



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Stone Temple Architecture of the Chindaka Nagvanshi of Bastar

Yudhveer Parihar

Research scholar, SOS Ancient Indian History culture and Archeology, Pt Ravishankar Shukla

University Raipur Chhattisgarh

Email - yudhveer.parihar1990@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

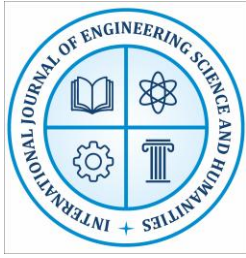
This paper examines the stone temple architecture of the Chindaka Nagvanshi dynasty, which ruled the Chakrakota region (present-day Bastar, Chhattisgarh) from approximately the 10th to the 14th centuries CE. The Chindaka Nagas, who traced their origins to Karnataka and established their capital at Barsur, created a distinctive architectural legacy that synthesized regional influences from Telangana, Odisha, and Maharashtra. Through an analysis of key surviving monuments—including the Chandraditya Temple at Barsur, the Bateesa Mahadev Temple, the Narayanpal Temple, and the Dholkal Ganesha—this paper argues that Chindaka Naga architecture represents a unique cultural crossroads where northern Nagara traditions, southern Bhumija styles, and indigenous artistic elements converged. The paper explores the dynastic context of these constructions, their architectural and artistic features, the epigraphic evidence that illuminates their history, and the challenges of preservation facing these 11th-century monuments. The architectural legacy of the Chindaka Nagas not only illuminates the cultural sophistication of this tribal-origin dynasty but also provides crucial evidence for understanding the complex patterns of cultural exchange that characterized medieval Central India.

Keywords: Stone Temple Ancient Republics, Chindaka Nagvanshi of Bastar, Maratha and British

1. INTRODUCTION

The dense forests of Bastar, now a district in the southern part of Chhattisgarh, hold a remarkable architectural legacy that belies the region's remote reputation. Scattered across the landscape, from the historic capital of Barsur to the hilltops of the Bailadila range, stand stone temples dating from the 11th and 12th centuries—monuments built by the Chindaka Nagvanshi dynasty, a ruling house that combined indigenous tribal roots with sophisticated courtly culture (Ram & Ram, 2012; Khute, 2020).

The Chindaka Nagas, also known as the Nagavanshi rulers of Chakrakota, established their capital at Barasur (modern Barsur) and ruled over a territory encompassing present-day Bastar, Koraput, and Kalahandi districts from approximately 1023 to 1324 CE (Sharma, 2005; Sundar, 2016). Their kingdom occupied a strategic position at the crossroads of cultural influences from



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

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Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

the Deccan, the eastern coast, and northern India, and their temples reflect this rich cultural synthesis (Mitra, 1993).

This paper examines the stone temple architecture of the Chindaka Nagvanshi dynasty, focusing on four major sites: the Chandraditya Temple at Barsur, the Bateesa Mahadev Temple, the Narayanpal Temple, and the enigmatic Dholkal Ganesha hilltop shrine. Through analysis of architectural styles, sculptural programs, epigraphic evidence, and historical context, the paper seeks to illuminate the distinctive character of Chindaka Naga architecture and its significance within the broader landscape of medieval Indian temple architecture.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE CHINDAKA NAGVANSHI DYNASTY

2.1 Origins and Identity

The Chindaka Nagas represent one of the most fascinating dynasties of medieval Central India, combining indigenous tribal origins with the sophisticated courtly culture of the period. According to the inscriptions discovered at Barsur and other sites, the dynasty traced its descent from the Nagas of Karnataka, with their earliest known ruler being Someshvara (Khute, 2020). However, scholars have noted that the dynasty's self-identification as Nagavanshi (serpent lineage) reflects a common pattern of tribal-origin dynasties adopting prestigious genealogical claims while maintaining connections to indigenous populations (Sundar, 2016).

The term "Chindaka" itself has been subject to scholarly debate. Some scholars derive it from the Sanskrit "Chhinda," meaning "to cut," suggesting a possible martial origin, while others connect it to the name of a region or tribal group (Sharma, 2005). What is clear is that the Chindaka Nagas successfully established themselves as a regional power controlling the strategic Chakrakota region, which commanded important trade routes connecting the Deccan, Odisha, and central India (Ram & Ram, 2012).

