

TEMPLES OF INDIA: DEVELOPMENT OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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Himachal Pradesh has been nick named as Dev Bhoomi (the land of gods) because of the numerous temples that represents the entire region through its length, breadth and span a long period of more than two millennia for their evolution and development. This gave us an chance to have a fresh insight in their art and architectural features and compare them in an logical manner with the observations of the scholars who have dwelt upon various aspects of the temples of Himachal Pradesh. There are a large number of writings on the temples and some of them are as old as a century and half. During this period, some changes became further clear. The art of temples though attracted their casual attention, yet no micro study has been done about them so far. The present study has provided an opportunity to study the works related to the subjects by several eminent art-historians on one hand and compare their observations with the monuments *in situ* on the other. Further, we were able to check both the secondary works and the monuments to see how far they are compatible to the ancient *śilpa śāstras*. Each time our findings have been able to shed new light on the subject as already described in detail.

This includes the temples of Himachal Pradesh as well as the rest of the country. The earliest surviving examples of the temples are those of the Gupta period, such as the temple no. 17 at Sanchi, Kankālī Devī Temple, Tigwa, Pārvatī temple, Nachna, etc. all being assigned to the 4th or early 5th centuries of the Christian era. However, the archaeological evidence has indicated towards the existence of temples at least in the Śuṅga period in the 2nd century B.C. The literary evidence goes further back as pointed out by scholars like V.S. Agrawala, Krishna Deva¹, P.K. Agrawala². All these examples and studies have highlighted the existence of early temples in the plains of the north and central India. On the basis of this evidence an impression has been created that the art of temple architecture came to Himachal Pradesh not before the seventh century A.D. and that too was borrowed from the idiom prevalent in the plains of North India. There is nothing farther from the truth. Though no early examples of temples exist in Himachal Pradesh today but the numismatic evidence has conclusively

shown the existence of beautiful temples of more than one storey with pillars, *śikhara*, etc. as early as the 2nd century B.C. in the time of the Audumbaras and Yaudheyas³. It is possible that these temples were made of wood and have since perished. Unfortunately, the coins do not provide us any details of their doorframes. The findings from our study also dispel the popular beliefs about the architecture of the early temples based on those of Sanchi, Udaigiri, etc. such as they had a flat roof and consisted of small square sanctum with plain walls. The temples during the Audumbara and Yaudheya period were more than one storey, had rows of pillars and a high *śikhara* with a *dhvaja* and *kalaśa* on the top. It may be presumed that they had developed artistic motifs also.

On the structural stone temples in Himachal Pradesh, Mangarh Śiva temple, temples of Parahat (Hatkoti) and those of Nirmand are referred. None of them belong to the anterior of the 7th century A.D. and none has flat roof. The latter feature may be attributed to the mountainous trait where a sloping roof was required because of the climatic conditions, as found at Mangarh. But the development of the *nāgara* style *śikhara* demands an explanation. However, we must not forget that in time scale there is no difference in the development of the stone temples of Himachal and that of the rest of India. There appears to be a simultaneous development all over. Without any prejudice to the idea that the artists may have travelled from one place to another, the hilly region cannot be branded as borrower alone. This is specifically known from the Chamba inscriptions of Meruvarman's time and onwards⁴. The *sūtradhāra* of the Vaidyanātha temple at Baijnath was also a local architect of Trigarta⁵.

They represent the contemporary iconographic traditions, but at the same time the artists used their independent ideas in various representations. Some of the temples have plain doorframes, but it does not help us assign them an early date. It may be due to the availability of artists or finances for the purpose, despite of the directions laid out in *śilpa śāstras* for making and embellishing various types of doorjamb. Some of the early temples like those of Mangarh and Laṭṭā Baoli (Nirmand) have carved doorframes. In the case of the former event the images of the river goddesses and the *dvārapālas* are made, a trait that became popular during the Gupta period but is missing at Sanchi. The development of the doorframes from single to *trīśākhā* or *pañcha-śākhā* doorways in various temples when compared with the iconography of the frames has been instrumental in determining the

dates of their construction and discards the theories of their early date on the basis of the external evidence. The case of Behani Mahādeva temple at Behna may be quoted here. M. Postel⁶, assigned it an early date on the basis of the *Moharās* enshrined in the temple. O.C. Handa has followed him but goes much beyond in describing its doorjambs as ancient work in folk-art. The present study indicates that a temple may have existed there from an earlier period but the doorframe of the present temple is very late. On the other hand, the doorjambs of temples like Gaurī Śaṅkara at Naggar. The doorjambs of the Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Jagatsukh helps in assigning it an early date with some interesting features in the image on the *lalāṭabimba*. Some new iconographic traits have also been noted in some of the arts and must be attributed to the original thinking of the artists who made them. With reference to the Baijnath temple a panel of *apsarās* in amorously lying postures is there. It is a good variant of *mithuna śākhā* combined with *gaṇa śākhā*. The depiction of Gaṅgā and Yamunā on the base of the doorframes, though a common feature of the temples from the Gupta period onwards, also has some interesting details in the regional examples. The ones carved in the porch of Basheshar Mahādeva temple at Bajaura though belong to the main stream iconographic features show their own style with which Yamunā carries the lotus. On the other hand, at Mani Mahesh, Bharmaur Gaṅgā and Yamunā are shown standing on swans in place of crocodile and tortoise. Another noticeable feature has been the crowns of these goddesses as well as of several other deities. The three pronged crowns have typical *Pahari* features. The only example in Himachal Pradesh where Gaṅgā and Yamunā have been depicted on the upper part of the doorframe comes from an early Śiva temple at Sawara in Shimla District. Not unique by itself, but this arrangement is very rare even elsewhere in India till the medieval period. It is difficult to say if this arrangement was original idea of the local artists or borrowed from outside. But it definitely indicates their will to experiment with the new, something besides the traditional trends.

Himachal Pradesh did not lag behind as far as the rock-cut architecture is concerned. Not a small example and by no means of lesser merits than those of Ellora and other places in Western India, the big rock-cut complex at Masrur vies with any other for its glory and grandeur. The only example of this type in the north-west India, it provides excellent examples of carving in the doorjambs. A notable feature of the frames here is the despite of it being a Śaiva complex, as is generally believed, the images of Gaṇeśa on the

lalātabimbas are missing. We have beautiful images of *dvārapālas* and couples on the base of the doorjambs but the depiction of the river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā did not catch the fancy of its craftsmen and hence they are missing. The blind doorways with plain walls but beautifully carved frames are also an enigma. The panels depicting images of various deities with attendants on the lintels of the doorjambs are also very interesting. The start from the classical style, the earlier examples having all been vanished, if any, and continue through the post-Gupta, Pratihāra and post-Pratihāra till they start degenerating into medieval sculptural style. Along with continuity these doorframes show the contemporaneity with their counterparts elsewhere in India.

References

Krishna Deva, Temples of India, Vol. I, pp. 4 ff.

Agrawala, P.K., Bhāratīya Vāstu evaṁ Kalā

Cf. Handa, Devendra, Tribals Coins of Ancient India.

In the Nandi pedestal inscription at Bharmaur technical terminology of temple architecture is used. There is no reference to any outside artist even in the inscriptions of Yugākaravarman or in the Sarahan Praśasti of Sātyaki.

C. Baijnath temples inscriptions. Ed. Jagannath Agrawa, Inscriptions of Punjab, Haryana, H.P., J & K and Adjoining Hilly tracts, pp. 298 ff.

Supra, Chapter IV.