



Sacred Structures and Skilled Hands: Art and Architecture of the Gurjara-Pratihara Era

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Abstract:

The Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty (c. 6th-11th century CE), which held dominion over a vast stretch of northern India spanning modern Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and the Gangetic plain, produced one of the most distinctive and technically sophisticated traditions in Indian temple architecture. This paper undertakes a systematic examination of the sacred structures and artistic achievements of this era, with particular focus on the Nagara-style temples of Osian, the early construction phase at Khajuraho, and the sculptural programmes of Gwalior, Deogarh, and Kannauj. Drawing upon epigraphic evidence, archaeological surveys, and contemporary historiographical literature, the study analyses the structural evolution of the Pratihara temple canon, the iconographic conventions governing divine imagery, the role of the royal court as patron of the arts, and the technical vocabulary of the artisan guilds (shilpins) responsible for these monuments. The paper further situates Pratihara aesthetics within the broader pan-Indian discourse on sacred space, demonstrating how architectural form was understood simultaneously as cosmological diagram, political statement, and devotional instrument. The findings reveal a coherent and evolving aesthetic programme that not only shaped contemporary regional traditions but also laid the groundwork for the Chandela and Paramara schools that succeeded it.

Keywords: Gurjara-Pratihara, Nagara architecture, Osian temples, temple iconography, medieval Indian art, shilpa shastra, Rajasthan sculpture, Gwalior fortress, sacred space, artisan guilds

1. Introduction

The temple in early medieval India was never merely a house of worship. It was, in the words of Stella Kramrisch, "the abode of the god, the universe in miniature, the mountain at the centre of the earth" (Kramrisch, 1946, p. 3). Nowhere is this conception more vividly realised than in the architectural corpus produced under the patronage of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty, whose imperial authority stretched from the Himalayan foothills to the Vindhya ranges between roughly the seventh and early eleventh centuries of the Common Era. The Pratiharas, who traced their lineage to the doorkeeper (pratihara) of the solar deity Rama, presided over a culture in which religious merit, royal power, and aesthetic refinement were understood as aspects of a single civilisational project.

Despite their pivotal role in shaping the landscape of north Indian sacred art, the Pratiharas have received comparatively less scholarly attention than the Chalukyas of the Deccan or the Cholas of Tamil Nadu. Scholars such as R. C. Agrawala (1966), M. A. Dhaky (1975), and Krishna Deva (1990) have produced foundational studies, but the corpus remains underanalysed relative to its scale and significance. Recent archaeological work

at Osian, Badoh-Pathari, and Terahi, combined with fresh epigraphic readings, now permits a more nuanced reconstruction of both the chronological sequence and the aesthetic ideology underlying Pratihara temple-building.

This paper proceeds in seven substantive sections. After establishing the historical and geographical context of Pratihara rule, it surveys the canonical architectural forms with detailed attention to structural typology, plan evolution, and decorative grammar. It then examines the sculptural programme in terms of iconographic content and technical execution, considers the organisation of artisan guilds and workshop traditions, and situates the entire enterprise within the matrix of royal patronage and religious ideology. The paper concludes with an assessment of Pratihara legacies and their absorption into successor traditions. Four original architectural diagrams are included to support the textual analysis.

2. Historical and Geographical Context

2.1 The Rise of the Gurjara-Pratiharas

The origins of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty are debated, but the preponderance of epigraphic and numismatic evidence points to a clan of pastoral and warrior lineage that established itself in the region of Mandor in Rajasthan during the sixth century CE (Majumdar, 1955). The dynasty rose to pan-regional significance under Nagabhata I (c. 730-760 CE), who successfully repelled Arab incursions from Sind and consolidated control over the upper Gangetic plain. His successors, particularly Vatsaraja (c. 775-800 CE), Nagabhata II (c. 805-833 CE), and the great Mihira Bhoja (c. 836-885 CE), expanded the imperial reach northward to Kannauj and eastward to Bengal.

The Gwalior Prasasti (876 CE), discovered on the fort at Gwalior and composed in ornate Sanskrit, provides one of the most detailed early medieval dynastic records, listing military campaigns, donations to temples, and the construction of water tanks (Bhandarkar, 1903-04). Similarly, the Jodhpur inscription of Bauka (837 CE) and the Dholpur stone inscription illuminate the administrative and religious concerns of the dynasty. These documents collectively portray a court deeply invested in Brahmanic orthodoxy, cow-protection, and temple construction as instruments of both piety and political legitimation.

