

Sun, Stone and Sovereignty: A Critical Study of the Surya Cult during the Katyuri Dynasty (7th to 13th Century CE)

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Abstract: The Surya (Sun) cult under the Katyuri Dynasty (7th–13th Century CE) in early medieval Uttarakhand represents a significant convergence of religious symbolism, dynastic identity, and political authority. Set against the backdrop of a broader subcontinental resurgence of Sun cults, it is exemplified by monumental Surya temples at Martand, Modhera, and later Konark. This study investigates the emergence and significance of Surya worship in early medieval Uttarakhand under the Katyuri rulers. It examines how the Katyuri, claiming descent from the Suryavanshi (solar) lineage, established their religious and political identity through the patronage of solar shrines, most notably the Katarmal Sun Temple.

Combining archaeological analysis, textual sources (including Puranic literature and regional inscriptions), and first-hand fieldwork with visual documentation, the research explores whether the Katyuris' adoption of Surya worship was merely a reflection of dynastic lineage or also a response to broader religious developments in the 7th–8th centuries CE, such as the consolidation of Brahmanical orthodoxy, the rise of Smarta Shaivism, and the philosophical influence of Adi Shankaracharya. By situating the Katyuri Surya cult within this pan-Indian religious and political landscape, this study offers a holistic interpretation of how sacred architecture, ritual symbolism, and solar ideology were utilised to assert sovereignty, cosmological order, and regional authority in the middle Himalayas. It contributes to interdisciplinary study on early medieval Indian temple culture and the political-theological function of Surya worship in frontier regions.

Keywords: Architecture, Iconography, Katyuri, Temple, Surya

Received : 14 October 2025

Revised : 10 November 2025

Accepted : 14 November 2025

Published : 30 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Deshmukh V., & Anita Rane-Kothare (2025). Sun, Stone and sovereignty: A Critical Study of the Surya Cult during the Katyuri Dynasty (7th to 13th Century CE). *Journal of History, Archaeology and Architecture*, 4: 2, pp. 141-159.

INTRODUCTION

ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात्। (Rigveda 3.62.10)

*"Om, Bhur, Bhuvah, Svah, Tat Savitur Varenyam,
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi, Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayat"*

We meditate upon the radiant brilliance of Savitr, the divine solar being who illuminates the earth (bhuh), the atmosphere (bhuvah), and the heavens (svah). May that supreme light, the destroyer of

ignorance and sorrow, inspire and guide our intellects on the path of truth and higher knowledge (Geeta, 2020).

The Gayatri Mantra, one of the most revered verses of the Vedas, captures the spiritual essence and cosmic importance of the Sun as the source of life, energy, intellect, and moral clarity. In the early Vedic imagination, Surya was not merely a celestial object, but a cosmic principle, the illuminator of truth (ṛta), the destroyer of darkness, and the inner soul (atman) of all beings (Geeta, 2020). In the Vedas, the Sun has been called the soul of the living world the energy of the world. His light has been described as visible and worthy of contemplation.

आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्त्व्यो निद्ध्यसित्वः”

‘Atma va are drastavyah srotavyo mantavyo nididhyasitavyo maitreyy
atmano va are darsanena sravanena matya vijnanandam sarvam viditam’
(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad - 2.4.5)

Means, “O Maitreyi, it is the soul itself that should be seen, heard, contemplated and meditated upon.” Here, the Sun as the visible embodiment of the Self (atman) becomes a focus of both devotion and contemplation, linking cosmic order with inner spiritual realization. (Deodhar, 1940).

The Sun causes day and night on the earth, because of revolution, when there is night here, it is day on the other side. The Sun never sets nor rises – Aitareya Brahmana (2.7).

This indicates that the Sun is Stationery. This is also elaborated in the later commentary, Vishnu Purana (2.8).

It states that the Sun is Stationed for all time, in the middle of the day, of the sun, which is always in the same place, there is neither setting nor rising.

SURYA WORSHIP

जपाकुसुमसंकाशं काश्यपेयं महाद्युतिं ॥ ध्वांतरि सर्वपापघ्नं भास्करं प्रणमाम्यहं ।
॥ *Japa kusuma sankasham kashyapeyam Mahadyutim* ॥
॥ *dhwantarim sarva papaghnam Bhaskaram pranamamyaham* ॥

Surya worship is a phenomenon not confined to India alone. Archaeological and literary records reveal that ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, China, Iran, and Egypt also revered the Sun as a powerful, life-giving deity. In India, this worship attained extraordinary symbolic and ritualistic significance. The Rigveda contains over thirty hymns dedicated to Surya, Savitṛ, and Aditya, celebrating their roles as cosmic regulators and dispellers of darkness. Later texts—Mahabharata, Ramayan, Upaniṣads, and Puranas—expand upon these images, portraying Surya under multiple epithets: Bhanu, Vivasvan, Ravi, Prabhakara, Mitra, and Aditya. Across centuries, poets and sages infused these solar deities with theological, poetic, and moral significance, deepening the cultural roots of sun worship in India.

1. Surya Imagery in Indian Art: Cross-Cultural Foundations and Iconographic Evolution

The earliest anthropomorphic depictions of Surya in India—particularly from regions such as Gandhara, Takshashila - Taxila, and Mathura—represent the clear influence of Iranian traditions. These early images of Surya were depicted in - northern attire (udichya-vesa), wearing trousers (suthna), boots,

a tunic, and adorned with ornaments. Coomaraswamy mentioned “it is by no means impossible that the Kushan Kings, whose attachment to the cult of Fire (whether Megian or Indian) is well known, and who paid special honour to Sun may have set up and popularised a form of Surya imaged dressed in their own fashion” (Coomaraswamy, 1927). In any places, Surya’s image is often portrayed as a majestic sovereign or divine ruler; this form of Surya stood in sharp contrast to the more abstract and symbolic representations found in earlier Vedic conceptions.

However, a significant transformation occurred from the Gupta period onward (4th –6th century CE). The Guptas, who are often credited with systematising Hindu iconography and religious practice, elevated Surya’s position within the emerging Panchayatnana or Panchadevopasana tradition—a five-deity system that included Surya, Visnu, Siva, Devi, and Ganesha. This period witnessed not only the ritual standardization of Surya worship but also the visual re-Indianization of his form (Bhandari, 2018). In the late Gupta period, the Surya image was depicted in traditional Indian attire, i.e. wearing a dhoti, an *uttariya* (Meister, 1991). He was often shown holding lotus flowers in both hands, which became a motif signifying the deity. The chariot iconography became more refined and symbolically rich. The *Sarathi* - Arun, his half-brother, began to appear more distinctly at the reins, and seven horses (sometimes stylized or merged into a single horse with seven heads) were standardized as the vehicle of the solar deity, representing the seven days of the week or the seven colours of visible light (Chandra, 1983). In many sculptures from the post-Gupta period, especially in central and northern India, Surya is also flanked by the goddesses *Usa* and *Pratyusa*, personifying the phases of sunrise. Occasionally, Surya is also accompanied by his wives or *Ganas*, further enriching the narrative and devotional dimension of his worship.