2.2 Chronology and Major Rulers

The chronology of the Chindaka Naga dynasty has been established through careful analysis of their inscriptions, particularly the Barsur and Narayanpal plates. The known rulers of the dynasty include:

- **Someshvara** (c. 1023 CE): The earliest attested ruler, who established the dynasty's authority in the Chakrakota region (Khute, 2020)
- **Somaraja** (c. 1050 CE): Son of Someshvara, mentioned in the Narayanpal inscription (Mitra, 1993)
- **Kanharaja** (c. 1080 CE): Known from the Barsur inscription, who claimed the title Maharajadhiraja (Sharma, 2005)
- **Chandraditya** (c. 1100 CE): The most prominent ruler, whose name is preserved in the Chandraditya Temple (Ram & Ram, 2012)



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- **Somaraja II** (c. 1150 CE): Continued the dynasty's patronage of religious institutions (Khute, 2020)

The dynasty's rule extended until approximately 1324 CE, when the region came under the influence of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal (Sundar, 2016). The architectural legacy of the Chindaka Nagas dates primarily from the 11th and 12th centuries, the period of the dynasty's greatest power and cultural achievement.

2.3 Capital and Territory

The capital of the Chindaka Nagas was located at Barsur (also spelled Barasur), situated on the banks of the Indravati River in present-day Bastar district. The choice of this location was strategic, as it commanded access to water resources, trade routes, and the fertile agricultural lands of the Indravati valley (Mitra, 1993).

The territory controlled by the Chindaka Nagas encompassed a vast area of what is now southern Chhattisgarh, western Odisha, and northern Telangana. Inscriptions indicate that their authority extended from the Mahanadi River in the east to the Godavari River in the south, and from the forests of Bastar to the plains of Kalahandi (Sharma, 2005). This strategic position at the crossroads of major cultural regions made the Chindaka Nagas important patrons of art and architecture, as they drew upon diverse stylistic traditions from across the subcontinent (Ram & Ram, 2012).

3. ARCHITECTURAL TRADITIONS OF THE CHINDAKA NAGAS

3.1 Stylistic Synthesis

The stone temple architecture of the Chindaka Nagas represents a remarkable synthesis of multiple architectural traditions. Scholars have identified influences from three major regional styles:

Northern Nagara Tradition: The temples exhibit clear elements of the northern Nagara style, particularly in their shikhara (tower) forms. The curvilinear towers rising above the sanctum, the amalaka (ribbed disc) crowning elements, and the urushringa (subsidiary towers) are characteristic of the northern tradition (Mitra, 1993).

Southern Bhumija Style: The Bhumija style, which originated in western India and spread through the Deccan, is evident in the temples' elevation patterns. The shikhara of Chindaka Naga temples typically features multiple *latas* (vertical bands) and *kutas* (pavilion-like elements), creating a distinctive star-shaped plan (Sharma, 2005).

Eastern Kalingan Influences: The proximity to Odisha resulted in clear Kalingan influences, particularly in the treatment of *jangha* (wall) surfaces, the placement of *pabhaga* (basement) moldings, and certain sculptural types (Ram & Ram, 2012).

This synthesis was not merely eclectic but rather represented a creative integration of diverse traditions suited to the region's cultural position. As Mitra (1993) observes, "the temples of the



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Chindaka Nagas demonstrate how the rulers of a strategically located kingdom could draw upon multiple cultural traditions to create a distinctive architectural idiom" (p. 87).

3.2 Materials and Construction Techniques

The Chindaka Naga temples were constructed primarily from locally available stone, including the fine-grained sandstone found in the Indravati valley and the harder granite of the Bailadila range. The quality of stone carving varies across sites, with the major temples at Barsur exhibiting exceptionally fine workmanship (Sharma, 2005).

Construction techniques employed by Chindaka Naga artisans included:

- **Dry stone masonry:** Stones were fitted together without mortar, using precise cutting and weight distribution
- **Interlocking system:** Architectural elements were designed to interlock, providing structural stability
- **Ashlar masonry:** Carefully dressed stone blocks were used for all visible surfaces
- **Structural pilasters:** Used to articulate wall surfaces and provide visual rhythm

The structural sophistication of these temples is evident in their survival for nearly a millennium despite the region's challenging tropical climate and seismic activity (Ram & Ram, 2012).

