

Five Hindu Temples Shrouded in Mystery

Copyright © 2017, DollsofIndia

India is a land of myriad temples and other sacred places of worship. According to experts, Hindu temples did not exist before or during the Vedic period (1500-500 BC). The concept of idol worship came into existence only after this era - this in turn gave rise to the construction of shrines and temples of all shapes and sizes.

Most of the major Hindu temples are truly amazing, jaw-dropping creations, which inspire a sense of awe and wonder in us. Yet others give rise to a totally different sensation in us - that of being in a mystical; sort of magical and surreal location.

In this post, we bring you a feature on five major Hindu temples, which seem unusually numinous and are shrouded in mystery and mysticism.

Konark Sun Temple

The Konark Sun Temple, also referred to as Konarak Sun Temple and Surya Deula, was built in 13th century CE. Located about 35 kilometers northeast of Puri, it lies along the coastline of Odisha. This temple is attributed to King Narasimhadeva of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty (around 1250 CE).

Dedicated to Surya (the Sun God), this structure is presently a 100-foot high chariot with huge wheels and horses; all carved from stone. Today, much of the temple is in ruins. A large shikhara, which rose high above the present mandapa, has unfortunately fallen off. The surviving structure is famed for its intricate sculpture, artwork and themes including the erotic Kama and Mithuna scenes. Built in the typical Oriyan style of temple architecture, it stood over 200 feet high before the start of its ruin.



Sun God - Wall Hanging

Because its great shikhara appeared black and served as an immense landmark for ships in the Bay of Bengal, it used to be referred to as the "Black Pagoda" by European sailors in the 17th century. Partially restored by the archaeological teams during the British Raj in India, it was declared a UNESCO world heritage site in 1984. Even today, it is a major pilgrimage site for Hindus, who gather here annually for the Chandrabhaga Mela held around February.

Construction

The name Konark comes from the Sanskrit words, "Kona" (meaning angle or corner) and "Arka" (the Sun). Kona, thus, may refer to the angle or direction in which the temple was aligned to face the sunrise.

The Sun Temple is built from stone and appears as a giant ornamented chariot, dedicated to the Sun God. In Hindu mythology, Surya is portrayed as rising in the east and traveling quickly across the sky in a chariot drawn by seven horses. The deity is shown as a luminous entity, standing inside the chariot, holding a lotus in both his hands. The chariot is driven by Aruna and the seven horses are named after the seven meters of Sanskrit prosody; namely, Gayatri, Brihati, Ushnih, Jagati, Trishtubha, Anushtubha and Pankti. Surya is flanked by the dawn goddesses, Usha and Pratyusha. They are shown to be shooting arrows, which represent their foray from the darkness into the light of dawn.

Sundial

The main attraction of the temple is its twelve pairs of wheels. These wheels are completely out of the ordinary - the spokes of the wheels actually create a sundial. One can calculate the exact time of day by just observing the shadow cast by the spokes on the wheel.



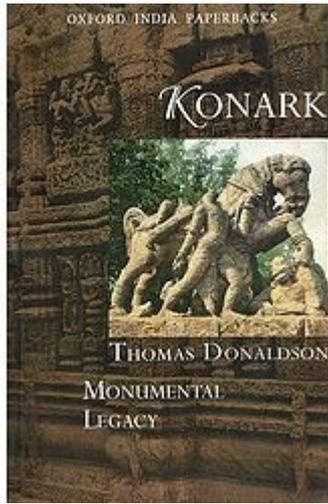
Chariot Wheel of Konark Temple
Stone Sculpture

Architecture

The architecture of the Konark Temple, which follows the Kalinga style of architecture, is symbolic with twelve pairs of wheels corresponding to the 12 months of the Hindu almanac. These 24 wheels are nearly 12 feet in diameter and are elaborately carved. They are pulled by seven horses. Interestingly, during dawn and up to sunrise, the temple seems to appear from the depths of the blue sea, carrying the sun along with it.

The general construction of the temple adheres to typical Odisha temple design, including square and circle geometry. The main temple is called deul; this is surrounded by secondary shrines, dedicated to other Hindu deities; particularly Surya in his many aspects. In front of this was the smaller sanctum, called the jagamohana (commonly referred to as mandapa in other parts of India). The main temple and the jagamohana comprise four zones, namely, the platform, the wall, the trunk and the mastaka (crowning head). On the east of the temple is the Nata mandira (dance temple), which stands on a high platform and is intricately carved.

The temple was made from three types of stones, including Chlorite, Laterite and Khondalite. The third type weathers faster - this may have contributed to the erosion and resulting damage to several parts of the temple.



Konark - Monumental Legacy

Book

Sculptures

The main attractions of the temple are the sculptures, carvings and ornamented reliefs, which adorn all the pillars and terraces of the structure. These include images of deities, animals and birds, the daily lives of ordinary people, musicians and dancers, bullock carts, geometric patterns and much more.

