumāra* on the right and *Bhṛkuṭī* and *Hayagrīva* on the left (Figure 2). The top register of the pedestal is mostly obliterated, but *Sūcīmukha* and possibly some devotees are discernible. The head of *Lokesvara* is adorned with a *Jata mukuta*, and the back-stone slab is decorated with a peacock arch-like crown, with *Amitabha* seated in *Dhyana Mudra* at the centre. Flying *Vidyadharas* are depicted in the top two corners of the back slabs, and votive stupas, along with a *preta* being chased by a monkey, are also visible. The pedestal shows *Lokesvara* placing his leg on a full-blown lotus, with male and female devotees, and possibly a king depicted below. *Vrukuti*, among the devotees, is described as having four hands and wearing various ornaments. This sculpture is identified as the *Khasarpana Lokeshvara* due to the presence of a full-blown lotus and *Tara* opening on the lotus border. The *Khasarpana Lokeshvara* marks the transition from the Mahayana to the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism. The fine carvings and refinement of the image indicate the influence of the Somavamsi on Buddhist art in the region. This type of Buddhist sculpture-making tradition continued in different parts of Odisha. Based on its iconographic representation and stylistic approach, the sculpture can be dated approximately to the late 9th century or the beginning of the 10th century CE (Donaldson, 2001).

STANDING VISHNU, NARASIMHA & TRIVIKRAMA SCULPTURE AT PANCHUGOCHHIA (SANA ANANDAPUR)

The village of Panchugochhia is located within the Hatadihi block of Keonjhar district, on the left bank of the Baitarani River valley. It is 15 km away from the sub-divisional headquarters of Anandapur. During fieldwork in the area, several sculptural remains were discovered on the right side of the road



Fig. 2: The Khasarpana Lokeshvara image from Kaliasambo village.

leading from Chhenapadi to Tarava village in Panchugochhia, locally known as Sana-Anandapur. Notable findings include a large Standing Vishnu image, along with Trivikrama and Narasimha sculptures found in one location.

STANDING JANARDANA VISHNU SCULPTURE

The standing Vishnu image at Panchugochhia is substantial in size, measuring 6 feet 5 inches in height and 3 feet 2 inches in width. This sculpture, carved on a rectangular grey-coloured sandstone slab (Figure 3), holds significance as it is worshipped in the name of *Dasavatar* by the local villagers. Identified as *Janardana* Vishnu according to *Rupamandana*, the specimen's attributes are recognized based on the arrangement of the emblems, starting from the lower (major) right hand and moving in a clockwise direction, ending with the lower (major) left hand (Rao 1996:73-99). In contrast to the

experimentation with various *caturvimsati-murti* forms of Vishnu throughout the 8th and 9th centuries CE, beginning in the 10th century, the overwhelming majority of Vishnu images correspond in ayudha alignment to his *Janardana* form (Donaldson 2001:17). Notably, the back slab of the sculpture features two flying celestial beings (Flying *Vidyadharas*). The *Prabhamandala*, or *halo*, is intricately ornamented with *trefoil-arch* and creeper designs. The mark of *Shreevatsa* adorning Vishnu's bare chest represents his consort, *Lakshmi*. Vishnu is adorned with the auspicious "*Kaustubha*" jewel around his neck and a garland known as *Vanamala*. He wears a diaphanous *uttariya*, or upper garment, with *upaviti*. In contrast, the short *antariya*, or lower garment, is held by a girdle fastened at the centre with a clasp, the loose end falling straight down between his legs. Notably, Vishnu is flanked by *Brahma* on the left upper hand and *Siva* on the right upper hand on both sides of the stone slab.



Fig. 3: Vishnu, as Janardana, is standing on the Viswapadma in Panchugochhia (Sana-Anandapur) village, Hatadihi, Keonjhar district.

