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# Ek Hathiya Dewal: A Rock-Cut Nagara Temple at Thal, Uttarakhand

Srikumar M. Menon<sup>1</sup> and Sudhakara G.<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. School of Humanities, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, Karnataka – 560 012, India (Email: srikumar.menon@gmail.com)
  - <sup>2</sup>. Department of Mathematics, Manipal Institute of Technology, Manipal, Karnataka – 576 104, India (Email: sudhakaraadiga@yahoo.co.in)
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**Abstract:** *The diminutive rock-cut temple at Thal was first reported in 1916, and later described briefly in 1975. So far, there has been no detailed description or drawings published, for the same. In this paper, we describe this small, but important monument, present measured drawings for the same, and speculate on the possible date of the rock-cut temple, based on comparison with similar monuments in the region and elsewhere.*

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**Keywords:** Thal, Kumaon, Rock-cut Temples, Nagara, Latina, Folklore, Pratihara Style

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## Introduction

The rock-cut temple at Thal, locally known as Ek Hathiya Dewal, is situated on a northeast-facing hill slope, at an aerial distance of 1km E-S-E of Thal village on the eastern bank of the Eastern Ramganga River near its confluence with the Barar River, and at an aerial distance of 55km E-N-E of Almora town, in Pithoragarh District of Uttarakhand. This monument was first reported by the Deputy Commissioner of Almora in 1916 (Sahni 1916) and described by Nautiyal (1969).

However, not much academic attention has been focused on this exquisitely carved, small monument, which might hold important clues to the advent and spread of *Nagara* architecture in the Himalaya. Virtually nothing is known about the monument, such as its date, or under whose patronage it was built, etc. Even the architectural drawings of this temple have not been published. Thal has been a centre for local trade for nearby settlements at Didihaat, Munsiyari, Chaukori and Dharamghar since antiquity (Walton 2016). Thal also has a Shiva temple, called the Baleshwar Temple, believed to date back to the ninth century, and built under the patronage of the Katyuri rulers (Walton 2016), situated right on the riverbank, in the village.

The rock-cut temple, however, is built at a distance away from Thal village, partway up a hill slope. Locally, this rock-cut temple is known as Ek Hathiya Dewal, or the

“temple built by the one-armed artisan.” The legend goes that once an artisan lost one of his arms in an accident, following which the villagers used to taunt him about how he could continue as an artisan without one hand. Sick of the taunts, the artisan decided to leave the village. However, to prove that his talent was none the worse for the loss of a hand, he carved an exquisite little temple out of a rock, before he left. The local people also believe that, since the *pranala* of this temple points to the west, instead of the customary north, it is inauspicious to worship the *linga* within the temple.

The first report of this temple (Sahni 1916) devotes only one paragraph to its description. The report mentions that “This monument has still to be surveyed and photographed” (Sahni 1916: 10), a state of affairs which is still partly true. We have attempted to add to the information about this monument by publishing the architectural drawings and details in this paper.



Figure 1: A panoramic view showing the location of Ek Hathiya Dewal



Figure 2: The rock-cut temple with the remainder of the rock it is hewn from



Figure 3: View from the south showing the cutting away of rock in the south and east to isolate the rock-mass from which the temple was carved