Apart from these, the Konark temple is also known for its erotic sculptures of maithunas. They show couples in various stages of courtship, intimacy and even coitus. While they were long considered infamous for their uninhibited exhibition of sexuality, they are actually associated with tantra and the vama marga tradition of the same. The sculptures found on the temple's Shikhara actually describe the bandhas and mudra forms described in the Kamasutra.

Shrines and Monuments

Several Hindu deities are depicted in other places of the temple, including Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Gajalakshmi, Narasimha, Krishna and so on. Additionally, the Jagamohana features Vedic deities such as Indra, Agni, Varuna, Kubera and so on.

Besides, the temple complex includes several subsidiary shrines and monuments, including the Mayadevi Temple, a Vaishnava Temple, a Kitchen monument, two huge wells and much more. Besides these, a collection of fallen sculptures can be found at the Konark Archaeological Museum.

The Mystery of the Magnets and the Floating Idol

The Konark Sun Temple was initially built along the sea. However, the sea has receded now and so, the temple lies a few kilometers away from it. This being an ancient temple, there are several myths, legends and mysteries associated with it. One of the most popular legends is

that of its magnets and floating idol.

The uniqueness of the Sun temple architecture lies in the fact that it was built using the power of magnets and magnetic force. While creating the main tower of the structure, the artisans placed an iron plate between every two pieces of stone. There is a lodestone at the top of the temple, which is believed to be a staggering 52-ton magnet.

Legend has it that the statue of the Sun God inside the temple is actually floating in mid-air, without touching the ground, and without having any other form of external support. They say that this feat has been possible due to the magnetic field created by the magnet at the top, interacting with the one at the bottom, plus the reinforced magnet around the temple walls.

Incidentally, the main temple has been so planned that the very first ray of the Sun would cross the Nata mandira and would reflect light from the diamond placed on Surya's crown.

Legends behind the Collapse of the Structure

According to one legend, the magnetic pull of the lodestone was so strong, that it would cause disturbances in the compasses of ships which passed along that area. This would end up making navigation difficult for sailors. In order to save their ships and their trade, the Portuguese sailors destroyed the temple and took away the lodestone. This is believed to be one cause of the collapse of the main temple structure. There is no historical or other evidence to support this theory. No one really knows if the magnets ever existed.

Some historians opine that, due to the early death of King Langula Narasimha Deva, the construction of the temple stopped halfway and was then left incomplete. It is said that this was the reason behind the collapse of the structure. However, there is some evidence to show that the temple was actually complete between 1253 and 1260 AD. Hence, this argument does not hold water.

One other popular legend relates that Kalapahada invaded Orissa in 1508. He destroyed this and several other temples. Though it was impossible to break this stone temple, he somehow managed to displace the Dadhinauti or the Arch stone, thus giving rise to its collapse.

A few experts aver that the temple could have been damaged by a severe earthquake, thunder or lightning. However, there is no proof of such a massive earthquake hitting the area. Besides, no thunder or lightning would have been able to affect the temple walls, which are 20-25 feet in thickness.

There are no actual historical records to prove any of the above-mentioned hypotheses and the real reason for the ruin of the temple's main structure remains a mystery. Irrespective of who or what caused it, it may never be restored to its original state.

Brihadeeshwara Temple

The Brihadeeshwara Temple, also referred to as the Rajeshwara Peruvudaiyar, is a Shiva temple, located in Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu. The term "Brihadeeshwara" is a combination of two Sanskrit words, "Brihat" (meaning huge, imposing, massive) and "Eeshwara" (which means the supreme Lord or Godhead). True to its name, this is one of the largest South Indian temples; also one of the finest examples of Tamil architecture. Constructed by Raja Raja Chola I between 1003 and 1010 AD, this temple is considered as a "Great Living Chola Temple" and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Lord Shiva - Terracotta Statue

The original monuments of this temple were built around a moat and included a gopuram, the main temple and its tower, frescoes, inscriptions and sculptures. Mainly focusing on Saivism, it also includes certain aspects of Vaishnavism and Shaktism traditions. During the course of history, the temple was damaged and some of the artwork is now missing. More mandapams and monuments were added at a later time and now, the structure stands amidst strong walls, which were built post the 16th century.

The vimana or the massive tower above the main sanctum is one of the tallest in the whole of South India. The temple has a huge prakara or corridor and features one of the largest ever Sivalingas in India. A favorite tourist destination, it is famed for its various shrines and sculptures; and especially for including the huge brass Nataraja, the Lord of Dance. Other shrines that can be found within the complex are dedicated to Parvati, Nandi, Ganesha, Kartikeya, Sabhapati, Dakshinamoorthy, Varahi, Chandeshwara and many more.

Architecture

During the Chola period, buildings predominantly featured projecting square capitals, and impressive columns and pillars. This created a whole new style of architecture. The temple inscriptions related how the main architect and engineer, Kunjara Mallan Raja Raja Rama

Perunthachan, adhered to this tradition and undertook construction of the temple.

