



Archaeological Exploration of Vindhyachal Region: A Study of Sacred Landscape and Cultural Continuity

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Abstract: The Vindhyachal region, located in the southeastern part of Mirzapur district in Uttar Pradesh, is one of North India's prominent sacred sites. Renowned for the *Śakti* worship, the area features a unique geographical setting—it is bounded by rivers on three sides and the Vindhya mountains on the fourth. The objective of this study is to understand the processes of cultural continuity persisting since ancient times by examining the archaeological remains and sacred geography of the Vindhyachal region. This research focuses on the temples, sculptural remains, and pottery traditions of this naturally abundant zone. When examined together, these physical remains vividly highlight a long, unbroken historical and cultural legacy. A multidisciplinary approach has been employed in this research integrating archaeological field surveys, documentation of physical remains, architectural analysis of temples, and an examination of literary and epigraphic sources. This research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the sacred landscape of the Vindhyachal region within the context of Indian archaeology and highlights Vindhyachal as a living heritage site where ancient traditions continue to shape contemporary religious practices. Furthermore, the study aims to elucidate the archaeological, historical, and cultural grandeur of Vindhyachal while providing a systematic archaeological framework for future heritage conservation and cultural studies in the region.

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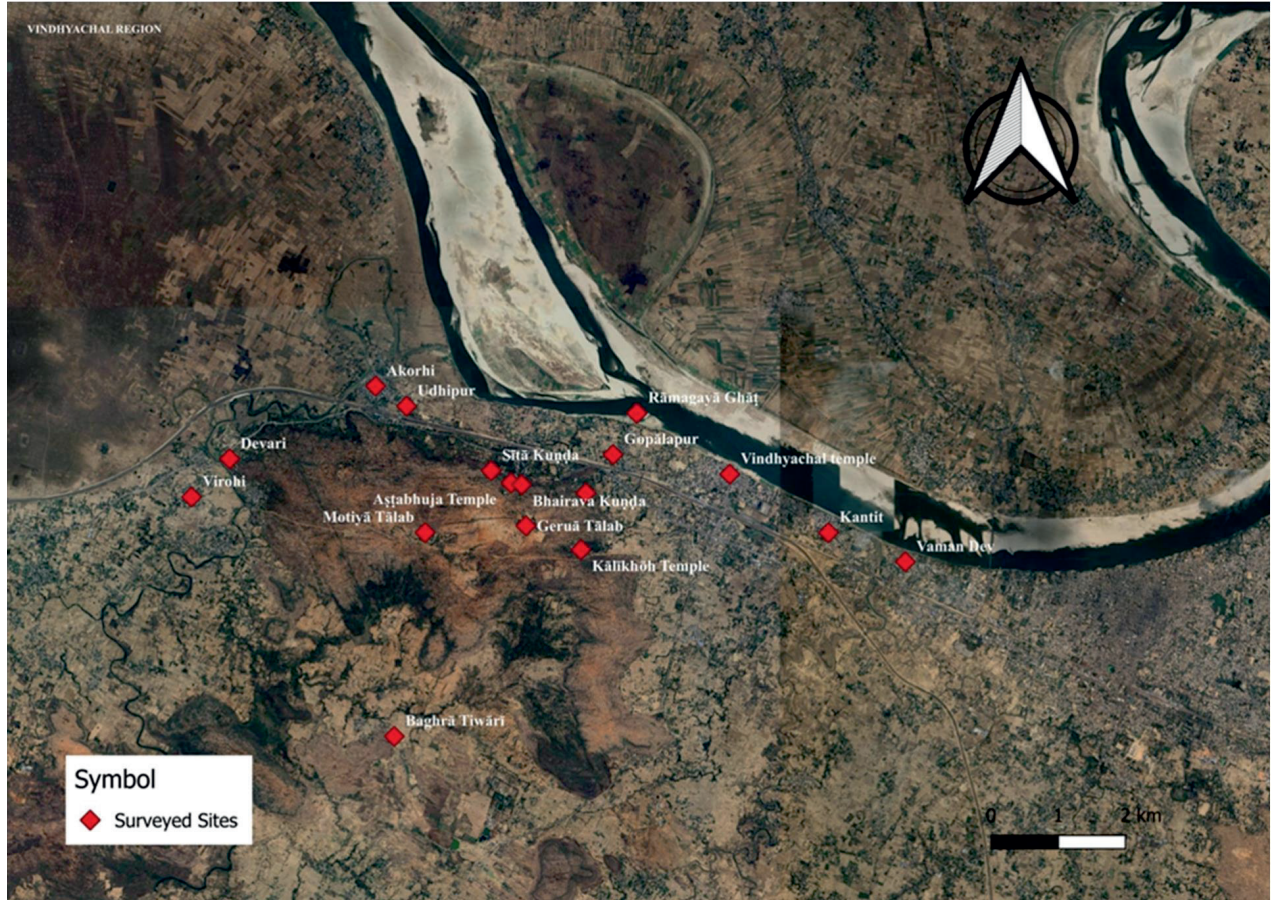
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Introduction

Situated in the south-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, the Vindhyachal region lies on the southern bank of the eastward-flowing Ganga River, to the west of the Mirzapur district headquarters. Geographically, the region extends between 25°15' and 25°17' North latitude and 82°48' and 82°52' East longitude (**Map 1**). Located approximately 11 km west of Mirzapur district headquarters, Vindhyachal is renowned as an important center of *Śakti* worship. The region is accessible by air, road, and rail transport. The nearest airports are Prayagraj Airport (Bamrauli) and Lal Bahadur

Shastri International Airport (Babatpur, Varanasi), located at distances of approximately 100 km and 72 km, respectively.

