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Contribution and participation of ancient tribes in temple architecture in India: Case studies

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Abstract

The temple architecture of India, a confluence of spirituality, artistry and regional diversity, reflects the collaborative efforts of multiple societal segments. Among these contributors, ancient tribal communities hold a significant yet often overlooked position. This study explores the multifaceted role of tribes in temple architecture, focusing on their participation in resource management, construction techniques and artistic contributions. With expertise in quarrying, woodworking and metal craft, tribal artisans played an essential role in the material and structural foundations of temples. Their motifs inspired by nature, mythology and everyday life, enriched temple iconography, bridging the tribal animism with Vedic traditions.

This article also delves into specific case studies, such as the Sun Temple in Konark, the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Temples in Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh, to highlight tangible evidence of tribal involvement. Despite their invaluable contributions, the role of tribes' remains under represented due to the lack of documentation and historical marginalization. The paper underscores the importance of recognizing and preserving these contributions through archaeological studies, ethnographic research and inclusive cultural heritage programmes.

By shedding light on the participation of ancient tribes, this study broadens the understanding of Indian temple architecture, emphasizing the collective spirit that defines these sacred structures.

Keywords: Temple architecture, ancient tribes, tribal art, iconography, mythology

Introduction

In India temple architecture stands as a monumental testament to the nation's cultural diversity, spiritual depth and artistic insight. These structures extend over centuries and varying across regions are not just places of worship but also reflect the social, economic and artistic evolution of Indian society. Temples are collaborative creations that brought to life by the combined efforts of rulers, architects, sculptors, artisans and laborers (Singh, 2008). Yet, among these contributors, ancient tribal communities remain an underexplored but significant force that shaped the development of temple architecture.

Ancient tribes in India, often residing in forested and hilly regions were integral to the socio-economic fabric of their time. Their proximity to natural resources, coupled with their unique craftsmanship and intimate knowledge of the land, made them indispensable in large-scale construction projects (Michell, 1988) ^[5]. Tribal expertise in quarrying stone, processing metals, crafting wood and creating symbolic motifs found its way into the architectural and ornamental features of temples. Moreover their artistic traditions, deeply rooted in nature and mythology, blended seamlessly with mainstream Hindu iconography, enriching the symbolic language of temple architecture (Nath, 1997) ^[6].

The influence of tribal communities is not uniform across the country but varies according to regional contexts and cultural interactions. For instance the Sabaras of Odisha played a pivotal role in the construction and rituals of the Jagannath Temple in Puri, while Gond artisans influenced temple designs in central India. In southern India, forest-dwelling tribes contributed to the sourcing of materials and the intricate woodwork seen in temples like the Meenakshi Temple in Tamil Nadu (Zvelebil, 1973) ^[16].

This article seeks to uncover the vital contributions of these ancient tribes to temple architecture, exploring their roles in material procurement, construction techniques, artistic motifs and ritualistic traditions. In such a manner, it aims to highlight their legacy and recommend for a more inclusive narrative in the history of Indian temple architecture.

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Historical context of tribal communities in ancient India

Ancient Indian society was marked by a complex social structure that included tribal communities living in forested and mountainous regions. Tribes such as the Gonds, Bhils, Santhals, Todas and Nagas lived close to nature and had developed unique cultural and artistic traditions (Guha, 2000) ^[4]. Their expertise in metallurgy, stone carving and woodwork made them essential to temple construction efforts.

Evidence of tribal interaction with mainstream culture can be found in ancient texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as inscriptions and local legends. These sources often highlight the symbiotic relationship between tribes and settled societies, particularly in large-scale projects like temple construction.

Objective of the study

To find out contribution and participation of ancient tribes in temple architecture in India

Tribal Participation in Temple Construction:

Contribution to Building Materials and Techniques

Tribal communities were often skilled in extracting and processing natural resources, such as stone, wood and metals, used in temple construction. For instance.

- **Stone Quarrying and Carving:** Tribes in regions like Odisha (the Bhumij and Sabaras) were involved in quarrying and transporting stones for temples like the

Sun Temple at Konark (Patnaik, 2005) ^[7].

