PROF S. K. R. COMPLETE WORKS: 26

THE INDIAN TEMPLE
ITS MEANING

Vidyalankara
Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao

Suramā Prakāshana

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Line Drawings by the Author

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The Indian Temple, It's Meaning, by Prof S. K. Ramachandra Rao, reprinted by Dr. S. R. Sudarshan for Surama Prakashana, the publication wing of The Prof S. K. Ramachandra Rao Memorial Trust ®,
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Photographs: B. Kesar Singh
Temple Ground Plan
on Page 138: P. Gururaja Bhatt

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First Edition: 1979
Second Edition: 2013

PREFACE

My father, Prof S. K. Ramachandra Rao wrote a series of books about Temples in the years 1979 to 1985, all of which were published by the IBH Prakashana, Bangalore. They were: '*The Indian Temple- Its Meaning*' (1979), '*Folk Origins of Indian Temples*' (1980), '*Indian Iconography*' (1981), '*The Icons and Images in Indian Temples*' (1981) and '*The Temple Rituals*' (1985). After his demise in 2006, the Prof S. K. Ramachandra Rao Memorial Trust brought out '*Icons and Images in Indian Temples*' and '*Temple Rituals*' as a single book, '*Temples: Icons and Rituals*' in 2008. The other books are still out of print.

We are happy to reprint the first book that my father wrote about Temples. The other books in the series will also be released shortly.

28-9-2013 Dr. S. R. Sudarshan

TO MY WIFE

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PREFACE

The essential significance of Indian temple has been mostly misunderstood, or understood in bits and pieces, even by Indians. Many books on temples that are flooding the market of late illustrate the strength of this statement. Students of art, students of religion and students of sociology have severally approached this 'enigma'; scholarship, intelligence and imagination have generously been poured into this cauldron. They have been fascinated by its art and architecture, repulsed by the degeneracy of its formalization as an institution, and puzzled by its great vigour and persistent appeal. But the total perspective, which alone is likely to ensure understanding, is lacking. They seem to forget that the temple-building activity was the expression of experiences and intimate visions of the priest-architects (*sthapakas*), whose convictions have been consolidated in the Canonical manuals, collectively called *Silpa-sastra*. The rationale of the temple can never be understood aright without reference to these manuals. The scholars who have looked into some of these old books have extracted from them

only fractional information concerning this or that aspect of the temple as a building-complex, and have believed that this is all the books can provide. It has been impossible for them to imagine that the Agama (canonical collection of literature concerning the temple) has its own total approach to the concept of a temple and all the activities that are involved in it.

Scholars appear to imagine that the history of temple-building activity in India can be reconstructed by exploring the records of ruling dynasties in different parts of the country. They even invent styles and name them after Guptas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas, Solankis, Pratiharas and so on. The entire exercise rests on a misunderstanding concerning the temple as an image and temple as building. Temple is not mere art-form, nor is it merely a ritual-complex. It is basically an expression of religion, and religion besides being multi-dimensional in its expression is an integrative experience. If the experiential content is lost sight of, the temple poses a hundred problems and leads the scholars astray.

The present book has been written relying entirely on the relevance of Agama in understanding the rationale of the Indian temple. It is impossible to omit reference to kings and chieftains who got many monumental shrines built. But the author is convinced that a huge or pretty temple which can be astonishing

or charming is not necessarily a complete expression of the real urge behind temple building ; on the other hand, a mean way-side shrine may be. Famous temples can illustrate styles and milestones, but they cannot represent 'the essential shrine'. The focus of this book is on 'the essential shrine'.

A new perspective is sought to be given here. It makes use of historical records, art ideas, and architectural norms freely, but the integrating idea throughout is that the Indian temple is an image, embedded in the Indian mind for over five thousand years. The cultural temperament may have altered due to the passage of time, but the living tradition which underlies it is what is important and relevant. And that is what has been emphasised here.

S. K. Ramachandra Rao.

CHAPTER I

The Early Shrine

Man is a unique animal : he can create culture. This he does, not to satisfy an impulse of fancy, but in order that he may survive. Culture guards him against present and possible shocks and stresses, and affords meaning to his otherwise animal existence. As an aspect of this culture, he creates images in his mind and fashions icons by his hands. The former represents religion and the latter art. Man has been an image-creator and an icon-fashioner throughout his career on earth. And, therefore, religion and art have always been with him. The temple represents a combinaton of religion and art ; and its roots go back to a very remote past, in fact to the earliest stages of his career. Ever since man became a *homo sapiens*, he has also been *homo religious*. And he has built temples and worshipped in them since that time.

Man needs religion. He needs it in order to secure himself from inconveniences from nature and from fellow-men. Religion is a sort of safety-valve for

stresses in life: anxieties about an uncertain future and irritation from present ills. There is perhaps no dispute about fear being the source of religion ; it is still the mainstay of religion the world over. The argument that religion is a method of adapting to the mysteries that loom large in life as well as in nature is not to be brushed aside lightly. But man's life in the world is not guided only by negative impulses. Man has also a capacity to wonder, to be struck by beauty and sublimity ; and this has played no mean part in the development of religion.

Added to it is a tendency, inherent in man, of transcendence, of reaching out into the unseen and the as-yet-unactualized. This capacity for transcendence combined with the ability to wonder is basic to religion as well as art. This is a necessary involvement in the 'Idea of the Holy'. In the various expressions of religion such as rituals, ceremonials, shrines, magical cults and worship paraphernalia, art is necessarily included. The images and the icons go together.

The image-making tendency representing religion discovered and projected a hidden but real power in the world around. The more uncanny and mysterious the aspect of nature, the greater was the likelihood of the presence of this power. A high mountain, the rugged peak, a deep gorge, forest fastness, or the source of a stream would naturally provoke in man a

sense of mystery, beauty and sublimity. It is not accidental that the early men worshipped them with awe and adoration ; they were regarded as divinities in themselves. Likewise, unusual objects like an odd-shaped stone, a splinter from a meteor, the weird shape of a decayed tree-trunk instilled in man not only curiosity but a certain feeling of reverence. The origin of shrines and objects of worship may be traced to these early attitudes. The early man had these attitudes not because he was ignorant, but because he was sensitive to encounter with the unusual. These attitudes have survived all through man's history, the accumulation of wisdom and the progress in sophistication have not dulled the edge of these attitudes among the more sensitive of human beings even to-day. When we trace religion and art to the primitive times, they should not by any means be regarded as in themselves primitive.

Man's creativity furthered the cause of religion and art. He did not rest content with natural shrines or natural objects of worship ; he sought to create them. Probably his early efforts were to replicate whatever won his fancy. A temple-tower or the church-steeple resembles a mountain peak ; the dome of a mosque resembles a hill-top. The *Linga* is perhaps a stone replica of a decayed tree-trunk or a miniature representation of a mountain. But the capacity to

create images and icons transcended the prototypes of nature. The forms of the images and the shapes of the icons took numerous forms, determined by man's experiences, expectations and imaginations.

Man used icons before he made them. If we throw back our minds to a remote past, we find that man's reaction to the mysteries around was not marked by a desire to conquer nature but to adapt himself to it. He had to fall back on his dreams and imaginations to give him the needed courage and confidence in his dealings with nature. When the cave-man set out on a hunting expedition, he naturally resorted to a device of compelling events to follow his imaginations. He drew a magic circle, and placed inside it a crude sketch of the animal he desired to hunt; or he etched on a tree or carved on a rock a wild animal with an arrow struck in its body. He may also have mumbled a few syllables from an abracadabra. He may have carried on his person the small pebble over which the abracadabra was mumbled or an unusual stone, when he went out to hunt. He ascribed his success to this ritual or icon (the magical diagram, the unusual stone, or the charmed pebble). The ritual was repeated, and the icon was preserved.

The ritual and the icon came naturally to be associated with each other; and they occupied a place of enormous importance in his simple scheme of life.

When he was not carrying the icon on his person, he placed it in a spot specially meant for it, and guarded it with care and zeal, for it contained his guardian spirit, his protective deity, his personal god. The spot which housed this icon was a 'shrine'. It was plain ground, cleaned for the purpose, or a simple stone-platform as a seat for the icon, outside his cave or rude hut, probably under a nearby tree. To guard it against intruders or lifters, he had a fence round it or built for it a crude cover. The shrine-structure thus came into being.

In an icon of this sort, it is not the object itself that is as important as the imagery associated with it. The capacity of man's mind to make images and conjure up visions transforms an otherwise innocent object into an icon with a special relevance for himself. The tendency to use and make icons deepened man's awareness of himself in the milieu of the animate and the inanimate world in which he found himself. It gave him ideas of relating himself favourably to the unseen but powerful forces inhabiting and enlivening the world.

It is both logically and psychologically incorrect to imagine that man's idea of the Holy resulted in the icons. It is actually the other way about. He first used the icons, attracted by their unusual shape or mysterious aspect. His continued contact with them

made him discern an extraordinary power in them. When such an icon became more and more intimately involved in his living contact with the world, the icon was no longer an object among other objects but a holy presence. When he lost it, he tried to make an image of it; the icon was now an artifact. He used not only his memory but imagination and skill in reproducing it. Whether a natural object or an artifact, the icon inspired in him a sense of the holy. It was his personal god. It filled his mind with feelings of reverence and gave him emotional satisfaction.

Although using or making icons is a phenomenon that is uniquely human, responsiveness to icons is reported even among the primates. Interesting in this context is a study conducted by the psychologist Wolfgang Kohler on chimpanzees. Kohler made a small image of a donkey out of rags. The image was doubtless crude and resembled a donkey only remotely. But the psychologist's rude art made it altogether unlike any other natural object, and different from the familiar artifacts such as boxes and chairs. When this was introduced into the chimpanzee's field of vision, the reaction of the animal was evident fear and awe. The object, however, held the chimpanzee's interest and provoked its curiosity; but it also encouraged the animal to keep a safe distance. The early man's response to natural icons was probably not

very different, for similar would be the response even among the sophisticated folk now. Even when icons were fashioned by man's skill and in conformity with his ideas of the Holy, others still reacted to it with fear and awe–a mixed feeling called reverence.

An icon (Greek *eikon*) strictly means an image, a representation, a likeness. But an icon is characteristically an image with a difference, a representation with a new slant of meaning, a likeness of something our eyes have actually never seen. It is not a duplication of a common object, but the concretisation of an idea concerning an unusual object. A natural icon may be an unusually shaped rock, an odd tree trunk, or a live animal. Objects that are not commonly found, like the crystal *lingas*, ammonite stones known as *Śālagrāmas*, pieces of quartz with strange veins in them, peculiar conch shells and other marine fossils, strange shaped roots of trees, may also be selected to serve as icons. The belief that all such unusual objects contain within themselves supernatural power (now familiarly known by the Polynesian word 'mana') supported such selection. The humans that came into contact with this object, to the accompaniment of a ritual, partook of this *mana* in some measure and thus developed a special relatedness to the icon. An icon may be looked upon as an image possessing *mana*.

When man made icons, his main interest was to incorporate some *mana* into this artifact. Hence the icon-making was also a ritual. The use of an icon, when made, was also elaborately formalised with a view to induce *mana* into the icon permanently. The shrine that housed the *mana* was also to be spacious enough to accommodate the participants and performers of the *mana*-inducing ritual. The shrine, being closely associated with the icon, was believed to partake of the *mana* that resided in the icon. Thus, the shrine itself was regarded as Holy. Because the icon was either natural or a severely simple artifact, it did not generally admit of the application of man's artistic abilities. But man could pour his artistic skill into the shrine to make it appear mysterious, beautiful and sublime. It developed an architecture of its own and an art style that was peculiar to it.

In the clan organization, the chieftain or the priest that bore an especial relationship with the icon was believed to share the icon's *mana*. His person was considered Holy and his words were received with awe and reverence, as if they issued from the icon itself. The chieftain or the priest assumed his position on the strength of certain extraordinary abilities or adventures, which were considered as expressions of the *mana*. When he died, his *mana* would return to the clan and continue in some way, and the clan

members had to house it in a shrine. This explains how numerous shrines both in India and abroad are associated with burial monuments. Such a shrine would be associated with unusual significance in the minds of the members of the clan. It is not so much to perpetuate the memory of the departed hero or priest but to preserve his *mana* that such a shrine came to be fashioned. It was a community shrine and in course of time the name and exploits of the hero would be forgotten, or transformed into mythology, but the shrine continued to have a relevance for the folk over generations.

Death is one of the greatest of mysteries; it is all along an unresolved riddle and a persistent threat to all the hopes and plans of man. Perhaps there is nothing that man fears more than death. And the fear of death is extended in a curious way to the dead too. All manners of disposal of the dead are to ensure that the dead will not return to the world of the living. The funerary monuments reveal an ambivalent attitude to keep the spirit of the dead away, and to perpetuate his memory. The earliest of man's intuitive guesses was that death was not the end of the person's existence, that he continued to live on in some way, and that the disembodied spirit may harm or help the living. It was necessary, therefore, to take the disposal seriously and propitiate the spirit adequately. Both

the disposal of the dead body and propitiation of the continuing spirit became elaborate magical rituals.

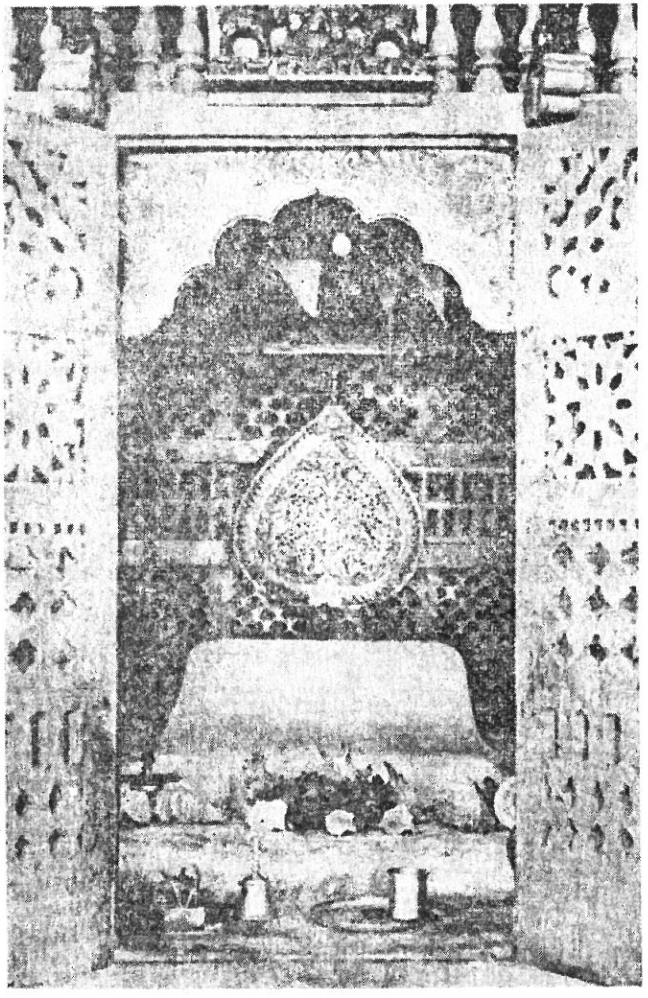
It might strike one as blasphemous that many of the important shrines of the present day can be traced to burial practices. But it can hardly be disputed. When the pious and wealthy Nattukoti Chettiars of Tamil Nadu undertook to renovate many of the dilapidated Siva shrines in the region, it was discovered that under the floor of the sanctum in most of these shrines funerary pots, heaps of ash, and skeletal remains had been placed. In fact, the old Tamil term for shrine, *pallippadai*, signifies the spot where the dead person ("one who has gone to interminable sleep") is buried. Tamil inscriptions of the middle ages describe many Siva temples as such shrines.

It was an old custom to denote the spot where the dead body is buried by a mound of earth and rubble. The mound represented the mountain. The background belief was that the disembodied spirit soars up onto a mountain. The celebrity of Kailasa as the abode of Siva may be traced to this belief. It was also a wide-spread practice in very early times to drag the dead body to a mountain top and leave it there. Burial and cremation were later methods of disposal. The burial mounds were a usual feature in the territorial arrangement of primitive clans. When the dead person was a respected chieftain or a priest of high

status, the mound would be larger and more lasting, for it was believed to house a powerful *mana*. It would also be periodically visited, and regarded with veneration. Myths would naturally gather round the shrine and the *mana* would attract devotees who gathered there to propitiate the spirit. The simple mound would be transformed into an elaborate structure.

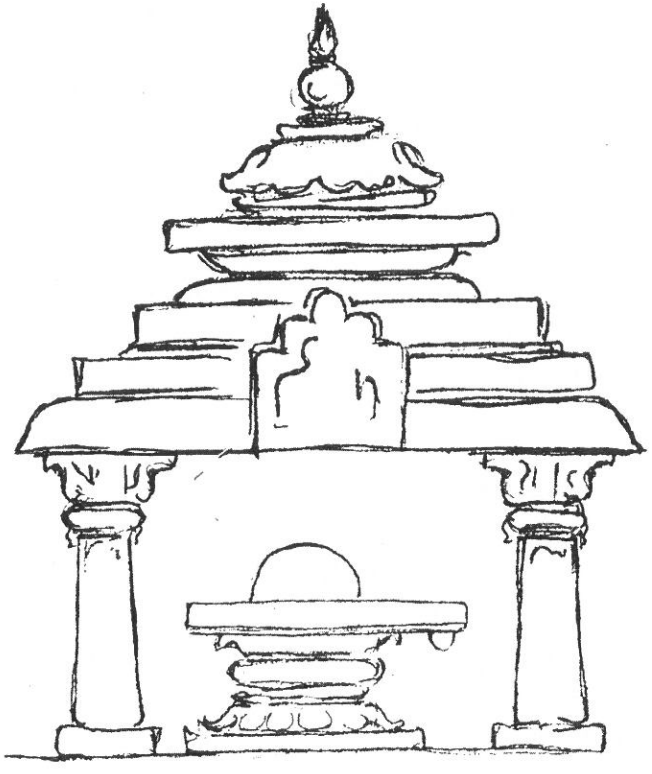
The stone age graves make an interesting study. Numerous clans and tribes in India continued the practice until comparatively recent times. After the dead body was buried, three large stones were placed in the centre (gathered up in a heap), and a ring of stones enclosed them.

Todas of Nilgiris burn their dead inside a circle of stones and bury the ashes in the same spot. They erect an upright stone block over the remains and surround it by rough, round or conical stones placed in a circle. Their funeral huts are also built inside a ring of stones. The hut is meant to receive the spirit of the dead; it is called the 'home of death' (*sāvu-mane*). The three stones that the primitives kept on the buried body were apparently meant to prevent his ghost from getting up and coming out. The two side-stones developed into pillars and the central stone was placed on top of the superstructure erected over these pillars. The funeral hut was square or



circular in plan, and the sloping roof over it was invariably conical or pyramidal symbolising the soaring up of the spirit. The shrines for the *bhuta* in coastal Karnataka and Kerala have preserved this primitive form.

The ring of stones represents a magic circle to preserve the central stone's *mana* (which symbolises the spirit of the dead person). The central stone stood



for the mound, and later when the stone had to be more impressive it assumed the form of a low sepulchural tumulus *(stupa)*, or a conical or pyramidal structure *(vimana)*.

The stupas have been well-known in India from the Buddha's own days; and they represent an interesting and important aspect of Indian architecture. But the stupa was not a Buddhist innovation. Jouean-Dubrenil has shown that the stupa form was directly derived from the Vedic tomb. The tomb called *agnidriya*, was hemispherical and hollow, with a central shaft and two raised stone platforms on either side of the shaft meant for the *agni* and *soma* rituals; the dome was made in timber and covered with clay. The whole structure was in imitation of the aryan hut; and the central shaft was a clever device to serve as chimney, for the rituals inside the *agnidiya*, involved setting up of fires.

It is true that the Buddhist adaptation of the stupa was unique as a religious monument. When Asoka is reputed to have built 84,000 stupas, they were not all burial mounds; they were more in the nature of memorial structures. But each stupa was to contain a relic of the Buddha or of some honoured sage. The renowned stupa at Sanchi, for instance, contains the relics of Sariputta and Moggallana, two of the

most eminent disciples of the Buddha, who died in far-off Nalanda in Bihar.

The temple may be regarded as a direct descendent of the stupa, which in its turn had been evolved from the primitive funerary mound. The custom of installing a stone-block or *linga* in the spot where the burial has taken place is even now prevalent in India. And the tombs of saints *(samadhi* or *brindavana)* continue to function as shrines. There is also the custom of planting trees over the burial spot or the place in which the funerary urn (in cases of cremation) has been hidden. These are referred to as *caitya-vrkshas* (from the Sanskrit word *citi*, which means cremation) and are held as sacred. The spirit of the dead is believed to inhabit certain species of trees, which received worship by proxy. It is not an accidental occurrence that almost every important temple in India is associated with a tree, called *sthala-vrksha* ('shrine-tree'). It is reasonable to assume that the presence of such a tree invited in due course the construction of a shrine in its vicinity, or over the very spot in case of the tree's decay and disappearance. The legends concerning the famous shrines in India strongly suggest this event.

CHAPTER II

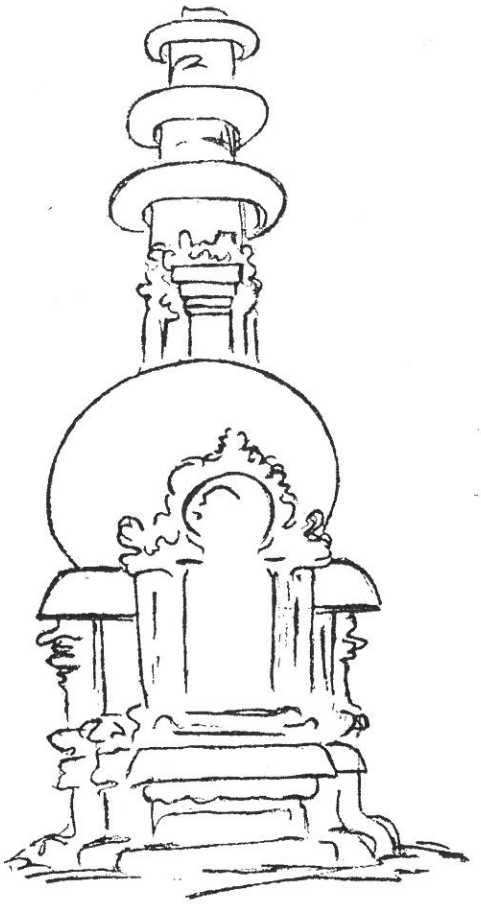
The Temple Evolves

The caves were naturally the earliest shrines. And caves were also places where the primitive burial relics or the funerary urns were preserved. The memory of the cave-shrines lingered on in the Upanishadic 'heart-cave'. Where natural caves were not readily available, people constructed cave-like shrines. But these would obviously have been flimsy, being little more than thatched huts or bamboo-and-mud houses. Among the tribes in which this practice still survives, as among the Todas, the resemblance of these shrines to natural caves is striking. We have no clues regarding their nature of appearance, for the ravages of time have wiped them out. But the tiled, sloping and conical roofs of the temples in the west coast may be regarded as survivals.

The stupas are the earliest shrines on record as well as in actual evidence. The expression *stupa* means a heap of grain or a mound of earth. As a heap of grain it was precious; and as a mound of earth it

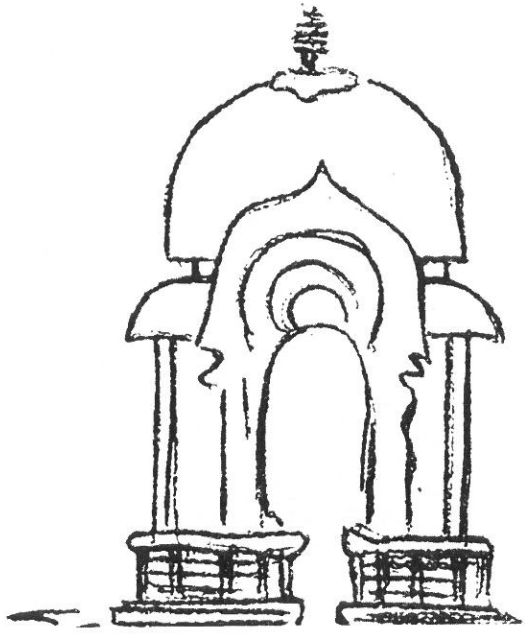
was a monument. The word is found in the *Yajurveda* in the sense of a precious monument *(Vishnoh stupah)*. We have already referred to *agnidriya*, which was the Vedic stupa. The building of stupas must, therefore, have been a very ancient practice. But it loomed into enormous importance during the days of Asoka. The large number of stupas that emperor Asoka is said to have built have all disappeared. But the architectural form of the stupa that was finalized during his days survived in many later stupas, like those at Barhut, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Sanchi, which were all structures built during the first and the the third centuries B.C., although they have been repaired and enlarged periodically. This Buddhist adaptation was a massive hemispherical structure, filled with earth, pebbles and stone, mantled by bricks, and covered by stone slabs. It was erected on a broad circular platform *(medhi)*, providing a passage for ceremonial circumambulation, and fenced by a running railing *(vedika)*. On top of this plain tumulus was a quadrangular terrace *(harmika)*, over which was placed a parasol *(chatra)* signifying spiritual sovereignty.

