



ISSN: 3049-2017

IJMH 2025; 2(6): 249-253

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www.themultijournal.com

Received: 13-12-2025

Accepted: 29-12-2025

Publish : 30-12-2025

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Beyond the Canon: Peripheral Aesthetics and Vernacular Expression in the Sculpture of Bolangir

Alakananda GahirDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21295302>

ABSTRACT

The "great tradition" of Bhubaneswar, Puri, and Konark has long served as the foundation for Odisha's art-historical imagination. This trio has come to represent the entirety of Kalinga sculptural achievement in both colonial-era surveys and subsequent nationalist studies. The stone-carving customs of the state's western uplands, and of Bolangir district in particular, have been driven to the periphery of research as a result of this centring, where they are primarily preserved as brief asides in temple-architecture surveys, gazetteer entries, and tourist comments. This paper argues that the sculptural remains of Bolangir — most prominently the hypaethral Chausath Yogini shrine at Ranipur-Jharial, the Vishnu-avatara reliefs of Nrusinghanath on the Gandhamardan hills, and the dispersed temple fragments of the Tel valley around Patnagarh, Harishankar, and Saintala — constitute not a provincial derivative of the eastern Kalinga idiom but a distinct, historically legible vernacular formation. Drawing on the historiographic critique of the "canon" developed in Indian art history and on the regional temple surveys of various scholars, the paper develops the concept of "peripheral aesthetics" as an analytical frame for reading sculpture that is materially coarser, iconographically hybrid, and institutionally under-documented, yet aesthetically and historically coherent on its own terms. The paper is a literature-based, it consolidates published epigraphic, archaeological, and art-historical sources on Bolangir into a single interpretive argument and identifies directions for the field documentation that the corpus still requires. It concludes that recentring peripheral sites such as Bolangir is necessary not to displace the eastern Odishan canon but to reveal the plural, regionally negotiated character of what is retrospectively homogenised as "Odishan" or "Kalingan" art.

Keywords: Bolangir; Odisha sculpture; peripheral aesthetics; vernacular art; Ranipur-Jharial; Chausath Yogini; Kalinga temple architecture; art historiography

1. Introduction

Standard narratives of Odishan (Kalinga) temple art move, with only minor detours, along a single geographic axis: from the seventh-century Parasurameswara and eighth-century Vaital temples of Bhubaneswar, through the tenth and eleventh-century Mukteshwar, Rajarani, and Lingaraja temples, to the thirteenth-century culmination at Konark (Behera, 1993; Donaldson, 1985–1987). This is not an unreasonable sequence — the coastal triad of Bhubaneswar, Puri, and Konark does represent the most monumental and best-preserved expression of the Kalinga *rekha-pidha* idiom, and it is the sequence around which colonial-era antiquarian survey, postcolonial state heritage machinery, and UNESCO-oriented tourism have all organised themselves. But a sequence built for administrative and touristic legibility is not the same thing as the full extent of the sculptural record, and when it hardens into "the" history of Odishan art, everything that does not fit its chronology, materials, or iconographic vocabulary is quietly reclassified as marginal, provincial, or merely "of local interest."

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Bolangir district, in the semi-arid uplands of western Odisha along the Tel and Sandul river valleys, is one of the clearest casualties of this centring. The district and its immediate surroundings hold a substantial and stylistically distinctive body of stone sculpture: the open-air Chausath (sixty-four) Yogini temple at Ranipur-Jharial, one of only four such shrines to survive in India, the others being at Hirapur near Bhubaneswar and at two sites in Madhya Pradesh (Dehejia, 1986); the Vishnu-avatara reliefs at Nrusinghanath on the Gandhamardan hills; the ruined temple complexes of the wider Ranipur-Jharial–Maraguda–Podagarh cluster; and a scatter of smaller shrines around Patnagarh, Harishankar, and Saintala that mark the district as an important, if under-recorded, node on the ancient route linking the Tel valley with the Mahanadi delta and central India (Senapati & Sahu, 1968). None of this material is unknown — it appears in the Orissa District Gazetteer for Balangir (Senapati & Sahu, 1968), in general surveys of Odishan temples (Behera, 1993; Parida, 1999; Mohapatra, 1988), and in Donaldson's exhaustive three-volume catalogue of Odishan temple art (Donaldson, 1985-1987).

