

Man and Temple : A Never-failing Bond

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Temple: the 'sacred' space

It comes as no surprise that a temple has long remained an abode of deities. Let me quote what the twelfth century Indian philosopher cum Lingāyat social reformer, Basava (also called Basavanna), has said: 'Gods, gods, there are so many there's no place left for a foot'¹. It means that everywhere there is a house of God, the temple. Such a polytheistic world of gods marked not only the Indian landscape but almost the whole of the ancient world. With the passing of time, when the nomadic people slowly started building houses for themselves, the gods were given their proper 'homes' with seats and even beds to enjoy a nap and sleep at night. Each of these homes got the name of a temple. Initially men built their homes close to God's homes to enjoy a tight bonding. During worship, which, in Indian thought, is, more or less, a 'private affair', people started 'treating the image in every respect as we treat a great man'². In this way there gradually emerged a give-and-take (offering-and-benediction) relation between the two kinds of household members.

A temple becomes a significant place to a man of religious bent. It has been observed that '(f)or religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions'³ between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', i.e., a 'space' of God and one of godlessness. We notice such a binary in the *Book of Exodus* (3.5) where God asks Moses to take off his 'sandals' as he was 'standing on holy

ground'. It implies that there is 'a break in the homogeneity of space'⁴. In fact, '(t)he threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious'⁵. It is as if one can transcend the world of man by crossing that threshold. At this point Swami Vivekananda's statement, 'The man who goes to a temple is not considered thereby a better man than he who *never* does'⁶ makes one pause and ponder.

The temple tradition

There is, however, no dearth of literature on such aspects of temple as noted above. Through this paper I would simply try to depict man's relationship with temples which is not only contributory to society but also an integral part of it. Obviously, this study will leave the 'devotional' approaches alone.

But, before I proceed, let us see the origin of the word 'temple'. This word has its origin in Latin *templum*, which means an open or consecrated space. In Sanskrit, however, the 'temple' is called *mandir*, a word that surely connotes a house of gods (*devagriha*), primarily a sleeping place (*nidrāsthān*) or a home (*griha*). Man, for his restful living, needs a home and he loves to have one. His *griha* becomes his *mandir* where the family members stay together. This urge came to him as an evolutionary gift to his bipedalism. Along with this, he thought of building a temple or a *mandir* to accommodate one or more gods in a homely ambience. With the installation of the

deities the space is transformed into *Devālaya*, the home of God. In this attempt to view temple as home, one finds an element of nostalgia. If we recall the ISKCON movement, that was in full swing in New York in 1967, the significant title of its magazine: ‘*Back to Godhead*’ was explained as ‘Back to HOME’⁷. A similar emotion may have been the driving force behind the building of the ‘Hindu Temple of Southern California’ (HTSC), that ‘was the culmination of the determined effort, dedication and commitment of several first generation Hindu families’⁸ during the Seventies of the last century when the immigrants were building new bonds of friendship by means of establishing a religious institution. This is how the connecting thread between the two kinds of homes gets woven.

Apart from being places of worship, the temples, as described above, serve as cultural and social centres too. Many of them host year-long festivals and ceremonies. Not only devotees, but visitors of various kinds, including tourists from home and abroad, form the temple-crowd that gets the opportunity to have a glimpse of the country’s history and culture through such occasions.

Though a temple is ‘erected mostly by rich persons as a meritorious religious act’⁹, one must know that ‘(r)eligion does not consist in erecting temples’.¹⁰ In earlier days kings used to build the temples. Also, it was their duty to protect the property of the temples. Apart from the kings or the rulers of the state, the ‘official nobility, rich merchants acting individually or grouped in more or less powerful grids, sometimes even regiments of soldiers... competed and co-operated with one another in religious undertakings’,¹¹ such as building Buddhist temples, the *caityas*, or the Hindu temples. We also find that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ‘(t)he mahārānās of Mewār sponsored temples and

towers at Eklingji and at Chittorgarh’¹². However, as noted in the book, *Diaspora of the Gods*, ‘In the new trading cities of India, temples... were openly the product of merchant wealth and merchant control’¹³. Further, it has been observed that such merchants ‘built their own temples in a new environment that was fully part of a global interchange of goods and people’¹⁴. The Birla Mandir, Kolkata, built by the industrialist Birla family, is a case in point.

