

The Bhojpur Temple-an Ancient Mystery of Architectural Construction

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Abstract

Shavisim is considered an important sect in Hinduism. Lord shiva is widely worshipped all over India. With these aspect in mind there was built a temple by the king of Bhopal during 11th century–The Bhojpur temple'. The Bhojpur temple lies amidst the Bhojpur village of Raisen district, which lies 32 km from Bhopal, in Madhya Pradesh, India. The temple is a gigantic shrine with lord Shiva as the supreme deity. The temple was built by Raja Bhoj during the 11th century and is famous for the largest monolith shivlinga. The temple is widely known as the unfinished Hindu temple. It houses a giant idol of 'shivling', having an overall height exceeding 26 ft. The scale of the temple still remains a wonder to its observers and leaves them awe struck. The temple lies in harmony with the surrounding nature which adds to the beauty of the temple. It was erected by the King near the Betwa River, a tributary of the Yamuna. On one side, it was erected on a mound in front of a water reservoir produced by a massive dam, and on the other side, Betwa. The carving of the temple complex is indeed a remarkable one.

Keywords: Shiva, Bhojpur, Shivling, Temple, Architecture

INTRODUCTION

The Bhojpur temple is regarded as one of the most prominent Hindu temples. The temple lies in an unfinished state and was built by the mighty king 'Maharaja Bhoj of Bhopal'. The temple is profusely also known as the Somnath of the east. The great king was a pioneer of many fields including architecture, astronomy, medicine, music, religion, grammar, lexicography, poetry, philosophy, etc. which can be easily seen in his works and from the 84 books written by him. The Bhojpur temple, built in the 11th century in the Goharganj Tahsil of modern Raisen district, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. It is a living and seemingly indestructible proof to king Bhoja's stunning personality and encompassing aspiration of the sacred and massive dimension of human life. The temple is perched atop a rocky cliff on the right bank of the Betwa River. According to some of the legends the Shivling was worshipped even before the construction of the temple from the era of Mahabharata by the great warrior 'Bhim'. It is also believed that Kunti left 'Karna' besides the nearby river. The massive idol of shivling is the most striking feature of this temple. The construction technology used to build this kind

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of giant temple is of great incredibility. Broken parts, unfinished carvings engraved on stones and raw material has been found nearby the temple. The reason behind the unfinished work is speculated as a result of climatic factors, war, lack of financial resources, natural disasters or maybe the attack of foreign invaders by the historians. [1]

Brief

The Great Temple is dedicated to lord Shiva, who is also known by the other name as Bhojeshwar, which means 'the lord of the king Bhoj'. The temple was located quite ear to the

reservoir so that devotees can take bath and enter the temple for seeking the blessings of Lord Shiva. The temple consists of a basic square layout. The temple stands on a square platform which rises upto 115 ft long. Two platforms cum temple-like structures stand outside the temple, in front of the entrance gate. Two of the platforms feature a dome-like roof, while the main temple did not have a closed roof at all. These two temples contain small idols of lord Shiva and nandi and are regularly worshipped by the devotees. These two temples are accessible from all four sides with the help of arch, similar in shape as that of big temple. Many minute carvings are also done there, which shows the ornamental nature of the incomplete work. The idol of a serpent and the Nandi Bull, which are major symbols in Hinduism and linked with Lord Shiva, may be found on all three platforms. Stairs are offered for climbing so that essential prayers and Yagna can be performed. A massive door leads to the garbhagriha or the main sanctum inside the temple. The temple's entrance has an arch, which was built according to Vastu Shastra. The temple is also said to be the earliest construction to have an arch. [2][3] (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Exterior view of the bhojpur temple.

The garbhagriha of the temple is divided into nine compartments by the four pillars and twelve pilasters. One of the pillars went missing earlier and was restored afterwards. The height of pillars and pilasters reach upto 40 ft high. The pillars are made up of three pieces, the lowest of which is an octagon with two and a half feet of faces, surmounted by a second octagon with facets of 2 1/8 feet from which springs a 24 faced segment. The gateway is ornate above but simple below, with two sculpted figures of exceptional quality on either side. On either side of the sanctum's door jambs are carved sculptures of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. The walls of the temple are built of huge sandstone stones with no windows. Cementing material was not used on the pre-restoration walls. The usage of false balconies is seen in the temple, which are highly decorated since, these are located very high up on the walls and have no openings on the internal walls; they are inaccessible from both within and outside the temple. Three balconies, one on each of the northern, southern, and eastern walls, can be seen being supported by huge brackets. Although the balconies on the three facades are deprived of any functional use, they are quite useful in breaking up the monotony generated by the plain walls. [4]

