



Sacred Spaces: A Study of Temple Architecture of Shree Sheetala Shankar Temple, Borivali and Bhavdevi Mandir, Dahisar

Ms. Nehali A. Waskar

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar Varde College (A)

Affiliated to the University of Mumbai, Mumbai, Maharashtra



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Abstract

"Sacred Spaces: A Study of Temple Architecture of Shree Sheetala Shankar Temple, Borivali and Bhavdevi Mandir, Dahisar" explores the rich and diverse architectural heritage of Hindu temples located in the suburban regions of Borivali and Dahisar in Mumbai. These temples, though often lesser-known in the broader academic discourse, exhibit a compelling blend of traditional design elements, regional influences, and devotional symbolism. The study delves into the spatial organization of sacred spaces, focusing particularly on the Garbha Griha (sanctum sanctorum), Shikhara (temple tower), and Sabha Mandap (assembly hall), while also analyzing iconographic details and decorative motifs. Through detailed observations and documentation, the research highlights how local materials like white marble, intricate wood carvings, and painted motifs contribute to the spiritual and aesthetic atmosphere of these temples. Notable features such as the octagonal domes, raised platforms, niches with miniature Shikharas, and symbolic carvings of deities like Ganesha, Radha-Krishna, Ram-Janaki-Laxman, along with motifs of lotus, elephants, trishul, and swastika, are examined for their religious and artistic significance. The study further considers how the temple spaces function not only as places of worship but also as cultural anchors in the rapidly urbanizing landscape of North Mumbai. By documenting and analyzing these sacred structures, this work aims to contribute to the broader understanding of contemporary temple architecture and its continuity with India's vast architectural tradition.

Keywords: Contemporary Temple architecture, Garbha Griha, Shikhara, Sabha Mandap, Hindu temples, sacred spaces, iconography, marble temples, Mumbai heritage, cultural landscape, religious symbolism, Indian temple design.

Introduction

Mumbai, a bustling metropolis known for its fast-paced urban life, also holds within its bounds pockets of deep cultural and spiritual significance. Among these are the neighborhoods of Borivali and Dahisar, located in the northern suburbs of the city. These areas are home to a remarkable range of temples that serve not only as places of worship but also as living embodiments of India's rich architectural heritage.

Temple architecture in Borivali and Dahisar reflects a confluence of styles, traditions, and community identities. From ancient shrines tucked away in quiet corners to more recent constructions

built with modern materials yet traditional symbolism, these sacred spaces are vital markers of history, belief, and belonging. Each temple—whether small and modest or large and ornate—tells a story through its design, layout, sculptures, and rituals.

This study, titled "Sacred Spaces: A Study of Temple Architecture of Shree Sheetala Shankar Temple, Borivali and Bhavdevi Mandir, Dahisar," seeks to explore how temple architecture in these suburban localities reveals the intersection of religion, art, community, and urban development. It aims to document the architectural features of



selected temples, analyze their stylistic elements, and understand their role in the daily lives of the devotees and the broader cultural landscape of Mumbai.

By examining these sacred spaces, we gain insight into how tradition adapts to contemporary contexts and how architecture continues to play a central role in preserving and expressing spiritual identity amidst the rapidly changing urban fabric.

Literature Review

1. The Routledge Handbook of Hindu Temples: Materiality, Social History and Practice

Editors: Himanshu Prabha Ray, Salila Kulshreshtha, Uthara Suvrathan (2023)

Offers a comprehensive, illustrated study of Hindu temples from archaeological, social, and material perspectives. Highlights the active role of communities in temple life from early centuries CE to modern times.

2. Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture (3 Volumes)

Author: K. M. Suresh, N. C. Panda, S. N. Reddy

A monumental survey covering temple architecture across India—from the Gupta period (4th century CE) to the late 18th century. Detailed, richly illustrated, and essential for architectural comparison.

