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A Preliminary Report on the Identification of Mason's Marks at the Lesser Known Architectural Monuments (13th– 14thCentury CE) of Panchmahal District, Gujarat, India

Avradeep Munshi[1] and Vasant Shinde[*, 2]

[1]*Department of History and Archaeology, North Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, India.*

[*]*Corresponding Author,*[2] *CSIR Bhatnagar Fellow, CSIR Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, India.*
E- mail: vasant.shinde@dcpune.ac.in

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the preliminary identification of mason's marks found in some of the historical structures of the Panchmahal district, Gujarat. Unlike other historical and archaeological research fields, mason's marks represent a less known field in Indian academia. In very general terms, one can define a mason's mark as any signs ranging from short inscriptions to any form of alpha-numeric values inscribed on architectural elements. In this paper, the authors discuss a series of such marks recorded at isolated historical buildings of the district, trying to explain why inquiry into mason's marks can be deemed an integral part of architectural studies. A brief description of the study area and adapted methodologies is followed by the detailed accounts of the monuments and the related finds in tabular format.

Keywords: Architecture, Historical, Mason's Marks, Monuments, Panchmahal.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Panchmahal is a district known for its rich cultural heritage and history. Located at the eastern fringe of the Gujarat border, the district borders Sabarkantha district of Gujarat and Banswara district of Rajasthan in the north, Baroda district in the south and west, Kaira in the west, and Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh state in the south and east (Patel 1972). Its long, unremitting history spans prehistoric times (Sonawnae 1979, 1984) to the present-day cultural milieu.

The present study aims to gain in insight into the history of the area with special reference to ancient monuments. Monuments, in general, are part of historical material culture that represents past social complexities. Starting from theoretical concepts to their applied arrangements, several treaties and historical sources have addressed the fundamentals, art, and aesthetic aspects of architecture in India. However, while tracing the history of the construction of such monuments, one will be disappointed to realize that our historical scriptures hardly acknowledged the contributions of working communities who were involved in erecting these structures in different time(s) and space(s).

Thanks to its long history of human settlement, Panchmahal district is home to an abundance of historical sites, most notable among which is the Champaner-Pavagadh archaeological complex. Pavagadh hill is a pilgrimage centre, a Shakti pith (Mehta, 1988:35), connected with Hindu religious practices, and a UNESCO world heritage archaeological park. However, there are many other historical areas in the district. The present paper focuses such areas beyond the periphery of the cited world heritage site, which albeit being less known are central to understanding the district's history.

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Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this article is to relook at architecture from the perspective of its makers, a known or unknown group of people who worked enormously to shape some piles of stone into monumental architecture. Champaner-Pavagadh has a long architectural tradition (Jadhav, 1982; People of Heritage Concern, 2021). While being a major locality, we know almost nothing about its makers except for the main commissioners (Faridi, 1899), a situation that has raised some questions regarding the architectural and related cultural activities happening outside the periphery of this capital area during the contemporary period. Therefore, the discussions in the present paper will mostly address the architectural history of the non-secular structures located in the environs of rather than within this capital city.

With respect to the lesser-known monuments, detailed documentation of all their structures and the marks carved on them has been done to understand the relation between mason's marks and their associated structures (Figure. 1).The following gives detailed descriptions of the considered structures.

Ratneshvara Temple (22.8394N, 73.4319 E)

The temple is situated in the Ratanpur village of Godhra Taluka. It is 1.5 km northwest of the village, next to a large irrigation tank on its south western corner.

Judging from the attested architectural ornamentations including numerous sculptural representations, the temple was dedicated to the *Saivite* pantheon. While at present it is in ruins, the surviving remains suggest that the original temple consisted of a sabhamandapa, a gudhamandapa along with the sanctum sanctorum. *Pancharatha* in plan, this temple is a classic representation of 9th–12th CE architecture. The temple also consists of a *kirtitorana* (Tomory 1892), which according to Sonawane (1979), is akin to the Modhera Sun temple and Rudhramala temple of Siddhapur. At present, except the *mandapa* and the *grabhagriha* and the shrine, the temple survives simply to the plinth height. Within the shrine, one can easily locate a *sivalinga* made of green-schist along with a loose sculpture of three-faced Brahma adjacent to it. The *kirtitorana* is richly carved. A small sculpture of *Ganesha* is on the dedicatory block of the lintel. The doorjambs include the sculpture of *siva* represented as *dvarpalas*. The outside walls of the temple are decorated with various sculptures of a conventional Gujarati style temple architecture. On the authority of Sonawane (1979: 102), the temple dates to the 11th Century CE (Figure. 2).

