



AURANGABAD: A SHAIVITE BASTION AMIDST BUDDHIST MAGADH

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores some archaeological sites of Aurangabad in Bihar and establishes the rich cultural heritage of the district as distinct from the Buddhist traditions of neighbouring Bodh-Gaya. Because of its proximity to Bodh Gaya, the place where Buddha attained enlightenment, and to Rajagriha, the seat of power of the Mauryan dynasty, the culture of Aurangabad is assumed to be an extension of the great Magadhan Empire. But a closer look at its cultural landscape shows that this southernmost district of Bihar is culturally more aligned with the plains of the Sonhadra River, as the antiquities obtained are largely Shaivite. It is proposed to discuss the two sites of Deo and Umga located in the district of Aurangabad in Bihar.

Key Words: Buddhist, Magadh, Shaivite, Shakti, Shiva, Sonhadra, Sun Temple, Surya

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Introduction

Deo is house to an ancient Sun Temple, which lies almost seventy-eight kilometres from the world famous Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya on 84.437026°E, 24.658791°N coordinates. This revered shrine is one of the very few Sun Temples in which rituals are still performed. A large number of devotees visit the sacred place bi-annually to perform the *Chhath Puja* in veneration of Surya,

the Sun God. Deo was a seat of power in pre-Independent India and has a palace in ruins besides the temple.

Umga is situated on the old Grand Trunk Road between Gaya and Varanasi on 24.6483° N, 84.5682° coordinates. It is the site of numerous ancient shrines perched on top of a hill, which houses various sculptures of Surya, Shiva and Shakti that are of immense antiquity. Most of these shrines

are now dilapidated, and only a single temple still retains its grandeur. It is perched on the western slope of the hill overlooking the countryside for many miles. Umga was the seat of power until Deo replaced it.

History and Culture

The present district of Aurangabad in Bihar was initially a sub-division under the district of Gaya. On 26 January 1973, it was separated from Gaya and gained the status of a district. The district is bound by the River Sonbhadra on the west and the district of Gaya on the east; on the north it shares its boundaries with the district of Arwal and on the south with Palamu District of Jharkhand. The area is an extension of Jharkhand's Chhotanagpur Plateau with numerous Archaean rocks belonging to small hill ranges, scattered around its southern part.

In the sixteenth century, during the reigns of Sher Shah Suri, Aurangabad was part of the *Rohtas Circar* (district). When the Afghan ruler built *Sadak-e-Azam*, the magnificent 2500 kilometres road that extended from Chittagong in the east to Kabul in the west, he also constructed several *Kos Minars* overlooking the road. These *Kos Minars* were similar to the modern milestones as each of these stood at an interval of a *Kos*, the unit for measurement of distance at the time; and also served as the watch towers. Some of these watch towers can still be found in Aurangabad atop the hills that dot the district.



Figure 3.1: A Kos Minar on top a hill along the Grand Trunk Road in Aurangabad © Author

Later *Sadak-e-Azam* was renamed *Badshahi Sadak* by the Mughals (Kapur, 2019) and later rechristened Grand Truck Road by the British.

Presently, it is known as the *Sher Shah Suri Marg* in India, but stretches beyond its boundaries from Bangladesh to Afghanistan.

According to an inscription datable to the fifteenth century CE, the region was ruled by King Bhairavendra, who is said to have built a fort on the Umga hill, along the Grand Truck Road. He also erected several shrines around it. After his demise, a state of anarchy prevailed and many of the monuments were razed to the ground and the antiquities plundered. Peace returned after Rai Bhan Singh, a young prince of the Sisodia Rajput clan of Udaipur, occupied the Umga Fort after marrying the daughter of King Bhairavendra. His descendants continued to occupy the palace at Deo, which is now a mere shade of its old grandeur as it stands in a most dilapidated condition. In 1700 CE, the eleventh ruler of this line, Raja Prabil Singh, built a grand palace at Deo and abandoned the Umga Fort.



