

The Mehrauli Mystery

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ABSTRACT:

The research work attempts to uncover the mystery behind the venerated Mehrauli Pillar in Delhi. When one looks at the pillar from the top, one may find an irregular hollow on the pedestal. The hollow arouses suspicion about an unknown article that once occupied the top of the pillar. The original article is irretrievably lost in time and remains an enigma to date. The paper uses various primary and secondary sources with the Gupta inscription on the column to identify the lost article. The study also considers the ancient sites of Eran and Udayagiri in present-day Madhya Pradesh. Gupta coins played a significant role to reconstruct the original article that crowned the Mehrauli pillar. If one were to describe the column in a word befitting its eloquence, an exotica, it would be. This paper analyses three possible articles that might've crowned the pillar following the conclusions made by various scholars. However, the original article atop the Mehrauli pillar remains a mystery.

KEYWORDS: Delhi, Mehrauli, Gupta, pillar, inscription, Vishnupadagiri, Garuda, chakra, nakshatra chakra

I. INTRODUCTION

We all might be well aware of the *Mehrauli* Iron Pillar at Delhi. The 23'8'' pillar is of equal importance to students and researchers of both Arts and Science. It is known for its anti-rust surface and is in the courtyard of *Jami Masjid* at the *Qutb* complex. It is tapering towards the top with a diameter of 16 inches at the bottom and 12 inches at the top. Also, an inverted lotus of 3'6'' surmounts the pillar once crowned by an emblem. The main inscription of the column is in six lines in the *Bhrami* script. James Princep identified the king who commissioned it to be *Dhava*, whereas Cunningham claimed it to be *Bhava*. However, further studies refute both the claims and suggest that it was commissioned by king *Chandra*, possibly *Chandragupta Vikramaditya* or *Chandragupta II*.



Figure 1: The Mehrauli Iron Pillar



Figure 2: The Hollow

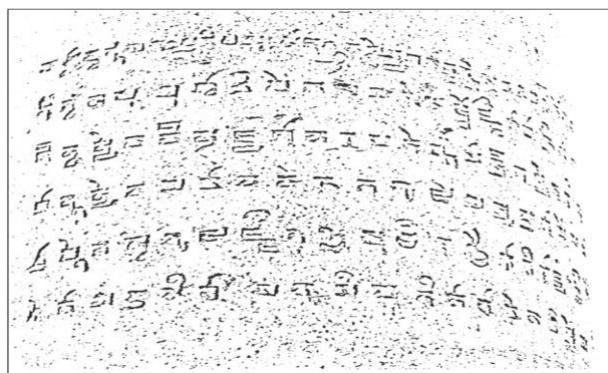


Figure 3: The Gupta inscription on the pillar

The book III of *Prithviraj Raso*, the biography of *Prithviraj Chauhan* written by his court poet *Chand Bardai* narrated the episode of *killi-dhilli-katha*. In line with the same, *Anangpala Tomara* ordered to dig out the pillar believed to be a long nail pierced on the Serpent king *Vasuki*. When dug out, blood flew from the ground and the terrified king ordered to replace the same. However, they failed to nail it firmly. When restored, only nineteen finger's length of the pillar went into the ground, leaving it highly unstable. Prophecies raged into the air claiming that the *Chauhans* followed by the *Turks* would arrogate the Kingdom after nineteen generations. It also suggests that Delhi got its name owing to that 'loose' pillar.

II. THE HOLLOW AND THE INSCRIPTION

The pillar seems to be formidably crafted *prima facie*. However, there is a hollow on its top. It suggests that something that crowned the surmounting inverted lotus got destroyed over time. This article attempts to recreate the original structure that might've been crowning the pillar.

