

North Indian Classical Temple Architecture: A Case-Study of Masrur Temple, Himachal Pradesh, India

Dr Shuchita Sharma

Assistant Professor, Central University of Higher Tibetan Studies, India, shuchi.vns@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The temples are most outstanding form of India's sacred architecture. Temples are conceived as a receptacle for an image of the saviour or deity who is worshiped there. Generally, temple is defined as a building dedicated to deity and worship or it is a place of worship. Masrur, in the Kangra district, is an important site in the Himalayan region with a view to study Hindu temple architecture. Masrur is amazing monolithic rock-cut curvilinear Shikhara type temple; probably it is singular example in the North India of its kind. The temple of Masrur is an extensive rock-cut temple complex with the central part, roughly 160X105 ft., showing a large east-facing Shiva temple as nucleus enclosed by eight subsidiary shrines. On the extremities of the longer side are excavated two medium sized temples, each facing the transverse direction and surmounted by four satellite shrines. The architectural and iconographical plan of the complex, the Masrur complex fits in between the Gupta architecture and the typology of overall character of the temples dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries those of Central India, Rajasthan and Gujrat. Regarding the dating of the Masrur, Professor C Shivarammurthi writes "Since the carving is very pleasing and follows the Gupta idiom- though very much more advanced in style- this must be eighth-century work".

KEYWORDS: Kangra, Temple Architecture, Nagar Temple, Vastushastra

Introduction

The temples are most outstanding form of India's sacred architecture. Temples are conceived as a receptacle for an image of the saviour or deity who is worshiped there. Generally, temple is defined as a building dedicated to deity and worship or it is a place of worship. Something temple is regarded as having within it a divine presence. In Sanskrit, the words Devalaya or Devayatana or Mandira, or Prasad are implied to the English word Temple. It means the House of God or Abode of God. However, for a Hindu, it is both and yet stills more. It is the whole cosmos in the miniature form. Professor Stella Kramrisch, in her book "The Hindu Temples" defines temple as 'monument of manifestation. According to the vastushastra, a temple is representation of cosmic man or Vastupurusha (Kramrisch, vol. I, 1976, 6).

In Hindu psyche, the temple seeks to represent everything of which the cosmic world brahmada, the entire universe is composed of the earthly world, the heavenly world, the astral world and the world below the waters, Prthvi, Akasha with Svarga and Patala respectively (Gupta & Asthana 2002, 11). Indian veteran Scholar Professor Krishna Deva, on symbolism of the Hindu Temple, writes that a Hindu temple is a symbol or rather a synthesis of various symbols. It conceived in terms of the human organism, which is the most evolved living form. The name of the various limbs of the human body from the foot to the hair on the crown of the head is applied in architectural texts to different parts of the temple structure. Term like feet, legs, thighs, necks and head denote the anatomical position, function of the structural parts corresponding to those of the human body, and are often used figuratively to emphasize the concept of human body in temple architecture. The Hindu temple is abode of god. Evidently, even the perfect body seems lifeless without the resident soul. Therefore, in the temple the god is the spirit imminent in the universe who lives in the temple.

The Hindu temple architecture has covered a course of development where at every phase new limbs were conceived according to the need whether it was realistic or symbolic. The plan of a Hindu temple invariably consists of a sanctum where the votive image is housed which is called

garbhagrha, a term referring to the place that contains the ritual kernel of the temple. The sanctum is customarily a dark chamber enclosed by massive wall, the interior of sanctum is simple and austere dimly lighted which stimulates the mystery of universe and divine spirits. The sanctum is considered as microcosm so the whole temple is the symbol of universe inhabited by gods, demy gods, human beings and animals, which are graphically represented on the walls of temples and elsewhere.

The architectural origin of the temple is significant as the base or adhisthana is derived from Vedic sacrificial alter, the plane cubical cell of the sanctum from the prehistoric dolmen and spire from the simple tabernacle made of bamboos tied together to a point. In due course of the time this basic structure evolved in to a complex with refined forms decorated with sculptures and pillars. In northern India, the Hindu temple architecture developed according to the geographical environment and source of material for construction especially in the basin of Ganga and Yamuna during the Gupta and Post-Gupta period. It seems that the north Indian temple architecture reached the apex of architectural evolution during the Pratihara's period. From here onwards, the north Indian temple style penetrated deep in the Himalayas.

