

A Historical Analysis of Vaiṣṇava Centres Influenced the Cultural and Religious Landscape of Ancient Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

This historical analysis delves into the profound influence of Vaiṣṇava centers on the cultural and religious landscape of ancient Rajasthan. Over the centuries, these centers emerged as focal points for spiritual devotion, philosophical discourse, and artistic expression, shaping the beliefs and practices of the region's inhabitants. Through a meticulous examination of historical sources, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence, this study traces the evolution of Vaiṣṇava centers in Rajasthan, highlighting their role in disseminating Vaiṣṇava philosophy, Bhakti traditions, and Vaiṣṇavaite rituals. These centers served as hubs of cultural exchange, attracting scholars, pilgrims, and artisans from diverse backgrounds. Through interactions within these vibrant communities, ideas were exchanged, traditions were enriched, and artistic forms flourished, leaving an indelible mark on Rajasthan's cultural heritage. From majestic temple complexes adorned with intricate sculptures to devotional literature and musical compositions inspired by Vaiṣṇava teachings, the legacy of these centers permeates every aspect of Rajasthan's cultural tapestry. Furthermore, the study explores the socio-political dynamics that shaped the patronage of Vaiṣṇava centers by ruling elites, highlighting the interplay between religion, power, and identity in ancient Rajasthan. By unraveling the complexities of this historical narrative, this analysis offers valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between religion, culture, and society in ancient Rajasthan.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural and religious tapestry of ancient Rajasthan is woven with the threads of Vaiṣṇava centers, pivotal in shaping its historical narrative. This historical analysis delves into the profound influence these centers exerted, unraveling their impact on Rajasthan's cultural and religious ethos. From the vibrant rituals to the architectural marvels, Vaiṣṇava centers left an indelible mark on the region, fostering spiritual growth and communal cohesion. Through an exploration of sacred texts, archaeological evidence, and cultural artifacts, this study illuminates the intricate interplay between Vaiṣṇava traditions and the socio-political fabric of ancient Rajasthan. By tracing the evolution of these centers, we gain insights into the dynamic exchange between faith, power, and identity, enriching our understanding of Rajasthan's rich heritage.

The discovery of a large number of epigraphic and iconographic evidences tends us to believe that Vaiṣṇavism was one of the popular and important cults in Rajasthan from the early centuries of the Christian era. The temples, images or icons, inscriptions also developed as centres of Vaiṣṇavism where the devotees observed Vaiṣṇava rites and ceremonies.

Nagarī, also known by the name of Madhymikā, one of the oldest towns of Rajasthan, is situated near Chitor, and from a religious point of view, it was a great, important place. At Nagarī, the early traces of Vaiṣṇavism are noticed. An Inscription of the 2nd century B.C. was found at Ghousūṇḍī not far from Nagarī records that the erection of a *pūjāsīlā-prākara* by Parāśarīputra Gājāyana for the gods Saṃkarsaṇa and Vāsudeva and performed an Aśvamedha sacrifice at Madhymikā.¹ *pūjāsīlā* and *prākara* were two

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different things were erected in *Nārāyaṇavāṭikā*. The worship of Saṁkarsaṇa and Vāsudeva in the early second century B.C. mentions this inscription. The *Nārāyaṇavāṭikā* continued to be associated with Vaiṣṇavism because there are letters of *Śrī Viṣṇu pādābhyaṁ*² engraved in the characters of the 7th century A.D.

There was another temple of Viṣṇu built in the 5th century A.D. An inscription dated V.S. 481 (424 A.D.) mentions the erection of a temple over footmarks of Viṣṇu by Satyaśūra and his brothers, who were Vaiśyas by caste³ and the crowning member of a *śikhara* temple unearthed at this place and datable in the 5th century A.D., testify to the existence of the *śikhara* temple as early as the Gupta period.⁴ It definitely proves that there were followers of Vaiṣṇavism at Madhymika.

Pushkara is one of India's oldest places and one of the most sacred places for Hindus. It is situated near Ajmer. The construction of a temple of Viṣṇu by a Brāhmaṇa named Rudrāditya at Pushkara during the reign of Vākpatirāja.⁵ It records an inscription of the 10th century A.D. The Chauhāna ruler Arṇorāja made repairs to the Pushkara Lake and built the temple of Varāha there.⁶

Nagara is situated in the Jaipur District of Rajasthan. In the 10th century A.D. the Dharkaṭa family of this place made several temples. A Viṣṇu temple built by Nāgahari, facing the east, with the image of Viṣṇu duly installed therein, on the bank of the tank called *Vaidya-taḍāga* and Nāgahari's son was Viṣṇuhari and Viṣṇuhari's son Nārāyaṇa built lofty temples at this place. Nandana of this family acquired fame by building a temple dedicated to three gods: Hari (Viṣṇu), Śankaraṇārāyaṇa and Khachara (Sūrya).⁷

The ancient name of Jhālrapāṭan is said to be Chandrāvati and Jhālrapāṭan was situated on the bank of Chandrabhāga. There are many ruined temples. One small temple is dedicated to the Varāha *avatāra*, or boar incarnation of Viṣṇu, and it is an open temple with four pillars supporting a canopy under which is enshrined the statue of a boar. There is an inscription on the pedestal, and the inscription is in characters from the 9th or 10th century. It mentions the name of a mason called Sīhata.⁸ In this place found several other figures of the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. Another great Vaiṣṇava temple called the Sāta Sahelī was rebuilt at some late period, and the shrine with its *śikhara* and the *maṇḍapa* up to the beams above the pillars is old work.

