

UNDERSTANDING THE HINDU TEMPLE
HISTORY, SYMBOLS AND FORMS



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TO MY STUDENTS

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Foreword

The Hindu temple is a highly complex sacred edifice. It embodies sacred space, which is fundamentally different from the surrounding ground and from that enclosed by secular buildings. It acts as a container, housing revered and often precious statues, whilst at the same time, the temple itself is considered to be sacred, is circumambulated and forms the focus of ritual activities. The architecture of the Hindu temple lends visual shape to a number of profound religious and cosmological concepts.

This excellent and fundamental study by Dr. Tiziana Lorenzetti visualises the enormous complexities surrounding the Hindu temple, provides a comprehensive and thought-provoking introduction to the diverse aspects shaping the sacred architecture of the Hindus and offers the reader a key with which to unlock the problems of interpreting the statues and great sacred temple monuments of India.

This timely monograph by Tiziana Lorenzetti is a translation and carefully revised and extended edition of her very successful book in Italian on the Hindu temple (*Il tempio induista: Struttura e simboli*. ISIAO, 2007), which is still the first and only publication to make this complex material available to an Italian-speaking readership. The latest edition makes her insight and far-reaching conclusions available to an English audience too. Following her previous approach, the English version has also been written for the general reader, particularly for students of Indian art, and represents a perfect teaching tool. The study provides a gradual introduction to the multiple and often profoundly complex levels of meaning, associated with Hindu temple architecture. By employing clear plain language, explaining terms and concepts in straightforward ways and providing helpful graphics and photographs, the author offers a methodical, easily accessible and lucid approach to extremely complex and multi-layered material.

In this wide-ranging book, Dr. Lorenzetti makes important interventions in a number of continuing debates surrounding the Hindu temple. Her systematic analysis is particularly concerned with the multiple symbolic and sacred meanings of temple edifices. In order to illustrate and elucidate these metaphysical levels, she makes ample reference to philosophical texts and religious treatises on architecture. Through this, she succeeds in linking the architectural and visual with the textual traditions of India.

Tiziana Lorenzetti delineates the profound significance of the temple as an *imago mundi*, an image of the cosmos, thus establishing a firm link between the macrocosm (universe) and the microcosm (world of man). In this correlation, the fundamental concepts of the 'centre', of expansion and re-absorption and of the cosmic pillar, which breaks through and interconnects different planes of existence, as outlined in South Asian cosmology, play crucial roles. Based on the significance of the centre, concepts such as the sacred rite of circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*) and the idea of sacred place (*tīrtha*), which are so closely entwined with the Hindu temple, are carefully elucidated. As the author meticulously demonstrates, these issues have a profound impact on the choice of the site, on foundation and orientation rites and on the laying out of the ground plan in the form of a sacred diagram (*vāstu-puruṣa-maṇḍala*). These devices clearly transform the space of the temple into a sacred centre, an abode of the divinity, yet at the same time, they convert the temple edifice into the body of the deity itself.

One of the issues which clearly distinguishes this monograph from previous studies is that Dr. Lorenzetti regularly draws remarkable parallels to western traditions of building, philosophy and religious thought. References to the Graeco-Latin *templum*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Plato's *Republic*, similarities in the orders of columns and Christian theology open up new inroads of understanding and appreciation, particularly for the general, non-specialist reader from a western cultural background.

In addition to the important metaphysical issues, Tiziana Lorenzetti illustrates clearly the development from timber and rock-cut architecture towards structural temple building and explains the shift from temporal to more permanent structures of veneration, such as temple no. 17 at Sanchi and the early remains from Nachna-Khutara in central India. This is followed by an analysis of the basic structure of the Hindu temple and variations in temple accessories, shapes and regional styles. In this area, deeply complex and detailed developments have been portrayed in a very accessible and comprehensible manner, making it easy and enjoyable for the reader to gain a profound and thorough understanding of differences in styles and regional developments.

One important issue, which the book tackles in much detail, is the question whether Indian temples correspond precisely to canonical texts. Grounding her conclusions on recent research in this area, the author stresses the relationship between texts and architecture but continues to question their immediate interrelatedness and closeness.

Hindu temple edifices are lavishly decorated and in these ornamentations, ample gods, goddesses and semi-divine beings have been depicted, which enliven the surface of the architecture. Dr. Lorenzetti meticulously analyses the different sculptural representations found in the Hindu temple, may they be anthropomorphic or symbolic, static or movable, made of stone or bronze. Particularly illuminating is the section focusing on the shape and the complex sexual and cosmological symbolism of *liṅga* and *yoni*. Systematically investigated are also representations of Śiva, Viṣṇu and of the Great Goddess, as well as of door guardians (*dvārapālas*), celestial beings (*apsarās*) and depictions of loving couples (*mithuna*).

To conclude what is already an extremely broad and wide-ranging study of the different religious and cosmological dimensions of the temple, the final chapter examines the Hindu temple in its wider context. Tiziana Lorenzetti penetrates into the political, the economic and the social dimensions of the temple in Indian society. Particularly enlightening is the discussion of political issues. Temple buildings provided legitimacy to rulers claiming descent from divine personalities, acted as signs of royal authority and enhanced the power of rulers and their Brahmin elite.

The book is lavishly illustrated with the author's own photographs, graphics and architectural drawings. Particularly helpful is also the all-inclusive glossary, explaining specialist Sanskrit terminology. All together, *Understanding the Hindu Temple: History, Symbols and Forms* by Dr. Tiziana Lorenzetti represents a comprehensive and profoundly accessible introduction to the Hindu temple architecture. This highly recommendable study summarises previous discussions and conclusions from a number of specialists in different fields, takes these further and opens up new debates which help us to recognise and appreciate the varied meanings of the Hindu temple.

Julia A. B. Hegewald
Bonn, September 2014