The sculpture depicts Vishnu in a *stambha* pose, standing on a *triratha* pedestal adorned with a *Vishwa Padma* design. Flanked by *Sridevi* and *Bhudevi*, Vishnu is shown holding a lotus and harp, while his consorts stand in a slightly relaxed posture with unembellished halos. *Garuda* is seated in *Anjali Mudra* by Vishnu's right leg, and devotees with folded hands in *Anjali Mudra* are carved on the lower part of the pedestal. *Sridevi* and *Bhudevi* are slightly inclined towards Vishnu, and the ear stud (*Kundala*) is particularly striking. Stylistic features, designs, and execution indicate that this

sculpture was created in the Kalinga School of Art, specifically the Panchugochhia specimen, during the mid-11th century CE. During this period, the trefoil torana replaced the halo, and a kneeling *Garuda* was introduced at Vishnu's feet. Additionally, miniature images of *Siva* and *Brahma* were typically placed on the right and left sides of the framing torana, and kneeling devotees were incorporated onto the pedestal. The consorts were elongated to nearly reach Vishnu's waist in height. Based on its iconographic features, the *Stanaka Janardana* form of the Vishnu image is dated between the mid-11th and 13th centuries CE (Behera and Donaldson 1998:83).

TRIVIKRAMA VISHNU SCULPTURE

The Trivikrama sculpture, made from grey sandstone, stands at a height of 3 feet 5 inches with a width of 2 feet 3 inches. The sculpture portrays Vishnu standing on a lotus petal, with his right leg firmly grounded on the earth and the left leg lifted in stride. Vishnu is depicted with four hands, holding Chakra in the upper left hand, Sankha in the lower left hand, Gada in the upper right hand, and Padma in the lower right hand (Figure 4). At the pinnacle of the sculpture, Brahma is depicted



Fig. 4: Vishnu, as Trivikrama, is found in Panchugochhia (Sana-Anandapur) village, Hatadihi, Keonjhar district.

holding the uplifted foot of Trivikrama and washing it with water from a vase. The demon Namuchi stands nearby with folded hands. Additionally, Garuda, Vishnu's vehicle, is illustrated on the left side, chastising Sukracharya for his counsel to Bali. On the right side, Vamana is portrayed holding an umbrella, awaiting Bali's gift. Bali is shown carrying a golden vessel in his right hand, with his wife standing behind him. Above Trivikrama, Jambavana is depicted sounding the drum of victory. Based on its iconographic features, it exhibits a close connection with the early Ganga Art in Odisha. In the historical context of Odisha during the reign of the Gangas, numerous four-armed Trivikrama representations of Vishnu have been discovered. Among the various avatars of Vishnu, including Varaha, Narasimha, and Trivikrama, the latter three eventually evolved as the standard *parsva-devatas* (attendant deities) in Vishnu temples. By the 12th century CE, the iconography of these representations had become standardized, with the most prevalent depiction featuring lowered hands, the right hand holding a lotus, the left hand carrying a conch, and the back hands holding a Gada and a Chakra in an uplifted position. Additionally, the common representation portrays Bali pouring water as a symbol of offering to Vamana beneath the uplifted leg of Trivikrama, while Trivikrama holds an umbrella, and Sukracharya is depicted with uplifted arms in despair, signifying his ignored warning. Images of Sridevi and Bhudevi, and occasionally Saraswati, are frequently positioned in the lower corner of the niche (Behera and Donaldson 1998: 85-86).

