



AN ENIGMATIC CASE OF A MEDIEVAL TEMPLE AT TALAVRIKSHA, RAJASTHAN

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Abstract:

This paper tries to solve the riddle of an early ninth century temple located at Talavriksha, District Alwar. The temple housing a Sivalingam inside the garbhagriha has figures of Varaha, Nrisimha and Trivikrama in the central *rathikas* and the placement of the guardian deities does not follow scriptures. The locale of the temple is also important due to its association with the Mahabharata and the presence of other important shrines.

Key-words: Talavriksha, Mahabharata, Durga, Ganga, Vishnu, Sivalingam, Varaha, Trivikrama, Nrisimha etc.

Introduction:

Talavriksha, as per the popular belief referring to the *Mahabharata* story marks the spot of the tree under which Pandavas had hidden their weapons during the thirteenth year of their *vanavasa*, the *ajnatavasa*. The *Mahabharata* informs that the five Pandava brothers had hidden their weapons inside the crater of a large *Sami* tree situated near a crematorium amidst the forest and hills before entering Viratanagara (*Virataparva*, 5th chapter). The spot is at present identified with the locality Talavriksha which lies midway between Viratanagara (Bairat) and Upaplavya nagara (Alwar) about 25 km north-east of the former, past Narayanpur village (Map 1). The place is situated amongst the forest and fields and is marked by the presence of a Ganga Mata Temple, hot and cold water springs, few late medieval *chhatris*, *kundas* and a Siva Temple (Map 2). As has been observed in the entire eastern Rajasthan, the spots of natural water sources are often marked by the presence of religious shrines of Devi since ancient times, this area again reaffirms this view. Similar presence of Devi shrines is observed at Old

Kaila Devi Temple, District Karauli; Narayani Mata Temple, near Bhangarh, District Alwar; Shakambhari and Old Shakambhari Mata Temple (Varahi Mata), near Udaipur Vati, District Sikar; Jeen Mata Temple, District Sikar; Shakambhari Mata Temple, near Sambhar, District Jaipur; Harshat Mata Temple, Abhaneri, District Dausa; Jamwa Mata Temple, Jamwa Ramgarh, District Jaipur; Jobner Mata Temple, District Jaipur; Harshnath Hill Temple, District Sikar etc. There are some other temples which at present are principally not dedicated to the goddess but have the natural presence of water, e.g. Shiwad Temple, District Tonk; Trinetra Ganesa at Ranthambhore Fort and Galtaji Temple, Sawai Madhopur; Galtaji Pith, Jaipur; Charchoma and Kansua Siva Temples, District Kota; Chandrabhaga Temple, Jhalrapatan; temples at Krishnavilasgarh, District Baran; Atru Temples, District Baran; Nilkanth Temple, District Alwar and many more.

The landscape at Talavriksha is surrounded by Aravalli hills and the spot has the presence of natural hot and cold water springs. The water table is quite high, so there is water at only one or two meter depth in some wells. The presence of natural springs would have attracted people to the spot since ancient times and it is quite possible that the spot was associated with River Goddess Ganga since ancient times. Rishi Mandavya is believed to have done *tapas* there, so the nearby village is named after him as Mundawara and the *kunda* at the Ganga Devi Temple premises is known as Mandavya kunda. This sacred landscape might have attracted the Pandavas during their *ajnatavasa* as various nearby places of District Alwar (ancient Matsyadesa) are well associated with them whether it is Viratanagara, Pandupol, Upaplavyanagara/ Alwar (Gupta 2020: 334) etc. The temple of Ganga Mata is situated on a lofty land (Pl. 1) and so is the ancient Sivalingam situated in front across the Bairat-Alwar road (Pl. 2). Natural spring water earlier used to ooze out at this Ganga shrine but now it oozes out occasionally. The ancient Sivalingam is about 6 feet high and would have been there at the spot before the destruction of temples there. Various temple architectural fragments lying in the vicinity and the two ancient pillars used in the Ganga Mata temple (Pl. 1) testify to the presence of Hindu temples about a thousand to twelve hundred years back at the spot (Pl. 3-4).

