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# Integrated Environment: The Sacred Landscape of Dhār Tīrtha in the Vicinity of Lonar Crater

Swapna Joshi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Dr. Homi Bhabha Road, Ward No. 8, Pashan, Pune, Maharashtra – 411 008, India (Email: swapna.joshi@students.iiserpune.ac.in)

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the Dhār Tīrtha-Gāimukh complex as a conglomerate, set within the landscape of the Lonar crater situated in Buldhana district of Maharashtra. The architectural productions here are a palimpsest of reappropriated structures and reused spaces. There can be traced a continuum in the building activity from the thirteenth through eighteenth century AD. The following article is a preliminary investigation to map this built environment and religious affiliations in order to understand the role of Dhār tīrtha within the ambit of Lonar.

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**Keywords:** Lonar Crater, Landscape, Temples, Water Spring, Pilgrimage, Myth, Heterogeneity

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## Introduction

Lonar crater is situated in the Buldhana district of Maharashtra state. A relatively young meteorite impact crater formed in basalt, it has a saltwater lake at its centre, a rocky terrain surrounding it, and natural water springs that emerge within this outcrop (Maloof *et al.*, 2010) (Figure 1). The active springs that incise the rim walls of the crater flow from the Dhār- Gāimukh tīrtha, Pāpahareśvara temple, Sītā nhāñī stream at the Kumareśvara temple and Rāmgayā temple. Studies have shown that there are also seasonally active streams other than the one mentioned above (Komatsu *et al.*, 2014). The Dhār Gāimukh water stream, situated in the northern scarp of the crater walls, is a perennial flow (Figure 2). This spring, locally known as Gaṅgā Bhogāvati, is a place of prime religious importance in both the mythical and pilgrimage circuit of Lonar. The stream that falls at the centre of Dhār tīrtha complex is a perennial source but has a heavy pressure only during the rainy season. Dhār is also the vantage point to view the panoramic vista of the Lonar crater and the wilderness surrounding it. An elaborate architectural landscape surrounds this water stream while keeping it as the central focus in the conglomerate (Figure 3). An integrated whole, it is regarded as the Dhār Gāimukh tīrtha, where Dhār denotes the freshwater spring and Gāimukh refers to the cow head through which the sacred stream flows (Figure 4). Even though today there

isn't stone sculpture of *gāimukh* near the water outlet, its sacrality is maintained through the name in common parlance. This nomenclature that the conglomerate has acquired underlines the position that the perennial water stream plays here. There is no available inscriptional evidence that aids in addressing a time frame for the constructions around Dhār. The material evidence in the form of religious architecture and sculptures is the sole source to understand this conglomerate.



Figure 1: Lonar crater, District Buldhana, Maharashtra

This article focuses on the spatial purview of Dhār *tīrtha* with respect to the Lonar crater and the architectural productions that encompass it. To any visitor, at first glance, all the temples and tanks here might appear as built during a single historical period, however, a deconstructive study of its structures and their features reveals that it is a layered construction. Though the earliest stone constructions are coeval with the period of the Yadavas, there are many interpolations, additions and changes that have taken place in this complex from the thirteenth through eighteenth centuries AD. The primary motive is to document these structures to understand the unprecedented value of Dhār *tīrtha* in context to the sacred landscape of the crater. It is essential to note the changing dynamics of the physical space around Dhār and its multiple roles. It acts as a starting point of the pilgrimage route encircling the Lonar crater, a perennial spring that is of practical use to the local people for their daily necessities and a pious flow of water that is believed to cure an ailing human being or wash away all sins of the individual who takes a dip in it. These are some traits and recurring themes that

are common to many *tīrthas* in India. Still, the vital feature of Dhār *tīrtha* is the continuous building activity which is rarely seen at place, even within Lonar. This article hence adds to the larger narrative of sacred geography in the Indic paradigm showing the creation and sustenance of regional *tīrthas* and their role in the formation of religiosity of a region.



