Cultural Matrix of the Deodhipa Shiva Temple at Mukuna, in the confluence of Khairi Bandhan and Baitarani Rivers, District Mayurbhanj, Northern Odisha: A Connoisseur Survey

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Abstract: *This paper presents findings from our recent archaeological investigation in the upper Baitarani River Valley, particularly in Mukuna village, at the confluence of the Khairi Bandhan and Baitarani rivers, within the Raruan block of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. Notable findings include a ruined temple complex characterised by architectural fragments; miniature votive Rekha temple shrines depicting Linga Puja and Chamunda images; bricks, brick bats, and hero stones; and two votive stupas. Additionally, a Chamunda image has been identified and is currently enshrined in a modern temple at the confluence of the two rivers near the Domuhani bridge. This bridge serves as a vital link between the Champua block in Keonjhar district and the Mayurbhanj district. The Baitarani River Valley, like other river valleys in Odisha, has been a focal point for architectural and sculptural endeavours in Eastern India. Renowned for its remarkable antiquities and religious sanctuaries in northern Odisha, the valley has garnered significant scholarly attention for the abundance of art and architectural remains from various sects scattered across its expanse. These preserved architectural and sculptural remains, all attributed to the artisans of the Kalingan School in Eastern India, offer insight into the art and architecture of classical Odishan art of the early medieval period.*

Keywords: *Early Medieval, Chamunda, Linga Puja, Miniature, Votive, Shrine, Brahmanical, Khijjinga maṇḍala and Images etc.*

Introduction

The region of North Odisha, India, is a vibrant palimpsest of human history, with traces of prehistoric *hunter-gatherers*, early agriculturalists, urban societies, and religious communities layered across its landscape. Bounded by the Bay of Bengal to the east and the Eastern Ghats to the west, North Odisha's river valleys, coastal plains, and upland forests have fostered a remarkable diversity of archaeological sites and cultural traditions. The archaeology of North Odisha shows that the area was not isolated but served as a bridge between the Chotanagpur plateau and the coastal plains of Odisha, fostering a distinctive cultural blend in ancient and early medieval India. Historical archaeology in North Odisha, primarily comprising the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, and Bhadrak, has revealed a rich, continuous, and diverse cultural sequence spanning prehistory to the early medieval period. Recent archaeological explorations indicate that this region, often considered a hinterland, played a significant role in trade and urbanisation, with characteristics distinct from those of the coastal and southern parts of the state. The Brahmanical temples and cults emerged and expanded in the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts from at least the Gupta period in the 5th century CE onwards. The Asanpat Nataraj Image inscription of King Satrubhanja of the *Naga Kula*, dated to the 5th century CE on paleographic grounds, indicates the presence of Saivism in Keonjhar. It also suggests a broader knowledge of India's sacred geography. This expansion of Brahmanical culture was accelerated in the tribal-dominated Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts, most likely beginning during the Bhanja rule of the *Khijjinga maṇḍala*, which ruled the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj areas from the 8th century CE onwards. The Bhanja origin myth, as represented in the Bhañja epigraphs, underscores their tribal autochthonous origin, with the first Bhanja, Virabhadra, emerging from the egg of a *pea-hen* (Mayura). The Brahmanical-acculturated Bhanja kings patronised both Buddhist and Brahmanical religions and worshipped *Siva* and *Visnu*. This political context explains the substantive presence of Brahmanical sculpture in the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts from the 9th century CE onwards. The inscription in the cave shelter of Sitabinjhi sheds light on the historical archaeology of North Odisha, especially the Baitarani River Valley. The inscription is in the Brahmi script, dated to the 5th century CE, and refers to Maharaja Sri Disabhanja. Other archaeological finds on the site include female figurines, bronze ornaments, beads, ear studs, terracotta, copper-cast Puri-Kushana coins, lamp stands, elephant figures, and burnt bricks. The *Chaturmukha* Sivalinga is another critical piece of evidence for the site, indicating an ancient Shiva shrine at the location (Ramachandran 1951:5-25; Panigrahi 1981:369; Mohanty 1988; Senapati 1986: 42; 433-434; Mohapatra 1986: 173-174). The archaeological excavation at Benisagar, located in the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand near the Odisha border, is a significant 5th-15th century CE archaeological site. Known for its large ancient tank and *Saiva-Tantric* temple ruins, the site was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India, which revealed seven Shiva temples, sculptures, and tools. Apart from these, numerous miniature *Rekha* temple shrines depicting linga puja scenes were found in the Gumla, Lohardaga, West Singhbhum, and Saraikela-Kharsawan districts of Jharkhand (Baidya *et al.* 2007: 262-265). The middle and lower reaches of the Khairi Bandhan River are an important zone with numerous Brahminical and Buddhist shrines. The *Maa Kichakeswari* Temple in Khiching, located at the confluence of the Khairi Bandhan and Kanta Khairi rivers in Odisha, is a 9th-10th-century CE shrine dedicated to the Goddess *Chamunda* and serves as the family deity (*Ishtadevi*) of the rulers of the Bhanja dynasty. Constructed entirely from

