

Iconography and Symbolism in Indian Temple Architecture

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Abstract- This paper explores the intricate iconographic and symbolic elements present within Indian temple architecture, focusing on how these components express spiritual beliefs and philosophical foundations. It delves into the representation of deities, celestial beings, and cosmic symbols, illustrating their role in connecting the material and spiritual worlds through architectural design. By examining selected temple structures, the study reveals how architectural features and elements convey religious narratives and cosmological concepts, such as the universe's creation and the eternal cycles of time. These symbolic elements are crucial in shaping the spatial organisation of temples, enhancing their ritual significance and fostering deeper spiritual experiences. The research also highlights the regional variations in architectural styles, including the Dravidian, Nagara, and Vesara traditions, showing how each interprets and integrates iconography within its unique structural forms. This examination aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between them and the sacred spaces in Indian temple architecture, offering insights into the profound connections between religious symbolism and architectural expression.

Keywords: Iconography, Symbolism, Indian temples, deities, cosmic symbols, architectural elements, religious architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Iconography and symbolism are central to the essence of Indian temple architecture, where structures transcend mere physicality to embody spiritual, cosmic, and metaphysical meanings. Indian temples serve not only as places of worship but also as intricate visual narratives that express the relationship between the divine and the universe for man. The architecture of temples is meticulously crafted to represent cosmological beliefs, with every element—from the overall layout to the smallest detail—imbued with symbolic significance. These elements convey spiritual philosophies, illustrating sacred texts and myths through their design.

At the heart of Indian temple architecture is the symbolic representation of deities, celestial beings, and cosmic principles. The symbolism and structure of a Hindu temples are rooted in Vedic traditions, deploying circles and squares. The garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) typically houses the

principal deity, symbolising the core of existence, while other structural features like the vimana (tower), vestibule (antrala), mandapa (pillared hall), ardha-mandapa, mukha-mandapa & gateway (gopura) align with cosmic dimensions in the same axis and the journey from the physical to the spiritual realm. Temples also integrate celestial symbols like the lotus, chakra (wheel), and geometric patterns, all of which represent cosmic cycles, creation, and spiritual enlightenment.

Each region in India contributes its unique stylistic interpretations, yet common iconographic themes persist across varying traditions. For instance, South Indian Dravidian temples often incorporate grand gopurams (gateways) adorned with intricate carvings of gods and mythological scenes, while the Nagara style in the north emphasizes verticality and ornate spires representing Mount Meru, the axis of the universe, where as Vesara style adopted/combination from both the above in variety of ways.

2. PURPOSE OF STUDY

This article delves into the iconographic and symbolic elements of Indian temple architecture, analysing their role in expressing religious and philosophical concepts. By examining few case studies of historic temples, the research highlights how these structural form and architectural elements create a profound dialogue between human belief systems and the cosmos.

3. SYMBOLISM AND ICONOGRAPHY IN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

3.1 DEITIES AND DIVINE REPRESENTATION:

Indian temple iconography prominently features the depiction of deities in various forms human, animal, and hybrid each embodying distinct aspect of the divine. Constructed as miniature representations of the universe, these edifices function as links bridging the divine and human realms. Temples dedicated to major deities like Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi typically house large central deity within the garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), surrounded by an array of other deities.



Fig.1. Sanctum sanctorum at the Chenna Keshava temple in Beluru

The intricate detailing of these deities' postures (mudras), attributes, and vahana's is imbued with profound symbolic significance, conveying divine qualities such as creation, preservation, and destruction. For instance, Vishnu reclining on the cosmic serpent represents the cycle of creation and preservation, while Shiva's performance of the Tandava symbolises the dynamic forces of destruction and regeneration. These representations serve not only as objects of worship but also as visual narratives that communicate the complexities of cosmic cycles, reinforcing the temple's role as a conduit for spiritual engagement and enlightenment.

3.2 MYTHOLOGICAL FIGURES: SCULPTURES AND CARVINGS WITH AN EXPRESSION

Indian temples are lavishly decorated with sculptures depicting mythological tales, reflecting the region's vibrant cultural heritage. Mythological figures such as apsaras and Gandharva's that serve to bridge the divine and human realms. These artistic representations are often depicted in dynamic poses of dance, music, or worship, symbolizing the vibrant interplay between the celestial and terrestrial worlds. Elaborate carvings and sculptures depicted stories from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, symbolizing the importance of religious narratives and teachings. Their presence not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the temple but also conveys important spiritual narratives.



