

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HINDU TEMPLES

Materiality, Social History and Practice

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INTRODUCTION TO TEMPLE AND ROYALTY

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INTRODUCTION TO TEMPLE AND ROYALTY

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Temples are often seen as ‘belonging to’ dynasties based on their chronology, geographical location and style, such as the Gupta temple and the Chola temple. Temples have been used to determine the spatial and geographical spread of empires and are frequently understood to mark political and military events such as the conquest of new territories, the vanquishing of a rival, the fulfilment of a religious vow or even to mark the memory of a deceased monarch. The temple is thus seen as an agent of political legitimization with the emergence of the state in early India.

This dynastic model focuses on the ‘mechanics of making’,¹ and on royal patronage and control by brahmana priests. It thus freezes the temple at the moment of its construction. But a temple is not simply a static structure belonging to one period or even necessarily to one community. It moves through time, collecting social memories, and both the temples and the communities they serve continually redefine their pasts and renegotiate their present.² The Hindu temple represents the demarcation of a sacred space; hence, its interaction with the community that uses it is significant to its existence and use.

This Introduction traces the historiography of studies on the Hindu temple, starting with the initial colonial construction of a one-to-one correlation between temples and dynastic patronage. The colonial methodological approach had a long-term impact, as it defined the parameters within which the successive generations of scholars continued to study the Hindu temple. This chapter addresses three broad methodological approaches to study the temple, which have underscored the relationship between temple and royalty largely to the exclusion of other imperatives and networks: the reliance of scholars on textual sources and architectural treatises; the connection between religious institutions and state formation; and finally, the art historical scholarship on temples.

I. Beginnings of writings on temples

The earliest descriptions of temples come from the 16th- and 17th-century travelogues of Europeans – the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and British. These accounts are limited to descriptions of the external architecture of the temples because of restrictions on the entry of Europeans inside the temple precincts. On the one hand, these reveal the prejudice and

fascination of the travellers with Hinduism; on the other hand, they provide the earliest textual descriptions of temples before any archaeological intervention. A second set of descriptions of temples come from their visual and artistic representations by British artists such as William Hodges, Thomas and William Daniell and L. Langles who travelled through the subcontinent in the 18th and the early 19th centuries. In these 'picturesque' depictions of monumental temples studded against vast tropical landscapes, the temple *shikharas* and *gopurams* appear taller, and the cave shrines of western India are darker, romantic and tinged with nostalgia and devoid of worshippers.

One of the earliest scholarly treatises on the Hindu temple by an Indian scholar was Ram Raz's (1790–1833) *The Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*, published by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1834. While the earlier accounts of foreign travellers were based on observation, Ram Raz was the first to use ancient Indian architectural treatises in Sanskrit and vernacular languages including the *Shilpa Shastras* and the *Vāstu Shastras*, and in particular the *Manasara* and the *Mayamtam* as primary sources to study Hindu temples. He collated fragments of manuscripts into a cohesive volume and translated select portions into English, further supplementing this architectural knowledge by drawing parallels with the existing temples of South India and interviewing brahmana priests and practicing artisans.

Ram Raz's study laid down the frame of reference used by later antiquarians and scholars in their study of Hindu temples. On the one hand, Ram Raz emphasized the unique aesthetics of temples and sculptures, and on the other hand, by standardizing the principles of architecture, he ushered in the trend of viewing temples as timeless and static structures devoid of their ritual and social component. By establishing a direct correlation between text and architecture, the texts were seen as prescriptive, whereas they were often commentaries on building practices, which allowed for considerable variation in physical form. Moreover, such an approach ignored the various stages of the expansion and renovation of temples, including changes in ritual practice and community use of the temple space, and structures and spaces beyond the built structure of the main shrine, such as tanks and courtyards. His text-based methodology laid the foundations for a still popular art historical discourse, where the emphasis is on passages describing buildings, floor plans, architectural fragments and sculptural narratives illustrated by line drawings in Ram Raz's style.³

The interest in temples is also evident in the statistical surveys of South India under Colin Mackenzie (1753–1821), the first Surveyor General of India. Mackenzie, along with his team of 20 native assistants, collected topographical and ethnographic information, oral accounts, antiquities and written historical accounts, both literary and epigraphic to compile a historical geography of the Deccan and a history of its ancient empires, through the study of inscriptions and monuments. While stone inscriptions were recorded *in situ*, copper-plate grants were collected and sent to Madras, uprooting them from their archaeological context. Temples were intensively studied, since they were considered to be closely bound up with the rise and fall of empires and a reflection of an idealized Hindu past. A parallel process of the construction of the political history of India through inscriptions and shrines was taking place in Calcutta under the aegis of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, also mediated through the knowledge of native scholars.

