

## Recently Explored Sculptural and Architectural Remains in the Salandi River Valley, Northern Odisha: A Preliminary Report

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**Abstract:** The Salandi River Valley is famous for its remarkable antiquities and religious sanctuaries in the northern part of Odisha. Like the other river valleys of Odisha, the Salandi River Valley has also produced an excellent trend of architectural and sculptural activities in Odisha and Eastern India. Many images of various sects were noticed in the different parts of the Salandi River Valley. Hence, the Salandi River Valley is a major attraction for scholars. The present work highlights the detailed description of some Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jaina sculptural and architectural remains recovered from the different parts of the Salandi river valley, particularly in the Hatadihi and Khaira blocks of Keonjhar and Baleswar districts. The extant sculptural remains discovered in the Salandi River valley region were produced by artists belonging to the Kalinga School of Eastern India. The unique images identified from this region embody the iconographic characteristics of classical Odishan art, reflecting both early medieval and medieval periods.

**Keywords:** Iconography, Brahminical, Surya, Ornamentation, Brahminical, Polyreligious, Landscape, Tradition and Manifestation etc.

### Introduction

Present-day Odisha mostly consists of the territorial units once under ancient Tosali, Kalinga, Utkala, Kosala, Odra, and Kangoda. Archaeological investigations and findings reveal that from the very

beginning of the historical period, Odisha has been associated with all the major contemporary religions in India, both orthodox and heterodox. All these major religious sects had a very long, prosperous, and continuing history in this region from the early times to the present. Odisha has historically served as a stronghold for several major religions in India, including Jainism, Buddhism, and Brahminical religions. The cultural expression of the region, particularly through its art, architecture, and literature, is predominantly influenced by religious practices. The impact of religion on the life and society of Odisha has been significant throughout the ages. Even after the decline of Jainism and Buddhism in their regions of origin, these faiths maintained their prominence in Odisha. Saivism reached its zenith in this state, while Vaishnavism continues to thrive, particularly within the cult of Jagannath. Although many religious centres in Odisha have diminished over time, and certain religions have seen a decline, their principles continue to be upheld by the populace to the present day. Odisha is recognized for its rich cultural heritage, exemplified through its art and architecture. Over the centuries, the artistic capabilities of Orissan sculptors have manifested in a plethora of exquisite images that rival the finest works produced in any region of India. The sculptural art of Odisha exhibits one of the most distinctive regional styles within the country. The study of this style is particularly rewarding, as it reflects an ongoing tradition of sculptural activity spanning over a millennium for each of the three primary religions: Brahminical, Buddhism, and Jainism. This style is distinguished by its clear and consistent evolving iconographic program. In the context of northern Odisha, particularly in the Baitarani-Salandi River basin in the Keonjhar, Baleswar and Bhadrak districts, numerous sculptures representing Brahminical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions can be found throughout the region.

### Study Area

The Salandi River originates from the Meghasani Hill of Similipal massif and traverses high altitudes, plateaus, and flat land regions across the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Baleswar, and Bhadrak in Odisha. It spans over an area of approximately 144 kilometres before merging with the Baitarani River within close proximity to Aradi at Tinitara Ghat in the Bhadrak district of Odisha. A significant number of tributaries, small streamlets, and Nullahs converge with the Salandi on the left and right banks of the river. Across the river basin on both sides, thick alluvium (silt and sand) can be seen up to 1 km from the present river basin. Extensive agricultural lands have been developed on both sides of the river basin. The Salandi River valley has turned into a rice bowl of this area with irrigation from the Hadagarh water reservoir. A majority of the archaeological sites are found on the Salandi river bank because of the availability of natural resources and its polyreligious landscape. The present study region covers the Hatadihi and Khaira blocks in the Keonjhar and Baleswar districts of Odisha.

### Previous research

As far as archaeological investigations in the Salandi River valley are concerned, no scholar has undertaken a single work earlier that may provide comprehensive and systematic information on the archaeological potential and early human colonization in the valley. However, very few studies undertaken earlier by scholars in the distant areas of the Salandi River in the context of the Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Bhadrak districts may provide a rudimentary idea of the archaeological heritage of this region. H. C. Das, during his field investigations in the undivided Baleswar districts of Odisha, reported and documented many Brahminical, Jaina and Buddhist shrines and monuments in the lower tracks of the Salandi valley (Das 1985). R. P. Mohapatra highlights the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina

## Recently Explored Architectural and Sculptural Remains

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**Figure 1: Map Showing the Location of Ratina Village in the Salandi Valley, Baleswar district, Odisha.**



the religious developments in northern Odisha in general and Salandi Valley in particular during the historical and early medieval period. However, the discovery of archaeological sites, monuments, and sculptural remains in and around the Salandi Valley may add new insights to the mapping of the cultural landscape of this region.