The origins of Surya iconography in Indian art have long been a subject of scholarly debate. One of the earliest and most influential voices on this subject, the art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, suggested that the earliest known image of Surya may appear in the *Bhaja* caves, dating to around the 2nd century BCE. According to him, a relief depicting a regal figure riding a chariot drawn by four horses in these caves likely represents Surya, the solar deity in his early iconographic form.

However, this interpretation did not go unchallenged. Later scholars, notably Gyani (Gyani, 1942), offered a counter-reading of the same sculpture. Drawing on the *Divyavadana*, a Buddhist textual source, Gyani argued that the image does not represent Surya at all, but rather King *Maudgalyanyana* (*Maudhala*), a royal figure whose deeds are described in that narrative ((Gyani, 1942) (Cowell, 1886)). In Gyani’s interpretation, the chariot motif is not a solar symbol, but a representation of royal power and historical event, suggesting a secular or historical reading rather than a divine one.

This scholarly divergence illustrates how visual motifs in early Indian art are often multivalent and contextually fluid. (Bhargava, 2009) It also underscores the importance of textual corroboration and iconographic consistency in the secure identification of deities like Surya, especially in the pre-Gupta period, when standard iconographic canons were still forming.

This evolution reflects both a theological shift and a regional localization of Surya worship. The deity was no longer only a cosmic force or royal symbol; he became an accessible, temple-centred god, integrated into Hindu temple architecture and domestic worship (Handa, 2009). This iconographic transition laid the foundation for the later regional expressions of Surya worship, including the *Katyuri* sun temples in the Middle Himalayas, where both royal symbolism and orthodox Vedic-puranic iconography coexisted in stone.

2. Surya worshipers Katyuri

Solar Devotion under the Suryavamshi Katyuri Dynasty - The Katyuri dynasty, which ruled Uttarakhand (Fig.2) from the 7th to the 13th century CE. They considered themselves as Suryavamshi - a solar lineage. This dynastic affiliation was not merely genealogical but deeply embedded in their religious, political, and cultural identity. For the Katyuris, the worship of Surya functioned as both a ritual-theological commitment and a symbol of divine legitimacy for kingship. Their devotion to the solar cult was manifested not only in genealogical and textual assertions, but also in temple construction, iconographic programs, and the ritual-geographical landscape of their kingdom.



Figure 1: Field Visit map - Google maps

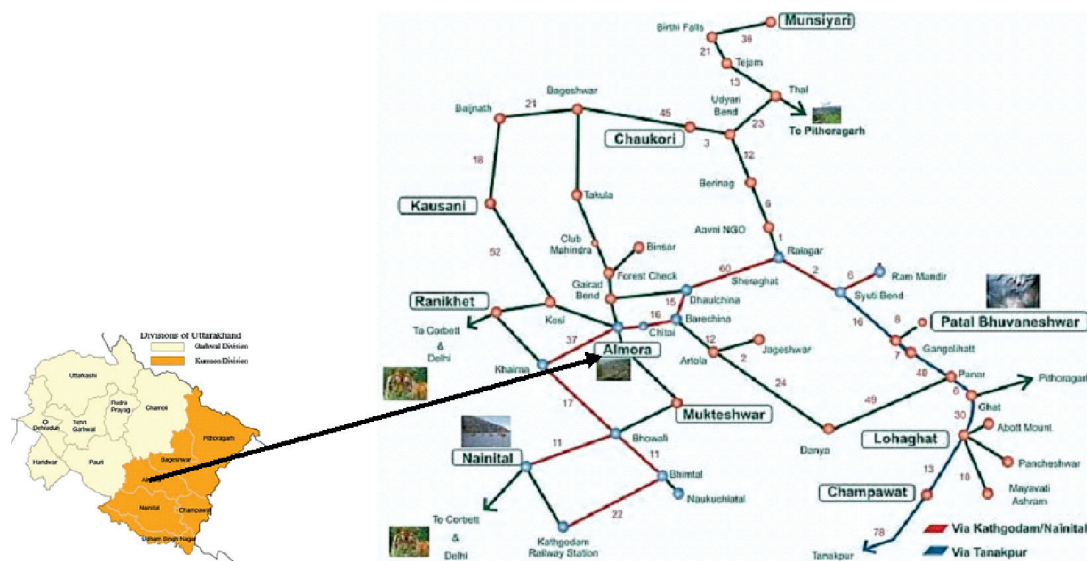


Figure 2: Almora map — Google maps (Maps are not as per scale)

The rise of the Katyuri dynasty took place in a period marked by religious flux and sectarian tensions. Their reign, like that of their successors, the Chand dynasty, witnessed the resurgence and consolidation of Brahmanical Hinduism, which gradually reached its zenith in the region. The Katyuris navigated an atmosphere of doctrinal contestation, where heterodox sects such as Buddhism and certain Tantric traditions coexisted with emerging orthodox movements.

A major transformation occurred with the arrival of Adi Shankaracharya in the Kumaon Himalayas, whose Advaita Vedanta philosophy and emphasis on Vedic orthodoxy significantly shaped the religious consciousness of the region. The influence of Shankaracharya is palpable in both the religious life and the Shaivite temple architecture of the period, particularly under the Katyuri. The religious milieu of the Katyuri period was marked by dynamic shifts and sectarian interactions. When the Katyuris ascended to power in the 7th century CE, they encountered a region already simmering with religious strife and sectarian diversity. Their rule witnessed the expansion and consolidation of Brahmanical traditions, particularly those associated with Shaivism. Inscriptions from this era offer frequent and elaborate praise of Shiva, indicating the centrality of Shaiva devotion in royal and temple contexts. Yet, alongside this sectarian emphasis, there emerged a distinct ecumenical trend—what may be termed an eclectic religiosity—that included Vaishnavism, Shakta traditions, and prominently, the Surya cult.

