

Shaktipeetha Temples in Transition: Contemporary Changes and Their Impact on Temple Architecture

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21590280>

Abstract:

Shaktipeetha temples are centres of Goddess worship and represent significant examples of living temple architecture in India. Traditionally, their layout was based on ritual requirements, sacred order and controlled devotional environment. The sanctum formed the sacred core, supported by mandapas and enclosed areas that guided the spiritual experience of devotees. The architectural design reflected regional style, material traditions and sacred principles developed over centuries.

In the present scenario, many Shaktipeetha Temples have transformed into major pilgrimage destinations with growing a number of devotees and increased management needs. To handle large crowds, several, infrastructural additions have been introduced, including concrete halls, queue system, security arrangements, lighting facilities and commercial spaces within or around the temple complex. These changes are mainly made to manage crowds and improve functionality.

This paper studies how Shaktipeetha temples are shifting from ritual-based planning to crowd-based expansion. It compares the traditional temple layout with the changes introduced in recent times. The study examines how modern additions are affecting the original structure, devotee movement and overall appearance of the temple complex. It observes that while the inner sacred core, especially the sanctum, usually remains unchanged noticeable changes are taking place in the outer areas and movement spaces of the temple.

The paper argues that Shaktipeetha temples, as living heritage sites, require a balanced approach that respects traditional architectural principles while addressing modern practical requirements. By studying this transition, the research contributes to the discussion on managing continuity and change in active sacred architecture.

Key words: Shaktipeetha, Temple Architecture, Ritual based planning, Contemporary Changes, Living Heritage, Pilgrimage

Introduction:

Shaktipeetha temples are I Important centres of goddess worship in India and represent significant examples of living sacred architecture. Traditionally these temples were designed according to ritual requirements and symbolic planning. The Garbhagriha formed the sacred core while Mandapas, Pradakshina Patha And enclosed spaces guided the movement of devotees in a sacred manner. Every architectural element had spiritual and functional meaning. In the present scenario many Shaktipeetha temples have developed into major pilgrimage centres. The growing numbers of devotees and management needs have led to new infrastructural additions such as concrete halls, queue systems, security arrangements and commercial spaces. While these changes address practical requirements, they also influence the traditional architectural layout and sacred environment.

This paper studies how contemporary interventions are transforming the architectural character For Shaktipeetha Temples and examines the balance between ritual-based design and modern functional expansion.

Traditional Architectural Framework of Shaktipeetha Temples

Shaktipeetha temples differ from many other Hindu temples because the focus is on the worship of shakti, the divine feminine energy. In many Shaktipeethas the sanctums do not always contain typical anthropomorphic idol. Instead, the sacred element may be a natural stone, a symbolic form, a yantra or self-manifested (Swayambhu) structure. This gives these temples a strong connection to natural forces and reflects its local history, regional style, material availability, and ritual practices.

Architecturally, the garbhagriha in Shaktipeethas often creates an intense and enclosed atmosphere. The space may have lower, darker or cave-like, Emphasizing inward spiritual experience rather than external monumentality. The ritual movement of devotees is deeply connected to energy symbolism, especially in temple associated with tantric traditions.

Many Shaktipeethas are located on hills, near rivers or naturally significant landscapes. This indicates that the sacred geography itself plays an important role. The temple is not a constructed building but part of a larger sacred environment. The surrounding Mandapas, Subsidiary shrines, and Pradakshina path, supports ritual practices specific to goddess worship. Festivals, seasonal rituals and community gatherings are integrated into the architectural

layout. Thus, Shaktipeetha architecture reflects a combination of sacred symbolism, natural setting and ritual intensity.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative architectural approach to examine selected Shaktipeetha temples representing different pilgrimage conditions. The research is based on architectural analysis of spatial organization, material composition, sculptural elements, and circulation patterns. Secondary sources such as published research papers, historical records and temple documentation are consulted to understand the historical development of each site. The comparison focuses on identifying patterns of continuity and expansion in relation to pilgrimage scale and infrastructural intervention.

