

# HINDU TEMPLES OF INDIA

By George Michell & Snehal Shah

## Introduction

One of India's greatest architectural traditions is that linked with Hinduism, a religion that focuses on the worship of powerful gods and goddesses. These divinities are represented by sculpted images and emblems housed in temple sanctuaries. Hindu architecture in brick and stone begins only in the fourth-fifth centuries AD, but has developed more or less continuously ever since down to the present day.

It is hardly surprising, considering the extent of India and the diversity of building materials and techniques, that Hindu temple architecture evolved distinctive regional patterns. These are sometimes classified into two broad categories: Nagara, or the North Indian temple style, and Dravida, the South Indian style. The two temples described here, one at Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh), the other at Tanjavur (Tamil Nadu), give the best possible idea of how the contrasting Nagara and Dravida styles had developed by the eleventh century.

These particular temples have been selected out of the many thousands that still stand from all periods of Indian history since they represent the climax of the constructional

and aesthetic achievements of the Hindu architectural tradition.

In spite of their obvious stylistic differences, the temples at Khajuraho and Tanjavur conform to a set of basic principles that are bound up with Hindu beliefs and practices. Many of these ideas are set down in building manuals known as shastras, while others are to be found in ritual treatises and mythological encyclopaedias.

Such sources give verbal expression to the idea of the temple as a seat of the god or deva-sthanam, where the divinity takes the form imagined by worshippers so that contact can be made between the world of humans and that of deities. It is the formalised worship of the image or emblem of the divinity within the sanctuary that remains the focus of all temple activity. Thus, in the two temples described here, it is the linga, or phallic emblem of Shiva, that is considered the repository of the sacred presence. The linga in both these temples is housed in a small and dark sanctuary, known as a womb chamber or garbha-griha, that resembles a natural cave, being unlit, massive and devoid of decoration.

The doorway to the sanctuary, and indeed to the other parts of the temple, is considered a vulnerable threshold, and is therefore supplied with auspicious protective motifs, including lotus emblems, amorous couples, and guardian figures with weapons.

Above the sanctuary rises the tower of the temple, a symbolic mountain, capped with an auspicious pot finial. This finial is the outer sign of an invisible vertical axis that rises from the middle of the sanctuary to the summit of the tower. It is counterbalanced by a horizontal axis that runs from the outermost doorway or gateway of the temple inwards to the sanctuary, along which devotees pass in their progression towards the sanctuary. The symbolic significance of these complementary axes explains the common features of the plans and elevations of these two temples built in the different Nagara and Dravida styles.

## ❖Kandariya Mahadeva temple

Photo1 Temple silhouette



Fig.1 Temple plan (bottom half) Ceiling plan (top half)

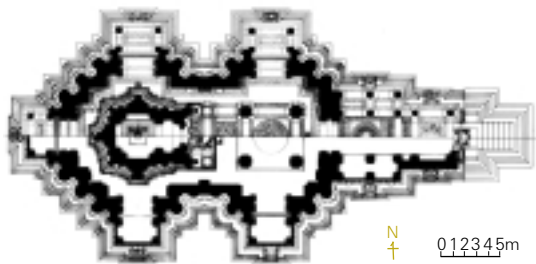


Photo2 Temple detail (Vertically ascending tiers of mythical narrative)



Photo3 Temple detail (Mythological scene of royal court life)



## Kandariya Mahadeva temple, Khajuraho

Erected towards the middle of the eleventh century by one of the kings of the Chandella dynasty, this great Shiva temple represents the climax of the Nagara style, the culminating point in a long series of experiments on the part of architects as well as their patrons. The circumstances of place, time, age and height of mastery of architecture and sculpture confirm that this is one of the unsurpassed achievements of Hindu art. It belongs to the early eleventh century, and is probably the work of Vidyadhara (ca. 1004-35) under whom the Chandella kingdom reached the height of its prosperity.

Taking its name from the word kandara, or cave, the Kandariya Mahadeva temple is the tallest monument at Khajuraho, its spire rising more than 30.5 metres above the lofty plinth on which the temple is elevated. The temple faces east and extends some 30.5 metres in length and 20 metres in width. Like other fully developed Chandella temples at Khajuraho, it consists of a linear east-west sequence of access steps, entrance porch, columned hall with side balconies, and linga shrine with encircling passageway, off which open three additional balconies. These balconies bring porches. The porches serve as balconies with high seating, bringing ventilation and light to the interior.

What distinguishes the Kandariya Mahadeva temple from the other monuments at Khajuraho is its grand scale and elaboration of design and ornamentation. Moreover, its indented plan with numerous projections and recesses create a visual rhythm, accentuated by the bright sunshine and shadow, that is carried up into the elevation of the building.

