



## ‘Death, Dissolution, and Transcendence in Indian Temple Architecture: An Archaeological and Cosmological Inquiry.’

**Ram Niwas**

Assistant Archaeologist,  
Archaeological Survey of India, Jodhpur Circle  
Email: [mahichramniwas@gmail.com](mailto:mahichramniwas@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

Indian sacred architecture encodes doctrines of death and dissolution through ritualized space rather than literal funerary representation. Hindu temples, Buddhist stupas, and Jain samavasaraṇa halls each respond to mortality by placing the body, cosmos, and soul into meaningful alignment. This paper examines how these architectural forms internalize ideas of cosmic destruction (pralaya), cyclic rebirth and ultimate transcendence. By analyzing canonical texts, archaeological evidence and regional variations, the study argues that the temple is both womb and tomb; the stupa, a cosmic reliquary; the Jain hall, a model universe. These structures guide devotees from the impermanent world toward liberation—whether mokṣa, nirvāṇa or kevalajñāna—by transforming death into a ritual passage.

**Keywords:-** Death and dissolution; Indian temple architecture; samsāra; pralaya; mokṣa; nirvāṇa; garbhagrha; stupa; samavasaraṇa; wooden temples of the Himalayas.

### Introduction

Concepts of death and rebirth permeate Indian religions, yet sacred architecture rarely depicts death explicitly. Cremation grounds (śmaśāna) are ritually excluded from temple precincts, and bodies do not enter sanctums. Nevertheless, mortality is deeply embedded in the fabric of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain monuments. How do temples, stupas and Jain halls encode the passage from life to death and beyond? This paper addresses that question by examining built form as a vehicle of

cosmological thought. It argues that the Indian temple is designed not to commemorate death but to transcend it. The analysis draws on textual prescriptions, field archaeology and comparative art history to uncover the architectural strategies through which dissolution and rebirth are enacted in stone and timber.

### 2. Cosmological Foundations: Pralaya and Cyclical Time

Indian cosmology posits an ever-repeating cycle of creation, preservation and dissolution. Vedic fire rituals, described in Brahmanical texts, enact these cycles on a ritual altar. The cosmos itself is believed to undergo periodic destruction (pralaya), after which it is reborn. At the human level, death is a transition rather than an end; the

Author:- **Ram Niwas**

Email:- [mahichramniwas@gmail.com](mailto:mahichramniwas@gmail.com)

Received:- 28 January, 2026

Accepted:- 12 March, 2026.

Available online:- 30 March, 2026

Published by JSSCES, Bareilly

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License



individual soul casts off the body “like worn-out garments” and assumes a new one. Buddhist and Jain doctrines reject a permanent soul but still present death as a moment within an endless chain conditioned by karma. In all three traditions, the goal is liberation from the cycle—mokṣa, nirvāṇa or kevalajñāna.

These metaphysical ideas inform the layout of sacred buildings. The vastu-puruṣa-maṇḍala, a square grid personifying the cosmic being, serves as the generative diagram for Hindu temples. Its centre corresponds to the universe’s navel and is reserved for the sanctum. The vertical axis from foundation to finial evokes Mount Meru and connects earthly and celestial realms. In Buddhist tradition, the hemispherical stupa symbolizes the universe; its spire (yasti) serves as an axis mundi, while the circular ambulatory path recalls the wheel of time. Jain cosmology organizes the universe into layered zones; architectural echoes of this structure appear in the concentric rings of the samavasaraṇa preaching hall.

### 3. The Hindu Temple: Womb, Tomb and Cosmos

#### 3.1 Ritual Origins and Mandala Design

The Hindu temple evolved from Vedic sacrificial altars. Early textual sources describe the altar as both a cosmic womb and a funerary pyre. Architects later transferred these ritual ideas to permanent structures, laying temples out on cosmic diagrams. The square mandala—divided into 64 or 81 cells—maps the cosmos onto the temple base. Into its centre is placed the garbhagrha (womb-chamber), which houses the deity and represents the germ of creation. Above it rises the śikhara (mountain) or vimāna, whose tiered superstructure echoes the layers of the universe. The sanctum thus functions simultaneously as womb (germinating the universe) and tomb (absorbing individual

identities), reflecting the dualistic nature of death and rebirth.

