

AGAMA SHASTRAS: Exploring the art of Temple Design and Architecture since Ancient India till now!

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ABSTRACT:

Hindu temples are breathtaking monuments to a rich, interwoven tapestry of faith and artistry. This paper explores how Āgama Śāstra has shaped the design and development of Hindu temples. Though separate from the Vedas, the Āgamas share their spirit and provide clear rules for choosing temple sites, building layouts, idol placement, and rituals. Key ideas like Sthala (location), Tīrtha (sacred water), and Mūrti (idol) guide temple planning, supported by texts such as Manasara and Mayamata. The study also looks at how these principles influenced temple architecture in countries like Cambodia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Over time, interpretations of Āgama texts have changed, adapting to different regions and periods. Yet, even today, they remain important in temple construction and worship. This paper shows that Āgama Śāstra is more than a set of rituals—it is a living tradition that connects spiritual meaning with physical space through temple architecture.

Keywords – Agamashastra, Manasara, Mayamata, temple architecture.

AGAMA SHASTRA

“The word 'Agama' literally means a 'well-structured and traditionally communicated wisdom’. One of the definitions of Agama is that, it is the knowledge that has been obtained

either by direct observation, by inference or by the testimony of those who are wise and trustworthy and which will be beneficial to man both here and hereafter. The word 'Agama' refers to an ancient tradition, dealing with worship, the philosophical, psychological, ritualistic and behavioural aspects, which have come down to us by oral traditions as well as through written texts and documentation. Hence the dual meaning of the word 'Āgama', is the heritage or traditional wisdom as well as the texts.

Another definition is that Agama tells us about dharma and adharma and gives us comprehensive knowledge regarding the highest objective of man, according to those who know the Vedas. *The Āgamas may be classified broadly into three groups on the basis of their sectarian affiliations: Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta. The definition of Agama as applicable to the Śaiva-Agamas is that it is the wisdom which proceeded from the mouth of Śiva and received by the ear of Parvatī and absorbed by Vāsudeva (viz. Viṣṇu) and The Śākta-Agamas on the other hand, define Agamas as the wisdom revealed by Pārvati to Śiva.*

Agama Shastra, as available in our Hindu scriptures is a collection of Sanskrit, Tamil and Grantha scriptures that contains, mainly, methods of temple construction, idol creation, philosophical doctrines and meditative practices that lays down the rules for worship, temple building, spirituality and rituals. Since ancient times it has been a guideline for many people of the Hindu faith. Agama Shastras are not part of the Vedas, they do not derive their authority directly from the Vedas. It cannot be dated some parts of it are pre vedic while the others are post vedic They are Vedic in spirit and character Vedic mantras are chanted while performing the service.

PRINCIPLES OF TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Temples are defined as public institutions and they involve social organization, They are different from shrines (grharca). Agam Shastra clearly states that Temples and places of worship cannot be built all rules for the same have to be followed as per agam shastra. As per the Agam Shastra, for a pilgrimage the three essentials are Sthala, Tirtha and Murthy, Sthala refers to the where the temple will be i.e place of the temple, the Tirtha signifies the temple tank and Murthy refers to the idol. There are rules in the Agama Shastra for just about every aspect, including the smallest detail, from the positioning of the holy figurine to the materials from which the temple is to be constructed. Kamikagama, Vaikhanasagama and Padmasamhita are important agamas. They provide details of construction of temples. The temple construction related important features are dealt in Devalaya Vastu. Prathima deals with the iconography and is scattered across the country

Manasara and Mayamata are the most well known compilations on the theories and principles of temple construction They are the standard texts on Vastu Shastra, and they codify the theoretical aspects of temple construction Architectural science including topics such as soil testing techniques, orientation, measures and proportion, divination, astrology and ceremonies associated with the construction of buildings are explained in these texts.

The principles and meanings can be summarized as per the tabular format presented below:

PRINCIPLES	MEANING
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1. Bhu pariksha	Evaluating a location and soil for temple and town with focus on fertility of land and suitable soil.
2. Sila pariksha:	Checking and choosing material for image
3. Karshana	Some crop is grown in the place first and is fed to cows only then the location is fit for town/temple construction
4. Vastu puja	Ritual to appease vastu devata
5. Salyodhara:	Digging out unwanted things like bones .
6. Adyestaka	Laying down the first stone
7. Nirmana:	Foundation is laid and area is purified by sprinkling water. A pit is dug, water mixed with navaratnas, navadhanyas, navakhanijas is then put in and pit is filled. Then the temple is constructed.
8. Murdhestaka sthapana:	Placing the top stone over the prakara, gopura etc. This again involves creating cavities filled with gems minerals seeds etc. and then the pinnacles are placed.
9. Garbhanyasa:	A pot made of five metals (panchaloha kalasa sthapana) is installed at the place of main deity.
10. Sthapana:	Then the main deity is installed.
11. Pratistha:	The main deity is then charged with life/god-ness.

Some preliminary rituals are undertaken before beginning the construction of temples. Proper sites are to be selected for the formation of village or town where the temple is to be constructed. Such villages are described and are of some kinds with the names Dandaka, Svastika and others which are described in the texts. Provision must be made to build houses for people of various living. The finding of certain kinds of stones and gems are held to indicate the nature of the result when the temple is constructed there.

A temple in miniature called Bālālaya or Taruṇālaya, a replica of the temple to be constructed is to be built at the outset and an idol is to be installed there. Daily worship is to be offered to this idol. This shall be of a prescribed measurement and shall be like the idol to be installed later. Commencement of the building of the temple is marked by placing the first brick in a deep pit where the temple is to be constructed. Perfect and flawless stones are to be used for preparing the brick. A box is to be made out of metal. Gems of various kinds are to be placed

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within that box. It shall be closed and placed above the first brick. The entire pit is to be filled and covered with mud and minerals. It is on this that the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagrha) is to be built.

