

Emerging Architectural Paradigms in South Indian Temples: A Chronological Analysis

Ar. Seema Anil ¹, Ar. Akshatha Devi S

¹Seema Anil, Associate Professor, BMS School of Architecture

²Akshatha Devi S, Assistant Professor, BMS School of Architecture

Abstract - This research delves into the intricate evolution of Indian temple architecture, spanning centuries of cultural and religious transformations. Originating in the Vedic/Aryan civilization, worship centered on natural elements with a simple square altar. A pivotal shift occurred with the introduction of idol worship, marking the genesis of temple architecture evolution. Initially, rock-cut structures featured a garbagriha and semi-open portico, retaining the windowless garbagriha from rock-cut temples.

The Chalukya era saw experimentation, notably at Durga in Aihole and Pattadakal, earning the latter the title "Cradle of temple architecture" due to Nagara and Dravida style exploration.

Pallavas contributed to the Dravidian vimana prototype, as seen in Mahabalipuram's monolithic rathas. Cholas refined the vimana, erecting the Brihadeshwara temple in Tanjore with a mortar-less construction.

Pandyas added Gopurams, reflecting emotional ties. Hoysalas introduced star temples with intricate carvings, featuring single to multiple garbagrihas in various styles.

The Vijayanagara era introduced Amman temples and Kalyana mantapas. Nayakas refined Dravidian architecture with concentric prakaras and tall gopurams.

In the 20th century, transformative shifts like the Isha Center in Coimbatore embody inclusivity, challenging traditions, and fostering diverse spiritual environments.

Key Words: Indian temple architecture, Cultural transformations, religious evolution, vedic/Aryan civilization, rock-cut structures.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of temple architecture finds its roots in the inception of idol worship, marking a significant turning point in human spiritual practices. As cultural beliefs gained depth and intricate rituals became integral to religious observance, temple architecture adapted in tandem, accommodating the evolving needs of worshippers. However, the gradual transformation and, at times, diminishment of traditional cultural beliefs and rituals have ushered in a novel trend – the emergence of non-religious or neutral religious spaces. This contemporary shift signifies a broader societal transformation where the traditional boundaries of religious spaces are redefined, paving the way for environments that transcend specific religious affiliations and foster a more inclusive and diverse understanding of

spirituality. In this paper, we delve into the dynamic interplay between evolving cultural beliefs, rituals, and the architectural responses of temples, culminating in the emergence of spaces that transcend conventional religious boundaries.

2. Chronological Analysis

The evolution of temple architecture in India is deeply intertwined with the cultural and religious shifts that have occurred over centuries. In the Vedic/Aryan civilization, worship centered around natural elements such as fire (Agni), water (Varuna), wind (Vayu), and earth (Prithvi), with a simple square altar sufficing as a sacred space. The societal structure during this period reflected a hierarchical division based on the perceived origins from different parts of the gods' body, giving rise to the four castes: Brahmins (head), Kshatriyas (shoulders), Vaishyas (middle part), and Shudras (legs/lower half).

A pivotal change in cultural beliefs transpired with the advent of idol worship and the emergence of the trinity of Gods—Shiva (destroyer), Brahma (creator), and Vishnu (preserver). This shift marked the onset of the evolution of temple architecture. Early temples were predominantly rock-cut, featuring a garbagriha (sanctum sanctorum) and a semi-open portico. The windowless garbagriha, a characteristic retained from rock-cut temples, symbolized mystery and darkness (Fig. 1).

During the Chalukya period, particularly in southern India, temple architecture witnessed experimentation. The Durga temple in Aihole drew inspiration from Buddhist chaitya hall plans, while the Ladkahn temple introduced the concept of the Nandi mantapa (Fig. 2,3). The significant experimentation in Nagara and Dravida styles occurred at Pattadakal, earning it the moniker "Cradle of temple architecture."

The Pallavas contributed to the development of the Dravidian vimana prototype, as seen in their monolithic rathas at Mahabalipuram (Fig. 4). Structural temples like the Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram showcased

innovative experimentation, including multiple cellas with their own smaller shikharas (Fig. 5,6).

The Cholas further refined the Dravidian vimana prototype, introducing the concept of Parivaralaya—housing Lord Shiva, his consort, and their children within the same prakara (Fig. 7). The Brihadeshwara temple in Tanjore, a Chola marvel, featured the tallest vimana with a mortar-less construction and an 80-ton cap stone.

The Pandyas contributed by adding Gopurams to existing temples, reflecting the emotional and cultural connections people had with these sacred spaces (Fig. 8). The Hoysalas introduced star temples with intricate carvings, utilizing a unique stone known as "Chloriteschist." Their temples featured single to multiple garbagrihas in Eka koota, Dwi-koota, and Trikoota styles (Fig. 9).

