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THE POST-GUPTA PERIOD As Buddhism flourished in India during the fifth century, Hinduism, supported by the Gupta monarchs, began to rise in popularity. Hindu temples and sculptures of the Hindu gods, though known earlier, appeared with increasing frequency during the Gupta period and its aftermath in the post-Gupta era of the sixth to mid-seventh century.

The Early Northern Temple

The Hindu temple developed many different forms throughout India, but it can be classified broadly into two types, northern and southern. The northern type is chiefly distinguished by a superstructure called a **shikhara**. The shikhara rises as a solid mass above the flat stone ceiling and windowless walls of the sanctum, or *garbhagriha*, which houses an image of the temple's deity. As it rises, it curves inward in a mathematically determined ratio. (In mathematical terms, the shikhara is a paraboloid.) Crowning the top is a circular, cushionlike element called an **amalaka**, which means "sunburst." From the amalaka a **finial** takes the eye to a point where the earthly world is thought to join the cosmic world. An imaginary *axis mundi* penetrates the entire temple, running from the point of the finial, through the exact center of the amalaka and shikhara, down through the center of the *garbhagriha* and its image, finally passing through the base of the temple and into the earth below. In this way the temple becomes a conduit between the celestial realms and the earth. This theme, familiar from Ashokan pillars and Buddhist stupas, is carried out with elaborate exactitude in Hindu temples, and it is one of the most important elements in the rationale behind their form and function.

One of the earliest northern-style temples is the temple of Vishnu at Deogarh in central India, which dates from around 530 CE (fig. 9- 17). Much of the shikhara has crumbled away, and so we cannot determine its original shape with precision. Nevertheless, it was clearly a massive, solid structure built of large cut stones. It would have given the impression of a mountain,



9-17. Vishnu Temple at Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. c. 530 CE



9-18. Doorway of the Vishnu Temple at Deogarh

which is one of several metaphoric meanings of a Hindu temple. This early temple has only one chamber, the *garbhagriha*, which corresponds to the center of a sacred diagram called a mandala on which the entire temple site is patterned. As the deity's residence, the *garbhagriha* is likened to a sacred cavern within the "cosmic mountain" of the temple.

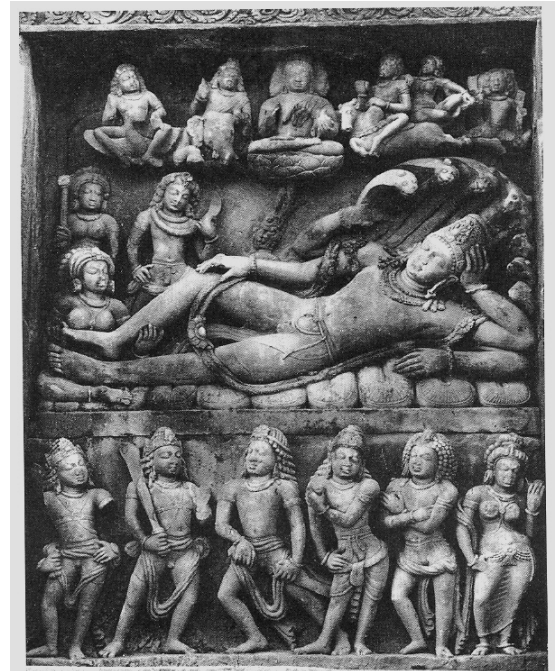
The entrance to a Hindu temple is elaborate and meaningful. The doorway at Deogarh is well preserved and an excellent example (fig. 9-18). Because the entrance takes a worshiper from the mundane world into the sacred, stepping over a threshold is considered a

purifying act. Two river goddesses, one on each upper corner of the **lintel**, symbolize the purifying waters flowing down over the entrance. These imaginary waters also provide symbolic nourishment for the vines and flowers decorating some of the vertical jambs. The innermost vines sprout from the navel of a dwarf, one of the popular motifs in Indian art. *Mithuna* couples and small replicas of the temple line other jambs. At the bottom, male and female guardians flank the doorway. Above the door, in the center, is a small image of the god Vishnu, to whom the temple is dedicated.

Large panels sculpted in relief with images of Vishnu appear as "windows" on the temple's exterior. These elaborately framed panels are not windows in the ordinary sense. They do not function literally to let light *into* the temple; they function symbolically to let the light of the deity *out* of the temple so it maybe seen by those outside. The panels thus symbolize the third phase of Vishnu's threefold emanation from Brahman, the Formless One, into our physical world.

One panel depicts Vishnu lying on the Cosmic Waters at the beginning of creation (fig. 9-19). This vision represents the Subtle Body, or second, stage of the deity's emanation. Vishnu sleeps on the serpent of infinity, Ananta, whose body coils endlessly into space. Stirred by his female aspect (shakti, or female energy), personified here by the goddess Lakshmi, seen holding his foot, Vishnu dreams the universe into existence. From his navel springs a lotus (shown in this relief behind Vishnu), and the unfolding of space-time begins. The first being to be created is Brahma (not to be confused with Brahman), who appears here as the central, four-headed figure in the row of gods portrayed above the reclining Vishnu. Brahma turns himself into the universe of space and time by thinking, "May I become Many."