Here, it is quite interesting to note that the story in the *Mahabharata* informs that Yudhishtira had prayed Goddess Durga after hiding their weapons and before entering Viratanagara and then the five Pandava brothers took a holy dip in the Ganga and paid homage to *devas*, *rishis* and *pitras* (*Virataparva*, 6th chapter). There is also a mention of the presence of a Devi Saktipitha (out of fifty-one Saktipithas) at Viratanagara in Hindu texts but it has never been identified. The mention of Durga-*stuti*

by Yudhishtira somewhere near Viratanagara confirms that there was a Saktipitha in the vicinity of Talavriksha or at some distance but within the territory of Viratanagara kingdom as the *Mahabharata* only informs of the *manasa stuti* of Devi Durga but not of a temple or idol. It indicates that the Pandavas (and the author of the epic) were well aware of the presence of a Durga Saktipitha in that kingdom but were not visiting it at that time. The dip in the Ganga in Viratanagara kingdom is very significant as the presence of Ganga Mata temple at Talavriksha confirms the association of that spot with the sacred Ganges and the *Mahabharata* story. The water stream at Talavriksha was identified to be the same as the sacred Ganges. As far as the identification of the Durga Saktipitha in Viratanagara area is concerned, I am of the opinion that Sarunda Mata situated atop a small hill near Kotputli on the road to Neem-ka-Thana might be the Saktipitha. The antiquity of the site goes back to prehistoric times as the presence of rock shelters there confirms and also the tradition which believes the Devi at Sarunda Mata to be the *Kuladevi* of the Pandavas and crediting the installation of the image there to the Pandavas. Sarunda is situated about 40 km to the north-west of Talavriksha. Besides Sarunda Mata, Shakambhari Mata near Sambhar and Jobner Mata at Jobner, both situated in Old Jaipur district and Jeen Mata and Shakambhari Mata in Old Sikar district are also probable Devi shrines which might qualify as a Durga Saktipitha.

The temple which is of interest to us here is the one which presently enshrines the ancient Sivalingam inside it (Pl. 5). The temple has possibly been visited by a few scholars in the past and recently Shri Harphool Singh, a retired Registering Officer of Rajasthan State Archaeology Department asked the author to visit it and to explore possibilities of its government protection. On first look, the temple seems to be an original building with repairs of comparatively recent times. But when the sculptures present on the temple's wall were studied in detail, it turned out that their position could not be original. This was quite an enigma as how the rules of placement of deities as per temple architectural canons were not followed and the most enigmatic was the presence of Vishnu's *avatara* panels on the temple walls instead of Saiva themes as the icon in the *garbhagriha* was a Sivalingam only. The temple faced south direction and the original parts of temple at the entrance were completely missing. This riddle continued for some time till the question was answered by the local *pujari* who informed that the temple was not the original building and it was brought and transplanted at this spot by a powerful *tehsildar* of area about a century ago. According to him, the original temple ruins were lying in an agricultural field in village Mundawara situated about 2.5 km to the north-west, from where the Thakur *tehsildar* brought them to the present spot at Talavriksha. Let us discuss the imagery on temple wall one by one:

Dikpalas:

1. **Dikpala Agni** (Pl. 6): The first sculpture on the wall of the temple while moving for circumambulation is of *dikpala* Agni represented in a *karnarathika* (niche) with decorated pilasters on either side topped by a pediment. Though as per architecture manuals, Agni is the guardian deity of the southeastern quarter, here he is placed at the southern end of the western wall after the transplant of temple structure. He is shown standing in *tribhanga* as a bearded man with his *vahana mesha* (ram). The left hand of the deity is holding a water pot whereas the right hand is possibly held in *abhayamudra*, a lotus flower is held behind his palm. He is wearing a beaded *yajnopavita*. The *jatamukuta* and the flames coming out from behind his shoulders are his other identifying attributes. Anklets and wristlets are adorning his feet and hands respectively and a three stringed pearl necklace his neck. He is also shown wearing a long garland made of pearls and flowers running down to his knees.
2. **Dikpala Yama** (Pl. 7): The second guardian deity placed in the *karnarathika* of western wall is Yama. He is fitted inside a niche with two decorated pilasters surmounted by capitals having foliage designs. The capitals are quite different from those surmounting the pilasters of Agni niche. Here Yama is the guardian deity of northern end of the western wall as per his placement on the temple wall whereas his proper position is the southern quarter. He is standing in *tribhanga* with his vehicle *mahisha* (buffalo) shown behind. In his right hand, the deity holds a *danda* (standard) whereas his left hand holds *Yamapasa* (noose), though quite broken. Traces of very fine lower garment are clearly visible. He is adorned with a beautiful necklace and with wristlets and anklets. Fragments of a long garland worn by him survive at the knees. He is seemingly wearing a three-tiered crown and a beaded *yajnopavita* is running across his left shoulder.
3. **Dikpala Nairitti** (Pl. 8): The third guardian deity placed in the *karnarathika* of northern *bhitti* is Nairitti. He is fitted inside a niche with two decorated pilasters surmounted by capitals having foliage designs. Here he is represented as guardian deity of the western end of the northern wall whereas his actual position in temple architecture is south-west. His *vahana nara* is shown near his feet. He is again shown standing in *tribhanga* pose with his right hand holding a *khadga* (sword) and left hand placed on his left thigh. He is adorned with a beautiful necklace, wristlets, anklets and *karnakundalas*. His *yajnopavita* is made of thick threads unlike the *yajnopavita* of Agni and Yama. He is wearing a long garland running down to his knees and is also wearing heavy armbands with *nagamukha*. Traces of very fine lower garment are clearly visible. His headdress is quite different but much broken.

