

Nāgarāditya: A Sun Temple on the Bank of River Hiranyā

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Abstract: A sun temple situated on the bank of river *Hiranyā*, is one of the many sun temples situated in the region around Somnath temple in the Prabhas Patan district of Gujarat in the *Saurashtra* peninsula. Always have been reported as a sun temple situated on the bank of river *Hiran* by the scholars is a lesser-known but an integral part of the long-standing tradition of Sun worship. The region of *Saurashtra* boasts of many important centres of solar cult. The *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* of the *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*, in its *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* mentions the region of ‘*Prabhās Kṣhetra*’ covering the modern-day Junagadh and Prabhas Patan districts of the southernmost part of *Saurashtra*. The myths given here, justifies the name ‘*Prabhāsa*’ given to the region, as the sacred land of light. Besides the mention of the other temples and the myths related to them, there is one temple mentioned as *Nāgarāditya*, situated on the bank of river *Hiranyā*. The archaeological remains in the *Prabhās Kṣhetra*, consist of many sun temples besides the temples dedicated to other gods and goddesses, dating from the seventh century to the fourteenth century, some extant and some in ruins, showcasing the prominence of the sun cult and the kings who patronized it.

Situated atop *Nāgarā nō tīmbō* besides the river *Hiranyā* and at a distance of 10 kms from Somnath temple shares its serene space with another modern-day temple dedicated to *Shitalā Mātā*. Though in ruins, this temple exudes a majestic presence, bearing silent witness to a glorious past. It’s scattered remains suggest it’s significance as a religious place of importance. and thus it is most likely that it was renovated and reconstructed over ages to maintain its status. Owing to its cultural and architectural features that it is a protected monument under the State Department of Archaeology, Government of Gujarat.

Keywords: Solar cult, *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra*, *Prabhāsa*, *Nāgarāditya*, river *Hiranyā*

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Introduction

A sun temple situated on the bank of river *Hiranyā*, (Sankalia, 1941; Sompura, 1968; Dhaky, 1962; Parikh and Shastri, 1976) is one of the many sun temples located in the region around Somnath temple in the Prabhas Patan district of Gujarat in the *Saurashtra* peninsula (Dhaky, 1962; Desai, 1965; Pandya, 2001).

Sun worship has been an integral part of the *Saurashtra* region since ancient times (Dhaky 1970; Pandya, 2001; Tripathi, 2006). During the reign of Skandagupta, *Senāpati Bhaṭṭārka* was stationed in

Saurāṣṭra, and following the decline of the Gupta Empire, the *Maitrakas* established their rule over eastern *Saurāṣṭra* from their capital at *Valabhi* in the 6th century CE. The prominence of Sun worship in the region became particularly evident during the *Maitraka* period (Dhaky, 1970, 1989; Parikh and Shastri, 1976, p.401). The *Maitrakas* continued the tradition of constructing structural temples, a practice initiated by the Gupta kings. This architectural and religious legacy was subsequently carried forward by the *Garulakas*, the *Saindhavas*, and later by the *Pratihara* and *Solankī* rulers (Dhaky, 1989).

Despite this royal patronage, there is a scarcity of epigraphical records or detailed references in ancient texts. Many mentions of temples in Puranic literature are vague and often dismissed as mythological. However, among the *Purāṇas*, the *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*—the largest of them all—attempts to provide geographical references for numerous temples, some of which can be correlated with present-day sites (Dhaky, 1962; Desai, 1965; Pandya, 2009; Ramkrishna, 2013).

The *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* of the *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*, in its *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya*, mentions the region of ‘*Prabhāsa*’ covering the modern-day Junagadh and Prabhas Patan districts. The myths mentioned here justify the name ‘*Prabhāsa*’ given to the region, as the sacred land of light [*Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*: VII. 11. 1-237]. Besides the mention of the other temples and the myths related to them, there is one temple mentioned as *Nāgarāditya*, situated on the bank of the river *Hiranyā* [*Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*: VII.I.239.1-32]. In this paper, we will be examining the references related to the *Nāgarāditya* as mentioned in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya of the Skaṇḍa Purāṇa in conjunction with the physical remains of the temple site on Nāgarā nō tīmbō, on the bank of river Hiran*.

