



Rameshwaram, The Anchor of Indian Renaissance - 9

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How to see an Indian Temple: “An altar raised to the Divine Self”

Rameshwaram is a temple city and the temple of Ramanathaswami is at the centre of the life of the city. This arrangement was very unique and profound in ancient Indian culture and deserves some elaboration. Right from the architecture, sculpture and surroundings, temple had many unique aspects representing the essence of Indian culture and ethos.

Sri Aurobindo has elaborated in his book - ‘The Foundations of Indian Culture’ about Indian Architecture and Sculpture. In his words, Indian temple is **an altar raised to the Divine Self**. How to see a temple? He explains:



“To appreciate [the] spiritual-aesthetic truth of Indian architecture, it will be best to look first at some work where there is not the complication of surroundings now often out of harmony with the building. ... The straightway here is not to detach the temple from its surroundings, but to see it in unity with the sky and low-lying landscape or with the sky and hills around and feel the thing common to both, the construction and its environment, the reality in Nature, the reality expressed in the work of art. The oneness to which this Nature aspires in her unconscious self-creation and in which she lives, the oneness to which the soul of man uplifts itself in his conscious spiritual upbuilding, his labor of aspiration here expressed in stone, and in which so upbuilt he and his work live, are the same and the soul-motive is one... There is in both a constant, subtle yet pronounced lessening from the base towards the top, but at each stage the repetition of the same form, the same multiplicity of insistence, the same crowded fullness and indented relief, but one maintains its multiple endeavor and indication to the last, the other ends in a single sign. To find the significance we have first to feel the oneness of the infinity in which

this nature and this art live, then see this thronged expression as the sign of the infinite multiplicity which fills this oneness, see in the regular ascent of the edifice the subtler and subtler return from the base on earth to the original unity and seize on the symbolic indication of its close at the top. Not absence of unity but a tremendous unity is revealed. Reinterpret intimately what this representation means in the terms of our own spiritual self-existence and cosmic being, and we have what these great builders saw in themselves and reared in stone... To appreciate the detail of Indian architecture is easy when the whole is thus seen and known; otherwise, it is impossible... This greatness and continuity of Indian sculpture is due to the close connection between the religious and philosophical and the aesthetic mind of the people. Its survival into times not far from us was possible because of the survival of the cast of the antique mind in that philosophy and religion, a mind familiar with eternal things, capable of cosmic vision, having its roots of thought and seeing in the profundities of the soul, in the most intimate, pregnant and abiding experiences of the human spirit."



“The more ancient sculptural art of India embodies in visible form what the Upanishads threw out into inspired thought and the Mahabharata and Ramayana portrayed by the word in life. This sculpture like the architecture springs from spiritual realization, and what it creates and expresses at its greatest is the spirit in form, the soul in body, this or that living soul power in the divine or the human, the universal and cosmic individualized in suggestion but not lost in individuality, the impersonal supporting a not too insistent play of personality, the abiding moments of the eternal, the presence, the idea, the power, the calm or potent delight of the spirit in its actions and creations. And over all the art something of this intention broods and persists and is suggested even where it does not dominate the mind of the sculptor. And therefore as in the architecture so in the sculpture, we have to bring a different mind to this work, a different capacity of vision and response, we have to go deeper into ourselves to see than in the more outwardly imaginative art of Europe.”

Indian culture never made an unbridgeable gap between a person’s practical life and his deeper aspirations, between his religious rites and his social regulations, between his external wellbeing and internal growth. Temple was a meeting point of these apparent divisions. Entire life from pursuit of organized religion, solving of social issues, conducting of philosophical debates, expression and appreciation of arts, Education of younger generations, deliverance of royal duties to society, perpetuation of oral literature and methods, dissemination of medical, mystic, martial, and artistic knowledge... everything was linked to the magnificent ingenious institution of a temple. A Brahmin was not just a religious priest in ancient India, he is one who acquires and disseminates secular as well as spiritual knowledge, and the former is a path to reach the

later. He used to get that pivotal role by his education, achievements and by his caliber and that explains why he was so patronized by kings and businessmen, was brutally hated by the invaders and revered by the local people. That original holistic institution is not same as today's isolated dilapidated religious structure of temples which is no more than a pilgrim place or tourist spot and that ancient order of Brahmins is not same as the present degenerated corrupted version of the bhat, badwa or panda in temples, getting the post by birth or by influence, busy collecting money from devotees as a middleman to god, while telling puja, fortune and stories, with no admiration from society and support from state. One can see Dharmapal's authentic records from 18th 19th century India to know that the above explained institution of temple and the role of Brahmins in it was continuing till recent times before British steamrolled all our lives and institutions. (Bharatka Swadharma)

The 6 parts of a Hindu Temple are as given below:
(from <http://hinduism.about.com/od/temples/p/hindutemple101.htm>)

1. The Dome and Steeple: The steeple of the dome is called 'shikhara' (summit) that represents the mythological 'Meru' or the highest mountain peak. The shape of the dome varies from region to region and the steeple is often in the form of the trident of Shiva.

2. The Inner Chamber: The inner chamber of the temple called 'garbhagriha' or 'womb-chamber' is where the image or idol of the deity ('murti') is placed. In most temples, the visitors cannot enter the garbhagriha, and only the temple priests are allowed inside.

3. The Temple Hall: Most large temples have a hall meant for the audience to sit. This is also called the 'nata-mandira' (hall for temple-dancing) where, in days of yore, women dancers or 'devadasis' used to perform dance rituals. Devotees use the hall to sit, meditate, pray, chant or watch the priests perform the rituals. The hall is usually decorated with paintings of gods and goddesses.

4. The Front Porch: This area of the temples usually has a big metallic bell that hangs from the ceiling. Devotees entering and leaving the porch ring this bell to declare their arrival and departure.

5. The Reservoir: If the temple is not in the vicinity of a natural water body, a reservoir of fresh water is built on the temple premises. The water is used for rituals as well as to keep the temple floor clean or even for a ritual bath before entering the holy abode.

6. The Walkway: Most temples have a walkway around the walls of the inner chamber for circum-ambulation by devotees around the deity as a mark of respect to the temples god or goddess."