Shaktipeetha Temples Between Continuity and Expansion: A Comparative Architectural Study

I. Temples Representing Architectural Continuity

1. Kamakhya Temple

Kamakhya Temple, located on Nilachal Hill in Assam, represents a strong example of sacred architectural continuity. The temple's present structure dates largely to the 16th century under the Koch dynasty, temple was constructed by king Naranarayana. The architecture follows the Nilachal style, slightly Nagara style characterized by a stone base and a dome-like brick superstructure.

The temple consists of an underground garbhagriha connected through an antarala to a mandapa. In the sanctum, Goddess Sati is worshipped in the symbolic form of the yoni, represented by a natural rock with a continuous flow of water. The structure stands on a stone adhisthana, and the outer walls contain sculptural panels depicting deities such as Bhairava, Gauri, and other divine figures. A notable sculpture of a mother breastfeeding her child further reflects the presence of divine feminine symbolism within the architectural expression of the temple.

2. Mahalakshmi Temple

The Mahalakshmi Temple at Kolhapur was originally built during the early medieval period under the Chalukya dynasty, with later contributions by the Shilahara rulers. Constructed primarily in black basalt stone, the temple reflects the Hemadpanthi style of deccan architecture. It comprises a defined garbhagriha, antarala and mandapa supported by carved

stone pillars, all resting on a strong stone adhisthana. The outer walls display sculptural panels of Mahalakshmi, Vishnu forms, Mahishasur Mardhini, along with decorative motifs such as shilabalikas, makaras, vyalas and intricate floral carvings that enhance the temple's architectural richness.

In both temples modern infrastructural additions such as barricades, lighting systems, and management facilities are present; however, they do not completely overshadow the architectural identity of the original temple. The traditional core remains structurally and visually strong.

II. Temple Representing Pilgrimage Expansion

1. The Vaishno devi temple is located in the Trikuta hills and originally centred on a natural cave shrine containing three sacred rock formation(pindis) worshiped as the goddess. The early sacred setting was simple and cave-based, closely integrated with the mountain landscape. With the rapid growth of pilgrimage, the site has expanded into a large, organized complex including paved approach routes, covered walkways, multi-level queue halls, tunnels, security installations, administrative blocks, and accommodation facilities. Although the natural cave remains the spiritual core, the surrounding built environment is now largely defined by large-scale infrastructure designed for crowd management and regulated movement.

Comparative Analysis

The comparison Shows different architectural responses to contemporary pilgrimage. At Kamakhya and Mahalakshmi temple, the traditional sacred core remains visually and spatially dominant. The garbhagriha, mandapa structure, sculptural details, and original materials continue to define the temple identity, while modern additions remain secondary.

In contrast, at Vaishnodevi, large-scale infrastructural development plays a major role in shaping the overall spatial experience. Although the sacred cave remains central, extensive pathways, tunnels and management statures significantly influence the architectural environment. This indicates that the scale of pilgrimage and administrative intervention directly affects how sacred architecture evolves in the present context.

The study demonstrates that Shaktipeetha temple exist between continuity and expansion in the present context. Temples such as Kamakhya and Mahalakshmi continue to preserve their traditional architectural core, where spatial hierarchy, material character, and sculptural elements remain dominant despite modern additions. In contrast the architectural condition at

Vaishnodevi reflects large- scale infra structural development shaped by intensive pilgrimage management.

Conclusion

To conclude, Shaktipeetha temples today stand between continuity and expansion. The sacred core remains intact. The garbhagriha continues to anchor ritual identity. Stone, sculpture, and spatial hierarchy still define traditional expression. But the scale of pilgrimage has changed. Infrastructure has expanded. Management systems now shape movement and space.

At Kamakhya and Mahalakshmi, the architectural core remains visually dominant. At Vaishno Devi, infrastructure operates at a monumental scale. Yet in all cases, the spiritual centre persists. This continuity within expansion reminds us that sacred architecture is not static. It adapts, absorbs, and reorganizes itself. Shaktipeetha temples therefore represent not decline, but negotiation between tradition and contemporary reality.

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