### **Temple at Ratina Village, Baleswar District (Lat: 21°14'21.73"N, Long: 86°22'37.25"E)**

The village of Ratina is situated in the Khaira block of Baleswar district in Odisha, on the left bank of the Salandi River. It is located approximately 5 kilometres distance from the Agarpada Market towards the north-eastern direction. The exact site is situated on the left side of the road connecting Agarpada to Kupari at a distance of 4 kilometres. The temple is currently situated on the premises of a villager's private land. The temple is an east-facing *tri-ratha* structure built from dressed laterite stone blocks (Figure 2). It is situated on a low lateritic platform measuring 9 feet 6 inches in length, 8 feet 9 inches in width, and 1 foot in height. Currently, the temple is in a state of disrepair, with the shikhara (spire) portion missing. The approximate height of the temple from the top of the platform is 15 feet, and it has a width of 6 feet 3 inches. The *tri-ratha* design features a central paga, known as the *Raha Paga*, along with two corner pages on either side, which lack any mouldings or decorations. On the three sides of the central paga of the temple, the *Parsvadevata* niches are present; these are located above the low elevated *pabhaga* portion, which is approximately 2 feet in height. In the *Parsvadevata*, niches are slightly bulged towards the exterior, and the deities are missing, which is a prototype of *Pidhamundi* motifs of the Kalinga style of temple architecture. On the four sides of the temple, the walls of the western, southern and northern sides have remained higher than the eastern wall; this part is broken just above the door jam. The temple has a narrow and elongated door jam, which is approximately 5 feet and 6 inches in height and 2 feet and 6 inches in width, which is devoid of any sculptural decorations and ornamentations.

Inside the broken temple, close to the western side wall, a standing Surya sculpture is placed, which is covered with mud and debris (Figure 3). The sculpture measures 3 feet 4 inches in length and 1 foot 7 inches in width. In the iconographic representations, Surya is depicted in full-length standing in his chariot. He is in the *samabhanga* pose and holds a full-blown lotus in each hand as in the other modes, but both hands are broken from the elbow portion. The northern dress is abandoned except for the boots; in some examples, even these are discarded. Aruna is placed at his feet, seated in *padmasana*; the body of the Aruna is missing. Only the Asana part is present, with the seven horses carved on the face of the pedestal. The chariot has a *tri-ratha* in plan, with the horses being divided into three groups. The front edge of the chariot is generally straight, and the seven horses are carved in a continuous row, with the centre one facing forward and those on the sides facing away from the centre. Surya is flanked at the base by Dandi and Pingala, along with *Usa* and *Pratyusa* also present. The black slab lacks any elaborate decoration, remaining notably plain. The upper two corners of the back slab are adorned with two flying *Vidyadharas*. Additional elaboration is evident in the crown, which rises in height. In the Surya image located within the temple, a cable-type diadem rests at the base, featuring projecting jewelled crests. The crown is divided into two registers, separated by a rimmed, beaded string. At the base of the upper register, more crests align alternately with those of the diadem, extending the height of the lower register. The upper register is capped by a rimmed, beaded string border, topped with a slightly rounded lotus finial. Surya's earrings are typically circular studs embellished with beaded borders or *puspa-kundlas*, which have flower-cluster terminals. The cuirass



extends down the centre of the chest, connecting the necklace to the *udarabandha* or girdle. It is often decorated with rows of floral motifs, crisscrossing horizontal or vertical bead patterns, or simple cross-hatching. The yajnopavita appears in Surya images from the 10th century, consistently depicted as a beaded or pearl-string type (*ratnapavita*) that hangs down to the hip (Behera & Donaldson 2002).



Figure 2: View of the broken temple at Ratina Village, Baleswar district.



Figure 3: Standing Surya image inside the temple at Ratina village.



