ANICONIC WORSHIP IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY: A BRIEF TYPOLOGY

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Introduction

Though wide-ranging and in-depth studies have been conducted about many religious ritual practices and sites in the Kathmandu Valley, there is a relative paucity of information about those ubiquitous and fascinating shrines which house aniconic representations of divinities. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘aniconic’—literally, ‘without icon’ or ‘without image’—refers to any object or area that is venerated in the manner of a deity, but does not represent the deity by means of anthropomorphized physical resemblance. In other words, any stone which has no face or body carved into it but is itself revered as a holy object, any niche in a wall which is worshiped, any natural boulder or rocky edifice which is regarded as a sacred emanation, self-originated or not, of a divinity or multiple divinities; all of these fall under the category ‘aniconic.’

This study’s relevance lies not only in the fact that there has been little field-research based work done in the area, either in English or in Nepali, but also in the fact that the number of aniconic shrines and worship sites in the Kathmandu Valley almost rivals that of iconic, anthropomorphized ones—that is, statues of Siva, the Buddha, Visnu, Saraswoti, Tara and many other deities. Judging by the numbers alone, one might draw the conclusion that iconic sites and aniconic sites are similarly or equally important. Even if this is not true, it still is imperative that aniconic worship practices be better investigated and explicated, if only to provide a more complete picture of worship practices and religious life in the Kathmandu Valley. An ethnography of aniconic worship serves not only to provide insight into localized ritual and practice, but also has the potential for furthering enquiry into anthropological studies of world-view, inference system building and semiosis. To the end of these varied enquiries, I will be producing a series of works exploring aniconic worship, of which this is the first. Herein I will discuss typology of anicons, as far as is possible; how location, kind, and size affect or do not affect the understandings, both local and textual, of the shrines.

Types of Anicons

Self-emanated versus constructed: There are many types of aniconic representation, just as there are many iconic representations of the divine. Because one of the primary defining characteristics of anicons is that they have no physical cues (such as body position, number of arms, or location of

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ritual objects on the statue) to help the viewer and worshipper identify what the anicon is, at first glance it is challenging to find physical differences between one aniconic worship site and another. However, I have formed a series of general guidelines from repeated observation of the worship sites, which may assist in delineating categories into which different anicons may fall.

The major dividing line that runs through the entire body of aniconic sites as they have been explored thus far is the divide between svayambhu and 'artificial' anicons. The svayambhu anicons are often large, natural rocky protrusions from an existing earthen element, such as a hill or field, though they sometimes also take the form of many distinct protrusions or even a hill itself. This is the case, for instance, with the Swayambhunath temple in Kathmandu: the hill itself is considered a self-arisen abode of the divine by both Hindus and Buddhists. Swayambhu are said to be sites which 'god chose' as a place to reside, as opposed to sites at which a god or gods have been requested by worshippers to reside. Swayambhu sites are holy by definition, since they are chosen by god, and therefore do not require the overt consecration of a priest, whereas sites chosen by worshipers that house man-made anicons and icons do require such a consecration. [Plates 1, 4]

**Monolithic anicons**

The form of anicons probably most familiar to practitioners and observers of Hindu and Buddhist at worship sites is the monolithic stone anicon. I say it may be the most familiar because the sivalinga, a monolith worshiped as a form of Siva, is an example of this kind of anicon, as is one of the most pervasive and arguably important Buddhist temple forms, the stupa. However, there are many sites at which the monolithic anicon is neither a stupa nor a sivalinga. In this case, monolith does not necessarily refer to an upright, pillar-like stone, although the definition does not exclude those. ‘Monolith’ means literally ‘one stone,’ and in these cases that is what the temples and shrines are—shrines in which there is one main stone being worshiped as an emanation of the divine.

I have explored sites at which I’ve been told that the monolith is ‘Buddha,’ ‘Devi,’ ‘Bhagwan,’ ‘Visnu,’ and ‘ajima’ (Newar: mother or grandmother), among other things. Some of these monoliths are svayambhu, and some are man-made; there are times when interlocutors will state that the site is a svayambhu one even when the anicon is made out of cast concrete. In general, monolithic anicons range in size from 2 centimeters to 2 meters freestanding, though some svayambhu monoliths are sometimes larger. ‘Artificial’ monoliths are often oblong in shape, though not always. Both 'artificial' and svayambhu anicons are usually found in one of several attitudes—standing on end, lying on the ground lengthwise, or if they are round in shape, resting on the ground, usually embedded three or more
centimeters deep in the shrine floor. Swayambhu anicons can also be found, of course, simply existing as part of much larger boulders and natural rock formations, jutting out from or resting in rock walls, fields, forests and town streets. [Plates 2, 3, 5, 7]