4. **Dikpala Varuna** (Pl. 9): The fourth guardian deity placed in the second *karnarathika* of the northern *bhitti* is Varuna. He is fitted inside a niche with two decorated pilasters surmounted by capitals having foliage designs. Here he is placed as the *dikpala* of eastern end of the northern wall instead of his actual textual position of western direction. The *sthanaka* figure of deity in *tribhanga* position holds a nectar vase in his left hand and a noose in his right hand. He is adorned with a two-stringed necklace, slightly different from the above-mentioned three *dikpalas*. His *yajnopavita* is a single-stringed beaded one and a long garland, wristlets, anklets and earrings adorn him. He is wearing a tiered crown and lower drapery similar to Nairitti. His *vahana makara* (crocodile) is shown at his feet in a slightly stylised manner.
5. **Dikpala Isana** (Pl. 10): The fifth guardian deity placed in a *karnarathika* of the eastern wall is Isana. He is fitted inside a niche with two decorated pilasters surmounted by capitals having foliage designs. He is placed as the *dikpala* of northern end of the eastern wall which is also his position as per *vastu* texts. His *vahana vrishabha* is shown in a quite disproportionate manner near the feet of deity. The standing deity in *tribhanga mudra* holds a *sula* in his right hand whereas his left hand is placed on his thigh. He is adorned with a three-stringed pearl necklace, armlets, wristlets, anklets and heavy *karnakundalas*. He is wearing a long garland similar to the one worn by other *dikpalas* here. His hair is arranged with the help of a tiered *jatamukuta*.
6. **Dikpala Kubera** (Pl. 11): The identification of the sixth guardian deity placed on the southern end of the eastern wall is slightly tricky. The three guardian deities who are still left are: Indra, Vayu and Kubera/ Soma. Indra and Vayu are absent at this temple and the extant image of the sixth *dikpala* has to be identified either as Kubera or Soma. The attributes of Soma image, e.g., his *vahana sasa* (hare), *soma* plant, and crescent moon are all absent, so the only option left is the identification of the *dikpala* as Kubera. As per order of *vastu*, Kubera should be placed as the *dikpala* of the northern direction but it is not the case here. The *vahana* of the deity looks like a *vrishabha* (bull) but for Kubera it should be a *mesha* (ram). So, the *vahana* may be identified as a ram. The left hand of the deity holds a vase which should be a vase full of wealth whereas the left hand is in *varadamudra* with a rosary tied to his palm. He is adorned with a two-stringed pearl necklace, anklets, armlets, wristlets and a long garland hanging up to his knees. A beautiful circular earring is visible in his right ear whereas the left one is mutilated. The deity is wearing a *jatamukuta* arranged in two tiers.

Now we can have a look at the deities who are represented in the three prominent central *rathikas* of the temple wall.