Instead of being an additional addition to the coastal canon, it lacks consistent interpretive attention as an aesthetic construction in and of itself. It asks two linked questions. First, in what ways does the sculpture of Bolangir diverge stylistically, iconographically, and materially from the canonical Kalinga idiom, and how should that divergence be read as provincial lag, as regional innovation, or as something that the very language of "canon versus periphery" distorts by presupposing a centre to begin with? Second, rather than treating Bolangir's sculptural corpus as a diluted regional echo of a metropolitan style, what would it mean methodologically to consider it as a "vernacular" tradition in the meaning articulated in postcolonial art history (Guha-Thakurta, 2004) and vernacular architectural studies?

2. Geo-Historical context: Bolangir and The tel valley

Bolangir, also transliterated as Balangir, is located in western Odisha's interior plateau and is drained by the Tel river and its tributaries. It is located some distance away from the Mahanadi delta which was home to the major Kalinga temple cities. The area was historically part of the shifting spheres of influence of the Nala, Sarabhapuriya, Panduvamshi, Somavamshi, and later Chauhan (Patnagarh) polities. While some of these polities also supported coastal construction, their western territories developed under different circumstances related to patronage, material availability, and craft lineage (Senapati & Sahu, 1968; Mohapatra, 1988). The surviving archaeological cluster around Ranipur-Jharial, Belkhandi (in neighbouring Kalahandi district, at the Tel–Utei confluence), Narisinghnath, Maraguda, and Podagarh attests to a persistent, if regionally distinct, building culture along this

route. The Tel valley served as a corridor between the Kalinga heartland and the Deccan and central Indian plateau.

The Chausath Yogini temple at Ranipur-Jharial is the most important monument in the district. It is a circular, roofless (hypaethral) shrine that was constructed, according to current scholarly consensus, in the ninth or tenth century CE. It has sixty images of dancing Yoginis surrounding its inner wall and an image of Shiva as Nateshvara (Lord of the Dance) at its center (Dehejia, 1986). Its circular plan and open-to-sky format depart sharply from the vertical, walled rekha deula that defines the coastal canon, and its tantric iconographic programme — Yoginis, Chamunda, an ithyphallic dancing Shiva — belongs to a ritual and aesthetic register largely absent from the Jagannatha-centred devotionism of Puri. A second significant location, Nrusinghanath, on the northern slopes of the Gandhamardan hills, is home to a fifteenth-century Vaishnava temple constructed by the Patnagarh Chauhans. Its surviving relief program features images of the Varaha, Narasimha, and Vamana avatars of Vishnu, as well as Ganga and Yamuna as door-guardian figures, Nandi, the dvapalas Jaya and Vijaya, Hanuman, a Shiva-Parvati group, and an image of Marjara-Keshari, an avatara that is unique to the standard Vaishnava canon. Around these two anchor sites is a larger scatter of shrines and fragments — at Patnagarh, Harishankar, Saintala, and the Maraguda valley — whose systematic art-historical evidence remains comparably thin relative to the coastal sites.

3. Theoretical Framework: Canon, Periphery, and the Vernacular

As Guha-Thakurta (2004) shows for colonial and postcolonial India, the idea of a "canon" in art history is an institutional artefact created by nationalist historiography, museum acquisition policies, conservation funding, and archaeological survey priorities, all of which tend to converge on a small number of monumental, well-preserved, and narratively convenient sites. The same institutional logic that elevated some artists and idioms to "national" status also reduced others to the position of raw ethnographic material or provincial curiosity, as demonstrated by Guha-Thakurta's earlier study of Bengal (1992). When applied to Odisha, this criticism implies that the Bhubaneswar-Puri-Konark sequence is canonical not only because it is more aesthetically pleasing than anything else created in the area, but also because it was the sequence that colonial antiquarians travelling along the coast could easily read, that it was most amenable to conservation by the Archaeological Survey of India following independence, and that it was most useful for state tourism and UNESCO branding during the twentieth century.