The Garbhagrha is to have four main parts - pedestal (upapīṭha), basement (adhiṣṭhāna), pillar (pādabandha) and entablature (prastāra) are built in this order over another, the pedestal to rest on the pit. A corner pavilion called Karṇakūṭa is to be built on the prastāra. A vimāna (The structure over the garbhagriha or inner sanctum) is to be constructed above Karṇakūṭa. The vimāna may be of various kinds called Vijayantī, Śrī Viśāla, Saubhadra and others such as Srikara, Pranavakara .

The temples shall be of three quadrangular kinds, Vesara round in structure, Nagara and Drāvida octagonal or hexagonal. The final part in the construction of the temple is marked by placing the last brick which is called Anirdeśakavidhi.

The central axis is then to be fixed in the dome of the vimāna. Figures of several deities are to be made and fixed in their proper places in the Vimana. They must be given coating with appropriate colours. The temples shall have enclosures (Prākāra) one, three or five in number. Provision must be made for Ardhamanṭapa ("Half hall" or transitional space. To be located between the garbha-grha and the maha maṇḍapa "Great hall", to be located right before the ardha maṇḍapa, closer to the sanctum), kitchen, Vastrālaya (place where clothes of Gods and Goddesses are kept), Dhānyaśāla- granary, Yāgamanṭapa (for performing sacrifices or Yajña), Sopānamanṭapa (pavilion or platform with steps leading up to a higher level or temple) and Nṛttamanṭapa (for dance). The figure of some deities are to be placed in the walls of enclosures facing particular directions. The figure of the lion or of Garuda shall adorn the corners of the walls of the enclosures. Even the idols of Dwarapalas are sculpted on either sides of the main idol's door. The Agamas use the words 'bera', 'arca', 'pratīma', 'bimba' and 'mūrti' in the sense of the idols which are made.

Temple culture

The building of these temples is an institutionalized activity, involving not only unskilled labour, skilled workers, masons, sculptors, wood-carvers and metal-workers but those who provide patronage and incur the expenditure. The earliest form of temple structures can be traced back to the second and first centuries before Christ. Well-known is the Brahmi inscriptions of the second century B.C. found at Besnagar (Vidīśā in Madhya- Pradesh) which commemorates the erection of a religious column in honour of the 'revered Vasudeva', 'the god of gods', The pillar was erected by the Indo-Greek ambassador, Heliiodorus. In Ghosundi (in Rajasthan) an inscription was found recording the construction of a stone-enclosure for the worship of the hero-gods Sankarśaṇa and Vāsudeva, by a chieftain named Gājāyana, This is attributed to the first century B.C. While neither of the inscriptions specifically mentions the construction of a temple, the flag-column (garuda-dhvaja) mentioned in the former inscription and the stone-enclosure (pūjā-silā-prākāra) mentioned in the second strongly suggest the presence of a shrine of some sort.-

The earliest structural temple is a remarkable brick-structure that has survived is the one at Bhitargāon (near Kanpur in Uttar-Pradesh), It has numerous terra-cotta plaques depicting the forms and deeds of Visnu and Durgā. Built in the 5th century during Gupta period.

Considered to be the oldest remaining Hindu shrine with a roof and a high shikhara. Another temple ascribed to the same period and to the kings of the same dynasty is the stone temple (called Daśāvatāra temple) at Deogarh (also in the same region). This temple is now in ruins (unlike the Bhitargaon temple).

The early formal temples were rock-cut, natural rock-shrines. Rock-shrines were mostly caves, and caves were important centres of the cults of the mother-goddess from pre-historic times. The expression "Guheśvari" (the lady of the cave) is a common designation for the mother-goddess all over the country. And numerous ancient shrines of the mother-goddess are just caves, often empty caves (the later sanctum) with no icon inside. In the wake of iconic representation of the worshipful divinities, Visnu icons appear to have been the first, followed by the iconic (murti) as well as the aniconic (linga) representations of Siva. When the icon was installed in the rock shelter or sanctum, the shelter or sanctum itself symbolized the mother-goddess.

Images privately worshipped at home are 'household-icons' (grhārcā), and images installed in temples for public worship are 'temple-icons' (ālayārca). A temple is described in the Agama texts as the body (deha) of godhead, and the image in the sanctum, the 'soul' (jīva). The temple acquires significance only by the image installed in it. The temple as a structure houses the image, and as an institution provides for worshipping the image.

The temple may be built in stone (śilāmaya), when it is considered the best, or in bricks (istaka), (average), or in wood (dāru), when it is regarded as inferior (Viṣṇu-tilaka-saṃhita. 176; Kāpiṇjala-saṃhitā, 10,3-4). When the entire temple is built of one material only (stone, bricks or wood) it is 'pure' (śuddha); when two materials are used, it is mixed (miśra); and when all three materials are used, it is complex (saṃkirṇa) (Mānasāra, 18, 99,100).

The 'pure' type of temples has only one material from the foundation to the finial, while the 'mixed' type has stone for the main structure (ālaya) and brick for the superstructure (śikhara); and the 'complex' type has stone for the foundation, brick and wood for the main structure, and brick for the superstructure. Temples built of brick and wood (viz. without using stone) are considered inferior and wood (viz. without using stone) are considered inferior, and not recommended. Temples built entirely of mud are prohibited (Īśānā-śiva-guru-deva-paddhatī, 86,89;

It is prescribed in the āgamas that the temple must have a surrounding wall (prākāra) in stone with an opening facing the sanctum (called the principal gateway or mahā-dvāra); and sometimes the gateways will be in all four directions. Mānasāra (31,1 -134) mentions that the prākāra gives strength (bala) to the temple, accommodates subsidiary deities (parivāra-devatā), adds charm to the structure (shobha), and provides defence (raksana).