Figure 2: The freshwater spring in *kuṇḍa* no. 1, locally called as Dhār, at Dhār *tīrtha*



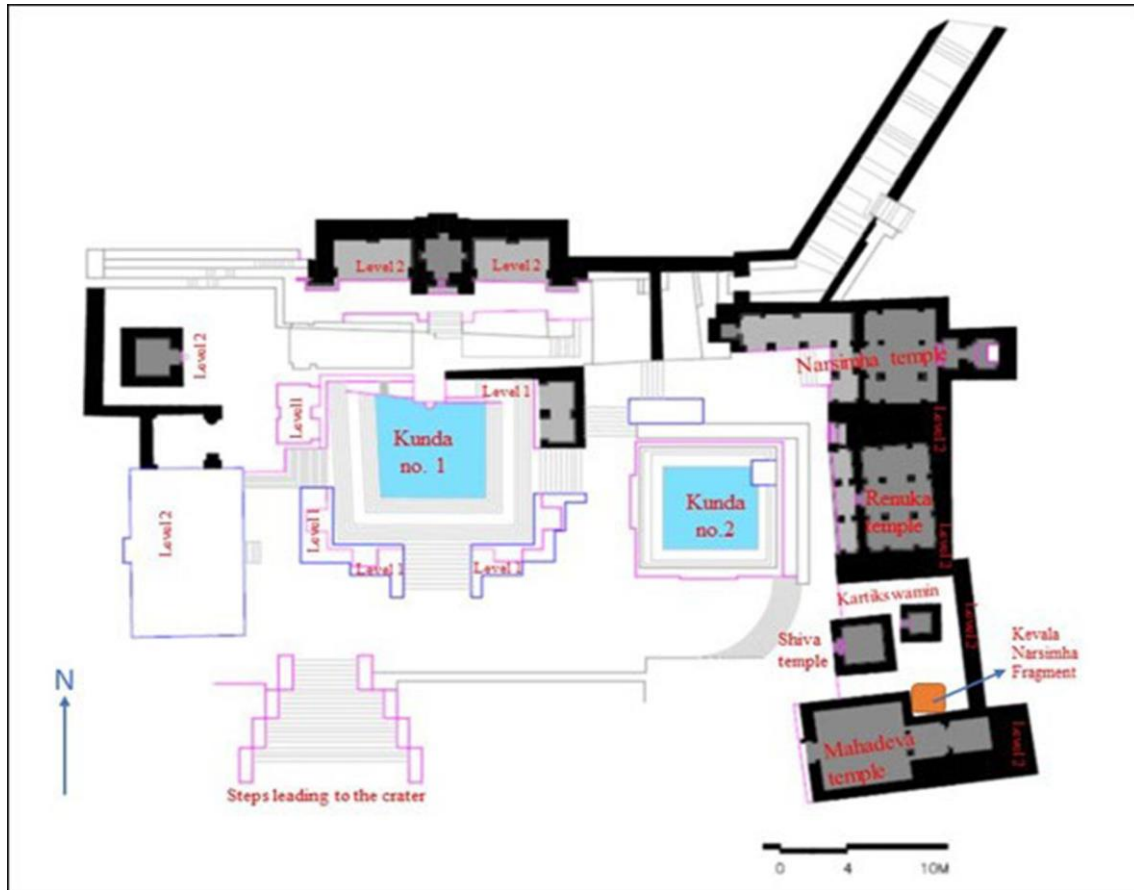


Figure 3: The plan of Dhār tīrtha showing all the temples, tanks and important remains (After ASI)



Figure 4: The north and west sides of Dhār tīrtha, construction on both Level 1 and Level 2 can be seen here

## Narratives Associated with the Dhār Tīrtha

The Lonar crater landscape has a set of nomenclatures that have been acquired over time through the varied facets in its sacred geography. Few of the common terms include Virajātīrtha, Virajakṣetra, Viṣṇūgayā, Nābhitīrtha and Lavaṇādityatīrtha. The antiquity of Lonar is traced to the *kṛtayuga*, claimed through its purported textual references from Skanda Purāṇa (Agrawal, 1989:4). But Padma Purāṇa refers to a tank in Viṣṇūgayā, where one should bathe and drink its water to be freed from all bondage (Padma Purana: 1954). Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbarī, a sixteenth century AD document, describes it as “a place of great sanctity. The Bramhins call it Bishan Gaya”. Further the text adds that, “Here is also a reservoir, having a spring in it of great depth, and measuring a kos in length and in breadth, and surrounded by lofty hills” (Fazl, 1891: 231). Though these texts do not provide a particular name for the reservoir or tank, the description is certainly of the Dhār tīrtha. It delineates the position of Dhār perennial water spring in the context of the Lonar crater.

