

# Understanding the Architecture of Hindu Temples: A Philosophical Interpretation

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**Abstract**—Vedic philosophy is one of the oldest existing philosophies of the world. Started around 6500 BC, in Western Indian subcontinent, the Indus valley Civilizations developed a theology which, gradually developed into a well-established philosophy of beliefs, popularly known as ‘Hindu religion’. In Vedic theology, the abstract concept of God was formulated mostly by close observation of the dynamicity and the recurrence of natural and universal phenomena. Through the ages, the philosophy of this theology went through various discursions, debates, and questionings and the abstract concept of God was, in time, formalized into more representational forms by the means of various signs and symbols. Often, these symbols were used in more subtle ways in the construction of “sacred” sculptures and structures. Apparently, two different philosophies were developed from the Vedic philosophy and these two philosophies are mostly seen in the northern part and southern part of the Indian subcontinent. This paper tries to summarize the complex philosophical treaties of Hinduism of northern and southern India and seeks to understand the meanings of the various signs and symbolisms that were incorporated in the architecture of Hindu temples, including the names given to various parts of the temples. The Hindu temples are not only places of worship or ‘houses of Gods’ like the Greek and Roman temples but are also structures that symbolize the dynamicity and also spiritual upliftment of human beings.

**Keywords**—Hindu, philosophy, temple, Vedic.

## I. INTRODUCTION

VEDIC philosophy is one of the oldest existing philosophies of the world. There are four Vedas, namely, *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. The oldest of the Vedas is the *Rigveda*. Rigvedic people were located in the region of north-west India-Pakistan possibly extending into eastern Iran or southern Afghanistan [1, p.297]. Archaeological evidences prove the existence of civilizations in this region dating back to 7000 BCE (Mehrgharh in Indus Valley).

The Vedic scriptures, being the most sacred books of Hinduism, span the complete range of culture of India from everyday life to the transcendental speculations of the philosopher. It talks about ‘*Dharma*’, which is not ‘Religion’ *per se*, but ‘a way of life’. The Vedas advocated the concept of Transcendental Absolute God, *Brahma*, who is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and formless – hence incomprehensible. This God ‘desired’ to be many and thus the universe is formed (*Rigveda*, book 19, hymn 129). The Vedic doctrines was, in the later ages, followed by the *Brahmanas*,

the *Upanishads* and the *Puranas*, where the concept of soul (*Atman*) was evolved. The souls are a reflection of the Supreme God and hence, in Hinduism there is no concept of ‘anti-God’. The divine play (*Lila*) is the play in which *Brahma* transforms Himself into the world. *Lila* is a rhythmic play which goes on in endless cycles, the One becoming many and many becoming One [2, p.220]. “...If we think that the shapes and structures, things and events, around us are realities of nature, instead of realizing that they are concepts of our measuring and categorizing mind” [2, p.100], then we are in the midst of the illusions (*Maya*) of the universe. The soul does some actions – known as ‘*Karma*’, and until it realizes its true (divine) nature, the soul continues in cycles in birth and rebirth. This is dynamicity of the Universe. The main aim of any soul is to attain release (*Moksha*) from the world of senses (and the cycle of birth and death) and discover the ultimate reality beyond.

This philosophy of the Vedas, were elaborated in the later texts and the complexity of the philosophy was explained through many symbols, diagrams and mythologies, which, today, forms a major volume of the Hindu religion.

## II. PHILOSOPHY OF GENESIS

The Seers (*Rishis*) observed nature, the starlit dome of the sky, the daily passage of the sun, the changing seasons, the growing of crops and trees, the birth and death of animals. This led to a logical question – ‘Who created them? What was there before the creation? And, how it happened?’

The *Rishis* asked questions and they observed nature to get a logical answer to such questions. The answers were further debated and more questions were asked to satisfy their inquisitive minds.

