



## Vaastuyogam Interviews temple architect whose family designed the Somnath Temple



### ARCHITECT'S VOICE

This month Vaastuyogam team met the prolific and renowned temple architect Mr Chandrakantbhai Balwantbhai Sompura at his residence in Ahmedabad

*Excerpts from the Interview:-*

Ordinarily, when a temple is to be built, people do not approach mainstream architects no matter how experienced and learned they are. They normally approach the traditional temple architects. Why is this so and more particularly what disqualifies the mainstream modern architect from this job?

In the syllabus of modern architecture, you will never find a subject related to temple construction. Temple architecture is not taught in mainstream colleges of modern architecture. Temples are built in strict accordance to the rules of Shilp Shastra and to understand temple architecture is to understand Shilp Shastra, which of course, is not taught anywhere.

The most proportionate structure built to meticulous scale of dimensions is the temple, wherein all dimensions are dependent upon the garbh-griha which in turn is dependent upon the size and type of deity that will be

housed in it. The intricacies of the linkages between the temple components have been handed down in the guru-shishya tradition and are a matter of dedicated apprenticeship rather than academic pursuit. This is compulsory because much of the Shilp Shastra text is couched in mystical references that need clarifications through other mystical references and the process continues. Thus, the traditional temple architect is rooted in ancient mythology and Puranic reference points that are neither understood nor practiced by modern architecture.

Finally, people make temples out of devotion and piety. They would not put that to risk through unnecessary experimentation that the modern architect will compulsorily introduce into the project. Moreover, for the temple architect, there is a traditional code of conduct for lifestyle, dress, non-language communication and even food habits. All these add up to his personality and garner for him acceptability among the temple visitors who would be very upset if traditional procedures were abandoned during temple construction. It would shake their faith in the temple.

#### Somnath Temple Reconstruction

At the time of India's independence, the Somnath temple was a building in total

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Chandrakantbhai Balwantbhai Sompura

#### Work Profile

##### Important Temple Projects - India

- Somnath Temple, Prabhas Patan (Guj)
- Sheshshai Vishnu Mandir, Nagda (M.P.)
- Swaminarayan Mandir, Mumbai
- Akshar Dham, Ahmedabad (Guj)
- Sun Temple, J.C. Mills, Gwalior
- Ambaji Mata Mandir, Ambaji (Guj)
- Birla Mandir, Kolkata
- Ram Mandir, Ayodhya
- Nandprabha Prasad, Palitana
- Swaminarayan Mandir, Surat
- Ganesh Mandir, Alibaug
- Hastagiri Derasar, Palitana (Jalia)
- Lotus Temple, Palitana
- Sammet Shikharji Tirth, Raska
- Koteswar Mahadev Temple
- Radha Krishna Temple, Reliance (Mum)
- Agassi Jain Tirth, Mumbai
- Shri Bahucharaji Mataji Mandir
- Mukeshbhai Ambani Residence Temple
- 51-Shakti Pith Project Gabbar Parikrama, Ambaji, Gujarat.

##### Important Foreign Temple Projects

- A.P. Temple, London
- Sarva Dharma Temple, Bangkok (Thailand)
- North America Hindu Union Temple, Pittsburgh, P.A. (U.S.A.)
- Shiv Temple (Singapore)
- Yantra Mandir, Fair field (U.S.A.)
- Jain Temple, Atlanta (U.S.A.)
- Tapobhumi Temple, Texas (U.S.A.)
- Shri Ram Mandir, Yorkshire, London
- Lakshmi Narayan Temple, Bangkok (Thailand)



Surviving ruins of Somnath temple that were used as models for building the temple anew



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## ARCHITECT'S VOICE

disrepair and a mound of ruins that the villagers were using as a public toilet. Prior to independence, Prabhas Pattan – the place where the Somnath temple is situated – was part of the princely state of Junagadh.

After integration of Junagadh into the Union of India, the Deputy Prime Minister of India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel came to Junagadh on November 12, 1947 to direct the stabilization of the state by the Indian Army.

