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## Historical perspective of Hindu temples in South India

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### Abstract

Hindu temple (Sanskrit: Mandir, Prasada) is a house of god (s). It is a space and structure designed to bring human beings and gods together, infused with symbolism to express the ideas and beliefs of Hinduism. A Hindu temple, states George Michell, functions as a place of transcendence, where man may cross over (do Tirtha) from the world of illusion to one of knowledge and truth.

The spiritual principles symbolically represented in Hindu temples are given in the ancient Sanskrit texts of India (for example, Vedas, Upanishads), while their structural rules are described in various ancient Sanskrit treatises on architecture (Brhat Samhita, Vastu Sastras). The layout, the motifs, the plan and the building process recite ancient rituals, geometric symbolisms, and reflect beliefs and values innate within various schools of Hinduism.

In the South Indian Temples sites of Aihole and Pattadakal, which contain some of the oldest temples in the south; some temples in Aihole, for example, date to approximately 450. For this reason these sites are sometimes referred to as the "laboratory" of Hindu temples. Pattadakal, another capital of the Chalukya Empire, was a major site of temple building by Chalukyan monarchs in the 7th and 8th centuries. These temples incorporated styles that eventually became distinctive on north and south Indian architecture.

In the Pallava site of Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram), south of Chennai, a number of small temples were carved in the 7th century from outcroppings of rock; they represent some of the best-known religious buildings in the Tamil country. Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram, near Chennai in the state of Tamil Nadu, were major cities in the Pallava Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries). Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, is sometimes called the "city of a thousand temples". Some of its temples date to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and many feature magnificent architecture.

**Keywords:** Hindu temples, Hindu temple, states George

### Introduction

History of mankind has shown that man cannot live without God. 'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him!' declared Voltaire. Belief in God, in a cosmic Power or cosmic Law, in a superhuman Spirit or Being is basic to all cultures. It is as it were, in the very blood of mankind. Once this fact is recognized, it becomes irrelevant whether the belief has been brought about by man's awe, wonder and fear of the powers of nature, or by the teachings of God-men who are supposed to have had mystical experiences of that God.

Man is human and not divine! This is so, at least, as long as he is conscious of his frailties and impulses. It is exactly because of this that he turns towards the Divine in times of need. Though the Divine transcends all temporal limitations, man the human, needs a temporal setup that can help him to visualize the Divine or establish contact with it. This is precisely where a symbol or an image or a place of worship comes to his rescue.

All religions have their sacred places, places of worship. All words which denote such places of worship, etymologically speaking, mean more or less, the same thing. 'Devalaya' means a 'house of God'. Temple' and 'Synagogue' mean a 'building for religious exercises' <sup>[1]</sup> and a 'house for communal worship' <sup>[1]</sup>. A 'Church' also means the same thing. A 'Masjid' <sup>1</sup> is a 'place of prostration before God'.

How and when the first temple took its birth is anybody's guess. Temples do not seem to have existed during the Vedic age. The practice of preparing images of the deities mentioned in the Vedic mantras might have come into vogue by the end of the Vedic period. The view that the yagasala of the Vedic period gradually got metamorphosed into temples by the epic period owing to the influence of the cults of devotion is widely accepted.

### **The Evolution of South India Hindu Temples**

The Gupta period was marked by the rapid development of temple architecture. Earlier temples were made of wood, but freestanding stone and brick temples soon appeared in many parts of India. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, stone temples, some of considerable dimensions, were found in many parts of the country. Originally, the design of the Hindu temples may have borrowed from the Buddhist precedent, for in some of the oldest temples the image was placed in the centre of the shrine, which was surrounded by an ambulatory path resembling the path around a stupa (a religious building containing a Buddhist relic). Nearly all surviving Gupta temples are comparatively small; they consist of a small cella (central chamber), constructed of thick and solid masonry, with a veranda either at the entrance or on all sides of the building. The earliest Gupta temples, such as the Buddhist temples at Sanchi, have flat roofs; however, the sikhara (spire), typical of the north Indian temple, was developed in this period and with time was steadily made taller. Tamil literature mentions several temples. The epic Silappatikaram (c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries), for instance, refers to the temples of Srirangam, near Tiruchachirappalli, and of Tirumala-Tirupati (known locally as Tiruvekatam).

