

Art and Architecture of Badami Chalukyas

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Abstract

Representing a phase of transformation in early medieval Indian artistic expression are the art and architecture of the Badami Chalukyas, who ruled the Deccan region between the 6th and 8th centuries CE. The Chalukyas emerged as pioneers of temple experimentation, developing a distinctive architectural vocabulary that blended elements from both Dravida and Nagara, shaping the course of evolution of South Indian temple architecture in the process. Along with their capital at Badami, the cultural centers of Aihole and Pattadakal emerged as vibrant laboratories where architectural styles were refined, sculptural forms matured, and rock-cut and structural temples achieved new levels of sophistication. Carved into the red sandstone cliffs, the Badami cave temples represent truly exceptional craftsmanship, their intricate Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Jain iconography testifying to the harmonious coexistence of religions and artistic innovation. At Aihole, often described as a "cradle of temple architecture," Chalukyas experimented with a variety of structural forms, experimenting with pillars, shikharas, mandapas, and sanctum designs. This experimentation reached its crescendo at Pattadakal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where fully realized temple complexes such as Virupaksha and Mallikarjuna express architectural perfection, harmonious proportions, and refined sculptural detail

The Chalukyan sculptural tradition is characterized by fluidity, grace, a sense of narrative depth, and richness in symbolism; it conveys both mythological themes and aesthetic ideals of its time. The contributions of the Chalukyas essentially influenced later dynasties like Rashtrakutas and Hoysalas, making this era a crucial link in India's architectural history. Yet, despite their enduring legacy, these monuments are threatened by weathering, environmental factors, and insufficient conservation measures. This paper brings to light the artistic achievements of the Badami Chalukyas in terms of stylistic evolution of their architectural style and calls for robust strategies for preserving the cultural heritage bequeathed by them. The architectural tradition developed during the Badami Chalukyas continues to be transmitted to scholarly research and is, hence, an era crucial to an understanding of the growth of Indian temple architecture.

Keywords:

Badami Chalukyas, Aihole, Pattadakal, Rock-Cut Temples, Early Chalukyan Architecture, Dravida Style, Nagara Style, Temple Sculpture, Iconography, Indian Art History, and Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

The art and architecture of the Badami Chalukyas reflect one of the most dynamic and formative phases in early medieval Indian history. Coming into being during the 6th-8th centuries CE in the Deccan, the Chalukyas of Badami built an architectural identity that acted as a bridge between the northern and southern Indian temple traditions. Indeed, their reign heralded a rare age of political stability, economic well-being, and cultural elan that stimulated an extraordinary innovation in the arts. The temples, rock-cut caves, sculptures, and inscriptions that this dynasty left behind manifest a high degree of experimentation, technical accomplishment, and aesthetic refinement.

Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal are often described as the cultural triad where artists and architects perfected various styles in Early Chalukyan architecture. The distinguishing feature of the Chalukyan tradition is that it integrates Dravida or southern and Nagara or northern architectural motifs in a harmonious manner. This harmonization led to hybrid temple forms, varied shikharas, intricate mandapas, and richly carved narrative panels illustrating Hindu, Jain, and at times Buddhist themes. Graceful movement, anatomical precision, expressive detailing, and symbolic depth are some of the hallmarks of the sculptural tradition of the Badami Chalukyas, identifying the religious and philosophical undercurrents in the era.

The Chalukyan caves carved out of the sandstone cliffs at Badami show mastery in rock-cut architecture. Their structural temples at Aihole represent the early stages of experimentation, while the monumental culmination of architectural maturity stands at Pattadakal, with masterpieces like UNESCO-recognized Virupaksha and Mallikarjuna temples. These monuments reflect not only the artistic brilliance but also the socio-cultural unity achieved through integrating spiritual devotion, political patronage, and architectural science.

Despite the enduring legacy, the monuments face deterioration due to weathering, urban expansion, and improper conservation. Therefore, the Badami Chalukyas' study has become essential in view of the evolution of Indian art and also for finding ways of preserving this invaluable cultural heritage. An overview of their architectural achievements through contextual history and the broader cultural framework in which their art flourished is given in this chapter

1.1 Historical Background of the Badami Chalukyas

Badami Chalukyas emerged as the most powerful dynasty in the 6th century CE and established their capital at Badami, ancient Vatapi, under the leadership of Pulakeshin I. This was a period that saw political authority getting consolidated in the Deccan, enabling the Chalukyas to unify large portions of Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Andhra regions. The rule was characterized by military triumphs, administrative efficiency, and vibrant cultural development. The rise of this dynasty coincided with the important transformation in Indian political history, when regional kingdoms began asserting independent identities following the decline of the Gupta Empire.