MAJOR ELEMENTS OF A TEMPLE

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Sikhara	spire or the tower, It is shaped as pyramidal and tapering.
Meru	highest mountain peak
Garbhagriha	womb chamber which is the innermost chamber of any temple where the deity resides. It is mainly square in layout and is entered through eastern side.
Pradakshina Patha	The path for circumambulation and comprises of enclosed corridor outside the garbhagriha. The devotees walk around the deity in clockwise direction, paying their respect to the deity.
Mandapa	The pillared hall in front of the garbhagriha, used as assembling point by devotees for chant; rituals meditate or observe the priests perform the rituals.
Natamandira	Provided in some temples which mean the hall for dancing.
Antarala	The intermediate chamber which joins the main sanctuary and the pillared hall of the temple premises.
Ardhamandapa	The front porch in the main entrance of the temple which leads to the main temple

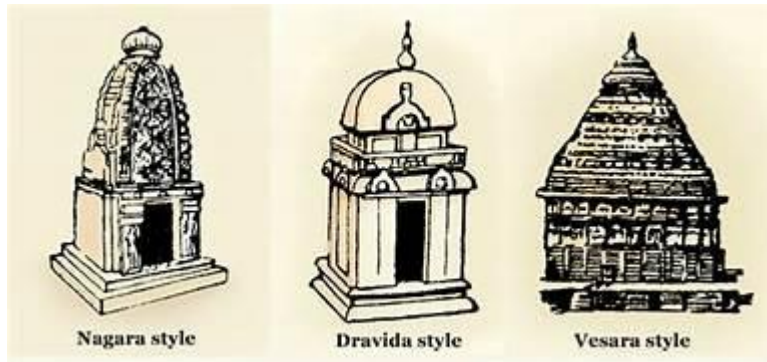
Some other essential structural elements found in the Hindu temples in the south :

- Gopurams are the monumental and ornate entrance or gateways to the temple premises.
- Pithas- the plinths of the main temple.
- The gateways typical to north Indian temples are, Toranas while to the southern temples are Gopurams.

Basic elements which remain same

- Garbhagriha or the sanctum where the main idol of the deity is housed
- Mandapa or the portico which leads to the garbhagriha, where the worshipers assemble
- Shikhara that is the spire above the sanctum
- Vahana which is the mount or vehicle of the main deity of the temple

MAJOR FORMS OF TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA



NAGARA

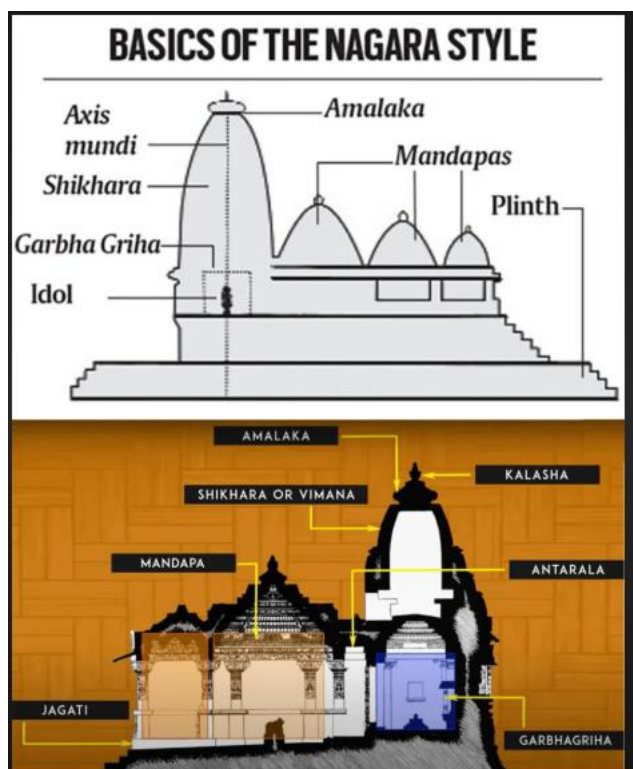
The Nagara style of temple architecture originated around the 5th century AD, with prominent regions of influence including Northern India, Karnataka, and parts of Madhya Pradesh. The word "Nagara" itself means "city", underscoring close association with urban architectural principles. The Nagara style temples display a unique blend of indigenous elements and influences from central Asia. It is characterized by its tower-like spires known as "shikhara," which rise vertically, symbolizing the sacred mountain, Meru. This temple style of architecture is closely associated with the Shaivite and Vaishnavite sects of Hinduism, reflecting their spiritual aspirations. Some of them include Kandariya Mahadev Temple in Khajuraho, Sun Temple in Konark, the Sun Temple in Modhera, Gujarat, and the Ossian Temple in Gujarat.

Nāgara style of temple architecture consists of four-sided plan.. According to temple architecture the garbhagriha or sanctum sanctorum houses the idol of the main deity or the image. The garbhagriha is a perfect square whereas Although the whole temple plan could be oblong The garbhagriha is a perfect square. the mandapa is the pathway leading to the garbhagriha It is where the worshipers assemble to have darśana. Over period of time, more mandapas were added. A pradakshinapatha or a circumambulatory path surrounded the garbhagriha. Windows called gavaksa were added in many cases to allow cross ventilation and sun rays to enter the temple.

Major features

FEATURE	DESCRIPTION
1) Garbhagriha:-	Sanctum sanctorum. It's literal translation is "womb-house". Garbhagriha is the womb chamber where the icon or murti of the main deity resides. It is generally square in layout and is entered through eastern gateway of the temple.
2) Shikhara:-	"Shikhar" means "mountain top" in Sanskrit .It refers to the tower. It is tapering representing the mythological Meru (the highest mountain peak). The elevation of the shikhara symbolises ascent from the earthly realm to the universe, thus recreating

	a abstract of the soul's journey towards enlightenment.
3. Mandapa:	It is a porch-like building which serves as a pillared outdoor hall (pavilion) for ceremonial gatherings. It is a component of the temple complex and is utilised for religious dancing and music.
4) Pradakshina Path	A circumambulatory path used by devotees to walk around the garbhagriha. Devotees walk in clockwise direction to pay obsecence to the deity, seeking blessings, and expressing devotion
5) Amalaka :-	a stone structure that resembles a disc and is located on the top of the temple shikhara.
6) Kalasha :-	This is the temple's peak object. It is placed above Amalaka
7. Antarala:-	a transition area which is situated in between the garbhagriha and the mandap. Antarala symbolizes the journey from the material to the divine
8) Jagati:-	It is the raised platform where worshippers sit.
9) Vahana:-	It refers to the primary deity's vehicle, which is also referred to as a standard pillar or Dhvaj placed axially before the sanctum.
10) Adhishtna:-	Temples are usually built on a raised platform. It is the base platform on which temple building is built.
11) Ardha Mandap:-	It is the main entrance to the temple.
12) Maha Mandap:-	It is a great hall for people's community gatherings.
13) Urushringa :-	It is a supplementary tower that protrudes from the sides of the main shikhara tower in the Hindu temple architecture of northern India



