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It is often said that Hinduism – which is perhaps more accurately described as *Sanātana Dharma* – is better characterized as a way of life than as a religion. It is no surprise, then, that in a spiritual tradition that encompasses every aspect of life, painstaking detail is paid to architecture and the construction of temples where the presence of the Almighty is invoked several times a day so that the Lord may listen to the prayers of his votaries. The deliberate, careful manner in which Hindu temples are built to adhere to *Vastu shastra* principles is one manifestation of the Hindu belief that God is pervasive and present in every aspect of the universe; *Vastu shastra* emphasizes the focus on finding a balance between the inner state of being and the exterior environment, all of which constitute the universe that God presides over. What is most powerful about Hindu architecture, then, is that through prayer, faith and invocation of God's presence, the Hindu temple allows the devotee to cross and transcend the liminal space that exists between the material world and the metaphysical, limitless realm of the Almighty.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Lord Krishna reveals his divinity to Arjuna, describing his limitlessness to the awestruck warrior. "I am the goal, the sustainer, the master, the witness, the abode, the refuge and the most dear friend," he tells an overwhelmed Arjuna. "I am the creation and the annihilation, the basis of everything, the resting place and the eternal seed" (*Bhagavad-Gītā* IX.18). Lord Krishna's declaration is indicative of the omnipresence of the Almighty: the universe is at once created and sustained by God, and it also represents and is a part of Him. It is this all-pervading quality that Lord Krishna wishes to convey to Arjuna in Chapter 9: "Both spirit and matter are in Me," Lord Krishna tells the *kshatriya* (IX.19). "It is I who am the ritual, I the sacrifice, the offering to the ancestors, the healing herb, the transcendental chant. I am the butter and the fire and the offering" (IX.16). These verses are instrumental to understanding the importance of the temple in Hinduism. Lord Krishna embodies every ritual that takes place in a temple as devotees pray and use the transformative nature of words to invoke the presence of God in the idols that they look upon. The temple provides the space where this metamorphosis occurs and gives devotees an opportunity to "raise human consciousness to the stage of God-realization where one ultimately sees the Godhead everywhere, in all things, and at all times" (Kolapen 52).

Documentation of the importance of the Hindu temple as a place of worship and as the literal House of God can be traced back to the *Āgamas*, Sanskrit texts which celebrate Shakti and Lords Shiva and Vishnu and describe in detail the proper ways in which to worship these deities. The texts discuss the importance of practicing *yoga* and conducting Hindu rituals and describe in great detail how temples must be constructed to venerate the Hindu gods and goddesses. No discussion about Hindu temples and Indian architecture is complete without an exploration of *Vāstu shastra*. In fact, to speak of a Hindu temple without speaking of *Vāstu shastra* would be similar to discussing a human body without mentioning the *jeeva*. The principles of *Vāstu shastra* are necessary to understanding that every aspect of the Hindu

temple's design reflects and represents the Almighty. The divine manifests itself not only in the anthropomorphized idols, but also in the temple's site, shape, and layout. For this reason, temples were constructed with the utmost attention to detail, and only learned architects trained in the principles of *Vāstu shastra* were commissioned to draft plans for and oversee construction of the sacred architecture. The creation of the temple design required (and still does call for) an expansive knowledge not only of architecture, but also of astrology and of the Hindu spiritual texts. The temple also embodies an oneness with the natural world that is necessary to attain realization of the Almighty; this is exemplified by the use of only organic materials in construction since "inorganic materials are not considered adequate conductors of cosmic energies" (Kolepan 49).

The system of *Vāstu shastra* is believed to have first been espoused and mastered by the mythical sage Maya Dānava, who is said to have lived during the time of the *Mahābhārata* (Kolapen 46). *Vāstu shastra* constitutes both an art and science of architecture, emphasizing the intricacies of temple construction, which carefully follows particular rules and guidelines pertaining to alignment and placement. To this day, principles of *Vāstu shastra* continue to offer Hindus accessible ways to apply the tenets of *Sanātana Dharma* in this increasingly modernized, technological era. *Vāstu shastra* is in fact such a cornerstone of the day-to-day practice of Hinduism that many Hindus incorporate it into their own lives by constructing and arranging their homes in accordance with these ancient scriptures.

The process of constructing Hindu temple begins with the selection of an appropriate site that can serve as "a crossing place for the upward journey of the soul and a place for the downward crossing of higher entities" (47). The square shape of most temples also carries heavy symbolic meaning, representing order and the all-encompassing nature of God. The square subsumes the circle and all other shapes, and by doing so, it embodies life, death and everything in between the two entities. It is as if the temple is at once a representation of, a creation of and a part of the Cosmic Being (47). The Hindu temple bridges the gap between the interiority of the soul and the exterior sensory world, as well as between the material, ephemeral world of humans and the metaphysical, eternal realm of the Almighty: "Most sacred artists maintain that an ultimate reality exists beyond the mundane plane of temporary forms. Although infinite in nature, that Higher Reality can make itself known to the finite living entities in this world. It does so through revealed forms that, while seemingly limited and temporary, provide a bridge between the finite and the infinite" (Kolapen 45).

