

# Significance of Relief Symbolism and Regional Heritage of The Pandukeshwar Temple

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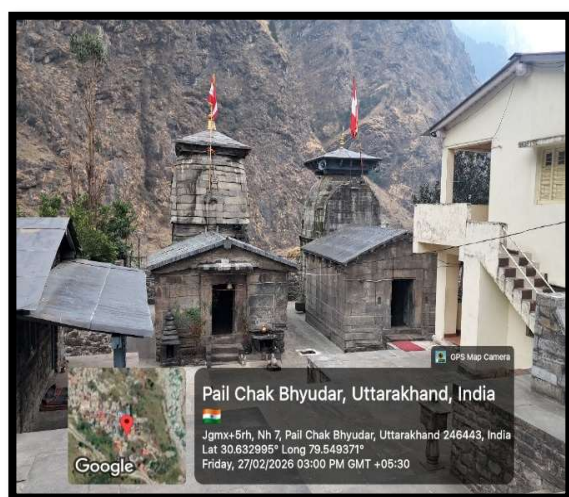
## Abstract:

Located along the upper reaches of the Alaknanda River in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, the early medieval temple complex at Pandukeshwar serves as an important intersection of architectural innovation, epigraphic history, and sacred Himalayan geography. Consisting of four notable stone temples – including the Yog Adhya Badri and Vasudeva-Badri temples – the complex uniquely synthesises northern (Nāgara) and southern (Dravidian) architectural motifs.

Using an integrated historical and art-historical analytical framework, this study examines the symbolic relief programme, structural design and regional heritage of Pandukeshwar. This highlights how royal patronage under the Katyuri dynasty established the site as an essential bridge connecting the northern mountain transit corridors to wider, pan-Indian socio-religious networks. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how the complex relief symbolism of the temple represents an artistic and spiritual metaphor for spiritual transcendence within the specific cultural landscape of Garhwal.

**Keywords:** Garhwal, temples, relief work, symbolism, architectural, temple styles

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Pic source-Primary data

## INTRODUCTION

Pandukeshwar holds an important place within the cultural ecology and sacred geography of the Central Himalayas, serving as both a high altitude transit station and an important pilgrimage site. Serving as the winter abode (winter stay) for the movable icon

(festival idol) of Lord Badrinath when the primary temple at the height becomes affected by the weather, Pandukeshwar ensures continuous ritual continuity within the sacred Panch Badri circuit (Handa, 2002; Nautiyal, 1969). Beyond its surviving ritual traditions, local folklore links this settlement to King Pandu of the Mahabharata legend, presenting the site as a place of royal penance and ancestral salvation. However, archaeological records and epigraphic evidence – particularly the Katyuri Dynasty copper plate grants found here – indicate that Pandukeshwar was historically an important settlement strategically located along ancient trade and trans-Himalayan transit routes leading to the Mana Pass and the Tibetan Plateau (Sarkar, 1955; Joshi, 1990).

The site contains four primary early medieval stone temples dedicated to Yogadhyā Badri, Vasudeva, Lakshmi-Narayana and Ganesha. Architecturally, the complex presents an extraordinary fusion of stylistic traditions; It integrates indigenous Phamasana (tiered painted-ceiling) vernacular profiles with northern Indian rekha-nagara (curved

peak) idioms and rare southern Dravidian-inspired superstructural motifs that are rarely seen at such altitudes (Mehta, 1998; Trivedi, 1995). The convergence of these diverse architectural forms and intricate stone relief carvings provides a fertile subject to study inter-regional stylistic exchange, political patronage under the Katyuri Empire and the symbolic representation of spiritual transcendence inherent within Himalayan temple art.



Pic source-Primary data

## OBJECTIVE

1. To identify the reliefs, present in the Pandukeshwar temple.
2. To study the reliefs of the Pandukeshwar temple.
3. To study the relationship between these reliefs and temple traditions
4. To explore how the reliefs reflect the regional identity and cultural context of Garhwal

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for your study uses a qualitative, multi-disciplinary art-historical framework: the research objectives employ a qualitative art-historical and visual analysis approach, beginning with field surveys to photograph, map, and document the architectural reliefs of the Pandukeshwar temple complex. Comparative iconographic and stylistic analysis will be conducted to evaluate the reliefs against broader Himalayan and transregional temple traditions. Finally, an ethnographic and contextual synthesis will examine local folklore, historical inscriptions, and Garhwali socio-cultural practices to determine how these sculptures embody the region's distinct cultural identity.



