

History of Architecture in India
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Lecture 03
Sacrificial Altars and Divine Shelters

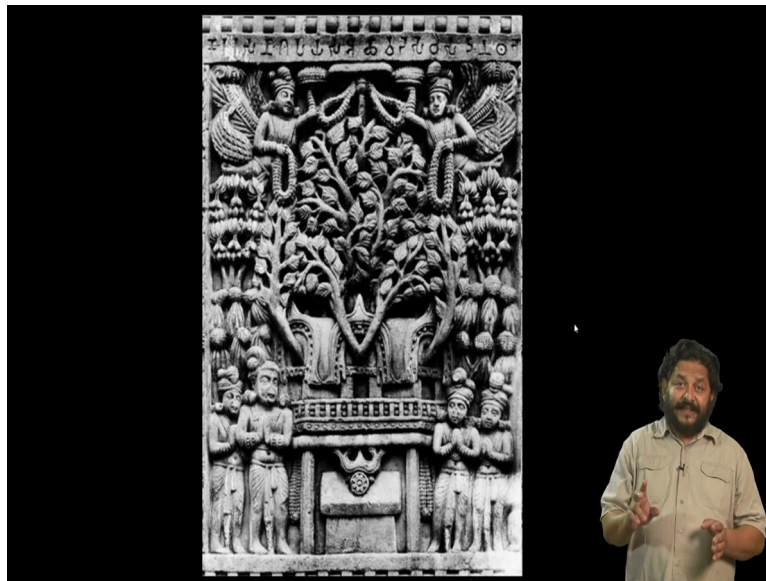
We have seen how the earliest temples started off as divine shelters but the idea of Vedic sacrifice which is an idea in which we have sacrificial altars also needed to be reconciled with these divine shelters that were being built for Jain, Buddhist and Hindu deities.

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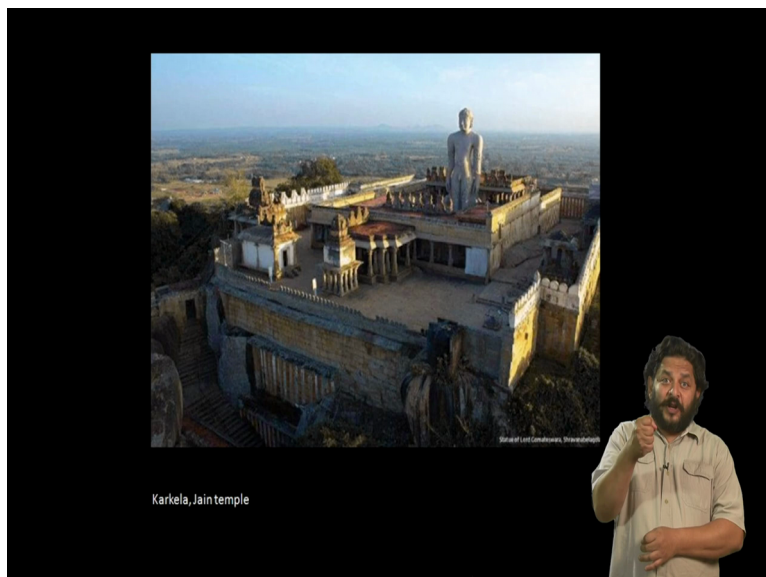
Thus shelters had to be combined with sacrifices and also with worship of stones and trees. In early Buddhist beliefs you do see a combination of shelters with trees that are enclosed within the shelter.

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Somewhere the idea that there is a strong vertical axis that needs to be sheltered or enclosed within a hut like structure was a strong paradigm. In fact, much later in the Jain image at Karkela in North Karnataka you see a similar idea where a vertical Jain tirthankara Mahaveera in this case is enclosed completely by a set of walls.

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He represents a cosmic axis which has to be sheltered but because that axis transcends any physical bounds, there is no roof over him. Animistic practices of worshipping stones were prevalent in India before temple Hinduism comes into being.

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You either have Vedic sacrifice in one hand or this kind of stone worship on the other. Stones with magical properties, magical in terms of their physical appearance were prized. Highly polished stones from river banks, shaligrams or Shivalingas were all cherished, put in pedestals and worshipped.

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These stones which were often longitudinal were set in bases called yonis. The linga and yoni, one set of meaning of which would mean the sexual organs of a male and female principle were worshipped as a set. It is what you see at the bottom right in the shape of those Shivalingas.

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You have lingas or linga stones being worshipped not only as stones but also in wooden format times as we see in the image on the top left where you have lingas from Nepal very clearly phallic in their manifestation.