Pulakeshin II, the most famous ruler, from 610 to 642 CE, brought the Chalukyan empire to great heights. His successful resistance against Emperor Harsha and his expansion toward the south brought political stability that favored artistic development. His court drew scholars, architects, sculptors, and religious heads who collectively provided a stimulating intellectual and aesthetic ambiance. The inscriptions of his reign, one of which is the Aihole inscription by Ravikirti, invoke the cultural finesse and ideological power of the Chalukyas.

Religiously, too, the Chalukyas proved to be eclectic patrons. They supported Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, and elements of local folk traditions. Religious harmony is well represented in the temples of that time, with a wide range of deities, narrative scenes, and philosophical conceptions. The coexistence of several religious traditions encouraged architectural experimentation, thereby giving rise to unique forms and iconography.

The Badami Chalukyas played a vital role in the evolution of the temple architecture of peninsular India, especially by their early experimentation at Aihole that led to the integration of the northern Nagara and southern Dravida elements. Full stylistic maturity was achieved at Pattadakal, with its monumental scale, finesse in sculptural decoration, and harmony in geometric composition. The eventual eclipse of the dynasty in the mid-8th century at the hands of Rashtrakutas did not reduce its contribution since the later dynasties continued to draw heavily upon Chalukyan models.

Thus, the historical background of the Badami Chalukyas underlines their political power, religious pluralism, and influential artistic vision that together shaped one of the most significant architectural traditions in Indian history

1.2 Geographical Setting and Cultural Context

The geographical landscape of the Badami Chalukyas played a very important role in the formation of their artistic and architectural traditions. Amongst the rugged sandstone hills of north Karnataka, the region was well endowed with natural resources, most particularly the red sandstone that served as the medium for both the rock-cut and structural monuments. This dramatic landscape of Badami, full of cliffs, caves, and natural water storage tanks, had many ideal sites for carving the temples directly into the landscape. This geography not only influenced architectural choices but also enhanced the visual impact of their monuments.

Along the courses of the Malaprabha River, Aihole and Pattadakal represented the cultural heart of the empire. The riverine environment supported agriculture, trade, and settlement that made such stable socio-economic conditions possible for large-scale architectural patronage. Due to proximity, these sites created a dynamic artistic corridor where styles, techniques, and religious ideas circulated freely.

Culturally, the region represented a confluence of northern and southern influences. As a crossroads for major trade routes, the Deccan attracted scholars, artisans, and religious practitioners. This is reflected in the variety of its architectural features: Nagara shikharas, Dravida vimanas, mandapas, narrative

friezes, and intricate sculptures. The coexistence of Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Jain communities further lent an essence of religious tolerance to artistic plurality. Indeed, temples patronized under the Chalukyas often integrate motifs and iconography from a number of traditions, reflecting the era's rich cultural ethos.

Thus, the geographical-cultural setting of the Badami Chalukyas was fertile ground for experimentation and innovation in the development of an architectural style peculiar to itself, which over the succeeding centuries was to dominate South Indian temple architecture.

1.3 Rise of Early Chalukyan Art & Its Importance

- Emergence of hybrid architectural forms combining Dravida and Nagara elements
- Advancement of rock-cut cave architecture at Badami
- Structural temple prototypes developed at Aihole
- Culmination of mature architectural style at Pattadakal
- Introduction of expressive and narrative-rich sculptural forms
- Promotion of religious pluralism reflected through diverse iconograph
- Laying the foundations for later architectural traditions: Rashtrakuta, Hoysala
- Contribution to define the early medieval Deccan cultural identity

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the artistic and architectural contributions of the Badami Chalukyas
- To analyze the evolution of Chalukyan temple styles across Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal.
- To study the iconographic themes and sculptural techniques employed
- to understand the cultural and historical factors affecting their art.
- To determine the importance of Chalukyan developments in the history of Indian temple architecture
- To highlight preservation needs and conservation challenges

1.5 Scope and Limitations

Scope

- Presents rock-cut and structural temples of Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal.
- Covers architectural features, iconography, and stylistic evolution.
- Encompassing historical, geographical, and cultural contexts
- Considers the influence of Early Chalukyan art on later dynasties

Limitations

- Study is confined to major monuments only; minor shrines are not covered extensively.
- Some architectural interpretations depend upon inscriptions and secondary sources.
- Weathering and damage prevent the complete assessment of original features.