The eighteenth-nineteenth century text in Marathi called Virajakṣetra Mahātmya or Loṇār Mahātmya consists of eleven adhyāyas that write about its creation and mention different locations within the crater surroundings as holy tīrthas, with Dhār tīrtha been accorded its deserved elevated status. In this text, many stories explain the sacred landscape of Lonar, the most common among them is the story of truth triumphs over evil, where Lord Viṣṇu in the form of Daityasūdana is said to have killed the demon Lavaṇāsūra. The story goes as follows. The demon Lavaṇāsūra, after severe penance, obtained a boon of immortality from Śiva. Having this boon, he was residing in Lonar in a den at the exact location of the crater. The notoriety of Lavaṇāsūra had disrupted the lives of the local people. Even Gods and other celestial beings could not control his wrath. While receiving the boon, Lavaṇāsūra was told that at a certain point he would be killed by the foot of two -three-year-old toddler, however, but Lavaṇāsūra never paid any heed to this announcement. Eventually, Viṣṇu takes the form of a toddler and with his foot pushed Lavaṇāsūra on his navel in his subterranean abode.

The victorious Viṣṇu (in the form of toddler), who was named Daityasūdana later, needed water to cleanse his toe off the demon's blood. Hence, the holy river Gaṅgā was requested to flow down on earth at Lonar to help Viṣṇu to rinse his foot. Another version of the fight between Daityasūdana and Viṣṇu comes from oral narratives and it is also depicted in the sculptural panel on the ceiling in the *antarāla* of the Daityasūdana temple. Here Viṣṇu as Daityasūdana is shown as a young lad. Apart from this difference, rest of the story is similar, especially the portion that describes how Viṣṇu, with his toe, killed the demon and later cleaned himself with the pious water of Ganga, now known as Dhār. This strand of the myth that states that the river appeared on earth to clean the God's feet has led to the belief that a dip in the holy water of Dhār tīrtha purifies an individual from all his dirt, sins, and wrongdoings.

The genesis of all the religious landscape that encompasses the Dhār stream also lies in this mythical narrative. Also, the story binds the crater, the natural water springs and

the architectural constructions in one confined circuit. While also providing sustenance to the local settlement, Dhār becomes an essential element of the socio settings of Lonar.

### Architectural Layout of the Dhār *Tīrtha*

The above discussed account of the narrative sphere of Dhār *tīrtha*, is complemented with religious architecture comprising temples, *kuṇḍas*, *maṭha* and *samādhīs* as well as scattered sculptural remains and architectural members that must have been part of the complex. There are two main *kuṇḍas* in this complex, one at the centre from where the main Dhār stream flows (henceforth called *kuṇḍa* no.1) and the other to its east (henceforth called *kuṇḍa* no. 2). Both these *kuṇḍas* are on a lower level (Level 1) accompanied by an arcade on all four sides of the water stream, and the upper level (Level 2) has all other structures from the complex (Figure 3). These levels or terraces are joined by steps from their north-eastern and south-eastern side.



Figure 5: The Viṣṇu Temple of Dhār *tīrtha*, above the Dhar stream

**The Central Shrine of Dhār:** On level 2, just above the small rectangular structure of the Dhār stream, there is a Viṣṇu temple built in the Maratha-Peshva period, possibly during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries. It is a stone structure consisting of a square shrine with a two-tiered *śikhara* above it. Adjoining the central shrine on both lateral sides are two arcuated divisions each, on the same plinth as the temple (Figure 5). The exterior walls of the temple are plain stone masonry except for minimal ornamentation to the doorframe. The *śikhara* has two tiers of empty niches designed like rectangular *chatrīs* with a bulbous dome as their finial. The temple's interior is a square *garbhagrha*,



at the centre of which is a sculpture of Daityasūdāna killing demon Lavaṇāsura, which is identified based on its body posture and Vaiṣṇava attributes.



Figure 6: Arcade remainders along the west edge of Dhār *tīrtha*

Alongside, there is a modern six-handed sculpture of Durgā seated on a lion. To the left of this Viṣṇu temple, on the western side of the complex, another small shrine belongs to the same period as the main temple and follows a similar architectural language. To the west side, connected to the small shrine, are dilapidated spaces that

must have had an arcade, as suggested by the remnants of the plinth, side walls, false arch design and niches in the back wall (Figure 6). Probably it was a long colonnade that once joined the arcade that is currently abutting the Viṣṇu temple. Though the entire structure belongs to the Maratha-Peshva period, minor changes like paints, retouched masonry joints, incongruously added architectural members are found in this temple. But all of these additions or changes must have been done in recent times.