### Surya riding in a chariot

An important specimen depicting Surya riding in a chariot, along with numerous other fragmented sculptures, was discovered in a sculpture shed located in the centre of Ratina village, where it is currently venerated by local inhabitants. This representation of Surya is notably intricate and can be categorised into several variations based on his posture (Donaldson 1987: 1139-1141). Surya is portrayed from the hips upward, with his legs obscured within the chariot. He holds a fully bloomed lotus in each hand while his charioteer, *Aruna*, is positioned at the front edge of the chariot. With the exception of a singular instance at Shergarh, where *Aruna* is depicted seated in *bhadrāsana*, or a few cases where he is depicted upon the central horse, *Aruna* is consistently illustrated in *padmasana* (Figure 4). Typically, he grasps the reins with his left hand while his right hand is raised to hold a lash. The front edge of the chariot is predominantly straight, and the seven horses are intricately carved in a continuous formation, with the central horse facing forward and those on either side directed away from the centre. Many examples exhibit the central horse in a rather awkward pose, suggesting a squatting position. The chariot features a *triratha* design, segmenting the horses into three groups. The stone slab exhibits significant damage, resulting in the absence of images of *Usha* and *Pratyusha* on the lower two sides. Additionally, on the upper two sides, the depictions of the flying *Vidyadharas* and other cult images are also missing. The face and head of the image is weathered due to the continuous use by the villagers for their ritualistic activities. However, the design generally approximates the *Kirita-mukuta* with large upward projecting crests alternating with pearl strings hanging straight down



Figure 4: Surya riding in a chariot sculpture found at Ratina village.

from the top. The earrings worn by Surya are usually circular studs with beaded borders or *Puspakundalas* with flower-cluster terminals. The lustre is richly bejewelled and wears a cuirass or coat of mail. In addition to the commonly prescribed boots and northern attire, the most distinctive ornaments include a ruby-studded crown and an ornate girdle. The *yajnopavita* appears in images of Surya from the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, typically taking the form of a beaded or pearl-string type (*Ratnapavita*) that hangs down to the hip (Behera & Donaldson 2002).

### Seated Ganesh Image

Ganesh is often depicted as a *Parśvadevata* in numerous Shiva temples throughout Odisha, with certain locations featuring independent temples dedicated to his worship. Shiva is accompanied by a significant number of *Gaṇas*, of which *Ganesh* is recognised as the foremost. The veneration of Ganesh has emerged comparatively later than that of other deities such as *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva*. The representations of Ganesh found in the temples of Odisha can be classified into three distinct categories based on iconography: *Asina* (seated), *Sthanaka* (standing), and *Nritya* (dancing). The *Asina* Ganesh has been present in Odisha since the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, typically depicted seated in *Ardhaparyanka* or, in certain instances, in *Lalitāsana*, reminiscent of Parvati. The occurrence of *Sthanaka* Ganesh is comparatively rare in Odisha; this form of image was primarily made during the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE under the patronage of the Somavamsi rulers (Donaldson 2001). Among the three categories, the *Nritya* (dancing) Ganesh images exhibit a superior level of artistic merit. This particular representation gained popularity after the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and is believed to have been initiated by the same Somavamsi rulers of Odisha. The Ganesha image found at Ratina village in the Salandi River valley dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE, which was stylistically modelled. The effects of weathering have significantly diminished the clarity of the iconographic representations of the figure, resulting in a lack of discernible features. In this image, the Ganesha is seated in *ardhaparyanka* pose with the right knee uplifted, frequently held in the place by a *Yoga-Patta*. The left hand invariably holds a *modaka* patra from which his proboscis (elephant trunk) is plucking sweet. The uplifted back left hand generally holds the *kuthar*. The right-hand holds a fruit, and the uplifted back right-hand holds a rosary (Figure 5). The iconographic representations seems that the god is helping himself, with the tip of his flexed trunk (Banerjia 1956).

### Image of Vairabha

This two-handed ferocious-looking Bhairava image is worshipped separately. He is in the



Figure 5: Seated Ganesha sculpture found at Ratina village.





Figure 6: Bhairava in Pratyalidha posture found at Ratina village.

*pratyalidha* posture, carrying a skull cup in his lower left hand, and his right lower hand is being broken. The face is highly weathered, and *Patrakundalas* are hanging from his ears and having *Jatamukuta*. His look is terrible with tusks coming out in both sides of his mouth. Two round lotus-rosette motifs are carved in both top corners of the back slab (Figure 6). This type of lotus rosette motif is found in the top corners of the back slabs of sculptures at Narsinghnath also, and this sculpture can be dated safely to the post-Somavamsi period, i.e. 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### Other Miscellaneous Sculptures

Apart from these Surya, Ganesh and Bhairava sculptures, there are a large number of unidentified sculptures, a broken female figure seated in Lalitasana, the head of a broken sculpture, a female figure seated in Padmasana, two Broken sculptures, a bust of a broken sculpture, broken part of a circular stone having chisel mark, Naga sculpture, Broken head sculpture, Nayika figure, hand of a broken sculpture were found within the sculpture shade at Ratina village (Figure 7 & 8). On the basis of the iconographic representations, i.e. the executions and refinements of sculptures, they belong to the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.