- **Woodwork:** In South India, forest-dwelling tribes supplied timber for temples particularly in Kerala, where wood is extensively used in temple construction. Their intimate knowledge of terrain and resource management ensured the availability of high-quality materials.

Architectural Techniques and Knowledge Systems

Tribal groups often contributed unique construction techniques and artistic knowledge. For instance:

- **Dry Stone Construction:** Tribes in central and western India practiced dry stone masonry, which influenced the construction of early rock-cut temples.
- **Symbolic Designs:** Tribes infused their motifs, such as animals, geometric patterns and nature-inspired symbols into temple sculptures and carvings, enriching the iconographic repertoire.

Artistic contributions of tribes to temple ornamentation Sculptural Influences

Tribal artisans often worked alongside mainstream sculptors, contributing their distinctive style to temple ornamentation.

The Yaksha and Yakshi figures, prevalent in early Indian temples, bear stylistic similarities to tribal art forms. These nature spirits, believed to protect sacred spaces, reflect the animistic traditions of tribes (Figure 1).



Fig 1: <https://www.pickpackgo.in/2018/01/sculptures-of-ellora-jain-cave.html> Retrieved on 20.01.2024

Tribal motifs, such as animals, floral designs and hunting scenes are evident in the carvings of temples like Khajuraho

and the Hoysala temples in Karnataka (Figure 2).



Fig 2: <https://ramaarya.blog/2020/02/17/karnataka-hoysala-temples-belur-halebid-somanathapur/> Retrieved on 05.02.2024

Metalwork and Craftsmanship

Tribal metallurgists, particularly those skilled in the lost-wax technique, contributed to the creation of temple idols

and bells. The Dokra art of the Chhattisgarh tribes influenced the creation of intricate temple artifacts (Figure 3).



Fig 3: <https://housenama.com/blogs/handmade-in-india/dhokra-art> Retrieved on 07.02.2024

Tribal Dance

Dokra Art done by Dokras, Chhattisgarh, India

Source: Internet

Ritualistic and Symbolic Contributions

Tribal art often carried symbolic meanings tied to fertility, protection and natural cycles. These elements were

seamlessly integrated into temple iconography, reflecting the harmonious blending of tribal and Vedic traditions. (Figure 4).



Fig 4:

<https://www.istockphoto.com/search/2/imagefilm?page=6&phrase=terracotta+of+ancient+hindu+temple> Retrieved on 24.02.2024

Terracotta Relief

Bishnupur, West Bengal, India

Source: Internet

Case Studies: Tribal Influence in Specific Temples

The influence of tribal communities on temple architecture is visible across India, particularly in regions where their interaction with settled societies was significant. The following case studies highlight their roles in construction, resource management, artistic contributions and ritualistic traditions showcasing how these communities enriched temple architecture.

Sun Temple, Konark (Odisha)

The Sun Temple at Konark a UNESCO World Heritage Site stands as a pinnacle of Kalinga temple architecture. Built in the 13th century, the temple is renowned for its intricate

carvings, monumental scale and symbolic representation of the Sun God's chariot (Figure 5, 6, 7).

- **Tribal Contribution:** Local tribes such as the Sabaras and Bhumij were instrumental in quarrying and transporting the massive stones used in the temple's construction. Their deep knowledge of the terrain and expertise in handling natural resources were vital to the project's success.
- **Artistic Influence:** The carvings on the temple walls depict scenes of daily life, including hunting, animal motifs and tribal dances, reflecting the artistic sensibilities of the tribal communities of Odisha. These motifs harmonize with the temple's overarching themes of life, nature and spirituality.