The arrival of Adi Shankaracharya in the Himalayan region during the 8th century brought a philosophical and liturgical unification of Vedic traditions, reinforcing orthodox Brahmanism across Uttarakhand. This influence is visible in the temples and sculptures patronized by the Katyuri kings, which often represent a synthesis of philosophical depth and ritual orthodoxy (Michell, 1988). The temple architecture of the period became a canvas upon which theological ideas, political legitimacy, and regional identity were all expressed.

It is within this complex religious tapestry that the Katyuri devotion to Surya must be understood. As self-declared Suryavamshi—descendants of the Solar lineage—the Katyuri kings not only used the Surya cult as a marker of divine ancestry but also as a means of legitimizing their rule. Surya, the solar deity, was more than a Vedic god of light and health; he became a dynastic symbol of royal authority, cosmic order, and ethical governance.

Because of the ‘panchayatana’ worship concept, the worship of Surya during this period was widespread. It is deeply entrenched in cultural and artistic expression. Inscriptions such as those found on the Taleshwar copper plates suggest that the cult of Surya was popular in the region as early as the 5th–6th centuries CE, but it was under the Katyuris that this devotion reached its architectural and iconographic zenith. Numerous temples were constructed and dedicated to Surya, including the Katarmal Sun Temple near Almora, which stands as a testament to the dynasty’s devotion and architectural vision.

The iconography of Surya in the Katyuri period exhibits both continuity and innovation. Early representations were influenced by Gandharan and Central Asian traditions, showing Surya in *udichya-vesa* with boots, tunic, and armour, often riding a chariot pulled by four horses. Later images began adopting more Indianized elements, depicting the deity in a dhoti and *uttariya*, often holding lotuses and accompanied by attendants such as Usha and Pratyusha. Despite the damage inflicted by iconoclasts in later centuries, surviving sculptures—often locally referred to as Bada Aditya, Banu Aditya, or Suryanarayan—offer a glimpse into the vibrant visual culture surrounding the solar deity in Kumaon.

The presence of such a strong Surya cult within the broader Shaiva-Vaishnava-Shakta matrix of the Katyuri polity reflects the inclusive yet strategic religio-political ethos of the dynasty. Through the

worship of Surya, the Katyuris linked themselves not only to the cosmic rhythms of time and power but also to the pan-Indian traditions of solar sovereignty, as seen in the Surya temples of Martand, Modhera, and Konark.

The worship of anthropomorphic Surya was prominently practised in the region of Uttarakhand, especially during the Katyuri period. A distinct iconographic feature of the Sun deities from this region is the adoption of the *udichya-vesa*, comprising a long tunic, trousers, and boots—a costume style associated with the Shaka-Kushan tradition. It is believed that these Central Asian groups were instrumental in introducing and popularizing Surya worship in this part of the Himalayas.

3. Field Observations

Although the Katarmal Sun Temple near Almora is one of the surviving structural temples dedicated to Surya. The archaeological findings from several sites—such as Bageshwar, Jageshwar, Gunaditya, and Kataramal (fig. 2) attest to the wide prevalence of Sun worship in the region (Singh, 2020). The discovery of Surya idols from these locations strongly indicates that solar devotion once had a robust presence in the cultural and landscape of Kumaon (ASI, 2011).

4.1. *The Surya Idol from Jageshwar*

A particularly noteworthy example of Sun iconography is found at Jageshwar. (Fig. 3) Nestled within a dense deodar forest at an altitude of around 1,870 meters, Jageshwar is renowned primarily as a major Shaiva pilgrimage site with more than a hundred stone shrines from the Katyuri period, i.e. the 8th to the 13th centuries CE. However, amidst this Shaiva milieu, the presence of a Surya idol at Jageshwar is a striking reminder of the multi-sectarian devotional landscape during the Katyuri period. (Fig.4)

The image, carved in black stone and standing approximately three feet in height, depicts Surya in *samabhanga* posture, mounted on a chariot drawn by seven horses and driven by Sarathi Arun. The deity holds lotus stalks in both hands—a common iconographic attribute. Flanking the base of the image are the attendants Danda and Pingala, along with the goddesses Rajni and Nikshubha, who represent twilight and night. Two elegantly sculpted Ashvinikumara figures stand at the bottom corners in *tribhanga* pose, symbolising the celestial physicians associated with dawn. In both hands, Surya holds long-stemmed lotus flowers, a conventional symbol associated with the solar deity across India. The *udichya-vesa* comprising a coat, trousers, and high boots—further establishes the continuity of Scytho-Kushan artistic influence in Himalayan solar imagery, as seen also in Katarmal and Gunaditya.

4.2. *Gunaditya Surya Image and Shrine (Dhauladevi, Almora)*

While Shaiva and Shakta temples dominate the religious landscape of Kumaon, temples dedicated to Vishnu and Surya are relatively fewer. Pandit Badridatta Pandey, in his seminal work *Kumaon Ka Itihaas* (Pandey, 1935) mentions Surya temples at Belad, Ramak, Katarmal, Naini, Jageshwar, and Bageshwar. Additional shrines have been identified in Gad (Didihat), Sui (Lohaghat), Mostwakoura (Champawat), and Gunaditya (Dhauladevi) (Fig. 5). At many of these sites, the original idols have been lost, stolen, or destroyed, though fragments and repurposed sculptures still survive in Shaiva-Vaishnava temples and village shrines.

Among these, the Gunaditya Surya Temple holds unique iconographic and architectural importance. Though modest in structure compared to Katarmal, Gunaditya remains a vibrant centre of local devotion. Most Surya temples face the east to welcome the rising sun, but this shrine is unusual in its westward orientation.



Figure 3: Surya– Jageshwar Museum (scanned image) – Almora



Figure 4: Surya – Almora.