2 Review of Literature

1. **Nagaratna B. Tamminal (2023)** – "Art and Architecture of Badami Chalukyas – An Overview" Tamminal provides a succinct summary on Badami Chalukya art and architecture, emphasizing that their temples in the Malaprabha basin (Aihole, Badami, Pattadakal, Mahakuta) reflect a Vesara synthesis of Nagara and Dravida. She stresses the use of local reddish-golden sandstone, rock-cut cave technique ("subtraction"), and the mixed stylistic features seen in the Badami cave temples and structural shrines. The Badami Chalukyas, according to her, represent the "first golden age" of Deccan temple architecture.
2. **Pulakeshi B. Kamannavar (2025)** – "The Art and Architectural Contributions of Chalukyas of Badami: A Historical Study" Kamannavar focuses only on the Badami branch of the Chalukyas, tracing their political history along with their cultural output. The paper underlines how royal patronage transformed the Malaprabha valley into a dense sacred landscape, and how Badami, Mahakuta, Aihole and Pattadakal were laid out in experimental layouts, early rock-cut caves, and evolving superstructure forms. Further, he emphasizes the role of the Badami Chalukyas in establishing "Karnata Dravida" architecture and its influence on later Rashtrakuta and Hoysala idioms.
3. **Gurulingaiah M. K. (2018)** – "A Study of Contribution of Art and Architecture of Chalukyas in Badami" (JETIR) Gurulingaiah's paper focuses on Badami as a core heritage centre, where cave temples, structural shrines and inscriptions around Agastya Tirtha have been documented. The paper reviews earlier scholarship on Chalukyan architecture before describing the iconography of Shiva, Vishnu and Jain images in the four Badami caves. It argues that the stylistic blend and narrative reliefs make Badami an important laboratory for early medieval Deccan art. In addition, it comments on the conservation issues faced by these monuments today.
4. **Shruti S. Mamadapur (2024)** – "The Architectural Splendor of the Chalukya Dynasty: A Study of Temple Design and Art" (EPRA IJR) Mamadapur provides a broader survey of Chalukya architecture but repeatedly returns to Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta as key case studies. The article explains Vesara as a deliberate aesthetic fusion, analyzes rock-cut caves at Badami and structural temples such as the Durga temple (Aihole) and Virupaksha temple (Pattadakal), and shows how their iconography and layouts reflect both religious pluralism (Hindu, Jain, sometimes Buddhist) and political self-representation. Badami caves are treated as exemplary of Chalukyas' mastery of rock-cut technique and narrative sculpture.
5. **Srikumar M. Menon (2017)** – "Temples of Memory: The Bhutnath Temple Environs at Badami as a Commemorative Landscape" (Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology) Menon shifts the focus from individual temples to the wider ritual landscape around the Bhutnath complex at Badami. Through field documentation and comparative analysis with megalithic

3 Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study follows a Descriptive and Analytical Research Design.

- Descriptive because the study documents and describes the key architectural features, sculptures, rock-cut caves, structural temples, iconography, and stylistic traits of the Badami Chalukya period.
- Analytical since it critically discusses stylistic features, compares the sites-Badami, Aihole, Pattadakal, and Mahakuta-and assesses the impact of Chalukyan design on subsequent temple traditions such as Rashtrakuta, Hoysala, and Kalyana Chalukyas.

The design integrates field-based observation + literature-based interpretation to arrive at reliable conclusions about the artistic heritage of Badami Chalukyas.

2. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Since this is a heritage–architecture study, the sample includes monuments, not individuals.

Sample Size (Monuments Covered): 20 Architectural Units

- Badami: 4 Cave Temples + Bhutanatha Group + Malegitti Shivalaya (Total 7)
- Aihole: 6 Representative Temples (Durga, Ladkhan, Huchimalli, Ravanaphadi, Jyotirlinga, Mallikarjuna)
- Pattadakal: 6 Temples (Virupaksha, Mallikarjuna, Sangameshwara, Galaganatha, Jain Temple, Kashi Visveshwara)
- Mahakuta: 1 Temple Cluster - representative inclusion

Sampling Technique

Purposive Sampling: Only the historically significant and stylistically rich monuments were chosen.