Location

The Sun temple situated on the bank of river *Hiran* is approximately 10 kilometers from the Somnath Temple at Prabhas Patan, in the southernmost part of *Saurāṣṭra*. The temple stands atop a mound known as *Nāgarā nō tīmbō* and shares its serene surroundings with a modern shrine dedicated to *Shitalā Mātā*.

According to the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* of the *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* in the *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*, the temple of *Nāgarāditya*, along with many others—including the famed Somnath Temple—forms part of the sacred *tīrtha* known as *Prabhāsa* (Pandya, 2009). The geographical and religious significance of this region is further elaborated in the *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* of the *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa* (Desai, 1965; Pandya, 2009; Ramkrishna, 2013).

The *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa* describes *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra* as being situated within the well-known region of *Saurāṣṭra* [*Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*: VII.I.11.37]. It identifies *Prabhāsa* as the ninth division near the ocean (VII.I.11.38-39) and defines its extent as being bordered by the sea to the south, the *Bhadra* River to the north, *Mādhava* to the west, and *Taptōdakaswāmi* to the east [*Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*: VII.I.4.15-16]. This description roughly corresponds to the present-day Junagadh and Prabhas Patan districts (Pandya, 2009; Ramkrishna, 2013). The Sun Temple *Nāgarāditya* (also known as *Nāgarārka*) is situated on the banks of the *Hiranyā* [*Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*: VII.1.239.1] (Joshi, 1976: 142).

Significance of *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra*

Significance of *Prabhāsa* as a sacred *tīrtha* has been since the time of the *Mahābhārata*. [*Mahābhārata*: III.88.20]

The *Skaṇḍa Purāṇa*, describes *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra* as a region associated with refulgence (*Prabhāsa* meaning ‘radiance’ or ‘effulgence’) (VII.I.11.196-197). The sacred significance of this site

is multifaceted, as it is associated with light. *Mahābhārata* also mentions the significance of *Prabhāsa tīrtha* as a place for the gods [*Mahābhārata*: III.88.20].

The foremost association is with the *Jyotirlinga* of Somnath, located at *Prabhāsa*, where the term *Jyotirlinga* itself denotes a radiant column of light [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.7.51, 54; VII.I.23.1-137].

Another major mythological connection is with *Sōma* (*Chandra*), who is believed to have regained the lost lustre at *Prabhāsa* through the blessings of Somnath [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.22.63-64].

A particularly compelling myth in this context is that of *Sūrya-Samjñā*, symbolizing the reorientation of Sun worship. According to this legend, *Sūrya* transformed his form from an unbearably scorching orb to a more benevolent one to appease *Samjñā* [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.11.66-205]. This transformation was undertaken by the divine architect *Viśvakarmā*, who refined the Sun's radiance at *Prabhāsa* [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.11.141]. The *Skānda Purāṇa* further narrates that the land of *Prabhāsa* acquired its name when the scraped-off part of the Sun's orb fell upon it, imbuing the region with divine radiance and thus this place was named 'Prabhāsa' [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.11.196-197].

Sāmba, one of the *Vṛṣṇi Panchavira* and the son of *Kṛṣṇa*, is a key figure in the propagation of the evolved solar sect (Hazra, 1955; Banerjea, 2002: 386). According to the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* of the *Skānda Purāṇa*, he established a Sun temple named *Sambāditya* at *Prabhāsa* after being cured of an ailment by *Sūrya*'s blessings [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.101.69-73]. Given *Prabhāsa*'s proximity to Dwarka, the stronghold of the *Yādavas*, it is likely that this temple was constructed in recognition of the region's religious significance. However, no physical remains of *Sambāditya* exist today.

