

Symbolism in Religious Architecture

A Study of sacred buildings

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Abstract

Religious architecture is the manifestation of man's attempt to create sacred spaces to pay homage or to pray to his god. It is created to experience the sacred, to provide forms into which spiritual energies flow & reflect a sense of divine. Religions have been less literal, and as a result, they tend to give rise to symbolism. Symbolism is mainly a derivation of faith. Faith relates itself directly to our culture & culture is a product of people. Symbolism for any community or group of people is a direct expression of their beliefs, ideas, fears & celebrations. This gets transferred onto the living spaces- our building envelope, which we call architecture. Architecture is a form of symbolic expression which represents in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people. This paper will focus on the study of architectural form of religious buildings and their symbolic significance.

Introduction

India has the oldest continuous civilization with a diverse culture Of several religions and historical antecedents, all co existing in discreet geographical regions. Even the history of architecture is concerned more with religious building than any other type because they have been the most expressive, most important and most Influential buildings in any community. Spiritual upliftment, peace and happiness have been the cherished goals of man since times immemorial. With the passage of time different religions have emerged and devised various ways of reaching the unreached, of communication with almighty and of elevating their spirit. Reflecting the philosophies and rituals of these religions, various building forms have emerged which have taken into consideration the social and climatic context of community. These buildings represent a special genre in architecture. They are different from other buildings In size, symbolic meaning and creative imagination.

The outstanding quality of Indian architecture has been its spiritual content. Being a complex nation geographically and historically, India has a diverse cultural heritage. It has been the birth place of four major religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism & Sikhism. Religious diversity and religious tolerance has been established here by law and custom. As per Indian constitution, right to freedom of religion is a fundamental right.

Literature study

Geographically India is a large country with different climatic conditions from north to south, hence the style of building across the country was also different. Moreover ancient India did not have a centralized rule. The Mauryas in 3rd century BC and the Mughals between 16th and 17th century ruled over most of India. These were the only times when most of the country came under central rule. Otherwise different kings ruled over different parts of the country, until colonization. As European architectural history is clearly defined according to the ages into Greek, Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, history of India provides ample evidence regarding the Golden Millennium of building of Hindu temples beginning with the rule of the emperors of Gupta dynasty in fourth century of Christian era. In 14th century A.D. with the establishment of the stable rule of the Sultanate at Delhi, Covering most parts of India, with the exception of peninsular India beyond the Southern banks of river Krishna, the building of Hindu temples had come to a grinding halt.

It cannot be said that prior to 4th Century A.D. the Hindus were not building their temples. There is no evidence of worship in the conventional temples by the people during the Vedic age, which is older than six millenniums. Then the priest class worshiped mostly natural friend (Indira, Agni, Vayu, Varuna, Bhumi etc.) in groups sitting around a fire altar. The people belonging to this period resorted to congregational worship of the elements in the manner of expressing their gratitude for having protected them from the ravages of nature and also for having provided the necessities for their existence.

During the early Buddhist period, the converts to Buddhism living in villages, in the shade of large trees used to gather around buddhist monk who delivered sermons on the life and teachings of Buddha. The inhabitants of the towns and cities used to gather around Buddhist clergy for worship in the large gardens filled with shady trees which were located beyond the fortifications of the urban settlements. In course of time the early buddhists began worshipping the symbols representing Buddha placed at the foot of the Bodhi tree & this place of worship was called Viruksha Chaitya. Later the worship in free standing chaityas had come into vogue, especially in town & cities . These Chaityas consisted of large halls with apsidal ends which were used for placing the symbols of Buddha in the shape of stupas. In third century B.C. Emperor Ashoka who became a Buddhist in his later life, was a great patron of Buddhism

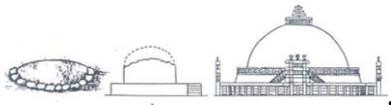
The outstanding quality of the architecture of India is its spiritual content. It is evident that the fundamental purpose of the building art was to represent in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people. Indian architecture is the mind materialized in terms of rock, brick or stone.

Early forms of Religious architecture

The earliest surviving architecture of India,

mainly Buddhist, takes three forms:-

- Rock cut preaching Caves/Chaitya Halls.
- Living caves or viharas.
- Stupa. (Fig.I)



(Fig.I)

- Stupa formed the focus of great Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The basic form of Stupa had a humble beginning. A few feet below the apex was usually placed a small chamber containing relics of the Buddha or Buddhist saints
- The normal Indian mode of paying the reverence consisted of walking around sacred objects, keeping them to the right hand side. This rite was known as Pradakshina.
- The earliest architectural development of Stupa consisted of facing the dome with stone and adding raised terrace with railing and staircases for the performance of this rite.
- The circular stupa with its terrace was then enclosed in a larger railing at ground level which frequently had one or four highly ornamented gateways.

