



Symbolism, Structure, and Cultural Synthesis of the Jain Kirti Stambh at Chittorgarh fort

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Abstract

Chittorgarh Fort stands as an enduring symbol of Rajput valor and heritage, its majestic walls and palatial structures testifying to centuries of resistance and cultural achievement. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the fort spans nearly 700 acres and is renowned for its intricate temples, palaces, and victory towers, narrating stories of unmatched bravery and artistic excellence. Among its most iconic monuments is the Jain Kirti Stambh, a 13th–14th-century tower commissioned by the merchant Jija. This impressive 24-meter-high structure, dedicated to Adinath—the first Jain Tirthankara—showcases the era’s architectural prowess, with spiral staircases, ornate pillars, and detailed sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras. Unlike Kumbha’s later victory pillar, the Kirti Stambh’s triumph is spiritual, symbolizing mastery over human passions and exalting Jain tenets of non-violence. Its impressive artistry and layered iconography make it a cornerstone of Chittorgarh’s religious, cultural, and art historical landscape, revered by scholars and visitors alike. This paper aims to focus on art, architecture and historical significance of Jain Kirti Stambh in detail.

Introduction

India’s tradition of erecting monumental pillars traces back to ancient times. These pillars were typically constructed for religious reasons, to celebrate victories, or to commemorate significant events for future generations. The history of pillar construction in India can be witnessed during the Harappan, Vedic, Mauryan, and later periods. The evolution of this tradition is as follows:

(1) Pillar Motifs on Unicorn Seals of the Harappan Civilization

The Harappan civilization stands as one of the most advanced ancient cultures of India. Its existence was firmly established in 1921 when Dayaram Sahni excavated Harappa. This discovery extended the timeline of Indian civilization by nearly 2000 years, placing it alongside the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Babylonia.

Following Harappa's excavation, other significant sites like Mohenjo-daro, Banawali, Kalibanga, Surkotada, and Dholavira were also unearthed. To date, over 1,500 Harappan sites have been identified, with roughly 900 in India and 600 in Pakistan.

Among the many artifacts recovered, steatite (soapstone) seals hold particular importance. More than 1200¹ such seals have been found, typically measuring between 1.90 and 3.17 cm in height. These seals feature a perforated, raised section on the back, likely used for threading, and come in both round and square forms.

A notable variety of these seals depicts a mythical unicorn. In front of this figure, a unique pillar or flag symbol² is often shown. This motif consists of three main components: a ribbed staff, a bowl or altar atop the staff (sometimes resembling a lotus seed pod or a square altar), and an upper section with three pointed, altar-like projections. Some seals even show a domed or oval roof.

Shri Vasudeva Sharan Agarwal interpreted these Harappan seal pillars as representations of Rudra flags, offering several arguments in support. The presence of yogic figures and depictions of Pashupati (lord of animals) on these seals suggests that the concept of Rudra-Shiva was familiar to the people of the Indus Valley³.

(2) Vedic Pillars

After the Harappan era, the tradition of pillar construction continued into the Vedic period. Vedic art includes pillars erected for sacrificial purposes, symbolizing the world as a grand sacrifice. The pillar supporting this world was known as the sacrificial pillar or Yupa⁴.

(3) Ashokan Pillars of the Mauryan Period

The tradition of pillar construction reached new heights during the Mauryan period, especially under Emperor Ashoka. Ashoka, the most illustrious Mauryan ruler, established numerous artistic monuments across his empire. Ashokan pillars are renowned for their tall, polished shafts and animal capitals. Two main motivations are cited for Ashoka's pillar construction: first, to express his profound religious ideals through inscriptions; second, to demarcate Buddhist⁵ sacred sites and important boundaries.

Chinese travelers Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsang, who visited India, recorded seeing six and fifteen⁶ Ashokan pillars, respectively. The following Ashokan pillars have been discovered:

- Sarnath pillar with four-lion capital
- Sanchi pillar
- Rampurwa pillars (lion and bull capitals)
- Lauriya Nandangarh pillar (lion capital)
- Lauriya Araraj pillar
- Allahabad pillar
- Kaushambi pillar
- Rummindei pillar
- Nigliva pillar
- Bakhira/Kolhua pillar (lion capital)
- Sankashya pillar (elephant capital)
- Two Delhi pillars, relocated by Sultan Firoz in 1356 CE from Topra (Ambala) and Meerut

Of these fourteen pillars, only ten bear inscriptions. The polished gleam of Ashokan pillars is a defining feature. The Sarnath pillar, installed at the site of Buddha's first sermon, is especially famous.

