
Early Images of Surya in Deogarh, Betwa River Valley: Analysis and Observations

Rahul Maurya¹

¹. Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, Guru Tegh Bahadur Road, Delhi-110 007, India (Email: rahulmaurya5496@gmail.com)

Received: 08 July 2023; Revised: 29 October 2023; Accepted: 02 December 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.2 (2023-24): 1091-1100

Abstract: Deogarh, an important archaeological site, preserves significant relics from the three major religious traditions of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Central to Deogarh's heritage is the Daśāvātara Temple, dating to the 6th century CE and recognized as North India's earliest Panchāyatana temple. Additionally, the eastern side of the fort hill contains a series of Jain temples from the 8th to the 17th centuries. About 4 km southwest of the Daśāvātara Temple, rock-cut images along the Betwa River Valley showcase deities from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, including rare depictions of Surya dating from the Gupta to the post-Gupta periods. This paper explores the iconographic evolution of Surya representations in Deogarh, focusing especially on the presence of Aditi, and contributes to a broader understanding of the Surya cult's development in North and Central India.

Keywords: Sun Worship, Iconography, Deogarh, Aditi, Gupta Period, Archaeological Evidence, Cultural Syncretism

Introduction

Surya, the Sun, is the ultimate source of energy, sustaining all life through light. In Hindu religious belief, Surya is one of the few deities considered "visible," symbolizing life and light that dispels darkness. Worship of the Sun is among the oldest forms of veneration in human history. Surya's significance is underscored in the Brahmanical tradition, where the Saur sect venerates Surya as the primary deity alongside other associated divinities. Puranic literature and related Sanskrit texts, such as the Saur Puranas, provide insight into the formation of Saur rituals, sacred centers, and the myths surrounding Sun worship (Handa 2006). Within the Saur tradition, worship practices are elaborate and begin with Surya's veneration, comprising sixteen distinct ritual methods (Shah 1996). Archaeological evidence of Sun worship dates back to the Neolithic era, where symbols of Surya are observed. The practice continued through the Harappan and Chalcolithic periods, with sun symbols appearing on pottery, seals, and beads. The earliest sculptural depictions of Surya date from the Shunga period (Pandey 1971). The global prevalence of Sun worship is evident, as numerous cultures have integrated Sun-centered ceremonies and festivals (Srivastava 1972).

An extensive body of literature, including the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as various Puranas (such as the Agni, Bhagavata, Matsya, Markandeya, Narasimha, Padma, Samba, Surya, Visnudharmottara, and Bhavisya Puranas), highlight Surya's role within the Vedic pantheon (Joshi 1976). Buddhist and Jain texts also acknowledge the significance of Surya worship.

The iconography of Aditi, often associated with maternity within the divine order, is rare in Indian art. Aditi is not depicted as a "mother goddess" but as a cosmic power associated with birth and creation, as noted by Stella Kramrisch (1975). Aditi's figure is mostly featureless, embodying an abstract maternal essence. Kramrisch discusses an ancient image, located in the Alampur Museum, which bears some resemblance to Lajjagauri figures, except it holds a lotus—a feature Kramrisch interprets as Aditi. However, H.D. Sankalia (1960) contested this view, considering the figure a representation of Lajjagauri. This scholarly discussion continued with M. K. Dhavalikar's 1987 article on Sakambhari, the "headless goddess." Later, Meera I. Dass and Michael Willis (2002) explored the solar-astronomical aspects of Udayagiri Caves, further examining the connection between iconography and Sun worship.

Inscriptions from central India provide valuable records of Sun temples and their patrons. Fleet (1888) documented three significant inscriptions related to Sun temples: the Mandsaur inscription of Kumargupta and Bandhuvarman, which describes a Sun temple built by the Tantvaya guild in Dashapur; the Skandagupta inscription of a Sun temple at Indrapur; and the Gwalior inscription of the Huna king Mihirkul. Dharapatta, a Maitraka ruler, was also a known Sun worshipper (Fleet 1888). During the early medieval period, further evidence of Sun temples in this region emerged, such as the Madhkhera Sun Temple in Tikamgarh, constructed by the Pratihara dynasty, and the Chitragupta Temple in Khajuraho, built by the Chandela kings (Deva 1959).