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In fact, even natural linga forms such as the one at Ambarnath formed by a natural process of icicles melting every year are worshipped and considered holy by Hindus.

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But it was this an iconic linga form, this principle of creation, this stone, this phallic object, this column, this axis mundi which became manifest as a deity, as an anthropomorphic form very early in Hindu mythology.

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In fact, if you look at various kinds of relieves, these two are from the caves at Ellora on your left and from the Brihadeshwara temple on the right, you see that this cosmic axis is seen as the un-manifest principle within which an anthropomorphic deity resides. So in both cases you have Shiva emerging from this raw linga form.

In the picture on the left you can see very clearly that on the top right you have Brahma trying to find the top of this column flying up to the heavens and that the bottom left you have Vishnu in the varaha avtar trying to find the bottom of this column going into the murky depths, the muddy waters and which is why he has the varaha avatar.

And this axis which is infinite you cannot find the bottom nor the top and therefore this is the principle of creation, this is the axis that needs to be worshipped and this can only be manifest in anthropomorphic form as Shiva burst through. The Arupa form of Shiva becomes the Rupa form of Shiva.

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At the famous Shiva found at Parel in Bombay you see this principle of manifestation explicitly where the Shiva in the form as Sadashiva is one in which an axis is maintained but in every direction Shiva is being manifest.

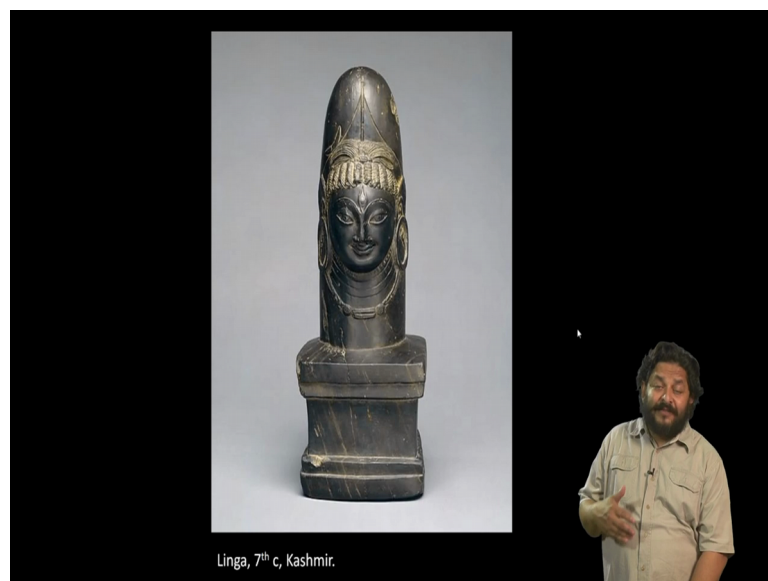
We shall see later that this imagery is not limited to Shaivism but you also have images of Vishnu which are similar where you have Vishnu along one axis starting off as a single anthropomorphic image but really expanding to fill up the whole universe beyond. In fact, Buddhism will also pickup on this iconography as we have seen in the caves at Ajanta where Buddha multiplies to fill up entire spaces.

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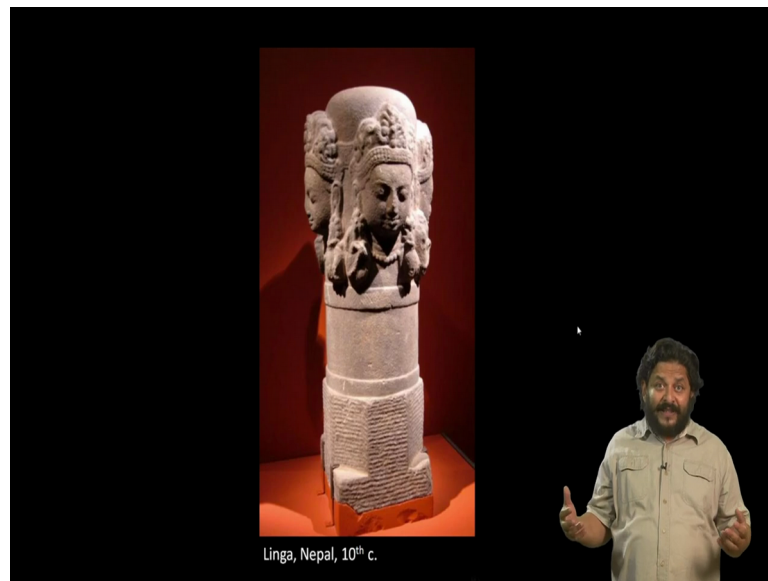
In fact, some of the early linga start showing this kind of face to suggest that an un-iconic linga will become manifest as a deity in all directions.

