



Vaastu & Temples

- Part One

The Vaastu way

This article draws generously from 'Mayamatam', Vaastu Shastra's most venerated treatise, as well as research papers (published and unpublished) on the subject.

INTRODUCTION

Since the sixth century, especially after the decline of Buddhism as the focus of religious patronage, temples obtained generous donations from kings, nobles and the wealthy. The result: a huge number of shrines throughout the country, many of which date back to hundreds of years. Most of them, albeit in ruins speak of the golden time when India was at the vanguard of civilization.

Lavishly built and aesthetically designed, these temples are unrivalled in architectural brilliance; In fact, they are the living embodiments of a passionately espoused way of life that is the very nerve centre of the fabric of Indian culture and history.

The word 'temple' is derived from templum, the Latin word for a sacred, ceremonial space that usually stands out clearly from its surroundings

operated by a large number of priests and temple servants under a high priest wielding tremendous power and influence. The membership of this team was (and still is) a hereditary privilege.

The great walled temple complexes of ancient and medieval India were like small cities, containing the central shrine as well as the numerous lesser shrines, bathing tanks, administrative offices, homes of the temple employees, workshops, bazaars and public buildings of many kinds. Directly and indirectly, they played an important part in the economy as they were among the largest employers and greatest landowners in their areas. They also performed valuable social functions because they served as schools, dispensaries and concert halls etc. Since that time, the Hindu temple architecture follows a set of fundamental rules.

The sanctum containing the statue or symbol of the deity is a square 'cella' (central chamber) constructed of thick and solid masonry with a verandah either at the entrance or on all sides of the building. This part of the temple is the holiest place of all. Brahmins perform the rituals in this part of the temple. A pyramidal structure rises above the cella symbolizing the Meru Mountain, the abode of the Hindu gods. In front of this tower is a hall open from three

be reached through a *Gopuram* or gateway. The levels of the main sanctum, *Mandapa* or hall, courtyard and gateway, are in the descending order. The *Garbha-griha* or the sanctum is the highest as it is the chamber of the deity. If a temple is dedicated to the Lord *Shiv*, the figure of the bull *Nandi*, Lord *Shiv's* mount, invariably faces the sanctum; and if the temple is dedicated to the Lord Vishnu, standards (*Dhvaja-stambha*) may be set up in front of the temple. To this basic architecture, little variations can be observed. But to see a temple very different in design is not possible. Building practices based on limited interpretations of these principles are still obvious in modern India.

The lofty temples and the artistic skills embodied in the minute stone and metal carvings bring us to appreciate the fact that the instruments for carrying great loads on the one hand, and instruments with sharp needle points on the other hand, must have existed in some advanced form with craftsmen under extensive tutelage.

HINDUISM & TEMPLES

The key to the social ethics of Hinduism is the conception of *Dharma*, which means duty or righteousness. The affirmative attitude of Hinduism towards life has been emphasized by its recognition of the four aspects: *Dharma* or righteousness, *Artha* or wealth, *Kama* or sensual pleasure, and *Moksha* or freedom from the cycle of life and death through the communion with God or the infinite. Of these, the first three belong to the realm of worldly values while the fourth *Moksha* is known to be of supreme value.

Many devotees who flock to the temples are those who have exhausted the pursuit of worldly alternatives and now approach God to gain his favours for fulfilling their unfinished social as well as spiritual agenda. Within the temple, they seek riddance of their distress, both physical and spiritual. As the temple is a place where devotees approach God and seek divine solace, the outward appearance of the temples must raise the expectation of meeting with God.

Worship at the temple is not congregational. Instead, individuals or small groups of devotees approach the sanctum in order to obtain a vision *Darshana* of the God, recite prayers and perform devotional worship. Most temple sanctums are operated by priests who take the offerings from worshippers, present them directly to the image of the deity, and then return most of the gifts *Prasad* to the devotees for use or consumption later at home. From the Gupta period onward, Hindu temples tended to become larger and more prominent, and their architecture developed distinctive and regional styles. On the authority of the classification in our authentic works, temples can be divided into three types based according to the differences in the construction of the temple (*Vimana*):

1) *Nagara*, 2) *Dravida*, and 3) *Vasara* The styles are distinguished by the ground plan or *Shikhara* that rises over the *Garbhagriha* and that became the commanding feature of temple architecture.