Indian iconography presents two main styles of Surya images: a North Indian style, influenced by Iranian elements and Central Asian depictions, and a South Indian style, which developed independently. The medieval period saw the rise of grand Sun temples, such as the Modhera Sun Temple in Gujarat, the Martanda Temple in Kashmir, the Arasavalli Sun Temple in Andhra Pradesh, the Sun Temple at Osian in Rajasthan, and the world-renowned Konark Sun Temple in Odisha. Smaller rock-cut sites like Deogarh also reveal the spread of Sun worship throughout India. These sites collectively showcase India's rich tradition of Sun worship and the diversity of its artistic and architectural heritage.

Surya Images

Deogarh (24.52.6° N and 78. 23.8° E.), a holy village is located in Lalitpur District, 33 km southwest of the district headquarters, located on the western end of Lalitpur hill range of Uttar Pradesh. Deogarh is situated on the right bank of Betwa River and in

between the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Deogarh comes under the Bundelkhand region. It is a corridor of trade and military in ancient India; it has been known as the Deccan pass. In ancient times Deogarh is in the centre between Udayagiri, Ujjain, Sanchi, Vidisha in the southwest, Kashi and Pataliputra in the north (Chandra 1977).



Figure 1: Surya

Deogarh is the most famous for the Gupta Daśāvātara Temple dated to the 6th Century CE and is the earliest known Panchāyatana temple in India. This temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. There is a fort was made by a Chandel king. There are two gates in this fort called the Elephant and Delhi Gate. The fort on the hill is covered by groups of Jain temples dating from c. 8th to - 17th century CE. There are a total of thirty-one temples

housing around two thousand sculptures forming the largest collection of such kind in the world. There are more than sixty inscriptions related to Hinduism and Jainism (Bruhan 1969). There are the remains of Varāha Temple located on the southwest corner of the fort. In the present days, only the remains of the foundation along with some architectural fragments have been survived.

In Deogarh, 4 km from Daśāvātara and Jain temples on the right bank of the Betwa river valley, there are many rock-cut sculptures associated with Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism along with inscriptions. The geocoordinates of the site are in between 24° 30'22" N and 78°15'14"N situated in a dense forest. After 200 m from the river valley one, Shaiva temple is located preserving the fragments of the temple and the sculptures of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Deogarh is one of the richest archaeological sites in Uttar Pradesh having numerous remains of temples and sculptures belonging to Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. This site was one of the important religious centres of all three religions.

Sculpture Niche No. 1

The first sculpture niche is located at 100 meters distance from the Buddhist locality. The image measures 67 × 48cm and is the last image of this area of the river valley. The image of Surya is shown standing in *samapada* and the hands are almost broken. The deity is shown wearing shoes. Although both hands of the deity are broken, looking into the present remains, the hands are raised upwards and might be holding lotus flowers, and based on this it has been identified as an image of Surya. He wears a well-ornate *kirita-mukutā*, and there is a *prabhāmandala* behind the head. In this image, he wears a *dhoti* up to his knees and both hands are covered by a scarf whose pleats fall to the knees. The deity is shown wearing *grāiveyaka* and *Karṇakuṇḍalas*. The deity is flanked by two female figures, one on each side holding some indistinct objects which are not preserved. The female figures can be identified with Rajni and Nikshubhā or Ushā and Pratusā (Figure 1).

Sculpture Niche No. 2

The second sculpture niche is situated in *Nahar Ghāti*. The sculpture niche measures 65 × 50 cm. This is the second image of Surya in the valley. This sculpture niche has a broad floral band around the rock-cut niche, wherein the image is placed. The height of the Surya image is around 50 cm. The portion of Surya's face and left hand are broken but he holds a lotus flower in his right hand. His crown is also damaged. The scarf falls to the knees and it drops over the arms. He is shown wearing a *grāiveyaka* and *karnakundalas*. There is a *prabhāmandala* behind the head of the deity. The image is flanked by two male figures, identified as Pingal and Dāndi. Both figures are eroded and thus hard to identify the objects held by them (Figure 2).

Sculpture Niche No. 3

The sculpture niche is located next to the left side of the Siva Linga sculpture in Raj Ghāti. The right side of the sculpture niche's first image is of a male. The image is in a

standing position, in which he stands on a well-decorated *Jagatipithā*. In this image, he holds a huge lotus flower in his left hand and the right hand is broken. We can see the dhoti up to the boot and *yajnopavitay* comes up to the thigh. The crowns of both images are of typical Gupta style.