The sculptor has depicted Vishnu as a large, resplendent figure with four arms. His size and his many arms connote his omniscient powers. He is lightly garbed but richly ornamented. The ideal of the Gupta style persists in the smooth, perfected shape of the body and in the delight in details of jewelry, including Vishnu's characteristic cylindrical crown. The four rightmost figures in the frieze below personify Vishnu's powers. They stand ready to fight the appearance of evil, represented at the left of the frieze by two demons who threaten to kill Brahma and jeopardize all creation.



9-19 Vishnu Narayana on the Cosmic Waters, relief panel in the Vishnu Temple at Deogarh. Stone.

The birth of the universe and the appearance of evil are thus portrayed here in three clearly organized registers. Typical of Indian religious and artistic expression, these momentous events are set before our eyes not in terms of abstract symbols but as a drama acted out by gods in superhuman form. The birth of the universe is imagined not as a "big bang" of infinitesimal particles from a supercondensed black hole but as a lotus unfolding from the navel of Vishnu.

Monumental Narrative Reliefs

Another major Hindu god, Shiva, was known in Vedic times as Rudra, "the howler." He was "the wild red hunter" who protected beasts and inhabited the forests. As Shiva, which means "benign," this god exhibits a wide range of aspects or forms, both gentle and wild: he is the Great Yogi who dwells for vast periods of time in meditation in the Himalaya; he is also the Husband par excellence who makes love to the goddess Parvati for eons at a time; he is the Slayer of Demons; and he is the Cosmic Dancer who dances the destruction and re-creation of the world. Shiva takes such seemingly contradictory natures purposefully, in order to make us question reality.

Many of these forms of Shiva appear in the monumental relief panels adorning the Cave-Temple of Shiva carved in the mid-sixth century on the island of Elephanta off the coast of Bombay in western India. The cave-temple is complex in layout and conception, perhaps to reflect the nature of Shiva. While most temples have one entrance, this temple offers three—one facing north, one east, and one west. The interior, impressive in its size and grandeur, is designed along two main axes, one running north-south, the other east-west. The three entrances provide the only source of light, and the resulting cross- and back-lighting effects add to the sense of the cave as a place of mysterious, almost confusing complexity. A worshipper seems to be in a world where the usual expectations are absent and is thrown off-balance—fit preparation for a meeting with Shiva, the most unpredictable of the Hindu gods.

Along the east-west axis, large pillars cut from the living rock appear to support the low ceiling and its beams although, as with all architectural elements in a cave-temple, they are not structural (fig. 9-20). The pillars form orderly rows, but the rows are hard to discern within the framework of the cave shape, which is neither square nor longitudinal, but a combination of overlapping mandalas that create a symmetric yet irregular space. The pillars are an important aesthetic component of the cave. An unadorned, square base rises to nearly half the total height. Above is a circular column, which has a pleasingly curved contour and a billowing "cushion" capital. Both column and capital are delicately fluted, adding a surprising refinement to these otherwise sturdy forms. The main focus of the east-west axis is a square lingam shrine, shown here at the center of the illustration. Each of its four entrances is flanked by a pair of colossal standing guardian figures. In the center of the shrine is the lingam, the phallic symbol of Shiva. The lingam represents the presence of Shiva as the unmanifest Formless One, or Brahman. It symbolizes both his erotic nature and his aspect as the Great Yogi who controls his seed. The lingam is synonymous with Shiva and is seen in nearly every Shiva temple and shrine.



9-20. Cave- Temple of Shiva at Elephanta, Maharashtra, India. Mid-6th century CE. View along the east-west axis to the lingam shrine



9-21. Eternal Shiva, Shiva at Elephanta. Mid-6th century CE. Height approx 11'

The main focus of the north-south axis, in contrast, is a relief on the south wall depicting Shiva in his Subtle Body, the second stage of the threefold emanation. A huge bust of the deity represents his Sadashiva, or Eternal Shiva, aspect (fig. 9-21). Three heads are shown resting upon the broad shoulders of the upper body, but five heads are implied: the fourth in back and the fifth, never depicted, on top. The heads summarize Shiva's fivefold nature as creator (back), protector (left shoulder), destroyer (right shoulder), obscurer (front), and releaser (top). The head in the front depicts Shiva deep in introspection. The massiveness of the broad head, the large eyes barely delineated, and the mouth with its heavy lower lip suggest the serious depths of the god. Lordly and majestic, he easily supports his huge crown, intricately carved with designs and jewels, and the matted, piled-up hair of a yogi. On his left shoulder, his protector nature is depicted as female, with curled hair and a pearl-festooned crown. On his right shoulder, his wrathful, destroyer nature wears a fierce expression, and snakes encircle his neck.