Our survey to identify mason's marks recorded a total of 8 marks all carved in *Devanagari* scripts. Only a single symbol and a single word were decipherable, and the rest were combinations of different alpha-numeric entities. All these

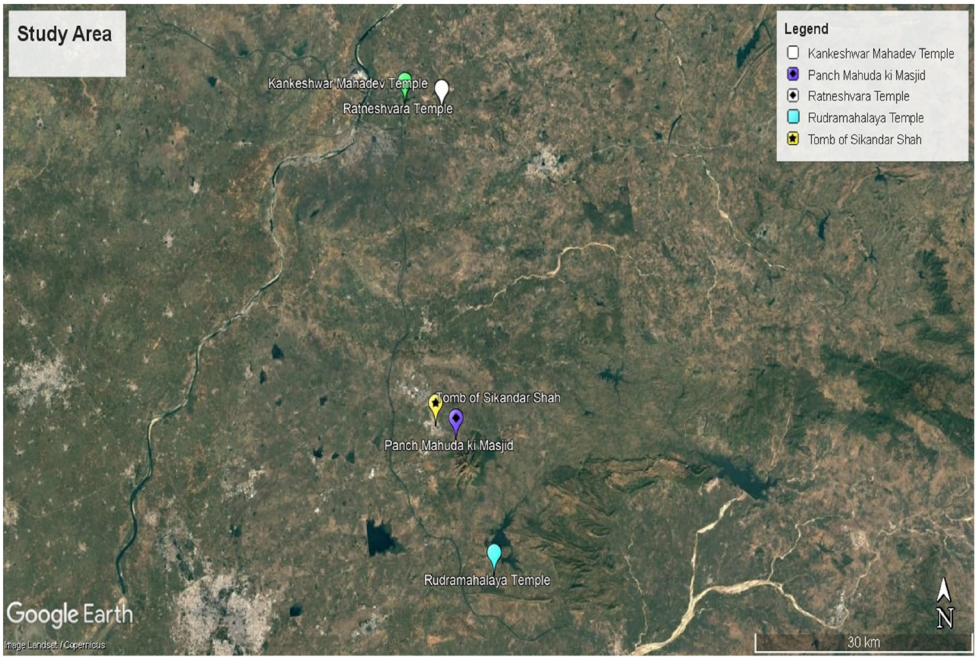


Figure. 1: *Map Showing the Study Area (After: Google Earth,25/11/2022)*

marks were created on the lowermost section of *mandovara* (Tomory, 1982) at an elevation of 60cm from the surrounding platform. As mentioned earlier, this small assemblage is dominated by marks representing a combination of alphabet and numbers carved as ja 40, where "*ja*" is written straight but the number '40' is flipped upside down. Apart from "*ja*40", the letter "*gā*" was identified along with a small curvilinear symbol measuring 3cm long. The identified word appears to read as *hatasri* (Figure. 3; Table. 1).



Figure. 2: *General View of Ratneshwara Temple*

Kankeshwar Mahadev Temple (22.8319N, 73.4816E)

The Kankeshwar Mahadev temple lies in the western skirts of the Kakanpur village of Godhra Taluka on the left bank of the Kun river. This village is known for its archaeological finds ranging from prehistoric tools to ancient temples, step-wells, and several sculptures (Sonawnae 1979; Patel 1972).