This collaboration between the native scholars and colonial antiquarians continued in other knowledge projects of the colonial state including the statistical surveys of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton (1762–1829) in Mysore and in the Bengal presidency.⁴ With a methodological approach very similar to that of Mackenzie, Buchanan personally visited historical sites and provided first-hand accounts of his observations. At each site that he visited, his trained draftsmen conducted a 'scientific survey' by taking measurements of buildings, elevations and ground plans, and of the sculptural ornamentation. These architectural investigations were accompanied

by the collection of inscriptions and of local legends and oral accounts from villagers and brahmana priests. The result was a systematization of the history of temple sites. Oral and inscriptional references were correlated with dynastic lists in the epics and Puranas to identify the dynastic affiliation of the site.

A new methodology of documenting temple sites based on 'archaeological' knowledge was advocated by Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893), who surveyed and documented over 166 sites in North India.⁵ Cunningham combined the visual observations of shrines with drawings of plans, sections and elevations.⁶ He also constructed a linear chronology of religious places in India from Buddhist to Hindu to Muslim⁷; and argued for foreign influence, particularly Greek, on Indian architecture. The trust in epigraphic knowledge remained central to his project, so much so that he excluded from his list the documentation of temples, which had no inscriptional evidence, such as the temple at Marhia, Madhya Pradesh.⁸

Cunningham's most substantial contribution to the study of Hindu temples was tracing the architectural evolution of what he labelled as Gupta temples, clearly outlining their main characteristics and defining the progression of temple building in North India from flat-roofed structures to more elaborate shrines with a pyramidal roof or *shikhara*.⁹ His labelling of the stages of temple architecture by dynasties and not temporal brackets (e.g. Gupta instead of 7th century) set the tone of the future scholarship, where dynastic and chronological labelling became interchangeable.

The colonial concern over the lack of a reliable textual history of India is also apparent in the writings of James Fergusson (1808–1886), who travelled to various parts of India between 1836 and 1841, studying and documenting Indian architecture.¹⁰ Fergusson tried to redress this issue by the visual observation of temples – their artistic styles and techniques of buildings, which were significant indicators of chronology. Fergusson was concerned with accuracy and truth, and the only way to properly convey the essence of a building was through illustrations (and later documentation through photography).¹¹ The long-term impact of this methodology has been to capture the static quality of temples as monuments standing in the midst of gardens and open fields, devoid of any cultural landscape.

For Fergusson, the study of temple architecture was a 'science', which held the key to understanding the ethnography of the subcontinent.¹² As a result, the first kind of classification of sacred architecture that he introduced was based on religious affiliation such as Buddhist, Hindu and Jain with no realization of the complexity in the use of religious space in the Indian context.¹³ His second approach was to introduce a racial and regional categorization of Hindu temples as Dravidian, Indo-Aryan and North Indian with no substyles or scope of intermixing of building traditions. These investigative parameters defined by Fergusson continue to dominate historiographical traditions into the present, where historians studying the temple first establish its identity and name, ascribe a date, the style of construction and, finally, the name of the ruler under whose apparent patronage it was constructed.

Within this plethora of writings on the Hindu temple in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a voice which stands out is of an Indian scholar, Rajendralal Mitra (1824–1891), who also became the first 'native' director of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.¹⁴ Mitra made notable contributions in the field of epigraphy and numismatics; he wrote on a number of inscriptions in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* which formed the basis for the construction of political history of ancient India and an attempt to solve the vexed problem of dynastic chronologies.¹⁵ At the same time, he engaged in the stylistic study of sculptures and the architectural components of the Hindu temple, which inaugurated the tendency among generations of historians to look at temples and the accompanying sculptures not as historical artefacts but as specimens of art of the various ruling dynasties.