VESARA

“Vesara means hybrid as the south Indian text *kamika-agama* explains that this name is derived from its mixed nature, where it is a Dravida architecture in plan, yet its shape is Nagara architecture in the details.” **Aihole, Badami, and Pattadakal are home to this type of temples** Following architectural styles have a vesara architecture history

- Chalukyan architecture
- Rashtrakuta architecture
- Hoysala temple architecture
- Vijayanagara architecture

According to some ancient historical texts, this style seems to have originated between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers in northern Karnataka. The roots of this architectural style are found in the Chalukyas of Badami(543 AD—755 AD). Some of them include Virupaksha temple, Durga temple at Aihole, Chennakeshava temple etc.

Features	
Shikhara	It is usually pyramidal, similar to the Dravida style, but it may lack the stepped

	appearance seen in pure Dravida architecture
Mandapa (Porch):	Vesara temples frequently feature a mandapa with pillars This is similar to Nagara style however the design may incorporate Dravida-style elements too.
Entrance Gopuram:	Gopuram (tower), it is generally smaller and less decorated compared to the adorned gopurams seen in Dravida temples
Axial Alignment:	Vesara temples typically follow axial alignment, like the Dravidian style ensuring a clear line of sight to view sanctum from entrance.
Sculptural Ornamentation:	Intricate sculptures and carvings, can be seen similar to both northern and southern styles
Pillared Halls:	The mandapas in Vesara temples include pillared halls like that of the Nagara style, providing space for congregational activities and rituals.
Fivefold Floor Plan:	Similar to both Nagara and Dravida styles, Vesara temples may adopt a fivefold floor plan, with the main shrine surrounded by four subsidiary shrines or corners.



DRAVIDA

Salient features of Dravidian style that distinguish its architecture which mostly includes Southern temples like Brihadeeshwara temple, Rangnathaswamy temple, Meenakshi Amman temple etc, from the other two styles are:

Vimana - The Vimana is the soaring structure crowning the (garbhagriha). Shaped like a pyramid and square in plan, the vimana consists of several tiers stacked in a decreasing order.

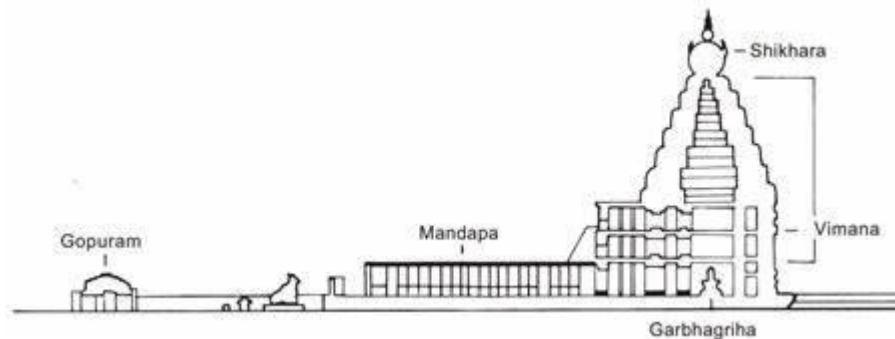
Stupika – It is the large stone and is present on the last tier of the vimana. The stupika is topped with the canopy or ornament at the tip adding to the height of the vimana.

Gopurams - Gopurams are tall grand entrances peculiar to the South Indian style of temple architecture. With time Gopurams became the focal points in the later temples of South India. Temples of the later years have taller gopurams, often taller than the vimana itself.

MAJOR FEATURES:

Fivefold Floor Plan:	Many Dravida temples follow a fivefold floor plan, known as panchayatana, where the main shrine is surrounded by four subsidiary shrines at the corners.
Vimana(tower)	It is the pyramidal tower or vimana that rises above the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) and is the unique feature of this style.
Shikhara	It resembles a stepped pyramid. The top of the shikhara is embellished with a small structure known as the stupika
Mandapa (Porch):	The hall or mandapa, has intricately carved pillars, leading to the main sanctum. The pillars are characterized by their vertical ridges and design
Gopuram (Entrance Tower):	Dravida temples have monumental entrance towers or gopurams, which are ornately decorated with sculptures and reliefs. with scenes from Hindu mythology.
Axial Alignment:	Dravida temples are characterized by axial alignment, with the main entrance aligned with the sanctum sanctorum, providing a clear line of sight to the principal deity.
Prakara (Enclosure Walls):	Temples in the Dravida style are enclosed by high walls known as prakara, creating a sacred space around the temple complex.
Pillared Corridors:	Some Dravida temples feature pillared corridors around the main sanctum, providing devotees with a circumambulatory path (pradakshina).
Vyalas and Kirtimukhas:	Sculptures of mythical creatures called vyalas and face with exaggerated features,

	known as kirtimukhas, are commonly found in Dravida temples
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REGIONAL TRADITIONS AND ĀGAMA INTERPRETATIONS IN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Although Āgamaśāstra conforms to a set of principles, and these principles are universally accepted for temple edifices, as local traditions prevail it is demonstrated that the practice in the temple plan is diverse. In India as well as in neighbouring countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka, Āgamic temples symbolize the combination of harmony in architecture and Ideosyncrasy of ideas and interpretations, with different styles prevailing in different regions but sharing the same philosophy. In South India, namely in Tamil Nadu, the Shaiva and Vaishnava temples built with the aid of the Cholas and the Pandyas followed Āgamic guidance to the later. Temples such as the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur (Shaiva, Chola period) represent architecture that is particularly closely associated with form of the Tamil sthapatya-veda of South India and is based on the principle of constructing a totally enclosed space. By contrast, the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple at Srirangam (Vaishnava) is based on the Vaikhanasa and Pancharatra Āgamas and features more complex ritual spaces and multi-layered prakāras.