Every architectural element present in a Hindu temple corresponds to an ethereal, eternal feature of the Cosmic Being, while also anchoring this divinity to the material world we live in. The *Brahmasthanā*, or main shrine of a temple, is sanctified by a priest to invoke the presence of the deity whose idol will be housed there (Kolapen 49). The structure and layout of a Hindu temple can be likened to that of the human body, with different elements corresponding to various aspects of the human form:

the *Brahmasthanā* can be equated with the head, while the *mahamandapa* (the long hall that usually leads to the central shrine) corresponds to the trunk of the body, and the entrance tower, the *rajagopura*, resembles the feet. The *gopra* that rises high above the main shrine is often adorned with sculptures and gilded in precious metals and corresponds to the human face and head. This cupola is connected to the roof (the shoulder that bears the weight of the structure) of the shrine via the neck-like *kanta*. The walls and pillars supporting the *gopra* correspond to human arms and hands, while the base can be equated with the trunk and legs of the body (51). In this way, the temple serves to elevate the physical, the human and the bodily to divine heights.

The sculptures that adorn the walls of Hindu temples are not merely ornamental or decorative in nature. They also serve a didactic purpose that is not lost upon any visitor to the temple. Sculptures are essential aspects of temple structures and once again emphasize the temple's status as a crossroad between the material world and the divine realm: in a way, the sculptures breathe life into the architectural structure, transforming it into a dynamic space. Temple sculptures of gods and goddesses represent "the Hindu concepts of *yoga* (union with the Divine) and *bhoga* (worldly pleasures)" (Kolapen 33). Figures are carved with such care and precision that "the human form [is] transcended to suggest the Divine, invoking a sense of wonder in the devotee" (39).

On a more cultural, tangible note, Hindu temples stand as testaments to the immense, ancient collection of ethnic and spiritual traditions that has been passed down from generation to generation for centuries. The grandeur of Indian art and architecture is exemplified by the temples of the Pratihara, Pala and Chandella dynasties (Kolapen 26-27). Hindu temples are prime reflections of the diversity that is inherent in *Sanātana Dharma*. Architectural styles vary from state to state in India, reflecting not only various historical and political circumstances, but also regional and individual differences in the practice of Hinduism. The trajectory and timeline of Hindu temple architecture also reveal a great deal about Hinduism's adaptive nature. *Sanātana Dharma* has met time – its most resolute adversary – and has emerged victorious. It has used its inherent flexibility and versatility to endure this test of time so effectively that it still continues to flourish and expand several millennia after its initial development into an organized religion based on both text and oral tradition. Hinduism's refusal to merely fade away into the history of the world's ancient religions is due in part because it gives a great deal of importance to individual, personal prayer and worship, and also because of the emphasis it places on timeless values that are applicable and relevant in every region of the world and in every era of time. In this way, then, the Hindu temple is the ideal meeting point of these two principles: it provides the Hindu devotee with a sacred space in which he or she can immerse himself in the nearness of God while also reminding the votary of the immense mythological and cultural tradition that informs the Hindu religion. In a way, both predetermination and free will exist within the Hindu temple, echoing the laws of *karma* and *dharma*:

“although the ancient texts prescribed a framework for the artist to create an object of art, they gave enough room for the talented artist to infuse his work with personal interpretation” (Kolapen 18).

As the Hindu diaspora outside of India continually proliferates, the practice of Hinduism – and Hindu temple-building, as an extension – has adapted to the times. An increased emphasis on fostering and sustaining ties to Hinduism (especially outside of India) has meant that the temple now also serves as a community center that fuses the cultural with the ritual. Temples therefore mirror the very dynamism that defines *Sanātana Dharma*: they are ever changing and maintain a fluid balance between the omnipresence of the Almighty and the necessity for devotees to pray either individually or to gather communally. The sanctity of the Hindu temple has by no means been compromised by its new status as a cultural, communal space, though; in fact, the temple becomes all the more powerful and important because of its expanded role as both a prayer hall and gathering center.

By acting as the bridge between the inward and the outward, the material world and the higher metaphysical one, and the mortal and the divine, the Hindu temple is a perfect fusion of form and function. It offers devotees spiritual sanctuary and a place to invoke the presence of the Almighty. Through intricate stonework and meticulous adherence to principles of *Vastu shastra*, Hindu temple architecture celebrates and upholds one of the purest and most timeless values of Hinduism: *bhakti*.

Works Cited

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