Post-Mauryan times saw a decline in pillar construction until the tradition was revived in medieval Rajasthan. Chittorgarh, the early capital of Mewar, became a hub for grand forts, palaces, step-wells, and pillars. Here, two notable Kirti Stambhs (Victory Pillars) exist: one Jain, and another built by Maharana Kumbha, dedicated to Vishnu.

The Jain Kirti Stambh of Chittorgarh Fort

(1) The Jain Tradition of Pillar Construction

The Prakrit text *Tiloyapannati* by Acharya Jinsen (9th–10th century), translated into Hindi by Phoolchand, A.N. Upadhyay, and H.L. Jain, is a Digambar Jain work of unique artistic and poetic merit.

Jain cosmology, as described in this text, is deeply mathematical, detailing the universe's structure, including the square field of existence. The third and fourth chapters describe divine mansions, the human world, and various realms:

"सम्यक् लोक, नरकलोक, भवनवासीलोक, मनुष्यलोक, तिर्यचलोक व्यन्तरलोक, ज्योतिषलोक, कल्पवसीलोक, सिद्धलोक।"

For the Tirthankaras, viharas, stupas, assembly halls, fragrant chambers, and altars are constructed—collectively referred to as Samavasarana. The text offers detailed descriptions of stupas, pillars, chaitya groves, and dharma wheels.

Dviparnva further identifies four main elements of Jain architecture: Parikar, Samavasaran, Ashtapad, and Nandishwara Island (in the form of Mount Meru). The design of the Jain Kirti Stambh incorporates these elements.

(2) The Jain Kirti Stambh of Chittorgarh

This remarkable stone structure was built by the Bagherwal merchant Jija of the Digambar sect in the 13th–14th centuries⁷. The pillar is square, 24 meters high, with a base diameter of 30 feet, narrowing to 15 feet at the top. It is dedicated to Adinath, the first Jain Tirthankara, and features a 6-foot-2-inch high southern entrance.

The pillar's center is open, 12 feet 10 inches wide, with spiral stairs and twelve decorated columns. An earlier inscription dated its construction to 695 CE, but Kumarpal's Prashasti places it at 1301 CE. Nearby stands an ancient Jain temple, initially built by a Shvetambar named Naya and later converted to a Digambar temple by Gunaraja. In 1438 CE, Ratnagiri, a disciple of Saumya Sundar, documented Gunaraja's work. The Mahavir Prasad Prashasti corroborates these details. South of the Mahavir temple, Kumarpal built another Jain temple, and to the north, Oswal Chacha, son of Teja, erected his own. The renowned Jain Kirti Stambh stands near these temples.

Jija, though attached to worldly affairs, was deeply spiritual. The pillar's spiral stairs symbolize the journey across the ocean of existence, inspiring liberation and ascent to heaven. The Jain Kirti Stambh is also called the Vijay Stambh—not for martial victory, but for triumph over human passions like attachment and aversion, symbolizing the victory of righteousness.

The pillar is a stunning example of architectural artistry, reflecting the era's values and the devotion behind its creation. The tradition of pillar construction, seen in Vedic, Vaishnav, and other forms, culminates in the Jain Kirti Stambh. Initially, such pillars were built outside Jain temples, but over time, they began to feature images of the Jinas. Constructed two centuries before Kumbha's Kirti Stambh, the Jain pillar served as inspiration for the latter. Both share similarities:

- Square bases adorned with sculptural art
- Internal spiral staircases
- South-facing orientation

Kumbha's Kirti Stambh is dedicated to Vishnu, while the Jain pillar honors Adinath. The Jain Stambh has seven sections, Kumbha's has nine. The Jain pillar is set on higher ground

at the fort's rear, enhancing its spiritual impact, while Kumbha's is at the front on lower ground.

