

Temple Site Preparations

The Preparation of the Temple Site

In both ancient and modern times the temple has been a sacred and important place of Hindu worship. It is within the holy sanctuary of the temple that communion between the realm of the worshiper and the realm of the gods occurs. Here “the gods appear to man” (Michell 61). The temple is referred to as: “a seat or platform of god, a house of god, a residence of god or a waiting or abiding place” (Michell 61-62). With the importance and significance of the temple, it is interesting to study the work and effort that goes into preparing a site for the potential shrine. There are several stipulations as to potential building sites as well as a wide range of rituals and tests that are conducted on the site to ensure that the site is suitable for the link between the gods and men.

Site Selection Based on Geographical Formations

Selection of the temple site follows strict guidelines. For example, temples are to be build near water, in forests and gardens, on mountaintops and in valleys, and especially in caves (Kramrisch 5). The *Brhat Samhitā* outlines:

The gods always play where lakes are, where the sun’s rays are warded off by umbrellas of lotus leaf clusters, and where clear waterpaths are made by swans whose breasts toss the white lotuses hither and thither; where swans, ducks, curleys and paddy-birds are heard and animals rest in the shade of Nicula trees on the river bank.

The gods always play where groves are near, rivers, mountains, and springs, and in towns with pleasure gardens (Kramrisch 4).

“Play” is clarified for us by stating, “Play is the modality in which the Supreme Spirit displays his presence in the world” (Kramrisch 5). By situating temples near locations and geographical landforms that are already associated with the gods, these structures become a residence for the gods.

Water is required for the temple rituals and is also seen as a symbol for cleansing, renewal and enlightenment (Michell 68). The *Visnudharmattara* teaches that when temples are located on islands they are considered to be auspicious because they are surrounded by water. It also suggests that temples should be built with “...a pond on the left, or in front, not otherwise” (Kramrisch 5). If a potential temple site is not located near any natural water, then a tank or cistern could be used to store the water needed for ceremonies (Michell 68).

Geographical landforms such as groves, forests, mountains and caves also have significant symbolism and importance. “...every village and town has its sacred tree or grove,” and groves have often been considered as places of meditation (Michell 68). George Michell continues by saying, “The gods of Hinduism have always been attracted to mountains and caves” (Michell 69). This idea that mountains can be holy or sacred may not be limited to Hinduism. In the Old Testament, which is believed to be true by Christianity, Judaism and Islam, God conversed with Moses on Mount Sinai, an account of which is found in Exodus 19:16-25. In addition to Moses, the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 2:3 that “...the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above all the hills.”

Hinduism also views caves as a place of refuge and a location in which the gods may live (Michell 69). With the sanctity of these landforms, it would be most auspicious to build a temple near mountains or caves. However, the temple is also symbolic of both mountains and caves through its unique architectural structure (Michell 69). As one walks farther into a Hindu temple

it is as if one is walking into a cave. At the point in which the individual is confronted with the image of the deity, the individual is also directly below the highest point or the tallest point of the temple. Thus, the temple represents both a cave and a mountain through its architecture (Michell 70).

Testing and Preparing the Site

Once a suitable geographical location is selected and the land is purchased, the site must go through a series of tests and rituals to ensure its purity. In the first test, as the *Brhat-Samhita* indicates, a pit is dug and the excavated soil is then returned to the pit. “In descending degree of quality, it then either exceeds the pit in quantity, is level with it or lower” (Kramrisch 14). Instead of filling the pit back up with the excavated soil, the pit could be filled with water and left overnight. The soil quality would then be judged according to how much water was remaining in the morning; “or a flame put into the pit burns, or else is extinguished....” (Kramrisch 14). If the quality of the soil is found unsuitable the land may be abandoned (Kramrisch 14). Following these tests for soil quality are procedures to test the sound, the consistency, the taste, and the colour of the soils. “The *Matsyapurana* prescribes stipulations regarding the colour of the soil, white earth for Brahmanas, red for Ksatriyas, yellow for Vaisyas, black for Sudras” (Kramrisch 14). The soil is also judged and ranked against the caste system based on tastes, “...sweet, pungent, bitter, and astringent,” each representing a different caste (Kramrisch 14). Once suitable ground is found, it is ploughed and seeds are planted in its furrows (Kramrisch 14). Germination tests are conducted on the seeds allowing them “3, 5 or 7 nights” to sprout (Kramrisch 14). The plot of land must also be cleared of any “extraneous” elements such as weeds (Kramrisch 14). Once the land is free of weeds, it must be ploughed

repeatedly, with seeds being sown, plants growing to maturity and the grain flowering and ripening (Kramrisch 15). The ground is considered pure and clean once all these ritual tests, ploughing and planting are complete.

Even with the ground being purified, there are still a few rituals that remain before the building of the Hindu temple can even start. Kramrisch claims, “When a house is about to be built, an oblation is poured into the pit to the ‘steady one’, Vastospati” (Kramrisch 12). This is done to make the earth firm. Firm is not a reference to solid or concrete but has more of a reliable or unchanging meaning in this ritual. The earth is traditionally “the ever wandering” and this ritual, once performed, binds the earth so it can no longer wander, but must be firm (Kramrisch 12). Following the ritual the gods and spirits that may be currently abiding on the temple site are asked to vacate and are given offerings for doing so. Now the site is pure, and the divinity for whom the temple is being constructed can now take possession of the site. The last step of the site preparation is to level the ground and prepare the temple floor plan so that the “forecast of the temple will be laid out on the ground” (Kramrisch 14).

Bibliography

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Related Readings

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Related Topics for Further Investigation

- 1) Lila, or “play” of the Gods.
- 2) Temple Deities and their worship.
- 3) Sacred geometry of temple construction – *mandala*.
- 4) Symbolism in temple architecture.

Related Websites

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