**Temple Architecture in India: Beginning, Development and Role of Guptas!**

The earliest examples of temple architecture in the subcontinent are scarce. The first shrines in the subcontinent were only tree or fenced-in areas. Some were connected to worshipping nagas, nagas, yakshas, and yakshas.

Between approximately 200 BCE and 300 CE, religious activity became increasingly institutionalised. This period marked the beginning of temple architecture. The ability to attract support from various societal groups sparked the emergence of customs for more permanent and sophisticated [temple architecture](https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/temple-style-architecture-india/). The majority of the ancient sculpture and architecture that has survived is actually of a religious nature. These sites' inscriptions detail the individuals who provided funding for the construction of these temples.

The practice of temple architecture is considerably old, but the surviving temples go only as far as c. 300-600 CE. Ancient temples had simpler architecture. Then, during the early medieval period, regional styles developed- within the broad divisions of **Nagara**, **Visara**, and **Dravida style**.

A gradual shift from cave temples through monolith temples to structural temples happens in the Dravida and Visara style.

## Earliest surviving temples in North India

The oldest surviving temples in North India are in the mountainous areas of Madhya Pradesh e.g. Vishnu temple at Tigwa; they belong to the Gupta age[.](https://studyiqworld.com/period-of-indian-history-from-3rd-to-5th-century-bce-was-the-period-of-innovation-and-interaction/) These were simple; with square sanctum-sanctorum, flat roofs, plain temple walls, etc.

In the 5th -6th century, temples were built on a plinth with a shikhara, and mythological engravings on the walls, e.g. Deogarh temple.

## Nagara Style of architecture

Nagara style of architecture further evolved during the early medieval period, with curvilinear shikhara, Panchayatan shape, plinth, pillared portico, etc., as its main features.

Its regional variations include the Khajuraho style in Kandaria Mahadev, the Solanki style in the Sun temple at Modhera; the Sena-Pala style with Bangla dome; the Kashmir style with the sloping roof; the Orissa style in the Lingaraj temple, etc.

## Visara Style of architecture

We see a mixture of Nagara and Dravida styles from the Vindhya ranges to the Krishna River. Rooted in the tradition of the Ajanta, Ellora; it begins with the cave temples of Badami. The Pattadakal and Aihole temple complex takes this tradition further. Kailashnath temple at Ellora is another example.

The Visara Style fully matured in the temples at Belur, Halebidu, and Somanathapura. They are known for elaborate carvings on walls and ceilings and cruciform-shaped zig-zag plinths. Later, under the Vijaynagar kingdom, Kalyan Mandap was added.

## Dravidian Style of Architecture

Dravida School started with the cave temples of **Mahabalipuram**, which are often inspired by mythology. Later, the monolith temples were erected e.g. **Ratha temples**.

During the Chola period, the Dravida style fully matured with its Gopuram, Viman, pillared Mandap, captive pond- in the Brihadeshwara temple, etc. Later, the Meenakshi temple represents the Madurai school, broadly similar to Dravida Style.

Therefore, the temple’s architecture evolved from the Gupta period to the modern period with three broad and several smaller divisions.

**Temple Architecture During Post Mauryan Period**

Hindu temple architecture from the Post-[Mauryan](https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/mauryan-empire-ancient-history-ncert-notes-for-upsc/) era is only known from their ground plans, which were uncovered by archaeological investigations, of which the superstructures have not been preserved. A Hindu temple is a symmetrically designed structure with numerous variations on a pada grid depicting exact geometric objects like squares and circles.

Among the earliest evidence of the beginning of Temple Architecture from this period is a Vishnu temple from the second century BCE, found close to the Heliodorus pillar in Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh. This temple's remnants are believed to date to the third century BCE. Another important example of temple architecture was the Sankarshana temple in Nagari, Rajasthan (ancient Madhyamika). Here, a stone enclosure for a Vishnu shrine is mentioned in an inscription from the first century BCE. Below the enclosure's surface level, archaeologists discovered the remnants of an earlier building that dates to the third century BCE.