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In fact, through time if you trace these lingas, from one face you start having multiple faces being manifest in all directions.

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And this really is the principle of temple Hinduism where a point which is marked by the sanctum really is to be understood as a big vertical axis which will manifest itself in all directions as we have seen in the early temple at Deogarh where a single deity starts manifesting itself on the four walls of the temples sanctum and then eventually the sanctum will multiply and unfold in all directions so that you have a multiplicity of deities on all the walls.

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Here is an example of how in a two dimensional space the single point, this kendra-bindu, this centre of the sanctum will manifest and spread itself in all directions. This is from 16th century Vijayanagar where votive lingas are carved by devotees of Shiva. But just like you

have one point expanding to fill up a horizontal space you have this one point expanding vertically to make an axis and fill up the third axis as well.

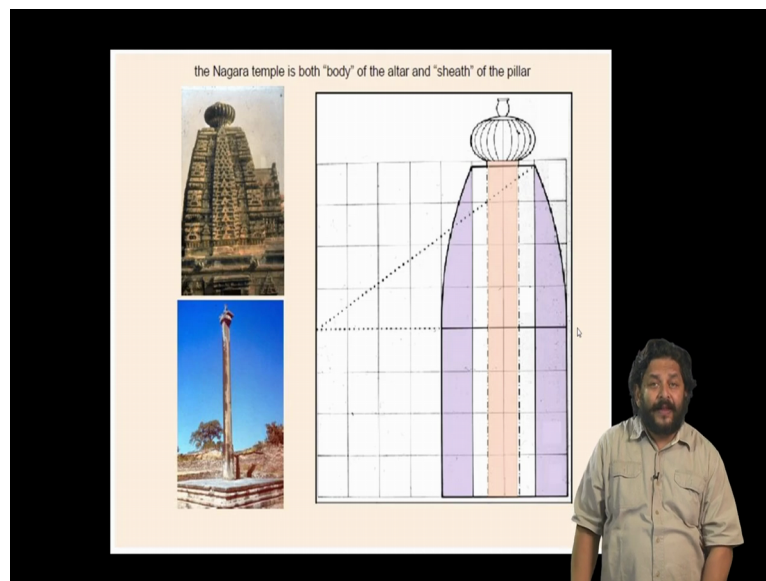
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Again very early you start seeing manifestations of such lingas both at Mathura but also in various contexts where you have sacrificial posts like the yupas you see on the right hand side being understood as marking certain kinds of divine axis in themselves.

So while the sacrificial altar is marked by a square horizontal area, this vertical axis also needs to be marked and the temple form will reconcile these ideas of a sacrificial post of a tree that needs to be worshipped of a phallic imagery which marks vertical axis of worship of a square altar that marks an area where a sacrifice needs to be performed and of course also as a shelter for divinity. All these ideas will come together and form the basis of what becomes the Hindu temple.

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And therefore if you understand a later Hindu temple has nothing but a marker of this cosmic axis. You will see it is not a far step to understand a temple as a sheath which houses this axis. If one remembers in the Mauryan columns that we have seen before with animal capital on tops, they too are space markers and this idea that a vertical pillar marks a divine axis becomes manifest in a Hindu temple.

And therefore the temple on top which is from the 7th century CE at the column at the bottom which is a Buddhist imperial column from the 3rd century BCE do share the same idea of controlling space by marking vertical axis. It is just that the column over time has been completely enclosed by a shelter that houses some form of divinity.

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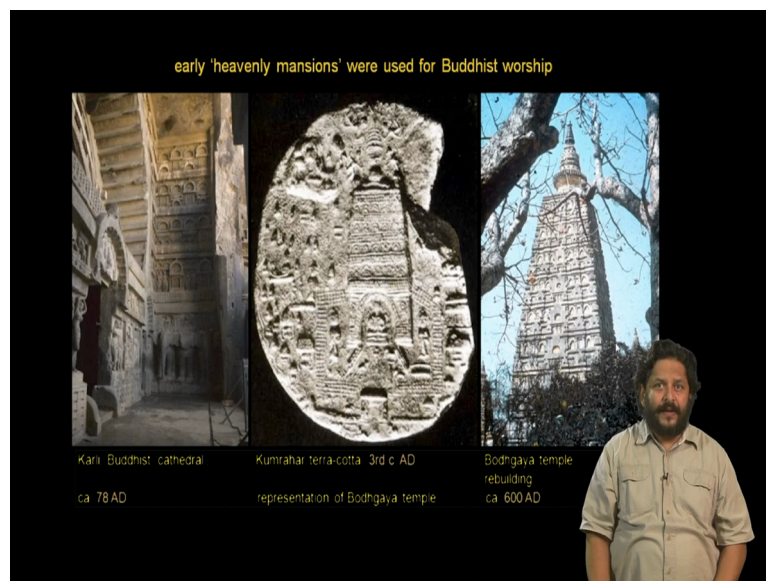