#### 3.2 Ritual Movement and Death

The pilgrim’s journey through the temple replicates cosmic cycles. After purifying at an external bath or threshold, the devotee circumambulates the shrine clockwise, aligning with the sun’s path. Each circuit symbolically enacts a life cycle, a death and a rebirth. In the Western Himalayas, the deity’s participation in village life reinforces this continuity: one ethnographic account notes that local gods accompany villagers “from womb to tomb” in all activities. The sanctum’s darkness and claustrophobic dimensions accentuate the sense of withdrawal from mundane life; emerging into the light after darśana represents rebirth. While cremation is absent, the temple’s design incorporates elements of dissolution: monstrous faces (kīrtimukha), skull motifs and fierce deities placed on the exterior remind devotees that the body must perish for the soul to ascend.

#### 3.3 Śaiva-Śākta Imagery of Destruction and Renewal

Certain Hindu temples incorporate vivid imagery associated with destruction. On the outer walls of Orissan and western Indian temples, Chamunda, the emaciated goddess, dances on a corpse while wearing a garland of skulls, her flames symbolizing both cremation and purification. Bhairava and Mahākāla, fierce forms of Shiva, appear near gateways; they dwell in cremation grounds but serve as protectors of the sacred precinct. These images underscore the belief that dissolution is a precondition for regeneration. The imagery remains outside the sanctum, preserving the interior as a pure

womb while acknowledging the inevitability of decay.



Figure 1: Chamunda at Mahanaleshwar Temple, Menal, Chittorgarh



Figure 2: Bhuta / Gana images at Someshwar Temple, Keradu, Badmer



Figure 3: Bhairava sculpture at Mahanaleshwar Temple, Menal, Chittorgarh



Figure 4: Chamunda at Arthuna, Banswara

## 1. Mandala, Fire Altar and Dissolution

The mandala undergirding Hindu temple design is not merely decorative. It is rooted in the geometry of the Vedic fire altar. Vedic ritualists constructed bricks in precise numbers and shapes to embody the cosmic person; the temple repeats this geometry in stone. Each brick symbolized a part of the cosmos and the altar itself was considered the sacrificial victim. When the altar was disassembled, it represented cosmic dissolution; when rebuilt, cosmic rebirth. Temples preserve

this notion in their plinth moldings (*adhithāna*), which often show mythic inundations and monstrous animals devouring the world. Above these layers rise bands of vegetal motifs, suggesting regrowth and regeneration. Through these sculptural registers, the temple narrates the cycle from dissolution to blossoming.

## 2. Death and Dissolution in Buddhist Architecture

### 5.1 Origin and Evolution of the Stupa

The stupa is perhaps the earliest Indian monument explicitly associated



with death. Legend recounts that after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, his relics were distributed and enshrined in mounds. Bilimoria remarks that the stupa “symbolized the way to escape conditioned existence”. The earliest stupas were simple earthen domes, but they soon acquired formal features: a circular base representing the earth; a hemispherical dome signifying the universe; a square *harmikā* denoting the domain of gods; and a spire connecting to the heavens. The act

of circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇā*) around the stupa became a ritual mirror of *samsāra*, moving the pilgrim into harmony with cosmic cycles. Gateways (*toranas*) were erected at the cardinal points, inscribed with scenes from the Buddha's previous lives and final *nirvāṇa*; however, these reliefs avoid literal depictions of cremation or corpses, focusing instead on moral exempla.



