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Exploring the Arthuna Temple Complex: A Survey of Historiographical Traditions

Abstract

For much of early medieval India, kingship became linked to temple building and preservation. For many newly emergent dynasties, the building and maintenance of temples became a symbol of the power and resources they wielded. At the same time, however, temples became indicators of cultural heterogeneity - bearing markers of diverse sects and adopting cultural practices of various faiths. The Paramara Dynasty that ruled over the region stretching from Malwa to Garhwal rose to prominence in such a rich, dynamic cultural landscape. The practices they undertook to legitimize their sovereignty also drew from prevailing norms. The construction of elaborate temples, hence, became central to their success. The Arthuna Temple complex in Rajasthan is testament to these royal endeavours. This paper attempts to examine historical research that frames the context in which these temples were constructed. Additionally, the paper aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the historiographical traditions that seek to reconstruct the prevalent socio-political and cultural realities which influenced the building of this temple. The paper will also endeavour to determine how scholars have understood the role of Arthuna Temple complex as a tool to promote the royal ambitions of the Paramaras.

The medieval temple complex serves as a repository of dynastic histories. From the architecture to the inscriptions, the temple helps with the reconstruction of the history of trials and tribulations. The temple serves as a testament to the way monarchs wanted to be perceived by posterity. At the same time, often unwittingly, temples provide us insight into the conditions of everyday populace.

The Arthuna group of temples, similarly, have helped historians study and reconstruct important aspects about the life and times of the long-forgotten Paramaras of Vagoda. This paper will attempt to survey scholarly approaches taken to the study of the temple and how these have helped us reconstruct the social, economic and political conditions of the time. Before this however, the following section will briefly endeavour to shed light on the dynastic Paramaras.

THE HISTORY OF THE PARAMARAS

The beginning of the Paramara dynasty can be traced to the early 9th century CE. It is likely that this dynasty emerged as subordinates to the Rashtrakutas. Different branches of the Paramara dynasty held control over modern Gujarat and Rajasthan until the 14th century. Their territory expanded over time to include the regions of Malwa, regions surrounding Vidisa in the east as well as Ratlana and Hoshangabad in the west and south respectively.

The imperial Paramaras ruled from their capital at Candravati situated near Mount Abu. The Paramaras of Bhimmal-Kiradu who ruled from Abu, were related to the central authority but also held ties with the Chalukyas of Gujarat¹. The Paramaras of Vagada, the dynasty in focus here, consolidated power by the 10th century. They ruled the region of

¹ Arvind K. Singh, "Interpreting the History of the Paramāras," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 1 (2012): 13, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41490371>.

Dungarpur and Banswara with their capital at modern-day Arthuna, known to them variously as Uttapanaka, Utthunaka and Arathunaka.

The history and genealogy of this dynasty and its branches has been reconstructed with the help of several primary sources including copper-plate inscriptions, literature and accounts of foreign travellers. Oral bardic traditions accord them the status of "agnikula" or fire-born. This is also evidenced by the name of the founder of the dynasty- Dhumaraja, who was born from the smoke emanating from a sacrificial fire. As Singh² argues, this may have led many scholars to believe that the Paramaras were of Huna-Gujara lineage. Singh however believes that they were Kshatriyas. While DC Ganguly suggests that they may have been the descendents of Rashtrakutas based on the use of phrases like "Tasmin Kule", "Amogavarsha", "Prithvivallabha" and "Srivallabha"; Singh argues that such titles were used by many dynasties in early medieval India to indicate continuity with their predecessors³.