And therefore if you look at the first proto shrines at sites like Udayagiri which you see on the left hand side, all you have is a cave with a porch in front, the porch consisting of no more than four pillars and a small portico roof. Your move from Udayagiri to Sanchi where you have temple 17 where the cave is now replaced by an artificial constructed cave, a cube which represents a cave inside a hill in front of which you have a portico.

And from there within 600 years you move to something like Khajuraho which is essentially the same idea of a sanctum cave with a portico in front but now what you have is the tremendous vertical axis which is also represented. This axis being a column that represents a form of divinity taking you right up to the heavens. It ties in with the Vedic idea that when you sacrifice into a sacrificial altar, the column of smoke that rises takes your sacrifice directly to the Gods. In this case this vertical axis connects you with divinity directly.

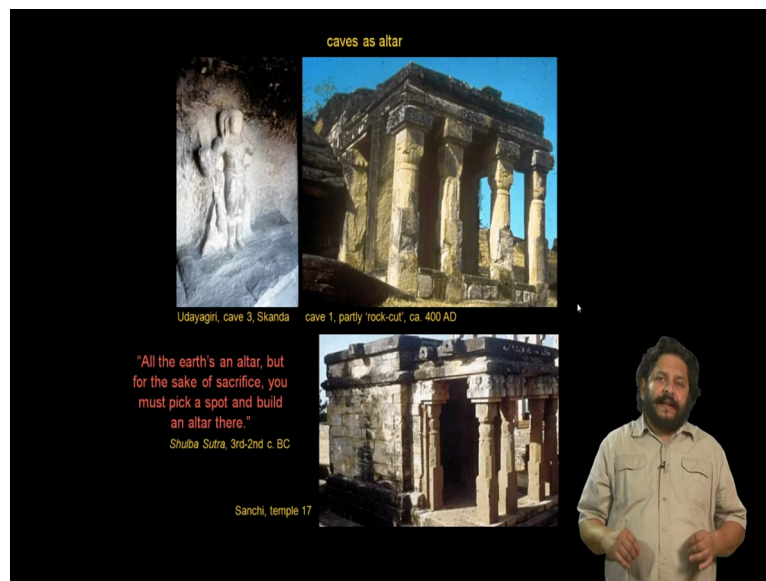
Right on top of this temple at Khajuraho you see this ribbed, flattened dome something called an amalaka which we will talk about shortly.

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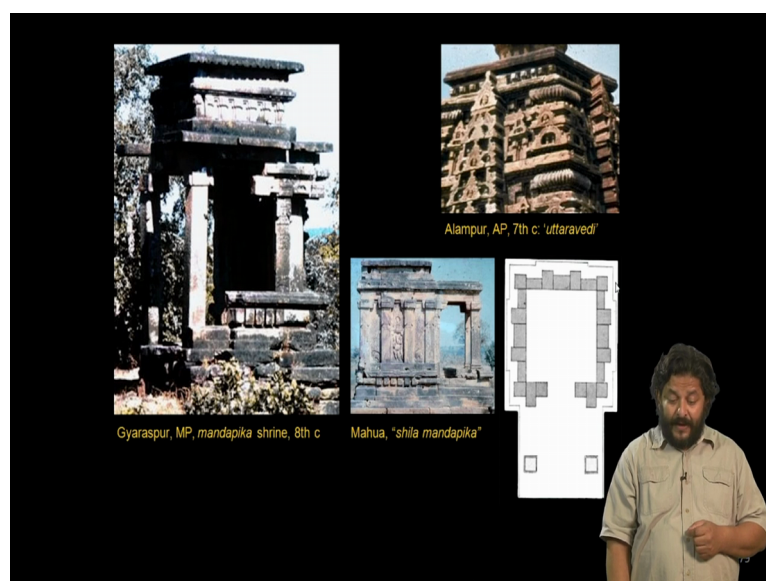
This idea of building some kind of tower is not completely new because you see it in the Kumrahar plate of the 3rd century but you also see it first in the Buddhist temple at Bodhgaya which is represented in that Kumrahar plate. What you do see at cave sites before are these multi-storeyed mansions which are represented on the insides of the caves. But to have multi-storeyed mansions as freestanding structure you really have it with early Buddhist sites and representation of those sites.