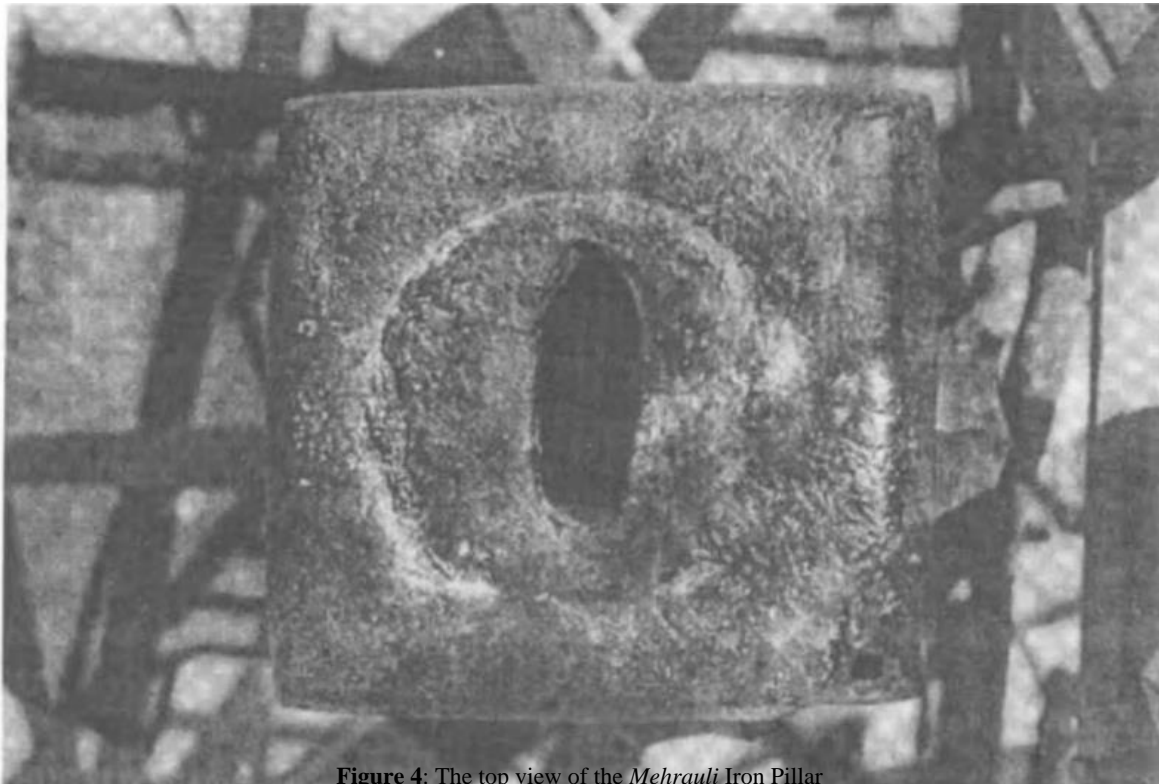


Figure 4: The top view of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar

To recreate the original structure of the pillar, one may lend significant attention to the content of the six-line inscription beautifully crafted on its surface by *Chandragupta II*.

The translation of the inscription is as follows:

(Verse 1)

On whose arm fame was inscribed by the sword, when in battle in the Vanga country, he repulsed with his breast the enemies who, joining together, had advanced against him; by whom, crossing the seven Mouths of the Sindhu, the Vahlikas were conquered in the battle; by the breeze of whose valour the Southern Ocean is still perfumed...

(Verse 2)

He, the lord of men, whose body, as though weary, has departed from this earth to another world (heaven) won by his deeds, but who remains on this earth in his fame; whose great glory, the result of his destruction of his enemies, do not leave this earth like the heat (from the smouldering embers) of a now quiet fire in a great forest...

(Verse 3)

*By that King, who acquired supreme sovereignty on earth for a very long time by his own prowess (and) who, having the name **Chandra** and beauty of countenance resembling the full-moon, having fixed his mind with **devotion on Vishnu**, this lofty standard of lord Vishnu was set up on the **Vishnupada** hill...*

The phrases in bold letters may be noted. These are to be used as pivotal clues in determining the structure that crowned this 'lofty standard of Lord Vishnu'.

