



The Influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on Indian Art and Architecture: A Study of Religious Aesthetics and Architectural Evolution

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Abstract

This study examines the profound and multifaceted influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on the development of Indian art and architecture from ancient to medieval periods. Through analysis of key monuments, artistic traditions, and architectural innovations, this research demonstrates how religious philosophies fundamentally shaped aesthetic principles and architectural forms across the subcontinent. The study reveals distinct patterns of artistic expression corresponding to theological concepts, ritual requirements, and cosmological understandings in both traditions, while also highlighting zones of syncretism and mutual influence. Particular attention is given to the evolution of temple and stupa architecture, sculptural traditions, and iconographic developments as manifestations of changing religious practices and patronage systems. The research concludes that the artistic heritage created under Hindu and Buddhist influence represents not merely decorative or functional structures but complex symbolic systems that embodied and transmitted religious knowledge, facilitated spiritual practices, and articulated cultural identities throughout Indian history.

Keywords: - Hindu Architecture, Buddhist Art, Temple Architecture, Stupa, Iconography, Religious Symbolism, Cave Architecture, Indian Aesthetics, Sacred Geometry, Ritualistic Art

Introduction: Religious Foundations of Indian Artistic Traditions

The intertwining of religious thought with artistic expression represents one of the most distinctive features of Indian cultural history. Unlike many Western artistic traditions that evolved through periods of secular patronage and aesthetic autonomy, Indian art and architecture remained intimately connected to religious worldviews, practices, and institutions from ancient times through the medieval period. This profound connection between faith and form has produced one of the world's richest repositories of religious art and architecture, with countless temples, monasteries, stupas, and sculptures bearing witness to the aesthetic manifestation of Hindu and Buddhist ideas across the subcontinent.

This research examines how Hindu and Buddhist cosmological conceptions, mythological narratives, ritual requirements, and metaphysical understandings shaped distinct architectural forms and artistic conventions. The analysis proceeds from the understanding that religious buildings in the Indian context were never merely functional structures but rather operated as three-dimensional mandalas spatial embodiments of theological concepts designed to facilitate specific religious experiences and practices. Similarly, sculptural traditions did not

merely represent deities but participated in complex devotional economies where images served as focal points for ritual activity and meditative contemplation.

This study aims to identify patterns of influence, zones of syncretism, and evolutionary trajectories in art forms associated with both religious traditions. The research challenges simplistic narratives that treat Hindu and Buddhist art as entirely separate categories, revealing instead a complex history of borrowing, adaptation, and mutual influence unfolding within shifting landscapes of royal patronage and popular devotion. While acknowledging areas of distinctive development, the analysis highlights the shared aesthetic vocabulary and technical innovations that crossed sectarian boundaries throughout Indian history.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining art historical analysis, religious studies, and architectural theory. Primary source materials include archaeological evidence, textual references from religious and secular literature, inscriptional records, and the artworks and buildings themselves. The theoretical approach draws from both emic categories of Indian aesthetic theory (particularly the concepts of *rasa*, *bhava*, and *dhvani*) and contemporary frameworks in material religion studies that examine how physical forms mediate religious experiences and embody theological concepts.

The analysis proceeds chronologically while maintaining focus on four key dimensions of influence:

- **Cosmological Representation:** How Hindu and Buddhist understandings of the universe were translated into spatial and visual forms
- **Ritual Accommodation:** How requirements for specific religious practices shaped architectural spaces and artistic productions
- **Iconographic Development:** The evolution of representational conventions for deities, enlightened beings, and religious narratives
- **Technical and Stylistic Innovation:** The development of distinctive construction techniques and aesthetic approaches in response to religious imperatives

This framework allows for systematic comparison between Hindu and Buddhist contributions while remaining attentive to regional variations, historical contingencies, and the frequent blurring of boundaries between traditions.

Early Foundations: Pre-Temple and Pre-Stupa Traditions

Vedic Antecedents and Early Hindu Ritual Spaces

The earliest Hindu sacred spaces were not permanent structures but temporary ritual enclosures. The Vedic tradition (c. 1500-500 BCE) centered on fire sacrifices (*yajnas*) performed on specially constructed altars (*vedis*). These altars, though impermanent, already displayed sophisticated geometric principles expressing cosmological concepts. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, for example, details the construction of the fire altar (*agnicayana*) in the form of a bird, representing a symbolic reconstruction of the dismembered cosmic man, *Prajapati*.