To the east, the Kalinga architectural tradition is reflected in the Vaishnava Jagannath Temple in Puri, with ritual Pancharatra texts. In this context, considerations of local craft and of the wet humid climate of Odisha have determined the vertical emphasis and practical details of the temple, and the design departs from the model of the vimāna in the other south Indian temples of the region while preserving the Āgamic essence. In Nepal, the Pashupatinath Temple integrates and explains Shaiva Āgamic ritual practice complemented with Newar pagoda architecture. The sanctum of this temple follows Āgamic rites of ritual purity, while the superstructure follows the Himalayan building style of woodwork and multi-tiered wooden roofs. Sri Lanka's Koneswaram Temple, another Shaiva site, displays Dravidian influence, but takes the temple plan model to coastal terrain and local cosmology.

As the historian **Ananda Coomaraswamy** put it, such regional adaption is not an adulteration but “local sanctification”—when art and scripture sync with place. Over 85% of the ancient temples in South India are based in Āgamic prescriptions (ASI, 2021). These numbers serve to emphasize the long-continued but adaptable contribution of Āgamas, which continue to justify sacred architecture as the ‘unifying and culture reflecting’ point between indic and trans-indic spaces.

Cosmic Harmony in Stone: Āgama Śāstra and Buddhist Temple Architecture

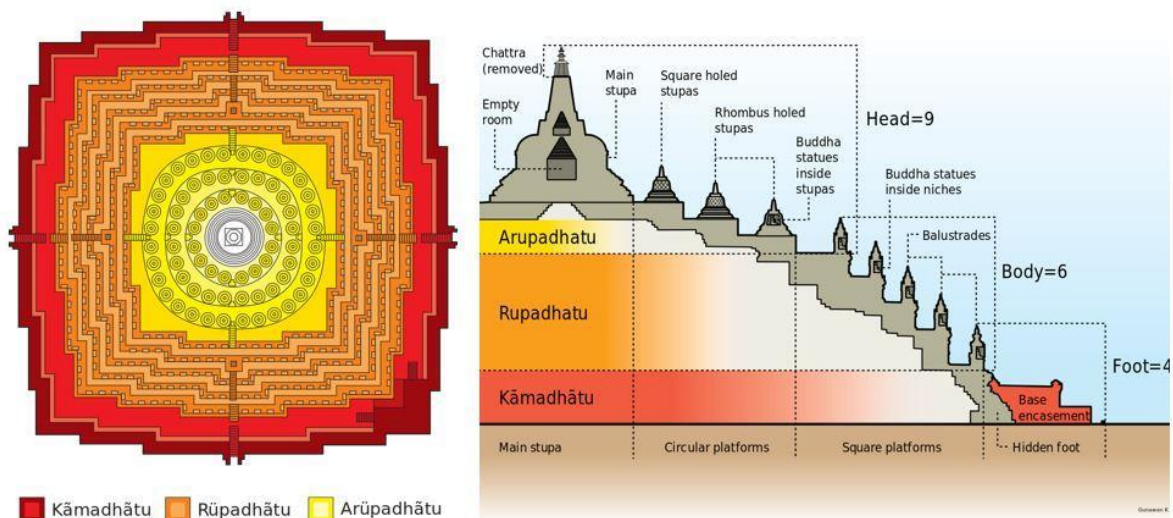
Even though Buddhism and Hinduism have different spiritual roots, Buddhist temples' architecture shares striking similarities with Hindu temple design, largely due to the influence of the Āgama Śāstra. These ancient Indian texts, which offer guidance on building sacred spaces, emphasize cosmological symbolism, axial alignment, and the representation of Mount Meru, the mythological center of the universe.

Within Buddhist architecture, particularly in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, these concepts are expressed through the mandala. For instance, the renowned Borobudur temple in Java acts as a three-dimensional mandala, constructed with concentric terraces that symbolize spiritual advancement. Its central stupa, soaring upwards like Mount Meru, reflects the same cosmic geometry prescribed by the Āgamas.



Borobudur temple in Indonesia

Historian Ananda Coomaraswamy pointed out that "the stupa, much like the Hindu vimāna, is Mount Meru...the axis of the world." This symbolism is also evident in the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, whose spire is reminiscent of a North Indian shikhara, and whose layout combines both Āgamic and Buddhist principles. Even monastic cave complexes, such as Ajanta, follow Āgamic principles of cardinal orientation, spatial organization, and sacred geometry, artfully integrating prayer halls (chaityas) and monasteries (vihāras) in a cosmically ordered manner.



Structure of Borobudur temple, Indonesia

During the reign of rulers like Jayavarman VII in Cambodia, Buddhist temples such as Bayon continued this tradition, incorporating Āgamic design elements with Buddhist imagery to

express both divine kingship and cosmic centrality. Despite their distinct doctrinal differences, Buddhist sacred spaces drew inspiration from shared Indian architectural ideals. As historian Benjamin Rowland observed, "In Buddhist temples, we witness the translation of the Hindu sacred order into Buddhist spiritual language," a testament to the enduring influence of the Āgama Śāstra in shaping sacred architecture across Asia.

The sacred peaks in stone: indian influence on the Combodian temple architecture through the Āgama Śāstra

The majestic temple complexes of Cambodia, especially Angkor Wat, are global symbols of ancient Southeast Asian grandeur. Yet, beneath their local aesthetic lies a profound influence from Indian temple architecture—particularly the spiritual and structural principles outlined in the Āgama Śāstra. Central to this transmission is the symbolic significance of the mountain, especially Mount Meru, regarded as the axis of the universe in Indian cosmology. The Āgama Śāstras are a set of ancient Indian scriptures that provide detailed guidance on temple construction, deity placement, rituals, and cosmological symbolism. These texts envision the temple as a sacred microcosm, centered on the garbhagrha (sanctum), and crowned by a towering shikhara or vimāna—representing Mount Meru. This mountain, considered the abode of the gods, became the architectural and spiritual nucleus of temples built across India.



