

Cultural and Architectural Contributions of the Chalukya Dynasty

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Abstract:

*The study of ancient Indian art reveals that its primary purpose, since antiquity, has been to elevate the spiritual and moral values of humanity. The preservation and promotion of spiritual values gave rise to various styles of temple architecture, including the *Nagara*, *Dravidian*, and *Vesara* styles. These architectural styles, influenced by regional factors and the preferences of their patrons, developed distinct characteristics unique to their respective contexts. Architectural masterpieces created in these styles are now globally renowned as invaluable cultural and historical treasures of Indian art history. Sanatan Dharma, the most ancient religion of India, encompasses two major branches: Jainism and Buddhism. To promote these religions, their followers constructed countless stupas and temples. Numerous Indian royal dynasties and religious communities have made remarkable and enduring contributions to the creation of stupas and temples. During the Mauryan to the Kushan periods, religious architecture primarily took the form of stupas and chaityas, as evidenced by their surviving remains. From the Gupta period to the medieval era, the construction of temples dedicated to Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism gained prominence. Among these contributions, the Chalukya dynasty played a significant role in shaping the temple architecture of South India. They constructed historically significant temples in Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal, which stand as testaments to their architectural innovation.*

This research aims to explore the Chalukya rulers' contributions to the development of the temples at Aihole and Pattadakal, highlighting their importance in the evolution of Indian temple architecture.

Keywords : Chalukya Dynasty, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal etc.

1. Introduction: The Chalukya dynasty was one of the prominent dynasties in ancient Indian history. Their capital was located at Badami, also known as Vatapi. The Chalukyas governed parts of southern and central India from the 6th to the 12th century.

Over time, the dynasty evolved into three related but distinct branches: the Early Chalukyas of Badami, the Eastern Chalukyas, and the Western Chalukyas.

The political power of the Kannada-speaking Chalukyas of the south expanded in 550 AD.¹ At the time of the decline of the Kadamba Empire, the Badami Chalukyas began to assert their independence; the Chalukya dynasty was founded by Pulakeshin I in 543 AD. Pulakeshin I took control of Vatapi (modern Badami in Bagalkot district of Karnataka) and made it his capital.

Pulakeshin I and his descendants are known as the Chalukyas of Badami. After the death of Pulakeshin II, the Eastern Chalukyas established an independent kingdom in the south-east. They ruled the eastern south till about the 11th century. In the western south, these Western Chalukyas ruled from Kalyani (modern Basavakalyan) from the middle of the 8th century until the end of the 12th century.

The Chalukya dynasty holds a significant place in the history of South India, representing a golden age of cultural and architectural achievements. Under the Badami Chalukyas, the region saw a transformation from fragmented small kingdoms to a unified empire. This political consolidation coincided with the emergence of a distinctive architectural tradition. Temples, central to religious life since ancient times, played a pivotal role in this era. By the third century, the practice of idol worship was well-established in North India, particularly during the Gupta dynasty. The Chalukyas embraced and expanded upon this tradition, constructing magnificent temples in and around their capital. These structures not only brought deities closer to the people but also reinforced the rulers' divine authority. Even after 1,500–1,600 years, many of these temples remain standing, offering a direct connection to the gods and the artistic brilliance of that period. The architects and artisans of the Chalukya era developed the Besar style by blending elements of the Nagara and Dravidian architectural traditions. This unique style manifested in two types of temples: cave temples carved into rock and structural temples built above ground, showcasing the ingenuity and creativity of their creators.

1.1 Cave Temples: The Badami cave temples exhibit three key architectural elements: a pillared verandah, a spacious hall, and a deeply recessed sanctum. Badami was established by Pulakeshi I, and his son Kirtivarman I (567–598 CE) constructed Cave Temple No. 3,² which is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Mangalesha (598–610 CE), Kirtivarman I's brother, completed the construction of the remaining cave temples. To

commemorate the installation of Vishnu's idol, he donated a village to the temples. The Badami cave complex consists of four temples: Cave Temple No. 1 is dedicated to Shiva. Cave Temples No. 2 and No. 3 are dedicated to Vishnu. Cave Temple No. 4 is a Jain temple. (Refer to Picture No. 1)



