

# Nidigonda and the Muppeshwara Trikulalayam: Reconstructing Kakatiya Cultural Landscapes in Medieval Telangana

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## **Abstract:**

The emergence of the Kakatiya dynasty (12th–14th centuries CE) marked a transformative phase in the socio-cultural and architectural history of the Deccan. This paper examines the temple-centered cultural landscape of Nidigonda, with particular focus on the Muppeshwara Trikulalayam. Moving beyond conventional architectural description, the study situates the temple within broader frameworks of political authority, sacred geography, and socio-economic organization. By integrating epigraphical, sculptural, and spatial evidence, the paper highlights the role of temples as dynamic institutions embedded within the Kakatiya “Tank–Temple–Town” model. It further explores the layered religious history of the site, including evidence of Jain presence, and evaluates ongoing challenges in heritage preservation. The study argues that Nidigonda represents a micro-regional node that reflects the larger processes of state formation, cultural synthesis, and artistic innovation under Kakatiya rule.

**Keywords:** Kakatiya, Sacred Landscape, Trikulalayam, Telangana, Temple Economy, Epigraphy, Medieval Deccan.

## **Historiography and Research Context**

Scholarly engagement with the Kakatiya dynasty has traditionally focused on major monuments such as the Ramappa Temple and the Thousand Pillar Temple. Foundational works by historians such as P. V. Parabrahma Sastry and architectural historians like George Michell have emphasized stylistic and dynastic narratives.

However, micro-regional centers like Nidigonda remain underexplored. This study contributes to filling that gap by focusing on a lesser-known yet historically significant site, thereby expanding the scope of Kakatiya studies beyond monumental centers.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining:

- **Epigraphical Analysis:** Study of inscriptions<sup>1</sup> for political, social, and economic data
- **Architectural Survey:** Examination of structural features and stylistic elements
- **Iconographic Analysis:** Interpretation of sculptural themes and symbolism

- **Landscape Approach:** Understanding spatial relationships between tanks, temples, and settlements

Such a multi-pronged method enables a holistic reconstruction of Nidigonda's historical significance.

**Conceptual Framework: Temple as Institution**

Temples in medieval South India functioned as complex institutions rather than isolated religious structures. They acted as:

- Economic centers managing land grants and redistribution
- Cultural hubs fostering music, dance, and education
- Political symbols legitimizing royal authority

The concept of Saptasantanas underscores the ideological importance of temple construction, linking it to dharma and social prestige.

**The Kakatiya Sacred Landscape: Tank-Temple-Town Nexus**

The Kakatiya developmental model represents a sophisticated understanding of environmental and social planning. The integration of water management (tanks), religious infrastructure (temples), and habitation (towns) created sustainable and cohesive communities.

This model can be interpreted through the lens of **sacred geography**, where water bodies and temples together structured both physical and spiritual landscapes. Nidigonda exemplifies this integrated planning, with temple remains located in proximity to water sources and settlement zones.

**నేటి నిడిగొండ.. నాటి నతవాడి**



The infographic contains several panels with text and images:

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**Nidigonda as a Political and Cultural Node: The Rise of the Natawadi Chiefs**

The Natawadi chiefs, who were initially vassals of the Western Chalukyas, later formed marital alliances with the Kakatiyas. The Narsampet inscription mentions them for the first time. The son of Natawadi chief Buddharaju was Durgaraju. There is an inscription in the Nidigonda Racheruvu (lake) bearing Durgaraju's name. Kakatiya Mahadeva's mother was Muppaladevi, Durgaraju's sister. Mahadeva married his two daughters, Mailama and Kundamamba, to Durgaraju's grandsons, Buddharaju Rudra (who had the same name as Pedarudra and Vakkatij Mallarudra). Mailama received the Inugurthi and Bayyaram regions as grants, while Kundama received the Nidigonda, Kundavaram, Janagam, and Chennur regions. The Inugurthi and Bayyaram inscriptions, and the recently discovered Redlavada inscription fragment, mention Mailama, while the Nidigonda and Kundavaram inscriptions mention

Kundama. The Muppeshwara temple in Nidigonda, which is in ruins and awaiting restoration, was built in the name of Muppambika, the wife of Duggarasa (Durgaraju), a daughter of the Kakatiya family. Duggaraju also had a lake called Rattasamudram dug there.