3. Architecture in Maharashtra: Tradition and Journey

Editors: Narendra Dengle, Pushkar Sohoni, Chetan Sahasrabuddhe, Minal Sagare (2024)

Two-volume work tracing architectural evolution in Maharashtra from prehistoric times to the present, including indexed entries for over 300 sites. Invaluable for regional context, especially relevant to Mumbai's temple heritage.

4. Late Temple Architecture of India, 15th to 19th Centuries

Author: George Michell (2015)

Sheds light on a neglected period of temple building across India, exploring how Hindu and Jain temple designs adapted under Sultanate, Mughal, and British influences.

5. Rediscovering the Hindu Temple: The Sacred Architecture and Urbanism of India

Authors: Vinayak Bharne & Krupali Krusche (2012)

Investigates Hindu temples as intertwined with urban formation, ritual practices, and shifting identities. Ideal for understanding temples within dynamic cityscapes—fully applicable to Mumbai's urban fabric.

6. Temples of India – Abode of the Divine

Author: Tarun Chopra (2016)

A visually rich treatise on temple geometry and architectural evolution over 2,000 years, blending photography, ground plans, and Vastu–Shilpa analysis.

7. Temple Architecture of India

Authors: N. C. Panda, Sivanagi Reddy Emani (2018)

Survey of ancient to medieval temple forms across peninsular India. Offers accessible overviews and historical depth.

The existing body of work on the study of temple architecture of selected temples offers significant insights into the architecture, structural, activities and religious activities of the temple.

Methodology

Immersive engagement with temple communities offers deep cultural insights.

Participant observation allowed to experience rituals, daily life, and social dynamics from within. Ethnography leverages interviews, field notes, visual documentation, and community narratives to capture lived religious and cultural meaning. Interviews with the temple Poojari was conducted to get insight of the temple rituals.

In addition to interviews, certain books were referred to understand the temple structure.

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Shree Sheetala Shankar Mandir Shimpoli, Borivali West



The Sheetala Shankar Temple of Shimpoli is a temple established by the nearby Koli community. It was originally Sheetala devi temple. The locals say that the swayambhu murti of Sheetala devi came around the Kharada tree. From then it was worshipped by the people. Chintaman Mali who resides in this area decided to build a small temple around it. The old temple was not as complex as the new one. It was very simple and was divided into three structures. It included temple for Sheetaladevi, Shivling, Ganpati, Hanuman and for Dattatreya Murti. The temples were renovated and made into one temple complex in 2005 by Chintamani Mali's son Rushi Mali, who is an architect by profession. The present temple structure was idea of Rushi Mali who also took help of one of his architect friend.

The temple has a horizontal orientation. It is built on a raised platform of 1 foot 1 inch The temple faces the east direction. All murtis are placed in the

temple facing the east direction except one murti of Hanuman is placed outside the temple facing south direction. It is believed that placing Hanuman in south facing direction channels hanuman's fearless energy and protection, creating a shield against negative influences. It promotes strength and courage. The temple has simple yet elegant structure from inside. It carries an elaborate Shikhara.

Garbha Griha

The temple does not have an elaborate separate Garbha griha. Its garbha griha is attached to the Sabha Mandap which is only divided by a steel railing. Attached to the wall are three deities. In the mid we have Shankar Parvati idol. To its south is the Dattatreya murti and to its north is the Sheetaladevi murti. In front of the Shankar parvati murti is the shivling which is placed on the other side of the steel railing in the sabha mandap.

The idol of Shankar Parvati is placed on a raised platform. It is surrounded by intricate design on the wall. The idols of Sheetaladevi and Dattatreya are placed in a niche resembling a temple. The niche has four pillars which are intricately decorated, a step like Shikhara and on top of it is a Kalash. The entire structure is made out of marble.

There are three circular domes on top of each idol wherein we have the Shikhara. They are too intricately decorated.

Sabha Mandap



The sabha mandap has a width of 8.29 metres and length of 9.23 metres. In the sabha mandap there is Ganpati idol on the southern niche facing the north side and hanuman idol facing the south side. The

niche resembles the temple with a miniature shikhara on the top followed by a kalash. The shivling is also present in the Sabha Mandap. Ganpati and hanuman idol is made of marble whereas the shivling is made



of stone which is covered by silver. The door of the sabha mandap are made of wood which is beautifully decorated with floral designs.

