



A STUDY OF NARAYANI MATA TEMPLE WITH EMPHASIS ON EIGHT GUARDIAN DEITIES (ASHTA DIKPALAS)

Dr. Vinay Kumar Gupta

Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Jaipur, archaeologist1@gmail.com,
9456053192

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the Narayani Mata Temple, focusing on the Ashta Dikpalas (eight guardian deities) to illuminate the temple's historical and cultural significance within Rajasthan's early medieval period, circa 800 CE. Located near Alwar and the Sariska Tiger Reserve, this site, despite its modern facelift, harbours an ancient core that reveals a rich tapestry of religious practices and architectural innovation. Through architectural and iconographic analysis, this study deciphers the temple's dedication to Narayani, a deity entwined between Narayana and Siva, challenging traditional religious narratives. The presence of the Ashta Dikpalas and Siva parivara deities underscores this temple's role in the evolution of imagery on temples. By examining the temple's sculptural and architectural elements, this research contributes to understanding the evolution of temple architecture and iconography in Rajasthan, offering new insights into the socio-cultural fabric of the region.

INTRODUCTION

Narayani Mata Temple is situated about 75 km south-west of Alwar town, the District Headquarter of same name in the State of Rajasthan. The temple situated on the eastern outskirts of Sariska Tiger Reserve is just 15 km to the north-east of Bhangarh Fort, a popular Centrally Protected Monument under the Jaipur Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India and lies on the road linking Gola ka Bas (Bhangarh) with Tehla. The other nearby places of importance are Parashar Tirth, Nilkanth Temple and an extensive mound Keetla (Map 1).

Narayani Mata Temple is a quite popular temple and has a special significance for Sen (Nai) community who consider the presiding goddess as their tutelary deity. The popular legend informs that a newlywed bride of Sen community was travelling with her husband when a snake bit her husband killing him. The grief struck bride asked the locals to help her in collecting wood for pyre so that she could commit *sati* to which they asked her to first make arrangements of water for their cattle stock. The lady produced a water spring there and thereafter committed *sati* at the spot along with the funeral



pyre of her husband while praying to Lord Siva. Thereafter, the Sen community started believing her to be an incarnation of Sati mata (wife of Siva) and a temple dedicated to her came up at the site. Here the most striking aspect is the name of the deity who is named Narayani (either wife of Narayana or emanating from Him) but the legend believes her to be the wife of Siva. The temple still provides evidence of Siva worship and can be linked to Sati or Uma-Mahesvara worship. There is no supporting evidence of Narayana or Sri-Lakshmi worship at the site, then, why the deity was called Narayani still remains a question to be answered.

At the first look, the Narayani Mata temple seems to be a modern construction but on closer look it appears that the temple is an old structure covered with modern tiles etc. The original main sanctum is *triratha* in plan and in all probability the old stone built *bhitti* and *sikhara* of the temple have survived the ravages of time and the spoils of the iconoclasts. The most important clue of the survival of the original structure is given by the placement of the *dikpalas* and Siva *parivara devatas* at appropriate places of the *bhitti*. There are placed eight guardian deities and three family deities of Siva - Skanda-Karttikeya, Ganesa and Parvati, though smeared with vermillion. On the basis of surviving temple architecture and the sculptures, the original temple can be dated around 800 CE, thus, pre-dating the temple activities at Nilkanth and being slight contemporary to the temple activities at Abhaneri.

The details of deities as per circumambulatory movement are as follows:

1. Indra (Pl. 1):

Indra is shown seated on his *vahana* Airavata on the eastern wall (towards the southern corner) as he is the guardian deity of the eastern direction. His *ayudha vajra* is discernible in his right hand whereas the object held in his left hand is not clear due to thick coat of vermillion. As he is considered a subordinate deity because of being guardian of a direction, he is not shown wearing a *kirita mukuta* but a *karanda mukuta*.

Prominent *kundalas* are visible in his ears. His sitting posture is that of *maharajalilasana*. A much-worn single stringed necklace is also visible in his neck.

2. Agni (Pl. 2):

Agni is shown seated on his *vahana chhaga* (he-goat), in *maharajalilasana* and facing south-east on the southern wall of the temple. He is wearing a *jatamukuta* and flames are shown coming out of his shoulders and behind the head. He is wearing a single stringed necklace and has elongated earlobes. His right hand resting on his right knee is shown in *abhayamudra* holding an *akshamala* whereas his left hand resting on his left knee possibly holds a *kamandalu*. Agni is not shown stout as he is generally represented in other images.