A good example of a swayambhu monolith is the Dakshinkali Mai shrine in Pharping, located up a long staircase at the back of the Dakshinkali temple. Dakshinkali Mai is ‘the mother of Dakshinkali,’ also the grandmother or the older sister, depending on with whom one speaks. Within the temple complex at the top of the hill, a small, open-air temple building stands, constructed around the trunk of a coniferous tree, at the base of which there is a flat stone, about one meter wide by one and a half meters long. The stone has low, round protuberances which are said to be the goddess’s eyes, nose and mouth, and worshippers have adorned those elements of the ‘goddess’s face’ with elaborate beaten silver eyes, nose, and mouth, each between 5 and 10 centimeters long, to enhance the vision of her ‘face.’ At the bottom of the stone, closest to the temple floor proper and perhaps 20 centimeters away from the silver mouth, there are also two silver footprints, each measuring 6 centimeters long, complete with toes and arches detailed. I was informed by one interlocutor that those were the marks where the goddess had stepped.

**Multi-lithic** anicons

A form slightly less well known to the casual observer, the multi-lithic site is less prevalent than the monolithic site. Multi-lithic sites house two or more anicons, of any size, within the same worship-group. Whereas a monolithic site may have two, three or more separate anicons, each worshiped individually, a multi-lithic site has at least one coherent group of anicons which are worshiped as a unit. ‘Multi-lithic’ refers to aniconic worship sites that house more than one stone: they are literally ‘many-stoned’ sites.

I have observed that the stones involved at these sites vary in size from approximately 6 centimeters to half-a-meter in length by 4 centimeters to half-a-meter in width. For the most part, multi-lithic sites involve stones that are mildly spherical or conical, and rounded in shape. The fact that these shapes are often seen standing on end, rather than lying flat on the ground, lends an aspect of verticality to them. Many of these multi-liths represent sets of gods which are otherwise recognizable in iconic form at other worship sites, such as the astamatrika, naudurga, pachakumari and dasamahavidhya. Each of these groups of goddesses are represented by a specific number of stones: 8, 9, 5 and 10, respectively.

There are other multi-lithic shrines that have no necessary direct correlation to any recognizable god or goddess—near Patan Durbar Square I spoke with a man who described the nearby multi-lith first as an emanation of Kumbeshwor, a god residing at a nearby temple. Shortly thereafter, the same man read the shrine’s inscription, which gave the ‘proper’ name for the
shrine, and changed his statement to me, saying that the shrine was 'really Sri Maatangi,' a goddess not often seen in iconic form. This incident is telling because it points out the flexible nature of anicons in the public eye. The man with whom I spoke told me he does not worship at that particular shrine, and therefore (I deduce) he has no overt reason to 'know' what the shrine 'is.' He was able, without hesitation, to tell me what he thought the shrine was—this points out the fact that the nature of anicons is to have no overt cues as to how to understand and relate to them. With most anicons, it is local worshipper knowledge that provides the 'true' answer about what each shrine represents. [Plates 6, 8, 10]

An example of a potentially well-known multi-lithic anicon is the shrine at Dhumvarahi, near the Ring Road. Though the central temple, under the tree, houses a statue of the god Varaha (called by local interlocutors Dhumvaraha), behind and slightly below that temple is a shrine encompassing one natural boulder about a meter and a half long by half a meter wide, and ten small (10 centimeters high) concrete arches, under which 'stones' sit. The arches protrude only slightly (2 centimeters at the highest point of relief) from the concrete slab to which they are attached; the 'stones' are also concrete, and also affixed to the slab, and sit centered under the arches. Each stone is 6 or 7 centimeters high and 4 centimeters wide. It is possible that the entire structure—concrete backing, concrete arches with snake-eating animal, and small stones—are all one piece of poured concrete, presumably made out of a mold. All of these objects, including the animal on the arch, the stones, and the svaayamhu boulder, are regularly anointed with red powder, yellow powder, norels, and other tika offerings.

