

Revival of Hindu Temple Architecture

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The Indian tradition of temple architecture is unique in many ways. It is a living tradition that is thousands of years old. Hindu art has penetrated deep into Indian life and permeates every walk of Indian life. The basic principles have been laid down by divinely-inspired Rishis over millennia. Hundreds of generations of hereditary architects-sculptors equipped themselves with deep understanding of Vedas and Sastras and created works not only of art, but of veneration. What we proudly refer to as 'truly Indian' has been the result of their spiritual mission.

An uninterrupted tradition of thousands of years was broken when the British came to rule the nation. But, the great spiritual and unparalleled art tradition of India declined faster only after independence. Westernization, materialism, rank commercialism and the inability of the public to differentiate between true and sacred art on the one hand and cheap mass-produced imitations on the other contributed to this. Withdrawal of patronage caused traditional Viswakarmas to look for alternate professions. The community of hereditary artists of olden days, who had pride in their own artistic culture, and faith in their spiritual mission, withdrew from the study of Vedas and Silpa-Sastras. The lineage was broken and has almost vanished.

EB Havell rightly pointed out that, "Now the art which shows in the modern temples is nothing but a hideous, vulgar conception, altogether unworthy of the noble artistic traditions of earlier times". The high aim of art was then also debased by ignorant people's whims and fancies. The idols in the modern Hindu temples are executed in a manner quite unworthy of Hinduism's high abstract ideas and philosophical doctrines. This is totally unacceptable.

The artistic understanding of the people, the ideas and impulses of Indian art which took India to the highest summit of civilization, have been totally trivialized. The very close inter-dependence of spirituality and art has vanished with a few exceptions. The artists of the present day have neither deep spiritual insight, nor a proper understanding of Hindu art heritage.

Symbolism nurtured over millennia is conspicuous by its absence, and instead what are found in modern shrines are meaningless patterns born out of perverted minds. A semblance to the old - feature exists, as the old methods are followed for production. But when only the methods of production are followed, without an understanding of why they are followed, then we have what can only be called a craft, and what is produced is not the sacred art for which the past was famous.

To cite an example, there are hundreds of extensive designs to the base, pillars, roofs, towers and sculpture of temple prescribed in the different Silpa texts. These designs are to be used according to the spiritual nature of the area in which the temple is to be built, the presiding deity and the specific purpose for which the temple is being built. But what we find today is a random use of these designs, not keeping in mind any of the basic principles laid down.

Virtually no attempt has been made to understand, appreciate and value the foundations of Hindu art and metaphysics. These days, it has become extremely rare to see a new temple being built, that shows that the architect-sculptor has understood these foundations.

Thousands of magnificent, splendid and neglected temples in India could reveal their secrets to modern Indians. But what we see painfully is the merciless attack on them in the name of renovation by employing cheap labor and cheap materials. The thousands of year's old uninterrupted tradition had been contemptuously broken. It is a loss to civilization.

The intellectual and social condition of our time is no way analogous to that which had given them birth in ancient India. There is virtually no scope for present day laborers to understand the motives, ideas, philosophy and inherent creative powers contained in the Silpa Sastras and the Indian art heritage. Indian traditional art is not taught in any systematic manner as the olden days. Most of the modern temple builders are learning the work in the commercial workshops which are remote from the spirit of Indian art. Art for these laborers is less real than it is for ordinary Indian society; it brings no beauty into their lives, and has no spiritual influence on their souls.

It is not merely a question of taste that is involved in the revival of art tradition, but a question of revival of our spiritual and intellectual values. What Coomaraswamy said more than seventy years ago, still has its validity. He observed: "It may be said without fear of contradiction that our present poverty, quantitative and qualitative, in works of art, in competent artists, and ineffective connoisseurship is unique in the history of the world, and that in all these respects the present day

can be most unfavorably contrasted with the past, from which we have inherited a super-abundance of works of art, for which, however, we have little positive use. The deterioration of art is always an indication of spiritual deterioration."

How, then, do we revive the great sacred art, some spiritually-inclined people may wonder. Indian traditional-spiritual art cries out for food but, we give museums, exhibitions, archaeology, seminars and dissertations. The spiritual fire still burns within a class of people who have strong zeal to preserve our ancient heritage. The time has come to find ways and means to revive our traditional art, for the sake of our Mother land.

Suggestions for revival:

1. Create awareness among general public especially young and spiritually inclined people.
2. Identify the almost vanished oral tradition i.e. interpretation and explanation of the Silpa texts.
3. Identify the vanishing traditional techniques in arts i.e. temple architecture, drawing, sheet metal work and sculpture.
4. Educate and encourage people to construct temples and icons as per Silpa Sastras
5. Encourage Gurugulam - training for young and aspiring pupils

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