3. Yama (Pl. 3):

Yama is shown seated on his *vahana mahisha* (buffalo), in *maharajalilasana* and facing south (towards the western corner) on the southern wall of the temple. His hair is arranged in a round top bun. His right hand holds a *danda* whereas the object in his left hand kept on his left knee is not clear. He is also adorned with a single stringed necklace.

4. Nairriti (Pl. 4):

Nairriti is again shown seated in *maharajalilasana* on his *vahana khara* (donkey) on the western wall towards the southern end. His hair is also arranged in a round top bun just like the above-mentioned sculpture of Yama. He is generally shown riding on a *nara* (human) but here his vehicle is a donkey which matches with description of *Agni Purana* (56.17.31) as cited by Wesells-Mevissen (2001). He is also shown wearing a single stringed necklace. His right hand holds an upright *khadga* (sword) whereas his left hand is placed on his left knee.

5. Varuna (Pl. 5):

This guardian deity is again shown seated in *maharajalilasana* on his *vahana hamsa* (goose) on the western wall towards the northern end. Generally ancient texts describe *makara* to be his *vahana* but *hamsa* is mentioned as his *vahana* in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* ((2.104.42b-50a) as cited by Wesells-Mevissen (2001). In his right hand he holds a *pasa* (noose) whereas his left hand is shown kept at his left knee. Whether he held something in his left hand or not, is not clear. He is adorned with a thick necklace and a wristlet is visible on his left hand. One can also make out the presence of a *yajnopavita* on his chest and large *karnakundalas* in his ears.

6. Vayu (Pl. 6):

Vayu is the guardian deity of northwestern direction and so he is placed at the western corner of the northern wall of the temple. He is shown seated on his *vahana mriga* (deer) in *maharajalilasana* as is the pose of other guardian deities. He is holding a *vayvapuritavastra* (inflated cloth) in both his hands which runs from behind his head. A necklace is adorning his neck.

7. Kubera (Pl. 7):

Kubera is the guardian deity of northern direction and so he is placed at the eastern corner of the northern wall of the temple. He is shown seated on his *vahana mesha* (ram) in *maharajalilasana* as is the pose of other guardian deities. He is adorned with a necklace and heavy *karnakundalas*. The object held in his right hand is not clear due to mutilation whereas his left hand seemingly holds a money bag.

8. Isana (Pl. 8):

Isana is the guardian deity of northeastern direction and so he is accordingly placed at the northern corner of the eastern wall of the temple. He is shown seated on his *vahana vrisha* (bull) in *maharajalilasana* as is the pose of other guardian deities. He is holding a *trisula/ sula* in his left hand and possibly an *akshamala* (rosary) in his right hand. He is adorned with a necklace and heavy *karnakundalas* like the other *dikpalas*.

Besides the representation of the eight guardian deities on the temple walls, three *parivara devatas* of Siva are also represented in the central niche of three walls facing south, west and north. Their details are as follows:

1. Ganesa (Pl. 9):

Ganesa is placed in the central niche of the southern wall and he is the first family deity of Siva encountered as one starts circumambulation of the *garbhagriha*. He is also seated in *maharajalilasana* and has four hands. His natural right hand is shown in *abhayamudra* with a rosary whereas his natural left hand holds a bowl of *modakas*. His upper left hand seems to hold a *pasa* (noose) and the upper right hand seems to hold an *ankusa* (elephant goad)/ *parasu*. His left turned trunk is picking up a *modaka*. He is wearing three necklaces, the lowermost being the most prominent one with a central bead. He is also adorned with a *yajnopavita* which might be a *naga yajnopavita*.

2. Skanda-Karttikeya (Pl. 10):

Skanda-Karttikeya, seated in *maharajalilasana*, is placed in the central niche of the western wall. He is depicted as a charming youth with elegant hair do and holding a spear in his left hand; his right hand is broken at palm. Possibly, two peacocks are depicting on either side of him, *mayura* (peacock) being his vehicle. He is adorned with a necklace and a *yajnopavita*. Two peculiar objects are shown on top on either side of his head. These might be Agni flames as he is well connected with Agni and six *Kritikas* as per his birth stories.