In the Vijayanagara era, the Dravidian style evolved further, introducing Amman temples with separate shrines for the female deity. Kalyana mantapas, free-standing structures for the annual marriage ceremony of the deities, became a prominent feature (Fig. 10).

The Nayakas, during the 15th-16th century, contributed concentric prakaras and tall gopurams to accommodate growing rituals around temple premises (Fig. 11). This period marked the refinement of ornamentation and layout in Dravidian temple architecture.

In the 20th century, a notable shift in religious spaces occurred, exemplified by places like the Isha Center in Coimbatore, reflecting a move towards inclusivity, where religious spaces are designed to belong to all religions rather than a specific one. This modern trend challenges traditional notions of religious exclusivity, paving the way for more diverse and inclusive spiritual environments.

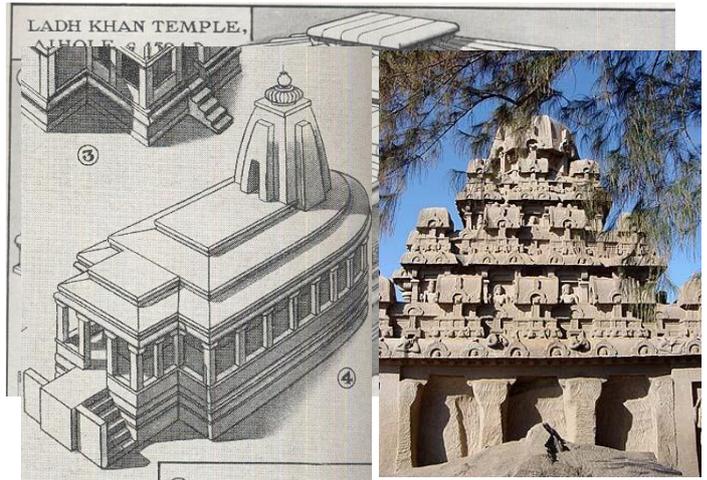


Fig -2: Ladh Kahn temple, Aihole

Fig -3: Durga temple Aihole

Fig -4: Dharmaraja ratha, Mahabalipuram

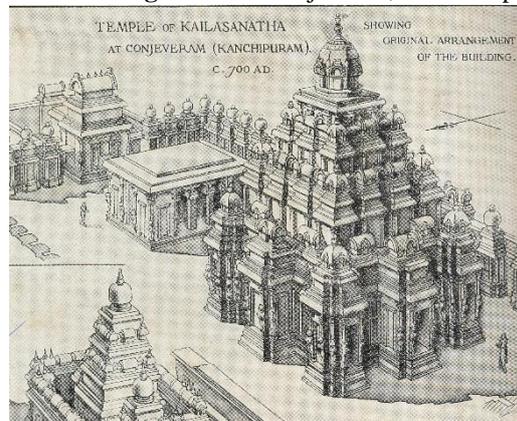


Fig -5: Kailasanatha temple, Kanchipuram

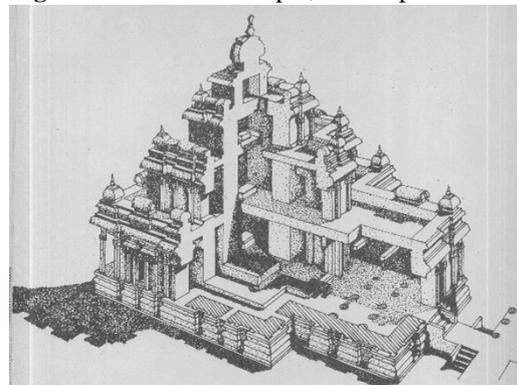


Fig -6: Vaikuntaperumal temple, Kanchipuram

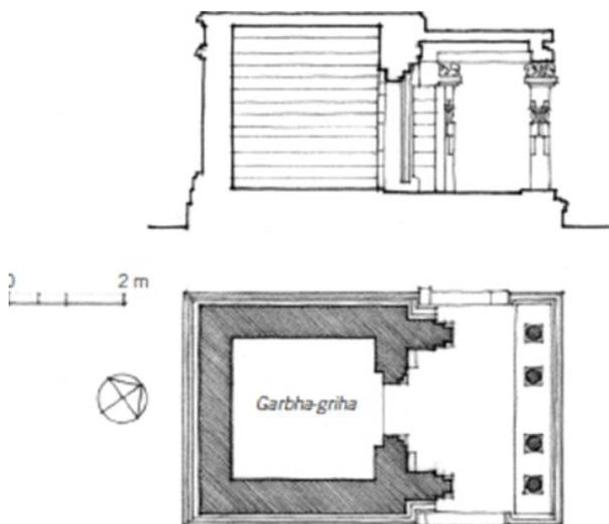


Fig -1: Gupta temple, Sanchi

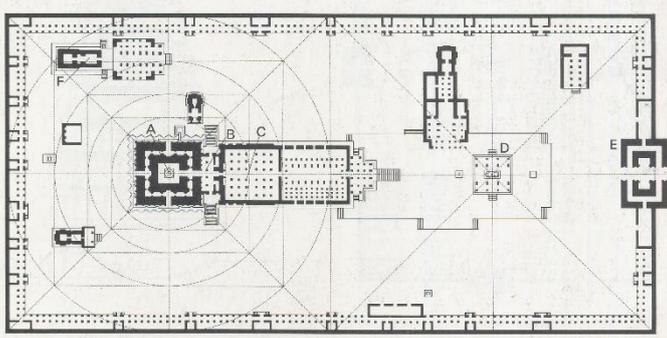


Fig -7 : Brihadeshwara temple, Tanjore

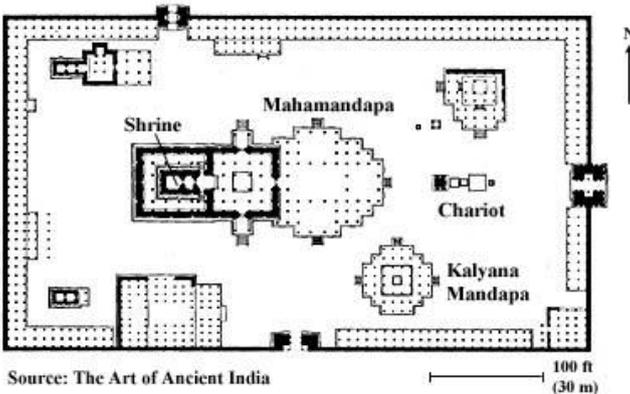


Fig -8: Kumbakonam temple



Fig.9: Keshava temple, Somanathapur

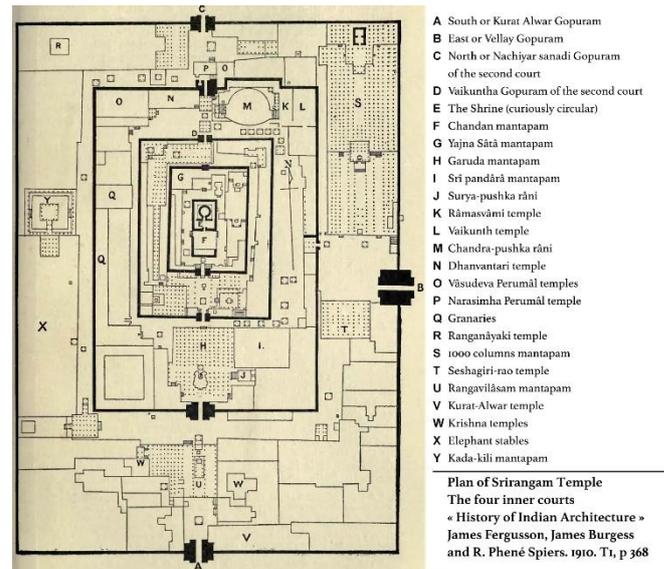
Vitthala Temple, Vijayanagara



Source: The Art of Ancient India

Fig. – 10: Vishnu Vittala temple. Hampi

Fig11. -) Ranganathaswamy temple, Srirangam