NARASIMHA SCULPTURE

The *Narasimha* sculpture is depicted on the Sandstone, which is now eroded. The height of the sculpture is 3 feet, and the width is 2 feet 08 inches in dimensions. The lower two hands are partly broken. In this image, *Narasimha* is standing on the lotus petal with a slightly curved back. Narasimha is depicted with four arms. In the upper left hand, he holds Gada, and in the upper right hand, he holds Chakra. The lower two hands show some erosion. He stands in a more upright pose, with the crawling demon beneath his foot eliminated (Figure 5). *Narasimha* holds a *chakra* and a *gada* in his uplifted backhand, and his hair, rising like flames, forms an oval *Prabhamandala* that frames his head. Typically, he is flanked at the base by Sridevi and Bhudevi. Such iconographic features of the *Narasimha* images in Odisha were added in the 12th century CE. In early depictions, *Narasimha* typically positions his raised left foot on the back of the crouching demon while providing support for the prostrate body of *Hiranyakashyopa* on his thigh. With his major right and left hands, the lion-headed deity tears out the entrails of *Hiranyakashyopa*, while his uplifted backhand generally holds a *chakra* and a *conch* (Behera and Donaldson 1998: 85).

NARASIMHA AND BROKEN VIYALA SCULPTURES AT PANCHUGOCHHIA VILLAGE

In the Hatadihi Block of Keonjhar district, within the Panchugochhia village, a Narasimha and Viyala sculpture has been discovered (Figure 6). The sculpture stands at 3 feet and 5 inches tall, with a width of 2 feet and 3 inches. Unfortunately, the lower two hands of the sculpture are broken. *Narasimha* typically positions his raised left foot on the lower back of the crouching demon while providing support to the supine body of *Hiranyakashyopa* with his thigh. The *Sridevi*, *Bhudevi*, and *Prahalad* (*Hiranyakashyopa's* son and a worshipper of Vishnu) can be seen on either side of the God. Although the arms and head portion of the sculpture are missing, two broken arms remain. A broken *Simha Viyala* image can be found nearby. Based on its iconographic representations, it is believed to date back to the last part of the 11th to 12th centuries CE (Behera and Donaldson 1998:85).



Fig. 5: Vishnu, as Narasimha, disembowelling the demon king, Hiranyakashipu, found in Panchugochhia (Sana-Anandapur) village, Hatadihi, Keonjhar district.

KAPILESWARA TEMPLE AT NANDAPUR, CHAMPUA BLOCK

Nandapur is a small village located in the Champua Tehsil of the Kendujhar District in Odisha, India. It is positioned 50 kilometres north of the district headquarters, Kendujhar, and 12 kilometres from Champua. The state capital, Bhubaneswar, is approximately 214 kilometres away. Nandapur is situated on the border between the Kendujhar District and the West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand State. The revered Kapileswara temple in Nandapur is positioned on the right bank of the Mermenda River, a tributary of the Baitarani River. A series of six temples are located atop a circular granitic rock outcrop about 500 meters from the river's right bank (Figure 7). A small Siva Linga is also present on the rock



Fig. 6: Broken Narasimha and Viyala images are found in Panchugochhia village, Hatadihi, Keonjhar district.

surface without any superstructure. Local villagers are currently undertaking modern cement plastering to renovate the ancient temples. Notably, this temple complex holds significance due to the coexistence of Vaishnavite sculptures alongside a Siva Linga. Furthermore, several fragmented sculptural and architectural remnants, including six amalakasilas, many broken stone chakras, and other architectural fragments, are scattered around the temple complex. The existing temples contain engravings of the Janardana form of Vishnu, featuring images of varying sizes, both large and small. The main shrine contains two large-sized Janardana Vishnu images (Figures 8 and 9); the others contain small-sized Janardana and Narasimha Vishnu images (Figure 10). During ancient times, Nandapur was a significant hub for both Saivism and Vaishnavism. The presence of scattered sculptures and temple remnants indicates the strong religious and iconographic influence of Khiching, which extends to the broader region of Odisha. Like other iconographic programs in Odisha, the Janardana form of Vishnu gained considerable popularity in Nandapur among the stanaka Vishnu images. Various stanaka Janardana images dating from the 9th to the 14th centuries CE have been found in Nandapur. The temples are built directly on the surface of a granitic rock outcrop without any foundations, featuring narrow entrances measuring 1 to 1.5 meters in height. Among the six temples, four face east and two face west. All the temples are built according to the Triratha plan; the temples' shikhara is crowned with small Amalakasilas. The main temple stands at a height of 5.8 meters, while the subsidiary temples reach approximately four meters in height. Similar types of temples are situated around the Benisagar area of West Singhbhum district and the Siva temple at Khekparta in the Lohardaga district in Jharkhand.