At the same time, he ordered the reconstruction of the Somnath temple. This initiated the search for a capable architect who could rebuild the temple along the same lines and style of the old one. No new design was to be attempted; the temple was to be a faithful replica of the original.

The Ja'am sahib of Junagadh got in touch with my grandfather, the late Shri Prabhashanker Oghadbhai Sompura and requested him to rebuild the temple. Perhaps they learnt his name from G.D.Birla, for whom my grandfather had built many grand temples.

Initially, the work of the temple reconstruction was taken up by the Central government. But after some time it withdrew from the undertaking and in its place, the Somnath



Ambaji temple (Guj) a temple designed by C B Sompura

Trust was given the responsibility. This happened because when Sardar Patel, K. M. Munshi and other leaders of the Congress went to Gandhiji with the proposal to reconstruct the Somnath temple, Gandhiji blessed the move, but suggested that the funds for construction must be collected from the public and that the temple must not be funded by the state.

Thus, it was decided that the temple was to be

built with money donated by the general public. No government funding was earmarked for the project. In fact, the government totally withdrew from the temple reconstruction. Instead it played the role of a bystander – albeit an interested one.

My grandfather, the late Shri Prabhashanker Oghadbhai Sompura did not charge a single paisa to design the temple. The trust provided him with accommodation and an assistant for the duration of the temple construction. He stayed at Somnath eight to ten days in a month for over eight years.

The entire temple project was done in a congenial spirit. All the office bearers of the Somnath trust had the greatest respect for my grandfather and allowed him a totally free hand in the design of the temple.

The drawing of the present temple was made after a thorough study of the ruins that existed at the site. The stone used for the temple was taken from the quarries in the village of Seriyad around Chorwad, because it approximated the type of stone used in the existing ruins. In fact, some of the undamaged portions of the ruined temple were used in the new temple.



Akshardham Temple, Gandhinagar (Guj) a temple designed by C B Sompura

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**ARCHITECT'S VOICE**

The present Shiva Lingam was sculpted as per the dimensions and design supplied by my grandfather.

We raced through the construction. The temple ruins were pulled down in October 1950 and according to the government's decision, the mosque that was built by Aurangzeb's order on the temple site was removed and relocated a little distance away at government expense. There was no opposition from any quarter at that time to the shifting of the mosque.

In May 1951, Rajendra Prasad, the first President of the Republic of India, invited by K. M. Munshi, performed the installation ceremony for the temple. In fact, the Pran Pratishtha was done years before the temple was complete. The nratya mandap was completed just about eight or nine years ago. Truth to tell, work is still going on in installments, though the design was completed by us and submitted all in one stroke. But, the temple was declared "built and ready" very early on, probably to put to rest any controversy surrounding the construction.

It is true that the temple reconstruction



Hastigiri Derasar 72 Jinalay, Palitana (Jalia) a temple designed by C B Sompura

episode created a serious rift between the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the movement for reconstruction of the temple as an attempt at Hindu revivalism and President Rajendra Prasad and Union Minister K. M. Munshi, who saw in its reconstruction, the fruits of freedom and the reversal of past injustice done to Hindus.

Another practical reason was that the temple reconstruction committee was aware of the shortage of funds and knew that work would have to be paced based on the donations that kept coming in. Yet, the more urgent task of keeping up the momentum dictated the decision of getting the Pran Pratishtha done early on.

**Temple Desecration**

The Muslims who desecrated Hindu temples, did so for the gold and jewels they would get to loot rather than to destroy the idols out of a supposed duty towards Islam. In fact, the Somnath temple was not destroyed by the Muslims – that would have taken them too much time. They first demolished the idol of the main deity and then indulged in needless rape and murder of the people, carrying away many women and children as slaves. As far as the temple structure was concerned, they merely hunted for the gold and diamonds and made off with it and in the process, damaged the temple structure seriously but did not destroy it totally. There was a practice among the Jain and Hindu temples, of burying sufficient gold beneath the temple to meet the expense of constructing another temple at the site, in case the need arose. It was this gold that the Muslims had come for and looted. ■



Birla Temple Kalyan a temple designed by C B Sompura