The temple was built on a large platform, and based on its structural ornamentations can be dated to the 13th–14thCentury CE (Sonawane, 1979: 98). Judging by its ground plan, the structure splits into two broader sections: garbhagriha along with *gudhamandapa* and the *sabhamandapa*, each of which follow the orthodox plan and each section is joined with connecting aisles to form a single structural complex. However, the remaining parts are in a ruined state. The entire temple complex exhibits rich sculptural ornamentations, the majority of which occur in the *madovara* section. Some of the identifiable prominent sculptures belong to *Ganesha*, *Umamahevara*, *Vishnu*, and *Mahadev*.

At this temple complex were identified only 2 mason's marks, both in the form of symbols

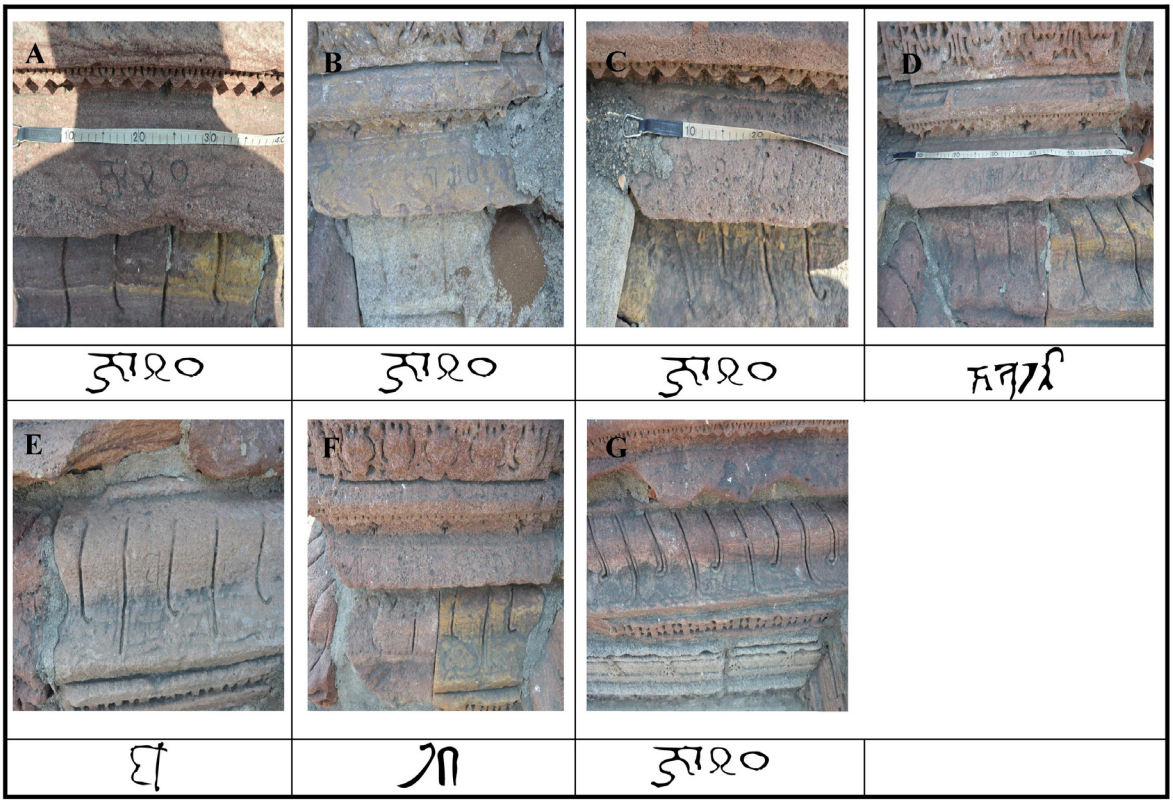


Figure. 3: *Mason's marks found a tRatneshwara Temple. The signs in photos A, B, C and G are similar and read jā 40. Photo D contains the word hatasri. Photo F contains the letter gā; Photo E shows a curvilinear symbol.*

Table. 1: *Detailed documentation of the identified mason's marks at the Ratneshwara and Kankeshwar Mahadev Temple*