Figure 4: View from the west showing the configuration of the temple

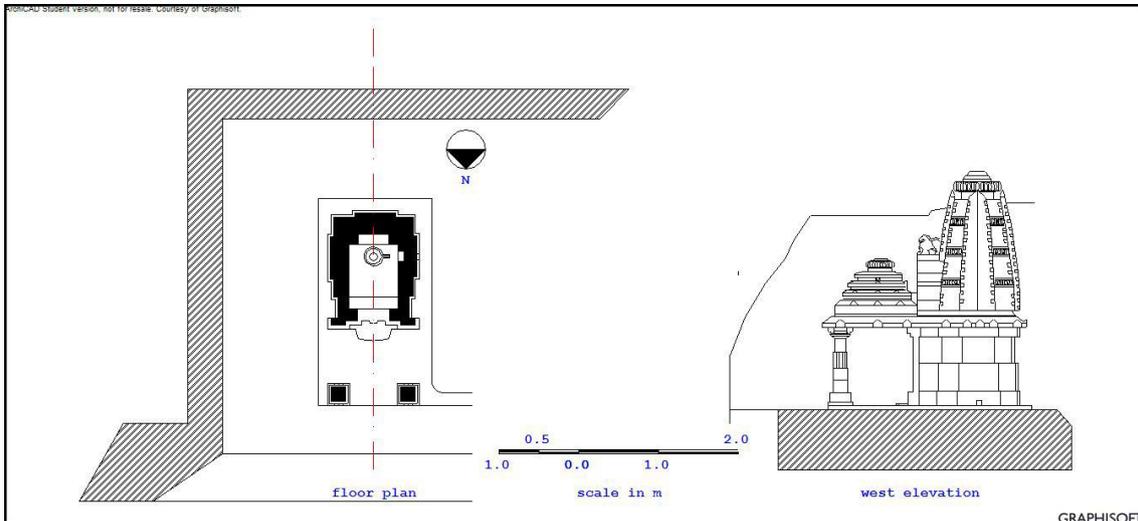


Figure 5: Floor plan and west elevation of the temple



Figure 6: The *chandrashila*, which precedes the access into the *garbhagriha*

Ek Hathiya Dewal was described in more detail by Nautiyal (1969), who was “the first to examine and describe its details” (Nautiyal 1969: 95). Relevant parts from Nautiyal’s account is quoted below.

*“The shrine is resting on a rocky platform and cut on a huge quartzite rock. Two parallel cuttings three feet wide separate the shrine from the rock. The rock is about twenty feet high and still bears the mark of chiselling.*

*The shrine is about 12 feet high with an open portico supported by two pillars. It has a small garbha-griha, which bears a linga of the original rock. Just below four feet from the plinth of the temple a pond is cut from the rock, which is descended by flights of steps from the temple. There is no jagati or the platform of the temple.*

*As already stated, it has a close resemblance to group C. But we notice one interesting feature in this temple. It is the extension of rathas on the sikhara beyond the griva or neck course. It is usually found in the central Indian temples and particularly in the Khajuraho group. Another notable characteristic of the temple is that there is a recess between the jangha and the sikhara, which is displayed nicely with beam-heads like that of the Navadurga temple at Jageswar. The roof of the mandapa is domical, with step pattern. This feature also resembles some of the temples at Khajuraho. Above the mandapa on the sikhara corbel is a squatted lion" (Nautiyal 1969: 96).*



Figure 7: Interior view of the *garbhagriha*, showing the rock-cut *linga*, the niches on two walls and the runoff to the *pranala*



Figure 8: The view towards the north from a terrace above the level of the temple. The prominent peak in the image is Nanda Kot. The peak is not visible from the level of the temple