What is particularly interesting to note about this temple is that, although the deity worshipped in the main shrine is the male, Varaha or Dhumvaraha, and is represented in anthropomorphized form, the place name is Dhumvarahi. Varahi is the female aspect of Varaha—therefore one might venture to guess that the one of the alternate worship sites within the temple complex is meant to represent the female aspect of the god. And, since a significant number of aniconic sites are considered sakti pith or female divine energy sites, one might further suppose that the above-mentioned anicon is actually the representation of the goddess Varahi. This supposition has yet to be confirmed by local interlocutors, but seems to stand on firm ground.

Empty Chandrashala
This brings us to the next form of aniconic worship: the empty chandrashala8 (arch). The chandrashala, in these cases, are usually 7-10 centimeters tall and 4-7 centimeters wide. The top of the arch is almost invariably decorated with the same mythical animal that decorates the top of larger temple entrances: it is shown with large eyes and a snake held in both hands and its' mouth. Below that animal, the arch encompasses an unmarked (except by tika and
puja offerings such as red powder) space of concrete or stone—in the Dhumbarahi temple, one can see this same arch used to confine or highlight small protruding stones, but in the empty chandrasala form of aniconism, there are no such protuberances. Where a stone, concrete or not, might sit under the arch, there is nothing—only the exposed concrete of the mold.

So far as this study has been conducted, there are no publicly and widely well-known empty chandrasala arch sites—this type of anicon can be observed in more private, localized worship settings.

**Niches in Walls**

Though not a particularly technical term, the phrase 'niches in walls' is used to represent a category of aniconic worship, of which there are several sub-types. Generally speaking, niches are usually triangular in form, usually acute triangles, and usually have the longest two sides pointing up, which means the highest point is centered over the shorter bottom side of the triangle. These triangles are typically 10-12 cm tall, although some are certainly larger or smaller than that. They can be found singly or in groups of three; there may be other numbered groups of niches in walls that exist, but I have not observed them as of yet. Their locations do not seem to be limited to a particular kind of wall—I have seen some in concrete walls, some in brick walls, and some in wooden walls. In most cases the wall was built with the shrine in mind, though there are instances where the niches were created after the wall was constructed.

The types of 'niche in wall' most commonly found in Kathmandu are several—one is the Newar nassaa-deo, and the other is the 'god's back door'. The nassaa-deo is almost always a group of three triangles such as I described above, located alone in an expanse of wall. The wall is usually bounded by something, such as an arch adorned with the mythical animal mentioned in reference to the 'empty arches,' though sometimes the nassaa-deo are located in a stretch of wall unremarkable except for their presence and the worship done there. More often than not, nassaa-deo are found to penetrate the entire wall in which they are located, though there are certainly places where they are only indentations of varying depths in their wall. [Plate 9]

Nassaa-deo are worshiped, by and large, as an emanation of Siva. This particular emanation is one that is supplicated before performances such as dance, music, or theater. Some interlocutors have informed me that it is largely an emanation of Siva as the god of creativity, while others have said that nassaa-deo are not that general, that their worship applies only to music, dance, and theater. Though when questioned local interlocutors call the god 'Siva,' it is more than likely that nassaa-deo are representative of the Nataraj emanation of Siva. Some nassaa-deo take bali offerings (blood sacrifices), as
evidenced not only by interlocutor commentary but also by my observation of dried blood on the wall around several of these sites.

Nassaa-deo, as a practice apparently specific to Newar communities, offers an interesting window into sub-culture oriented aniconic worship. I intend to explore further the implications of ethnic grouping and family grouping (clan) on the understanding and practice of aniconic worship; it is certainly beyond doubt that location is central and integral to aniconic shrine identity.

Kumar Puja, or pikhalakhu\textsuperscript{16} Puja
Another distinctly Newar practice is puja offered in front of the main entrance to a Newar home on a sanctified area on the ground that has been made ritually clean by the application of a mixture of cow dung and mud. These spots on the ground in front of houses (very obvious throughout Kathmandu and outlying Newar settlements such as Thimi, Bhaktapur, Patan, and Pharping), are usually 10 to 25 centimeters in diameter, and almost invariably circular. Particularly observant practitioners perform this puja before doing anything else outside of the house in the morning. The cow-dung-purified circle is reapplied, sometimes made to include a line (4 to 9 cm wide) from the circle back to the doorway of the house, which is usually also daubed with cow dung and mud.

Some houses have stones set into the dirt, concrete, brick or tarmac road in front of their houses: some have a large slates on which to offer puja, some houses have small round ones, some have none at all and simply offer their puja on the flat ground. According to my interlocutors, there is no particular reason for having or not having a 'real' stone in this puja space—it is simply a matter of personal choice.