The temple plan uses axial and symmetrical geometry. This comprises five main sections, namely, the sanctum with the huge vimana, the massive Nandi mandapam in front, the mukhamandapam (main community hall) in between, the mahamandapam (gathering hall) and the ardhamandapam (pavilion connecting the hall with the sanctum).

The complex integrates a large pillared and covered prakara, with a perimeter of about 450 meters for devotees to circumambulate the temple. Outside this verandah are two walls of enclosure.

On the east end is the original main gopuram or gateway. Additional entry and exit points help devotees enter and leave the temple from multiple locations. The towering vimana stands 63.4 meters high.

The Sanctum

The main sanctum is at the center of the western square. Surrounded by huge walls, it houses the huge stone Shivalinga. The sanctum is in the form of a miniature vimana. The entrance of this sanctum is elaborately decorated. The inner wall and the outer wall together create a sort of path around it for pradakshina (circumambulation).

The main Shikhara or Vimana is 16 storeys high and dominates the entire area. It is elaborately decorated with Pilaster, piers and columns.

Connection with the Natya Shastra

On the second floor is an effigy of Shiva in the form of Tripurantaka, in different postures. The wall of the aditala corridor on the upper floor is carved with 81 of the 108 karanas (movements) of Bharata Natyam, as prescribed by the Natya Shastra, the most extensive treatise on Indian dance. The rest of the 27 karanas are blank blocks of stone. It is not known why they were never carved. These sculptures indicate the importance that Bharata Natyam enjoyed even during the 11th century.



Bharatnatyam Dancer - Hand Painted Wall Hanging

Murals

The Brihadeeshwara temple has a layer of Chola frescoes along the circumambulatory passage way. These creations, which spanned from the floor to the ceiling, were discovered as late as 1931. The painters had used natural pigments and infused them into the wet limestone layer to set in. The themes of these frescoes were largely based around Shaivism - they were restored in the 2000s. Some other frescoes painted later included other Vaishnavite deities and the royal family as well.

Some paintings within the sanctum sanctorum have been damaged due to the soot collected on them from the burning lamps and camphor within the chamber.

Inscriptions

The temple walls feature innumerable inscriptions in Tamil and Grantha scripts. Many of these are in Tamil and Sanskrit. These unique inscriptions actually give detailed accounts of the temple personnel; the people employed there, their roles, names and wages. There are records of over 600 people who the temple employed and supported; including priests, sacred parasol bearers, washermen, jewelers, tailors, carpenters, artisans, artists, devadasis, dance and music gurus, and so on. They received their wages in kind - they would receive parcels of land for their services.

Besides, the temple also provided free meals to devotees and pilgrims. Wayfarers could stay there as long as they wished. On festivals and occasions, these meals would be elaborate and grand.

Additions and Renovation

The several raids and wars, particularly those fought between the Hindu kings and Muslim

Sultans, caused immense damage to the Brihadeeshwara temple. These damages were repaired when the Hindu rulers regained control.

In some cases, the rulers even replaced the old paintings with newer murals. Others constructed secondary shrines within the temple complex. According to inscriptions dating back to 1801, the Marathas contributed vastly to the repair of several shrines, the prakara walls, the courtyard and even the temple kitchen.

Millennium Commemoration and Cultural Festivals

The Brihadeeshwara temple turned 1000 years old in 2010. In order to celebrate this occasion, the government and the town held several cultural events; including a Bharatanatyam Yagna, which featured famous classical dancers such as Padma Subramaniam. It also included a program by 1000 dancers, hailing from different corners of the world - they all jointly performed to 11 verses of Thiruvisaippa, the ninth volume of the Thirumurai.

Other cultural events include an annual dance festival called the Brahan Natyanjali festival, held around February, during Mahashivaratri.

The Brihadeeshwara Temple Fire

A massive fire accident occurred in the temple during its Kumbhabhishekham (consecration) on June 7, 2000. Some experts opine that the source of the fire was a mystery. A stampede ensued, which resulted in the death of several people, also injuring over 200 devotees. The fire accident was declared to be one of the four major accidents in that town.

Rescue efforts were ably carried out by the police and several non-profit organizations and renovations had been undertaken on the temple as well.

Mysteries of the Brihadeeshwara Temple

The Brihadeeshwara temple holds several mysteries within its walls. Here are the major ones:

- Its Shadow Disappears at Noon:** One of the most surprising things about this structure is that its shadow never falls on the ground at noon. Being one of the tallest temples, it is so designed that the vimana does not cast any shadow at noon, at any time of the year.
- First All-Granite Temple:** This is the first all-granite temple in the world. No granite quarry is present within a 100 km radius and hence, it is not clear where the material was sourced from. Granite is harder to carve and yet, Raja Raja Chola had wanted it to be most intricately carved and designed.
- Tallest Ever Temple:** The Brihadeeshwara temple is the tallest till date. The real wonder, though, is that it was completed in just 7 years, including the time taken to move and place up to 50 tons of solid rock each day, carving and then putting them in

position. Atop the towering vimana is a capstone which weighs 80 tons. After dusk, when the structure is lighted, its topmost light shines over the dome like a star glowing closer to earth. This is one of the major attractions for devotees and tourists alike.