black granite slabs, the temple is renowned for its Kalinga-style architecture (Mohapatra 1986). The art and architectural remains of the recently explored Deodhipa Siva temple at Mukuna, locally known as the Domuhani Siva temple site, show evidence of a *Siva linga*, a large *Chamunda* image, miniature Rekha temple shrines depicting linga puja scenes, images of *Chamunda* and *Siva* saints in their *niches*, along with remnants of the temple, such as the *pabhaga* portion, *kalasha*, door jambs, many broken pieces of *pranala*, *chandrasilas*, *amalakasilas*, memorial stones (*hero stones)*, and many bricks and brickbats, found scattered around the newly built temple (Figure-4). In addition to these two Buddhist votive stupas, one is on the eastern side of the temple and the other on the Baitarani Riverbed. Preliminary observations of all these architectural remains indicate that they are constructed in the Kalinga style of temple architecture, under the royal patronage of the Bhanja rulers.

Study Area and Environmental Settings

The present study focuses on the Deodhipa Siva temple located at Mukuna, located at the confluence of the Khairi Bandhan and Baitarani rivers within the Raruan block of Keonjhar district. This temple is situated at the boundary of the Champua block in Keonjhar district and the Raruan and Sukuruli blocks in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha (Figure 1). The geographical characteristics of the study area include undulating terrain, red soil, and Paleoarchean granitoid geology, all of which are encompassed within the Singhbhum Craton. The region is marked by buried pediments and landscapes with small hills and slopes that rise from north to south, along with high humidity and significant monsoonal rainfall. The Raruan block in Mayurbhanj district contributes to the western rolling uplands of
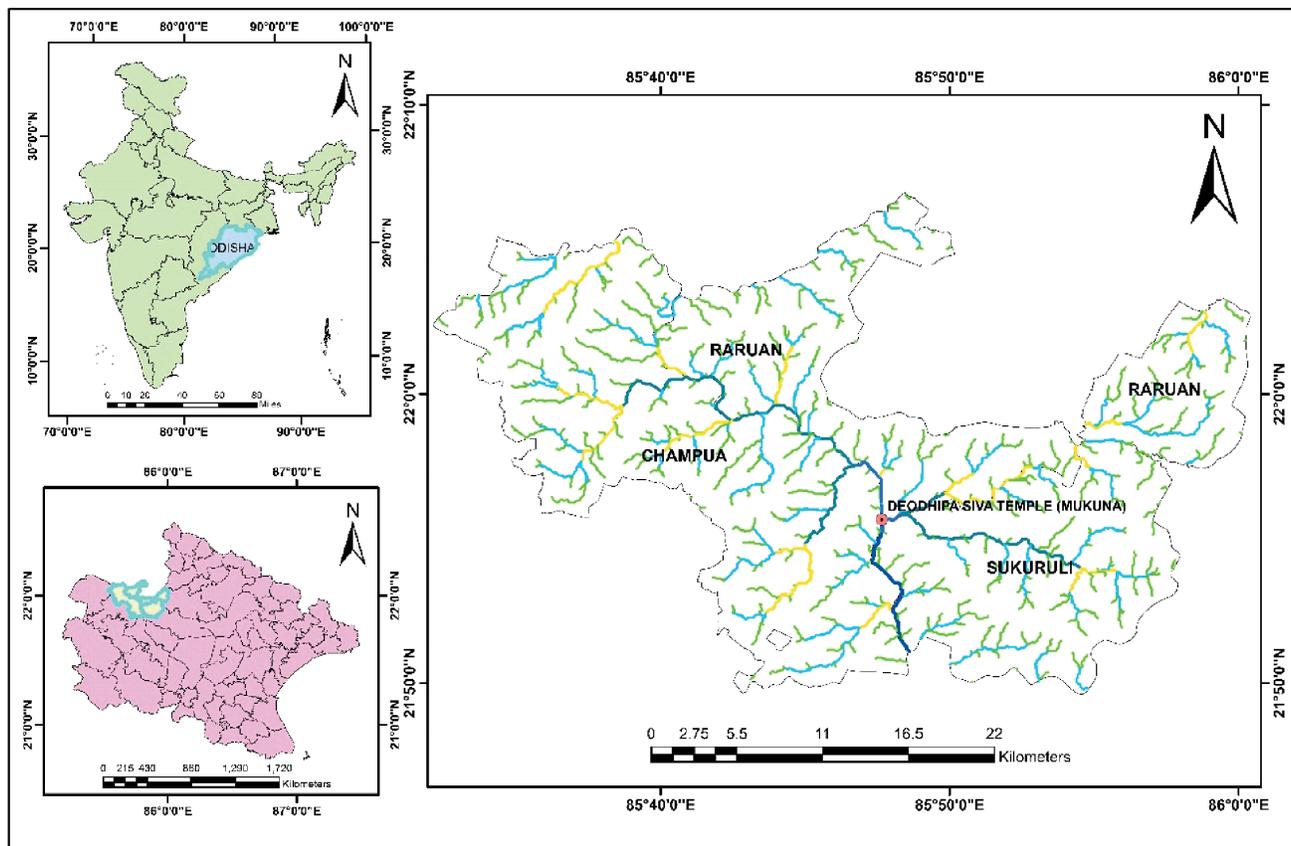