In his 2002 work, Sudarshan Raj Tiwari offers an understanding of this kind of worship:

...the first place of departure of the [town's] residents, the intersection of the line of exit from each house and the direction of the street outside, is taken as a heavenly point. Here, the Newars worship a stone vedī every morning. Called pikhalakhu, these points mark the interface of the in-house state of mind and the change to public behavioural mode, a ritual point of departure or an exit marked by the presence of Kaumari or Aparajita, a sakti of Siva. Kaumari commands worship even prior to Ganesha, the god in the Hindu pantheon always worshipped first in other rituals. In the religious scheme of spaces, a pikhalakhu...indicated a passage or a flowing movement similar to that of a stream...Thus, the pikhalakhu in front of all the houses symbolically transform the street into a river of flowing humans. (2002:13)
This understanding of this particular Newar tradition is different from, though not counter to, the understanding that has been offered by my interlocutors. Several have explained this worship practice as the Kumar puja; Kumar was a military chief, and by sanctifying a space for him with cow dung and doing puja in front of the home, one can protect one’s house from evil. The evil, it is said, will be afraid to come into one’s home if Kumar has been welcomed, and is therefore in residence and protecting the home. Some interlocutors have also mentioned Kumari puja, which may be parallel to the Kaumari puja in Tiwari’s research. Again, the flexibility of aniconic worship is demonstrated through the possibility of differing understandings of identical practices.

Offerings at the pikhalkhu, or Kumar puja, differ from day to day and from house to house. During Diwali, I observed that swatches of a certain kind of grass, still attached to the dirt in which it grew, were offered for this puja. However, for day-to-day puja, the general elements include the lighting of butter-soaked or dry wicks, the offering of incense, flowers, bananas, hard-boiled eggs, red powder, yellow powder, apples, and more.

Location
Within the greater city of Kathmandu there tend to be some areas with a higher density of aniconic worship sites, just as there areas of the city with a higher density of iconic worship sites. The relative density of both kinds of shrine and worship site correlates with historical geographic locations of distinct ancient settlements within Kathmandu: examples of areas with high density of aniconic sites include the ancient settlement of Handigaon; the settlement around Darbar Square extending north to Chhetrapati and south to Teku area; the area around Pashupatinath and Deopatan; and the area around Swayambhunath, not to mention outlying areas such as Pharping, Sankhu, and Bhaktapur, among others. Where there is a higher density of iconic worship sites, there is often, though not always, a correspondingly higher density of aniconic sites.

At first glance, exploring aniconic sites in the Kathmandu Valley might lead one to believe that aniconic worship is largely a Newar practice. Although the concentration of monolithic and multi-lithic aniconic sites is far greater around older Newar settlements such as the ones mentioned above, it is likely a false positive to assume that the correlation is only with Newar ethnic groups, not the least because some of the worship sites in those areas predate the area’s settlement by the Newar. Exploration of areas outside the Kathmandu Valley, which will be discussed in further research, show that aniconic worship is prevalent in the village areas of many ethnic groups. In each ethnic group, however, location is a key factor in understandings of and relations to shrines.
To take the example of a specific area within the Kathmandu valley, we turn again to Tiwari’s research on the ancient Lichchhavi, and later Newar, settlement of Handigaon. He refers below to the ritual structure of this ‘town;’

In the more ancient of the indigenous towns, the ritual structure consisted of a dyoche, or house of god, in the town and a pith, or aniconic power place, outside the settlement limits in the domain of nature. (2002:12-13)

The ‘ritual structure’ of ancient settlements which Tiwari points out is indicative, in this instance at least, of the placement of a high level of importance on aniconic sites around the creation of Handigaon. The location of the settlements’ worship sites anchors the area spiritually and ritually—keeping this in mind, what then is indicated by the placement of the aniconic sites ‘outside the settlement limits’? Though anicons are certainly observed within the ancient limits of many settlements, the fact that the pith is aniconic and relegated to a position removed slightly from the settlement could indicate a level of mystery around this kind of anicon.

The idea that aniconic sites can be synonymous with mystery and at times fear has come up often in my research. The Dakshinkali Mai temple in Pharping is located on a hilltop about 100 meters straight up from the more-visited Dakshinkali temple at the stream in the gulley below—it is an anicon, although it has been adorned with silver as previously described. The shrine is said to be svayambhu: my interlocutor (who I will call Rita) told me that a long, long time ago, Dakshinkali’s mother arose in the rock at this temple.