The Jain Kirti Stambh features twelve raised pillars and is a monolithic stone structure, adorned with numerous Tirthankara statues. Notably, it lacks a Vishnu idol, but includes images of Brahma, Shiva, and Bhairav, indicating Shaivite influence. Renowned art historians Ferguson and Percy Brown have praised its beauty, with Brown dubbing it the 'Fame Pillar.'

The base's first section, with all lateral projections, measures 20 feet 5 inches (6.22 meters), with subsequent sections as follows:

- Second: 14 feet 6 inches (4.22 meters)
- Third: 13 feet 6 inches (4.11 meters)
- Fourth: 10 feet 9 inches (3.25 meters)
- Fifth: 11 feet 6 inches (3.51 meters)
- Sixth: 14 feet 6 inches (4.42 meters)

Each level above the first has a shallow groove⁸. The spiral staircase is compact, unlike the more elaborately sculpted stairs in Kumbha's later pillar. The Jain Kirti Stambh aligns with Indian temple architecture, its sculptural richness reflecting folk life.

Another notable feature is the absence of a Vishnu idol, while Brahma, Shiva, and Bhairav's presence points to Shaivite influence.

The Puratan Prabandh Sangraha's 'Chitrakoot Utpati Prabandh' describes the rise and spread of Jainism in Chittor and its places of worship. Here, the Jain Kirti Stambh is called the Vijay Stambh, symbolizing the Tirthankaras' victory over worldly bonds through simplicity and non-violence.

(3) Epigraphic Evidence Related to the Jain Kirti Stambh

Several inscriptions confirm the history of the Jain Kirti Stambh:

- An inscription in Chittor's Topkhana Museum, likely from 1300 CE, credits Jija and his son Puransingh with the pillar's construction. The first religious ritual was performed by Dharmachandra⁹.
- Two inscriptions in Udaipur's Victoria Hall Museum corroborate these facts¹⁰.
- The Chittor Prashasti compiled by Puransingh provides further details¹¹.
- According to the Mahavir Prasad Prashasti¹² at the Oriental Research Center, Pune, the Mahavir temple was rebuilt by Gunaraja, and his son Bala installed the image of Vardhaman in 1428 CE. This Prashasti, composed by Ratnagiri, a disciple of

Saumasundar, opens with a verse dedicated to Mata Bharati¹³, the goddess of speech.

Verses 2–6 are benedictory, dedicated to various Tirthankaras. The 7th verse references Mewar, verses 8–17 recount the lineage from Bappa Rawal to Mokal, and verses 18–25 praise Maharana Kumbha. Verses 26–75 describe the Oswal community, and verses 76–85 detail the Jain Tapa Gaccha sect.

Verses 86–104 provide a comprehensive account of the Jain Kirti Stambh and the adjacent temple. Some notable verses highlight the grandeur and spiritual significance of the monument¹⁴.

उच्चैर्मण्डपपङ्क्तिदेवकुलिकाविस्तीर्यमाणश्रियं,
कीर्तिस्तम्भसमीपवर्तिनममुं श्रीचित्रकूटाचले ॥
प्रासादं सृजतः प्रसादमसमं श्रीमोकलोर्वीयते-
रादेशाद्गुणराजसाधुरमितस्वधोदधार्षिन्मुदा ॥ 86 ॥
नानान्तरायतिमिराणि निहन्तुमत्र,
यस्योद्यमस्तरुणतिग्मकरांचकार ॥
बालाभिधोअस्य तनयः सनयश्चिरायु-
रस्तु प्रशस्तगुणसंपदकम्पकीर्तिः ॥ 87 ॥
नेत्राणाममृतांजनं त्रिजगतः श्रीचित्रकूटाचला-
लंकारः सविहार उज्ज्वलपुर्विभ्राजतेअभ्रंलिहः ॥
जाने श्रीगुणराजसाधुयशसां विश्वेअप्यमातामयं,
पिण्डीभूय महोच्छ्रयः समुदयः स्थेमानमास्तिघ्नुते ॥ 88 ॥
अस्य त्रिलोकैकविलोकनीयां सौन्दर्यलक्ष्मीमवलोकमानः ।
व्याक्षिप्तचेता इव सप्तसप्तिर्मध्यं दिने याति विलम्बमानः ॥ 89 ॥

