



Divine Designs: The Evolution of Temple Art in Bharat

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Article information

Received: 13th September 2024

Received in revised form: 11th October 2024

Accepted: 15th November 2024

Available online: 16th December 2024

Volume: 1

Issue: 1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499994>

Abstract

The evolution of temple art in Bharat has remarkably merged the ethos of culture, art and spirit over many centuries. In this article, the temple architecture has been traced from the early religious structures of the Indus Valley civilization to the magnificent monuments of the Gupta, Cholla and Vijayanagara periods. It highlights the main architectural styles-Nagara, Dravida and Vesara and their distinctive features illustrating the regional diversity in design, symbolisation and creativity. The study discusses the intricate carvings, motifs, and ornamentation of temples, which are often overlooked. They play an essential role in the temple's spirituality and functioning as a centre for social and economic activities. It also analyses the impact of exterior cultures during the Islamic and colonial eras, demonstrating the tenacity of temple art in maintaining its identity while adapting to evolving surroundings. These temples, as guardians of India's cultural history, represent the convergence of devotion, art, and architecture, exemplifying the lasting legacy of Bharat's varied traditions. The paper emphasises the critical necessity for conservation initiatives to safeguard these architectural masterpieces in the face of modernisation and environmental problems, so securing their importance for future generations.

Keywords: - Temple Art, Bharat, Gupta dynasty, Chola dynasty, Nagara Style.

Introduction

The progression of temple art in Bharat exemplifies the interaction of culture, spirituality, and artistic innovation across millennia. The origin of temple architecture goes back to the Indus Valley Civilisation, whereby primitive religious buildings laid the foundation for later sophisticated structures. Given the significant transformation of these initial designs into major works over the years, it was during the Gupta period (300-600CE) that major temples were created. Rock-cut architecture and structural temples developed during this period due to political stability and economic prosperity (Bassin, 2024; Kumar, 2024). Furthermore, they display a synthesis of aesthetic excellence and spiritual devotion. During the Gupta dynasty, temples became more elongated and sophisticated than earlier constructions. These temples were not only sites of worship but also centres of culture and intellect. During this time, the artisans and architects began to sculpt elaborate forms, and temple walls had deities, heavenly beings and epics engraved. The architectural forms that came into existence during this period, the Nagara in the north and the Dravida in the south, reflect the geographical, cultural and regional diversity of India. The Nagara style is known for the curved shikhara and elaborate entrance gates, while the Dravida style displays pyramidal towers, pillared halls, and a large number of shrines (Anil, 2023; S & Sadhukhan, 2020).

This used to be a crucial time in temple art. A realization that the Gods should now also reside in a temple. This change by the people led to the making of rock-cut temples like the Ajanta and Ellora caves and showed creative and architectural excellence. These rock-cut shrines were carved out of the hillside and often decorated with paintings and sculptures embodying the spirituality of the time. As temple construction continued to advance, artists were able to create elaborate sculptures and monumental constructions in stone (Kumar, 2024; Martins, 2018).

The Chola dynasty (9th–13th centuries) in southern India advanced temple art to unprecedented levels. The Chola temples, exemplified by the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur, embody magnificence and meticulousness. These temples were gigantic in grandeur and renowned for their ornate sculptures, elaborate friezes, and bronze icons. The Chola rulers viewed temples as marks of political power and divine approval. Thus, they set up large temple complexes that became centres of religious, cultural and commercial activity (Anil, 2023; Bassin, 2024).

The Nayaka background enriched the Dravidian temple art through the addition of spacious temple enclosures (prakaram), large gopurams (ornate entry towers), and numerous decorative features. The Nagara style flourished in northern India, exemplified by the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho, which features intricate carvings and architectural symmetry. These temples frequently illustrated themes from Hindu epics, divine courtships, and complex geometric designs, showcasing a harmonious fusion of faith and artistry (S & Sadhukhan, 2020; Kumar, 2024). Temples in Bharat were influenced by foreign cultures during the Islamic and colonial period. The Islamic architecture had domes, arches, and beautiful jali work. But the colonial influence brought new material and restoration methods. Despite these outside forces, the basic ideas and symbols of Hindu temple art remained the same, proving its continuity (Martins, 2018).