Figure 2: Surya



Figure 3: Surya and Aditi (?)

The second image is very interesting depicted along with Surya's image. She is sitting in *uttānapāda* position on a big carved lotus *Jagatipeithā*. In the right hand, she is holding a lotus and in the left hand in *varadamudrā* holding something, it is unclear. The sculpture niche setting and iconographical features provide strong evidence to identify the image as Aditi (Figure 3).

The Deogarh river valley has various images of Surya images belonging to various periods. The first image of Surya is situated on the eastern part of the hill to show the 'Vāstu Shāstra' effect on the site setting. *If we go through the iconography, the first and second are similar postures but the third image is different. The first sculpture niche has two female attendees, the second sculpture niche has two male attendees, while the third has a single image. The first and second images are holding lotuses in each hand while the third holds only a lotus in the left hand.*

The third sculpture niche is a unique figure of Surya with Aditi. It represents the relationship between a mother and son in a single sculpture niche. This is one of the rarest sculpture niches in India having the two figures together. The first image of Surya is also interesting in the context of central India. The coat depicted in the image

is very rare showing the influence of Indo-Scythian. The attendees of the first image Rajani and Nikshubhā or Ushā and Pratusā are very common but came in the late Gupta period (Joshi 1976). The second image is different from the first image for the coat size and style are different, and the presence of two male attendees Pingal and Dāndi. So, we can see the early Pratihāra effect in the second image.

Sculpture niche No. 1 of Deogarh, has the same feature which can be observed in the Allahabad Museum's stone sculpture. This museum has one Surya image with female attendees, two Surya images with male attendees, and two Surya images with both male and female images. The first image recovered from Bara in Allahabad District shows the presence of female attendees as known as Rajani and Nikshubhā. Apart from these, two other unidentifiable attendees are also present in this sculpture. Surya is depicted as holding full-blown lotuses in his hands. He is wearing boots and a girdle with *kirita-mukutā*. The left part of the image is broken and the image has been dated to the 9th Century CE (Chandra 1970). The second evidence of Surya from Allahabad Museum but recovered from Kara in Allahabad District add ref with page number and image accession number This image is of Surya holding full-bloomed lotuses with triple stalks in the upper hand but the lower hand is broken. Next to the Surya image stands the attendees' figure of Rajani and Nikshubhā as well as the male attendees figure called Dāndi and Pingal. In addition, there is also the figure of two more female attendees called Ushā and Pratushā. Surya is depicted adorning jewellery as well as wearing boots and dated to the 11th Century CE (Chandra 1970). The third evidence of Surya is recovered from Karchhana District in Allahabad. This image is also similar to the one recovered from Kara as mentioned earlier. Here there is also the presence of Dāndi, Pingal, Rajani, Nikshubhā, Ushā, and Pratushā. This Surya image is well decorated with a tall crown, boots, and scarf that falls to the knees. The sculpture niche has been dated to the 10th century CE (Chandra 1970). The one image of Surya in Gaya, Bihar has a similar feature to Sculptural niche 1 of Deogarh. The image has two female attendees known as Rajani and Nikshubhā. Even here Surya is depicted as holding two full-blown lotuses and the crown has a resemblance to the *kiritamukuta* crown. The image has been tentatively dated to the 7th Century CE (Leeuw 1984).). There is an also similar image observed in the Mathura Museum (Accn. No 88.19.4) with the male and female attendees which is tentatively dated to the 10th Century CE (Kumar 2002).

Sculptural niche No. 2 of Deogarh, has a very similar feature which can be observed in the Allahabad Museum's stone sculpture, there are two Surya images with only male attendees, Dāndi and Pingal which were originally recovered from Kaushambi. Both are approximately dated to the 9th Century CE. The sculpture niches are well decorated with a *kiritamukuta* crown and both the male attendees are present on either side of the Surya image (Chandra 1970: 137-141). An image recovered from Bhita in Allahabad has a close resemblance to that of Sculpture niche 2 from Deogarh. The image is carved on a rectangular stone slab and is dated to the 8th Century CE. The deity is in *Udyicyavesa*, and holding a small bunch of lotus flowers with the short stalks in both hands are alike to Deogarh's Sculpture niche 2. The jewellery such as bracelets,