Structurally, a temple is a roofed entity with a particular geometric pattern that houses one or more deities (with one as the Supreme) and the temple gets its name accordingly, like *Kāli mandir*, *Shiv mandir*, *Vishnu mandir*, etc. As exceptions that prove the rule, Lotus Temple in Delhi, belonging to the Bahai sect, and the ancient Oachira Temple in Kollam district of Kerala, dedicated to Parabrahman, are found as idolless temples. There are, however, temples where, instead of the established deities, divine incarnations are worshipped and the temples become famous accordingly. Thus, we get Swaminarayan Temple, Ramakrishna or Sarada Temple, Sai Baba Temple, Lokenath Baba Temple, Ram Thakur temple, Anukul Thakur Temple, Mirabai Temple and the like. Again, there are temples where neither gods nor the divine incarnations are worshipped. Instead, an epic character is worshipped. One such example is the Hidimbā temple in Manali, Himachal Pradesh. Here the veneration of Hidimbā Devi, a demoness, has a prominent cultural significance as she is worshipped as a manifestation of Goddess Durga. Her kindness towards the ‘Dhungri’ locals has made her immensely popular and, through this popularity, the ‘local’ here meets the ‘national’ and the temple, as a result, has come into the spotlight. Swami Vivekananda, in his lecture ‘The Future of India’, delivered in Madras, however, laid

emphasis on the importance of ‘a non-sectarian temple’ with a symbolic ‘Om’ for this polytheistic, pluralistic nation.

Today temples are found in varied locations throughout the world, in rural and urban areas, in a crowded metropolis, on inaccessible hilltops or national borders, inside the caves and in deep forests. We read of an eighteenth-century underground Shiva temple deep in the tunnel in a dense forest in the famous novel *Devi Choudhurāni*. Often it is found that temples are being built in proximity to and oriented toward rivers or oceans (temples of Dakshineswar and Murudeswar for instance) as such places are believed to be auspicious for the purpose. But, before the erection work starts, as with our homestead, the concerned piece of soil is symbolically purified through *bhumi-pujā*. In all these, man’s concern for temple is eminently in evidence. There are now even many a street temple across India as there is a mushrooming of temples. If one looks around to see the roadside temples, dedicated to deities like Hanumanji, Shani Maharaj, Kālī or Shiva, one often notices the close proximity of the marketplace and the temple that share the same public space. Their number is steadily on the rise, indicating the growing popularity of these temples. Every such temple invites a huge evening crowd of people from all walks of life. Whether this type of gathering is caused by ‘the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos’¹⁵ as Mircea Eliade has suggested, or reflects a resurgence of religious sentiments in a sceptical era, one would never know.

The countless varieties in the structure, the ritual pattern (like chanting, prayer or *prārthanā*, ‘personal’ worship or *arcanā*, and ‘public’ worships including daily worships by the priests as well as the occasional, majestic celebrations where the deities are taken out in procession), the distribution of *prasādam*, and the ambience of the temples have from

ancient times created religious fervour and made religion visibly vibrant among huge masses of people and produced what could be called the temple tradition. The temple being the locus, this tradition brings people to temples and creates an ecological relation between the two. In understanding its depth, it would be worthwhile to recall that, in India, probably the first ‘attempts at building small stone temples to Hindu deities, temples which within half a millennium were to become the dominant focuses of society in many parts of the subcontinent,’¹⁶ were made as early as in the Gupta Age. But that temples of deities might have existed even in the fourth century BC is evident in P. V. Kane’s study. In his *History of Dharmashāstra* he writes: ‘Khārvela, king of Kalinga (latter half of 2nd century BC) is said to have re-established an image of Jina carried away by Nandarāja and he is described as “sarva-devāyatana-sankhāra-kāraka” (one who looked after the preservation and repair of all temples)’¹⁷. The *Arthashāstra* of Kautilya (II. 4) also states that temples of Shiva, Ashvins, Lakshmi should be erected in the centre of the capital, to make them cynosures.