Figure 5: Gunaditya –Almora Rajkiya Sangrahalay – Almora

The idol enshrined at Gunaditya is approximately three feet tall and cast in ashtadhatu. The deity is shown in dvibhuja form, in line with iconographic prescriptions found in classical Sanskrit texts such as Rupa-Mandana, which describes the Sun deity as:

सर्वलक्षण संयुक्तं सर्वाभरण भूषितम्। द्विभुजं चैकवक्त्रं च श्वेत पंकजधृक्करम्॥
Sarvalashanam saiyuktam sarvabharn bhushitam |
dwabhjam chaikavakvam ch chweta panajdhrukkaram ||

Stylistic and Symbolic Context

The image displays both arms raised in a blessing posture, with a serene and composed expression, a necklace, knee-high boots, an upper garment, and a short lower garment. A kritimukut and prabhamandal frame the head. The deity stands on a lotus pedestal, with attendants Danda and Pingala flanking the feet—elements common in early Surya iconography. Additionally, lotus flowers adorn the deity's shoulders, and a lotus seat is carved behind the figure. This form aligns with known iconographic norms in which Surya is shown either standing on a lotus or seated in a chariot drawn by horses. The Gunaditya statue falls into the former category and displays features that are stylistically rooted in the Katyuri sculptural idiom, particularly visible in the treatment of the crown and physiognomy. The boots reaching up to the knees are a distinctive mark of the udichya-vesa tradition, reflecting influence from the Shaka-Kushan and Gandharan schools. According to Dr. Ram Singh, (Singh, 2020) in his, such boot-clad Surya figures are examples of Greco-Roman influence, typically dated between the 4th and 8th centuries CE. Dr. D.N. Tiwari, of the State Museum, Almora, however, suggests a Katyuri-period origin, or at least a Chand-period reproduction in imitation of earlier art. He notes: "This statue of Gunaditya starts a new chapter in the history of Sun worship in Uttarakhand." (Agarwala, 1965).

Religious and Dynastic Significance

The Katyuri were prolific temple builders. They constructed numerous shrines and temples. Their architecture remains evident from the number of temples across the Uttarakhand region. The dynasty sponsored an artistic tradition that combined regional Pahari features with pan-Indic iconographic elements. Gunaditya village may derive its name from a Katyuri ruler named Guna, who may have been responsible for the commissioning of the idol and the shrine. Local oral traditions preserve the legend that the idol emerged under a 'Radhel' tree, prompting the villagers to enshrine it. Another version claims that a Katyuri 'mandalik' commissioned the sculpture from a Salam-based artisan, who prepared the idol under royal patronage. The first priest, Gurau, was childless, after which the Paliwal Brahmins of the village assumed hereditary priesthood—a tradition maintained to this day.

Although no epigraphic record has yet been found for this site, the convergence of local belief, material iconography, and stylistic analysis offers compelling evidence that the Gunaditya idol is a crucial node in understanding the persistence and regional expression of Surya worship in Uttarakhand's historical and religious landscape.

4.3. The Surya Idol from Baijnath: Royal Radiance in Stone

The Baijnath temple complex, located along the banks of the Gomati River in present-day Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand, is primarily known for its Shaiva orientation. However, it also houses remarkable specimens of solar iconography, including a finely sculpted image of Surya, which represents the sophisticated artistic milieu under the Suryavamshi Katyuri dynasty during the 8th–9th century CE.

Iconographic Description

The Surya idol from Baijnath (Fig. 6 and Fig.7) presents the deity seated on a chariot drawn by seven horses, symbolic of cosmic movement and time. The charioteer - Sarathi Arun is shown driving the horses, anchoring the celestial narrative. Surya is richly adorned, with features distinct from the surrounding deities and attendant figures in the same panel.

Another standing sculpture of Surya from the Katyuri period was found in the Baijnath temple. He is standing on his chariot of seven horses driven by Sarathi Arun. The god is shown adorned with all his proper ornaments. He is wearing long boots, kirit-mukuta, kundal, necklace, armband, gridle and his uttrariya reaching up to his knees. His two wives Nikshubha Chhaya and Saranyuare/Saranyu/Sanjana are standing on each side in tribhnaga holding chouri and a lotus flower hand. His attendant Danda and Pingal are also shown at the lower end. The lord is flanked by a flying couple of Gandharva Vidyadhara at the top, holding a garland in their hands.

Stylistic and Symbolic Context

Notable iconographic elements include:

- A kirita-mukuta, which is stylistically different from those usually seen in the Kumaon region, bearing affinities with Rajputana-style iconography,
- Long boots featuring geometric patterns, unusual in local representations but seen in art from Central Asia and Kushan influences,



Figure 6: Seated Surya – Baijnath

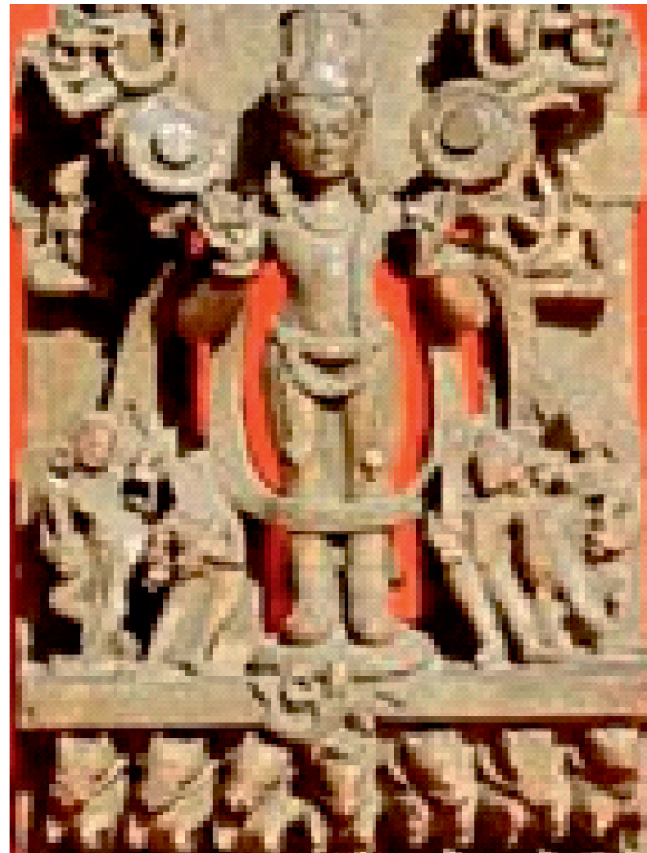


Figure 7: Standing Surya - Baijnath – Almora

- A thickened yajnopavita (sacred thread), a stylistic trait more often seen in South Indian Surya sculptures, suggesting wide-ranging artistic crosscurrents,
- Uttariya draped across both arms and cascading toward the attendants standing at the lower corners—a dynamic detail reflecting sculptural finesse,
- An avayanga or waist-belt, another feature reminiscent of Kushan-period iconography. Surya is flanked by his consorts.
- Nikshubha / Chhaya and Saranyuare, both in tribhanga pose, one holding a lotus, the other a fly-whisk,
- Attendants Danda and Pingala near the deity's feet,
- A pair of celestial Gandharvas flying above, holding a garland as an offering,
- Two female figures above the shoulders of Surya, holding bows, are possibly manifestations of his energetic powers.