Pic source-Primary data

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of the relief sculptures and architectural program at the Pandukeshvara temple complex

suggests that the site was more than an isolated Himalayan temple; It served as an important center where regional art, state patronage and trans-subcontinental architectural ideas intersected. Located in the upper Alaknanda valley, Pandukeshwar provides empirical evidence of how central Himalayan communities synthesized local traditions with wider pan-Indian networks during the early medieval period.

### SYNTHESIS OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLES AND INTERREGIONAL EXCHANGE

The presence of Rekha-nagara, Phamāsana and Dravidian-influenced structural elements within the Yogadhyā Badri and Vasudeva-Badri temples reflects a sophisticated inter-regional exchange. Consistent with Chanchani's (2015) framework on the transmission of architectural knowledge, the relief symbolism at Pandukeshwar indicates that artisan guilds (sthapati) in the central Himalayas were actively participating in a shared Indian architectural idiom. Rather than passively imitating Terai styles, local artisans adopted interregional iconography to suit local stones, climatic constraints, and spatial layout, creating a distinct regional dialect within Katyuri art (Joshi, 1990; Trivedi, 1995).

### SYMBOLIC PROGRAM AS A FORM OF SPIRITUAL AND POLITICAL UPLIFTMENT

The relief program on the outer walls (bhittis) and doorframes (doorways) of the Pandukeshvara temples reveals a deliberate symbolic progression. Moving vertically from base friezes depicting terrestrial life and regional fauna to distinctive figures of Vaishnava deities and celestial motifs, the reliefs reflect the concept of spiritual upliftment (moksha). Concurrently, this symbolic program served a political function. As Sircar (1955) noted in his study of the Pandukeshwar copper plates, Katyuri rulers used temple building and iconography to legitimize their authority over important Himalayan trade and transit routes leading to the Mana Pass. The relief program was thus both a visual representation of cosmos-building and a declaration of royal patronage.

### RELIEF SYMBOLISM AND GARHWALI REGIONAL IDENTITY

Beyond the official state iconography, the reliefs reflect the cultural ecology and mythological geography of Garhwal. The site's association with King Pandu and its role as the winter seat (winter

sojourn) of Lord Badrinath deeply connects the physical sculptures to surviving ritual practices (Handa, 2002; Nautiyal, 1969). Reliefs do not exist in isolation; They continue to provide information on local folklore, pilgrimage routes and seasonal festivals. Architectural reliefs thus function as permanent stone archives that enshrine regional memory, reinforcing Garhwal's identity as a sacred borderland connecting the North Indian plains with trans-Himalayan trade routes

### Relief symbols and stirps



Pic source-Primary data

### CONCLUSION

This study has examined the significance of relief symbolism and regional heritage within the early medieval temple complex at Pandukeshwar. Situated along the strategic transit routes of the Alaknanda Valley in Garhwal, Pandukeshwar stands as a monumental testament to the convergence of artistic innovation, political patronage and sacred Himalayan geography.

Is. Research shows that the relief symbolism and architectural programs at Pandukeshwar are not merely decorative, but represent a highly thoughtful synthesis of regional and inter-regional traditions. By

integrating northern rekha-nagara, vernacular Phamasana and southern Dravidian-inspired forms, the complex demonstrates that the early medieval central Himalaya actively participated in a broader pan-Indian architectural dialogue. Under the patronage of the Katyuri dynasty, these stone reliefs served as spiritual maps – symbolizing cosmic order and divine ascension – and as visual declarations of royal authority along the important trade and pilgrimage corridors leading to the Mana Pass.

The reliefs and structures of Pandukeshwar are deeply embedded in the living cultural ecology of Uttarakhand. As the winter seat (winter sojourn) of Lord Badrinath and a major node in the Panch Badri Circuit, the site combines ancient epigraphic history with contemporary ritual practices and local Mahabharata folklore. Finally, the Pandukeshwar temple complex represents an important stone collection and relief symbolism of the Garhwali heritage, symbolizing a unique regional identity that seamlessly links local tradition of relief work with subcontinental art-historical.



**Pic source-Primary data**

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