Besides *Sambāditya*, the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* mentions numerous other Sun temples in the region, reinforcing *Prabhāsa*'s status as a radiant and sacred *tīrtha*. Each temple is associated with unique myths and legends surrounding its establishment. These numerous references, while highlighting the region's prominence, also suggest an extensive religious landscape where almost every space was consecrated as a *tīrtha*, which belonged to *Viṣṇu*, *Shiva*, and *Devī* besides *Sūrya*. The *Sūrya-Samjñā* myth set against the backdrop of *Prabhāsa* underscores the transformation of Sun worship, leading to the installation of *Sūrya* images and the establishment of temples, which in turn nurtured a fully developed solar cult.

The *Maitraka* rulers played a significant role in constructing numerous temples not only dedicated to *Sūrya* but also to *Viṣṇu*, *Shiva*, and *Devī*, both within *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra* and across the *Saurāṣṭra* peninsula (Dhaky and Nanavati, 1970).

Archaeological Correlation

Correlating the temples mentioned in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* with physical structures remains difficult due to the absence of written records. It is plausible that the religious importance of *Prabhāsa* made it a target for invasions, resulting in the destruction of many temples. Subsequent ruling dynasties may have undertaken renovations, while some structures may have been lost to time.

Nevertheless, archaeological evidence strongly supports the presence of Sun temples within *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra* and across the *Saurāṣṭra* peninsula. Remnants of *Sūrya* images found scattered throughout the region further substantiate its historical role in the development of the solar cult. The *Rājabhattārka* chapter [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.11.1-] of the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* reinforces the immense religious significance of this site, particularly in connection with the *Sūrya-Samjñā* myth. According to Desai (1965), the chapter name *Rājabhattārka* suggests the importance given to *Senāpati Bhattārka* and the temple building activity of the *Maitraka* dynasty. They carried forward the agenda

of spreading the Brahmanical thought as their overlords the Gupta kings. There hasn't been one author of this *Purāṇa*, but many successively have contributed in writing about the various parts of the Gupta Empire. *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* has been composed by the scholarly Brahmins who were invited from *Nagara*, modern day Vadnagar also known as Anandnagar, by the *Maitraka* rulers as mentioned in the *Nāgara Khaṇḍa* [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VI.164.4-10], as well as the *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.239.16] and settled here in *Prabhāsa* and eventually in the *Saurāṣṭra* peninsula. The time period of the composition of the *Prabhāsa Khaṇḍa* is by all means prior to the fall of *Valabhi* in 789 A.D., allowing this work most probably to spread on for the three centuries during the *Maitraka* rule (Parikh and Shastri, 2005: 1). The architectural and religious legacy was subsequently carried forward by the *Garulakas*, the *Saindhavas*, and later by the *Pratihara* and *Solankī* rulers (Dhaky, 1989).

There are archaeological remains of numerous temples dedicated to *Sūrya* found not only in the precincts of *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra*, but in the *Saurāṣṭra* peninsula as well. Some of which are still extant in its original form, while some of which stand in ruins and while some are reconstructed keeping in view the need of the modern worshippers, showing a continuity of the sun cult in the region (Pandya, 2001). The temples in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra* are of great architectural value as the temples had been dedicated to the Sun as early as the seventh century CE till the fourteenth century CE, which shows the prominence of the cult in the region as well as the patrons which gave enough importance for it to thrive, thus even showcasing the historical importance as it suggests the endeavor of many dynasties for the sustenance of a belief (Pandya, 2009; Ramkrishna, 2013).

Nāgarāditya or Nāgarārka

The *Hiraṇyā* River, originating from the hills of the Gir forest, flows southward into the Arabian Sea, shaping the religious landscape of the *Prabhāsa* region [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.238.1-4]. Revered for its sin-absolving powers, this river is associated with numerous sacred *tīrthas* and temples. A significant legend linked to this site is that of King *Satrajit*, who is believed to have installed an image of the *Sūrya* here. Additionally, the temple's name, *Nāgarāditya*, is attributed to the arrival of *Nāgara* Brahmins in *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra*, who were invited to perform daily rituals [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.I.239.16].