“Hindu temples are symbols of the model of the cosmos and their form represents the cosmos symbolically” [5]. The garbhagriha encompasses a huge idol of shivling which consists of a yonipitha and linga, depicting goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva respectively. It is an abstract representation of the divine deities. It represents the union of Purusha and Prakriti in the form of Shiva and Shakti and it shows dependency of both on each other for creation and regeneration of the cosmos. The enormous Shivlinga is a great masterpiece of art of that time and is one of the tallest Shivling of the Indian subcontinent. The base of the Shivling is highly moulded. Various designs in mouldings can be seen from the plinth to the lower level of the roof. For the drainage purpose of the sacred water used for bathing the shivling the makara pranala was installed on the northern wall. The only carving on the external walls, aside from the front wall sculptures, is this makara sculpture. The ceiling of the temple remains unfinished and holds a great mystery in respect to its shape. The shape of the ceiling to be domus in shape. Since it is evident from many archaeological findings that this temple was made before the advent of Islam in India, it signifies the use of domes even before introduction of Islamic architecture in India. However, the shape is not as pyramidal as it can be found in other Hindu temple architecture. The ceiling is of ornamental in terms of architecture. The ceiling is composed of three tiers decorated with floral patterns including circles of various sizes shaped like a medallion or intertwined among others. Before restoration an opening at the center could be easily observed through which rainwater would enter and bathe the entire Shivling. During restoration the opening of the ceiling had been closed with fiberglass keeping the patterns and architectural carvings in accordance with the rest of the ceiling. The surface of the Shivling is engraved with the letter ‘Om’ and three lines as tripundra, a saivite tilak on forehead. The lingam in the sanctum reaches a height of 7.5 feet and a circumference of 17.8 feet, making it one of the largest in the world. The architectural harmony of the lingam and platform produces a wonderful synthesis of firmness and lightness, set upon a large platform 21.5 feet square and formed of three layered limestone blocks. Since, the idol is very gigantic, an iron staircase is provided in order to access shivling for certain practice of rituals by the devotees. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Gigantic shivling at the garbhagriha of the temple.

An earthen ramp was used to raise the stones to the level of the dome is still standing. The ramp is on the back side of the temple with which the transportation of large size stones to the raising heights

was made easy during the construction of the temple. It was a temporary sloping ramp. The temporary slope ramp at the north-eastern corner, which soars about 300 feet to climb to a height of 40 feet at an easy gradient along the sloping courses of the building, illustrates the overwhelming size of the process involved in the construction of the building. About more than 1300 mason marks are still present around the temple which also includes 50 mason names engraved on the temple. Apart from the mason names engraved various auspicious symbols like conch shell, swastika, different circles, trident, wheel, crossed circles along with some text written in Nagari script are found. These markings were useful in order to identify the amount of work being done by the masons. Individuals, guilds involved in the construction of the temple. On the adjacent quarries, the final temple's detailed architectural designs are carved on the rocks. Various architectural drawings found besides the temple contain plan, elevation, sections of the temple and even the detailed architectural elements. According to these architectural designs, the original aim was to construct a large temple complex with many additional temples. If these designs had been carried out successfully, Bhojpur would have been one of India's greatest temple complexes. According to the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904, the site was handed up to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1951 for restoration. The ASI restored the missing steps and rebuilt the damaged stairs of the platform and sanctuary in the early 1990s. It also renovated the temple's front on the north-west corner. Many quarry sites found on the north and east side of the temple where incomplete architectural remains in various levels of carving have been discovered. Many broken parts and fragments with architectural carvings were found. Several sculptures from the quarries had earlier been taken to the temple site and had been left there. In the twentieth century, the ASI relocated these sculptures to a storehouse. [6]

A cave dedicated to goddess Parvati is situated nearby the temple, so that devotees can take the blessings of goddess along with lord Shiva present in the bhojpur temple. The cave contains various architectural sculptures of great importance of the 11th century. A relatively museum dedicated to the Bhojeshwar Shiva Temple is located near the main temple, approximately 200 meters away from the temple. Through posters and illustrations, the museum tells the history and details of the Bhojeshwar Temple. The museum also contains the information on Raja Bhoja's rule and his kingdom, as well as key texts authored by him and information on the mason markings. A Jain shrine is also located close to the temple which contains three sculptures of Jain Tirthankaras. It is quite similar to temple and contains a rectangular plan. Just like Bhojpur temple it also remains unfinished with a similar ramp present in order to lift stones for the construction purpose. [7]

The causes for the abandonment of the construction of temple are unknown, although historians believe it was caused by a natural calamity, a shortage of resources, or a conflict.