By road, Vindhyachal lies between the Prayagraj–Mirzapur route and the Prayagraj–Varanasi route. From the Prayagraj–Varanasi road on National Highway–19 (Formerly NH-2), the region can be reached via the Gopiganj–Mirzapur road or the Aurai–Mirzapur road. It can also be accessed via the Prayagraj–Mirzapur road on National Highway–35.



Map 1: Vindhyachal Region

This region, renowned as an important centre of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*) and *Śrāddha* rituals, is also described in various *Purāṇic* texts. In the *Auśanasa Purāṇa*, this region is described as a unique and incomparable sacred place within the universe:

*Tatra pratapatām puṣām durlabham nahi kañcana
Vindhyakṣetrasamaṃ kṣetraṃ nāsti brahmāṇḍagolake
(Auśanasa Purāṇa, 10.4)*

The Vindhyachal region marks the first point of contact between the Vindhya mountain range and the Ganga River. The confluence of mountains and river must have played a significant role in facilitating the livelihood of both humans and wildlife in this region. The *Purāṇas* describe this confluence as a highly meritorious sacred place:

Gaṅgātīre 'thavā vindhye sarvakāmaphalapradā
(*Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 9.3–7)

The *Matsya Purāṇa* describes this region as a sacred *tīrtha* known as *Samśāra-mocana* (the place that liberates from worldly existence):

Vindhyayoge gaṅgāyāstathā nadītaṭaṃ śubham
Samśāramocanaṃ tīrthaṃ tathaiva ṛnamocanam
(*Matsya Purāṇa*, 22.66–67)

The author of the *Matsya Purāṇa* describes this region as ten times more meritorious than Kurukṣetra:

Kurukṣetrasamā gaṅgā yatra tatrāvagāhitā
Tasmād daśaguṇā proktā yatra vindhyena saṅgatā
(*Matsya Purāṇa*, 107.47–48)

Surrounded on three sides by rivers, this region is bounded by the *Puṇyaughā* (*Oghawatī*) River in the east, the *Karṇāvatī* River in the west, and the Ganga River in the north. To the west, near the archaeological site of Shivpur, lies the confluence of the Ganga and the *Karṇāvatī* rivers. The meeting of these two rivers forms a triangular sacred landscape, which since ancient times has been associated with the concept of *mokṣa* (liberation). This confluence is known as *Rām-Gayā Ghāṭ*.

In the eastern part of the region, near *Vāman Temple*, the *Puṇyaughā* River meets the Ganga. This confluence is also associated with the religious concept of *Śrāddha*, signifying its importance as a ritual centre.

The greatest fame of the Vindhyachal region is associated with Goddess *Vindhyavāsini*, whose shrine is located near the confluence of the Vindhya hills and the Ganga. The *Bṛhannīla Tantra* refers to this sacred location as follows:

Saṅgame vindhyagaṅgāyām vindhyaśrīr vindhyavāsini
(*Bṛhannīla Tantra*, 5.123)

Research Methodology

This research aims to examine the sacred geography of the Vindhyachal region and analyse the archaeological and artistic remains discovered through field investigations in order to understand the processes of cultural continuity that have shaped the region over time. The study seeks to document and evaluate the archaeological and architectural heritage of Vindhyachal, explore the relationship between sacred landscapes and material remains, and assess the continuity of religious and cultural traditions from the past to the present. To fulfil these objectives, the research adopts a multidisciplinary approach that combines extensive field surveys, systematic documentation of archaeological remains, architectural analysis, and the critical study of literary and epigraphic

sources. The study correlates archaeological evidence with textual and epigraphic records to reconstruct the historical and cultural landscape of Vindhyachal. Through this integrated analysis, it evaluates the significance of the region's heritage and highlights its relevance for heritage conservation and future scholarly research.

Previous work in this area

The earliest significant archaeological survey of this region was conducted by Alexander Cunningham during 1875–76 and 1877–78 CE (Cunningham 1885: 130–1). Alois Anton Führer also carried out a survey of this region in 1881 (Führer 1969: 257). Excavations conducted by the Uttar Pradesh State Museum, Lucknow, between 1955 and 1957 near Ashtabhuja brought to light artistic remains dating from the post-Gupta period to the late medieval period (Joshi 1989: 19).

Furthermore, under the direction of Dr. Rakesh Tiwari, Director of the Uttar Pradesh State Archaeology Department, surveys conducted during 1997–98 CE revealed several archaeological sites and antiquities dating from the prehistoric period to the medieval period (Tiwari et al., 1998: 180–1).

Subsequently, surveys conducted by various researchers have continued to reveal new archaeological evidence from this region. In continuation of these efforts, the present author has also conducted a systematic survey of the area, the details of which are presented below according to individual sites.