Archaeological evidence from sites like *Kauśāmbī* shows that by the late Vedic period, some ritual spaces were acquiring more permanent features, though still far from the developed temple architecture of later periods. The emphasis remained on precisely measured spaces rather than monumental structures, with geometric arrangements reflecting astronomical alignments and cosmological principles.

Early Buddhist Sites: From Worship Places to Stupas

The earliest Buddhist sites similarly began as simple demarcated spaces rather than elaborate architectural complexes. According to traditional accounts, the Buddha himself designated certain types of sites as appropriate for commemoration, including places associated with his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and final nirvana. Archaeological evidence suggests that by the 3rd century BCE, during the Mauryan period, these sites were being marked with commemorative structures.

The stupa originally a burial mound—became the primary form of early Buddhist monumental architecture. The Great Stupa at Sanchi, initially constructed under Emperor Ashoka (r. 268-232 BCE) and later enlarged, represents one of the earliest surviving examples of this form. Even in its early manifestations, the stupa embodied cosmological principles, with its hemispherical dome (*anda*) representing the cosmic mountain, the *harmika* and *yasti-chattrā* (umbrella) symbolizing the axis mundi, and the circumambulatory path (*pradakshinapatha*) facilitating ritualized movement around the sacred center.

Evolution of Buddhist Architecture: From Stupa to Monastery

Structural Development of the Stupa

The Buddhist stupa evolved significantly over centuries, developing from simple hemispherical mounds to elaborate architectural complexes. This evolution reflected changes in Buddhist practice, shifts in patronage patterns, and regional aesthetic preferences.

The early stupas at Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati established fundamental architectural elements that would remain central to the tradition: the hemispherical dome, the harmika (square railing at the top), the chattra (umbrella), and the vedika (railing). These stupas were typically surrounded by elaborately carved stone railings and gateways (toranas) that provided surfaces for narrative sculpture depicting jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) and events from the historical Buddha's life.

By the Kushan period (1st-3rd centuries CE), stupas in the Gandhara region had begun to assume a more elongated form, with a heightened cylindrical drum supporting the hemisphere and multiple chattra umbrellas. This verticality would be further emphasized in later periods, particularly in the development of the pagoda form as Buddhism spread to East and Southeast Asia.

The Development of Buddhist Cave Architecture

Parallel to the stupa tradition, Buddhist cave architecture emerged as another distinctive expression of religious aesthetics. Beginning in the 2nd century BCE, excavated worship halls (chaitya) and monastic residences (viharas) created entirely new possibilities for sacred space. The earliest substantial examples at Bhaja, Karle, and Bedsa in Western India established a basilica-like pattern for chaitya halls: an apsidal plan with a central nave separated from side aisles by rows of columns, barrel-vaulted ceilings, and a stupa placed at the far end as the ritual focus.

These early cave temples adapted wooden construction techniques to stone carving, with remarkable fidelity to original wooden prototypes. The famous chaitya hall at Karle (1st century CE) demonstrates this wooden aesthetic, with rock-cut beams, rafters, and even decorative elements mimicking wooden predecessor structures that have not survived.

The vihara caves, intended as monastic residences, typically featured a central hall surrounded by individual cells for monks. These spaces evolved from simple functional quarters to elaborate complexes incorporating shrines, elaborate sculpture, and painted decoration. The development culminated in sites like Ajanta, where 5th-century CE viharas contain some of India's most sophisticated early Buddhist painting and sculpture.

The Emergence of the Mahayana Monastery Complex

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism from the 1st century CE onward significantly influenced architectural development, particularly in the creation of large monastic universities. Sites like Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri evolved beyond simple residential facilities to become vast educational complexes with multiple temples, lecture halls, dormitories, and administrative buildings. These institutions required new spatial organizations to accommodate thousands of residents and elaborate ritual practices.

The architectural layout of these complexes typically featured symmetrical arrangements around central shrine areas, with clear hierarchical organization of spaces reflecting monastic administrative structures. The remains of Nalanda, for example, show a planned arrangement of courts and quadrangles with standardized residential cells, larger assembly halls, temples containing colossal Buddha images, and specialized ritual spaces.

The decorative programs of these institutions also reflected Mahayana theological developments, with greater emphasis on bodhisattva figures, elaborate mandalas, and cosmic Buddhas. The stucco and stone sculptures from these sites show a movement toward more complex iconographic programs expressing the sophisticated metaphysical systems of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

Hindu Temple Architecture: Cosmic Symbolism and Regional Variations

Conceptual Foundations of the Hindu Temple

The Hindu temple, unlike the Buddhist stupa, evolved primarily as a residence (mandir) for the deity rather than a commemorative monument. Its conceptual foundations lie in the Vastupurusha Mandala—a mystical diagram that maps cosmic forces onto architectural space. According to this system, the temple ground plan represents the body of a primordial being (vastupurusha) pinned to the earth by various deities, with different portions of the plan allocated to different divine energies.