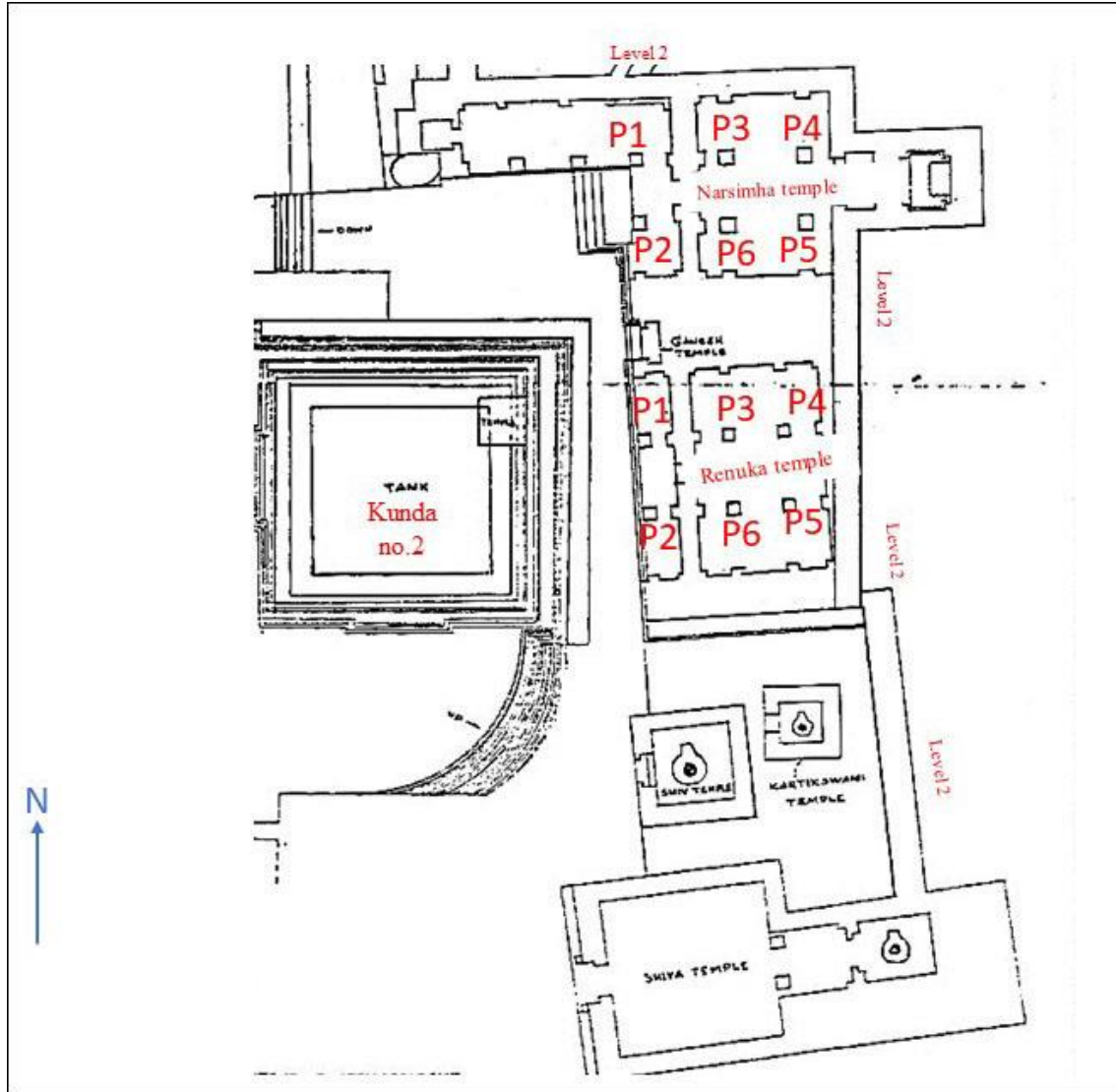


Figure 7: The eastern fringe of Dhār tirtha (After ASI)