People came up the hill and they kept getting lost. Two people came and one got lost. Three people came, and one got lost. Someone said that Bhagwan had eaten them. People realized that it was a very powerful site, a Tantric deity site and they started being very afraid of it. It is more powerful than the site of the Dakshinkali shrine, though that is also powerful. Down there is a murti, a formed thing, and it is ‘artificial.’ (research mine, October 2007)

Though in Rita’s estimation the hilltop location is the more powerful of the two Dakshinkali shrines, it is visited by only a fraction of the worshipers who visit the stream-side shrine. When asked about this, Rita explains that many people don’t even know about this hilltop anicon—if they do, they are afraid of it. And besides, she says, it’s a long walk to the top.

Whatever the reasons, the location of any aniconic shrine is vital to its identity, even more so than with iconic, anthropomorphized shrines. Without the physical cues present in anthropomorphized icons, so necessary to inform the visitor or potential worshiper as to the shrine’s identity, it is the local
people and frequent visitors who lend identity to monoliths, multi-liths or any other form of anicon.

It is difficult to imagine taking an anicon out of its’ home shrine for a parade through town to an overnight at another shrine, as occurs during many Hindu festivals in Kathmandu for various gods throughout the year. To remove an anicon from its’ ‘seat’ is nearly synonymous with removing it’s identity as an emanation of the divine.

Conclusions
It is the nature of the anicon not to willingly reveal its’ ‘nature,’ its’ ‘explanation,’ even through conversations with local interlocutors. Though at first it seems that answers to any questions by the researcher are confusing and sometimes rationally contradictory, it is also obvious that there is a different kind of rational lens through which to consider religious moments. The typology of aniconic shrines I have assembled here is itself broad, and perhaps not definitive—however, I believe it is a good first step on the road to exploring the intricate pathways of aniconic worship.

Eventually this path will lead through many considerations, including (but not limited to) questions of how human beings are cognitively capable of creating an idea of the divine; from that idea, how we relate to that idea of the divine, and what both of those processes say about world-view creation, ethos and inference systems. I look forward to continuing research on these small, beautiful and cognitively complex shrines.

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Notes
2. See below.
3. The idea of dhām (residences, abodes, visiting places) and pīṭh (seats) for gods, what import each of these types of shrines and others has for local worshippers, and what the combination means for local practice and understanding of the god
itself is a complex and intricate discussion—one which will be addressed in my next article.

4. Tibetan: *mchodrten*. A dome-shaped structure varying in size from approximately 10 centimeters tall to 100 meters tall.

5. Sometimes, on conversing with several people around one aniconic, it comes to light that each person sees a different god or goddess in the stone of the shrine, an issue I will address further later in my research.

6. Though interlocutor terminology in these instances utilize the word 'svayambhu,' it is possible that something is meant which does not imply 'direct' self-arising by the god; perhaps someone had a dream that god chose the spot, for instance, and therefore it can be considered *svayambhu* even if the object put there to facilitate human interaction was not created prime facie by the god. Whichever is the case, the changeable notions and definitions of words and concepts surrounding these worship sites needs further exploration.

7. ‘Multi-lithic’ and ‘multi-lith’ are two terms coined by the author in order to be exacting in her descriptions of worship sites. ‘Multi-lith’ was coined due to reflection on the term ‘monolith;’ therefore, as ‘monolith’ means ‘one stone,’ ‘multi-lith’ means ‘many stone.’

8. The term *chandrashala* is defined in a glossary of Indian art at http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/india/glossary1.html: "Chandrashala: the ubiquitous ogee, circular, or horseshoe-shaped arch, that decorates Indian temples and shrines. This arch is shaped like the cross-section of a barrel vault (shala). Chandrashala is the term most often used for this kind of arch. It is called a chaitya arch when used on the facade of a chaitya hall."

9. Though the majority of niche-sites observed have been triangular, there are exceptions. I have seen some niche-sites using holes which would be triangular, with the variation being that the top of the ‘triangle’ is rounded rather than pointed; I have also seen sites with significantly rounded niches, some nearly circular in form, though both of these are the exception to the rule.