Early textual sources like the Brihat Samhita and later works such as the Manasara and Mayamata codified elaborate systems of proportion, orientation, and construction understood to harmonize the temple with cosmic principles. The temple's vertical axis was conceived as the axis mundi connecting terrestrial and celestial realms, while its cardinal orientations aligned with cosmic directions governed by specific deities.

Unlike Buddhist stupas meant primarily for circumambulation, Hindu temples developed around the garbhagriha (womb chamber) a small, typically unadorned space housing the primary deity image or symbol. This inner sanctum represented the convergence point of divine energy, from which power radiated outward through the surrounding architectural elements.

Evolution of Structural Forms

The structural evolution of Hindu temples followed several distinct regional trajectories while maintaining certain fundamental principles. From modest beginnings in the Gupta period (4th-6th centuries CE), temple architecture developed into elaborate forms with complex superstructures, multiple shrine chambers, and extensive sculptural programs.

The Nagara (North Indian) style developed a distinctive curvilinear tower (shikhara) culminating in an amalaka (stone disk) and kalasha (pot finial). This tradition reached its height in the temples of Khajuraho, Konark, and Bhubaneswar, where the central tower was surrounded by smaller replications creating a mountain-like silhouette.

The Dravida (South Indian) style evolved differently, with pyramidal stepped towers (vimanas) composed of progressively smaller stories, elaborate gateway towers (gopurams), and extensive courtyard enclosures. The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur (completed 1010 CE) represents a magnificent example of this tradition, with its 66-meter vimana demonstrating both technical mastery and imperial ambition.

The Vesara style of the Deccan region combined elements from both northern and southern traditions, creating distinctive forms seen in sites like Pattadakal, where both styles appear in neighboring temples. Later developments like Hoysala architecture (12th-13th centuries) elaborated these forms with extraordinarily intricate sculptural programs covering nearly every available surface.

Temple Architecture as Ritual Framework

The evolution of Hindu temple architecture correlates directly with developments in ritual practice, particularly the growth of puja (devotional worship) and darshan (visual communion with the deity) as central religious activities. The temple's spatial organization facilitated a graduated movement from mundane to sacred space through a series of thresholds.

The mandapa (hall) that preceded the garbhagriha provided space for ritual performances and congregational worship. In more elaborate temples, multiple mandapas created specialized functional zones—the nritya mandapa for ritual dance, the bhoga mandapa for food offerings, the kalyana mandapa for ceremonial marriages of deities. The circumambulatory path (pradakshinapatha) around the garbhagriha allowed devotees to physically enact their reverence through ritual movement.

Water management became an integral aspect of temple architecture, with tanks, stepwells, and elaborate drainage systems accommodating ritual bathing and ablutions. The incorporation of subsidiary shrines within temple complexes reflected theological relationships between deities and accommodated calendrical cycles of festivals and observances.

Comparative Iconographic Developments

Early Buddhist Aniconism and Narrative Art

Early Buddhist art avoided direct representation of the Buddha figure, employing instead symbolic elements such as the empty throne, footprints, the Bodhi tree, the dharmachakra (wheel of law), and the stupa itself to indicate the Buddha's presence. This aniconic phase, evident in the reliefs at Bharhut, Sanchi, and early Amaravati, focused on narrative representation of jataka tales and key events from the Buddha's life without depicting his physical form.

This narrative tradition developed sophisticated visual strategies for storytelling, including continuous narrative (showing multiple episodes within a single frame) and synoptic narrative (representing key moments that evoke complete stories). The medallions and panels adorning these early monuments established compositional patterns and iconographic conventions that would influence later Buddhist and Hindu art alike.

The Emergence of the Buddha Image

The anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha emerged around the 1st century CE, developing simultaneously in the Gandhara region (modern Pakistan/Afghanistan) and Mathura in northern India. These two schools created distinct aesthetic approaches: Gandharan Buddha figures showed Hellenistic influence in their naturalistic modeling, draped robes, and idealized facial features, while the Mathura school developed a more indigenous style with emphasis on symbolic attributes and frontal presentation.

Both traditions established the fundamental iconographic features of Buddha images that would remain consistent across Asian Buddhist art: the ushnisha (cranial protuberance), urna (mark between the eyebrows), elongated earlobes, and various mudras (hand gestures) signifying specific moments or aspects of the Buddha's teaching. The iconometric systems developed for these representations drew from both artistic conventions and textual descriptions of the "32 marks of the great man" (mahapurusha lakshana).