Figure 9: The *phamsana* roof of the *mukhamantapa*

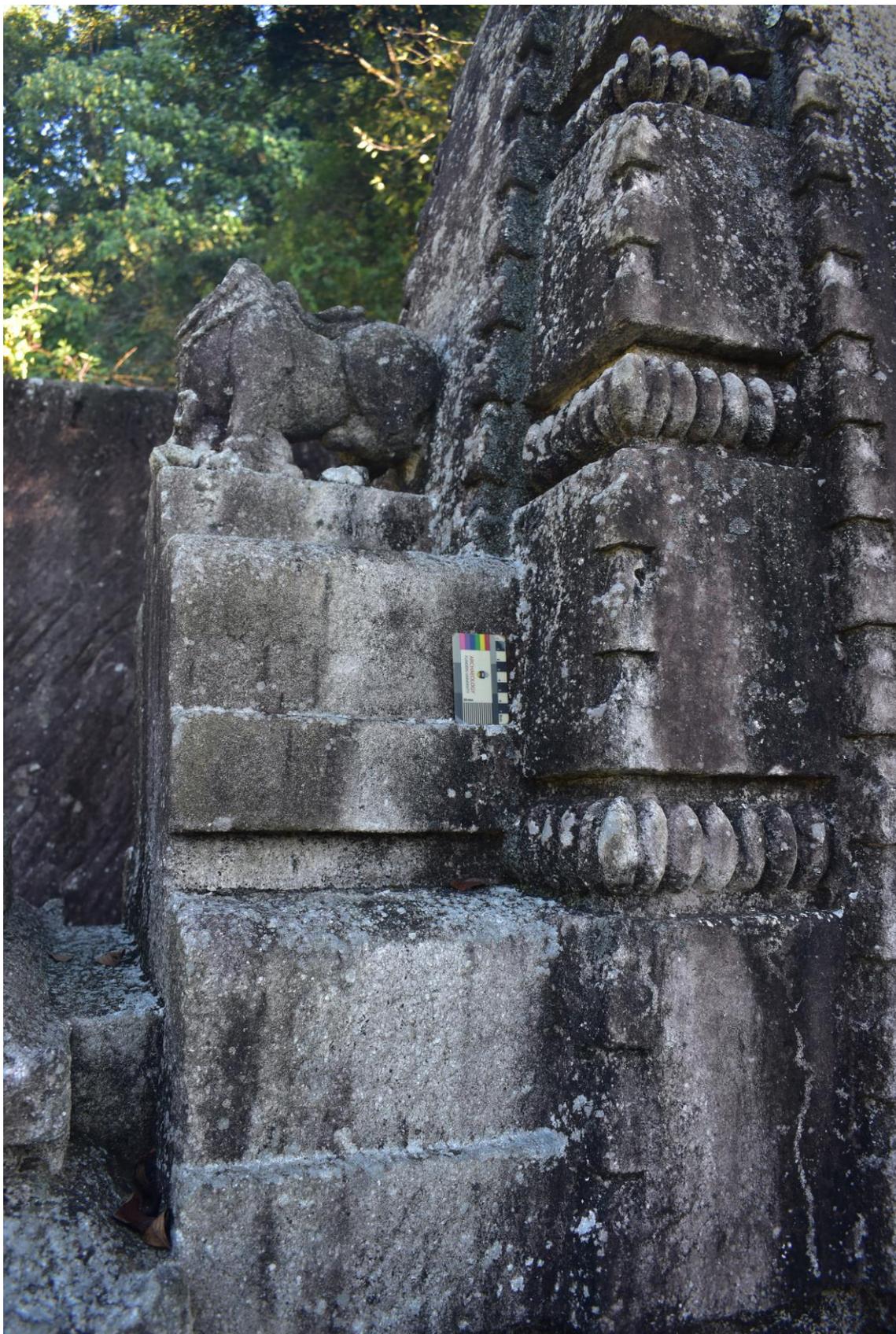


Figure 10: The *sukanasi* fronting the *latina* spire above the shrine



Figure 11: The *latina* spire of the temple



Figure 12: View from above showing the projections of the *lata* above the *skandha* of the *shikhara*

The temple is described by Nagar (1992); however, this description is merely a repetition of what has already been stated by Nautiyal (1969). Observations from our field visit and documentation are described below. The similarity of the monument with “group C” mentioned by Nautiyal (1969) will be discussed later in this paper.

### **The Ek Hathiya Dewal at Thal**

The temple is situated on an excavated terrace on a hill slope which faces north and northeast (Figure 1). The temple has been carved out of a large boulder of quartzite; the remainder of this boulder is still extant to the east of the temple (Figure 2).

The artisans who carved the temple seem to have first isolated a mass of the boulder by cutting out two trenches – 1.2m wide in the east, and 1.0m wide in the south (Figure 3). This mass of quartzite, slightly more than 1.2m x 2.25m and 3.0m in height, they proceeded to carve into a *Nagara* temple with two components – a *mulaprasada* and a *mukhamantapa*. The *mulaprasada* is capped with a simple *latina shikhara*, and the *mukhamantapa* with a *phamsana* roof (Figure 4).