2.2 Territorial Extent and Cultural Zones

At its apogee under Mihira Bhoja, Pratihara territory encompassed the modern states of Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and parts of Gujarat and Bihar. This vast domain contained at least three distinct artistic subregions whose stylistic trajectories, though sharing a common grammar, diverged in response to local traditions, available stone, and the preferences of regional sub-chieftains. Table 1 summarises the principal zones and their characteristic architectural signatures.

Table 1: Principal Artistic Zones Under Pratihara Dominion

Zone	Geographic Area	Key Sites	Architectural Character
Zone I - Rajasthan	Marwar, Mewar, Sambhar	Osian, Mandore, Nagda	Early Nagara, compact shikhara, prolific figural sculpture
Zone II - Malwa	Western Madhya Pradesh	Badoh-Pathari, Terahi, Gyaraspur	Transitional Nagara, mature bhumija precursors, elaborate gavaksha friezes
Zone III - Gangetic	UP, eastern Rajasthan	Kannauj, Gwalior, Deogarh	Imperial workshops, refined finish, Vaishnava iconographic cycles
Zone IV - Bundelkhand	Eastern MP, SW UP	Khajuraho (early phase), Ajaigarh	Proto-Chandela style, sandstone, large-scale narrative panels

Table 1: Distribution of major artistic zones within the Pratihara domain with characteristic architectural signatures.

3. Architecture of Sacred Space: Temple Typology and Structural Evolution

3.1 The Nagara Canon: Plan, Elevation, and Component Terminology

The architectural vocabulary of the Pratihara temple is that of the Nagara order, one of the three canonical modes identified in the shilpa shastra texts. In the Nagara mode, the sanctuary (garbhagriha) is a dark, cubic space housing the principal image; above it rises the curvilinear tower, the shikhara, whose form is generated by the repetition and superimposition of ribbed projections (rathas) and their associated decorative elements. The Pratihara contribution to this tradition lay principally in the systematisation and elaboration of the component parts, as illustrated in Figure 1.