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The Vedic text contained a very important set of text called the Shulbasutras which were sacrificial manuals that taught people how to build sacrificial altars on which you could sacrifice for gods above. And the whole earth was thought of as an altar but you had to demarcate a space which was described in the Shulbasutras. In many ways these cave sanctums which house divinities were thought of these marked spots where you worshipped and you sacrificed. The cave at Udaygiri which does this was replicated completely in built form at Sanchi just about 50 years later.

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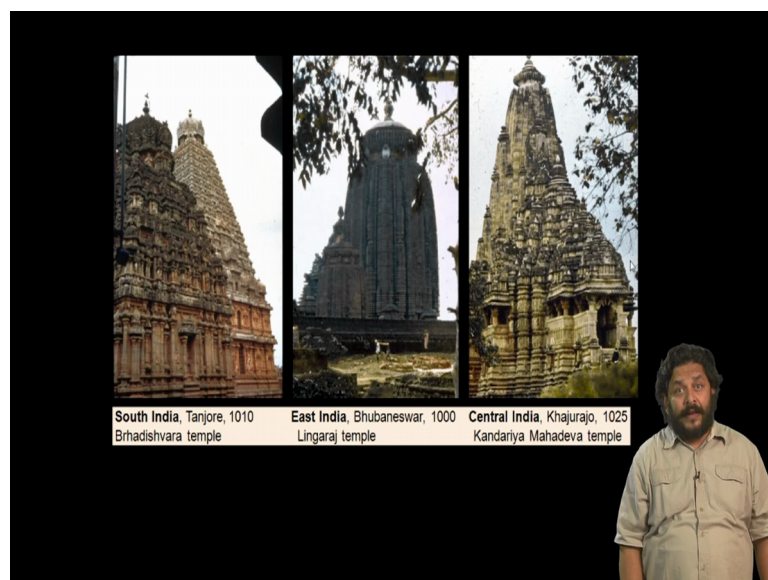


You have Mandapika shrines in Central India which take this idea even further and what you see in the Mandapika shrine on the left is nothing but a sacrificial altar, a square altar which

has four columns that support roof on top. And the roof on top is also in the form of a sacrificial altar. The altar at the bottom is called a vedi and the model of an altar on the roof is called an uttarvedi. This idea that the sacrificial altar on which you have your object of worship is replicated right on top at the roof line never goes away.

And you will see in later temples such as the one at Alampur on your top right where you have these dentils marking the uttarvedi on top just below the amalaka. But from there it is a big leap to the age of great temples and this is an age from the 6th-7th century onwards till about the 12th-13th century where these ideas of manifestation of divinity in all directions assumes proportions never really seen before.

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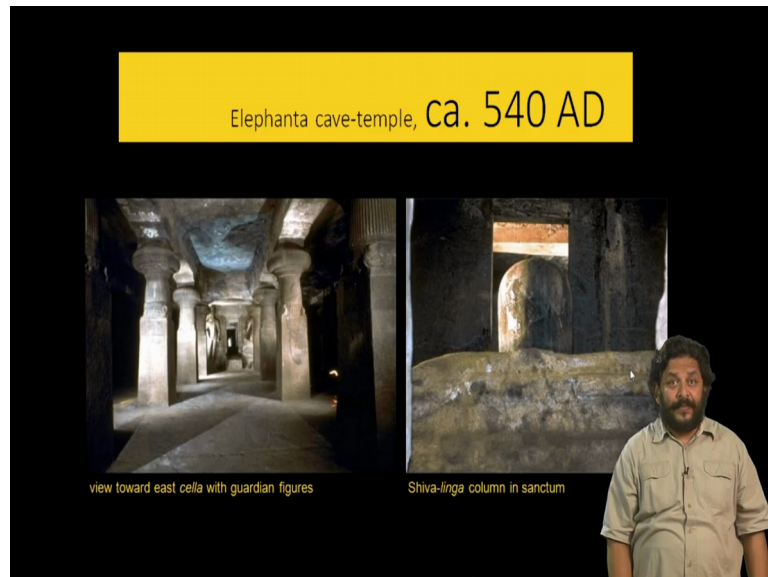


And the three large remnant extinct examples we have of great temples are the Brihadishwara temple built in 1010 at Thanjavur, the Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar and the Kandariya Mahadeva temple built at Khajuraho in 1025. Remember all these temples are built within a few decades of each other. All of them exhibit slightly different forms but the basic principle is the same.