Vindhyachal (25°16' North Latitude and 82°50' East Longitude)

Located about 11 km west of the Mirzapur district headquarters, the renowned centre of *Śakti* worship, the *Vindhyavāsinī* Temple and its surrounding area constitute the principal sacred and archaeological zone of the Vindhyachal region. In the *Vindhyavāsinī* Temple, *Mahālakṣmī* is worshipped in the form of *Vindhyavāsinī*. The image of Goddess *Vindhyavāsinī* is rock-cut (*śailastha*), although most of the sculpture remains covered with ritual ornamentation. On stylistic grounds, the image appears to date to the early centuries CE. The shrine is encased with silver plating, and the goddess is installed beneath a golden arch, depicted with large prominent eyes (Mishra 1988: 302).

In Tantric representations, Goddess *Vindhyavāsinī* is shown with an owl-like face, three eyes, and four arms. One hand is in *abhaya-mudrā*, while the remaining hands hold the conch (*śaṅkha*), discus (*cakra*), and mace (*gadā*). In this Tantric iconography she is depicted as lion-mounted, accompanied by Bhairavī and Gaṇeśa (Singh 2010: 316).

Near the *Jhāṅkī-dvāra* (window) of the temple is installed an image of the *Saptamātrkāś* (Fig. 1). In front of the *Kālī* Temple within the temple complex are stone sculptures of a lion and a buffalo head (*mahiṣa*). Near the western entrance of the temple stands a stone sculpture of a lion, approximately 1 metre in width. Nearby, close to the *Phoolmati* Temple, several ancient sculptures are preserved, though their identification remains uncertain.

Adjacent to the *Sarasvatī* Temple, several sculptural remains have been documented, including: A *Viṣṇu* image measuring 14 × 70 × 20 cm, A *Gajalakṣmī* image measuring 56 × 50 × 25 cm, Two Goddess images measuring 44 × 35 × 35 cm and 69 × 40 × 23 cm respectively (Fig. 2).

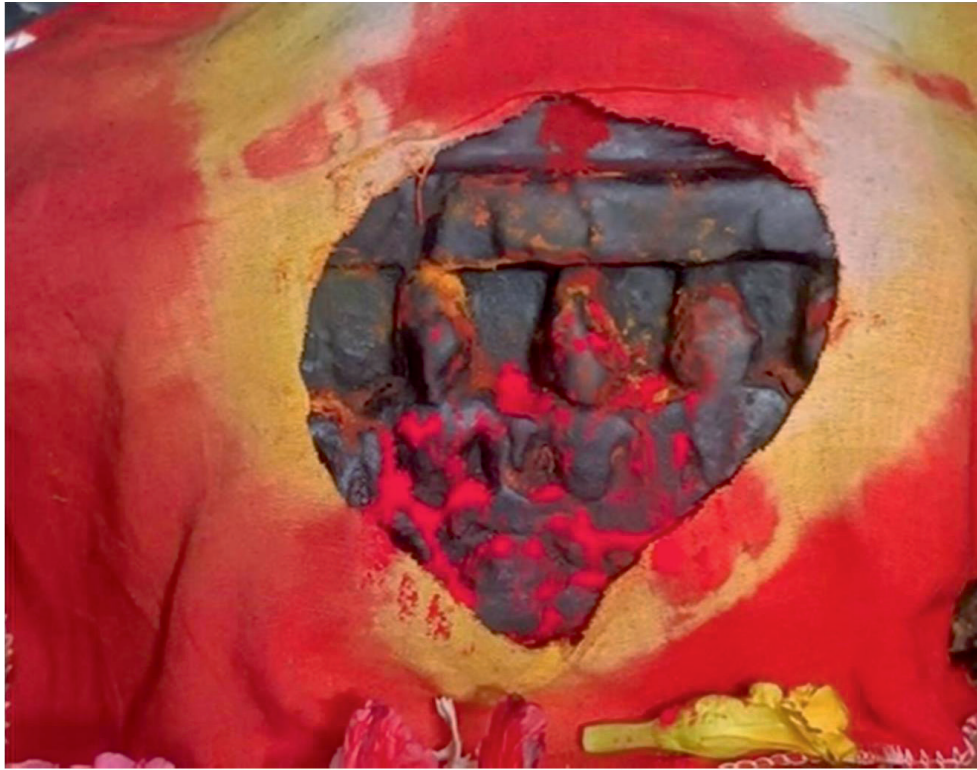


Fig. 1: *Saptamātrkās*



Fig. 2: *Viṣṇu, Gajalakṣmī and Goddess images*

On the northern side of the *Sarasvatī* Temple are installed a paired image of *Nāga Deva* and *Nāga Devī* along with two additional sculptures (Fig. 3). Near the temple exit, close to a *Śiva* Temple, a standing image of a female deity and structural remains of an ancient temple have been found.



Fig 3: Paired image of Nāga Deva and Nāga Devī

North of the *Annapūrṇā* Temple, in the *Vindhyeśvara* Temple, images of *Śiva*, *Nandi*, *Sūrya*, and *Hanumān* are installed. Near the *Gaṅgā* Gate of the *Vindhyavāsinī* Temple lie structural remains of an ancient temple. At the *Gaṅgā Ghāṭ*, a *Śiva* Temple preserves architectural fragments including a *lalāṭabimba*, *āmalaka*, *śiva-argha*, and other temple remains.

From the outer area of this complex, a stone elephant sculpture measuring $140 \times 80 \times 27$ cm has been found. The sculpture depicts a rider on the elephant, several horses, and a *Śiva-liṅga* carved near the elephant's trunk (Fig. 4). Nearby are a *candraśilā* and a *smārta Śiva-liṅga* approximately 85 cm in length, half embedded within a tree trunk (Fig. 5). Images of four-armed *Viṣṇu* and an upward-faced *Kālī* are also installed in this area. In front of the *Śiva* Temple, near the *Bhairava* Temple, architectural fragments of an ancient temple have also been recovered.