Angkor Wat, a Hindu temple in Cambodia

As Indian culture spread through trade and religious missions across Southeast Asia, these temple-building principles were adopted and transformed by Khmer architects. The Cambodian context, where mountain tops were already viewed as abodes of spirits, made this transition seamless. As noted in a research, “the temple usually stands upon a lofty terraced plinth which also symbolizes a mountain.” This shared symbolism helped Indian temple design philosophies take root in Khmer soil. Cambodian temples like Angkor Wat, Bakong, and Preah Ko are direct manifestations of these ideals. Angkor Wat’s five central towers mirror Mount Meru’s five peaks. Its concentric galleries symbolize mountain ranges and cosmic oceans, reflecting the Āgamic emphasis on sacred geometry and cosmic alignment. Like Indian temples, these Khmer sanctuaries are built on elevated bases, symbolizing spiritual ascent and cosmic centrality. The central shrine typically housed a sacred image—Vishnu, Shiva, or a composite deity like Harihara—representing the divine patron of the king. This divine image was seen as the king’s celestial counterpart, echoing Indian royal practices. Subsidiary shrines, adorned with goddesses and royal consorts, extended this symbolism, blending Indian iconography with local styles.

Historians underscore this continuity. George Coedès wrote that “the religion of India was adopted with remarkable fidelity in Cambodia, including the cosmological model of the temple as Mount Meru.” Similarly, Jean Filliozat emphasized that Khmer temples were built in accordance with Āgamic and Silpa Śāstra prescriptions that shaped Indian temples. Yet, the Khmer did not simply copy—they localized.

Cambodian temple art adopted sensuous, rounded forms and a distinctive sandstone-based aesthetic, giving rise to a new yet familiar sacred style. These temples represent a harmonious blend of Indian cosmology and Khmer creativity. As H. G. Quaritch Wales observed, “what the Indian architects conceived in religious terms, the Khmer kings built in stone with imperial ambition.” These structures, thus, are not only places of worship—they are cosmic mountains carved in stone.

Temple Cities in India

The emergence of temple cities in India is deeply intertwined with the evolution of sacred geography, religious practices, and architectural traditions. These cities developed not merely as centers of worship but as vibrant hubs of pilgrimage, economy, and cultural life. Guided by ancient texts such as the Āgama Śāstra, Hindu temple cities grew around monumental temples which served as both spiritual nuclei and physical anchors for urban development. While Buddhist sites like Nalanda and Bodh Gaya played important roles in earlier centuries, it was primarily Hindu temple cities that flourished into expansive urban settlements with enduring influence.

Sacred Architecture and Urban Planning

Indian temple architecture, especially in the Hindu tradition, adheres closely to the prescriptions laid out in the *Āgama Śāstra*, which outlines not just ritual procedures but also iconography, spatial arrangements, and directional alignments. As Dr. Stella Kramrisch asserts in *The Hindu Temple* (1946), “The Hindu temple is a planned image of the cosmos, built in stone... a channel through which divine order is drawn into the human world.” This cosmic mapping often took physical shape in the form of temples modeled after Mount Meru—the mythical axis of the universe—through towering shikharas and elevated plinths. Temples were placed at the heart of cities, with roads, markets, water tanks, and residential zones arranged concentrically or radially, reinforcing the temple’s centrality in both spiritual and civic life. This layout, described in the *Vāstu Purusha Mandala*, mirrors the temple’s own architectural configuration: sanctum (*garbhagriha*), halls (*mandapas*), gateways (*gopurams*), and enclosing walls, all aligning with cardinal directions.

Case Study: Jagannath Temple, Puri

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, built in the 12th century under King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva, is a prime example of how a temple became the epicenter of a thriving temple city. Rising 192 feet above a square plinth, the temple follows the Kalinga architectural style, with distinct features such as the *vimana* (main sanctum), *jagamohana* (assembly hall), and *nata mandapa* (dancing hall).

According to K.K. Patnaik, the temple complex occupies the Nilgiri mound and is enclosed by the massive *Meghanada Prachira*, measuring 665 x 644 feet, with four intricately carved gates representing symbolic guardians: lions, elephants, horses, and celestial beings. The temple not only symbolizes religious cosmology but also served as a fortress during times of foreign aggression.