They enclose a square sacrificial altar in the middle of which is an object of worship that is divine. This object represents a vertical axis which has to be marked by a model of a multi-storeyed mansion culminating on top in either a hut or an amalaka and from there your prayers reach the Devlok right on top. In front of all these sancta are big Sabhamandapas in which various activities pertaining to worship might be carried out. The idea that this

shikhara, the superstructure has to manifest a multiplicity in all directions to represent the great manifestation of the divine is also not forgotten.

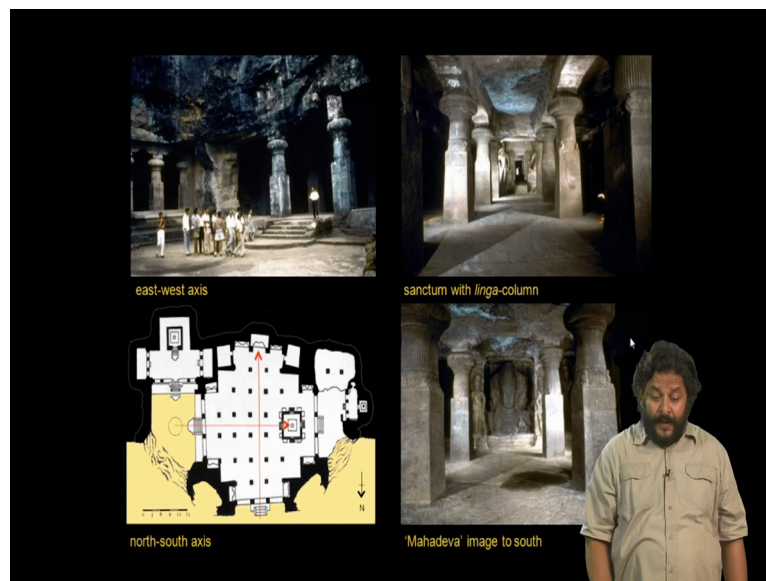
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But take a step before and we have a couple of temples which are not free standing temples of this great age but proto temples such as the great temple at Elephanta in the 6th century CE. And this is a temple that has all the characteristics of the great temples that we see later except one difference in that it is built inside a cave and it is not a free standing object.

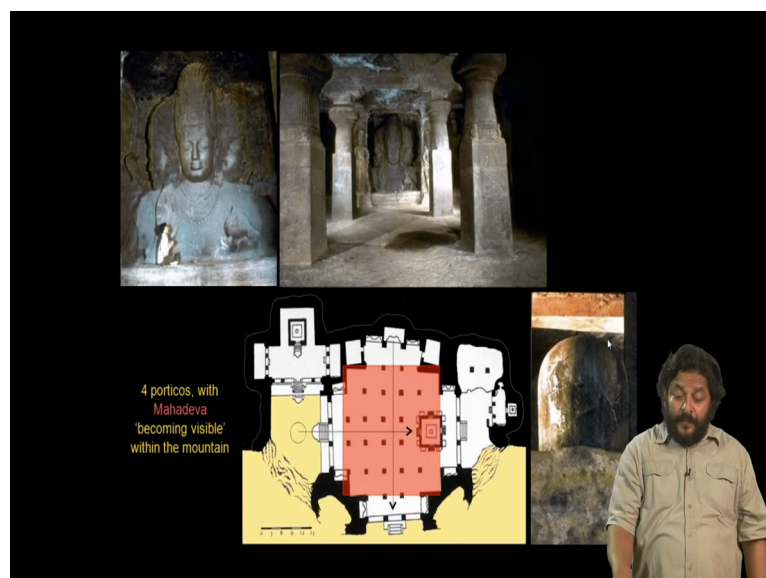
But note that the temple of Elephanta has two different axes on which you see two different things, one of which is ritual axis on which you have at the end a small hut like structure within which is a Shivalinga. This represents the un-manifest form of the divine.

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And that is the axis you see on top which goes from east to west. At the bottom you see the other axis which goes from north to south. And along that axis all you see at the end is this great Trimurti, this great manifestation of Shiva arising out of the rock and so depending on your mode of worship you would either move from east to west worshipping the Shivalinga house inside a small shrine or you would move from north to south looking at this great image of Shiva as its manifesting itself from the living rock.