Hindu Iconographic Evolution

Hindu iconography evolved from early representations of yaksha and yakshi figures (nature spirits) and fertility deities toward increasingly complex pantheons of gods and goddesses. The Gupta period (4th-6th centuries CE) established classical canons for deity representation that balanced naturalistic human features with supernatural attributes and symbolic elements.

Shiva's iconography developed multiple forms expressing different theological aspects: Nataraja (the cosmic dancer), Lingodbhava (emerging from the linga), Ardhanarishvara (half-female form), Bhairava (terrifying aspect), and numerous others. Similarly, Vishnu iconography elaborated distinct forms for each avatar (incarnation), while goddess imagery ranged from benevolent forms like Gajalakshmi to fierce manifestations like Chamunda.

These developments were guided by textual sources (agamas, puranas, and specialized texts like the Vishnudharmottara Purana) that provided detailed prescriptions for proportions, attributes, postures, and associated symbols. Iconographic correctness was considered essential for images to function effectively as receptacles for divine presence.

Tantric Influences on Both Traditions

From approximately the 7th century onward, tantric influences transformed iconography in both Hindu and Buddhist contexts. In Buddhism, the pantheon expanded dramatically to include numerous bodhisattvas, dakinis, dharmapalas (protector deities), and cosmic Buddhas arranged in elaborate mandalas. The Vajrayana tradition developed complex iconographic systems where each detail of color, posture, attribute, and accompanying figure carried specific doctrinal significance.

Parallel developments occurred in Hindu tantra, particularly in Shakta traditions focusing on goddess worship. The Dashamahavidya (ten great wisdom goddesses) and other tantric pantheons introduced fierce, transgressive imagery that contrasted with earlier classical forms. Temple programs in regions like Odisha and Kashmir came to incorporate these tantric elements alongside more conventional imagery.

In both traditions, the influence of tantra led to greater emphasis on the transformative potential of visual engagement with divine images. The deity was no longer merely represented but presented in forms specifically designed to catalyze spiritual realization through visual means.

Aesthetic Principles and Technical Developments

Rasa Theory and Religious Art

Indian aesthetic theory, particularly the concept of rasa (emotional essence or aesthetic flavor), profoundly influenced religious artistic production. While initially developed in theatrical contexts, rasa theory was expanded by thinkers like Abhinavagupta to encompass visual arts and religious experience. The theory proposed that successful art evokes specific emotional states that, when properly experienced, lead to a form of aesthetic transcendence (alaukika).

In Hindu contexts, bhakti (devotional) movements increasingly emphasized shringara (erotic) and madhurya (sweet) rasas in their artistic expressions, seen in the sensuous temple sculptures at sites like Khajuraho and the intimate Krishna imagery of later painting traditions. These aesthetic choices reflected theological positions that embraced emotion as a path to divine connection rather than an obstacle.

Buddhist art, particularly in Mahayana contexts, increasingly employed karuna (compassion) and shanta (peace) rasas to evoke specific meditative states. The serene expressions of Buddha figures and bodhisattvas were designed not merely to represent but to induce states of tranquility and compassion in the viewer.

Technical Innovations in Architecture

Both Hindu and Buddhist architectural traditions drove significant technical innovations. The problem of creating large interior spaces in trabeate (post and beam) construction led to sophisticated bracketing systems and corbelling techniques. The magnificent hall of the Karle chaitya or the expansive mandapas of temples like Madurai Meenakshi demonstrate these solutions.

Stone construction techniques evolved from early wooden prototypes to develop distinctive methods for joining blocks without mortar, creating self-supporting arches through careful counterbalancing, and distributing weight through complex load-bearing systems. The massive monolithic rock-cut temples of Ellora—both Buddhist and Hindu—represent extraordinary achievements in understanding stone's structural properties.

Temple towers presented particular engineering challenges. The massive vimana of the Brihadisvara Temple employs a system of diminishing squares with hollow chambers to reduce weight while maintaining stability and appears to have used a sophisticated ramp system for construction. Northern shikhara towers developed a modular construction system of miniature towers (urushringa) clustered around a central core.

Wall Painting Traditions

The tradition of wall painting flourished in both religious contexts, with the Buddhist caves at Ajanta (5th-6th centuries CE) representing the finest surviving examples of early practice. These paintings employed a distinctive palette derived from minerals and local plants, applied to a carefully prepared surface of clay and organic materials over the rock substrate.