Fig. 1: Location of the Deodhipa temple at Mukuna in the Raruan block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha

Mayurbhanj, a component of the Odisha Plateau. The drainage in the study region is predominantly facilitated by tributaries of the Baitarani, Budhabalanga, Khairi Bandhan, and Kharkai rivers, which display a structurally controlled dendritic drainage pattern. Several small water bodies are present in the area, which is primarily defined by dendritic to sub-trellis stream branching. The landscape is largely composed of valley fills and pediments, with the drainage patterns influenced by local geological structures. The dendritic patterns observed reflect a combination of varied rock types and slopes that permit the free flow of branching streams.

The Field Survey and Findings

Our recent field investigation in the upper Baitarani valley, particularly in the border areas of the Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha, led to the discovery of a ruined temple complex at Mukuna village in the Raruan block of Mayurbhanj district. The temple is known by various names among locals, such as the Deodhipa Siva temple or the Domuhani Siva temple (Figure-2). Presently, it is worshipped by the local tribal communities of Mukuna village. The Siva temple is located on a small island at the confluence of the Baitarani and Khairi Bandhan rivers, which is cut off from the mainland during the rainy season. During our field survey in the area around the Deodhipa Siva temple, we reported numerous miniature votive *Rekha* temple shrines scattered on the mound and on the slope towards the Baitarani riverbed, all built in the *tri-ratha* style of Kalingan temple architecture (Figure-3). All the miniature votive *Rekha* temple shrines have a central niche that contains carved images of Siva lingas, *linga-puja* scenes by female *devotees*, royal and female figures, and Chamunda images. All these miniature votive temple shrines were made of fine-grained grey granite, which is locally available in that region. The surrounding area of the modern temple also contains fragments of ancient temple remains, such as door jambs, broken pieces of *pranala*, the *pabhaga* portion, *chandrasilas*, and two complete *amalakasilas* (Figure 4). Along with the Brahminical temple remains, the evidence of one large-sized votive stupa on the mound and one small-sized votive stupa is found near the Baitarani riverbed. A tall, rectangular hero stone found on the slope of the mound towards the riverbed features carved figures in *alidha* poses (martial stances), with hair styled in the *balaganthi* (chignon) style. They often hold a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left. The *garbhagriha* of the newly constructed temple houses a recent Siva linga, but the back wall of the linga bears evidence of a large *Chamunda* image and a broken *Kalasa* from an ancient temple. The heavily eroded *Chamunda* image depicts the goddess having a skeletal body in a terrifying form, holding a baby on the right and a staff on the left, seated on the *apasmara purusa*, a unique iconographic variation that highlights her role as a protective mother despite her fearsome appearance.