3. Parvati (Pl. 11):

Parvati, seated in *maharajalilasana* on her *vahana godha* (iguana), is placed in the central niche of the northern wall of the *garbhagriha*. She is shown four handed wherein her natural left hand holds a *kamandalu* (water-pot) in her palm and her natural right hand possibly holds a rosary with *abhaya* pose. Her upper left hand seems to hold a mirror and the upper right hand possibly holds a *sruva* (sacrificial ladle). She is adorned with a beaded necklace. To her right and left near the shoulders are depicted two objects. The object to her left is very much abraded whereas the one to her right is either a Sivalinga or an *agnikunda*. In case it is a Sivalinga, then the abraded figure on the opposite side might have been a Ganesa image. In case, it is an *agnikunda*, the figure on opposite side should also



be an *agnikunda*. The overall treatment of the Parvati figure somehow resembles with that of Parvati in *panchatapas* at Temple No. 22, Naresar and at a temple at Batesar, District Moreina (Trivedi 1991) which are slightly contemporary.

Besides the above-mentioned sculptures, one Uma-Mahesvara *murti* (Pl. 12) in much abraded condition is also kept at a corner inside the *garbhagriha*. The sculpture does not seem to belong to the earliest phase of the temple but might have come up at the site some centuries later. The finding of this Uma-Mahesvara *murti* indicates that the shrine of Narayani Mata was a Saivite shrine. The placement of *parivara devatas* on the walls confirms the dedication of the temple to Siva. There might have been some other shrines in the complex, one of which would have belonged to Parvati/ Sati Mata which with some later associations started to be called as Narayani Mata.

The landscape of the shrine (Pl. 13) is important to understand its setting. It seems that the site came up there in the foothills of Aravalli due the presence of a natural source of water in this water scarce region. The water source or stream might have been mightier than the small stream of water that runs now-a-days and survives as a small channel of religious importance (Pl. 14). The shrine in its earliest antiquity would have been dedicated to the cult of *Devi* and that would have lasted for a comparatively longer period than the history which we observe at present. During the eighth century CE, when the Gurjar-Pratihara power was gaining momentum, some sort of religious constructions began in the area. Abhaneri where the ancient water body was developed as a magnificent stepwell and the Harshat Mata Temple was constructed in around the eighth century, was the most prominent spot of activity in the surroundings. At around the same time, temple was built at Narayani Mata and possibly some sort of activity also began at Nilkanth, a significant temple town of *circa* tenth century CE. The Harshat Mata Temple is believed to have been dedicated to Pancharatra cult originally but somehow it got associated with the cult of Harasiddhi Devi when rebuilt in the late medieval period after its destruction by the iconoclasts. This dedication should not be considered a case of mistaken identity, rather there must have been a temple originally dedicated to the goddess at the site, keeping aside the fact that the present day surviving temple possibly belonged to the Pancharatra cult. Similarly, at Nilkanth, the most popular shrine is dedicated to Siva but the deity at the entrance of the temple town is named Ashawari Mata and must be indicative of the worship of the goddess from ancient past which might have predated the temple of Nilkantha Mahadeva. Similarly, there must have been a pre-existing popular cult of the goddess at Narayani Mata because of which the spot is named so, in spite of the possible dedication of the present temple to Siva.