Bayānā is situated near Bharatpur. Chittralekhā, who was married to a Chief named Maṅgalarāja, erected the temple of Viṣṇu during the reign of the emperor

Mahipāla in 956 A.D.⁹ and gave two villages named Gograpura and Nāgapallī as well as certain fields in Hāḍhapallī to the deity.

Mandor is situated near Jodhpur. D.R. Bhandarkar identified two red sandstone pillars depicting several incidents from the Kṛṣṇa legend discovered at Mandor.¹⁰ The scenes carved on them are assigned to the 4th century A.D.

1. The uplifting of the Govardhana Mountain by Kṛṣṇa;
2. Yaśodā churning milk, Kṛṣṇa is shown stealing butter;
3. Infant Kṛṣṇa upturning the cart with his tiny legs;
4. Yaśodā nursing the baby god on her breast;
5. The slaying of the ass-demon Dhruka by Balarāma;
6. The subjugation of the Nāgakāliya by Kṛṣṇa.

In the 9th century A.D., an inscription mentions that a certain worshipper of Keśava performed a fire sacrifice, and the same person obviously made the perpetual offering of a Karisha (Karsha) of oil to it.¹¹ It proves that Rajasthan was getting deeply involved in the lyrical tradition of love and attachment to this human incarnation of the god who was to command a very deep devotion from the people of Rajasthan.

The Village of Osiā, situated north-west of Jodhpur, is a city of temples. There are three early temples probably built in the eighth century A.D. dedicated to Harihara, the half Viṣṇu and half Śiva combining the dual aspects of life giver and annihilation, and the early temples are attributed to the Abhiras.¹² Two of these temples are of the *Pan̄chāyatana* class, standing on a high terrace, and their *śikharas* are crowned with the *āmalāka*. also, in the shrines of the temples are placed the images of Harihara and Viṣṇu. These three temple walls have been depicted the exploits of Kṛṣṇa, such as the story of his birth, the flight to Brīndābana, the destruction of Pūtanā and Govardhana Giradhārī.

An inscription has been found at Jodhpur that references the God Viṣṇu styled as Hrishikeśa.¹³ The epithet Hrishikeśa has been a common pseudonym of the god Vāsudeva and indicates that here Kṛṣṇa, worshipped as Viṣṇu, had been held in adoration.

Nīlkanṭha, a place named after the local deity, is situated south-west of Alwar. In the temple of Chaturbhujanātha, an inscription of 1152 A.D. records the erection of an image of Chakrasvāmin (Viṣṇu) by Vālhaṇa, Nālhaṇa, Arjuna and others, sons of Delhaṇa, son of Rālhaṇa, a great devotee of Viṣṇu when Prīthvīpāladeva was ruler.¹⁴

The earliest trace of the creation of a Vaiṣṇava establishment by a subordinate ruler of Mewar is met

within an inscription found at Nāgada, near Udaipur, dated in the Vikrama Samvat 718 (c. 661 A.D.). The inscription begins with an invocation of the god Viṣṇu under the name Hari and Sauri. It informs that a temple dedicated to Viṣṇu was installed at the place by Queen Yaśomati, the wife of Mahārājā Varāhasimha, a general troop of the Guhila king of Aparājita of Mewar. The inscription ends with the invocation 'Namaḥ Purushottamāya'. The terms Hari, Sauri, and Purushottama beings are all epithets attributed to the deified entity of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa.¹⁵ This indicates the popularity of Kṛṣṇa worship in the Mewar region from the early 7th century A.D.

The village of Āhār has now become a part of Udaipur City, and it was famous by the name of Gaṅgodbhed tīrtha. A temple of Ādivarāha was built in 943 A.D.¹⁶ during the reign of Bhartribhaṭa II and for the maintenance of this temple, donations were fixed. The temple in the form of Varāha was constructed when Allāṭa was ruling.

Chitor and its vicinity, which later had come to be a stronghold of the guhila power, had some interesting remnants of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva cult as envisaged from the existence of the Vaiṣṇava establishment and *pūjāśilā prākāra* built round the shrine of Śamkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva.¹⁷ The Solānkī ruler named Kumārāpāla built at this place the temple of Varāha, and granted in the village Duṅaudā containing wells and gardens in 1150 A.D.¹⁸

Dhamnār is situated south-west of Jhālrapātan. At this place, the temple of Dharmanātha, originally dedicated to Viṣṇu and the temple is surrounded by 7 minor shrines, 5 around the main shrine and one each in the north-east and south-east corners of the courtyard. these shrines contain image slabs. Some letters are found engraved in the script of the 8th century A.D. on the pedestal of the Kalkī avatāra statue¹⁹ of this temple.

Kāmān, one of the twelve holy places of the Vraja Maṇḍala.²⁰ At this place Vachchhalikā, the queen of the Śūrasena ruler Durgabhaṭa constructed the temple of Viṣṇu in about the eighth century A.D.²¹

The earliest terracotta panels,²² depicting the life scenes of Lord Kṛṣṇa discovered at Baropel near Rang-Mahal, prove that this cult became popular in this region.

The town of Bāghera is situated south-east of Ajmer. This town was founded During the Pratihār rule. Some coins²³ found at this place with a representation of the Varāha-avatāra on the obverse and the *Śrī madādi Varāha*, which was a biruda of Mihir Bhoja

on the reverse, and it seems probable that the place was a part of the kingdom of Mihirbhoja (843-881A.D.). In the Bijauliā inscription of 1169 A.D., Vyāghreraka is mentioned²⁴ and it was also famous by the name Varāhanagara also the old tank of this town is known as Varāhasāgara. This town is a great seat of Vaiṣṇavism, and it is believed to be the actual traditional scene of the Varāha *avatār*.

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