There has been substantial research tracing colonial writings on the representation of the country's archaeological wealth.¹⁶ What is often lacking in these debates is the long-term impact of this approach on historical methodology, the terminologies used to study temples and the overlapping of the disciplines of art and archaeology where temples continue to be studied for their aesthetic value.¹⁷ For instance, the focus on temple sculptures as art specimens of the different ruling dynasties and temples as monuments does not take into purview the fact that many of these temples were in use in the 19th century and had a significant place within existing pilgrimage circuits. There is, hence, a need not only to question the parameters within which the Hindu temples have been studied but also to interrogate the knowledge base and the ways in which historical sources have been interpreted.¹⁸

Scholars have suggested conflicting interpretations of the past termed 'scientific interpretation' versus a 'nationalist interpretation' of comparing texts with material culture. While the contributions of 'native scholars' such as Ram Raz and Rajendralal Mitra have been widely recognized, what is often not discussed is how the interpretations of Indian scholars continued to be framed within colonial parameters and in response to the questions raised by the colonial scholars.¹⁹ As a methodological approach, Mackenzie, Buchanan and Cunningham spent a great deal of their energies interviewing people and collecting ethnographic data on the history of temples for the purpose of which they directed a large group of 'native scholars' and brahmana *pundits* who acted as translators and interpreters. However, the limitations of this practice are evident. For instance, writing in the context of the temples of Mahabalipuram, it has been questioned how in this process of colonial archiving, local narratives around temples, their rituals and festivities came to acquire entirely new meanings.²⁰ Mackenzie and his colleagues produced views of the temples at Mahabalipuram, which catered to western aesthetics but were unconcerned with the local understanding of the sites, and these were often regarded as local myths and ignored. The Europeans focus on the built space of the temples, a clear-cut designation of public and private space, and the distinction made between the sacred and secular precincts of temples often did not apply in the context of the subcontinent.²¹

Architectural histories from this period followed a European model, where textual sources were used to create architectural treatises that could be emulated, including the establishment of the classical category of 'Hindu' architecture.²² In the 19th century, with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India, the study of architecture began to be increasingly based on documentation and fieldwork, and thus on the detailed study of the physical form and not just the textual prescription. Publications by James Fergusson, James Burgess, Henry Cousens, Alexander Cunningham and Rajendralal Mitra established an extensive corpus of monuments, and historical chronologies and typologies of these based on dynastic affiliations.

II. The architectural approach

In the early years of the 20th century, the tacit link between temple and royalty found further affirmation in the writings of Indian scholars studying the Hindu temple. Moving away from inscriptions, these scholars once again turned to the knowledge contained in Sanskrit architectural treatises, such as the *Shilpa Shastras* and the *Vastu Shastras* and supplemented this textual knowledge by eliciting the help of the practitioners, viz., the *sthapatis* or the traditional architects. In 1918, PK Acharya undertook the editing and translation of 11 fragmentary palm leaf manuscript versions of the *Manasara*²³; a more complete translation than the somewhat selective interpretation undertaken by Ram Raz. Yet the style of writing and the accompanying blue-prints of temple plans were similar to Ram Raz's. Acharya's interpretation inaugurated several

important academic trends in the study of temples such as compiling a glossary of traditional terminologies used to describe the temples and its associated architectural features like sculptures and doorways. More importantly, Acharya laid the foundation of the idea that texts could be dated prior to the temples, and that these provided the guidelines for construction, which architects, masons and sculptors duly followed. This premise was unquestioningly accepted and followed in subsequent scholarship.

A second methodological shift was ushered in through the writings of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), who shifted the focus from the external style and ornamental motifs of religious architecture to engage with their inner, spiritual symbolism.²⁴ Coomaraswamy created a taxonomy of architectural types in the subcontinent by a rigorous investigation into the typology and morphology of early Indian architecture based on circumstantial observations of craftsmen, existing temples, ornamental motifs and literary texts.²⁵ He left behind an invaluable legacy of a grammar to decode regional architectural forms, and of technical terms and quotations from Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit sources.