Figure 3.2: The palace of the Deo Raj built in 1700 CE by Raja Prabil Singh © Author

Among the *Deo Raj*, as the descendants of Raja Prabil Singh are called, Raja Fatteh Narain Singh and Raja Ghanshyam Singh ruled as far as over Palamu (now in Jharkhand). Raja Fatteh Narain helped the English Army in the War of Pinduri and was duly awarded with the *Raj of Palamu* for his services. However, he exchanged it for some of the villages in Gaya that yielded him an income of Rs. 3000 per annum. His son, Raja Mitra Bhan Singh received the *Raj of Palamu* back along with the remission of revenue amounting to Rs. 1000 for the services he rendered in quelling the Kol insurgency of 1829. His son Raja Jai Prakash Singh too helped the British during the Mutiny of 1857 and in return

the title of *Maharaja Bahadur* was conferred on him (Saran & Pandey 1992: 27-30). The legacy of the *Deo Raj* ended with Raja Jagannath Prasad Singh, who was well known for his interest in the arts and was a playwright of extra-ordinary merit himself.

Besides Deo Raj, there were some other fiefdoms in the name and style of Mali, Pawai and Chandragarh. These fiefdoms, however, opposed the British tooth and nail. Remains of old forts can be found in all these places. Another fort attributed to Daud Khan, a Governor of Bihar under Aurangzeb, can be found at Daudnagar, a sub-division of Aurangabad. Though known as the Sarai, it is well fortified with a battlemented wall, two large gates and a moat all around it.

The cultural landscape of the district includes other places of interest like Deokund, Piru and Haspura. Yet another Sun Temple can be found at Deokund, where Rishi Chwayan is believed to have camped for some time. Similarly, Piru is believed to be the birthplace of legendary Sanskrit poet and scholar Bana Bhat, who was the state chronicler of King Harshvardhan (<https://aurangabad.bih.nic.in/>). Haspura is associated with Vatsyayana the author of *Kama Sutra*. According to folk traditions, the philosopher-saint visualised the various *asanas* and compiled the book of love and lovemaking here itself.

Some miles away from the Deo Sun Temple is a village named Ketaki, believed to be the cradle of the dance form *Kathak*. It is believed that the original name of the village was Kathaki and *devdasis* were trained here to dance at the nearby temples.

Site of Quarry to Construction

Umga is one of the rare sites where we can find signs of quarrying for construction at the same site. Unlike the Kailashnath temple at Ellora in Maharashtra, where the rocky hill was carved into a temple, here the rock has been split into slabs and used in construction of a temple at the same site. While climbing atop the hill, one may see the quarry marks in the form of holes that have been made at regular intervals. It is easy to guess that these holes were made with chisel and hammer to split stones by driving dry wooden wedges into the holes and soaking the wedges with water that

subsequently expanded and split the blocks into two. Historically, the same technique was in use in various civilizations, including ancient Egypt and Rome, for splitting and parting of stones. Besides these holes, marks of Shivalingas can also be seen here, suggesting that not just the temple, but the idols too may have been made from the local quarry.



Figure 3.3A and Figure 3.3B: Various quarry marks found on the Umga Hill © Author

The sixth century CE temple stands at about 150 meters from the ground with the village of Umga at its heels.



Figure 3.4A: The Temple at Umga as seen from below the hill © Author

A closer look at the temple reveals its dry-stone construction design, a technique common to Machu Pichu and Battir, in which no mortar or binding materials are used. Here too, the stone blocks obtained from the local quarry have been meticulously put one over the other and are locked together, their own weight, giving the structure tremendous balance and stability.

It would be interesting to note that the same technique, in a much-developed form, has been employed in the construction of twelfth century CE,



Figure 3.4B: A closer view of the temple at Umga with the Garuda Dhwaj (pillar) in front © Author

which are characteristics of the *Nagara* style. The walls are very basic in design with no motifs or carvings. A *mandapa* is attached to the *garbhagriha* in which Surya occupies the place of the presiding deity. The temple, picturesquely located on the western slope, remains the most evolved and the best preserved of the several temples located on the hill. The locals claim that there were as many as fifty-two such temples on the hill, which is not unfounded and can be corroborated by the large number of quarry marks found here. However, only a few of the shrines have survived the onslaught of time and iconoclasm.

According to an inscription upon a stone slab kept outside the temple, it was dedicated to Lord Jagannath, and his brother and sister, Balbhadra and Subhadhra, by King Bhairavendra in 1437 CE.

However, besides the *Garud Dhwaj*, a symbol of Vaishnavism, there is no other remain could relate the place with Visnu. The popular belief attributes the temple to Surya, the Sun God. However, the name of the place Umga appears to be a distortion of *Umagriha* or *Umagah*, meaning the ‘abode of Uma’, thus suggesting its association with *Shakti*. Its identity as a *Shaktipeeth* is corroborated by several Shiva and Ganesha portrayals that can be found here. Two of such images deserve special mention – one is a *Shivalinga*, with hundreds of smaller icons

three-storied Devsomnia Temple at Dungarpur in Rajasthan.