Picture No.1, Badami Caves, Karnataka

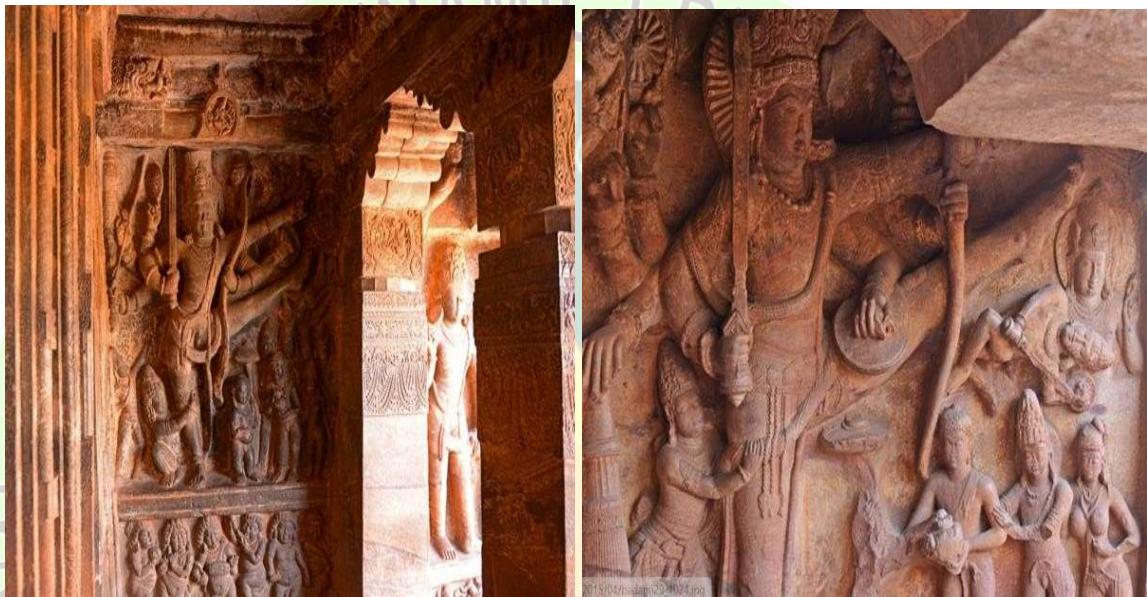
1.1.1 Cave No. 1: The first cave temple at Badami is dedicated to Nataraja, a form of Lord Shiva, and was constructed around 578 CE. Carved from red sandstone, the temple features an open veranda, a spacious chamber supported by intricately designed pillars, and a sanctum sanctorum. Access to this cave is via a flight of 40 steps. Within the cave, there are 81 depictions of Lord Shiva, including an extraordinary 18-armed sculpture. (Refer to Picture No. 2) The ceiling and pillars are adorned with exquisite carvings, including depictions of loving couples, showcasing the artistic finesse of the era.



Picture No.2, Nataraja statue, Badami cave No.1

1.1.2 Cave No. 2- This cave temple is dedicated to **Lord Vishnu** and showcases several depictions of his divine incarnations. One of the most notable sculptures illustrates the **Trivikrama (Vamana avatar)**, where Lord Vishnu is depicted with one foot firmly placed on the earth and the other reaching the sky. (*Refer to Picture No. 3*)

The temple is supported by four intricately carved pillars, each adorned with fine and detailed carvings, reflecting the artistic excellence of the Chalukya artisans.



Picture No. 3, Trivikram (Vamanavtar) incarnation, Badami cave no. 2

1.1.3 Cave No. 3- Dedicated to **Lord Vishnu**, this cave temple was constructed in **578 AD** and is renowned for its grandeur and artistic excellence. The cave features **massive statues of Lord Vishnu** and measures approximately **70 feet in width** at the front, exemplifying the architectural brilliance of the Deccan style.

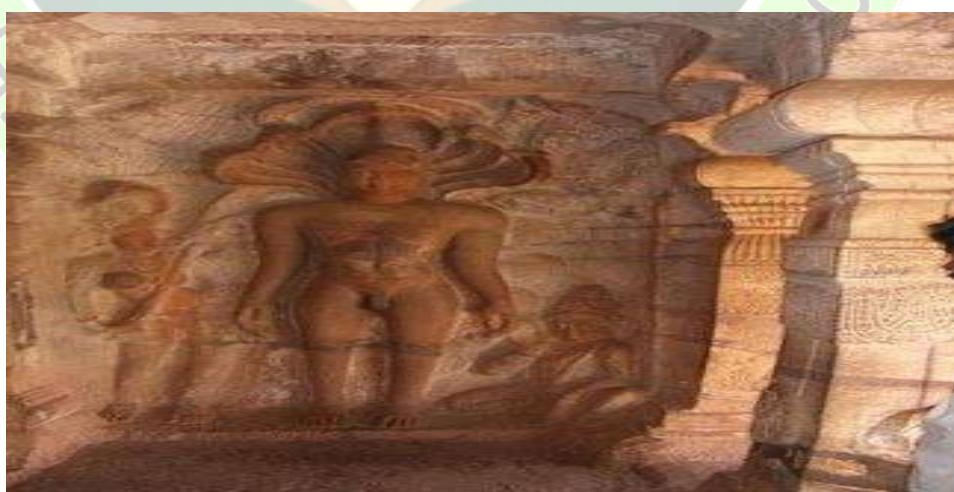
The temple platform is adorned with intricate carvings of **Ganas**, while the walls depict various incarnations of Vishnu, including **Narasimha, Varaha, Harihara** (a fusion of Shiva and Vishnu), and **Trivikrama**. (*Refer to Picture No. 4*)

Like the other caves, the **ceiling and pillars** of this temple are embellished with exquisite carvings, showcasing the meticulous craftsmanship of the Chalukya artisans.