1. **Varaha** (Pl. 12): Varahavatara is represented in the central *rathika* of western *bhitti*. Four-handed Bhagavana Varaha holds *sudarsana chakra* and *kaumodaki gada* in his upper left and right hands respectively whereas his natural left hand holds Prithvi on his palms and the right hand is placed on his thigh. The tusk of Varaha and the figure of Prithvi are quite mutilated. Varaha's *vaijayantimala* is running down his knees. He is adorned with *keyuras*, *kanthahara* and a pearl *yajnopavita*. The upraised left foot of the God is resting on a lotus under which a *naga* couple with serpent hoods and bodies is shown in adulation with folded hands. The mutilated figure of a lady carved to the right of Varaha may be identified as goddess Sri-Lakshmi, the wife of God whereas the male figure to Varaha's left may be Brahma. Two palmettes are shown on either side at the top ends of the niche, perhaps as indicative of the setting of scene at the spot "Talavriksha"! To better understand the early representation of Varahavatara in art (as at Adivaraha Cave, Mahabalipuram), one may refer to Sivaramamurti (1952).
2. **Nrisimha** (Pl. 13): The central *rathika* of the northern wall has the sculpture of God Nrisimha. The eight-handed deity is shown standing on a kneeling human figure who might be *bhakta* Prahlada; the raised left leg of the deity is placed on the back of this kneeling figure whereas the right leg of the deity is kept on the head of the kneeling figure, but, this kneeling figure does not appear to be in any sort of discomfort. The panel shows the *ugra* form of the God who is tearing apart the belly of demon Hiranyakasipu with his natural hands. Two of his hands are holding two of the demons, one each on either side from their *sikha*. These two demons, each holding a mace are carved quite lively. The objects held in the hands of the God are not identifiable due to mutilation but the top hands of the deity seem to be in a pose of self-coronation/ self-proclamation on defeating the demon as is observed on many Mahishasuramardini sculptures of the Kushan and Gupta period from Mathura and elsewhere. The God is adorned with *vanamala*, *keyuras*, *kankana*, *kanthahara* etc. The body of the God is of a man up to the neck whereas the head portion is of a lion with manes. Two palmettes, one on each side at the top of the niche are again depicted, possibly to mark the locale of the temple as "Talavriksha". The overall depiction of the scene is quite vivid and lively. All three demons are shown wearing ornaments and having linear bodies.
3. **Trivikrama** (Pl. 14): The third central *rathika* of the temple, located on the eastern wall has the depiction of Trivikrama form of Bhagavana Vishnu. The scene is again quite vivid with the upraised right leg of the God touching the mouth of Rahu in the tertiary world. The upper right hand of the God holds the *kaumodaki gada* and the upper left hand holds the *sudarsana chakra*. The natural left hand of the God is placed on his thigh whereas the natural right hand seems to be in *tarjanimudra*.

Rahu who had become immortal due to inhaling nectar up to his throat before his body was slit away during the *samudra-manthana* (churning of the ocean) episode, is represented by his head only. He along with Ketu is the last of *navagrahas* and thus represents the farthest point of the tertiary world. Ketu is possibly also represented here as a snake who is partially visible by the side of Rahu above the mace of Vishnu. Vishnu is adorned with a *yajnopavita*, *vaijayantimala*, *keyuras*, *nupuras*, *kanthahara*, *karnakundalas* and a *mukuta*. In the lower end of the panel, the story of Vamanavatara is represented which had occurred just before Vishnu took three strides as the victor of three worlds (*Trivikrama*). Vishnu as Vamana is standing holding a parasol over himself. Behind him is standing the horse of *yajna* and a personage in royal attire, possibly Indra. In front of Vamana is standing King Bali with a vase in his hand to sprinkle water. By his side, a kneeling figure with folded hands is shown who in all probability is the grandfather of Bali, the great *bhakta* Prahlada. A human figure standing behind the left leg of Trivikrama is possibly *Daitya Guru* Sukracharya or Brahma as represented in some Vamanavatara reliefs. To better understand the depiction of Vamanavatara episode in art, one may refer to Mankodi (2013).