The *Rishis* arrived at a concept of God who is Complete (*Purna*) and nothing can be out (or extra) of Him. This God is known as *Purusha* (the Supreme Consciousness), the primeval man, from whom creation emerged. He is the eternal male principle, the passive or fixed aspect of creation [3, p.318]. This *Purusha* wished to be many– He dreamt– and thus, *Prakriti* is created. *Prakriti* stands for nature or matter, the active principle of creation [3, p.311]. Hence, *Purusha* is the observer, and *Prakriti* is the observed. *Purusha* (with symbolism of male aspects) creates without and *Prakriti* (with symbolism of female aspects) creates within. Thus, *Prakriti* is the primeval female. As opposed to *Purusha*, *Prakriti* is characterized by limited power, limited presence, limited knowledge, limited truth, limited consciousness and limited joy. She is activated energy (*Shakti*), always in search of perfection. She is tangible (*Maya*— *Ma* means ‘to measure’ in

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Sanskrit). She harbors *pashu* (*pashya* means ‘to see’ in Sanskrit, also meaning animals.).

The next question the *Rishis* asked, “What did He create first?”

The *Purusha*, as Consciousness, creates by ‘Thought’, (or desire or imagination) and the ‘thought’ must be known or it must have some name, which could be uttered.

Thus, the creation, the *Rishis* thought, as per a previous creation, was a rhythm or vibration, which is the *Shabda* (sound) (*Omkar*). This is very similar to, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” (John, 1:1, Bible, New Testament). By the virtue of evolutionary process, the universe with all the non-living materials and living beings are originated.

The whole cosmos vibrates in the rhythm and thus follows a similar, cohesive unison. If that cohesion is maintained, there is a perfect harmony or concord of the creation with the Universal Plan, otherwise it may create disharmony or discord. Hence at the *Prakriti* level, all must be in harmony with the ‘Rhythm’ of the universe (*Brahmanda*), and then only those things will be congenial for spiritual and materialistic growth.

The basic intension of the Vedic philosophy always remained in knowing the Absolute *Purusha*, as then only people can understand that they are equally divine as the *Purusha*. This understanding may be achieved by “application or concentration of the thoughts, abstract contemplation, meditation, (esp.) self-concentration, abstract meditation and mental abstraction practiced as a system” known as *Yoga* [4].

### III. THREE TEMPLES – ONE THEME

Architecture of Cosmos becomes architecture of the minutest and the architecture of minutest retraces the plan of the Cosmos [5, p.15]. This is represented by:

1. The Vast Temple of stars – *Arupa* (non-morphic principles). By observing the Universe above, one can understand the manifestation of God in the creation of ‘forms’ of the universe – the forms come out of the Formless.
2. The Temple of Man – *Rupa* (anthropomorphic principles). It is the search of divinity within the human body. Here one can understand that the soul within the human body is a reflection of the Super Soul (*Brahma*). What is needed is to unite the individual soul with the Super Soul.
3. The Temple of bricks and stone, representing both cosmic astral temple and the small human temple of feelings, experience and aspirations. This is best represented by the allegory of *Vajra* – ‘the thunderbolt’. As the formless energy of the thunderbolt is observed through ‘forms’ of light and sound, so also the incomprehensible, Formless Supreme God may be understood by the ‘forms’ made by nature (galaxies, mountains, rivers, trees etc.) and by humans such as in temples and idols. This is how Hinduism visualizes forms, or idols of various gods, which are seen actually as manifestation of various powers of the Omnipotent God.

### IV. THE PHILOSOPHY OF TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION

Temples are built to establish the contact between man and God. The rituals and ceremonies performed in the temples have primarily influenced the forms of temple architecture.

The identification of divinity with the fabric of the temple and the reflection of the form of the Universe with that of the form of the temple is of supreme importance. Hence, importance is given right from the selection of the site of the temple, to formation of the ground plan and also to its vertical elevation.

The symbolic representation of the cosmic ideas is formalized by creation of sacred mathematical treatises, with precise measurement systems.

The plans of the temples are based on sacred geometric diagrams (*Mandala*) – symbolized as a miniscule image of the universe with its coordinated organized structure (as in *Vaastu Purusha Mandala*) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Vastu Purusha Mandala [6, p.72]

Astronomy and astrology provide the basis of determining the appropriate moment of building construction and the temple acts like a miniature universe.