However, the *Nāgarakhanda* of the *Skānda Purāṇa* specifies that the *Nāgara* Brahmin community originally settled in *Prabhāsa Tīrtha* on the banks of the *Saraswati* River, rather than the *Hiraṇyā*, having migrated from *Nagara*, present-day Vadnagar [*Skānda Purāṇa*: VI.164.4-10]. The *Prabhāsa* region was renowned for the sacred river *Prāchi Saraswati*, which ultimately merges with the *Hiraṇyā* and *Kapilā* rivers to form the *Triveṇī Sangam*, considered a site of great holiness. Both the *Nāgarakhanda* and the *Prabhāsa Khanda* of the *Skānda Purāṇa* recount the arrival and settlement of the *Nāgara* Brahmins in *Prabhāsa*. The temple, situated atop *Nāgarā-nō-tīmbō*, and its name, *Nāgarāditya*, seem to serve as enduring reminders of this historical connection.

Architectural Features

Recognized for its unique architectural and cultural significance, this sun temple is a protected monument under the State Archaeology Department, Government of Gujarat.

This is a west-facing Sun temple, which sets it apart from the other sun temples (Dhaky, 1962; Pandya, 2001; Pandya, 2009). It is a *sandhāra* style of temple with a *gudhamandapa*. The exterior of the temple with least decoration but the arrangement of the vertical and horizontal projections creates a drama of light and shade.

Ground Plan

On plan, this temple has an elaborate entrance porch, *guḍhamaṇḍapa*, *antarāla*, *garbhagriha* and *pradakshīṇā patha* around the *garbhagriha*.

Elevation –Interior of the temple

The temple has the *shrīngār chowkī* with the *kakshāsana-like* arrangement. These pillars are square at the base, octagonal in the center, and circular on the top with the carved chained *ghanṭikā*. Above this are the *kirtimukhas* over which rests the capital of the pillar to hold the weight of the roof. The beams rest on the pillars and finally the ceiling with a carved lotus in the square. The entrance door to the *guḍhamaṇḍapa* is very well carved in yellow stone. The *dwārśākha* is *panchaśākha* with the *Gaṇeśa* in the lintel and a *Navagraha* panel above it. On both sides of the *udumbara*, the guards are placed in the niches on each side in the *dwārśākha*. These guards could be *Danḍa* and *Pingāḷa*, the attendants of *Sūrya*. It cannot be made out clearly as those images have been weathered.

Through the entrance doorway one enters a spacious *guḍhamaṇḍapa*. The *maṇḍapa* has the arrangement of six pilasters and two free standing pillars over which the roof of the *maṇḍapa* must have rested, which is now open to the sky. There is no *shikhara* anymore (Dhaky and Shastri, 1962; Sompura, 1965; Pandya, 2001, 2009). The pillars and pilasters have a common arrangement of layers, square at the base, octagon in the center and the layers with *karṇikā*, *hamsāvali*, the chained *ghanṭikā* and finally *grāsapaṭṭī*, then supporting the capital and finally the beams to support the roof. The interior of the roof would be of concentric circles, the general spacing of the interior of the *shikhara* during the Solanki times. Those concentric layers were carved with the *asōpālav* pattern, the lozenges, with buttresses, the lozenges pattern again and the layer of the full-blown lotuses. The layers above it are now no more and the *maṇḍapa* is now open to the sky. In the cardinal position on both sides of North and South are the latticed windows to lit the *maṇḍapa*. All the pillars and pilasters in the *maṇḍapa* and the *antarāla* have the same arrangement of the horizontal layers.

The entrance door to the *garbhagriha* is simple with the least carving, except for the *Navagraha* panel above. The *garbhagriha* is empty and without any decoration. Around the *garbhagriha* is the *pradakshina patha*. The outside wall of the *garbhagriha* is carved with various layers – the lowest layer has the lozenge pattern with a layer of *kharaka*, *kumbhaka*, *kalaśa*, with two layers of *kapōtalī*. The layer of *jānghā* is simple and an *asōpālav* pattern runs through the centre. At the cardinal points on the East, the North and the South, on the *jānghā* are standing images of *Sūrya* set into the niches, which have elaborately carved *Udgama*. *Sūrya* stands here in the *sama* position and with all possible northerner's features, holding a lotus in each hand along with *Danḍa* and *Pingāḷa*, *Uṣā* and *Pratyusā* (Banerjea, 2002:430-441). The next layer is of the *kirtimukha*, with *kapōtalī* layer twice and topped with *chāḍḍjya*. This *pradakshinapath* is blocked from one side, that is the southern side, while there is a small opening on the northern side.