Sculptures at the Temple

The temple though in an unfinished state contains the design and sculptures rich in architectural quality. The sculptures at the Bhojeshwar temple reflect the prominence of art at the period. Apart from the front façade, most part of the temple is left plain without any decoration. The pillars carry some amount of decoration. The inside walls are left completely bare. At the entrance statues of river goddesses are gracefully carved and have a wide ornamentation. They are seen having large and protruding eyes, in elegant poses, wearing attire comprising of ringing bells and chains. They seem to hold chowris in their hands. Above them are umbrellas in the shape of a lotus, which contain various small statues of ganas in different positions playing flute, dancing or in a seated position. However, some parts of the statues lies broken due to unknown causes. While glancing up at the ceiling rich ornamentation can be seen. Images of deities are carved onto the pillar capitals. On the ceiling brackets are the carved statues of different ganas, gana being the major attendants of lord shiva. The cornerstones are supported by four brackets which hold the statues of four divine couples: Shiva-Parvati, Brahma-Shakti, Rama-Sita, and Vishnu-Lakshmi. On all three faces of each bracket, a single pair emerges. [8] (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Sculptures gracefully carved at the entrance consisting of river goddesses and deities.

Some of the fascinating reflection of life can be seen by the sculptures of nayikas of the Bhojpur. They appear as a poetic image to the viewers. The shapes have been created, inspired by the natural beauty. A sculpture of a lady stands having a shaft in one hand containing a chowri; her garland can be seen flowing along her exquisitely flexible body. Another sculpture of a woman and a tree can be seen, in which the desire for creating a new life is depicted. It shows that the woman and the tree motif impregnate each other with the desire of longing and creation of upcoming new life. The motion of leaves and the tendrils of tree seem to be alive. They lean and spin along her body and coil themselves into a leafy round pattern like a medal in which a seated gana is observed playing flute. There is another figure of a woman looking below in a forward motion at a seated figure. She is ready to throw a ball in forward direction which is remarked by her fingers. [9]

There are a vast amount of sculptures of ganas. A gana with expressions carved on its trunk is widely and is known as 'udare mukha' which means 'the one having a face on the stomach'. The expressions on its trunk include with a big head and wide nostrils, dark eyes filled with anger, having teeth in an aggressive growl. The gana has four hands and is depicted in a seated position. A halo like structure is formed by the hairs which are placed in a round shape and flutter around just like the flames of burning fire. Another gana is seen playing a musical instrument 'flute' in a flying position. One gana with a curved sword in hand is marching into warfare, slashing across the sky and looking up bravely. Besides Nandi, which is placed in a seated position, is located another gana in a gracefully dancing position. Another gana leaps out, with its little legs dangling from the side of a 'karimakara', the fabled aquatic creature which is a symbol of the consuming seas of fire. The creature contains big protruding eyes, with its hind legs being compressed into a small part, ending in a floral flourish as a tail, a remark on the transformation, which is quite prevalent aesthetic sense of Indian architecture. Rudra ganas are placed near to shivling in order to serve and guard the main deity. The ganas have four hands all have enormous bulbous stomachs, their limbs and legs are full of fat and

chubbiness, with a rebellious and powerful gesture in order to protect the deity placed along with the assembly of gods. Ganas can be seen jumping from the temple's aerial brackets, with their two upper palms lifted in abhaya mudra. The ganas can be seen forming a row side by side in flying in order to carry the temple's flying chariot commonly known as vimana. Every sculpture of the gana is intricately carved and is gracefully adorned with ornaments. Most of the ganas wear various necklaces of different sizes and each bead of the necklace is carefully carved in proportion. The legs and arms too contain ornaments. The crown of each gana is adorned with jewels and contains a halo at the backside. The makara placed on the exterior wall of the temple is carved intricately and is also of symbolic significance. It represents the aquatic life. [10][11]

CONCLUSION

The temple aspires to everyone by its beauty and harmony with the natural surroundings. The shivling is astonishing and appears imposing to its observers due to the massiveness in its size. The temple achieves a great quality in terms of architectural aesthetics and engineering. A great amount of detail can be seen in the perfection and the quality of design along with landscaping in harmony along with the temple. Currently, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is in charge of safeguarding the monument. It attracts a large number of tourists due to its close proximity to the state capital, Bhopal (28 km). The National Tourism Award (2013–14) for "Best Maintained and Disabled Friendly Monument" was given to the site in 2015. The temple is still in use for religious purposes. Thousands of worshippers go to the shrine during the grand festival Maha Shivaratri. Every year during Maha Shivaratri, the Government of Madhya Pradesh hosts the Bhojpur Utsav cultural festival at the location. This temple from the 11th century stands not only as one of the best architectural monuments in the region, but it also provides a unique look into the construction process at the time with the usage of giant stones and heavy materials at the time when no modern machinery or technological advancement was there. Due to the massiveness in size, it can be viewed from far off point. This extraordinary temple remains unfinished for unexplained reasons. If completed, this incomplete temple may have been one of Lord Shiva's greatest temples.

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