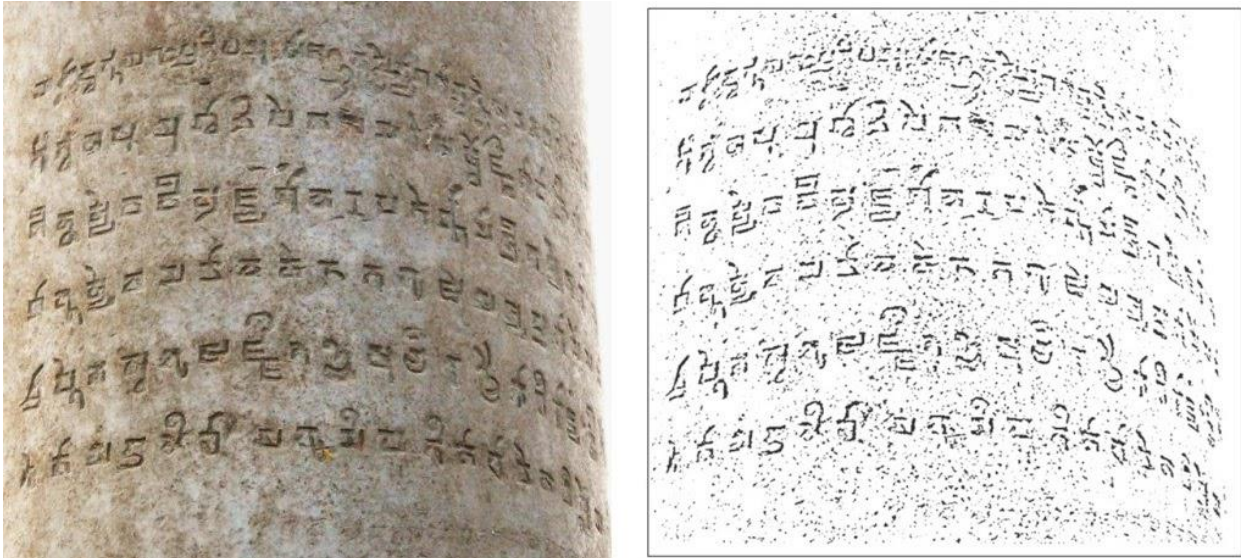


Figure 5: The Six-line inscription on the Mehrauli Iron Pillar

One may note the name of King *Chandra* mentioned in the inscription. This bespeak of a 'lofty standard of Lord *Vishnu*' erected by a king named *Chandra*. The second couplet is, however, melancholic as it hints that the King has expired. Therefore, *Chandragupta* might have inscribed the first couplet and the second and third stanzas were added by his successor, *Kumaragupta*. The third stanza further suggests that the pillar was a standard in front of a *Vishnu* temple. Comparing with similar standards erected in front of other *Vishnu* temples, a *Vaishnava* emblem might have probably crowned the *Mehrauli* pillar.

III. THE GARUDA

Now, on close analysis of various coins issued by *Chandragupta II*, one cannot ignore the *Garuda* type coin. Being a hardcore devotee of Lord *Vishnu* and as most of the *Vaishnava* temples of the present-day has the structure of *Garuda*, the mythical eagle or the avowed vehicle of Lord *Vishnu* crowing the flag-staff guarding the temple, the layout of the *Garuda* might've crowned the column.



Garuda Copper Coin- Chandragupta II

Figure 6: The Garuda-type coin of *Chandragupta II*

However, there can be two versions of this *Garuda* structure. The first one can be the eagle-like or bird-like *Garuda* as depicted in the *Garuda*-type coins issued by *Chandragupta II* and the second being an anthropomorphic *Garuda* as installed in *Eran*, an ancient city in present-day Madhya Pradesh.