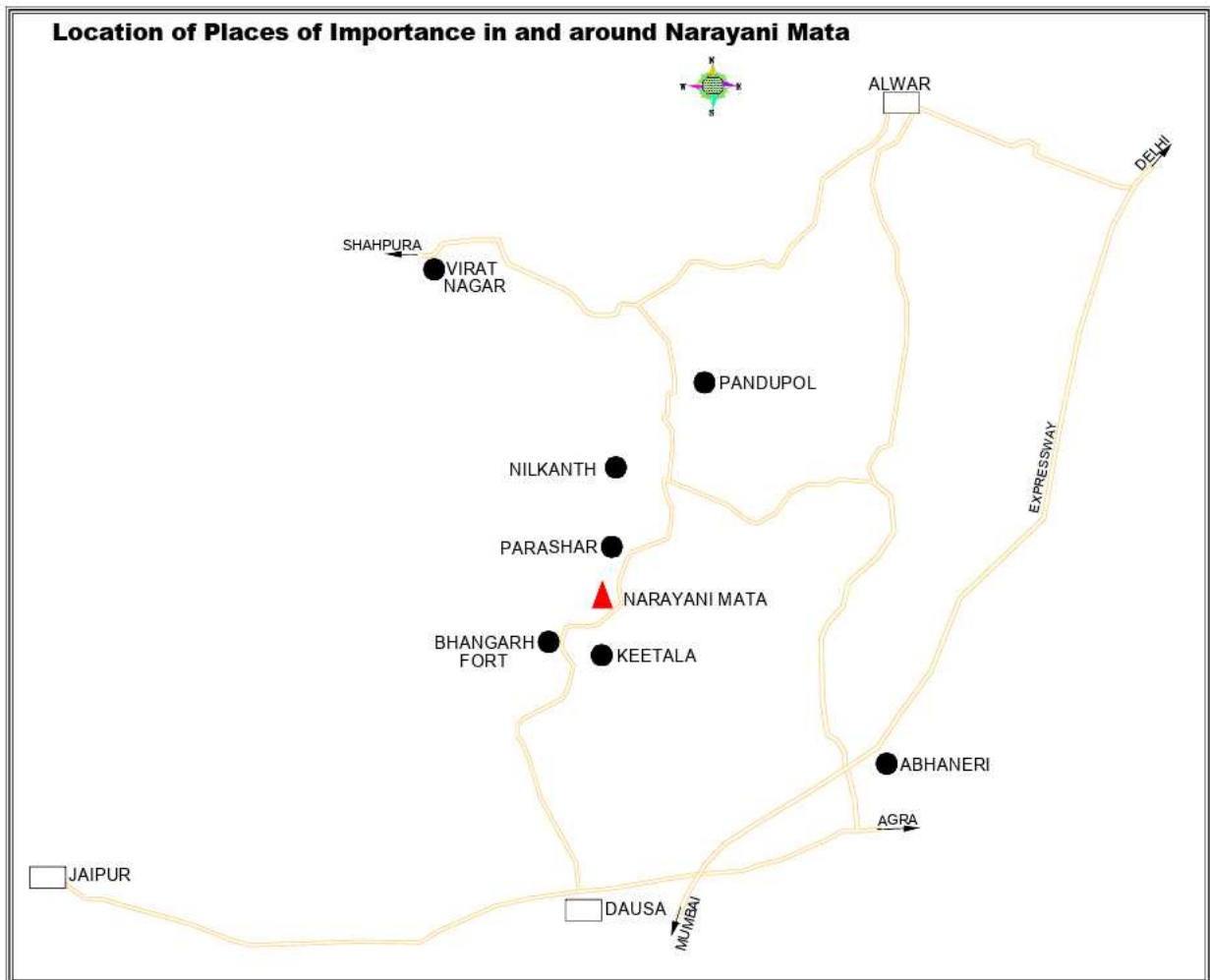
The case of dedication of an important shrine to the goddess also has some semblance at the site of Mundeshwari Devi, Kaimur district, Bihar where Neuss (2003) proposes that the original shrine of Mundesvari Temple was a *Panchayatana* shrine with dedication to Siva. There also the fame of the site at present is due to the presence of the cult of goddess Mundesvari. Mundesvari hill, in fact has provided even an earlier antiquity and more popular religious landscape than Narayani Mata.

As far as the chronology of the original temple at Narayani Mata is concerned, on stylistic grounds it can be dated to around 800 CE. Somewhat similar but earlier representation of *dikpalas* is met at Mundeshwari Hill Temple and slightly contemporary temples at Osian, District Jodhpur and Batesar and Naresar group of temples in Central India.

References:

1. Mankodi, K. (2023). *To What God Shall We Render Homage in the Temple at Modhera? And Other Writings*. Mumbai: Franco-Indian Research Pvt. Ltd.
2. Neuss, J. (2003). The Temple of Mundesvari: Reconsidering the Evidence. *Berliner Indologische Studien*, 15-17, 531-585.
3. Trivedi, R. D. (1981). *Temples of the Pratihara Period in Central India*. Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
4. Wessels-Mevissen, C. (2001). *The Gods of the Directions in Ancient India*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