Discussion and Conclusion

The early medieval sacred landscape of the Baitarani Valley in Odisha (c. 6th–12th century CE) was a vibrant, poly-religious, and strategically important region characterised by a synthesis of Brahmanical, Buddhist, and indigenous traditions. Centred on the holy Baitarani River, which flows through the Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, and Jajpur districts, the valley emerged as a major centre for religious, artistic, and political activities under dynasties such as the Bhaumakaras, the Somavamsis, and their feudatories, especially the Bhanjas. The Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha fall within the
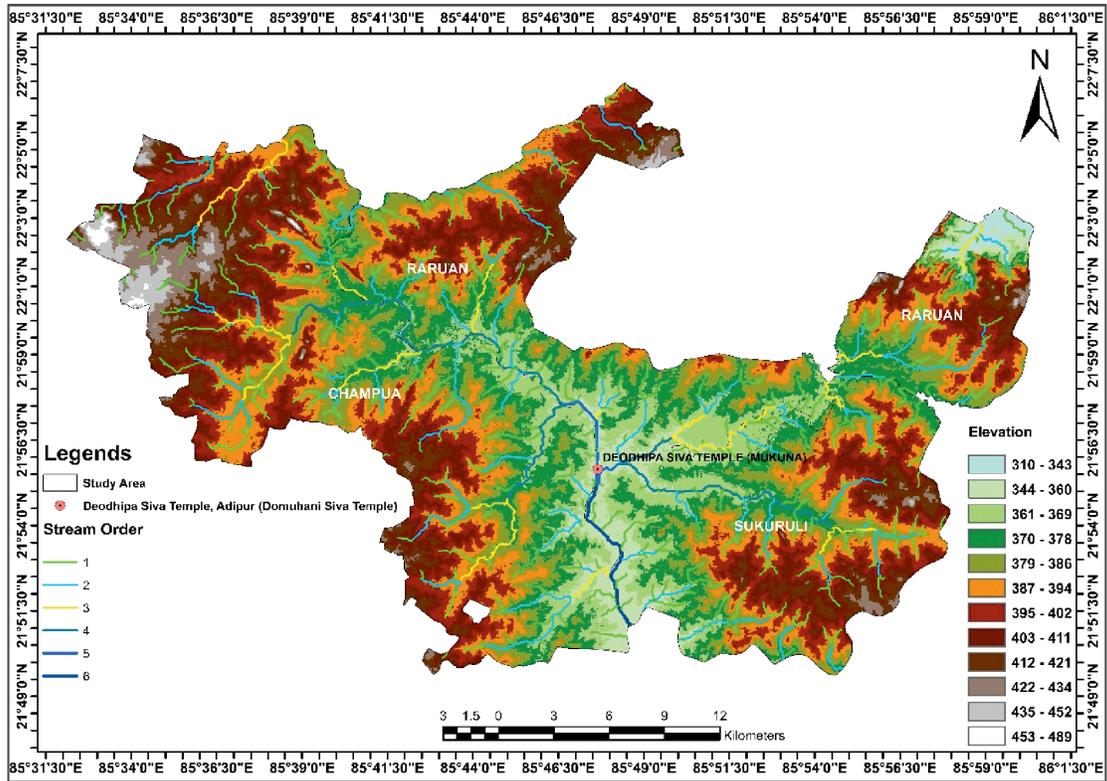
Fig. 2: Drainage and digital elevation model map of the study area.

Fig. 3: General view of the Deodhipa Siva temple at Mukuna.

Fig. 4: Architectural fragments of temples scattered on the site.

ancient *Khijjinga Mandala*, which has been continuously ruled by the Bhanja dynasty. The Bhanjas of *Khijjinga Maṇḍala* (from the 9th century CE) and the Somavamsis played a major role in developing this area by patronising Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. The region saw the gradual integration of local, tribal-dominated areas into the mainstream Brahmanical fold, as reflected in the Bhanja rulers' origins and their subsequent patronage of temples. Thus, the region is a major repository of art, architecture, sculpture, and epigraphy belonging to the Bhanja dynasty. During our field work, there was certainly the presence of some dressed stone slabs comprising both *memorial stones* (secular) and *votive temples* (having a religious affiliation). Their presence in an isolated religious landscape and on an ever-changing geopolitical landscape may have fostered diverse patronage/allegiance, as

well as sectarian identities, and so a fusion of stylistic idioms over a broad chronological span. The is broad term used for 'memorial stones' (particularly pertaining to the Hoysaḷas) includes two major types, i) *niśidhi*- memorials, erected in honour of those Jainas who terminated their lives, observing a ritual code (religious) and ii) *hero-stones* or (*vīragals)* erected in honour of those who either laid down their lives on battlefields or immolated themselves for secular or socio-psychological reasons (Settar and Ganihar 1982: 326). Among the documented uninscribed memorial stones in the Deodhipa Siva temple complex are those made from granite. The memorial stones found within the temple complex are classified into two types: 1. elongated stone slabs with a *pidha*-type *sikhara* and a depiction of a hero, often holding a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left; 2. small miniature *pidha* shrines containing images of male, female and royal figures (Figure-5).