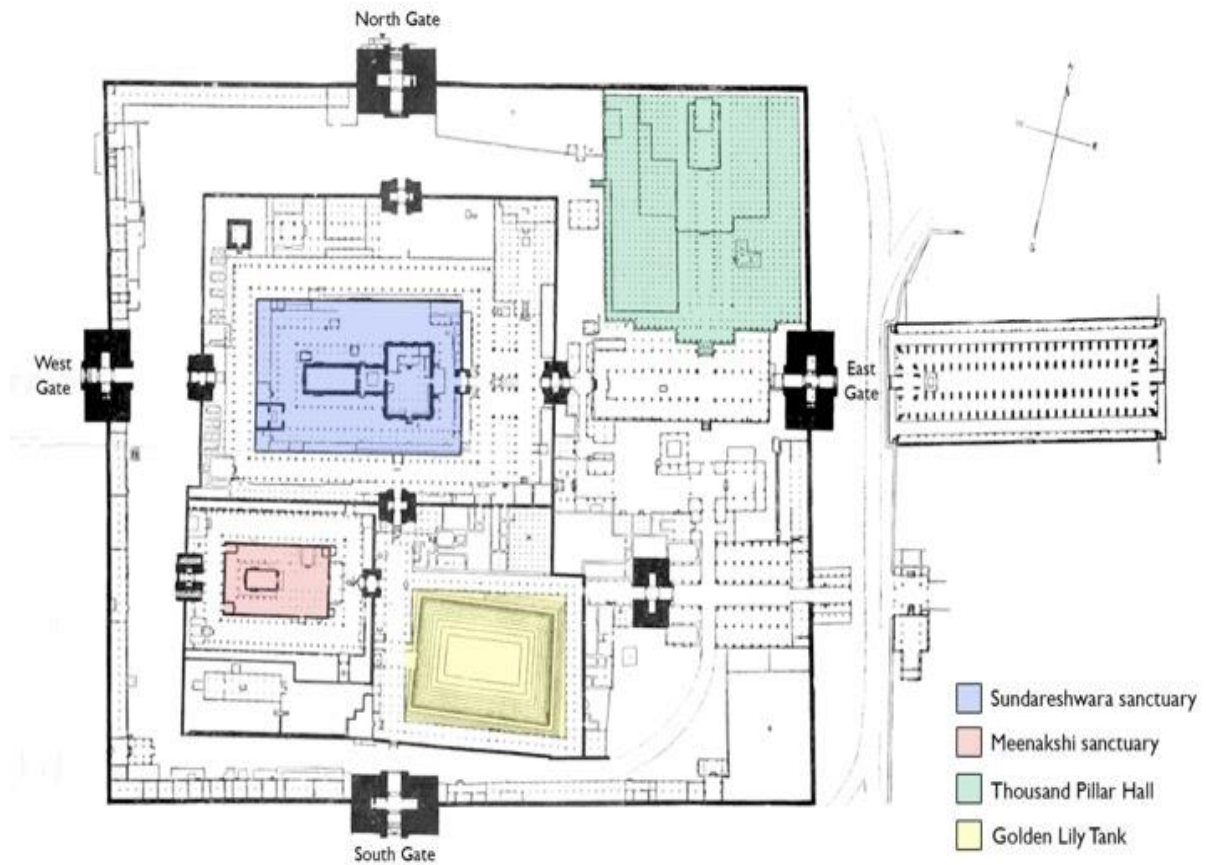
The city of Puri evolved around this sacred nucleus. Annual rituals, especially the Rath Yatra (chariot festival), draw millions of pilgrims, reinforcing the temple’s role in shaping the local economy and infrastructure. Streets and markets emerged along the main pilgrimage routes, transforming the area into a permanent settlement.



Vimana of Jagannath temple at Puri

Case Study: Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai

Madurai, a city brimming with history and spiritual significance, truly captures the spirit of a temple town, with the Meenakshi Amman Temple at its core. Originally envisioned by the Pandyas and later enhanced by the Nayak dynasty, this Dravidian architectural wonder is famed for its fourteen towering gopurams, the most remarkable of which is the southern tower, soaring to an impressive 170.6 feet. According to Dr. R. Rajappan, the temple "is more than just a place of worship; it's the very foundation upon which the city's distinct identity is built." The city's layout mirrors the sacred architecture of yesteryear, showcasing a concentric design, with the temple acting as its focal point. Madurai's streets are laid out in prakaras, or circular enclosures, which echo the act of pradakshina, the devotional circumambulation performed in honor of the divine.



Layout of Meenakshi Amman temple

The Aayiram Kaal Mandapam (Thousand Pillar Hall), although housing only 985 pillars, is a marvel of architectural planning, acoustics, and sculpture. The temple also features advanced understanding of acoustics, seen in the design of bells, musical pillars, and mandapams that resonate with sacred sound. Festivals like the Meenakshi Thirukalyanam attract vast crowds, making the temple a center for not only devotion but also trade, crafts, and tourism.

Guided by the Āgama Śāstra, these cities materialized as living mandalas—spiritual and civic landscapes integrated into one. With temples functioning as cosmological centers, administrative institutions, and economic engines, cities like Puri and Madurai stand as enduring symbols of how divine space was mapped onto the material world.



Thousand pillar hall, Meenakshi Amman temple

The Dusk for a new Dawn

Indian temple architecture, a dynamic art form spanning numerous centuries, has consistently evolved, influenced by changes in religious beliefs, cultural practices, and the political landscape. Originally, temples were rather modest, constructed using wood and earth. The Mauryan era signaled the arrival of enduring stone structures, while the Gupta period, often referred to as a golden age, saw the rise of exquisitely sophisticated temples, as exemplified by the majestic Nagara style. Simultaneously, the Dravidian style flourished in the South, characterized by its towering gopurams and expansive inner sanctuaries.

The Mughal Empire, a three-century narrative, is far from a simple story. While figures such as Aurangzeb (reigned 1658–1707) are remembered for their strong-willed policies and the destruction of temples, others, including Akbar (reigned 1556–1605), Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627), and Shah Jahan (reigned 1628–1658), demonstrated a remarkable religious tolerance. Shah Jahan's capital city, Shahjahanabad, was purposefully designed with inclusive spaces, welcoming both Hindu and Jain worshipers. Jain and Khattri financiers were crucial to the Mughal economy, and the support of semi-independent Hindu Maharajas bolstered the Mughal regime. This inclusive approach was later mirrored by the British East India Company, which heavily relied on Marwari financiers and local rulers for military assistance.

Mughal Architecture and the Echoes of Pluralism

Mughal emperors, particularly those from the early and late periods, displayed a deep appreciation for India's varied cultures. Akbar's chronicler, Abul Fazl, in his comprehensive work, **Ain-i-Akbari**, meticulously documented various Hindu practices and temples with great admiration, drawing parallels between Hindu and Islamic rituals. He wrote of a grand temple in Banaras, once filled with pilgrims, much like Muslims circumambulating the Kaaba. This temple, destroyed by a 12th-century invader, served as a stark contrast to the tolerance exhibited by Mughal rulers. This spirit of cultural fusion and pluralism was most evident during the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, before it was overshadowed by Aurangzeb's stringent policies.

Temples and Pilgrimage: A Fusion of Faith and Power

Mughal interventions at important pilgrimage sites, such as Banaras and Brindavan, reflected both political strategy and spiritual aims. The Vishwesvar temple in Banaras, supported by the Mughal noble Todarmal and his mentor Narayan Bhatt around 1590, was a Shaiva shrine that incorporated Mughal design elements like intersecting vaults and pointed arches with a traditional carved stone exterior. Unfortunately, Aurangzeb had this temple demolished in 1669. Likewise, the Bindu Madhav temple in Banaras, managed by the Kachhawaha, met the same fate, replaced by the Dharhara mosque. Its interior, as described by the European traveler Tavernier, was notable for its impressive cruciform plan. In Brindavan, the Govind Dev temple integrated jharokhas—a symbol of Mughal authority—into its design, showcasing a blending of artistic influences.