Fig. 7: General view of the Kapileswara temple complex found in Nandapur village, Champua block, Keonjhar district.



Fig. 8: Vishnu, as Janardana, is standing on the Viswapadma found in the Kapileswara Temple at Nandapur village, Champua block, Keonjhar district.



Fig. 9: Vishnu, as Janardana, is standing on the Tri-Ratha pedestal found in the Kapileswara Temple at Nandapur village, Champua block, Keonjhar district.



Fig. 10: Vishnu, as Janardana, stands on the plain pedestal found in the Kapileswara Temple at Nandapur village, Champua block, Keonjhar district.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of archaeological explorations in the upper Baitarani valley and its vicinity, it is contended that the religious landscape of the region during the early medieval period was characterized by polireligiosity. This denotes the coexistence of diverse religions within the same cultural and geographical space. During the 7th to 12th centuries CE, Brahmanical religion, Buddhism, Jainism, tantrism, and other faiths experienced significant expansion in the area. The emergence of temples in the religious landscape of Odisha, starting from the 6th-7th century CE, marked the propagation of Brahmanical religion and the validation of political authority. The Kalinga style, a distinctive regional style of temple-building tradition, reached its pinnacle during the rule of the Somavamsis and their regional counterparts, such as the Bhanjas of Khijingakota, between the 9th and 11th centuries CE. The Kapileswara temple complex, present at the Nandapur village in the Champua block of Keonjhar district, is unique for its strategic location and architectural style. It is located in the border areas of the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and the Keonjhar district of Odisha. The architectural style of the Nandapur temples is similar to that of the temples of Benisagar and Khekpata in Jharkhand. The Siva temple at Khekpata stands atop a granitic hill in the village of Khekpata. The temple follows a Triratha plan, and its shikhara is topped with a small amlaka. The overall height of the temple is approximately four meters. The temple has the same style and affinity with Rekha deula of the Kalinga style of Odisha and can be dated to the 9th century CE (Bhatt, 2002). The architectural features show the influence of the early Kalinga style of temple architecture found on the temples built in the northern highland regions of Odisha and some parts of Jharkhand state. In the ninth century CE, the Somavamsis of Utkal and the Bhanjas of *Khijingakota* established numerous religious centres in early medieval Odisha.

It has been seen that between the mid-10th and 13th centuries CE, Janardana Vishnu worship became popular in different parts of the Baitarani River Valley. In contrast to the diverse experimentation with various *caturvimsati-murti* forms of Vishnu during the eighth and ninth centuries, a prevailing trend emerged in the tenth century wherein the majority of Vishnu images aligned with his *Janardana* form (Donaldson 2001:17). The *Viraja Mahatmya* glorifies the magnificence of Mother *Viraja*, situated on the Vaitarani River, and records the presence of twelve different types of *Madhava* images worshipped in that region. During our field investigations, it was noted that both the northern and southern parts of the Keonjhar district along the Baitarani River bear numerous *Janardana* Vishnu images, all of which are currently objects of worship by the local populace. Based on both archaeological evidence and textual records, it indicates that *Janardana* Vishnu worship was highly popularized in the upper Baitarani River valley from the 10th-11th century CE to the present day. In the context of the Middle Baitarani valley, the evidence of *Janardana Madhava* images is found in the Siddhesvara and Trilocanesvara temple complex at Jajpur town near the *Dasasvamedha Ghat* (Behera and Donaldson 1998:83; Donaldson 2001:17-18). So, it indicates that the tradition of *Janardana Madhava*, a form of Vishnu worship, has been very popular throughout the Baitarani valley from early medieval times to the present day. Apart from these, many *Madhava* and *Janardana* forms of Vishnu sculptures were reported from the many areas of Cuttack and Puri districts in the context of Prachi Valley. These discoveries suggest that *Janardana Madhava* worship was very popular in the Prachi Valley and Baitarani Valley as well during the early medieval and medieval periods.

