

GUPTA ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Gupta Period is called Golden or Classical age of India partially due to the unprecedented activities and development in the arts, architecture, sculpture, painting and literature. The rock cut architecture reached at its zenith in Gupta era and a new beginning of free standing temple architecture began.

Gupta Architecture

The period of Gupta Empire was regarded as the Golden Age of Indian art and architecture. Gupta architecture was quite diverse in its style, features and design. This diversity cleared the air that the building of Hindu temples was yet to evolve from its formative stage during the period of future dynasties. Nevertheless, it was the Guptas who started the era of building Hindu temples in the country using rock-cut architectural styles. The temples, adorned with elaborate carvings and towers were dedicated to Hindu Gods. To our misfortune only a few temples of the period survive today.

Gupta Cave Shrines

Cave temples were the earliest examples of religious art and architecture in India. It was a typical design of relief sculpture in the exteriors which had a single carved doorway. Inside the shrine, there was an area where sculpture like Shiva Linga was placed. The enclosing walls were carved with the scenes from Hindu mythology. Some of the important cave temples built during the Gupta dynasty are:

Udayagiri Caves in Madhya Pradesh

Udayagiri Caves dates to the 5th Century CE and is considered as the oldest Hindu temples surviving in the modern age. Situated near Vidisha in the state of Madhya Pradesh, one of these 20 rock-cut caves has one of the famous sculptures of Gupta period, the sculpture of Vishnu as an incarnation of a boar-headed Varaha. The panel around measures 7m X 4m and the figure in center is carved in round shape symbolizing Vishnu rescuing the Earth (Goddess Bhudevi) by defeating a snake-like monster.

Today Udayagiri Caves is one of the most important monuments of the Gupta Period protected by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra

We can't get away without talking about the first Buddhist cave monument in India – the Ajanta Caves. Located in the Aurangabad District of Maharashtra, Ajanta Caves dates back its establishment from the period of 2nd Century BCE to 7th Century CE. These paintings and

sculptures were (and still) regarded as great Buddhist religious art and had great artistic influence.

During Gupta dynasty (in the 5th and 6th centuries CE), some of the most important caves were added. The 29 rock-cut caves were created in a row following the river bed of Waghora towards North-West Deccan. The central point of the paintings was to depict the important scenes from the life of Buddha. The first cave comprises of a columned shrine having a flat-muffled column capitals – built in typical Gupta style of architecture. There are some other caves added with a touch of Gupta architecture like the 19th cave having relief panels and rich carvings depicting scenes of Buddhist lore.

Gupta Temples

The Gupta craftsmen wanted to make some more artistic inventions after the cave temples and that was evident in the foundation of the formative stage of Hindu temples. Being the first Indian dynasty to start building free-standing temples for Hindu gods, the Gupta rulers along with their skilled architects initiated a whole new tradition of Indian temple architecture which lasted for centuries. A notable point about the temples built during the Gupta period is that the temples were not made as a congregation but an adobe for a Hindu deity.

The temple or Devalaya, as it was called back then, allowed priests and individuals to give offering to the gods such as prayers, food and flowers. The architecture of Gupta temples had a sacred statue or idol of God housed in a small, windowless space called garbhagriha.

Dasavatara Temple in Uttar Pradesh

Located in Lalitpur town, Deogarh in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Dasavata Temple was established by Captain Charles Strahan and named by Alexander Cunningham. The large temple was designed with typical Gupta art and architectural style having a cubical garbhagriha and without a Shikhara. The temple depicts ten avatars (incarnations) of Lord Vishnu, thus given the name Dasavatara (10 forms).

Bhitargaon Temple in Kanpur

Bhitargaon Temple in Kanpur City of Uttar Pradesh is one of the oldest Hindu temples existing today. Built in the late 5th Century CE during the Gupta period, the temple was entirely built using bricks. Although its upper portion is damaged, the curved and four-sided Shikhara tower still maintains the gavaksha niches.

Dhamekha Stupa in Sarnath

Located 13 kilometers from Varanasi, Dhamekha Stupa is one of the stupas (Buddhist temple) in Sarnath which marks the Rishipattana or deer park, the place where Gautam Buddha presented his first sermon. Dated somewhere around 1026 AD, Dhamekha was earlier called as Dharmachakra Stupa. The known archaeologist of the ancient age, Alexander Cunningham bored a shaft into the center of the foundation in search of a relic but rather found a 91cm slab having

an inscription – ‘Ye Dharma Hetu Prabhava Hetu’, which was noted to be an inscription from the 6th or 7th century.

Various other temples during the Gupta Period include names like Vishnu Temple of Tigawa in Jabalpur, Parvati Temple of Nachria in Kathura, Lakshman Temple in Raipur, Shiva Temple in Bhumara, Bhitari Temple in Ghazipur and Shiva Temple in Koh.