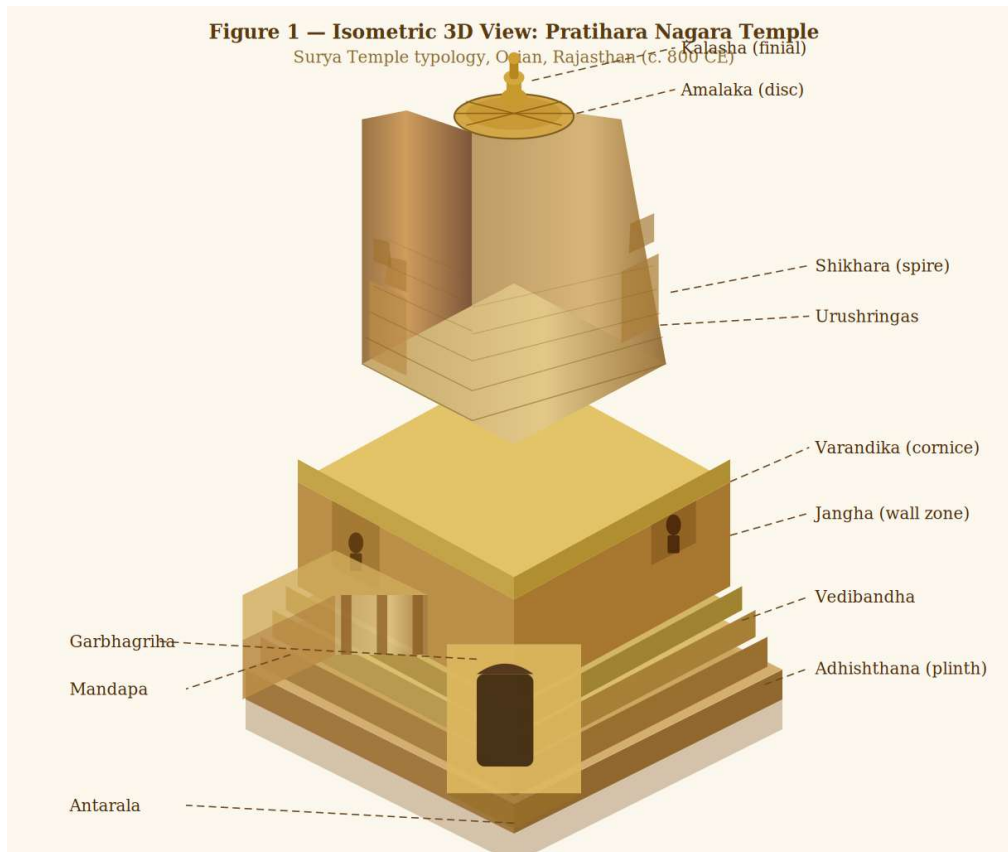


Figure 1: Isometric 3D view of a Pratihara Nagara temple showing principal architectural members from Kalasha finial to Adhishthana plinth. Typology based on the Surya Temple, Osian (c. 800 CE). Drawing by authors.

The adhishthana, or raised plinth, served both a functional and a symbolic purpose: it separated the sacred precinct from the profane ground level and provided the surface for the opening register of sculptural decoration. Above it, the vedibandha comprised a series of horizontal mouldings whose profiles became progressively more elaborate through the ninth and tenth centuries. The shikhara itself, in its earliest Pratihara manifestations at Osian (e.g., the Harihara Temple No. 1, datable to c. 750 CE), presents a relatively simple silhouette of superimposed candrashalas (horseshoe-arch motifs) arranged in vertical registers. By the ninth century, workshop experiments had produced the fully developed latina shikhara, characterised by the progressive diminution of rathas and the integration of miniature shrine models (urushringas) into the tower face (Agrawala, 1966).

3.2 The Vedibandha Moulding System

The vedibandha -- the moulded base that transitions between the plinth and the wall proper -- constitutes one of the most reliable indices of date and regional affiliation in Pratihara temple architecture. Figure 2 presents a three-dimensional cross-section of the canonical moulding sequence, and Table 2 details the Sanskrit terminology, profile type, and decorative treatment of each band.

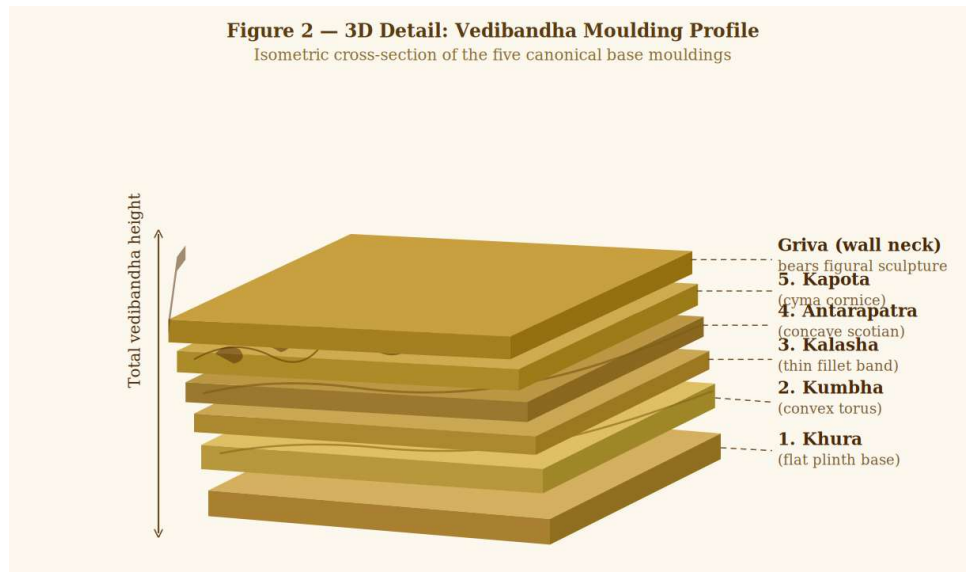


Figure 2: Three-dimensional isometric cross-section of the vedibandha moulding profile, showing all five canonical members. Cross-hatched face represents the cut section. Drawing by authors after Dhaky (1975).

Table 2: Vedibandha Moulding Sequence in Pratihara Temples

Moulding	Sanskrit Term	Profile Type	Decorative Treatment
1. Plinth	Khurapada	Vertical flat band	Plain; occasionally elephant frieze
2. Torus (lower)	Kumbha	Convex half-round	Pot-and-foliage; floral roundels; creeper scroll
3. Fillet	Kalasha	Narrow flat band	Beaded string or plain
4. Scotian	Antarapatra	Concave	Occasionally geese (hamsas) frieze
5. Cornice	Kapota	Cyma recta (S-curve)	Chandrashalas; foliage; amorous couples (mithuna)
6. Neck	Griva	Vertical register	Dikpalas, devatas, apsaras -- principal figural zone

Table 2: Standard moulding sequence of the Pratihara vedibandha with Sanskrit terminology and decorative treatment.