On the base moulding, in the central niche on each side, a deity is depicted. The details are as follows:

1. **Ganesa** (Pl. 15): In the central niche of the base moulding on the western side, a seated figure of Ganesa is carved. Vermillion has been applied all over the figure, in spite of that certain features of the image are recognisable. In his left hand he is holding a *parasu* whereas the object held in his right hand is not clear. A bowl full of sweet balls is held possibly in his lower land hand. The deity is seated in *maharajalilasana*.
2. **Sri-Lakshmi** (Pl. 16): In the central niche of the base moulding on the northern side, a seated figure of Sri-Lakshmi is carved who is being lustrated by elephants. The goddess is seated in *maharajalilasana*. In her two upper hands, she is holding lotuses on which are standing the elephants who in turn are lustrating her by emptying the down turned vases. Her natural hands are too broken to identify the attributes held in them.
3. **Kubera** (Pl. 17): In the central niche of the base moulding on the eastern side, the seated figure in *lalitasana* appears to be of Kubera. The two-handed deity is shown seated on a low stool. Attributes held in his hands are quite mutilated, still the object held in his left hand seems to be *nakula* purse and the object held in his right hand a wine cup. Two foliages are shown coming out from his back side, possibly indicating something. Over his head an object is seen which somehow resembles a plough. The probable visible attributes are not enough to identify the figure but the presence of Ganesa in the western niche and Sri-Lakshmi in the northern niche indicates towards the possibility

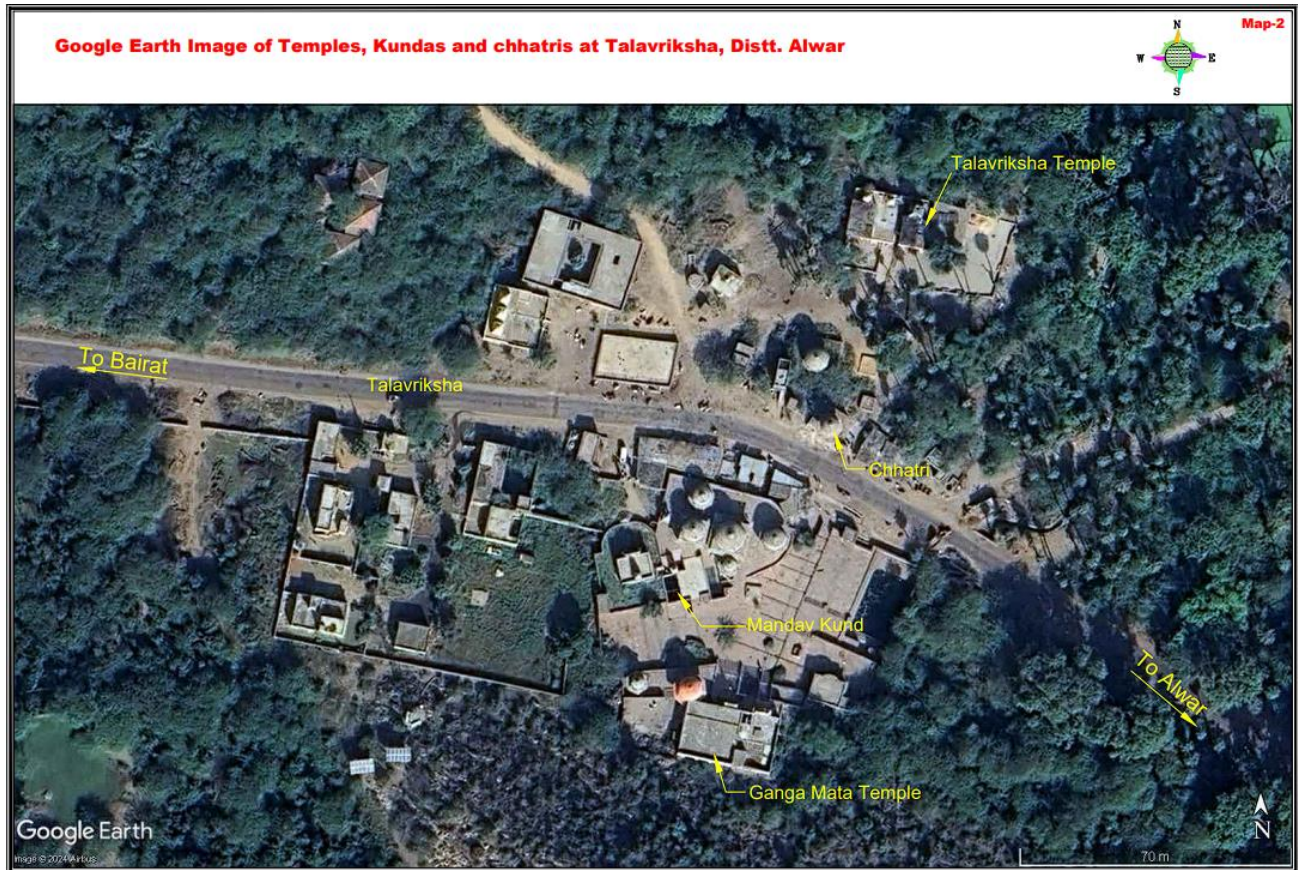
of the presence of Kubera in the eastern niche as these three together form part of an important triad during the Post-Gupta and early medieval period, Sri-Lakshmi being the most prominent of them and being represented in the center.