Fig.2. Ornamentation - Apsaras and Gandharva's

The strategic placement of these figures within the temple's mandapas (halls) or along exterior walls is deliberate, reflecting their roles as guides for devotees. Positioned to lead worshippers toward spiritual enlightenment, these figures, guiding worshipers towards spiritual enlightenment, inspire a sense of transcendence and divine communion. They remind the faithful of the continuous interaction between the human experience and the cosmic order, reinforcing the temple's purpose as a sacred space for worship, meditation, and communion with the divine.

3.3 COSMIC SYMBOLS AND SPATIAL REPRESENTATION:

Indian temples are deeply influenced by cosmic symbols that embody the connection between the universe and the divine. Key symbols like the orientation, Vastu shastra, mandala, lotus, animal figures, frescoes and murals, numerology etc are foundational to the temple's architectural design.

The mandala, a geometric figure representing the cosmos, serves as the blueprint for temple layouts, with its symmetrical patterns reflecting the order and harmony of the universe.

The lotus, often seen in temple architecture on floors or friezes, symbolizes purity and spiritual awakening, as it rises from the earth to unfold in heavenly realms. The lotus pattern is still used in modern architecture, which is evidence of its enduring relevance.

Use of Numerology, Architectural components, such as the number of pillars, steps, or gates, frequently incorporated symbolic numbers that corresponded with cultural or religious beliefs.

Orientation of Temple entrances were often oriented toward specific directions, symbolizing the importance of aligning with the path of the sun.



Fig.3 Example of the many frescos found in the pillared cloister.

The Vaastu Purusha Mandala is a foundational concept in Vaastu Shastra, representing the cosmic framework for temple design. This diagram embodies the relationship between celestial forces and the physical realm, aiming to

manifest the unseen into tangible form. The architect begins with a square, viewed as a primary shape that derives from the circle, symbolising order and completion. The interplay of these forms reflects life's essence, with the square representing stability and perfection.

At its core, the Vaastu Purusha Mandala signifies the Earth as a living entity, with the Vaastu Purusha symbolising the divine presence within it. The site for construction is viewed as the body of this cosmic being, with specific directions corresponding to divine energies. For instance, the southeast corner is associated with prosperity, while the northeast is linked to auspiciousness.

Each quadrant is meticulously organised, housing various deities corresponding to natural elements and cosmic directions. The symbolism extends to the temple's spire, aligning above the Brahmasthana, reinforcing the connection between the divine and the earthly. (Fig.4)

Hindu temple architecture is deeply symbolic, reflecting a complex interplay of ideas and cosmic principles. Oriented eastward, the temple represents the Cosmic Person, with a floor plan that embodies the archetype of the cosmic mountain. This design aligns with sacred texts (shastras and agamas) that dictate proportions and geometric forms, emphasizing the temple's role as a microcosm of the universe.

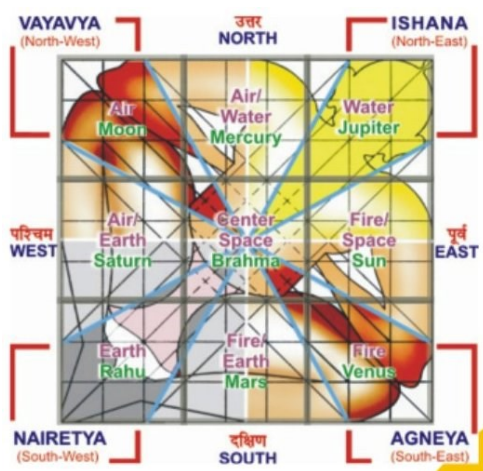


Fig.4 Vastupurushamandala (Source: <http://theindiacenter.org/architecture/>)

The temple mirrors the subtle body and its chakras, with the garbhagriha aligning with the heart chakra (anahata) and the kalasha atop the vimana symbolizing the seat of consciousness (sahasrara). The temple's design incorporates recursive geometrical forms, suggesting a fractal nature that resonates with cosmic order. (Fig.5)