3.3 Key Temple Sites and Their Architectural Significance

3.3.1 The Osian Temple Complex, Rajasthan

Osian, located roughly 65 km north-west of Jodhpur, preserves the largest extant collection of Pratihara-period temples, with eighteen structures spanning the eighth to eleventh centuries surviving in varying states of completeness. The Harihara group (temples 1-3, ASI numbering) represents the earliest stratum, datable to c. 740-780 CE (Agrawala, 1966; Mankodi, 1991). The larger Surya Temple belongs to the mature phase, exhibiting the fully integrated sculptural programme that characterises the ninth-century high point of Pratihara art. Figure 3 presents an axonometric site plan of the Surya Temple complex.

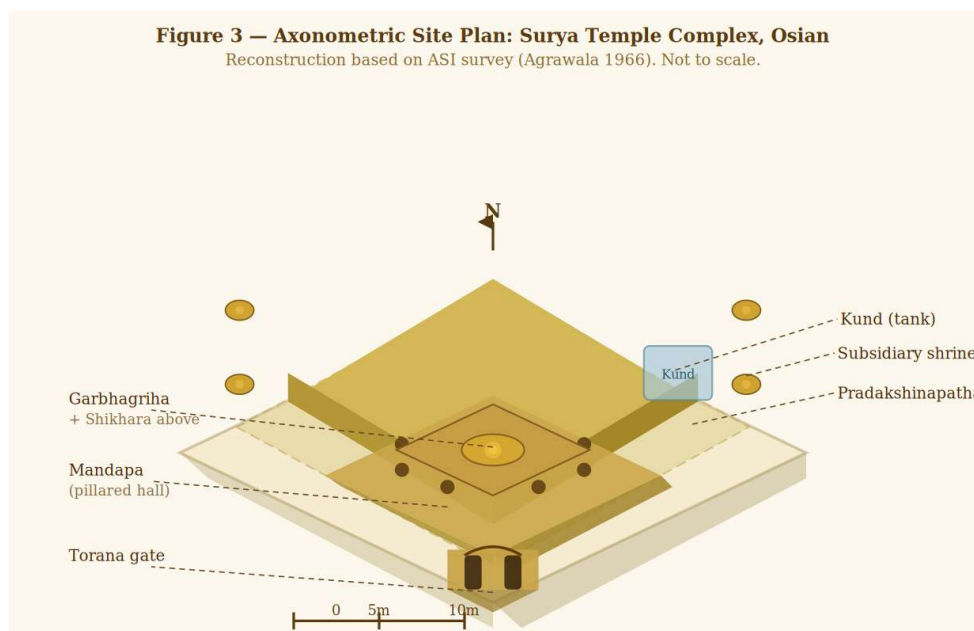


Figure 3: Bird's-eye axonometric site plan of the Surya Temple complex, Osian, showing principal spatial zones, subsidiary shrines, kund, and entrance torana. Based on ASI survey data (Agrawala, 1966). Not to scale.

3.3.2 Gwalior Fort Temples, Madhya Pradesh

The Teli ka Mandir at Gwalior, rising to approximately twenty-three metres, is among the largest surviving Pratihara structures. Its plan combines the standard sanctum and vestibule with an unusually tall superstructure that fuses Nagara and Dravida elements -- identified by Dhaky (1975) as a "Pratihara experiment." The doorframe is one of the most elaborately carved surviving examples, with nine bands of decoration including Ganga and Yamuna goddesses at the base, a mithuna frieze, and a Gajalakshmi panel at the lintel centre.

3.3.3 Deogarh, Lalitpur District

Though the celebrated Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh is generally assigned to the Gupta period (c. fifth century CE), subsequent construction activity through the eighth and ninth centuries produced a significant

Pratihara-period layer that includes a remarkable series of Vaishnava narrative panels. The Anantashayana Vishnu panel -- depicting the god reclining on the cosmic serpent Shesha -- remains one of the supreme achievements of early medieval Indian relief sculpture, and its compositional conventions were directly absorbed into the Pratihara workshop vocabulary (Vats, 1952).