The floor plan of the temple, as well as the elevation of the western face, is indicated in Figure 5. The temple, which faces north, does not have an *adhishtana*, or basement, and the whole structure stands on a levelled rectangular platform a few cm high, and 1.4m x 2.6m in extent. The *mukhamantapa*, or porch, measures 1.15m x 0.96m in plan, with two columns in the front. Each of the columns has a square base, a shaft which

has a square lower portion, an 8-sided middle portion and a circular top portion. The columns are surmounted by a capital which has a circular disc-like lower part, surmounted by a square block with bracket extensions on four sides, each of which have a wavy bottom surface, with a single curl at the extremity. The height, from the floor to the ceiling of the *mukhamantapa*, is 1.0m.



Figure 13: The rock wall on the east of the shrine, sporting tooling marks



Figure 14: The wall to the south of the shrine is faced with masonry blocks, with niches for lamps

Two pilasters on the front face of the shrine correspond to the columns. A *chandrashila* is carved on the floor of the *mantapa*, in front of the access to the *garbhagriha* (Figure 6). The doorway to the *garbhagriha* is 0.40m wide, and has a recessed upper portion on the door jamb and a plain lintel block. The *garbhagriha* measures 0.61m x 0.81m in extent and the floor-to-ceiling height is 0.91m. It is plain and unadorned. A rock-cut *linga* is situated on the floor, closer to the rear wall (Figure 7). The runoff (*argha*) for ablutions is towards the west, instead of to the north as is conventional. The shrine was built to face north, towards the snow-clad Himalayan range. The major peak Nanda Kot is in the general direction which the temple points to, though it is not visible from the level of the temple (Figure 8). Probably this is the reason that the *argha*, and consequently the *pranala*, could not be made to point to the north. The rear wall has a niche 0.38m wide, and the west wall has another smaller niche, 0.13m wide, possibly to house lamps, or other ritual appurtenances.

The roof of the *mukhamantapa* is of *phamsana* type, pyramidal, with four tiers, and surmounted by an *amalaka* (Figure 9). All the tiers have *panjara*-like bosses projecting at intervals. The *phamsana* roof rests on a *kapota* moulding, which is contiguous with the similar element above the *jangha* of the main shrine. The height, from the bottom of the *kapota* to the top of the *amalaka*, is 0.86m. There is no *antarala* as such, as can be seen from the floor plan; however, the *kapili* portion connecting the shrine to the *mukhamantapa*, is surmounted by a *sukanasi* structure, which is a fronton to the *latina shikhara* of the temple (Figure 10). Though there is no *antarala*, a level difference in the

floor of the *garbhagriha* indicates the extent of the *kapili* on the inside. A standing lion adorns the top of the *sukanasi*. It is decapitated, an instance of the very little damage which has occurred in this remarkably well-preserved monument.



Figure 15: The recessed tank to the north of the shrine with the channels that direct water into it



Figure 16: A view of the Ek Hathiya Dewal from the north showing the tank in the foreground, and the twin slots which disgorge water into it



Figure 17: The group of temples at Jageshwar



Figure 18: A group of some of the smaller shrines at Jageshwar. The Nataraja shrine can be seen toward the right of the frame, in the backdrop



Figure 19: One of the shrines at Jageshwar, with proportions similar to the Ek Hathiya Dewal



Figure 20: The Surya Temple at Katarmal surrounded by a multitude of smaller shrines



Figure 21: A cluster of smaller shrines at Katarmal demonstrating differing proportions of the sikharas