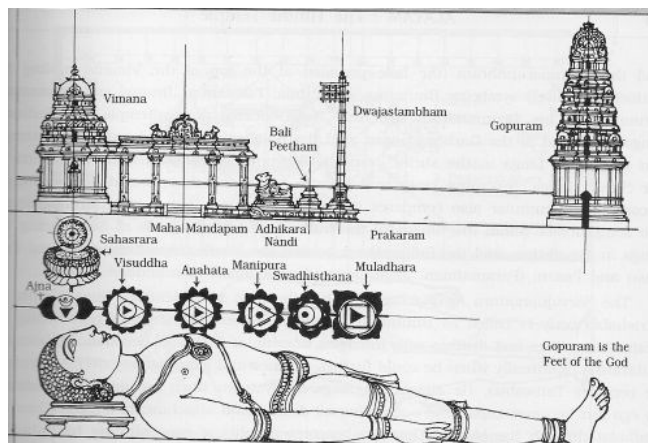


Fig.5 Vastupurusha (Source: Temple Architecture-Devalaya Vastu – Part Three (3 of 9))

4 CASE STUDIES

4.1 BRIHADESHWARA TEMPLE, THANJAVUR

Thanjavur (formerly Tanjore under British rule), situated at the head of the Kaveri River delta, commands the heartland of Tamil Nadu. Once the preferred capital of the Cholas (10th–12th centuries), Nayakas (16th century), and Marathas (17th–18th centuries), Thanjavur is home to over 90 temples. Brihadeshwara, also called Rajarajeshwara, reflects a rich blend of symbolism, meticulous planning, and innovative construction techniques.

Symbolism: The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and embodies cosmic principles through its architectural design. The central sanctum sanctorum (garba-griha), housing the gigantic Shiva lingam cut in a monolithic rock represents the axis of the universe, while the towering vimana (sanctum tower) symbolizes Mount Meru, the cosmic axis in Hindu cosmology. (The mythological axis of the universe).

Its thirteen-storied tower (all temple towers in India have an odd number of storeys) The cella is accessible via two flights of steps on either side, with a platform interrupting the ascent between ground level and the top of the plinth.



Fig.6 Brihadeshwara Temple (Source: Author)

Plan: The temple complex is a giant rectangle, the Prakara or the enclosure wall the temple's layout adheres to a precise geometric plan, incorporating a grand courtyard surrounded by fortified walls. The main axis aligns with cardinal directions, and the central space, where the garba-griha is located, serves as the focal point. The layout also includes a large pillared hall (mandapa) and a separate enclosure for the temple's processional activities.(Fig.7).

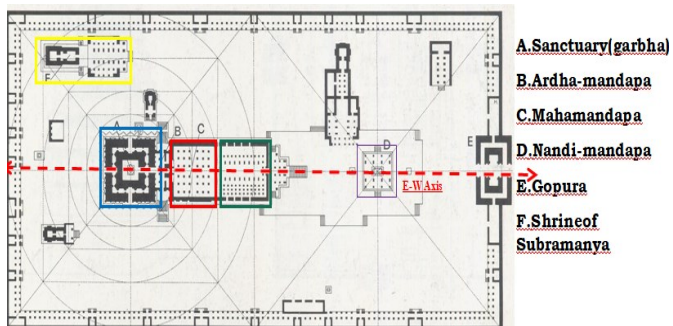


Fig.7 Brihadishwara Temple plan (Source: Image edited by Author)



Fig.9 Nandi with Frescoes on the enclosure roof

The gigantic Nandi that stands at the entrance has the ceiling of its enclosure decorated with frescoes in the typical painting style of Thanjavur. The majority of Shiva temples and shrines include a sculpture of Shiva's mount, Nandi, facing the linga that is housed inside. (Fig.9)

4.2 KONARK SUN TEMPLE, ODISHA

The Konark Sun Temple, located in Odisha and built in the 13th century during the reign of King Narasimhadeva I of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, is a quintessential example of Kalinga architecture and a symbol of celestial grandeur.

Symbolism: The temple is dedicated to Surya, the Sun God commonly depicted in Indian iconography as rising from the east, and is designed to represent a colossal chariot drawn by seven horses, all carved from stone. This chariot motif signifies the movement of the sun across the sky, reflecting the temple's celestial and astronomical significance. Envisioned as the chariot of the sun god, Surya, it is borne on twelve pairs of wheels symbolising the months and drawn by seven horses representing the days of the week. The wheels also serve as sundials, capable of measuring

time. (Fig 12) The intricate carvings and sculptures within the temple celebrate the Sun God's divine power and his role in the cosmic order.