मूर्तोअयं किमु सोमसुन्दरगरोः पुणयोपदेशोच्चयः,
प्राप्तो वा गुणराजसाधुसुकृतस्तोमः किमध्यक्षताम् ।
पिण्डीकृत्य सुधारसः सुकृतिनां दृक्पारणेवोन्नत-
स्थानेअस्थापि जगत्कृतेतिकृतिभिर्नो तर्क्यते कैरयम् । 90 ॥

तत्र श्रीजिनशासनोन्नतिकरैत्यद्भुतैरूत्सवै-
नव्यां श्रीवर सोमसुन्दरगुरुप्रष्टैः प्रतिष्ठापिताम् । ।
वर्षे श्रीगुणराजसाधुतनयाः पंचाष्टरत्नप्रभे,
न्यास्थन्त प्रतिमामिमामनुपमां श्रीवर्धमानप्रभोः ॥ 91 ॥

शोभावन्ध्यः स विन्ध्यः सुरगुरू — — — नोच्चकूटस्त्रिकूटः,
कैलासश्चाविलासो हिमगिरिमहान्वामनाभः सुनाभः ।
मैनाकः पाकरूपः सकलवसुमतीदत्तनेत्रप्रसादे, प्रासादे द्योतमाने
रविरथतुरगप्रात्तविश्रान्तिके अस्मिन् ॥ 92 ॥

रागद्वेषजितो जिनस्य विजयस्तम्भौ किमुत्तम्भितौ,
पारावारदुरन्तदुर्गतियुगोत्ताराय सेतू किमु । ।
किं वोच्चैस्त्रिदिवापवर्गगमने निश्रेणिदण्डाविमौ,
कीर्तिस्तम्भममुं च वीक्ष्य विदधत्येवं विकल्पान्न के । । 93 ॥

सोपानपद्धतिभिमामधिरुह्य भव्याः

स्वर्गापवर्गभवनेषु सुखं रमध्वम् ॥

इत्येष वक्ति किल हस्तमुदस्थे

कीर्तिस्तम्भच्छलेन निनदैरिव किंकिणीनाम् । 194 ॥

प्राग्वंशस्य ललाम मण्डपगिरिं शोभां नयत्रैष्टिक-

प्रष्टः प्रत्यहमष्टधा जिनपतेः पूजाः सृजन् द्वादश । ।

संगधीशकुमारपालसुकृती कैलासलक्ष्मीहतौ

दक्षं दक्षिणतो अस्य सोदरमिव प्रासादमादीधपत् । 195 ॥

ऊकेशवंशतिलकः सुकृतोरुतेजा-

स्तेजात्मजः प्रतिवसन्निह चित्रकूटे ॥

चाचाह्वयः सुजनलोचनदत्तशैत्यं

चैत्यं च चारु निरमीमपदुत्तरस्याम् । 196 ॥

सर्वत्रागुंजिता कीर्तिगुणराजस्य गर्जतु ॥

येन श्रीधर्मसाम्राजयमसृज्यत कलौ युगे । 197 ॥

यः कल्लोलवतीपतेः कलयितुं कल्लोलमालां प्रभु -

निष्णातश्च नभागणे गणयितुं यस्तारकाणांगणम् ॥

यो मातुं सिकताकणांश्चसरितां शक्तः स एव ध्रुवं

संख्यातुं गुणराजसाधुविहितश्रीधर्मकार्याण्यलयम् । 198 ॥

तेजस्विनो विजयिनो गुणराजसुता जयन्तु चिरमेते ।

श्रीजिनशासनसौधे स्तम्भा इव ये विभासन्ते । 199 ॥

यद्विद्यानां विनेया यदुरुगुणानुतेराननान्युतमानां

श्राद्धा यद्वोधशक्तेः सकलवसुमती यद्यशोमण्डलस्य ॥

ब्राह्मी यत्प्रौढिमोक्तेर्गुरुरपि मरुतां तत्ववादस्य येषां

यद्बुद्धेर्बोध्यभावां न हि विषयतया यान्ति पर्याप्तियोगम् । 1100 ॥

शिष्यः प्रशस्तिमेतां तेषां श्रीसोमसुन्दरगुरुणाम् ।

शरनिधिमनु (1495) मितवर्षे चक्रचारित्ररत्नगणिः । 1101 । ।

लक्षस्य सूत्रदक्षस्य नन्दनो नारदः प्रशस्तिमिमाम् ॥

उत्कीर्णवान्सुवर्णा लिखितां संवेगजयतिना ॥102 ॥ !