Sr No	Type	Specific	Monument	Elevation from Ground (in CM)	Inner / Outer (wall)	Position on the slab	Orientation on the slab	Measurement (Object)
1	Alphabet+Number	ja 40	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Reverse	N/A
2	Alphabet+Number	ja 40	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Reverse	N/A
3	Alphabet+Number	ja 40	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Reverse	N/A
4	Alphabet+Number	ja 40	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Reverse	N/A
5	Word	hatasri	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Straight	N/A
6	Symbol	Curvilinear	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Straight	3
7	Alphabet	gā	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Straight	N/A
8	Alphabet+Number	ja 40	Ratneshwara Temple	60	Outer	Middle	Reverse	N/A
9	Symbol	Linear	Kankeshwar Mahadev Temple	365	Inner	Right	Flipped	14
10	Symbol	Linear	Kankeshwar Mahadev Temple	365	Inner	Right	Reverse	22

resembling a spear-head each measuring 14cm and 22cm, respectively. They were both located on the lowermost part of the *manodvara*, on the *kaksashana* inside the sabhamandapa (Figure .4; Table. 1).

Rudra Mahalaya Temple (22.3502N, 73.5519 E)

This temple is located in the Desar village of Halol Taluka at a distance of 15km from the main city of Champaner to the southeast. Representing a Saivite temple in character (Sonawane, 1979), it currently falls under the jurisdiction of Archaeological Survey of India, Vadodara circle. The temple consists of an exterior wall up to the *prastara*/ *varandika*. Some elements of the *sikhara* are still extant, though the entire superstructure has vanished. The temple shows a stellate plan, and there still survive such elements as *khuda* and *gajathara*. The *kumbha* part of the *adhisthan* / *vedibandha* contains the sculptures of *surasundaries*, female divinities as well as images of *siva-parvati* (Figure. 5)



Figure. 4: *A:General View of Kankeshwar Mahadev Temple. B: Mason's marks at the temple. C & D: Mason's marks as linear symbols resembling a spearhead*



Figure. 5: *A, C, D: General view of Rudramahalaya Temple; B, E: Various images/sculptures of the subsidiary deities related to the temple*

On the *Jangha*, there can be seen images of *surashundaris* like *Mardala*, *Darpana,* etc. along those of *dikapalas*. Apart from these, the *devakostha* contains images of *Siva*, *Chamunda* and *dwarpalas* with a *khatavanga* and *damru*. These are indicative of the fact that the temple belonged to the *saivaite* pantheons. However, the possibility of a *shakta* influence on the temple cannot be ruled out.

The extant element of the *sikhara* displays an image of *Bramhani*, and it is conceivable that the images of other *maitrakas* like *Vaishnavi*, *Vrahionce* once existed there as well. These also point to the possible practice of Shaktism.

Moreover, there is an image of *Lakshmi-Parvati* (or some other form of 64 yoginies), which is currently placed within the sanctum. Yet, it is quite possible that the image was installed here in the course of the renovation work, and was perhaps originally a part of *devakostha*. All these suggest that the place might have been a Siva temple but under the influence of the *Yogini* Cult.

A total of 15 mason's marks were identified in the temple. All were engraved on the outer façade near the lowermost section of the *grabhagirha's* mandovara (Figure. 6; Table. 2).

As with the previous two temples, the marks were carved in the *devanagari* script, here at an average elevation of 45cm–120cm from the floor level. Among the assemblage, both letters and words are seen singly, whereas the numbers are mostly found in combination with letters. From the preliminary observations, the words appear to represent proper nouns and could either be the names of the master masons or convey some other meanings. Further explication of this matter requires more comparative data and analogies.

