

Located atop a hillock in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, the Neelkanth Mahadev Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Unassuming at first glance, the structure is expansive – comprising three shrines, elaborately carved doorways, and inscriptions

# Indian Aesthetics The Neelkanth Mahadev Temple of Alwar

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Deep within the Sariska National Park, in Alwar, Rajasthan, a winding road, little more than a rugged path, leads to a small settlement atop a hillock. Nearby, in a clearing amidst the fields, stands the Neelkanth Mahadev Temple. At first glance, the temple appears to be a simple structure, with a single sanctum, the outer walls covered with sculptures, and a spire towering above. From the front, the view is even more modest, the most striking feature being the two intricately carved pillars of the porch.

The porch, in turn, opens out to the Rangamandapa, a four-pillared hall leading to not one, but three shrines. The central shrine, facing west, is the only one intact. The sanctum holds a Shiva Linga, the aniconic representation of Lord Shiva, which is in worship. The shrine itself is simple, without any decoration or carvings on the inside. The doorway, however, is elaborately carved, with five deities on the lintel – a Dancing Shiva in the centre, flanked by Brahma and Ganesha on one side, and Kali and Vishnu on the other. On the doorposts are carved six Matrikas, three on either side.

The two other shrines leading from the Rangamandapa also have elaborate doorframes. The figures on the lintels identify these shrines as dedicated to Brahma and Vishnu. These shrines, however, are in a



dilapidated state, and are closed to visitors. From the outside, they have been built over, and the sculptures which would once have graced them, are placed in a shed outside. The Rangamandapa itself is almost intact. The four pillars have intricate carvings, depicting *Apsaras* or celestial women in dancing postures, *Ganas* or dwarves, and celestial flying figures. The most unusual feature of the Rangamandapa are four female figures, depicted as if they hold up the ceiling. On the outside, the only evidence of sculptural grandeur remains on the niches on the outer walls of the main shrine. The most prominent figures here are Narasimha in the central niche of the northern wall, Tripurantaka on the southern one, and Hari-Hara-Pitamaha-Arka on the eastern one. Other sculptures depict the *Dikpalas* or the guardians of the directions, Surasundaris or celestial women, and Vyalas, or mythical creatures. There are more deities carved on the lower levels, and on the platform the temple is built on.

It is significant that central figures on the northern and southern walls are those of Shiva and Vishnu, both shown destroying demons – Shiva destroying the demons of the three cities (Tripurasura) and Vishnu destroying Hiranyakasipu. On the eastern wall is a composite figure, Hari-Hara-Pitamaha-Arka, bringing together the attributes of Vishnu (Hari), Shiva (Hara), Brahma (Pitamaha) and Surya (Arka).

This page, clockwise from top-left: The sanctum with Shiva linga; carvings on the pillar of Rangamandapa; eastern wall of the sanctum  
Opposite page, clockwise from top-left: the view of the temple from the back; an intricately carved pillar on the porch; female figures on the supporting ceiling of the Rangamandapa



The iconography, in consistence with Shaiva philosophy, represents the transformation of the unmanifest within the sanctum, to the manifest.

An inscription found at the site <sup>[1]</sup> dates the temple to the late 10th century, and attributes it to Mathanadeva, the Gurjara-Pratihara ruler of Rajyapura (present day Rajor). It mentions a grant of a village to the temple, entrusted to an ascetic, an inmate of the *matha* (a Shaiva monastery) at Rajyapura.

The lineage of the ascetic and the *matha*, also mentioned in the inscription suggests <sup>[2]</sup> that it might have been one of the important Shaiva Siddhanta schools in the region.