The founder of the Vagada branch of the Paramaras was Dhanika. He established the Banswara branch of the dynasty in the middle of the 10th century. He was succeeded by Cacca who died in battle against the Rashtrakuta ruler Khottiga of Manyakheta. Satyaraja took over the reins of the Paramaras in the 11th century. He fought the Chalukyas of Gujarat under the suzerainty of King Bhoja (1010-1055). The descendents of Satyaraja were devotees of Shiva and erected temples in reverence. They established posts for the upkeep for temples in Arthuna, some of which were Jain. Chamundaraja, it is reported, dispensed funds for the repair of a temple in Mandalesa in 1079 CE. The temples of Arthuna thus contribute tremendously towards a study of the ritual belief of the Paramaras of Vagada. Several important inscriptions have also been recovered from their compounds. The following section will examine the study of the study of Arthuna temples in historical traditions.

² Singh, "Interpreting the History," 13

³ Singh, "Interpreting the History," 14.

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF THE ARTHUNA TEMPLES

The Arthuna group of temples were constructed by the Paramaras of Vagoda. Thus, the history of the Arthuna temple complex is deeply intertwined with the history of the dynasty. The rulers of this branch of the Paramaras venerated both Shaivite and Jain beliefs. Thus, the temples constructed also represent these beliefs. As mentioned above, DC Ganguly⁴ reports that Chamundaraja gave orders for the repair of the Mandalesa Temple. The Archeological Survey of India⁵ however, suggests that Chanmundaraja constructed the temple of Mandalesa and commemorated it in the inscription from 1079 CE. Another inscription from 1080 CE claims that the Anantapala, the son of his noble, also built a temple honouring Shiva⁶. Temples of Hanuman, Vishnu as well as a Jain temple built by Bhushana in 1190 CE have also been found in the area. On the other hand, temples dedicated to chausath yoginnis and Shiva have also been recovered.

The Mandalesvar Temple is the main attraction of the group of temples. Standing on a *jagati* (platform), it faces towards the east. Constructed as a Saptayatana, the main shrine was surrounded by six smaller shrines, some of which have not survived. The Garbhagriha has projections of Nandi, Praajapati, Karna and Kapota among others. It has a Yonipatta but the linga is missing. A figurine of Parvati is also present. The *Antarala* (vestibule) and the door frames have also been beautified.

The study of the Arthuna Temples has remained scattered. However, attempts have been made to explore the group of temples' architecture as well as study their social, political

⁴ Dharendra Chandra Ganguly, History of the Paramaras (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1933), 341.

⁵ "Arthuna: Archaeological Survey of India Jaipur Circle", accessed Nov 12, <https://asi.jaipurcircle.nic.in/arthuna.html>.

⁶ "Arthuna: Archeological Survey of India"

and economic contexts. Special attempts have been made to reconstruct the history of the Paramaras from inscriptions found in the temples.

Adam Hardy⁷ studies the rise of the Sekhari or shikhara temple in Western India as a central feature of Nagara architecture. He categorises the evolution of these temples into five distinct phases. The stepped diamond emerges as a prominent feature of this type of temple. This allows for the development of an extended bhadra (central projection). As Hardy⁸ shows, the Nilakantha Mahadeva Temple at Arthuna, is an example of such a formation.

The temple of the chausath yogini at Arthuna also displayed a pattern that involves carvings of elaborate erotic sculptures on the kumbha of the bhadra. Temples such as the ones in Arthuna showcase a "profusion" of erotic sculptures⁹. At the same time, Shiva is depicted in these temples in various forms. Shiva is manifested as Andhakantaka, who is stomping out the personification of misknowledge. He is also depicted as Netesa, adorned with a trident and a skull staff. Chamunda is also depicted on these temple walls.

The iconography of the temples in Arthuna reflect contemporary social contexts in more ways than one. Sitala was commonly worshipped across the Indian subcontinent as she protected people from diseases, especially smallpox as shown by Tiwari¹⁰. Her image has been found in the Nilakanteshwara Mahaddeva Temple in Arthuna. She is depicted as having four arms and riding a donkey. One of her arms is broken, while the other holds a rosary. The other two arms carry a winnowing basket. While this is relevant to the study of the

⁷ Adam Hardy, "Śekhārī Temples," *Artibus Asiae* 62, no. 1 (2002): 81-137.