An inscription detailing the donations made on December 24, 1104, is located in the lake. Dugga Bhupati donated two marturus of land and 20 karambas of land for the deity's rituals and for the priest's sustenance. The inscription reveals that Muppambika also donated the Gundamibanda Nerupugunta village for the divine rituals and for the priest. (Warangal District Inscriptions, Page No. 37, Inscription No. 17) Another inscription from Nidigonda was found on a broken stone next to the old Shiva temple. It was commissioned by Kundamamba, the wife of Natavadi Rudra and sister of Ganapatideva. This inscription is similar to the Kundaram inscription. The donations made to the temples in the name of her father Mahadeva, brother Ganapatideva, son Madhava, and husband Rudra are described in this inscription. The Kakatiya dynastic lineage is also detailed. The poet of this inscription was Bhalabharati.

In Nidigonda, sculptures of both the Western Chalukyas and the Kakatias are found together. The old Shiva temple is in the Chalukya style, but during its restoration, pillars in the Kakatiya style were erected. Around the small hill in Nidigonda, there are temples and sculptures. Some of these appear to be pre-Chalukya. It is regrettable that inscriptions with sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras were used for the steps of the mandapa next to the Shiva temple. This is silent evidence of an attack on Jainism. If the content of those inscriptions were known, the history of Nidigonda could be traced back to even earlier periods. A Shivalinga, its base, and Nandi sculptures from the Kakatiya period have been found broken. Six or seven hero stones are visible in the village. They are evidence that a battle took place here in the past. One of the hero stones looks like a royal sculpture. The king's attire and the high-heeled sandals worn by this hero, which are not seen on anyone else's feet, are unique. High-heeled sandals are seen on Veerabhadra in Kakatiya sculptures and on the Madanikas in the Ramappa temple. To the northeast of the village, the Muppeshwara temple lies in ruins, presenting a desolate sight. It is a temple from the Chalukya period, perhaps repaired during the Kakatiya period, which is why Kakatiya sculptures are found in this temple.

The group of sculptures depicting divine worship, carved on the rocky outcrops behind the Nidigonda High School, is unlike anything seen elsewhere. In these sculptures, which face east, there are 9+1 figures on the left side: eight women, a man with a crown and royal attire, and a boy. Except for the boy, everyone has fly whisks in their left hands and fruits (like coconuts?) in their right hands. The king appears taller than everyone else. The women's adornments—their earrings, hairstyles, anklets, and the way their sarees are draped—all resemble Kakatiya sculptures. Besides these, three other women facing them are also seen with fly whisks in their right hands and fruits in their left hands. It seems they are all going to worship the deity. However, the sculpture of the deity is not visible here. These half-relief sculptures depicting the king, queen, prince, and their attendants are very beautiful. Everyone's feet and toes are finely carved.

A label inscription appears in a single line above their heads. The script is completely damaged; only a few letters are visible. Another sculpture is carved behind these. This figure holds a fly-whisk and a fruit in his hands. There is also a label inscription above his head, which reads ‘...ladharudu’. On the sculptures, in one place, the letters ‘‘Vadu Brahmnadevaninna...lukaram Nidiko...’’ and the name ‘Kamavalli’ are visible. Elsewhere on this hill, there is a beautiful sculpture of Bhairava. It is similar to the sculptures mentioned above.

Another ancient Bhairava sculpture is located on the other side of the hill, beyond the Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy hill. Another Bhairava idol is found near the flagpole outside the Shiva temple. A similar one was found in Kallem. The Virabhadra sculpture there is unique. It is noteworthy that this idol has a chakra and a conch in its right and left hands on the back. Among the sculptures found in the village, there is a head of a Shaivite sculpture and a Jain Yakshini sculpture in one place.

The Jain inscription pillars on the steps of the Shiva temple's mandapa, and this Yakshini sculpture, suggest that there was a Jain basadi (monastery) in Nidigonda in the past.