Figure 7: Broken Sculptures recovered from Ratina Village, Baleswar district, Odisha.



Figure 8. General View of the Sculptural Remains in the middle of Ratina Village.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The northern part of Odisha is important from an archaeological perspective. Like other parts of India, this region of Odisha showcases a rich history of continuous human habitation, spanning from the Pleistocene to the Holocene epoch. The stone tool artefacts and other cultural antiquities recovered from the study area show that this area was inhabited by humans from the Paleolithic period to the present. Nevertheless, the Salandi River valley is a treasure of ancient remains; people often come upon sculptured stones and statues, which are sometimes of remarkable beauty, underneath the earth, in ruined temples and deserted jungles. Some idea of the influence which various religious sects exerted here may be gleaned from a study of these figures, temples, mounds or brick debris. The long-forgotten figures of different deities, found in various places, are, so to speak, the only surviving witnesses of the various stages of the religious history of the study area in the past.

Based on the findings of archaeological explorations in the Salandi valley and its vicinity, it is contended that the religious landscape of the region during the early medieval period was characterized by polireligiousity. This denotes the coexistence of diverse religions within the same cultural and geographical space. During the 7th to 13th 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 architectural style of the Ratina temple stands on a low lateritic platform, triratha in plan and features a narrow entrance, measuring 1 meter in height, facing east. The region is characterized by a lateritic formation, which is readily accessible for the construction of temples in this area. The *Sikhara* portion of the temple is broken towards the *beki* portion. A Surya image is placed in the garbhagriha of the temple, serving as the presiding deity. The temple has the same style and affinity with those of Rekha deula of the Kalinga style of architecture and can be dated to the 8th-9th centuries CE onward. 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, particularly the Kapileswara temple complex at Nandapur and some parts of Jharkhand state, i.e., temples of Benisagar and Khekpata region (Bhatt 2002; Dwibedi 2024). It may be in the 9th century CE onwards, with the arrival of the Somavamsis of *Utkal* and their political affiliation with the Bhanjas of *Khijingakota*, this region witnessed the establishment of many religious centres in the form of large and small temple shrines in the early medieval Odisha.

The tradition of sun worship in Odisha has been practised since ancient times, reaching its zenith with the construction of the monumental Sun Temple at Konark (Behera & Donaldson 2002; Bedbak 2012; Sahu 2012 & 2014, Bose 2023). The concept of sun worship in Odisha appears to have been shaped by various influences from the prehistoric through early medieval and medieval periods. This practice is regarded as an indigenous tradition that likely predates the Vedic solar deities, finding prominence among the primitive tribes of Odisha (Sahu 2012: 30-31). Evidence from numerous inscriptions and monumental architecture throughout the state indicates that sun worship was embraced by different royal dynasties of Odisha, including the Matharas, the Nalas, the Sarbhapuriyas, the Sailodbhavas, the Bhanjas of *Khijjinga* mandala, the Somavamsis, and the Gangas. As a significant centre of sun worship, Odisha boasts a substantial number of sun images.



A sun image, found in a damaged condition, was situated against the platform of the Patanamangala temple at Chharapada in the Bhadrak district of Odisha. This image is regarded as one of the earliest representations of a sun image in northern Odisha (Bedbak 2012; Sahu 2014). A significant number of solar images have been previously documented in various locations throughout northern Odisha, including Khiching, Dumuria, Kaupur, Trisala, Narendrapur, Seragada, Ada, and the renowned Viranchi Narayana temple situated in Palia, Bhadrak, all the sites are located in the Bhadrak, Baleswar and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha. The recently discovered Surya images within the Ratina village, situated on the left bank of the Salandi River valley, are considered the continuation of the Sun worship tradition in the region. Ratina village is located approximately 7 kilometres to the north-east of Kaupur. Its proximity to Kaupur makes it an area of interest for exploration and study. All the earlier reported sites with evidence of Surya images are located within 10 kilometres to 50 kilometres from the Ratina village in the Khaira block of Baleswar district in Odisha. The iconographic features such as physical features, attributes, hairstyle, ornamentation and the representation of the chariot with horses of the Surya images at Ratina show a close similarity with the Sun images from Kaupur, Ada and Khiching area.