⁸ Hardy, "Śekhārī Temples," 100.

⁹ Anuja Joshi, "Erotic Sculptures Flanking Deities on Kumbha Moulding: Investigation of Early Medieval Temples of North-Western Maharashtra and the Maru-Gurjara Temples," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 98 (2017): 17.

¹⁰ Maruti Nandan, Tiwari, and Kamal Giri. "Iconography of Sitala," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 44 (1983): 684.

iconography of this deity, it also signifies that a large number of gods and goddesses were part of Arthuna's pantheon of worship. The rulers patronised a large number of sects which were incorporated within the religious structures.

The inscriptions found from the temples also relay information about the condition of workers and merchants in the area. The Mandalesvar inscription commissioned by Chamundraja also provides details of the donations made by artisans to the temple. The inscription reports-

...from each house of the traders in the local bazar one dramma on the caitra festival of sacred thread; on the shops of braziers - one dramma for the month; on each vumvaka of distillers, four rupakas' on each traders* association -1 dramma (on the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight in each month¹¹

We know that the markets of Arthuna often imported goods like sesame oil, oil and sugar cane. As Gupta shows-

The revenue terms in the inscriptions, also hint at the wide range of crops produced in the region. Arthuna inscription of Paramara Camundaraja (1078 CE) records tax of one haraka of barley from a water-wheel, and taxes being levied on cartload of grains, betel leaves, on bullock load of barley, candied sugar and jaggery, salt, Bengal madder, thread and cotton, among others.⁴³ However, increase in the number of taxes on agricultural products is another indicator of increase in crop production and an organised agrarian base¹²

¹¹ Pushpa Prasad, "Artisans in North Indian Inscriptions (Sanskrit and Allied Languages) of 10th to 14th Centuries," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66 (2005): 186.

¹² Geetika Gupta, "Rulers, Merchants and the Growth of Rural Economy in Early Medieval Western India," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 78 (2017): 173.

Fields were sown with crops like barley and were irrigated with the help of vapi (water reservoirs) and araghatta (waterwheels). The stone inscription of Chanmundaraja also gives us information about the excavation of a tank and a stepwell. This was undertaken by Hari, among the six grandsons of the goldsmith Doahala. This shows us that merchants and artisans took an active part in the construction of wells and dams as well as reaping their benefits.

This inscription also indicates that Arthuna was a flourishing market that was visited by traders from far and wide. This inscription mentions that Dhanala and his family were well-versed in testing precious metals such as gold, rubies, diamonds et cetera. It also suggests that Hari, in addition to constructing a water tank, also built a temple and a garden. Srivastava (2009) argues that Arthana was a commercial trading town¹³.

A prashasti recovered from a Jain temple in Arthuna mentions the sway held by Jains over the trade activities of the city as well as attributes to their economic prowess. It also names three Paramara monarchs such as Chamundaraja. This may imply royal patronage of the temple as well as the community that built it.

Attempts have been made to revive the Arthuna group of temples in modern memory and position them as an important tourist spot. Efforts to encourage tourism in Banswara became prominent during the first decade of the 21st century. From 2010 to 2019, tourism in Banswara witnessed a steady increase with events such as Arthuna-Mahi Maahotsav

¹³ Surbhi Srivastava, "Analyzing the Characteristics of Urban Centers in Paramara Period," in *Transformations in Indian History*, ed. Pratima Asthana and S.Z.H Jafri (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2009), 197.

contributing to its success. The unique position of the temples of Arthuna as well as their remains can also be promoted to attract tourists¹⁴

CONCLUSION

A survey of this research makes it clear to us that no comprehensive attempt has been made to study the Arthuna temples. However, even though little research has been conducted presently, we do have valuable insights about the Paramaras. Future studies focusing specifically on the Paramaras and the Arthuna group of temples will help us understand their history better as well as increase the current value of the region as a tourist attraction.

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