In this work, "periphery" refers to a site's physical, infrastructural, and historical distance from the

establishments that generate canonical rank rather than an innate lack of artistic worth. Accordingly, "peripheral aesthetics" refers to the visual and material traits that peripheral production typically exhibits due to its distance from metropolitan patronage and survey attention: less standardised iconometric proportion, greater tolerance for local and tantric iconographic innovation (as at Ranipur-Jharial), coarser or more locally available stone (sandstone rather than the finer khondalite and chlorite combinations used at Konark, whose rapid surface decay has been linked mineralogically to the high weathering susceptibility of khondalite; Raymahashay & Sharma, 1993), and hybrid figural conventions that combine traditional Puranic iconography with regional or tribal visual habits. Lastly, the term "vernacular" is taken from studies of architecture and folklore to characterise expression that is created inside and accountable to a local community of practice and belief rather than to a supra-regional stylistic authority. Simply focused on local ritual, patronage, and material logics rather than the standardising pressures—royal inscriptional legitimation, pan-regional pilgrimage traffic, competitive dynastic display—that shaped the coastal Kalinga program at its most monumental, a vernacular sculptural tradition need not be simple. In this way, interpreting Bolangir's sculpture as vernacular is an effort to break out from the dichotomy of "canonical achievement" and "failed imitation" and instead consider what internal logic the corpus adheres to.

4.Literature Review

Systematic documentation of Odishan temple art begins with colonial-era antiquarian notices and consolidates, in the postcolonial period, into a handful of comprehensive surveys. Acharya's *Studies in Orissan History, Archaeology and Archives* (1969) and the *Orissa District Gazetteers* series edited by Senapati and collaborators (including the Balangir volume, Senapati & Sahu, 1968) remain foundational descriptive sources, cataloguing sites, inscriptions, and local traditions district by district. Behera's *Temples of Orissa* (1993), Dhaky's comparative work on Indian temple forms (1977), Parida's *Early Temples of Orissa* (1999), and Mohapatra's essay on architectural tradition in *Art Traditions in Orissa* (1988) all provide chronological and typological frameworks for the coastal *rekha-pidha-khakhara* sequence, and each acknowledges, in varying degrees of detail, the existence of parallel western Odishan building activity without making it a primary object of analysis.

The most substantial documentary resource for the present study is Donaldson's three-volume *Hindu Temple Art of Orissa* (1985–1987), which — unlike the shorter surveys — extends its descriptive reach into the interior districts and records the Ranipur-Jharial, Nrusinghanath, and related monuments in detail alongside the coastal corpus. On the Yogini cult specifically, Dehejia's *Yoginī Cult and*

Temples: A Tantric Tradition (1986) situates Ranipur-Jharial within the small, pan-Indian group of surviving Yogini shrines and provides the iconographic vocabulary (the dancing *karana* poses of the Yogini images, the ithyphallic Nateshvara) through which the site's tantric programme can be read. Vatsyayan's (1997) study of geometric ordering in Indian temple and sculptural design offers a comparative framework for the way Odishan design texts organise both the walled *deula* and, by extension, the circular Yogini plan, although Vatsyayan's own case studies concentrate on the coastal canon.

On the theoretical side, Guha-Thakurta's two major studies (1992, 2004) supply the historiographic critique of canon-formation that this paper adapts to a regional, intra-state context; her arguments were developed primarily around the national and colonial framing of Indian art writ large, and their application here to an intra-regional distinction between coastal and interior Odisha is an extension rather than a direct import of her argument. Taken together, the literature establishes that the factual record of Bolangir's monuments is reasonably well documented in gazetteer and survey form, but that an interpretive, comparative account of the district's sculpture as an aesthetic formation — rather than as a supplementary entry in a coastal-centred narrative — has not yet been written.