The appearance of such a series of Sun images suggests that the cult related to sun worship was one of the most vital segments of the Brahmanical faith in this part of Odisha. As an important stronghold of Sun worship, Odisha has produced several Sun images of different types having conventionality with the instructions given in various sacred texts. Some of them even throw new light on the iconic features of the deity. Tradition holds that the *Magas* or *Scythic* Brahmanas were the pioneers in introducing Sun image worship to India. Besides Sun worship, they engaged in the study of Astrology and medicine. This raises the question of when these Brahmanas migrated to India and settled in its different regions. The Greek envoy *Megasthenes*, during his visit to the court of Pataliputra, noted the practice of idol worship dedicated to the Sun in that area of the province. The ancient *Pali* texts reference the *Maga* Brahmanas, indicating that they held significant power during the time of the Buddha. In the well-known *Pali* text, *Bambhajala Sutta*, Lord Buddha speaks unfavourably about this group of Brahmana astrologers. These sources lead us to reasonably conclude that the *Scythic* Brahmanas arrived and established themselves in Eastern India well before Buddha's era. The influence of the *Saura* Brahmanas in Jharkhand remains strong even today. Although they no longer identify as *Scythians*, they live distinctly apart from the majority of the Indian *Brahmana* community. In current times, they refer to themselves as Angirasas and venerate the Sun under the names *Narsimha* or *Raghunatha*. The Angirasas possess unique customs and practices that set them apart from other Brahmanas. Their traditions still bear a resemblance to those of the ancient *Maga* Brahmanas who honoured *Mitra*, the Sun (Vasu 1911: 9-12). According to accounts, after settling in Jharkhand close to the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanja districts of Odisha, some of them moved to *Suryapur* in the Baleswar district, while others went to Konarak along the coastline. The prosperous village of Soro in Baleswar District was previously named *Saurapur* or *Suryapur*. Evidence exists to demonstrate the considerable influence once exercised by the *Saura* Brahmanas in the Soro village. Inscriptions found on the stone pedestal of the *Saptakumari* located in Ghora-Shahi near Soro indicate that a temple dedicated to the Sun existed even in the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, confirming that sun worship persisted in that region up until that time. The Angirasa Brahmanas are priests for the Sun temple in Konarak, renowned worldwide for its architectural brilliance. The illustrious temple of Konarak was constructed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Prior to that, the area had already established itself as a prominent centre for the Sauras. In the

course of our ongoing discussion, it is pertinent to note that Ratina village, located within the Baleswar district of Odisha, served as a significant centre for Surya worship during both the early medieval and medieval periods. This observation is consistent with the general trends observed in other regions of northern Odisha, underscoring the cultural and religious importance of this locality.

The polyreligious landscape of northern Odisha, in general, and the Salandi river valley, in particular, between the 7th and 15th centuries CE, was characterised by diverse religions and practices and some common attributes found in all religions. These shared elements can be called common cultural baselines. These baselines are common and were integrated by each religion into their respective system. Major religions of the period— Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism, Buddhism, Jainism— had adopted and integrated these common elements into their respective religions. One common element of this shared cultural landscape was the worship of *Yaksha* and *Yakshini*, *Naga* and *Nagini*, *Gajalakshmi*, *Ganesa*, *Vairabha* and *Kirtimukha*, etc, by Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanical religions. A common art motif used by all religions was *Kirtimukha*, which is found in all religions. *Kirtimukha* represents both devouring and benign aspects. Both *Kirtimukha* and flying *Vidyadharas* depictions are found in the centre of the top portion of the back slab of all the Brahminical, Buddhist and Jaina sculptures. The depiction of *Purna-ghata*, *lotus medallions*, and *viswapadma*-type pedestals was a very common aspect found on the sculptures of all these above religions. The other cultural baseline was the mode of rituals and worship. Both Buddhism and Brahmanical religions share a similar mode of worship. The veneration of gods and goddesses, accompanied by specific ritualistic observances and the worship of particular deities to attain profound objectives, became prevalent across all religions in India during this period. Furthermore, within the South Asian cultural milieu, identical gods and goddesses were revered in various religions, sometimes bearing the same names and at other times different ones.

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