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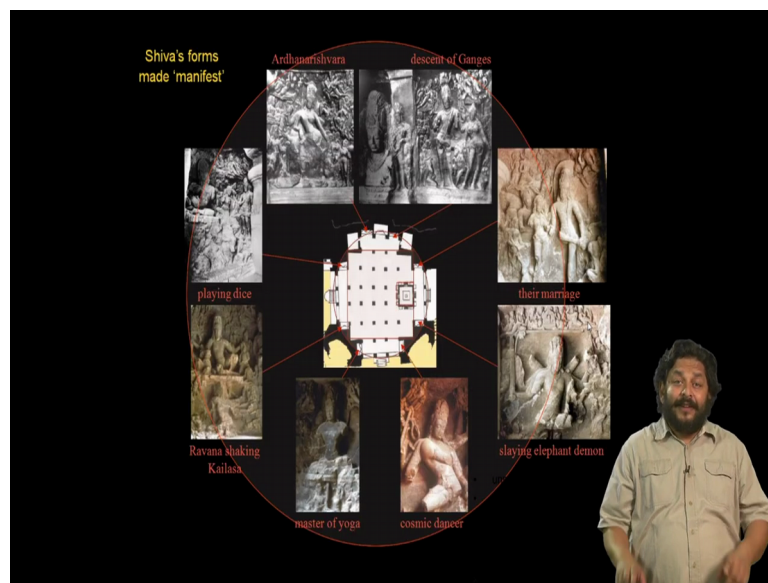


And so these two manifestations of Shiva are a point that is at the cusp of moving from cave temples to freestanding temples. Here you have both modes of worship along two axes. And

while the temple is inside the cave it starts exhibiting many of the properties that freestanding temples have.

And one of the most important of these properties is this idea that the deity who is enshrined inside the temple will manifest himself or herself on the walls of the temple. This is not a free standing temple so the only walls on which this deity can be manifest are the internal walls of the cave. And how that is done we shall see now.

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If you look at the mandapa, this big hall which leads you along two axes to the Shivalinga and to the Mahadeva, you see in the corners of this hall various depictions of episodes from the life cycle of Shiva. If this was a free standing temple, all these manifestations would have been exhibited on the outside of the temple. Because this is a cave they are all exhibited on the inside.

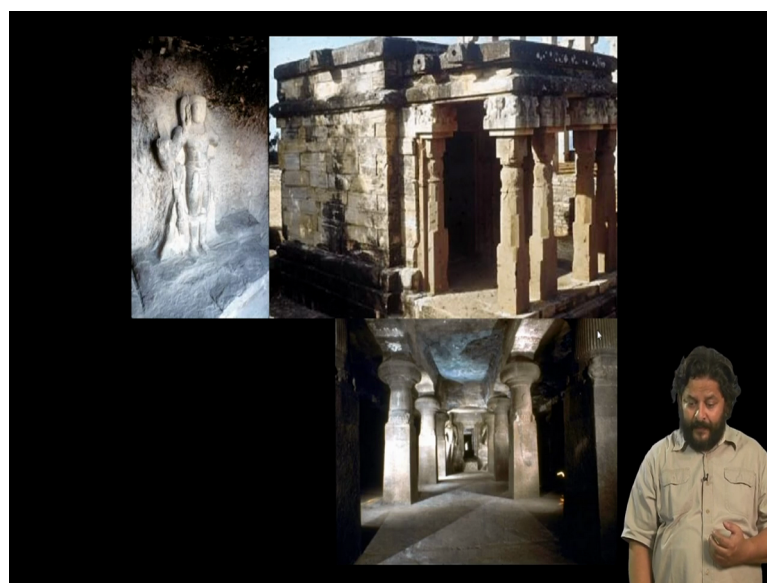
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How do we get to this kind of cave temple from the simple caves that represent huts that we saw very early on? Where is the connection between this and the great temple at Elephanta? If one remembers the cave at Barabar, all it is a long cave with a hut like structure at one end in which holy presence marking the divine would reside.

You then had Buddhist caves in which you had a hut that would house a stupa inside, the stupa of course indicating the presence of a holy men, in this case the Buddha. How do we move from there to this simple hut like shrines in which some kind of divine object, divine idol, or divine presence was to be venerated?

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This is where we are where you start having instead of caves, freestanding building in which the divine is actually housed. This is just the next step up from a cave carved inside a hut. Here instead you have a free standing building inside which is carved a cave, the sanctum being a cave in this case.

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And this idea that divinity manifests itself in all direction as we saw with the Shiva at Parel. You also see the Shamlaji Vishnu who does the same thing. Vishnu, when he manifests himself, expands to fill up the whole universe. Shiva, when he arises from the Shivalinga, expands along an axis vertically and then outwards to fill up the whole universe. And the temple which marks a square piece of ground and then a vertical axis also expands in all directions to fill up the whole universe.

And as a temple fills up the universe, you move from this divine axis to more mundane and propane worlds and therefore on the outside of temples at the very bottoms at the very outside margins you see scenes of daily life. The kinds of temples that you have in India can be broadly divided into two types, Latina temples and Kutina temples and let us look at Latina temples first.