4. Sculpture and Iconographic Programme

4.1 The Logic of Temple Iconography

The exterior surface of a Pratihara temple was not decorated randomly. It was a carefully organised symbolic universe in which the spatial position of each image carried specific theological meaning. The outer walls were understood as a mandala of divine presence, with the cardinal and subsidiary directions governed by their corresponding guardian deities (dikpalas or ashtadikpalas). Figure 4 illustrates this cosmological arrangement, which structured the placement of every major sculptural element on the temple exterior.

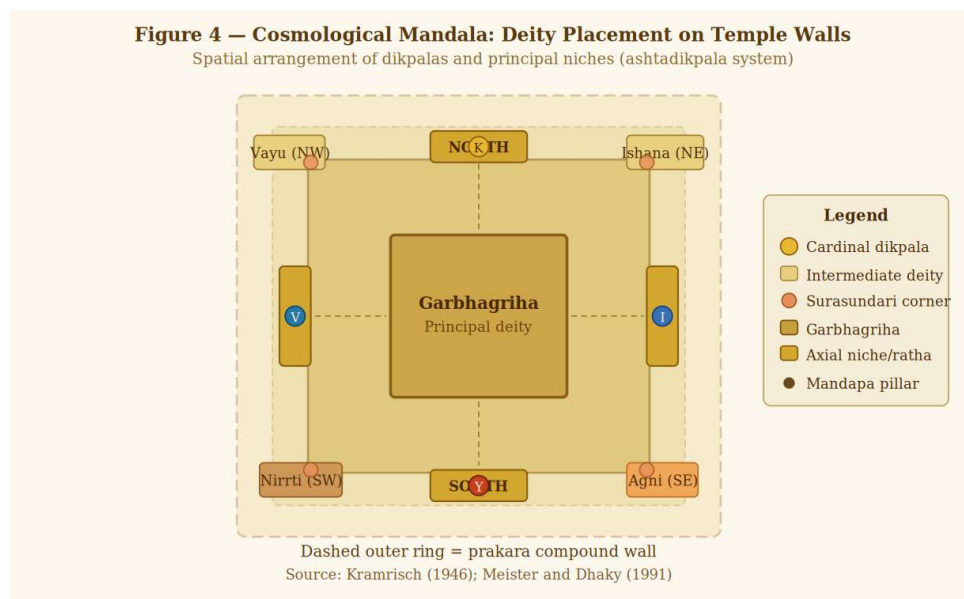


Figure 4: Cosmological mandala diagram showing the canonical placement of ashtadikpalas (eight directional guardians) and principal deity niches on the Pratihara temple exterior. Drawing by authors after Kramrisch (1946) and Meister and Dhaky (1991).

The principal deity of the shrine occupied the axial wall-niches (devakulikas) on the north, south, and west faces, while the remaining surface was given over to attendants (dvarapalas), celestial beauties (apsaras and surasundaris), amorous couples (mithunas), and narrative episodes. The mithuna motif deserves particular note, as it has frequently been misread as evidence of tantric licentiousness. Current scholarly consensus, articulated by Vidya Dehejia (1997) and Devangana Desai (1975), understands these figures as auspicious emblems

signifying fertility, abundance, and the life-sustaining power that the temple both embodies and transmits to its surroundings.

4.2 Principal Iconographic Themes

Table 3: Principal Iconographic Themes in Pratihara Temple Sculpture

Theme	Deities / Subjects	Location on Temple	Symbolic Significance
Dikpalas	Indra, Agni, Yama, Nirrti, Varuna, Vayu, Kubera, Ishana	Cardinal/intermediate wall niches	Guardian deities anchoring sacred space in cosmic directions
Dvarapalas	Armed attendants flanking doorways	Either side of main entrance	Protectors of threshold; mediators between profane and sacred
Surasundaris	Celestial beauties: mirror, flower, letter-writer	Upper wall registers	Embodiments of divine beauty; auspicious adornment of sacred space
Mithuna	Amorous couples; embrace, music, dance	Vedibandha, wall intersections	Fertility, abundance, life-force; auspicious omens
Vaishnava Cycle	Dashavataras; Vishnu Anantashayana; Trivikrama	South and west walls; lintel panels	Cosmic preservation; royal legitimation through Vishnu devotion
Shaiva Imagery	Shiva-Parvati; Nataraja; Lingodbhava	Axial niches; doorframe bands	Cosmic generative force; royal Shaiva patronage
Maha-Devi Forms	Durga Mahishasuramardini; Saraswati; Lakshmi	Niche panels; torana	Victory over chaos; learning; abundance

Table 3: Distribution and significance of principal iconographic themes in Pratihara sacred architecture.