Konark Sun Temple

Temple Complex and its Sculptures
Konark, Puri, Odisha, India

Source: Internet

Fig 5:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konark_Sun_Temple#/media/File:Konark_Temple_Panorama2.jpg Retrieved on 19.03.2024

**Fig 6:**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konark_Sun_Temple#/media/File:Stone_wheel_engraved_in_the_13th_century_built_Konark_Sun_Temple_in_Orissa,_India.jpg Retrieved on 19.03.2024

**Fig 7:**

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Konark_Sun_Temple_Statue_of_Sun_God.jpg Retrieved on 19.03.2024

Jagannath Temple, Puri (Odisha)

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, another architectural and cultural marvel of Odisha, holds special significance for its integration of tribal traditions (Figure 8, 9).

- **Tribal Participation in Rituals:** The Daitapati community, believed to be descendants of the Sabaras, plays a central role in the temple's rituals, especially during the annual Rath Yatra (Chariot Festival). The

wooden idols of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are said to have tribal origins, reflecting an animistic tradition that predates Vedic influence.

- **Material Contributions:** Forest-dwelling tribes provided timber and other natural materials for constructing the chariots and maintaining temple structures.

**Fig 8:**

https://admin.stayatpurijagannatha.in/images/frontend/main-slider-2_1670308972.jpg Retrieved on 25.03.2024

Jagannath Temple

Ratha (Chariot), Temple and its Sculptures
Puri, Odisha, India

Source: Internet

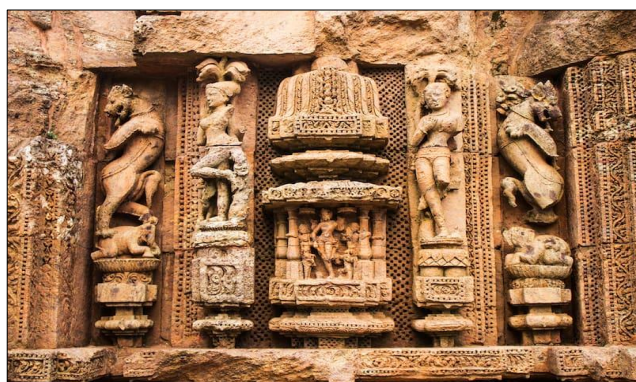


Fig 9: <https://www.yatrablog.com/know-about-jagannath-temple-in-puri> Retrieved on 25.03.2024

Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareswara Temple, Madurai (Tamil Nadu)

The Meenakshi Temple a hallmark of Dravidian architecture, is a vibrant example of temple art and sculpture. While the temple is widely celebrated for its Gopurams (ornamental towers) and intricate carvings, the contribution of local tribes is significant in its construction and adornment (Figure 10, 11, 12).

- **Material Sourcing:** Forest-dwelling tribes in Tamil Nadu supplied high-quality timber for scaffolding and construction.
- **Artistic Contributions:** The sculptures and carvings on the temple walls frequently depict tribal motifs, including flora, fauna and depictions of tribal life, reflecting the artistic dialogue between mainstream and tribal cultures.



Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareswara Temple

Temple Complex, Temple Interior and its Sculpture, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Source: Internet

Fig 10: Retrieved on 12.04.2024
<https://www.tamilnadutourism.tn.gov.in/destinations/meenakshi-amman-temple>



Fig 11: Retrieved on 06.05.2024
<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/324329610643339672> **Fig 12:** Retrieved on 06.05.2024
<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/324329610643339672>

Hoysala Temples, Karnataka

The Hoysala temples of Karnataka, such as those in Belur, Halebidu and Somnathapura are celebrated for their detailed carvings and unique architectural style (Figure 13, 14, 15).

- **Stone Quarrying and Carving:** Tribes from the Western Ghats were actively involved in quarrying the soapstone used in Hoysala temples. Their expertise in

stone carving contributed to the detailed friezes depicting mythological stories, nature and everyday life.

- **Symbolic Art:** Tribal motifs like hunting scenes, depictions of wildlife and geometric patterns can be seen in these temples, suggesting a synthesis of local tribal artistry with the mainstream Hoysala style.