Coomaraswamy's body of work was later enlarged upon by Stella Kramrisch in her two volumes analysing the spiritual meaning and symbolism of Hindu temples.²⁶ Kramrisch's study was based on a deep engagement with the *Shilpa Shastras* along with the narratives of the *Puranas*, the Epics and the *Upanishads*, where she argued that the temple was a tangible symbol of sacred art, and also a visual expression of the imagination of patrons and craftsmen.²⁷ The most enduring legacy of Kramrisch's work was her categorization of Hindu temples into the *Nagara*, *Dravida* and *Vesara* styles based on geographical location, regional styles and dynastic affiliation – concepts which have survived till today in art historical discourse with remarkable tenacity.

The immediate impact of these academic traditions was that the 1940s and the 1950s saw the discovery and publication of various *Shilpa Shastras* from different regions of the subcontinent.²⁸ While for most manuscripts, the editors succeeded in interpreting their technical and symbolic aspects, in some cases, the editors were uncertain of the meanings and merely carried out a literal translation without taking into cognizance the living *shilpa* tradition within Hinduism. A parallel process that scholars and *sthapatis* worked with was a single-minded focus to find a local textual tradition for each temple; inversely, individual standing temples were matched willy-nilly to these terminologies and typologies. This was further systematized due to the setting up of the Architectural Survey of Temples within the ASI in 1955 to determine the evolution and regional characterization of temples, with Krishna Deva and K. R. Srinivasan responsible for north and South India, respectively.²⁹ Together these two processes resulted in the compilation of an exhaustive list of technical vocabulary associated with the temple edifice, based on a survey of *shilpa* texts, inscriptions and living traditions and the standardization and widespread use of this vocabulary in academic scholarship. At the same time, within this codification of regional trends, the various styles of architecture became synonymous with dynastic patronage and nomenclature.

In post-colonial times, one of the most comprehensive scholarship on the architecture of the Hindu temple is the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia of Temple Architecture*, a compendium of temples from different parts of the subcontinent covering the early medieval to the modern periods organized by a chronological, geographical and dynastic classification of temple complexes.³⁰ In this exhaustive survey, the editors Michael Meister, M. A. Dhaky and Krishna Deva utilized Sanskrit vocabulary from the *shastras* to list the distinctive architectural features of each period (illustrated in exhaustive floor plans and elevations), thus reiterating the connection between texts and monuments. The temples of the *Encyclopaedia* are arranged as per dynastic affiliation, with approximate dates of construction for each temple and a historical outline of each of the

dynasties (including a genealogical table) to which the temples are ascribed, the premise being that building styles change with changes in political power and the temples represent an 'accumulation of general characteristics that reflect a broad cultural grouping'.³¹

These epistemological models for the study of Hindu temples on the basis of the external superstructure, and the division into *Nagara*, *Dravida* and *Vesara*, continue to dominate architectural discourse, and the various regional sub-styles which emerged between the 11th and the 13th century, such as *Vesara*, *Bhumija*, *Kalinga* and *Varata*, are understood as arising from the patronage of regional dynasties.³² At the same time, based on the visual observation and a conceptual understanding of built space, an evolutionary framework has been created for the development of temple architecture between the 6th and the 13th century CE, the starting point being the 'proto-Nagara form found from the Gupta heartlands of the Gangetic basin and central India', which became the superstructure of more elaborate versions.³³ The architectural approach thus continues to associate the cultural, religious and architectural origins of the Hindu temple with two simultaneous processes: first, the political and financial exigencies of ruling dynasties, which led to the evolution of diverse architectural idioms in the different regions.³⁴ Second, the correlation between architecture, theology and treatises such that the *Shilpa Shastras* have come to be defined as 'a collection of rules that attempts to facilitate the translation of theological concepts into architectural form', codified by the brahmanas.³⁵

Temple, state and ideology

The implicit link between royal patronage and the establishment of temples has been cemented in the last six decades through the writings of left historians on the 'early medieval period' (8th–13th centuries) marked by the emergence of a series of smaller states after the decline of the Gupta empire. A common thread in these writings is the association of temples with the state, where temples are seen as providing legitimacy to the newly emerging political powers. This has resulted in establishing the identity, history and the biography of temples solely with ruling dynasties and ignores any links with people or communities who used the temple space.