The area of the stupa was enclosed by gateways *(torana)* on the four sides; this enclosure derives from a tantrik background. The real significance of the stupa lies in the *mana*-articles that it contains. The



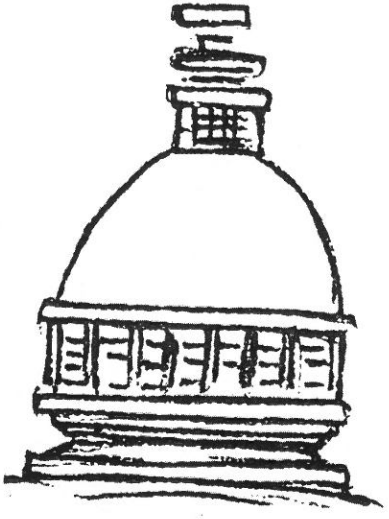
technical expression for the stupa is *dhatu-garbha* (the original for the Sinhalese 'dagoba'), which means 'the womb of the relic'. The relic may be the physical remains of a great man of spiritual strength, such

as his bones, tufts of hair, or nail pairings *(saririka)*, or articles that he had used such as his robes, begging bowl, or a piece of his staff *(paribhogika)*, or symbols of high attainment like the wheel, the triple-gem or a miniature stupa itself *(uddesika)*. The introduction of such relics into the body of the stupa is accompanied by magical rituals. The square enclosure facing the four quarters is meant to contain and intensify the power of this relic; it guards the relic from the intrusion of distracting and inimical forces. The mandala form of a circle contained within a square with openings on four sides is concretized in the stupa.



The relic is thus the essence of the stupa. The stupa is also called the 'egg' (*anda*) as it contains the 'relic-seed' within. The funeral tumulus is in a very real sense a magical monument. The wealth of sculptural representations involved in the gateways and pilasters are to be regarded as essentially mystical in character and purpose. While there are narrative sculptures depicting the main events in the Buddha's life, most of the carvings have a magical purpose. Sometimes, folk sprites and goblins (*yakshas* and *yakshnis*) are also represented, for the same purpose.

There is a measure of truth in the saying that a Hindu temple is a successor to the Buddhist stupa. But it is not readily recognised that the Buddhist stupa



itself is a successor to the Vedic stupa. which can be traced back to the cave-shrines. The Buddhist stupa is as magical in its intent as the Vedic stupa was, and it involved rituals even as the latter did, although of a different kind.

Another innovation that was chronologically parallel to the Buddhist stupas was the excavated caves like those of Junnar (one hundred and fifty caves, near Poona, about 100 A.D.), Krishnagiri or Kanheri (eight caves, near Bombay, about 150-189 A.D.),Ajanta (about twenty seven caves, the first few centuries after Christ) and Ellora (about thirty three caves, about 550-750 A.D.). These caves were excavated from hard, living rocks on the faces of hills. They were elaborately carved and richly ornamented by pillars, arches and pierced windows. These excavated caves, however, were more in the nature of retreats and settlements for monks and hermits than shrines in the strict sense of the term. They were far removed from the austere and simple cave-shrines, both in design and purpose. Even though they had a shrine area containing either a stupa image or a Buddha icon, the major portion of the excavated cave was utilized for the assembly hall, habitation cells, porch, and the verandah. These caves were meant to be ornate and architectural monuments. There was more of the

art in them than of the shrine. Here is an instance of the image dominating the icon.

The significance of these cave-sanctuaries is that the simple shrine was fast becoming a public institution, where people gathered not only to offer worship but to meet monks and listen to their discourses. The sacred calling of the residents of these cave-monasteries had now secular involvements. Sects developed, affiliations began, and the shrine element was minimized.

It is not to be imagined that the cave-shrines were the only kind of shrines that prevailed during those days. There must have been numerous shrines constructed of perishable material like wood, clay and bricks. For, an inscription of the Pallava King Mahendravarman I (600-630 A.D.) refers to them and suggests that this king was the innovator of the rock-cut shrines. This inscription, found at Mandagapattu in South Arcot, claims that this king, who was celebrated as 'Vicitra-cítta' ('one whose mind was ingenious'), got constructed a shrine for Brahma, Siva and Vishnu without the employment of bricks, timber, metals or mortar :

एतदनिष्टकमद्रुमलो-
हमसुधं विचित्रचित्तेन ।
निर्म्मापितन्नृपेण ब्रम्हे-
श्वरविष्णुलक्षितायतनम् ॥

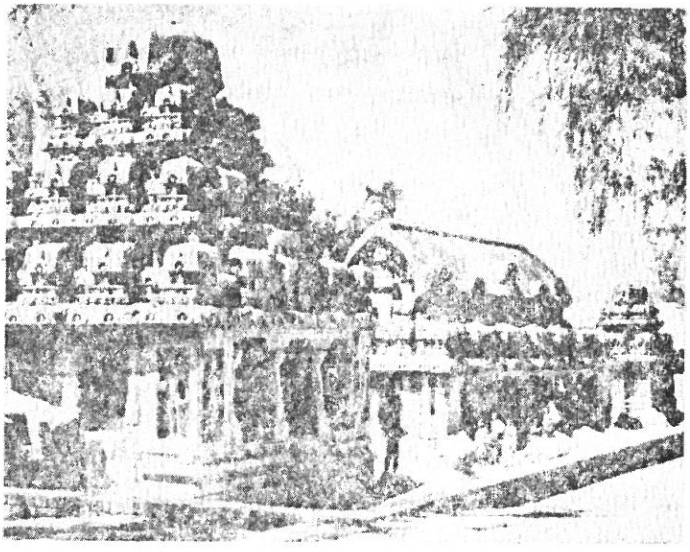
We are not sure if he was the first person to conceive the idea of stone temples, for the stone-temples of Banavasi and Talagunda in Karnataka were several centuries earlier. But, true to his title, this king Mahendravarman was versatile. He was not only a patron of the great Sanskrit poet Bharavi, but was himself an author. His Sanskrit farce *Mattavilasa-prahasana* has come down to us. He appears to have come under the influence of the celebrated Saiva saint Appar, and built many shrines to Siva. In fact, he bore another title *Chettakari* ('builder of temples'). Numerous temples in and around Kanchipuram, Pallavaram, Vallam, Mamandur and Tirukkalukkunram have been ascribed to him. The original structure of the famous Ekamranatha temple in Kanchipuram appears to have been commissioned by him.

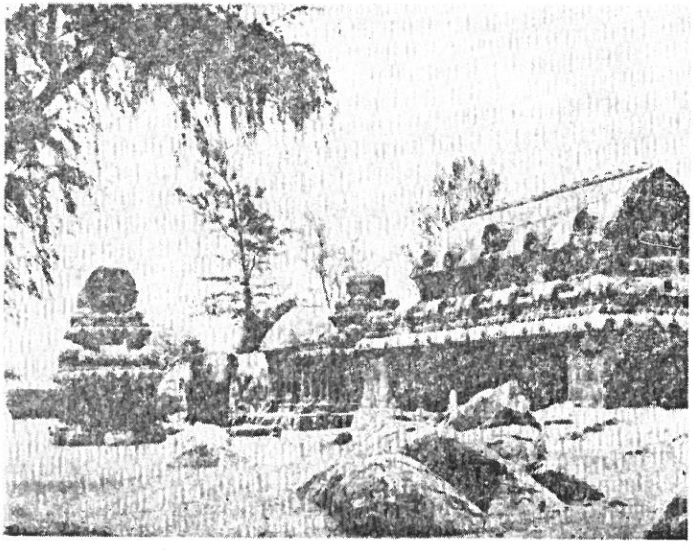
But it was his successor, Narasimhavarman I (630-668 A.D.) who built the world famous five monolithic shrines on the sea-shore in Mamallapuram, near Madras. He bore the title 'Mamalla' ('the great-fighter'), after which the township was named. Each of these shrines has been cut out of a granite boulder and shaped into a free-standing temple. This answers to the description of the 'Ratha' style of temples in the classical texts.

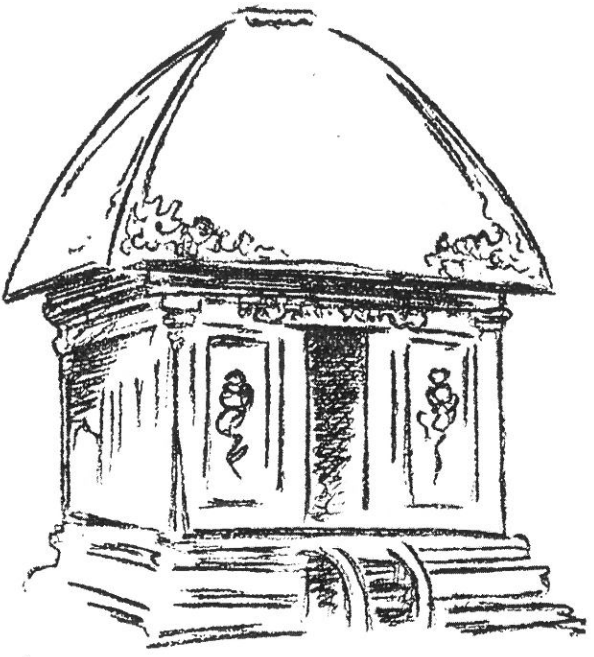
Ratha ordinarily means a vehicle, but its etymological import is to 'play and enjoy' (*ramu kridayam*).

In classical texts, four kinds of 'rathas' are distinguished : 'metrical' (*chando-maya*), where a hymn becomes a vehicle of expression; 'divine' (*deva-maya*), where a structure becomes a habitation of gods, a pleasure-resort for them; 'corporeal' (*deha-maya*), where the body of ours becomes a means for the conveyance of *karma*-dispositions through several lives; and 'transport' (*vaha-maya*), signifying the chariots used by kings and warriors in the battle-field. *Rigveda* uses the word *ratha* in all these four senses. The old Indian texts of architecture take the expression to mean any solid construction for the habitation of gods, fashioned by the celestial mason *Tvastr;* they rely on the *Taittiriya–brahmana* statement "Adamantine is ratha" (*'vajro vai rathah'*). The ancient caste nomenclature 'rathakara' signifies not the "makers of chariots" but "the builders of temples"; it was a 'mixed caste' inasmuch as the work they did involved a variety of skills and a co-ordination of different professions. The five monolithic shrines in Mamallapuram were called 'rathas' in the sense of 'divine habitations' sculpted by men.

These shrines have been popularly, but fancifully, named after the Pandava heroes and their consort Draupadi. The most interesting shrine in this group is the one named after Draupadi. It is actually a shrine dedicated to the Mother Goddess. It is architecturally







simple and artistically elegant. It is a one-celled shrine containing the icon of standing Durga carved in relief. The cell on a raised platform is approached by a flight of three steps. The opening is flanked by stylized 'door-gaurdians'; the other sides have niches containing replicas of the icon within the cell.

This represents a major shift in the conception of a shrine. It is not any relic that is contained within the cella, as it was in the stupa, but an icon carved by a sculptor. And the icon-containing chamber was not closed but was open to the worshipper. The

square plan and the pyramidal roof (although four-cornered) are in a way continuations of the stupa theme; but the suggestion of a hut is unmistakable. The four *toranas* of the stupa occur here as four doors, three of which are blind, and the one facing the icon within the cella being open. The blind doors have also the representations of the same divinity as the sanctum contains. Thus the divinity is made to face all the four quarters. The intent of the four gateways to the stupa is not lost here. Further, the sanctum which is an innovation is a small one, admitting but one worshipper at a time. The shrine was no doubt public, but the idea did not accommodate the community assembly as yet. This may be seen as the beginning of a monumental temple. In the canonical description, it is the sanctum alone that constitutes the real temple. Here is therefore the basic shrine. The shrine named after Dharmaraja, which is located at the other end of the series, is actually dedicated to Siva ; it has a *linga* installed in the sanctum. But the cella is surmounted by a pyramidal and turrated *vimana* which provided the model for all vimanas in the temple of the Dravidian style. The portico is open and pillared.

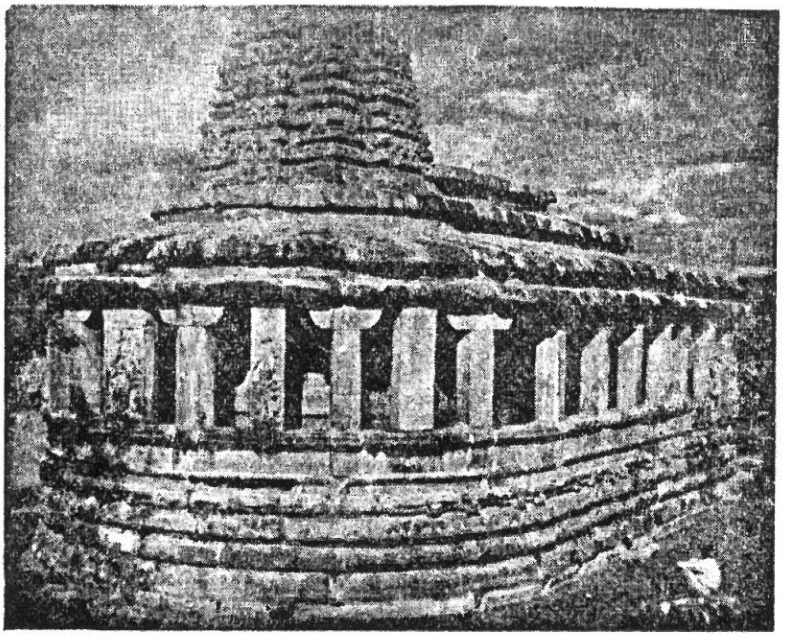
If these shrines are rather sparse in sculptural details and mythological representations, there are about ten excavated rock-cut halls nearby which are

in the the nature of pillared assembly halls (*mandapas*) where excellent sculptural panels are carved in rock-reliefs; the themes are mythological such as Varaha rescuing the earth, Durga slaying the Buffalo-demon, and Krishna lifting the Govardhana hill. The patron king is also portrayed with his two consorts. Sculptures include secular themes and animal portraiture. These *mandapas* are not in the nature of shrines; art is of predominant interest here and they may be regarded as sculpture-galleries.

Ascribable almost to the same period are the two excavated cave-temples at Namakkal in Salem district in Tamil Nadu bearing some resemblance to the *mandapas* in Mamallapuram in the matter of sculptured panels. These, however, are cave-shrines and are dedicated to Vishnu. One of the caves is styled in the inscription there as 'Atiyanatha-vishnu-grha' ('House of Vishnu dedicated by the Atiya King'). The King of Atiya (or Adiyanman) dynasty mentioned here was Gunasila, who ruled from Tagadur (present-day Dharmapuri) in Tamil Nadu, around 750 A.D. Three of the ten avataras of Vishnu (Vamana, Narasimha and Varaha) provide themes for some very fine sculptures; and the narrative style has been employed. The representations are vigorous, if also somewhat stylized.

An interesting group of four cave-temples are to be found at Badami, a charming valley in the Karnataka region. The caves were excavated during the reigns of the Chalukya Kings, Kirtivarman I and Mangalisa, in the sixth century. These Kings were in cultural contact with the North as well as the South, and we find in these cave-temples and also in the structural shrines due to them in the region, a fusion of several stylistic details and the emergence of fresh styles. Of the four cave-temples, one is Jaina. The largest among them, known as cave No. III, is also the earliest (abot 578 A.D.), and was carved at the instance of Kirtivarman I (566-597). It is dedicated to Vishnu, and we have here a majestic and splendid sculpture in relief of Trivikrama, and another imposing relief statue of Vishnu seated on the hooded serpent facing the corridor. Caves I and II, dedicated to Siva, bear an obvious impact of the last cave in the Ajanta group. These cave-temples illustrate the combination of sanctuary and shrine.

The structural stone-temples in the Karnataka region are of great antiquity. Some of such temples in Aihole (in Bijapur district) like the Kontagudi and Lad-Khan temple (before 500 A.D.), are earlier then the cave-temples. The impressive 'Durga' temple on a raised platform 2.44 meters high in this small temple-town (containing no less than 70 temples)



was begun around 450 A.D., although it was completed almost a century later. These temples appear to have been clever adaptations of the Buddhist Chaitya details, but they have incorporated the Gupta element of *sikhara*.

The Guptas (330-530 A.D.) were great temple-builders; and the earliest of the extant and independent structural temples in the North date back to their times. The *sikhara* as a monumental spire on top of the sanctum evolved in the fifth century, pro-

bably under the patronage of the Gupta kings. As a massive dome surmounted by an ornamental pinnacle (*stupi*), it became the characteristic feature of the Indian temple, permitting some stylistic and regional variations. The relation of the expression *stupi* for the pinnacle of the formalized and pyramidal Spire with *Stupa* as the monumental tumulus is not accidental; nor is it merely a linguistic coincidence. The involvement of the *stupa* idea is fundamental to the *sikhara* notion.

Besides the early temples at Banavasi and Talagunda, which we have had occasion to mention and which were well-known shrines even during the days of the Satavahana rulers (the first two centuries after Christ), the Kadamba inscriptions refer to many such temples in Halmidi, Puligere, Halasi and Malavalli. The Pranavesvara temple at Talagunda was earlier than 450 A.D. and the Jina temple at Halasi goes back to the days of the Kadamba ruler Mrgesa-varman (about 455 A.D.). With the exception of the temples at Gudimallam and Chejerla in Andhra-Pradesh, these temples are the oldest monumental experiments in South India.

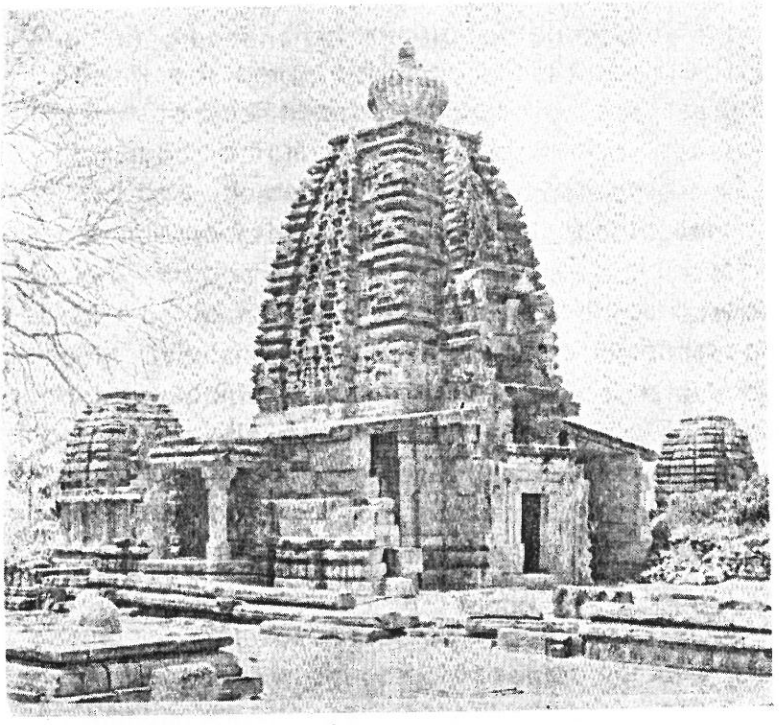
The Parasuramesvara temple at Gudimallam (near Renigunta in North Arcot district) is said to be a work of the second century A.D. The chief interest of this temple lies in the unusual and probably earliest

iconic representation of Siva found in its cella. We will have occasion to consider this interesting icon in some detail later on. Of greater significance, however, is the Kapotisvara shrine at Chejerla in Andhra Pradesh. This structural temple was built probably in the fourth century at the instance of the kings of the Ananda gotra lineage who ruled over parts of the present-day Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh during the first few centuries of the Christian era. Although it is now a Siva shrine, it was undoubtedly meant to be a Buddhist sanctuary. It was probably the king Damodaravarman, whom an inscription describes as "devoted to the feet of the perfectly enlightened Buddha" (*samyak-sambuddha-padanudhyata*) that built this shrine, which is modelled after the oblong Buddhist *chaitya*-hall in the 'back-of-the-elephant' (*gajaprshtha*) shape. There is an interesting suggestion that the Pallava ruler Mahendra-varman, who was a great enthusiast of the stone-shrines was a kinsman of the royal family of Ananda-gotra lineage (as also of the Vishnukundi kings), was inspired by the Chejerla temple. It may be noticed that rock-cut shrines (the so-called Pandava *rathas*), especially the ones named after Bhima and Sahadeva, bear a definite resemblance to the Chejerla temple.

Within the kingdom of the Chalukyas of Badami was Pattadakallu (called Kisuvolal in old texts), now

in the Badami taluk of Bijapur district in Karnataka. It was an important township, especially favoured by the Lakulisa-Pasupata sect of the Saivas. Even the Greek traveller Ptolemy (around 150 A.D.) mentions this town along with Badami. There are about ten ancient temples in this place, most of them built during the seventh and eighth centuries. The most famous among them, the Virupaksha temple (built around 740 A.D.) appears to have been modelled after the Rajasimha temple at Kanchipuram (about 700 A.D.); and it is likely that it inspired the Kailasa temple at Ellora (built by the Rastrakuta king Krishna I, 757 A.D., around an old cave-shrine dedicated to Siva). The earlier name for the temple was after Lokesvara, the Mahayana Buddhist divinity who had close association with the Lakulisa-Saiva cult; there is also a suggestion that it was named so after Loka-mahadevi, the queen of the Chalukya king Vikramaditya II. A remarkable, and altogether unprecedented, feature about the Pattadakallu temple is that we have an inscriptional mention of the architect who actually built this structure : 'sutradhari' Anivaritagunda. For the first time in the history of temple-building, the craftsmaster is given his due recognition. The original shrine was probably austere and one-celled, with an imposing although modest *sikhara*; but it came to have in due course numerous pavilions.

It became a complex structure, but not forsaking the dominant element of harmony. We should turn to the Vijayesvara (now known as Sangamesvara) temple, if we want to have an idea of how the original temple would have looked like without a porch. This latter temple was an earlier one, having been built by Vijayaditya (696-733 A. D.).



A still earlier temple is the one dedicated to Siva (or Vishnu, according to Percy Brown), Papanatha, with a short tower of the North Indian type. An obvious and bold disregard of the canonical proportions characterizes this temple, which was constructed before 690 A. D. A narrow circumambulatory passage, a disproportionately large vestibule, greatly spread out pillars, and the hesitantly low *vimana* make the temple closer to the rock-cut shrines than to the structural ones. In the half-pavilion (*ardha-mandapa*), structurally removed from the main shrine, is sculptured a fine Nataraja group. The sculptor's name (Baladevamayya) is inscribed on the panel near the left shoulder of the main figure.

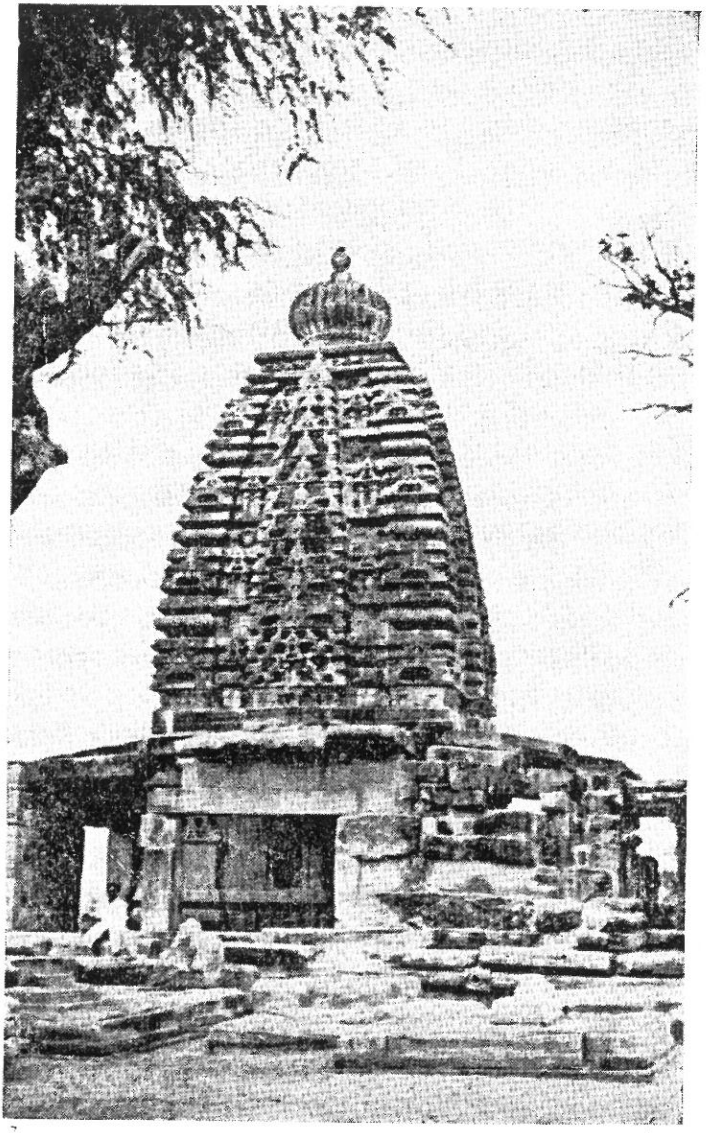
The temple-complex of the Chalukyas of Badami, scattered in Badami, Aihole, Pattadakallu, Kopana, Puligere and Vakkunda, marks an important phase in the evolution of temple architecture in India. It not only marks a definite transition from the rock-cut shrines to structural temples, but it reveals numerous experiments in stylistic variation. Here, perhaps, was the origin of the classical trichotomous classification of Indian temples into Nagara, Dravida and Vesara.

