Unlocking the Wisdom: Temples and Shrines as Catalysts for Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

The present work examines the importance of Indian temples and shrines as a means to shape consciousness and perceive profound wisdom. The paper addresses the history, the symbolism, and the architecture of the structures, with a focus on their influence on spiritual and philosophical aspects. The research questions include but are not limited to the following: how do the temples and shrines influence cognitive abilities and consciousness? What is the significance, in terms of symbolism and architecture, of the structures mentioned above? What are the ways in which the rituals and ceremonies performed in those temples implement the ancient wisdom in the context of modern practices? The key findings demonstrate the fact that temples and shrines act as mediums to the divine, enforcing introspection, meditation, and spiritual development. Their peculiar symbolism and architecture, which has its origin in the ancient scriptures, mirror the deepest philosophy and reveal profound knowledge. Together with that, these holy places promote the process of social integration and cultural interchange as temples are the focal point of any community. It is achieved through the application of Indian mythology and scriptures in temple rituals, which beneficial effect on personal growth and spiritual development cannot be overestimated. At that, the pilgrimage to these sacred sites contributes to personal growth, developing spiritual awareness and engaging with higher consciousness. Overall, by interacting with temples and shrines, participating in sacred rituals, meditation and private reflection, people can discover ancient wisdom and engage with their consciousness and get to know their true selves. In other words, temples and shrines are pivotal agents of consciousness that facilitate the accumulation of knowledge and spiritual development.

Keywords: Temples, Consciousness, Devalaya, Upanishada, Mahakavya.

From these dim beginnings of long ago flow out the rivers of Indian thought and philosophy, of Indian life and culture and literature, ever-widening and increasing in volume, and sometimes flooding the land with their rich deposits. During this enormous span of years, they changed their courses sometimes and even appeared to shrivel up, yet they preserved their essential identity. They could not have done so if they had not possessed a sound instinct for life. (Nehru 77)

India's cultural heritage is profoundly influenced by its spiritual and philosophical traditions. The country has nurtured remarkable thinkers whose profound insights into the mysteries of life continue to inspire future generations. Among the primary foundations of this knowledge

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system are the multitude of temples and shrines that grace the Indian landscape. These ancient structures serve as conduits to the divine, offering a sacred space for introspection, meditation, and contemplation. In this paper, I seek to explore the significant role temples and shrines play as the foundation for shaping our cognitive abilities in shaping our consciousness and enhancing our understanding of the profound wisdom and insights they embody. This study delves into these structures' history, symbolism, and architecture, unraveling the secrets they have safeguarded for centuries. The purpose of the paper, is to take the reader on a journey of unlocking the wisdom held within India's temples and shrines and discover how they can ignite conscious awareness in our lives today.

**Introduction**

“…..Unlike many other great civilizations of the past, the Hindu civilisation has not become a historical relic, an antiquity of the past, but has survived as an unbroken continuum to the present.”(Varma Preface)

India, a nation renowned for its diverse traditions, vibrant colors, and ancient wisdom, boasts a rich cultural heritage that spans thousands of years. From majestic temples to sacred shrines, India has been a hub of spirituality, knowledge, and enlightenment. This mystical land is a treasure trove of ancient scriptures, philosophical teachings, and profound insights that continue to inspire and captivate individuals from all walks of life. The cultural heritage of India is deeply rooted in its religious and spiritual practices, with Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism being the predominant religions followed by its people. Each of these religions contributes its own unique set of traditions, rituals, and beliefs, enriching the diverse tapestry of Indian culture. Talking about the idol/image worship Meenakshi Jain writes, “The beginning of images in the subcontinent could perhaps be traced to the “commingling” of Vedic deities with the beliefs and practices of the wider populace. In the last verse of the Svetasvara Upanisad(VI. 23), the idea of bhakti (deep affectionate and mystic devotion for some personal deity who is the object of worship, puja), was mentioned for the first time,

Yasya deve para bhaktiryatha deve tatha gurau
Tasyaite kathita hyarthah prakasante mahatmanah”(115)

Temples, characterized by their exquisite architecture and intricate sculptures, serve as magnificent representations of India's spiritual traditions. These architectural spectacles stand testimony to not only the craftsmanship of ancient artisans but also serve as sacrosanct spaces for devotees to connect with the divine. That is why these temples are sometimes referred to as Devalyaya – a place where dev resides. Every place of worship has its distinction whether it is
the majestic temples of Kashi, South India, or the serene Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayas. Shrines, on the other hand, are smaller, often dedicated to specific deities or revered figures. These humble abodes of spirituality can be discovered in every corner of the country, nestled amidst bustling cities or hidden in remote villages. From the renowned Vaishno Devi shrine in Jammu and Kashmir to the revered Ajmer Sharif Dargah in Rajasthan, each shrine attracts millions of devotees seeking solace, blessings, and a deeper connection with the divine.