The icon bears testimony to an era when artistic forms were cosmopolitan yet rooted in local devotion. The Rajputana-style crown, South Indian-style thick yajnopavita, and Kushan-inspired boots and waist-belt reflect a syncretic visual culture influenced by trade, pilgrimage, and political alliances (Bhargava, 2009). This blending of styles mirrors the eclectic religious temperament of the Katyuri court, which embraced pan-Indic iconographic norms while commissioning regionally meaningful expressions of faith.

Religious and Dynastic Significance

As members of the Solar lineage, the Katyuri rulers consciously elevated the worship of Surya—not only through temples but through highly stylised sculptures that symbolised royal divinity, temporal authority, and cosmic order. This Surya image, despite being situated within a Shaiva-dominated complex, stands as a powerful dynastic statement about the ideological integration of Sun worship into the religious fabric of Kumaon during the early medieval period.

4.4. The Katarmal Surya Idol: The Radiant Heart of the Katyuri Solar Cult

Perched at an altitude of over 2,000 metres in the Kumaon Himalayas, the Katarmal Sun Temple, which is locally known as Bara Aditya Mandir (fig 8) stands as the most monumental expression of Surya worship under the Suryavamshi Katyuri dynasty. Commissioned in the 9th century CE by Katyuri king Katarmalla, this temple complex near Almora is the only major surviving Surya temple of its scale and sophistication in Uttarakhand. At its heart once stood the magnificent Surya idol, now preserved in the National Museum, Delhi.

Iconographic Features of the Katarmal Surya Idol

The original idol of Surya, which once graced the sanctum of the Katarmal temple, is now absent from the site due to theft attempts and preservation concerns. However, extensive photographic and art historical documentation, along with its display at the National Museum, allows for a detailed analysis. (fig. 9)

- The Surya murti stands in samabhanga, a calm and poised posture signifying divine equilibrium.
- The deity is adorned in a kirit-makuta and udichya-vesa, including:

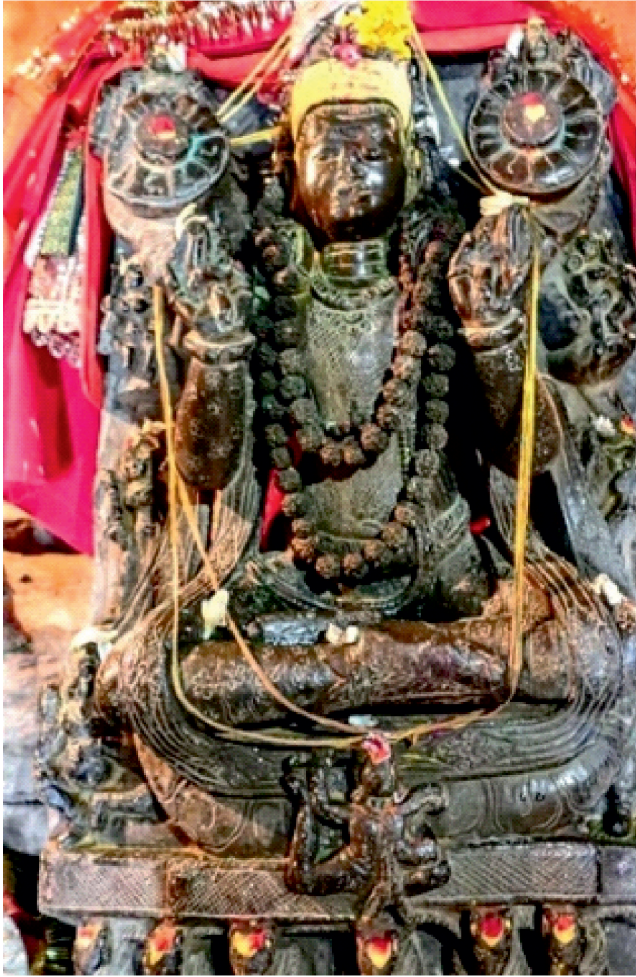


Figure 8: Surya - Kataramal temple – Almora

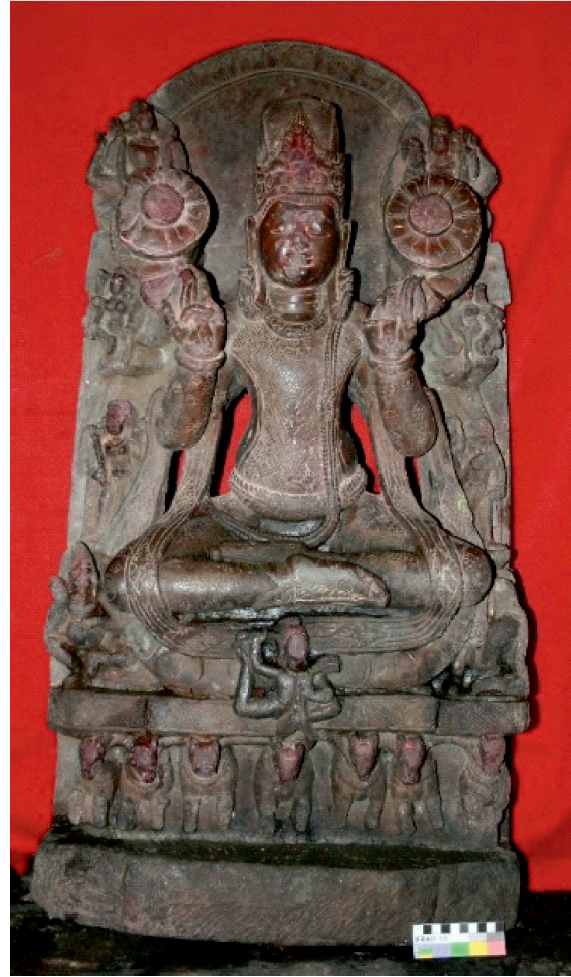


Figure 9: Surya – earlier in Kataramal temple - now National Museum, Delhi

- A tunic-like upper garment,
- Trousers and long boots, reflecting Shaka-Kushan influences,
- A finely detailed yajnopavita and uttariya are draped elegantly across both arms.
- Lotus stalks are held in both hands—a signature feature of Surya images—symbolising solar energy and purity.
- At the base, the attendant figures of Danda and Pingala are represented in a typical stance, acting as celestial gatekeepers.
- On either side, his wives are carved in graceful tribhanga, reflecting the passage of time as embodied in solar mythology.

This image is noted for its refined features, proportionate limbs, and balanced iconographic program, which reflect the culmination of the early medieval sculptural idiom in the Himalayan region.