Fig. 4: Elephant sculpture Fig.6: *smārta Śiva-līṅga*

Within the Police Station complex, located near the *Vindhyavāsini* Temple, sculptures of *Umā-Maheśvara* and *Hanumān* in a gesture of prayer have been found. Adjacent to the Police Station stands a *Bhairava–Bhairavī* Temple, in front of which images of *Durgā* and *Umā-Maheśvara*, along with architectural remains of an ancient temple, have been found. Along the same route stands a *Śītālā Devī* Temple, where an ancient image of Goddess *Śītālā* seated on a donkey is installed (Fig. 6).

On the *Bhairava Ghāṭ* lane, along the *Vindhyavāsini* Temple route, a small shrine houses a standing image of a Goddess. Nearby, a *Śiva* Temple contains architectural remains of an ancient temple along with *Nandi* and *Śiva-līṅga*. Another *Śiva* Temple on this route preserves a standing four-armed image of *Viṣṇu* (Fig. 7), and a *Chamunda* image approximately 1 metre in width is also installed here. North of the *Chamunda* Temple, near the *ghāṭ*, another *Śiva* Temple preserves ancient images of *Nandi* and *Gaṇeśa*.



Fig.6: Goddess *Śītālā* Fig.7: Four-armed image of *Viṣṇu*

Near Bus stand, in the *Nihuta Mahavīr Temple*, a lion-mounted Goddess image approximately 6 feet in height is installed, locally identified with *Śāradā Devī*. Nearby are preserved remains of ancient temple pillars. Close to the station road, near the Birla Guest House, the octagonal *Barkhaḍī Mahādeva* Temple has yielded architectural fragments and sculptures belonging to an earlier temple structure. The images and temple remains found in Vindhyachal may be dated between the 9th century CE to the late medieval period.

Kantit (25°15' North Latitude and 82°52' East Longitude)

Located in the eastern part of the *Vindhyavāsīnī Devī* temple complex, this archaeological site is known for the *Śmaśānanātha* temple situated near *Futahā Ghāt*, where eleven *Śivaliṅgas* along with other images are installed. Outside this temple, the remains of an ancient temple are scattered. Among these remains are an *Āmalaka* measuring 80×50 cm, a broken image of *Nandī* measuring $35 \times 13 \times 15$ cm, stone pillars, a *Candraśilā*, a *Lalāṭabimba*, upward-facing lotus petals, a broken female image measuring $28 \times 23 \times 10$ cm, and other broken sculptural fragments measuring $80 \times 40 \times 14$ cm and $70 \times 47 \times 18$ cm. In front of this temple, an image of *Viṣṇu* is installed in a small shrine.

Near the steps outside the *Kāntiteśvara* temple, located to the east of this *ghāt*, a *Lalāṭabimba* and a *Rathikā* (architectural niche) have been found (Fig.8). Close to this site, from a small shrine situated along the main road, an image of a *Nāga* and an image of *Nandī* have been found. Further along this road, in front of the *Bhairava* temple, an approximately six-foot-high image of *Gaṇeśa* is installed. From this point, the route leading to *Dugdheśvara Nātha* and *Nāgakūpa* also begins. The images and temple remains found in Kantit may be dated between the 9th century CE to the medieval period.



Fig. 8: Lalāṭabimba and a Rathikā

Nāgakūpa is an ancient well covering approximately 455.2 square meters, believed to have been constructed by the *Nāgavaṃśī* rulers and particularly associated with *Nāga* worship. Steps are constructed on all four sides of the well for descending, and a *Śivaliṅga* is installed at the bottom (Singh 2010: 213).

Akodhi (25°10' North Latitude and 82°27' East Longitude)

Situated about 3 km west of *Śivpur*, at the confluence of the *Gaṅgā* and *Karṇāvatī* rivers, this village contains a *Śiva* temple at its northern end from which pillars of an ancient temple, an unfinished image of *Nandī*, and several broken sculptures have been found.

At the southern end of the village, an archaeological site known as *Caurā Mātā kā Sthāna* has yielded a broken image of *Viṣṇu* and an image of a *Dvārapāla*. Antiquities are found at several places throughout the village, many of which are currently being used by the villagers for domestic purposes.

Earlier surveys have revealed antiquities ranging from the Pre-Historic Age to the Early Medieval period, along with red and black pottery, from this site (Tiwari et al., 1998: 180–1). It is noteworthy that during field ploughing an ancient image of *Kaṅkāla Kālī* was found in this village, which is presently worshipped by the local inhabitants.

Udhipur (25°10' North Latitude and 82°28' East Longitude)

This village lies to the east of Akodhi, situated north of *Virohī* railway station and south of the *Gaṅgā* River. From the courtyard of a temple located at the western end of the village, images of *Gaṇeśa*, *Mūṣaka*, *Gaja*, *Dvārapāla*, and a *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇalīlā* pillar have been found. Near this site, pillars of an ancient temple are embedded in the edge of the platform of a well.