Ever since the publication of R. S. Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* (1965), the focus of historians' writing on early medieval India has been on economic and social structures.³⁶ Sharma, based on an extensive study of epigraphic data, wrote of the breakdown in 'modes of production', which led to a situation where kings had to resort to making land grants because of their inability to maintain the administration. Through the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s, a proposed feudal model was widely discussed and debated to fit this essentially European institution into an Indian framework. Numerous land grants were taken to represent the alienation of state revenue to political subordinates and especially to religious functionaries.

Various alternative anthropological models were introduced as a critique to the feudal polity and society and at the same time to explain the lack of a centralized bureaucratic structure. As a result, diverse strands of writing based on different regions, such as those of Romila Thapar,³⁷ Burton Stein,³⁸ B. D. Chattopadhyaya,³⁹ Herman Kulke,⁴⁰ G. W. Spencer,⁴¹ James Heitzman⁴² and R. Champaklakshmi,⁴³ became the norm, but at the heart of these debates, the primary importance was given to state formation. Having recognized the importance of localities, communities and small administrative units, historians engaged in charting out the process of the phased integration of early kingdoms or trans-local polities within the imperial kingdom or regional polity.⁴⁴

In this process of assimilation, a vital role was seen to be played by temples, monastic complexes and brahmana priests, who provided the much-needed legitimacy to the newly emerging states. In turn, the temples and monasteries emerged as significant landowners and economic

centres wielding substantial local authority and were closely linked with the revival of the state, agriculture, trade and urbanism. Scholars have also emphasized the use of certain visual, ideological and literary symbols by political dynasties as strategies of asserting sovereignty and control, such as the use of *prashastis* or genealogies presumed to have been composed by the brahmanas, to legitimize the rule of the kings. Similarly, the political allegory of kings being equated to gods in physical prowess, moral values and virtuosity has been analysed through the imprint on coins, sculptures and in temples.

This overemphasis on the correlation between temples, kings and legitimacy has detached temples from their surrounding cultural landscapes.⁴⁵ Moreover, the continuing emphasis on deriving information about politics and the state from inscriptions has led to an uneven geographical focus on regions with a larger number of inscriptions.

It is important to move beyond the perspective of mechanical functionalism, which has linked state building, ideology and religion and to adopt a more nuanced reading of temple inscriptions to see what roles religious institutions played in cultural developments and as centres of community interaction. For instance, Leslie Orr has used thousands of inscriptions to analyse piety and patronage in Tamil Nadu between the 9th and the 13th centuries, within a gendered framework.⁴⁶ By examining the religious experiences of both – common men and women – and by cross-referencing epigraphic vocabulary with existing texts, she draws attention to the frequent mention of the transfer of merit, reflecting the strength of familial, social and political bonds through ritual activities.

III. Representing royalty in temples

The implied connection between deities and kings, suggesting their divine right to rule as well as the emphasis on the idea of shared sovereignty, has also been a focus within art historical scholarship. Temple complexes have been understood as reflective of royal propaganda through their monumental architecture, rich iconographic vocabulary and conspicuous use of paintings. A well-thought-out sculptural narrative, the floor plans of temples and the choice of site (such as one in the capital city and a similar one in a remote villages) have all been discussed as part of an organic plan, aimed at the legitimization of political power.

A significant question raised by art historians is how royalty and political allegory have been represented in temple iconography. The body of the divinity has been identified with the body of the king, and the deities' mythic actions are equated with the political actions of rulers.⁴⁷ A much-discussed iconographic motif is the Varaha *avatara* of Vishnu (equated with the ruler) rescuing the earth from an evil netherworld. The early-5th-century Varaha image from Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh, a site of importance to the Gupta rulers, has been widely discussed as indicating the unification of the empire under Chandragupta II.⁴⁸ A partially damaged, kneeling figure in *anjali mudra* facing the Varaha has been identified as that of Chandragupta II kneeling in front of the deity; alternatively, the Varaha has also been identified with Samudragupta,⁴⁹ thus establishing his royal genealogy and asserting his right to rule. Michael Willis has argued that the site of Udayagiri emerged as a vital religious centre, where the royal consecration of the Gupta rulers was organized through the use of elaborate Vedic sacrifices and the annual celebration of a festival for Vishnu. In this process, Willis gives credit to the Guptas for establishing the earliest Hindu temples to bring worship into a 'public' context.

The establishment of various temple complexes has been interpreted as monuments commemorating key political and military events. For instance, the Brihadishvara temple of Thanjavur and the patronage it received from Rajaraja Chola has attracted much scholarly attention.