The Ligaraja temple in Bhubaneswar, Orissa is more than 1000 years old. It is located in a spacious courtyard covering over 2,50,000 sq. ft. and is bounded by fortified walls. Its tower rises up to 180 feet and is elaborately carved. This temple was built in the early 11th century.

and has a pronounced architectural character. In ancient and medieval India, temples were richly endowed with wealth and land. The larger ones accommodated colleges of higher learning (*muths*), primarily for priests. The temples were (and still are) controlled and

sides, held on beautiful pillars with intricate carvings where the devotees gather in large numbers to participate in the rituals and the chantings.

Surrounding this hall is a courtyard, which can



The North Indian temples conformed to the *Nagara* style, as seen at Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh) and Konarak, Bhubaneswar and Puri (Orissa).

The South Indian, or *Drāvīda*, style with its commanding *Gopuram* (gateways) can be seen in the Madurai temples.

The Deccan *Vasara* style tended to be an intermix of the northern and the southern pattern.

VAASTU

The term Vaastu can be explained thus:

The place where the immortals and mortals dwell is called Vaastu i.e. “the dwelling site” and the “dwelling” (structure proper erected above the dwelling site). Thus, the term Vaastu includes both the dwelling and the dwelling site. The very first paragraph of Chapter 1 of the *Mayamatam* states: “Having bowed his head before the Omniscient God, Lord of the Universe and having listened exclusively to Him, *Maya*, wise and learned architect proclaims this systematic treatise which is the basis of success of every kind of dwelling intended for gods and men and which contains the characteristics of dwelling for all.”

This is followed by paragraphs 1-3 in Chapter 2:

“Experts call all places where immortals and mortals dwell, “dwelling sites’ (Vaastu). I present their different varieties which are four in number: earth, temples, conveyances and seats. The earth is the principal dwelling place because it is on Her that constructed dwellings such as temples have appeared and because of the temple’s union with this site that the ancients called it “dwelling sites” in this world.

“Vaastushastra also covers iconography and the astrological points bearing upon the founding and construction of the dwelling. The Vaastu principles were put into practice in different ways with architectural details evolving over the time.

“Though Vaastu means all types of constructions, including palaces, public buildings, halls, tanks etc., the majority of surviving structures of ancient days are temples. Hence, *Vaastu-Shilpa* generally refers to the study of temple architecture. *Devalaya Vaastu* is the appropriate term to indicate temples and their architecture. It also includes, in part, sculpture as iconographic detail also forms part of temple construction.

The need for separate and specialized Vaastu details for a temple in contrast to the standard norms for routine buildings was necessitated because even though a public building, a temple has the unique requirement of reducing *Kama* and substituting *Dharma* in its place.”

Ravi Rao, as told to Ravi Sharma



Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Dr Ravi Rao along with others laying the foundation deposit of Balaji Temple on SG Highway, Ahmedabad. The temple is designed as an exact miniaturized replica of the original temple at Tirupati.

Foundation Deposit

Chapter 12 of 'Mayamatam' deals with the foundation deposit.

This deposit that is essential to the success of the constructions is to be placed in a pit; its principal element is a casket (phela) with compartments placed upon a bed of earths, roots and seeds in the course of a ceremony conducted by the architect. Next, the 'Mayamatam' describes the deposits appropriate to temples of the different deities Shiv, Vishnu, Brahma, the attendants of Shiv and the goddesses.

The ceremony at the end of work on the temple is to some extent, the counterpart of the foundation rites. It is performed on the occasion of the putting in place of the finial above the four crowning bricks ('murdhnestaka') which correspond to the four first bricks covering the sacred deposit, which itself corresponds to the foundation deposit.

These operations accompany the completion of a temple and the opening of the eyes of the image found therein. The architect withdraws once the finial has been put in place.

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