North Indian Stone Temple

The typical North Indian temple typologically called Nagar in style present a four-sided construction having a perfect square garbhagrha (sanctum sanctorum), but the whole temple plan could be oblong. Four-sided neck or griva and a tall tapering Shikhara mark its elevation. A north Indian temple of Prasada or Nagara style has two basic components:

1. Garbhagrha or sanctum sanctorum or central cella, with only one entrance, in which the image of the main deity is installed.
2. Mandapa or porch in front of the garbhagrha, usually open from three sided for the worshippers to flock for worship (Gupta & Asthana, 2002, 14, 15).

Earliest simplistic prototype in perfect state of preservation is temple no. 17 with flat roof at Sanchi, in Madhya Pradesh, dating to the Gupta period (5th century). During the same period but towards the end of the century, perhaps, at Deogarh, near Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, a slightly more elaborate temple for Vishnu was built; in this the roof over the garbhagrha became pyramidal, i.e., tall and pointed, resembling mountain. It is called Shikhara, which is, in fact, the spire, a tall structure that tapers to a point above. Shikhara is symbol of is a ritual imitation of the cosmic mountain, which is the point of contact between the human and the divine (Fergusson, Bushell Encyclopaedia of World Art Vol. I 1959, 630). The Shikhara, the walls and the pillars, as well as the roofs over the garbhagrha and the mandapa, are often decorated with floral and geometric patterns as well as with the images of gods and goddesses and scenes from mythologies.

A Hindu temple also called vastupurusha, i.e., an architectural piece resembling the body of a human being. 'Human being' here stands for God or 'Supreme Being' since he conceived in the form of man. Later this concept developed into the mandala concept called vastupurusha-mandala. Generally, a Nagara style temple stands on a large and high platform, called jagati, made of stone and bricks, with several mouldings. It represents the feet of man. Over this stands is a smaller platform of stones, called pitha. Over the pitha rises a still smaller platform, called adhisthana or vedi-bandha, the immediate base of the superstructure of the temple. It is on this platform that the pillars and walls of the temple are raised; the top of this adhisthana or platform is the floor of the temple. Three parts of the temple represent the ankle, lower feet and upper feet of the human body (Gupta & Asthana, 2002, 16, 17).

Masrur, in the Kangra district, is an important site in the Himalayan region with a view to study Hindu temple architecture. Masrur is 32 kilometres from Kangra on Nagrota Surian link road. Masrur is amazing monolithic rock-cut curvilinear Shikhara type temple; probably it is singular example in the North India of its kind. The temple complex is situated in village of Masrur, tehsil of Dehra Gopipur of the district Kangra.

Masrur temple was first came to notice in the list of archaeological monuments prepared in 1875 but its rock- cut character was not appreciated till H.L. Shuttle worth's (Assistant Surveyor)

visit to the site in April circa 1913 CE. (ASI AR 1915-16, 1918, 40). In October of the same year, H. Hargreaves of the Archaeological Survey of India (Hargreaves, ASI AR 1915-16, 1918, 40) visited the site. Because of its rather inaccessible location, the rock-cut temple at Masrur has not yet received proper attention that it deserves from the historians of ancient Indian architecture.



Figure 1. Front view of Temple

Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Photographer)

Though such temples abound in western India, in the Deccan, in Bihar, in Madhya Pradesh, in Orissa, and in the South, there are not many of this type in the North, and from this point of view, these monuments at Masrur are of special interest. The temple with the finished interior, adorned with carvings of a high order, faces east and is aligned with but higher than the subsidiary shrines on either side. Because of its imposing position on the high point of the hill, its beauty is shown off to great advantage. In this temple, the architect has arranged the Shikhara so that the solid rock shrines blend softly in a contour that harmonizes their lesser height with that of the primary one.

The temple of Masrur is an extensive rock-cut temple complex with the central part, roughly 160X105 ft., showing a large east-facing Shiva temple as nucleus enclosed by eight subsidiary shrines. On the extremities of the longer side are excavated two medium sized temples, each facing the transverse direction and surmounted by four satellite shrines. The complex overlooks a large tank measuring 155' by 85' approximately with an imposing and expressive appearance. This tank retains water throughout the year; probably it is linked to a subterranean spring.

The main temple comprises a sanctum with a lofty Latina Shikhara, antarala, mandapa with four massive columns, and a mukhamandapa with four subsidiary shrine on either side.



Figure 2. Front view of main shrine

Source: flickr.com

The doorway has five ornate shalakas (shafts) embellished with scrolls, diamonds, ornamented pilasters, ganas and garland design. The lintel or *lalata*, in centre display tiny images of Shiva, Ganesha, and Karttikeya at the ends.