श्रीचित्रकूटाचलमौलिमौलिरमोधितोर्वीजनदृष्टिसृष्टिः ॥

छेयादमेयाः शरदः प्रमोदं सतां महावीरविहारराजः ॥103 ॥ ।

यावल्लीलां विधत्ते सततद्रुदयिभिर्दीपततेजः प्रतानै-

युक्ता मुक्तावलीयं हृदि विशदगुण सिद्धिलक्ष्मीस्मिताक्ष्याः । ।

प्रासादस्तावदेषोअभ्युदयतु विदुषां हर्षमेषां प्रशस्ति-

दत्तां धत्तां नितान्तं जिनमतमदयं प्रीयतां सर्वलोकः । 1104 ॥

इति

श्रीचित्रकूटदुर्गमहावीरप्रासादप्रशस्तिश्चचारुचक्रचूडामणिमहोपाध्या यश्रीचारित्ररत्नगणिभिर्विरचिता । ।

संवत् 1508 प्रजापतिसंवत्सरे देवगिरी महाराजधान्यामियं प्रशस्तिलेखि ॥

Nandgaon Inscription¹⁵

मेदपाट देशे चित्रकूटनगरे

श्रीचन्द्रप्रभजिनेन्द्र-

चैत्यालयस्याग्रे निजभुजोपार्जितवित्तबलेन

श्री कीर्तिस्तम्भः आरोपक साह जीजा । ।

This eulogy was compiled by Punsī, Dharmśi, and Devśi, all descendants of Jija in the tenth generation. According to their account:

1. The eulogy indicates that the distinguished Naya, Jija's father, was responsible for building the Chandraprabha Chaityalaya at Chittorgarh during the final quarter of the 13th century.

2. Jija, Naya's son, constructed the structure in front of the temple. The construction was completed during his son Puransingh's lifetime, with the religious consecration performed by Jain Acharya Dharmchandra.
3. However, following the Khilji conquest in 1303 CE, the temple and its art suffered significant destruction. The restoration was later undertaken by Ganaraja, which occurred during Mokal's reign. Initially, this was a Svetambara Jain worship site, but Ganaraja converted it for Digambara worship and dedicated it to the 24th Tirthankara, Mahavira. This renovation was finished in 1428 CE, as recorded in the Chitrakoot Fort Mahavira Prasad eulogy composed by Ratnagiri in 1438 CE.
4. To the south of the Mahavira temple is a Jain Chaityalaya built by the Porwal Kumarpal, and to the north, Oswal Chacha, son of Teja, constructed another Jain temple.
5. The 1484 CE Chittorgarh eulogy¹⁶ presents the full genealogy of Jija's lineage as follows:
 - Jija or Jijak (1)
 - Puransingh or Purnasingh (2)
 - (3) ?
 - (4) ?
 - (5) ?
 - (6) ?
 - Deu (Devsingh) (7)
 - Chatvar (Chatussingh) (8)
 - Lakhman, Bhimsingh, Viran, Made (9)
 - Lakhman's son Hansraj, Made's sons (Purnasingh/Punsi), (Dharmsingh/Dharmsi), (Devsingh/Devsi) (10)

Samavasarana:

This is a multi-tiered structure described in Jain architecture, associated with the Jina's liberation. Originally, it was connected to funeral ceremonies, but over time, it evolved into a place of worship. According to legend, Indra constructed it at the time of the Jina's nirvana. Eventually, this form was fully absorbed into the Chaityalaya tradition. The structure is typically a three-storey square building, richly adorned with symbolic sculptures, and features Jina images facing all four directions at the summit.

Ashtapada:

Ashtapada refers to a structure with eight steps, significant in Jain worship. It has entrances on all four sides and Jina images placed on the base platform above the steps. The entire structure is covered by an ornate stone roof, surmounted by an amalaka and a flag pillar. The Jain Kirti Stambha at Chittorgarh symbolizes the victory of the Tirthankaras over attachment and aversion, serving as a source of inspiration for others. The spiral steps represent the symbolic journey across the ocean of existence.