While this classification is neither neat nor absolute, it points to certain trends of stylistic variation, especially with regard to the *sikhara* treatment. Texts like *Vishnu-Tilaka*, *Manasara*, *Mukutagama*, *Silpa-*

ratna, *Maya-mata* and *Isana-siva-guru-paddhati*, which deal with this classification, give broad hints about their differing features. There are texts (like *Vishnu-tantra*, and *Markandeya-samhita*) which group temples into nine types; in addition to the above three, they mention Sarvadesika, Kalinga, Varata (the three regional styles, recognized in *Kamikagama*), Mandira, Bhavana and Yoga. But the variations detailed here are too minute and minor to be of much practical significance. The trichotomous classification alone was regarded as valid and inclusive. And, both *Silpa-ratna* and *Isana-siva-guru-paddhati* insist that this classification refers only to the *sikhara*. It is said that the word *Nagara* actually means squarish, *Vesara* circular, and *Dravida* polygonal (six or eight sided). But this refers, according to these texts, to plinth of the temple (*adhisthana*) rather than to the shape of the towering spire. Whatever the stylistically differentiating features, the territorial grouping is also done in the texts. The classical description is that the Nagara type prevails in the land between the Himalayas and Vindhya ranges, the Vesara between the Vindhya ranges and the river Krishna, and the Dravida in the country between that river and Kanyakumari. There is also a variant description, denoting the Southern style (between Krishna and Kanyakumari) as Vesara and the Central style (between Vindhya and Krishna) as

Dravida. The significance of Vesara is that it is a mixed style. The Nagara temple is square or cruciform in plan and its *sikhara* has a vertical emphasis. The Dravida, on the other hand, emphasizes the horizontal aspect; its *sikhara* is octogonal or domical, or in the shape of a vaulted roof. Another distinguishing feature of this type is the tall and storeyed towers on gateways (*gopuras*); but this is a later innovation. The Vesara is circular in plan or apsidal and combines the *sikhara* - features of the other two types.

The temples built by the Chalukyas of Badami are said to conform more or less to the Vesara typology, but we find examples of the other two types also. In fact, the textual incorporation of these types must have followed the actual construction of these temples. The tendency to emphasize the element of tower over the sanctum in monumental and structural temples which we see initiated in the Pattadakallu complex found their fulfilment in both North Indian and South Indian temples. Two fine and early examples of the typical and stylized South Indian Dravida treatment of the tower are the Shore-temple at Mamallapuram and Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, both built by the Pallava-ruler Narasimhavarman II (also called Rajasimha, about 680-720 A.D.). It is probable that the Virupaksha temple at Pattadakallu was directly influenced by them. But stylistic variations have been



tried out here. The Galaganatha temple has the tall *sikhara* with the *amalaka* motif, which undoubtedly was the forerunner of the typical spiral Nagara type. Likewise, the Visvesvara temple provided the model for the characteristic Kalyana-Chalukya tower.

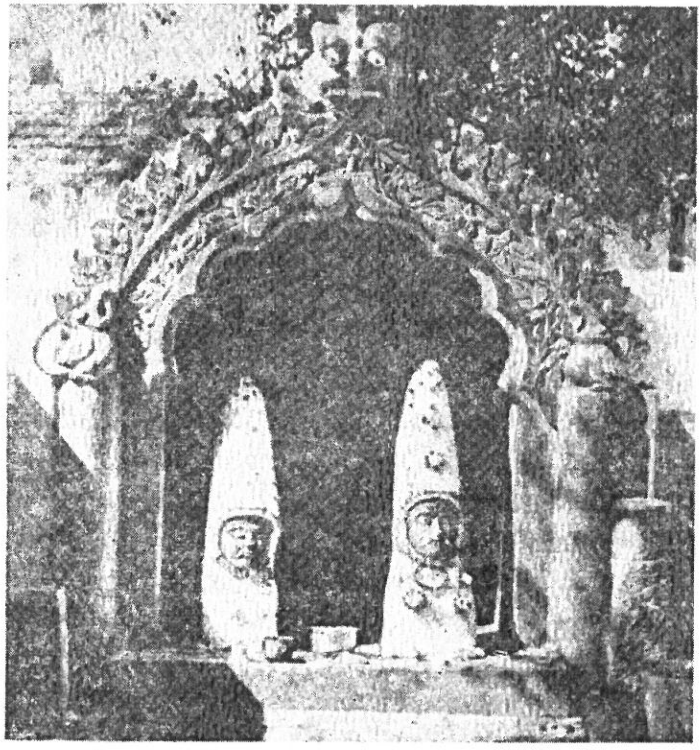
The transition of the Nagara idiom to the North is best illustrated by the early, broad, squatty and low *vimana* of the Parasuramesvara temple of Bhuvanesvar (built around 750 A.D.), which strongly reminds one of the Durga temple at Aihole. Its development into a typical Orissan style with a tall tower and the tiered front pavilion roof can be seen in the Muktesvara temple, built about two centuries later, and the great Lingaraja Temple built around 1000 A.D., in the same town. A variant idiom was evolved in Central India, with preference for pyramidal *sikhara* rising on an elevated masonry terrace, as illustrated by about twenty temples that are extant in Khajuraho (in Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh) built between 950 and 1050 A.D. These temples also reveal a tendency to integrate the several structural details into a neatly packed mass. However, sculptural enthusiasm dominates the architectural skill here.

CHAPTER III

The Temple Structure

The Indian temple is not a building; it is an image, a conception of divinity. While it is both natural and necessary for the image to be projected into a spatial arrangement and concretized by a structural monument, the image does not depend upon such activities for its continuance. It is true that the urge for the expression of the image has grown from a simple ring of stones to a vast complex of shrines, chapels, pavilions, corridors, yards, and tanks. It is also true that sometimes townships have grown inside the temple enclosure; and the administrative machinery in many cases is elaborate and involved. But the basic truth about the temple is the image that people have, and this centers round the icon. The icon is the source of the image; and the image may reach far out.

It is not impossible to conceive of an icon devoid of the temple paraphernalia. In fact, it is not till a late period in the history of Indian religion that the temple

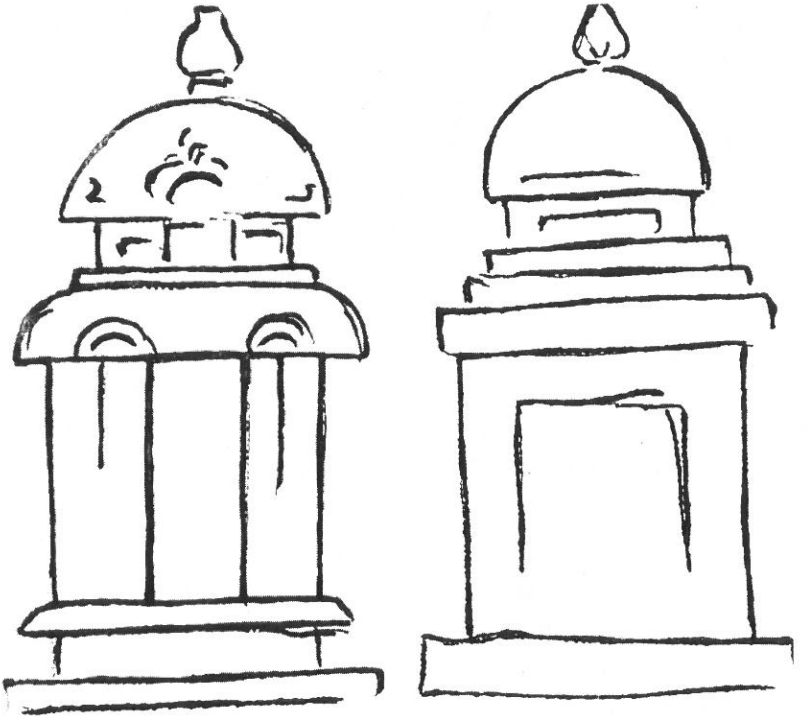


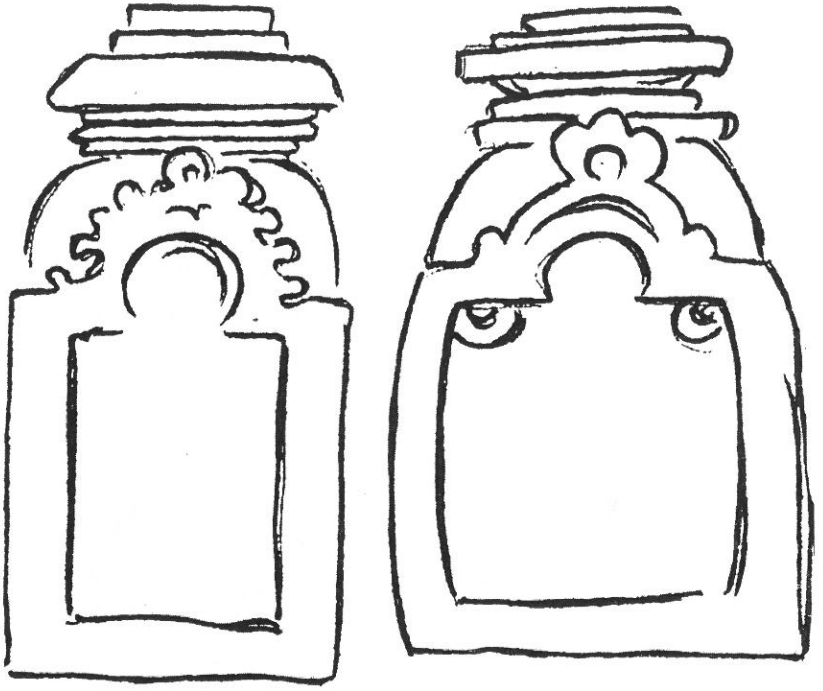
as a distinct socio-religious institution began. Early shrines were probably confined to the icons. The custom of building the temple first and then preparing an icon to be installed in it is a later one. According to strict canonical considerations, a temple must be built for the icon, and not an icon got ready for the temple, for a temple is really only an outgrowth of the icon, an image of the icon.

It is impossible to indicate when exactly the custom of building stylized temples began in our country. There is hardly a structural shrine that can reach back to the third or even the fourth century A.D. But temples must have been there much earlier. The village shrines of thatch and mud, bamboo and wood would not have been meant to survive till our days. The builders of such shrines had no eye for abiding fame. They did not aspire that their buildings should last "till the sun and the moon and stars cease shining", as the later kings and chieftains vainglori-ously wanted. Early constructions were not instru-ments of vanity or even acts of piety, but necessary means of worship.

There is evidence to suppose that the early shrines were temporary structures, erected when the occasion of community-worship demanded, and were pulled down later. The canonical concept of 'pavilion' (*mandapa*) supports this supposition. The old text *Visvakarma-prakasa* suggests that the purpose of the pavilion is to accommodate the people that gather to participate in the worship ritual. People gather to worship at the temple only occasionally. Every house had its own shrine, and daily worship would be con-ducted there. Two kinds of shrines are recognized: 'private' shrines, meant for the individual devotee and for his family (*atmartha*); and 'public', meant

for all the people in the community (*parartha*). In the former case the performers and the participants are not different, whereas in the latter the priests are the performers and people are the participants. The sanctum of the public shrine would be for the performance of the worship ritual, and the pavilions for the participants to assemble and partake of the proceedings. Temporary structures would be put up when





large groups of participants are expected to gather.

It is only later that such structures tended to become more permanent, and the early stimulus came probably from the Indo-Greeks who became converts to Indian religions. We have inscriptions that reveal their influence. Heliodorus (son of Dion), the Indo-Greek ambassador who resided in the city of Taksha-sila around the second century B. C, was a devotee of Vishnu, a 'bhagavata', and got erected a stone column in honour of "Vasudeva, the god of gods (*deva-deva*)". An inscription in Brahmi characters on

this *garuda-dhvaja*, found in Besnagar (the old Vidisa) near the present-day Bhilsa near Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, suggests the existence of some sort of a temple. An inscription belonging to the same period speaks of "an excellent temple (*prasada*) dedicated to Bhagavan". The Saka satrap, Rajuvala, son of Shodasa, who styled himself 'the great satrap' (maha-kshatrapa), tells us in an inscription found in Mora near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) that he got built a stone temple for the icons representing five great heroes of the 'Vrshni clan' (bhagavatam vrshninam panca-viranam pratimah saila-deva-gri.....).

The five great ones constitute the family of Vasudeva, the form of Vishnu extolled in the Bhagavata cult: Vasudeva, Samkarshana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, and Samba. The first two of these heroes, identified with Krishna-vishnu and his brother Bala-rama (who was later merged in the concept of Kartikeya-subrahmanya) appear to have been popular divinities during the days prior to the Christian era. There is another second century B.C. inscription found at Ghosundi (Nagari near Chittor in Rajasthan), which speaks of a "stone temple-enclosure with a garden dedicated to Narayana" (*pujasilaprakara-Narayana-vatika*) meant for the worship of "the unconquered heroes and lords of all, Vasudeva and Samkarshana" (*anihatabhyam sarvesvarabhyam Vasudeva-Samkarshanabhyam*).

What these temples were like is hard to conjecture. It is not even certain that they were temples in the present-day sense; they may have been mere enclosures around an icon. Icons were older than temples. We know, for instance, that the celebrated temple on the top of the Tirumala hills (in Andhra Pradesh) was not there during the days of the early Alvars, the Vaishnava saints of the South, viz., the third and fourth centuries A.D. Their Tamil songs describe the majestic Venkadam icon as free-standing and exposed to sunshine and rain; there was only a dwarf rampart enclosing the icon. The famous five-foot icon of Siva (?) found at Gudimallam (near Renigunta, in North Arcot district) has been assigned by Ananda Coomaraswamy to the first century B.C. It is now housed in Parasuramesvara temple, which is not a structure of any great antiquity. It is likely that this icon also was free-standing. We have from the village Burhikhar (in Bilaspur district, Madhaya Pradesh) an inscribed sculpture of the same period (first century B.C.), worshipped as 'Chatur-bhuji Bhagavan' (four-armed Vishnu) and gifted by some lady Prajavati. There is, however, no mention of a temple having been there to house it.

The Puranas, which are medieval works, contain not only praises of temples but promise great glory to the builders of temples. *Agni-purana*, for instance,

says that if a person merely desired to build a temple for Vishnu, all the sins that he had accumulated during all his previous lives would disappear. *Haya-sirsha* proclaims that if one should put a brick in place for building a temple and die soon after that act, he would have acquired the benefits of performing a sacrifice. *Vishnu-rahasya* promises heaven even for a child that playfully builds a temple in the sands. Such praises and promises suggest that temples had already been looked upon as acts of great merit, and that temples were being built in large numbers by the rich and pious folk. This activity was encouraged by affirmations that a single temple built would confer merits that one would acquire by performing two sacrifices together, 'Rajasuya' and 'Asvamedha' (*Vishnudharmottara*). It was the new substitute for the degenerating tradition of performance of sacrifices.

The early Puranas had focussed the religious attention of the country on a few places which were regarded as especially favourite of the gods; the divine presence was supposed to be spontaneous and abundant there. Their celebrity has continued till our own day. Instances are Badari-vana, Kedara-natha, Indra-dyumna (Jagannatha-puri), Kasi (Banaras), prayaga, Somanatha, Simhadri, Venkatachala (Tirumalai), Setu (Ramesvaram), Kanchipuram. Here the icons were reputed to be 'self-manifest' (*svayam-vyakta*),

not made by man; and therefore what remained for man to do was to build temples over them. And the places themselves were considered holy, and visits to them were held especially meritorious. Pilgrimage, which still remains as one of the essential features of Indian religions, was largely the contribution of the Puranas. The essence of the holy place was concretized in a shrine, often containing the icon that was reputed to be 'self-manifest'. Structural additions to such shrines, buildings to accommodate the pilgrims, tanks to provide water to them, free refectories to cater to their needs, and other acts of charity were deemed meritorious. There are instances where whole townships have grown out of shrines. These are in scriptures called 'independent' (*svatantra*) shrines, in contradistinction to the temples built for the sake of a village or township ('dependent' or *paratantra* shrines).

This is how vast temple-complexes evolved in hundreds of 'sacred sites' (*kshetras*), strewn all over the country. But when places which did not command such Puranic prestige emerged into importance owing to political or commercial reasons, they were also got sanctified by kings or chieftains or influential residents through the installation of icons and construction of shrines. Sometimes, icons were brought over from the ancient, sacred sites which had been deserted or which were not easily accessible to people. The con-

quering kings sometimes carried away prestigious icons as booty and got them set up in their own capitals. Or, more frequently, replicas of icons from the accreditedly sacred sites were got made and installed. There are for instance hundreds of Kasi-Visvanatha temples in the country today, and hundreds of Kedaresvara shrines; Venkatesvara shrines have sprung up in large numbers after the original shrine at Tirumalai.

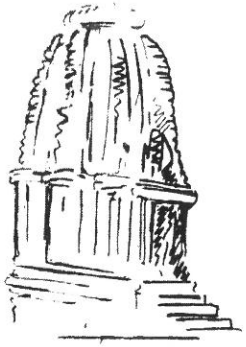
Thus, not only architects but sculptors got busy during the middle ages. And to fulfil the new need several texts prescribing the norms, styles, methods and measurements of the temples and icons came to be written. Craft-guilds were organized, and kings and chieftains undertook to be patrons of artists and craftsmen connected with temple building. Craftsmen's organization was in terms of four classes of skilled workers: the designing architect (*sthapati*), the surveyor (*sutragrahin*), the sculptor (*takshaka*), and the builder (*vardhaki*). The architect directed and co-ordinated the activities of others; he was in general charge of the entire construction, and was expected to have an expert acquaintance with the canonical norms. The surveyor was hierarchically next to the architect; his special area of work concerned with proportions, vertical and horizontal (*mana* and *unmana*). The sculptor worked with stones, cut them into large and small pieces according to plan and

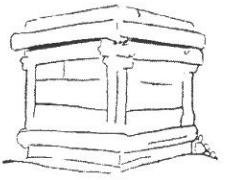
design; he also sculpted images and attended to decorations. He was free to work as his fancy dictated, within the general framework provided by the architect. He was acquainted with canonical prescriptions and descriptions concerning icons and sculptural ornamentation, and his creativity was not only acknowledged but praised. The builder put the pieces, cut and worked by the sculptor together, and attended to the temple coming up (the term *vardhaki* means 'an increaser'). His professional affiliation was with the carpenter's craft. It may be remembered that early temples were constructions in wood, and carpenters were the main craftsmen who attended to them. The work of all these four classes of artisans was often supervised by a director or manager *sthapaka* or *sthanika*) who was not only learned in temple-craft but a priest as well; he was the administrative chief of the temple who had control over the other priests who were directly responsible for the details of worship in the temple.

Worship in the temple was more formalized than domestic worship and it involved many more details than the latter. It therefore necessitated many priests and assistants. And numerous festivals were incorporated into the normal working of the temple. The devotees who assembled had to be given token food blessed by the offering-rituals (*naivedya*, *prasada* or

bhoga); and in olden days pilgrims were also fed in the temple. The temple had also to provide place for assemblies of devotees and their socio-religious performances.

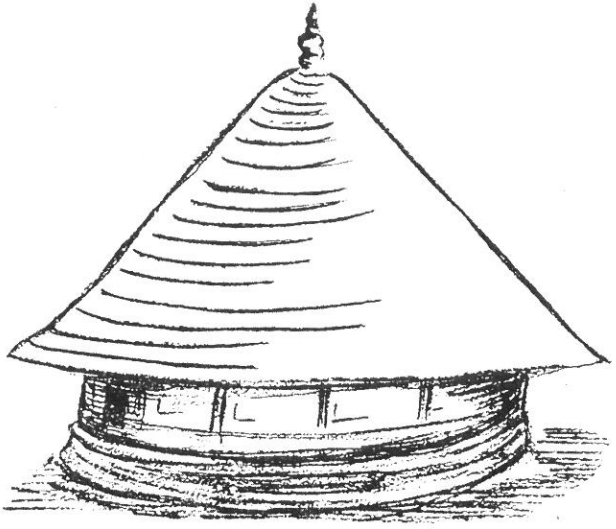
All this meant not only an increase in the staff of the temple and a more elaborate administrative procedure but a growth in the spatial arrangement. The temple had to have several halls, not strictly connected with the routine worship: audience pavilion (*rangamandapa*), treasury and store-house (*Sri-bhandara*), the chamber for the performance of daily and occasional sacrifices (*yaga-sala*), kitchen (*paka-sala*), dining hall (*Siva-kuta* in Saivite temples and *Ramanuja-kuta* in Vaishnavite temples in the South, *bhoga-mandapa* in the North), marriage-hall (*kalyana-mandapa*), the rooms where the festival vehicles were kept (*vahana-mandapa*), and the temple-tank (*kalyani* or *teppa-kulam* in the South). And in addition to the main icon in the sanctum, several other icons in the nature of consorts (Amman or Devi), attendants (*parivara*), and companions (*parsva*) had to be provided with separate chambers, cells or at least niches in canonically fixed positions. The temple thus became increasingly complex both architecturally and administratively. Especially the temples that came to be favoured by royal patronage got unnecessary and superfluous halls

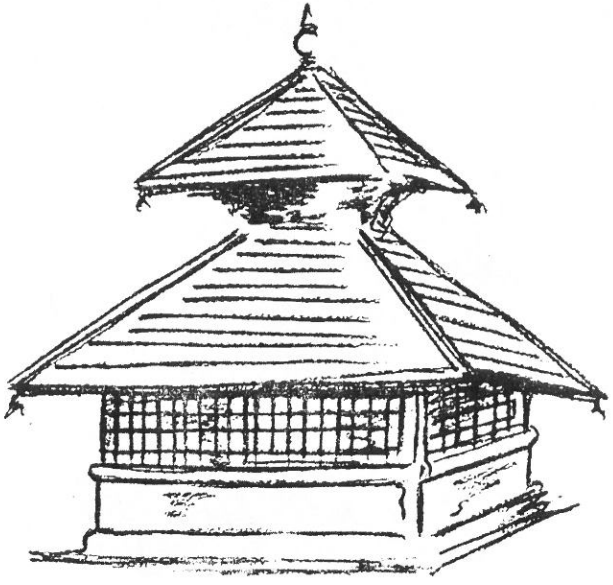




and pavilions added periodically; the structure tended to grow out of all proportion to the function.

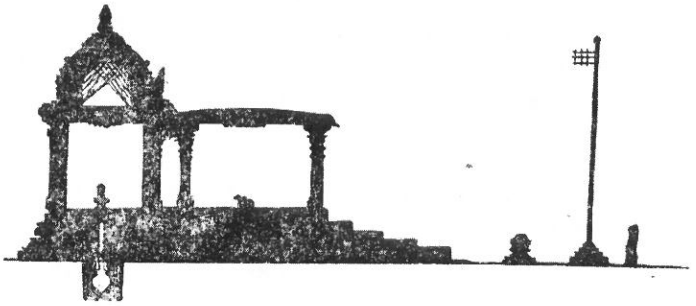
But the added structure does not add to the shrine value. The real temple consists of the sanctum in which the icon is housed, and the immediate structural involvements that are essential for the main worship ritual. In fact the canonical texts describe the sanctum alone as the real temple. *Sri-prasna* declares that the sanctum is the divinity's body and the icon is it's soul (*jiva*). Usually it is a stone structure, square in shape and severely plain, although there could be niches for other icons on the outer walls. There will be no pillars, and the sanctum will be altogether devoid of windows. The shutting off of air and light was meant to preserve the icon which, in olden days, was made of wood, stucco, or even clay. Besides preventing the ill-effects of weathering, the dark interior added to the mystery of the divine presence in the sanctum re-





presented by an empty low platform (*vedi*, probably with a mystic diagram called *mandala*), a copper vessel placed on a seat (*kumbha*), a sacrificial fire-place (*kunda*) or a sculpted icon (*bimba*). Although it is usual to find the sanctum built in stone, constructions in brick are not rare. *Vishnu-tilaka* mentions that while the stone sanctum is the best, the brick one is the next best; the wooden sanctum however is inferior, and the mud one is said to be the worst.

The sanctum is technically known as the 'garbha-grha' ('the womb-house') and 'Deul' (in the North). It is insisted that this part of the temple must be constructed first, and before the construction a significant ceremony known as 'impregnating' (*garbhadhana* or *garbha-nyasa*) should be performed. This ritual involves letting into the earth a ceremonial copper pot, containing nine precious stones, several metals and minerals, herbs and soils, symbolising creation and prosperity. The building which contains this 'womb' is said to prosper, and not the one which lacks it (*Siddhanta-sekhara*). After the completion of this ritual, a stone slab (*adhara-sila*) is placed over the spot where the copper pot has been buried. This stone slab will be the foundation for the installation of the icon. The copper-pot symbolises the womb, and the icon the soul. The sanctum that is built round it is the body. This is the significance of the sanctum being called 'the womb-house'. Texts like

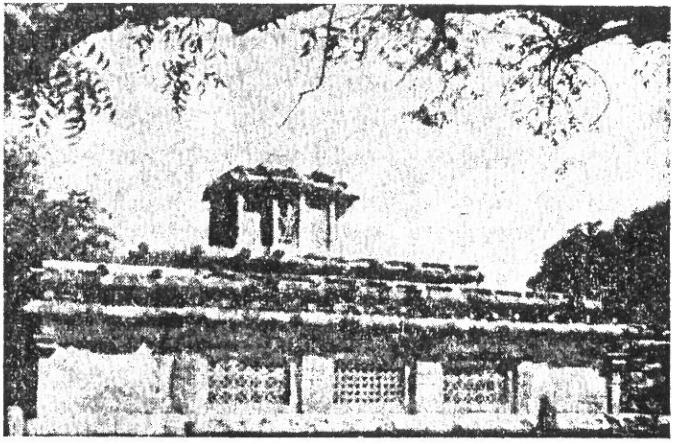


Silpa-ratna, *Tantra-samuccaya* and *Isana-siva-guru-paddhati* give an elaborate account of this ritual.