Shahjahanabad: Vestiges of a Shared Aesthetic

Shahjahanabad, now known as Old Delhi, still houses remnants of Mughal-era temples that reveal shared aesthetics and cultural unity. An example is the Ghanteshwar Mahadev Shivalaya, located in Katra Neel—once the heart of the Shaivite community. Erected during the reign of Bahadur Shah Zafar (reigned 1837–1857), this temple is a rare example of late Mughal patronage. Intriguingly, these temples often lacked soaring **shikharas**; instead, they were adorned with lotus domes—a signature feature of Mughal architecture. The shivalayas of this period were nestled within Mughal-style pavilions, surrounded by gardens, havelis, and dharamshalas, most of which have been lost due to relentless urban development.



Jharokha (projecting window),Govind Dev temple,Brindavan



Neglect and Loss of Heritage

Following the British takeover of Delhi in 1857, significant portions of Shahjahanabad were demolished. The Red Fort, a former emblem of imperial dominance, now appears as a mere reflection of its past splendor. Curiously, the surviving interiors of the Jain temples provide a window into the Delhi of the Mughal period. Regrettably, these remarkable architectural gems are under threat. Temples such as the one at Sant Charan Dasji ki Bagichi, built during Muhammad Shah's rule (1719–1748), have suffered damage due to ill-considered restoration endeavors. The Bagichi, for instance, once featured stunning frescoes depicting Vaishnav life, which have since been painted over, leading to the obliteration of a singular historical element. Although heritage advocates on social media have tried to draw attention to the situation, the public is largely unaware, with many people expressing astonishment at the discovery of historic temples within Delhi.

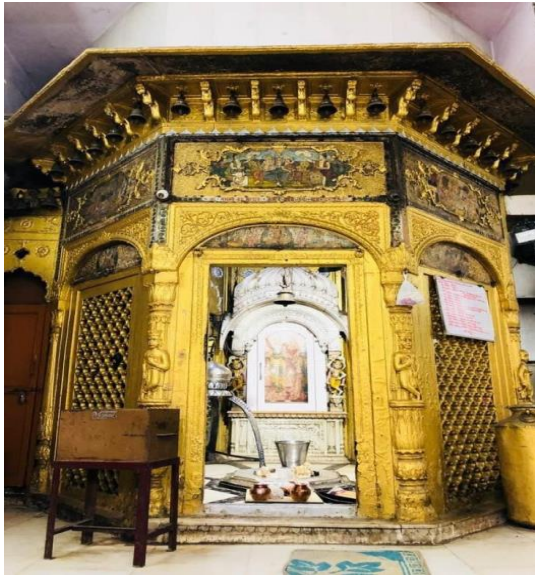


Artworks depicting the Vaishnava life in Charan Das ki Baghichi that have now been painted over.

A Forgotten Legacy

The state of these old buildings is, frankly, quite sad; most aren't even recognized as heritage sites by the Archaeological Survey of India. A great many important temples have been so changed that they're barely recognizable. Take the Jhajjarwala Shivalaya in Chandni Chowk, once celebrated for its image of a black Lord Krishna; now, it's just a small part of the huge

ISKCON temple. Even the Ghanteshwar Temple is wrapped up in local stories, with locals saying its shivling was carved from a rock brought there by the Pandavas. These monuments mean more than just religion—they're like architectural records of mixed traditions. They challenge rigid historical narratives and stand as proof of those "twilight" areas of Indian history that bring people together.



Katra neel, Ghanteshwar Mahadev Shivalaya



An image of Lord Krishna at Jhajjarwala Mandir, now known as ISKON temple

The architectural legacy of this era is complex. It reflects not only religious tension but also resilience, adaptation, and an undercurrent of continuity. Thus, while Aurangzeb's rule brought undeniable strain, temple architecture survived and evolved, carrying forward both ancient traditions and Mughal influences.

Contemporary development -the new dawn:

1. Ram Mandir, Ayodhya:

Recently inaugurated, this temple has been built in the famous Nagara temple architecture.



2.BAPS temples: BAPS temples, particularly those like the Akshardham Temple in Delhi and the Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple in Gandhinagar, feature intricate carvings, sculptural work, and traditional domes, reflecting ancient Vastu Shastra principles.



3.ISKON temple, Bengaluru

This stone temple is constructed as per traditional Shilpa shastras (designs as mentioned in scriptures) in the Dravidian style of architecture. The design and aesthetics, including

the seven doors to the sanctum, are inspired by the Sri Venkateshwara Swamy Temple in Tirumala.



Conclusion:

In a nutshell, we can say that Agama Shastra is a collection of ideas that lays down the rules for temple architecture, temple worship, spirituality and rituals. Agama shastra has not only influences temple architecture of Indian temple but also the temple architecture of neighbouring countries of India like Nepal and Sri Lanka. It has not influenced only the Hindy temple architecture but also the Buddhist temple architecture and of temples even located in Java, Cambodia etc. The case studies like influence of Agama Shastra on temple architechure of Cambodia has also been explained. The research paper has covered the principles for temple construction as prescribed in the Agamashastra and also the three major types and features of Temple architecture i.e. Nagara, Dravida and Vesara. Guided by the Āgama Śāstra, Hindu temple cities grew around monumental temples which served as both spiritual nuclei and physical anchors for urban development. Even the temples built during the Mughal reign and influence of Mughal Architecture on them which signifies Religious Pluralism is also included. Also, these temples suffered from the invaders, some Mughals like Aurangzeb and the British who were keen to spread Christianity and do intentional desacralization in our country full of religious diversity. Although many temples were damaged and still some are neglected, the legacy of temple architecture as prescribed in Agamashastra is reflected in the temples built in the contemporary times like the BAPS temple made in UAE, Akshardham, ISKON, most recently built Ram Mandir at Ayodhya etc. Thus, being of the period around that of the Vedas, the Agamashastra is still a very important living ancient text which has been shaping the temple architecture all around the world.

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