A typical Orissan temple has dominant East - West axis. The temple has four components: -(Fig 10)

- 1: Bhogmandir (hall for offerings).
- 2: Natmandir (dance - hall).
- 3: Jagmohan (mandapa)
- 4: Deul (garbhagriha or cella)

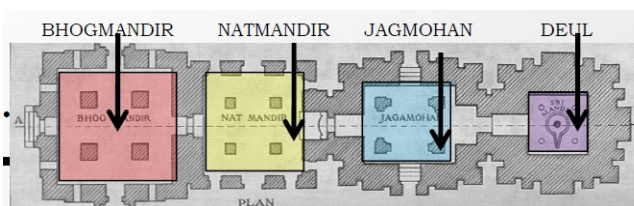


Fig. 10 shows plan of Orissan temples

Vimana: The vimana, the temple's towering structure above the sanctum, making it one of the tallest in India. It is crowned with a massive single stone (kumbh), weighing around 80 tonnes. This towering presence signifies the divine and the celestial, providing an imposing and awe-inspiring visual. The main treatment has a vertical character contrasting with the horizontal moulding. The truncated pyramid's breadth at the apex is one-third that of its base width. The tower's base-to-apex width ratio is 3:1. (Fig.8)

The lowest part is the prismatic base, this is divided into two storeys by a deep horizontal moulding and the façade of this part of the Vimana consists of a treatment including pilasters, niches, canopies and statues of Gods, Apsaras and Demons. The temple is approached from the East via two gopuras. Its entranceway is flanked by two very large dvarapalas, the carvings below represent various Shaiva legends. The lower part of these gopuras is made of stone, while the roof which rests upon it is made of brick in order to reduce its weight; this innovation was adopted for the increasingly larger gopuras which followed in Southern India.

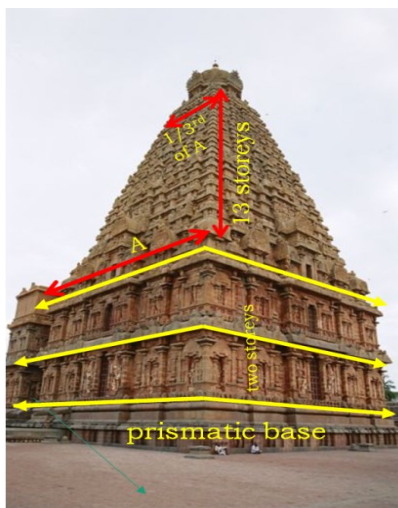
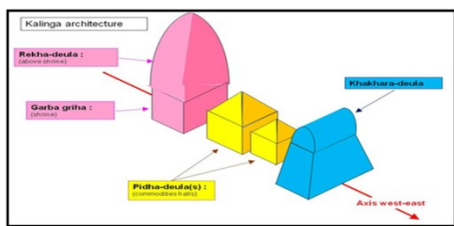


Fig.8 Brihadishwara Temple (Source:Image edited by author)



Vimana: The vimana, or central tower, once stood approximately 70 meters high, though it has partially collapsed. Its design is intricately carved and showcases the temple's grandeur. The vimana's structure is crowned by a decorative stone disk (chakra), representing the Sun's radiant energy. (Fig.11, 13)

Large sculptures on either side in front of the dance hall entrance show a lion rearing above a kneeling elephant that holds a prostrate man (on his side, facing the viewer) with his trunk. This appears to be a variant of the Gajasimha (lion on elephant) motif, although it is not understood completely. The sculptures on the grand Jagmohan depict musicians playing cymbals, beating drums, and blowing horns, with a multi-headed Bhairava featured at the top row centre.

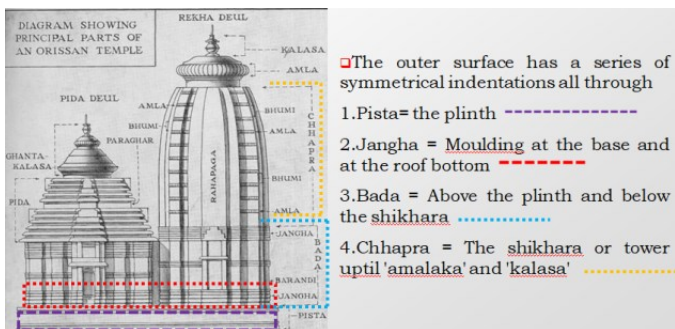


Fig.11 Shows parts of Orissan temples. (Source: image edited by author)



Fig. 14 shows the iconographic representations

Plan: The temple's layout is meticulously planned to embody the chariot theme. The main structure is oriented eastward to capture the first rays of the sunrise, enhancing the symbolic connection to the Sun. The complex includes a large central sanctum (garba-griha), a towering vimana (tower), and a spacious open courtyard. The temple's outer walls are adorned with detailed bas-reliefs and sculptures that narrate various aspects of Hindu mythology, including celestial beings, deities, and royal processions.