Besides the above sculptures, in the *rathika* niches of all the six *pratirathas*, six female figures or *nayikas* have been carved out. The first one on the western wall standing in *tribhanga* is possibly holding a lamp in her right hand and the pleats of drapery in her left hand (Pl. 18). The second lady on the western wall is possibly holding a *chauri* or broom in her right hand whereas her left hand is holding the pleats of her dress (Pl. 19). The lady standing in the western *pratiratha* niche of the northern wall is possibly holding a fly-whisk in her right hand whereas her left hand is holding the pleats of her drapery (Pl. 20). The lady figure standing in the niche of the second *pratiratha* of the northern wall is holding a musical instrument possibly a *sarod* in her hands (Pl. 21). The lady in the northern *pratiratha* niche of eastern wall is in *nrityamudra* (Pl. 22) and the last lady figure available in the southern *pratiratha* niche of the eastern wall represents a standing lady with a musical instrument possibly *tambura* (Pl. 23).

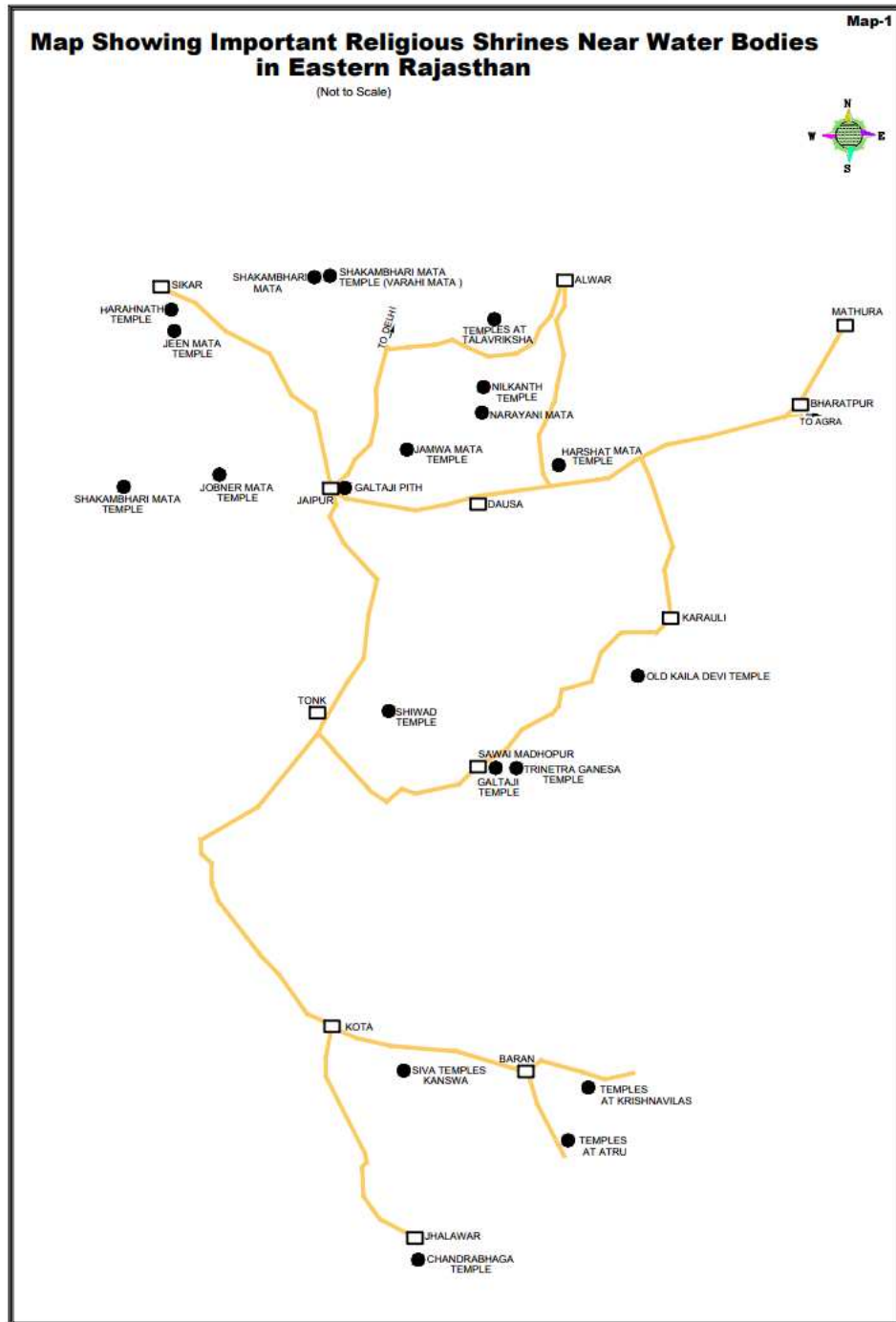
Besides the temples, the spot also houses a number of late medieval *chhatris*, one of the *chhatri* (Pl. 24) which is situated just by the side of the road is situated on a raised platform and its ceiling is supported on eight pillars. The ceiling of the dome is beautifully painted with a central lotus symbol and radiating designs (Pl. 25) and the spandrels and pendentives of the dome are painted with eight beautiful theme-based paintings which include narratives from the religious folklore and royal episodes (Pls. 26-29). These paintings require further studies.