In the contemporary era, the preservation and rehabilitation of old temples are essential to safeguard India's vast cultural heritage. Temples serve as a spiritual hub as well as a repository of historical, artistic, and traditional works. Bharat's art and spirituality remain indicators of nation's historical legacy, and despite rapid modernisation, they continue to be permanent symbols of identity (Bassin, 2024).

Objectives

- To analyse the historical evolution of temple building in Bharat.
- To examine Principal Architectural Styles.
- To Analyse Artistic Components and Iconography.

Major Architectural Styles

Indian temples have three main architectural styles – Nagara style, Dravida style, and Vesara style. These are quite popular among the temples of India. Each of these kinds has a different cultural and regional influence. They are marked by the curved shikharas (towers) and intricate ornamentation characteristic of the Nagara style, which is seen predominantly in Northern India. The Dravida style which belongs to the south of India is known for its pyramidal vimana (temple tower), huge temples, and numerous sculptures. The Vesara style, which combined elements of the Nagara and Dravida styles, appeared in the Deccan. It was characterized by its own proportions and design features.

Nagara Style

India's rich architectural heritage is exemplified by the Nagara style of temple construction, which is primarily located in the northern region of the country. This style is renowned for its elaborate designs, spiritual meaning, and creative perfection. This style flourished between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, a time period that was characterised by the proliferation of religious plurality and the flourishing of cultural expression (Bassin, 2024; Hardy, 2007). It reflected the combination of artistic creativity with spiritual ideas, and it became the dominant architectural form in the contexts of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. According to (Meister, 2010), one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Nagara style is the curvilinear shikhara, also known as the tower. This tower is a remarkable structure that rises gracefully over the sanctum sanctorum, also known as the garbhagriha. It represents a cosmic axis that connects the earthly realm to the holy.

Nagara temples usually consist of a garbhagriha – the structure containing the main deity – and adjacent mandapa – a hall – where members of the devotee community congregate to worship and perform rituals. (Hardy, 2007) argues that the layout is often consistent with sacred geometry, representing a philosophical notion of the order of the cosmos and its movement through the universe. The carvings of these temples offer an insight into how artistic imagination was allowed to flourish in that period. Decorations of gods, mythological stories, heavenly beings and ornamental motifs are there. (Bassin, 2024) explains that the carvings aren't just for decoration; rather, they serve as image scriptures representing ideas and spiritual lessons of the culture.

An example of Nagara architecture that is particularly noteworthy is the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho. This temple is well-known for the wonderful sculptures that it contains, which show various deities, celestial dancers, and scenes from Hindu mythology. According to (Hardy, 2007), the temple constitutes the pinnacle of Nagara creativity since it combines architectural perfection with sculptural brilliance within its design. The Sun Temple in Modhera and the Vishwanatha Temple are two further noteworthy examples. Both of these

temples exhibit regional variances within the Nagara tradition, while still keeping to the tradition's fundamental ideals of symmetry, verticality, and detailed craftsmanship (Meister, 2010).

Not only are Nagara temples significant from a religious standpoint, but they have also historically played an important role as cultural and social hubs, helping to develop community participation and local economies. Festivals, performances, and intellectual activities were frequently held at these temples, which enabled them to become hubs for cultural expression and increased opportunities for social interaction. According to (Bassin, 2024), the economic activity that was generated by the construction and upkeep of temples also contributed to the wealth of the regions that were surrounding the temples.

On the other hand, the preservation of Nagara temples is confronted with difficulties brought about by urbanisation, neglect, and environmental degradation. Due to the fact that they are exposed to natural elements, numerous temples are in varying degrees of disrepair, and delicate sculptures are deteriorating. The preservation of these architectural marvels for future generations is dependent upon the conservation measures that are undertaken. It is necessary for preservation efforts to strike a balance between historical accuracy and contemporary approaches in order to restore and preserve the structural integrity of these temples as well as their artistic worth (Bassin, 2024).

The Nagara style of temple construction is a monument to the artistic and spiritual legacy that India has left behind. The depth of India's historical accomplishments is highlighted by the elaborate carvings, symbolic architecture, and cultural significance inherent in this edifice. Taking measures to ensure the preservation of these temples is not only a monument to the inventiveness of the past, but it is also a commitment to maintaining the cultural and spiritual heritage of the nation in the face of the problems that are present in the current world.