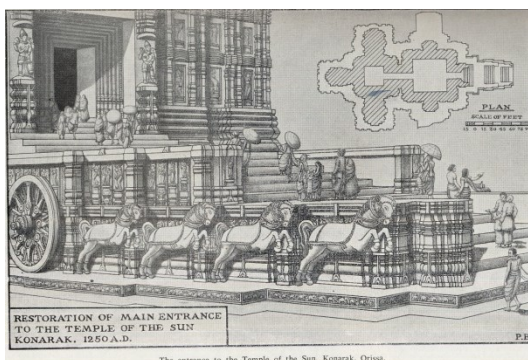


Fig.12 Restoration image and plan of Konark sun temple



Fig. 15. shows the iconographic representations

One of the renowned wheels that bear the solar chariot on its celestial journey features a rim, hub, and eight major and minor spokes. The wheels, like the entire terrace, are intricately carved into an exquisite filigree of delicate design.



Fig.13 View of Konark Sun Temple

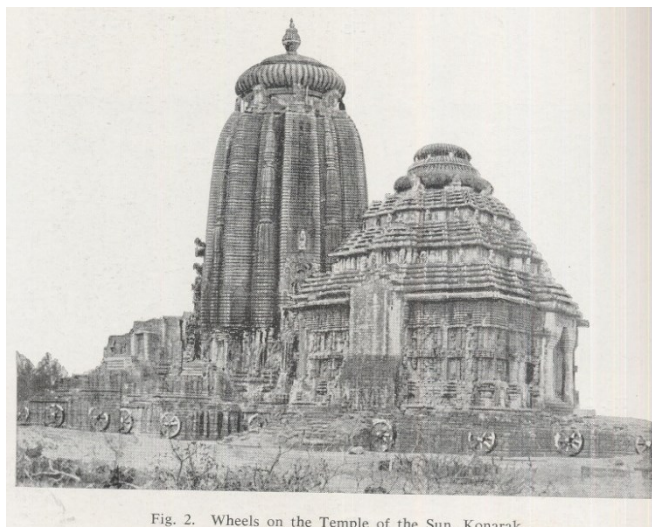


Fig. 2. Wheels on the Temple of the Sun, Konarak.

Fig. 16 shows the wheels on the Sun temple ,Konark.

The Konark Sun Temple remains a masterpiece of ancient Indian architecture, celebrated for its symbolic design, astronomical precision, and intricate craftsmanship.

4.3 KESHAVA TEMPLE, SOMANATHPURA

Hoysala temples are found mainly in Beluru, Halebidu and Somnathpura. These temples have certain unique characteristics. They are called ‘Star temples’ because the most important part of the temple namely the Vimana (cella) is star shaped. The star shape of the Vimana in plan is obtained by rotating a square about its center and marking the outer profile of the square in different positions.

These temples have four important parts **1:** Garbhagriha,

2:Sukhnasi(Antarala), **3:**Navaranga (Mandapa) and **4:**Mukhamantapa (pillared hall in front). These temples are planned on the basis of axial planning i.e., they consist of two or more axes in plan.

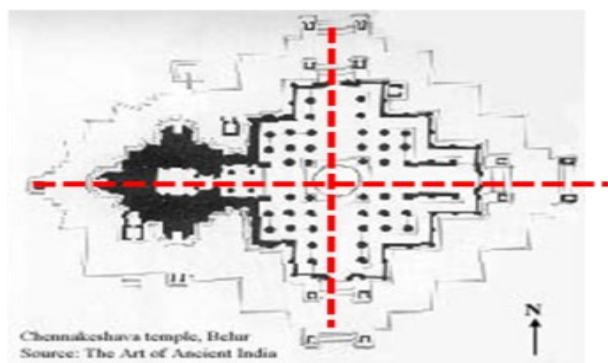


Fig.17 Hoyasala architecture temple plan showing the axial planning concept (source image edited by author)