- Musical Pillars: You can find two idols of Ganesha near the entrance of the sanctum sanctorum. On tapping them, you can feel the sound traveling via stone in one idol and through the metal on the other. Besides this, there are some musical pillars around the main hall of the temple. These, when tapped, produce different musical sounds.

Veerabhadra Temple

The Veerabhadra temple is located in Lepakshi in the Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh. Built in the 16th century, it features the typically Vijayanagara style of architecture, featuring innumerable carvings and paintings on almost every exposed surface in the temple. The multi-colored frescoes are detailed and elaborate, depicting scenes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. This temple is counted among UNESCO World Heritage Site and is protected and maintained by the Government of India.

History

The Veerabhadra temple dates back to 1583 and was built by brothers Virupanna Nayaka and Viranna, who were Governors under the Vijayanagara Empire, during the reign of King Achutaraya at Penukonda. Much of the structure is built on a low, rocky hill, called Kurmasailam, which literally means, "tortoise-shaped hill".

According to the Skanda Purana, this temple is one of the divyakshetras, or sacred pilgrimage sites of Lord Shiva.

Architecture

The main temple comprises three parts. The Mukhamantapa (assembly hall), also called the Natya mantapa or Ranga mantapa; the Arda mantapa or antarala (ante chamber); and the Garbhagriha or the sanctum sanctorum.

The temple is encircled by two enclosures. The outer walled enclosure has 3 gates, out of which the northern gate is used most frequently. The inner east gate offers access into the assembly hall. This is a large open hall. This leads to the sanctum sanctorum and features immense sculptures and paintings across the entire length and breadth of the halls, fully covering the columns and the ceiling. These include images of the 14 avatars of Shiva, saints, divine beings, guardians, musicians, dancers and so on. The sanctum is flanked by figurines of Ganga and Yamuna on each side. The temple additionally features a pyramid tower and pillars with amazing carvings.

The open space in the middle of the hall has large columns or piers, which feature carvings of

triple figures. In the columns of the northeast part of the hall, you can find images of Natesha, along with Lord Brahma and a drummer. In adjoining columns are figurines of nymphs dancing, accompanied by drummers and cymbalists. The column on the southwest part of the hall shows an image of Parvati, along with her female entourage.

All the frescoes are painted over an initial plaster layer of lime mortar. Vegetable and mineral dyes are blended with lime water to breathe life into the paintings. These paintings are stunningly lifelike and feature impressive period costumes, high in detail and precise facial expressions as well.

Sanctum Sanctorum

The presiding deity of the temple is an almost life-size effigy of Veerabhadra, fully armed and ornamented with skulls. The sanctum includes a cave chamber, wherein sage Agastya was believed to have lived, when he installed the image of the Linga at this location.

The ceiling of the sanctum has paintings of the builders of the temple. Here, they are depicted with their entire staff, in a state of utter devotion and prayer.

Other Monuments

The eastern side of the temple complex has a separate chamber for Shiva and Parvati, carved on a boulder. Another shrine chamber is dedicated to Lord Vishnu.

On the eastern side, there is a huge granite boulder, featuring an elaborate carving of a coiled, multi-hooded serpent, forming a sort of umbrella cover over a Shivalinga. Legend has it that members of the Naga race carved this marvel while they waited for their mother to prepare lunch.



Brass Shiva Linga

Located about 200 meters from a temple is a huge 20-foot by 30-foot granite Nandi, carved out from a single block stone. What immediately strikes the observer is the fine detailing of the statue; including the calm and serene look on the bull's face and the amazing precision with which the sculptor created each and every line on its face, neck and so on. Interestingly, this Nandi is aligned in such a way that it faces the statue of the serpent within the precincts of the temple.

Mythological Significance

The origin of Lepakshi has two interesting legends associated with it.

Le-Pakshi

This legend relates the epic battle between Jatayu, the Eagle, and Ravana from the Ramayana. In order to rescue Sita from Ravana's attempt to abduct her, Jatayu fought valiantly against the ten-headed demon. He gave tremendous resistance to the latter. However, Ravana gained the upper hand when he cut off both of Jatayu's wings. It is believed that the great bird then fell off to the earth, hitting the rocks at this very location.



Jatayu Vadh - Raja Ravi Varma Painting on Canvas

When Lord Rama saw Jatayu, he tried to coax the bird to rise. This is how this place got the name Le-Pakshi.

Lape-Akshi

Another legend about Lepakshi is about the brothers Virupanna and Viranna. Virupanna's son was blind since birth. It is believed that he got back his eyesight while playing near the Shivalinga within the temple premises.

The King then came to know that Virupanna, who was the royal treasurer, was using the funds from the treasury to build these shrines. He was doing this without taking prior permission

from the royalty. The enraged King ordered his henchmen to take away Virupanna's eyesight and make him blind.