The curvilinear walls of the temple rise about sixty feet above the plinth level. The *shikhara* over the sanctum is capped with an *amalaka* and a *kalash*,

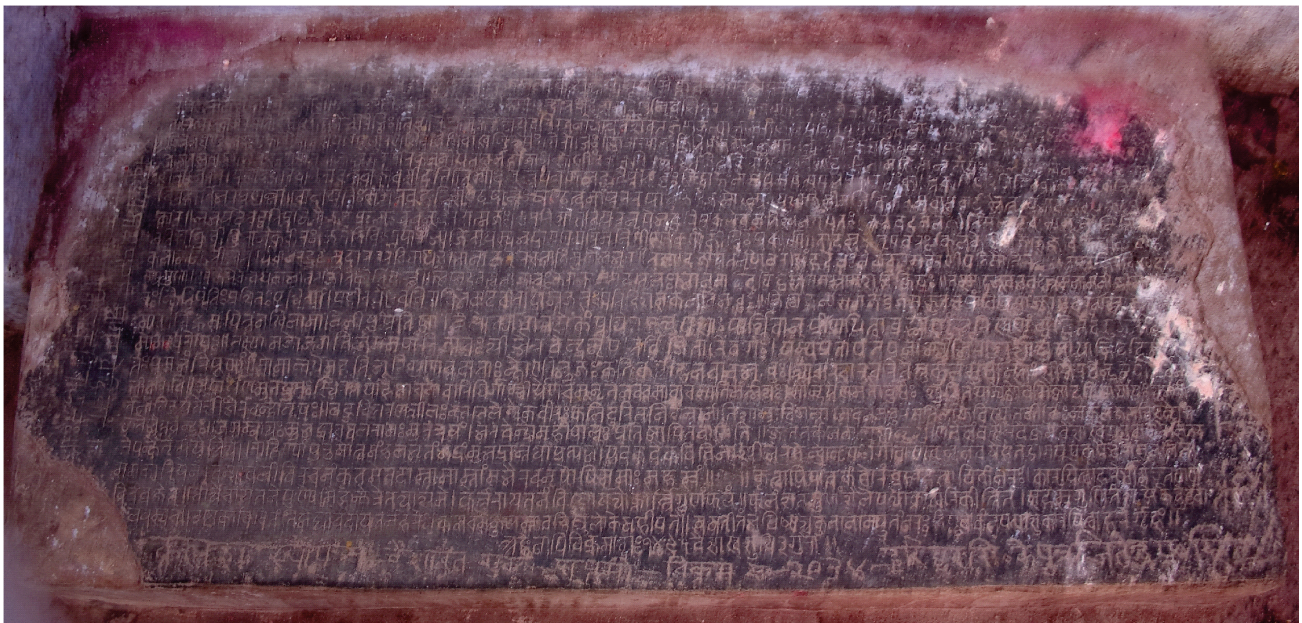


Figure 3.5: An inscription outside the temple © Author



Figure 3.6A: Sahashralinga at Umga



Figure 3.6B Sahashralinga at Khajuraho

etched on to it; the other is that of Uma-Maheshwar, where Uma is seen seated on Shiva's lap, while he stands unsupported, a rare artefact indeed. The *Sahashralinga*, the aniconic form of Shiva covered with hundreds of miniature replicas found here are similar to the one in the Duladeo Temple at Khajuraho.

The *Sahashralinga* can be seen as the depiction of enormous power multiplied a thousand times. The *Sahashralinga* icons takes the place of presiding deity in one of the surviving temples here that itself is of a rudimentary design.

The antiquities of Umga have received scant attention by historians and archaeologists. The Uma-Maheshwar icon found here, though belonging to the *Uma-alinganamurti* group of icons, is unique as Shiva is depicted in a yogic posture, his right foot resting upon Nandi and his consort seated on his lap and looking at him in admiration. Her left foot rests upon her mount the lion. Generally, in the *Uma-alinganamurti* images, made famous by their various depictions at Khajuraho, Shiva is seen in a comfortable seating position on a pedestal, while holding Uma in embrace with one of his arms and caressing Uma's chin with his other hand; whereas

here Uma is seen sitting on Shiva's leg that has been folded with thigh almost perpendicular to the ground while his other leg is stretched and extended



Figure 3.7: Uma-alingana icon at Umga © Author

at about forty-five degrees. Uma is seen looking adoringly at him in this black basalt sculpture as she puts a finger on her lip in awe. This sculpture at Umga is a rare find as it portrays *Yogeshwara* Shiva and *Uma-alingana* in a single icon.