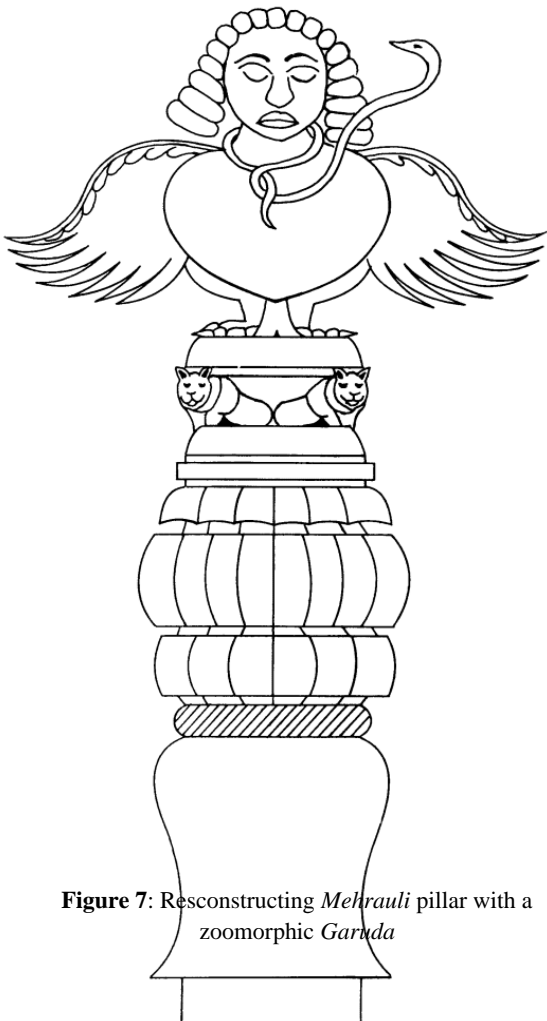


Figure 7: Reconstructing Mehrauli pillar with a zoomorphic Garuda

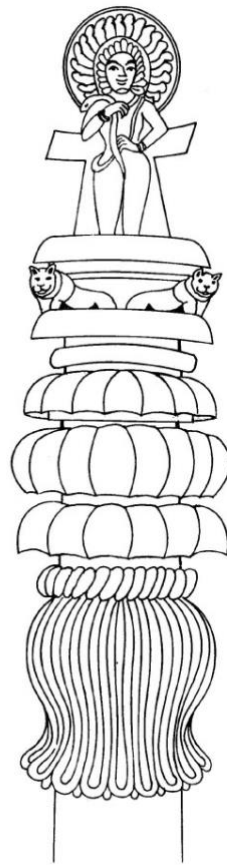


Figure 8: (Left)- Reconstructing Mehrauli pillar with an anthropomorphic Garuda, (Right)- The Garudastambha found at Eran



his statement by suggesting that no remains of broken claws of a zoomorphic Garuda or feet of an anthropomorphic Garuda are present at the top of the pillar. Therefore, some other structure might have crowned the Mehrauli pillar.

IV. THE NAKSHATRA CHAKRA

The third stanza suggests that the pillar was erected on *Vishnupadagiri* or the *Vishnupada* Hill. Nonetheless, there's no such hill in Delhi, and the column is not *in-situ*. Like the Delhi-*Topra* and Delhi-*Meerut* pillar, it might've also been relocated, probably by *Anangpala Tomara*. However, most historians identify the so-called *Vishnupada* hill with present-day *Udayagiri*, another ancient site in Madhya Pradesh.

Large-scale excavations at *Udayagiri* in 1914 revealed several structures representing a disk similar to the *Sudarshana-chakra*, the divine discus of Lord *Vishnu*.

Firstly, the excavations unearthed broken structures with part of the circular disk in one and a lotus in the other. Comparing it with other *chakras* exhumed and on close analysis, the *chakra* carried either twenty-seven or twenty-eight smaller disks that decorated the bigger *chakra*.

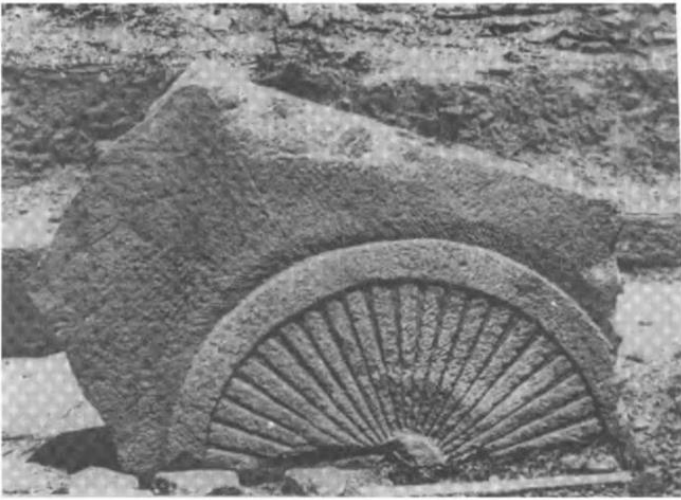


Figure 9: Broken fragments of *chakra*-bearing structures disinterred from *Udayagiri*