ILLUSTRATIONS: MAP AND PLATES



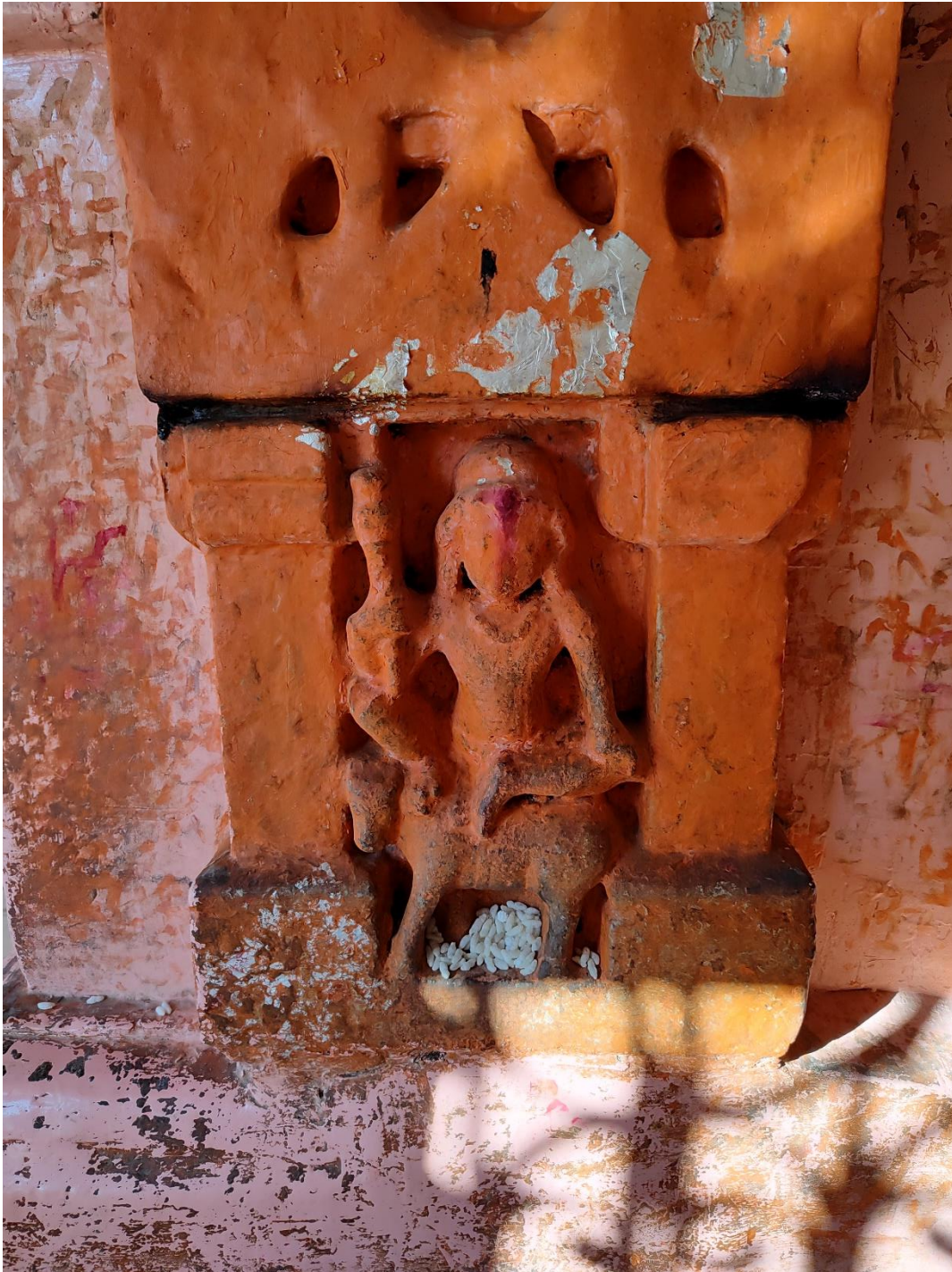
Map 1. Map showing Places of interest in and around Narayani Mata (prepared by Shri K.L. Saini, Surveyor, Jaipur Circle)