**Eastern Fringe of Dhār Complex:** Along the eastern edge of the Dhār complex, there are three large structures with few other small shrines, sculptural fragments and *samādhīs*. All these religious constructions are situated on the left as one enters Dhār tirtha. From north to south it consists of many temple buildings; Narasimha temple, Gaṇeśa shrine, Reṇukā temple are set above *kunḍa* no. 2, slightly displaced from these are Mahādeva temple, Kārtikasvāmī shrine and another Śiva shrine, further away is a small cluster of possibly two temples and two *samādhīs* (Figure 7). All of these temples



listed here have varied elements that need to be explicated in detail. This side of Dhār is a heterogenous space that has been periodically occupied and refurbished, evident from its architecture. Hence it is necessary to attempt a nuanced study of every structure and deconstruct the overall space.



Figure 8: Facades of Narasimha and Reṇukā Temples, above *kuṇḍa* no. 2 along east edge of Dhār *tīrtha*

**Narasimha and Reṇukā Temples** (Figure 8): The Narasimha temple of has two wings, of which the verandah on the left has been added later, as is evident from its crude masonry. The original structure is on its right, consisting of a *mukhamaṇḍapa*, *gūḍhamaṇḍapa* and the *garbhagrha* (Figure 7). Presently the *garbhagrha* has a four-handed sculpture of Vidaraṇa Narasimha on a pedestal, identifiable only based on the body posture of the deity and the Hiraṇyakaśipū on his lap. The *dvāraśākhā* has Garuḍa on the lintel and Viṣṇu in the *uttarāṅga rathikā*. The *maṇḍapa* of the temple, separated from the *garbhagriha* via an *antarāla*, is rectangular on plan with four central pillars and four pilasters. The typology of the four center pillars is as follows – a rectangular block at its base, followed by a rectangular shaft, decorative floral bands, square block with icons, *laśuna* member with a *nāsī*, *kaṇī*, *ghaṭa* and finally the capital with *nāga* motifs. Pillar no. 6 on the right in front of the entrance, has the icon of Brahmā, Bhairava, and probably Viṣṇu on the vertical rectangular shaft. Most of these icons have lost their attributes and have paint layers. The *mukhamaṇḍapa* of the temple also has two pillars, typologically similar to the pillars of the *gūḍhamaṇḍapa* with Narasimha, Bhūvarāha and Viṣṇu images. *Dvāraśākhā* of this *mukhamaṇḍapa* has a Vidaraṇa Narasimha icon on the inner side of the cantilever below the *uttarāṅga*, flanked with images of Brahmā and

Śiva on his two sides. The prominence of Vaiṣṇava imagery in the temple shows it was a shrine dedicated to Viṣṇu, probably Narasimha form. Looking at the pillar typology, architectural layout and sculpture it can be speculated that this temple was built in the thirteenth century AD.

Next to this temple is a small niche, with a Gaṇeśa icon in it, which appears to have been haphazardly incorporated (Figure 3). Originally in plan, there could have been a space between the Narasimha and Reṇukā temples. This is also evident from the redone exterior walls and roof of both these temples, markedly different in stone course and masonry compared to the interiors. At this point, it is imperative to discuss Reṇukā temple with its details to figure if its art aesthetics match the Narasimha temple. The Reṇukā temple comprises on plan a rectangular *mukhamaṇḍapa* followed by a *maṇḍapa* (Figure 7). Looking at the ground plan of this structure, it is plausible that this was a *maṭha* originally. The ground plan matches the Tripuruṣācā *maṭha* near Daityasūdana temple in Lonar, *maṭha* from Gokuleśvara temple complex in Charthana, *maṭha* in front of temple no.5 of Balsane, *maṭha* in the Gondeśvara temple complex at Sinnar and many others. Also, the position of Reṇukā temple, abutting *kuṇḍa* no. 2 could have been suitable for certain ritualistic purposes. It may have served as a resting place for ascetics and pilgrims like the arcade on the western edge of Dhār *tīrtha* must have been in later times. The pillars of the *mukhamaṇḍapa* and the *maṇḍapa*, *devakoṣṭhas* in the side wall of the *mukhamaṇḍapa*, and its *dvāraśākhā* are stylistically similar to Narasimha temple (Figure 8). Thus, it can be said that both these are contemporary structures and most likely the earliest extant structures within the Dhār conglomerate. This hypothesis would be substantiated further in the article while analysing other structures and sculptures within Dhār *tīrtha*. Another important feature of Reṇukā temple is that it is also a Vaiṣṇava affiliated structure, deducible from the narrative panels on pillars. These sculptures are on the small square slabs in the upper half of the pillar. Pillars in the *mukhamaṇḍapa* have panels depicting Samudramanthana, Vāmanā-Trivikrama, two fighting scenes and two erotic panels. Four pillars in the *maṇḍapa* have Kṛṣṇalīlā (childhood stories of Kṛṣṇa) and Rāmāyaṇa panels, some of the episodes being Govardhandhārī Kṛṣṇa, Ariṣṭāsūra *vadha*, Dadhimanthana (churning butter), Mārica *vadha*, Vālī *vadha* and Hanumān meeting Sītā in Aśokavāṭikā. The affiliation of Reṇukā temple and the purpose of the structure might be further accentuated only after a nuanced iconographic enquiry of all these episodic narratives. However, since it is not the focus of the current article they have not been analysed here in detail.