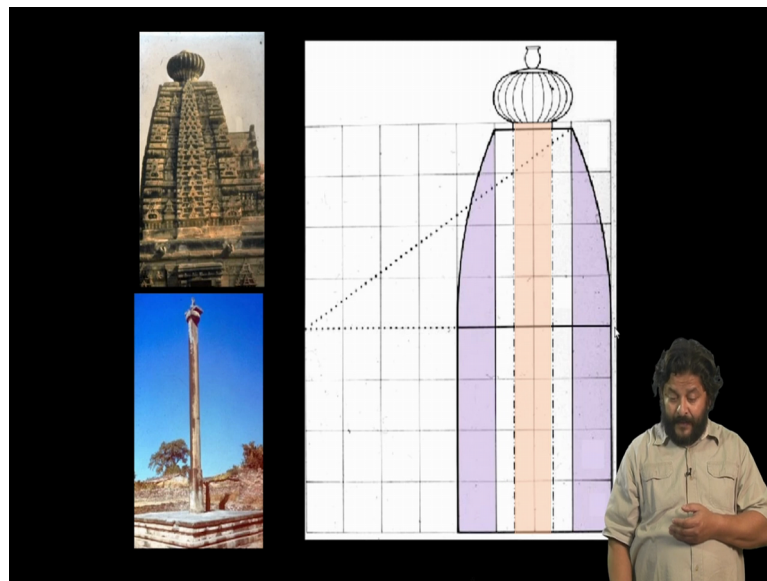
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Latina temples commonly called the North Indian temple are common from Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh onwards into most of North India. They can be characterized by having right on top an amalaka, this ribbed solid dome below which is a small sacrificial altar called the uttarvedi. The uttarvedi is a miniature version of the vedi which is at the bottom of the shikhara or of this temple spire. The amalaka can be seen very early in Buddhist caves like the one at (())(21:27) that you see on your top left.

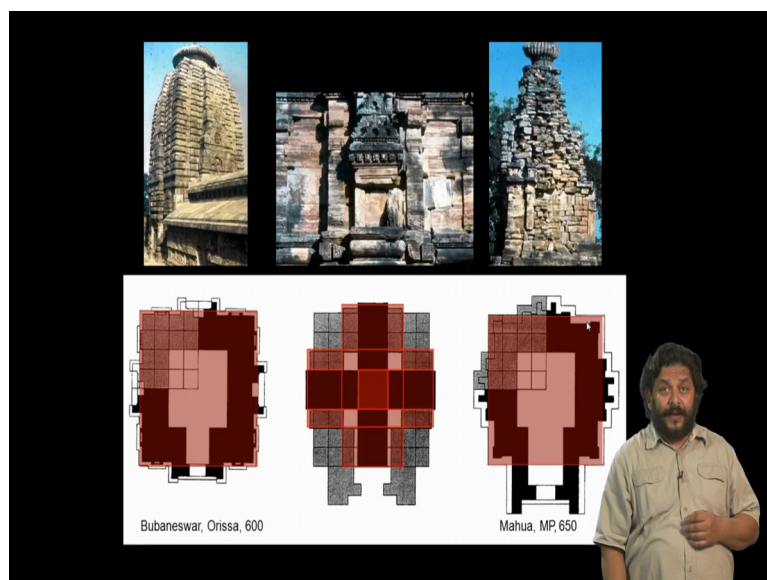
But the vedi is also borrowing very heavily from Buddhist stools, pedestals and altars such as the ones you see at Gaya. In between the altar at the bottom and the altar at the top is a multi-storeyed mansion which in the Latina style of temple building is completely compressed and so you will see a number of squished, compressed amalakas in between on the spire. They will mark the different storeys of the temple and so the spire of this temple is one, two, three and four, four storeys tall.

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As we saw, a number of Buddhist ideas of controlling space through an axis marked by a column having a capital on top here in the form of an amalaka having a multi-storeyed palace clothed, cloaked, enclosed this kind of axis. This multi-storeyed palace taking the form of a temple spire and being completely compressed, make up elements of a temple.

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But temple plans also grow in complexity over time and that is because just like the Sadashiva or the Shamlaji, Shiva and Vishnu respectively, the temple also needs to now manifest itself on all sides. The Bhadrakas or the side projections of a temple grow more and more elaborate over time. These will follow well proportioned grids.

It is not that you can expand temple plans in haphazard ways in any directions. There are constructional grids which are conformed to. There are grids of two types and those are dictated by the proportions of the wall thicknesses and the sanctum.