The sanctum is covered by a flat roof of stone slabs, and sometimes by wooden beams and planks. This serves as the base (*adhisthana*) for the tower that rises above the sanctum. This super-structure known as 'vimana' or 'sikhara' is an important part of the temple, especially of the temples built in villages and towns. It is interesting to note in this context that holy places are classified into five kinds in an old text named *Arcana-navanita*. The first variety is where the divinity is self-manifest (*svayam-vyakta*), the second is where the icons are installed by gods (*daivika*), the third by sages (*arsha*), the fourth glorified in the Puranas (*pauranika*), and the last is where the shrine is man-made (*manusha*). While the first four kinds of places are holy by themselves, the last variety needs to be sanctified by special effort. The background belief was that the entire area which the *vimana* overlooked was rendered holy. Thus the *vimana* construction was a means of sanctifying the otherwise ordinary place.

The early temples were understandably flat-roofed. The Gupta temples in the North belonging to the fifth century were flat-roofed. We have in Aihole an early specimen of such temples in the Lad-Khan (about 500 A.D.), on the roof of which is another sanctum whose

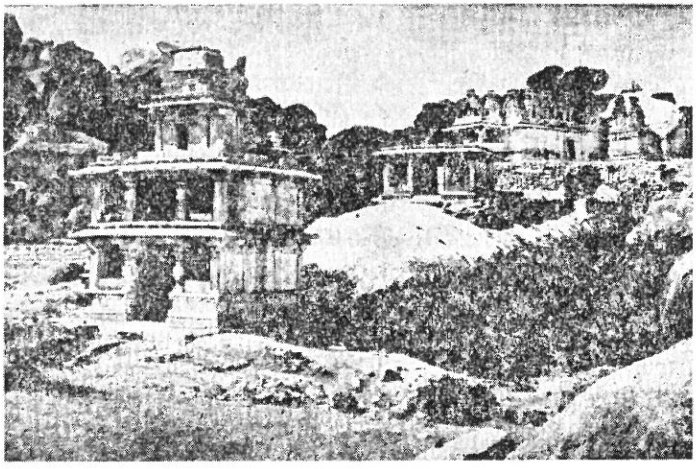
roof consists of stone slabs grooved at the points and pieced together. Sometimes, the temple roof resembled the roof of the huts, as illustrated by the so-called Draupadi shrine in Mamallapuram. But there was a tendency for the roof to be vaulted or dome-shaped, probably in order to reproduce the shape of the cave-

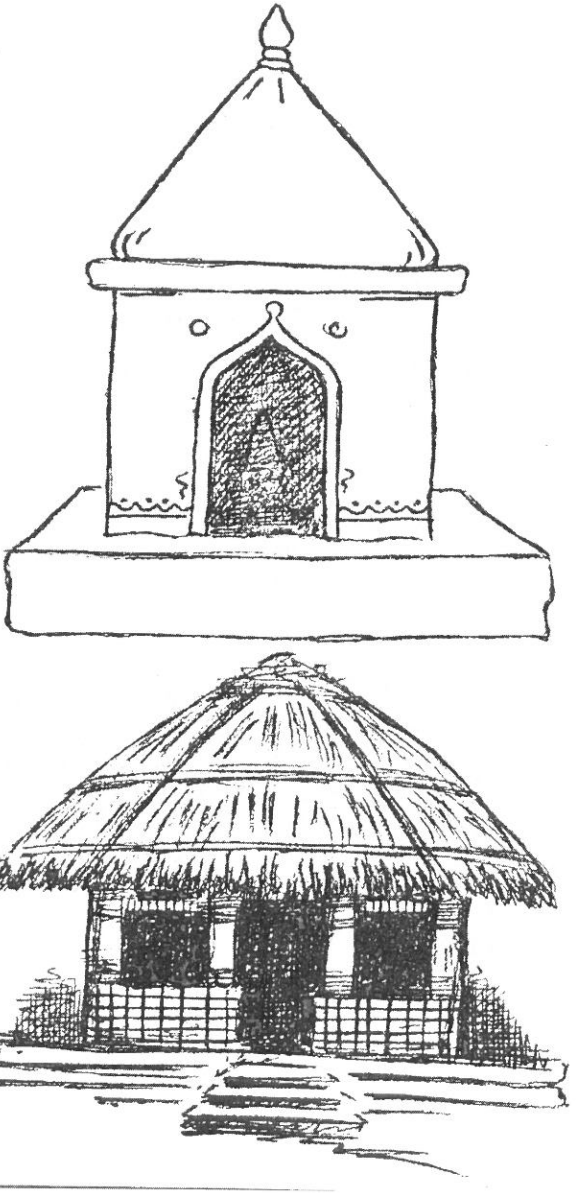


shrines or in imitation of the stupa-form. The mean mud-shrines in the villages even today are surmounted by a mound of earth, as in the primitive funerary monument. In course of time, the tendency resulted in the pyramidal or curvilinear form. This was regarded as the part of the temple that gave the structure a monumental dignity.

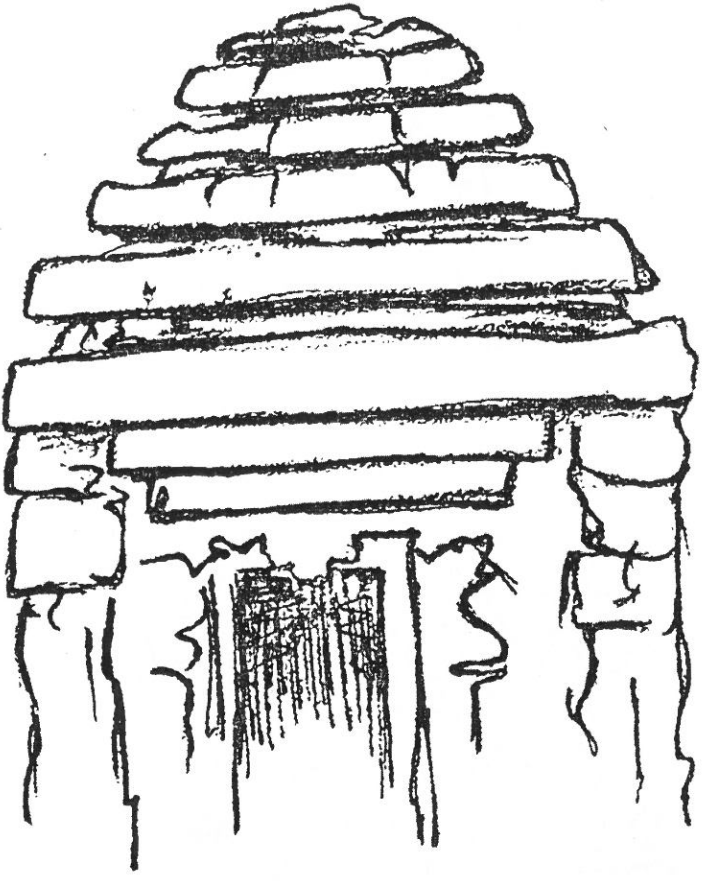
The North Indian temples, especially in Orissa, emphasized this aspect. Perhaps the upper storey of

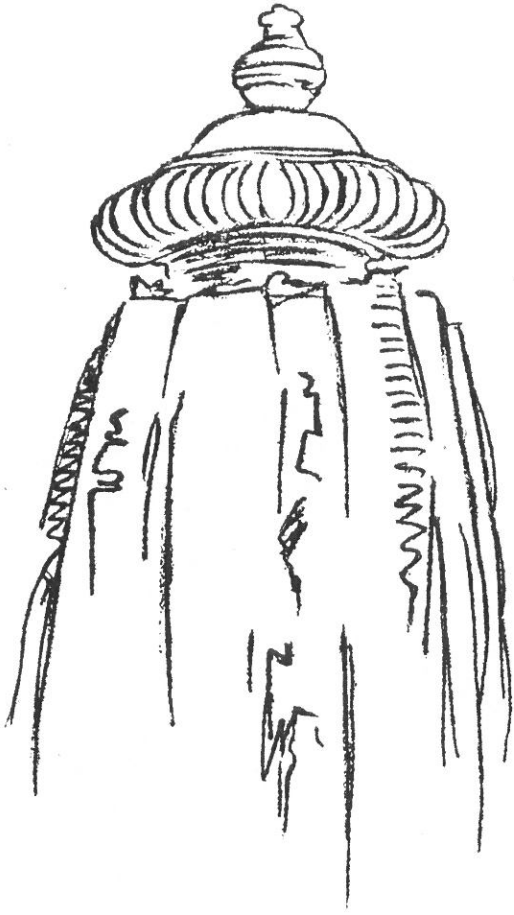
the temple (as in the Lad-Khan temple of Aihole) was stylized into this part; and several storeys were amalgamated into a decorative spire. By about the eighth century, the towers became parabolic in character. Legends about the mythical mountain Sumeru (or Meru) were employed to highlight the value of the tall towers that rose to impressive heights. Indeed some of the temple-complexes in Orissa and Khajuraho appear like mountain ranges. The *vimana* of the Lingaraja temple in Bhuvanesvar is 125 feet tall; that of the Jagannath temple at Puri is 200 feet tall, and can be seen from a distance of six miles. In the temples of North India, the main sanctuary comprehending the sanctum (*garbha-grha* or *deul*) as well





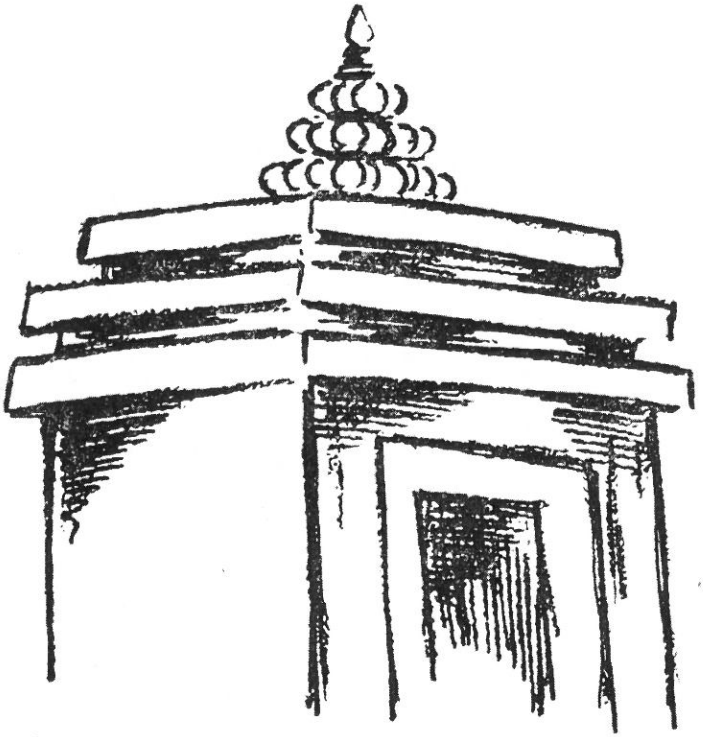
as the tower above it is called the *vimana* (or *sikhara*). Although the same connotation obtained in the South,

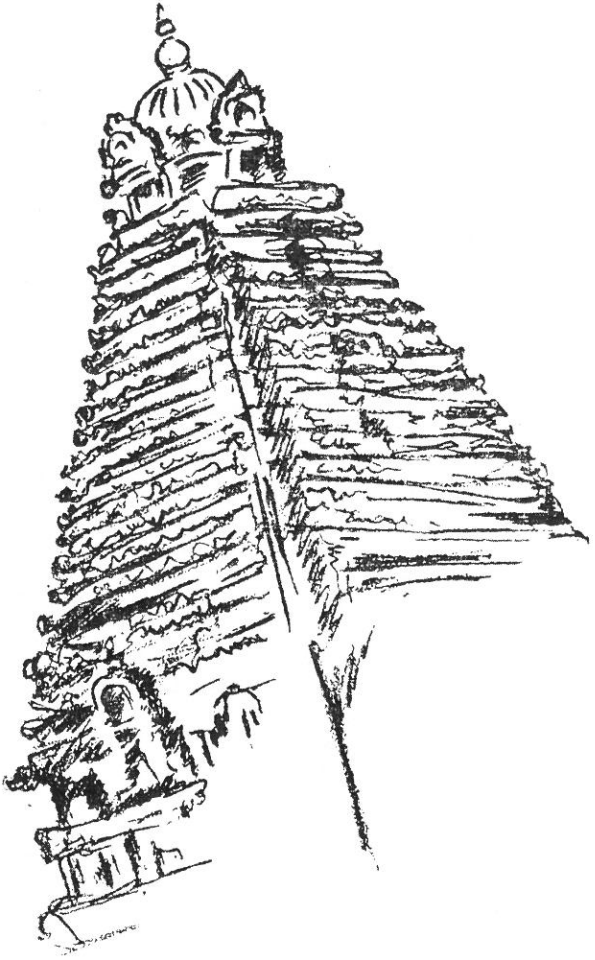


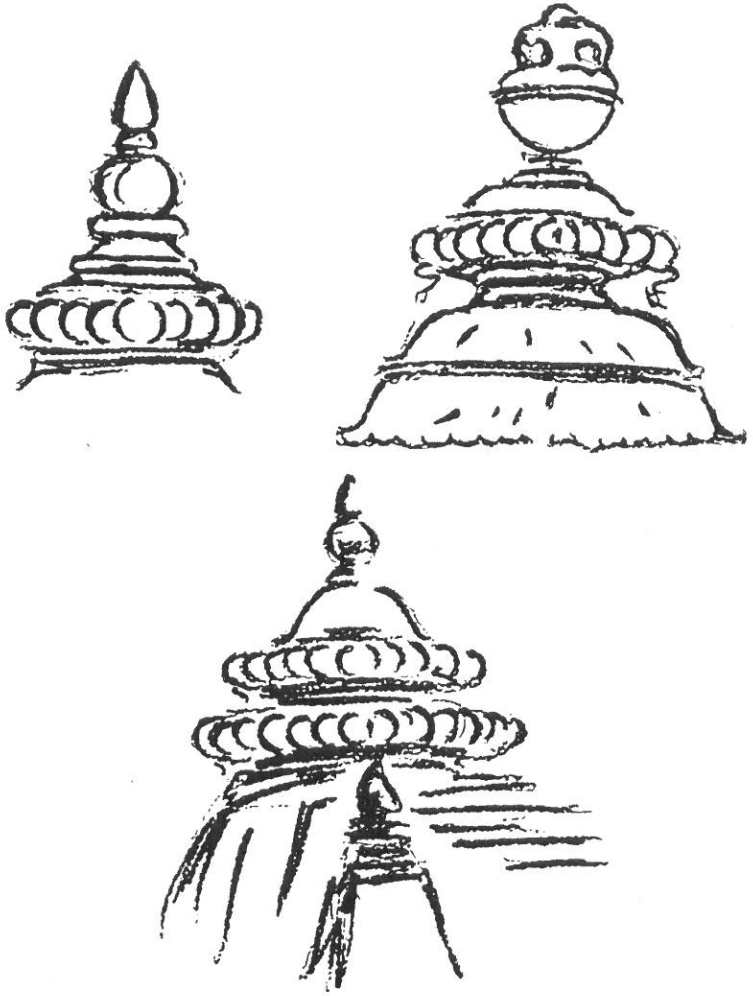


it has become more usual to confine that expression to the superstructure above the sanctum.

The North Indian *vimana* is crowned by a large circular (wheel-shaped) capstone block known as *amalaka*, after the common fruit *emblic myrobelan*;





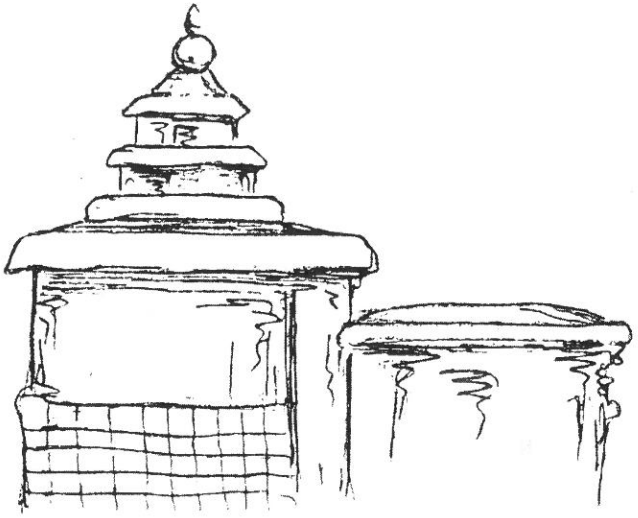


while its South Indian counterpart ends in a cupola (*srnga*) or wagon-roof (*khakhara*). The South Indian *vimana* is broader and shorter than the North Indian one, and we find the usual tendency is towards the

form of a polygon, on a square or rectangular plan. The North Indian temples rise from a pedestal (*pitha*) through the wall (*bara*) and main body (*gandi*) to the 'head' (*mastaka*), which consists of a ribbed *amalaka* surmounted by a 'skull' (*khapuri*), on which is installed the *kalasa* (the finial). And on top of the finial will be seen the 'weapon' (*ayudha*) of the deity, a trident or a discus.

In South India, there was emphasis on the *vimana* in the earlier phase of temple architecture. For instance, the *vimana* of the Rajarajisvara (or the so-called Brihadesvara) temple at Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu (built by the Chola King Rajaraja I, and consecrated in 1009 A.D.) rises to a height of 58 metres, "an architectural texture of great beauty". But the tendency was in favour of shorter *vimanas*. For example, the *vimana* of the temple at Gangaikonda-chola-puram (built by Rajendra-Chola in 1025 A.D.) was already only 46 metres high. Subsequent *vimanas* are less emphasized in their height, in comparison with the tower over the gateway (*dvara-gopura*). But the sanctity of the *vimana* was not affected by the diminished height. While sculpture on the gateway-tower could contain secular and erotic themes, the *vimana* had to be austere and could accommodate only the prescribed divinities, associated with the icon in the sanctum. The practice of bowing to the *vimana* as if that were verily the outer form of the icon continues even today among the devout folk. The gateway-tower, on the other hand, does not command this reverence. It is more a creature of the donor's pomp and the sculptor's skill than an expression of religious sentiment.

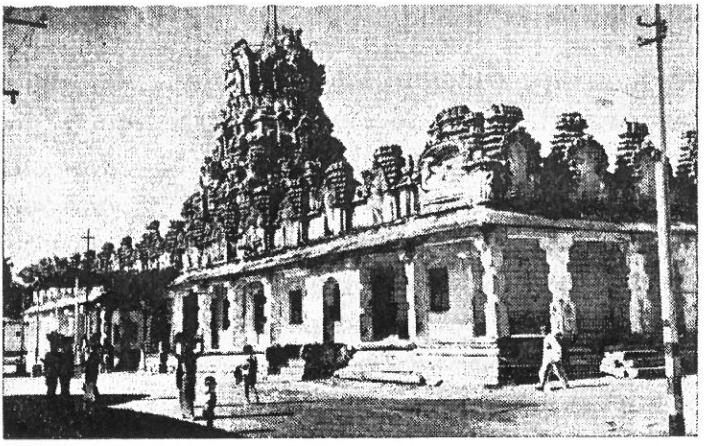
The plan of the *vimana* could be round or square: it could also be six-sided or eight sided. It could



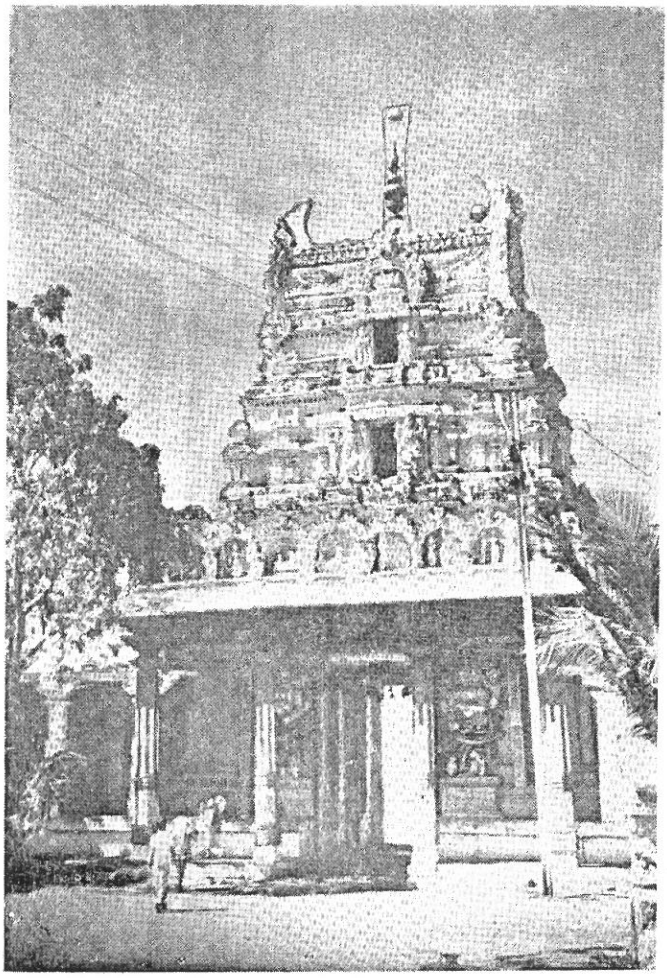
either retain one form uniformly from its base to the top, or combine two or more plans at different levels. It consisted originally of several distinct storeys, sometimes as many as sixteen, but the prevailing style is devoid of such differentiation into storeys. It rises directly above the sanctum, with the flat roof of the sanctum (*bhumika* or *kapota*) as its base (adhisthana). Sometimes, however, it encompasses the area covered by the circumambulatory path round the sanctum as well as the rectangular porch immediately in front of the sanctum. Its mass rests on a square base, called 'support' (*adhisthana* or *pitha*), and rises through stylized treatment of dormer-windows in several tiers to a dome-shaped tower (*sikhara*) surmounted by a cupola (*srnga* or *stupi*).

Alround the sanctum will be a passage, often narrow, permitting the devotees to pass round the sanctum in the customary act of devotion. This circumambulatory path (*pradakshina-patha* or *bhrama*) became a structural involvement as the temple grew in size; it is more naturally open, as it was in the early phase. The rectangular porch in front of the sanctum (*mukha-mandapa* or *mukha sala*) is a pillared hall, allowing the devotees to stand and watch the worship rituals as they are conducted inside the sanctum. When the temple became popular and the participants increased in number, there was need for an additional hall of considerable dimensions (*nava-ranga* or *maha-mandapa*) to accommodate large assemblies. In such an event, the porch became merely a 'vestibule' (*antarala*), structurally connecting the sanctum with the assembly-hall. This intermediary space was open in the early temples, as for instance it was in the Venkatesvara temple on the Tirumalai hills. But it tended to become a closed hall resting on pillars as the fortunes of the temple prospered.

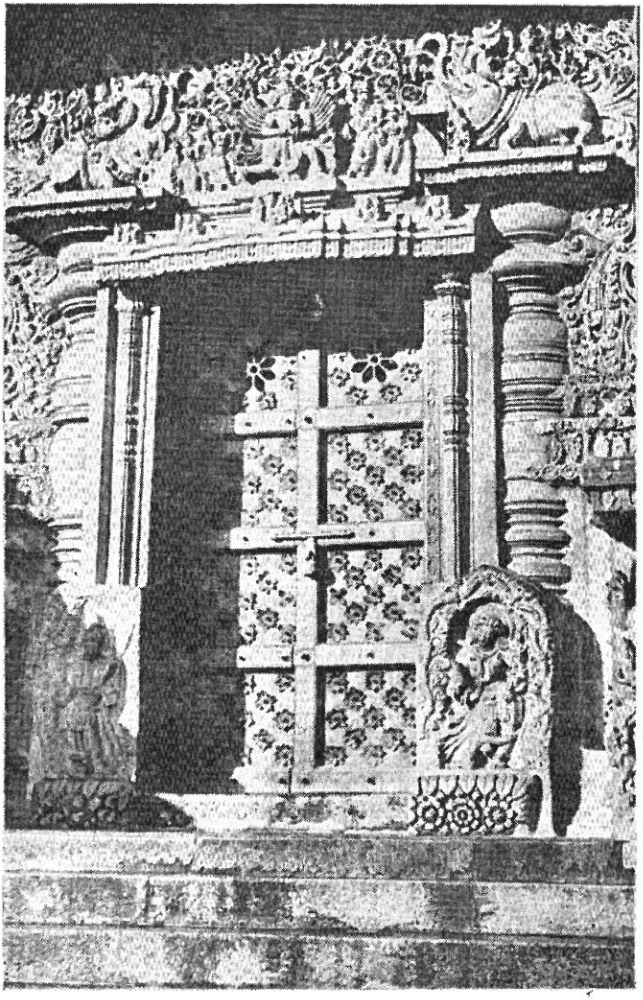
The area of the temple comprising of the sanctum and the halls as well as the tanks and gardens came to be enclosed by a wall (*prakara*), like the ramparts of a fort. But this was a later innovation, and became an especial feature of South Indian temples. Later canonical texts provide for as many as thirty-two such



concentric and enclosing walls, but recommend not more then five or seven, although the need to have more then one was rarely felt. The Ranganatha temple at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu has seven enclosing walls, encompassing almost the entire township. Where there are multiple walls, the one nearest to the sanctum is styled as 'the inner enclosure' (*antarmandapa*) and the outermost as 'the limiting lines' (*maryadahara*). In the South Indian temples the *prakaras* are not merely boundary walls; they accommodate a series of pillared halls or pavilions, rooms for storage, resting places for pilgrims, and shrines for minor deities. Although their chief purpose is protection of temple property, the walls are also rendered elegant and artistic.