Scholars have argued how the Brihadishvara temple came to represent a mechanism for centralized administration, political control, mobilization of resources⁵⁰ and so on. Scholars have also drawn a symbolic parallel between the cosmic significance of the temple and the body of the presiding ruler⁵¹ as well as the use of political allegory in the temple iconography in South India during the early medieval period which reflect the socio-religious and political discourses of the period.⁵²

A similar trend highlights the presence of royal portraits in stone, bronze and mural paintings in temple complexes. Royal portraiture in temples is a contested category, with the central question being how to explain the apparent overlapping of the categories of the divine and royalty. Discussions have ranged from historical figures and sculptural depictions, and the identification of a particular ruler with the central deity in the temple,⁵³ to suggestions that these sculptures were not 'true portraiture' but were 'effigy'.⁵⁴ Vidya Dehejia contends that it is not 'verisimilitude', which is the ruling principle in South Asian portraiture but the context and placement that conveys identity.⁵⁵ C. Palacuppiramaniyan's⁵⁶ extensive survey of royal portraits in Thanjavur; Padma Kaimal's identification of certain *lakshanas* to identify royal portraiture in South India⁵⁷; and most recently, Vincent Lefevre's monograph on 'intention, perception, and function' of portraits⁵⁸ are some noteworthy writings in this context.

Scholars have compared these presumed royal portraits to textual prescriptions such as those provided by the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* and the *Shilpa Prakasa*, where it has been argued that it is the absence of multiple arms and divine attributes, which distinguish these sculptures of royalty from those of deities. For Crispin Branfoot, it is not so much the identity of images which is crucial but the architectural and ritual context of images which establishes its identity, such that royal portrait sculptures are located primarily in corridors, in the gateways of *gopuras* and in the festival *mandapas* and processional routes where all three, that is, the deity, the royalty and the worshipers interact.⁵⁹

If we move away from this uni-dimensional way of reading temple iconography as symbols of royal preference and patronage, what are some of the possibilities? Vishakha Desai has emphasized the larger ritual, historical and aesthetic context of temple sculptures and has argued that the full meaning of a temple emerges only when its structural form is considered together with the imagery that so richly embellishes it.⁶⁰ By taking into consideration both the sacred and secular images on temple walls, she contends that the Hindu temple bridges the link between the sacred and the secular, and the spiritual domain of the temple extends beyond its built architectural edifice. In this context, the temples at Khajuraho have been discussed either in their association with the Chandella rulers or for their erotic sculptures which has engrossed scholars ever since they were brought to attention by T. S. Burt in 1838. Devangana Desai in her study of the religious imagery at Khajuraho has very effectively shifted the conversation from looking at the erotic sculptures in isolation to the distinct religious environment that moulded the conceptions of the three major temples at Khajuraho, such as the relationship between iconography, philosophy, cults and rituals.⁶¹ Desai has adopted an iconological approach to explain that the 'individual iconography of images is not as important as the study of their configuration'.⁶² Similarly, Kirit Mankodi has argued that there is a logic to the arrangement of sculptures in temples, as these are meant to bind together the different architectural elements.⁶³ By studying the patterns of placement of images and sculptural styles, he has traced its architectural chronology and links of the *Rani-ki-vav* stepwell at Patan, Gujarat, to other monuments in the neighbourhood, thus helping to construct a cultural landscape and establish the ritual connection of the temples with water bodies in the vicinity, rather than merely focusing on its royal patronage.

IV. New paradigms

The major scholarly perspectives have largely discussed Hindu temples as a static remnant of the past patronized by ruling dynasties without taking into consideration the longevity of the shrines or their whole as living spaces. The study of temples has over the years come to be fragmented into different academic disciplines with specialists looking at their specific narrow branch of academic specialization, such as texts, architecture, inscriptions and sculptures. Asher highlights the importance of overcoming disciplinary barriers and moves away from merely analysing stray inscriptions, sculpted panels and architectural fragments to read them as integral parts of larger architectural complexes.⁶⁴ The material studied by epigraphers has a direct bearing on the study of art history, while the works of art themselves, if properly interpreted, can serve as documents that illuminate the study of epigraphy.⁶⁵ The history of sacred spaces in the subcontinent should be approached as a continuous process rather than as placed within cycles of rise and decline tied to the political fate of ruling dynasties.