**Other Temples in the Dhār Conglomerate:** As mentioned earlier, there are three temples, little separated from the Narasimha-Reṇukā temple cluster (Figure 3). The Śiva and Kārtikasvāmī temples are small square shrines with a plain stone masonry wall, domical ceilings and slender finials on their roofs. Built somewhere in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries AD, these structures have been renovated later. The stone courses used in the exterior masonry walls match the masonry of the façades of other structures within Dhār *tīrtha*. This shows that renovations of many structures in the Dhār conglomerate result from one phase of restoration probably sometime in the

last 200-300 years. Any further additions and restoration work can be attributed to the works of the Archaeological Survey of India. The Mahādeva temple to the south of the Śiva temple also has two phases of rework seen through its exterior wall masonry, but the temple's trabeated interiors and pillar typology are roughly coeval with the late Yadava period (Figure 9). It might be a construction of late thirteenth or fourteenth century AD. That the walls of this temple are added later, is also evident from the crude filler walls in the temple's interior that do not match the stone surfaces of the pillars. On plan, this temple consists of a *garbhagrha*, *antarāla* and a *maṇḍapa* but the incongruous wall additions make it clear that this might not have been the original layout of the temple. In the back wall of its *garbhagrha*, there is a pillar embedded in the crude wall made of stone and brick. The most notable feature of this temple is the lintel, currently placed on its entrance doorway, but certainly has been reused here from a different structure or belongs to the earlier temple that stood in place of Mahādeva temple. On the inner horizontal face of the cantilever of this lintel, there is a small two-handed icon of Kevala Narasimha having a leonine face, sitting in *mahārājājalāsana* and holding a *cakra* in his right hand (Figure 10). It is rare to find this depiction on a lintel. The essence and context of this image with respect to the Lonar sacred landscape will be discussed later. In the extreme south of this eastern fringe on a hillock there are two more temples in ruinous conditions. One of these Śiva temples has an ornate *dvāraśākhā* but plain, unmatched and crude masonry walls. Though there isn't much left to discuss their stylistic nuances or architectural details, the temple ruins testify presence of well-designed and elaborate structures from thirteenth or fourteenth century AD.



Figure 9: Interiors of the Mahadeva Temple





Figure 10: Small image of Keval Narasimha at the centre of the inner face lintel of Mahadeva Temple



Figure 11: Fragment of Kevala Narasimha: Frontal photo showing one extant leg of the deity and attributes.

**Kevala Narasimha Sculpture Fragment:** Among the scattered remains, within the premises of Dhār *tirtha*, the most prominent is the fragment of a Kevala Narasimha icon, currently kept in a heap of accumulated remains behind the Mahādeva temple. Archaeological Survey of India officials mentioned that all of these broken pieces were



found from the vicinity of Dhār *tīrtha* itself (pers.comm). This particular Kevala Narasimha fragment has not been reported in any previous works concerning the site. It is a shrine image that originally must have been in some temple sanctum. Carved in the round and seated on a lotus pedestal, it must have been a two-handed image (Figure 11). A portion of the left hand is seen rested on the left leg and the broken right leg must have supported the right hand (Figure 12). Three of Narasimha's attributes, *śaṅkha*, *gadā*, *padma* are sculpted on the pedestal below the folded left leg and the missing right hand must have held a *cakra*. The finding of this fragment and the small lintel image of Kevala Narasimha strongly suggests the presence of a temple dedicated to this deity, somewhere in the vicinity.