Between the 7th and 12th centuries CE, Buddhism experienced notable expansion and underwent adaptations in response to the developments in Puranic Hinduism. An important development during this time was the introduction of instrumental Buddhist deities, including gods, goddesses, and Bodhisattvas, which were believed to address the existential needs of devotees when worshipped in specific ways (Mishra, 2012). Buddhism integrated various aspects of the Puranic religion and assimilated them into its own traditions. The area encompassing the Hatadihi block and the neighbouring blocks of the Bhadrak and Balasore districts contains significant evidence of Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jaina sculptural remains. These sites, located within a 50 km radius, include prominent locations such as Bancho, Podasingidi, Panchugochhia, Sadha, Ana, Baidakhia, Kaliambo, Marichipada, Kupari, Agarpada, Kaupur, Anijo, and Kantigadia. Notably, these sites display a polyreligious nature and are situated approximately 70 km from Jajpur, reflecting the influence of Jajpur on the sculptural representation of the area. The Khasarpana Lokesvara sculpture in Kaliambo village indicates the spread of Mahayana Buddhism to the region. Additionally, the village of Bancho features many Saiva, Vishnu, Buddhist, and Jaina sculptural remains housed within a recently constructed sculpture shard. In the northern part of the Keonjhar district, the Kapilesvara temple at Nandapur in the Champua block reveals the coexistence of Siva and Vishnu shrines within the same temple complex, signifying the presence of both major sects within the Brahminical puranic tradition in a specific area.

The northern Odisha region, especially the Baitarani River valley, exhibited a diverse polyreligious landscape between the 7th and 13th centuries CE. This period saw the coexistence of various religions, including Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism, Buddhism, and Jainism, each incorporating common cultural elements into their respective religious practices. Notably, worshipping *Yaksha* and *Yakshini*, *Naga* and *Nagini*, *Gajalakshmi*, *Ganesa*, and *Kirtimukha* was a shared cultural motif among Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanical religions. Additionally, the art motif of *Kirtimukha*, symbolizing both devouring and benign aspects, was prevalent across all these religions. Furthermore, the depiction of *Purna-*

ghata, lotus medallions, and *viswapadma*-type pedestals was a common feature in the sculptures of Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions. The mode of rituals and worship also exhibited similarities between Buddhism and Brahmanical religions. The veneration of deities, accompanied by specific ritual observances to achieve profound objectives, was a prevalent practice across all religions in India during this era. It is important to note that within the South Asian cultural context, identical gods and goddesses were revered across various religions, sometimes bearing the same names and, at other times, different ones.

The exploration of these archaeological sites, in conjunction with iconographic and textual evidence, indicates that these locations were situated at the confluence of diverse religious beliefs and practices, coexisting within the same geographical and cultural framework. These sites served as a habitat for various religious beliefs and practices, encompassing distinctively Brahmanical, Jaina, and Buddhist deities and a fusion of multiple religious traditions. Contrary to the prevailing narrative in early medieval Indian historiography, which portrays religion in a linear fashion, the evidence suggests a poly-religious landscape where various social and religious groups intermingled and coalesced. This challenges the traditional view of the emergence of Brahmanical religion following the decline of Buddhism, as evidenced by the presence of diverse religious groups converging and coexisting within the same space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I sincerely express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Subrata Kumar Acharya, for his continuous support, guidance, and encouragement. I also express my gratitude to all my teachers in the Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, for their support of my research work. I also owe sincere thanks to Rajashree Puhan, one of the co-authors of this paper, for her help and support in preparing this paper.

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