On hearing this, Virupanna pried off his own eyes and threw them against the walls of the Kalyana Mantapa, which was then under construction. The place thus got the name Lape-Akshi (village of the blinded eye). Even today, one can see two prominent red blotches on that very wall. What's more, tests have confirmed that they are indeed human blood stains.

Mysteries of the Lepakshi Veerabhadra Temple

The Mystery of the Hanging Pillar

One of the biggest mysteries of the Veerabhadra temple at Lepakshi is the "hanging pillar". The outer portion of the Dance Hall is filled with numerous pillars supporting the roof. One corner pillar, which is known as the hanging pillar, does not touch the temple floor. When some experts tried to force a corner of this pillar to touch the ground, it led to a tectonic shift in the entire roof of the outer hall. The engineers then realized that any further attempt on their part would end up destroying the entire edifice. One other thing was that the pillar acted as a sort of ballast to the hall's roof. Hence, changing its angle even slightly would cause damage to the entire structure.

3D Mural

In the same hall, a Gopalakrishna mural on the roof appears to be three-dimensional. It also seems to look directly at you from anywhere in the hall below.

Large Footprint on the Rock

Outside the temple on one hillock, one can find a large footprint next to the Sita Amman Kovil. This structure includes shrines dedicated to Rama, Sita and Hanuman. This is believed to be the footprint of Hanuman, as he jumped to find Sita and give her Rama's ring (incidentally, there are similar giant footprints of Sri Rama and Sita at Sphatika Shila and in Chitrakoot as well). The footprint at this temple always has a trickle of water coming into it. The source of this water remains unexplained to date.

Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple

The Padmanabhaswamy Temple is located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Anantha Puram literally means the "City of Anantha" and so, the city itself is named after Lord Ananta, or Lord Sri Maha Vishnu. Built in a mix of the Kerala and Dravidian styles of architecture, it features high walls and a 16th century Gopuram. To some extent, the temple is quite similar to the Adikesava Perumal temple in Thiruvattar, Kanyakumari.

The principal deity of the Padmanabhaswamy temple is Vishnu, in his Anantashayanam posture.

This is his eternal yogic nidra (sleep) posture, resting on a bed of coiled snakes in the Milky Ocean, with Devi Lakshmi seated at his feet and the great serpent Adishesha forming a protective umbrella over his head.



Lord Vishnu in Anantashayan

Sri Padmanabhaswamy is the tutelary deity of the royal family of Travancore. The Maharaja of Travancore, Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma, is the trustee of the temple. Even today, this ancient temple follows strict conventions. Only Hindus are allowed to enter and everyone has to follow a strict dress code. Females have to dress in saree or the traditional Kerala Mundu set, whereas males have to wear the veshti and angavastram.

History

The Padmanabhaswamy receives prominent mention in ancient texts, such as the Puranas and the Mahabharata. It even features in Sangam literature, which dates back between 500 BC and 300 AD. According to the Bhagavatam, Lord Balarama visited the city (referred to as Phalgunam) and took a dip in Panchapsaras (Padmateertham). Though the sannidhanam (sanctum) of Padmanabha has always been present in this holy city, the actual temple came up much later.

Several experts opine that the temple had once been called as "The Golden Temple", on account of the immense wealth that it possessed. Many pieces of Sangam literature and works by poets such as Nammalwar talk about the temple and the city as having walls made of pure gold! In several places, there is reference to it as the "Temple of Heaven".

In Vaishnavism, the Padmanabhaswamy temple is one of the 108 Divya Desams (Holy Abodes) and is glorified in the Divya Prabandhams. The Ananthapuram temple in Kasargod is said to be the Moolasthanam of the temple.

Legend about the Temple

Legend has it that the sage Vilvamangalathu Swamiyar, who lived near the Ananthapuram temple, prayed to Vishnu for his darshan. The Lord came to him in the guise of a mischievous little boy and defiled the idol that he kept for his pooja. Enraged, the sage chased away the boy, who disappeared in front of his eyes.

After searching high and low, the sage was walking on the banks of the Arabian Sea, when he heard a pulaya (untouchable) lady threatening a child that she would throw him in the Ananthakadu. The moment he heard the word "Ananthakadu", he was elated and enquired from the lady as to how he could reach the place. He then went there, hoping that he could find the boy in that place. Sure enough, he saw the boy merging into an Iluppa (Indian Butter) tree. The tree fell down and became the Ananthashayana Moorthi (effigy) of Sri Vishnu.

The effigy, however, was extremely large, with the Lord's head at Thiruvallom, his navel at Thiruvananthapuram and His Lotus Feet at Thrippadapuram. This spanned about 8 miles in length. Dismayed, the sage requested the Lord to shrink in size. Immediately, the Lord shrank to the form that can currently be seen at the Padmanabhaswamy temple.

The sage saw the Lord in the above-mentioned three parts. He prayed to the Lord to be forgiven for his sins and offered rice kanji and uppumanga (mango in brine) placed in a coconut shell - he had obtained this from the pulaya woman.