From the courtyard of the *Garhapālaka* deity temple situated at the southern end of the village, a *Sarasvatī* image measuring 82 × 47 × 23 cm (Fig. 9), a *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇalīlā* pillar, and fragments of door pillars have been recovered. Nearby, from the *Śayār Mātā* temple, a *Candraśīlā*, a *Gaja* image, a *Vyāla* sculpture, and other ancient stone fragments have been found. The images and temple remains found in Udhipur may be dated between the 9th century A.D. and the medieval period. In addition, red and black slipped pottery has also been found from a nearby mound.

Devari (25°10' North Latitude and 82°25' East Longitude)

Situated on the bank of the *Karṇāvatī* River along the Mirzapur–Gāipura road, earlier surveys at this village have revealed archaeological remains dating from approximately 600 BCE to the medieval period. These include fragments of Northern Black Polished Ware, black pottery, red pottery, and black-and-red ware (Tiwari et al., 1998: 173–4).

In the present survey, from the site known as *Caurā Mātā kā Sthāna*, a early-medieval image of *Gaṇeśa* and a broken image of *Viṣṇu* along with other fragmentary remains have been found (Fig. 10). Near the *Hanumān* temple located at the northern end of the village, a figure carved on rock has been observed; however, due to continued ritual activities by local inhabitants, its details are not clearly visible.

At the southern end of the village, a mound has been identified from which remains of a small shrine, fragments of red and black pottery, and bangles have been recovered.



Fig. 9: *Sarasvatī* image



Fig. 10: Broken Image

Virohi (25°9' North Latitude and 82°25' East Longitude)

Located about 1 km west of the Devari archaeological site, on the southern side of the Gāipura–Mirzapur road, earlier surveys have reported fragments of red pottery, stone sculptures, a well, and evidence of an oil press (*kolhū*) from this village (IAR 1997–98: 182).

During the present survey, a medieval pillar fragment and other structural remains were found at the southern end of the village. The pillar fragment is currently worshipped locally as *Ḍāyin Mātā*. Broken sculptures and stone fragments have also been recovered from the temples of *Vīrabhadra*, *Karṇeśvara*, and *Siddheśvara* located within the village. The images and temple remains found in Virohi may be dated between the 10th century CE to medieval period.

Vāman Dev Temple (25°15' North Latitude and 82°53' East Longitude):

Located near the *Ojhalā* bridge on the Mirzapur–Vindhyachal road, this archaeological site lies at the confluence of the *Gaṅgā* and *Puṇyauḍhā* rivers and is an important centre for faith and rituals. A stone temple stands at the bank of river, though its *garbhagrha* is presently empty.

Nearby stands the *Vāman* temple, whose structure appears to be relatively recent. Within its *garbhagrha* are installed images of *Vāman Deva*, *Umā-Maheśa*, and *Kṛṣṇa*, which stylistically appear to belong to the early medieval period. Outside the temple stands a shrine dedicated to *Narasimha*. The images and temple remains found in *Vāman Deva* Temple may be dated between the 8- 9th century CE to the late medieval period.

To the east of this site an image of *Nāgeśvara Nātha* is installed; its construction is attributed to the *Nāgavamśī* rulers (Kesari 2004: 74).

Ānandamayī Āśrama (25°16' North Latitude and 82°48' East Longitude):

Situated on the left side of the Śivpur–Aṣṭabhuja road along the Mirzapur–Prayagraj route, this archaeological site has been identified by Prof. Rana P. B. Singh with the *Vindhyavāsini* temple mentioned in the *Gauḍavaho* composed by *Vākpati Rāja* (Singh 2010: 227).

Following excavations conducted in 1955, the antiquities found here were preserved in the Lucknow Museum. During the present survey, a broken *Āmalaka*, upward lotus petals, a load-bearing figure (*Bhāravāhaka*), and images of *Umā-Maheśa* and a *Dvārapāla* were found. Outside the temple complex an ancient image of *Ṣaṣṭhī Devī* is installed. The temple remains found in *Ānandamayī Āśrama* may be dated between the 9th-10th century CE.

Aṣṭabhuja Temple (25°4' North Latitude and 82°21' East Longitude):

Located about 1 km east of the *Ānandamayī Āśrama*, the *Aṣṭabhuja* temple is famous for the worship of the sister of *Śrī Kṛṣṇa*. Earlier surveys have yielded sculptures dating from the 9th–11th centuries CE, including images of *Śiva*, *Naṭarāja Śiva*, *Umā-Maheśa*, *Viṣṇu*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Nandīśvara* with consort, *Sarasvatī*, *Pārvatī*, *Yamunā*, *Indra*, *Agni*, and others (Tiwari et al., 1998: 213; Führer 1881: 254; IAR 1956–57: 29; Joshi 1989).

In the present survey, a *Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu* image measuring 48 × 54 × 15 cm, a *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇa-līlā* pillar measuring 45 × 34 × 13 cm, and several broken pillar fragments were found. The images and temple remains found in *Aṣṭabhuja* Temple may be dated between the 9th- 12th century CE.

Bhairava Kuṇḍa (25°16' North Latitude and 82°47' East Longitude):

Located about 400 meters east of the *Aṣṭabhuja* temple, this site contains eight caves associated with *Bhairava* along with an ancient *Śiva* temple. To the south of the *kuṇḍa*, early medieval images of *Mahiṣāsura-mardīnī*, *Gaṇeśa*, and *Kalyāṇa-Sundara* are installed (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: *Mahiṣāsura-mardīnī* Sculpture

At the entrance of the *kuṇḍa*, four *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇa-līlā* pillars and a fragmentary image of a *Hanuman* (Fig. 12) have been found. The images and temple remains found in *Bhairava Kuṇḍa* Temple may be dated between the 9th- 12th century A.D.