Panch Mahuda Ki Masjid (22.49N, 73.50E)

Panch Mahuda Masjid is located at the outskirts of the town of Halol, adjacent to the world heritage site of Champaner Pavagadh Archaeological Park. Built in the 14th–15th century CE (People for Heritage Concern, 2001), this mosque was constructed with dressed sandstone. It is square in plan with an adjoining rectangular plinth. The structure is flanked by two minarets at the entrance. Some pieces of evidence can be seen such as an adjoining linear staircase that possibly led to the first tier of the minarets. There is a steep staircase inside the structure which leads through an 'L' to the terrace and possibly to the minaret's entrance. The material remains of the collapsed dome suggest that it was constructed with bricks. Towards the western

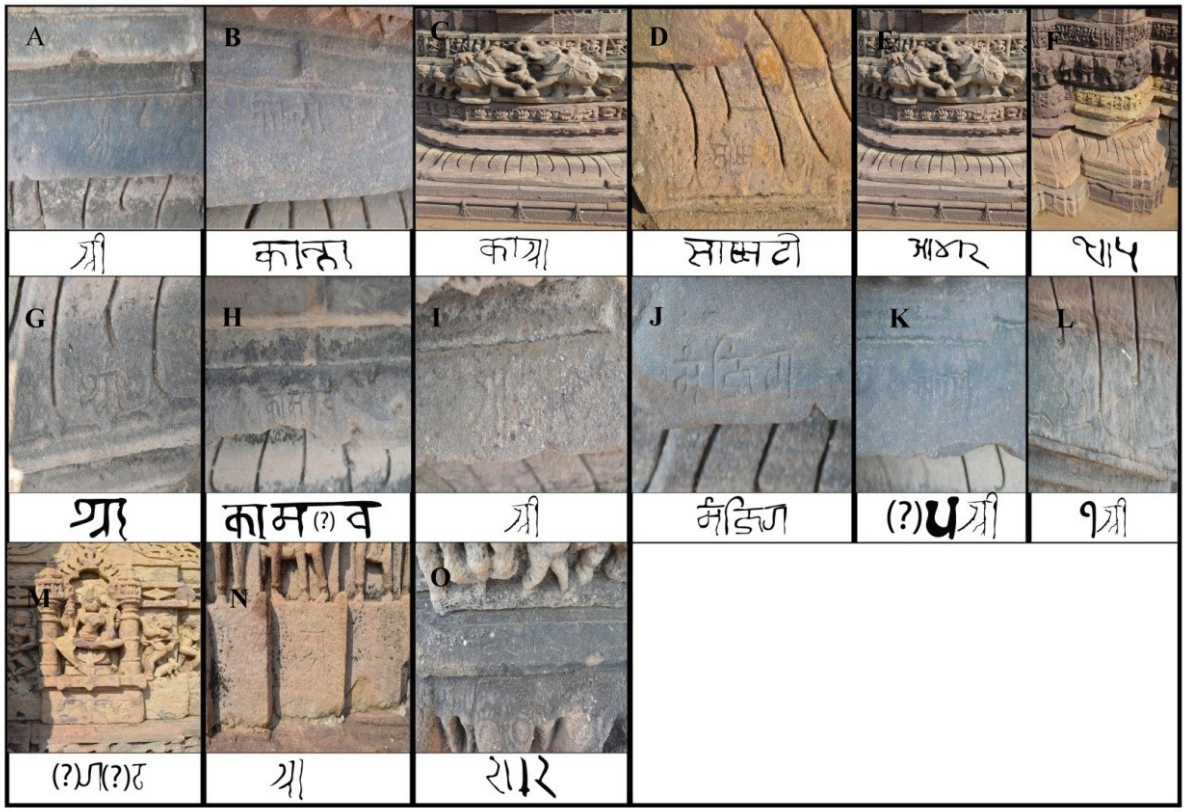


Figure. 6: *Identified mason's marks (letters and words) at the Rudramahalaya Temple. Details: A: grí, B: kātjā, C: kāgrā, D: sāmmaṭi, E. ā 412, F: ya 5, G: grā, H: kām(?)ba, I: grí, J: mijiga, K:(?)yagri, L: 1 grí, M: (?)ga(?)ḍha, N: grí, O: khāra*
Because of weathering, the marks in Photos H,K,M were partially identified

Table. 2: *Detailed documentation of the identified mason's marks at the Rudramahalaya Temple*

