



## Rameshwaram, The Anchor of Indian Renaissance - 10

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### “An altar raised to the Divine Self”

In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “An Indian temple to whatever godhead it may be built is in its inmost reality an altar raised to the divine Self, a house of the cosmic Spirit, an appeal and aspiration to the Infinite.”

Temple had pervaded not only religious life of the citizens but also their secular life and their spiritual aspirations. Indian temples had magnificent architecture with abundant sculptures, well documented parts and their significances. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, “Indian architecture especially demands this kind of inner study and this spiritual self-identification with its deepest meaning and will not otherwise reveal itself to us. The secular buildings of ancient India, her palaces and places of assembly and civic edifices have not outlived the ravage of time; what remains to us is mostly something of the great mountain and cave temples, something too of the temples of her ancient cities of the plains, and for the rest we have the fanes and shrines of her later times, whether **situated in temple cities and places of pilgrimage like Srirangam and Rameshwaram or in her great once regal towns like Madura, when the temple was the centre of life.** It is then the most hieratic side of a hieratic art that remains to us. These sacred buildings are the signs, the architectural self expression of an ancient spiritual and religious culture. Ignore the spiritual suggestion, the religious significance, the meaning of the symbols and indications, look only with the rational and secular aesthetic mind, and it is vain to expect that we shall get to any true and discerning appreciation of this art. (The Foundations of Indian Culture)



Figure 1: Top view of temple

The architecture of Hindu temples has evolved over a period of 2,000 years and although the shapes vary from rectangular, octagonal, semicircular – with different types of domes and gates, still there are many things in common.

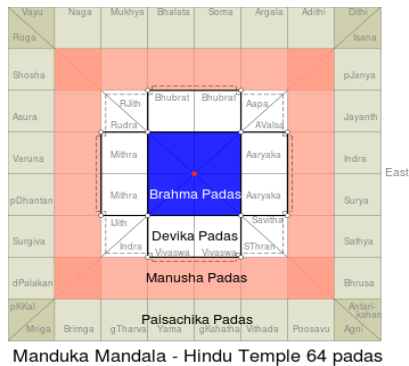


Figure 2: 64 padas

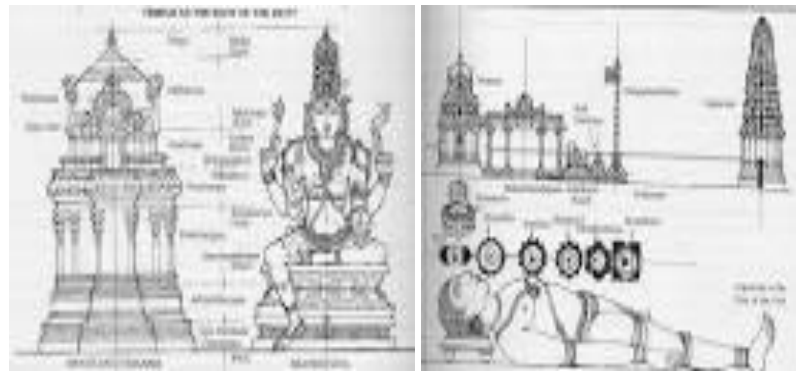


Figure 3: Temple plan similar to human body

In the words of **Anthony Batchelor**,

“The temple is the focus for all aspects of everyday life in the Hindu community - religious, cultural, educational and social. The temple is also the place where one can transcend the world of man. Hindus believe that their lives are merely stages in the progression to ultimate enlightenment. The temple is a place where God may be approached and where divine knowledge can be discovered. All aspects of the Hindu temple focus on the goal of enlightenment and liberation - the principles of design and construction, the forms of its architecture and decoration, and the rituals performed. And all of these are determined by ancient texts called shastras compiled by the priests, the brahmins. The vastushastras were theoretical and idealised descriptions of the architectural traditions and conventions to be followed.” “God and therefore by implication the whole universe is identified with the temple’s design and actual fabric. The ground plan is perhaps the best example. The vastushastras describe it as a symbolic, miniature representation of the cosmos. It is based on a strict grid made up of squares and equilateral triangles which are imbued with deep religious significance. To the Indian priest-architect the square was an absolute and mystical form. The grid, usually of 64 or 81 squares, is in fact a mandala, a model of the cosmos, with each square belonging to a deity. The position of the squares is in accordance with the importance attached to each of the deities, with the square in the center representing the temple deity; the outer squares cover the gods of lower rank.

The construction of the temple follows in three dimensional forms exactly the pattern laid out by the mandala. The relationship between the underlying symbolic order and the actual physical appearance of the temple can best be understood by seeing it from above which was of course impossible for humans until quite recently.

Another important aspect of the design of the ground plan is that it is intended to lead from the temporal world to the eternal. The principal shrine should face the rising sun and so should have its entrance to the east. Movement towards the sanctuary, along the east-west axis and through a series of increasingly sacred spaces is of great importance and is reflected in the architecture. A typical Hindu temple consists of the following major elements - an entrance, often with a porch; one or more attached or detached mandapas or halls; the inner sanctum called the garbhagriha, literally ‘womb chamber’; and the tower build directly above the garbhagriha. Besides the ground

plan there are other important aspects of the temple which connect it to the phenomenal world - its site in relation to shade and water, its vertical elevation relating to the mountains, and the most sacred part, the garbagriha, relating to caves.” (The Hindu Temple by Anthony Batchelor, July 1997)



**Architecture and History of Rameshwaram:** Following details are taken from the site Temple website: ‘This temple, spread over an area of 15 acres, has lofty gopurams, massive walls and a colossal Nandi. Rameswaram also boasts of a 4000 feet long pillared corridor with over 4000 pillars, supposedly the longest in the world. The carved granite pillars are mounted on a raised platform. What is unique about this corridor is that the rock is not indigenous to the island and it was brought in from elsewhere in Tamilnadu across the sea. The eastern Rajagopuram towers to a height of 126 feet and it has nine levels.

The Western Rajagopuram, though impressive is not as tall as the Eastern one. The image of Nandi is about 18 feet tall and 22 feet in length. Now recently in the year 2016, two additional gopurams at South and North have been constructed.



It is believed that the ancient shrine was housed in a thatched hut until the 12th century and that the 1st ever masonry structure was built by Parakrama Bahu of Sri Lanka. The Setupathy rulers of Ramanathapuram completed the rest of the temple. Some of the temple vimaanams resemble the Vimaanams of the Pallava period. Much of the additions were carried out between the 12th and the 16th centuries. The long corridor (3rd prakaram) dates back only to the 18th century. The Gandhamadhana Parvatam (hill) provides a good view of the temple. This temple has received royal patronage from several kingdoms such as Travancore, Ramanathapuram, Mysore and Pudukkottai.’ (<http://templenet.com/Tamilnadu/s038.html>)

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