earrings, necklaces, and cylindrical crowns also have a similar pattern. The attendee Pingala, on the right side of Surya, holds a pen and an ink-pot wearing a Scythian cap, while Dāndi on the left side also has similar attire holding a staff (Chandra 1970: 137-141). Similar to Sculpture niche 2 of Deogarh, the evidence of the Surya image has also been recovered from the Barabar Hill in the Gaya District of Bihar. Here, the Surya image has two male attendees Dāndi and Pingal on either side. Surya is also depicted holding two full-blown lotuses in both hands along with a *kiritamukuta* crown. The image has been tentatively dated to the 7th Century CE (Leeuw 1984).

Conclusion

The Deogarh Aditi image is different from the Alampur image as the Deogarh image has a full head and the genital is not depicted (Kramrisch 1975). The image sitting posture is different from the Alampur image as well. Based on the context of the image along with the presence of Surya, and the Iconographic feature of the image is enough evidence to consider it as an Aditi image. The third sculpture niche of Surya is one of the oldest and rare images in central India. Based on iconographic elements, this image belongs to the early Gupta period. The influence of the later Gupta art can be seen in the first and second images respectively. After studying the images, the rock-cut image setting pattern becomes clear; and based on the sizes of the image, the first sculpture niche can be considered to belong to the post-Gupta period.

Thus, we can say that Surya in Deogarh art contains within itself the successive stages in the evolution of Surya Iconography in Central India. It is a very good example of the symbolic significance of the Surya warship in Central India. This region has several depictions of Coins and Seale, but the sculptures from Deogarh has one of the oldest pieces of evidence in this region. The Deogarh have some specific depictions only like Surya in standing position only it can see the absence of the other from of Surya like on the chariot with horses and other symbolic forms. So, this kind of depiction shows the religious ideas, cults, and creeds of that period in this region.

The Surya cult starts getting patronized in the first century during the Kushāna period (Pandey 1999). Several coins have Surya depictions till Punch-marked coin, thus showing the importance of the Surya cult. Central India has several pieces of evidence of the Surya cult in various forms, like coins, inscriptions, and sculptures. The Gwalior the centre of the Surya cult, there is a Surya-Kunda according to Cunningham this water tank was assigned by local ruler Paeupati who ruled from c. 275 to 300 CE, probably there was a temple dedicated to Surya (Cunningham 1864-65: 342). Inscriptional evidence shows in the 6th century CE. Huna king Mihirkula patronized the grant for the Surya temple (Fleet 1888: 161-164). According to D.C. Sircar Bhilasa, the place's name probably come from the Sun god Bhaillāsvamin, their earliest stone inscription evidence at Bhilasa is dated to 878 CE (Srivastava 1972). This shows us the importance of the god Surya in the region. In central India have a number of Vishnu depictions in the forms of *Yajña-Varāha* the presented with the soler symbols (Agrawala 1959). This region has one of the oldest sites Udayagiri, it is very similar to Deogarh in

terms of landscapes. Udayagiri hill has a very good example of solar astronomy in can see the architecture of the places (Dass & Willis 2002). Very similar astronomy can be overseeded in Deogarh rock-hill, the first sculpture niche of Surya is situated on the most eastern part of hill-lock, that means not even images depiction the architect give importance to solar Astronomy in Deogarh. The Surya cult not only has evidence in Deogarh only, but it can also see some of the places sounding arias like Budhani, Chandpur, Dudhai, and many more. The Budhani have a well decorative temple devoted to Surya, the doorframe of the temple is fully decorated with the depiction of Navagraha. The garbhagriha of temple has an intact Surya image, this temple belongs to the 12th century CE. The site Chandpur has a full complex of Hindu and Jain temples thus dated to the 8th to 15th Century CE. The several temple doorframes are depicted with the Navagraha depiction.

Hence, the Sun in Deogarh art is a symbol of successive modifications in the evolution of Solar Iconography and the Surya cult. It shows traits of conformity to foreign subcultures and adjustments towards Indianization. The Surya images of Deogarh is a seen image of this dual manner of history-exchange and conformity, and as such are precious sources for the reconstruction of the Surya cult in trendy and for demonstrating the popularity of the Surya cult in significant central Indian area for the duration of the historic length.