Sr No	Type	Specific	Monument	Elevation from the Ground (in CM)	Inner / Outer (wall)	Position on the slab	Orientation on the slab
1	Alphabet	grí	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
2	Word	kātjā	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
3	Word	kāgrā	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
4	Alphabet+Number	ā 412	Rudramahalaya Temple	10	Outer	Middle	Straight
5	Word	sāmmaṭi	Rudramahalaya Temple	35	Outer	Middle	Straight
6	Alphabet+Number	ya 5	Rudramahalaya Temple	10	Outer	Middle	Straight
7	Alphabet	grā	Rudramahalaya Temple	35	Outer	Middle	Straight
8	Alphabet	grí	Rudramahalaya Temple	35	Outer	Middle	Straight
9	Word	kām(?)ba	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
10	Word	mijiga	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
11	Word	(?)yagri	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
12	Alphabet+Number	1 grí	Rudramahalaya Temple	45	Outer	Middle	Straight
13	Word	(?)ga(?)ḍha	Rudramahalaya Temple	120	Outer	Middle	Straight
14	Alphabet	grí	Rudramahalaya Temple	120	Outer	Middle	Straight
15	Word	khāra	Rudramahalaya Temple	120	Outer	Middle	Straight

side, there are the remains of the qibla wall and a praying bay, as is evidenced by the existing column bases.

One of the minarets consist of three or four tiers, with the lowermost one sitting on a solid stone footing. This tier is made of richly carved stones, while the upper ones are made from brick. The minarets translate from a square plan in the base to an octagon at the first tier, a hexadecagon at the second, and a circle at the third. It is topped by an astonishing brickwork decoration.

With regard to mason's mark, the mosque has so far yielded only 3 marks. Located towards the entrance side of the mosque on the plinth area, they all represent letters written in *devanagari* scripts. The marks possibly read "*ph*" (फ) (Figure. 7; Table . 3).

Tomb of Sikander Shah (22.5055N, 73.4736E)

The Sikandar Shah tomb has a direct historical connection with the Sultanate history of Gujarat. Sikandar Shah was the brother of Latif Khan, who was directly linked with Imad-ul-Mulk (Bayley,1886). Reportedly constructed around 1526 CE (Bayley 1886, Patel 1972), the tomb is a symmetrical structure, surrounded by three porches and covered with fluted domes. The inner chamber that include the grave lies at the centre of the structure.

The central grave contains a spiral staircase that leads to the first floor where it ends abruptly. The structure seemingly formed part of a larger complex to the west, and was probably associated with a cistern currently in ruins.

The structure also includes a series of arches that run along with the columns at 45 degrees and form



Figure. 7: *Panch Mahuda Ki Masjid and mason's marks from the structure. All the photos (A, B, C) contain the letter 'pha'*

Table. 3: *Detailed documentation of the identified mason's marks at the PanchMahudaki Masjid and the Tomb*

Sr No	Type	Specific	Monument	Elevation from Ground (in CM)	Inner / Outer (wall)
1	Alphabet	pha	Panch Mahuda Masjid	50	Outer
2	Alphabet	pha	Panch Mahuda Masjid	50	Outer
3	Alphabet	pha	Panch Mahuda Masjid	50	Outer
4	Word	rajā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Outer
5	Word	rajā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Inner
6	Word	gorā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Inner
7	Word	vavvā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Inner
8	Word	vakāra	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Inner
9	Word	rujā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Outer
10	Word	rajā	Tomb of Sikander Shah	Floor of the tomb	Outer

squinches to support the superstructure. The dome appears to have been of a multi shell type, though everything is now in a ruined condition.

The tomb consists of several columns, the capitals of which were highlighted with intricate carvings. The chajja are of stone slabs for protection against the weather. The monument is simple in design except the brackets, plinths' base and finial part (dome) which are elaborately embellished with different geometrical and floral designs (Figure. 8).

Seven mason's mark were identified within the structure. Invariably written again in *devanagari* script, they mainly consist of words. "*Rajā*" is the dominating variety among the assemblage (Figure. 9; Table. 3). However, as they are all out of context, nothing more can be done beyond the mere identification of the words. All the slabs bearing the words lie on the floor, and none of them have any definite measurements. From the preliminary observations, the slabs were either reused or discarded at a later time.