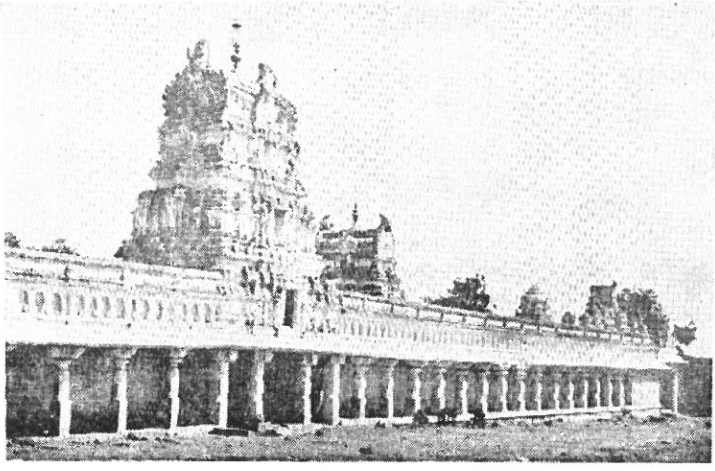


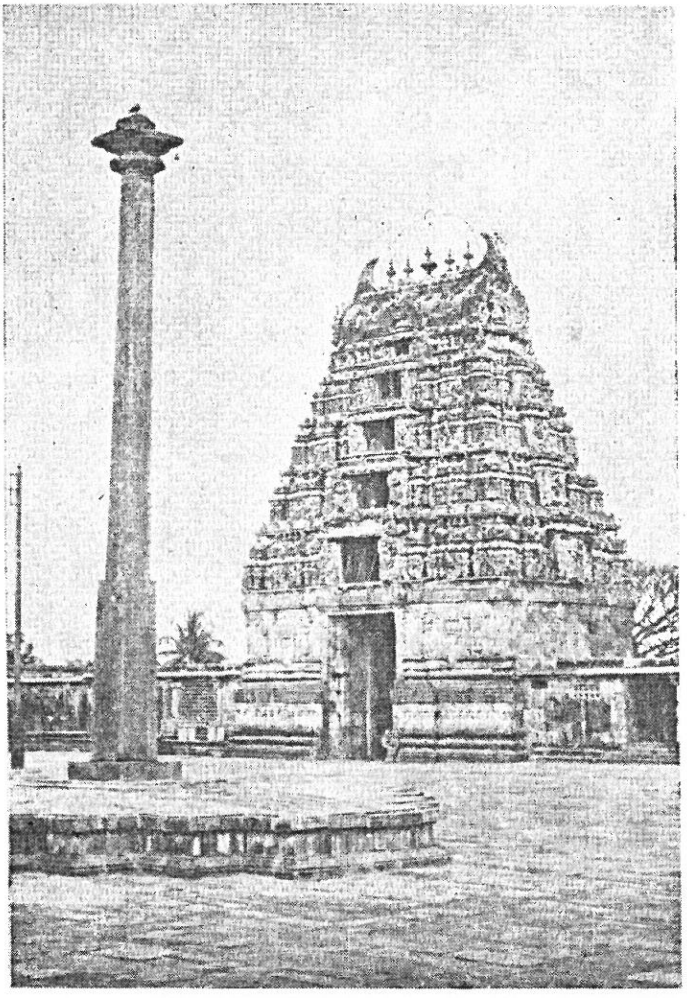
Although the texts prescribe that each enclosure must have doorways, on all four sides, with a tower over each one of them, and although we do find large



temples (such as the one in Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu) answering to this prescription, it is commonly the wall facing the sanctum alone that has the opening.

This doorway is called *maha-dvara*, and usually it is an immense one, allowing the temple elephant or small chariot to pass through. Since the tenth century it has become customary to have a tower above the doorway. The ancient texts such as *Vaikhanasagama*, *Maya-mata* and *Isana-siva-guru-paddhati* mention the gateway-tower, but do not consider it as important. One of the earliest towers that can be regarded as impressive is on the gateway to the Avani-Kandarpesvara temple in Kilaiyur (near Tirucchi in Tamil Nadu). The *gopuras* built by the later Chola and Pandyan rulers between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries are majestic and massive, as in Madhurai, Tirunelveli, Chidambaram, Kumbhakonam and Tiruvanaikkaval





(near Srirangam). They are multi-storeyed pyramids, oblong in plan, rising tier upon tier, tapering till the wagon-roof *sikhara* with fans (*nasi*) on either end representing mythical heads (*kirtimukha*) calls a halt. The really tall *gopura* may reach to the height of about 200 feet. The entire mass, built of brick and mortar, is filled with stucco figures and decorations.

Despite its immensity and artistic profusion, the *gopura* is not regarded as an essential feature of the temple. And it is unique to the South Indian temples. Neither the enclosing wall (*prakara*) nor the gateway-tower (*dvara-gopura*) figures prominently in the North Indian temples. And many temple-complexes, as for instance at Khajuraho, are devoid even of the enclosing walls.

The sanctum, which is the most important structural detail, is closely associated with 'the dispensing seat' (*bali-pitha*) which is installed in front of the sanctum directly facing the icon. It is a low stone altar, frequently modelled in the form of a flat lotus in bloom. In the early shrines it is a mere block of stone, but later, it assumed a relatively elaborate form with a base, cornices, wall-surface and the top-lotus. Actually there will be several 'seats' of this nature, installed in various ritualistically determined positions inside the enclosure and outside the sanctum. However, the one in front of the sanctum is the 'chief

seat' (*pradhana-pitha*), and it is on this that the sculptor spends his skill. The purpose of these seats is to offer food to the attendant and secondary deities, after the main offering has been made in the sanctum. The canons specify that the real temple comprises of

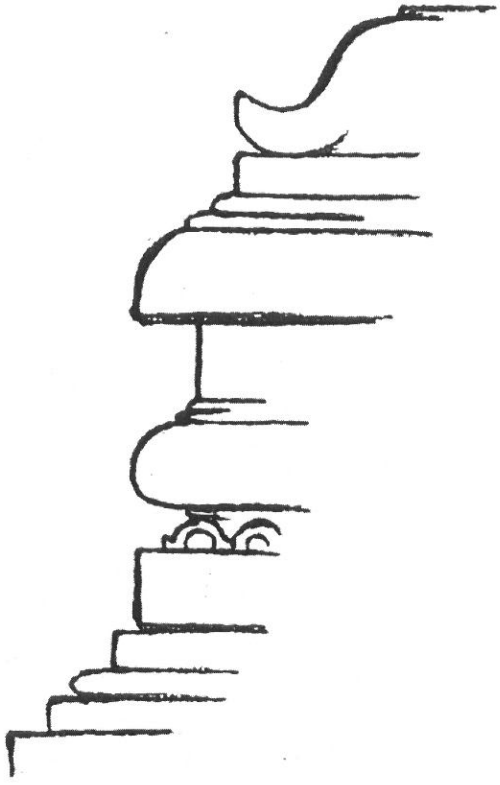
the sanctum, the tower on top of it, the icon inside it and 'the dispensing seat' in front of it. These are the essential parts of a shrine. Some texts even proclaim that the extent of the shrine reaches only as far as 'the dispensing seat' and no further.

CHAPTER IV

Symbolism

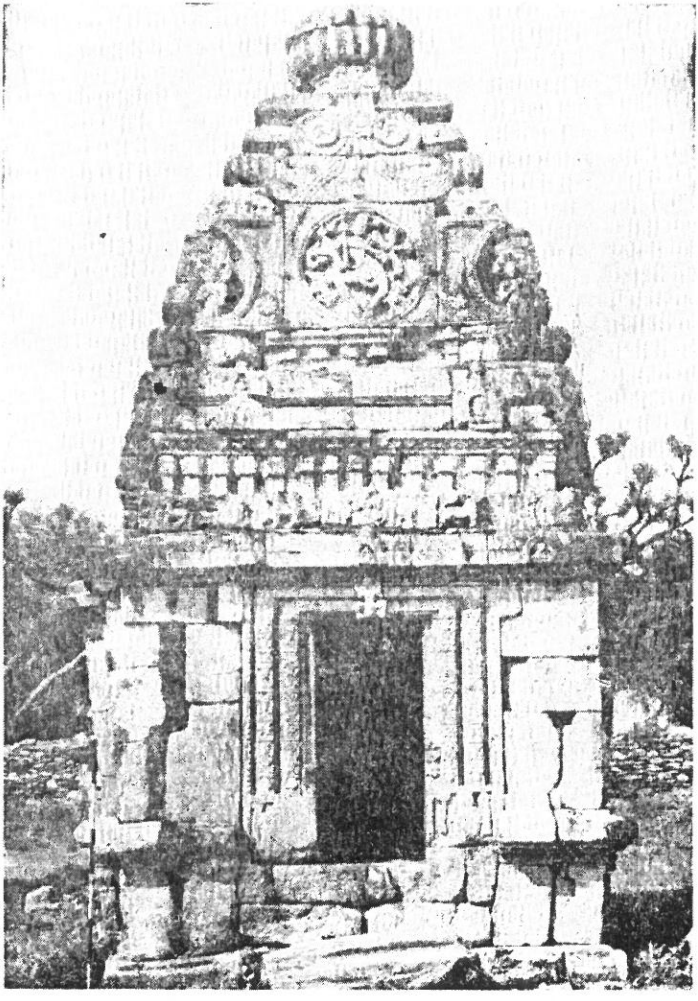
The Upanishads speak of the "inverted tree", *asvattha*, with roots hidden above and branches spreading below (*Katha*, 2, 3, 1). The tree is an ancient analogue of life here and beyond. We find references to it in the *Rigveda* itself, and we find it illustrated in the Indus Valley seals. The folk cults are filled with reverential involvements of trees. Trees have been claimed as totems, trees have been worshipped as divinities, and trees have played an important role in our economy. The two trends in the growth of the tree, the normal upward and the spiritual downward, emphasize the principle of complementareity in human life. The Indian temple has not only been associated with trees, but it is in fact a representation of the life-tree. It pictures the principle of complementareity. The sanctum is a model of the normal tree with roots below and branches above; and the spiral tower of the sanctum symbolizes the inverted tree, with roots above and the spreading branches below.

We have seen that before the sanctum (the 'womb-chamber', *garbha-grha*) is constructed, the ritual of 'impregnation' (or 'depositing womb', *garbha-nyasa*) is gone through. The 'womb' that is deposited in an underground chamber is a consecrated copper-pot containing the essential ingredients of growth and prosperity. It represents the roots of the temple-tree.



The sanctum rises above it in distinct tiers : the most fundamental tier is nature itself or the earth (*prakrti*, in Tamil *adippadai*), and over it is laid the primary plinth or 'base' (*tala*), to be covered by the secondary plinth or 'seat' (*pitha*). The three levels of growth are securely bound by a ritual as well as an engineering device known as 'packing' (*bandha*). Above this packed surface is laid the 'bed' of the sanctum (*adhishthana*, 'base' or 'support') which is seen as the floor.

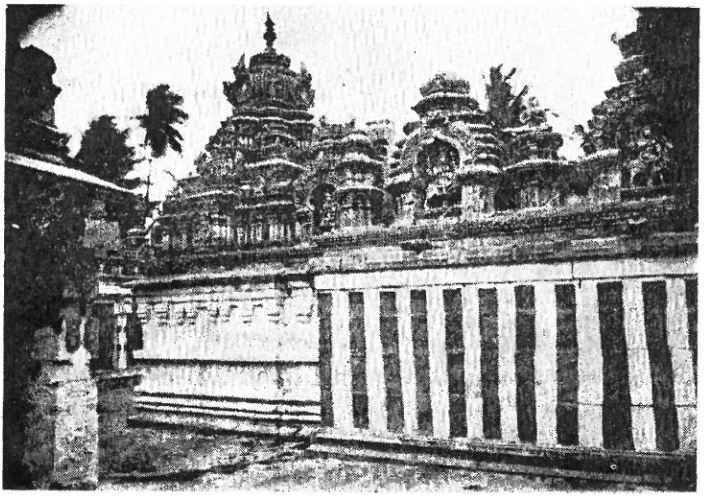
Walls rise from the 'bed' on all the four sides. It may be noted that the early sanctums were circular or apsidal in shape. A circle signifies the entire universe, and the sanctum is indeed a model of the universe. The primitive huts were also circular and they were nearer the model of the universe than modern buildings are. When the *agama* texts began to look upon the world as being bound by the four directions, they insisted that the shape of the sanctum must be a square, with its opening normally facing the East. The spot where the 'womb' is hidden would be the seat of the icon. The icon represents the sap of the temple tree, the four walls would indicate the spreading branches alround. The roof resting over the walls is technically called the 'row of doves' (*kapotapali* or simply *kapota*), after the birds that perch on tree-tops. The sanctum is thus a neat model of the growing tree.

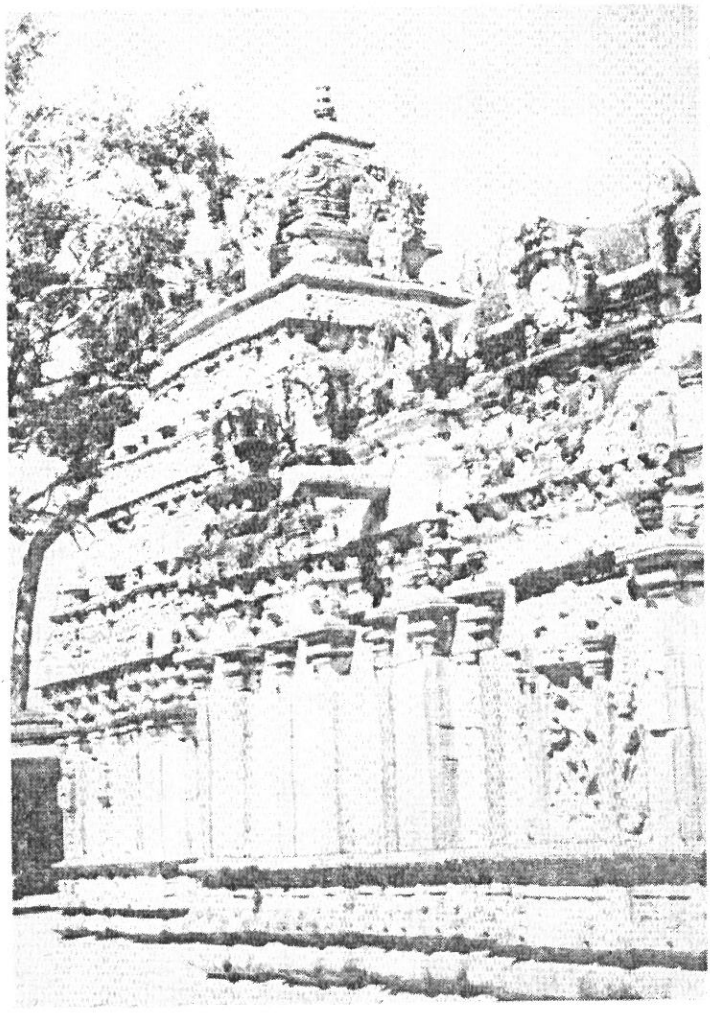


The early sanctum had a flat-roof, but there was an urge towards a superstructure above it, a spiral or

pyramidal tower which may be circular or polygonal in shape. The name for this architectural limb is '*vimana*', which expression has two connotations : "that which is without (*vi*) comparison (*mana-upama*)", and "that which brings about (*vimayate*) fruits". The

latter connotation, according to the Vedic commentator Sayana, refers to the Fire-God, Agni, who bestows benefits on the performers of sacrifices. The tower





over the sanctum is a physical representation of Fire. It is interesting that the foundation of the temple is

made to represent Earth (*prithvi*), the walls of the sanctum Water (*ap*) and the tower over it Fire (*tejas*); the finial of the tower stands for Air (*vayu*) and above it is the formless Ether (*akasa*). The sanctum is thus a constellation of the five elements that are basic to the entire universe. And Fire being the active element that fuses the others, the tower becomes an important limb in the structure of a temple.

The flat-roof (*kapota*) of the sanctum on which the tower rests and rises is overlaid by a single square stone slab known in the texts as 'the stone denoting the upper passage of life' (*brahmarandhra-sila*). The sanctum is viewed as the head. Right on top of the head is the passage through which the currents of life ascend to the higher realms. The life of the sanctum ascends to the tower through this stone slab. Around the four corners of this slab are placed the images of the vehicles or emblems that characterize the icon inside the sanctum. If the icon is Siva, bulls are shown; if Sakti lions; if Vishnu the sacred eagles (*garuda*); and if Subrahmanya peacocks.

The vehicles are normally on a level lower than their owners. What then is the significance of the deities of vehicles above the sanctum? They act as door-guardians for the icon in the sanctum. But where are the doors there? Here is an interesting aspect of the tower. The guarding deities stand bet-

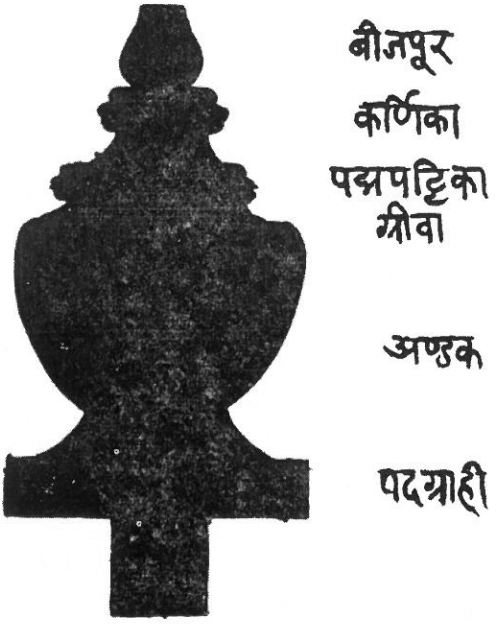
ween the sanctum and the tower, admitting the forces that descend through the tower into the sanctum. The tower is the inverted tree. The main mass of the tower represents the spreading branches, and the finial above it the roots.

Over the stone slab mentioned above, the 'neck' (*griva*) is introduced. And on the 'neck' rests the dome of the tower. The term *vimana* refers to the structure between the top-slab (*upana*) and the finial (*stupi*). Early *vimanas* were circular and conical, in keeping with the circular shape of the early sanctums. It rose in tiers (from one to twelve *talas*) of diminishing circumference until it ended in the point of the finial. Later the body of the *vimana* tended to be polygonal. Four-sided *vimanas* have become popular; six-sided and eight-sided ones are not rare. There are a few temples with the *vimana* having as many as sixteen sides. The Kallalangar temple at Madhurai is reputed to have as many as 64 sides! The prevailing shape in all such towers is pyramidal. But the early conical towers were close imitations of the conical thatched roof of the circular hut, built around a central bamboo pole which projected beyond the roof. Whatever the later form the tower took, the basic image of the cone or spire or pyramid persisted. The branches of the inverted tree spreading alround is the vision in the background.

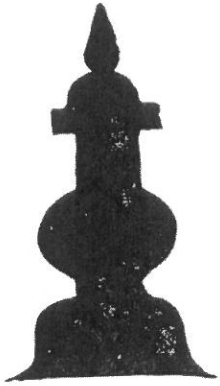
Above the *vimana* rests the 'vase' (*kalasa*), representing the roots of the inverted tree. Texts mention that the original *kalasa* was born as one of the fourteen precious gems that came out of the milky ocean when it was churned: and they suggest that it symbolizes blessing (*Prasada-mandana*). The old name for this unit was "kama-kumbha" or 'the pitcher of desire'. In the architectural development of the Indian temple, this feature arrived late, and its arrival appears to be subsquent to the canonical texts. And the early kalasas were probably only stone blocks, round or ribbed. They were in the nature of cap-stones that held structurally as well as stylistically the *vimana*, especially when it was tall and tapering, as in the North Indian temples. The copper vases were later innovations. Sometimes brass was used; opulence and vanity prompted gilded ones. But the *agama* books favour copper. The *kalasa* is actually a vessel, like the vessel that is deposited under the sanctum. And, like the latter, this also is made to contain tokens of growth and prosperity, viz., cereals with subtle seeds (such as millet) and nine precious stones.

This feature has several members, such as 'the foot-hold' (*padagrahi*) which is structurally imbedded in the masonry of the tower, 'the egg' (*anda*) or the belly, 'the neck' (*griva*), 'the lotus-band' (*padma-*

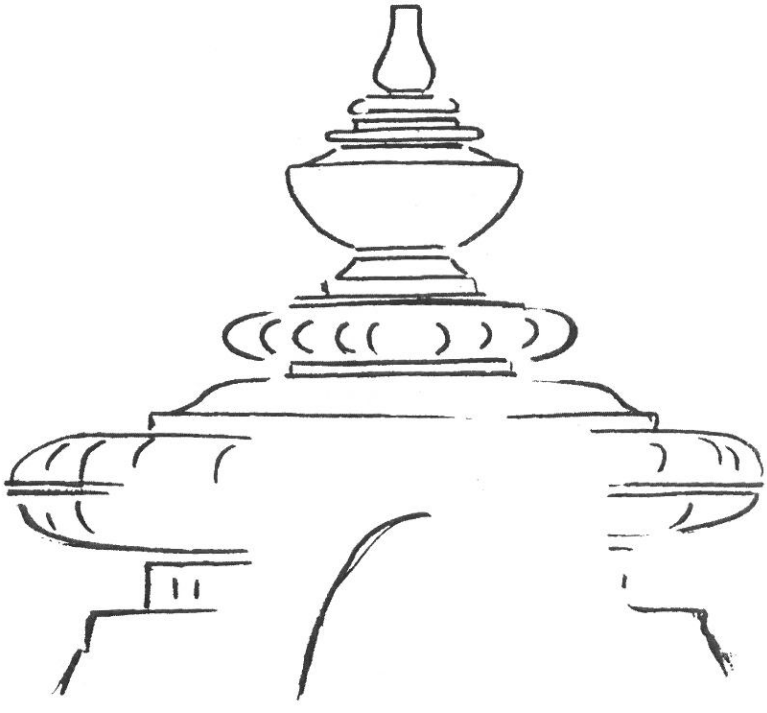
pattika), 'the rim' (*karnika*), and the 'bud' (*bija-pura*). The shape of this unit could resemble the bell, the flower-bud, the lamp, coconut, altar or pot. The significance of all these shapes is that it symbolizes the potentialities of life.



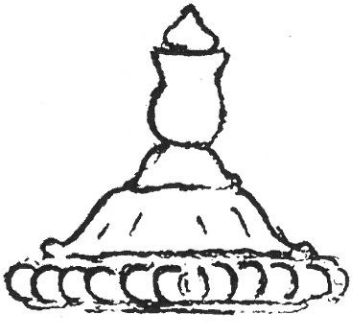
The ritual of installing the metal vase over the brick and mortar body of the tower is an interesting one. The vase is not bound to the tower by any packing material like mortar or cement. It is only fixed by a hollow rod that juts out of the center of



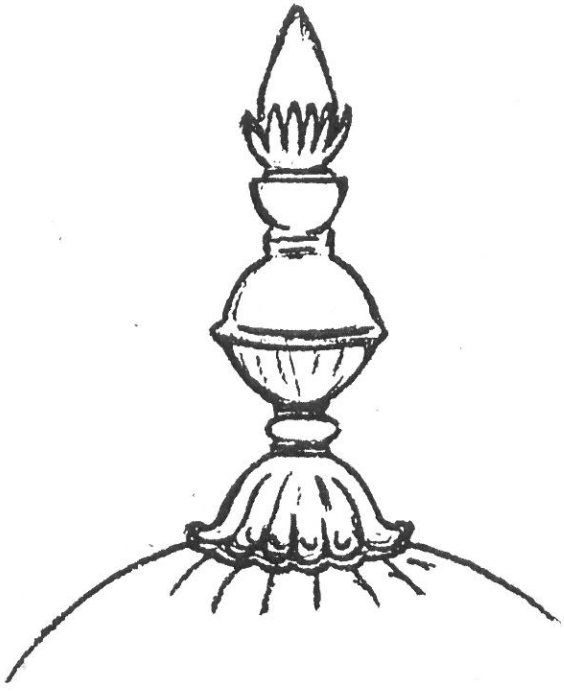
मुकुलाग्र
मुकुल
वेदिका
नाल
कुम्भ
कण्ठ
दल



the tower and runs through the vase. It is through this tube that the 'tokens' (cereals and precious stones) are introduced. It is sealed above the body of the *kalasa* before the 'bud' rises.



The body has five limbs : the 'seat' (*pitha*) in the form of a lotus flower whose petals open out completely; the 'neck' on which the bulging out 'pot' (*kumbha*), which is the next limb, rests ; the 'brim' or lid for the 'pot' ; the 'flower' which opens upward; and finally the 'flower' bud which tapers off to a point. The 'bud' is actually the central

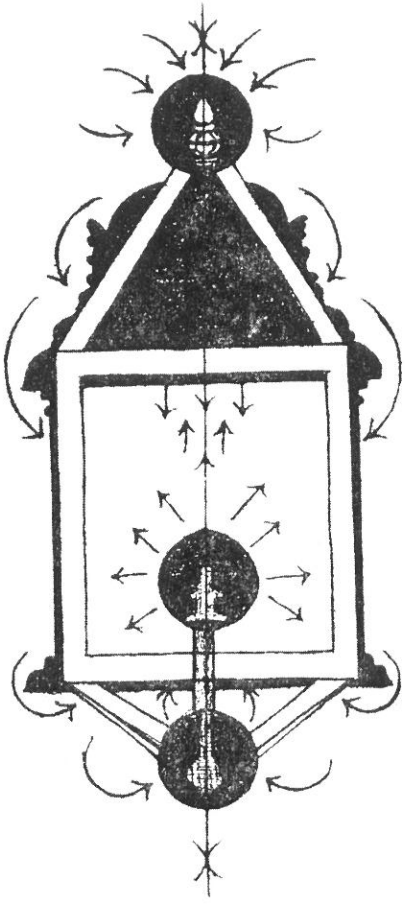


part of the flower whose peripheral petals are separated. It signifies new life and growth. The *kalasa* has an important hidden component, viz. 'the golden person' (*suvarna-purusha*), who is regarded as the very soul of the temple. The belly of the *kalasa* is made to contain a tiny cot made in silver, copper or sandal-wood, over which is laid on a soft-feather mattress the golden icon of this 'person', with one hand holding a lotus flower over the heart and the other carrying a triple-flag. Four little pots made in gold, silver or copper, and containing consecrated

water are placed on the four sides of the cot. Near the recumbent 'person' is kept a golden or silver pot filled with ghee. The procedure of introducing this 'golden person' into the body of the *kalasa* is known as *hridaya-varnaka-vidhi*. It is described in detail in such texts as *Aparajita-paripriccha* and *Diparnava*.