Acknowledgments

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Shrikant Ganvir, Dr. Gopal Joge, and Dr. Suken Shah for their invaluable guidance and assistance with proofreading. I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Parul Pandya Dhar, for her unwavering support and encouragement throughout this work. I would also like to thank Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, Pune, for the M.Phil. program, the University of Delhi for Ph.D. support, the UGC for funding, and the Archaeological Survey of India, Lucknow Circle, for granting permission to conduct fieldwork.

References

- Agrawala, V. S. 1959. *Solar Symbolism of the Boar* (Yajña-Varāha, an Interpretation). Prithivi Prakashan. Varanasi.
- Bruhn, K. 1969. *The Jina-Images of Deogarh*. E.J. Brill. Leiden.
- Chandra, M. 1977. *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*. Abhinav Publications. Delhi.
- Chandra, P. 1970. *Stone Sculpture in the Allahabad Museum: A Descriptive Catalogue*. American Institute of Indian Studies. New Delhi.
- Cunningham, A. 1871. *Four Reports Made During the Years, 1862-63-64-65* (Vol. 2). Government Central Press. Calcutta.
- Dass, M. I. and M. Willis. 2002. "The Lion Capital from Udayagiri and the Antiquity of Sun Worship in Central India." *South Asian Studies* 18(1): 25-45.
- Dhavalikar, M. 1999. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 80(1/4): 213-214.
- Elgood, H. 2000. *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*. A and C Black. London.

- Fergusson, J. and J. Burgess. 1954. *The Cave Temples of India*. W.H. Allen and Co. London.
- Fleet, J.F. 1888. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. III*. Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing. Calcutta.
- Giese, A. C. 1976. "The Sun, Sun Myths, and Sun Worship. *Living with Our Sun's Ultraviolet Rays*. (pp. 1-16). Springer. Boston.
- Handa, D. 2006. *Sculptures from Haryana: Iconography and Style*. Aryan Publications. New Delhi.
- Hazra, R. C. 1942. "The Three Most Important Places of Sun Worship." *Bharatiya Vidya*, 4: 212-215.
- Jaiswal, S. K. 2013. "The Classical Age of Sun Worship in Ancient India." *Asian Man-An International Journal*, 7(1 and 2): 151-153.
- Joshi, M. C. 2017. "Rock Shelters at Deogarh District, District Lalitpur, UP: Certain Idioms of Hindu-Buddhist Legacy." *Kalash*, 19-22: 20-27.
- Joshi, N. P. 1976. *Prachin Bharathiy Murthi Vijnan*. (Hindi.). Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad. Patna.
- Kramrisch, S. 1956. *An Image of Aditi-Uttānapad*. *Artibus Asiae*, 19(3/4): 259–270.
- Kramrisch, S. 1975. The Indian Great Goddess. *History of Religions*, 14 (4): 235.
- Kumar, J. 2002. *The Masterpiece of Mathura Museum*. National Museum Institute. New Delhi.
- Leeuw, J.E.V.L. (Ed.). 1984. *Studies in South Asian Cultures*. E.J. Brill. London.
- Mevissen, G. 2008. "A Group of Strange Surya Images from Gajole in the Malda Museum: Some Remarks on the Bare Feet of Surya and His Attendants." *Journal of Bengal Art*, 13(14): 89-108.
- Pandey, D.P. 1939. *Surya: Iconographical Study of the Indian Sun-God* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Lucknow. Lucknow.
- Pandey, L. P. 1971. *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*. Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. Sarnath, Varanasi.
- Pandey, S. 1999. Solar Iconography of Mathura. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 60: 1097–1103.
- Sahu, R.K. 2012. *Sun-Worship in Odisha*. Bharatiya Kala Prakashan. New Delhi.
- Sankalia, H. D. 1960. "The Nude Goddess or 'Shameless Woman' in Western Asia, India, and South-Eastern Asia." *Artibus Asiae*, 23 (2): 111-123.
- Sharma, R. K. 2010. *Madhyapradesh Evam Chathisgarh ke Puratattv ka Sandarph Granth*. (Hindi). Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, Bhopal.
- Srivastava, V. C. 1972. *Sun Worship in Ancient India*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. New Delhi.