4. MAJOR TEMPLE SITES

4.1 Chandraditya Temple, Barsur

The Chandraditya Temple at Barsur is the most significant surviving monument of the Chindaka Naga dynasty. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple was constructed during the reign of King Chandraditya in the late 11th or early 12th century (Khute, 2020). The temple exemplifies the mature phase of Chindaka Naga architecture, demonstrating the full synthesis of stylistic influences that characterized the dynasty's patronage.

Architectural Features:

The temple follows the panchayatana (five-shrine) plan, with a central sanctum surrounded by four subsidiary shrines at the corners. The main shikhara rises in the characteristic Nagara curvilinear form, reaching a height of approximately 15 meters (Mitra, 1993). The shikhara is articulated with multiple urushringa elements, creating a rich textural effect that contrasts with the smooth surfaces of the wall.

The mandapa (pillared hall) features an ornate ceiling with elaborate floral motifs, supported by four central pillars carved with exquisite detail. The pillars exhibit a distinctive form combining square, octagonal, and circular sections—a characteristic feature of Chindaka Naga architecture (Sharma, 2005).

Sculptural Program:

The Chandraditya Temple's sculptural program is remarkably extensive. The jangha (wall) surfaces are decorated with:



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- Dikpalas (guardians of the directions) positioned at cardinal points
- Mithuna (amorous couples) scenes celebrating fertility and prosperity
- Apsaras (celestial dancers) in various poses
- Narrative panels depicting scenes from the Ramayana and Shiva Purana

The quality of carving is exceptionally high, with figures displaying the naturalism and expressive quality characteristic of the best medieval Indian sculpture. As Ram and Ram (2012) note, "the sculptors of Barsur achieved a remarkable synthesis of classical norms and regional sensibilities" (p. 134).

Epigraphic Evidence:

An inscription on the temple's foundation records its construction by King Chandraditya, describing him as a devotee of Shiva and a patron of the arts. The inscription is written in Sanskrit using the Nagari script, providing valuable evidence for the dynasty's cultural and religious affiliations (Khute, 2020).

4.2 Bateesa Mahadev Temple, Barsur

The Bateesa Mahadev Temple, also located at Barsur, represents an earlier phase of Chindaka Naga architecture. The temple takes its name from the thirty-two (bateesa) lingas arranged in a circular formation around the central shrine (Mitra, 1993).

Architectural Features:

The Bateesa Mahadev Temple follows a simpler plan than the Chandraditya Temple, consisting of a garbhagriha (sanctum) and mandapa. The shikhara is less elaborate, featuring a simpler curvilinear form with minimal subsidiary elements. However, the quality of stone carving remains high, with particular attention paid to the pabhaga moldings and the jangha figures (Sharma, 2005).

The unique feature of the temple is the arrangement of 32 small linga shrines arranged in a circular pattern around the main structure. This arrangement suggests a connection to the concept of the chaturvimshati (twenty-four) or the astrological significance of the number 32, though the precise symbolism remains debated (Ram & Ram, 2012).

Artistic Features:

The Bateesa Mahadev Temple's sculptural program, while less extensive than that of the Chandraditya Temple, includes several notable features:

- Exquisite salabhanjika (tree-maiden) figures on the doorjambs
- Gavaksha (dormer window) motifs decorating the shikhara
- Guardian figures at the temple entrance
- Floral and geometric patterns in the mandapa ceiling



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The temple's dating remains somewhat uncertain, but stylistic evidence suggests a date in the mid-11th century, earlier than the Chandraditya Temple (Khute, 2020).

4.3 Narayanpal Temple

The Narayanpal Temple, located approximately 10 kilometers from Barsur, is notable both for its architecture and its extensive inscription. The temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and features a distinctive plan that differs from the Shiva temples at Barsur (Mitra, 1993).

Architectural Features:

The Narayanpal Temple is a triratha (three-projection) structure, with three vertical projections on each side. The shikhara follows the Bhumija style, characterized by multiple latas arranged in a star-shaped pattern. The temple's mandapa is supported by twelve pillars arranged in a complex geometric pattern (Sharma, 2005).

The temple's elevation exhibits careful attention to proportion, with the pabhaga, jangha, and shikhara sections following a precise ratio. The pabhaga consists of five moldings, while the jangha is divided into two registers separated by a bandhana (binding) course (Ram & Ram, 2012).