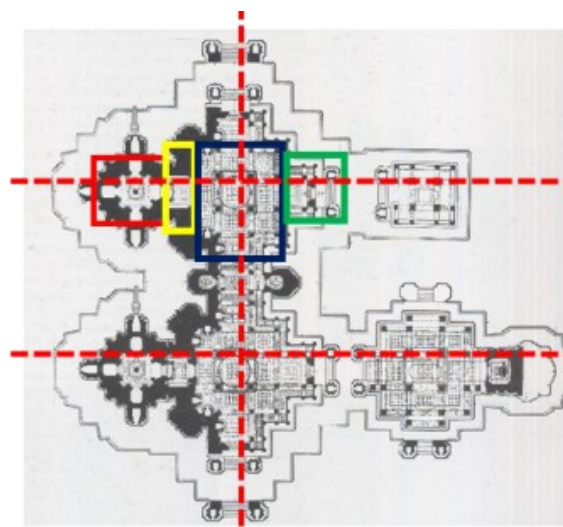


Fig.18 Hoysala architecture temple plan showing the axial, biaxial planning concept (source image edited by author)

The Keshava Temple, built in 1268 by Hoysala general Somanatha during the reign of King Narasimha III, stands as the finest and best-preserved of the major Hoysala temples, representing a true architectural gem. These temples have a high plinth or terrace and there is sufficient space on the terrace around the temple. The purpose of this space is that it can be used as exterior ambulatory since there is no ambulatory inside. These temples are profusely carved both on the exterior and in the interior so much so that they are labeled as Artist’s architecture. The profusion of the ornamentation has been possible because of the use of soft variety of stone called ‘CHLORITESCHIST’, grayish green in colour.

Symbolism: The temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and embodies themes of divine beauty and cosmic harmony. This perfect temple marked the development of Medieval Indian Architecture the exterior is exquisitely ornamented in bands with processional elephants, foliage, sculpted humans & gods. Its elaborate sculptures depict various deities, celestial beings, and mythological narratives, illustrating the cultural and spiritual richness of the era. The temple’s design reflects the Hoysala belief in the divine presence within art, where each carving serves as an offering to the gods.

PLAN: The entrance (East-facing) to the temple is framed by lathe-turned columns leads to three star-shaped sanctuaries. This is cruciform shaped with 3 cellas, one each at the head and 2 transepts or side – arms. The 3 cellas are dedicated to 3 aspects (avatars) of Lord Vishnu himself on the West, North and South. All the 3 cellas are star / stellar shaped. A Sukhanasi (Vestibule) is here preceding each of the 3 cellas. The peripheral columns are screened with stone Trellis or Tallies for privacy to the Brahmins watching the dance of Devadasis in the evenings. There are 33 columns in all, profusely carved in rings and stellar profiles, on a stone lathe. The 3 shikharas on 3 cellas are of 30 feet high, pyramidal in shape while the Mandapa has flat roof.(Fig 19)

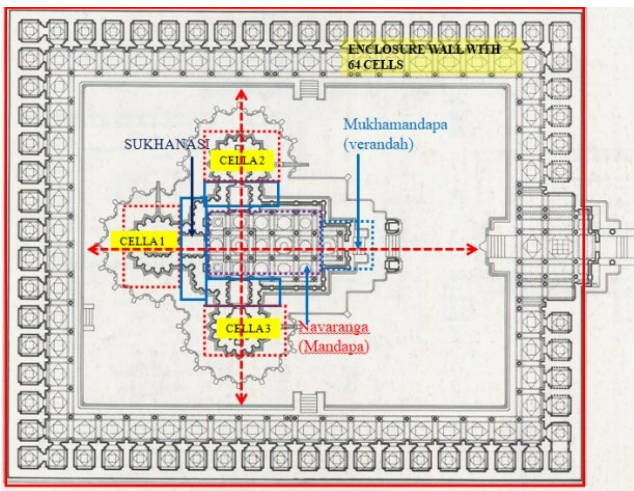


Fig.19 showing the plan of the Keshava temple (source image edited by author)

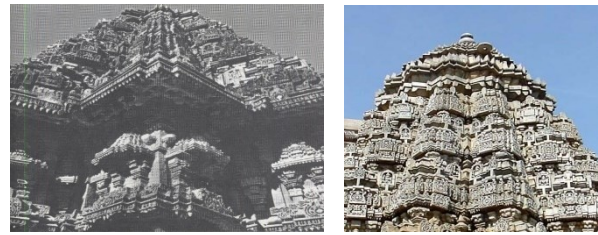


Fig.22 (a & b) shows the star-shaped ground plan is repeated at every level

Corbelled Dome: The corbelling is masked by the dome's elaborate banded decoration; the "sawtooth" marks represent tiny lotus buds, like the large pendant bud in the center of the dome. A gallery of tiny figures, barely visible in front of miniature columns in the lower band, overlooks the space below.