Stylistic and Symbolic Context

The sculpture's distinctive dress and posture bear the hallmark of Gandharan and Kushan artistic influence, yet the stylistic execution is firmly grounded in the local Katyuri aesthetic, marked by:

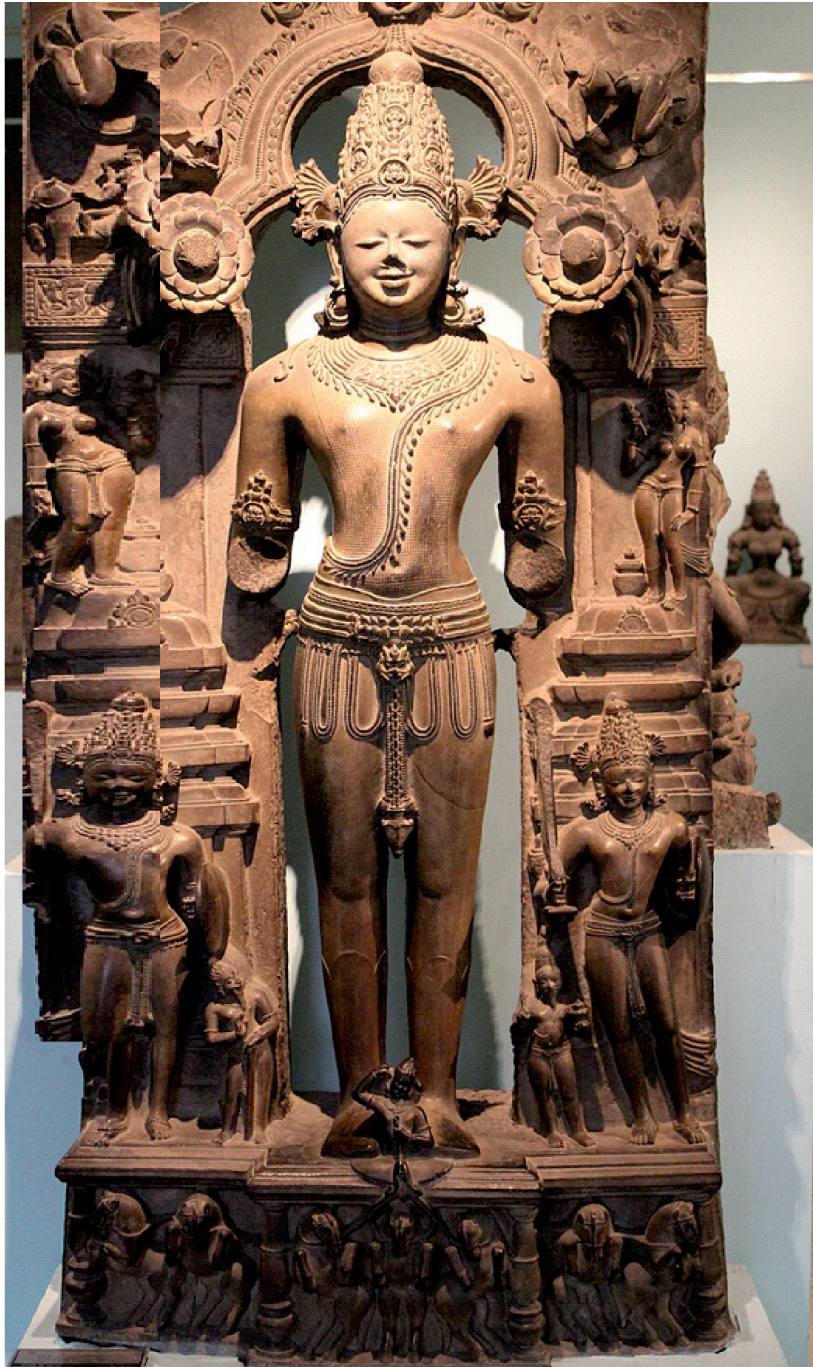


Figure 10: Surya - Konarak – National Museum, Delhi

- Firm yet delicate facial expression with a gentle smile,
- High attention to ornamental detail is evident in the form of necklace, armband, earrings, and girdle,
- Architectural alignment with the temple's eastern orientation to receive the first rays of the sun, which is a symbolic merging of art and cosmology.

The icon exemplifies Pan-Indian iconographic conventions adapted for regional use—combining royal legitimacy, Vedic orthodoxy, and devotional fervour.



Figure 11: Surya - on relief of Martand Temple – Kashmir – Google photos

Religious and Dynastic Significance

The Katarmal idol was not merely a cult image; it was a political and spiritual centrepiece. Katyuri King Katarmalla's commissioning of the temple and its grand Surya image demonstrates:

- The conscious Katyuri claim to the Suryavamshi lineage, invoking the sun as a divine legitimiser of their rule,
- A bid to rival or complement earlier Sun temples like Modhera (Gujarat) or Martand (Kashmir),
- An attempt to assert religious authority and orthodoxy in the face of sectarian diversity in early medieval Uttarakhand.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF SURYA IMAGES IN THE KATYURI PERIOD

5.1. Stylistic Unity and Iconographic Features

The Surya images from Kumaon during the Katyuri period demonstrate a striking stylistic consistency. These include long boots, the kirit-mukuta, kundalas, keyuras, kankanas, malas and hara, and a circular halo, often stylized as a radiant solar disc. Together, these elements symbolize solar divinity and royal authority. Despite regional variation, this visual vocabulary forms a shared aesthetic and ritual grammar across Sun temples and sculptures of the period.

5.2. Regional Variations and Foreign Influences

Certain Surya images show features that diverge from this norm, indicating outside influence or local experimentation. For example:

- The Baijnath idol bears a yajnopavita of exceptional thickness—a trait common in South Indian Surya sculptures but rare in North India.
- The uttariya in the Baijnath sculpture is uniquely folded over both arms and falls upon the attendants' shoulders, resembling a Kushan period textile depiction. (fig.13)
- The Dwarahat Surya image includes an avayanga (waist girdle) with extended drapery and, possibly, a sheathed sword at the right waist. This martial motif is found in early Gupta or Kushan art, such as a Surya image from Mathura that features a dagger strapped between the feet. V. S. Agrawala (Agarwala, 1965) has interpreted such details—especially sheathed weaponry—as reflecting Iranian influence, opening up the possibility of trans-regional artistic borrowings.

5.3. Chronological Framework and Artistic Evolution

These sculptures span a time frame of roughly three centuries, reflecting subtle transitions in style and iconographic choices. The Jageshwar Surya image, with its simplicity and elegance, is stylistically dated to the 8th century CE.