3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the evolution of Indian temple architecture unfolds as a rich narrative entwined with cultural and religious shifts over millennia. Originating in the Vedic/Aryan civilization, worship centered on natural elements, establishing a simplistic sacred space with a square altar. The hierarchical societal structure, mirroring the gods' body divisions into four castes, shaped this early period.

A transformative shift to idol worship and the trinity of Gods—Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu—marked the genesis of a new temple architecture era. Early rock-cut temples retained symbolic elements, including garbagrihas and semi-open porticos with windowless interiors exuding an aura of mystery.

The Chalukya period, a crucible of experimentation, merged Nagara and Dravida styles at Durga in Aihole and Pattadakal, the latter earning the title "Cradle of temple architecture." Pallavas contributed to the Dravidian vimana prototype seen in Mahabalipuram's monolithic rathas, while Cholas refined it with the grand Brihadeshwara temple in Tanjore.

Pandya added emotional depth with Gopurams, and Hoysalas introduced star temples with Chloriteschist stone carvings. The Vijayanagara era marked milestones with the evolution of the Dravidian style and the introduction of Amman temples and Kalyana mantapas.

The Nayakas refined Dravidian temple architecture in the 15th-16th century with concentric prakaras and tall gopurams. The 20th century witnessed a transformative shift, exemplified by the Isha Center in Coimbatore,

symbolizing inclusivity, challenging religious exclusivity, and fostering diverse spiritual environments. India's temple architecture reflects not only the evolution of religious practices but also attests to the adaptability and enduring vitality of cultural and spiritual traditions.

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