In Hinduism, the attainment of spiritual perfection is through progression of various stages of consciousness [6, p. 66]. Thus, the temple is a place of transit, a ford or passage (*Tirtha*). The symbolism of passage through the doorways is represented by the idea of changeover from temporal to the perpetual. The sacred deities are placed in a small sanctuary within the temple known as *Garbhagriha* (womb chamber). The interior spaces of the temples are arranged to promote the movement of the devotee from outside through a series of enclosures which becomes increasingly sacred and dark as the enclosure is approached [6, p.67]. At a general level, the nomenclatures of the spaces, as one pass from outside to inside of the temple, designates the various functions that are supposed to be performed in those spaces. For example, as one enters from outside, the first space is the *Bhoga Mandir*, which generally means the ‘offering space’, where the

offerings, particularly, the food offerings are made to the deity. Then one comes to the *Nat Mandir*, which is the 'dancing hall', used for performance of dancing and singing to the God. Dancing, in Hindu philosophy, is a "prototype of cosmic dance...(that) brings into play every portion of the body in movement which symbolizes precise spiritual state... (emulating) the return to the Sole Being from whom all things emanate and to whom all things return to the ceaseless ebb and flow of the life force" [7, p.273].

The space that comes next is the *Jagamohana*, which is used as an assembly space to look at the deity and after that comes the threshold (*Antarala*) to the sanctum sanctorum, the *Garbha Griha* (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Plan and section of Lingaraja Temple, Odisha, India [8, modified]

The nomenclatures of these spaces also describe the subtle philosophical (or spiritual) venture that one has to pass through while attaining the absolute knowledge of the Supreme God. As one enters the temple, he/she comes to the *Bhoga Mandir*. The term *bhoga* in Sanskrit means "any object of enjoyment, as food, a festival etc." also as "experiencing, feeling, perception (of pleasure and pain)" [9]. This space signifies the first tier of spiritual upliftment, when the aspirant starts realizing that the world is a place of feelings (of pleasure and pain), and all these are temporary in nature.

Next, is the *Nat Mandir*, which symbolize the next level, where the aspirant realizes the rhythmic dynamicity of nature and "the whole universe is thus engaged in endless motion and activity; in a cosmic dance of energy" [2, p.249].

The next stage of spiritual upliftment is where the aspirant realizes that the whole universe is bewildering and infatuating. This space is *Jagamohana* (*Jaga* in Sanskrit means "the universe; the world" [10], and *Mohana* means "depriving of consciousness, bewildering, confusing, perplexing, leading

astray, infatuating" [11]. This progression in spirituality is also reflected in the increasing volumes of spaces as one pass from the *Bhoga Mandir* to the *Jagamohana*. Beyond this is the "womb-chamber" (*Garbha Griha*), which is approached by a small doorway as a threshold (*Antarala*), where the aspirant is free from all confusions, pain and pleasure, a complete state of transcendence. The *Garbha Griha* is small and dark, imitating the confinement of a womb. This progression is symbolized as re-tracing the journey to the womb (of *Prakriti*). An embryo, in the mother's womb, is like a threshold between Formless and Form. The embryo is thus the closest physical form nearest to divinity— that is, being 'one' with the *Purusha*.

The next level of spiritual upliftment is symbolically represented by movement of spiritual energy upwards, as vertical tower of the summit of the temple. The forms of the temples may be influenced by sacred mountains, with the horizontal tiers, referred to a *bhumi* (meaning earth, soil or levels) reinforcing mountain symbolism [6, p. 69]. The highest point of the superstructure is aligned with the most sacred part of the temple (*Garbha Griha*) and both are linked together along an axis which is a powerful projection upwards to the forces of energy which radiate from the center of the sanctuary [6, p.70]. This implies progressions towards enlightenment, as an axis to support the heavens (*Meru*), as the spinal cord of an ascetic (*Meru-Danda*), as a *Yupa*, the holy pillar as per Vedas, it also represents the churning axis of spiritual sea (*Samudramanathana*) to get the jewels of *Amrita* (deathlessness).

