

THE ORIGIN OF THE VIMANAS OF TEMPLES IN SOUTH INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Temples are an essential part of every believer's life and contribute greatly to providing him solace and peace of mind. Each temple has a hoary legend associated with it. Temple stands as a symbol of the soaring aesthetic aspirations and sacred place where we have the privilege of worshipping the Almighty in a form appealing to our thought and heart. The word temple from the latin word "**Templum**" means holy enclosure or building or the dwelling place of God. In our country temple is the product of philosophy, religion, culture and spiritual centre. Temples are the mirrors reflecting the times of their creation and it is consisting of three major parts namely Gopuram, Sanctum and Vimana. The Gopuram means all the four sides of the temple. Sanctum is a dwelling place of the presiding deity. Vimana is constructed just above the sanctum or Garpagraha. Now let us see the origin of the Vimana.

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THE ORIGIN OF THE VIMANAS

We have confined our attention to a consideration of the ground plan and the based structure of the temple. The imposing vimana is built on the temple just above the Sanctum. The time and period of their existence, we have not been able to trace it. Therefore its origin is shrouded in darkness. Some people inclined to see in it a foreign element, some trace its origin to be Egyptian pyramid, and others find in it an adoption of Chaldean ziggarets.

Mr. Longhurst says that the stupa as the vimana is called the corrupted form of Sanskrit stupa which signifies a Buddhist shrine. It is originally a dome shaped structure which has a development of the low sepulchral tumulus, or mount of earth and stone in which the bricks were substituted for earth, with a view to durability. The Buddhist did not bring the stupa in to existence. It existed even long before the time of the Buddha. It was a common form of dome at that period and nothing more or less than a regularly built dome shaped pale of masonry. To secure the loyalty of the masses after the death of buddha is further developed and universalized by the followers, and became the religious edifice of the Buddhist. A striking change in the mediaeval stupa is the introduction of figures sculptures, but no Buddha sculptures found anywhere in the stupa when Buddhism began to decay. There is no Hindu temple before Buddha. The earliest representation of the Hindu deities are found on Buddhist temples.

We are not able to trace the origin of the vimana surmounting the temple from indigenous sources. It has a striking resemblance of the developed stupa, and is also called by the name supi. Therefore it is nothing more or less than a conventionalized model of a medieval Buddhist stupa, erected purely as an architectural ornament, denoting the position of the image enshrined within the building or temple.

TYPES OF VIMANAS

According to Manasara, vimanas are of three sorts distinguished from one another by the principal materials of which they are formed as suddha, pure, misra - mixed and sankirna or anomalous. (The materials used are, in the languages of the Mandapagattu inscription timber, stone, brick, etc.) an edifice is suddha which is composed of one material as stone, brick, etc.,

and this is considered best of all misra is that which is composed of two kinds of material, such as brick and stone and metals, and sankirna is that which is compound of three or more kinds of materials, as timber, stone brick, metals, etc.. The Pallavas were the first to introduce temple architecture in south India and introduced the Vimana also.

There is another type of architecture that seems to have been known in South India in early times. The most primitive representative of this type is the sudalsi-Mada's pillar, which is a common feature of the county surrounding the town of Tirunelvely district. The pillar is generally pyramidal in shape, although the conical variety is not unknown. Occasionally, pillars resembling miniature temple vimanas as for instance, at palamcottah are also seen. Three of these pillars generally stand together, although single ones are met with, standing here and there. They are built of bricks and mortar, but more frequently of clay. They are supposed to be the dwelling places of sudalai-Madan or the lord of the cremation ground. This appellation is fully explained by the legends associated with him. He was originally a demon of the graveyard feeding on corpses, although at present, he is identified with God Siva.

Again we see the same style of architecture in a more developed form in another part of South India. At mudu-bidri in South Canara are seen tombs of the Priests. They vary much in size and magnificence, some being from three to five or seven storeys in height. In spite of what Fergusson says to the contrary, their kinship to our temple towers or Vimanas is unmistakable. These tombs mark a stage in the development of Sudalsi's pillars. Both of them are pyramidal in shape, the tombs have storeys, whereas Sudali's pillar has generally none.

The next stage in the growth of this type of building or temple generally seen our graveyards. Over a good number of graves are found structures of brick and chunam which consist of a series of square platforms placed one above the other. The platform at the bottom is the biggest in the series. The one above it is smaller than that in size, the next still smaller, and soon. The whole structure, if of sufficient height, resembles a temple tower in miniature. Sometimes this structure is built on a basement of solid brick. Then its resemblance to a temple is complete.

Another variety of the vimana with barrel shaped summit. The sikara of this kind of vimana bears a striking resemblance to the roof of the Buddhist Chaitya. It is generally inferred from this that the vimana with the barrel shaped summit is derived from the Buddhist chaitya. It may be admitted that some of the vimanas belonging to this class are modeled upon Buddhist chaityas. This style of architecture seen in the chaitya is very primitive and pre Buddhist.

The Arthashastra says that the chaitya was a structural building, its external appearance could not have been very different from that of the shrine found among the bas-reliefs of Bharhut which in the language of Ferugusson is so exactly like the ratha that there can be no doubt that such buildings were used in the North India two centuries at least before Christ. It is not unreasonable to conclude from this that the rathas at Mahabalipuram and consequently the vimanas with the barrel-shaped summits are the lineal descendants of the pre-Buddhist.

The modern temple consists of a sanctum, an adjoining hall in front, and a conical or pyramidal tower called vimana or stupa which stands upon the sanctum. People generally believe that this feature of our temple architecture was borrowed from the Buddhist stupa but this view is not based upon any evidence we may say that suppose that the Dravidians learnt the art of constructing vimanas from the Aryans who came to the South much earlier than the time of the Buddha, there is no need for us to think that the Dravidians borrowed the idea of vimana from the proselytizing Buddhist. From very early times, there existed in South India two important types of temple, the dolmen shaped and the hut-shaped. What really happened was that these two types coalesced under the influence of the Aryans. All the local cults of South India were united and built into a single universal cult. The result of this union was the formation of a federation of all the religious sects of South India.

CONCLUSION

A careful examination of all the vimanas in South India reveals the existence of three varieties of which the hut-shaped vimans, just considered, is one. The two others are pyramidal-shaped but they differ from each other with regard to their summits. One of them has a dome-

shaped summit, whereas the summit of the other has the form of a barrel. These varieties of vimanas have attracted attention long ago.

The above considerations seem to justify us in concluding that the pyramidal vimana marks the final stage of development of the primitive type of Dravidian architecture represented by Sudalai-mada's pillars. Therefore no need for considering that they had been borrowed from outside. We now close our study with the conclusion that every part of our temple had an indigenous origin, and a careful perusal of history that tells us how the unification of its various parts into a single whole has been brought about.

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