Figure 5: Saru Maru Stupa, image from Mandals Life Nepa.(An early stupa)

## Parinirvāṇa and Emptiness

Stupas associated with the Buddha's death carry special symbolism. The so-called Stupa of *Nirvāṇa* at Kushinagara is intentionally plain; its unadorned bell shape underscores the Buddha's total release from form. The emptiness of the reliquary chamber hints at *shunyatā* (emptiness) doctrine: ultimate reality has no abiding essence. By walking around this empty core, monks and

laypeople meditate on impermanence and the cessation of rebirth. Even in later Buddhist art, when elaborate narrative panels appear, the moment of cremation is usually omitted; instead, the presence of the stupa itself stands in for the death event and leads the mind toward detachment. Cosmic dissolution is symbolised by the destruction of the self through wisdom, not through depiction of bodily decay.



Figure 6: Kushinagar Stupa, Uttar Pradesh



## Regional Adaptations: Wooden and Earthen Stupas

Buddhist architecture was remarkably adaptable to local conditions. In the Himalayan valleys of Himachal Pradesh and Lahaul-Spiti, stupas and monasteries were built with timber and rammed earth. The Tabo monastery in Spiti, for instance, employs rammed earth walls and birch bark roofing; it has been dubbed the “Ajanta of the Himalaya” for its murals. These constructions incorporate the principle of impermanence in material form: earthen structures weather and require renewal, echoing the cycle of dissolution and reconstitution. Timber stupas in the Eastern Himalaya, with their multiple tiers and verticality, emphasize the path from earth to sky; their architecture invites reflection on death as a step toward a higher plane. In each regional adaptation, the abstract stupa is translated into vernacular materials without losing its cosmological import.

### 1. Jain Perspectives on Death:

#### *Samavasaraṇa* and *Sallekhana*

##### 6.1 Stupa to Samavasaraṇa

Early Jain communities erected stupas similar to those of Buddhists, but by the early medieval period the stupa was

largely replaced by the *samavasaraṇa*, a preaching hall that appears when a *Tīrthaṅkara* attains omniscience. The Jain stupa had a peculiar cylindrical form and was eventually superseded by the circular or square *samavasaraṇa* with multiple tiers. Jain temples subsequently adopted plans inspired by this preaching hall: open halls accessible from four directions (*chaumukha*), circular bays with concentric ambulatory paths, and central platforms. The shift reflects Jainism’s rejection of relic worship and its emphasis on preaching and moral conduct.



**Figure 7:** Parshvanatha Ayagapata (Votive Tablet with Stupa Motif, Kankali Tila, Mathura) source: Wikimedia. org

### 5.2 Iconography and Ascetic Death

Jain art conveys death in an ethical context. Panels on temple walls show *sallekhana* (ritual fasting to death) undertaken by laymen and monks as an



act of self-purification. Emaciated yogis practicing meditation appear alongside images of the *Tīrthāṅkaras*, emphasizing detachment. Hell scenes with tormenting demons warn against sinful actions; heavenly realms celebrate liberation. Even so, the physical act of cremation or burial is absent from temple sculpture. Jain cosmological diagrams—the *lokapurusha*, *Jambudvīpa* maps and the upper and lower worlds—are painted on ceilings or carved in stone. These diagrams situate life and death within a structured cosmos, guiding the devotee toward right conduct and knowledge.

### 6.3 Ritual Movement and Ascension

Jain temple complexes often occupy hills (e.g., Shatrunjaya, Girnar). Pilgrimage involves climbing thousands of steps; each landing corresponds to a level in the cosmic order. The physical ascent to the temple symbolizes the soul's ascent beyond death. Within the complex, the devotee walks through a labyrinthine network of corridors arranged in quincunx or concentric patterns. Ritual movement thus embodies the passage through realms of existence. Having completed the circumambulation and ascent, the pilgrim venerates the *Tīrthāṅkaras* in the central shrine, reciting the *Navakār Mantra*—a summary of the path to liberation. Architecture thereby facilitates meditation on mortality while offering a route toward transcendence.