The entire structure of the *kalasa* thus represents the roots of the inverted tree. It bears a correspondence with the 'womb' under the sanctum. Both are roots, the latter urging the upward growth of the ordinary tree, and the former the downward growth of the inverted tree. The 'womb', the icon and the finial are structurally collinear and run along the same axis of divine consciousness. This consciousness in its ascent transforms itself into the icon, and materializes into the sanctum. In its descent, it runs through the finial and is concretized as the mass of the tower. Under the ground it is in a dormant, nebulous condition; and in the sanctum it gets transformed into a world of materiality and activity. In the tower it rises above this world, before it is absorbed in the universal consciousness at the peak of the finial.

Man's approach is one of ascent of matter towards the spirit. But it becomes meaningful only if there is a complementary process of descent : the divine spirit must flow down into the material. The finial of the tower symbolizes the dual act of gathering the divine



essence from the formless cosmos and communicating it to the main mass of the tower. The essence here acquires a concrete form and then descends into the sanctum, to be focussed in the icon. The sanctum is man's head, as will be evident in the analogue we will shortly consider. The stone slab over the roof

(*brahma-randhra-sila*) is the top of the head, representing the esoteric passage known as *brahmarandhra.* The hollow tube in the vase is the external projection of the main channel in the human constitution, the *sushumna-nadi.* The axis on which the 'womb', 'the icon', and the finial are positioned is also the path along which the ascent and descent of vital forces may be achieved.

The shrine thus demonstrates the constellation of the human and the divine currents ; matter moves up and the spirit flows down. The devotee that stands in front of the icon is expected to partake in this transaction. The emanations that proceed from the icon must be picked up by faith in his heart. Devotion is the transformer. The rituals conducted within the shrine involve these ideas, and attempt to facilitate transformation along the horizontal axis of icon-devotee. The devotee represents active matter and the icon passive spirit. The two are brought together in the creative act of worship.

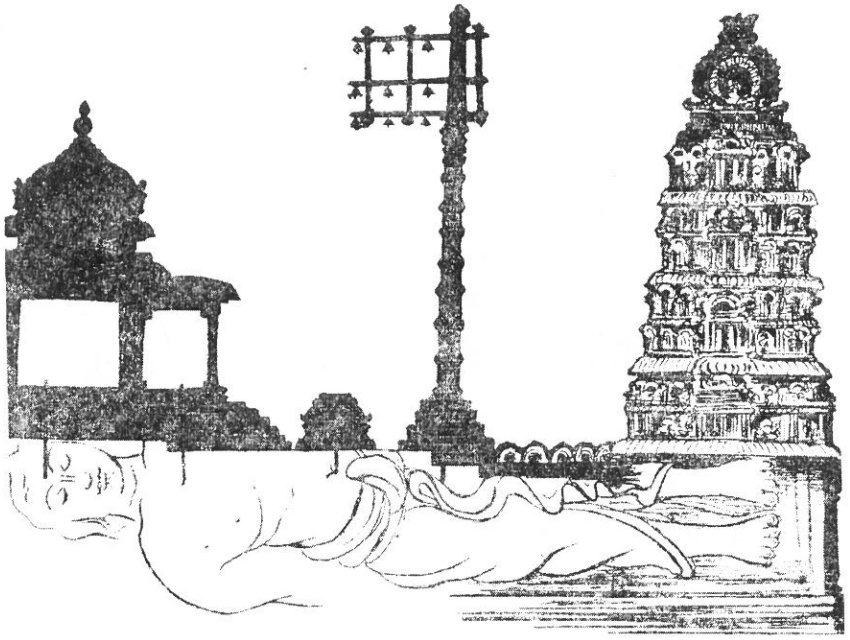
When the Upanishads speak of the 'inverted tree', they mean the phenomenal world of matter and spirit having its roots in the 'unmanifest' emanation of the Absolute. The reference is to man that is involved in the world of ignorance, passion, desire and activity. Man s roots are hidden in the abstract, 'thousand-petalled lotus' (*sahasrara*), a center just above the

head, outside the physical frame. He spreads out into the world and moves away from his roots. He is therefore distressed. The task before him is to discover the roots, and make them the real base for his being and becoming. This means an upward thrust on his part, and a concurrent descent from the source of his being, the 'thousand-petalled lotus'. The Yoga texts speak of different psychic centres in the body, pictured as so many lotuses with their petals bent downward, in the normal condition of existence; the adept will be able to reorganize and correct the vital currents inside him so as to give the petals the upward slant. It may be recalled that the level below the 'pot' in the finial (above the *vimana*) is pictured as a lotus with petals that droop and spread out, and the level above the 'brim' has a flower the petals of which turn up and close in. The sculptured motifs of lotus flowers with petals positioned thus are commonly to be seen in several aspects of temple structure. The row of flowers with petals turned upward is known to sculptors as 'padma-vari', and the row where the petals are bent down 'kumuda-vari'. The petals of the lotus turn up when the sun shines. The 'kumuda' is the blue water-lily that blooms when the moon is up. The divine grace is the sun, and man's effort is the moon. Their conjoint operation is what is pictured in such sculptured pieces.

The analogy of man's constitution with the temple architecture is a favourite theme of many canonical texts like *Sri-prasna, Vishnu-tantra, Silpa-ratna, Vatula-gama* and *Aparajita-silpa*. The texts insist that the devotee must approach the temple as if it were the body of the Divine. They further highlight significant correspondences. The sanctum is the head, the tower the top-knot of hair (*sikha*), the pavilion middle parts of the body, the enclosure hands, and the entrance-tower feet. The icon within the sanctum is the personification of the mantras. The temple thus becomes a tool for the devotee and a technique of worship. We may recall what the Talmud suggests: "If you desire to perceive the invisible, then perceive the visible". This is precisely what the canonical texts drive at. Some texts (e.g., *Paramesvara-samhita*) point out that the base of the temple represents the earth, the sanctum the intermediate space, and the tower the heavens. In the scheme of 'seven worlds', the tower comprises three worlds: the seat thereof 'jana-loka', the pot portion 'tapo-loka' and the spike (*stupi*) 'satya-loka'.

A more interesting thought is the projection of the temple architecture in terms of human constitution. The saying that "the human body is said to be the temple and soul the icon" is found in many texts. The architectural terms used in all the texts are the

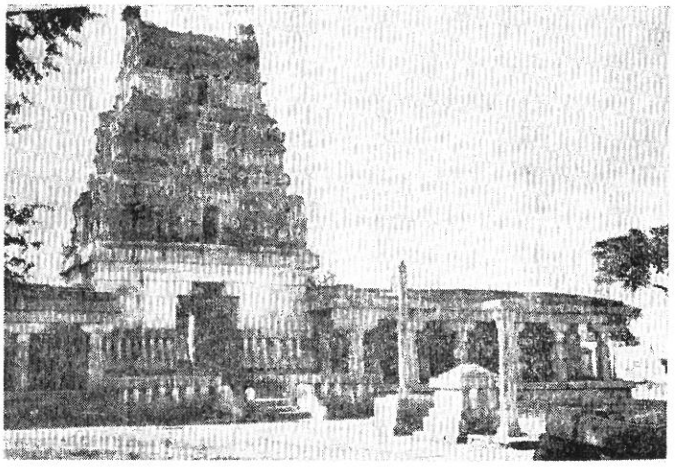
names of parts of the human body : 'feet' (*pada*), 'knee' (*janu*), 'thighs' (*jangha*), 'belly' (*kukshi*), 'neck' (*griva*), 'shoulders' (*kandhara*), 'nose' (*nasika*), 'face' (*mukha*), 'head' (*sirsha*) and so on. As a temple is laid out, it is said to picture a man lying down. His feet connote the entrance-tower, his genital organ the flag-staff (*dhvaja-stambha*), his belly the assembly-hall (*ranga-mandapa*), his heart 'the porch' (*antarala* or *sukanasi*), his head the sanctum, and the brows-meet the seat of the icon. There is another account which reckons the neck as the sanctum and the head



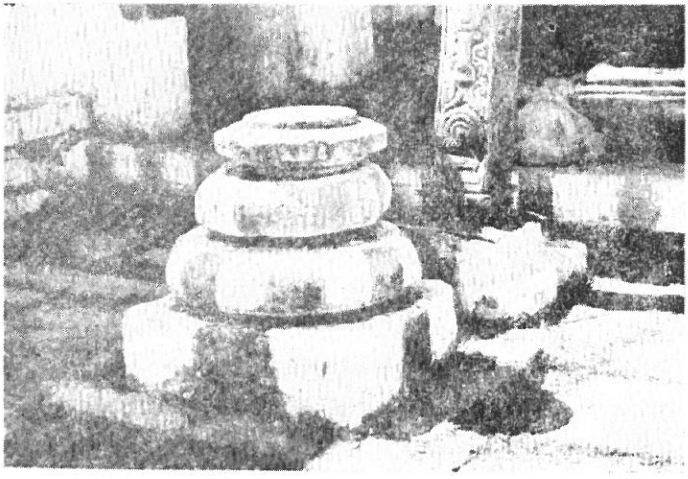
as the tower; the heart, according to this account, is the porch where the devotee stands and looks at the icon.

The forehead of man is said to represent the sanctum, and top of head, the tower. The space between the eyebrows is the seat of the icon. The icon is located in the *ajna* center. The finial of the tower is unseen above the head, in the *sahasrara* region; and the 'womb' of the sanctum at the tip of the nose.

Mention must be made here of the structural detail known as the altar or 'the dispensing seat' (*bali-pitha*), which is an indispensable associate of the sanctum. As already described, it is a small but sty-



lized stone seat that is installed directly in front of the icon and very near the sanctum. Some texts prescribe that it must be outside the *gopura* or the first enclosure (*Vishnu-tilaka*, *Manasara*). It is on this seat that the food offerings to the attendant divinities and the guardian goblins are placed, after the main food offering to the icon in the sanctum has been completed. There will be several such seats around the sanctum in positions determined by the canonical texts. Usually altars are provided in the eight directions, but the one in front of the sanctum is regarded as the chief (*pradhana*), and it will be the most ornate, and stylistically majestic, with several limbs such as the base, cornices, wall-surface with door-lets or niches.



It is usually made of hard granite, but it is also built in bricks and mortar. There is a provision also for metal ones and when the altar is wooden it is recommended to be covered by metal sheets (*Karanagama*). Texts like *Silpa-ratna* indicate that mud altars were also common at one time. Most texts suggest that the size of the altar should be 1/8, 1/7 or 1/5 of the dimension of the sanctum. Depending on their sizes and shapes, altars are classified into several types such as Sri-bandha, Padma-bandha, Sri-bhadra, Sarvatobhadra and so on. Further details about the rituals connected with the altar will be given later.

Its development and incorporation into the Indian temple architecture are hard to delineate. Perhaps, it is a remnant of the Vedic *yupa,* and in many temples we do find *bali-pithas* which are merely crude stone blocks or wooden posts. In the well-known temples, it is not unusual to find two 'dispensing seats' placed together, one crudely simple and the other stylistically sculpted. The former can be presumed to be the original, and the latter a later addition. It is also likely that the stone seat in early days was meant to offer animal food, and some canonical texts do contain details of offerings which include flesh mixed with turmeric powder. Whatever the origin, this seat is ritualistically very significant. In fact, the area of the real temple reached only to these seats; whatever

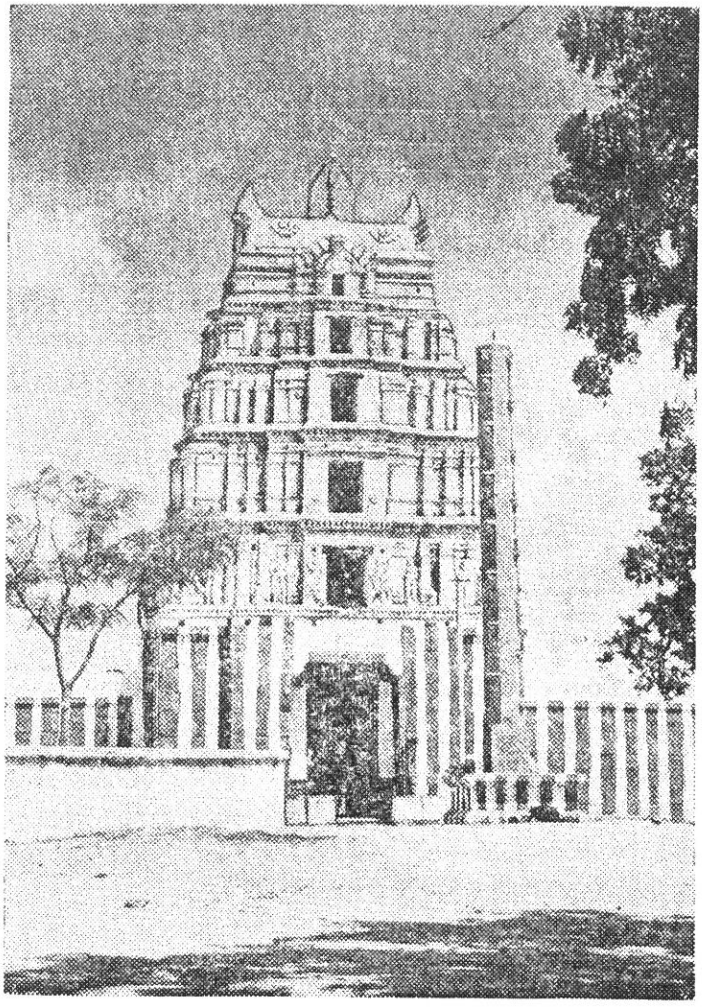
structure is beyond them is deemed to be secondary, answering more to the donor's fancy than to the prescriptions of the texts. A text clearly lays down that a shrine consists only of four limbs : the sanctum, the

icon, the tower above the sanctum, and the 'dispensing seat'. And another text speaks of the 'dispensing seat' as a replica of the tower above the sanctum.

A text claims that the dispensing seat and the tower above the sanctum (*vimana*) are indeed the same, for it is there that the gods assemble (*Narayana-samhita*). Indeed the shapes of the two closely resemble each other, with the difference that the altar is crowned by a flat lotus motif while the tower ends in a round *kalasa* surmounted by a spike (*stupi*). And like the tower, the altar may be square, circular or polygonal.

The symbolism of this seat is not very different either. But its position is along the horizontal axis of consciousness. It represents the meeting place of the active consciousness of the devotee and the passive consciousness of the divinity. In the projection of the temple-image on the human body, the 'seat' is located in the navel, which esoterically is considered the center or hub of man's physical existence. Before the devotee enters the porch in front of the sanctum, he has ceremonially to go round the 'dispensing seat', which act symbolizes centering himself adequately. It should prepare him to receive the emanations from the icon.

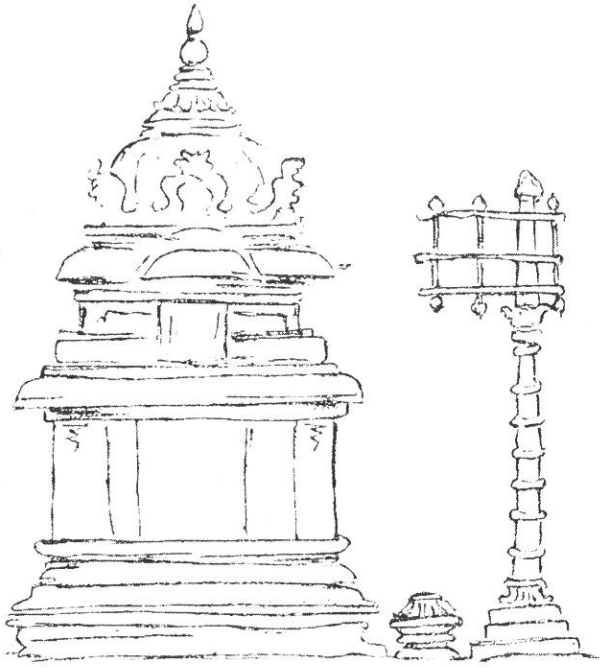
The flag-staff (*dhvaja-stambha*) is often seen close to the 'dispensing seat' in South Indian temples. It is



usual for the two to be together. Some texts prescribe that the 'dispensing seat' must be located between the sanctum and the flag-staff, although in practice the

flag-staff frequently takes the middle position. The custom of erecting this tall thin column, whose height varies from fifty to eighty feet, appears to be a late one. The early purpose was only to indicate the position of the sanctum. Even today, the mean shrines in villages and on highways when they are otherwise indistinguishable have flags on them, to show that they are places of worship. In North Indian temples, it is a practice to fly long and flowing banners from the tower itself. The canonical texts favour wooden or bamboo poles, with an uneven number of joints, upto twenty-five. Covering them with metal plates was optional. And the flag-staff was not necessarily intended as a permanent structure. Putting it up marked the commencement of occasional festivals in the temple.

However, in course of time the permanently fixed flag-staff became a common feature in temple architecture. The wooden pole, covered with copper, brass, or even silver plates gilded, is installed on a raised stone platform, often square in shape, in front of the sanctum. The top portion of this tall mast will have three horizontal perches (symbolising righteousness, reputation and propriety, or the three divinities Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Siva the Destroyer), pointing towards the sanctum. The 'seat' of the flag-staff as well as the mast with



perches came to be highly stylized in South India during the days of the Chola and Pandya rulers, for the flag-staff was uniquely a royal insignia.

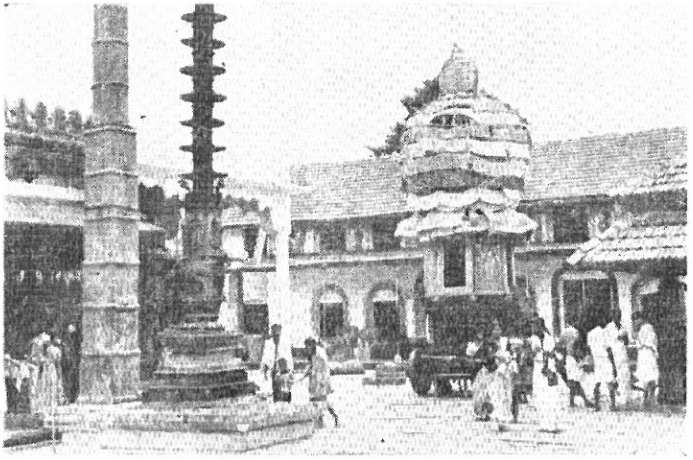
When the flag-staff became a permanent detail in the temple, the commencement of festivals began to be signalized by ceremonially hoisting a flag on it (*masuraka*). Normally, however, the flag-staff will only be a column without the banner (*nispataka*). It would only indicate the limit of the consecrated area of the shrine. When occasion demands, a banner would be flown from its top (*sapataka*). *Hayasirsha-samhita*, a Pancaratra text, which insists that a building

(*prasada*) without a flag would be in vain, gives some interesting details about the position and height of the mast, the type of bamboo that is to be chosen, the colour of the cloth for the banner, and so on. The benefit of the flag-mast is here said to be "obtainment of all that is desired". Another text, *Siva-sarvsva* describes the purpose of the flag as indication of the insignia of the deity, or of the characteristic vehicle of the icon that is within the sanctum.

The symbolism of the flag-staff is not clear in the textual accounts, probably because it was a late innovation and not a necessary involvement of

the shrine. It was an introduction from royal association, and therefore the usual symbolism is that of victory and prosperity. A tall flag-post, richly decorated and elaborately installed, would mean a rich and prosperous temple commanding royal patronage ; it is a sign of pomp and pride. God is the greatest of kings and the temple is His palace.

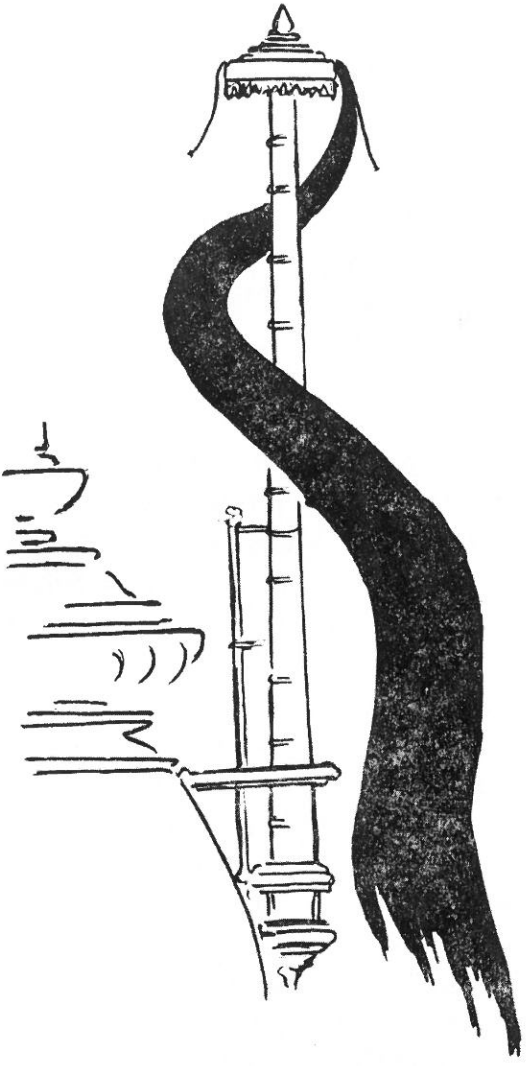
A text mentions that when the flag is hoisted in front of the temple, gods as well as manes will be delighted. Otherwise, according to the text, demons and goblins would sneak in and make the temple their abode (*Prasada-mandana*). The association of flag-posts with tall lamp-posts in the temples is well-known. One may recall that there is a custom of



erecting tall *Yama-deepas* on occasions to provide satisfaction for the departed ancestors and to illumine their path towards our realm. The flag-post is also magical in its significance. The texts assign Siva to the bottom of the post, Brahma to the middle portion and Vishnu to the top.

While in the South, the flag-cloth (*pataka*) is occasionally tied to the flag-post, it is ever present in the temples of the North. The length of the cloth in the latter case will be equal to the length of the flag-post, which will be fixed to the top member of the tower over the sanctum. South Indian *vimanas*, however, are not meant to accommodate the flag-post, which is a distinct member, outside the inner enclosure.

But the 'flag' in the traditional context also means a resolve to exert and a will to succeed. Hoisting the the flag suggests setting out to conquer. The devotee coming into the temple would have to resolve to conquer his own baser nature, to set out on a war with his own mean disposition; a look at the flag-mast would be a reminder for him in this regard. The Sanskrit word for the flag or banner, *dhvaja*, strictly means whatever is raised. It therefore has the connotations of hope, desire (especially erotic desire which is physically expressed as erection, and the Sanskrit expression is frequently employed in this context), pride, arrogance and will. Whatever raises man to a



higher level of understanding and activity is a *dhvaja*. It is a call that God is high and above (*Mahabharata*, 1, 33, 17). The characteristic animal and the insignia of the icon on the banner gives a direction to the devotee's desire and will. When the devotee sights the banner and bows to it, he resolves to rise higher.

The Indian temple is thus a constellation of symbolism. It is an image that is at once relevant to to human aspirations and persistent in human thought and actions. The texts of Indian architecture which provide us with all the details of measurements and parts of the temple, and prescribe the rites of installation and rituals of worship, also indicate the real value of a shrine :

> "The ritualists have their God in the fire ; but the wise folk find Him in their own heart. It is the dullwitted one that seeks God in an icon. Those who have higher understanding see God in everything."

CHAPTER V

The Traditional Perspective

The Indian temple as an art form has a human as well as a divine character. It exists in its material outfit as something that endures in space and time and as something that was a response to a situational need. It is a building, accomplished by engineers and masons who follow the laws of the physical world and employ their technical skill. Indian temple has even a mathematical basis ; the *mana*-orientation was almost in the nature of an obsession with the old temple-builders in India. But the inspiration to the building activity was in every case derived from religious mysticism. The temple has also a psychological and spiritual existence. It is in the nature of 'sacred art', bringing man into contact with the divine. It enables man to feel the spiritual presence, and to find it in his own heart.

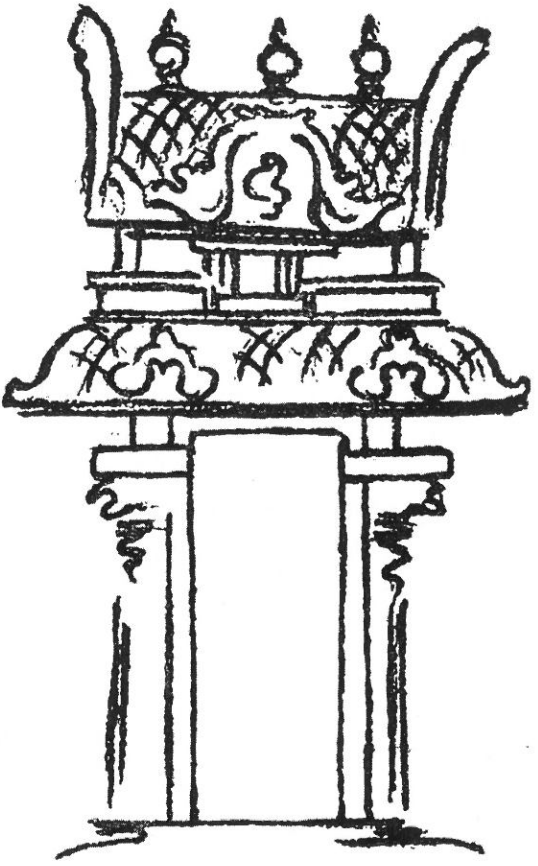
It is not so much to pray that a devotee visits a temple as to feel this presence. He could pray anywhere, and, as every devotee knows, the well-known and popular temples of the present-day are the last

places in the world where one can really get into a prayerful mood. If one does not have an inclination for this presence, he does not go beyond what is physical and visible in the temple. It is not enough for the devotee to believe in God or to believe in the efficacy of prayer. He must have an intuitive apprehension of the presence that makes the temple a sacred enclosure and he must be eager to partake of that presence. Without such equipment, the temple would lack meaning and value.