Figure 3. Doorway of main temple

Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Photographer)

The ceiling of sanctum is carved with gorgeous lotus blossom with rows of smaller lotuses and half diamond around. From each side of the mandapa ascends a staircase to its roof terrace over which rises the entire edifice from the vedibandha and jangha upwards culminating in the Shikhara tower. The jangha is lavishly adorned with tall udgamas, Shikharaikas and large gavaksha-arches enclosing heads of deities.

At least 16 minor shrines have been identified in the central block, each raised on its own vedibandha supporting a large niche with decorative frame, roofed by a tower made up of udgamas and Shikharaikas. The niche frames emulate doorframes with three to five shakhas embellished with scrolls, ganas, vidyadharas, matrikas and other divinities some of which are also repeated on their lintels. Two flanking outcrops have been utilised for excavating shrines of sarvatobhadra plan showing Latina Shikhara rising from the central rock core with Kapotali projections carrying shuknasa in the four directions.

The mandapa of the main Shiva temple has massive circular columns with plain shaft embellished on the upper one-third with bands of diamond, half-lotus, and paired ghatapallava motifs, carrying richly carved figural brackets of designs recalling those on the wooden temples of Bharmaur and Chhatrari. The developed plan and design and the iconography of the images are certainly influenced by the Pratihara art of Madhyadesha through the flat and round physiognomy of the figures and the rich decorative repertoire and their treatment reveal the workmanship of the Himalayan wood-carvers. This interesting rock-cut complex is assignable to circa 800-825 CE. (Krishna Deva 1995, 219,220).

The portico leads to the mandapa (26'7" long and 28" wide) of which the roof has disappeared. The roof was originally about 19'9" above the floor level and supported by four pillars. On both sides of the mandapa there were opening for staircases to the roof. The floor level of the sanctum is about 5'4" deeper than that of the mandapa. The sanctum is 13' square with the roof about 16' above the ground level. The roof is characterised by a lotus design. In the centre of the sanctum is a platform obviously for the image or images. The original image is missing. The presence of the figures of Shiva flanked with two ganas in the centre of the lintel of the main shrine is a strong presumption that the temple was dedicated to Shiva (Chakrabarti & Hasan 1984, 42, 43).

The carving on the eastern and western sides have disappeared but the surviving carving on the other side shows that the main Shikhara rises above the roof of the sanctum. Each of the Shikhara originally bore the symbolic representation of Shikharas with three successive receding trefoil pediments (each bearing a medallion and human face) above. The amalaka and kalasha portions have been lost. The main Shikhara has been flanked by monolithic solid roof shrines, the Shikharas of which are lower than the main Shikhara. The doorways of the cells are only partly excavated indicating a simple but complete shrine.

There were four shrines at the four corners of the complex but not hewn inside leaving space for sanctum, although their entrances are richly decorated with carved lintels and doorjambs. Only one of them is better preserved. These shrines also are partly excavated. Two massive pillars support the roof of the Mandapa, the pillars are exquisitely proportioned and carved particularly the base and capital are noteworthy. The Shikharas possess chaitya-window carvings. Only one of the four subsidiary shrines, which are situated in front of each wall of the main temple, still survives. These are 13'7" square in plan. Their Shikharas are about 7'8" high above the roof and, according north Indian Shikhara. Two cruciform shrines stand in front of the shrines at the corners. These monolithic temples have square cells with porches on each side. A polygonal Shikhara, which gradually tapers above, rises over the roof of the sanctum. These Shikharas are decorated with chaitya window motifs.

As has already been mentioned, due to paucity of any epigraphic and literary record, it is rather difficult to date the Masrur, but architectural plan and treatment of floral decoration and other carvings indicate towards the medieval tendency of ornamentation. The architectural and iconographical plan of the complex, the Masrur complex fits in between the Gupta architecture and the typology of overall character of the temples dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries

those of Central India, Rajasthan and Gujrat. Moreover, conveniently it is comparable to the early phase of Bhubaneswara – Orissa and Ossian group of Rajasthan. This analogy suggests a more convincing date as 8th-9th century CE., which accords with the views of Hargreaves (ASI, Annual Reports 1918, 41; Deva 1995, 221 and Chakrabarti, 1984, 42). Regarding the dating of the Masrur, Professor C Shivarammurthi writes, “Since the carving is very pleasing and follows the Gupta idiom – though very much more advanced in style – this must be eight-century work. They may be attributed on the Karkota dynasty of Kashmir, which thus then held this entire region” (Shivaramamurthi 1977, 454).

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