5. Artisan Guilds, Workshop Traditions, and Technical Processes

5.1 The Organisation of Shilpin Communities

The temples of the Pratihara era were not the work of individual artists but of organised guilds of hereditary craftsmen (shilpins) whose technical knowledge was transmitted within family and sub-caste lineages and codified in the shilpa shastra manuals. The principal surviving texts of relevance -- the Samarangana Sutradhara, the Aparajitapriccha, and the Vishvakarma Prakasha -- describe the social organisation of the construction enterprise with some precision, distinguishing the sthapati (master architect), the sutragrahin (draughtsman), the takshaka (stone-cutter), and the vardhakin (mason) as the four primary occupational categories (Kramrisch, 1946; Meister, 1988).

Epigraphic evidence for the identity of individual craftsmen is rare in this period, but the Gwalior Prasasti mentions donations "by the artisans of the shilpa community" alongside those of merchants and royal officers, suggesting that workshops were legally recognised entities with collective rights of religious gifting. The continuity of workshop traditions is evident from the close stylistic correspondence between temples separated by decades, pointing to the transmission of pattern books and the apprenticeship system through which standardised proportions and ornamental vocabularies were perpetuated.

5.2 Materials and Construction Sequence

The preferred building material in Zone I (Rajasthan) was a buff-coloured fine-grained sandstone quarried from the Vindhyan formation near Jodhpur and Nagaur -- a stone that weathers to a warm golden tone and is amenable to precise carving. In Zone III (the Gangetic plain), the stone was often a harder, greyish sandstone from the Chunar quarries. The construction sequence, reconstructed from surviving structural evidence and textual prescription, proceeded through five phases: (1) site selection and ritual preparation; (2) foundation and plinth construction; (3) wall construction with simultaneous carving; (4) superstructure (shikhara) erection; and (5) consecration (pratishtha) ceremony involving the installation of the principal deity.

6. Royal Patronage, Religious Ideology, and the Politics of Sacred Space

The relationship between Pratihara kingship and temple construction was reciprocal: temples legitimated royal power by associating it with divine sovereignty, while royal patronage provided the resources that enabled architectural ambition to be realised on a monumental scale. The ideological mechanism was most explicit in the case of Vaishnava temples, where the identification of the king with Vishnu as the sustainer of cosmic and social order (dharma) was articulated through the choice of deity, the placement of the royal portrait in the doorframe band, and the inscription of the king's victories in the temple's dedicatory verses.

Mihira Bhoja's adoption of the epithet "Adivaraha" (Primordial Boar, after the Varaha avatar of Vishnu) is particularly significant. The Varaha avatar -- in which Vishnu assumes the form of a cosmic boar to rescue the earth goddess from the primordial ocean -- was understood as a prototype of the king who "raises" his kingdom from the chaos of disorder. Several Pratihara temples incorporate a prominent Varaha panel in their south-face niche, reinforcing the ideological equation between the deity's cosmic act and the king's martial prowess (Huntington, 1985).

Table 4: Major Pratihara Royal Patrons and Their Architectural Commissions

Ruler	Approx. Dates	Principal Structures	Religious Affiliation / Key Donation
Nagabhata I	c. 730-760 CE	Harihara Temples, Osian	Shaiva-Vaishnava syncretism; anti-Arab military donations
Vatsaraja	c. 775-800 CE	Sachiya Mata Temple base, Osian	Shakta patron; silver vessel donation (Jodhpur inscription)
Nagabhata II	c. 805-833 CE	Renovation of Kannauj temples	Vaishnava; Ganga-Yamuna doorframe iconography introduced
Mihira Bhoja	c. 836-885 CE	Teli ka Mandir; Adivaraha chapel	Adopted epithet Adivaraha; Vishnu cult primary; Varaha coins
Mahendrapala I	c. 885-910 CE	Gwalior fort temples; Deogarh additions	Vaishnava; Rajashekhara as court poet; extensive endowments
Mahipala	c. 912-944 CE	Khajuraho early temples	Transitional; endowments shared with Chandela sub-chiefs

Table 4: Principal Gurjara-Pratihara rulers and their documented architectural and artistic patronage.