The capping placed at the top of the temple is known as the *Amalaka-kalasha*, where *Amalaka* is the ring stone with a "three-dimensional shape if the filaments of the lotus or of a halo with its rays" [12, p.351]. In Sanskrit, *Amalaka* means "the fruit of the *Emblic Myrobalan* (*Phyllanthus emblica*)." [13], which is used as a medicinal plant in folk and *Ayurvedic* medicine. This "is reflected in the suffix *officialis*. Perhaps it was the healing effect attributed to the fruit ... that should be passed on to the architectural *Amalakas* as a kind of protection or happiness promise." [14], thus, symbolizing the "passage, of exit from this worlds and entry into heaven" [12, p.352]; the *Kalasha* (or *kalasa*) meaning a "vase", a "receptacle of water which is the foremost representative of life in general; water is also allied to breath and all-pervading cosmic consciousness. The heart of the devotee should be ready like the jar to contain and hold the waters of truth and universal wellbeing. The jar also contains the nectar of immortality — liberation from conditioned existence" [15]. Thus, it symbolizes the Absolute and timeless principle beyond repetition and relativity, and is intended as a reminder of the ultimate goal of the journey that man embarks upon [6, p.68] (Fig. 3).

The architectural and sculptural motifs, in different sizes, that appear on the body of the temple, along with the temple form itself, represents the rhythmic cycles of time and repetition of cosmic eras. The most important of devotional dynamism is circumambulation (*Pradakshina*), done in a clock-wise manner. As per Michell [6, p.66], the sacredness of the image in the 'womb' expresses itself as a powerful force, whose influence expands outwards in all directions. Hence the

secondary images that are placed in the centers of north, west and south walls of the sanctuary are of great importance. As a further extension of the idea of the emanating lines of energy towards the corners, images are placed on the corners too [6, p. 66].

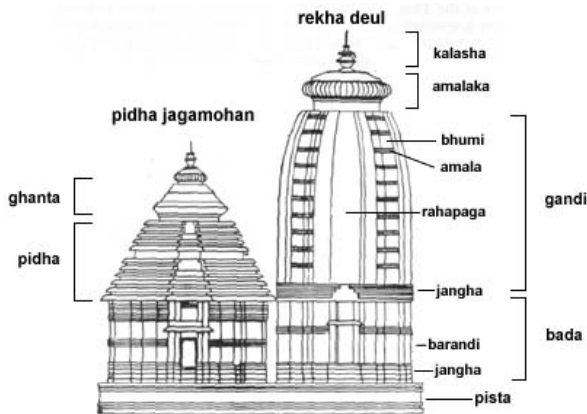


Fig. 3 Elevation of a typical temple of Odisha, India [6, p.15, modified]

Texts like *Mayamata* (literally meaning, ‘the doctrine of measurements’) give the importance of mathematical proportions in the temple building. *Mayamata* says, “if the measurements of the temple are in every way perfect, there will be perfection in the universe as well” [12, p.130]. Thus, the time and place of construction of a temple, the directions, the position of the sun and zodiac – all are superimposed over each other to technically make the ‘rhythm’ of the temple at unison with the rhythm of the universe. The *Shukranatisara* talks of iconography and tells about the various *Talas* (modules) in idol construction which also seeks unison with the eternal rhythm.

The divinity of the temple is not only represented in the sanctuary but also on the whole fabric of the temple. Thus, the temple is not only a place of worship or to place the idols of God within it, but also an object of worship.

#### V. NORTH INDIAN AND SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLES

Based on the astrological, astronomical and climatic reasons, various different styles of temple construction are observed in India. Categorization of the Indian temples is found in many ancient treatises. Treatise like “*Aparajitaprccha* suggests fourteen, collectively known as *Prasada Jati*. Eight of the fourteen are identified as Pure Order namely, *Nagara*, *Dravida*, *Latina*, *Bhumija*, *Varata*, *Vimana*, *Misraka (Vesara)* and *Sandhara*. These divisions, in South Indian treaties, are elaborated even further but are often categorized under *Nagara*, *Dravida*, and *Vesera* variations” [16, p.64]. These styles “are said to correspond to cardinal divisions of India -- that is, *Nagara* in the north, *Dravida* in the south, and *Vesara* in the east (especially in the temples at Orissa” [16, p.65].