Sculptural Program:

The Narayanpal Temple's sculptural program focuses on Vaishnava themes, including:

- Images of Vishnu in various forms (Trivikrama, Narasimha, Varaha)
- Scenes from the life of Krishna
- Dasavatara (ten incarnations) panels
- Gajalakshmi (Lakshmi with elephants) on the lintel

The quality of carving is comparable to that of the Chandraditya Temple, with figures exhibiting the same naturalism and attention to detail (Khute, 2020).

The Narayanpal Inscription:

The temple's most significant feature is its long inscription, which provides detailed information about the Chindaka Naga dynasty. The inscription records the construction of the temple during the reign of King Somaraja and provides a genealogy of the dynasty extending back several generations. The inscription also mentions grants of land to Brahmins and temple priests, documenting the patronage relationships that supported the temple's operation (Mitra, 1993).

As Khute (2020) observes, "the Narayanpal inscription is one of the most important sources for understanding the political and cultural history of the Chindaka Nagas, providing both chronological data and insights into the dynasty's religious and administrative practices" (p. 50).

4.4 Dholkal Ganesha

The Dholkal Ganesha is one of the most enigmatic monuments associated with the Chindaka Nagas. Located atop a hill in the Dantewada district, this site features a massive rock-cut image



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of Ganesha, along with the remains of a stone temple and several other sculptures (Ram & Ram, 2012).

The Ganesha Image:

The central feature of the Dholkal site is a colossal image of Ganesha, carved from the natural rock of the hill. The image measures approximately 4 meters in height and depicts Ganesha seated in the lalitasana (royal ease) pose. The image's distinctive features include:

- An elaborate headdress with multiple tiers
- Large, clearly rendered elephant head with naturalistic features
- Four arms holding various attributes (broken)
- A robust, fleshy body typical of 11th-12th century sculpture
- The trunk curved to the left, characteristic of the period (Sharma, 2005)

The scale and quality of the Dholkal Ganesha suggest that it was an important regional pilgrimage site. The image's location atop a prominent hill would have made it visible from considerable distance, serving as a marker of Chindaka Naga authority over the surrounding territory (Mitra, 1993).

Temple Remains:

Surrounding the Ganesha image are the remains of a stone temple, now largely collapsed. The architectural fragments indicate that the temple was originally a structure of considerable size and sophistication. Surviving elements include:

- Pillar fragments with fine carving
- Doorjambs with dvara-pala (door guardian) figures
- Shikhara elements with amalaka crowns
- Sculptural panels including dikpalas and apsaras (Ram & Ram, 2012)

Iconographic Significance:

The Dholkal Ganesha is notable for its unusual iconographic features. The image's headdress and jewelry differ from standard depictions of Ganesha, incorporating elements more typical of royal portraiture. This has led some scholars to suggest that the image may represent a fusion of divine and royal imagery, perhaps depicting a Chindaka Naga ruler in the form of Ganesha (Sharma, 2005).

As Ram and Ram (2012) note, "the Dholkal Ganesha represents a unique synthesis of religious and political symbolism, demonstrating how the Chindaka Nagas used monumental sculpture to assert their authority over the landscape" (p. 178).

4.5 Other Sites

In addition to the major sites discussed above, the Chindaka Nagas constructed temples at several other locations in the Bastar region. These include:



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- **Dantewada Temple:** The Danteshwari Temple, while largely rebuilt, incorporates earlier Chindaka Naga elements, particularly in its shikhara fragments (Khute, 2020)
- **Palari Temple:** A small but well-preserved temple near Barsur featuring distinctive Bhumija shikhara (Mitra, 1993)
- **Mahuradanpur Temples:** A group of small shrines with interesting variations on the Chindaka Naga style (Sharma, 2005)
- **Bijapur Temples:** Remains of several temples in the Bijapur area showing Chindaka Naga influence (Ram & Ram, 2012)

These sites demonstrate the extent of Chindaka Naga architectural patronage and the spread of their distinctive style across their territory.

5. SCULPTURAL ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

5.1 Stylistic Characteristics

The sculptural art of the Chindaka Nagas exhibits distinctive stylistic characteristics that set it apart from contemporary regional schools. Key features include:

Naturalism and Movement: Chindaka Naga sculptures display a remarkable naturalism, with figures rendered in three-quarter view and bodies depicted in dynamic postures. This is particularly evident in the mithuna and apsaras figures, which convey a sense of movement and vitality (Sharma, 2005).