Figure. 8: *General View of Sakar Khan's Dargah (Front View is in Inset, Bottom Right)*

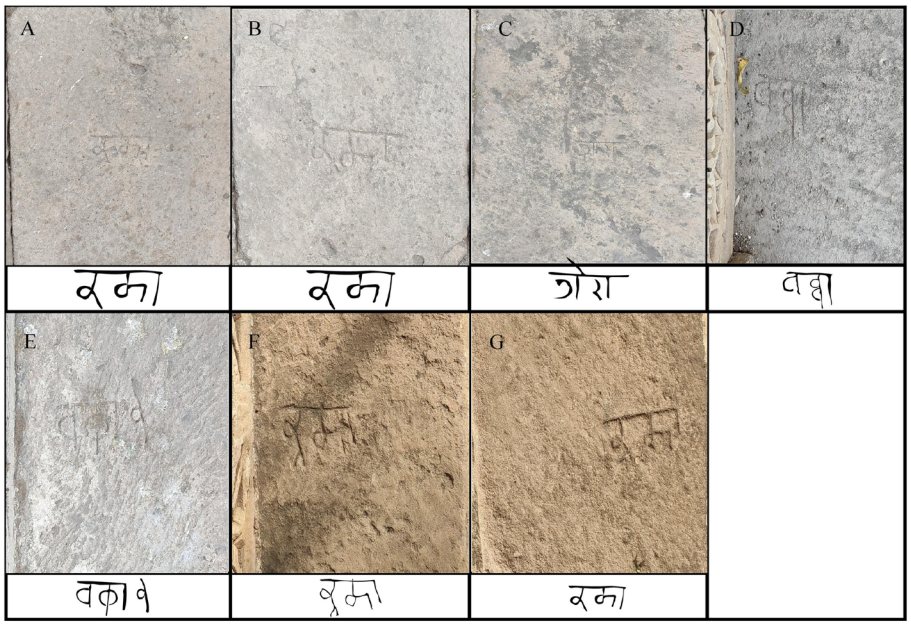


Figure. 9: *Mason's marks identified at Sakar Khan's Dargah. Details: A, B & G: rajā, C: gorā, D: vavvā, E: vakāra, F: rujā*

Discussion

The survey suggests that these marks contain some information which can be associated with their respective builders or masons. The bulk of these marks consist of different words written in *devanagari* script. The words might refer to the names of the chief masons or the guilds involved in building activities. Also identified in these monuments were evidences of scattered letters, numbers and symbols that can be likewise regarded as possible mason's marks.

Mason's marks, also known as stone-cutter's marks, across the continent represent the different crafts involved in construction activities. In medieval India, such workers used to travel from states like Gujarat and Rajasthan to other regions (Patel, 2004). Therefore, evidences like these as remains of the past material cultures testify to more direct involvement of the different toiler groups in building activities which have remained unsung mostly in historical narratives of the past.

One of the most rewarding and popular approaches to understanding architecture is to grasp different forms of structural and sculptural ornamentations. And, Indian academia has a rich heritage in this regard. However, a few avenues of ancient architectural study deserve equal attention, such as the engineering process of these structures together with the contributions of the builders who made these structures monumental. Sometimes Mughal archives (Nath, 1985), along with historical accounts from other parts of the subcontinent (Srinivasan, 1971; Tomory, 1982), provide us with some hints regarding the above fact. However, still at large what can be observed is that, the regional histories are frequently confined to the propensity of dynastic stories and rulers' political achievements . For example, the archival records of medieval Gujarat up to the 15th CenturyCE are mostly known for the political attainments of different rulers compared to the common people's histories. And that is why in the case of these glorious monuments scattered around the state, we are only familiar with those names who either commissioned the process or funded the construction projects of these monuments.

Therefore, as a concluding remark it can be said that considering the broader scenario of the socio-economic sphere of medieval India including the 13th–14th century CE Gujarat, studies like this (though currently it is only limited to reporting the finds) on a much wider and larger scale can surely open up several avenues for understanding contemporary architectures in the larger context of reconstructing past lifestyles of medieval India.

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