Undoubtedly, the glory of the temple is its lofty curving tower, crowned by an amalaka, or ribbed circular motif, and pot finial, against which cluster miniature versions of itself to create a mountain-like profile. The component towered elements of the Kandariya Mahadeva expand outwards from the core shaft to create a dramatic geometric massing that is unsurpassed in North Indian architecture.

Equally significant in the overall conception of the temple is the sculptural treatment of its outer walls, which are covered with images of the god Shiva, to whom the monument is dedicated, in the company of consorts, attendants and lesser divinities. Important among the images here are the non manifest-manifest aspect of the god, including those who subdues the blind demon, the cosmic dancer, and the destroyer of the triple demon cities. The sculptures are arranged in three tiers on the outside, amounting to no less than 646 figures in all, not counting the 226 figures of the interior. The famous erotic groups for which the temple is well known are placed on the juncture of the walls of the mandapa and the passageway surrounding the sanctuary, marking one of the most ritually vulnerable parts of the monument. Among the other images are those of female deities, such as the seven mothers, let alone the countless apsaras, or heavenly maidens that attend on the gods, and who are shown in alluring postures that reveal the mastery of the Khajuraho artists in rendering female contours with conscious sophistication and exuberant grace.

#### Brihadishvara temple at Tanjavur (Tanjore)

Completed only a few years earlier than the Khajuraho temple, in about 1010, this equally imposing Hindu monument is also considered to mark the climax of a building tradition; in this case, the Dravida style of South India. The patron, Rajaraja, was one of the most powerful kings of the Chola kings who governed much of Tamil Nadu in the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. This particular ruler's personal involvement in the construction of the monument is recorded in inscriptions that cover the granite basement. They mention Rajaraja gift of a golden pot finial, as well as the large numbers of persons employed in the temples rituals.

Originally dedicated to Shiva under the name of Rajarajeshvara, the Tanjavur temple stands in a vast rectangular compound, entered on the east through a towered gateway known as a gopura. This entrance structure is aligned with the temple itself, the core of which consists of a square linga sanctuary surrounded by a passageway on two levels. Windows on three sides admit light into the passageway, while at the same time giving expression to the luminous energy of the linga radiating outwards. The shrine is approached from the east through a vestibule with side doorways reached by flights of steps. Further to the east are two spacious columned halls, intended for congregational gatherings and public ceremonies. Subsidiary shrines for other divinities, including Subrahmanya and Ganapati, considered the sons of Shiva, and Nataraja, the dance form of Shiva, stand freely within the compound.

Undoubtedly, the most impressive aspect of the temple is the square tower that rises some 66 metres above the ground, directly over the sanctuary. This is built of granite blocks laid without any mortar, cantilevering inwards and hollow on the inside. The tower is carried on walls divided into two storeys, each marked by basement mouldings with animal friezes, pilastered walls with sculpture panels, and overhanging eaves, the upper storey being completed by a parapet of model vaulted roof forms. The walls are rhythmically divided

#### ❖Brihadishvara temple

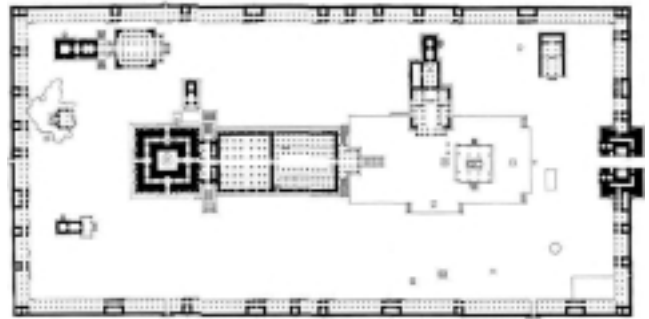
Photo 4 The 13-stoned pyramidal tower



Photo 5 View of the gopura (portal) and the temple



Fig.2 Temple plan



into alternating recesses and projections, the latter punctuated by niches to house carved images of Shiva in different aspects, including Nataraja. They are replaced by guardian figures brandishing clubs beside the window openings in the middle of each side.

The tower above is a steeply pyramidal composition of thirteen storeys, each with pilastered walls and a parapet of model roof forms, diminishing gradually in scale to create an impression of limitless height. This notion of a multi-storeyed pyramidal tower is, in fact, an essential feature of the Dravida style, dating back to the earliest South Indian temples of the seventh and eighth centuries. Here, the storeyed tower is extended to create a monumental superstructure of unprecedented height and grandeur. At the top is a massive octagonal-to-dome roof, once thought to consist of a single piece of stone, but actually fashioned from several tightly fitted sections. Much speculation has taken place about how these stones might have been lifted to such a great height, probably by ropes, scaffolding and sheer manpower, as may still be seen today in India. As to the architect and master masons who were employed in the construction, these remain unknown.

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