Some Ganeshaa idols have also been found at the site. Among them, one is spherical in shape and is kept besides the presiding deity in the *garbhagriha* of the main shrine; and the other with ten arms is kept in the *mandapa* of the same shrine. Usually Ganesha is characterized by two, four, or eight arms. He may also have sixteen arms as in Veera Ganesha or ten arms, as in Maha Ganesha. Although Maha Ganesha is the most worshipped form, but the idol found at Umga attains significance because of its Mauryan polish that can be observed in the Didarganj Yakshi sculpture kept at the Patna Museum.

Confluence of faith

The eighth century CE temple at Deo is much more evolved than the one at Umga. While the Umga Temple is located atop the hill, the Deo Sun Temple stands on plain ground signifying that it may have been constructed during a more peaceful time.



Figure 3.8A: Surya Mandir at Deo © Author

Unlike its predecessor, this has carvings on its walls. It is similar to the Sun Temple at Osian in Rajasthan, located almost 1300 kilometres away from this site. The architecture of the two temples is identical and both face the setting sun. The carvings on the walls of the Osian Temple are however, more intricate. The *mandapa* and the *garbhagriha* at Osian are larger than the one at Deo; and stand on

a raised platform approached by a flight of steps. The present *mandapa* of the Deo Sun Temple is a later addition though it may have been built once the original was razed to the grounds. However, the depilated temple at Osian is not in use unlike its counterpart, where the rituals are still performed.



Figure 3.8B: The Sun Temple at Osian in Rajasthan
© Author

At Deo too, the plinth is raised almost five feet above the ground and measures 144 square feet. The walls of about two feet thickness rise to a height of about a hundred feet. These walls take a curvilinear form almost midway giving way to the *shikhara* above the sanctum with an *amalaka* and a golden *kalash* over it. Structurally, the *shikhara* follows the corbelled design principle, while the walls are based on the dry-stone construction technique. Iron pegs have been used to join the stone blocks that may have been obtained from nearby Umga. A Ganesha icon is seen at the centre of the front wall. Beneath the Ganesha idol are four smaller figures of demi-gods. An image of Narsimha can also be seen on the outer walls.

A replica of the main temple can be found just below the Ganesha group of figures. Five such replicas or *angashikharas* are found over the entrance of the *garbhagriha*, and another five over the entrance of the *mandapa*. Together with the main shrine they present ‘temples in a temple’ design. Such *angashikharas* are common in ancient temples of the Nagara style.

Though the presiding deity of the temple is the Sun god, yet three distinct icons, said to be that of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar are seen placed on a



Figure 3.9: Facia of the Deo Sun Temple © Author



Figure 3.10: Uma-alingana Murti in Deo Sun Temple

platform inside the *garbhagriha*. The three together are believed to be the manifestation of *Trikaal Surya* depicting three different phases of the day, that is, morning, noon, and evening. The platform is five feet high and two feet broad and occupies an area of twelve square feet. The *garbhagriha* opens to a *mandapa* that though joined, is a separate structure. The *mandapa* in turn is approached by an *ardha-mandapa*.

There are four stone pillars inside the *mandapa*, all of which are twenty-one feet in height and 1.5 feet in thickness. Looking at the thickness and strength of these stone pillars, it may be assumed that they could have been part of a much larger structure. The space for *paridakshina* or circumambulation is conspicuous by its absence.

The *mandapa* and the *ardha-mandapa* together form a hall that houses several sculptures in damaged state. An icon of Uma-Maheshwar is kept in the north-east corner of the *mandapa*.

Unlike the Uma-Maheshwar figure of Umga, here Shiva is seen comfortably seated in *Lalitasana* with Parvati on his lap reminding us of the *Uma-alingana Murti* at Khajuraho and elsewhere.

An icon of Surya is placed in the south-east corner. The deity is in *samapadasthanaka* but due to its damaged state the arms holding lotuses are missing. A *kiritamukuta* adorns the head and at the feet sits the charioteer. The seven horses of the Sun God's chariot are depicted standing on their hind legs, while the central horse has an almost anthropomorphic aspect. It appears that the sculptor did not know how to depict the horses in the three-dimensional form.