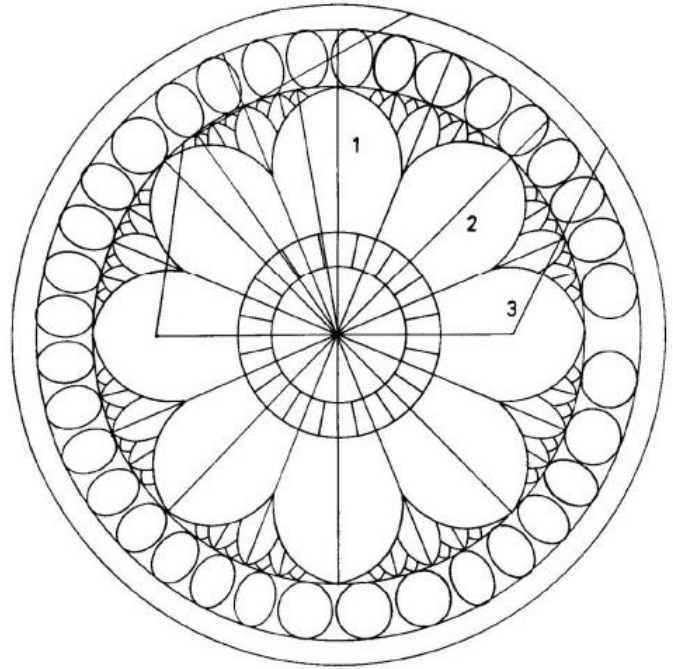
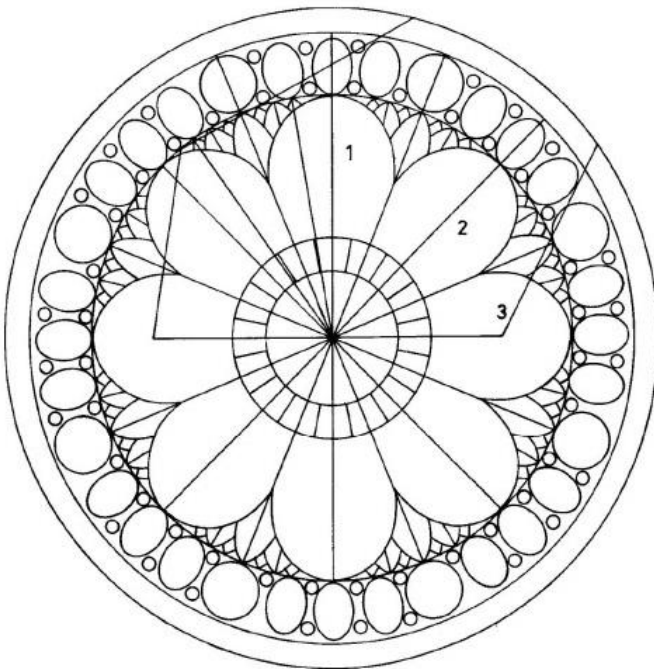


Figure 10: Reconstructing the *Udayagiri nakshatra-chakra*. (Left)- 27 smaller disks, (Right)- 28 smaller disks

Secondly, a magnificent structure of Lord *Vishnu* is found to the left of the entrance of the *Udayagiri*'s cave number six. He is holding a *chakra* in his left arm and it rests on a box-like pedestal similar to the pedestal atop the *Mehrauli* pillar.