The *jangha*, or wall portion of the shrine, is stepped inwards in three horizontal bands, and another band at the top steps outwards. We feel that the two bottom bands could have been carved into the mouldings of the *adhishtana*, and the top band into the mouldings of the *varandika*. There is only one central *bhadra* projection, which does not correspond to the location of the *garbhagriha* within. There is a curved *kapota* over the *jangha*, with *panjara*-like bosses projecting out at intervals, above which there is a

recessed portion, surmounted by the *shikhara*. Unlike the description by Nautiyal (1969), we did not find any beam-heads carved in the recessed portion. The *latina shikhara* is 1.95m high, and is divided into three *bhumis*, by *karna amalakas*, the squashed *amalaka* forms at the corners, which divide the spire into storeys (Figure 11). The central *lata*, which corresponds to the width of the *bhadra* in the main *jangha* portion, is 1.55m in height, and is unadorned by any carving except for square notches along its periphery. The tapering *lata* on each face extends beyond the *skandha*, or shoulder platform of the *shikhara*, and the chamfered points of these extensions nearly reaches the bottom of the *amalaka*, which is the crowning member sitting atop the *griva*, or neck, of the *shikhara* (Figure 12). The total height of the structure from the levelled platform to the tip of the finial, is 2.95m.

The face of the remnant of the boulder to the east of the shrine has been dressed into a vertical wall sporting tooling marks (Figure 13), while the face of the rock remnant in the south has been faced with masonry blocks, with three niches, presumably for lamps (Figure 14). On the northern side the rock has been carved into a rectangular tank at a lower level, into which stormwater is directed through a recessed channel incised into the rock (Figure 15). The channel terminates in twin slots which disgorge water into the tank, and this entire arrangement of waterfall and tank acts as the foreground for the rock-cut shrine (Figure 16). There are no steps descending to this tank, as reported by Sahni (1916) and Nautiyal (1969).

## Discussion

The Ek Hathiya Dewal represents a distinct class of *Nagara* temples with a *latina shikhara* among the temples of Kumaon, and is by no means unique as regards its form, though its rock-cut nature lends itself that distinction. As noted above, Nautiyal (1969) classifies it under his “group C”, which is one among four groups which he assigns for the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of temple-building at Jageshwar and other sites in Kumaon, during the period 950CE – 1300CE. Also included in this group are shrines of the Ratan Deo temples and the Kacheri group of temples at Dwarahat, as well as minor shrines at other sites, such as Bheta, Joshimath, Nala and Katarmal in Kumaon, but Nautiyal (1969: 95) decrees, about these latter shrines, that “none of them merits a description.” The observation about the similarity to some of the smaller shrines of the temple complex at Katarmal, is also seconded by Handa and Jain (2009: 158), in the statement “Some of the mini-temples in the complex are architecturally quite similar to the Ratan Dwal complex of temples at Dwarahat.” Handa and Jain (2009) assign these mini-temples to the mid-twelfth century based on the date assigned by Goetz (1955) to the Ratan Deo shrines at Dwarahat.

Characteristics of the category of temples referred to as “group C” by Nautiyal (1969) are as follows.

*“The shrines under this group look more tapering than the rest at Dwarahat or anywhere else in Kumaon. The volume of the jangha seems to be more than that of the sikhara, which looks*

*conspicuously thin. This closely resembles the Khajuraho shrines, though lacks the repeated recess of the latter” (Nautiyal 1969: 95).*



Figure 22: One of the shrines at Katarmal with proportions similar to the Ek Hathiya Dewal

The Jageshwar temple complex (Figure 17) is a cluster of more than a hundred and fifty shrines located 35km northeast of Almora town (Chanchani 2013). The larger temples in the complex are the Mrtyunjaya Temple, the Jageshwar Temple and the Dandeshwar Temple, though many other notable monuments, albeit smaller in scale – like the wagon-vaulted Navadurga Temple, are also prominent. There are numerous other smaller shrines scattered among the larger temples of the complex. A look at these minor shrines of the Jageshwar temple complex (Figure 18) illustrates what Nautiyal means when he refers to the attenuated proportions of the *shikaras* of group C temples. The difference in the proportions and massing of the *shikhara* is readily discernible between the Nataraja temple, seen towards the right of frame in the backdrop, and the rest of the shrines in Figure 18. A closer view of one of the temples of the Jageshwar group (Figure 19) shows the similarity in proportions and design, to Ek Hathiya Dewal, even in the detail of the squarish notches carved on the periphery of the *latas*.