A *Shivalinga* is established on the north-west side, while a triangular *havan kunda* occupies the south-west portion of the *mandapa*. Icons of Ganesha and Vishnu are also kept inside. The Vishnu icon is completely damaged and can be identified by its feet. An icon of Vishnu kept at the entrance of the



Figure 3.11: A damaged sculpture of Surya kept inside the mandapa of Deo Temple © Author

temple, is venerated as *Dukhaharini Mai* (Goddess who vanquishes all sorrows).



Figure 3.12: A Vishnu idol kept outside the temple at Deo © Author

In spite of its damaged state, the various attributes of Vishnu like *vanamala*, consorts, etc can be easily identified. The icons kept in the *mandapa* are much larger than those kept inside the *garbhagriha*. All the three icons inside the *garbhagriha* are covered with red sheets and the devotees are not allowed to see them in their natural state. However, this author had an opportunity to examine these icons closely and was surprised to find that these are in fact the icons of Surya, Vishnu and Avalokiteshwar; and not of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara as claimed by the local priests.

All these icons are almost similar in height and stand about 2.5 feet tall. The icon on the left is clad in a dress that covers all of his legs. It also appears to be wearing a boot that is typical of the Surya icons. Usually, Surya is flanked by *Usha* and *Pratyusha*, but here we find the Surya flanked by four female figures and two more are placed in the centre. The icon's arms are folded up from the elbow and the hands are in *Prithvi mudra* with the ring finger and the thumb touching each other. There is a *kiritmukuta* on the head. Surya is wearing a *janeu*, the sacred thread, on his chest, a necklace around his neck and *kundal* in the ears. A lotus on each side completes the Surya iconography (Nagar, 1995).

The icon in the centre is of Vishnu with four arms. He is holding a *Chakra* (discuss) and a *Shankh* (conch) in his two left hands and a *Gada* (club) in his upper right hand. The palm of the fourth hand is fully open. He is draped in a knee-length attire and wears a necklace around his neck. Typically, there is also a *Vaijyanti* or *Vanamala* (a garland of forest flowers) dangling on his chest. He is flanked by a male and a female figurine on either side.

As the icons of Surya and Vishnu are well established in the first two figures, similarly, the icon of Avalokiteshwara cannot be mistaken either. In fact, the third icon kept inside the sanctum has been mistaken for Maheshwara. It is too difficult to miss the Avalokiteshwara icon because of the Buddha figurine placed besides it that is very much noticeable in this icon too. The seating posture of this figure is identical to the seating posture of Avlokiteshwara idol in Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya.



Figure 3.13: (left) Icon of Surya © Author



Figure 3.14: (right) Vishnu at Deo Temple © Author

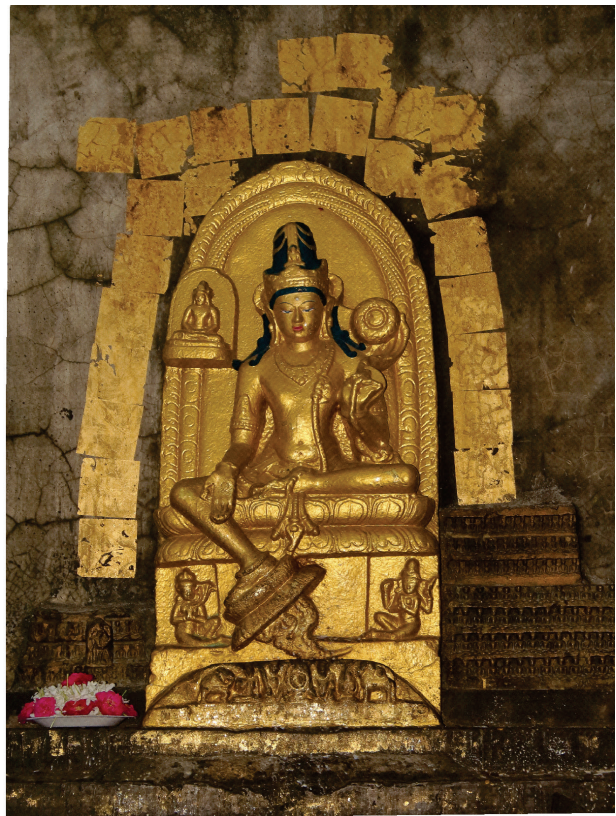


Figure 3.15A (left) and 3.15B (right): Icons of Avalokiteshwar at Deo and Bodh Gaya respectively © Author

It may be observed that in both these icons, Avalokiteshwar is seen seated upon a lotus throne in *Lalitasana* posture, where one leg is tucked inwards and the other hangs down to rest on a lotus. While the extended right arm rests on the knee, the left arm is folded upwards. The small image of Buddha in *Padmasana* to the right of Avalokiteshwara in both the icons confirms their Buddhist affiliation.