Nidigonda village is a beautiful hamlet that captivates with its natural beauty. The village, flourishing with lakes, ponds, streams, hills, and abundant agriculture, welcomes us with its charming natural surroundings and fills us with joy. It is not only rich in natural beauty but also a unique repository of historical traces and spiritual radiance. This village greets us, showcasing its unique features from the time of primitive man to the present day. Nidigonda is a village that flourished under the rule of the Satavahanas, Rashtrakutas, Kalyani Chalukyas, Kakatiyas, and the Natavadi feudatory kings. It served as the residence of the Natavadi kings, who followed the Kakatiyas, acting as their vassals and forming marital alliances with them, thus shining as a glorious feudatory kingdom and radiating a legacy of splendor. The dilapidated Muppeshwara Trikuta temple, awaiting restoration, preserves countless remarkable sculptures in its embrace, offering future generations a glimpse into the culture of that era. These include sculptures of Kalamukha Shaiva gurus, Sapta Tala Bhanjanam, Vali Vadha, Tara Vilapam, Ashtadikpalas with their vehicles, Uma Maheshwara, Nandi, Garuda, Hanuman, the pedestal of the Sun god, dancers, musicians, soldiers, Gaja Dhara, Simha Dhara, and sculptures adorned with vines and other beautiful decorations.

Historical evidence regarding the Natavadi chiefs primarily comes from inscriptions discovered in the region. One of the earliest references to this family appears in the Narsampet inscription, which sheds light on their lineage and political status. The Natavadi rulers governed local territories while acknowledging the authority of the Western Chalukyan Empire.

Among the early leaders of this family was Buddharaju, a chief whose lineage continued through his son **Durgaraju**. Durgaraju appears to have played a significant role in the history of Nidigonda. His name is preserved in an inscription found on the embankment of the Racheruvu lake in the village.

The presence of such inscriptions suggests that Nidigonda was already a well-established administrative center during his time. The Natavadi chiefs, though feudatories, exercised considerable influence in their domain, managing land grants, maintaining temples, and overseeing the development of local infrastructure.

## **Marital Alliances with the Kakatiyas**

The political importance of the Natavadi chiefs increased significantly through their alliances with the Kakatiya rulers. This relationship was strengthened through marital connections that bound the two families together.

One of the key figures in this alliance was **Muppaladevi**, the sister of Durgaraju. She became the mother of **Kakatiya Mahadeva**, an important ruler of the Kakatiya dynasty. This familial bond created a strong political partnership between the Natavadi chiefs and the Kakatiya court.

Mahadeva further reinforced this alliance by arranging marriages between his daughters and members of the Natavadi family. His daughters **Mailama** and **Kundamamba** were married to the grandsons of Durgaraju.

These marriages were accompanied by generous land grants. Mailama received the regions of Inugurthi and Bayyaram, while Kundamamba was granted Nidigonda, Kundavaram, Janagam, and Chennur. Inscriptions discovered in these areas record these grants and provide valuable information about the social and political structure of the time.

### **The Muppeshwara Trikulalayam: Architectural Analysis**

When we think of the architectural and sculptural prowess of the Kakatiyas, the structures that immediately come to mind are Ramappa Temple, Warangal Fort, and the Thousand Pillar Temple. These sculptures, which reflect the craftsmanship of the sculptors of that era and the patronage of the kings, continue to attract everyone with their timeless beauty.

One such place that captivates us with its sculptural splendor is the Muppeshwara Trikulalayam in Nidigonda village, Raghunathpally Mandal, Jangaon district. This temple is also known as Kummarigudi by the locals. An inscription on a tank built by Duggabhupala, a feudatory king of the Western Chalukyas, mentions the land grants given to Lord Muppeshwara and the temple priests by him and his wife. Similarly, a later inscription by Kundamamba also mentions the donation of agraharas (land grants) to the deity in this temple. It is believed that Kakatiya Ganapati Deva constructed this temple in 1219 AD. The temple's beams feature numerous exquisite sculptures, including depictions of Sapta Tala Bhanjana, the battle between Vali and Sugriva, Tara's lament, the Ashtadikpalakas (guardians of the eight directions) with their respective vehicles, Nandi, elephants, Kolatam dance, various dance postures, soldiers, musicians, Kalamukha Shaiva gurus, Shiva and Parvati, Gajadhara sculptures, and pillars adorned with vines and animals. The Director of the Department of Archaeology, Dr. V.V. Krishna Sastry, declared this dilapidated temple a protected monument and entrusted the responsibility of its restoration to Dr. Emani Sivanagi Reddy, an architect and historian.