5.Methodology and Scope

This paper is a literature-based critical synthesis rather than a report of new field data or fresh photographic documentation. It draws on published gazetteer, archaeological-survey, and art-historical sources to reconstruct the extent and character of the Bolangir sculptural corpus, and it applies a historiographic and comparative-stylistic framework to that published record. A thorough aesthetic and technical analysis of the corpus, including accurate stone-type identification, workshop attribution, iconometric measurement, comparative dating through epigraphic cross-reference, and a systematic photographic survey of weathering and restoration history, necessitates sustained fieldwork at Ranipur-Jharial, Nrusinghanath, and the smaller Tel valley sites. This scope is a purposeful limitation that the reader should be aware of. As a result, the paper should be interpreted as a framework-building and literature-consolidating contribution that argues for the analytical value of "peripheral aesthetics" as a category and identifies the empirical gaps that future fieldwork in the district would need to fill, including condition surveys, stone provenance studies, oral-history documentation of ongoing ritual use, and comparative epigraphic study.

6.The Sculptural Corpus of Bolangir

6.1.Ranipur-Jharial :The Chausath Yogini Temple

The Chausath Yogini temple at Ranipur-Jharial is architecturally and iconographically the most singular monument in the district. Its circular, hypaethral plan has no equivalent among the coastal *rekha* or *pidha deula*

forms; where the Bhubaneswar temples enclose their sculptural programme within a vertical tower rising toward a single crowning *amalaka*, the Yogini shrine spreads its sixty images laterally around an open circular wall, arranged to be viewed processionally rather than approached axially (Dehejia, 1986). The Yoginis are, distinctively among surviving Yogini temples in India, shown in dancing poses corresponding to the *karana* positions of classical dance technique, a detail that links the shrine's sculptural programme to contemporary performance practice rather than to static iconographic convention. The central image of Shiva as an ithyphallic, three-faced, eight-armed Nateshvara, flanked by Ganesha and Nandi, situates the site within a tantric Shaiva idiom that stands apart from the increasingly Vaishnava-Jagannatha orientation of the coastal centre from the twelfth century onward. Stylistically, the carving is in a coarser sandstone than the fine-grained khondalite and chlorite preferred at Konark and Bhubaneswar, and the figures show a heavier, more compact modelling than the attenuated elegance of the Rajarani or Mukteshwar reliefs — a material and formal difference that earlier scholarship has tended to register only as evidence of “weathering” or “provincial execution,” but which this paper reads instead as evidence of a distinct workshop tradition responding to locally available stone and to the requirements of an open-air, weather-exposed setting.

6.2 Nrusinghanath and the Gandhamardan Ensemble

The Nrusinghanath temple, founded under Patnagarh Chauhan patronage in the early fifteenth century, is later than the Ranipur-Jharial complex and shows a closer, though still regionally inflected, relationship to the wider Kalinga *rekha deula* vocabulary. Its relief programme — the avatara triad of Varaha, Narasimha, and Vamana, the dvarapala pair Jaya and Vijaya, the river-goddess figures of Ganga and Yamuna, and the Shiva-Parvati group — draws directly on the standard Vaishnava-Shaiva iconographic repertoire familiar from the coastal temples. The eight-armed Ganesha and the cowherd Sahadeva figure seen in the surviving reliefs, as well as the small cult image of Marjara-Keshari—a cat-headed, lion-bodied form of Vishnu explained in a local Odia-language mahatmya narrative and seemingly lacking close parallel in the standard Puranic avatara lists—are what distinguish the site as vernacular in the sense suggested here. The eight-armed Ganesha and the cowherd Sahadeva figure seen in the surviving reliefs, as well as the small cult image of Marjara-Keshari—a cat-headed, lion-bodied form of Vishnu explained in a local Odia-language mahatmya narrative and seemingly lacking close parallel in the standard Puranic avatara lists—are what distinguish the site as vernacular in the sense suggested here. This figure exemplifies precisely the kind of local mythic elaboration that a canon-centred survey tends to note as an oddity and

move past, but that a vernacular-studies approach treats as a primary datum: evidence of a living, regionally specific theological and narrative tradition generating its own iconographic solutions rather than simply reproducing an inherited metropolitan template. The site is further situated within a regional epigraphic and linguistic tradition that is separate from, but connected to, the Sanskritic and Odia inscriptional culture of the coastal temples due to the existence of an inscription in proto-Odia script on a stone slab inside the shrine.