He then took the assistance of the ruling king and some Brahmin households to construct a temple for the Lord. This temple, which is located to the west of the Padmanabhaswamy temple, still stands as the Ananthakadu Nagaraja temple. Later, a Krishna temple was built over his Samadhi. This temple is known as the Vilvamangalam Sri Krishna Swami Temple.

Temple Structure

Inside the sanctum sanctorum, Padmanabhaswamy is shown assuming the reclining position. The massive idol rests on the bed of the coiled Adishesha; the snake's five hoods facing inwards and forming a protective cover over the Lord. Vishnu's right hand is stretched below, in such a way as to be placed over a Shivalinga there. His divine consorts, Sridevi, the Goddess of Wealth and Bhudevi, the Goddess of the Earth, are by his side. Lord Brahma sits on a lotus, which comes out from the Lord's navel.

This massive deity is made from 12,008 saligramams, which had been gathered from the banks of the Gandaki River in Nepal. The idol is covered with Katusarkara Yogam, which is a special plaster mix, in order to keep the deity clean. The daily worship routine includes abhishekham, flowers, arati and other rituals.

The two platforms in front of the vimanam where the deity reclines are carved out of a single

stone. Hence they are called "Ottakkal-mandapam". This rock had been cut out of a rock at Thirumala, about 4 miles north of the temple.

To take darshan or to perform puja, the devotee has to ascend to the mandapam. The deity is visible through three doors, symbolic of how the sage had seen the Lord. The face of the Lord and the Shivalinga is seen through the first door. His torso, along with his consort Sridevi and Brahma and other divine beings can be seen through the second door. The third door gives the devotee a darshan of the Lord's feet, Bhudevi and several other Rishis (sages).

Only the King of Travancore can perform a sashtanga namaskaram (offering obeisance lying completely prostrate on the ground) on the Ottakkal mandapam. Traditionally, it is believed that anyone who prostrates on the mandapam has surrendered his or her everything to the Lord. Since the ruler has already done that, only he has the permission to prostrate thus.

Other Shrines

The temple includes two other major shrines within itself, namely, the Thekkedom and Thiruvambadi shrines, for the deities, Ughra Narasimha and Sri Krishna respectively. The Thirvambadi shrine is older than the main shrine and hence, enjoys independent status. It has its own namaskara mandapam, bali stones and flagmast. The deity here is Parthasarathy, the Divine Charioteer of Arjuna, during the Great War of Kurukshetra. The granite idol is depicted in standing posture, holding a whip in one hand, with the other resting on the left thigh, holding a conch close to it. On Ekadasi days, the Lord is dressed up as Mohini.

There are yet other shrines for Rama and Sita, Vishwaksena, Vyasa, Ganapati, Sasta (Ayyappa), Garuda and Hanuman. the thevara idols of Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma and Uthradom Thirunal Marthanda Varma can be found in the southeast side of the temple.

Gopuram

The temple features a massive 100-foot, seven-tier gopuram, constructed in the Pandyan style. The temple, which is located by the side of a tank, called Padma Theertham, has a corridor with 365 and one-quarter sculptured granite pillars having elaborate carvings on them. This corridor extends from the eastern side, right to the sanctum sanctorum. An eighty-foot flagstaff stands proud, right in front of the main entry from the prakaram. There is a Nataka Sala on the ground floor under the gopuram. Here, Kathakali performances were staged all through the night during the ten-day uthsavam, conducted twice a year, during the Malayalam months of Meenam and Thulam.

The Royal Family of Travancore

In the first half of the 18th century, Anizham Thirunal Marthanda succeeded his uncle King Rama Varma at the age of 23. On 17th January, 1750, he surrendered the kingdom to Sri

Padmanabhaswamy and pledged that all his descendants would serve the Lord as his dasas (servants). Since then, all the rulers of the land have the title Sri Padmanabha Dasa, while the female members are called Sri Padmanabha Sevinis. This donation of the kingdom to the Lord was known as Thrippadi-danam. Marthanda Varma was most particular that no deviation whatsoever should be made in this aspect and that all future territorial acquisitions should be made over to the Devaswom.

Temple Rituals and Festivals

There are several festivals associated with this temple. The Alpashy festival in October/November and the Panguni festival in March/April, which lasts for 10 days each, are the major festivals. On the ninth day, the Maharaja of Travancore escorts the deities, on foot, to the vettakkalam for Pallivetta. The festivals end with the Aaratu or purifying immersion ritual procession to the Shanmugham Beach. The Utsavamoorthis of Padmanabhaswamy, Narasimha Moorthi and Sri Krishna are all given a bath in the sea, after the traditional pujas. After this, they are taken back to the temple.

Yet another major festival is the 9-day Navaratri. The idols of Saraswati, Parasakti and Murugan are brought to the Kuthira malika palace in front of the temple in a procession. The Swati music festival is also held as part of the festival.

