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# Mansar – the Monumental Brick Architecture Marvel of Vakatakas

Nirdesh Singh, independent researcher, India

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As far as surprises go, they rarely come in Maharashtra. Besides Ellora and Ajanta Caves everything else is crumbling and with no information or signage, you are plain lucky to find places by chance or if friends are nice enough to point them out to you. To be fair, the beautiful and profusely embellished Daitya Sudan Temple in Lonar Buldhana and the tranquil Pitalkhora Caves tucked away just beyond Ellora were surprises alright.

Here you are stretching your luck as you make your way from Nagpur towards Ramtek. Ramtek with its beautiful setting and a lake is the place where Lord Ram spent time during the exile and Kalidas penned Meghdoot. A little before Ramtek you turn left to arrive at the gates of site of Archaeological Excavations at Mansar. Everything is green and fresh and the air heavy with moisture. This is the monsoon season and the washed trees and grass glisten under the bright sun.



**Photo 1: MNS II – View from South-West**

It is all quite around here. Just beyond the gate and the trees, a mound rises with a structure discernible on top. Next to the site a gate announces the entrance to MOIL (Manganese Ore India Ltd). Apparently, just beyond lies an underground manganese mine. You wave to the tea kiosk owner at the gate and step inside. As you walk to the top of the mound a grid of excavated walls all around is revealed and in the middle rises a handsome looking sprawling pyramidal brick structure. You have never seen such a huge brick structure. The closest you have come to brick structures were the famous Lakshman Temple and the lesser known Ram Temple both in Sirpur Chattisgarh about 400 kms to the East. From the pictures you have seen, this immense tiered brick platform reminds you of the sprawling ruins of Nalanda. The low brick walls outside the platform remind you of the Harappan site at Lothal Gujarat. Mansar is definitely a surprise.



**Photo 2: MNS II – View from North-West**

You walk around the structure trying to make sense of the dimensions. All you had expected was maybe few temple ruins. But this mammoth structure has delivered you a delightful jolt. As you make your way to the top, you get a better view of the surroundings and the structure. To the west, in the distance, you can make out the Ramtek temple complex built on a wooded hill – your next destination.

The three storied structure identified as MNS II is 15 metres high with the plinth or adhithana decorated with alternating niches and pilasters. During successive building stages, the lower terrace was enlarged and a new adhithana was constructed. Also, square bastions were added to the four corners. Near the NW corner, a sacrificial fire-pit

can be seen. Two sets of stairs on the West lead to the top of the first platform. Here a lobby runs between the inner and outer walls. Outside the outer wall is a wide open space. To the East is the grand Darbar Hall around which were interconnected rooms. This area constituted the palace. In the West again two stair cases lead up to the third storey. The top or the second floor had number of rooms built on wooden planks.



**Photo 3: MNS II – Adhithana decorated with Pilasters and a Sacrificial Fire Pit**



**Photo 4: MNS II – View of the First Floor with Darbar Hall**



**Photo 5: View Towards West looking at the Main Gate and Mandap**

Around the terraced structure in three directions, North, East and South, lie sprawling residential quarters. The main gate of the structure is situated on the West along with the remains of a mandap. The mandap is believed to be built by Satavahanas. Bordering on all sides are the remains of huge brick fortification walls along with moat and tank to protect the palace complex.

According to scholars, the construction apparently happened in three phases here at MNS II with every successive activity adding features and enlarging the structure. This is natural. You have seen this in forts where successive rulers and dynasties continue to build on the existing site resulting in a bigger structure, of course, with an embellishment of mix of construction styles. Burned deposits indicate large scale burning happened in the palace complex. Was the burning accidental or did the Western Vakatakas of Vatsagulma branch went a little hostile when taking over the Nandivardhan Vakatakas?

