

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Temple Architecture in India [Art and Culture Notes for UPSC]

Temple Architecture and Sculpture

Basic Form of the Hindu Temple

- The basic elements that comprise a Hindu Temple are given below:
- Garbhagriha: Literally means womb-house. It is a cave-like sanctum which houses the main icon of the temple. In earlier times, it was a small cubicle with one entrance. In later periods, it grew into a larger chamber.
- Mandapa: The entrance to the temple. It could be a portico or a collonaded hall where worshippers stand.
- Shikhara/Vimana: Noticed from the 5th century CE. It is a mountain-like spire on top. In north India, it is called Shikhara and is curving in shape. In the south, it is like a pyramidal tower and is called Vimana.



- Amalaka: Stone-like disc seen at the top of the temple. Mostly in north Indian temples.
- Kalasha: It is the topmost part of the temple. Mainly seen in north Indian styles.
- Antarala: It is a vestibule between the Garbhagriha and the Mandapa.
- Jagati: This is common in north Indian temples and is a raised platform where devotees can sit and pray.
- Vahana: It is the vehicle of the main deity which along with the standard pillar or Dhvaj which are placed axially.

Types of Indian Temple Architecture/Styles

Basically there are 3 kinds of temple architecture:

1. Nagara Style
2. Dravida Style
3. Vesara Style

The Nagara or North Indian temple style



- Became popular in northern India.
- Entire temple is generally built on a stone platform with steps leading to it.
- No grand boundary walls or gateways (unlike the Dravida style).
- Earlier temples had one shikhara whereas latter temples had many.
- The garbhagriha is located directly beneath the tallest shikhara.

Subdivisions of Nagara Style

- Based on Style:

Rekha-prasada/Latina

- Simple shikhara with square base and whose walls slope inwards to a point on top.



- Most common.
- In later periods, latina type became more complex with several towers clustered together.
- The tallest tower was at the centre and the garbhagriha was directly beneath it.

Phamsana:



- Roofs composed of many slabs that gently rise to a single point over the building's centre.
- Roofs do not curve inwards like the latina type, but they slope upwards on a straight incline.
- Phamsana structures are generally broader and shorter than latina ones.
- In many temples, the latina type is used to house the garbhagriha whereas the mandapa has a Phamsana style of architecture.

Valabhi



- Rectangular buildings with a roof that rises into a vaulted chamber.
- Also called wagon-vaulted buildings.

Nagara Style in Various Regions

Central India

- Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan.
- Made of sandstone.
- Oldest surviving structural temples from the Gupta period are in MP. They are small shrines with four pillars to support a small mandapa. The mandapas are basically small porch-like structures before the garbhagriha which are also rather small. Examples: temple at Udaigiri – part of a larger Hindu complex of cave shrines (outskirts of Vidisha); temple at Sanchi (which was a Buddhist site).
- This shows how similar architectural developments were incorporated in both religions.

Dashavatara Vishnu Temple, Deogarh, UP



- Classic example of the late Gupta period temple architecture.
- Patrons are unknown.
- From the architecture and imagery, it is known that the temple was built in early 6th century CE.

- **Panchayatana** Style of architecture.
 - Main shrine is built on a rectangular plinth with four subsidiary shrines that are smaller and at the 4 corners.
 - Hence, there are a total of five shrines and hence the name, Panchayatana.
- This temple has a rekha-prasada type of shikhara.
- It is a west-facing temple. Most temples are north or east facing.
- Has a grand doorway with figures of Ganga and Yamuna on the left and right side respectively.
- Depicts Vishnu in various forms. 3 main Vishnu reliefs on the temple walls: Sheshashayana on the south; Nara-Narayan on the east; and Gajendramoksha on the west.
- Since it was assumed that the subsidiary shrines had avatars of Vishnu in them, the temple was mistaken to be Dashavatara temple.

Khajuraho Temples (MP)

- Built in the 10th century CE.
- It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Patronised by Chandela Kings.
- All temples made of sandstone.
- From the temple at Deogarh (built about 400 years before Khajuraho temples), the development of the Nagara architectural style is visible here.
- These temples are known for their extensive erotic sculptures. Mostly Hindu, though some Jain temples are also present.
- There are also temples dedicated to Yoginis which form part of Tantric worship indicating the rise and spread of tantric cult after the 7th century. E.g. Chausanth Yogini temple.
- Important temples in Khajuraho: Kandariya Mahadeo (dedicated to Lord Shiva) and Lakshmana temple.

Lakshmana temple



- Grandest of the Khajuraho temples.
- Dedicated to Vishnu.
- Built by the Chandela King Dhanga in 954 CE.
- Structure is placed on a high platform that is accessed by stairs.
- Has small temples in four corners.
- Has high shikharas, amalak and kalash. Also has projecting balconies and verandas.

West India

- Gujarat, Rajasthan and western MP.
- Sandstone is most common, grey to black basalt is also seen in some 10 – 12th century temples.
- Also seen is soft white marble in 10 – 12th century Jain Temples at Mount Abu and a 15th century temple at Ranakpur.
- Samlaji in Gujarat is an important art historical site. Many sculptures made of grey schist are found here.

Sun Temple, Modhera, Gujarat



- Built by Raja Bhimdev I of the Solanki dynasty in 1026 CE.
- Temple complex features a huge rectangular stepped tank known as the 'Surya Kund' in the front. This is a noticeable feature from earlier times – proximity of a sacred water body. By early 11th century, this was a common feature of many temples.
- The Surya Kund is a 100 sq.m pond – one of the grandest of its kind in the country. 108 miniature shrines are carved in between the steps inside the tank.
- A large ornamental torana (gateway) leads to the sabha mandapa or assembly hall that is open on all sides.
- Lavish carving and sculpture work is present.
- The central shrine walls are plain. The temple is east-facing and every year at the time of equinoxes, the sun shines directly onto the central shrine.