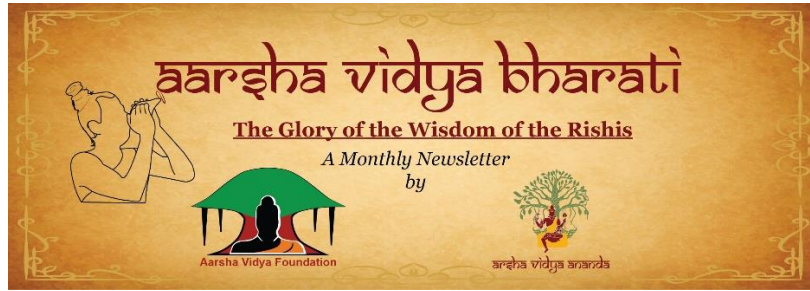

Aarsha Vidya Bharati - Sep 2021

A monthly newsletter that will bring you more happiness, more wisdom and more freedom



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A Hindu temple is more than just a place of worship!

By Usha Swarup, Mumbai

A Hindu temple is a spiritual, religious as well as a social institution. It was also designed to showcase art, architecture, knowledge of science, astronomy, astrology and much more.

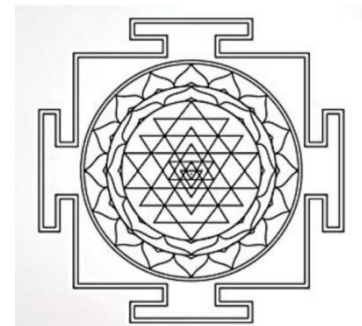
On the physical level, a Hindu temple architecture combines **harmony and symmetry** with a high degree of outer adornment. The Elements are designed to have correct proportions and exert a positive influence on their surroundings. What makes the architecture, as a whole, so beautiful is the way the small details harmonize and mix with the massive architecture.



The basic form of a temple is a square area, oriented to the four cardinal directions, containing a pedestal with a sculptured idol of the deity in the centre with a pyramidal roof overhead, and a doorway. In front of the doorway is a porch with a roof supported by pillars, where worshippers gather before and after approaching *Bhagavān*. In an elaborate consecration ceremony based on *Āgama śāstra*, the priests sanctify the image of the deity in the sanctum sanctorum with complex rituals accompanied by the chanting of Vedic mantras. The deity then becomes one with the murti, which is a manifestation of *Bhagavān*. The temple is seen as the centre of the universe, where *Bhagavān* aids us to centre ourselves.

Complex temples have hallways and galleries built off the sanctuary. They are usually set on platforms, with stairways connecting different levels. Large temples sometimes have separate buildings for meditation halls, offices and other purposes, and elaborate porches.

Hindu temple plans are **based on yantra-s** which



are sacred diagrams representative of the deity, based on Vedic Astrology and tantric texts. Specific *yantra-s* are traditionally associated with specific deities. Some examples of temples designed like Yantras are: The *Śri Yantra* temple at **Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh. This *kṣetra* is one of the 54 Shakti peethas too.** Shri Jagannath Temple in Puri has a *Śri Yantra*. The *Śri Yantra* is engraved in this Temple's *Ratnavedi* in the shrine of *Lalitāmbā* in the temple complex. The *Lalitā sahasranāma* sloka #60 mentions HER as चराचरजगन्नाथा चक्रराजनिकेतना. *carācarajagannāthā cakrarājaniketanā*. The one who rules over the moving beings and the non moving; the one who has her abode in *Śri cakra*.

As a social institution, a Hindu temple is a place where devouts meet for the common purpose of seeing Ishvara in the consecrated deity and for praying. Announcements regarding festivals and various activities bring people closer for a higher cause and **promote social harmony**. Talents are showcased and promoted as a dedication to the Lord. To name a few, the Mookambika, Belur, Halebid temples in Karnataka, Tirupati, Khajuraho etc are temples where artistes deliberately visit to dedicate their talent. It is believed that the blessings received here goes a long way for their future progress in their chosen fields. Most of the learning done in and around the temple was not just esoteric and theology, but included **skills for living well**. Temples had a panel of dedicated skilled scholars well versed in the *Vedāṅgā-s* who would reach out to the needy. For example, astrological solutions to human issues, were given by astrologers well versed in *Praśna Sāstra*.



In the Vidya Shankara temple in Sringeri, Karnataka, one can see principles of astronomy and Astrology used brilliantly. It combines the general features of Dravidian style with the Vijayanagara style. Standing on a richly sculpted plinth, this temple has six doorways. Twelve pillars surrounding the *maṇḍapa* have figures depicting the twelve signs of the zodiac. They are constructed in such an ingenious way that

the rays of the sun fall on each pillar in the chronological order of the twelve months of the Hindu calendar. On top of each column is a Yali with a rolling stone ball in its mouth.

Since a temple was an integral part of every town or village, the temple rituals used a lot of items that were sourced from people whose livelihood depended on selling or making or growing such items. So, a temple **fostered commercial activities** too. Madurai, Kanchipuram, Badrinath, Haridwara, Mathura etc are temple towns, where the towns were built around the temple. The commercial activities



came into existence for the temple, and soon became a livelihood for the residents of that region.

Also, most temples were and still are places which **provide free food**. People willingly contributed towards this cause as a seva. In addition to feeding hungry stomachs, this also fostered the feeling of 'acceptance' and inculcated '*prasāda buddhi*'. Places like Annapoorna temple in Horanadu, Dharmasthala, Sringeri, Mantralaya are known for their *annadānam*. The sense of fulfilment in partaking the food here, or sponsoring the *annadānam* is invaluable.

In olden days, temples provided **legal aid** to solve small disputes. The holy surroundings served as a reminder of Dharma and principles of correct living. The Kanipakkam Ganapathy temple is one such. It is noted for its divine power to resolve differences between warring parties, among many other benefits.

A Hindu temple is more than a place of worship.