MNS II built in second quarter of 5<sup>th</sup> century was initially believed to be a monastery. With continued interest in Mansar and further excavation and studies, the structure has been identified as Pravaraपुरa or Capital and Residence of the Vakataka King Pravarasena II. Pravarasena II belonged to the dynasty of Eastern Vakatakas of the Nandivardhan branch and Mansar became his political and religious capital when he shifted from his earlier capital Nandivardhan. Pravarasena II was the youngest son of Rudrasena II and Prabhavati. Some accounts say Prabhavati was the daughter of Gupta ruler Chandragupta II. So this effectively was the age of Vakataka-Gupta with

Guptas ruling over North India and Vakatakas (250 – 500 AD) ruling south of Vindhyas. Pravarasena II ascended the throne probably between 419 and 422 AD, thirteen years after his mother had ruled as a regent. He ruled for at least 20 years perhaps until 457 AD. It is believed, that after Ashok, Pravarsena II is the most recorded ruler of ancient India, as a number of copper plates have been discovered inscribed during his times.



**Photo 6: Looking West from MNS II towards Hidimba Tekdi and Mansarovar Lake with Residential Quarters' remains on the ground**

In the West, waters of Mansarovar Lake shimmer under the sun. It is possible that Mansar is the shortened version of Mansarovar. To the southwest, the vegetation grows tall. A hillock rises and on the top another structure peeps through the trees. You are not sure if you want to explore on your own. At this exact point of time the caretaker makes his entry! Oh yes there are more structures to be seen in the complex and yes he will show you around.



**Photo 7: MNS V – The Stellate-Plan Shiv Temple with Circular Garbhagriha**



**Photo 8: Projections with interesting Pilasters**

The rains have made the grass and shrubs grow wild. You follow the caretaker as we try to make our way on the undulating track. And hidden in the grass appears another surprise. This is a stellate-plan Shiv Temple identified as MNS V. The structure seems to have been restored. Like the word stellate, the temple resembles a star and it looks like as if petals of a flower are radiating out of the centre. The garbhgriha with the ling in the centre is circular instead of square – why because the temple is designed by drawing two concentric squares at 45 degrees and the resulting garbhgriha in the centre takes an octagonal or circular shape. The resulting five triangles facing N, NW, W, S, SW becomes the five projections or petals if you like. Oh yes, did you say Mansar is a delightful surprise.



**Photo 9: The Splendid Siva of Mansar (Photo Courtesy – National Museum, Delhi)**

As we start making our way to the hillock, we encounter the foundation of a building identified as MNS IV. There is nothing spectacular about it. MNS II had several such buildings around the main platform.

The clouds have disappeared and it is sweltering hot. Sweat runs from your brows into your eyes. It is increasingly becoming difficult to put the camera's viewfinder to the eye. And you are not carrying any water. You had figured Mansar would be a twenty minute shoot and scoot job and you will be on your way to Ramtek in no time. You have hit upon a treasure called Mansar. Right now heat and thirst is the last thing on your mind. You live for such days.

The hillock is called Hidimba Tekdi after the name of the goddess enshrined here. This location is identified as MNS III. Mansar burst into prominence when the splendid 'Siva of Mansar' image was discovered here in 1972. Today the image finds its place in National Museum in New Delhi. The 84 cm high image carved from red sandstone is almost as enigmatic as Mona Lisa and subject of several studies with iconographers variously identifying it as Shiv, Gana, Nidhi and Kuber. For now it has been identified as Siva until a different interpretation comes up.



Photo 10: Diamond Shaped Walls at Hidimba Tekdi – MNS III

Fascinated by the intriguing iconography of the image brought Mansar under the spotlight and with it archaeologists across the world made Mansar their subject of research. This led to further excavations of the mound and finding of seals that proved the conjecture that this hill contained the ruins of Shiv Temple Pravaresvaradevakulasthana or the State Sanctuary of King Pravarasena. Eventually the

excavations revealed an impressive temple at this site. The study of images and seals also confirmed that Mansar had no Buddhist lineage as was believed at one time.