Elaborate Ornamentation: Figures are adorned with elaborate jewelry, including multiple necklaces, earrings, armlets, and anklets. The treatment of textile patterns is also elaborate, with carefully rendered folds and textures (Mitra, 1993).

Facial Types: The facial types in Chindaka Naga sculpture are distinctive, with:

- Almond-shaped eyes with pronounced lids
- Full lips with a slight smile
- Strong, rounded chins
- Elaborate headdresses and hairstyles (Ram & Ram, 2012)

Anatomical Proportions: Figures exhibit careful attention to anatomical proportions, with bodies following classical shilpa shastra norms. The treatment of the torso is particularly refined, with clear articulation of musculature and subtle modeling of forms (Khute, 2020).

5.2 Iconographic Program

The iconographic program of Chindaka Naga temples reflects the religious affiliations of the dynasty. While Shiva and Vishnu temples predominate, the sculptural programs incorporate a wide range of deities and mythological themes:

Shaiva Iconography:

- Linga worship as central focus



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- Images of Shiva in various forms (Nataraja, Ardhanarishvara, Ravanaanugraha)
- Ganas (attendants) and Nandi (bull)
- Scenes from the Shiva Purana (Mitra, 1993)

Vaishnava Iconography:

- Vishnu in various forms (Trivikrama, Narasimha, Varaha)
- The dasavatara panels
- Scenes from the Ramayana and Krishna legends
- Garuda and Shesha as associated figures (Sharma, 2005)

Feminine Deities:

- Saptamatrika (seven mothers) groups
- Lakshmi and Parvati in various forms
- Yogini figures in subsidiary positions
- Apsaras and salabhanjika as decorative elements (Ram & Ram, 2012)

Secular Themes:

- Mithuna scenes depicting amorous couples
- Courtly scenes with musicians and dancers
- Hunting scenes and royal processions
- Floral and geometric decorative patterns (Khute, 2020)

5.3 Regional Distinctiveness

While drawing upon broader Indian artistic traditions, Chindaka Naga sculpture exhibits distinctive regional features. Scholars have noted parallels with contemporary sculpture from:

- The Kakatiya region of Telangana
- The Kalingan region of Odisha
- The Chandella region of Madhya Pradesh

However, Chindaka Naga sculpture is not merely derivative but represents a distinctive synthesis. As Mitra (1993) argues, "the sculptors of Barsur achieved a unique artistic vision that combined the grace of Kalingan sculpture with the monumentality of Kakatiya art, filtered through a local sensibility that gave their work distinctive character" (p. 156).

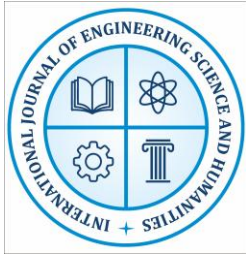
6. EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

6.1 Major Inscriptions

The history of the Chindaka Nagas is illuminated by several important inscriptions, which provide crucial evidence for the dynasty's chronology, political relationships, and patronage activities:

The Barsur Inscription:

Discovered at Barsur, this inscription records the construction of a temple during the reign of



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Kanharaja. It provides a genealogy of the dynasty's early rulers and mentions grants to Brahmins and temple priests (Khute, 2020).

The Narayanpal Inscription:

The longest and most detailed of the Chindaka Naga inscriptions, the Narayanpal inscription provides a complete genealogy of the dynasty, detailed accounts of land grants, and references to the cultural and religious life of the period (Mitra, 1993).

The Kanker Inscription:

Found in the Kanker region, this inscription provides information about the dynasty's military campaigns and their relationships with neighboring powers, including the Kalachuris and the Eastern Gangas (Sharma, 2005).

The Podagarh Inscription:

This inscription, discovered at the site of the Nala dynasty's capital, provides evidence for the continuity of settlement and political authority in the region across dynastic changes (Ram & Ram, 2012).

6.2 Language and Script

The Chindaka Naga inscriptions are written in Sanskrit using the Nagari script. The quality of the Sanskrit is generally high, indicating the presence of educated Brahmin scholars at the court (Khute, 2020). The inscriptions employ the shloka (verse) form for genealogical sections and prose for administrative records (Mitra, 1993).