After the temple was dismantled piece by piece with numbered markings in 1984, the reconstruction work began in 1985. Reconstruction work was carried out in 1985, 1986, 1989, 1990, and 1992, but due to a lack of adequate funds, the temple construction was not completed. The Nidigonda Trikulalayam, which resembles the Thousand Pillar Temple and the Ramappa Temple, would be a valuable asset for future generations if the central and state governments take notice and complete its construction. Located near the Jangaon district center and situated on the Hyderabad-Warangal National Highway, this village boasts numerous historical artifacts such as inscriptions, temples, sculptures, and hero stones. Therefore, this temple's completion would benefit historical tourists, historians, and everyone else. The villagers, along with historians Dr. Emani Sivanagi Reddy, Sri Ramoju Haragopal, Reddy Ratnakar Reddy, and others, are requesting that appropriate measures be taken to complete the temple construction quickly, bringing the splendor of the Kakatiya sculptures, which are currently languishing in obscurity, to the attention of all.

An examination of the doorways of this Trikulalayam reveals evidence of the worship of Shiva, Vishnu, and Surya. The temple is a center of extraordinary sculptural art, featuring Nandi, Shiva Lingam, Panavattam, Surya's pedestal with Anuru driving a chariot pulled by seven horses, geometric instruments, a Rangamandapam, and lotus panels. Rows of lions, sculptures of musicians, sculptures of

Uma-Maheshwara, a broken sculpture of a warrior going to battle on an elephant, and many other sculptures are languishing in darkness. Undertaking this project would not only enhance the tourism appeal and preserve this heritage structure, but also bring to light many historical facts. These sculptures, currently covered in dirt and debris, need to be restored to showcase their former glory. Nidigonda is a historical and spiritual village that holds within it countless treasures of heritage.

Among the most important monuments in Nidigonda is the **Muppeshwara Temple**, a magnificent temple that stands today in a partially ruined condition but still radiates the grandeur of its past.

This temple is a Trikotalayam, meaning it originally had three sanctums dedicated to different deities. It was constructed in the name of Muppambika, the wife of Durgaraju and a woman connected to the Kakatiya royal family.

An inscription dated December 24, 1104 provides valuable details about the temple's history. According to this inscription, Dugga Bhupati donated two marturus and twenty karambas of land to support the temple's rituals and the livelihood of its priests.

Muppambika herself contributed by donating the village of Gundamibanda Nerupugunta for the temple's maintenance. Such donations illustrate the patronage system that sustained religious institutions in medieval South India.

## The Inscription of Kundamamba

Another significant inscription discovered in Nidigonda was commissioned by Kundamamba. She was married to Natavadi Rudra and was also the sister of the renowned Kakatiya ruler.

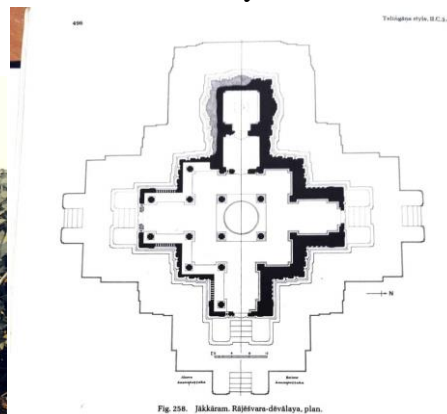
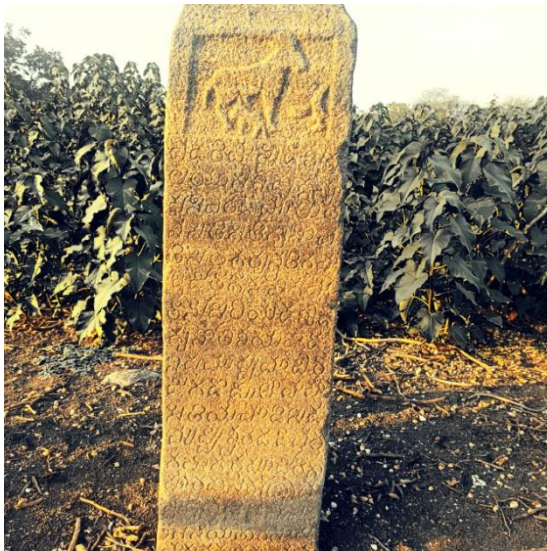