- Although its pedestal bears a later 13th–14th century Nagari inscription naming 'Raul Jogi', this likely represents a later addition inconsistent with the original artistic features.
- The Baijnath sculpture, more ornate and visually dense, fits into the 11th century CE, a time of flourishing temple patronage.
- The Dwarahat icon, heavily decorated and flanked by multiple attendants, belongs to the 12th century CE, reflecting a shift toward narrative elaboration and visual complexity.
- A seated image from Baijnath, sharing several iconographic features, also aligns with this later phase.

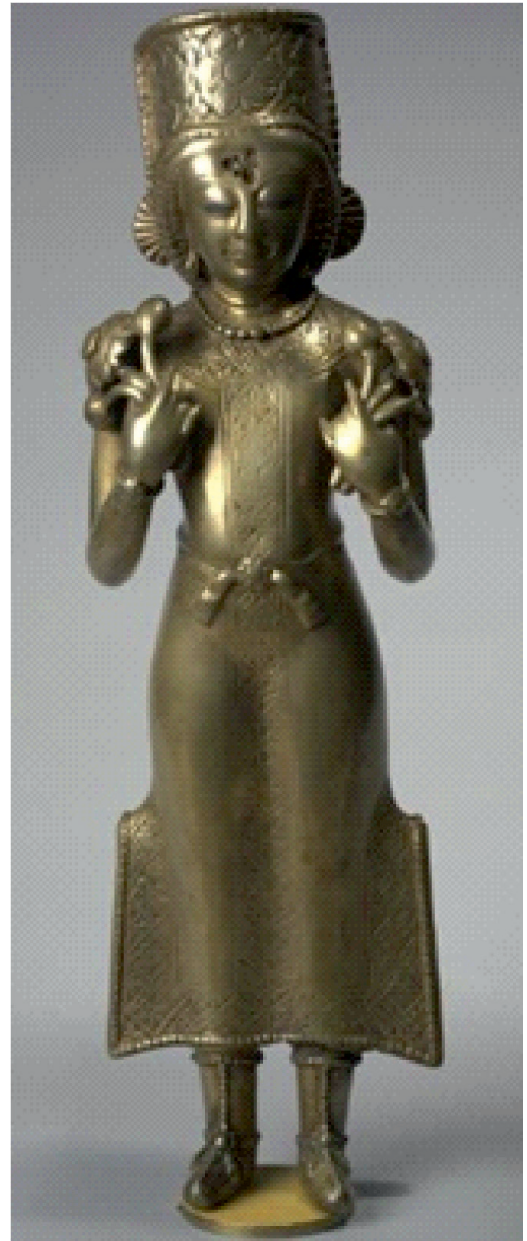


Figure 12: Surya 8th Century CE - Kashmir - Bronze. Courtesy <https://www.clevelandart.org/>

5.4. Northern Purity and Limited Southern Influence

Unlike Surya images from other regions, the Kumaoni examples remain predominantly North Indian in aesthetic execution. While a few southern traits are observable (e.g., thick yajnopavita), they are marginal and do not dominate the regional iconographic idiom. The relative “purity” of these images can be attributed to:



Figure 13: Surya – National Museum – Delhi – 11 century sculpture – showing eleven other Aditya

- The origin and growth of the Surya cult in North India allowed local sculptors to master regional styles based on established Brahminic norms.
- Limited intervention from southern ritual specialists or donors, who may have been aligned more with Shaiva or Vaishnava traditions than with Surya worship.
- A possible continuity of local sculptural traditions under the patronage of the Katyuris, who maintained a consistent artistic vocabulary despite foreign contact.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Surya image from the Katyuri Period

Iconographic Features	Jageshwar	Gunaditya	Bajjnath	Katarmal
Period	10 th –11 th Century CE	11 th –12 th Century CE Katyuri/early Chand	8 th –9 th century CE Katyuri Period	9 th century CE Katyuri Period
Material	Black stone	Originally Ashtadhatu, Now sand stone	Black schist stone	Stone
Posture	Samabhanga	Standing on lotus, blessing posture	Standing on a chariot drawn by seven horses	Standing on the lotus or pedestal

<i>Iconographic Features</i>	<i>Jageshwar</i>	<i>Gunaditya</i>	<i>Bajjnath</i>	<i>Katarmal</i>
Attendants (Danda & Pingala)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sarathi -Arun	Yes	Not depicted	Yes	Yes
Ashvins	Yes below (tribhanga)	No	Not clearly shown	Yes
Number of Arms	Two	Two	Two	Two
Lotus in Hands	Yes	Yes, on the shoulders	Yes	Yes
Yajñopavīta	Standard	Not clearly visible	Extra-thick; South Indian Style	Present
Boots	Yes	Yes, knee-length boots (Gandhara-style)	Yes, with geometric motifs	Yes
Kirit-mukuta	Yes	Yes, Katyuri style	Yes, Rajputana influence	Yes
Jewellery/Ornaments	Garland, earrings, necklace	Garland, belt, uttariya	Necklace, armbands, uttariya, earrings, girdle	Crown, earrings, necklace
Consorts / Female Powers	Rajni and Nikshubha	Not shown	Wives in tribhanga others above with bows	Two attendants depicted
Garland Bearers	No	No	flying Gandharvas with a floral garland	Present (faint remains)
Distinctive Features	Twin Ashvins rendered	West-facing temple; Hellenistic boots and posture	Waist belt, thick Yajnopavita Rajputana-Kushan style fusion	Prominent site; largest Sun temple in Kumaon

5. COMPARISON OF SURYA IMAGES

Comparison of Surya images from the Katyuri period with Surya images from other parts of the country, 7th to 14th centuries CE

Surya iconography portrays regional variations across India, reflecting local artistic styles and religious interpretations. Although common elements such as the lotus and chariot are present, specific details in the costume, supporting figures and overall composition vary considerably from Kumaon and Kashmir to Odisha and Gujarat, and further south.

In Kashmir, Surya idols are often found in metal, especially in bronze. (fig.12) One of the Surya statues from medieval Kashmir is now in the Cleveland Art Museum describes - Surya wears a long tunic and boots suitable for riding horses across the grassland steppes of Central Asia. The sun god was of paramount power among the people of Central and Western Asia, who followed the religion, Zoroastrianism, a pre-Islamic faith that emphasised a sacred duality between light and darkness. In Kashmir, Surya image is frequently depicted (fig.11) in a standing pose, whereas in Kumaon, we found in all categories i.e. standing and seating postures, Chariots, with gana with wives. Surya, riding a horse, wearing high boots and holding two lotuses in his two hands. He is accompanied by his attendants Dandi and Pingala. The image was on one of the reliefs of the Martand temple, Kashmir.