Temples in history

We know that only a century or two before the Muslim conquests, there arose splendid temples at Ellora, Khajuraho, Mt Abu, Konark, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, among many others. All these temples are seen to form a veritable cyclopaedia of the history and culture of the surrounding areas. The interests of the people visiting these temples have little to do with worshipping or prayer. People go there to know and enjoy the temple sculptures and architecture. They receive more aesthetic stimuli than religious ones and respond through a different kind of relationship with them. To know the aspects that led the temples to widely become the ‘dominant focuses

of society', let me take help from a well-researched paper. It writes that the 'temple came in course of time to develop a strong social side to its organization, attracting numberless endowments, which accumulated in its hands through several generations. It became the bank, the landlord, the school, and the hospital of the village or town where it was located, and offered scope for the display of the piety and liberality of all types of persons and groups'¹⁸. The temples became the targets for greedy kings like Mahmud (eleventh century), whose 'greed for gold' directed his raids 'to major temple towns such as Mathura, Thanesar, Kanauj and finally Somanatha'¹⁹. The fact that 'conquest' 'was sometimes imprinted by the destruction of a temple' was, as argued by Thapar, due to its being 'a statement of the power of its patron'²⁰. The temple also became 'an art gallery, even as it was a hall for concert, lecture, or transaction of local affairs'²¹. In South Indian temples, the author continues, 'a special class of temple-singers called *oduvārs* recite them [the Tamil hymns] every evening in a hall in the temple, and, during festivals, accompany the deity in procession, singing the *Devāram* [the hymns of Shaiva canon] in a party'²². Moreover, in 'the heyday of their glory, the income of temples went mainly to the benefit of the people at large by way of the promotion of education and help to the needy'²³. Today proper utilization of temple funds can be seen in various philanthropic services. The magnificent temples, to quote *The Sunday Guardian*, 'smoothen the way to India's economic revolution', by becoming centres of travel and tourism. A temple, as an institution, employs a large hierarchy of priests and other administrative workforce. People thus feel attachment to the temple. These are some of the dynamic aspects of a temple. There is another aspect too. For many in Mewar, 'their ruler remains Sri Eklingji, a god ["a Pāsūpata manifestation of the god Siva"] ...in need of a

diwān at that. It is in this capacity that Sriji Arvind Singh Mewār serves as mahārānā in the twenty-first century and the age of the modern nation-state'²⁴. So, God is seen as the living ruler. All these help us view the temple as a civil space as well as a religious one and discern the why-s and how-s of man-temple relations in a generalised manner. Herein lies the pre-eminent importance of temples in our society.

Temple as a multifaceted institution

There was a time in rural India when temples used to be the vital centres of the villages. It was almost customary for every villager to visit the local temple and pray before the *grāmadevatā* prior to going out for a work within or outside the village. This created a family value. Special occasions like the first writing ceremony of the kids (*hātekhori*, considered as the major milestone to a child's education), taking the child first time to a school, an examination, a job interview, a court hearing, a medical treatment elsewhere, fixing a marriage or solemnizing a wedding, celebration of new harvest (*nabānna*), someone's debut as an actor or a singer or, praying for someone else's cure unfailingly brought people to the temple. This almost goes unabated till today. There are examples of regular visits too. It is the temple courtyard where we hear *Hari-kathā*, the reading of sermons with commentaries, drama or *jātrā* performance on secular and mythical subjects and enjoy folk dances or community lunch (*bhoj*) during festive occasions. In all these cases the caste or *varna* disparities get diluted. If we think of Indian classical dance forms, we are bound to note that their roots are deeply grounded in temple tradition. The classical dancers virtually worship the gods by telling stories about their lives and exploits. It marks their association with temples. A wide study on the temples of

Madras and Madurai has led Milton B. Singer to comment that they ‘function as predominant centers for dramatizing in cultural performances the sacred myths of particular sects, and for traditionalizing the social and cultural innovations for which members of these sects are responsible...’²⁵. The temple becomes an inspiration for children, where in the *chandimandap*, the *pundit* sits with them to inculcate moral education (though this is becoming rare these days). The site of Sri Ramakrishna’s primary education stands as one such example. In many villages the temples were used as places for imparting formal education in Sanskrit. The brahmins educated this way were often absorbed as temple priests (like Sri Ramakrishna’s elder brother’s appointment at Dakshineswar temple). Previously ‘Jaina and Buddhist monasteries also educated novice monks or even some lay persons’²⁶. In modern days too, as Arindam Chakrabarti mentions, ‘lamas of every age reach the temple premises, without failure, in the evening time for their daily reading and tests on logic and Buddhist arguments’²⁷. In this context, let us recall a tenth-century (as far back as 971 AD) record. We read there, ‘the Lakulisa temple and inscription record a debate that took place among Buddhists, Jains, and the Pāshupata-Shivas’²⁸.