6.3 Patnagarh, Harishankar, saintala, and the Wider Tel Valley

Beyond these two anchor sites, Bolangir and its immediate neighbourhood preserve a dispersed set of smaller shrines and sculptural fragments — at Patnagarh (the historical seat of the Chauhan rulers who also patronised Nrusinghanath), Harishankar, Saintala, and across the Maraguda valley — that are recorded in gazetteer and survey literature (Senapati & Sahu, 1968; Donaldson, 1985–1987) but have not, on the evidence of the published literature consulted for this paper, received the kind of comparative stylistic analysis applied to the coastal sequence. Their cumulative significance lies less in any single monument's individual grandeur than in what their distribution indicates about the density and continuity of a regional building and carving tradition along the Tel valley corridor — a tradition that this paper argues deserves to be studied as a coherent regional formation rather than catalogued site by site as a series of minor annexes to the Bhubaneswar-Puri-Konark narrative.

7. Discussion : Reading Peripheral Aesthetics

The information reviewed above leads to three interpretive steps. First, artistic deviations from the coastal canon, such as less uniform iconometric proportion, rougher stone, and more compact figural modelling, should not be automatically interpreted as indicators of technical inadequacy. Particularly at Ranipur-Jharial, the divergence tracks a different architectural problem (a hypaethral, laterally organised shrine instead of a vertically towering one) and a different ritual register (tantric Yogini worship instead of Puranic temple devotionism), both of which require a different sculptural solution rather than a scaled-down version. Guha-Thakurta's (2004) more general claim that “canon” and “periphery” are relational, institutionally generated categories rather than inherent rankings of creative merit is consistent with interpreting the distinction as a functional and theological adaptation rather than as a failed emulation. Second, the vernacular character of the Bolangir corpus is most obvious precisely when local narrative and cult practice provide iconographic solutions distinct from the conventional Puranic repertoire — the Marjara-Keshari image at Nrusinghanath being the clearest illustration. These pictures serve as proof of theological

and narrative agency at the local level: communities and patrons were actively creating new mythic content and giving it sculptural form rather than just taking a completed Kalinga template from the coast and executing it in a lower register. This is a stronger claim than “regional variation” in the usual descriptive sense; it treats the periphery as a site of aesthetic and doctrinal production in its own right.

Third, the historiographic marginalisation of Bolangir’s sculpture is itself an object of study, not merely a regrettable gap to be filled by more fieldwork. The comparative thinness of interpretive literature on Ranipur-Jharial, Nrusinghanath, and the Tel valley sites, relative to the volume of scholarship on Bhubaneswar, Puri, and Konark, mirrors the broader pattern Guha-Thakurta traces at the national scale: archaeological survey attention, conservation funding, and heritage-tourism branding all concentrate resources at a small number of already-canonical sites, which in turn generates more scholarship on those sites, further entrenching their canonical status in a self-reinforcing cycle. Bolangir’s position within Odisha replicates, at a smaller and more local scale, the same dynamic that positions Odisha itself as peripheral to the pan-Indian temple canon dominated by better-funded and more heavily surveyed regions.

8. Conclusion

The sculpture of Bolangir — the tantric Yogini programme at Ranipur-Jharial, the avatara reliefs and locally generated Marjara-Keshari cult image at Nrusinghanath, and the wider scatter of Tel valley shrines — constitutes a coherent regional formation that current art-historical practice tends to register only as a supplement to the canonical Bhubaneswar-Puri-Konark sequence. Reframing this material through the concepts of peripheral aesthetics and vernacular expression makes it possible to read the corpus’ material coarseness, iconographic hybridity, and local mythic innovation as evidence of a functioning regional tradition rather than as symptoms of provincial deficiency. This reframing does not require displacing the coastal canon from its rightful place in the history of Kalinga architecture; it requires only that the canon be understood as one formation among several, produced under particular historical and institutional conditions, rather than as the exhaustive horizon of what Odishan sculpture is. The paper’s most immediate practical implications are for future research design: systematic condition surveys, stone-provenance analysis, comparative epigraphic study, and ethnographic documentation of ongoing ritual use at Ranipur-Jharial, Nrusinghanath, and the smaller Tel valley sites would enable the preliminary argument developed here from published sources to be tested against primary field evidence and would start to close the documentary gap between Bolangir and the much more.

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