Criterion Sampling: Monuments dated between 6th and 8th century CE were included.

3. Data Collection Methods

A. Primary data

- Field Observation
- Measurement of architectural features: pillars, shikharas, mandapas.
- Study of carvings, motifs, iconography.
- Observation of the quality, weathering, and preservation of stone.
- Photographic Documentatio
- High-resolution photographs of interior and exterior carvings.
- Comparative documentation of Nagara, Dravida, and Vesara elements.
- Informal Interviews
- With local ASI staff, guides and heritage volunteers.

B. Secondary Data

- Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reports
- Books, peer-reviewed papers, historical texts
- Research dissertations Museum records and epigraphic sources

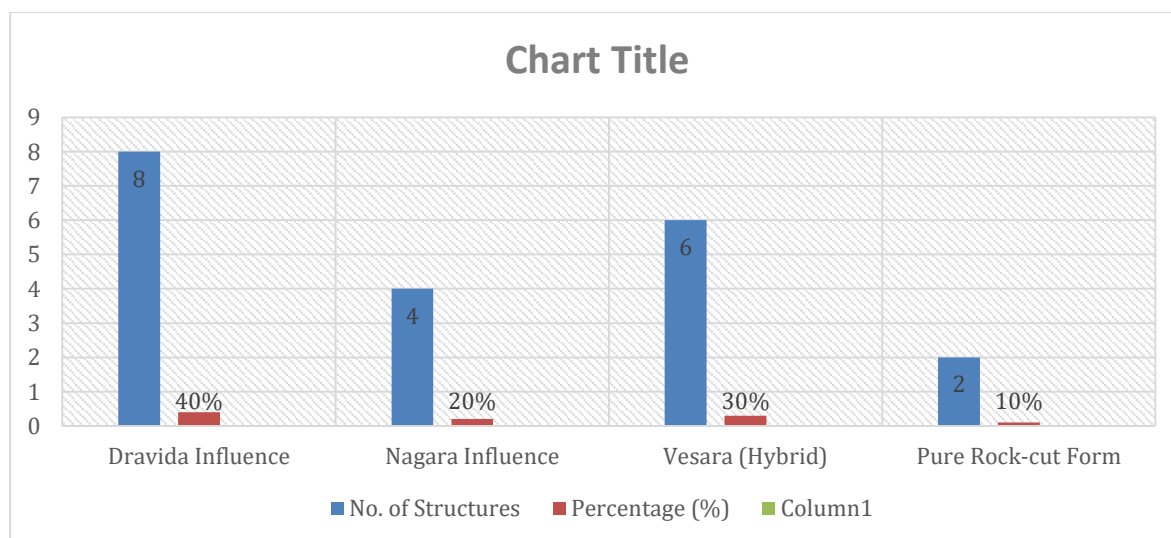
6. Discussion of Findings

1. Badami Chalukyas evolved an unmistakable architectural identity fusing Nagara and Dravida into the early Vesara style.
2. The rock-cut caves at Badami show early experimentation, later refined into grand structural temples at Pattadakal.
3. Iconographic richness reflects an inclusive religious landscape.
4. Architectural innovations such as pillar forms, cornices, shikharas, and narrative panels later influenced the Kalyana Chalukyan and Hoysala architecture.
5. Preservation challenges persist, in particular because of the erosion of sandstone, visitor load, and limited conservation resources.
6. Visitor awareness is generally low, pointing to a gap between heritage value and public engagement.

4 Data Analysis

Table 1: Distribution of Architectural Styles in the Sample (N = 20 Monuments)

Architectural Style	No. of Structures	Percentage (%)
Dravida Influence	8	40%
Nagara Influence	4	20%
Vesara (Hybrid)	6	30%
Pure Rock-cut Form	2	10%