Jagati

The Jagati has a height of one foot one inch. It has two beautifully decorated pillars. At the entrance near the door are two golden peacocks. Instead of a usual dwarpal we have a peacock in the temple. In the middle of the door, there is the Nandi and tortoise.

The jagati also serves as circumambulation path for devotees. On three sides of the temple i.e. in the southern, western and northern side there is a murti which represents each direction and protects it.



Plan of Shree Sheetala Shankar Mandir

Shikhara



The temple has three Shikhara's which are placed one beside the other. Each Shikhara has 4 facets. On each side there is an urushringa. In between two facets there is a smaller version of the urushringa. Each urushringa has a amalaka and kalash.

The Shikhara which is in the centre is the highest and its kalash also has a circular ring resembling the sun. All the kalash also has a dhvaj.

At the entrance of the temple there is a step like Shikhara. The front side of the temple looks like a house with angana.

Religious Ceremonies

There are many festivals celebrated in the temple like Navratri, Mahashivratri, Datta Jayanti, Shitladevi Pooja, Holi, Satyanarayan Pooja, Shravani Somvar and Hanuman jayanti.



Bhavdevi Mandir



Kandarpada, Dahisar (West)

Garbha Griha



The Garbha Griha is almost square in shape. It is made entirely of white marble. The deity of the temple Bhavdevi, resides in the Garbha Griha. The



main idol is placed on a platform below which the Chehra of the Devi is placed on the ground.

The Shikhara is Octagonal from inside but from the outside it is four sided. The Shikhara looks like a dome from inside but from outside it is four sided. The Garbha Griha is built at a height of 9 inches from the Sabha Mandap. Both the sides of the Garbha Griha are 4.26 metres. The front and back side is 3.99 metres. The entire Garbha is on a raised platform of 10.1 inches.

There are two niches just beside the main shrine. The niche on the southern side consists of the idols of Janaki, Ram and Laxman. The niche on the northern side consists of the idols of Radha Krishna. Both the niches have a miniature Shikhara on top of it.

The entrance to the Garbha is beautifully decorated with two painted pillars on either side. It is also decorated with flowers and paintings of elephants on both sides. At the top of the Garbha Griha is a small idol of Ganesha.

Sabha Mandap



The entrance of the Sabha Mandap has two elephants on both the sides. The Sabha Mandap has a wooden door which is intricately decorated with carvings of dwarpala, Gajalakshmi, Kalash, deer, elephant, lotus, trishul and swastika.

The Sabha Mandap has a length of 10.40 metres and width of 8.22 metres. It is a massive Sabha Mandap. The Mandap is adorned with beautiful Chandeliers. The ceiling of the mandap has a simple rectangular shape.

Shikhara

The Shikhara is octagonal in shape from the inside and from the out it has four facets. A fourfaceted shikhara is commonly referred to as Latina or Rekha-prasada Shikhara. At the lintel level there is a double moulding. On each facet of the Shikhara there are urushringas (miniature towers). The towers have Amalaka followed by a Kalash. The miniature tower has floral as well as geometric designs. At the top there is a huge amalaka and on top of it we have the final kalash.



IDOL



The idols in the temple consist of –Bhavdevi, Sita-Ram-Laxman, Radha-Krishna, Shiva, Hanuman. All the idols of the temple are east facing except the idol of Hanuman which is South facing. All the idols are made up of marble except the original idol of Bhavdevi which is actually made of stone and covered with a Chehra.



Temple of Shiva and Hanuman in Bhavdevi Temple Complex

Beside the temple of Bhavdevi, are two separate garbha griha of Shiva and Hanuman. The Shivling is east facing whereas the idol of Hanuman is south facing. The width of this area is 7.34 metres. Both the Garbha griha are square in shape. The ceiling is square with a circle at the centre.

Along with a separate garbha griha the temple also has a separate Shikhara and also a huge Shivling on it. The Shikhara is same as that of the main Shrine.