Fig. 5: Memorial stones found from the Deodhipa Siva temple complex.

Fig. 6: Votive Rekha temple shrines depicting a linga puja scene, with the linga and Chamunda seated with a baby and Staff.

Fig. 7: Niche of a Votive shrine with a male figure depicted.

Fig. 8: Two Buddhist votive stupas found from the Deodhipa Siva temple site.

Fig. 9: Seated image of Chamunda and a Kalasha found within the newly constructed temple at the site.

In addition to these memorial stones, numerous miniature votive *Rekha* temple shrines were found around the temple complex (Figure-6). They were basically categorised into four types: 1. votive *Rekha* temple shrine having the depiction of only linga or a *kneeling devotee* (female) in adoration to a Śiva *liṅga*, 2. votive *pidha* temple shrine having the depiction of only linga or a *kneeling devotee* (female) in adoration to a Śiva *liṅga* and 3. Rekha *śikhara*-type shrine with a depiction of goddess *Chamunda,* holding a baby in her right hand and a staff in her left, and 4. votive temple shrine within a sizeable niche *that* accommodates a figure seated in *rājalīlāsana* (Figure-7). This miniature *Rekha śikhara* shrine is carved with *rāhā, anurāhā, and kanika pāgas, and* topped by an *amalaka*; in the case of *pidha* shines*,* it is topped by a square-shaped finial in place of a circular *amalaka*. The *bāḍa* portion and the pedestal form a niche that accommodates a stocky portrayal of Siva *Linga*, a *Linga Puja* scene by the female devotee, and a Chamunda image seated in *rājalīlāsana*. Another two interesting specimens are the miniature votive *stūpa,* which lacks a central niche to accommodate *Buddha* or *Bodhisattva* images. The large votive stupa is partly broken at the top, and the *chatra* part is missing, whereas the second one, located very close to the present-day Baitarani riverbed, is fully intact but highly eroded due to continuous contact with river water (Figure-8). The remnants of the temple are scattered around the mound, including the pabhaga portion, door jamb, large blocks of stone with and without sockets, *chandrasilas*, and two *amalakas*. Such evidence suggests that, at one point, especially during the Bhajna rule in the 8th century CE onwards, this was a flourishing Saiva centre in northern Odisha. The architectural fragments found in this area show a lack of rich stone carvings, apart from a

large number of intact bricks measuring 30cm x 15cm x 5cm, and brickbats were also laid on the site surface. Evidence from stone architectural fragments and bricks suggests that, in the early medieval period, both materials were used to construct a temple in this region.

Within the *garbhagriha* of the newly constructed temple, a large Chamunda image is placed, which is 2 feet and 9 inches in height and 1 foot and 8 inches in width; the thickness of the stone slab is 10 inches. The image is highly eroded, making it very difficult to identify the complete iconographic features. The two-handed *Chamunda* is represented in a terrifying form, seated on the *apasmara* in *lalitāsana*, wearing a skull-type garland *(Munda Mala)*. She holds a baby in her right hand, and a staff in her left hand, and the little finger of her left hand touches the mouth of *Chamunda*. On the side of the *Chamunda* image, the *kalasha* part of a temple is placed within the *garbhagriha* of the recently built temple (Figure-9). Several findings of the images of *Saptamatrikas* after the 4th century CE throughout the Indian subcontinent indicate that the worship of goddesses was prominent during the Early Medieval period (Kinsley, 1975; Meister, 1978; Panikkar, 1997). The goddess *Chamunda* was instrumental in killing the demons *Chanda* and *Munda*, hence she is named *Chamunda*. The deity is known for her ferocious nature and is mentioned as a consort of Bhairava, who is also ferocious. The deity is also considered a goddess of death and time (Kinsley, 1975). There are multiple aspects discussed in the texts; as a result, the deity's fearful nature developed as its defining element. This ferocious element is represented by a skeletal body with a terrifying face, sunken eyes, a gaping mouth, pendulous breasts, long nails, and a sunken belly, surrounded by flesh and bloodthirsty wild animals. The mount of the deity is a *preta* (corpse). Some opinions vary, which claim that it is not a *preta*, but rather it is himself, Shiva, who lies beneath her in order to get her to calm down from anger after killing a demon (Sundarajan 2003: 267-71). This rare sculpture of the goddess *Chamunda* holding a baby and a staff depicts a complex, nurturing yet terrifying aspect of the goddess found from this temple site, who is typically known as a fierce slayer of demons. While often depicted as skeletal, with fangs and garlanded with skulls, this imagery merges her role as a fierce destroyer with a nurturing, albeit fierce, motherly aspect. The sculpture in Simhanatha Temple (near Banki, Cuttack district), dating to the 8th Century CE, is a unique example of Kalingan craftsmanship, depicting Chamunda in a rare, motherly pose despite her terrifying appearance (Behera & Donaldson 1998: 95). The present *Chamunda* image in the temple is iconographically dated to the 8th-9th Century CE, during the Bhanja period, because the goddess *Chamunda* is the '*istadevi'* of the Bhanja dynasty.