Śītā Kuṇḍa (25°16'4" North Latitude and 82°47'07" East Longitude)

Situated about 400 meters west of the *Aṣṭabhuja* temple, this site is associated with the legend of *Śītā*. From this archaeological site, a *Candraśīlā* measuring 42 × 59 × 14 cm and a *Kubera* image measuring 64 × 40 × 15 cm have been found (Fig. 13).

From a nearby *Gaṇeśa* temple, an approximately six-foot-high image of *Gaṇeśa* in *Tribhaṅga* posture and a *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇa-līlā* pillar have been found. Additionally, names written in *pre-Nāgarī* and *Nāgarī* scripts have been identified near a nearby waterfall. The images and temple remains found in *Śītā Kuṇḍa* Temple may be dated between the 9th- 12th century CE., and inscription may be dated upto 16th century CE.



Fig. 12: *Hanuman* Sculpture



Fig. 13: *Kubera* Sculpture

Geruā Tālab (25°15'7" North Latitude and 82°47'06" East Longitude):

Located to the south of the *Aṣṭabhuja* temple, the temple built on the bank of this tank has yielded broken images of *Gaṇeśa* and *Viṣṇu*. *Sarvatobhadra Kṛṣṇa-līlā* pillars have also been found here. The images and temple remains found in *Geruā Tālab* Temple may be dated between the 9th- 12th century CE.

Motiyā Tālab (25°15'6" North Latitude and 82°45'11" East Longitude) :

Situated south of the *Aṣṭabhuja* temple, near this archaeological site stands the *Mukteśvara Mahādeva* temple where structural remains of an ancient temple have been found, which may be dated between the 9th- 12th century CE. At the other end of the temple complex stands an ancient *Hanumān* temple along with an old well.

Kālīkhōh Temple (25°15'43" North Latitude and 82°48'42" East Longitude):

Located about 3 km south of the *Kālīkhōh* Gate on the Prayagraj–Mirzapur road, this temple stands on the Vindhya hills and forms an important halt of the *Trikōṇa Yātrā* pilgrimage circuit. Images of *Trikāla Bhairava*, *Cāmuṇḍā*, *Bhadrakālī*, *Śivaliṅga*, *Sūrya*, *Vaṭuka Bhairava*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Viṣṇu*, *Lakṣmī*, and *Hanumān* are installed here. The architectural style of this temple appears to belong to the late medieval period.

Below the temple, inside a cave (*khōh*), a rock-cut image is present, while outside scattered fragments of *Āmalaka* and remains of an ancient temple structure are visible. . The images and temple remains found in *Kālīkhōh Temple* may be dated between the 10th century CE to medieval period.

Baghrā Tiwārī (25°7'46" North Latitude and 82°27'24" East Longitude):

Located about 7 km south-west of the *Amarāvati* crossing on the Prayagraj–Mirzapur road, remains of an ancient temple were reported from this village in earlier surveys (Tiwari et al., 1998: 213). In the present survey, mason's marks carved on stones, an image of *Sarasvatī*, and an *Āmalaka* were found.

The temple, with a 5 × 5 meter *garbhagrha* and a *maṇḍapa*, appears to have been dedicated to *Śiva* (Fig. 13). Nearby, close to the site known as Sapta Sarovara, a large *Gaṇeśa* image measuring 140 × 100 × 40 cm is currently worshipped. According to local residents, this image originally belonged to the same temple. The temple remains found in *Baghrā Tiwārī* may be placed upto 9th- 11th century CE.

Gopālapur (25°10'06" N Latitude, 82°29'06" E Longitude):

This site extends on both the northern and southern sides of the railway track located west of the *Vindhyavāsini Temple*. At the worship site of the *Narasimha Āśrama* in this area, a four-armed stone image of *Viṣṇu* is presently worshipped. The image has been coated with blue pigment.

To the south of the āśrama lies a stone-built tank known as *Kajrahvā Pokhrā*, covering approximately 415 square feet, along with a stone-built *Śiva Temple*. Near the *Śiva* temple, a sculptural fragment measuring 65 × 45 × 17 cm depicting a woman removing a thorn from her foot has been found.



Fig. 13: Temple Remains

North of *Kajrahvā Pokhrā* is an archaeological spot locally known as *Chaura Mātā kā Sthān*. From this location, an image of *Hanuman*(?) measuring $110 \times 68 \times 28$ cm in *pratyālīḍha mudrā* has been recovered; however, its upper portion and right arm are broken (Fig. 14). Additionally, a female sculpture measuring $110 \times 58 \times 10$ cm in *tribhaṅga mudrā*, provided with a halo



Fig 14: Image of *Hanuman*(?)

(*ābhāmaṇḍala*), has been found. Other associated architectural fragments include a *candrasālā* ($38 \times 50 \times 30$ cm), an *āmalaka* measuring 48 cm in length and 18 cm in thickness, and an *ūrdhva kamaladala* measuring 76 cm in length and 38 cm in thickness.

Near the railway crossing, close to a neem tree, a stone sculpture measuring $44 \times 76 \times 22$ cm has been found. The sculpture depicts a standing couple (*sthānaka mudrā*), flanked on both sides by three attendant figures. In addition, a pillar fragment bearing a *Gaṇeśa*-face motif and a *bhāravāhaka* (load-bearing figure) has also been recovered.