The biggest festival is the laksha deepam, or the festival of the one lakh lamps. This happens only once in 6 years. Prior to its commencement, prayers, pujas and veda recitation are performed for a period of 56 days (Murajapam). On the last day, one hundred thousand lamps are lit all around the temple premises. The next event is scheduled for January 2020.

Temple Records

One of the most important aspects of the temple is the "granta-pura" or the record-room, which is housed within the temple complex itself. This room was constructed in 1425 AD by the then Venad King Veera Iravi Iravi Varma. Over 30 lakhs of those documents from this Mathilakam had been donated to the Archives Department in 1867. Only a small fraction of cadjan leaf (bundles of coconut palm leaves) records have been deciphered. The scripts are in proto-Tamil and archaic Malayalam, which makes it difficult to understand and translate. The rest is lying unread at the Archives Department.

Temple Vaults and Assets

While the temple and its assets were controlled by a trust headed by the Royal Family of Travancore in the past, the Supreme Court of India has now radically changed the workings of the management. In 2011, the Supreme Court ordered the Archaeology Department to open several secret chambers of the temple, which were kept under lock and key in the past. The temple has six hitherto known Kallaras (vaults), labeled from A to F. In April 2014, 2 more subterranean vaults had been discovered and they have been name G and H.

While A was probably opened in the 1930s and vaults C to F have been opened and accessed from time to time, vault B has never been opened for centuries. Vaults A, C, D, E and F were found to contain a three-and-a-half foot tall solid idol of Mahavishnu, crafted in pure gold. This moorthi was studded with hundreds of diamonds, rubies and other precious gems. Apart from this, there were an 18-foot long pure gold chain, a 500-kilo gold sheaf, a 36-kilo golden veil, 1200 gold chains embedded with precious stones and several hundreds of 18th century Napoleonic era coins, golden coins from the Roman Empire, gems, precious stones, artefacts and other objects. These findings proved that the Padmanabhaswamy Temple was the wealthiest ever place of worship in the whole world.

The Mystery of the Unopened Vault B

Though all the other vaults have been opened several times, vault B has never been tampered with. The Trust members, the rest of the Royal Family and leading astrologers consider that chamber to be mysterious, sacred and risky (or even dangerous) to open it. The chamber is considered to be shut with the help of 16th century siddhas (people with yogic powers), who shut it permanently with the means of powerful mantras such as 'naga bandham' or 'naga paasam'

It is believed that this door can be opened only by a highly erudite sadhu, tantric or mantrika, who have adequate knowledge of the 'garuda mantra', which is the only chant that can successfully extricate the powers of the 'naga bandham'. It is believed that, in that case, the doors would unlock automatically, without needing any force to be put on it. Legend further states that if any ordinary human being attempts to open it with technology, terrible catastrophes are likely to occur in the temple or even in the whole of India.

As per legend, hunters tried to invade and loot the temple somewhere in the 1930s. However, their attempts were foiled when huge deadly serpents came out of hiding and drove them out.

Attempt to Open the Chamber

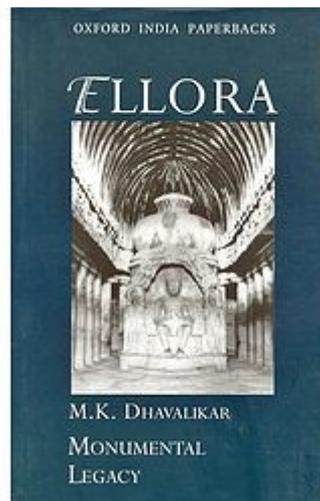
According to legend, several Devas and Rishis; including the Naga Devatas; requested Balarama to permit them to reside in vault B. Balarama granted them that boon. Along with them, the Kanjirottu Yakshi also resides in this Kallara, worshipping the ferocious and powerful Ughra Narasimha. To further enhance the power residing here, sacred objects such as the Sreechakram too were installed here.

In 2011, the antechamber to vault B was opened. But no one succeeded in opening the main vault. Then, a Devaprashnam (ritual to know the will of the deity) was performed. The Pushpanjali Swamiyar, who is considered to be the highest spiritual authority of the temple, expressed his strong opposition to opening the chamber and even sent letters to the Chairperson of the Administrative Committee, advising them against the act.

No other attempts were made to open the vault after this. So what does this imply? Is it only superstition? Or is the temple actually protected by Divine Beings? The answer to this question still remains an unsolved mystery.

Kailasanatha Temple

The Kailasanatha Temple, also known as the Kailash Temple, is one of the largest ancient, rock-cut, Hindu temples in India. This is located in Ellora, in the Indian State of Maharashtra. A massive megalith, carved out from a single rock, this is considered to be one of the most amazing cave temples.



Ellora - Monumental Legacy

Book

The Kailash Temple is one of the 32 cave temples and monasteries, which collectively make up the Ellora Caves. This temple lies in Cave 16 of the entire cave structures. Attributed to the 8th century Rashtrakuta King Krishna I (756-773 CE), the general architecture seems to be done in the Pallava and Chalukya styles.