There are questions raised in the mind about why the Bhanjas established the Chamunda temple or Saiva centres at the confluence of two rivers, such as the Maa Kichakeswari temple at Khiching, located at the confluence of Khairi Bandhana and Kanda Khairi rivers, and the recently explored temple site of Mukuna at the confluence of Baitarani and Khairi Bandhan rivers. Most likely, the construction of Saiva centres, associated with tantric practices, was tied to specific purposes and rituals. Several factors may contribute to this situation, particularly the ancient trade routes linking northern India to southern regions that pass through north Odisha, especially Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj districts (Chakrabarti 2018: 213-248). It is plausible that these trade routes are relevant to the region encompassing the Khairi Bandhan and the Baitarani River valley. It provides better connectivity and is easily accessible to both Saiva saints and common devotees. Another possible fact is the small islands located at the confluence of two rivers. This place is not easily accessible to the general public, as it is far from the

village, and it may provide a suitable environment for practising *tantric* rituals. Another possible cause is that the confluence points of the river have an abundance of fish; in comparison, in the other areas of the river, the confluences provide a larger number of fish, and the fish may also have been used as an object of offering during the performance of *tantric* rituals to the goddess *Chamunda*. Another cause may be the use of sacred water from both rivers for *tantric* and *Vedic* rituals. The presence of numerous early historic, historical, and early medieval sites and monuments within the region is noteworthy. Prominent examples include the Kapileswara temple situated in Nandapur within the Champua block of Keonjhar district, the Deodhipa Siva temple located in the Raruan block of Mayurbhanj district, Benisagar in the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, the Maa Kichakeswari temple at Kiching in Mayurbhanj, and the Viratgarh site, also in Mayurbhanj, dated between the 1st century CE and 16th century CE. All of these significant sites are within a 60-kilometre radius, so this may be the region where the ancient trade route crossed, connecting northern India with southern India.

The Bhanjas exhibit a notable degree of sympathy towards both Brahminical and Buddhist traditions, thereby extending royal patronage to the establishment of shrines associated with these traditions in the region. The site is complex, incorporating diverse minor art forms carved in stone that elucidate its secular and religious activities and its surroundings. The presence of diagnostic types of *memorial stone* slabs (uninscribed) signifies rituals associated with a deceased hero or an event, whereas the votive temples are essentially religious in character. The presence of two votive stupas suggests that this site may have been a *Mahayana* Buddhist site earlier, and later occupied by the Saivites. This hypothesis can't be proved solely from the evidence of votive stupas; it also requires proper excavation to establish the fact. The presence of miniature shrines with secular images, as well as memorial stones for the honour of a *hero* (warrior or soldier) who died in defence or self-sacrifice, acting as war memorials, which can't be treated in isolation, must be considered alongside other recovered religious shrines and materials. The presence of numerous sculptural specimens associated with Brahmanical ideology, particularly *Śaiva* and *Śākta*, suggests a common ritual tradition in which this repertoire forms only a significant part (Donaldson 2001: 64-77). Such miniature shrines are found in the ancient *Viraja Kshetra* (Jajpur town) region, with depictions of both *Śaiva*, *Vishnu*, and *Śākta* images carved in the niches (Acharya 2016: 97-114). However, it can be concluded that the art and architecture of *Viraja Kshetra* influenced the miniature votive shrines from the northern Keonjhar region, especially the Deodhipa Siva temple.

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