Dravida Style

The Dravida style of temple architecture, prevalent in southern India, represents a profound synthesis of cultural, religious, and artistic expressions. Originating during the early Pallava empire, this architectural tradition is distinguished by its characteristic pyramid-shaped vimanas (towers), intricately designed gopurams (gateway towers), and elaborate layouts often featuring multiple sanctums. The style's meticulous attention to detail and adherence to spiritual symbolism reflect the deep-seated values of Hindu philosophy, wherein temple architecture serves as both a sacred space and a cosmic representation of the divine order (Anil, 2023).

One of the most remarkable examples of Dravida architecture is the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, built during the Chola dynasty. This UNESCO World Heritage site exemplifies the grandeur and innovation of the period, showcasing a massive vimana that rises majestically over the sanctum sanctorum, intricate stone carvings, and an overall design that demonstrates unparalleled engineering and artistic capabilities (Anil, 2023). The temple not only served as a centre of worship but also as a hub for cultural and social activities, reflecting the Chola dynasty's emphasis on integrating art and religion into everyday life.

The evolution of the Dravida style saw significant contributions from various dynasties, including the Chalukyas, Pallavas, and Cholas. The Chalukyas introduced innovative structural techniques and intricate carvings, while the Cholas elevated the architectural tradition to new heights with monumental temples and exquisite sculptural details. Each dynasty added unique elements to the Dravida style, ensuring its continued growth and diversification over centuries (Anil, 2023).

A unique aspect of Dravida temple architecture is its connection with other art forms, particularly South Indian classical dance. Ancient temples were not merely places of worship but also venues for cultural performances, including Bharatanatyam. The carvings and sculptures often depict celestial dancers in graceful poses, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between architecture and dance as complementary expressions of devotion and aesthetics (Chithralekha, 2018). This interplay creates an immersive experience of worship, where visual and performing arts converge to evoke divine presence.

The Dravida temples are also notable for their advanced planning and functionality. Many temple complexes include expansive courtyards, mandapas (pillared halls), water tanks, and smaller shrines, designed to accommodate large congregations and various rituals. The emphasis on symmetry and proportion in these structures reflects a sophisticated understanding of geometry and aesthetics, further enhancing their appeal and spiritual resonance.

Despite their historical and cultural significance, many Dravida temples face challenges related to preservation and modernization. Environmental factors, neglect, and encroachment threaten these ancient structures, necessitating urgent conservation efforts. Preserving these temples is vital not only to safeguard India's architectural heritage but also to maintain the spiritual and cultural identity they embody (Chithralekha, 2018).

The Dravida style of temple architecture stands as a testament to the ingenuity, devotion, and artistry of ancient South Indian dynasties. Its intricate designs, monumental structures, and integration of various art forms underscore its enduring legacy in the cultural landscape of India. The temples continue to inspire awe and reverence, serving as timeless symbols of the spiritual and artistic brilliance that defines India's architectural heritage.

Vesara Style

The Vesara architecture, a robust amalgamation of the Nagara and Dravida styles, established a novel architectural tradition in the Deccan that fused the characteristics of one with the era of the other. Halebidu's Hoysaleswara Temple exemplifies Vesara architecture, characterised by its intricate ornamentation and cohesive architectural components. This temple exhibits remarkable artistry with beautifully carved relief panels and finely etched columns that depict narratives of deities, epics, and heavenly entities. These temples exemplify the Bharat Vesara style, an evolved iteration of the Vesara heritage, characterised by its intricate architectural design prevalent during the mediaeval period, especially in Karnataka. Many of these temples feature intricate carvings and exquisite sculptures that illustrate mythical narratives and floral designs, reflecting the creative and spiritual wealth of the era, to show both cultural magnificence and religious devotion via stone and artistry (Bassin, 2024).