In Odisha, there is a rich tradition of Surya sculptures, e.g. Konark temple. Here we found all the category sculptures. Early images are in a rigid frontal pose, holding a lotus, but dressed in heavy

attire. Later, four horses with Sarathi become more prominent. The Surya sculpture, crafted in the 13th century during the rule of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty, is a remarkable example of Odisha's artistic excellence. Originally part of the garbhagriha of the Konark Sun Temple, it was later relocated to the National Museum, New Delhi (fig. 10).

In Gujarat, the Modhera Sun temple showcases in complex posture, he is depicted with a sarathi holding a chariot.

Table 2: A Comparative Study of Sun Images

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Kumaon (Katyuri period)</i>	<i>Odisha</i>	<i>South India</i>	<i>Kashmir</i>	<i>Gujarat</i>
Posture	Predominantly standing (e.g., Baijnath, Gunaditya)	Mostly seated in temple niches e.g., Konark	Both standing and seated; regional variation	Seated or standing; some on chariots	Mostly standing
Facial Features	Moustached faces, with Central Asian traits (e.g., Dwarahat),	Sharp, idealized features; clean-shaven	Clean-shaven, serene expressions	Moustached, elongated eyes; Indo-Iranian influence	Varies: both clean shaven and moustached
Ornaments	Moderate: Kirit-mukut, malas, keyura, kundalas, waist-belt	Mukuta, bracelets long garlands,	Heavy, multilayered jewellery Makara-kundalas	Refined, detailed but often minimalist	Rich ornaments, sometimes showing early Maru-Gurjara style
Attire	Uttariya on arms, folds reaching attendants; lower garment (avayanga)	Dhoti and uttrariya	Complex lower Garments - dhotis, uttrariya	Fitted tunics, draped uttariya; Persian stylistics	Dhoti with decorative waistband; regional styling
Footwear	Boots - decorated, up to the knee rare feature	Typically, barefoot	Barefoot or anklets; footwear rare	Boots or sandals sometimes visible in early sculptures	Sandal-like footwear in some images
Yajnopavita	Occasionally thick, especially in Baijnath Surya	Usually thin, stylized	thick, looped across chest	Thin, minimal	Thin or braided, rarely emphasized
Sarathi / Attendants	Chariot with Four/ seven horses, Sarathi - Arun; wives and Gandharvas	Surya on a pedestal; Attendants less emphasized	Chariot occasionally shown; more symbolic	Depicted riding a chariot or seated in regal posture	May show symbolic chariots or halo

Comparative table for some Surya images of Kumaon and Other Parts of the Country in the Medieval Period.

SUMMARY OF COMPARATIVE OUTLINE

The above comparative table outlines significant iconographic distinctions in the representation of Surya from the Katyuri period with other regional styles across India (7th –14th century CE). The Katyuri Surya icons, especially from Baijnath, Gunaditya, and Katarmal, display distinct features such as the decorated boots, thick yajnopavita, and unique uttariya folds (add reference). These features draw partial influence from Kushan and Central Asian styles, setting them apart from the highly ornate South Indian Surya bronzes and the stylized elegance of Odishan depictions.

Notably, the moustached face, visible in some Kumaoni and Kashmiri icons, reinforces a regional variation and possibly foreign influence—something largely absent in South and Eastern India (Tolia, 1994). Meanwhile, the presence of detailed attendants, consorts, and the representation of Arun as charioteer -Sarathi aligns with the northern Puranic tradition, further distinguishing these idols in terms of religious narrative integration.

This comparison allows for a nuanced understanding of how local idioms, material culture, and cross-regional artistic exchanges shaped the evolving image of Surya across different parts of India.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to examine and analyze the iconography of Surya images from the Katyuri period (7th–13th century CE) in the Kumaon region, with a specific focus on field-documented temples such as **Bajjnath, Jageshwar, Katarmal, and Gunaditya**. The visual vocabulary of these sculptures—such as the **moustached visage, decorated boots, thick yajnopavita, and uttariya falling onto attendants**—demonstrates a rich blend of indigenous North Indian sculptural idioms with subtle influences of **Kushan and Indo-Iranian aesthetics** (Saraswati, 1975).

The styles diverged or intersected in terms of Surya's **posture, ornamentation, attire, and iconographic detailing**. While South Indian images tend to emphasize elaborate by expanding the analysis to include **comparative regional case studies** from **Odisha (Konark), South India, Kashmir, and Gujarat**, the study further highlights how **regional** ornamentation and idealized facial features, and Odishan icons adhere to a more stylized Puranic template, the Katyuri Surya images appear to have retained a **relatively austere but symbolically rich** iconographic identity.

The presence of unique features—such as the Bajjnath Surya's boots or the Dwarahat idol's sword and avayanga—suggests a **local sculptural idiom** that responded not just to Puranic norms but to regional socio-cultural and martial themes.

The comparative analysis underscores the **independent yet interconnected trajectory** of Surya worship in the central Himalayan zone and affirms that **Katyuri-era artisans**, though possibly exposed to external currents, developed a **distinct visual language** that reflected their geographic and political realities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The detailed analysis of Surya idols in the Kumaon region has been developed in consultation with my research guide, whose insights have significantly shaped this study.

We would like to thank the following museums

- National Museum, Delhi
- Jageshwar Museum, Almora
- Mathura Museum, Mathura
- Rajkiya Sangrahalay, Almora

Through these sculptural testimonies, the radiance of the Sun god in Kumaon continues to illuminate not only the past artistic brilliance of the Katyuri era but also its spiritual and cultural ethos. These Surya images, though scattered and in varied conditions, stand as enduring symbols of a devotional vision shaped by dynastic patronage, regional artistry, and sacred geography. Their

presence reminds us that the Katyuri legacy, though partly veiled by time, still speaks through stone—resonating with the light of the Sun and the faith of its people

There are many references to Surya in Kumauni folklore (Pandit, 1894). I conclude this paper with a mention

१ चार दिन कि चांदनि फिर अंधेरी रात. Chára dina ki chañ-
dani phira andheri ráta.
Moonlight for a few days and then the dark fortnight.

Which means - Moonlight for a few days and then the dark fortnight. This is used to impress on one's heart that prosperity and adversity will not last, but are transient. C. f. "Make hay while the sun shines." "Work while it is called to-day, for the night cometh when no man can work"

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