In earlier days temple-chanting reverberated in the air during dawn and dusk. In the morning the women used to draw sacred, colourful motifs (*ālpanā*) at the temple courtyards. The men folk of the villages developed a habit of making the temple courtyards a gossip-centre (*āddā*) in the evening time. Playing cards, smoking hookāhs, and administering local justice were also the usual practices of the village veterans there. In each of these events the concerned temple deity was seen as an eye-witness, the conscience, so to say. This was why people

nurtured a fear of both God and temple and, from there, an extended fear of religion. The fear was deep-seated and got ingrained. This, coloured with devotion, made some temple-deities appear *jāgrata*, ever-awakened. How people get connected with the temples through prayers or worship or *vrata* observances during a major crisis could be seen in recent times during the Covid pandemic. This awe generated a binary between the temple and the outer space and termed them ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ respectively. Kautilya’s *Arthashāstra* also divides settlement areas into ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ zones. In India people also come to temples with special objectives and perform ‘yajnas’ to make the national cricket team win the world cup, or help a candidate win the election. We also see people offering puja before bringing the new car home.

Apart from these aspects, history also gives evidences of temples having some negative associations. The eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal witnessed many terrifying robberies. The robbers (*dākāt*) were said to be ardent devotees of Mother Kālī and sometimes the temple became their dwelling house. They used to worship the Mother before setting out for robbery, invoking Her to grant them courage and muscle power. The temple premises were the place for sharing their booty among themselves. Human sacrifices were often made before the Mother either at the start of their programme or at its end. The *Dākāt Kālī Mandir* at Singur, in the district of Hooghly, evokes legendary memories. The Bengal Government Gazette had published many such stories²⁹. Even today some of the dilapidated temples of different locations are used as dens for nefarious activities.

The subject of ‘temple entry’ has long remained a national issue in India. In a letter written from Ridgely Manor on 14th

September, 1899, Swami Vivekananda wrote to Mr Sturdy that he 'was driven out of a private temple by the owners for eating with Europeans'³⁰. It was believed by many Indians that 'eating with Europeans' made them untouchables. Therefore, he was barred from entering the 'private temple'. The subject 'had become an important concern of Gandhi and of Congress, as an extension of reform activities around the plight of untouchable groups,' and it 'had an ambivalent career in the nationalist movement'³¹ in the early decades of twentieth

century. The movement for the right of temple-entry for the untouchables was one of the chief concerns of both Periyar and Ambedkar. Even today the Jagannath temple of Puri does not allow entry to Dalits, nor does the Sabarimala temple in Kerala allow females (of the age group 10-50 years) to enter. These kinds of restrictions are imposed by the guardians of the temple complex. Under such conditions a temple seems to become a private property of a few individuals and not the 'house of gods' for everyone to see and visit. ■

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* This is the last in a series of articles, published over the last few months, to commemorate the establishment of the Vivekananda Temple and the Brahmananda Temple at Belur Math a century ago.

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*Nainam chhindanti shastrāni
nainam dahati pāvakah /
Na c'ainam kledayanty āpo
na shoshayati mārutah //*

It means, no weapon can slay the Ātman, the Divine in man, water cannot wet It, fire cannot burn It, air cannot dry It. It is immortal. That is why knowing this truth, you can face death with a gentle smile. It is a great teaching.

Conclusion

Thus we have a tremendous cultural inheritance which has got diverse aspects. However, one supreme aspect of Indian culture is the artistic aspect. But what is the source of the aesthetic element in Indian culture? In the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, there is the beautiful description of the Supreme Divine. That is not only *Sat* or Real, That is not only *Cit* or Pure Consciousness, but That is also *ānanda*, the infinite Bliss. Out of the Bliss element of that divine reality came the tremendous impulse to develop

the arts and aesthetic ideas in this country and create literature, dance and music of exceptionally high order.

Last year we had a Festival of India in America. India's art products had gone to America for exhibition there. I was in America at that time. In one of the journals I read about this Festival of India. They wrote, 'Just now we are having a cultural blitzkrieg from India.' Blitzkrieg is the word used for German mass bombing of England in the Second World War. So America was having then a cultural blitzkrieg from India. The National Geographic Magazine also wrote that eighty million Americans were touched by this cultural blitzkrieg. What a wonderful blitzkrieg! And they wrote it approvingly. So the artistic heritage of India is alive. Though much has been destroyed, what remains is still impressive. A living tree will shed the old bark and will grow a new bark for itself. India is a living tree. It has shed many barks, but the tree itself is eternal, *sanātana*. ■

(To be continued)

* This is a slightly abridged version of the first part of the two-part Sardar Patel Memorial lecture that Swami Ranganathanandaji, the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, delivered in 1986. The speech is derived from the Prasar Bharati archives.