Fig 13: Chennakeshava Temple (Hoysala Style)

Retrieved on 21.09.2024

<https://www.agatetravel.com/chennakeshava-temple-karnataka-india.html>



Fig 14: Retrieved on 21.09.2024



Fig 15: Retrieved on 21.09.2024

Temple Complex and its Sculptures
Belur, Hassan,
Karnataka, India

Source: Internet

<https://travellermusingsblog.wordpress.com/2018/03/28/hoysala-temple-trail-the-famous-belur-and-halebeedu-temple> <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/5006/garuda-in-chennakesava-temple-belur>

Bastar Temples, Chhattisgarh

In central India, Chhattisgarh's tribal regions are home to numerous small temples that reflect a unique blend of tribal and mainstream Hindu traditions (Figure 16, 17, 18).

- **Integration of Gond Art:** Gond tribal communities in Bastar influenced the decorative elements of temples,

incorporating their distinctive artistic style characterized by vibrant patterns and animal motifs.

- **Metalwork Contributions:** The Dokra art of Bastar a form of lost-wax casting used to create intricate metal sculptures has been employed in crafting temple bells, ritualistic items and ornamental pieces (Figure 19).



Fig 16: <https://bastariya.com/temples-in-bastar/narayanpal-temple>, Retrieved on 10.10.2024



Fig 17 and 18: <https://www.tumblr.com/hinducosmos/627391166207377408/narayanpal-temple-jagdalpur-chhattisgarh> Retrieved on 10.10.2024



Fig 19: <https://spainindustrialdesign.wordpress.com/2020/12/15/dhokra-art-and-craft-of-bastar-and-ekatal-chhattisgarh>, Retrieved on 15.10.2024

Narayanpal Temple
Temple Complex, Sculpture
and Temple Inscription,
Narayanpal, Bastar,
Chhattisgarh, India

Source: Internet

Dokra Art Forms
Dokra Art done by Dokra
Tribes, Bastar, Chhattisgarh,
India

Source: Internet

Khajuraho Temples, Madhya Pradesh

The Khajuraho Group of Temples, known for their detailed and sensuous sculptures, also reflects tribal influences. (Figure 20, 21, 22).

- **Themes and Motifs:** Scenes depicting tribal life, including hunting, dancing and community gatherings

are carved into the temple walls, blending the everyday life of tribal communities with spiritual narratives.

- **Material Procurement:** Tribal expertise in stone quarrying and transport played a key role in sourcing the sandstone used in constructing these temples.



Fig 20: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/khajuraho-temples> Retrieved on 18.10.2024

Khajuraho Group of Temples
Temple Complex and its Sculptures
Khajuraho, Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, India

Source: Internet



Fig 21: Retrieved on 18.10.2024
<https://www.indiabylocals.com/location/khajuraho-trip>

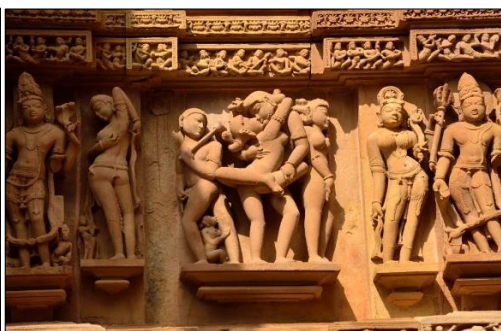


Fig 22: Retrieved on 18.10.2024
<https://lakshmisharath.com/temples-khajuraho>

Northeast India's Tribal Temples

The temples in regions like Manipur and Nagaland often exhibit a strong influence of tribal culture.

- **Symbolic Elements:** Temples in these regions often incorporate animistic symbols, such as the hornbill,

which is sacred to many Naga tribes, into their design and decoration (Figure 23).

- **Cultural Practices:** The integration of tribal music, dance and rituals into temple activities underscores the symbiotic relationship between tribal and mainstream traditions (Figure 24, 25).