Sensitivity to spiritual presence is not guided by considerations of utility. The Indian temple has been many things: art gallery, economic institution, political power, social organization, crafts-guild, fortress, and refectory. All this has only contributed to the decay of the temple as a spiritual institution. The temple now inclines to be in a less austere setting. The civilization of machine has made an inroad into it. It is no longer "static and peaceful" as it used to be when the twin demons of speed and utility had not as yet possessed it or us. The human perspective has altered, and the temple has become a mere building, and, worse, an office.

The sanctity of the Indian temple depends not on its art or its utility but on its esoteric significance. The texts of Indian architecture are no doubt prolix and full of technical details; but they do not lose sight

of the truth that the temple is chiefly meant to be a tool of spiritual realization. The devotee goes to the temple with faith in his heart and expects to find grace in the shrine. It is only when man has faith that he can lay claim to grace. And faith does not need



gnosis or understanding of the symbolism involved in the temple; it even excludes intellection. What it needs is the appropriate mood. In order to create an atmosphere or a mood of holiness and sanctity, which would enable a devotee's faith to become more receptive to this spiritual presence, certain traditional prescriptions like physical cleanliness, postural reverence, and ritual offering have been introduced.

The devotee would have intuitionally apprehended the symbolism. Ability to vocalize or convey it is a different thing, and may be wholly unnecessary. He would not be seduced by the illusion of anthropomorphism; he would not mistake the human looking icon for a mere human being, nor a temple for a mere building. Art in the temple will not distract him, and technical skill will not hold his attention. He floats over these obstacles and directly reaches the shrine to receive grace.

But when the traditional hold has been loosened, intellectual apprehension of symbolism becomes necessary. Understanding must augment faith. But nothing can be more harmful than attempting to understand ancient images by contemporary attitudes. We often slip into the error of wanting to understand things without really involving ourselves in them. No

door can be opened with merely collecting an odd assortment of keys. The proper key must be selected and involved in the lock. The attitude for understanding needs to be relevant, legitimate and receptive. The pretensions and prejudices of the modern mind can easily lead one astray. Unless sincerity and humility are allowed to inspire the urge to understand, the understanding is bound to be defective and superficial.

The Indian temple has its own symbolism, at once profound, mysterious and relevant for all time. The 'manifestation' of this symbol-complex is in terms of elaborate and intricate spatial projections, material masses of constructions, passionate patterns of forms, and schematic representations of techical skill. Such manifestations, possessing an objective character, are sought to be described and classified according to prevalent styles in well-defined periods of time and within certain territorial confines. But the 'content' of the temple is an abstract something hidden within (or revealed through) these 'objective' appearances, and quite unattached to styles or periods. It has an inner dimension which is real for the devotee but elusive for a visitor to the temple. The latter is interested in what 'is' out there, while the former is concerned with what 'may be' in relation to himself. This veiling of the content for a casual person (that is to say, one devoid of faith) is one of the functions of art, for art does not reveal so much as conceal.

The content cannot be concrete. But it is real, provided the perspective is proper. One of the errors the casual man is prone to is the thought that whatever is not manifest either does not exist or is not relevant. He does not suspect that the things that do not appear before the senses may appear to the mind, that what is not apprehended by the intellect may be understood by intuition. Manifestation is in reality an incarnation of the content, which is available only to intuition.

It is natural that the aspect of manifestation comes to be formalized. The temple is a public institution; its appeal is collective. The priest performs the worship-ritual, not for his own sake but for the sake of all *(parartha)*, unlike in the worship at home. For the devotee, worship in the temple cannot be a substitute for worship at home. In fact, worship at home is obligatory, while the visit to a temple is optional. There is an interesting account of the origin of temples in a celebrated text, *Vishnudharmottara :*

Time is divided in ancient Indian thought into four immense periods, *Krta*, *Treta*, *Dvapara* and *Kali*. *Kali* is the dark age we now live in, and temples appeared only during this period. In the first of these divisions, there was no need for temple because gods lived and moved amongst humans. In the next division, the presence of gods became scarce and they

descended on earth only when men invoked them in sacrifices ; but then they came as gods. In the third great division of time, men had only to make images of these gods and worship them ; and the gods came down in disguised forms, showering their grace. The worship at that time was only domestic ; the shrines were within the precincts of homes. During the last phase of time, temples (as public shrines) began to be built and icons were installed. But the gods ceased coming down in their own or disguised forms. However, their presence was felt when the icons were properly installed, and temples correctly built. The priests, who were professional performers of worship, were the only ones who were competent to compel this presence; others could only be participants and beneficiaries. In the early phases of this period, the sages merely installed the icons, and the divine presence was with them ever after. But in the later and decadent phases, the presence could be secured only by continuous worship and periodical festivals.

This is an interesting account, where historical facts are combined with symbolic interpretations. Temples were later than domestic shrines. In the remains of the Indus Valley civilization, we find evidences of domestic shrines : but there is no trace of a public temple. And domestic shrines were later than the magical procedures (sacrifices and rituals), which

came into vogue only at a stage when man felt separated from the supranormal forces. Magical rites, domestic shrines and temple-complexes may, in a sense, be considered as distinct phases of religious evolution; but it would be an error to look upon that evolution as a succession of disappearing and appearing phases. Magical rites, domestic shrines and temple-complexes co-exist in Indian life, and they have always done so. This co-existence has been possible because all three are essentially symbols; and as symbols they do not deny history but transcend it.

Thus it becomes important to recognize that Indian temples have sprung from a traditional symbol that is at once ancient and enduring. The temple would remain an enigma for one who fails to appreciate the content as well as the manifestation of this symbol. For one who stops at the manifestations of this symbol the temple would present itself as 'luminous obscurity' (the expression of Frithjof Schuon, in another context); and one who would be content with considering only the content would see it as 'obscured light'. The symbol is revealed not only by its material manifestation but also by a vision of its content. The vision in this case is both aesthetic and spiritual.

In order to enable our understanding the aesthetic as well as the spiritual aspects of the temple-symbol, the Indian tradition has crystallized a doctrinal ap-

proach which comprehends the idea, the method, and the purpose behind the temple-building activity. The approach is referred to as 'Agama', which indeed is a generic expression meaning "that which has come from a hoary past": it is the ever-active presence of a useful framework for our thoughts and actions, for our growth and fulfilment. 'Agama' with reference to temple deals with the temple-building activities as well as the procedures of worship in temples. The former appears to emphasize aesthetics, while the latter the spiritual aspect. But the distinction between them is arbitrary and unreal, for Beauty and Serenity cannot in fact be separated.

There are doctrinal formulations in *Agama* regarding the selection of proper land for the temple, the purificatory ceremonies prior to the construction, the plan, 'lay-out', direction, size, relative proportions of the plinth and other structural parts, permissible decorations and embellishments, installation of icons and deities in the sanctum as well as in the niches and pavilions, rituals of daily worship and periodical festivals, purifications and sacramental activities, and so on. These formulations take manifestations and content of the symbol as two complementary elements.

The temple as an incarnation of the symbol is the medium of rituals. Ritual is active thought. Rituals

are actions that lead to contemplation, and contemplation strives to achieve the serenity of consciousness that lifts one from the stress of common life. The *Agama* focusses attention on the temple as a pattern of rituals. It provides us with a perspective to understand the symbol and act effectively with regard to it. It seeks to construct for us a half-way house between the limitations that we have and the perfection we aim at. Limitations are inherent in human life; we live amidst what pass for the commonplace and the ugly. Perfection is a divine quality; it is also beautiful. The purpose of rituals is to facilitate the passage from the commonplace to the unique, from ugliness to beauty, from what is human to what may be divine.

The *Agama* has an earlier oral tradition, communicated through generations of craftsmen and priests. It has also a later written tradition, consisting of hundreds of texts and manuals meant for craftsmen and priests. The oral tradition has almost disappeared, for craftsman as well as priests have fallen on decadent days. The texts and manuals have, for the same reason, gone into oblivion, neglected by those for whom they were meant and ignored by others in the community. Fortunately, however, many of these literary works are available, mostly in manuscripts and some of them in print. The literary tradition comprises of works that are usually classified into three classes : revela-

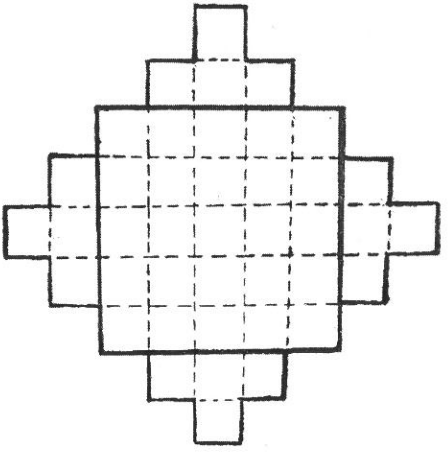
tions (*divya*), composition of sages (*muni-prokta*), and writings of ordinary men (*paurusha*). The revealed texts claim a hoary antiquity and have been relied upon by the other two classes of works. The compositions of sages are original works, based on inspiration, intuition and contemplation. They now exist only in citations and fragments. The third group of works is largely in the nature of compilations of relevant passages from the compositions of sages. They employ intelligence and reason, and are also liable to err. They are chronologically recent, and some of them are what the priests and craftsmen mostly have relied upon for several generations now.

The fundamental assumption in this mixed tradition is that Divinity has two aspects : the hidden and pervasive aspect (*nishkala*), and the manifest and specific aspect (*sakala*). The former is abstract and is likened to oil in the sesasum seeds, fire in fuel, butter in milk, and scent in flower. It is all-pervasive and is settled in the human heart as the 'inner guide' (*antaryamin*). It has no form, and is not apprehended by sense-organs or by the ordinary mind. The latter, however, is concrete, like fire that has come out of the fuel, or oil that has been pressed out of the seeds, or butter that floats on the surface when milk is churned. It has numerous forms, and man can realize Divinity through these forms ; but an act of worship

is necessary. The tradition enumerates and describes not only the forms the Divinity may assume to facilitate man's approach but prescribes rituals that are involved in such an approach. We find in these texts descriptions of icons as visible symbols of Divinity and details of worship with regard to them (*arca*). This in fact is the burden of most of these books. Incidently, they also discuss associated problems of practical import such as the methods and materials employed in the fashioning of icons, installation of these icons and consecration of temples. Sometimes they expatiate on alternate or accessory approaches such as fire-rituals (*homa*), meditational exercises (*dhyana* or *yoga*), recitations (*japa*), and intellectual appreciation of spiritual involvement (*jnana*).

When iconic forms and worship rituals became the principal contents of these texts (especially those texts of accreditedly human origin), there was naturally an introduction of sectarian differences. The three main sects flourishing in India for two thousand years now, Saiva, Sakta and Vaishnava, developed their own distinctive lineages, their own metaphysical positions, their own deities, and their own rituals of worship. But the essential framework remains common for all of them. And there is a tradition of each sect borrowing freely from the texts belonging to other sects whenever necessary. For instance, the

manuals of the Pancaratra sect of Vaishnava persuation are chronologically early and numerically large. We find that the sectarians of the Vaikhanasa division



of Vaishnava as well as the Saiva rely on many prescriptions and explanations found in Pancaratra books. Prejudices and differences become wholly irrelevant in the higher reaches of approach to the Divine.

CHAPTER VI

The Temple as a Mandala

The shrine itself was regarded as an object of reverence. The icon in it was an additional source of sanctity. There are many ancient shrines with empty sanctums; and it is likely they were never meant to contain any icons. And there are many temples with sanctums containing icons that were never meant for them : either they are scripturally disproportionate or structurally incongruous. Kings of the medieval times had a strange practice. While returning from a successful military expedition they would bring with them prestigious icons from the defeated kingdom as loots to be installed in their own capitals. Inscriptions are there that unabashedly narrate such instances. Temples would then be specially built for these icons, or empty sanctums of already celebrated temples would house them. And the temples from which icons were removed would continue to be held sacred nonetheless.

We have thus a curious situation. There were icons installed before they got housed in temples;

and there were temples which later came to possess icons. The *Agama* texts, do not regard the situation as paradoxical, because the temple has a sanctity of its own, independent of the icon : and the icon's sanctity on the other hand is dependent on the temple. The Agama recognizes the sanctum which is prior to the installation of an icon in it as *grha-garbha* ('house-womb') and the sanctum which is subsequent to the icon as *'garbha-grha'* ('womb-house'). The expression in Sanskrit for shrine, *ayatana* ('abode') signifies that there is in it a power that abides, a sort of container of certain field-forces. Thus, strictly speaking, the shrine could be either an icon (*bimba* or *bera*) or a temple (*mandira*). The temple is in fact regarded as a pattern of powers (*mandala*), even as the human body is. If the body is the 'moving' *mandala* (*cara* or *jangama*), the temple is a 'stationary' one (*acala* or *sthavara*). The symbolic correspondance between the two has already been mentioned. If the Tantra emphasizes the human *mandala*, the Agama focusses its attention on temple as the divine *mandala*. The icon represents a condensation of the same divine force, corresponding to the 'soul' in man.

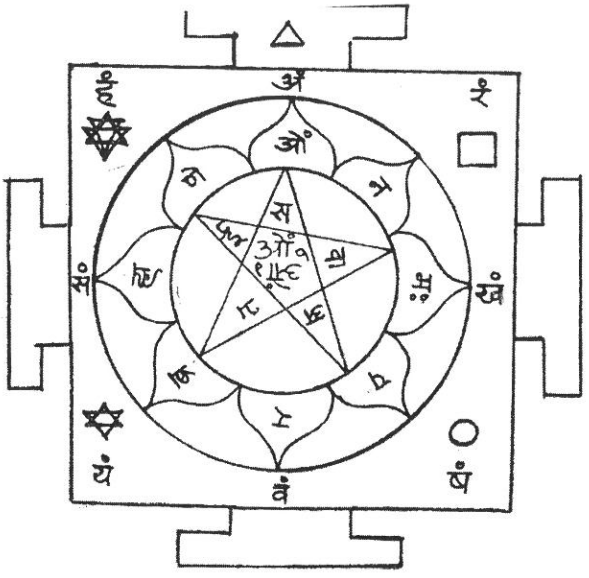
The evidence for the cult of concretely representing the *mandala* occurs even in the Vedic literature. It developed into the stupa symbolism. Involvement of geometrical forms (square, circle, semi-circle,

triangle, polygon and so on) helped in the crystallization of this cult. The *Yoga-tattva-upanishad* spells out the symbolism in terms of the five fundamental elements that constitute the material basis of the entire cosmos. Earth element is represented by a square, water by a semi-circle, fire by a triangle, air by a six-angled figure, and ether (sky) by a circle. The point without dimensions (dot, *bindu*) is the focus of all energy. All the other forms are only emanations from it: the icon in the sanctum occupies this position, and the temple should represent the other forms. The architectural details of a sophisticated temple reflects this fundamental symbolism.

The first architect of the stylized temples is imagined to be the divine creator-sculptor, Visvakarma (the 'All-maker'). He is represented as five-faced. Each face has a name, a deity, a colour, an attribute, and a form :

Name	*deity*	*colour*	*attribute*	*form*
Sadyojata	Siva	crystal white	inertia	triangular
Vamadeva	Vishnu	blue	knowledge	square
Aghora	Brahma	reddish	action	circular
Tatpurusa	Indra	ash-coloured	mixture of above three	six-angled
Isana	Sun	golden-coloured	pure entity	eight-angled

A combination of the above five forms is represented in a *mandala*, known as *Visva-karma-mandala*, which

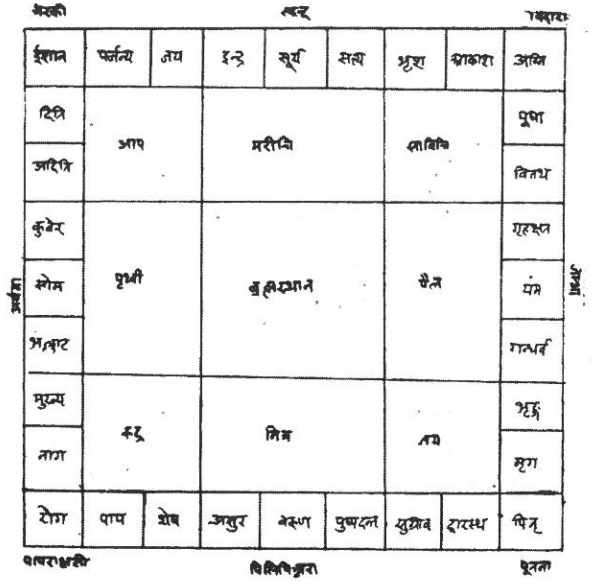


is regarded as fundamental to all temple architecture. The four sides of the *mandala* symbolize the four main directions: and the corners this square represent four mid-directions: and each of the eight quarters is presided over by a deity. The inner circle symbolises the 'creator' (*brahma*), symbolic of activity'. Guarded by the eight direction guardians, the *mandala* is symbolic of the entire universe. The 'All-maker' (creator) is also the progenitor of the whole mass of scripture, consisting of manuals of architecture, sculpture and painting, known collectively as Agama. Early temples were reputed to be built by this 'All-maker.'

He had five offsprings: Manu, the first 'man', the 'contemplative' (*man*) man; Maya, the tribal architect

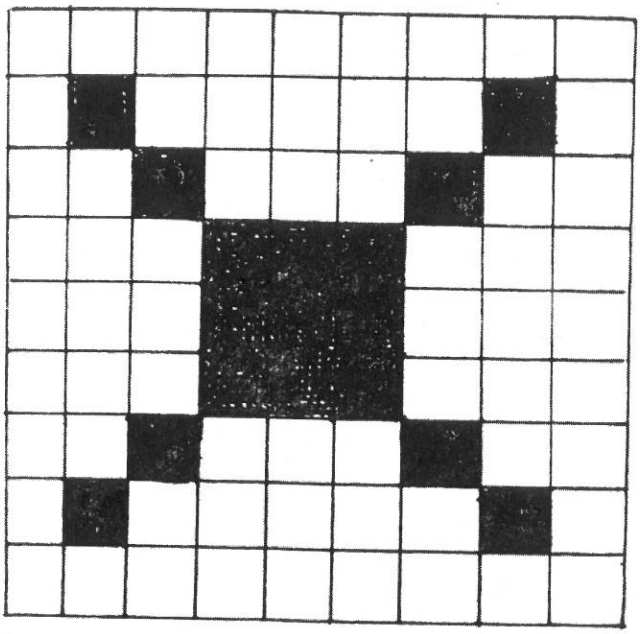
or designer (who is reputed in *Mahabharata* to have designed the assembly hall of Dharmaraja); Tvashtr, the carpenter (who fashioned the trident of Siva and the discus of Vishnu out of the trimmings he made of the Sun); Silpin, the sculptor, proficient in all the three above crafts, and in addition skilled in metal work, weaving and clay-modelling; Arka (or Visvajna), the master artisan or smith who worked with gold and silver. These are the crafts-progenitors and ancestors of guilds. The temple was their craft. It comprehends the five deities, the five qualities, and the five forms. The entire group of factors is pictured in the *mandala* after Visva-karma.

Another image that enters into the mandala background of the temple is that of the 'lay-out of the building site (*vastu*). It continues to be a custom in India that whenever a building is sought to be constructed, the area on which it comes up is first ceremonially propitiated. The idea is that the extent of the earth necessary for such construction must be reclaimed from the gods and goblins that own and inhabit that area. The ritual is known as 'pacification of the site-deity' (*vastu samana*). During this ritual, a *mandala* is employed. It is a square subdivided into nine smaller squares on each side, altogether making 81 squares. There is a variant procedure specially meant for temples, according to *Hayasirsha-samhita*,



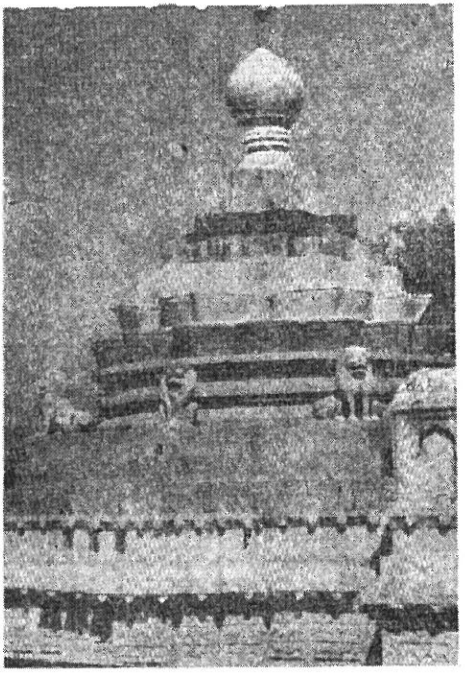
of subdividing each side into eight smaller squares, in which case the total number of cells would be 64. The four sides of the square contain along with them 32 cells, and in each one of them a deity is invoked and propitiated. The deities include gods like Sun and Indra, spirits like Yama, Gandharva and Naga, 'demons' like Sin (*Papa*) and Disease (*Roga*), ancestors and animals.

The central-most area, consisting of nine cells (a square with three sub-squares on each of its sides), is assigned to Brahma, the supreme deity and the chief object of worship and propitiation. The entire *man-*



dala is surrounded and guarded by seven demonesses regarded as attendants of the gods. The conception of *vastu-mandala* appears to be outside the framework of early Vedic religion.

The legend which explains this *mandala* is given in several texts of Indian architecture and also in some Puranas (like *Matsya*). The account given in *Raja-vallabha* (Sutradhara-mandana) is typical. When Siva fought fiercely with the terrible demon Andhaka, a drop of sweat fell from Siva's forehead with a loud thunder on the earth. The drop assumed the form of a ravenously hungry demon, who attempted devouring the three worlds. The gods and spirits, however,

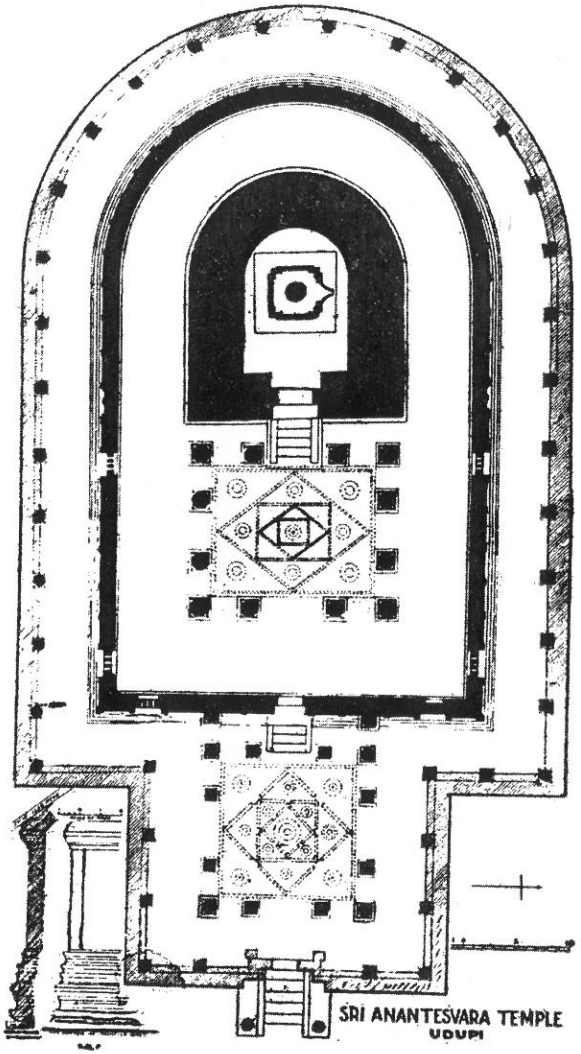


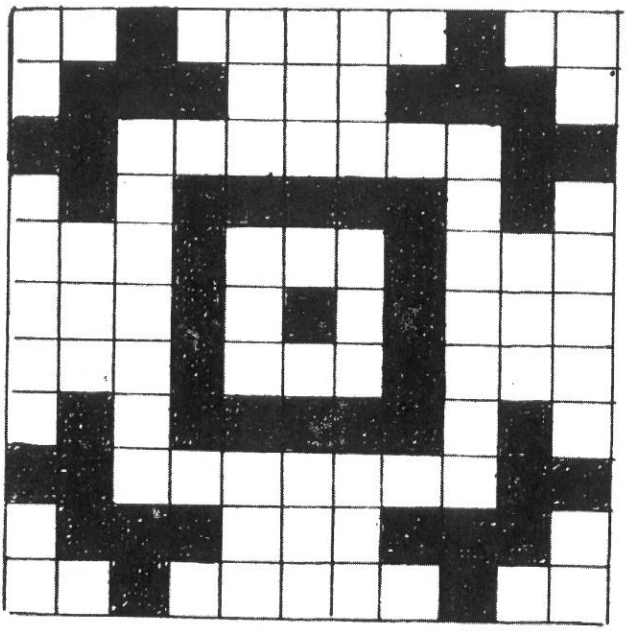
rushed at once on the demon and held him down. When the demon fell on the ground face downward, the gods and spirits lodged themselves on different parts of his body and pressed him down. Because the gods were lodged on him, the demon came to be called 'Vastu' ('the lodgement of the gods'); and as his body was spread out on the ground he became the 'recumbent master' *(sayya-rata-prabhu)*. He is pictured as lying down, showing his back, inside the *mandala* with his arms and legs so folded as to cover the whole area, and his head pushed into the north-

eastern corner of the square (the *Isana* cell). As many as forty-five gods are lodged on his body directly on his limbs and joints. It may be recalled that the mystical yantra 'Sri-Cakra' also comprises of forty-five angles. The *mandala* may have had a Tantrik background.