The Buddhists and Jains have made use of artificial caves for religious purposes, and these were adapted by the Hindus. Hindu cave shrines, however, are comparatively rare, and none have been discovered from earlier than the Gupta period. The Udayagiri complex has cave shrines, but some of the best examples are in Badami (c. 570), the capital of the Chalukya dynasty in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Badami caves contain several carvings of Vishnu, Shiva, and Harihara (an amalgamation of Vishnu and Shiva), as well as depictions of stories connected with Vishnu's incarnation, Krishna. Near the Badami caves are the sites of Aihole and Pattadakal, which contain some of the oldest temples in the south; some temples in Aihole, for example, date to approximately 450. For this reason these sites are sometimes referred to as the "laboratory" of Hindu temples. Pattadakal, another capital of the Chalukya Empire, was a major site of temple building by Chalukyan monarchs in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. These temples incorporated styles that eventually became distinctive on north and south Indian architecture.

In the Pallava site of Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram), south of Chennai, a number of small temples were carved in the 7<sup>th</sup> century from outcroppings of rock; they represent some of the best-known religious buildings in the Tamil country. Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram, near Chennai in the state of Tamil Nadu, were major cities in the Pallava Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries). Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, is sometimes called the "city of a thousand temples". Some of its temples date to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and many feature magnificent architecture.

### **Religious Significance of the South India Hindu Temples**

Although early temples in south India may have been made of disposable materials as early as the first few centuries of the Common Era, permanent temple structures appear about the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, as attested in early Tamil literature. From the Gupta period onwards, Hindu temples became larger and more prominent, and their architecture developed in distinctive regional styles. In northern India the best remaining Hindu temples are found in the Orissa region and in the town of Khajuraho in northern Madhya Pradesh. The best example of Orissan temple architecture is the Lingaraja

temple of Bhubaneswar, built about 1000. The largest temple of the region, however, is the famous Black Pagoda, the Sun Temple (Surya Deula) of Konarak, built in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Its tower has long since collapsed, and only the assembly hall remains. The most important Khajuraho temples were built during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Individual architectural styles also arose in Gujarat and Rajasthan, but their surviving products are less impressive than those of Orissa and Khajuraho. By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE the south Indian style had reached its apogee in the great Brihadeshwara temple of Thanjavur (Tanjore).

In the temple the god was worshipped by the rites of puja or archana (reverencing a sacred being or object) as though the worshipers were serving a great king. In the important temples a large staff of trained officiates waited on the god. He was awakened in the morning along with his goddess; washed, clothed, and fed; placed in his shrine to give audience to his subjects; praised and entertained throughout the day; and ceremoniously fed, undressed, and put to bed at night. Worshipers sang, burned lamps, waved lights before the divine image, and performed other acts of homage. The god's handmaidens (devadasi) performed before him at regular intervals, watched by the officiants and lay worshipers, who were his courtiers. The association of dedicated prostitutes with certain Hindu shrines may be traceable to the beginning of the Common Era. It became more widespread in post-Gupta times, especially in south India, and aroused the reprobation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans. Through the efforts of Hindu reformers, the office of the devadasi was discontinued. The role of devadasi is best understood in the context of the analogy between the temple and the royal court, for the Hindu king also had his dancing girls, who bestowed their favors on his courtiers.

The same is true of most of the main religious centres of northern India but not of the regions where the Muslim hold was less firm, such as Orissa, Rajasthan, and South India. Despite the widespread destruction of the temples, Hinduism endured, in part because of the absence of a centralized authority; rituals and sacrifices were performed in places other than temples.

### **Conclusion**

It is seen that the temple which represents God and His abode, creation and the Creator, man and his true Self, has played no insignificant part in the life of our society, if today its effect has waned considerably, it is worth making a study of the maladies affecting it and try to find out appropriate remedies.

The basic malady from which all to her maladies spring is the lack of proper organization. This again is the outcome of the fact that the Hindu society is the most disorganized society in the whole world! Though organization and order are found in bits and pieces, here and there, in small and well-knit groups, the Hindu society as a whole suffers from an utter lack of discipline due to the absence of a central church controlling all sections of the Hindu society and claiming the loyalty of all. This problem is as urgent as it is big. It is high time that the hefty respected and influential religious leaders of the Hindu society make an earnest attempt to tackle this problem on a war-footing. The earlier, the better. When the Hindus have enough catholicity to accept all the great religious systems of the world as equally valid and true, they can certainly extend that catholicity

towards their own innumerable sects and groups, thereby achieving greater amalgamation and cohesion!

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