On the basis of temple architecture and iconography of the images, the original temple can be dated to around the early ninth century CE, slightly later contemporary of architectural activities at Abhaneri and Narayani Mata but earlier than Rajorgarh (Nilkanth village). The architectural and iconographic features resemble those of contemporary Osian temples (Handa 1984). The style of representation of *avatara* panels has some continuity in the *avatara* panels on Central Indian temples during the tenth century CE (Trivedi 1990; Wessels-Mevissen 2001; Mankodi 2013). The original temple would have either been dedicated to Vishnu or Vasudeva as the presence of Vishnu's three incarnations (third, fourth and fifth) on the central *rathikas* indicates. This temple is a rare example of transplantation by some individual rather than the governments. Since the temple is not at its original place and has many alterations uncharacteristic of ancient temple architecture, it might not be possible to bring it under Central government protection but still it has some uniqueness for which it must be protected by some authority, possibly by the State or local authorities so that it survives for future generations.

MAPS



Map 1. Google view of Talavriksha with important structures (prepared by Shri K.L. Saini, Surveyor, Jaipur Circle)



Map 2. Map showing important religious shrines situated near water bodies in the Eastern Rajasthan (prepared by Shri K.L. Saini, Surveyor)

PLATES



Pl. 1. Ganga Mata temple with use of ancient pillars



Pl. 2. Sivalingam



Pl. 3. Bharaputraka part of temple pillar



Pl. 4. Fragments of temple pillars



Pl. 5. The ancient temple, Talavriksha



Pl. 6. Agni



Pl. 7. Yama



Pl. 8. Nairitti



Pl. 9. Varuna



Pl. 10. Ishana



Pl. 11. Kubera



Pl. 12. Varaha



Pl. 13. Nrisimha



Pl. 14. Trivikrama



Pl. 15. Ganesa



Pl. 16. Gajalakshmi



Pl. 17. Kubera



Pl. 18. Lady 1 on the western wall



Pl. 19. Lady 2 on the western wall



Pl. 20. Lady 1 on the northern wall



Pl. 21. Lady 2 on the northern wall



Pl. 22. Lady 1 on the eastern wall



Pl. 23. Lady 2 on the eastern wall



Pl. 24. Late medieval chhatri



Pl. 25. Inner ceiling of chhatri



Pl. 26. Paintings, Chhatra



Pl. 27. Paintings, Chhatra



Pl. 28. Paintings, Chhatra



Pl. 29. Paintings, Chhatri



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