Elevation – Exterior of the temple

The exterior of the temple have least of the least carvings but the vertical and horizontal projections are boldly set in to create the play of light and shade very well. The layers over the *bhīṭṭa* are the *jāḍyakumbha*, *karṇaka*, *antarapatra*, *chāḍḍyaki*, a layer with the lozenges pattern. The layers of the *Mandovara* are: *khuraka*, *kumbhaka*, *kalaśa*, *antarapatra*, *kapōtalī*, *mancika*, *jānghā*, which are plain with only an *asopalav* band in the middle of the *jānghā*. The *jānghā* is topped by *grāsapaṭṭī*, *bharanī*, *sirahpaṭṭī*, *kapōtalī* and *khurachāḍḍya* (Dhaky, 2017:298).

The *garbhagriha* is a *sapta-ratha* on plan with bold *bhadra* and the other *rathas*. The *bhadra* projection in the *shikhara* has a niche but is meant to be a latticed window set in a balcony this window-like projection is topped with an *udgama*. The *karnas* and the *pratirathas* have the *shringas* on each of its vertical projections. The *shringas* do not show the usual pattern of the Solanki order, with *jālī* carved on each of its *shringas*.

Over the layer of *khurachāḍya*, there is a layer similar to *bharaṇī* above, which are the *shringas* placed on the top of each projection. At the base of each *shringa*, there are two *shringika* on both its sides, while in the center, there is a niche-like thing with a diamond/ lozenge pattern above this is a plain *shringa* topped by an *āmlaka*. The same is found in the arrangement of the *maṇḍapa*. The balcony-like projection in the *bhadra* niche is projected at all the cardinal points in the *maṇḍapa* and the *garbhagriha*. Unfortunately, the shikhara of the *maṇḍapa* and the *garbhagriha* is no longer there (Dhaky, 1962; Sompura, 1968: 306; Pandya, 2001; Pandya, 2009).

A part of the wall is broken on the eastern side of the outer wall of the *pradakshina patha*, so that the image of the sun could be accessed from the side of the newly established Shitala Mata temple. To reach up to the level of the Sun image, a flight of steps and a spacious platform has been provided.

Remains strewn around the temple

According to Dhaky, there was also a *tōraṇa* placed in front of the temple, the remains of which are now placed in the Prabhasa Patan Museum. There was also a small-sized *kūṇḍa* present here, the remains of which at that time were visible (Dhaky, 1962). There are remains of the temple strewn all over the place. Since this temple has been mentioned in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* of *Skānda Purāṇa*, its antiquity and importance could be ascertained by the reconstruction and renovation of the temple and its premises. According to Dhaky and Shastri (1962), this temple belongs to the fourteenth century CE.

Conclusion

The Sun temple on the bank of the river *Hiraṇyā*, as it has always been identified by the scholars (Sankalia, 1941, p.91; Dhaky, 1962; Sompura, 1968: 201) have been recognized as the *Nāgarāditya* aka *Nāgarārka*. Owing to its proximity to river *Hiran* aka *Hiraṇyā* and its location atop the *Nāgarā nō tīmbō* and the name of the temple *Nāgarāditya*, are constant reminders of a *Nāgara* Brahmin community that once settled here. The temple of *Nāgarāditya* (*Nāgarārka*) is one of the significant yet lesser-known Sun temples. Its mention in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* of the *Skānda Purāṇa*, holds significant cultural value. Situated on the banks of the river *Hiraṇyā* (Hiran), it is believed to be a sacred site capable of absolving sins (*Skānda Purāṇa*: VII.1.239.1), is still standing though in ruins, as a testimony to a glorious past (Dhaky, 1962; Pandya, 2001; Pandya, 2009; Ramkrishna, 2013). Despite the destruction, the temple's mention in the *Prabhāsa Kṣhetra Māhātmya* of the *Skānda Purāṇa*, and its existing ruins confirm its antiquity and religious significance.