The word *Vastu* occurs in the Veda (*Rg.* 7, 54, I) and the 'lord of the Vastu' is identified with the chief of the gods, Indra *(Vastoshpati)*. Even today, during the ritual connected with the pacification of the building-site a hymn is addressed to Indra. Devarajayajva, an authority in Vedic interpretation, looks upon *vastu* as the mid-region (*antariksha*), and the gaurdians of this are included in the 'Vastu-deity'. However, the *Vastupurusha* has been regarded in later lore as a demon, or at best as a demi-god, whose permission is necessary before any construction can come up on the site. And, at the same time, care is taken to propitiate the deities that hold him down, for it is important that he should not get up.

The expression *mandala* is classically employed to denote the air that encompasses the light of the sun and the moon : the orb that spins round the entire cosmos luminously. It thus symbolizes the totality of existence. The form it naturally takes is circular because circle is perfect and comprehensive. Perhaps the original shape was oval (corresponding


SRI ANANTESVARA TEMPLE
UDUPI

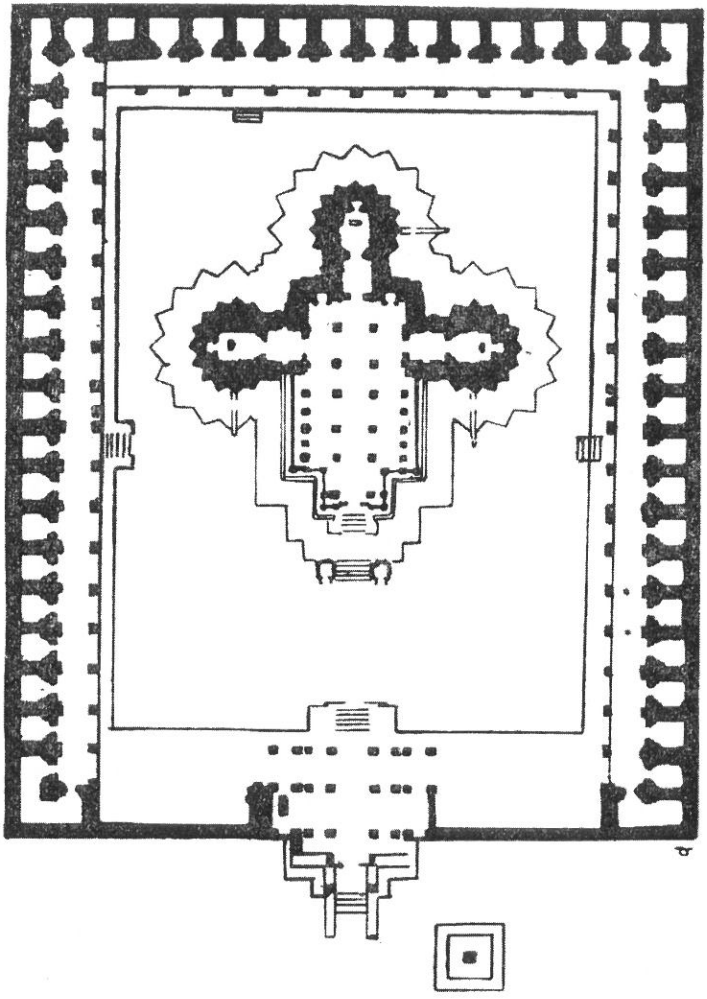


to *brahmanda*, the brahma-egg, or *Hiranya-garbha*, the golden womb), and it was transformed into a circle by a natural process. Associated with this idea was the conjecture concerning the centre of the universe being the mythical mount, Meru, round which were arranged all the continents and islands. Meru was symbolized by the circle and the four quarters that guarded it were represented by forms contained in an enclosing square. The *vastu-mandala* belongs to this phase of representation ; and the central square, which is the position of the chief deity Brahma, stands for Meru. In the temple architecture, the square sanctum

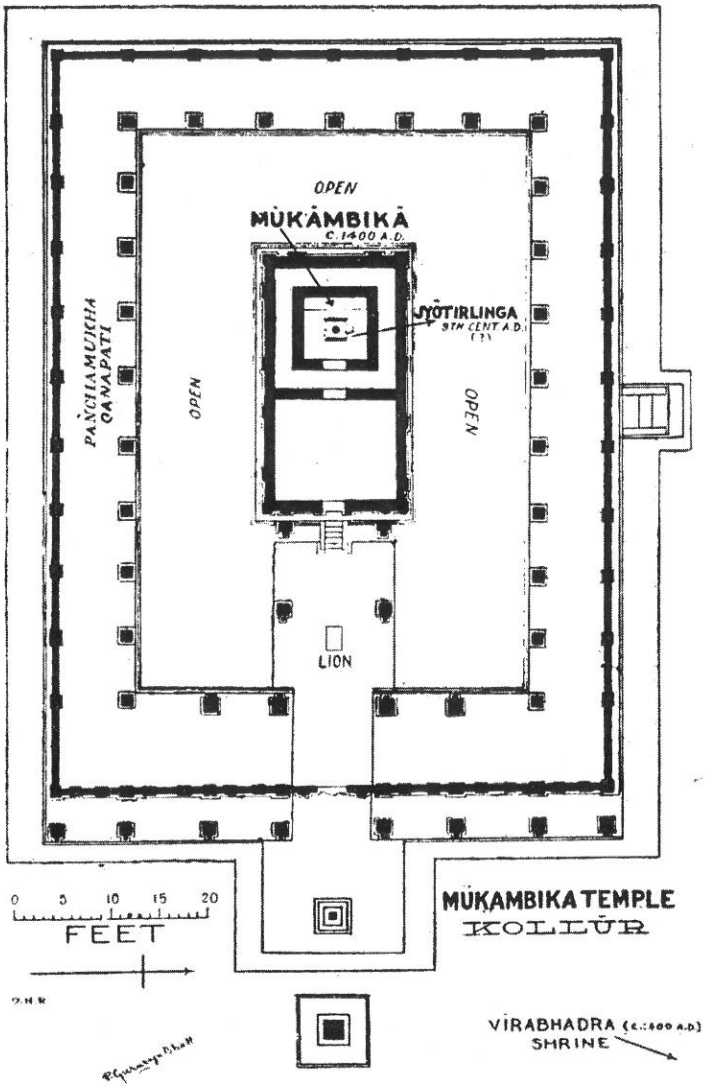
is the outer *mandala*, the *vimana* on top of the sanctum is the monumental reproduction of the mount Meru. It is usual for the *vimana* to comprehend also the several geometrical forms stylized in the *mandala* of Visvakarma.

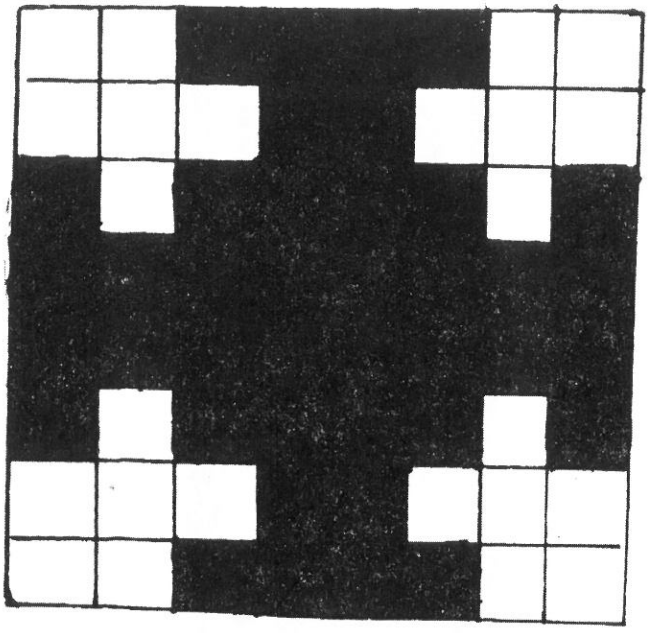
The reason why the sanctum (with the tower) is regarded as the real shrine is that it constitutes the position of Brahma inside the *vastu mandala*. The mid-most point inside this central square (where the diagonals meet) is the position of the icon. This point is lifted out of the *mandala* and transformed into the pinnacle *(stupi)* of the tower above the sanctum. The sanctum, being the central portion of the *mandala* is a condition of concentration of divine energy ; and the icon is the very crystallization thereof. The different deities prescribed to be installed on the *vimana* represent the several gods and spirits located on the limbs and joints of the site-*mandala* personified. The entire structure is thus a visualization of the *mandala*.

Extension of the sanctum in terms of porch, passages, assemby halls, pavilions and corridors is a projection of the basic *mandala*. If we inquire carefully into the significance of the ground-plans of the early temples, we discover that they are merely adaptations of the *mandala* design. We find the conventional and basic forms (triangle, square, rectangle, circle and so on) repeated with variations in size and



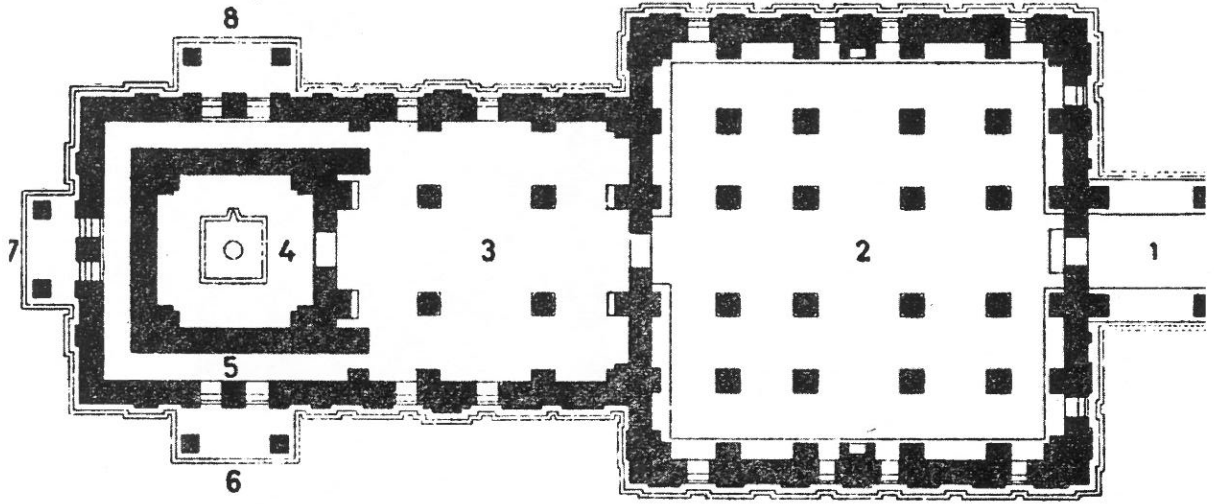
simplicity. When a devotee enters the temple, he is actually entering into a *mandala* and therefore participating in the power-field. The field enclosures and


OPEN
MŪKĀMBIKĀ
C. 1400 A.D.
JYOTIRLINGA
9TH CENT. A.D. (?)
PAÑCHAMUKHA GANAPATI
OPEN
OPEN
LION
0 5 10 15 20
FEET
MŪKAMBIKA TEMPLE
KOLLŪR
VIRABHADRA (c. 1600 A.D.)
SHRINE



the pavilions through which he must pass to reach the sanctum are symbolic. They represent phases of progress in the journey of man toward the divine beatitude.

As soon as the devotee sights the threshold of the gateway, he bends down and touches a *mandala* on it before crossing it: this marks for him the transition from the 'way of the world' (*loka dharma*) to the 'way of God' (*Siva dharma*). But he continues to be in the common state of 'wakefulness' until he reaches the flag-post or the 'dispensation-seat'. He then has the first vision of the sanctum, and gets into the state of 'dream'. As he proceeds towards the sanctum and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stands in front of the sanctum (in the vestibule), he sinks into the state of 'deep sleep'. When he looks at the icon, the higher state of 'semi-tranquillity' (*santo-dita*) descends upon him. And when he has suffused himself with the vision of the icon, he gets into the state of 'tranquillity' (*santa*).

In accordance with this scheme of transition, architectural and sculptural details vary from phase to phase in the devotee's onward movement towards the sanctum. To signify the worldly aspect of the devotee as he enters the temple, the gateway and the tower over the gateway as well as the niches above the enclosing walls are filled with secular sculptures. The 'dispensation seat' is a miniature shrine, with obvious *mandala*-details in it : it lifts the devotee from the common condition of worldliness onto a dream-like vision of the sanctum. The sculptural treatment of the columns and the ceilings, niches and the doorways in the pavilion has a dream-like quality. Mythological themes, legendary subjects, mythical animals, and unusual motifs abound here : they are designed to take one away from dull and common-place reality. The vestibule and the ambulatory passages are restrained in sculptural decorations, and the prevailing darkness of these areas are suggestive of sleep-like condition. The sanctum with its outer walls divided by simple pilasters and its entrance plainly adorned is expected

to lead the devotee further to the condition of 'semi-tranquillity'. It enables attention to be focussed on the icon, with minimal distractions. The interior scheme of the sanctum is altogether plain : it is also

dark, but for the oil lamps that lit up the icon. The devotee can here forget all the states and phases that he has passed through and get absorbed in the beauty and serenity of the icon. He is now in 'the the inner square of Brahma' in the *vastu-mandala* and direct communion with the chief source of power in the temple-*mandala.*

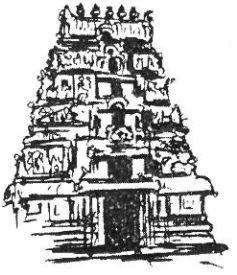
Along the vertical axis, the square sanctum is the *mandala* of wakeful condition, the surmounting *vimana* (square, circular or polygonal) is the concrete representation of the dream state, and the vase (*kalasa*) of the deep sleep state. Even as in sleep the distinctions of form disappear, and the variety gets unified, so in the *stupi* the ascent of forms culminate in a point (*bindu*). The 'pot' of the tower, surmounted by semi-circular lid, is crowned by an upright needle (*suci* or *stupi*). In the Orissan temples, the spheroid or ribbed *amalaka* is surmounted by semi-circular 'skull' (*khapuri*), over which rests the pot of the tower. The entire structure of the *vimana*, resting upon a square base and tapering off into a needle is a remarkable pattern of many *mandalas*, animated by an upward thrust.

The Agama of Vaishnava persuation has an additional symbolism of the *mandala*. The sanctum represents the concrete and worshipful (*arca*) manifestation of the divine power. The icon inside it is the

'inner controller' (*antaryami*), corresponding to the divine presence in the 'heart' of each individual being. The *vimana* over the sanctum represents the 'glory' (*vaibhava*) aspect of the divine. The crown-vessel on top of the *vimana* is 'the patterned expression' (*vyuha*) of the divine power; and pinnacle which vanishes in a point is the 'transcendent' (*para*) aspect.

One of the important Agama texts, *Suprabheda* tells us—

"The Mandala is the very essence of the temple."
(caryapada, 2)



Descriptive Glossary

The Indian temple, primitive or sophisticated, is designed to be distinguished from all structures. As an object suffuced with sanctity, it was not to be treated like an ordinary building; and as a structure of great social value it should be seen and reverenced even from a great distance. It came to have, therefore, certain characteristic aspects, each bearing a technical name and fixed in the canons of Indian architecture with considerable rigidity. While there are regional and stylistic variations in the patterning of these aspects, the aspects themselves have common structural and functional validity in the country.

1. The old name for the temple was 'the house of god' (*devagrha*) or 'presence' (*sannidhi*). It came to be called *devalaya* ('the abode of god') in Sanskrit, which occurs in North Indian dialects as *deul* or *deval*. In South India, *alaya*, *degula*, *koil* and *gudi* are commonly employed.

2. The most important and universal aspect of the temple is the sanctum (sanctum sanctorum or cella), called in Sanskrit *garbha-grha* ('womb-house'), so-called because it contains the icon (*bera* or *sannidhi*, 'the presence'). In fact, this is the real temple, other units being accessory and inessential. It is usually a dark square structure (sometimes rectangular or circular), closed on three sides by solid walls and having an entrance on the fourth, usually facing East.

3. Early sanctums had a flat roof. But in course of time

the flat roof was surmounted by an imposing tower known as *vimana*, which served to distinguish the sanctum from other structures within the temple-complex. From a plain mound-like appearance, it evolved into an elaborate cupola. In the North, it matured into a curvilinear spire, while in the South it tended to take a domical or pyramidal form. In the South it also inclined to resemble a royal crown with projecting facets.

The expression *vimana* was employed initially to denote any tall building : it also signified the chariot that was constructed during community celebrations. When it was confined to the temple, it signified the tower together with the sanctum underneath it. The usage is still common with regard to North Indian temples. In the South, however, *vimana* usually refers only to the superstructure.

4. The expression *sikhara* ('top' or 'crown') is found to be employed synonymously with *vimana*. But strictly, it denotes the top member of the *vimana*, immediately below the finial (*kalasa*). It tends to assume a domical shape.

5. The main mass of the *vimana* rising above the flat roof of the sanctum in the North Indian temples is called *gandi* or *sarira* ('body').

6. Surmounting this main mass (or the *sikhara* in South Indian temples) is the finial (*kalasa*), a vase-like structure in stone or metal. The main part of the finial resembles a 'bellied pot', *kumbha*, (sometimes a bell, *ghanta* or rarely the altar-post, *yupa*). Crowning this member would be a 'needle' or 'bud' with an upward thrust, this feature being known as *stupi*.

7. In the North Indian temples, especially in the Orissan specimens, immediately above the *gandi* and below the *kalasa*, can be seen fluted or ribbed round blocks of stone, called

amalaka, after the common Indian berry *Emblic Myrobalan* which it closely resembles. Sometimes two or three of them are poised one over the other.

8. In front of the sanctum will be the porch, which may be a walled passage or a columned aisle. It is called *antarala* ('intervening space') because its function is to connect the sanctum with the main hall where the devotees congregate. It is also called *ardha-mandapa* ('half-pavilion'), because its prescribed dimensions are half of the main pavilion. Sometimes the expression *sukhanasi* is also applied to this unit.

9. The sanctum is surrounded on three side (the front opening leading to the 'porch') by a walled and narrow enclosure which serves as an 'ambulatory passage' (*pradakshina-patha* or *bhrama*). Its function is to enable the devotees to go round the sanctum in an act of devotion. Such going round, keeping the worshipful object always to the right of oneself (*pradakshina*) is a very ancient practice going back at least to three thousand years. Strictly, this passage must be immediately around the sanctum : but it is often made to include the front porch also. In the early temples it was an open passage, but later it tended to be closed. It is usually within the main complex of the shrine (as in Kandariya Mahadeva temple at Khajuraho), bu sometimes we find it outside (as in the Rajarajisvara temple at Tanjore).

While it was the early practice for the *vimana* to rise over the sanctum alone, in course of time the area covered by the base of the *vimana* included the front porch and the ambulatory passage also.

10. This complex of sanctum-porch-ambulatory passage can often be seen constructed over a high plinth or a raised platform, called *jagati*. The approach to the porch will be by

a flight of steps. This is usual in many regional styles in the North (as in Khajuraho) and in the South (as in the Aihole–Pattadakal group as well as in the Hoysala temples).

11. In front of the sanctum beyond the porch will be seen the *bali-pitha* ('the dispensing seat'), a small altar (plain or stylized) on which food-offerings are kept for minor divinities in the temple as well as for the goblins hovering around. Its position will invariably be at the main entrance. The shape of this altar in the very old shrines suggests that it was originally meant for animal sacrifices.

12. Close to this altar will be the 'flag-staff' (*dhvaja-stambha*) a tall and imposing wooden or stone pillar on which the temple flag (carrying the deity's emblem) will be ceremonially hoisted on occasions. The position of the flag-staff should strictly be behind the dispensing seat. The early temples did not have a permanent flag-staff: it was installed when occasion demanded and taken out after its function was over. And it had to be installed immediately in front of the shrine (which canonically extended as far as the dispensing seat). However, we often find the 'flag-staff' standing in between the sanctum-porch and the dispensing seat.

13. With temple–rituals and festivals becoming more numerous and complex, structures within the temple multiplied. We find in more sophisticated temples many halls and pavilions each originally intended for a specific purpose : the main assembly hall (*sabha-mandapa, maha-mandapa, Jagmohan* or *navaranga*) which is usually pillared and artistically impressive, the front hall (*Sukanasi* or *mukha-mandapa*) leading to the main shrine, the dance-hall (*nritya-mandapa* or *Nat-mandir*), the pavilion for offering food to the deity and distributing food so consecrated among the devotees (*bhoga-mandapa*), the large

room where temple vehicles (on which the deity is taken out in procession) are kept (*vahana-mandapa*), a pavilion where marriage-ritual for the deity is conducted (*kalyana-mandapa*), the pavilion in the Saiva temples where the deity's vehicle Nandi is installed (*Nandi-mandapa*), and so on.

An interesting appendage in some South Indian temples of celebrity are the thousand-pillared halls of huge dimensions. The one at Madhurai (Minakshi-Nayakar Mandapa in the outermost enclosure) is 250 ft. long and 240 ft. wide. The hall in Chidambaram is 350 × 260, and the one at Srirangam is 500 × 138. The most artistic and impressive specimen in the shape of colonnades is the one at Ramesvaram, running to nearly 4000 feet in length.

14. The temple-complex thus structurally swelling, the area covered by it increased enormously as illustrated by the following well-known specimens :

Parasuramesvara temple (Bhuvaneswar)	960	square feet
Kailasnatha temple (Kanchipuram)	3000	,, ,,
Kailasa temple (Ellora)	4300	,, ,,
Lingaraja temple (Bhuvanesvar)	6100	,, ,,
Kandariya Mahadeva temple (Khajuraho)	6500	,, ,,
Rajarajisvara temple (Tanjavur)	6700	,, ,,

There was need to enclose this area by a well-defined and fortress-like wall, called *prakara*. It is understandable that early shrines did not have such enclosing walls. There are many famous shrines without them. Among the early specimens that did have enclosing walls, the Shore temple at Mamallapuram, Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram and Rajarajisvara temple at Tanjavur are celebrated. Probably it was a South Indian practice. It symbolised the *avarana* or enclosure in the shape of the physical foundation for our spiritual urge.

There were sometimes more than one enclosing wall. While the Lingaraja temple (Bhuvaneswar) has only one such wall (covering an area of 2,40,000 Sq. ft.), the Jagannatha Temple (Puri) has two concentric walls, the first enclosing the main temple-complex and the second accessory shrines and administrative buildings (the total coverage being 4,29,000 sq. ft.). The famous temple at Chidambaram has four of them (covering 0.81 million sq. ft.), and the Srirangam temple has seven, although the first four concentric *prakaras* enclose the temple-complex proper. The dimensions of the seven *prakaras* are :

The first prakara enclosing the main temple-complex		240′ × 181′
The second	,,	426′ × 295′
The third	,,	762′ × 503′
The fourth	,,	1,235′ × 849′
The fifth	,,	1,653′ × 1,270′
The sixth	,,	2,108′ × 1,846′
The seventh	,,	3,072′ × 2,521′

15. The *Prakara-wall* will usually have an entrance in one direction : but in the bigger specimens on all four sides. The entrance is stylized as an immense and artistic gateway (*mahadvara*), surmounted by a tall tower called *gopura*. There may be a plurality of gateways, as for instance, in the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram (4), Ramanatha temple at Ramesvaram (5), Valmikesvara temple at Tiruvalur (8), Minakshi temple at Madhurai (10), and Ranganatha temple at Srirangam (21).

The *gopura* towers, which appear to have become popular in South India during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, tended to increase in height. The eastern *gopura* built around 1250 A.D. in the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram was 135

feet tall, but the northern *gopura* built around 1520 A.D. was 140 feet in height. The Vijayanagar Kings, especially Krishnadevaraya, were so fond of getting tall *gopuras* constructed, that any tall *gopura* came to be called *Raya-gopura* (*Raya* being the Vijayanagar King). Some of the important *gopuras* have been listed below :

Ramanatha temple (Ramesvara)	78 ft. tall	(western *gopura*)
Varadaraja temple (Kanchipuram)	100 ,, ,,	(main *gopura*)
Valmikesvara temple (Tiruvalur)	118 ,, ,,	(,,)
Kumbhesvara temple (Kumbhakonam)	130 ,, ,,	(,,)
Minakshi temple (Madhurai)	150 ,, ,,	(all four in the outside *prakara*)
Ekambranatha temple(Kanchipuram)	188 ,, ,,	

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Prof S. K. Ramachandra Rao (1925-2006) was born in a conservative Madhva Brahmin family. He studied Sanskrit in a pathasala in Nanjangud, and then learnt the prasthana traya under Palghat Narayana Sastri in Mysore.

He also studied Pali and Tripitakas from Sri Narada Mahathera of Sri Lanka, and learnt Tibetan in order to learn Tibetan Buddhism. He obtained an M.A. in psychology from the Mysore University, and started his career as a research assistant in the Indian Institute of Science. He later headed the department of clinical psychology in NIMHANS in Bangalore.

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He was a prolific writer, artist, sculptor, musicologist, scholar and orator. He had written more than 150 books in English

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