The Ajanta paintings demonstrate sophisticated composition, naturalistic but stylized human figures, and narrative techniques that influenced later painting traditions throughout Asia. Scenes from jataka tales and the Buddha's life are presented with remarkable attention to landscape, architecture, costume, and emotional expression.

Hindu painting traditions continued to develop these techniques in both temple and palace contexts. The Brihadisvara Temple contained extensive wall paintings (now mostly lost), while later traditions at sites like Lepakshi (16th century) show the continued vitality of this medium for religious narratives.

Continuity and Change: Medieval Developments and Cross-Fertilization

Buddhism's Decline and Architectural Legacy

The gradual decline of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent from the 8th century onward meant fewer new Buddhist monuments, but its architectural legacy continued to influence later building traditions. The stupa form was incorporated into Hindu and Jain architectural vocabularies, while techniques pioneered in Buddhist cave architecture informed later excavated Hindu temples like those at Ellora.

The last great phase of Indian Buddhist architecture came with the Pala dynasty (8th-12th centuries) in eastern India, whose distinctive temple style featured a unique cruciform plan and bent cornice (banga) roof derived from regional vernacular architecture. These temples housed elaborate stone sculptures within relatively modest structures, emphasizing iconographic programs over architectural monumentality.

Regional Temple Traditions and Synthesis

The medieval period saw increasing regionalization of Hindu temple styles, with distinctive traditions emerging in Gujarat (Solanki style), Karnataka (Hoysala), Tamil Nadu (Chola and later styles), and other regions. These traditions developed signature architectural elements while maintaining fundamental principles of Hindu sacred architecture.

Particularly interesting cases of synthesis occurred in regions with histories of strong Buddhist presence. In Kashmir, the distinctive temple style showing Gandharan influence represents a synthesis of Buddhist architectural elements with Hindu ritual requirements. Similarly, certain Bengal temple types show clear influence from earlier Buddhist structures in the region.

Islamic Encounter and Adaptive Responses

The encounter with Islamic architectural traditions from the 12th century onward created new dynamics of influence and resistance. While some regions experienced destruction of earlier monuments, others saw

interesting synthetic developments. The "Sultanate" temple style that emerged in regions under Islamic political control adapted to new political realities while preserving essential Hindu spatial concepts.

In regions like Gujarat, architectural elements from Islamic traditions were selectively incorporated into Hindu temple design, creating distinctive synthetic styles. The Rajput kingdoms maintained traditional Hindu architectural patterns with minor adaptive elements, emphasizing continuity with pre-Islamic traditions as a form of cultural resistance.

Conclusion: Religious Vision and Material Form

This research has demonstrated that the development of Indian art and architecture cannot be understood apart from the religious traditions that inspired and shaped them. Both Hindu and Buddhist traditions viewed the creation of sacred spaces and images not as mere aesthetic exercises but as participations in cosmic order with transformative potential for both creators and users.

Several key findings emerge from this analysis:

- **Embodied Theology:** Both Hindu and Buddhist architectural forms represent "theology in stone," with spatial arrangements, proportional systems, and decorative programs directly expressing religious concepts. The temple as cosmic mountain, the stupa as axis mundi, and the garbhagriha as womb of manifestation all exemplify this principle.
- **Ritual Determinants:** The evolution of architectural forms correlates directly with changes in ritual practice. The growing importance of individual devotional practices (puja) in Hinduism and the development of increasingly complex tantric visualization practices in Buddhism both left clear architectural imprints.
- **Cross-Fertilization:** Despite doctrinal differences, significant technical and aesthetic exchange occurred between Hindu and Buddhist traditions throughout their shared history. Construction techniques, decorative motifs, and iconographic conventions moved readily between religious contexts.
- **Regional Adaptation:** Both traditions demonstrated remarkable ability to adapt to regional conditions while maintaining core principles. This adaptability produced the rich variety of architectural expressions across the subcontinent while preserving recognizable pan-Indian features.
- **Continuity through Change:** Even as specific religious fortunes waxed and waned, fundamental aesthetic principles and technical traditions showed remarkable continuity, creating an architectural language with deep historical resonance.

The massive corpus of art and architecture produced under Hindu and Buddhist inspiration represents not merely an aesthetic heritage but a preserved body of religious knowledge. These structures and images functioned and in many cases continue to function as three-dimensional texts articulating complex theological positions, cosmological understandings, and ritual technologies. Their study reveals not only artistic evolution but the dynamic religious imagination that has characterized Indian civilization throughout its history.

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