Stupa At Sanchi

- Sanchi complex contains all the structural gestures of Buddhism, the Chaityas, viharas, the torana, the vedika and the remains of lats/stambhas. Art historians have suggested that stupa was a representation of the universe, hemisphere symbolizing the dome of heaven and enclosing the world mountain which rises from earth to

heaven. The worshipper entered the enclosure from eastern gateway and walked around the mound in a clockwise direction, imitating the movement of the sun across the sky_ a common ritual in solar cult.

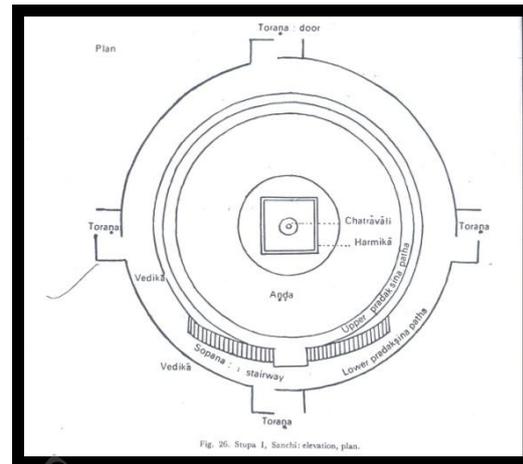


Fig. 26. Stupa I, Sanchi: elevation, plan.

(Fig.II)

The real glossary of Stupa at Sanchi (Fig.II) were the entrance gateways or torans. They had more than one purpose. At first

- They were monuments to piety.
- The gateways were there to instruct (as the subject of relief were the lives of Buddha and long road he had travelled before enlightenment)
- The form of the gateways had an effect of massiveness giving an impression of great strength.

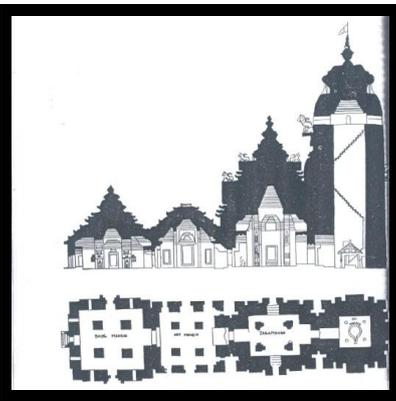
The Hindu Temple

On the eastern coast of southern India, a type of structural temple developed which played an important role in the revolution of Hindu temple. The most famous example is Shore temple at Mamallapuram. Chief characteristic of this temple is that the ground plan of the shrine and portico was extended by the addition of a large pillared hall dance pavilion. The tower or shikhra above the shrine was usually of a regular pyramidal form and developed as series of tiers, each with a prominent curved drip molding.

Lingraja Temple, Bhuvaneshvara

Plan of Lingaraja temple is an axial grouping of Sri Mandir(Deul),jagamohan (Pillared Hall), Nat Mandir (Hall of Dance) and Bhog Mandir (Hall of Offering). (Fig.III)

The great tower of Sri Mandir dominated not only the entire composition but the whole town of Bhuvaneshvara with its height and volume.The free standing buildings are as massive as the caves or carved natural pinnacles whereas they enclosed tiny interior spaces in proportion to the mass of stone surrounding them.



(Fig.III)

Khajuraho Temples

They are examples of fully developed expertise and craftsmanship.Temple of Khajuraho are elevated from the ground by an extremely high plinth of solid masonry.Temple is aligned east to west with temple taking the shape of a latin cross.The exterior is elaborately carved with sculptures of high technical quality.Unlike the orrisan tower which is Pyramidal in form, here it is domical with curve increasing the upward thrust.The symbolism of tower representing the mountain is at its most effective in Khajuraho. (Fig.IV)



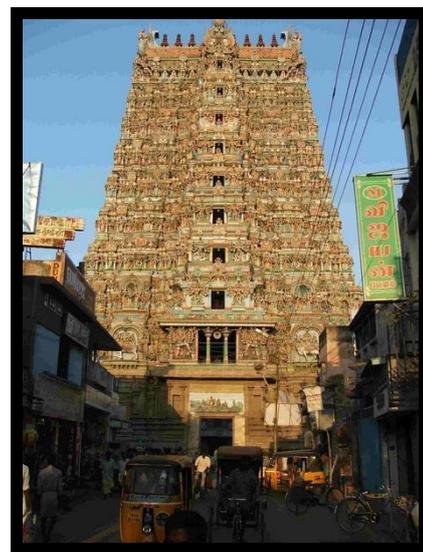
(Fig.IV)

Jain Temples, Mount Abu

Stunning cluster of Jain temples that forms a distinct style of temple architecture which is Buddhist in its ideology, Hindu in its architectural form with some Islamic elements as well.The whole white marble temple with unlimited use of wealth in religious cause symbolizes a religious extravaganza as the core of all Jain architecture in India.The basic architectural form that stands out today is adopted from Hindu physical feature such as mandapa and shikhara. The mandapa in front is roofed by a dome.The main axis of the entrance culminates in a storm looking statue of Mahavira in an open cell at the end of it.