Step System and Architectural Explanation:

In Indian pillar architecture, monolithic structures are common, but the Kirti Stambha is unique in featuring a step system. This is a novel aspect not seen in earlier pillars. The spiral staircase inside the Jain Kirti Stambha is designed as if leading upward toward heaven. Traditionally, flag or Kirti Stambhas erected in front of temples were solid stone pillars. The only other comparable structure, the 'Ubhadiwala' pillar in Nagari-Chittorgarh, was built with stones placed on all four sides and a hollow center but lacked stairs. Globally, among Hindu pillars, the Jain Kirti Stambha is the only one with an internal staircase, referred to as the step system¹⁷. The reason for this architectural innovation remains a mystery. According to the 12th-century text 'Aparajitaprichha,' there is reference to internal stairs from bottom to top, and both the Ubhadiwala pillar and scriptural guidelines may have influenced the design of the Jain Kirti Stambha. Thus, this is the world's first pillar in Hindu or Jain architecture to feature internal stairs. Maharana Kumbha later adopted this design in his own Kirti Stambha, 150 years afterward¹⁸.

Meaning and Significance:

The Jain Kirti Stambha is an exceptional example of ancient Indian architecture in its refined form. In the Puransingh eulogy, it is referred to as Meru Stambha, with a poetic claim that the solar family circles it at noon. Its inspiration is rooted in ancient Vedic pillars, Yupa, and Vishnu Dhvaja Stambha traditions. The blending of architectural elements from different traditions is a hallmark of Indian culture, exemplified here by the integration of Jain and broader Indian architectural styles.

The Jain Kirti Stambha is a remarkable stone monument composed of seven distinct architectural sections. The Gujarati translation of the inscription related to the Kirti Stambha was done by Sompura ji of Ahmedabad. The Kirti Stambha was constructed at select locations to enhance its spiritual significance. The work was carried out with careful attention to sculptural detail and the finer points of architectural craftsmanship, signifying respect within the Jain temple complex. Images of Varuna appear on the southeast side and Kubera on the northwest, along with numerous sculptures of Hindu gods and goddesses.

Conclusion:

The Jain Kirti Stambha of Chittorgarh stands as a magnificent symbol of medieval India's rich architectural and spiritual heritage. This detailed study highlights several key facets of this extraordinary monument:

- **Historical Continuity:** The pillar exemplifies a continuous tradition of commemorative architecture in India, from the Harappan era through the Vedic and

Mauryan periods to medieval Rajasthan, showcasing the evolution of architectural forms while maintaining their symbolic essence.

- **Architectural Excellence:** Built in the 13th–14th century by the merchant Jija, the seven-sectioned Kirti Stambha demonstrates advanced engineering and artistic skill. Its monolithic construction, elaborate carvings, and spiral staircase reflect the high level of craftsmanship in medieval India.
- **Religious Significance:** Dedicated to Adinath, the first Jain Tirthankara, the pillar embodies deep spiritual meaning. It signifies not a victory won by force, but the triumph of righteousness over worldly attachments and aversions. The structure serves as a bridge for crossing the ocean of existence and inspires the pursuit of liberation.
- **Cultural Integration:** Despite being a Jain monument, the inclusion of Hindu deities like Brahma, Shiva, and Bhairav illustrates the syncretic nature of medieval Indian religious architecture, reflecting harmonious coexistence among different faiths.
- **Influence and Legacy:** The Jain Kirti Stambha predates and likely inspired Maharana Kumbha's more famous Kirti Stambha by two centuries, establishing its role as a prototype for later monumental towers in the region.
- **Documentary Evidence:** Numerous inscriptions from museums and collections provide reliable historical evidence regarding the monument's construction, patronage, and religious importance.

Thus, the Jain Kirti Stambha is not just an architectural wonder but a symbol of spiritual aspiration, artistic achievement, and cultural synthesis that defined medieval Indian civilization. It continues to inspire visitors with its message of victory through non-violence and the timeless quest for spiritual liberation.

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