Fig.20. Keshava temple



Fig.23 shows the tiny lotus bud, like the large pendant bud in the center of the dome.

The artisans employed advanced stone-cutting techniques, allowing for remarkable detail in the sculptures. The temple's walls are covered in reliefs, showcasing the Hoysala artisans' exceptional craftsmanship and creativity.

4.4 KANDARIYA MAHADEVA TEMPLE, KHAJURAHO.

The Khajuraho group of temples represents the most refined and finished manifestation of Indian Architecture in the Indo-Aryan mode. There are originally 85 temples made of sand stone and granite, spread over an area of 1 Square mile. Only 30 of them survived today, all of them were originally disposed around an Ornamental sheet of water. All these temples were erected in a short span of 100 years between 950 A.D and 1050 A.D by Chandela rajas. We can find Shaivite, Vaishnavite as well as Jaina temples here.

The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, is a stunning exemplar of Indian temple architecture, renowned for its intricate design and rich symbolism of Shiva.



Fig.21. Keshava temple Entrance

Vimana or Tower: A small pierced disk, scarcely visible near the top, holds a flagpole. The crenelation at the tower's summit reflects typical Hoysala style. The tip of the shikhara represents the point of creation, from which all forms proliferate as it descends towards the earth. (Fig 22 a & b)

Symbolism: Dedicated to Lord Shiva who destroys and recycles life to govern the cosmic dance of time, evolution, and disintegration, is the focal point of the temple site, the temple symbolizes the cosmic connection between the divine and earthly realms. The sculptures adorning the temple walls are renowned for both their artistic merit and their role as architectural elements that beautifully enhance the building's fabric. They portray a celestial court featuring major and minor deities, attendants, graceful maidens, dancers, musicians, mythical creatures, and couples. The ascending structure symbolizes Mount Meru, the axis of the universe in Hindu cosmology, while the myriad sculptures depict various deities, celestial beings, and mythological narratives, highlighting the temple's significance as a spiritual and cultural hub.

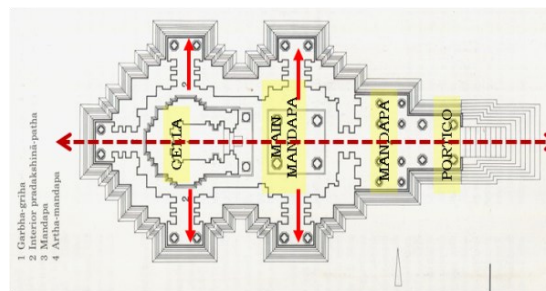


Fig.25Kandariya Mahadeva Temple plan



Fig.24. Kandariya Mahadeva Temple. (source: Kandariya Mahadeva Temple – Wikipedia)

Plan: The temples are all very compactly planned and represent the architectural synthesis of various parts. These temples are rather modest in size, the length not more than 100ft but the temples have elegant proportions, graceful contours and rich surface treatment. The temples have for their plan, a Latin cross; the long axis facing East and West with the entrance on the East. The temple follows a classic layout with a well-defined sanctum (garba-griha) at its core. The plan is characterized by a square base and a central axis that aligns with cardinal directions. The temple features an open courtyard and a sequence of mandapas (halls) that facilitate worship and processions. The intricate arrangement of shrines and niches reflects both aesthetic sophistication and religious significance. (Fig.25)

Vimana: The temple's vimana, or tower, is a striking feature, rising approximately 31 meters high. It is adorned with exquisite carvings that depict gods, goddesses, and intricate floral motifs. The vimana tapers elegantly, symbolizing the ascent toward the divine and enhancing the temple's verticality. In section, there is a progression of levels from the pillared portico to the cella. The pillared portico welcomes the visitor with a deeply shaded MULTI-LOBED false Arch. From the exterior, all the balconies on the South, North and Near West display good surface symmetry in ornamentation and massing. There are rich and ornate mouldings on the plinth, 3 series of friezes (triple registers) with sculpted human figures on the middle part (superstructure) and the shikhara has urushringas / Turrets that act as buttresses and on the whole, Verticality it is emphasized in spite of horizontal moldings on the turrets. All the components have pyramidal roof towers that are of increasing height from the portico to final shikhara over the cella. The shikhara has Amlaka, kalasa (With vertical flutings) and a finial. (Fig.26)