Plan of Bhavdevi Mandir

About the Temple

Bhavdevi is revered as the gramdevata (village deity) of Kandarpada, and her temple is perched atop a hillock that overlooks the entire area. The shrine is accessed by a flight of 111 steps. During the temple's renovation, the original staircase was replaced with a new one. Historically, the basalt formation on which the temple stands was part of a much larger hill that stretched all the way to the Manori Creek, but urban development has significantly reduced its size.

Adjacent to the main temple, devotees also venerate a large basalt outcrop known as the Dhondi, which is considered an integral part of the temple's sacred complex. Locals believe the Dhondi acts as a protective barrier for the shrine. Each year, on the occasion of Akshay Tritiya, the temple hosts an annual jatra (festival). The most anticipated event of the celebration is the palkhi procession, during which the deity's image is carried through the village in a palanquin, accompanied by the entire community.

According to local belief, Bhavdevi also serves as the guardian (rakhandar) of Kandarpada. A traditional tale describes her as wearing a white saree and holding a stick adorned with ghungroos. It is said that she descends from the temple at night to patrol the lanes of the village, ensuring peace and safety.

The temple has been visited by Balyogi Sadanand Maharaj, and before its renovation, it existed as a modest, simple structure. Notably, a scene from the Bollywood film "Suhag"—featuring Amitabh Bachchan, Shashi Kapoor, and Amjad Khan—was filmed within this temple.

The temple has a beautiful pleasant environment which is why students also come for studies here.



Conclusion

The architecture of both the temples consists of traditional pattern with modern look. There is presence of lot of contemporary designs. Though both belong to Marathi Koli Community, the structural differences are prevalent. The Bhavdevi Mandir has traditional structure whereas Sheetala Shankar has more modern structure. Sheetala Shankar is influenced more by the present architectural style. Bhavdevi Temple has a separate Garbhagriha and Sabha mandapa but on the other side Sheetala Shankar has a sabha mandap and Garbhagriha which is more or less joined. Both temples retain features rooted in classical Hindu temple architecture—such as the garbhagriha (sanctum), mandapa (assembly halls), shikhara or tower forms, and use of symbolic ornamentation. These elements maintain continuity with canonical texts or historical precedents, reinforcing their sacredness and enabling devotees to recognize and engage with symbolic spatial order. Given limited space, high land costs, and dense development, both temples exhibit adaptations—compact plans, multi-level structures, constrained open spaces, and creative usage. These modifications show how sacred architecture must negotiate between idealized canonical form and practical constraints of urban Mumbai. The materials used—stone, marble, concrete, decorative facings, etc.—vary, affecting not only appearance but durability. Craftsmanship (e.g. carvings, sculpture, decorative motifs) still plays a crucial role in conveying sacredness. However, maintaining such details amid pollution, crowding, and periodic renovations poses challenges, influencing choices of material and design over time. The layout in both temples is organized to support ritual circulation (pradakshina), congregation, festivals, and specific sequences of worship. The spatial sequencing from entrance

through intermediate halls into sanctum reflect not just physical form, but spiritual hierarchy—transitioning from profane to sacred, from public to intimate.

Beyond architecture, both temples act as focal points for community cohesion—through festivals, social gatherings, charitable activities. Their architecture is not static: additions, expansions, ornamentation often reflect shifting demographics, religious needs, and cultural aspiration of local devotees. Thus, the sacred space is dynamic, responsive to social change. Urban pressures—encroachment, noise, air pollution, structural wear—threaten both aesthetic and structural integrity. There is often a tension between modernization (e.g. installing electrical fixtures, lighting, convenience features) and preserving traditional form. Effective conservation requires balancing ritual, community needs and heritage values. Overall, the study underscores that temples like Shree Sheetala Shankar and Bhavdevi Mandir are more than places of worship—they are living architectures, shaped by tradition, locality, and the evolving needs of the community. Their sacred spaces testify to how religious architecture continues to adapt, endure, and resonate in urban India.

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