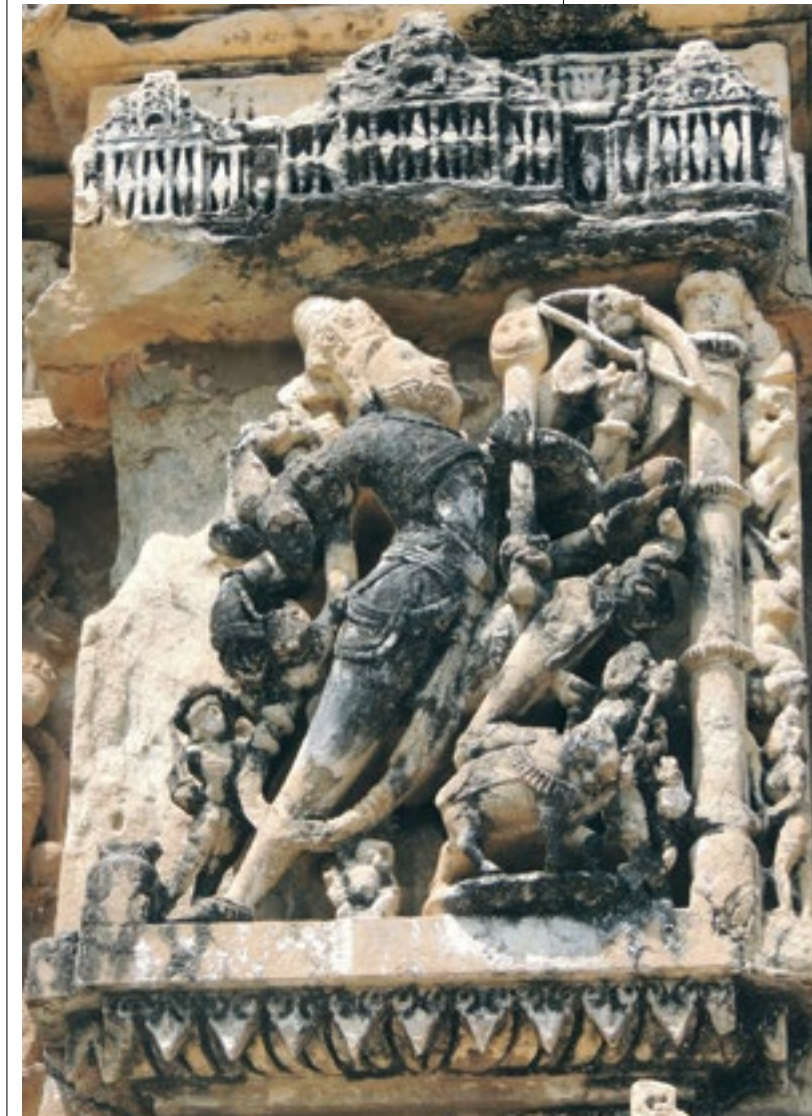
It is notable that the inscription mentions the consecration of the "Lacchukeshwara Mahadev, named for Lacchuka, the king's mother. There is no mention of "Neelkanth Mahadev", though the inscription was found near this temple. While it has been suggested that the temple referred to in the inscription is the same as the



Neelkanth Mahadev temple standing today, it would be very interesting to understand the change of name of the temple, and indeed, the Lord. It is also probable that the Lacchukeshwara Mahadev mentioned in the inscription could have been installed in another shrine within the same complex.

It is evident that this temple was part of a larger complex. The inscription mentions a shrine to Vinayaka, and arrangements made for its upkeep. There are ruins of smaller temples situated slightly behind the main temple, on its two sides. Only the platforms of these shrines remain today, giving no indication of which deities they may have housed. Opposite the temple are more ruins, mostly just scattered pillars and solitary sculptures. Most of the sculptures have been housed in a shed, right next to the temple, which is closed to visitors.

The location of the temple, atop at hillock, in the middle of the forest, its proximity to a *matha* at the time of its construction, and



This page, clockwise from left: Tripurantaka on the south wall; Hari Hara Pitamaha Arka on the eastern wall; a shed outside the temple with several sculptures

Opposite page, left: dancing Ganesha on a base; Narasimha on the main niche of the northern wall





royal patronage — together, this evokes an image of a spiritual capital of the kingdom of Rajyapura, with the temple at its centre. Today, the Neelkanth Mahadev temple comes alive only during the occasion of Shivaratri, when locals queue up for a glimpse of the Lord. Otherwise, the Lord lives in solitude, with only peacocks with company, the only constant visitor the priest who arrives diligently, every day.

References

[1] Kielhorn, F., Rajor Inscription of Mathanadeva, (Vikrama-) Samvat 1016, *Epigraphia Indica III* (1894-95), pp 263-267

[2] Sharma, Shanta R., and Shanta Rani Sharma. "METAMORPHOSIS OF ŚAIVISM IN RAJASTHAN, C. AD 600-1000: THE CULT, SECTS AND MONASTIC ORDER." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 83, 2002, pp. 139-151.

This page, top: Sculptures on the temple base; right: a sculpture of Vayu on the northern wall

Opposite page, top: Vishnu and Lakshmi on Garuda, on the base; bottom: a sculpture of the Dancing Shiva