To maintain its religious significance, the temple likely underwent several renovations, as evidenced by scattered remains. The ruins suggest that the last major renovation occurred during the fourteenth century CE (Dhaky, 1962), after which the once-thriving pilgrimage center faded into obscurity. Despite its dilapidated state, the temple retains unique architectural features. Notably, it is west-facing, an uncommon orientation for Sun temples. Additionally, while its exterior lacks elaborate carvings, the interplay of vertical and horizontal projections creates a striking effect of light and

shadow. This temple provides enough scope for future research and conservation, which could shed more light on this forgotten monument.

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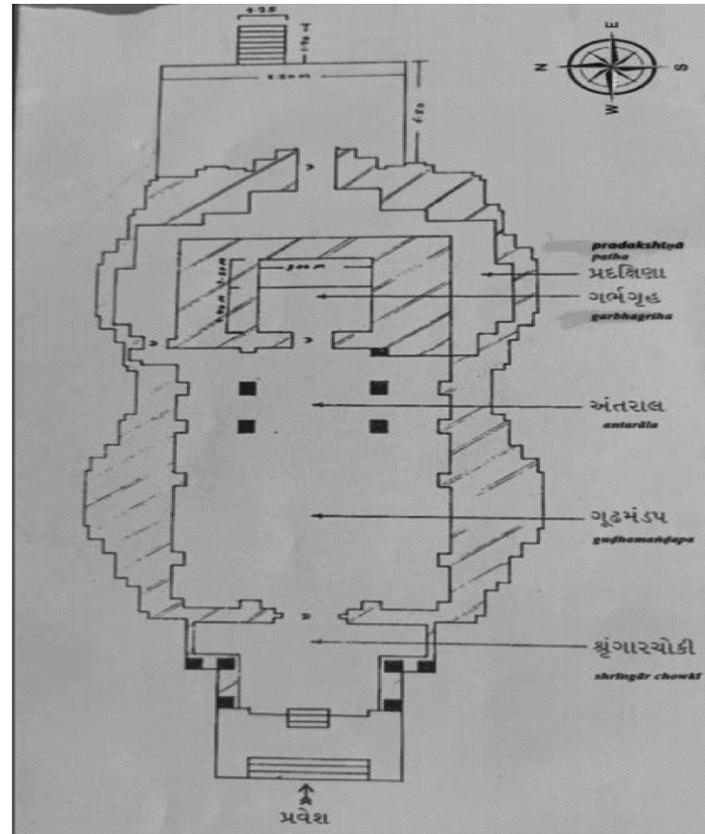


Fig. 1: Ground plan of the sun temple on the bank of River Hiran, courtesy: State Department of Archaeology, Government of Gujarat