Within the walls of these temples and shrines, flows the very essence of India's knowledge system. The wisdom of ages is passed on to generations in these ethereal homes through rituals, scriptures, and teachings. We all know that the ancient Indian literature be it be Vedas, Shastras, and Upanishads or mahakavyas like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, these celestial dwellings have been the cradle for profound philosophical and spiritual insights. It is very pertinent today to once again go back to our rich cultural practices dwelling in temples and shrines that shall play a significant role in expanding consciousness and nurturing of knowledge. We need to decode the treasure trove of prudence enshrined within these sacred spaces, gaining a deeper understanding of the spiritual and philosophical depths they hold.

**Temples and Shrines and the Ancient Indian Literature**

Temples and Shrines occupy a very significant position in ancient Indian literature. The ancient texts delve in-depth into every aspect of temple construction and architecture. One notable characteristic of temples and shrines described in the Indian knowledge system scriptures and texts is their remarkable architecture. These sacred structures are meticulously designed, incorporating intricate carvings, symbolic motifs, and sacred geometry. Every aspect of their construction is infused with deep spiritual meaning, reflecting the profound wisdom and philosophy embedded in the Indian knowledge system. Varma in his book The Great Hindu Civilization writes, “According to the shastras, the sthapati or architect was the incarnation of Brahma, the creator himself, in the form of Vishvakarma. The purpose behind this was not to make architecture religious, but to imbue architecture with a gravitas which was akin to the divine.” (125) He further writes, “The common spiritual inspiration for art shows in different mediums. The Natya Shastra enumerates 108 postures in Bharatnatyam dance. These can be seen in dance performances, as also in the magnificent Chola bronzes and in the stunning stone rendering of the entire set of stances in the Chidambaram temple”(122)
Additionally, temples and shrines are often built in locations believed to be spiritually charged. Carefully selected considering the energy flow and cosmic alignments, these sites provide individuals with a heightened sense of spirituality and a deeper connection with the divine. “The multistoryed Kailash Temple at Ellora, designed to recall Shiva’s abode at Mount Kailash, is an architectural wonder. Covering an area twice the size of the Parthenon in Athens, it is carved top-down out of a single rock to precise geometrical symmetry…”(Varma 127)

Rituals and ceremonies performed within the premises of temples and shrines are also significant aspects. These rituals serve as a medium to invoke divine energies, purify the surroundings, and create a conducive atmosphere for spiritual growth. From the rhythmic chants of mantras to the offering of prayers, and ringing of bells to the lighting of incense, each ritual holds a specific purpose and importance/significance in the Indian knowledge system.

Moreover, temples and shrines often house ancient scriptures and revered relics. These repositories of knowledge are considered sacred and provide seekers with an opportunity to delve into the profound wisdom of the Indian knowledge system. By studying these scriptures and understanding their deeper meanings, individuals can unlock the hidden treasures of spiritual enlightenment. “The Vedic texts refer to forts and citadels, and the Rig Veda speaks convincingly of a palace of a thousand doors and as many columns. (Varma 125)

**Temples as nurturers of spiritual journey**

Temples have long been revered as sacred spaces in the Indian knowledge system, serving as powerful catalysts for spiritual growth. These architectural marvels are not simply structures made of stone and mortar, but rather intricate embodiments of divine energy and wisdom. The moment one enters into these sacred spaces you are carried away from this materialistic world and its worries. The ambiance surrounding the temples and shrines is imbued with undeniable allegiance, nurturing a setting propitious to reflection, contemplation and connection with the divine.