Figure 11: The box like pedestal above the *Mehrauli* iron pillar

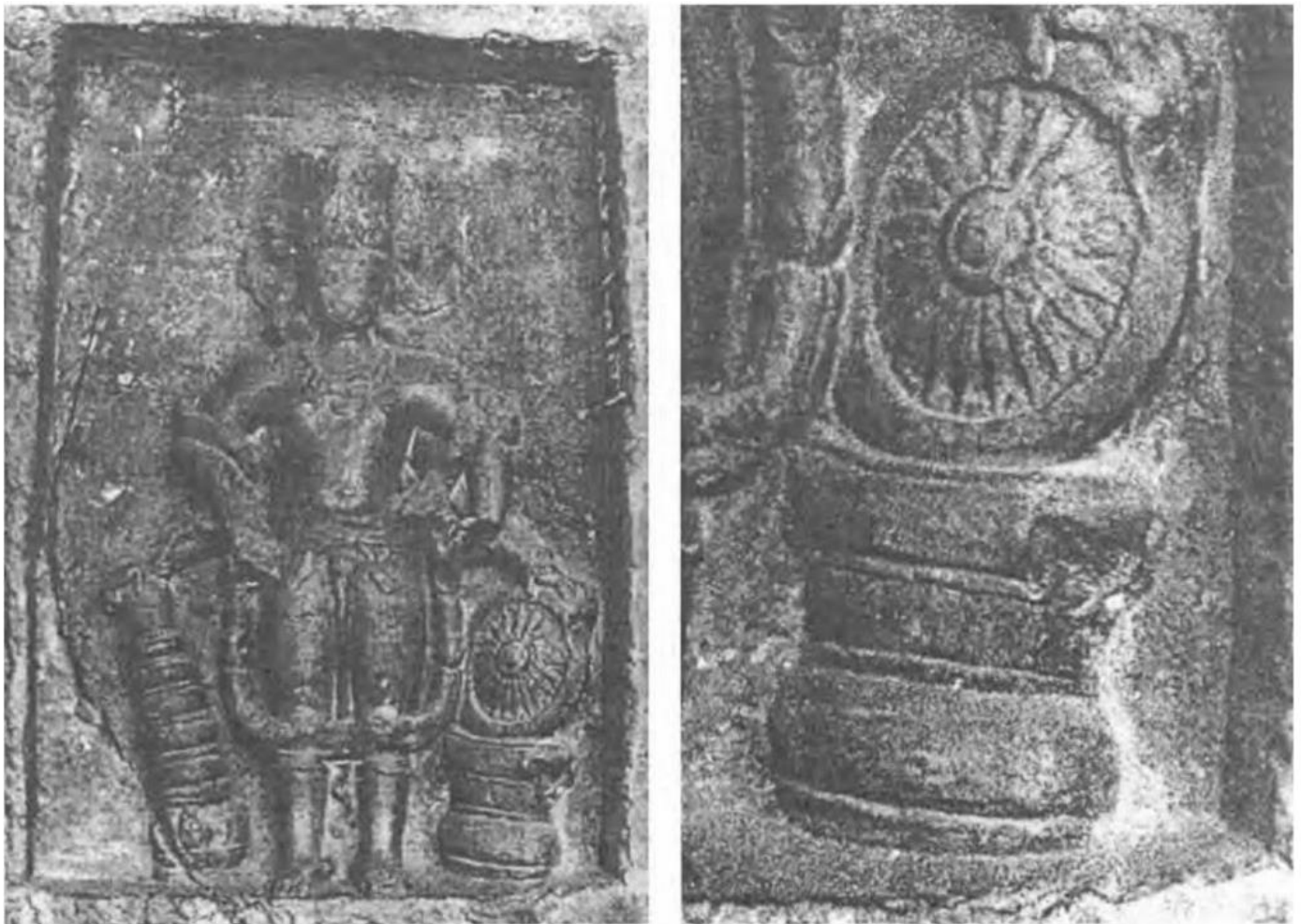


Figure 10: (Left)- The structure of Lord *Vishnu* to the left of the entrance of the *Udayagiri*'s cave number six
(Right)- The box-like pedestal similar to that of *Mehrauli* pillar

Another structure, resembling the lion capital was found during the excavation and it was supposed to have held a similar *chakra* on the top.

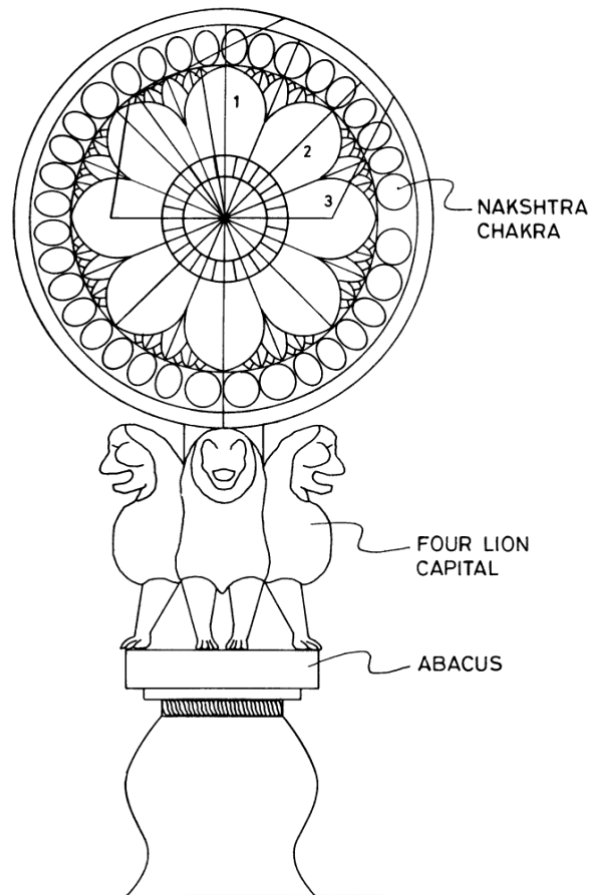


Figure 11: (Left)- The *Udayagiri* lion capital
(Right)- Reconstructing *Udayagiri* lion capital with *nakshatra chakra*