Fig 23: <https://www.kaarwan.com/blogs/architecture/traditional-architecture-of-nagaland?id=264>, Retrieved on 20.10.2024

Morung
Traditional Tribal Institution
Kohima, Nagaland, India

Source: Internet



Hornbill Festival
tribal music, dance and rituals
Kohima, Nagaland, India

Source: Internet

Fig 24, 25: <https://www.trodly.com/blog/article/the-hornbill-festival-of-nagaland-all-you-need-to-know> Retrieved on 20.10.2024

Cultural and Spiritual Integration

Tribal participation in temple architecture was not limited to physical labor or artistic contributions. Their cultural and spiritual practices often merged with mainstream Hindu traditions, creating a unique synthesis.

- **Animism and Temple Symbolism:** Tribal animistic traditions, which revered nature, were incorporated into temple rituals and iconography. Sacred groves maintained by tribes often became sites for temple construction.
- **Dance and Music:** Tribal dances and music were integrated into temple rituals, enriching the cultural life of these spaces.

Challenges in Recognizing Tribal Contributions

Despite their significant contributions, tribal participation in temple architecture often goes unacknowledged due to:

- **Lack of Documentation:** Historical records primarily focus on royal patrons and architects, overlooking tribal labor and artistry.
- **Marginalization:** Tribal communities have historically been marginalized, leading to the underrepresentation of their cultural contributions in mainstream narratives.
- **Erosion of Traditions:** Modern development and urbanization have disrupted traditional tribal lifestyles, erasing their historical roles.

Efforts to acknowledge and preserve tribal contributions

- **Archaeological Studies:** Recent archaeological studies have begun to uncover the role of tribal communities in ancient construction projects. Detailed studies of local motifs and materials have highlighted tribal influences.
- **Documentation and Research:** Ethnographic research documenting tribal art and oral traditions is helping preserve their contributions to Indian heritage.
- **Inclusion in cultural heritage programs:** Government initiatives and heritage conservation programs are working to include tribal contributions in the narrative of India's cultural history.

Conclusion

The contribution and participation of ancient tribes in temple architecture in India represent a critical yet underexplored dimension of the country's architectural and cultural history. These tribes with their deep connection to nature, intricate craftsmanship and unique artistic traditions, played an indispensable role in shaping the aesthetic and functional aspects of Indian temples. From sourcing and processing materials to crafting symbolic motifs and participating in temple rituals, their contributions reflect a collaborative and inclusive process that transcended social hierarchies.

Tribal communities brought their cultural ethos to temple architecture, enriching it with motifs inspired by nature, mythology and everyday life. Their integration of animistic beliefs into temple iconography and rituals illustrates how these sacred spaces were not just monuments of devotion but also centers of cultural synthesis. Temples like the Sun Temple at Konark, Jagannath Temple at Puri and the Hoysala temples in Karnataka stand as enduring testimonies to this collaborative spirit, where tribal ingenuity complemented the vision of architects and patrons.

Despite their significant contributions the role of tribes has often been marginalized in historical narratives. Recognizing and celebrating their involvement is essential to understanding the collective heritage of Indian temple architecture. Doing so not only honors the tribes' legacy but

also sheds light on the inclusive processes that define India's cultural achievements.

The inclusion of tribal contributions in the Indian knowledge system has profound implications:

Holistic Historical Narratives: Incorporating tribal roles into the history of temple architecture fosters a more inclusive understanding of India's past, emphasizing collaboration and diversity in cultural achievements.

- **Preservation of Tribal Knowledge:** Highlighting tribal craftsmanship and architectural techniques can lead to the preservation and revival of these traditions, ensuring they remain part of India's living heritage.
- **Cultural Harmony:** Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between tribal and mainstream traditions underscores the continuity of India's cultural ethos, where diverse knowledge systems coexist and enrich each other.
- **Educational Relevance:** Integrating tribal contributions into academic curricula on Indian architecture can inspire a more nuanced appreciation of the country's cultural heritage among future generations.
- **Sustainability Insights:** Tribal practices in resource management and ecological sensitivity offer valuable lessons for sustainable architectural practices in the modern era.

Indian temple architecture exemplifies how diverse communities came together to create enduring cultural landmarks. By acknowledging the role of ancient tribes in this process, we celebrate the collective spirit that has defined India's knowledge system and contributed to its unique cultural identity.

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