Like the relief panels at the temple to Vishnu in Deogarh (see fig. 9-19), the reliefs at Elephanta are early examples of the Hindu

monumental narrative tradition. Measuring 11 feet in height, they are set in recessed niches, one on either side of each of the three entrances and three on the south wall. The panels portray the range of Shiva's powers and some of his different aspects, presented in the context of narratives that help devotees understand his nature. Taken as a whole, the reliefs represent the third stage of emanation, the Gross Body manifestation of Shiva in our world. Indian artists often convey the many aspects or essential nature of a deity through multiple heads or arms. Their gift is to portray these additions with such convincing naturalism that we readily accept their visions. Here, for example, the artist has united three heads onto a single body so skillfully that we still relate to the statue as an essentially human presence.

The third great Hindu deity is Devi, a designation covering many deities who embody the feminine. In general, Devi represents the brilliant power of shakti, a divine energy understood as feminine. Shakti is needed to overcome the demons of our afflictions, such as ignorance and pride. Among the most widely worshiped goddesses are Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and beauty, and Durga, the warrior goddess.



9-22. Durga Mahishasura-mardini (Durga as Slayer of the Buffalo Demon), rock-cut relief, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, India. Pallava period, c. mid- 7th century CE. Granite, height approx. 9' (2.7 m)

Durga is the essence of the splendid conquering powers of the gods. A large relief at Mamallapuram, near Madras, in southeastern India, depicts Durga in her popular form as the slayer of Mahishasura, the buffalo demon (fig. 9-22). Triumphant riding her lion, a symbol of her shakti, the eight-armed Durga battles the demon. His huge figure with its human body and buffalo head is shown lunging to the right, fleeing from her onslaught. His warriors are falling to the ground. Accompanied by energetic, dwarfish warriors, victorious Durga, though smaller in size, sits erect and alert, flashing her weapons. Thus the moods of victory and defeat are clearly distinguished between the left and right sides of the panel. The artist clarifies the drama by focusing our attention on the two principal actors. Surrounding figures play secondary roles that support the main action, adding visual interest and variety.

Stylistically, this and other panels at Mamallapuram represent the final flowering of the Indian monumental relief tradition. Here, as elsewhere, the reliefs portray stories of the gods and goddesses, whose heroic deeds unfold before our eyes. Executed under the dynasty of the Pallavas, which flourished in southern India from the seventh to ninth century CD, this panel also illustrates the gentle, simplified figure style characteristic of Pallava sculpture. Figures tend to be slim and elegant with little ornament, and the rhythms of line and form have a graceful, unifying, and humanizing charm.

MEANING AND RITUAL IN HINDU TEMPLES AND IMAGES

The Hindu temple is one of the most complex and meaningful architectural forms in Asian art. Age-old symbols and ritual functions are embedded not only in a structure's many parts but also in the process of construction itself. Patron, priest, and architect worked as a team to ensure the sacred nature of the structure from start to finish. No artist or artisan was more highly revered in Indian society than the architect, who could oversee the construction of an abode in which a deity would dwell.

For a god to take up residence, however, everything had to be done properly. By the sixth century CE, the necessary procedures and explanations had been recorded in exacting detail in a group of texts called the Silpa Shastra. First, a site was chosen that was auspicious-- promised to bode well. A site near water was especially favored, for water makes the earth fruitful. Next, the ground was prepared, an elaborate process that took several years. Various spirits who were already inhabiting the site were "invited" to leave so that the

temple might be raised on pure ground. The ground was then plowed and planted, and the resulting crop was harvested through two seasons. After that, cows--sacred beasts since the Indus Valley civilization--were pastured there. Through their stomping, breathing, and feeding on the site, they lent it their potency. When construction began each phase was accompanied by ritual to ensure its purity and sanctity.

All Hindu temples are built on a mystical plan known as a **mandala**, a schematic design of a sacred realm or space. Specifically, Hindu temples are based on the Vastupurusha mandala, the mandala of the Cosmic Man, the primordial progenitor of the human species. His body, fallen on earth, is imagined as superimposed on the mandala design: together, they form the base on which the temple rises.

Although the Vastupurusha mandala can be drawn in any number of different ways, it always takes the form of a square subdivided into a number of equal squares (usually sixty-four) surrounding a central square. The central square represents Brahman, the primordial, unmanifest Formless One. This square corresponds to the temple's sanctum, the windowless **garbhagriha**, or "womb chamber." The nature of Brahman is clear, pure light; that we perceive the garbhagriha as dark is a testament to our deluded nature. The surrounding squares belong to lesser deities, while the outermost compartments hold protector gods. These compartments are usually represented by the enclosing wall of a temple compound.

The garbhagriha houses the temple's main image—most commonly one of the forms of Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi. Usually this image is a sculpture made of stone, bronze, or wood. The image is made with the understanding that the god will inhabit it. To ensure perfection, its proportions follow a set canon, and rituals surround its making. When the image is completed, a priest recites mantras, mystic syllables, that bring the deity into the image. The belief that a deity is literally present is not taken lightly. Even in India today, any image "under worship"—whether it be in a temple or a field, an ancient work or a modern piece—will be respected and not taken from the people who worship it.

A Hindu temple is a place for individual devotion, not congregational worship. It is the place where a devotee can make offerings to one or more deities and be in the presence of the god who is embodied in the image in the garbhagriha. Worship generally consists of prayers and offerings such as food and flowers or water and oil for the image, but it can also be much more elaborate, including dancing and ritual sacrifices.