On the road leading to *Birla guest House*, a broken *sarvatobhadra* pillar depicting episodes of *Kṛṣṇa līlā* measuring $100 \times 20 \times 20$ cm has been found. On the same route, an *āmalaka* measuring 89 cm in length and 30 cm in thickness and a bracket measuring $80 \times 92 \times 31$ cm have also been found.

Within the premises of *Birla guest House*, a stone image of *Kṛṣṇa* measuring $92 \times 43 \times 28$ cm has been found. In this sculpture, a cow is depicted seated on the left side of the deity. The four-armed figure holds a *śaṅkha* and is adorned with a *mayūra-mukuta* (peacock crown). Along with this, a headless sculpture of a goddess (?) seated in *lalitāsana mudrā*, measuring $88 \times 41 \times 26$ cm, has also been recovered. The images and temple remains found in *Gopālapur* may be dated between the 8th century CE to medieval period.

***Rāmagayā Ghāṭ* (25°17'11" N Latitude, 82°49'07" E Longitude):**

This archaeological site is situated approximately three kilometres west of the *Vindhyavāsini Temple* on the southern bank of the *Gaṅgā*. According to local tradition, the site is associated with *Bhagavān Rāma*. Two stone mounds are visible at *Rāmagayā Ghāṭ*, which may be divided into eastern and western sections (Fig. 14). While the eastern mound contains scattered stone fragments without clear evidence of human workmanship, the western section is particularly rich in archaeological remains.



Fig. 14: Western section of *Rāmagayā Ghāṭ*

The dispersed remains found here indicate the existence of an ancient stone-working workshop. It is plausible that the workshop was established at this location due to the convenient riverine transportation available through the *Gaṅgā* and the easy availability of stone resources. During a village-level survey conducted by the Uttar Pradesh State Archaeology Directorate in Mirzapur district, pottery fragments dating from approximately 700 BCE to the early medieval period were recovered. These include *kṛṣṇa-lepita mṛdabhāṇḍa* (black slipped ware), *uttarī kṛṣṇa mārjita mṛdabhāṇḍa* (Northern Black Polished Ware), grey ware, and red ware.

Four massive cylindrical stone pillars have been found here, each measuring approximately 198 cm in length and 265 cm in thickness. Among them, one pillar is worshipped as *Rāmaśilā* and has been painted saffron. The *Rāmaśilā* itself is devoid of inscriptions; however, the other three cylindrical stones bear inscriptions. Additionally, inscriptions have been found on two other stone fragments. The script of these inscriptions is *Prāk-Nāgarī*, and the language is *Saṃskṛta*.

From the southern side of *Rāmaśilā*, an *āmalaka* with a diameter of 60 cm has been recovered. From the western side, a semicircular stone fragment measuring $50 \times 25 \times 30$ cm has been found. Nearby lies an unfinished stone block measuring $52 \times 160 \times 20$ cm bearing chisel marks, as well as another stone block 80 cm long and approximately 20 cm wide with grooves, which appears to represent an unfinished architectural component of a doorway.

According to local inhabitants, many antiquities from this site were washed away by floods of the *Gaṅgā*, while others remain submerged. Among the surviving remains is a stone block west of *Rāmaśilā* shaped like a basin (*kuṇḍa*), measuring 57×57 cm with an internal depression measuring 27×27 cm. Nearby lies a U-shaped stone fragment measuring 80 cm in length and 55 cm in width, containing a circular perforation. Some of these ancient stone fragments have been reused by villagers as supports for seating platforms.

East of *Rāmaśilā*, several sculptural fragments have been collected and painted. These include a sculpture measuring 53×30 cm with broken arms and a damaged face, a goddess image measuring 40×25 cm, three additional sculptures measuring approximately 60×45 cm, and a broken head of a *Gaṇeśa* image. Nearby stands a small shrine crowned with an *āmalaka*.

Numerous bow-shaped stone blocks have also been found at the site, most measuring approximately 65 cm in length and 67 cm in width. Several of these bear chisel marks, while some have broken arms. A larger bow-shaped stone measuring 80×85 cm has circular perforations at the top and bottom, possibly indicating a ritual or architectural function.

Fragments of a temple pillar have also been recovered, including the upper and lower portions of a pillar approximately 175 cm thick, along with a broken pillar measuring 150 cm in length. Other discoveries include a triangular stone fragment with four perforations and an unfinished stone block measuring 40×30 cm. Numerous square and circular sockets carved into the rock surface have also been observed, the largest measuring approximately 170 cm in diameter.

A stone slab measuring 77×24 cm bears two small partially carved images of *Gaṇeśa* (each measuring 20×16 cm), suggesting that these were carved in situ and intended to be separated after completion (Fig. 15).

Additional finds include square stone slabs bearing eye-shaped carvings measuring $47 \times 45 \times 23$ cm and $50 \times 47 \times 23$ cm, one of which contains a square marking representing the nose. A broken decorated stone fragment measuring 24 cm in length and another fragment bearing bow-



Fig. 15: carved images of Gaṇeśa

shaped chisel marks have also been found, along with a stone block containing seven perforations. Broken sculptures of *Gaṇeśa* and another unidentified figure measuring 50×50 cm have also been recovered.