Fig. 258. Jakkirra Rajivara-divalaya, plan.

never been built. The doorframes have the usual but sparing and incompletely carved *jakkira* which show door-guardians, a large *chidya*-cornice and a lintel with turned profile above. The western and southern shrines were meant for Siva, the northern was dedicated to Visnu. The temple has been rightly dated to the first half of the 13th century by Ramaniiah.

Nidigonda, Kundari-guzji (Figs. 259-261; Plates 1475-1476)

This south-facing Tripurasa shrine was founded by Kundamahmba, sister of king Ganapati-deva, in a.o. 1219 for Rudra, Mahadeva-Madhava, and Surya in the names of her husband (Nativadi Rudra), father (king Mahadeva), and brother (Ganapati-deva). The three temples as usual share a *raṅgamadapa* (Fig. 261). The western shrine and

## Ganapati Deva.

This inscription records the donations made to temples in the name of various members of the Kakatiya royal family. These included her father Mahadeva, her brother Ganapati-deva, her husband Rudra, and her son Madhava.

Apart from documenting these offerings, the inscription also describes the genealogy of the Kakatiya dynasty. The poetic composition of the inscription was crafted by a poet named Bhalabharati, reflecting the literary sophistication of the period.

## Architectural and Sculptural Heritage

The temples and sculptures of Nidigonda reveal a fascinating blend of artistic traditions from different historical periods. The old Shiva temple in the village reflects the architectural style of the Western Chalukyas. Later renovations introduced pillars and decorative elements characteristic of Kakatiya art. Around a small hill in the village, numerous ancient temples and sculptures can be found. Some of these appear to predate the Chalukyan period, suggesting that the site may have been culturally significant even earlier.

Unfortunately, some valuable historical artifacts have been damaged over time. In certain places, stones bearing inscriptions and sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras were reused in the steps of temple mandapas. Such reuse has resulted in the loss of important historical information.

## Hero Stones and Memories of Battle



Nidigonda also preserves several hero stones, or Veeragallu, which commemorate warriors who died in battle. Six or seven such stones can still be seen in the village today.

One of these hero stones is particularly remarkable. It depicts a warrior who appears to be of royal status, judging by his attire and ornaments. The sculpture also shows him wearing high-heeled sandals, a rare feature in historical sculpture.

Similar footwear can be observed in certain Kakatiya sculptures, including the figures of Veerabhadra and the famous Madanikas of the **Ramappa Temple**.

## Rock Sculptures of the Royal Procession

Behind the Nidigonda High School, a series of remarkable rock carvings depict what appears to be a royal procession approaching a place of worship. The sculptures portray a king, several women, attendants, and a young boy. The figures are carved in half relief and display the distinctive ornamentation and attire associated with Kakatiya art. Most of the figures hold fly-whisks in one hand and fruits in the other, perhaps representing offerings carried for ritual worship. Though the deity they were approaching is no longer visible, the scene clearly reflects a moment of royal devotion. Above the figures are label inscriptions, though much of the script has been damaged. Only fragments of words and names remain visible today.

The Muppeshwara temple represents the **Trikutalayam** architectural form, characterized by three sanctums aligned within a unified structural complex. Built during the reign of Ganapati Deva, the temple reflects both Chalukyan influences and mature Kakatiya stylistic features.

## Key Architectural Features:

- Lathe-turned pillars with ornate carvings
- Star-shaped or stellate platform elements (influenced by earlier traditions)
- Mandapa spaces designed for ritual and community gatherings
- Integration of multiple deities, indicating syncretic worship

The temple's design reveals a transition from earlier Western Chalukyan styles to a distinctly Kakatiya idiom.