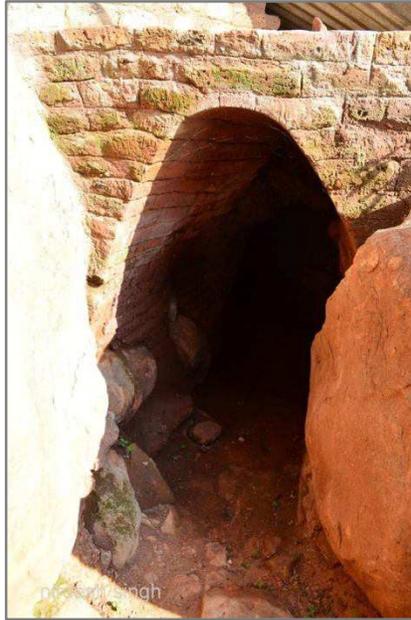
**Photo 11: Kalash, Serpent Hood, Rounded Bastions – Amazing Architecture at MNS III**

No plan of MNS III has been published so far as the construction of the temple is believed to be very complex and astonishing. Only a set of sophisticated instruments can help the archaeologists draw its plan. The most astounding feature of this terraced structure is the shaped masonry of the walls. You can see the walls shaped into diamonds, *kalash* and serpent hood through the use of moulded bricks. Over the platform walls, rounded bastions can be seen. You are not sure if the concept of bastions had developed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century or this is just an embellishment of the builders. Of course the uses of special-shaped bricks have been known since the times of Mohenjodaro. Then there are the straight and curving steps, stepped ramps of different shape, size and height. At the East Gate the stairs leading up are paved with stone slabs. The caretaker believes this was the contribution of Chandragupta Maurya though largely it is believed that Mansar had no Maurya / Sunga / Satavahana influence.



**Photo 12: One of the surviving lingas at MNS III**

On the western and southern side of the mound a row of sixteen brick Shiv shrines was found. Now only four Shivilings can be seen. An interesting find by the excavators was a ceremonial human sacrifice in the form of a substitute terracotta male figure.



**Photo 13: The Tunnel possibly going to Nagardhan Fort**

As if all this was not enough, MNS III has caves and a tunnel believed to be going all the way to Nagardhan Fort. Nagardhan is the shortened version of Nandivardhan about ten kms away which housed the earlier capital. To you this entire mound with MNS II and MNS III looks like a small citadel with palace complex, temples, residential quarters, caves, tunnel and fortified wall all around. Most of the forts we see today have been built over by successive rulers. Even Nagardhan Fort formerly Nandivardhan has been built over by the Bhonsales. It is possible that the Nagardhan Fort too looked like Mansar in its earlier avatar. To you Mansar is an extant fort of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

Along with the famous Siva image, a number of other images have been found in Hidimba Tekdi with the most fantastic hairdos, and which are subject of several research papers. Such iconography features can be seen in the paintings of Ajanta Caves. Buddhist rock-cut chaityas and viharas were built during the reign of later Vatsagulma Vakatakas.

So far you have seen forts, temples, tombs, palaces, havelis and caves built or carved out of stone. The visits to Mansar, Sirpur, Lothal and recently to Thanesar in Haryana are helping you discover a new dimension to India's incredible built heritage. Now that you recall, most of the shikhars of temples in Hampi are built of bricks with stucco images adorning the facades. Brick as a building material suddenly looks beautiful.

Mansar in its ruins and images echoes the magnificence of Vakatakas, a dynasty of rulers of Ancient India that deserves to be as well known as the Guptas. With the recent interest in Mansar and its finds, it is time for Vakatakas, the great patrons of art,

architecture and literature to find their own place under the sun. Come to Mansar and bask in the golden sunshine.



Photo 14: Perfect Setting of MNS III with Mansarovar Lake in the background

### Getting There

Mansar is a town in the Ramtek Tehsil of Nagpur District in Maharashtra. Along with Mansar, visit Nagardhan Fort, Ramtek and Khindsi Lake. Nagardhan Fort is built over the Eastern Vakatakas earlier capital of Nandivardhan. Ramtek has Kalidas Smarak and a huge Varaha statue along with several temples on a hilltop. Just beyond Ramtek is the Khindsi Lake. Mansar is about 50 kms and Ramtek is about 55 kms from Nagpur. Nagardhan Fort is about 12 kms away from Mansar.

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Nirdes Singh wishes, he were a historian or an archaeologist. To stay sane, he is doing the next best thing – tripping and discovering built heritage of India. It has been an incredible journey so far for him. He runs his site at <http://justrippingg.blogspot.in>.

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