A. K. Ramanujan has said that the Hindu temple is designed to represent the human body. The ritual for building a temple begins with digging in the earth and planting a seed. The temple is said to rise from the implanted seed, like a human. The different parts of a temple are named after body parts. The two sides are called the hands or wings, the hasta: a pillar is called a foot, pada. The top of the temple is the head, the shikhara. The shrine, the innermost and the darkest
sanctum of the temple is a garbagriha, the womb-house. The temple thus carries out in brick and stone the primordial blueprint of the human body. ((Varma 126)

The intricate guidelines and methodologies prescribed by Vastu Shastra reflect a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between human life and cosmic forces. The Vastu Purusha Mandala, as a sacred design template, not only serves as a practical tool for architectural planning but also symbolizes a deeper spiritual connection between the physical realm and metaphysical energies. This holistic approach to architecture, rooted in the Hindu tradition, not only emphasizes the importance of spatial arrangement but also highlights the spiritual significance of the built environment. Varma addresses this subject in his book by stating that,

The design of the Hindu temple followed a certain pattern. Its location was carefully chosen, for it had to represent the axis of the world, the axis mundi, and radiate spiritual energy. The entrance was often grand, consisting of a richly decorated crowning tower, followed by a courtyard and a series of pillared halls. These, in turn, led to a corridor leading up to the sanctum sanctorum, garbagriha, literally the womb, a small enclosed area deep in the recesses of the temple, where the deity or the lingam was placed. (126)

The intricate carvings that grace the temple walls narrate tales from ancient scriptures and mythology, serving as visual aids for spiritual learning. These intricate details, often depicting gods, goddesses, and celestial beings, transport visitors to higher realms of consciousness, inspiring devotion and reverence. Temples are not merely physical structures; they also function as centers for spiritual and cultural activities. They act as gathering places for the community, where devotees come together to commemorate festivals, perform rituals, and engage in prayers and chants. This collective energy amplifies the spiritual experience, cultivating a sense of unity and belonging among worshippers. Furthermore, temples often house libraries and study centers, providing access to ancient texts and scriptures. These repositories of knowledge serve as invaluable resources for seekers of wisdom, encouraging intellectual exploration and the deepening of spiritual understanding.

Exploring the architectural and symbolic elements

Temples are built to establish the contact between man and God. The rituals and ceremonies performed in the temples have primarily influenced the forms of temple architecture. The identification of divinity with the fabric of the temple and the reflection of the form of the
Universe with that of the form of the temple is of supreme importance. Hence, importance is given right from the selection of the site of the temple, to the formation of the ground plan and also to its vertical elevation. The symbolic representation of the cosmic ideas is formalized by the creation of sacred mathematical treaties, with precise measurement systems. The plans of the temples are based on sacred geometric diagrams (Mandala) – symbolized as a minuscule image of the universe with its coordinated organized structure (as in Vaastu Purusha Mandala). (Vinay Kumar)

The architectural and symbolic elements found in Indian temples are exceptionally intricate and captivating, representing the deep spiritual and philosophical beliefs ingrained in the Indian knowledge system. A visit to these sacred structures not only offers a visually captivating experience but also provides an opportunity to delve into the profound cultural and spiritual heritage of India. Indian temples are often constructed in accordance with the principles of Vastu Shastra, an ancient architectural science that aims to create harmonious spaces in alignment with natural forces. The complex designs and layouts of these temples are believed to facilitate a connection between the divine and the mortal realms.

One remarkable aspect of Indian temple architecture is the elaborate carvings and sculptures that adorn the walls and pillars. These meticulous artworks depict various gods, goddesses, mythical creatures, and celestial beings, each carrying symbolic significance. Through these sculptures, ancient scriptures are narrated, conveying moral teachings and spiritual insights.

Moreover, the temple structures themselves are often designed to represent cosmic order and balance. The towering spires, known as gopurams, symbolize the journey from the material world to the spiritual realm. The inner sanctum, referred to as the garbhagriha, houses the main deity and is considered the most sacred space within the temple. Surrounding this central area, there are various chambers and corridors, each representing different aspects of the divine and the universe. Visiting an Indian temple offers a splendid chance to witness and experience the profound symbolic representations embedded within its architecture. It allows individuals to explore the layers of meaning behind each carving and marvel at the meticulous craftsmanship that has preserved these cultural treasures for centuries.

Beyond their architectural beauty, Indian temples serve as spaces for prayer, meditation, and spiritual practices. They are believed to possess potent energy centers, radiating positive vibrations that can elevate and purify the mind, body, and soul. Devotees often flock to these
sacred sites in search of solace, guidance, and enlightenment. Exploring the architecture and symbolism of Indian temples is not merely an intellectual pursuit, but rather a transformative journey into the depths of consciousness. It invites individuals to contemplate the profound wisdom embedded in every stone, serving as a reminder of the interconnectedness between humanity, nature, and the divine.