## Iconography and Narrative Sculptures

The sculptural program of the temple is rich in narrative and symbolic content. Major themes include:

- **Epic Narratives:** Vali–Sugriva combat, Tara's lament
- **Mythological Motifs:** Sapta Tala Bhanjanam
- **Cosmic Order:** Ashtadikpalakas representing spatial guardianship
- **Everyday Life:** Musicians, dancers, warriors

These carvings not only reflect धार्मिक devotion but also encode social values, performance traditions, and cosmological ideas.

## Religious Pluralism and Jain Presence



The discovery of Jain sculptures, including Tirthankaras and a Yakshini figure, indicates that Nidigonda was once a site of Jain religious activity. This suggests a pluralistic religious environment prior to the dominance of Shaivism.

The reuse of Jain inscription stones in later temple structures points to a shift in religious patronage and possibly changing political dynamics. Such transformations are crucial for understanding the evolving religious landscape of medieval Telangana.

## Hero Stones and Memory Culture

The presence of Veeragallu (hero stones) highlights the importance of martial valor and commemorative practices. These stones functioned as markers of memory, preserving the legacy of fallen warriors.

The depiction of high-heeled footwear in one such sculpture is particularly noteworthy, suggesting elite or divine association. This aligns with similar iconographic features seen in Kakatiya art.

## Rock Art and Royal Representation

The rock carvings depicting a royal procession provide rare visual evidence of courtly life. The hierarchical representation—larger king figure, attendants, and offering-bearing women—reflects established artistic conventions of power and devotion.

Such panels contribute to our understanding of royal ritual practices and the performative aspects of kingship.

## Temple Economy and Patronage Networks

Inscriptions from Nidigonda reveal a well-structured system of temple economy involving:

- Land grants (measured in marturus and karambas)
- Endowments for rituals and priestly maintenance
- Donations by royal women and local elites

These practices illustrate how temples functioned as economic institutions integrated into agrarian production and redistribution systems.

## Conservation Challenges and Heritage Politics

Despite its historical importance, Nidigonda remains under-recognized. Efforts by scholars such as V. V. Krishna Sastry and Emani Sivanagi Reddy initiated restoration work, but progress has been limited.



Key challenges include:

- Incomplete reconstruction
- Environmental degradation
- Lack of public awareness
- Insufficient funding

This raises broader questions about **heritage politics** and the prioritization of monuments in regional and national narratives.

## Efforts toward Restoration

Recognizing the importance of this monument, archaeologists took steps to preserve it. The renowned archaeologist **V. V. Krishna Sastry** declared the temple a protected monument.

Under the supervision of historian and architect **Emani Sivanagi Reddy**, restoration work began in the 1980s. The temple was dismantled stone by stone in 1984, with each block carefully numbered for reconstruction.

Rebuilding began in 1985 and continued intermittently over several years. Unfortunately, due to limited funding, the restoration work remained incomplete.

## Nidigonda: A Heritage Awaiting Recognition



Throughout its long history, Nidigonda has witnessed the rule of several powerful dynasties, including the **Satavahana dynasty**, **Rashtrakuta dynasty**, the Western Chalukyas, the Kakatiyas, and the Natavadi chiefs.

Each of these periods left its mark on the village in the form of temples, sculptures, inscriptions, and cultural traditions.

Today, Nidigonda remains a place of immense historical and cultural value. Its monuments stand as silent witnesses to centuries of artistic creativity, political alliances, and spiritual devotion.

If proper restoration and conservation efforts are undertaken, the village could become an important heritage destination. Preserving the legacy of Nidigonda is not only a tribute to the past but also a gift to future generations who will inherit this remarkable cultural treasure.



## Conclusion

Nidigonda offers a compelling case for rethinking Kakatiya history through a micro-regional lens. The Muppeshwara Trikulatalayam is not merely an architectural relic but a dynamic site reflecting political alliances, religious transitions, and artistic innovation.

By situating the temple within its broader cultural landscape, this study underscores the importance of integrated approaches in historical research. Preserving such sites is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for sustaining cultural memory and identity.

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