A broken *Śivaliṅga* measuring approximately 120 cm in length has been found along with fragments of *Śiva argha*. One *argha* measuring 160 cm contains a circular cavity measuring 135 cm intended for a *Śivaliṅga*, beneath which lies a broken *Śivaliṅga* fragment measuring approximately 66 cm. Another *Śiva argha* measuring 160 cm contains a broken *Śivaliṅga* fragment measuring 45 cm. An inscription engraved on the northern side of this *argha* had already been recorded during a survey conducted by the Uttar Pradesh State Archaeology Directorate (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16: Inscription on Śiva argha

The inscription has been deciphered by Prof. *Devī Prasād Dubey* (personal communication, 2026):

Śrī Mukteśvara (Mukteśvar) Deva
Śrī Siddha Varmadevasya

Near the site stands the temple of *Tārā Durgā*, well known for *tantra sādhana*. Close to the temple, an unfinished stone sculpture of *Umā–Maheśvara* has been found. The left portion of Śiva's face, one right hand, one left hand, and the face of Pārvatī are damaged. The four-armed Śiva holds a *triśūla* in his upper right hand. Pārvatī's right hand rests on Śiva's shoulder, while her left hand holds a mirror. Both figures are richly adorned with ornaments. The images and temple remains found in of *Rāmagayā Ghāt* may be dated between the 7th century CE and medieval period.

Discussion

Archaeological exploration conducted in the Vindhyachal region indicate that this sacred landscape embodies a long-standing and continuous tradition of religious activities, human habitation, and cultural development extending from ancient times to the present day. The geographical configuration of the region-encircled by the *Gaṅgā*, *Karṇāvatī*, and *Puṇyoghā* rivers has played a pivotal role in shaping its sacred character. The geographical features formed by these rivers, along with the triangular zone defined by the temples of the three goddesses, have been associated with concepts of salvation, pilgrimage, and religious sanctity since the early historic period. The Puranas also describe this region as a site of immense spiritual significance and merit.

Archaeological evidence recovered from sites such as *Gopālapur*, *Rāmagayā Ghāt*, and *Śivpur* reveals a rich legacy of structural remains, sculptural fragments, inscriptions, and pottery. The discovery of pottery traditions including BSW, NBPW, Grey Ware, and Red Ware indicates that human activity existed in the region at least as early as the early historic period. Furthermore, the recovery of architectural elements such as *āmalaka*, *candrasilā*, pillars, and various temple components confirms the existence of temples and religious institutions across different eras, particularly during the *Kuṣāṇa*, *Gupta*, and early medieval periods.

Sculptural remains from these sites also shed light on the region's religious diversity and artistic traditions. Images of deities such as *Śiva*, *Viṣṇu*, *Gaṇeśa*, *Durgā*, *Kubera*, *Varāhī*, and *Umā–Maheśvara* highlight the prominence of *Śaiva* and *Śākta* traditions, while the presence of *Vaiṣṇava* and *Jaina* images testifies to the coexistence of diverse religious traditions within a shared cultural milieu. The unfinished sculptures and traces of stone-working found at *Rāmagayā Ghāt* suggest the existence of a local sculptural workshop. This indicates that the area was not merely a center of worship but also a significant site for artistic creation and sculpture making.

Inscriptions in the Prak-Nagari script and Sanskrit language, found on cylindrical stone pillars and other architectural remains, provide valuable insights into the region's religious patronage, social structure, and cultural milieu. These inscriptions point to the observance of religious rituals and demonstrate that the Vindhyachal region was a prominent pilgrimage center that flourished under the patronage of local rulers, devotees, and religious communities.

Another significant aspect revealed by the exploration is the remarkable continuity of the region's sacred traditions. Many archaeological remains discovered during the exploration continue to be integral to local religious practices and beliefs today. Sculptures, stone fragments, and ancient architectural elements have been preserved in various temples, enshrined as objects of worship, or reused in later structures. Sites such as *Rāmgayā ghāt*, *Tārā Durgā Temple*, *Rāmeśvara Mahādeva Temple*, *Sapt Sarovar*, *Vindhyachal*, *Ashtabhujā*, *Kalikhoh*, and *Anandmayi Ashram* exemplify how ancient material remains continue to retain their religious and cultural significance for local communities. This continuity reflects the deep cultural memory and enduring traditions associated with the sacred landscape of Vindhyachal.

Furthermore, the presence of pilgrimage routes, sacred shrines, and ritual sites throughout the region confirms that Vindhyachal was not merely a collection of isolated religious sites, but an interconnected and well-organized sacred landscape. The spatial relationships existing among temples, rivers, ghats, and ritual sites point towards a well-planned sacred geography that shaped pilgrimage, religious rituals, and faith-based activities in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the archaeological surveys conducted in the Vindhyachal region demonstrate the existence of profound and multifaceted interrelationships among geography, religion, and cultural traditions. The physical remains unearthed through this study not only attest to the presence of ancient human settlements and religious institutions but also illustrate how sacred landscapes maintain their cultural continuity while evolving over time. In this regard, Vindhyachal emerges as an exemplary instance of a "Living Sacred Landscape," where archaeological heritage and contemporary religious traditions coexist, mutually reinforcing and enriching one another.

Overall, this study contributes significantly to understanding the historical evolution of the Vindhyachal region and underscores the necessity for systematic documentation, scientific conservation, and extensive archaeological research to preserve this culturally significant sacred landscape and safeguard its invaluable heritage for future generations.

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