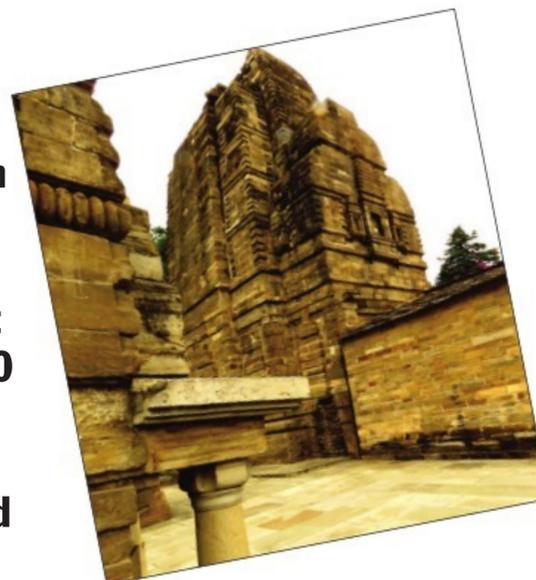


Trek

worth making

somen
sengupta
visited the sun
temple
complex of
Katarmal built
more than 900
years ago and
came away
feeling blessed



THE Konark Sun Temple of Odisha is almost an icon now, as much because of its close proximity to Puri and Bhubaneswar as also the Unesco tag of being a World Heritage Site. Pictures and information of the Martand Sun Temple of Kashmir and the Modhera Sun Temple of Gujarat abound in social media, yet the biggest sun temple in the Kumaon region still remains in oblivion.

My driver clarified that at this time of year no one visited the Katarmal temple. When I told him the purpose of my visit was to witness history and enjoy archaeological wonders, he took me as lightly as possible. A pleasant 15-km drive from Almora finally ended at the foothills of the Kumaon range of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand. From here one has to trek uphill for another 1.5 km to witness a marvel of time.

Since the morning the sky had been overcast with black clouds and a heavy shower was imminent. The climb was rocky and tough, but manageable. As I neared the almost 1,000-year-old shrine, I finally saw the eye-catching tower of the central monument of the majestic temple complex of Katarmal — an exceptional yet lesser-known sun temple of India.

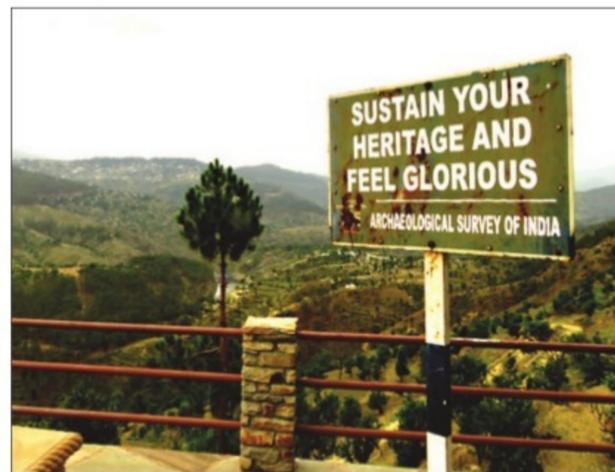
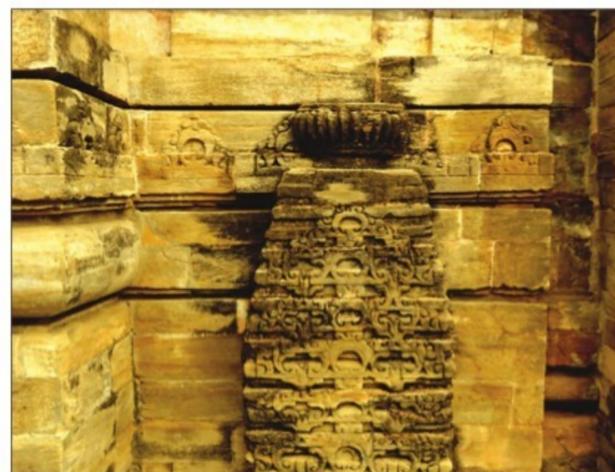
The Archaeological Survey of India signboard read, "Sustain your heritage and feel glorious". Built in the 13th century by a king named Katarmalla of the Katyuri dynasty of Kumaon who ruled the central Himalayan region, the small yet well-kept archaeological site contains an array of small temples decorating the central shrine.

The man I met there claimed to be working for the ASI and, according to him, this temple was linked to the *Mahabharata*. When the Pandavas were in exile, they came to this place and tried to build all the temples overnight. But having



failed to do so, they left the place with the central temple incomplete. I enjoyed this legend but took it with a grain of salt, as I'd already found a huge *Amalaka* (a circular stone ring placed on the top of the temple's pinnacle) had fallen to the

ground, clearly indicating that the tower of the central shrine was once a complete one and had later collapsed. In addition to this *Amalaka*, there were many small and big stones inscribed with excellent floral motifs, Hindu signs



and Brahmanical divine figures.

A closer look made it obvious that the original temple was built with brick and wood. Later, it was modified by many hands and the stone slabs were added. When the ASI found the temple more than 100

years ago in a state of dilapidation, many wooden crafts were discovered there.

From the inscriptions on the pillars and the architectural features, it was assumed that this temple was built in the 13th century and all the small temples were added later.

Entering the central shrine I was thrilled to feel that more than 900 years ago huge slabs of stones were quarried and transported to the hilltop to revere Buraadhitya, the old Sun God. At the complex, a stone slab placed by the ASI describes the temple's architecture. These temples were built on a raised stone plinth with the curvilinear pinnacle of the Naggar style. Apart from the Sun God, other artistic metallic statues of deities were also present, including Shiva, Parvati, Laxmi and Narayana.

The entrance to the sanctum was once decorated with an excellent wooden door panel that is now kept at the National Museum of New Delhi to protect it from vandalism. There are a total of 44 smaller temples, all in the Naggar style, with an *Amalaka* on top and a square sanctum where the deity is housed. Smaller temples are made of the same stone but their difference in size and shape clearly prove their eras of erection.

Having done with my tryst with Katarmal, I was expected to make an offering to the Sun God and carry his blessings back to my family. I declined because I felt that by exploring the tallest temple of Kumaon and witnessing a glorious saga of the past I'd already derived my share of blessings.

I then looked up and saw black clouds gathering, but as I made haste to reach my car, these clouds suddenly disappeared and the sun flooded the sky. I realised that I'd really received the blessings of Buraadhitya.