6.3 Patronage Networks

The inscriptions document the complex patronage networks that supported Chindaka Naga architecture. Grants of land to temples and Brahmins, recorded in the inscriptions, provided the economic foundation for the construction and maintenance of temples. These grants typically specified:

- The amount of land granted (in nivartana units)
- The beneficiaries (specific temples or Brahmin communities)
- The purposes of the grant (temple construction, daily worship, festivals)
- The exemptions from taxation granted to the recipients (Sharma, 2005)

As Sundar (2016) notes, these patronage networks "created enduring relationships between the state, religious institutions, and local communities that shaped the social and political landscape of the region for centuries" (p. 67).

7. LEGACY AND PRESERVATION

7.1 Influence on Later Architecture

The architectural legacy of the Chindaka Nagas influenced later building traditions in Bastar and the surrounding region. The Kakatiya dynasty, which established control over the region in the 14th century, incorporated elements of Chindaka Naga architecture into their own building



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programs (Mitra, 1993). The later Bastar state, while adopting different architectural idioms, continued to maintain and patronize the Chindaka Naga temples, ensuring their survival (Sundar, 2016).

The influence of Chindaka Naga architecture can be traced in:

- The temples of the Kakatiya period in Warangal
- The later temples of Bastar state
- The regional vernacular architecture of southern Chhattisgarh
- The stone carving traditions of the region (Sharma, 2005)

7.2 Current State of Preservation

The Chindaka Naga temples face significant preservation challenges. The region's tropical climate, with heavy rainfall and high humidity, contributes to the weathering of stone surfaces. Additionally, the remoteness of many sites has limited access for conservation efforts (Ram & Ram, 2012).

The Archaeological Survey of India has designated several Chindaka Naga sites as protected monuments, but conservation efforts have been limited by resources and access. The Chandraditya Temple has received some conservation work, but other sites, particularly remote locations like Dholkal, remain in precarious condition (Khute, 2020).

7.3 Conservation Challenges and Opportunities

Preserving the architectural heritage of the Chindaka Nagas requires addressing several challenges:

- **Structural stability:** Many structures require structural consolidation to prevent collapse
- **Stone conservation:** Weathering and biological growth require treatment
- **Site management:** Uncontrolled vegetation and visitor access threaten sites
- **Documentation:** Comprehensive documentation of sites is needed
- **Community engagement:** Local communities must be involved in conservation efforts

At the same time, the Chindaka Naga temples represent a significant opportunity for cultural heritage tourism in Chhattisgarh. With appropriate conservation and interpretation, these sites could contribute to regional economic development while preserving an important cultural legacy (Ram & Ram, 2012).

8. CONCLUSION

The stone temple architecture of the Chindaka Nagvanshi represents one of the most significant but understudied architectural traditions of medieval India. At sites like Barsur, Narayanpal, and Dholkal, the Chindaka Nagas created a distinctive architectural idiom that synthesized influences from northern, southern, and eastern traditions into a unique regional expression.



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Several conclusions emerge from this study. First, the Chindaka Nagas were sophisticated patrons of architecture and art, creating monuments that rank among the finest surviving examples of medieval Indian temple architecture. The quality of design, construction, and sculpture at sites like the Chandraditya Temple demonstrates that the dynasty's cultural ambitions matched those of better-known contemporary powers.

Second, Chindaka Naga architecture reflects the strategic position of the Chakrakota kingdom at the crossroads of major cultural regions. The synthesis of Nagara, Bhumija, and Kalingan elements in their temples is not merely eclectic but represents a creative integration suited to the region's cultural position.

Third, the architectural legacy of the Chindaka Nagas provides important evidence for understanding the cultural and political history of medieval Central India. The temples, through their inscriptions and sculptural programs, illuminate the patronage relationships, religious affiliations, and artistic networks that shaped the region.

Finally, the preservation of Chindaka Naga architecture presents both challenges and opportunities. As these monuments continue to weather and deteriorate, urgent conservation efforts are needed to preserve them for future generations. At the same time, their artistic and historical significance makes them potentially valuable resources for cultural heritage tourism and community development.

The temples of the Chindaka Nagas stand as enduring monuments to a dynasty that combined indigenous roots with sophisticated courtly culture, creating an architectural legacy that continues to inspire wonder nearly a millennium after its creation.

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