If the general presumption of a direct link between temple complexes and patronage holds true, what happened to the temples after the patron died? Did ritual worship stop or did even very large temple complexes meet their final demise? The focus on architectural form and the examination of temple architecture through the lens of dynastic patronage denude them of their spiritual and social context. Moreover, the primacy given to large temple complexes established by successful dynasties tends to ignore local and village shrines, which are deeply embedded in the cultural landscape as centres of piety and pilgrimage. As a result of this empire-centric study, the role of regional variations and transformation of architectural form are seen as the personal preference of rulers and the role of the artists, and the patronage of common people is erased. It is increasingly clear that the tri-fold categorization of temples into *Nagara*, *Dravida* and *Vesara* eludes a wide range of regional variation. The material used in temple construction might also determine the structures that survive today. This could also explain the emphasis on studying the temples of South India, which as a result of being built in stone have continued to stand as sources to study the past and provide a continuity in history.

The chapters in this section have adopted varied methodological approaches, which take into purview the historical geography of sites, the evolution of cults and rituals, the afterlife of temples beyond the moment of their original construction and the participation of the community in the temple-building process. In the first chapter, Anila Verghese makes a detailed survey of all the extant monuments within the core area and the suburbs of Hampi and substantiates these with inscriptions and accounts of foreign travellers to discuss the cultural landscape of Hampi-Vijayanagara. She argues that the primary cults and temples in the region associated with Virupaksha and Rama had an indigenous association with the site, and were native to the sacred topography and support of the local people, which is why some of these have survived even into the present. In the second chapter, Ashish Kumar maps the socio-cultural landscape of a micro-region in central India along with reading the inscriptions of the Gupta rulers and their subordinates to bring into discussion professional groups, *Pashupatas* and local elites who supported several shrines dedicated to different gods and goddesses in the region. Even though a few kings figure as donors to some of these temples, the brahmanas do not seem to be a dominant force in the building and functioning of the temples. Finally, Valérie Gillet's paper talks about new ways to read stone inscriptions on temples to discuss the dynamics of temple reconstruction and argues that the state was not always an agent of temple construction. Through her thorough reading of Tamil inscriptions, she shows how a few notables accumulated wealth and gained social and political power over the locality and built temples, which came to play

an increasingly important role in society. The corpus of original inscriptions used by Gillet for this chapter has been retained in its English translation to allow readers to explore that data from inscriptions as not necessarily related to patronage, land grants or legitimation.

Notes

- 1 Michael W. Meister, *Ethnography and Personhood: Notes from the Field*, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000, p. 20.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Jennifer Howes, 'The Manasara and Pre-Colonial Kingship in South India', in *The Courts of Pre-colonial South India: Material Culture and Kingship*, Royal Asiatic Society Books, London: Routledge, 2003.
- 4 Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar, . . . : For the Express Purpose of Investigating the State of Agriculture, Arts, and Commerce; the Religion, Manners, and Customs; the History Natural and Civil, and Antiquities, in the Dominions of the Rajah of Mysore, and the Countries Acquired by the Honourable East India Company, in the Late and Former Wars, from Tippoo Sultan*, vol. 2, London: T. Cadell and W. Davies/Black, Parry and Kingsbury/W. Bulmer and Company, 1807.
- 5 Marika Vicziany, 'Imperialism, Botany and Statistics in Early Nineteenth-century India: The Surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762–1829)', *Modern Asian Studies*, 20(4), 1986, pp. 625–660.
- 6 Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Memorandum*, 1861.
- 7 Alexander Cunningham, 'An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture, as Exhibited in the Temples of Kashmir', *Journal of Asiatic Society*, September 1848.
- 8 This tendency to construct a linear chronology of religious sites continued in many subsequent works: E.B. Havell, *Indian Architecture: Its Psychology, Structure, and History from the First Muhammadan Invasion to the Present Day*, London: J. Murray, 1913. B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, London: Penguin Books, 1953. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: (Buddhist and Hindu)*, Bombay: DB Taraporevala, 1965. J.C. Harle, *Art and Architecture of Indian Subcontinent (Pelican History of Art)*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.
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