This hilltop capital at *Udayagiri* is further reconstructed with The lion capital placed over an abacus with the *nakshatra-chakra* (The *chakra* possessing twenty-seven/ twenty-eight smaller disks similar to the twenty-seven or twenty-eight *nakshatras* or birth stars) crowning the lion capital.

Similar reconstruction can be attempted for the Mehrauli pillar. However, the presence of a similarly reconstructed *chakra* alignment of *Udayagiri* hill capital may not be plausible to reconstruct the *Mehrauli* structure. For that, one may again analyze the *Gupta* coins of *Chandragupta II*. One of the coins, namely, the *Chakravikrama* type is worth considering. The coin depicts king *Chandragupta Vikramaditya* (*Chandragupta II*) standing to the right of a *Chakrapurusha* (possessor of *Chakra*), mostly Lord *Vishnu*. The coin depicts the *Chakrapurusha* conferring three *chakras* or three disks to the *Gupta* king himself.

Albeit being an attempt to relate himself with the divine in the quest for greater legitimacy for his rule, the same coin may be used to establish the relation with *Chandragupta Vikramaditya* and the *chakra*. The inscription suggesting him to be a devotee of Lord *Vishnu* also validates this argument. If so, one may reconstruct the *Mehrauli* iron pillar with the *nakshatra-chakra* found in *Udayagiri*.



Figure 11: The *chakravikrama* type coin

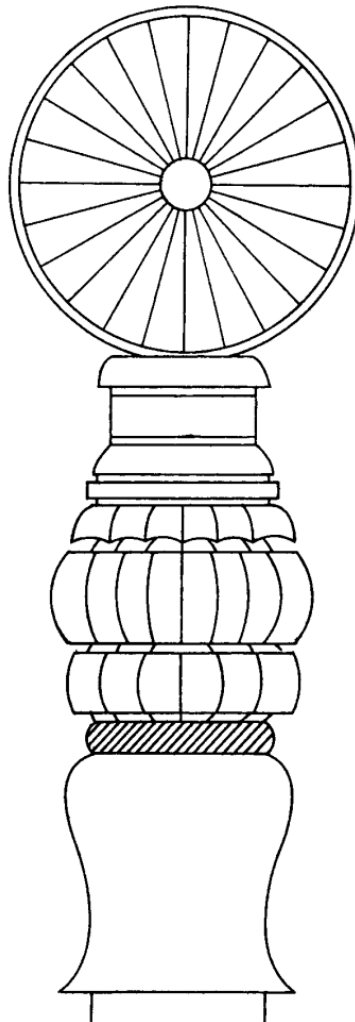


Figure 12: Reconstructing Delhi Iron Pillar with *nakshatra chakra*

V. CONCLUSION

In toto, the *Mehrauli* iron pillar with an enigmatic hollow at the top has been a mystery yet unsolved. While some argue the presence of a *Garuda*, others suggest the presence of *Nakshatrachakra* or *Sudarshana chakra*. The supporters of *nakshatra chakra* invalidates the argument put forth by *pro-Garudites* claiming that there exist no broken fragments resembling the claws or foot of a *Garuda*. Notwithstanding constant hammering by *pro-Garudites*, it is possible that the *Garuda* rested on yet another abacus and breaking away of that abacus

where the *Garuda* rested might have left the existing pillar without its feet or claws. Also, whether the column is *in-situ* or *ex-situ* and the location of *Vishnupadagiri* is widely debated. Hence, it is strenuous to reconstruct the original structure that crowned the *Mehrauli* pillar backed by efficacious evidence and historical and technological explanations. Nonetheless, the *Garuda* and the *Nakshatra Chakra* remain contested structures that might've crowned the *Mehrauli* pillar that makes the mystery of *Mehrauli* remain a mystery.

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