7. Legacy, Influence, and the Transmission of the Pratihara Aesthetic

The dissolution of centralised Pratihara authority during the tenth and eleventh centuries did not entail the disappearance of the artistic tradition it had fostered. Rather, the fragmentation of the empire into a constellation

of regional successor states -- the Chandelas in Bundelkhand, the Paramaras in Malwa, the Chahamanas in Rajasthan -- distributed the Pratihara workshop tradition across the subcontinent, where it underwent localised transformation while retaining its fundamental structural and iconographic vocabulary.

The most celebrated outcome of this diffusion is the Chandela temple complex at Khajuraho (c. 950-1050 CE), which deploys the Pratihara architectural grammar at a scale and with a decorative density that far exceeds its prototypes. The sandstone used at Khajuraho is the same Vindhyan formation quarried for the earlier Rajasthan temples; the plan types represent systematic elaborations of experiments visible in the late Pratihara phase at Osian and Badoh. The mithuna sculptures of Khajuraho, though executed with greater virtuosity, belong to an iconographic tradition firmly established in the Pratihara eighth century (Desai, 1975).

The Paramara tradition, centred on Dhara in western Madhya Pradesh, developed the Pratihara inheritance in a somewhat different direction, emphasising the elaborate mandapa rather than the shikhara and producing, at Udayapur (the Udayeshvara Temple, c. 1059-1080 CE), one of the most perfectly proportioned temples in the Nagara repertoire. The Chahamana temples of eastern Rajasthan maintained the Osian workshop conventions well into the twelfth century, demonstrating the remarkable durability of the Pratihara canonical forms.

Table 5: Comparative Chronological Framework: Pratihara and Successor Schools

Period	Dates (CE)	School / Dynasty	Key Monument	Pratihara Inheritance
Early Pratihara	730-800	Gurjara-Pratihara	Harihara Temple, Osian	Foundation of Nagara canon; early vedibandha
Mature Pratihara	800-900	Gurjara-Pratihara	Surya Temple, Osian	Latina shikhara; full iconographic programme
Late Pratihara	900-1000	Gurjara-Pratihara	Teli ka Mandir, Gwalior	Hybrid Nagara-Dravida; elaborate doorframes
Early Chandela	950-1020	Chandela, Bundelkhand	Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho	Multi-spired plan; mithuna elaboration

Period	Dates (CE)	School / Dynasty	Key Monument	Pratihara Inheritance
Mature Chandela	1020-1060	Chandela, Bundelkhand	Kandariya Mahadeva	Apex of north Indian shikhara
Paramara	1000-1100	Paramara, Malwa	Udayeshvara, Udayapur	Refined proportions; mandapa emphasis
Chahamana	1000-1200	Chahamana, Rajasthan	Sas-Bahu, Gwalior	Conservation of Osian conventions

Table 5: Comparative chronological framework showing the Pratihara tradition and its absorption into regional successor schools.

8. Conclusion

The sacred architecture of the Gurjara-Pratihara era represents one of the foundational chapters in the long history of Indian temple-building. Working within the inherited framework of the Nagara order, Pratihara architects, sculptors, and patron-kings collectively developed a coherent and technically sophisticated aesthetic programme that served simultaneously as cosmological model, political instrument, and devotional space. The systematisation of temple components, the elaboration of the vedibandha moulding sequence, the integration of an all-encompassing iconographic programme articulated through the ashtadikpala system, and the organisation of hereditary artisan guilds -- all of these achievements were, in the fullest sense, the work of the Pratihara era.

This paper has argued that the Pratihara artistic tradition deserves to be understood not merely as a regional prelude to the more celebrated productions of the Chandela or Paramara schools, but as an achievement of intrinsic and enduring significance. The temples of Osian, Gwalior, and Deogarh are works of genuine creative ambition, remarkable for both the clarity of their spatial conception and the vitality of their sculptural surfaces. They stand as evidence that the intersection of royal patronage, organised craft knowledge, and living religious conviction is capable, in any era, of producing art of permanent value.

Future research directions include: a comprehensive corpus study of all surviving Pratihara-period inscriptions for evidence of workshop organisation; geochemical sourcing studies of stone to map quarry-to-temple supply chains; and a systematic comparative analysis of the Pratihara sculptural vocabulary with contemporaneous productions in the Pala, Rashtrakuta, and Gurjara kingdoms, which would illuminate the extent of inter-regional artistic exchange in early medieval India.

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