Picture No. -4, Vishnu on Sheshnag, Badami cave number 3

1.1.4 Cave No. 4- This cave temple is dedicated to **Lord Mahavira**, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, and is considered the newest among the four caves. There is scholarly debate regarding its construction period; while some believe it was built in the **7th century**, others suggest it was constructed in the **8th century**, approximately 100 years after the first three caves. The temple houses a **statue of Lord Mahavira** in a seated posture as its central feature. Additionally, it includes sculptures of **Bahubali**, **Yakshas**, and **Yakshis**. The inner walls and pillars are adorned with numerous intricately carved statues of **Jain Tirthankaras**, showcasing the temple's rich Jain artistic heritage. (Refer to Picture No. 5)



Picture No. 5, Lord Parshvanath, Badami Cave No. 4

1.1 Structural Temples- In addition to their magnificent cave temples, the Chalukyas constructed several **structural temples** in **Aihole** and **Pattadakal**, showcasing their architectural ingenuity. The temples at Aihole, built during the reign of **Vikramaditya II**, reflect a confluence of diverse architectural styles and elements.³ These temples demonstrate a blend of the **Shikhara style** of North India and the early forms of **Dravidian architecture**, culminating in the distinct **Vesara style** that the Chalukyas pioneered.

The main structural temples constructed by the Chalukyas include:

1.2.1 Lad Khan Temple- The **Lad Khan Temple**, dedicated to **Lord Shiva**, is one of the oldest surviving temples built by the Chalukyas. Scholars differ on its date of construction, with some attributing it to the **5th century** and others to the **7th century**. If dated to the 5th century, it would be considered the earliest structural temple built by the Chalukyas.⁴

The temple features a **sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha)** surrounded by a covered pathway for circumambulation. In front of the sanctum lies the **Mukha Mandapa**, supported by a set of **12 intricately carved pillars**.⁵ The **Sabha Mandapa** leads to the **Maha Mandapa**, which houses a striking statue of **Surya (the Sun God)**.⁶ The pillars of the Maha Mandapa are arranged in two concentric squares, enhancing the structural symmetry. Both the walls and pillars of the temple are adorned with **elaborate carvings** depicting scenes from Hindu mythology. (*Refer to Picture No. 6 and 7*) The Lad Khan Temple follows a **cave-temple style of architecture**, as it lacks a **shikhara (gopura)**. This indicates that the temple's construction involved significant experimentation, reflecting the Chalukyas' innovative approach.

Another notable feature is the **abundant depiction of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers**, a motif characteristic of Chalukya art. At the main entrance, statues of **Ganga** and **Yamuna** are prominently carved. **Yamuna** is represented standing on a tortoise, as seen on a pillar on the eastern side. (*Refer to Picture No. 8*) The Lad Khan Temple stands as a testament to the Chalukyas' architectural creativity and remains one of their most beautiful and significant contributions to temple design.



Picture No. -6,7,8 Ladkhan temple, Aihole 600 AD

1.2.2 Durga Temple-The Durga Temple in Aihole, dedicated to **Surya (the Sun God)**, is believed to have been constructed in the **8th century**.⁷ This temple is an exceptional example of early **Chalukya structural temple architecture** and is renowned for its **grandeur and intricacy**.

The temple features the **largest and most ornate pillars in Aihole**, intricately carved with artwork representing **Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, and Vedic deities**.⁸ The temple's name, "Durga Temple," originates from the **durg** (fortified outpost) built atop the structure in the 13th century during conflicts between Hindu kingdoms and Islamic sultanates. Architecturally, the Durga Temple combines a **semicircular plan for the sanctum** with a **square plan for the mandapa**, possibly influenced by the semicircular design of **Buddhist Chaitya caves**.⁹ (Refer to Picture No. 9) However, this connection remains a matter of scholarly debate. According to **Philip Harding**, while early researchers considered the design derivative of Buddhist Chaityas, it is now widely recognized as a traditional **Brahmanical form**. The temple's **entrance and pillars** are adorned with carvings of **Dvarapalas** and depictions of scenes from human life, such as **Artha and Kama**, including **Mithuna** (depictions of happy couples).¹⁰ (Refer to Picture No. 10)

At the base of the courtyard and mandapa, small panels illustrate scenes from the **Hindu epic Ramayana**. The entrance base also features carvings of the goddesses **Ganga** and **Yamuna**, accompanied by their traditional attendants. The artwork near the sanctum

sanctorum includes beautiful depictions of stories related to deities, religious themes, and various scenes of spiritual significance. (Refer to Picture No. 11) The Durga Temple is a masterpiece of early Chalukya art and architecture, reflecting their innovative spirit and devotion to integrating artistic traditions into temple design.