Madurai Temple

The temple was not built overnight but over 100 years, it is a throbbing vibrant city of Gods where the centre of activity is Minaakshi temple.Temple city is dominated by many Gopurams and Provides abundantly for every human need within its precinct for living for celebration, for prayer, for shopping and many other activities.The pradakshina space between successive Gopurams is filled with such day to day activities.Magnificent Gopurams, (Fig.V) large mandapas, hall of thousand pillars, water tank, all are a part of symbolic journey t the dark sanctum of Goddess Minakshi.Over the years the skyline of the temple has gone from symmetry to the unsymmetrical.



(Fig.V)

Symbol & Symbolism

Symbol

A symbol is a representation, visual or conceptual, of that which is unseen and invisible. The religious symbol points beyond itself to reality, participates in its power makes intelligible its meaning, as such it goes beyond a sign or an image (Fig.VI). The value of a symbol is its ability to elucidate, to compress into a simple, meaningful, whole, readily grasped and retained to provide a centre for the shaping of conduct and belief.



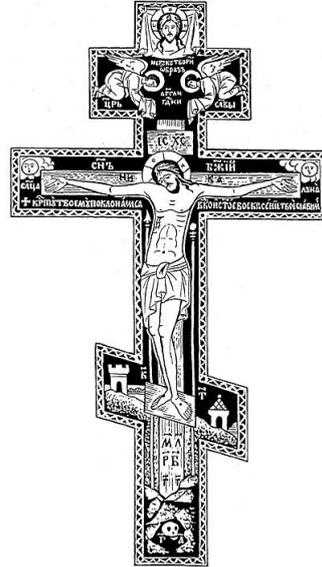
(Fig.VI)

Symbols are part of the language of faith, the means by which faith expresses itself when it interprets the holy, the eternal, the beyond; when it communicates the divine confrontation, claims and demands. As such symbolism is a part of biblical religion from its beginning.

Symbol is the vehicle of revelation. Born in encounter, given during inspiration, symbols summarize and interpret the experience. They are created, given, born and die among changing circumstances. At times they appear as something new significance to observances which have lost their meaning or from the realm of human experience, they relate man to that which is of ultimate concern. Symbolism simply connects the physical with the spiritual. Symbols and symbolism are more effective in communicating rich messages than speeches or discourses. When architectural forms become the vehicles of content --- in plan, elevation and decoration — they are symbolic. Their symbolism can be understood consciously or unconsciously, by association, (e.g. Spire Church) to a building one has seen before and the fact that it suggests certain universal experiences (e.g. vertical forms rise, low roof envelop).

Symbolism is mainly a derivation of faith. Faith relates itself directly to culture & culture is a product of people. Hence, symbolism for any community or group of people is a direct expression of their beliefs, ideas, fears & celebrations. This gets transferred onto the living spaces- our building envelope, which we call architecture. Hence, architecture is a tool of symbolic expression (Fig.VII & VIII)). The way

people respond & understand becomes perception and these perceptions get crystallized in form of geometric shapes - as symbols - pertaining to their faith.



(Fig.VII)



(Fig.VIII)

Symbolism is then transferred in architecture in terms of shape, form, mass, organization, orientation & nature of space, details & motifs. Significance of symbols for communication in Architecture:

The significance of symbol is in two stages:

- To interpret & comprehend the totality of the expression represented in part by the symbol.
- To relate the symbol to its whole.

Symbols & Symbolism are more effective in communicating rich messages than speeches or discourses. One of the basics of visual communication is non-verbal expression. In architecture, this involves a development of an

experience in terms of depth of space. The concept of space including the depth of space and time is the tool for symbolic expression in architecture. This can encompass various applications such as in -

- Forms of structure/structures.
- Planning & organization of built forms.
- Details & motifs representing the particular belief/ideology.

When architectural forms become the vehicles of content – in plan, elevation and decoration – they are symbolic.

Summary

Symbolism in religious architecture has been observed at two levels :

- Religious place as a city in itself.

At city level the symbolism is attached due to its geographical location, memory of an act or saints place of enlightenment. Cities like Varanasi, Bodh Gaya etc. are examples of such cities. Here the symbolism lies in going for pilgrimages to such cities.

- Religious place as an individual building.
- At building level symbolism is attached to the architectural form which is conceived as a perception of space through movement.

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