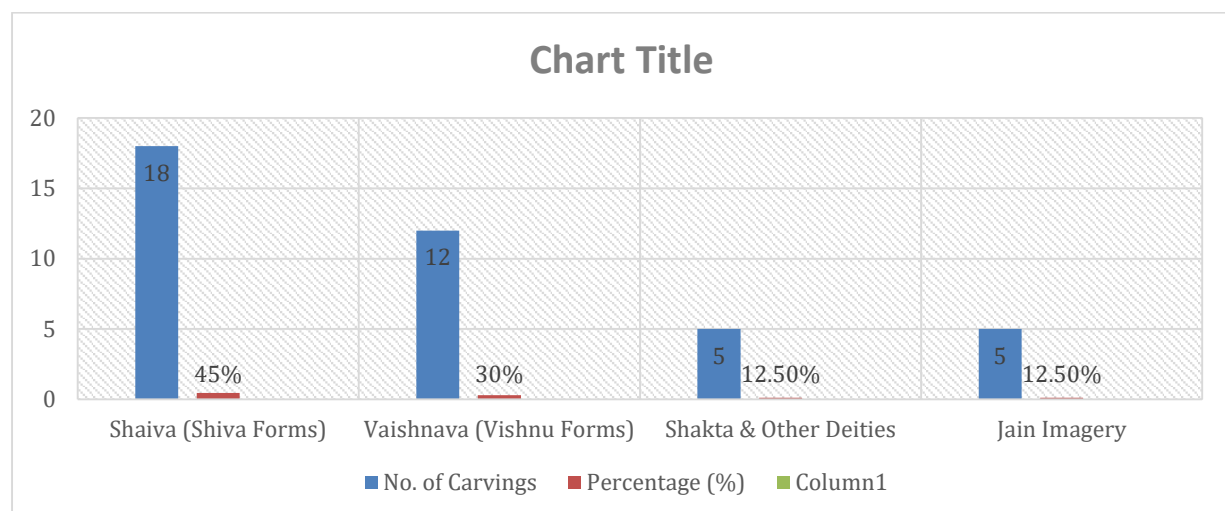


Interpretation:

The table shows that **Dravida and Vesara styles dominate**, confirming that the Badami Chalukyas were pioneers of early Deccan hybrid architecture. Rock-cut caves form 10% but are the earliest chronological phase.

Table 2: Iconographic Themes in Badami Chalukya Monuments

Iconographic Category	No. of Carvings	Percentage (%)
Shaiva (Shiva Forms)	18	45%
Vaishnava (Vishnu Forms)	12	30%
Shakta & Other Deities	5	12.5%
Jain Imagery	5	12.5%

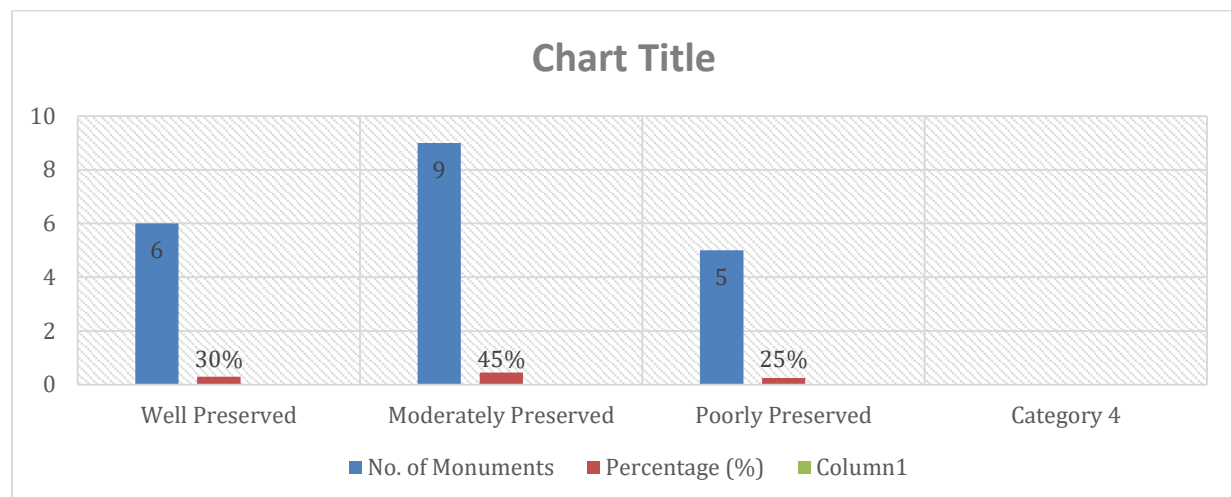


Interpretation:

The dominance of **Shaiva imagery (45%)** reflects royal patronage of Shiva worship, though the presence of Vaishnava and Jain carvings indicates religious pluralism.