As discussed above, the Surya Temple complex at Katarmal also consists of a large temple to the Sun God, surrounded by a multitude of small shrines (Figure 20). The main temple structure has been variously dated as belonging to the ninth century (Goetz 1955), thirteenth century (Handa and Jain 2009), and the sixteenth century (Sahni 1916). The uncertainties in the dates assigned to temples in Uttarakhand are considerable, as summed up by Chanchani (2013: 134) with reference to the temples of the Jageshwar complex: “Discrepancies of up to fourteen hundred years in the dates assigned to individual monuments abound”. However, based on the evidence of an inscription dated to the thirteenth century on palaeographic grounds (Handa and Jain 2009) upon a pillar of a *mantapa* of obviously late date attached to the main temple, one can conclude that the temple existed before that date. Thus, the date ascribed by Goetz (1955) for the main temple at Katarmal, on the basis of stylistic similarity to other ninth century monuments of Kumaon seems to be a good estimate. This also ties in well with the observation by Handa and Jain (2009) that the mini-shrines of the Katarmal temple complex, which presumably came up later, can be assigned a date of mid-twelfth century CE.

Though the Ek Hathiya Dewal is similar in proportions and design to the group C monuments of Nautiyal (1969), it is unique in the feature of the central *lata* on the four faces of the *shikhara* projecting beyond the *skandha* and nearly touching the bottom of the *amalaka* (Figure 12), a feature that Nautiyal (1969) rightly associates with the temples of Khajuraho.

However, this feature first appears in Nagara temples during the Pratihara period in central India, as noted by Trivedi (1990: 21-21) – “the upper terminals of the *madhya-lata* and the *bala-panjaras* extend over the *skandhas* up to the lower part of the *amalaka* at the top, a feature which was subsequently adopted in several other temples in central India.” Trivedi (1990) associates this feature with the later phase in Pratihara temple architecture, roughly in the period 850-950CE.

The influence of Pratihara architecture in Kumaon has been postulated by Goetz (1955: 69) to have occurred after the conquest of Kannauj by the Pratihara dynasty in 814CE, when this style of architecture “spread over all the vassal states owing allegiance to the emperors of Kanauj”. The influence of Pratihara style on the monumental architecture of Kumaon has also been reiterated by Nautiyal (1969). Goetz (1955: 69) mentions the early Pratihara influences which can be seen in the heavy nature of the architecture and sculpture, “massive temples with rather short bee-hive *sikharas*”, as does Trivedi (1990). As Goetz (1955: 70) points out, “It was not until the second quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century that Pratihara art was to rediscover elegance and lightness.”

From the above discussion, it can be surmised that, though the observation by Nautiyal (1969) associating the style of the *shikhara* of the Ek Hathiya Dewal to the temples of Khajuraho is tenable, it is to the earlier Pratihara influence that we should ascribe the form of the temple to. As Trivedi (1990: 3) notes, the Pratihara dynasty “passed on a sound and well-established architectural tradition to succeeding medieval dynasties in the region”, which included the Chandellas of Jejakabhukti, to whom the temples of Khajuraho are attributed.

The influence of the Pratihara style on temples such as the rock-cut temple at Masroor, in Himachal Pradesh is well established (Trivedi 1990), though Meister (2006, 2009) attributes this temple to the patronage of Yasovarman of Kannauj, in the eighth century. Trivedi (1990) conjectures that the Pratihara tradition of architecture might have derived from earlier temples built during the reign of Yasovarman and his son Amaraja at Kannauj.

This conduit of influence between Kannauj and the vassal Himalayan states, which might have been in the form of supply of trained artisans, seems to have persisted over the centuries, with all the three phases of Pratihara temple architecture postulated by Trivedi (1990) having their influence on stone temples in the Himalaya.