The Aryan (North Indian) principle is that of the fire

(representing the fire of sacrifice). This is represented by the first phase of the cyclic movement of the sun (*ayana* or *aeon/ion*) in the ascendant i.e. north-bound. Beginning from south-east (*Agni kona*) via south-west (*Nairit* -- Plane of *Vastu* or built environment), ascending the heights of evolution – path of urge – through north-west (*Vayu kona*) (symbolizing power or *Shakti*) to north-east, *Issan kona* (the direction representing absolute harmony and contemplation). Hence Aryan (North Indian) temples show a profile of ascent (Fig. 4 (a)).

The Dravidian (South Indian) principle is the principle of descendent – symbolized by the movement of the sun towards *Dakshina* (south). The Sun loses heat by going down to the tropic of Capricorn – bringing rains. This signifies composition, condensation and the art of forming the ‘gross’, the ‘sculptured’ and the ‘tangible’ out of the intangible [5, p. 37] (Fig. 4 (b)). Thus, the north-Indian temples the spiritual journey is characterized by an increasing height of the temple form as the user moves from outside to the inner sanctum. The increasing height stands for expansion and rarefaction of the ‘Aryan Seer mind’. On the other hand, the south Indian temple form begins with great heights (*Gopuram* – the tower of the cow) and comes down to a smaller inner sanctum representing condensation, liquefaction [5, p.36-37].

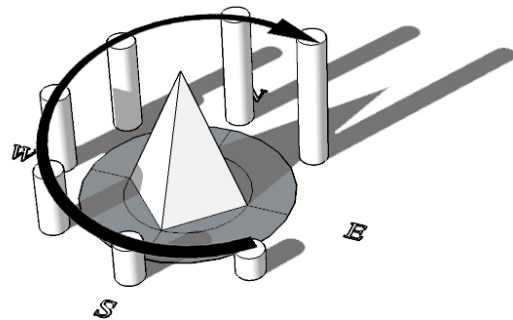


Fig. 4 (a) Sun of Ascent (Aryan principle)

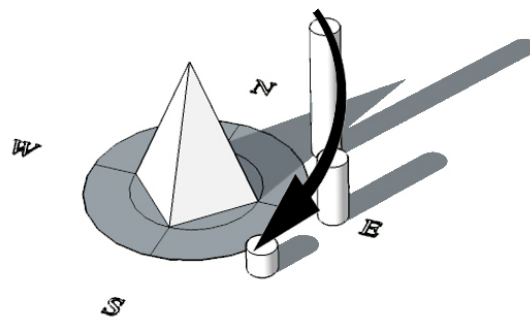


Fig. 4 (b) Sun of Descent (Dravidian principle)

The Aryan principle of temple construction is the movement from earth – to water (through fire) – to air (life) – to space beyond (Fig. 5 (a)), and the Dravidian principle represents the movement from beyond – through space – into creation in the descendent (involution) and through ‘life giving waters’ (*Soma*) [5, p.36-37] (Fig. 5 (b)).

Both styles of architecture strive to connect forms with

Formless, individual with Universal, humans with God.

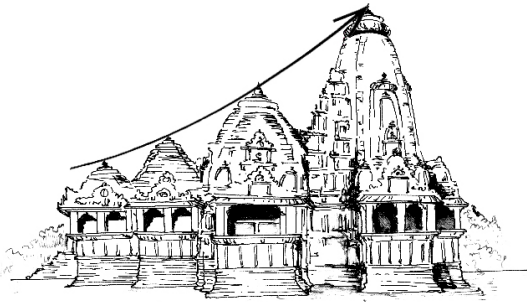


Fig. 5 (a) Profile of North Indian Temple

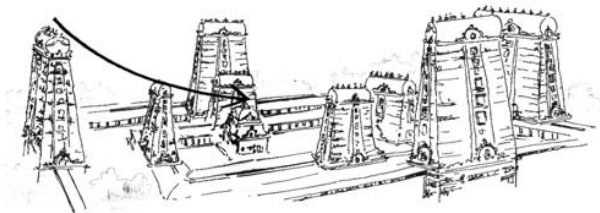


Fig. 5 (b) Profile of South Indian Temple

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