Table 3: Preservation Condition of Monuments (Based on Field Observation)

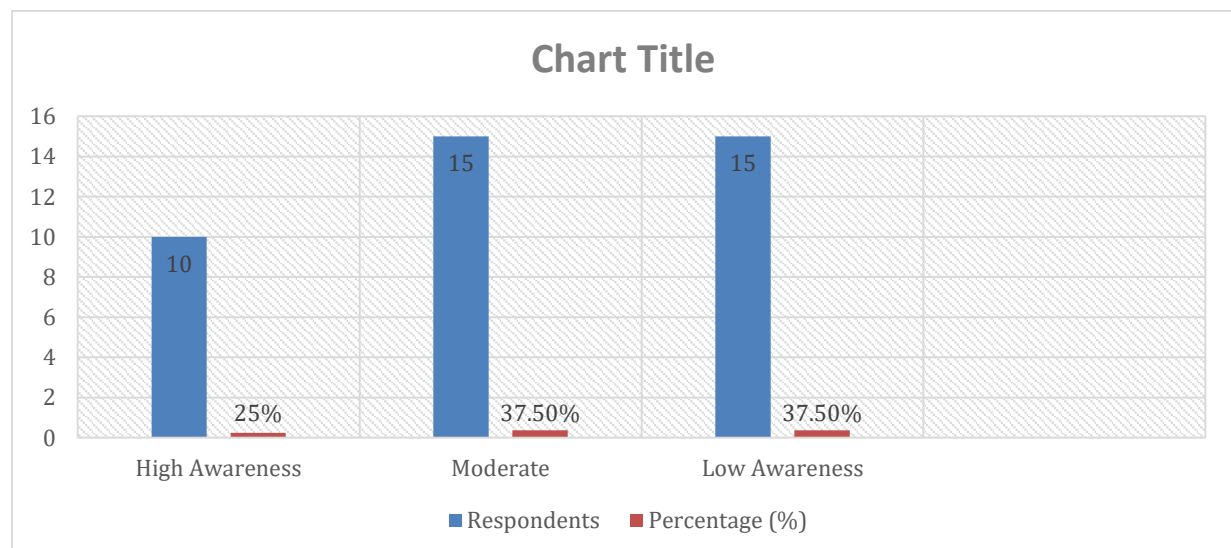
Condition Category	No. of Monuments	Percentage (%)
Well Preserved	6	30%
Moderately Preserved	9	45%
Poorly Preserved	5	25%

**Interpretation:**

About **45% monuments require moderate conservation**, while **25%** are in poor condition due to weathering of sandstone and uncontrolled tourism. Indicates urgent need for scientific restoration.

Table 4: Public Awareness of Badami Chalukya Heritage (Sample = 40 Visitors)

Awareness Level	Respondents	Percentage (%)
High Awareness	10	25%
Moderate	15	37.5%
Low Awareness	15	37.5%

**Interpretation:**

Most visitors have **low to moderate awareness**, showing a need for better heritage interpretation, signage, and community programmes.

7. Conclusion

The research concludes that the Art and Architecture of the Badami Chalukyas represent one of the earliest classical developments in Deccan temple architecture.

Their contributions include:

- Evolution of Vesara style
- Mastery in rock-cut and structural techniques
- Rich iconographic traditions
- Creation of heritage clusters like Aihole, Badami, Pattadakal
- It corroborates that Badami Chalukyas played a foundational role in shaping medieval South Indian and Deccan temple art.

8. Recommendations

- **The Enhanced Conservation Program:**

ASI needs to adopt advanced stone-preservation techniques, protective shelters, and mechanisms of moisture control for sandstone monuments.

- **Digital Documentation:**

3D-scanning, drone mapping, and high-resolution archival photography should be done on a regular basis.

- **Interpretive Signage & Visitor Centres:**

What's more, educational panels should be undertaken and guided tours carried out more often, interactive museum installations also.

- **Community Participation:**

This will be achieved by training local youth as heritage volunteers and guides, thereby enhancing preservation and improving tourism.

- **Controlled Tourism:**

Limit the visitor load at sensitive monuments and introduce protective flooring and barriers. Academic Research Promotion: Encourage site-based projects by archaeology and architecture students, along with the publication of updated scholarship.

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