These temples functioned not just as sites of worship but also as dynamic cultural centres, mirroring the socio-political context of their day. These gigantic edifices were commissioned by mediaeval sovereigns to assert their divine authority and cultivate a bond with their subjects, therefore conflating the sacred with the profane. These structures functioned as reminders of their legacies, embodying a synthesis of spiritual devotion and political symbolism. Nevertheless, these architectural achievements confront existential risks, primarily stemming from environmental factors and neglect. These heritage structures possess historical, cultural, and spiritual importance, making their preservation essential. Proactive actions, such as preservation initiatives and educational campaigns, are essential for guaranteeing that future generations can appreciate these testaments to human talent and dedication (Bassin, 2024).

Artistic Features

Temple art, characterised by ornate sculptures, frescoes, and elaborate ornamental themes, beyond mere architectural expression; it serves as a meaningful reflection of spirituality and cultural identity. The elaborate carvings and embellishments in temples has profound symbolic significance, reflecting diverse elements of existence, divinity, and the universe. Sculptural aspects are essential in communicating these themes, featuring temples embellished with intricate representations of deities, heavenly entities like apsaras, and vivid narratives from mythology. These sculptures function as artistic masterpieces and visual narratives that convey spiritual lessons and cosmological ideas (Bassin, 2024).

The Khajuraho temples are renowned for their sensual sculptures that explore themes of love, sexuality, and the cycle of life. These sculptures are not just provocative but also intended to commemorate the equilibrium between life's terrestrial and celestial components. They contest traditional views of spirituality, illustrating a healthy relationship between human and heavenly love. The incorporation of these sculptures reflects the holistic character of temple art, which encompasses both the holy and the secular, underscoring the concept that divinity pervades all facets of existence (Bassin, 2024).

An integral aspect of temple art is its iconography. In Hinduism, each deity is represented according to particular iconographic standards that express their essence, qualities, and legendary narratives. Vishnu is frequently depicted resting on the serpent Ananta, symbolising the limitless and eternal aspect of the world, as well as divine protection over all existence. These iconographic depictions function as spiritual and philosophical teachings, directing adherents in their comprehension of the divine sphere and the essential truths of existence (Kumar, 2024).

Temple architecture is rich in symbolism, with every design element representing cosmic principles and spiritual values. The design of a temple is meticulously structured to reflect the cosmic order, utilising geometric forms as representations of diverse cosmic and metaphysical ideas. The square plan is frequently employed to represent solidity, durability, and the tangible essence of the material realm. This sturdy base juxtaposes the circular forms symbolising eternity, wholeness, and the cyclical essence of life, death, and rebirth. These architectural shapes transcend basic aesthetic considerations; they encapsulate the temple's function as a spiritual nucleus, providing a physical environment that mirrors the broader cosmic structure (Meister, 2010).

The sculptures, iconography, and architectural features of a temple collectively create a unified story that integrates art, spirituality, and philosophy. Temple art functions as a potent instrument for religious teaching, providing both a venue for worship and a representation of the profound interrelations among the divine, the

natural environment, and the human experience. Thus, temple art surpasses its architectural purpose and manifests the divine, encouraging all entrants to engage in a significant spiritual odyssey.

Conclusion

The growth of temple art in Bharat signifies a remarkable progression of cultural, spiritual, and creative expression across millennia. The architectural heritage, ranging from the early religious edifices of the Indus Valley civilisation to the grand temples of the Gupta, Chola, and Vijayanagara periods, exemplifies a cohesive amalgamation of spirituality, artistry, and regional variation. The Nagara, Dravida, and Vesara styles exemplify the diverse array of temple architecture, each presenting unique structural and ornamental features that reflect the cultural essence of their respective locations.

Temple art surpasses simple construction, incorporating elaborate sculptures, iconography, and symbolism that convey epic narratives, embody cosmic ideologies, and honour divine adoration. These temples have functioned as spiritual centres and cultural hubs, promoting artistic creativity, communal meetings, and economic development. Despite external influences from Islamic and colonial eras, temple art maintained its fundamental identity while incorporating new aspects, showcasing the endurance and adaptability of India's cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the issues of neglect, environmental degradation, and modernisation highlight the pressing necessity for conservation initiatives to protect this invaluable heritage.

By comprehending and safeguarding the profound heritage of temple art, we honour a crucial aspect of Bharat's past, guaranteeing that future generations can perpetually derive inspiration from this extraordinary amalgamation of artistry, dedication, and architectural brilliance.

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