Picture No. 9,10 Durga Temple, Aihole 8th century



Picture No. 11, Carved sculptures in Durga temple, Aihole 8th century

1.2.3 Sangameswara Temple-The Sangameswara Temple, located at **Pattadakal**, was commissioned by the Chalukya king **Vijayaditya Satyashraya**. Inscriptions and other evidence suggest that the temple was constructed between **720 AD and 733 AD**.

Following the death of King Vijayaditya in **734 AD**, the temple was left incomplete, though intermittent construction efforts continued in later centuries.¹² Also known as the **Vijayeswara Temple**, it is believed to be the **oldest temple** in the Pattadakal region. The temple exemplifies the **Dravidian architectural style** and features an inner passage, a **cella (garbhagriha)**, and a sanctum. The **outer walls** of the temple are adorned with sculptures depicting **Ugranarasimha** (a fierce incarnation of Vishnu) and **Nataraja** (the cosmic dancer form of Shiva). The temple's roof and cella structure bear a striking resemblance to the **Virupaksha Temple**, which was itself inspired by the **Kailasanathar Temple** at Kanchipuram. Like these temples, the Sangameswara Temple follows a **square layout** from the base to the summit, demonstrating geometric precision.

The shrines within the temple are richly decorated with intricate carvings of **Lord Shiva** and **Lord Vishnu**. A notable feature of the architecture is the harmonious arrangement of **protruding windows** within the rectangular and square elements, adding aesthetic balance and elegance to the design. (*Refer to Picture No. 12*)

The Sangameswara Temple stands as a testament to the Chalukyas' mastery of Dravidian architecture, blending functional design with artistic brilliance.



Picture No.12, Sangameswara Temple, Pattadakal, c. 733 AD.

In addition to the aforementioned temples, the **Malikarjuna Temple**, **Papanatha Temple**, and **Kashi Visvesvara Temple** in **Pattadakal** are remarkable examples of the Chalukyas' rich cultural heritage. Between the **7th** and **10th centuries**, nearly a

hundred temples were constructed in **Aihole**, showcasing a striking blend of **North Indian** and **South Indian architectural elements**. This fusion highlights the Chalukyas' ability to integrate diverse architectural traditions, creating a unique and influential temple style.

Conclusion- The Chalukya rulers were predominantly followers of **Vaishnavism**, which is reflected in the temples they built, dedicated to **Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism**. Most of these temples are oriented towards the **east**, a common feature in Chalukya temple architecture. The artistic magnificence and the grandeur of the sculptures reveal both the **religious devotion** and **artistic sensibilities** of the Chalukya dynasty.

During their reign, the Chalukyas introduced new experiments in temple architecture, leading to the development of the **Vesara style**. The idols carved within the temples are diverse and significant. Among the **Vaishnava idols**, depictions of Vishnu's **Dashavatara**, Vishnu reclining on **Shesha**, **Baikuntha Narayana**, and **Garuda Vishnu** can be found. In the **Shaiva** sculptures, notable figures include **Natesha**, **Ravananugraha**, **Gangadhar**, and **Kalyana**, while in **Shakta** art, the **Mahishasura Mardini** and **Saptamatrikas** idols stand out.

Special depictions of **Ganesha**, **Ganga**, **Yamuna**, and **Ganas** adorn the main gates of many temples. The **outer walls** of the temples also feature **Jain idols**, with representations of **Mahavira meditating**, and figures of **Parshvanath** and **Bahubali** in **Kayotsarga** posture. Interestingly, the symbol of **Shrivatsa** is notably absent on the chests of Jain Tirthankaras, a unique feature among these sculptures.

The temple carvings often depict stories from the **Ramayana**, **Mahabharata**, **Krishna Leela**, and **Samudra Manthan**, with the **Ramayana** being most frequently represented in the **Pattadakal temples**.

Through their tireless efforts, the Chalukya rulers played a pivotal role in educating the public about India's rich cultural traditions through the construction of these awe-inspiring temples, which are not only architectural marvels but also significant religious monuments. The contribution of the Chalukya dynasty to the creation of these temples, both architecturally innovative and religiously profound, remains unforgettable.

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