However, we would propose a date earlier than the twelfth century date postulated by Handa and Jain (2009) for the mini-shrines of Katarmal, and closer to the earlier part of the date bracket of 950CE – 1300CE proposed by Nautiyal (1969). This is due to the rock-cut nature of the temple, which falls out of favour in the later centuries, and the stylistic aspects outlined below.

The rock-cut temple at Masroor is dated to the eighth century (Meister 2006, 2009) and is arguably influenced by the early Pratihara style. The heart of Pratihara territory too boasts of a rock-cut temple – the Chaturbhuja Temple at Gwalior (Trivedi 1990), which is dated to 875CE (Michell 1989) on the basis of the earliest inscription, incised above the doorway of the temple (Trivedi 1990). Rock-cut architecture, by itself relatively a rarity, wanes virtually to nonexistence before the twelfth century, thus it is likely that the Ek Hathiya Dewal was probably carved by the end of the tenth century. The shape of the *chandrashila*, which is characteristic of the architecture of the tenth century, also bolsters this proposed date (Padigar 2020, private communication).

The pillars of the porch or *mantapa* of the Ek Hathiya Dewal (Figures 2, 16), bear close similarity to those of the porches of the mini-shrines at Katarmal (Figures 21, 22), from their division into sections square, eight-sided and circular in plan, to the triangular projections on the faces of the base, and the design of the capital. However, the pillars of the Ek Hathiya Dewal also seems to predate those of the Katarmal mini-shrines, in the sense that some features become more refined, such as the terminations of the facets of the eight-sided portion becoming more pronouncedly pointed. The mini-shrines of Jageshwar, though, do not have porches, so any comparison of the columns is not possible.

The Ek Hathiya Dewal is surprisingly devoid of carvings, even to the extent that the basement and other mouldings are left only blocked out and uncarved (Figure 4), unlike the shrines of Katarmal (Figure 22) and some of the shrines of Jageshwar (Figure 19). It is easy to imagine, by looking at Figures 4, 22 and 19, that the horizontal bands of the Ek Hathiya Dewal could be carved into the mouldings of the *adhithana* and *varandika*, at the bottom and top of the *jangha*, respectively. Even if left uncarved, lending an austere appearance to the structure, the proportions of this temple are tastefully outlined and it is precisely carved.

The precise nature of carving of the Ek Hathiya Dewal, in comparison with the mini-shrines of Jageshwar and Katarmal, points to an execution by a master craftsman, probably from Pratihara country, possibly even as a standard prototype for this type of shrine in the mountain states under the suzerainty of the Pratiharas. This latter point is also supported by the unconventional orientation of the temple. Since there is sufficient mass of the boulder still extant in the east, it should have been perfectly possible to have oriented the temple structure towards east. This would have resulted in the *argha* pointing to north, as per tradition. Considering this, it is significant that the builders chose to orient the shrine to the north. One possibility, already mentioned, is that they chose to orient the temple to the Himalayan range in the north. It could also be that the builders never meant it to be used for worship, but rather as a perfectly executed demonstration prototype of the new temple type imported from Pratihara country.

Thus, it appears likely that the Ek Hathiya Dewal is the first of the group C temples of Nautiyal (1969) to be executed in the Himalaya, likely in the late tenth century, or not much later than that. Thus, this diminutive shrine on a remote hilltop near Thal assumes great significance in the study of *Nagara* architecture in the Himalaya.

## Conclusion

The Ek Hathiya Dewal is a small rock-cut shrine in the *Nagara* idiom of temple architecture, situated in the foothills of the Himalaya, at Thal. This monument, carved out of a mass of quartzite rock not much larger than 1.2m x 2.25m and 3m high, is a simple shrine with a *latina shikhara* and a *mukhamantapa* with a *phamsana* roof. It appears to have influences from the late Pratihara style of temple architecture of central India, and could date to the late tenth century, making it one of the earliest

shrines of this design in Kumaon, and spawning a series of mini-shrines at several temple complexes at Jageshwar, Katarmal, Dwarahat etc., making it an important monument in the history of temple architecture in stone in the Himalaya.

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