10. *pikhalakhu:* "pin, kha and lamkhu respectively mean ‘outside,’ ‘door’ and ‘stream’...,” Tiwari, 2002:13

11. Whether a human or divine military chief my interlocutors did not express specifically.

12. ‘Bhagwan,’ in this context, was used by my interlocutor to signify ‘goddess.’ Though the term ‘bhagwan’ or ‘bhagvan’ is usually indicative of a masculine god, while ‘bhagavani’ is indicative of a feminine god, my interlocutors also often use the former term as a catch-all for ‘something divine.’

13. It is a point of interest that though she and I had been conversing in Nepali up to that point, when she got to the word ‘artificial,’ she switched to English, for that word only. Although I don’t believe that the word has as many powerfully negative or pejorative connotations to her in translation as it does to me in my native English, it is still indicative of the importance and difficulty of drawing the line in Nepali language between ‘man-made, constructed’ shrine images and ‘self-arisen, natural’ ones. I believe that the distinction which was more important to Rita was that between *self-arisen* shrines and *man-made* shrines in general, rather than between *aniconic* and *iconic* shrines. Though it is nearly always true that self-arisen shrines are aniconic, I believe that, for Rita, and perhaps for others as
well, what is important and different about the Dakshinkali mai shrine is not that it is aniconic, but that it is self-arisen.

References


Plate 1: Deolingeswori: Located in Devlang, in Dolakha district, this gigantic monolithic anicon is said to be the place where a cow repeatedly gave all her milk to the stone (Siva), a fact which was noticed when she came home for several weeks with no milk to give her farmer. Deolingeswori is recognized as a srawambhu emanation of Siva.

Plate 2: Dhumbarahi monolithic anicon: This small, man-made anicon is a free-standing one inside the temple complex at Dhumbarahi. It is clearly a fairly recent addition, with brickwork of a quality and style which has begun to emerge in the last ten to twenty years. The small rock under the chaitya arch is a contrast to the large, srawambhu one we see at Deolingeswori.
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Plate 3: Unidentified Monolith, Golkopahka, Thamel: This small monolithic anicon actually rests inside the base of the peepal tree which crowds over it. It is hard to tell if the tree was planted inside the temple, and then grew out and through it, or if the temple was built around the tree and then disfigured by the tree's growth. Either way, this aniconic shrine in Galkhopakha, Thamel, is certainly fairly old, as it is clear the level of the street has risen up around the site over the years.

Plate 4: Kalika 3859: This temple, in Dumkot of Dolakha district, is a beautiful example of a syncretism between iconic and aniconic worship practices. The 'main' (that is, front) worship item is a simple monolith, and just behind it is an elaborate statue of the goddess Kali, whom the rock represents.
Plate 5: Kirtipur monolith (deutaa): This small anicon, located in Kirtipur just next to the Indrahini temple, may fool people into thinking that it is a Siva lingam. However, since it does not sit on a yoni base, and since local interlocutors name it 'deutaa,' it is safe to assume that it is not, in fact, a lingam.

Plate 6: Kirtipur Visnudevi pith: These are two slightly different perspectives on the same multilith. The Visnudevi pith site includes a multitude of icons and anicons within the temple complex, but none are more intriguing than the multilithic representation of the goddess herself. Why are there so many stones? Were they all offered and consecrated at the same time, or have they been added one by one over the years? How do people understand the multilith as a single entity, or do they?
Plate 7: Mahadevsthan: Another large, svayambhu monolith, Mahadevsthan is also on the road between Dolakha Bazaar and Dumkot.

Plate 8 Naxal Pachakumari: This small multilith has been identified by an interlocutor and myself as a Pachakumari, or Five Kumari. Though it has not appeared in any textual study thus far and I believe our analysis to be correct, it is still hazardous to try to identify anicons 'firmly' unless they have an inscription or a local pujari, as assumptions about form can sometimes be wrong.
Plate 9: Niches Pashupati area: This is a prime example of niche worship practices. It is likely that many people would identify this site as a nassa-deo; however, the nassa-deo usually come in one or three niche form, not five niches, as we see here. We can also see that this shrine is a bali chalaune, or blood-offering, shrine, and as it is located below current street level (though newly bricked, as is much of the area) it is safe to assume it is somewhere on the order of 200 years old or more.

Plate 10: Patan Sri Maatangi: Another excellent example of a multilithic shrine, this Sri Maatangi has been recently renovated with new cement structure, tiling and inscription. It is possible that its’ location is relevant to the existence of the sewer/waterway running beneath it, but I am unsure.