Pl. 1. Indra



Pl. 2. Agni



Pl. 3. Yama



Pl. 4. Nairrti



Pl. 5. Varuna



Pl. 6. Vayu



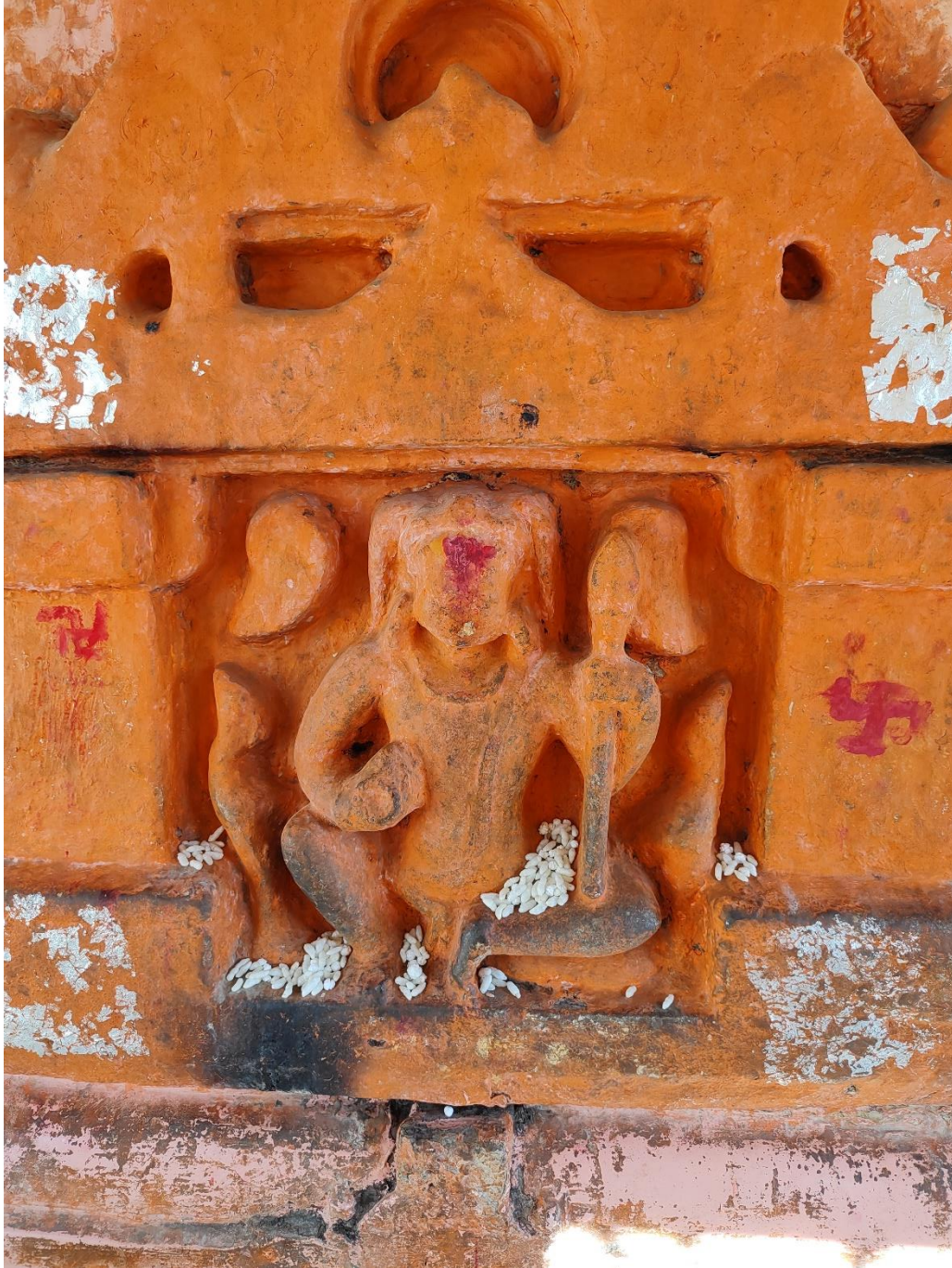
Pl. 7. Kubera



Pl. 8. Isana



P. 9. Ganesa



Pl. 10. Skanda-Karttikeya.



Pl. 11. Parvati.



Pl. 11. Uma-Mahesvara



Pl. 13. Narayani Mata Temple



Pl. 14. Water channel



VESTIGIA INDICA: BSSS JOURNAL OF HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY,
E-ISSN - 2583-9470, VOL-2, Issue-I (2024), pp-1-20.
Dr. Vinay Kumar Gupta: A STUDY OF NARAYANI MATA TEMPLE
WITH EMPHASIS ON EIGHT GUARDIAN DEITIES (*ASHTA DIKPALAS*)