



Brick Temple at Bhitargaon

The temple at Bhitargaon in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) is one of the earliest surviving **brick** temples of India.

- It was built in the 5th century A.D during the **Gupta Empire**.
- It is the oldest remaining terracotta Hindu shrine with a roof and a high Shikhara (spire) which paved the way for elaborate Nagara style of temple architecture in North India.

Brief History of Temple Architecture

- There is no evidence of the existence of temple architecture during the Vedic period.
- Over generations, worshipping was systematised and paved the way for the evolution of temple structures.
- Rock-cut architecture began to develop from the 3rd century BCE. Though the earliest rock-cut architecture is from the Mauryan dynasty, the Ajanta caves which belong to post Mauryan period are among the earliest rock-cut temples.
- As man progressed and learnt new techniques, rock-cut temples gave way to stone temples and as stone was not easily available everywhere, it gave way to brick temples.
- In the Gangetic plains, which have alluvial soil and paucity of stones and rocks, many brick structures came up.
- Though rock-cut and stone temples withstood the vagaries of time, brick temples could not survive. That is what makes the brick temple of Bhitargaon so special.

Architecture of Bhitargaon Temple

- The entrance into the sanctum shows one of the first uses of a **semi-circular doorway**.
- **Alexander Cunningham** (First Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1871) called this as the 'Hindu arch' which was peculiar to India.
- The temple has a tall pyramidal spire (shikhara) above the inner sanctum (garbha griha). This shikhara became the standard feature of the **Nagara temple architecture** of India.
- The walls of the temple are decorated with terracotta sculptures of God and Goddesses like Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, Vishnu etc. on panels separated by bold ornamental pilasters (rectangular column that projects slightly beyond the wall).
- According to Cunningham, because of the Varaha incarnation at the back of the temple, it was probably a **Vishnu temple**.

NAGARA, DRAVIDA & VESARA TEMPLES

- Temple architecture evolved slightly differently in different regions, such as the distinct features of Orissa, Kashmir and Bengal temples, but it can be generally classified under three categories- **Nagara (North)**, **Dravida (South)** and **Vesara** styles.
- The **shikhara** tower in Nagara temples has a **sloping curve** as they rise and are topped by an
- The Nagara style of temples were generally built on upraised platforms.
- **Kandariya Mahadeva temple** at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh is one of the best expression of Nagara temple architecture.
- In contrast, **Dravida** towers (known separately as **vimana**) are in the form of a **stepped pyramid** that rises up linearly rather than curved.

- There is only one vimana in the Dravidian architecture on top of the main temple. The subsidiary shrines do not have vimanas, unlike in Nagara architecture.
- The **presence of water tank** inside the temple enclosure is a **unique feature of the Dravidian style**.
- Southern Indian temples are typically enclosed within a walled courtyard with a gate (**gopuram**) which over time had become even more massive and ornate than the temple itself.
- The 11th century A.D. **Brihadishwara Temple** complex (built by Rajaraja I of Imperial Cholas) at Tanjavur is a wonderful example of Dravida temple which incorporates all of these features.
- Vesara style of temple architecture flourished under the later Chalukya rulers in the 7th century A.D.
- **Vesara style** had **combined features of both Nagara school and Dravidian school** and resulted in a hybridised style.
- **Durga temple at Aihole**, Karnataka is a prominent example of Vesara style temple.

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