It can be easily inferred that the idols now kept in the *garbhagriha* were not kept here originally and may have been placed by the local priest at a later date. Looking at the sizes of the broken idols kept inside the *mandapa*, it can be said that these are more worthy of being established on the altar, whereas those in the *garbhagriha* probably occupied the niches of the walls.

According to folk tradition, the *Surya Mandir* (Sun Temple) originally faced east when an invader approached the place with an intension of destroying it. He was persuaded by the local priests not to do so else misfortune would befall on him. The invader laughed it off and challenged the priests that if the temple was so miraculous, it should turn itself from east to west. Surprisingly, the face of the temple was found turned overnight. This legend suggests that there may have been a sun temple facing east, which was destroyed by the invaders. Subsequently, the ingenious priests established the remaining idols from the demolished temple at the nearby west facing temple and proclaimed it the *Surya Mandir*.

The damaged images of Surya, Vishnu and Uma-Maheshwar in the *mandapa* and other parts of the temple complex also suggest that there could have been three distinct temples here with these icons occupying each of them as its presiding deity or it could have been a *panchayatana* shrine dedicated to the *Panchadevata*. Considering the Ganesha image prominently configured on the front wall of the present temple, it could be assumed that the *Surya Mandir* may have been a *Shiva Mandir* instead. Remarkably, the *Surya Kunda* (Sun Pond) that is often adjacent to the Sun Temple is almost hundred and fifty meters away from the *Surya Mandir* here. Archaeologists suggest that excavation around the *Surya Kund* may unearth the original sun temple. There are several mounds around the temple and the palace that are waiting to be explored.

Conclusion

The images of Surya, Vishnu and Uma-Maheshwar in the temples of Aurangabad suggest that there was a confluence of faith at the site. The original consecrated icons may have been deemed inauspicious because of them being damaged by invaders and were placed outside the *garbhagriha*; and the Surya became the object of reverence in its natural state. Twice every year, thousands of devotees throng the place to observe *Chhath*, an event associated with the Sun God. It is a unique event in which the rising sun is worshiped only after the setting sun has been duly adulated.

Earlier, the Shaivite cult must have been prevalent in the area. A.B. Saran and Gaya Pandey have mentioned several Shiva Temples around Umga and Deo in *Sun Worship in India* (1992). According to them, 'at Fatehpur, about 80-kms to the east (of Umga - author), there is an old temple of Shiva called Sadheshwara Mahadeva with an ancient tank and ruins nearby. There is another shrine of the same name in a village Sandhail about 7 kms north-west of Umaga'.

Remarkably, the ancient temple at Deokund is also known by the name of *Dudheshwarnath Mandir* dedicated to Shiva. On the other side of the River Sonbhadra too, we find several *Shaktipeeth* like Tara Chandi and Mundeshwari along the old Grand Truck Road. Further west are the *Shaktipeeths* of *Vindhyavasni* and *Alopidivi*, both in Uttar Pradesh, but not far from the Sonbhadra plains.

Salila Kulshreshtha was surprised to see 'a strong Shaiva presence' in the area. According to her, 'the largest concentration of Umā Maheśvara images in Bihar are from the southernmost districts of Patna, Jehanabad, Rohtas, Gaya, Aurangabad, Nalanda and Nawadah', whereas 'this region is seen as the heartland of Buddhism, with Bodh Gaya and Nalanda being premier centres and Rajgir and Pawapuri as Jain pilgrimage centres. The city of Gaya meanwhile is associated with the rite of *shraddha* (the Hindu ritual to honour the ancestors) and is now a pre-eminent Vaishnava centre'. (Kulshreshtha 2018). She claims to 'have uncovered more than 150 Uma Maheshvara sculptures from this region alone'.

Acknowledgement

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