### 3. Vernacular Expressions of Dissolution: Timber, Earth and Stone

Indian architecture is not restricted to monumental stone temples. Regional building traditions adapt cosmological concepts to local conditions. The Western Himalayan temples of Himachal Pradesh utilize wood and stone

in a stacked-beam (*katth-kūnī*) technique. Scholars note that temples to indigenous deities did not appear until Buddhism stimulated temple building; once established, these shrines functioned as the repository for village life and death. The deity's presence is invoked at births, marriages and funerals, linking individual mortality to the deity's cyclical life. The very materials used—deodar cedar and rubble masonry—symbolize the interpenetration of nature and culture, life and decay. Similarly, rammed earth monasteries in Spiti—constructed with mud, timber and birch bark—embody impermanence in their fabric. As they weather, they require periodic renewal, echoing the cycle of destruction and re-creation.

### 4. Comparative Analysis: Architecture as a Ritual of Death and Release

A comparative synthesis reveals common strategies across Hindu, Buddhist and Jain architectures. First, none of these traditions depict death directly in their holiest spaces. The corpse and the pyre remain outside, yet death is omnipresent as a process. Second, each uses geometry and axis to map cosmic order: the temple's square mandala and vertical tower; the stupa's circle and spire; the *samavasaraṇa*'s concentric hall. These geometries transform physical movement into metaphysical ascent. Third, all three traditions position dissolution as a necessary precursor to regeneration. Hindu imagery of Bhairava and Chamunda, Buddhist meditations on emptiness, and Jain depictions of *sallekhana* all affirm that the destruction of the body or ego is essential for liberation.

Regional materials and building techniques also express dissolution. Wooden temples and earth monasteries emphasize the impermanence of matter; stone temples suggest the stability of cosmic order. Pilgrimage circuits,



# Janak: A Journal of Humanities

“An International, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed Journal”  
( I S S N : 3 1 1 7 - 3 4 6 2 ) Volume: 02, Issue: 01, March, 2026

Available on <https://janakajournal.in/index.php/1/about>

processional routes and ritual circumambulations across traditions enact the cyclical path of birth and death. Through architecture, the devotee experiences dissolution (enclosed darkness, labyrinthine movement) and emerges renewed, having symbolically conquered death.

## 5. Conclusion

Indian sacred architecture narrates a profound dialogue between mortality and transcendence. Far from being mute monuments, temples, stupas and preaching halls are dynamic ritual spaces that absorb metaphysical doctrines of dissolution and rebirth. The Hindu temple encloses the devotee in a womb-tomb,

leading to release through *darśana*; the Buddhist stupa externalizes the Buddha's death while opening a path to *nirvāṇa*; the Jain *samavasaraṇa* universalizes ethical instruction and maps the cosmos in concentric rings. Wooden temples of the Himalayas and earthen monasteries of Spiti adapt these principles to their landscapes, reaffirming the continuity of life and death. Across traditions, architecture transforms dissolution into an opportunity for transcendence: by aligning the body with cosmic rhythms and guiding the mind beyond fear, it becomes both a map and a means to conquer death.

## References

1. Acharya, P. K. *Hindu Architecture in Its Form and Symbolism* (Calcutta: 1927).
2. Bilimoria, Purushottama, “Temple Architecture and Its Symbolism,” in *Vedānta and Indian Culture* (Delhi: 1991).
3. Dhaky, M. A., and Michael W. Meister, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture: North India – Early Maturity* (Delhi: 1991).
4. Donaldson, Thomas E. *Tantra and Śākta Art of Orissa* (New Delhi: 2002).
5. Gangoly, O. C. *Indian Architecture: Buddhist and Hindu Periods* (London: 1916).
6. Hudson, D. D. *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna* (Oxford: 2008).
7. Kramrisch, Stella, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta: 1946).
8. Meister, Michael W., and Dhaky, M. A., eds., *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture: North India – Beginnings of Medieval Idiom* (Delhi: 1998).
9. Rameshwar Singh, “Temple Architecture of Western Himalayan Region: Wooden Temples—A Case Study of Chamba, Kinnaur and Shimla Hills,” *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 9 (2019).
10. Bhagavad Gītā (transl. 2nd ed., 1966), on the soul casting off worn garments.
11. Smith, H. R., *Jaina Canonical Architecture: The Samavasaraṇa and Jain Cosmic Diagrams* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975).