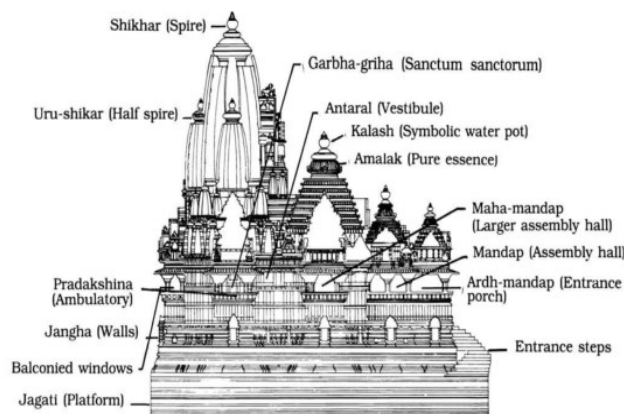


Fig.26.KandariyaMahadevaTempleparts.
 (source:<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/46/bb/a0/46bba07b0eea0cd3cde25da006582e6e.jpg>)

The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple remains a pinnacle of architectural achievement, celebrated for its artistic richness, symbolic depth, and enduring legacy in Indian temple architecture.

5 BUILDING MATERIALS IN ANCIENT TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Ancient Indian temples are remarkable examples of architecture, primarily due to their use of locally sourced, durable materials. This choice not only ensured structural longevity but also aligned with ecological practices, allowing these sacred spaces to withstand the test of time.

Stone as a primary material: chlorite, khondalite, and laterite. Granite, soapstone and sandstone are the predominant materials used in the construction of ancient Indian temples, such as the Brihadeshwara Temple in Thanjavur, the Konark Sun Temple in Odisha, the Kesava temple Somanathpura, and the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple in Khajuraho.

These stones are highly durable, providing the structural integrity necessary to support intricate architectural features. These materials have allowed many temples to endure for centuries, showcasing an understanding of material longevity. Their aesthetic and symbolic function, the workability facilitates detailed carvings and sculptures that encapsulate rich religious symbolism. These artistic expressions not only enhance the spiritual experience but also serve as historical records of cultural narratives.

In many ancient temples have incorporated lime mortar; an environmentally friendly binding material made from limestone. Unlike modern cement, lime mortar is produced through a less energy-intensive process. Its ability to absorb carbon dioxide during curing also contributes to lower carbon footprints. Lime mortar is flexible, allowing buildings to adapt to minor shifts without cracking.

Aesthetic Qualities: These materials provided vibrant colours and finishes, enhancing the visual appeal of temple interiors and exteriors without the environmental impact associated with synthetic alternatives.

6 DISCUSSION

The intricate relationship between iconography and architectural form in Indian temples reveals deep insights into spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. Symbolic elements like deities and cosmic motifs show that these structures serve as manifestations of divine presence, with layouts aligned to celestial bodies and sacred geometry creating a harmonious connection between the earthly and spiritual realms. Case studies highlight how regional styles Dravidian, Nagara, and Vesara interpret these shared themes, showcasing the diversity of Indian architectural traditions. Additionally, the use of materials, such as locally sourced stones and eco-friendly lime mortar, reflects an early understanding of ecological balance, ensuring the temples' longevity while aligning construction practices with spiritual ideas.

7 SUGGESTIONS

Future research on Indian temple architecture could benefit from interdisciplinary approaches, integrating archaeology, anthropology, and environmental science for a holistic understanding of their socio-cultural contexts. Regional

studies focusing on lesser-known temples across various Indian states can reveal unique iconographic and architectural practices, highlighting the diversity within this tradition. Additionally, exploring the adaptation of ancient practices in contemporary architecture could connect historical wisdom with modern challenges, fostering innovative solutions in today's architectural landscape.

8. CONCLUSION

The exploration of iconography and symbolism in Indian temple architecture highlights the profound connections between spirituality, cultural identity, and religious practices. The temples not only serve as places of worship but also as enduring symbols of the intricate relationship between humanity and the cosmos. Their careful design, rich artistic detail, and materials exemplify an architectural legacy that continues to inspire and inform modern practices. By recognizing the significance of these elements, we can appreciate the role of architecture in conveying deeper philosophical and spiritual narratives, ultimately fostering a greater respect for both heritage and the environment.

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