Figure 12: Fragment of Kevala Narasimha; Profile photo showing the lotus pedestal, left thigh and the broken hand of the deity

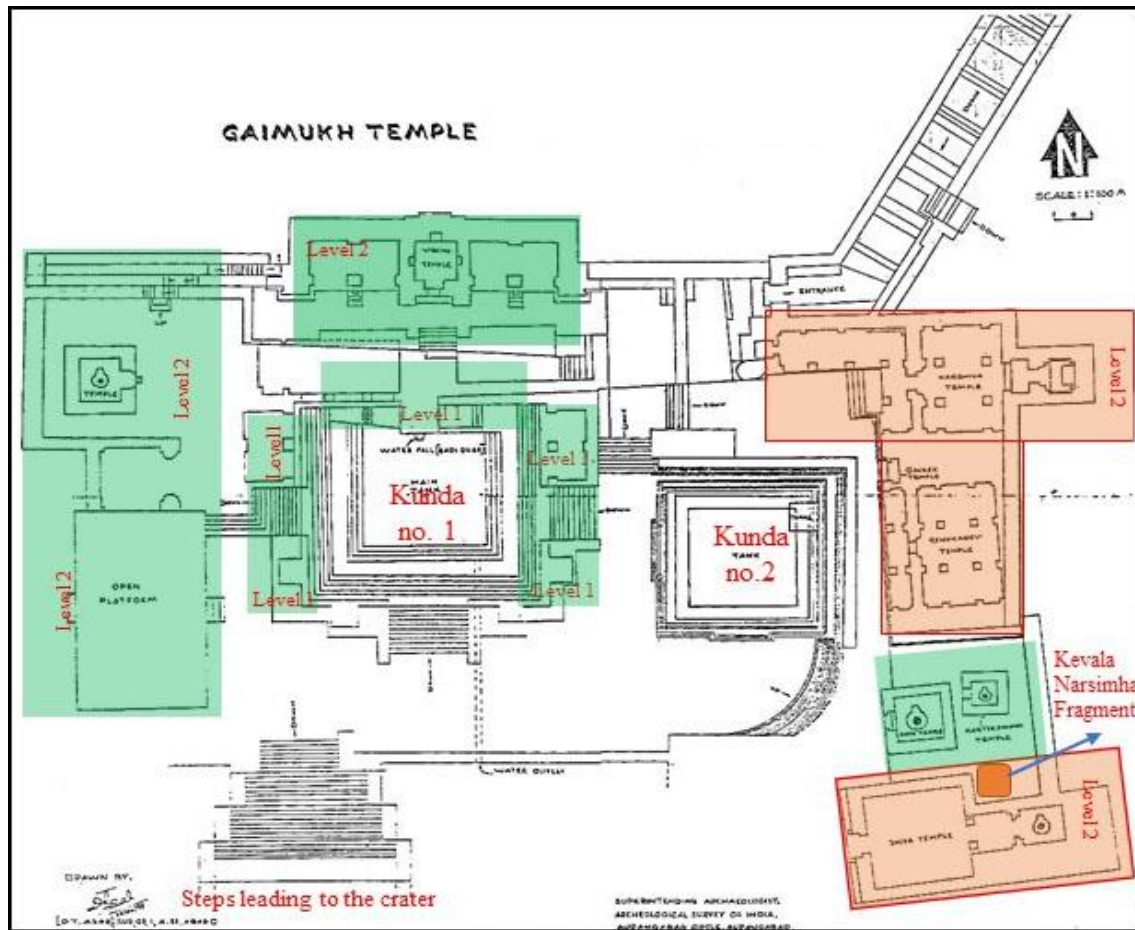


Figure 13: The plan of Dhār tīrtha showing the different periods of construction (After ASI)