**Temples and Shrines as centers for community and social integration**

Temples in India have always been highly respected, not just for their spiritual importance, but also for their unmatched ability to unite communities. These sacred places play a significant role in social integration, creating a sense of unity and belonging among people from diverse backgrounds. One remarkable aspect of temples is their profound ability to bring communities together. They provide a platform for individuals to gather, interact, and form strong connections. Whether it is during festive celebrations, religious ceremonies, or regular congregational meetings, temples foster a deep camaraderie and promote a spirit of togetherness among devotees. Temples play a vital role in promoting social integration by serving as meeting points for individuals from various walks of life to connect and engage in collective activities. These activities may include charitable initiatives, educational programs, cultural events, and social welfare projects. Temples often act as catalysts for positive social change, encouraging individuals to actively contribute to the betterment of society.

Temples and shrines have served as educational hubs, providing knowledge about Indian culture, traditions, and spirituality. They offer a space for individuals to learn from knowledgeable priests and explore religious texts and scriptures, thereby enriching their understanding of the unique knowledge systems of the country. This exchange of wisdom strengthens the religious fabric and deepens cultural appreciation among community members.

In essence, temples are not just religious spaces; they are essential foundations of community and social integration. Through their power to unite people, create a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for individuals to contribute to the collective welfare, temples unlock invaluable wisdom and promote consciousness and harmony within society.
The influence of Indian mythology and scriptures

The rich tapestry of Indian mythology and scriptures holds immense significance in the rituals performed at temples and shrines. These rituals, deeply rooted in ancient traditions, serve as a means to connect with the divine and awaken consciousness.

The rituals performed in temples draw inspiration from these mythical narratives, infusing them with spiritual energy and symbolism. The scriptures, such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, provide a comprehensive guide to the principles and practices of Hinduism. They offer profound wisdom and insights into the nature of existence, human behavior, and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Temple rituals incorporate verses and hymns from these scriptures, ensuring that the sacred texts remain an integral part of the worship experience. The influence of Indian mythology and scriptures in temple rituals goes beyond mere religious practices. They serve as powerful catalysts for expanding consciousness and fostering a deeper understanding of the self and the universe. Through the performance of these rituals, individuals are encouraged to cultivate virtues such as devotion, humility, and gratitude, which are essential for personal growth and spiritual evolution.

In essence, the influence of Indian mythology and scriptures in temple rituals is a testament to the enduring power of ancient wisdom. It is an invitation to explore the depths of consciousness, unlock profound insights, and embrace a holistic approach to life. By embracing these rituals with reverence and an open heart, one can embark on a transformative journey toward self-realization and spiritual enlightenment.

Temples as treasure trove of ancient wisdom and knowledge

Temples hold a significant place in the cultural and spiritual landscape of India. Apart from their religious and architectural importance, these sacred sites serve as repositories of ancient wisdom and knowledge. They are not just places of worship but also centers for education and understanding of the profound teachings of the Indian knowledge system. “The temples and the deities were the source of spiritual and devotional inspiration for the poets, scholars and writers to produce the works of high standard in Sanskrit and other languages which helped to strengthen the religious, moral, spiritual and ethical values among the monarchs and the masses”( Vinay Kumar)
Upon entering a temple, a sense of tranquility and serenity can be felt. The intricate carvings, vibrant paintings, and sacred sculptures that adorn the temple walls are not just artistic expressions but symbolic representations of profound philosophical concepts. Each element within the temple complex tells a story, inviting visitors to delve deeper into the rich tapestry of Indian wisdom. Within the sacred halls of these temples, one can find meticulously preserved ancient scriptures, manuscripts, and texts that encompass a wealth of knowledge in various disciplines such as philosophy, astronomy, astrology, medicine, art, and architecture. Temples serve as custodians of this knowledge, ensuring its continuity and accessibility to those in search of wisdom. Furthermore, temples often house libraries and study centers, providing a nurturing environment for scholars and researchers to explore and interpret these ancient scriptures. These centers of learning foster intellectual growth and the exchange of ideas through discussions, debates, and lectures.

Temples also serve as platforms for cultural and artistic expression. Through dance, music, and theater performances, artists pay homage to the divine and convey profound philosophical concepts in a visually captivating manner. This fusion of spirituality and artistry creates a unique experience that transcends the ordinary and connects individuals with their inner selves. Visiting temples, therefore, becomes a transcending voyage where one can immerse oneself in the timeless wisdom of the Indian knowledge system. It is an opportunity to unlock the secrets of the past, comprehend the complexities of life, and develop a deeper appreciation for the profound teachings that have shaped Indian civilization.