The most exciting example of ancient temple architecture is found at Sonkh, where a series of Apsidal temples were excavated. Let us examine the features of Apsidal Temple No. 2 at Sonkh to understand the earliest temple architecture better.

* A large portion of the stone railing surrounding the temple compound was engraved on both sides.
* On the southern side of the railing, there were the exquisitely carved ruins of a stone entrance, which had two pillars supporting a superstructure of three architraves with voluted ends.
* An architectural piece from the bottom lintel of the doorway was carved with a relief depicting a naga and a nagi reclining on thrones, surrounded by servants and people bowing in submission.
* There is no doubt that Apsidal Temple No. 2 was a superb naga temple based on this carving, various stone sculptures and reliefs, terracotta figurines and moulds, inscriptions, and the top half of a four-sided, seven-headed stone naga image.

Another set of temple complexes was found at Nagarjunakonda. As they are essential evidence of the beginning of temple architecture in South India, let us look at some of its features.

* The Nagarjunakonda temple complexes lacked a unified architectural design. Some had a single shrine that was oblong, apsidal or square in shape.
* Others had multiple shrines, each preceded by a mandapa (pillared hall).
* These complexes might either have two apsidal shrines or both apsidal and rectangular constructions.
* The majority of the temples had east-facing entrances.
* Stone was employed for the pillared mandapas, and brick was the primary building material.
* Wood was used in one of the temples.
* The mandapas appear to have flat roofs and must have been supported by carved limestone pillars.
* Temple walls were plain and simple.

With the arrival of the Gupta Dynasty on the scene, the ‘Golden Age’ of Indian History started. The Gupta period began the second stage of Indian Temple Architecture.

## Temple Architecture During The Gupta Period

In the development of Indian temple architecture, the time between 300 and 600 CE is a critical turning point. According to historian Coomaraswamy, the Gupta period was characterised by governmental stability and affluence, facilitating the formation of magnificent local art forms free from Greek and West Asian influences.

The temple architecture under [Gupta Dynasty](https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/ncert-notes-gupta-empire/) developed in two stages- Early and Later Gupta Style. Let us look at both of them:

### Early Gupta Style

The 3rd through 5th centuries CE are considered the early Gupta period. This architectural design has produced both free-standing and cave temples. Let us explore some of the significant features of the early Gupta Period.

* Early temples were modest in size.
* The deity fit perfectly inside the square garbha-griha (sanctum), roughly 10 x 10 feet in size.
* The roof was typically flat, and there was a small porch.
* Temple gateways were frequently beautifully and lavishly carved, whereas temple walls tended to be simple.

A remarkable cave complex was found in Madhya Pradesh near Udayagiri. The low-lying sandstone hills have been the site of about 20 cave excavations. Three have inscriptions from the Gupta era, two from Chandragupta II and one from Kumaragupta. All of the temples in this complex are single-roomed buildings with a pillared porch as the entryway. Most interiors are plain. However, the entrances have elaborate decorating. Its pillars each had a square base, an octagonal shaft, and a capital in the form of a vase.

### **Later Gupta Style**

The complexity of the layout rises in the later Gupta style, which dates to the fifth and sixth centuries CE. The following features were prominent in the later Gupta style of temple architecture.

* The temples were now constructed on a platform or plinth with a staircase.
* A pyramidal or curvilinear tower took the place of the flat roof.
* They were constructed using bricks adhered with mud mortar or stone put together with dowels.
* The entryway and outside walls were more ornately decorated with representations of the expanding Hindu pantheon's gods and goddesses, floral patterns, etc.

One of the most well-known examples of later Gupta-style temple architecture is the Dashavatara temple in Deogarh.

* The shikhara at the Deogarh Dashavatara temple were curved.
* Its shikhara was about 40 feet high, and it featured four sizable porches.
* The construction was made of stones that were joined together by dowels.
* A variety of themes, including birds, attendants, purnaghatas, mithuna figures (couples), svastikas, foliated scrolls, and dwarfish figures, are shown on the main gateway of the Deogarh temple.
* The conch and lotus carvings or paintings on door jambs are another hallmark of this era and are evident at the Deogarh temple.