Iconographic schemes from early medieval temples in Maharashtra commonly include the Vidaraṇa Narasimha form, but the Kevala Narasimha form that denotes royalty and kingship is infrequent. Having said that, there are quite a few reported images of Kevala Narasimha discussed in detail in earlier scholarship, that come from the regions of Marathawada and Vidarbha, from the time bracket of eight to twelfth centuries AD (Welankar, 2009; Bakker, 2019; Dhere 2016). Further, the prevalence of the Kevala Narasimha cult during the Vakataka period of fifth-sixth centuries AD, has been studied through two gigantic Kevala Narasimha images from Ramtek (Welankar, 2009; Bakker, 2019). Moreover, the association of Narasimha images in the region surrounding Lonar has to be taken into consideration to appreciate the specific occurrence of Narasimha in context of Lonar. Within Buldhana district, the villages of Umrud, Chandol, Mehkar have prominent Narasimha temples, mostly with Vidaraṇa Narasimha images as their shrine deity. Even within Lonar, the *jaṅghā* of Daityasūdana temple has three Vidaraṇa Narasimha icons, but Kevala Narasimha preserves its exclusivity. This background studies about the region and time-period contextualises the fragment found from Lonar and demands further investigation to place in the larger picture of the Kevala Narasimha iconography and the cultic affiliation of Lonar.



It's finding at Dhār *tīrtha* and thus in the vicinity of Lonar gives different perspective to the Vaiṣṇava affiliation of the site. It would be interesting to see how the site of Lonar was shaped at the backdrop of these religious developments.

## Discussion and Conclusion

An overview of different structures in Dhār *tīrtha* has made it clear that this conglomerate is not a homogenous unit rather a heterogenous set of temples, where there is evidence for building activity from thirteenth through eighteenth centuries AD. Most likely, this is also the period during which the fresh water stream acquired the influential identity of Dhār *tīrtha*, while serving as a vital locus of the Lonar crater and the starting point of its pilgrimage route. The west edge of the premises is mostly seventeenth-eighteenth century constructions while temples and *kuṇḍa* along the eastern edge have more early period structures (Figure 13). An important textual reference concerning the settlement at Dhār, which has not been discussed yet in this article is the visit of Cakradhara svāmī of the Mahānubhāva sect to Lonar, and his stay at Dhār *tīrtha*. In one *līlā* from the *ekāṅka* period of his journey, Cakradhara svāmī is said to have met Yadava Kanhardeva at Lonar. When the King offered him some money, he denied taking it, instead requested him to undertake restoration of the Kumareśvara temple. Probably, it is the Dhār *tīrtha* which is referred sometimes as Tārā *tīrtha*, as in the case of this *līlā* (Tulpule, 1964, p.22-23). Another *līlā* states that Cakradhara svāmī visited Lonar along with Boṇebāi from Mehkar to bathe in the Dhār *tīrtha* water and undertake the *aṣṭatīrtha yātrā* of Lonar crater. Cakradhara resided at Dhār, probably in a Śiva temple along the eastern fringe of Dhār *tīrtha* and Boṇebāi commenced her pilgrimage from Dhār to visit the *aṣṭa tīrthas* (Tulpule, 1964, pp. 35-36). These references of Cakradhara's visit to Lonar, and descriptions about all the places where he resided in Lonar, provide an idea of its structural setting and socio-religious milieu. It substantiates that Lonar was a significant pilgrimage centre from the thirteenth century onwards, at the least, and this is corroborated by the temple architecture discussed earlier.

Some of the re-appropriation and addition of structures could also have resulted from the changing hydrology of the crater walls and basalt bedrock. For instance, *kuṇḍa* no. 2 has an inlet of water that is not perennially flowing now, as the stream in *kuṇḍa* no. 1, which could have been the reason for change in focal point of the complex. Studies have shown that the water percolation in the basalt rock is through its crevices, making it difficult to trace the network of underlying water flows (Komatsu et al 2013). Climate change over the years is likely to have affected the social settings and the architectural landscape of Dhār *tīrtha*. Not only is the Dhār *tīrtha* a conglomerate of many temples, *kuṇḍas* and *maṭha* or dharmasālā but the shoreline of the crater also has over ten temples encircling it. Most of these temples were built in thirteenth to fifteenth century AD as evinced from their architectural styles. Daityasūdāna temple in Lonar village can also be dated to twelfth to thirteenth centuries AD. The Hanumāna mandir next to Little Lonar or Ambar Lake is a nineteenth century monument. But palimpsest as seen at Dhār is rarely found in other temple buildings from Lonar, which underlines the

necessity of understanding Dhār in its entirety. The intersection of the natural – crater, freshwater springs and the wilderness and social phenomenon – belief systems, religious practices and social gatherings led to the continuous occupation of the space of Dhār. A nuanced study is imperative to situate Lonar as the religious site with all the temple complexes and their elements, Dhār *tīrtha* claiming an essential position in the investigation.

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