History

The cave temple does not possess any particular set of inscriptions regarding its history. However, a Baroda copper-plate inscription of Karkaraja II records Krishnaraja as the patron of Kailasanatha; also mentioning a Shiva temple at Elapura (Ellora). It states that the King constructed a structure so wondrous that even the Gods were stupefied by it. Experts believe that that this refers to the Kailasha temple. The Kadamba grant of Govinda Prabhutavarsha also seems to credit Krishnaraja in a similar fashion.

So, though there is no direct resource to prove that Krishnaraja did indeed construct the temple, it is largely assumed that he may have been responsible for its construction.

Method of Construction

The Kailasha Temple is most famous for its vertical excavation method. The carvers started at the top of the original rock, moving downwards.

According to a Marathi legend, the local king suffered from a chronic disease. His queen prayed to Lord Ghrishneshwara (Shiva) at Elapura, vowing to construct a temple if her wish was granted. She also promised to observe a fast till the time that she could see a shikhara on top of the temple.

As soon as the king was cured, she asked him to build the temple immediately. But the architects stated that it would take much time before they could finish the construction of the shikhara.

One architect called Kokasa, however, came forward and assured the king and the queen that they would be able to see the shikhara within a week's time. The clever architect started carving from the top, thus finishing the shikhara by just a week. The queen was able to fulfill her promise to the Lord and was also able to break her fast after the construction of the shikhara.

Some experts think that Kokasa was the main architect of the temple, which was probably known as Manikeshwara at that time. Several 11th-13th century inscriptions found all over central India mention architects born in the brilliant family of Kokasa.

Architecture and Sculptures

The Kailasha temple features several distinct architectural and sculptural styles. This, combined with its massive size, has led some experts to aver that its construction spanned the reign of several kings.

Some reliefs feature the same style as the ones found in the Dashavatara cave, which is located just next to this temple. The latter contains an inscription of Krishna's predecessor and nephew, Dantidurga. Based on this, some historians think that the temple's construction could have begun during the reign of Dantidurga. With time, other rulers such as Dhruva Dharavarsha, Govinda III, Amoghavarsha I and Krishna III could have also contributed to its construction. Finally, Ahilyabai Holkar commissioned the last layer of the paintings therein.

Some historians aver that the entire temple structure was planned out right at the beginning. The main shrine is similar in structure to the Virupaksha Temple at Pattadakal and the Kailasa Temple at Kanchi. The latter was commissioned by the Chalukyas of Badami. The fact that the main architectural style is non-Rashtrakuta in nature itself may be an indication of the involvement of Chalukya and Pallava artists.

The entrance to the temple courtyard includes a low gopuram. Most of the deities at the left of the entrance are Shaivite, while the ones on the right are mostly Vaishnavite. A two-storeyed gateway leads to a U-shaped courtyard, edged by a brilliantly sculpted columned walkway, three storeys high. Originally, bridges of stone connected these galleries. However, these have fallen in the present day.

The central shrine is dedicated to Shiva and his mount Nandi. The sanctum sanctorum houses an enormous Shivalingam and features a flat-roofed mandapa, supported by 16 pillars and a shikhara built in the Dravidian style. The shrine additionally features several pillars, windows, inner and outer rooms and gathering halls, all carved with the images of deities, mithunas and other figures.

As always, the Nandi sits on a porch, right in front of the sanctum. The Nandi mandapa and the main shrine are each about 7 meters in height and are built on two storeys. The base of the temple is carved, so as to suggest that elephants are holding the structure aloft. A rock bridge connects the Nandi mandapa to the main porch of the temple.

Other Structures

There are two Dhvajasthambas in the courtyard. One striking sculpture is that of Ravana trying to lift Mount Kailasa.

One can also find five detached shrines within the temple complex. Out of these, three are dedicated to the Sacred River Goddesses, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati.

Mysteries of the Kailasanatha Temple

- The Kailasha temple is carved out of a single rock. It remains a mystery as to how workers during that time managed to achieve that feat and construct a structure of that size.
- The entire complex was carved from top to down. It is amazing to even try and imagine how the artisans would have successfully managed to do this; that too, with just rudimentary tools such as hammer, chisels and picks available to them at that time.
- The Kailasanatha temple has the largest cantilevered rock ceiling in the world. And this was created in 700 AD; probably even earlier.
- Larger in area than the Pantheon in Greece, it is said that over four hundred thousand tons of rock had been scooped out to build this temple!
- The temple was supposedly designed so as to mimic Mount Kailash. The pyramidal structure of the main temple is believed to represent the actual shape of Mount Kailash.
- It is believed that work happened only 16 hours a day. Since there was no electricity those days, the sun's rays were reflected onto mirrors to help the artisans continue with their work. However, there are several inner parts of the structure, where the

sun's rays cannot reach, no matter how many mirrors are used for the purpose. It is baffling to think how the workers had managed such intricate carvings and sculptures in those areas.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to info@dollsofindia.com.

Copyright © 2017, DollsofIndia Ecommerce Private Limited