Fig. 2: Entrance porch: Shringar chowki with the kakshasana



Fig. 3: Entrance doorway to the gudhamandapa

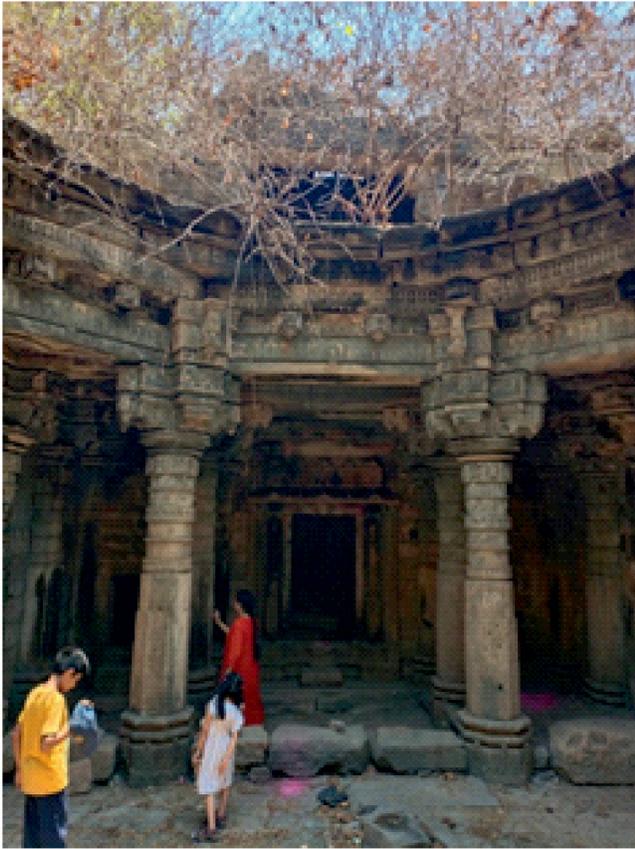


Fig. 4: *Gudhamandapa* and *antarāla*



Fig. 5: Surya in the eastern niche of garbhagriha in the pradakshina patha around



Fig. 6: The exterior of the temple from the souther side

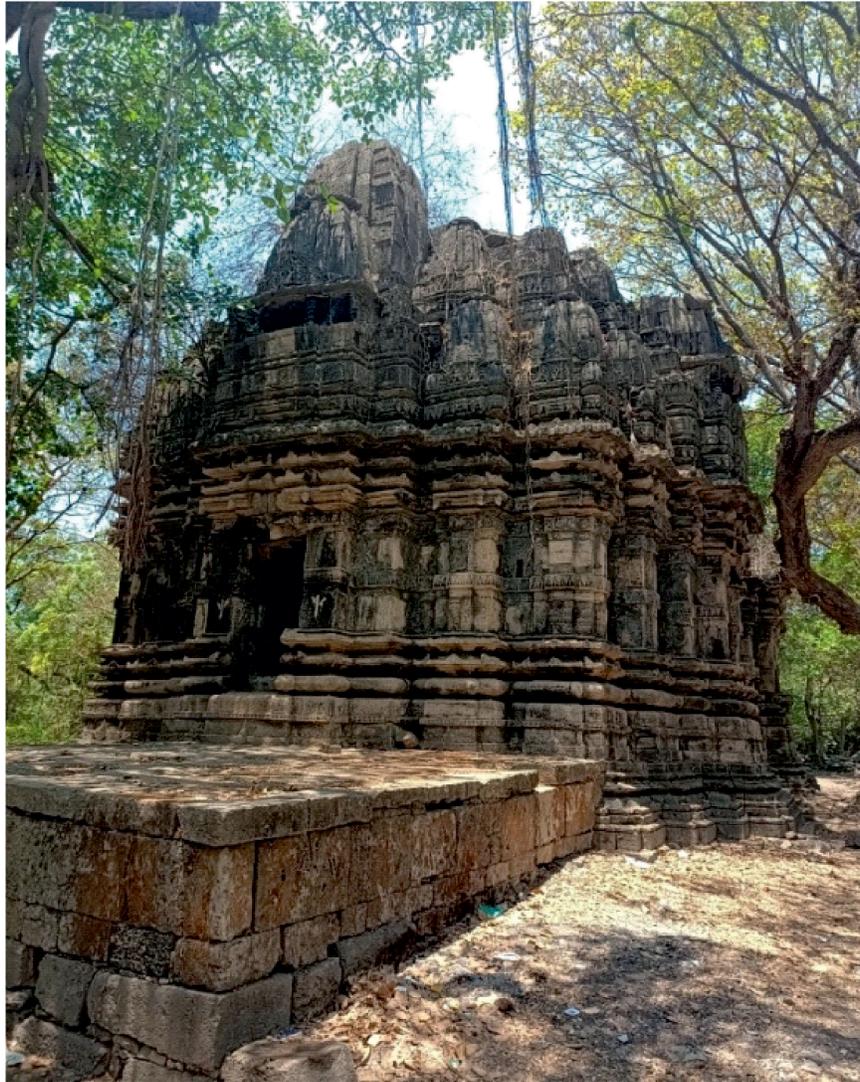


Fig. 7: Temple exterior – eastern side