The transformative power of pilgrimage to temples and Shrines

Embarking on a pilgrimage to Indian temples is not only a physical journey but also a profound and spiritual experience. These sacred sites hold immense significance within the Indian knowledge system and serve as catalysts for consciousness and personal growth. Indian temples are not merely architectural marvels; they are revered as spiritual powerhouses that have been cherished for centuries. Believed to be the abodes of gods and goddesses, stepping foot into these sacred spaces is believed to invoke divine blessings and facilitate spiritual awakening.

This metamorphic expedition itself is a profound undertaking, with devotees embarking on arduous journeys often on foot, seeking spiritual enlightenment and connection with the divine. The physical challenges encountered along the way act as tests of devotion and determination,
fostering resilience and inner strength. Once inside the temple premises, devotees are enveloped in an atmosphere of devotion and reverence. The intricately carved structures, vibrant colors, and fragrant incense create a sensory experience that transports pilgrims to a realm beyond the ordinary. They are encouraged to leave behind their worldly concerns and immerse themselves in the spiritual realm, finding solace, clarity, and inner peace. The energy that permeates through these sacred spaces is tangible as pilgrims join together in their shared pursuit of spiritual awakening. The collective consciousness that emerges during a pilgrimage magnifies the transformative power of the experience, enabling individuals to tap into ancient wisdom and connect with something greater than themselves.

Ultimately, the meaningful quest of a pilgrimage to Indian temples lies in its ability to awaken dormant spiritual faculties, expand consciousness, and inspire individuals to live a more conscious and purposeful life. It is an invitation to explore deeply the wealth of wisdom that has been preserved within these sacred spaces for generations.

**Conclusion**

Engaging with temples and shrines presents a remarkable potential for personal development and spiritual enlightenment. These sacred sites possess profound wisdom and serve as gateways to enhanced understanding and communion with the divine. To fully appreciate and benefit from the encounter, it is essential to approach temples and shrines with utmost reverence and respect. This mindset sets the foundation for a meaningful experience and allows for complete immersion in the spiritual energy permeating these sacred spaces. Participating in the rituals and ceremonies that regularly take place in temples and shrines provides an avenue to tap into the collective devotion and connect with the spirituality inherent in these sanctuaries. By engaging with knowledgeable individuals such as priests, spiritual leaders, or guides, one can seek insightful teachings and guidance that deepen understanding of the spiritual practices associated with the location. Kapoor & Singh eloquently articulates in their seminal work *Indian Knowledge Systems*:

“The entire body of organised knowledge is divided into two sets in the Mundakopanisad- para vidya and apara vidya (Mundakopanishad, I.1.4), knowledge of the ultimate principle, paramatma or Brahman, (that is the metaphysical domain) and knowledge that is secondary to the means by which one grasps aksara-Brahman (knowledge of the worldly domain) and knowledge that is secondary to the means by which one grasps aksara-Brahman(knowledge of the worldly domain).…..The first kind of knowledge is observed and is gained by the eyes, etc., the other is experiential and is gained by the inner self as drasta. In one, the whole cognizing self is bahirmukhi directed towards and involved in the outer world; in the other, the whole cognizing self is antarmukhi, (turned inwards). To acquire the first kind of knowledge,
only the sensory apparatus, including the mind, has to be prepared, but to acquire the second kind of knowledge the knower has to go through a process of preparation, sadhana, (for knowledge – acquisition) (12)

The temples and shrines are very instrumental in acquiring this antarmukhi gyan. These devalayas help tremendously in this voyage of moving towards oneself. One can find solace and introspection within these sacred environments by engaging in meditation and reflection. By dedicating time to stillness and presence, channels for personal insight, clarity, and spiritual growth are opened. The complete environment of these sacred edifices and structures along with engaging in the act of prayer, whether through offering prayers, chanting mantras, lighting diyas, or making symbolic gestures, collaborate harmoniously to uplift and facilitate the discovery of our authentic self, our real self. As one explores ancient Indian literature whether agama (religious text), shastra (scholarly treatises), itihasa(tradition), Purana (history and mythology), and akhyana (epics) each of them appears to convey the same fact that temples and shrines serve as repositories of consciousness. Embracing the silence and stillness within these spaces enables individuals to be fully present, letting go of worries or preoccupations, and immersing themselves in the tranquility and serenity of the ambiance,” The most ancient fancies sometimes startle us by their strikingly modern character, for insight does not depend on modernity.”(Radhakrishnan 7)

Works Cited:


