

**In search of roots: The start of a journey to uncover the ancient Hindu concept of *"Art as Experience"* in India, today.**

**- An exploration of Indian metaphysics as the foundation of this concept.**

KSHAMA CHARI

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Architecture.

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*If the thunderstorm is no longer for us the marriage of heaven and earth, but only a discharge of electricity, all that we have really done is to substitute a physical for a metaphysical level of reference; the man is far more a man who can realise the perfect validity of both explanations, each on its own level of reference.*

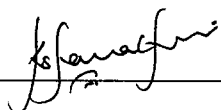
*Of the man who could look up to the roof of his house, or temple, and say "there hangs the Supernal Sun" or down at his hearth and say "there is the navel of the earth", we maintain not only that his house and temple were the more serviceable to him and the more beautiful in fact, but in every sense much more such homes as the dignity of man demands than are our own "Machines to live in."*

Coomaraswamy, Symbolism of the Dome

## Declaration

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Indian architecture has its unique place in the architectural history of the world. It constantly inspires its people. It continues to fascinate many a tourist and thinker. It has a multi-layered, 4000 year old history with the Indus valley civilisation (approx. 2500 BCE) boasting of highly sophisticated space planning concepts. The progressive evolvement of Indian culture since then has seen further refinement of all its art-forms. The remnants of the built forms of such bygone eras hold immense architectural merit that makes a walk through any traditional town a meaningful memory, even today.

If architecture is the reflection of culture, what should have been the richness of the culture that gave rise to such splendour in architecture! Yet, “In order to understand a culture, it is not enough to describe its buildings, but one wants to know the impulses that drove people to build them.” (Ballantyne, 2004, 30). So then what were these impulses that drove the Indian people to create the stupendous architecture, the representations of which are marvelled at today?

The main proposition of the dissertation is that the ancient Hindu concept of “*Art as Experience*” on which much of the conscious place-making by the Hindu people was based, evolved from profound metaphysical seeds that addressed the very basis of man’s existence on earth. The research hopes to partially prove that the greatness of traditional Hindu architecture lies in its metaphysical moorings of Ultimate Reality and Ultimate Truth and in doing so understanding what Ultimate reality was in Indian philosophy and what bearing it had on Hindu architecture and addresses the questions of how traditional Indian Hindu architecture housed man: body, *being* and all within his unique context? How does Hindu architecture with its unique perception of man and his environment converse with universal perennials? What is the current architectural scene in India? And what are the lessons that such a comparative study might teach one?

The research tries to answer the above questions by looking in depth at the ancient Hindu architectural concept of “*Art as Experience*” that is believed to have given rise to the ancient Hindu architecture of India. Starting with examining Indian metaphysical constructs and within it the perception of known and unknown entities of reality; further exploring its relevance to architecture in terms of the role of body in architecture, the concept of micro and macrocosms, contextual appropriateness and the unique place that thresholds held in life, the research moves on to the role of an architect and the way in which the architecture created lent meaning to the everyday life of people, attempting to understand how ancient architecture was weaved into the lives of people and their beliefs. Further, some parallels with non-Indian architectural thought are discussed following which the need for a sensate environment for human beings to live in, the need for identity and meaning in architecture, the concept of place and culture as a generating force for architecture are also explored. Finally the current state of architecture in India is discussed. In the end, some lessons that could be learnt from history are enumerated that could help in creating architecture that integrates both the universal principles and the particularities of culture to bestow meaning and identity to the people it purports to serve.

This research tries to examine the past to look for clues to a future of identifiable and authentic architecture – to bring the ancient and contemporary into the same framework in order to look for lessons within.

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Title:

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Introduction:

Indian architecture has its unique place in the architectural history of the world. It constantly inspires its people and continues to fascinate many a thinker, practitioner and tourist. India has a multi-layered, 4000 year old history. It is believed today that the Indus valley civilisation dating back to 2500BCE made use of highly sophisticated space planning concepts. The progressive evolvement of Indian culture since then saw further refinement of all the art-forms of music, dance, literature, architecture, and others. The heyday of artistic excellence in India was reached in the Gupta rule in the North (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE) (Gupta Empire, Wikipedia, [www](#)) and the Chola, Chera and Pandya rule in the South (11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE) (History of Tamil Nadu, Wikipedia, [www](#)), the period of Gupta rule being called the Golden age of the Guptas. The remnants of the built forms of these eras in the history of India still hold immense architectural merit. When the splendour of architectural forms are spoken of, one not only refers to the monumental buildings but to every form that emerged as a result of conscious place-making; the architecture of the collective that, even today, makes a walk through any traditional town a meaningful memory.

Art and architecture, it is said are the reflection of culture. What then should have been the richness of the culture that gave rise to such splendour in architecture! Also, synonymous with the existence of this tradition of artistic excellence in the Indian sub-continent, unbroken philosophic speculation existed too. In fact, the seed of Indian philosophic thought can be traced back to 600BCE (Hiriyanna, 1932) or before. Some strains of this philosophic thought continue to live even today, most notably the philosophy of Vedanta as made known to the world by seers like Shri Adi Shankarar and Swami Vivekananda and later Shri. C. Rajagopalachari. Religion, Philosophy and the arts within the Indian subcontinent are deeply interdependent, each enriching the other. But while religion and even art can be contained within the notion of Hinduism or Buddhism or any other, Indian metaphysics, as the eternal quest for the truth of existence,

encompasses and rises beyond all these apparent classifications. The length and breadth of Indian philosophy is astounding as it encompasses the philosophic speculation of all Indian thinkers based only on the merit of this search for the truth. So, how does such philosophy converse with art and culture? How do they come together to form the Indian identity?

This author being brought up and having studied architecture in India, a fascination for traditional architecture was inescapable. This research is an attempt to go beyond that fascination. It is an attempt at understanding the dominant Hindu culture of India that was the root cause of this marvellous architecture, an attempt at seeing beyond the 'exotic' and understanding it.

Yet, *"In order to understand a culture, it is not enough to describe its buildings, but one wants to know the impulses that drove people to build them."* (Ballantyne, 2005, 30)

So then what were these impulses that drove the Indian people to create the stupendous architecture, the representations of which are marvelled at today? What was unique about it that created architecture that its people were proud of, that Europeans like Sir E.B. Havell, Lockhard Kipling and Sir George Birdwood fell in love with, that "is extraordinarily uplifting" (Ananth, 2001, 11) even today? What is the Indian secret?

*"What after all, is the Indian greatness? Not a dogma or a book; but the great open secret that all knowledge and all truth are absolute and infinite, waiting not to be created, but to be found"* (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 17)

### **Statement of the Problem and the main hypotheses:**

This research began as a journey to discover some answers waiting to be found.

The main proposition of the dissertation is that the ancient Hindu concept of "Art as Experience" on which much of the conscious place-making by the Hindu people was based, evolved from profound metaphysical seeds that addressed the very basis of man's existence on earth. It aimed at creating harmony between the tangible and intangible aspects of man's life, through the medium of art.

The objectives of the research are to *partially* prove that:

- The greatness of traditional Hindu architecture lies in its metaphysical moorings of Ultimate Reality and Ultimate Truth and in doing so understanding what Ultimate reality was in Indian philosophy and what bearing it had on Indian architecture.
- Though Indian Hindu art and architecture might have been based on deep metaphysics, it related to man at various levels of physical reality too, thus addressing the question of how traditional Indian Hindu architecture housed man: body, *being* and all within his unique context.
- Indian Hindu architecture though unique in its perception of man and his existence in this universe, indeed catered to certain fundamental human needs that were universal preoccupations within the field of architecture anywhere in the world.
- An examination of the roots of Indian Hindu architecture – one of which is the concept of “Art as experience”- will go a long way in helping the process of constructing post colonial identities within the chaotic architectural scene of contemporary India; while the reasons for the disappearance of the concept within India today are also discussed.

(Note: the word “man” is used in its generic sense to denote any human being, irrespective of gender)

### **Structure of Research:**

The research could broadly be divided into three unequal sections. The first and most important section deals with the ancient Hindu architectural concept of “Art as Experience”. This concept is generally believed to have given rise to the ancient Hindu architecture of India. Since it is the aim of the author to prove that this concept is based on a deeper metaphysics, the focus is on understanding the concept from a philosophical point of view. This section first takes a look at the dominant strains of philosophy in India with its emphasis on ‘direct experience’ and its implications to art. This also sets out the ideal towards which all of ancient Indian art strove. Then the document explores the ways in which things unknown were understood in terms of known entities going on

to examine the role of the 'body' in this understanding. The understanding of man's place in his immediate environment and the bigger scheme of the universe and beyond, both at the physical and metaphysical levels are dealt with next, followed by the context-sensitivity that such architecture accords to an individual. Then, the unique place and importance given to thresholds in the Hindu way of life and in architecture is discussed. Finally the attributes of an architect within the traditional system and the impact that the architecture created had on the everyday lives of the people is discussed.

What this section hopes to achieve is to introduce the reader to the ancient Hindu architectural concept under discussion, unearth its metaphysical roots and give a considered idea of how it was weaved into the lives of people and their beliefs, aiming to create dwellings that were tailor-made to suit every individual's aspirations and reflect the universe that he/she inhabited.

The second section tries to look at a few non-Indian conceptions of the essence of architecture and draw some parallels between it and the Indian Hindu conception. It is not exhaustive by any means but tries to show that the concept of "Architecture as Experience" is by no means exclusively Indian and has its parallels in Non-Indian thought too. It also explores the need for a sensate environment for human beings to live in, the need for identity and meaning in architecture, the concept of place and culture as a generating force for architecture. In the end, this section hopes to bring home to the reader the fact that the intangible first principles of architecture are universal and will continue to be the driving force behind all the architecture of this world, irrespective of their cultural variations.

The third section of the document looks at the dominant trends in current day Indian architecture. In contrast to the architecture discussed earlier with its focus on the individual and his aspirations, the lack of humane-ness and prevalent identity-crisis in post-colonial India is highlighted. The possible reasons for this 'fall from grace' are also discussed. Then the failed attempts in post colonial India, to create an authentic *Indian* architecture is examined; highlighting the fact that throughout this attempt to revive *Indian-ness* the ancient Indian architectural concept that thrived over many centuries and

many foreign invasions, was completely ignored and in fact, when it was noticed, was used only in fragments merely to validate non-Indian design theory without any proper understanding of its own context and integrated nature. What this section hopes to achieve is create a strong contrast in the reader's mind of what Indian architecture was, as opposed what it currently is.

The final section looks at the possible lessons that this history could have for us. This section draws conclusions by juxtaposing in the reader's mind the earlier readings of Indian architecture – the universals and particulars – against the current Indian architecture and tries to elicit certain aspects that could be worked on in order to create architecture that is authentic, integrating both the universal principles and the particularities of culture to bestow meaning and identity to the men it purports to serve.

### **Research Method:**

This research aspires to be interpretive and analytical in nature and so relies heavily on theoretical and conceptual research methods.

The research had to necessarily be interdisciplinary as it deals with metaphysics as a seed for architectural conception. While metaphysics alone could not yield all the necessary answers, the lifestyles of people, their modes of thinking and their expressions in cultural artefacts also aided the research to an extent. It draws from philosophy, cultural psychology, prehistory, art theory, art history, sociology and other fields.

While formally published works of literature provided the bulk of knowledge needed, unpublished works have also aided the study. Also, the fact that the author's own life experiences and observations have coloured the 'reading' of such works is acknowledged; making the research contextual at best.

The print media (newspapers, magazines, journals etc.) has been extensively used to explore the current state of architecture in India. Personal interviews with various professionals in India and other casual discussions have also been used to support the arguments in this document.

### **Limitations of the study:**

- This study only deals with the conscious place-making activity of ancient and contemporary India and does not include the staggering and equally astounding subconscious building processes found in India.
- This study looks mainly into the theory of Hindu art that flourished until the early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD (*as illustrated by Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy*). Consequently any reference to theories from other schools of thought will be minimal and only be used to establish the dominant theory under investigation.
- This study, due to constraints of language and accessibility, does not aim to study original texts on philosophy, religion and art theory but only contemporary interpretations thereof.
- The study itself is conceived to be interpretive and analytical; hence preference is given to such work in the above regard.
- The study is more philosophical than historical; hence historical facts are not necessarily used sequentially, rather are used wherever required to support the philosophy under discussion.
- Since religious Hindu philosophy is closely tied to art theory, it will be pursued at the discretion of the author to interpret art philosophy.
- The metaphysical basis of the art theory under discussion is like a core that does not differ from region to region. So, though India has many subcultures, focusing on a particular sub-culture is not the intention of this dissertation. Yet when it becomes necessary to illustrate by using example, architectural models of the Tamil subculture will be used.
- In the discussion about the state of post-colonial architecture in India, the focus is, again, not on any particular region but on the trends that currently dominate the contemporary architectural scene in India
- As for non-Indian architectural thought, the study will limit itself to existentialist tendencies and may use any other philosophy only to support the above.

**Importance of the study:**

The starting point of this dissertation was the author's personal experiences with identity-crisis in India and South Africa. The author was born into the rich, vibrant Tamil culture in which tradition and heritage are not mere modes of speech but are lived experience. But while studying for the degree of architecture in India, these traditional practices were relegated to the fringes of the mainstream architectural education that focused largely on non-Indian architectural practices/modes of thought. Like many of the young professionals in India, a double life became a necessity where personal choices were based on one's own culture while professional decisions were largely based on learned non-Indian modes of thought. The issue of identity within the architectural profession, then, became very real, echoing the larger issue of identity crisis amidst the youth of contemporary India. A shift to South Africa only deepened this need to examine the author's own cultural roots, making it an important personal journey.

The author found this sense of double identity also mirrored in the works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century metaphysician and art historian Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy. He was a Tamil born in Colombo, Sri Lanka to a Tamil father and an English mother (1877-1947). He grew up in England, during the turbulent times of British rule in India. His initial training was in the field of science and he served as the Director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon (as Colombo was known then) from 1902 to 1907. Later Coomaraswamy devoted himself to the study of Indian and South East Asian art and philosophy and curated the 'Indian art' section of the Boston museum of Fine Art from 1917 until his death (Princeton University Library, 1998, [www](#)). This unique identity of his, along with a sound grounding in Indian tradition and philosophy and his erudition in the many streams of Western philosophy of art resulted in an almost poetic rendering of the fundamentals of the Indian artistic tradition that is revered even today. The Government of India, recognising Coomaraswamy as a great scholar and aesthete instituted the Ananda Coomaraswamy Fellowship in 1996 through its Sahitya Akademi (Sahitya Akademi, 1999, [www](#)).

Through this author's many discussions with professionals in South Africa and India and readings of many other philosophers, it is Coomaraswamy's critical analysis and

exploration of traditional Indian art that has emerged as most comprehensive and relevant. It has constantly guided the author throughout the research in finding some answers to the many questions raised.

All post colonial nations are united in their attempts to revive their own traditions and in their relentless quest for an authentic identity. India, it could be said, with its deeply entrenched philosophy and traditions while also being one of the fastest growing entities in the “global village”, leads this quest from the forefront. Today, as India walks from a hoary past through a confused present towards a future of rapid all-round development, examination of what *was* will prove to be invaluable in helping one understand what *will be*. The identity constructs that the young architects of India are struggling with will become clearer when one examines one’s roots. It will also enrich the architecture created, enabling it to become “places” for people to dwell in.

Literature describing the splendour of India abounds. But very few have attempted to ask the “why” and “how” of it. This study addresses these absences. It is meant to be an initiative in examining architectural philosophic thought rooted in the celebrated past of India – an exercise which might be a step in the direction of creating architecture that responds to its people in their everyday lives and thus bestow meaning and identity to the architects themselves and the people for whom they create it.

## Indian Philosophy

Philosophy is integral to man's existence. Philosophy is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and existence. Man is constantly trying to understand the source of his creation and existence in the world that he sees around him. It could be said that philosophy began when civilisation began and has been the substratum on which has been built - sometimes consciously, other times subconsciously – the various elements of man's expression of life, called culture. In particular, the seed of Indian philosophic thought can be traced back to 600BCE (Hiriyanna, 1932) or before when Aryans settled down in India assimilating into themselves, the highly sophisticated Dravidian culture existing then. The Vedas – a collection of hymns that are the unquestioned source of Vedic culture which heavily influences current day Hinduism – were revealed to them and in a gradual progress, speculative activity began. From then till this day for more than two and a half millenniums, there has been an unbroken stream of speculative activity in India. Indian philosophic atmosphere is characterised by a rich variety and diversity of thought like none other. Though the philosophic streams themselves vary, they all share a clear common technique of “examined belief” which operates thus:

- 1) Stating the case for the opposing system of philosophy
- 2) Systematically highlighting and criticising the inconsistencies in it.
- 3) Examining and establishing its own idea. (Rao, unknown, 10 and 11)

Thus we find that though the various philosophic systems worked out their own logic, they worked as a whole in a constructive atmosphere to eliminate inconsistencies and establish an internally structured idea to explain existence and reality and the means of arriving there. These meticulously worked out systems permeated every day life “and coloured the themes of all the aspects of Indian culture” be it ethics, aesthetics, art or architecture (Rao, unknown, 11). Another important element, in fact *the most* important aspect that unites all the varying philosophic systems of thought is the question of ideal. What is the ideal towards which these, painstakingly constructed systems of philosophy, strive?

### **Aim of Indian philosophy:**

The basis of any effort, the first cause, is motive. The motive of all philosophic thought is to understand the meaning and nature of existence. But the aim of Indian philosophy has always been transcending existence in the world as we see it, in other words overcoming the apparent realities of moral and physical good and evil. The common ideal of all systems of Indian philosophy is the emancipation of man from this world of endless good and evil i.e. not only striving to discover the Truth (behind the workings of universe and man's existence in it) but *realising* that through one's own experience. This realisation and experiencing of Truth (or) Reality is called Moksha or liberation. Thus Indian philosophy urged every individual person to look within his human self to discover Truth and Reality and focused on discovering the perfect aspect of the human self, common to all. Thus it was and is a philosophy of inwardness (Rao, unknown, 13). But this looking within can only happen with trained self discipline, when the self gradually moves from looking at and being distracted by the happenings outside the confines of the human body into looking and meditating on what lies within itself in order to immediately experience its own reality and perfection.

Thus it follows that the ideal of experiencing Reality and self discipline as the recommended means to it, were the two aspects that almost the whole of Indian philosophy agreed upon. Logic and ethics were the means used to achieve these ends, but philosophy as a whole aimed beyond mere logic and ethics at the inward experience of realisation of Truth (Moksha) and the self discipline based on metaphysics that makes it possible (Hiriyanna, 1932, 24).

### **Vedanta Philosophy:**

The term Darśana in Sanskrit language means “vision” or “view”. In Indian philosophy the term refers to different philosophical view points explaining the basis of experiencing Reality. Of these Darśanas the ones that accept the authority of Vedas are called orthodox. These orthodox systems are six in number.

*we* make them do it). We enjoy the taste of orange (which is an object) and experience dreams (which could be called objects of the mind – we do experience fright at the sight of lion in our dreams, so we are the experiencer or subject while the object is our dream). But what does this ‘we’ denote, who is the subject?

The subject – Experiencer:

In the empirical world that we live in, we readily take ‘we’, the subject as the material body. This material body of ours consists of the sense organs that allow us to experience the world around us. It is these sense organs, so to speak, that come into contact with the objects. But by themselves alone, they cannot act or experience anything. They have to be ordered to do so.

Thus, there is something beyond the body with its sense organs that commands it. This we usually call as the Mind. So, is mind the experiencer? According to the Upaniṣads, the mind (called “Manas” in Sanskrit) is the one responsible for all conscious activity. The object experienced first comes into contact with the sense organs. The impressions received from them are then co-ordinated by the mind (Manas). Thus the sourness of an orange first comes into contact with the tongue but it is the mind that interprets it as ‘sourness’ and not ‘sweetness’. Thus the mind is merely a synthesiser of sensory impressions.

Thus far, the body with its sense organs and the mind have brought the process of experience to the statement: This orange is sour. But experience is not that alone and we have still not identified the ‘experiencer’. The judgement that, “This orange is sour. I do not like sourness. So I do not like this orange.” is made by our self-conscious ego through reason (or) intellect. In Sanskrit, this reason or intellect is called *Buddhi*. It is the *buddhi* or intellect that determines our attitudes, fortifies our beliefs and makes understanding possible (Deutsch, 1980, 60). So is intellect the subject, the experiencer? No, because all the intellect does is make value judgements for the ‘I’. Once judgement/determination that ‘I’ do not like the orange is made, the mind acting on the judgement resolves motor action and the hand throws the orange away.

Thus far, after carefully examining the process of experiencing the object we still do not know what/ who the experiencer is. The body with sense organs are the carriers, the mind the synthesiser, the intellect the determinant of experience. But who/what is it that enjoys the experience, the sourness of the orange? For whom or what is the judgement of the intellect made? I act consciously and am aware, yet “I” am not merely the intellect, mind or body – all these merely perform their role in making me conscious. Who/what then is this ‘me’? “The existence of the physical body with its diverse but co- operating parts implies the existence of something whose end it serves.

*“That something apart from which the beautifully co-ordinated mechanism of the body would remain meaningless is the soul” (Hiriyanna, 1932, 66).*

This soul is the subject and the experiencer of the phenomenal world. This soul is more usually called the self and in the Upaniśads and Vedanta it is called the **JIVA**.

**Jiva – The Self:**

What is the nature of this self? If it is not the body, mind or intellect, what is it? “Jiva” literally means “to continue breathing”. The self is that which is breath (prana), the experiencer and agent i.e. the soul has unconscious actions such as breathing and conscious activities of experiencing and acting.

*“ It is the innermost, all pervading, like the ether, subtle eternal, without any parts, without qualities, spotless, having no abilities like going or coming etc. devoid of ideas of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ and also of desire, aversion and effort, self effulgent by nature like the heat of fire or like the light of sun.....It is untouched by hunger and thirst, by grief and delusion and by old age and death....It is the self, which resides in the hearts of all beings and the seer of all intellects.”(George, 2001, 32).*

Different states of being are associated with the self, namely:

1. The physical body (annamaya)
2. The vital breath (pranamaya)
3. Experiencing of the conscious (manomaya)
4. Experiencing of the self-conscious (vijnanamaya)
5. Experiencing of bliss and perfect tranquility (anandamaya)

The jiva or self is a complex of all the above five states, its highest state being the level of perfect bliss which the Vedanta states as existing in Deep Sleep. Thus the jiva or self wrongly identifies itself with its gross physical body in the first state, in the second with life giving breath, in the third with mind that assimilates knowledge, in the fourth with the discriminating intellect, finally in the fifth the self realises its true nature. The fifth state 'anandamaya' is the one in which all subject-object distinctions cease to exist. In this state the self exists not in the empirical, phenomenal world but in the Transcendental alone, being able to perceive its tendency to wrongly identify itself with the body, mind or intellect. At this state, the self is fully integrated as one and exists as "pure subject" in its complete potentiality.

So, is this state 'Moksha' or liberation? Is this the experience of Ultimate Reality? But even before that, what is Ultimate reality?

Ultimate Reality:

The world we see around us is real. It exists, we see, hear, smell, taste and feel it. So it cannot be false. Yet, all things that belong to this world have a beginning and an end. That means that everything in this world decays which includes all things organic and inorganic. Even human bodies decay. So, though the world with all its beings is real can it be Ultimate reality? It cannot because it decays, it has an end. Something that ends cannot be Ultimate reality because then it is not ultimate anymore.

The world is experienced through the senses. But do the senses always convey the truth? A classic example oft quoted in Indian philosophic writing could be given here. A snake is seen and feared, getting closer it is realized that it is not a snake but a mere rope. The presence of a snake was an illusion, a wrong message from the sense of sight. Senses make mistakes. Many more such instances of mistaken identity could be quoted. What this goes to prove is that the ability of the senses is limited and sense data is not always reliable. Now, can the Brahman which is the undivided Ultimate Reality and Ultimate Truth be experienced through our limited and sometimes untrue senses? Definitely not.

So, Ultimate reality exists beyond this world. Yet this Ultimate reality has to be in this world too, for without its presence the reality of the phenomenal world ceases to have meaning. This Ultimate Reality, in Indian Philosophy is given the name Brahman.

The term Brahman denotes “that first reality.... from which the entire universe of our experience has sprung” (George, 2001, 26). Brahman is the one reality that is limitless, endless, undifferentiated, non dual, imperceptible and self-sufficient, constituted by pure Being, Intelligence and Thought. Brahman is unqualified and is “beyond the order of our empirical and worldly experience” (George, 2001, 26). Brahman is not a “he” or a “she” or even an “it”. In essence Brahman is a state of Being. “Brahman is that state which is when all subject/object distinctions are obliterated. *Brahman is ultimately a name for the experience of timeless plentitude of being*” (Deutsch, 1980, 9). Brahman is the Ultimate Reality which has manifested itself into the multitude of the world we see around us. Without Brahman, the world would not exist. Brahman is the Being in every being. Yet Brahman is not affected by the changes in the world. Brahman is both within and without the phenomenal world. Brahman is Ultimate Reality.

*“[Ultimate] Reality is defined as that which persists. That which exists in all periods of time. Remains the same in the past, present and future. [Ultimate] Reality exists both in the manifest and the unmanifest. The world arises out of [Ultimate] Reality. Exists in [Ultimate] Reality. Merges back into [Ultimate] Reality. [Ultimate] Reality is the substratum and the structure. [Ultimate] Reality is like the ocean. Exists in ocean. Merges back into ocean. Similarly the world is nothing but [Ultimate] Reality. Everything is [Ultimate] Reality.”*  
(George, 2001, 30).

#### Experience of Ultimate Reality:

The experience of Ultimate Reality is not a new, novel experience. It is nothing but the realization that “Everything is Reality”. In simpler terms, it is the integral undifferentiated experience of Ultimate reality. But then it was established earlier that any experience requires a subject and an object and the intervention of the senses. Yet it was also said that Ultimate reality is non-dual and limitless. So, if Ultimate reality is non-dual, how can it be relegated into the position of an object experienced? It cannot. Also, it was said that Ultimate Reality cannot be experienced through the senses. Ultimate

Reality is experienced in a state of Being which is beyond all distinctions of subject and object. “It is neither Brahman-Consciousness nor Self-Consciousness; it is pure consciousness without subject object duality”. Then experience of Ultimate Reality becomes nothing but the realization that the Self and Brahman are nothing but one and the same i.e. I am Brahman. It is the realization of one’s own true nature. This realization of self is called Moksha.

If I (the Self) am the Brahman or Ultimate Reality, then everything is Ultimate Reality. The only difference being that most beings are ignorant of this fact and have not realised it yet.

So, where does experience of art objects fit into the above scheme?

### **Art and Art-Experience:**

The first principle of Indian art begins from the belief that the entire world we see around us is a manifestation of the Ultimate Reality. For the artist, the act of creation of art imitates this first Act of Creation – All art purports to give form to the Divine Principle-to Ultimate reality.

*Every traditional artist uses the operations of his craft as a support to ‘contemplate divine ideas’, that is, to understand the principles governing gross manifestation. Identifying himself with and losing himself in his artistic operation he treads the path of spiritual progress.*  
(Kollar, 2000, 55)

Art is then a statement made by the artist about the Divine. In defining art one could quote the Indian work on rhetoric called ‘Sahitya Darpana’ translated by Coomaraswamy as ‘Art is a statement informed by ideal beauty’. Statement is the body and *rasa* the soul of the work of art in which *rasa* is a spiritual experience of the Essence that arises from a ‘perfected self-identification’. If such is the conception of art then surely it cannot be divorced from its theme and from experience – art can never exist for its own sake, much less architecture.

Experience here plays a pivotal role – experience of both the artist and the beholder of art. In all of Indian philosophy and art, experience is valued over intellectual perception. The starting point of Indian philosophy ‘The Vedas’ were fundamental spiritual experiences of the seers, they were not conceived as a result of intellectual apprehension but were just *experienced*. Till date, it is maintained that the aim of every individual person is to *experience* the Ultimate Reality, not ‘know’ it. But how does the Hindu tradition define art-experience? The simplest yet most profound definition of the term ‘experience’ is found in Rasa theory:

*“(Art) experience is an awakening or manifestation of various innate states which exist in the mind....as latent impressions that derive from past experiences” (unknown.)*

Experience is not mere stimulation of the senses. Senses are essential in enabling ‘experience’ but actual experience is an awakening of hidden impressions of the mind. Every art-object is conceived as being powerful enough to bring these impressions to the fore. If a single phrase was to be employed, art-objects ‘*move*’ us by creating the kind of experience described above. Does the fact that ‘experience’ is an awakening of mental impressions mean that it is brought about by intellectual activity like pure abstraction or logic? The answer is No. It is believed that this experience does not come about as a result of mere intellectual activity, but is directly perceived or experienced.

*“The reality of such perception is witnessed by every man on an infinitely small scale. It is the inspiration of the poet. It is at once the vision of the artist and the imagination of the natural philosopher”*  
(Coomaraswamy, 1981, 18).

Thus the experience of the artist, the translation of that experience into a suitable sensible form and the experience of the user when he/she comes in contact with that art-form constitutes that sum total of the art-experience.

According to Indian philosophy, art experience at its highest level, of both the artist who gives form to an art object and the beholder who experiences it, belongs to the realm where there is no distinction between the beholder and beheld i.e. the artist and the idea that he gives form to. It is just an experience and no more, for in this experience there is

no subject and object - the experiencer and experienced are one and the same. When this happens what is experienced is pure bliss or  $\varnothing$ nand©. The experiencer is raised to the level of being explained earlier in this section (Refer to the sub-section titled Jiva-The Self) as “ $\varnothing$ nand©maya”.

Predictably, this level of art-experience can only happen in a trained artist and an equally discerning beholder. Having spoken of all the metaphysics that gave rise to traditional Indian art and architecture and the depth of art-experience described above, one would conclude that art indeed was “high art”. It was created only for deeply intellectual people and not for the common masses. Yet facts point to the contrary, the beauty of a temple sculpture or the tranquility of a traditional home is hardly ‘abstract’. They are real experiences, wholly real even for the common man. Art and architecture have always touched people in whatever level they are willing to be touched. Traditional art and architecture, though aiming at the highest ideal of pure bliss, was also accessible to all levels of being. How was this achieved?

### **Levels of Art-experience:**

Three levels of meaning are spoken about in Indian philosophy with reference to the spoken word (George, 2001, 44). The first level is direct meaning conveyed by the word. For example, let us consider the sentence “She is blue”. The words in the sentence would literally mean that she is blue in colour. The second level is implied meaning which is meaning conveyed by way of metaphor. So, ‘she is blue’ may in fact imply that her body is blue for lack of oxygen. The third level is meaning hinted or suggested by association. The above stated sentence might imply that “I am feeling depressed”, since ‘blue’ is a colour associated with depression. (It is hoped that the concept expressed above in its barest reduced form does not detract the reader from the actual depth of the concept of nested meanings explored in great depth in Indian poetry and prose.) An analogous concept of ‘nested meanings’ (or experiences) is found in traditional Indian art.

### Sensible Experience:

At the most basic level art is the experience of the senses. It is the spontaneous reaction that arises when one beholds an art object. It is the pleasure that is felt directly by the senses contacting aesthetic surfaces (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 62) It is the experience of walking a street and seeing beautiful architecture, of entering a space and feeling the warmth of the floor and everything else that brings home 'an experience'. As Coomaraswamy (Coomaraswamy, 1935, www) says, it is the experience of the quivering flesh. If one takes the example of the courtyard (explained in detail in later sections), it is designed such that it is primarily an experience of the senses. The feel of rough ground beneath the feet while the wind from above touches the skin in the bright light of the court is a complete experience for the senses. It is the warmth of the hearth and the security of the roof – all these are experiences at the first level, *sensible meaning* which corresponds to the level of literal meaning in literature. Yet traditional man could not conceive the possibility of living *by bricks and mortar only* (Ed.Meister, 1995), the sensual attraction of an art-object was nothing but a summons to something beyond and not to itself. Here Coomaraswamy asks "...ought we to be so entranced by the sound of the dinner bell as to forget to eat?" (Ed.Lipsey, 1977, 69) Beyond the sound of the dinner bell is waiting the actual multi-course feast; beyond the sensual experience were encoded many levels of metaphysical experience.

### Metaphysical Experience:

At the metaphysical level, the center of the building site was left open as it was considered as the Center of the Universe, the womb of the earth. The roof of the home was thought of as the all encompassing sky. It becomes evident that this level corresponds to the level of metaphor – the roof as a metaphor for the sky, center of the home for the center of the Universe so on and so forth. Simply put, a metaphor is a symbol. It is from this symbolic meaning that the sensible meaning derived its content.

*The essential distinction between the profane and symbolic point of view is simply this: that a profane operation preoccupies itself merely with the appearance of the sensible order, whilst the symbolic operation transposes these appearances into the ideal and causal orders, since it is from these higher principles that the sensible manifestation derives its existence. (Kollar, 2001, 55)*

### Transcendental Experience

Beyond this level of metaphor is the level of suggestion or transcendence. When one experiences Reality beyond all symbols and meanings, one transcends the physicality of the experience and realizes one's Self. This is the Ultimate aim of all art, yet the other levels of meanings/experiences cannot be belittled, for they are the stepping stones that lead to the final experience. It is said "What is one's thought, that he becomes" and to quote Coomaraswamy "...in so far as his(man's) communication and understanding are limited to "matters of fact", he is not merely "a little" but a great deal " lower than the Angels". (The term 'angels' here could be taken to refer to the highest ideal of man or the perfected man.)

In conclusion it could be said that while the Indian art/architectural tradition found a place for the human body to rest, it also catered to mankind's aspirations towards perfection. While the physical world was never denied, it was never considered as the end of the road, one was always urged to go beyond and discover one's true self – art being the perfect vehicle for it. Thus art responded at various levels, Experience of the senses being only first of many levels and Self-realisation the ultimate.

The above argument illustrates an important aspect of the Indian tradition and culture – the concept of understanding the unknown through the known. Coomaraswamy says that:

*" Ideal art is rather a spiritual discovery, than a creation"* (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 19)

The levels of experience described above also mean a gradual discovery of art by the beholder. Each succeeding level of experience is a discovery, the final experience being the discovery of one's own self. This, in simpler words would mean that art experience is a journey from the known to the unknown until Reality itself becomes known. The importance and prevalence of this concept in Indian tradition and its operation in art will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **The known and unknown**

The world is a strange mix of known and unknown aspects. Science by far explains most of what we observe around us. But there are some phenomena beyond the reaches of science, which defy any logical explanations. Though some can be written off as illusions and hallucinations, certain central mysteries like ‘How was the world created?’ “What makes it work in the order that it does?” “What happens after people die?” are valid, the answers (despite many theories) remains elusive. This sense of mystery was predominant in primitive societies where animistic thinking and imagination prevailed. But most of it has been dispelled by the advent of science and the world of facts. Thus there are two components – the known and the unknown though the proportion of known to unknown has changed drastically with changing times. Similarly our experiences of life can be thought of as happening at two levels. One is the experience of the known and the other the experience of *unknown*.

### **Known experience:**

Man experiences as long as he exists. The experience of giving birth to a child; the experience of love; the experience of a beautiful dawn – the hues of the sky, the smell of fresh dew, the feel of wet grass, the taste of humidity in air.....war, peace, adventure, just mundane everyday life....all these experiences fall within the realms of the known. This experience comes about from practical contact with and observation of facts or events. It is constituted by the body of life processes that we go through as human beings and creatures of this phenomenal world. Thus collectively every experience that belongs to this world around us can be termed as “experience of the known”.

### **Experience of unknown:**

The experience of *unknown* is the experience of that lies beyond the realm of this physical world; that which cannot be proven as existing merely by the senses or the mind. The *unknown* is experienced only intuitively and can only be explained, albeit inadequately by abstract logic. We hear people say that they lost themselves in music – they lost their sense of time and place. There are those who say they saw a blinding light

that transformed them, yet others say they felt a force within. They were given a taste of the *unknown*. Precisely because the *unknown* is not known in the same way that we get to know the world around us i.e. through the senses and because it is not a uniform experience for one and all, all explanations to try to describe the *unknown* fall short. Yet there is no denying that this *unknown* exists or that one can experience this. This *unknown* has been the subject matter of philosophy, theology, spirituality and in some instances even science.

Thus we see that both the known and unknown are experienced and find a place in our lives on this earth and beyond.

### ***Unknown through the known:***

We human beings live in the physical phenomenal world. We only know those things that are observable and perceptible through our senses and mind. That is why the *unknown* is usually approached through what is already known to us. This method is common in all forms of Indian tradition. While abstract reasoning and logic belong in the realm of philosophy, Ultimate Truth and Reality and many lesser morals and principles are weaved into myths and legends that can be easily understood by people at large, not requiring any dexterity of mind. Essentially all things that lie beyond grasp are understood through examples and lore. Explained below are some of the most outstanding examples of this.

### **Idol Worship:**

The Ultimate reality, as we discussed earlier, is considered to be limitless, defying description and infinite. If such were its nature, Ultimate reality remains an abstract philosophical construct in itself. How then can people be motivated towards understanding/realising it? It is here that theology and philosophy work together. The very many powers of this world – all considered to be manifestations of the Ultimate Reality – are all given like-human form in the Indian tradition. This is so that one can identify oneself with and aspire to be like the idols that represent Perfection.



Fig 1 & 2: Some revered Hindu idols

Sometimes these forces are given form for one to be able to contemplate upon or believe in. Thus we have the Lord Rama who is Parama Purushan or the Perfect Male. We have Ganesha who is the personification of the force that dispels obstacles. Durga, the personification of feminine power; Shakti, creative force personified; Sita, the Perfect Wife etc all have human form.

### **Individual's yearning towards self-realisation:**

As we saw earlier, realisation of self is the ultimate goal of all mankind according to Indian tradition. But it still is an abstract construct for the majority of people. At an everyday level this notion is interpreted as the individual soul's yearning to unite with God. This finds expression in many ways – giving rise to a variety of mythological constructs varying along the length and breadth of India.

### **Radha and Krishna:**

The epic Mahabharata is known throughout the world. It represents the triumph of good over evil and sends across the message that one has to do one's duty at all times. It is also the epic which includes in itself the great wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita. The hero, if it could be termed so is the Cowherd called Krishna. Krishna in fact is the incarnation of the Lord. As a child he gets away with stealing butter and a lot of other mischief. He also plays the flute and captures the hearts of all the womenfolk. They find that they are drawn to Him despite themselves. His special love is the cow-girl Radha. This part of the epic, depicting the love they share is one of the most sensuous, emotive even erotic

pieces of Indian literature. Various descriptions of Krishna – His appearance and Music – the way the womenfolk (Gopikas) fall in love with Him is the subject matter of many a poetry and song in India to this day. It is called Rasa Lila. Rasa is *essence* or for want of a better word, it can be explained as enjoyment facilitated by the senses and Lila is play. So Rasa Lila is Play of Essence or Play of sense provoked enjoyment. But it is the images that show Krishna embracing many different Gopikas simultaneously that is of interest to us here.



Fig 3: Lord Krishna dances with many women at the same time.

To an uninitiated viewer Krishna may appear to be vain and unscrupulous – hardly an example of the Perfection of man. But at a deeper level what this represents is as follows:

Krishna - is the Lord, the personification of Perfection – Paramatman, Ultimate Reality manifested

Gopikas – are the individual souls – Jivatma, clothed in the physical body believing themselves to be imperfect and yearning to be perfect.

That the Gopikas yearn to be with Krishna despite themselves represents the soul's natural inclination to be one with the Ultimate Reality. In other words, the Jivatma desiring union with the Paramatman. Krishna's embracing of the Gopikas denotes that if one truly desires to be one with the Lord, the all-loving Lord will grant it.

Thus a philosophical abstraction – the soul yearning for self-realisation - is given life through the known and familiar emotion of love operating through senses and minds of the known characters of a cowherd clan.

Thiruppaavai:

Another interesting rendering of the same theme exists in the Tamil speaking region of Southern India. It is a legend that belongs to the Bhakti era of the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Here Aandaal is a child who dreams of marrying the Lord Vishnu one day. Her father, Vishnuchittan does service at the nearby Vishnu Temple. He collects fragrant flowers from the temple gardens called Nandavanam and strings them into a garland for the idol of the Lord. In India, the most important custom in a wedding ceremony that declares the bride & groom as married is when they exchange their garlands. Unbeknown to her father, Aandaal tries on the garland on herself before Vishnuchittan takes it to the temple to garland the Lord. One day Aandaal is caught red handed with the garland meant for the Lord on her shoulders, by her father. Her rebukes her and makes a fresh garland for the Lord. But to his surprise, tears stream down the eyes of the Lord when offered the fresh garland. At that moment Vishnuchittan realises that he has interrupted a silent conversation between his daughter and the Lord. He then proceeds to ask the Lord's hand in marriage to his daughter. There are 30 verses of poetry composed by Aandaal in the meantime called the Thiruppaavai, which speaks of her love of the Lord. Finally the Lord and Aandaal are united together in holy matrimony.

These verses are popular even today in the region, sung early in the morning in the Tamil month of Maarghazhi. It is considered an auspicious month for unmarried girls and so weddings are not conducted during the 30 days of the month of Maarghazhi.

The deeper meaning embedded in the Thiruppaavai legend is similar to the Radha Krishna lore.

The individual soul (jivatma) is represented by Aandaal. Her instinctive love even as a child for the Lord, whom she believes to be the force behind the idol in the temple, is the soul's natural inclination towards union with the Perfect Being, the Paramatman. That the idol of the Lord sheds tears when not offered the garland tried on by Aandaal tells us that the Lord, realising Aandal's love for Himself ( the yearning of jivatman to realise it's true self) acknowledges it and finally embraces Aandaal in marriage. Once again the philosophical truth - that the individual soul yearns for union with the Ultimate being and

when it truly does so is rewarded – is cleverly expressed through legend using known characters and their familiar emotions and actions.

These legends are just two examples among abundant lore that exist to this day in India, that express the unfamiliar theme of experiencing the Unknown through the familiar forms of everyday characters.

#### Maata-Pitha-Guru-Deivam:

A very pertinent truth that is introduced to children which leads on to greater principles as they grow older is the concept of Maata-Pitha-Guru-Deivam. Maatha is mother, Pitha is father, Guru is teacher and Deivam is Divinity. As a child one is curious about the concept of Divinity. It remains strange and incomprehensible. So, the child is initiated to an understanding of Divinity by being taught the above concept. This has to be especially understood within the context of ancient India where the roles of individuals were clearly demarcated – the mother is the primary care giver and stays at home, the father is the bread winner and gets to travel outside, the teacher has the task of watching over and imparting knowledge to his wards who stay with him and his family till they have completed their study under him. As a child, within its small world Maata or mother remains central and all encompassing; then it discovers its father or Pitha who introduces it to the world outside the home, and the child's world is occupied primarily by its father; at the next stage when the child starts learning, the Guru or teacher is everything to him/her; gradually the child is initiated into the concept of Deivam. Thus as the child grows, gradually the character of infallibility is transferred from the mother to the father to the teacher to the Lord.

The unknown turf of faith in Divinity is approached through the known, recognised feeling of love, awe etc. for the figures of the mother, father and teacher.

#### The Sexual Union:

Much has been discussed about the treatise on sexual union written in India by the sage Vatsyayana called Kama Sutra. There has also been a lot of research on the presence of sculptures of couples entwined in various sexual poses found in many Indian temple

complexes, with the temple at Khajuraho being most famed for it. It has puzzled many an onlooker that sex should be so blatantly displayed in the most sacred of places – the temples. To conclude that ancient Indians were perverts or sex maniacs would be crass and not do justice to the concept behind the creation of these sculptures.

Sex, according to the Indian tradition is not the mere coming together of two bodies in lust. It is the striving of two souls to rise beyond the physical world to experience that which lies beyond and remains hidden to us in our everyday moments. It is a conduit to experience the magic of infinity. The coming together of two bodies in love-making is akin to the soul's union with Ultimate Reality. When individuals stumble upon those rare moments when they rise beyond their body and feel the essence of themselves as not being different from the essence of Ultimate Reality, they are suspended from the physical world for a few fleeting moments just like in sexual release. The sexual release is called the smaller joy (*sittrinbam*) while the spiritual coming together to find one's essence is called the larger joy (*brahmaanandam*) (Ananth, 1999, 73). This smaller joy is also found when one loses oneself in sculpture, music, dance or drama or any of the arts. Thus one is drawn towards that which is as yet unknown through familiar instruments of sculpture, architecture, music or even sex. That is the reason why so much of importance has been given to sexual union, with a whole treatise being written on perfecting the act, so that one may be given a taste of what it means to rise beyond the physical phenomenal world. Within this context, sculpture depicting sexual themes does find its rightful place in temples dedicated to the personification of Ultimate Reality, asking the devotee to become one with it.

Thus we see that within the Indian tradition the concept of understanding the unknown through the known, is a common way of making abstract philosophical constructs accessible to the common mass.

### **The concept of unknown in Indian art:**

The metaphysical basis on which almost all forms of Indian art and literature have evolved consists in the quest for knowing the '*unknown*'. Rephrasing, it could be termed as understanding the *unknown* or better still as '*realising the unknown*'. The terms

‘realisation’ or ‘experience’ are preferred to ‘understanding’ and ‘knowledge’ when referring to the ‘*unknown*’ because it is believed that the nature of the *unknown* is not limited by language or mere descriptions. The *unknown* is infinite, indescribable and limitless and so can only be realised or experienced directly. This *unknown* is variously referred to as the Ultimate Reality, Ultimate Truth and Ultimate Beauty (Satyam Shivam Sundaram).

As explained earlier, according to the Indian philosophy of Vedanta; the whole world is a manifestation of one Ultimate reality called the Brahman. This Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world we see around us. Within this framework emerges the relationship between the known and the *unknown* and also the means to realising the *unknown*.

If Brahman exists beyond the physical, phenomenal world and if the world as we know it, including ourselves, is a manifestation of the Brahman, then knowing the Brahman means realising that “I am Brahman”. This self realisation is what all of Indian philosophy is aimed at. The path towards this self-realisation is long and arduous, requiring one to go through various levels of being before the final experience happens.

But while philosophical speculation and contemplation remains the domain of a select few, art belongs to the masses. Art is enjoyed and experienced by one and all, albeit according to their own level of consciousness. Thus the onus of aiding the general people towards their goal of self-realisation comes to rest upon Art.

Realisation of the Brahman is an individual pursuit but it can be aided in many different ways, of which art is the most effective. For in art, subtle ways of bringing one closer to the Ultimate reality can be encoded. One of the oral verses of Vastu Shilpa Shastra – traditional Indian treatises on architecture and sculpture – has the following to say:

*In sound through Music, In body through dance  
In words through poetry, In space through architecture  
In form through sculptur, In thought through mathematics  
A person can experience the divine.* (Ananth, 1999, 55 & 56)

Thus the art object holds in itself the potential to initiate the individual into the experience of the other. The process of creating an art object is similar to the process of Creation itself. The essence of the artist is manifest in the object he/she creates like Brahman is manifest in the world created. This 'threshold into the other' happens naturally in rare moments.....when the collective consciousness and the larger energy become palpable to the individual's understanding due to a certain configuration of space (Ananth, 1999, 69).

Thus all art forms become vehicles for the experience of the Ultimate Reality. In this journey to discover the unknown through art forms, the basic known entity and point of reference is the body. The centrality of the body in initiating the journey will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Body in Indian Architecture:

*“One who probes into the significance of our (the Hindu) architectural terms will be struck by this conception of architecture in terms of the human organism”*  
(Kollar, 2000, 30)

It is a puzzle to many a student of Indian art and architecture that, being based on the metaphysics of *Moksha*, traditional Indian art forms should carry such sensuousness. It is astounding that from the forms of sensuous maidens who lend their image to sculpture, to the subtle nuances of a dance-drama, to the treatise on pleasure called *Kamasutra*, a complete theory of aesthetics (Rasa theory) has been evolved. When Spiritual pursuit is given the highest stance, how does one explain the development of material pleasures to such high levels of sophistication? The answer also lies in Indian philosophy itself.

### Human Body as Point of Reference:

Experience of whatever kind starts from the human body. The experience of pleasure/pain or any other emotion requires the presence of an object that gives rise to the emotion and the subject who experiences it. The subject accesses the pleasure giving object through his/her sense organs. It has to be reminded here that Indian philosophy considers the mind to be a sixth sense organ (refer to sub-section in the chapter Indian philosophy titled Subject-Experiencer). So, even if the enjoyment is a mental/intellectual activity, it requires the participation of the mind which is considered as an internal (*antahakarana*) sense organ. Thus to access any enjoyment, the presence of the sense organs which automatically implies the presence of the human body is essential. But then one asks, what has *Moksha* or Self-realisation got to do with enjoyment or sense-experience?

Any art object, like a statue or a work of architecture though its highest ideal is to aid in the process of Self realisation, does not immediately take the beholder to the level of experiencing the Ultimate Reality. As explained in preceding sections, many layers of meanings are encoded in it. How those meanings are read and experienced depend on how prepared the beholder is. The more ready he/she is, the greater is the level of experience he/she gets. Yet the most basic of these levels of meaning is its appeal to the

physical senses. “The function of objective beauty in the work of art is to attract us to the theme or use of the object before us” (Coomaraswamy, 1935, www). That is the most basic level at which the art-object works. Yet if it stopped there – at mere sensual response, the whole experience of the art-object would become superficial. After this initial experience, follow the other levels of experience and understanding that decode the various meanings encoded in the art object. To carry on with our argument here, the body (with its sense organs) is the starting point of any experience. [Here we speak of the general masses and not include those enlightened beings who reach Moksha directly.] Thus as long as we are beings of this phenomenal world, the body is a precious instrument in propelling us towards our unrealised goal.

#### Human Body as Analogy:

Speaking from a different viewpoint, to an individual who is striving for oneness with the Ultimate reality which is unknown to him/her, the body is an analogy that is known. The ordered Universe is analogical to the human body – with its various parts and organs working together as an organic whole, similar to the ordered universe which consists of many components each different from each other but which function together to ‘keep the world going’ as it were. Parts of the universe relate rhythmically to the Whole, like parts of the body relating to its existence as a wholesome entity.

Another analogy is with the temple. A temple is considered as an abode of God. It has many openings which are also points of access. The body, like the temple is indwelt by the Ultimate Reality and represents its possibilities of manifestation in time and space (Ed.Lipse, 1977, 5). The body as an enclosure though temporary against the permanence of the soul, is the soul’s abode in this physical world. Similar to the openings in the temple are the openings in the body (i.e. the sense organs) that act as points of access. Yet most important analogy is that of the *Garbha Griha*. Literally translated, it means “Womb House”. It is the innermost chamber of the temple – the sanctum sanctorum. The physical feel of the sanctum itself is womb-like. It is a dark, windowless, low-ceilinged chamber. It is also the most important chamber within the temple complex, where the image of the principal deity is established. Analogous to the human womb, it is the place where transformation and regeneration of the human soul is expected to occur. Entry into

the garbha griha symbolically denotes the return to the beginning of all things, to one's own being, similar to one's sojourn in one's mother's womb – the very beginning of life in this world, where the Lord is the mother and every creature her child.

Thus the body and architecture (and all other forms of art) were intimately linked. The body became an analogy to understand concepts of metaphysical nature and thus gained its place of pride within the Indian tradition. Unlike the Christian notion of the body as a facilitator of sin, the Hindu culture held body to be sacred, capable of taking the individual to higher levels with the right discipline.

Gradually a whole system of philosophy developed that focussed on the psycho-physical fine tuning to enable spiritual enlightenment. This system of philosophy as listed elsewhere in this document is the Yoga philosophy. According to the Yoga philosophy, the body is the temple in which the soul resides. The body is not an end in itself but is an indispensable means of liberation from every sort of enclosure (Ed.Lipsey, 1977, 5) (and ultimately liberation from ignorance or Maya i.e. self realisation). Thus we see that for an individual who aspires towards Moksha which is called an indescribable and hence an unknown experience, the body as a known and experienced entity, becomes a basic tool to initiate understanding. Experience follows from this understanding at a much later stage. Especially in architecture, which was necessarily created for use by the human being the body was perceived as the basic unit of this phenomenal world – the known world, though it never stopped with body alone, the soul with all of man's aspirations were also to be housed. It is around this human body that space was ordered rhythmically, in consonance with a perceived cosmic order - body, in tune with the spaces which were in tune with the larger cosmos.

In order to understand the primacy of the body in the Indian tradition, one has to understand the conception of the body according to Indian philosophy.

## **Body in Indian philosophy:**

The predominant metaphysics of Indian Yoga philosophy states that this created world we live in, including every being in it has two causes for its existence – the material(substantial) cause and efficient(essential) cause called Prakrti(Primal matter) and Purusha(Spirit) respectively. This Primal matter, from which the material of the entire world - both physical and mental - is derived, is made up only of three substantive entities called Gunas:

1. Sattva : illumination or intelligence principle,
2. Rajas : energy or principle of nature of action and
3. Tamas : inertia or obstructive principle(Dasgupta, 1924, 3).

These three entities in a state of equipoise *is* the Primal matter (Chennakesavan, 1980, 23). It is also only these three elements that compose all phenomena - both the physical ones and the mental ones. The three Gunas are in themselves the potentiality of all things mental and physical in this world; and they conjoin in different proportions, regulated by limiting factors such as time and space to form the manifold physical world on the outside and also the diverse internal faculties and phenomena. Thus it comes to be that the material and mental aspects of our experiences are made up by the same ‘stuff’, only differing in the evolvment of the Gunas that comprise them. Between the mental processes and physical objects, one is in no way superior or inferior to the other since both are made up of the three Gunas. Thus the body and mind are both made up of the same ‘stuff’ ie matter. The mind only being composed of finer particles of matter than the body, in other words mind is matter in the form of energy whereas body is gross matter itself. So between the mind and the body one is not more sacred or profane than the other. But together both these serve a common purpose.

As indicated elsewhere in this document (Refer to the sub-section “Ultimate Reality” under Indian Philosophy), Brahman or Ultimate Reality is both the material and efficient cause of this manifested world in other words both Prakrti and Purusha (Matter and Spirit) exist in Brahman. But in this unmanifest state, where there is no differentiation

and the world exists only in potential, spiritual progress is not possible. With the metaphysical act of manifestation, the differentiation of Primordial Matter and Spirit in the Brahman is effected, following which the entire world with its individual beings is manifested. Then the goal of all manifested forms is to be reintegrated into Brahman. And so, in our context the purpose of the Gunas combining to form various forms including the body and mind is to liberate the Purusha or Spirit from its abode in this physical world and effect its re-integration with the Ultimate Being i.e. Self-realisation or Moksha.

### **Notions of the Body, Place and Divinity:**

The notion of body as a sacred space exists throughout India. But moving from the high metaphysics of the argument so far to the simple notions of Hindu village folk one comes across a unique perception of the relationship between the physical human body, the body of the Divinity and the physical space of the village widely prevalent in the Southern parts of India. This part of the document derives almost entirely from the essay “Madurai: The City as Goddess” by Dennis Hudson (Ed. Spodek and Srinivasan, 1993).

A village is called an ūr. Thus there are various villages called Kadalūr - Kadal meaning Sea and ūr meaning village for a village near the Bay of Bengal Sea – Perur meaning big village and so on and so forth. Many of these villages have belief in a presiding deity. These deities usually take female form called Amman derived from the root word Amma meaning mother. Thus we have Mariamman, Māsaniamman etc. The ills and good in a particular village is said to be the result of the actions of the villagers either pleasing or displeasing the presiding deity.



**Fig 4**

The idol of an Amman with a spear and other weapons – symbols of protection. The bunch of neem leaves at the entrance is also symbolic of Amman. It has healing properties and is especially used during chicken pox.

Within the above context, the space of the ūr itself is perceived as a human body. The centre of the ūr

is perceived as the core of the body – its consciousness, from which it proceeds outwards towards the periphery. The boundaries of the *ūr* are vulnerable to invasion and sentinel deities are employed for protection. The soil of the *ūr* has its inherent character and as manifestation of Mother Earth has its own decisive disposition which forms its personality. It is believed that this inherent character is also shared by those who live from it for generations. In his essay “Is there an Indian way of thinking”, A. K. Ramanujam states as follows: “The soil in the village which produces crops for the people, affects their character; houses have mood and character, change the fortune and moods of the dwellers” (Ramanujam, 1989, 51) Thus there is an interpenetration of the bodies of the *ūr* and the bodies of its inhabitants “the *ūr* serving as their mother with whom they share their material substance”. The term “*maṇin maindhan*” meaning ‘son of the soil’ is taken seriously and interpreted literally in these villages. It must also be noted here that similar to the western practice of succeeding one’s name with a surname, in India it was a practice until recent times to precede one’s name (usually indicated by an initial) by the village from which one comes – the village served as one’s anchor and identity.

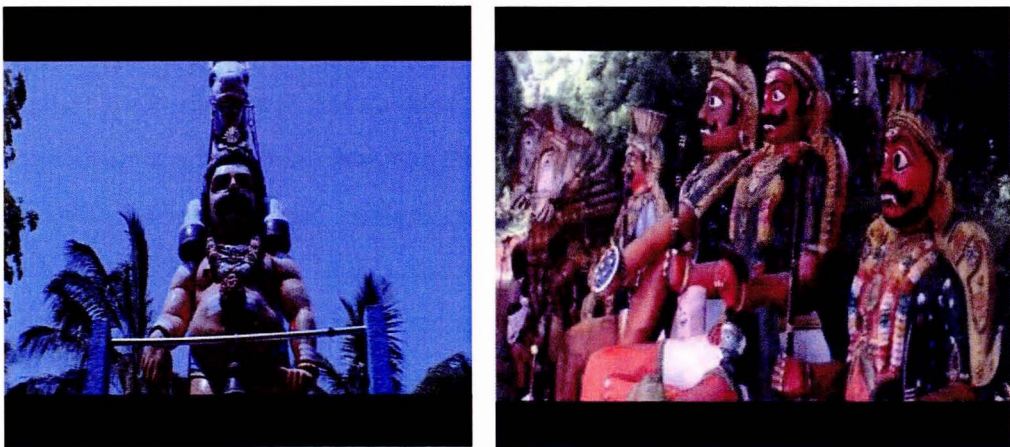


Fig 5&6: Various village deities of protection – male representations called Ayyanaar

Thus this divine Mother of the *ūr* “draws people to herself as a fixed center, gives them and the village they build their identity, and defends them from whatever alien substances may intrude”. She is fertile – allowing people to live from her, maternal in nurturing her sons (and daughters) and warlike in defending them from enemies – she is Amman “the

lady who *is* the ūr itself. She expresses her fury in the form of fever and pox. When a child gets chicken pox it is not called so, it is said that Amman has come to the child's body. This is not an archaic parlance, it is used even today. Amman occasionally enters the body of a villager to express herself. When that happens, the person into whose body she is supposed to have entered is called 'Ātha' meaning mother and is worshipped as the Goddess herself.

Every once a while on designated days, even in urban centers of contemporary Southern India, a simple ritual is performed in the privacy of one's home, inviting female neighbors. A pre-pubescent girl is offered oblations of sari, bangles, saffron turmeric etc., the idea being that the girl is a personification of the Goddess for the day and is worshipped as one.

From the above illustration we derive that people in general are very aware of their bodies. At one level, understanding of another physical entity outside of oneself i.e. physical place is enabled by this awareness of body. The place is imagined and understood as a body itself with a core, a periphery and a persona. At the next level, the *unknown* becomes known as the Goddess by being given a human body with supernatural powers. Inexplicable natural happenings like famine, floods and their positive counter-happenings are attributed to this Goddess. Once again we come across ways in which the unknown is approached through the known. But more important for us is the fact that this understanding starts from one's own body. Thus the human body holds a unique place amongst the people of India, in this case southern India. The notion that the human body is interpenetrable with Divine body and physical place of the ūr is expressed through various ways outlined above.

“Generally among Indians there seems to be a different relationship to outside reality, compared to the one met with in the West. In India it is closer to a certain stage in childhood when outer objects did not have a separate, independent existence but were intimately related to the self and its affective states.”

The above was an observation made by a sophisticated psychoanalyst, deeply knowledgeable in matters Indian as well as Western called Sudhir Kakar (Ramanujam, 1989, 45).

The inter-penetrability between the physical place and the human body on the one hand, between the human body and the Goddess on the other and finally between the perceived body of the Goddess and the physical place amply illustrates that the above observation is in fact true even today.

So also, the metaphysical understanding that the world of internal processes and external objects are only differentiated by degrees but are in fact comprised of the same substantive entities also indicates a certain blurring of boundaries between inside and outside – a certain lack of distinction between self and non-self. Within this context, the possibilities for architecture, though being on the outside - as non-self, to aid and abet the process of integration of the self and non-self through profound 'experience' are immense. At the very least, architecture could heighten experience within the physical realm and provide meaning to the people who inhabit it. But at its most profound level, architecture also holds the possibility of giving a taste of the Ultimate experience, for those beings metaphysically ready for such an experience.

## **Macro- and Microcosm: Finding a place for the human within:**

Spatially the aspect of interior/exterior integration described in the previous section is beautifully translated into the internal courtyard, typical of traditional Indian architecture. This courtyard is a common feature found almost in all traditional building types that has gained popularity in academic/professional circles in recent times in the works of well-known Indian architect Charles Correa. It functions as an interior space with an exterior character. Spatially, its edges rather than being defined by solid walls are framed by columns, thus blurring its boundaries. It is a seemingly multi-use space serving many purposes simultaneously and consequently can be interpreted in different layers. Two of these interpretations are the courtyard as the physical plane of the human body and the metaphysical plane of the transcendent Self.

*“In almost all parts of the country, the courtyard has been adopted as a device for physical well-being as well as spiritual contentment. Be it an individual building with its private court, or group dwellings with their quadrangle, the open space has been integrated into the life and relationships of the people” (Ananth, 1999, 137).*

Courtyard as the physical space:

The societies of the world are broadly classified as individualistic or collectivistic with India, along with many other Asian countries, belonging to the latter. This is especially true of Hindu culture that is under discussion. Collectivistic societies foster the values of a group over that of an autonomous, unique individual. Members of such cultures always see themselves as “fundamentally connected” with others (Matsumoto, 2000). In such a scenario, the collective becomes more important than the individual. It follows that the time that one effectively spends in privacy i.e. in the absence of the immediate family and extended family, is limited and kept to a minimum.

Inevitably, privacy as defined by the Western notion as “*having one’s own space*” hardly exists. In such a scenario definite boundaries are hard to draw with those that exist being ambiguous at best. There being varying degrees of social/communal space and time, places for gathering and meeting are also many and varied. While private space remains at a minimum and is defined, collective space is differentiated into many forms,

Fig 7: A typical courtyard.



courtyard being one such collective space. “The hot summer months become bearable because of the open court and in winters they play their part in community gatherings.” (Ananth, 1999, 138)

In general until recent times, traditional societies in the various parts of India lived

collectively in large joint families, mostly paternal but some maternal too, following their own codes of conduct. Many rural areas still follow the joint family system, though it is fast disappearing in urban centres and larger towns. Also, beyond the family setup, communities that shared a common vocation, tended to live together. Owing to this collective nature of society, access to spaces had to be controlled.



Fig 8

Courtyard as an internal universe –  
The family gathering space; the focal point of the home.

Architecture was charged with the responsibility of ensuring that people who entered the household were rightly oriented and knew their place. Thus, there was always a gradual progression from the public to the semi public to the semi private to the private realm. Considering the residential context (See examples 1, 2 & 3, Pg.a-e, at the end of chapter),

when one entered the boundaries of a residential unit from the street, one first encounters a veranda. While the street acted as a public space, the veranda becomes a semi-public space. Many a visitor is greeted here and leaves without entering the house-proper. Then, when invited, the visitor enters a courtyard, usually via a passage. This courtyard now becomes a semi-private space, where only those invited could enter. From this court, one enters small rooms where valuables and personal belongings are stored. This is the most private realm. Usually very few other than the person whose belongings are stored enter this space and that too by invitation only.

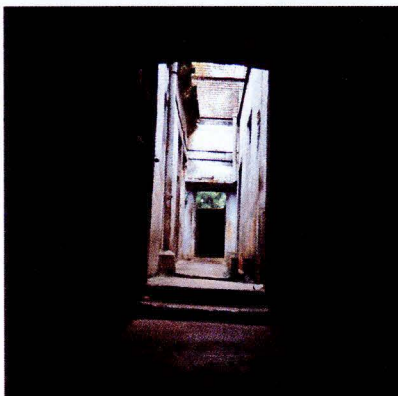


Fig 9: The private room to store belongings

Fig 10: The common court with openings above – a variation of the open court.

Fig 11: The passage from the common court leading to the open backyard beyond.

In bigger households there may be two or more courtyards (See example 1, Pg. a). In actuality the purpose of each courtyard changes with its context. The one nearest to the

street will serve to receive the guests of the men-folk of the family. A bucket of water and a mug is usually placed in a corner of this court for cleaning one's dirty feet as one enters. Usually the courtyard in the rear will serve as the arena of the womenfolk. While the former provides space for business and other discussions, the latter is the place where womenfolk gather to do their daily chores – cutting of vegetables, cleaning and skinning meat, supervising children, grinding spices, cleaning vessels etc.

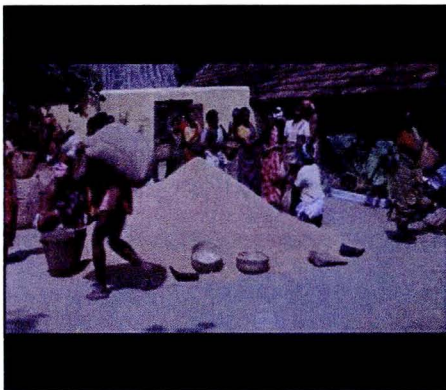


Fig 12,13,14 & 15 : Courtyards in various contexts



There may be a court in which bathing and ablution facilities can be located. A court around the bathing facility is ideal in the Indian context. For example, in many subcultures of India taking an oil bath at least once a week is customary. It is usually done on Fridays for women and girls and on Saturday for boys and men. On the designated day, all the male/female children in the household are rounded up and the oil-bath process begins with massaging oil onto the head and body – usually done by the lady

of the house or a person specially employed for it. Then the oil is allowed to soak during which time one does not do any chores and cannot mix with others in the household because of the oiliness. The bath court is ideal at this time for it gives children the freedom to move around without disturbing the routine of the house while waiting to be bathed. During this time, the water is also heated up in a corner of the courtyard using firewood. Finally a good, long bath is given in the hot water in semi enclosed bathrooms. These bath-courts usually also have a washing facility and clotheslines too. There may also be other service courts for example, in rural areas where daily labourers are employed to work in the agricultural fields a specific court may exist where they come to present their problems and where produce is measured out.

But spatially what is most striking is the ambience in and around these courts. They function almost, like a world within a world. Shielding one from the harsh glare of the tropical zone, these courtyards offer a highly sensual experience: The entrance is marked by a splashing of cow dung on the ground with rice powder designs (called kolams) drawn on them. The entrance door is flanked by colonnaded verandas leading to the courtyard with light from above, bordered on all sides by dark private rooms.

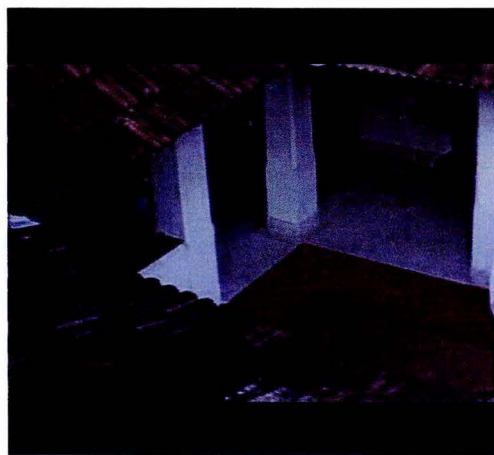


Fig 16 & 17: The chiaroscuro of courtyard and surrounds

These courts, in dry arid zones, have large troughs of water placed at the centre that cools the room as the passing wind picks up this humidity. Thus one sees the sky above and revels in the light that is let in, feels the wind blowing through to dispel the heat of the harsh sunlight, hears the background noises outside – the rustling of leaves or even the comforting hum of people going about their lives, inhales the faint smell of cow dung and

outside dust while the dark silent rooms around the court gives a sense of security. The chiaroscuro (light and shade effect) made possible by the courtyard sparks life into these homes. In fact, the light cotton clothing and barefoot habit of the Indian people reinforces this experience. These have to be experienced first hand to realise how deeply this courtyard space is imbibed in the lives of the Indian people on an everyday basis. The outside is brought in – with the absence of confining walls making the space seem larger than it is and the comforting feeling of known space (the private rooms) close by giving a sense of security, one almost feels part of the outside world within the warmth of one's own home.

In essence, these courtyard spaces become an almost unconscious spatial expression of the observed nature of the Indian people: a space that can be called an 'outside reality that is intimately related to the inside'. Simultaneously, it also relates deeply to the body and senses at once enabling the body to function freely and readily stimulating all the senses. It is only logical that the courtyard is a device widely employed by the Indian people who are so aware of their bodies.

#### The Metaphysical space:

While at one level, as seen above, the courtyard relates to the physical human body; at another level it has deep metaphysical significance.

The non-dual Brahman that existed before creation was effected, first differentiates into the efficient and material cause, Purusha and Prakrti. As man was created from these two causes, "every organ, the corresponding sense and the correlating element were also conceived as evolved" (Chennakesavan, 1980, 4).

*From space appeared air, From air appeared fire,  
From fire appeared water, From water appeared earth,  
From earth appeared the herbs, From herbs appeared food,  
From food appeared human beings, Therefore human being is pervaded by food.  
-Taittiriya Upanishad (Ch2, Sec1)(Ananth, 1999, 93)*

Thus enumerating the evolution of the various elements of air, water, fire, earth and ether; the human senses namely sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are considered as their evolutes; sound is an evolute of ether (ākāśa), touch of air, sight of fire, taste of water and smell of earth (Dasgupta, 1924, 61).

The five sense organs of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin; the corresponding five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch; and the five natural elements of air, water, fire, earth and ether are related in a hierarchical scale of evolution, establishing firmly man's intimate relationship with the natural elements.

This metaphysic is further in line with the observation made by Zimmer that "India thinks of time and herself ...in biological terms." not pitting themselves against the play of nature but in fact aspiring to align the human institutions with the order of nature.(Zimmer quoted by Ramanujam, 1989, 45). If by metaphysical logic in Indian philosophy, it has been proved that man in effect relates to the world that he lives in through his senses and these senses evolved from natural elements then, the fact that Indians revere nature and do not strive to conquer it makes absolute sense. This argument will be continued later in the document.

Spatially the courtyard becomes an expression of this re-integration with the elements – a way to align the microcosm of one's own body with the macrocosm of nature and beyond. The air element in breeze and wind, the water element in the rains that pour in, the fire element in sunlight, the solid earth element which is the stratum of the courtyard and the limitless sky as space element all relate intangibly to the body and senses of the person experiencing it.

Beyond this is a deeper metaphysic at play:

*“ The central court can be seen to coincide with the reclining Vastu Purusha's (Vastu Purusha is the demonic person who is believed to lie face down on earth, held in place by various nature-gods who overpowered him, sitting on his body) central body composed of lung, heart and stomach. Physically this part of the building offers the heart nexus or*

*feeling centre, the lung or praana(life breath) centre and the nabhi or creative centre” (Ananth, 1999, 138).*

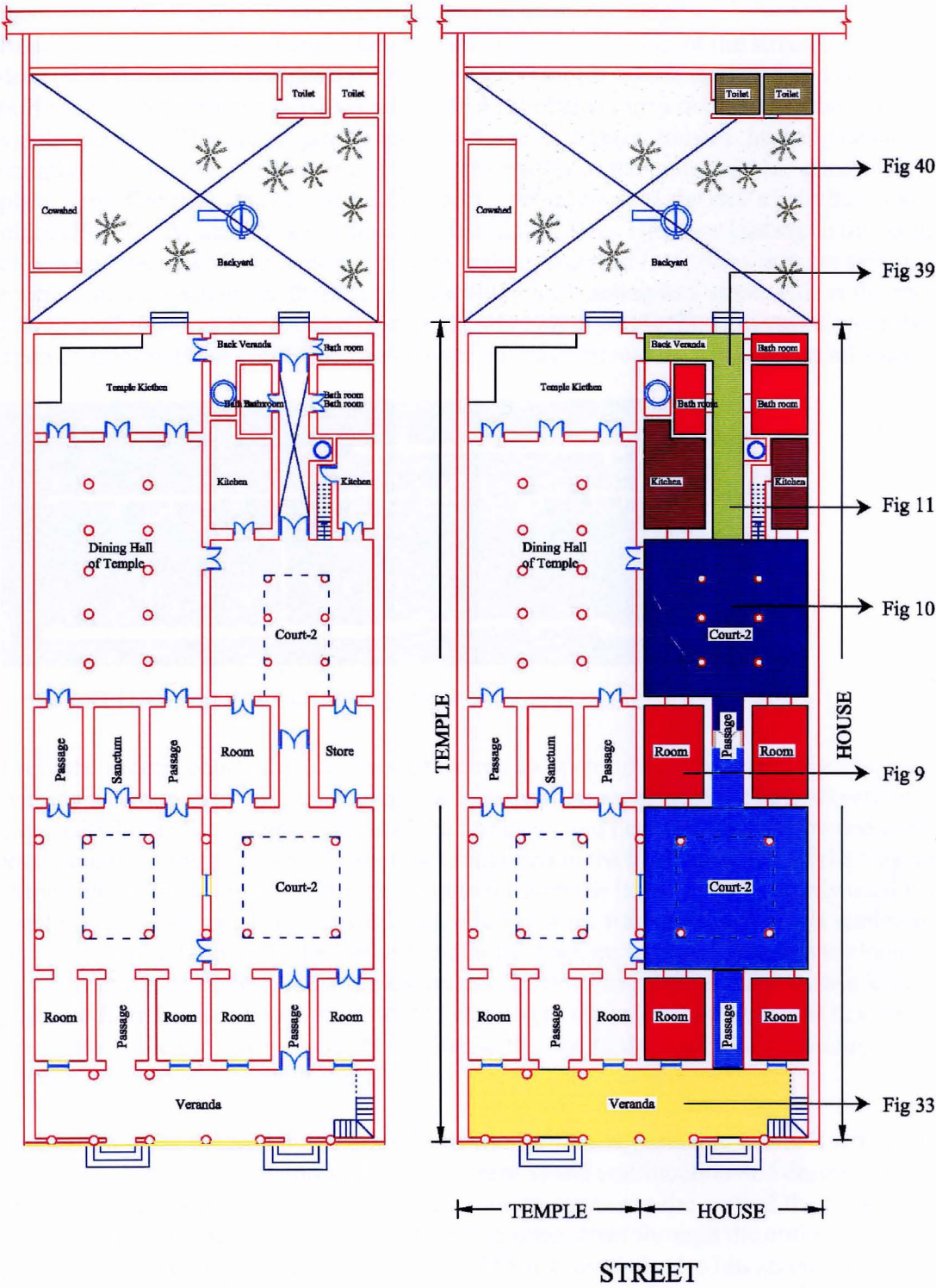
More often than not, the open court in a building is designed to coincide with the centre of the site. This centre of the site is called the Brahmathāna. To further understand the importance of the Brahmathāna, we need to understand the symbolic rendering of the act of building as explained in various traditional building (and sculpture) manuals. The following part of this section is derived from an understanding of the chapter “The Divine Measure of the Core” from the book *Symbolism in Hindu Architecture* by Peter Kollar and the essay “The Symbolism of the Dome” printed in *Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers I* by Roger Lipsey.

A building site before being measured out for construction is a single entity without any differentiation. With the act of measuring out and determining the directions one first differentiates this entity into a vertical axis and a horizontal plane. This process of measuring out is described in detail in the traditional texts. While there can be no building without resolving the vertical axis, without the ground plane there would be no manifestation of the vertical too. Thus the horizontal plane and vertical axis are akin to the first division of the Supreme Being into substantive Prakṛti and efficient Puruṣa (Kollar, 2001, 48). Together the substantive cause and the efficient cause conjoin to initiate the process of creation. Once this measuring up is done, the centre of the plot is determined. It is believed that the vertical axis running through this spot coincides with the Axis of the Universe, relating the chosen site to the macrocosm of the Universe itself. Evidently, this Axis of the Universe is a universal and not a local position, in the same way the center of every habitation is analogically *the* center, this Axis from the hypostasized center of the nether world below passes through the center of earth (of every site) to the hypostasized center of the sky at the other pole (Lipsey, 1977, 421 & 422). Thus within every site is created a universe, a microcosm, in the likeness of the perceived order of the Universe. Though the homes created around this center may be many and varied, they all are but one and the same – they are the reality of the Universal world revealed in the image of the Universe beyond.

Thus the center of the plot – the Brahmasthāna (Also see Example-3 at the end of this chapter) and the courtyard that contains it attains its importance. It is the ‘Navel’ of the earth akin to the perceived center of consciousness. It is the spatial expression of the need for man to connect with the larger Universe. It is the space that locates him within the Universe and helps him relate to it. It, in essence is the womb that gives birth to the building.

On an interpretive note, the concept of ‘*microcosm within macrocosm*’ and ‘*parts relating to the whole*’ as illustrated above (and recurring further in this document) is a strong one that colours almost all facets of the Indian tradition. A. K. Ramanujam, in his essay “Is there an Indian way of thinking?” says “the microcosm is both within and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it. Indian conceptions tend to be such concentric nests” and goes on to give many examples including the concept of ‘different states of the self’ – annamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, vinjanamaya and anandamaya discussed in the chapter titled ‘Indian Philosophy’. It is a reflection of the Indian belief that Ultimate Realisation occurs when one seeks to surpass the obvious. Yet surpassing the obvious does not mean negation of it. It is just that as one progresses beyond the physical obvious world of facts, factual reality falls away to make place for Ultimate reality within the seeker. A peaceful co-existence is made possible by establishing a suitable relationship between them. Thus we have various levels of meaning in architecture, each level having a specific relationship with the next finally leading to realisation of Ultimate Reality. Ananth calls this balancing of inner and outer realities as the sacred task of architects and the creation of this balance as the goal of architecture (Ananth, 2001, 58).

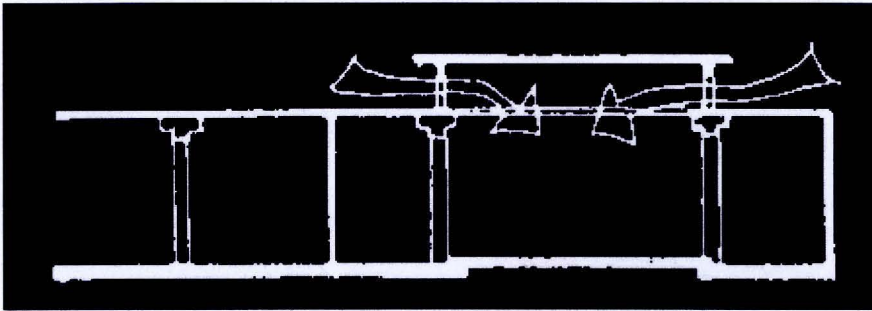
**Example1: Multifamily Household**



These plans are of a multi family household in the town of Srirangam, Tamil Nadu.

The occupants of the house described are involved in priestly duties so, half of the available land has been turned into a temple, for use by the family and those invited by them. This family consists of three brothers and their offspring.

In this example, one sees the gradation from the public domain of the street, to the private domain of the rooms very clearly. The entrance veranda is semi enclosed and acts as a buffer space between the outside and inside. From the veranda one reaches the main court via the passage. This main court belongs to the semi-private domain. Invited guests usually come up to here. Meeting between the master of the house and his guests takes place here. The next court is the family court – where most of the day's activities take place (Fig.10). At meal times, it becomes the dining area. The door leading to this court is closed and the court functions as a private realm. Accessed from this court are private rooms, one for each of the three families with a fourth acting as a store. This is the most private realm, where the occupants store their belongings (Fig.9). As a variation of the open courtyard, these courts are roofed over but have clerestory windows on all sides.

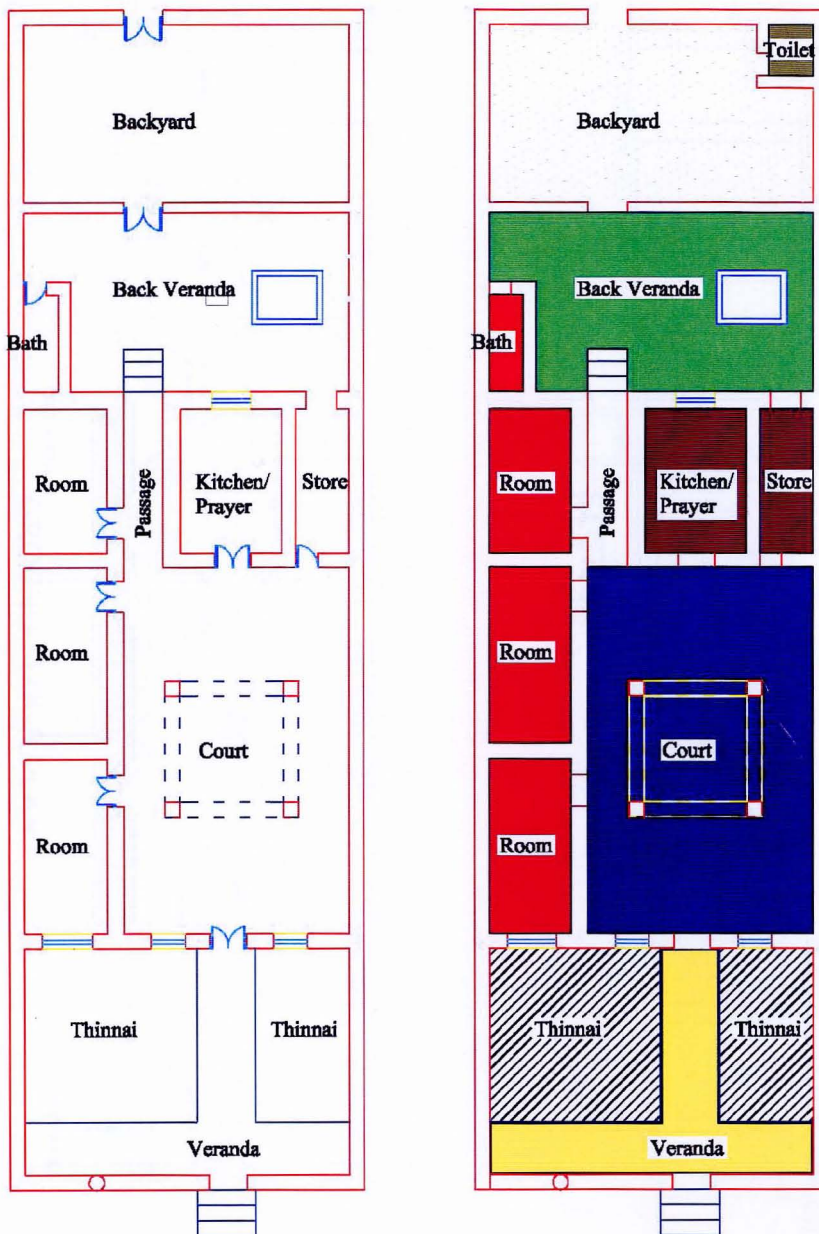


Section of House showing clerestory window

From the second courtyard, one passes through an open (to sky) passage (Fig.11), into the bathing area and then the back veranda, a semi-open space (Fig.39). The backyard is especially big in this example because the families cited here traditionally owned cows that are kept in the backyard. These cows remained in the backyard most of the time but if they had to be brought out, the same route through the house that the family used was used for the cows too. The backyard typically has some trees and herb plants tended to and used by the family. At the farthest end of the backyard, close to the service lane and away from the rest of the house are the toilets. Traditionally toilets were always kept separate from baths. The spaces from the veranda to the court-2 make up the dry area of the house while the spaces from the kitchen to the end of the backyard (including the service lane) constitute the wet area.

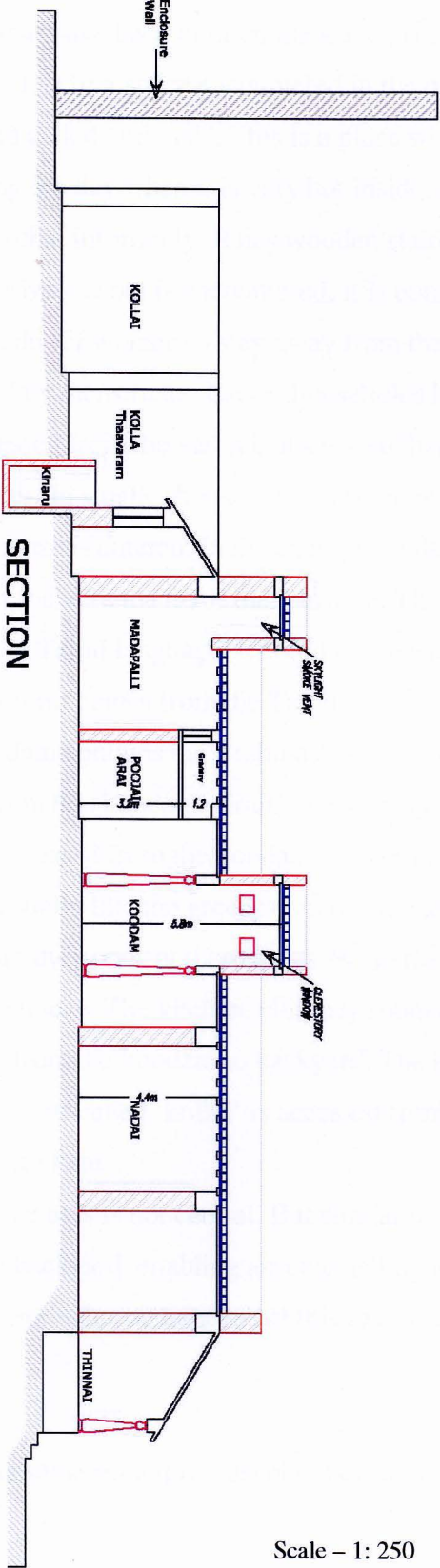
The centrality of the axis of the house is maintained throughout and where it reaches the backyard, it is broken off and walled, to prevent visual continuation and ensure privacy. When one stands at the entrance door, one can see right up to the wall of the back veranda – this enables channelling of fresh air from the open street through the entire house to be let out in the open backyard and vice versa. The hot, used air also has an outlet through the windows in the two courts mentioned. These windows also act as conduits to let in fresh air. Together these devices ensure there is ample air circulation in the house.

**Example 2:** Single family household.

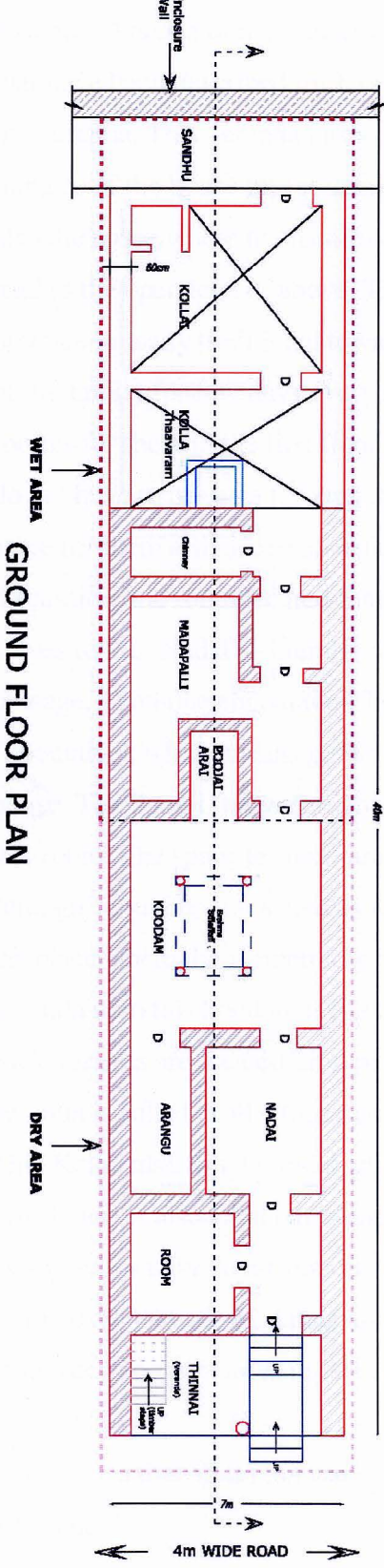


These plans are of a single family household in the town of Srirangam. The occupants of this house, unlike the occupants of the previous example (1), are employed in other fields of work and not in priesthood. Hence, a formal temple is not seen here; but, the hierarchy of spaces remain the same. Entrance is at the semi-public space of the veranda; then onto the semi private court from which the private rooms are accessed. The back veranda has the bath and well, while the toilet is located in the backyard, near the service lane. The same ritual of invitation and access described in example 1, applies here too.

E  
X  
A  
M  
P  
L  
E  
  
3



Scale - 1: 250



Example 3 is one of the houses of Srirangam that have been built on the same principles that have been described for Example 1 and 2. The first space encountered in the house is the veranda. This veranda has a raised platform called “thinnai”. This is a place where the inmates of the house rest sometimes rest during the day when it is very hot inside. It is also the space where the menfolk sit around to chat informally. It has wooden stairs that lead to the open terrace above. Then the first private room is encountered. It is common practice in many traditional towns in Tamil Nadu for women to stay away from the rest of the family for few days every month when they menstruate. Larger households have room/s for them in the first floor which is accessed from the veranda itself – so that they do not have to traverse through the house-proper. In smaller households, a room is set aside for them also accessed before the main house is entered. In the example under discussion, the room located immediately after the veranda is for that purpose. Then one comes to the ‘Nadai’ – literally meaning *walk* in Tamil language, it could be translated as passage. Then one encounters “koodam”. This term comes from the Tamil word “kooduthal” which means *gathering*. This koodam contains the Brahmasthaanam of the house. The Poojai (prayer) room is accessed from this koodam. Grains are stored above this room. The space termed “arangu” is also accessed from the koodam. The term “arangu” could be translated as *stage*. This is usually like the green room of the theatre, the place where the women folk dress-up before they present themselves. From the veranda upto this koodam is the dry area of the house. The kitchen, chimney room and back veranda are located off a passage leading from the koodam to backyard. The back veranda is called ‘kollai thaavaaram’. The backyard called ‘kollai’ is accessed from here. This Kollai also has the toilet, close to the service lane.

This house is also axial but unlike example 1, the axis is not central. But similar to it, the axis remains unbroken from the veranda to the backyard, enabling air channelling aided by clerestory windows. Since all the functions of the house happen off this axis, the issue of privacy does not arise in this case.

This we see that all three examples work on the same principles, despite their individual differences.

## **Context Sensitivity:**

One profession that takes this idea of micro and macrocosm to its height is astrology. In the Indian tradition, it is considered as a highly evolved science (for the purposes of this document, the current day degradation of astrology as a means of exploitation of the gullible will not be considered. Astrology will be considered with respect as a part of traditional Indian canons). Astrology was a means to locate man within the cosmos. The life of man on a microscopic level relates to the macrocosm of the planets and stars. Thus every individual has a unique horoscope, based on his place and time of birth. Astrology helped him understand himself. It guided him to do certain tasks at certain times working within the calculated influence of the planets to benefit him most.

Essentially, man strived towards harmony with nature. Nature was not to be exploited, but it was to be respected. If the world around was differentiated from the Self only by degrees and the microscopic life of every human being “was both within and like the macrocosm (of the natural world and the cosmos beyond)”(Ramanujam: 51: 1989), then it is only logical that nature be respected. Unlike some Western notions of Nature vs. culture, “culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture ... a nature-culture continuum (is experienced). Zimmer would sum up the western viewpoint thus “Our will is not to culminate in our human institutions the universal play of nature, but to evaluate, to set ourselves against the play with egocentric tenacity” (Zimmer: 21: 1946) which is unlike the Indian view that professes great respect for the perceived macrocosm of nature and beyond.

### **Context in ethics and epics:**

This reverence for nature coupled with the conception of everything with relation to the bigger picture precludes certain sensitivity to context. A. K. Ramanujam, a noted Indian poet and author who also gained recognition in the Western world through his interpretations of Indian literature and folk arts, would say that broadly there are two types of societies: context-free and context-sensitive ones and that India definitely belongs to the latter. This he explains effectively using examples from ethics and

literature. For example, telling the truth at all times is a non-negotiable moral - a clear example of universal (context-free) human conduct. Yet, the following conditions are placed on truth-telling, i.e. a context is created for making judgements:

*“At the time of marriage, during dalliance, when life is in danger, when the loss of property is threatened, and for the sake of a Brahmana.....Manu declared....whenever the death of a man of any of the four castes would be occasioned by true evidence, falsehood was even better than truth” [Muller quoted by Ramanujam (Ramanujam: 46: 1989)].*

The great sage Thiruvalluvar, whose work Thirukkural is considered as the authoritative code of ethical and moral conduct by the Tamil people, has this to say:

*“Pomaiyum vaaimai idathu puraitheerntha  
Nanmai payakkum enin.”*

Which translated into English would mean – Falsehood can be substituted for Truth, if it results in unprejudiced goodness. Thus we see that contexts were created even for truth-telling which is an unconditional moral in Western society.



Fig 18:

A Banyan tree sets the context for a village court: the judging panel is made up of elders from the village. Each case is tried in context, on its own merit based on accounts from both parties, the panel's word being final and binding. This 'panchayathu' is prevalent even today in rural areas, being preferred by the people to the impersonal courts.

The same could be said for Indian texts. Though most of the ancient texts are dateless and anonymous, their contexts, uses and efficacies are explicit. There are no universal codes of conduct similar to those in the West. The codes are full of particularities. Ramanujam gives the example of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata which are in the form of stories within stories, the outer story framing the inner and the inner illuminating the outer as well, often acting as a microscopic replica for the whole text. These inner stories

are context sensitive – deriving their meaning from the story without and giving it further meaning. The inner stories are expected to be read in consonance with the outer stories, its poignancy being partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic (Ramanujam: 48: 1989).

Thus it is seen that every instance has a certain context to it and everything from literature to ethics is framed within this context. In such a world, systems of meaning are elicited by contexts, by the nature (and substance) of the listener (Ramanujam: 53: 1989). Following this general tendency within the Indian tradition, great emphasis was placed on context in art too. Specifically in traditional architecture, the spaces were to be designed to suit the specific individuals who are to inhabit it and the particular context within which the site was located.

The context of site:

The first step in the design of built environment is site selection. While clients come to the architect with a site these days, in olden days the site itself was selected with the help of the architect that best suited the client's needs and temperament. Ancient Indian texts lay down specific criteria to be used to select sites for specific use. For example, ancient texts specify the following criteria for choosing a site for a Matha – a place where a Guru (teacher) might instruct a Sadhaka (pupil):

(One has to keep in mind that according to the ancient Hindu tradition pupils lived with their Guru in his hermitage during the course of their study.)

The text Hathasanketachandrika says that a matha should not be constructed in a well hidden place, a place full of mosquitoes, a place with snow or heat, fertile land, saline land or desert land, a place of worship, near a burial ground, near ant-hills or near a major crossway. In order to bring home the point, the text further lists the ill effects of constructing a matha in contexts described above i.e. loss of memory, dumbness, dullness, fever, sluggishness, deafness etc. (Chari: 2003) If one considers how intimately the soil of a land and human temperaments are believed to be linked in the Indian tradition (refer to section titled Body, Place and Divinity) then the above statements cease

to be as ominous. Also many of the places that are not advised as being ideal for a matha can prove to be a distraction to a young learning mind e.g. Practically speaking, locating a matha near a major crossway might mean pupils being distracted by the varied activities a crossroad may generate, the young mind may be distracted or terrorised by the goings on in the burial ground or for an impressionable mind the loud chanting and rituals in a place of worship may be more alluring than the pursuit of knowledge. A place full of mosquitoes or with snow or heat may be physically uncomfortable for the learner and thus hinder his learning process.

Thus most suitable places for housing various types of activities are described in various ancient texts i.e. appropriate contexts for various activities to take place are explicitly explained. Emphasis was placed on choosing the right context for the right activity.

#### Context within the site:

At the next level, the context within the site is taken into account; certain criteria are prescribed for certain castes. Without going into any argument about the ill-effects of caste-based discrimination, it is easy here to understand that castes were based on occupation and the growth of an occupation could be facilitated by appropriate site conditions. “Certain communities had livestock in their garden, some had workshops with effluent channels, others had gardens for flowers and herbs and so on” (Ananth: 110: 1998). It then is logical to choose a site that best suits the need of a particular community – while the herb communities need soft fertile top soil; the smithy needs a harder surface. There are guidelines for choosing slopes too, so that water contamination is prevented while waste management is effectively carried out (Ananth: 110: 1998). The colour of the soil and its composition are also to be examined before a site is decided upon. “The designer would (traditionally) observe the site for one season at least to ascertain whether the soil is fertile, holds water and sustains life forms such as plants, birds and animals” (Ananth: 109: 1998). Thus even before the design process begins, great care is given to choosing an appropriate context to finally house the built form.

Creating a context for activities:

The next step is the actual design of the proposed built space. Traditional Indian architecture works with modules called pada vinyasa (modular grid) – This pada vinyasa is a set of concentric spaces radiating out from the centre of the site. Once the cardinal directions have been determined, the site measured out and the centre determined (as described in the preceding section dealing with courtyards) then a modular grid is hypothetically drawn on it. Essentially they are energy grids. The centre of the grid is designated as the Brahma Padam. It is considered as a high energy point and as explained in the preceding section, is left open as a “courtyard or quadrangle” or at least as a large gathering or religious place; but “What is important is that the central point should not be stifled or burdened with pillars and walls” (Ananth: 29, 30: 2001). Next energy level is the Deivika Padam, i.e. Godly level in which non-specific activities such as “conversing” are contained. Following the Deivika padam is the Manusha Padam or human level in which specific activities are housed, for example kitchens for cooking, bedrooms for sleeping etc. The outermost, last energy level is Paisacha Padam or Demonic level which is considered suitable for storehouses, animal shelters etc. (Ananth; 31, 32: 2001). This classification has been extended to all other building types too. What is most striking about this conception of a modular grid is that by creating such a grid, a context is created to facilitate the design of each activity. The previously undifferentiated site is now contextualised at a micro level for each activity to be carried out within the built space. Also, the activities of an individual (and at the level of town planning, the whole society) and consequently the individual himself is tied into the hierarchy of perceived energy levels.

Contextualising the individual:

All the more fascinating is the next act of contextualisation. Having spoken about modular grids, one then wonders what this basic module that makes up the grid is based on. If the module is a constant, how does the grid respond to the context of each individual? Individuals, as the word indicates are unique, no person similar to the other, then how can a constant module work for all individuals? So the module cannot be a constant. The process adopted to arrive at the module appropriate to each person is called

Ayadi Poruttam where Ayadi could be translated as ‘all resources’ and poruttam is ‘match’. The birth star of each individual and his horoscope (which is unique for each person, based on time and place of birth) is used to calculate the best suited module for that person. This module then becomes the primary unit for all calculations of measures for the space to be built and is aimed at “prosperity in all walks of life” for the individual for whom the space is designed (Ananth: 135: 1998). Again here, the sensitivity accorded by traditional architecture, to a person’s context is astounding. An individual’s intrinsic character, to which the built space is to respond and his projected life as read in the horoscope is used as a guide to help the designer arrive at a design that best suits the context in which it is to be built. Context-sensitiveness is taken to its heights in this process. Since a building serves its occupants for a lifetime, the future is also taken into account here. Again, at another level the individual is anchored within the context of the greater macrocosm by using astrology, with its understanding of the cosmos, in architecture to create the microcosm of a built environment in consonance with the universe and with the microcosm of the world within the individual.

#### Materials suited to context:

The same context-sensitiveness was also extended to materials. For example, stone which has a long life was considered as the appropriate material to build temple-complexes that were expected to last for many generations. While residential complexes were built with brick and lime mortar which had a lifespan shorter than stone, the building expected to be used for a few generations at best. And within a building, traditionally, stone, burnt or unburnt bricks, mud and timber is recommended for the walls; Timber, bamboo and stone for beams; tiles, thatch, shingles, slate and stone slabs for the roof; wood for windows and doors; lime mud and combination of both for mortar and plaster; lime, mud, a combination of both, stone and terracotta for the floors. These natural materials were considered to be conducive for harmony and well-being of users (Ananth: 32: 2001). Coomaraswamy’s statement that to make a statue right, both human nature and the nature of the material to be used needs to be understood (Ed. Lipsey: 52: 1977) also highlights the importance placed on the appropriateness of a material to its use.

Beyond this was the sensitivity towards the environment. The site which sustains the building in many ways is revered more than the building itself. It is treated with great care. Customary rituals are performed that ask for forgiveness for having destroyed the life forms that lived on the site prior to the commencement of building activity.

For example, in a conversation with architect and vastu consultant Shashikala Ananth in India, she mentioned that traditional texts prescribe that for every tree cut down for wood; nine more had to be planted. In her book “Vaastu” she goes on to explain that “Till a hundred years ago, the carpenters were also part of forest conservation. In fact their community held the knowledge base for forest management known as *Vana Samrakshana Samhita* (Ananth: 27: 2001); Vana meaning forest, Samrakshana meaning protection and Samhita meaning treatise. Other rituals include Bhoomi Puja to propitiate various Gods associated with various natural elements like air, water, fire etc;



Fig 19:

Bhoomi Pujai: Prayers are said and offerings made to various Gods by everyone involved in the building process – the owners’ family, the architect, builders, labourers etc. This is done on site before any building activity commences

the ritual called Garbhanyasa; (Garbha meaning womb) aimed at bringing alive the building from the womb of mother earth; and so on (Ananth: 103: 1998). Thus, as discussed earlier, traditional architects tried to be sensitive to and work with nature to make life peaceful for the inhabitants of the built space.

Importance of context in other art forms:

The same sensitivity to context is considered essential to all art forms. Coomaraswamy, while talking about the perfection of the art-object explains it thus:

*“...at the same time that of their own perfection and that of their aptitude with respect to the environment in which they are to be used, the beauty of a work being not entirely contained within itself, but depending also upon its adaptation to its intended context. So*

*that for example, we cannot call a sword altogether beautiful unless its pommel is adapted to the hand that is to wield it; and the icon which may be beautiful in the architectural environment for which it was designed may be incongruous, and thus lose a part of its beauty, when we see it in a museum or in a drawing room” (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 67)*

Thus the fact that traditional India was sensitive to context and so created art-objects that were appropriate to a given context comes through clearly in the arguments presented above. The concept of a microcosm within a macrocosm and locating an individual within it was also a very strong one, which found expression in all forms of art especially so in architecture.

### **Universality:**

Undoubtedly, Indian society is context-sensitive in nature. But does that mean that there is no scope for universality? Is Universality the exact opposite of context-sensitiveness? A. K. Ramanujam, in his essay describes the two types of society as context-sensitive and context-free; not as context-sensitive vs. universal. He also makes a very important observation “In ‘traditional’ cultures like India, where context sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context” (Ramanujam, 1989, 54). Within this discussion of art, this aspiration towards the universal is expressed through the ideal of Moksha discussed in the earlier chapter of ‘Indian philosophy’ and in the Rasa theory which is at the heart of every classical Indian art form.

The ideal of Moksha is discussed in detail in the above mentioned chapter, so it will suffice to say here that it was a common ideal – a universal concept, of release from the world of good and evil as we know it - transcendence of the perceived ‘proper ends of human life’ namely, pleasure (kama), artha (wealth) and dharma (righteousness) (Coomaraswamy: III) and (Ramanujam, 1989, 54). This universal conception was the theme of every conscious art-form in traditional India. The aspiration towards ‘Universality’ through the concept of “Moksha” then becomes self-evident.

The term 'Rasa' literally means 'flavour' but it denotes 'Essence'. An in-depth analysis of the Rasa theory is beyond the purview of this document, so for the current purposes a brief description is attempted. Defining the meaning of 'Rasa' Coomaraswamy says thus:

*"Rasa, is not an objective quality in art, but a spiritual activity or experience called "tasting"; not affective in kind, not dependent on subject matter or texture, whether lovely or unlovely to our taste, but arising from a perfected self-identification with the theme, whatever it may have been." (Coomaraswamy: III)*

Thus the concept of 'Rasa' was a way of imparting 'Universality' to all art works. By definition, it was independent of both the subject and object and so of any context. It was a *pure* and *disinterested* aesthetic experience, transpersonal and universal in nature.

Hindu tradition speaks of the one thing that distinguishes an art-work as a unified whole from a mere aggregate of constituent elements; it is "the manner in which a feeling tone suffuses the work and gives unity to it" (Deutsch, 1975). This feeling tone is called *bhava*. Yet it is important for the *bhava* to be "grounded in the deepest categorical structures of feeling" and simultaneously be "transpersonal and universal" (Deutsch, 1975). The subject and materiality of the art-object may be relative but its "essence" is context-free. Coomaraswamy contends that beauty has no degrees with "the most complex and simple expression remind us of one and the same state" (Coomaraswamy, 1915, www) and that state is *Rasa*, independent of any and all contexts. While taste is relative, Beauty or *Rasa* is Universal.

Thus we find that the most distinguishing features of Hindu philosophy and aesthetics aspired towards universality. In doing so, relative context was never forgotten but a delicate hierarchy was established whereby one progressed from particularities to the absolute in a gradual journey of 'art-experience'

## **Thresholds:**

Thus one speaks of an inner world – a microcosm contained within the boundaries of a household and the world outside which relates to it. Within this relationship, the points where inside and outside are defined become very important. These points could be called thresholds. A threshold is defined as “a level or point at which something is about to begin”. Thus thresholds serve as the interface between the outside and inside. They also serve the very important function of making one aware that one is entering another level/layer. In a society like traditional India where the collective is placed higher than the individual, threshold takes the focus to the individual yet curiously enough relates the individual back to the crowd through common experience.

## **Body as threshold:**

We now return to our earlier account of the traditional notion in India that the body is the abode of the soul and so is sacred. The ultimate goal of every human being's existence is to progress from identifying oneself with the the physical body(through a series of mis-identifications with the vital breath (pranamaya), the mind (manomaya), the intellect (vijnanamaya) and bliss (anandamaya)) to realize that that one is atman or Pure spirit ie Self realization. Thus there is the internal world - the world within us and an external world in which we live. Man himself is a microcosm with the body serving as the interface between the internal world and the world outside. The body thus serves as a threshold. To be more precise, the senses are the thresholds. It is they that go out to the sense objects on the outside and at times of intense concentration, return within. These senses relate the outside to the inside – the senses act as thresholds and carry information from the outside to inside, thus enabling sense experiences. They also express what happens within – the will of the self, likes and dislikes, judgments and the like are expressed through the senses. In times of deep contemplation these senses are recoiled and “return to the “heart” of one's being” (Ed.Lipsey, 1977, 5). Analogous to this notion of the body and senses acting as thresholds, traditional India placed great importance on thresholds in life, in the form of rites and rituals and thresholds in space in the form of

elaborate gateways, doors and windows. In any case, the concept of threshold was very important to traditional India and it served to heighten one's experience whether of this world, of life or of architecture.

### **Rites of Passage as Thresholds:**

India is known throughout the contemporary world for the myriad rites and rituals that is followed even today. It is considered archaic and meaningless in the modern world of today, but in reality these rites and rituals hold meaning for the people who use them and are in fact thresholds that define one's transition through life.

It could be said that the life of a Hindu Indian is defined by a series of rituals right from birth to death. If we were to trace the life of a female child, it starts from the naming ceremony which is celebrated within the first few months of the child's birth – the day differing with each community. The first birthday of the child, celebrated according to lunar month is the next highlight. Then there is a ritual to celebrate the first grain of rice that the child eats – a threshold to mark the child's development from drinking liquids to eating solid food. These rituals serve to make the parents and the extended family aware of the growth of each child in the household. This is followed by the ritual to start off the child's formal education - a ritual to make the child aware that it is entering an important phase of life when its life patterns are bound to change. Then follows the ritual to mark a female teenager's reaching puberty.

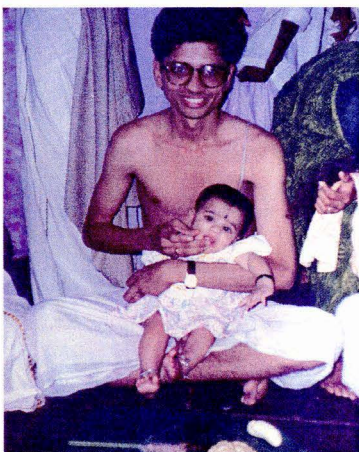


Fig 20: The rite of Annaprasnam, Fig 21: Reaching Puberty

It is not only an important ritual that makes the teenager aware that her body and psyche are about to change but also that she is ready for child-bearing and needs to prepare to shoulder the responsibilities of an adult. Then comes the ritual of bride seeing, engagement and marriage. The importance of these rituals in the life of a bride cannot be stressed enough. In the patriarchal society of India, a bride goes to live with the groom's family after her marriage. It is a big step in her life and so marriage as a threshold is a very important one in her life. It is not a single ritual and involves a number of rituals over a period of days – marriage in olden days happened over five days, then it became three and now two days. Broadly the marriage ceremony consists of giving away the bride, the groom's acceptance of the bride as his companion for life, their entering the home where they will settle and finally their conjugal union.

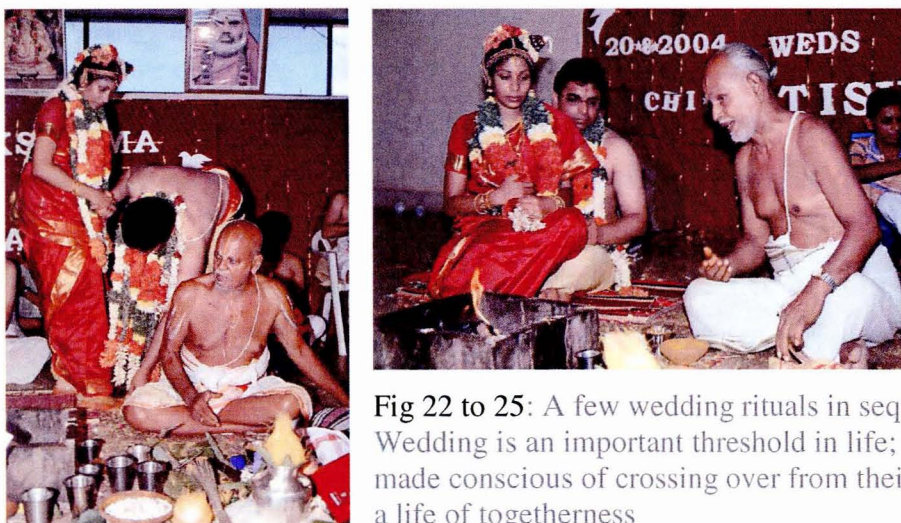


Fig 22 to 25: A few wedding rituals in sequence: Wedding is an important threshold in life; the couple are made conscious of crossing over from their single state to a life of togetherness

Apart from these spiritual rites, there are many more social rituals that make up a marriage ceremony. Thus the marriage rituals work as thresholds, preparing the bride and groom who had been strangers till then, for their life ahead together and for one family to bid farewell to their daughter, the other to accept the bride as their daughter.



Fig 26 & 27: Social rituals to familiarise the families of the bride and groom

Then come the rituals during pregnancy. There are rituals done during the 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> month (usually this is done only for the first pregnancy) making the new mother aware of the changes within her and helping her to handle her new experiences. Then there are rituals to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. These rituals not only make the celebrating individual (and the spouse) aware of their advancing age and the responsibilities that come with it but also make the others aware of the person's wisdom and experience, urging them to benefit from it. Finally the ritual of death – generally it is as elaborate as the marriage ceremony, celebrated with various rituals over a number of days. It is essentially a rite of passage from this world to the one beyond and at a practical level helps those left behind celebrate the life of, accept and grieve for the person gone.

The one common feature in all these rituals is that they act as rites of passage from one phase of life into the next – as thresholds of life. But they are thresholds both from the inward, metaphysical sense and the outward, social sense. From the social point of view these rites of passage are never celebrated in isolation by the person going through it. It happens in the company of many others, on the one hand those who have already been through it – reassuring the newly inducted that he/she is not alone in this as yet new

unknown phase and on the other those who are not yet at the threshold but will be at some point in their own life. Metaphysically, they are points in life when one is urged to take note and take stock before proceeding to the next phase – a time to go within, contemplate and an opportunity to transform. Thus thresholds are points of heightened experience of life; they help one live life more consciously.

### **Thresholds in Space:**

Spatially these thresholds become translated into actual doorways, openings and perceived doorways, becoming significant as visual and physical access-control devices. They are pause points when one is forced to consider - to make a decision. Spatially too these thresholds have their physical and metaphysical significance and work in various contexts. The following section will enumerate the significance of thresholds in a traditional home and a typical South Indian temple.

#### Thresholds in temples:

The temples in the town of Madurai, Srirangam, Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, are some of the oldest and most famous in South India. They are also the largest; yet many more temples of great significance to the people still exist that are many hundred years old. These South Indian temples cannot be defined as buildings to visit but as *precincts*. They are spiritual and religious precincts that also serve as communal space while primarily they are platforms for the transformation of the individual. Temples are places where opportunities are created to induct the individual into higher consciousness. They are also places where people meet and confederate.

But then, why do temples need thresholds? Thresholds signify transition. The temple is a physical manifestation of the spiritual realm. To the common man, it is a symbol of all that he aspires to *be*. But what exists outside the temple precinct is the material, physical realm. The transition here is from this material realm that man finds himself in to the spiritual realm symbolised by the temple precinct. The temple precinct itself is designed to enable a gradual movement from one state of consciousness to the next. Thresholds

then become important as physical place-markers in enabling a conscious and smooth transition from the one to the other.

The Gopuram as threshold:

The sense of sight is the strongest of all the senses, in that one can *see* from very far, while the other senses work as one gets closer to the object experienced. One is generally made aware that one is in the vicinity of a temple precinct when one sights a temple gopuram from afar.

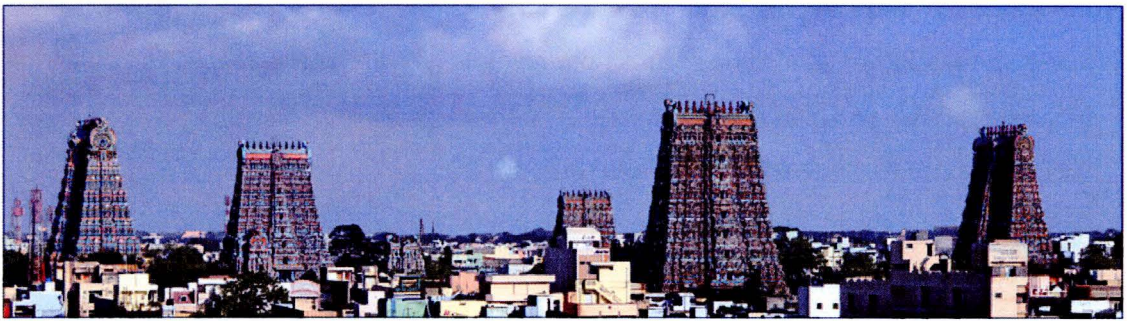


Fig 28: Gopurams towering over the city of Madurai signalling the presence of the temple precinct/s.

The gopuram soars high signalling the presence of a temple near it. It acts as a visual place marker and is the first threshold through which one passes while entering the temple precinct. Usually these gopurams are four in number placed in the four cardinal

directions, their axes converging at the temple proper. Yet they are not mere visual symbols, they offer a rich sensorial ambience too.



Fig 29: One of the gopurams of Sri Ranganathaswamy temple viewed from inside the precinct

The traditional temples in India are always accessed by foot. Vehicles on four wheels or more are usually stopped many meters away from these temples. One may travel by two- wheeler unto a certain point but generally one walks to the temple with the sun beating down (summer reigns in

India for the better part of the year). Thus when one first enters the gopuram from the blazing heat outside, it becomes a haven. It provides shade, a respite from the scorching

sun. It contrasts strongly with the open outside as one is enclosed within a thick, stable stone structure. All these immediately make one aware of transition. The faint smell and strong haptic feel of stone together with the darkness inside only add to this feeling. Sometimes smaller shrines are also placed within these gopurams at human eye level - a subtle reminder of the purpose of one's visit.

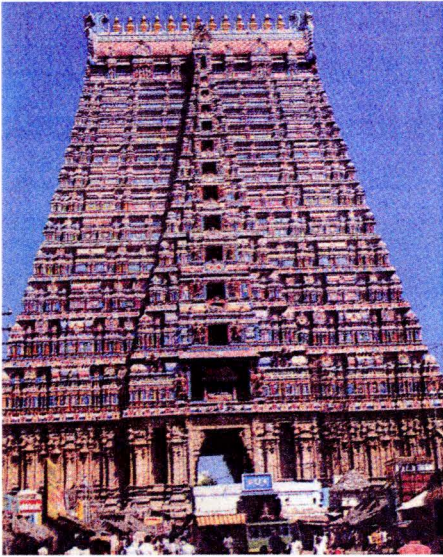


Fig 30: The famous Raja Gopuram stands tall above the bustling bazaar in the town of Srirangam as a visual symbol of the temple precinct

One exits this gopuram to face the hot sun once again – the entry into the next layer. Larger temple precincts have a succession of these gopurams until the temple-proper is reached. The play of heat and shade, of openness and enclosure, of darkness and light effectively create the sense of transition, through the gopuram as the threshold. Visually these gopurams decrease in height as they near the sanctum of the temple at the center, with the gopuram above the sanctum crowned with a golden finial – a visual representation of the need to progressively look within in order to reach the other realm.

#### Mandapams as thresholds:

While some temples have a succession of gopurams that act as thresholds, many temples have a single perimeter wall running around the precinct with one gopuram at the centre of the wall on each side facing the cardinal direction that marks the axial route to the innermost sanctum. Before one reaches this tall threshold of a gopuram, one encounters a succession of mandapams which also act as points that highlight the act of transition. While the gopurams as thresholds have a clear vertical axis, the mandapams relate strongly to the ground plane. The gopurams are passing through spaces while the mandapams are rest spaces. They are simple rectangular platforms with columns holding up the roof.



Fig 31: Mandapams as pause points

They act in a way similar to the gopurams, making one aware that one is getting closer to the spiritual realm of the temple precinct. They are intended to act as thresholds, slowly driving away thoughts of the external world and preparing the devotee for the act of worship, of intimate dialogue with the deity in the sanctum. Very similar to the gopurams, they

also provide respite from the sun, are stable stone structures and in the place of shrines have sculpted heavenly creatures/Gods/Goddesses in them. Many of these Mandapams in addition to acting as pause points, also act as settings for various cultural gatherings.



Fig 32: The Famous, ornate Thousand Pillar Mandapam in the Meenakshi Sundareshwarar temple complex in the city of Madurai in Tamilnadu .

Sometimes both gopurams and mandapams are employed together to act as thresholds in the transition from the material realm to the spiritual precinct.

### Prakarams: Doorways as thresholds

In temples, one encounters layers of circumambulation routes called Prakāram

The space for circumambulation between the gopurams and around the sanctum is called the Prakaram. Generally temples have an inner prakaram immediately around the sanctum and an outer one going around the whole shrine.

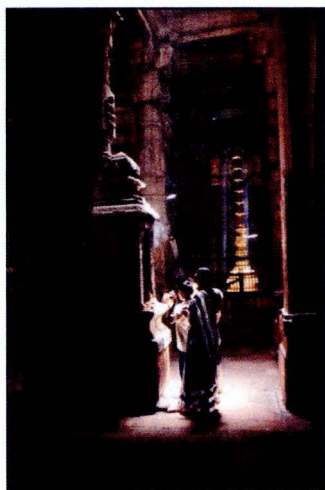


Fig 33: Inner Prakaram, Fig 34: Outer Prakaram  
of Sri Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple in Madurai City.

The larger temples have more than two prakarams. The Lord Ranganatha temple in Srirangam has seven concentric, rectangular prakarams, each having a boundary wall running along its perimeter. Each prakaram acts as a layer that takes one closer to the sanctum from the outside. By the time one reaches the sanctum one is put into a mood of introspection, contemplation and worship. Once the worship is done, the circumambulation provides the devotee with a way to continue the mood of contemplation that was so carefully constructed within him/her until he/she reaches the outside world once again passing through the same thresholds. Thus prakarams become an important aspect of the temple precinct. Of interest to us here is design of the prakaram. The prakarams themselves are generally enclosed, colonnaded or open pathways. But they always have a perimeter definition in the form of high walls on both sides with the ceiling open or high walls on all sides with a closed ceiling (usually closest to the sanctum) or high wall on one side, colonnade on the other and roofed over. The idea here is to give a sense of enclosure – the sense of having entered one space from another.



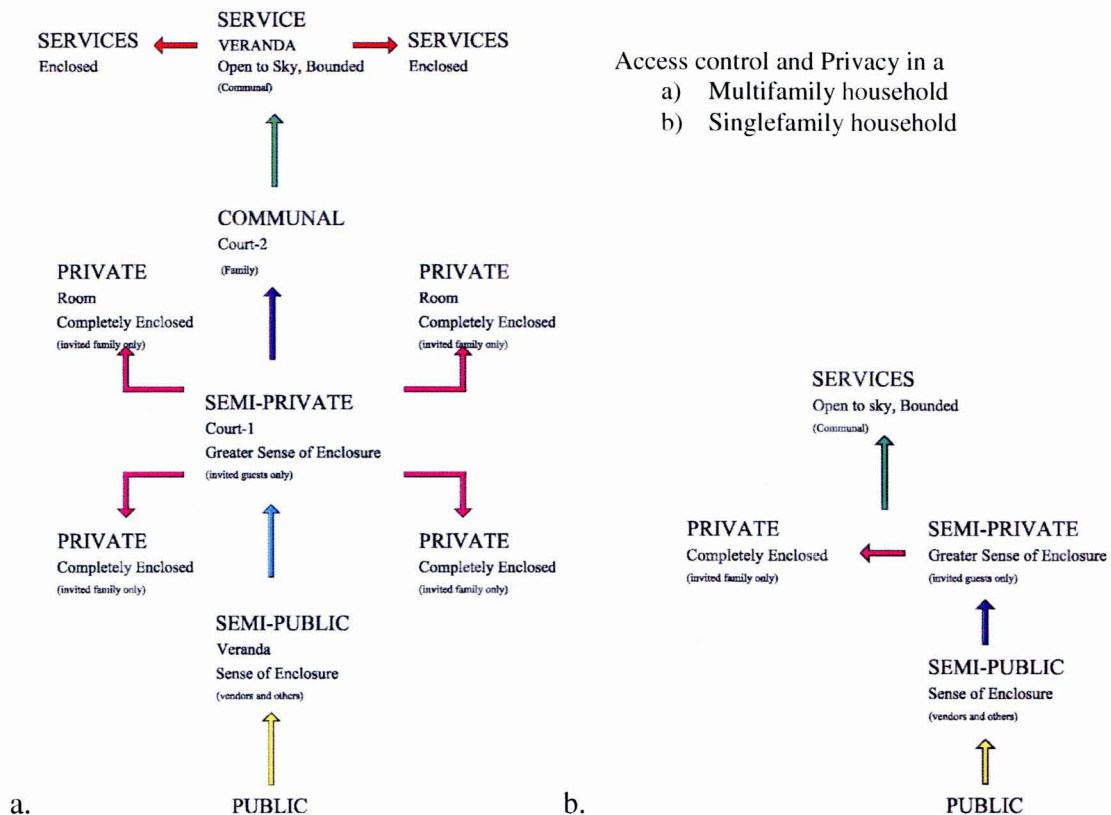
**Fig 35:** The tall boundary wall enclosing one of Seven Prakarams – Routes of circumambulation - in Sri Ranganathaswamy temple precinct, Srirangam.

In other words, these enclosed prakarams make us aware of transition. While access from one prakaram to the next could easily be provided through simple openings in the wall of the prakaram, in reality access is through elaborate doorways. These doorways, generally very large in scale are in the true sense *thresholds*. They usually have a step or steps that differentiate one prakaram from the next, so it is not just the visual presence of a door leading to the next space but one is actually forced to change one's stride thus being forced to take note of the fact that one is entering yet another layer of the temple precinct.

Both in the physical and metaphysical planes these thresholds heighten our awareness of the transition towards the Supreme Soul manifest in the deity present in the sanctum.

#### Thresholds in homes:

In a manner similar to the temple complex, thresholds are important pause points in households too. As discussed earlier in the section titled 'Courtyards', homes in traditional India were ideally 'collective' spaces. They were places where people gathered and lived in togetherness. At any given time, there were more than two families and two generations sharing a home, added to which was the visiting extended family and the many people who enter the home at least once a day like vegetable vendors, cleaning women, milkman etc. While courtyards operated as worlds within worlds, thresholds defined these spaces and allowed the inmates of a household to exercise access-control.



Traditional Hindu dwellings in the town of Srirangam show clear hierarchy of spaces, necessitating well defined thresholds. (Derived from Example 1 and 2 cited in Pg. a-e at the end of chapter titled “Macro- and Microcosm: Finding a place for the Human within”)

Veranda as threshold:

The semi-public space of the veranda itself acted as the first threshold in most homes. When one crosses a veranda, one knows that one is crossing the first threshold to a specific space. In traditional towns and villages even today, it is common to see the vegetable vendors at the veranda right in the front of the house shout out to the lady of the house who might be at the back of the house going about her daily chores. The vendor would continue calling till he/she is heard. He/she would not step into the house and will stay in the veranda until (if at all) he/she is invited into the house by the lady. This is not seen as discrimination at all. It is logical because these vendors walked the streets filled with dust. If they were to enter the household, they would have to wash their hands and

feet. Doing so in every house is just not feasible, so here the veranda acting as a threshold becomes the perfect interface between the outside and inside.

Fig 36: Veranda in a humble residence.

Fig 37: Veranda in a stately home.



Further back in time, the so-called untouchables were not allowed anywhere near the perimeter of the house of a person belonging to a higher caste. The lower caste people were allowed only up to the veranda of the house. Only an equal was invited beyond. These thresholds thus made a

person aware of his/her own position and the attitude of the lord of the house towards himself/herself.



#### Entrance Door as Threshold:

While the veranda was the first threshold, the most important threshold was the main door itself. Common instances of current day western architecture do not seem to attach great importance to the entrance door of a house but in general in India, even today when non-descript flats are taking over, entry and entrance doors are considered very important.



**Fig 38:** The entrance door in a humble rural residence: The main door being the most important threshold, was usually heavier, made of superior quality wood and had as much detail as could be afforded by the owner

“Entry into the residence forms the most important part of the residence” (Ananth, 1999, 123). When one is invited to come in, to cross the threshold of an entrance door, one is invited to the inner world of a family making the main entrance to a home the most important threshold in that home. This is succinctly summed up by Ananth when she says

*“The door or dwaram is a symbol of the psyche of the occupiers. By crossing the entrance threshold the visitor is transported into the inner universe of a family. Traditionally the entrance door was treated with great sanctity” (Ananth, 1999, 123)*

This threshold is not important just for the visitor but also for the occupants. The solemnity of the entrance door is highlighted by the rite commonly called “Nelakkadhavu nattal”. During the process of building the house, when the time is right to put thresholds for openings in place, the main threshold is erected first. An auspicious time and date is chosen for this and the proposed owners of the house are required to be present when the rite is performed. It symbolises the creation of the microcosmic living unit – the entry into one’s inner world which is in consonance with the world without. Generally the entrance door is heaviest which could have been for security reasons too but their symbolic import overweighs and security concerns.

Even today what could be classified as middle class family homes in Southern India, while the rest of the doors might not have a threshold i.e. frame, the main entrance door has a frame or threshold and is rarely flush. It is heavier, made of costlier timber and has carved panels in it. The most celebrated thresholds of Southern India belong to the Chettinad community. They are essentially traders and their entrance thresholds are generally made of very good timber like teak or rosewood. The threshold and the entrance door are usually heavily carved befitting its great importance, at times there being multiple thresholds.



Fig 39 & 40: Entrance to homes both old and new is made significant.

Similar to the rite described above is the “Pandhakaalnattal” ritual performed at the bride’s place before the marriage ceremonies begin. It is customary to erect a temporary structure made of palm leaves and staves at the entrance to the house of the family which will be giving away its daughter as a bride to another family. During the rite, the first staff that will hold the structure will be adorned and strengthened by prayers and be placed in the position marked out for it.

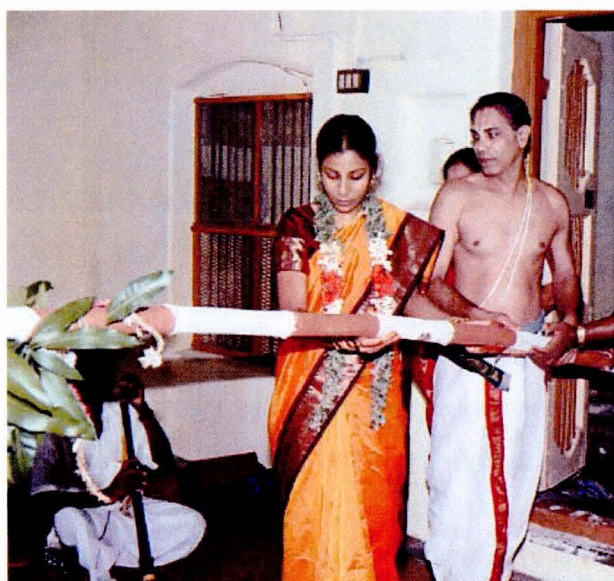


Fig 41: Pandhakkaal ritual: Creation of a threshold – first spatial threshold during the wedding which itself is a threshold of life

Usually a banana tree with its flower in bloom is tied to the entrance of this structure to signify that the life and fertility of their daughter is in full bloom for she is going to be married.

For visitors, crossing this threshold means entering a place of joyous wedding festivities whereas for the family, the erection of this threshold is a solemn reminder of their daughter's entry into another life.

Similarly, when the married couple first enter the homes of their parents and all their relatives, they are given an 'aarathi' (which is a red liquid – red symbolising prosperity) by the elder women of the house at the main threshold after which the arathi is emptied on the kolam (rice powder design) at the entrance door. Again here, the entry of the couple into their new life is signified and celebrated. In some cultures, the bride is asked to topple a pot full of rice at the main threshold of her in-laws' house, when she first enters it after marriage – a symbol of prosperity(rice) that she is going to bring to the household she has chosen to enter. Other important thresholds in traditional Indian homes include the door to the backyard. While nowhere near the entrance doors in their importance, they do serve the function of a threshold. The backyard is the place where the ablution facilities are located. It is place that is perceived as being dirty and unclean. So passing through the back door makes one aware that one is entering an unclean area from a clean one or vice versa. It is normal practice to wash one's feet before passing through the threshold that separates the unclean backyard from the clean areas of the main house.

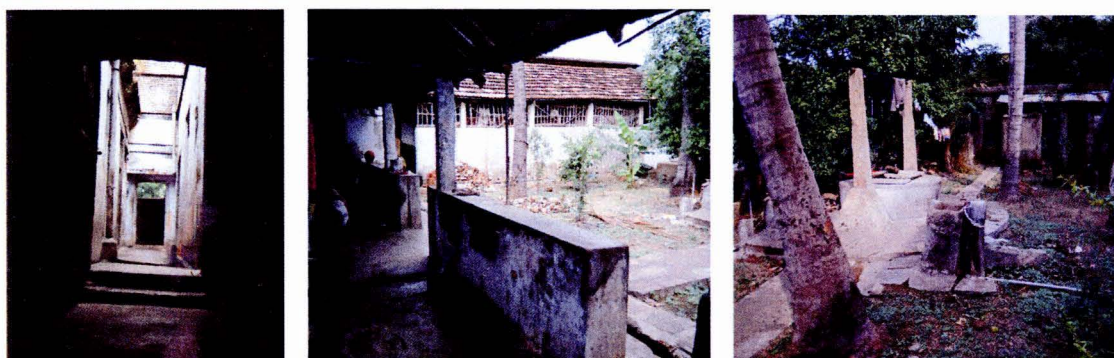


Fig 42, 43 & 44: The passage to the backyard, rear veranda and backyard proper.

Homes that have designated spaces where the idol of the family deity is installed i.e. a miniature version of the temple; generally have elaborate thresholds in the form of heavy doors (some with bells imitating temples) at the entry to these spaces. Once again the

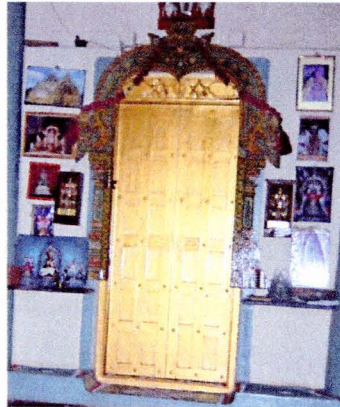


Fig 45 & 46: Elaborate entrances to place of worship in homes.

threshold serves to remind one to make a conscious decision to enter the space only if one is clean and ready for it.

Similar thresholds were created in all other building types too. The idea behind creating these thresholds in life and in spaces was to make one conscious of one's actions, to signify certain important phases and spaces, to define them, to create boundaries of understanding and to orient an individual within the sea of his/her life and the space that he occupied. They were designed as pause points, giving one the opportunity to take note and make decisions, to become aware and not just be carried on by the flow of everything around.

## **Psyche of the designer:**

The metaphysical ends towards which the whole of ancient Indian art and architecture until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD tended were discussed in the preceding chapters. The resulting levels of high sophistication were also touched upon. It is the artist/architect who actually encodes these metaphysical truths in the material form of the art-object, be it sculpture painting or architecture. Ananth while summarising the stages of design in traditional architecture, puts forth the ‘psyche of the designer’ as the fifth and final determinant of design (Ananth, 2001, 72). So then one wonders at the ability of the artist/architect himself. In the first place the artist/architect will not be able to symbolise metaphysical truths if he has not had a taste of them. Secondly, the artist/architect must have the necessary technical skill to give form to his metaphysical idea in a way that is accessible to the beholder. While these preconditions themselves are Herculean in nature, is that all that is required from a traditional artist/architect to be able to produce work of such high quality as discussed throughout the document? Once again Coomaraswamy explains the rigorous processes that make up the creative process and the training of an artist/architect.

## **Art as a form-giving process:**

Coomaraswamy in line with traditional Indian texts elucidates the “lot” of an artist thus “Art in its becoming is the manipulation or arrangement of materials according to a design or pattern, preconceived as the theme may demand, which design or pattern is the intelligible aspect of the work to be done by the artist” (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 71). So it is the artist’s job, so to speak, to imagine an idea appropriate to the given context and give form to the idea using suitable materials and techniques. Coomaraswamy further explains the above process as happening in four stages, or four ‘causes’ that gave rise to the finished product of the art-object, which are explained below (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 56-59).

### **First Cause – the contemplative act:**

The first cause is the formal cause i.e. the contemplative act, in which having been given an assignment to create an object of art, be it a piece of sculpture or a building, the artist withdraws unto himself and “sees” only that which is to be made. It is the stage of

extreme concentration when nothing but the object to be created occupies the artist's mind and imagination. At the height of this contemplative state, the artist becomes one with the image that he has conceived in his intellect, the subject-artist is completely identified with the art-object. Here Coomaraswamy speaks of the artist's idea as the 'art in the artist', that which existed before the coming into being of the thing and continues to subsist even after the art-object has been made or even perished. Thus the idea is formed in the artist's mind by extreme contemplation and self-identification with the object to be created. Ananth calls this resulting 'form in the mind of artist'/architect as *mano vastu*. (Ananth, 2001, 73&74)

*"The designer begins by absorbing the impetus of the outer challenge within the mind and from this he/she creates mental forms known as vastu....The substance of designer's mind interacts with the brief given for design. After a great deal of inner activity, the designer comes up with a form within the mind. This is known as mano vastu."*

Coomaraswamy explains the process that results in *mano vastu* as the present idea in the artist's mind being a result of his/her own limited intellect reflecting a miniscule bit of the Divine Intellect in which all ideas that ever came into being and will ever come into being, exist. Thus the formal cause of the object to be created is the fully formed idea in the artist's mind.

Second Cause – Material appropriateness:

The second cause could be called the material cause. Great importance is given to the choice of material for "it is only a suitable material in which the form in the artist's mind can be realized...he cannot reproduce in clay what was imagined in stone." This is very true of architectural conceptions too. Architectural forms can only be conceived in suitable materials. If a form is imagined in wood and made in stone, it ceases to be true to the artist's first conception. Thus material is an essential reason for the 'finished product being what it is' and so it becomes the second cause or stage in the inception of the art-object. At this stage, the art-object to be created would correspond to Ananth's *mano shilpam* i.e. mental form.

#### Third Cause – Essential Form:

The next stage is the actual form giving. The material does not itself shape into what the artist intended. He/She has to now apply the appropriate technique to faithfully reproduce the form in his/her mind onto the chosen material. This technique and the tools required by the technique become the third cause for they too affect the final product. Here Coomaraswamy mentions that at this stage, the whole operation of the artist becomes servile, i.e. the artist becomes a servant to his/her master which is his/her art. "...the artist himself is now an instrument directed by his art". This skill and workmanship that is the third cause comes about due to rigorous practice. Coomaraswamy says that the "one thing most necessary to the human workman is "practice", the fruit of which is....second nature or skill". The means employed thus become the 'working' or efficient third cause.

#### Fourth Cause – The need:

The fourth cause is the most important. It is the need that actually created the art-object. It is the need for a place to house day-to-day activities that actually sent the client to the architect who had the skill to conceive a house appropriate to the client and build it for him. "Thus the first and final cause is the occasion or necessity of the work". The artist/architect, once he/she has given consent to the task, works "by art and with will".

#### **Capturing the Spirit:**

The artist working thus, Coomaraswamy says quoting a Chinese classification can be one of three types. This classification, though intended for painters can be extended to all types of artists including architects. The first type of artist is called 'Divine' "who makes no effort of his own, his hand moves spontaneously" achieving an absolute perfection that represents "rather the goal than the attainable in human art" (Coomaraswamy, 1934, 18). The second is the "mysterious" artist who "first experiences in imagination the instincts and passions of all things that exist in heaven or earth; then in a style appropriate to the subject, natural forms flow spontaneously from his hand" and the third type of artist is called 'astounding' who "though he achieves resemblance in detail, misses

universal principles, a result of mechanical dexterity without intelligence...when the operation of the spirit is weak, all forms are defective” (Coomaraswamy, III).

The process of Conception:

Thus it becomes obvious from the stages described above and the classification of artists as divine, astounding and mysterious that supreme emphasis was given to the first stage i.e. contemplative phase of an artist’s work – “the operation of the spirit” as said by the Chinese author quoted above. Perfection of technique is definitely appreciated.

Coomaraswamy says that the artist enjoys his work while it is a-making and when it is done. “The artist’s mind and body are both involved...He both understands what he is doing and feels it”. Yet what is greatly lauded is the conception of the initial idea to best suit the brief at hand. And the rigours required to be able to conceive such an idea are great. The process described in traditional texts that has to be adopted in order to prepare oneself for it is almost ritualistic. For example, revisiting the first cause described above, “the artist (then) purified by a spiritual and physical ritual, working in solitude, and using for his purpose a canonical prescription, has to accomplish first of all a complete self-identification with the indicated concept...the desired form then “reveals itself visually against the sky, as if seen in a mirror, or in a dream” and using this as a model, he begins to work with his hands”(Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 109), “the imager is required, after emptying his heart of all extraneous interest..”(Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 85), “Then he (the artist) must meditate on the original purity of the first principles of things....there are destroyed the individual consciousness. Only when the personality of the individual is thus set aside...” does the image appear like a reflection in the artist’s intellect. Ananth phrases it thus:

*“What is required is concentrated attention and the ability to empty one’s consciousness so that something entirely new and different can take its place and be absorbed”*  
(Ananth, 2001, 63).

Thus in the ancient Indian tradition, great responsibility was placed in the artist. The prepared artist was conceived as a receptacle of ‘Eternal’ ideas to which he/she gave form. The onus was on the artist to be able to make him/her self into a receptacle for what was appreciated above all else is the conception of the initial, appropriate idea and then the intellectual operation of giving form to that idea.

The experience of the artist and the beholder:

Though such demands are placed on the artist, ultimately he/she takes immense pleasure in it. The stage of complete self-identification with the conceived form of the object to be created is a state of ecstasy for the artist (the “anandamaya” state explained in the section titled “Indian Philosophy”). The same experience is relived each time the artist beholds the finished art-object. To the extent that the object was created by self-identification to that extent, the art-object comes alive with life – the work of the mysterious artist. To the extent that the art-object is alive, it takes the artist to greater depths of ecstasy.

A similar experience happens in a user of the art-object. While the conceiving and making of a necessary art-object is the artist’s responsibility, the use of it is the patron’s who commissioned it. “...insofar as he (the patron) is qualified by knowledge and sensibility to take both a rational and an animal pleasure in the qualities of the work itself” “he both understands and feels it” (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 60) Indian tradition never conceives of its ‘experiencer’ or user as a passive entity. The experiencer will realise as much joy from the art-object as he/she is prepared to. The further he/she goes, the more his/her intellect becomes akin to the artist’s. The most discerning experiencer will experience the same self-identification that the artist did while conceiving the art-object and the resulting indescribable ecstasy. This experiencer will then be able to “occupy the house that was built for” another patron, will be able to imagine with the artist and share with the artist the pleasure of a “perfected operation” (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 63) i.e. understand what the artist understands and feel what he feels, not by observation but providentially and vitally. Yet this depends on the experiencer’s identification with essential form of the art-object “...upon an identity of the causal consciousness with the form of the pattern of the thing that is caused: “the pleasure in which the cognitive life subsists (,) arises from a unification of the active power with the pattern (of the thing to be), to which this active power is ordered” (Ed. Lipsey, 1977, 64).

Thus we see that any artist and the patron for whom he/she creates the art-object need to share a common language. They should be able to intrinsically understand each other.

Only then can art-objects be created that respond specifically to the patron's need, which might also continue to be his/her and the artist's "source of joy forever".

### **Artist as servant:**

Yet the most important aspect in any work of art is its theme itself, which was never "just the personal emotions or thoughts of either the artist or the experiencer" (unknown). All themes were ideal; for example all love-poems expressed the love Lord Krishna had for Radha or Majnu's love for Laila of which the 'love' in context partakes. It is precisely because of this idealised theme that "art objects lose their appeal to the egoistic or practical self and appear the same to all" (unknown). This is true not just for the experiencer but also for the artist. In attempting to give form to ideal themes, the artist becomes a slave to his art; he approaches the task with great humility. It does not matter who the artist is, for every artist expresses the same ideal. Once again here one can recall Coomaraswamy's insightful words "*Ideal art is rather a spiritual discovery, than a creation*" (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 19). He further qualifies this statement thus:

*"...it is a discovery of the right way of solving a given problem...Whoever insists upon his own way is rather an egoist than an artist; just as the mathematician who "finds" that two and two make five, and insists upon the beauty, or perfection, of his own solution, is a peculiar person rather than a mathematician."* (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 50)

Thus we find very little background on the lives of individual artists, architects or craftspeople themselves while volumes have been written on the 'why' and 'how' of the art itself, for the Indian tradition had no place for the individual whims and fancies of the artists. Such presumptuousness was seen only as exhibitionism and the art-object created by the mere need for self-expressionism was "compared to the ravings of a madman" (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 79).

Traditionally, in architects, this humility was of greater significance for the architect was not just trained in building skills. He was also expected to have competent understanding of philosophy, language, grammar, engineering, literature, the arts (music, dance, poetry, and theatre), religion and rituals (Ananth, 1999). It is only with an understanding of these

other fields that the architect proceeded to give form to metaphysical truths and in a form that was understood by the people for whom he built.

In conclusion it could be said that in ancient times, if timeless metaphysical truths were brought home through the vehicle of art, it was because both the artist and patron were aware of and aspired to such spiritual ends. Art creation and experience is a full circle, starting from the need of the patron – the first cause, to the artist's experience of the conceived art-object in his intellect, to its realisation in physical form and finally the patron experiencing one-ness with the art-object created for him/her. Within this cycle, experience was of the utmost importance; any art that was not created from the first intellectual experience of the artist, however great it be in its mechanical perfection was still inferior and did not hold out any hope of a transcending experience for the user. Yet however great the artist's skill in giving shape to accepted ideal themes, he approached his task with the greatest humility in being able to serve his art.

*“Every traditional artist uses the operations of his craft as a support to ‘contemplate divine ideas’, that is, to understand the principles governing gross manifestation. Identifying himself with and losing himself in his artistic operation he treads the path of spiritual progress” (Kollar, 2001, 55)*

## Art and the Everyday:

Having spoken at length about the sensible, metaphysical and spiritual layering of an art-object and its decoding thereof, one wonders what happens to its most basic utilitarian aspect? What was the Indian tradition's attitude towards 'function' and 'utility' in architecture? Where in the above described scheme of things does 'utility' fit in?

The usefulness of any art-object, according to Indian art tradition, is a given. This has to be stressed here especially since everything discussed is done so within the context of architecture. An architecture that does not serve its most basic function of housing people's everyday activities in the most appropriate manner is according to the Indian tradition inconceivable – function is not a condition for architecture, it is taken for granted as having been fulfilled in the best possible manner – all the rest comes only after that. “The workman being a rational being, it is taken for granted that every work has a theme or subject...and a corresponding utility or meaning” (Coomaraswamy, 1934, 100). That the aspect of function is not dwelt with at length in Indian canons is proof enough of the above fact. Quoting Coomaraswamy it could be said:

*“Only when we have been convinced that a work originally answered to intelligible and reasonable needs, tastes, interests, or aspirations....., only when we are in a position to take the work for granted as a creation which could not have been otherwise than it is, are conditions established which make it possible for the mind to acknowledge the splendour of the work itself, to relish its beauty or even its grace” (Coomaraswamy, Introduction to Art of Eastern Asia)*

It is in the extreme relish of an art-object that one is taken to higher levels of experience. When sensual experience is spoken of as the first level of experience, it is assumed that the basic function of the art-object has been fulfilled as best as possible. Sensual pleasure may perfect the operation and the use of any art-object including buildings but that does not mean that sensual pleasure can actually substitute either the use or the operation itself (Ed.Lipsey, 1977, 69). Put succinctly, any work of art was conceived outwardly to use and inwardly to a delight of reason (Coomaraswamy, 1934, 55). Art for art's sake had no meaning in the ancient Hindu tradition. In his essay “Love of Art” Coomaraswamy gives a scathing account of the elitist view of art that looked upon art as a luxury, “divided off

and from and known apart from everyday social, industrial, and political activity” (Coomaraswamy, 1936, www). In all traditional societies, especially in India art was an integral part of everyday life



Fig 47: Kolam designs on the floor done by women either with rice powder or flowers: they are creative expressions executed with mathematical precision on an everyday basis

and artists was just like the common man, only possessing the necessary skill to produce the needed artifact be it a sculpture, musical composition or architecture.

*“Whatever was made was made by the artist, not for connoisseurs but for consumers, not for exhibition but for use....No one supposed that the artist was a more sensitive or more intelligent being than other men, but simply that he was an expert in some department of manufacture, either as a blacksmith, painter, architect, or in some other field.”*  
(Coomaraswamy, 1936)

But then what is ‘use’? When utility is spoken of does it just mean ‘functionality’ as in enabling physical use of the object i.e. shelter with relation to architecture? Here Coomaraswamy says that any artist is concerned both with the physical and spiritual use of the art-object that is created for every work of art was not just an ‘ornament’ that beautified an existing use. In fact, in traditional Indian conception there was no division of art as ‘fine’ that appealed to intellect (without concerning itself with proper ‘use’) and a ‘common’ craft that was useful (without aspiring to go beyond mere physical use). As

Coomaraswamy would say *“to make anything solely for physical and not at the same time for spiritual use is something less than human”* (Coomaraswamy, 1936)

One and the same art object served both the physical function of use, intellectual function of understanding and spiritual function of transcendence.

The blacksmith and carpenter stood an equal standing with a painter and an architect, none being superior or inferior to the other. This is attested to by the fact that sixty four arts are equally recognised in India – *“aaya kalaigal aruvathi naangu”* in Tamil translated as *“ancient arts sixty four”*.

*“Nor is any distinction of kind as between fine and decorative, free and servile, art to be made in this connection. Indian literature provides us with numerous lists of the eighteen or more professional arts (silpa) and sixty-four avocational arts (kala; and these embrace every kind of skilled activity, from music, painting, and weaving to horsemanship, cookery, and the practice of magic, without distinction of rank, all being equally of angelic origin”* (Coomaraswamy, 1934, 9)

Thus it becomes evident that art was not divorced from everyday life. Everyday life was not subordinated to the glory of special moments; on the contrary, every moment of life became a celebration.

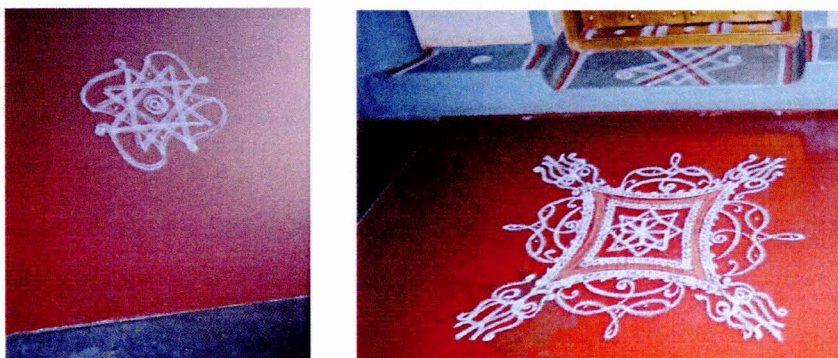


Fig 48 & 49: A rice powder kolam easily lends itself to everyday simple designs and complex decorative designs for special occasions.

In such a life filled with everyday use of incredible works of art right from the home one dwells in to the clothes and jewellery one wears and to basic food that one eats, the instances of being instituted into a higher level of consciousness are indeed very many.

Once again, as an architectural example, one can revisit the courtyard. In the earlier section titled “Courtyards” the everyday use of these courtyards was enumerated. These courts apart from being the setting for daily activities like greeting guests, cutting vegetables, cleaning and skinning meat, supervising children, grinding spices, cleaning vessels etc. eminently lend themselves to large gatherings like ceremonies: e.g. marriage rites and pregnancy rites and the like.

During these special occasions, the courtyard transforms into a special place accommodating large crowds and becoming the setting for many a threshold of life. The mundane everyday space of the court finds a unique place in the memories of the inhabitants of the household and during these special occasions finds its place in the joyous memories of the invited guests too. The courtyard thus simultaneously becomes the physical usable space, the metaphysical space connecting one with the universe beyond the house and the social space of special occasions making an indelible mark in every user’s psyche.

In conclusion it could be said that in the ancient Indian tradition there was no distinction between works of art that were for everyday use and others that served the intellect and spirit. Every work of art was conceived to serve physical, social and metaphysical ends simultaneously. Art then became a celebration of *the* everyday. Only when the kind of art that has been discussed so far i.e. an art that aspires towards the ideal of self-realisation, works in everyday life situations can it hope to be a vehicle for realising Ultimate reality. If architecture is the setting for the everyday drama of human life to unfold, then every activity of everyday life holds in itself the potential for that realisation to happen – for every activity happens in that setting which holds the promise of a *taste of the other*.

## **Non-Indian conception of Architecture as experience**

Having discussed at length the nature and conception of architecture within the ancient Hindu framework, this chapter will take a very brief outlook at a similar non-Indian conception of architecture and other aspects related to it. An attempt will be made to coherently define the concept of “architecture as experience” and touch upon certain key aspects that have a bearing on it.

Any inquiry into the nature of architecture must begin with an attempt to discover what it actually means. Architecture is understood differently by various people – to the architect it may be self expression, to the philosopher the quest for truth, to the ethnologist an element of culture, to the sociologist the provision of shelter to all and to a lay person, just buildings or maybe buildings and the site surrounding it. In reality architecture is in fact all of the above.

### **Architecture as experience:**

The most basic explanation for architecture could be “*creating spaces*”. But then, if architecture was just creating spaces, then giving form to our practical, economic and functional requirements would suffice. In which case, the task of building would be done by putting together various elements of shelter in the most economic way. Any person who methodically approaches this system of ‘facts’ and resolves the problem at hand, no doubt a feat in itself, is an architect. Man’s perception of his environment too is just as simple. Since man’s life by and large consists of the same activities i.e. sitting, speaking, eating, abluting, sleeping, cooking etc at home for example, the same prototype house repeated with small variations to accommodate individual ‘idiosyncrasies’ should constitute architecture and should make man happy.

But does it? In the most simplest of ways, that man who shares the same life as his neighbor, sets about to transform that ‘practical, economic and functional’ space into a place that is uniquely his own – in other words, gives ‘**meaning**’ to it. An everyday

example of this is the rich variety of transformations and underlying meanings that is brought by people into the exactly similar, unchanging apartments that are sold to them. No apartment looks like the other, yet there is little variation in the ‘practical, economic and functional’ requirements of the people who inhabit it.

So our definition that architecture is ‘making places’ does not hold its ground. Christian Norberg-Schulz, in his book “Architecture: Meaning and Place” (Norberg-Schulz, 1988) offers this explanation for architecture

*“...architecture simply means the creation of meaningful places.”*

It is this meaning that sets architecture apart from all other buildings. True architecture is not created when an architect designs or builds a place, but when the place is experienced by a person or persons. It is in the feeling of freedom in a light flooded courtyard, the secure feeling of a dark corner, the warm feeling of wood beneath the feet that architecture thrives! Notice the recurrence of *feeling*. It is not the courtyard, the walls or the floor that create architecture, but the feeling they invoke in us: the physical building becoming just a tool to create this feeling and give meaning to life.

*“Buildings are inert, architecture is volatile. We encounter buildings: architecture is experience.....*

*Architecture is the experience that is produced by the architecture machine, which is assembled when the inert building comes into contact with its users”* (Ballantyne, 2004, 115). This view of architecture throws a whole new light on the way architecture is conceived and perceived, thus gathering it from the rational realm of science and thought and taking it beyond into the realm of feeling and art. We cannot say that a room of dimensions ‘X’ and ‘Y’ will produce the feeling of joy in men, so if a happy space is needed, make a room of those dimensions and expand it exponentially to accommodate more people. Architecture just doesn’t work that way because the rational discipline of scientific postulates “can never cover the fundamental fact that qualities of different kinds are spontaneously mixed when experiencing (architecture)” (Norberg-Schulz, unknown)

Meaning and feeling are qualities and cannot be quantified, when we try to approach them scientifically they simply fall apart.

## **Architecture and the Senses**

Thus *architecture is experience* itself which evokes the intangible qualities of meaning, feeling and such, making life richer and fuller. But in the real world what architects do and can do is design spaces – which are a tangible physical reality. How then is the physical reality of space linked to the feelings that exist in a person's mind? The clue to the above relationship exists in understanding how spaces are perceived by us. The very demarcation of internal and external presupposes the existence of a boundary – what is within and what stands outside it. In our case, this boundary is the human body; feelings are contained within while space exists outside.

### **Body and Perception:**

Our perception of space starts from our body. One aspect of the environment that we learn to perceive very early in our lives is 'size'. Whenever one thinks of the fabled palaces of Northern India or the temple complexes of the South, the first adjective that comes to mind is *huge*. The very concept of "huge" or "big" arises from the fact that the space in question is many times larger than us. Part of the fascination that we have for prehistoric animals – the mammoths and dinosaurs – that could crush these vast spaces beneath their feet is their sheer size, which we perceive in relation to ourselves. A place is near when we can reach it easily and far when our body, by walk or transport (in which our body travels), takes a long time to reach.

In ancient times, that which was not understood, that which stood beyond reason, that which was recognized as greater than man himself was spatially represented by forms many times larger in scale than the average man. The classical orders that were developed later also had man's body as its basic unit, as did the many proportioning systems recorded at length in the annals of history.

*“...human perception and action extend outward from the materiality of flesh and organ and bone to items and sources of sensation that exist outside the boundaries of the skin”*  
(Franck and Lepori, 2000, 31)

But it is not mere morphology that initiates our perception mechanism. If perception is regarded as an active process through which we make sense of the world around us, (Lawson, 2001, 42) then the sum total of our experience of it is the integration of our sense-experiences without conscious analysis. So, apart from the ‘form’ of the human body, the senses – sight, sound, touch even smell – play a seminal role in our perception of space.

#### Senses and Perception:

Ghost stories always take place in forsaken castles with peculiar sounds creeping down tall towers. A master story teller’s voice modulation is enough for us to imagine and literally *feel* the length and depth of those ominous towers. How many times have we had this irrepressible urge to whisper eerily in an empty space or shout aloud in a deserted barn for the sheer pleasure of hearing the walls throw back our voice to us? The rebounding sound gives us a grasp of the volume of space we are in. More indirect are the ways in which we use smell to perceive space, through associations. The smell of fresh earth may give a sense of vast open spaces while it is not uncommon to think of a space as dingy and stuffy, when the air smells stale. Even more powerful is the sense of touch; the refuge of cool marble flooring in a hot Indian home or the welcoming warmth of plush carpeting on a cold night in South Africa.

Thus the link between the inside and outside is enabled through the body, more specifically the *senses*. The senses render the body porous and permeable rather than closed and independent. They enable the transmission of information, sensation and other cues from outside into the human mind and transmit back the responses. In fact, this communication that is largely enabled by the senses is also very important for the healthy development of the self. It is essential for survival.

*“The senses define the interface between the skin and the world, the interface between the opaque interiority of the body and the exteriority of the world.” (Juhani Pallasmaa, 1996, 29).*

Ultimately, the relationship between space as an exterior concrete reality and experience as the interior intangible quality can be represented thus.

This phenomenon was implicitly understood by generations past. The meandering alleyways, the texture of stone facades, the surprising changes in scale, all together invite one to explore, experience and participate. Life itself brimmed over with vibrancy – filled with colours, sights and sounds.

### **Meaning in architecture:**

We now have a strong argument for creating ‘meaningful’ places. When the term meaning comes to the fore, it presupposes a person/society that seeks and discerns that meaning. But do we really need meanings? Walter Gropius of Bauhaus fame, in his book “The new architecture and Bauhaus” talks of the aesthetic satisfaction of the soul which is as important as the material

*‘Meaning is the fundamental human need’*

says Geoffrey H. Baker in his book ‘Design strategies in Architecture’. The human mind can never be satisfied with the explanation that ‘this is so, because it is.’ Consciously or unconsciously we seek deeper explanations and try to fill our lives with meaning & content. Our understanding of the world around us stems from the fact that we experience our lives by comparing the unknown with the things that are already a part of our experience (Ballantyne, 2004, 8) Architecture aids and abets our understanding of this world and ourselves because every action of our takes place in a ‘space’ and one cannot think of an action event or circumstance in isolation without also thinking of the space that supports it. In the words of Rudolph Shwarz (Quoted in Norberg-Schulz, 1988, 31)

“The people inserts the world it carries within, into the surrounding earth, that is inserts the interior landscape into the exterior one and both become one” People cannot be isolated from the architecture they inhabit and are surrounded by. Architecture gives meaning to and derives meaning from people’s lives.

Christopher Alexander, the author of the book “A Pattern Language” speaks of patterns of events (action) that are almost completely defined by the spatial character of the place where it occurs (Christopher Alexander, A timeless way of building.) Christian Norberg-Schulz goes a step further and says

*“When an action takes place..... (it) does not only part take in a spatial structure, but is also linked with a system of values and meanings”*( Norberg-Schulz, 1988, 31)

A closer inspection of the above statement yields the possibility that there may be two different aspects to our understanding of the meanings architecture gives to people. One is the literal meaning of the space, i.e. flying buttresses, rosaried windows and a tall steeple means a place of God. There is the other associational meaning – this building made of flying buttresses, rosaried windows and a tall steeple may have instilled a subtle fear and remind one of one’s guilt in the early times but in the modern world it may suggest introspection and contemplation. This is what architect Robert Venturi, in his book “Complexity and contradiction in architecture” (1966) refers to as the meanings which stem from the interaction of interior characteristics and its particular context which could be termed as *spatial meanings* and the meanings that are called up by associations (Venturi, 44, 1966) which could be termed *iconographic* ones - essentially determined by memories.

Spatial and iconographic meaning may appear to be two distinct aspects fully contained in themselves while in fact they are as inter-dependent as inter-related.

Let us take the example of a ubiquitous house, the most common yet most diverse architectural typology. When a person sets out to design a ‘house’ what he actually seeks to build is a ‘home’ and there is a world of difference between both. The house is a

visible tangible thing whereas the home is an abstract concept. So, in essence, one is trying to create a place that exists only in one's mind and using the physical reality of the house to contain it. In so far as the physical reality aids in our experience of the 'place', in this case our conception of home, architecture is created. When it fails to elicit the anticipated feeling, no architecture exists. The physical reality of the building may vary and change but it should continue to support the conceptual home which remains constant. Yet at the same time, when a house is destroyed, though the place where it stood remains, the illusionary place of home, is also destroyed. Similarly, when the concept of place is destroyed, we also destroy architecture. The spatial meanings arrive from the built forms whereas iconographic meanings arise from the impression created on the mind i.e. the concept of place. This theory can be extended to every building type.

### **The concept of Place:**

Place is thus an illusionary perception of space which through architecture becomes an "ethnic domain, visible, tangible, sensible" (Langer, 1953). Architecture here is regarded as the translation of the concept of place into visual impressions. This understanding may be further illustrated using a simple example found widely in Southern India.

A weapon called the 'Arivaal' in the Tamil language is a sharp defense with a handle that holds a sickle like sword knife. The handle of arivaal is buried in the ground or on a raised platform made for it. This symbol is usually found near the boundaries of villages. It is an assurance to the village that the Super power that guards the village will protect them at all times, and a warning to any attacking enemy that this village is heavily protected. In actuality, in the event of a skirmish, it is the men of the village who with their own weapon (arivaal) will fight the enemy. Nevertheless, the above mentioned place is created to represent the concept of guarding and protection. The physical reality is just a weapon effectively invoking the concept of 'place', the physical place being just a semblance (Langer, 1953, 95).

## **Culture as a Generating force:**

It is very important to bear in mind that these spatial and iconographic meanings can only arise from culture. It is culture that nurtures both the conceptual and physical realities of 'place'. Though a universal order is always present, the created architecture varies according to differences in culture. But then, what is culture?

*"A culture is made up, factually, of the activities of human beings"*  
(Langer, 1953, 96).

Thus everybody eats but the way food is eaten differs from culture to culture. When architecture is created to contain that activity and the many activities of human life, an image of culture itself is created. Thus architecture becomes an expression of the very being of societies (Ballantyne, 2004, 16). As cultures grow and change, Architecture reflects the progress of the world. In fact the rich interrelations of man and his environment built or otherwise takes place within the matrix of culture. In the words of Eugene Raskin

*"In short architecture mirrors the various aspects of our lives –  
Social, economic, spiritual,..."*  
(Eugene Raskin, 1974)

He goes on to emphasise that architecture cannot conceal or misstate the truth, it cannot lie. The role of architecture is to delineate and define the nature of contemporary man. Architecture has truly created the image of culture (Langer, 1953)

Yet in ancient culture, settlements were small with every person was known to the other, giving rise to similar perceptions and conceptions of things. Experiences, though unique for every individual could be compared, because of the existence of a common culture. Every one had a unique and firmly established identity within their own society and culture. But as the world progressed, with the advent of transport and the consequent merging of settlements, experiences became richer, more diverse and an explosion of thought and knowledge took place. Large nations with a common identity were formed

and man as an individual was lost. Ironically man became an individual in his own right in this democratic world but lost his sense of identity. But why did this happen?

### **The need for identity:**

Symbols and signs are the means of communication in a common culture. So, for example, a simple cross symbolizes the place of God anywhere in the world and carries with it layers of meaning – humility, piety, reverence. But when cultures merge, the symbols lose their meaning and new symbols are not immediately understood. The need for more exact symbol-systems arises.

*“The more complex and differentiated the environment becomes, the more we need a large number of different Symbol-systems.”*  
(Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1988, 20)

And these symbol systems give us comparable experiences, effectively directing our behaviour and giving us a sense of identity. But, do we need a sense of identity? And if we do, how does Architecture contribute to it?

The archaeologist Grahame Clark in his insightful work on prehistory speaks about evolution of material culture making it abundantly clear that the whole apparatus of material culture goes over and beyond mere utility in expressing symbolic meaning. Symbols have been important even to prehistoric man for they were a means of establishing identity. And *“a sense of identity....was recognized as the most important fact of existence”* (Clark, 1982, 65). Identity was and continues to be a basic human impulse. It is especially important for architecture which provides the setting for the drama of human life to be able to give its users a sense of identity. But how is this identity created? Norberg-Schulz would say that human identity to a large extent is dependent on places and things that facilitate concrete identification (Norberg-Schulz, 1984). The relevance of identification in and through architecture is summed up thus:

*“Human identity presupposes the identity of place”* (Norberg-Schulz, 1984, 22)

And creating this identity of place is the prerogative of architecture.

In conclusion, the above discussion could be summed up as: architecture is created only through the experience of its user, experience being the key. Such architecture, by definition will accommodate over and beyond the utilitarian needs of its user, the body and the senses. When this happens, the greater human need for meaning and identity based on culture is also taken care of. “Architecture as Experience” not only serves the civilized individual of today’s complex society but also houses the “hunter and caveman” within each person, i.e. the deeper unconscious human impulses.

## Interpreting the Indian concept

“Art/Architecture as experience” as seen from the preceding chapters, is a concept that is not exclusively Indian. It has its parallels in non-Indian architectural thought too. So it might be useful to interpret some of the aspects of Indian architectural thought within the framework of non-Indian thought explored in the previous chapter, highlighting possible parallels and divergences. It needs to be stated here that the comparison is only general and by no means exhaustive. It is merely a synthesis of first impressions that the author had during preliminary readings of non-Indian works on architectural discourse and philosophy.

### Art as Experience:

According to Indian thought, art in its becoming consists of giving tangible form to an idea in the artist’s mind, conceived best to suit a given context. This requires complete self-identification of the artist with his/her theme in first instance, then skill in expressing the idea in material form which will embody multiple meanings for the user; ideally culminating in the self-identification of the initiated user with the art-object, leading to self-realisation. Experience is the key to unlock the many meanings that may be encoded – the artist’s intuitive *experience* of the idea as an immediate reality and the user’s *experience* of it at the sensible, metaphysical and transcendental levels.

The non-Indian concept of “Architecture as experience” deals with experience at the sensible and to a certain extent metaphysical levels. At the sensible level, the rationale behind both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions are in agreement. The body and senses are the interface between the outer reality and the inner worlds of human beings. So, any architecture that hopes to serve more than the physical needs of its users must accommodate the human senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. The body also becomes important in both conceptions as the ‘known’ entity that facilitates an understanding of the unknown – Indian thought takes the unknown to the level of Ultimate Reality while non-Indian thought considers the “unknown” as the unknown environment, natural or man-made, in which one has to orient and identify oneself. In

both cases body becomes an important tool in aiding the creation of architecture as a setting for the dwelling of mankind.

The most basic difference between both these conceptions is that in ancient India, the spiritual ends overrode all other ends. The sensible and metaphysical were not denied but were superseded by the spiritual. So while in the non-Indian conception, 'experience' was concerned with physical perception, in the Indian conception 'experience' at the level of perception was a stepping stone to the intuitive experience of Ultimate Reality. This ideal of self-realisation sets apart the ancient Indian concept from all other conceptions of 'art as experience'.

#### Identity and Place:

The fact that identity is essential to human existence is deeply understood by both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions of architecture. While the non-Indian conception speaks of *place* in terms of the axis mundi connecting man to the heaven and earth, the Indian conception speaks of the axis of the universe passing through the centre of every site verily locating the individual within the larger cosmos. Both the conceptions express the need for man to have an identity at personal, social and metaphysical levels and conceive of architecture as being capable of providing that to a large extent. The non-Indian conception considers *place* as 'Being' manifest while the Indian thought conceives it as being born of the marriage of heaven and earth (manifestation of Ultimate Reality).

What both streams of thought try to express is the hierarchy of micro and macrocosms within which the individual is located, i.e. the cosmic order of the universe, the natural order of the surrounding environment and the order within every human habitat – villages, houses and interiors. The non-Indian conception speaks of "character" of a place or its "spirit" called *Genius Loci*, which determines the character or essence of the people who live off and by the place. Similar thought in the Indian scene is found in the assertion that the inherent character of the *ur* is shared by those who live from it for generations. Thus it is found that in both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions, *place* serves as the anchor and identity for the individual and architecture recognised this. This recognition

results in a certain sensitivity to context. The Genius Loci of a place had to be acknowledged and respected in the non-Indian conception while the Indian thought did the same in the form of many rites and rituals that were performed on site for having disturbed its existing rhythm and harmony. In the non-Indian conception, the settlement had to gather its surrounding landscape, with its internal structure aligned with the external features. Similarly Indian conception uses astrology and various other traditional canons as a tool to align the place created, with the larger environment and cosmos by enunciating the suitability of certain directions to certain activities, measurements to individuals etc. Thus both lines of thought place great importance on *context*. The Indian conception takes it a step further when, with the aid of astrology, it attempts to design places that respond to perceived individual personalities.

Thus both the Indian and non-Indian conception of architecture attempts to help man identify himself by creating a sense of place that helped him locate himself within his territory, then his immediate environment and finally the larger cosmos.

Meaning in architecture:

Both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions of architecture speak of meanings. In the non-Indian stream two types of meaning are spoken of - spatial and iconographic. The spatial meanings arise from a literal reading of the place while iconographic meanings arise from associations. A similar conception of meanings in art/architecture is also found in Indian thought. Sensible and metaphoric meanings are spoken of. Sensible meanings correspond to the first experience of architecture when readily available architectural cues are apprehended by the senses, very similar to the spatial meaning spoken of above. Metaphoric meanings arise at a different level of experience, when meaning is suggested by way of metaphor not unlike iconographic meanings which arise from associations. But the Indian conception, in keeping with its primary ideal of realisation of Ultimate Reality, speaks of a third level of meaning which is spiritual or transcendental in nature. This meaning, when rightly read holds the possibility of transcendence beyond the levels of subject-object distinctions into the realm of ultimate self-realisation.

Yet, the importance of meaning is recognised and asserted by both the streams of thought. Neither of them is content with an architecture that is merely 'functional' or 'utilitarian' as the term is understood today. In their own ways both Indian and non-Indian conceptions of architecture worked to enrich man's experience by embodying different levels of meaning in the places created and thus fulfil his fundamental need for meaning in life.

The importance of culture:

Any discussion of meaning and identity cannot take place outside the framework of culture. Both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions recognise and endorse this viewpoint. If culture factually consists of the everyday activities of its people, then it is culture that nurtures meaning and identity in people. Culture essentially has to do with symbols for expression and both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions recognise the need for symbol systems. In the non-Indian conception, symbolisation allows for identification and orientation of the individual. In the Indian conception of architecture, symbolism plays a very important role and this symbolism will be understood only when the architect and the user share a common culture. This aspect is very important in the Indian thought for art and so architecture is essentially thought of as a means of communication. So, for communication to take place both the communicator and the person to whom it is communicated need to speak the same language. A quote from Coomaraswamy will effectively communicate the importance of culture within Indian traditional art/architecture.

*"The problem before the artist is that of communicating to others a given idea, and though this can be done by means of sensible symbols – perceptible shapes or audible sounds – it is evidently essential that these shapes and sounds be such as can be understood, and not merely seen or heard, by the patron or spectator who rightly expects to be able to understand and make use of the work of art to procure those ends to which it was ordered on his behalf." (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 85)*

Thus it is seen that both the Indian and non-Indian streams of thought discussed here place primacy on the use of culture as a basis for design and contend that no work of art or architecture conceived outside of the matrix of culture within which it is to be used or situated can truly serve its ends of serving the people for whom it is made. This also relates back to the question of context – as much as the immediate environment is a contextual consideration for design decisions, so also culture forms an important context to which any art form needs to be sensitive. This is also acknowledged by both Indian and non-Indian forms of thought.

#### Architecture and the everyday:

Art and so, necessarily, architecture was looked upon as a means to celebrate the otherwise mundane situations of the everyday. Architecture was never conceived as being exclusive and for the elite. The mystery of art and architecture had the power to enrich everyday lives. This line of thought is strong both in the Indian and non-Indian conceptions of architecture discussed in the document. In the Indian conception there is no divide between “fine” and “decorative” arts. They are both one and the same. Similarly the non-Indian notion of ‘architecture as experience’ does not reserve experience for those special moments. It does not consider an architecture that does not provide its user with enriching experience during everyday use as architecture itself. A marriage of use and meaning is considered essential here; for a *rich* experience is constituted by both the ease of use and the accommodation of the unconscious human impulses of meaning and identity – by both the mundane and the profound. Thus it is seen that the concept of architecture as enriching the everyday is central to both the Indian and non-Indian conceptions of architecture as experience.

The points of coincidence listed above, between the Indian conception of art as experience and non-Indian conception of architecture as experience, are few in number and have been briefly dealt with. The point to be made is that while a preliminary comparison could bring about these parallels, the possibilities for discovering deeper and more exhaustive congruencies between the two architectural philosophies are immense. This only illustrates further that the first principles of architecture are universal and

intangible. The delightful variety in architecture stems from different interpretations of the same universal principles, none being superior or inferior to the other but rather serving to complement each other.

## Current Indian Architectural Context:

Architecture is designed and built for man, to facilitate his everyday activities and to celebrate his life on earth – to enable him to  *dwell* poetically. That this was never lost sight of in architecture of the past (Indian or any other) is seen from the previous chapter. The architecture of the past concerned itself with enriching the lives of men by creating places that related to his body, senses and mind; the sensate environments that stimulate him, the meaning it held for him, the identification it enabled and beyond this by relating to his  *being*. What then is the architecture of today enabling? This chapter will try to look at the current architectural scene, especially in India.

An exploration of the architectural scene could rightly begin from a general overview of cities for cities as settings for architecture speak about the dominating trends in architectural thought. What do our modern cities look like?

The modern city today is a sprawling metropolis, with dead straight streets bordered on either side by monotonous glass and steel structures “that reach to the sky, reflect each other and reflect you” (Ballantyne, 2004, 120). This city neither invites the eye nor the body to engage.....*Observe but do not feel* is what it says (Franck and Lepori, 2000). But to feel is to experience and when feeling is denied, experience is denied and architecture itself is denied. It would seem that in cities as we see them developing, **architecture is dead**. Juhani Pallasmaa calls it a certain “pathology of the senses” and relates it to “growing experiences of alienation, detachment, solitude and exteriority characteristic of the technological world of today” (Pallasmaa, 1996). Spaces today are largely eye candy...or serve the high intellect at best. But our everyday life falls right in between these two.

*“Our dependence on a rich sensate environment transcends our needs  
For food shelter and clothing”  
(Lowenthal and Prince, 1976, 118)*

What we see around us today hardly seems to have taken account of this basic necessity of sensate environments for everyday use. The  *observe but do not feel* architecture may at

best accommodate the eye but fails to stimulate the other sense modalities, intellect or more importantly the *being* in every person. What it creates is an inhuman, a-people environment where no sense of ownership or pride is felt because the environment seems to be largely designed without people and their needs in mind. In the words of Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore:

*“Offices, apartment and stores are piled together in ways which owe to filing cabinet systems or the price of land than a concern for human experience or existence”.*(Bloomer and Moore, 1977, 7)

What has resulted is that, the eye and the intellect have been sheltered, whereas the body and the other senses as well as our memories and dreams – the essence of man’s existence – have been left homeless (Pallasmaa, 1996).

This take on modern cities is equally true in the urban centres of India. The renowned artist-architect-critic Gautam Bhatia, in his insightful essay on Indian cities provocatively titled “Building an ugly India”, writes:

*“If there is a professed spatial, humanist or aesthetic purpose to architecture it is difficult to experience it in the reality of the city”* (Bhatia, 2001)

The Indian city that Bhatia talks about leaves the user with “nothing. No remembrance of landmarks, no encounter with history, no cause for celebration” (Bhatia, 2001) and remains pretty only on paper. This is a far cry from the older traditional cities that created a sense of place and provided for identification while all that the city of today manages to do is nurture a sense of disconnectedness and isolation, the same thing that Pallasmaa calls “alienation, detachment, solitude and exteriority characteristic of the technological world of today” (Pallasmaa, 1996). While Pallasmaa attributes it to a neglect of the senses, Bhatia over and above that, cites the urge of the architect to stamp his/her ‘original’ style on buildings as a possible cause for buildings not relating to each other in a given environment, thus negating the possibility of people actually making sense of the built environment they are in. This also further limits the possibilities of identification and orientation that is accorded so easily in the rhythm and order of the architecture of traditional cities.

The above discussion does not merely reflect the odd architect's opinion. Time and again people also wonder about the state of architecture. A reputed newspaper in India, the Deccan Herald, representing the voice of the people asks:

*"If the Mysore Palace invokes the time when kings in fine jewellery rode on resplendent elephants, if the Taj Mahal brings to mind the Moghul era and the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata reminds one of the English presence in India, what will present day buildings remind the people of the coming generations?"*

It further laments about new structures that have no "unifying identity". This sentiment is also echoed by the noted journalist Geeta Doctor who thus describes the current day architectural scene in India:

*"Wherever there is a Collectorate, there will be a building, plain-as-a-cardboard shoe box, painted grey, or yellow, rimmed in red, with dust laden cement louvers sheltering pigeons, boxed windows that have been blocked out against a possible air-raid, or perhaps just the glare, and the cantilevered porch at the entrance...By way of contrast the upwardly mobile classes have gone in for the chocolate box style, with as many false balconies, plaster work Apsaras (nubile heavenly maidens), wrought iron balustrades, glass ornaments and marble finishes, that their architects can provide. This is in direct contrast to the fake piety of the super rich who imitate the austere colours and forms of vernacular architecture, with add-on carved temple pillars, hand polished floors, tribal rugs, grass mats and antique accessories, that hint at minimalist longings in immense Californian Pacific beach house interiors that roar and purr with central air-conditioning in the calm backwaters of their country retreat, which they like to describe as a simple "farmhouse" (Doctor, 1999)*

What Doctor manages to do is give an accurate account of current day architecture in India for she cleverly describes all types of buildings that architects build for the state, the upwardly mobile and the super rich – the only people who use architects to build at all. She calls it the "insidious effect" that architects have on the environment. Ironically, India is the largest construction market in the world (Bhatia, 2001) and churned out at least 21,000 architectural students in the year 2003 and had 25,000 registered architects in the same year (Phaidon, 2004). One would imagine that with such impressive statistics, the built environment would be astounding! Yet "Contemporary architecture in India fails to inspire" (Das, 1999) and has very little meaning in the lives of people and propels architects like Bhatia to question the fundamentals

*To what extent does the environment of India endorse the identity of a young nation and an old culture? Does architecture have a place in the collective identity of a people? Do buildings have a stake in fortifying our self-worth? (Bhatia, 2001)*

It becomes obvious now that India is still struggling with her post colonial identity. What has emerged since independence according to A.G. Krishna Menon, one of India's prominent architect-educators and conservationist tirelessly crusading for a revamp of architectural education in India, is two types of identity constructions – revivalist and modernist. The modernist construction is largely a legacy of the *masters* who left their indelible mark in the minds of Indian architects of the time aptly worded by Geeta Doctor as "*Le Corbusier's deadly legacy*". But chronologically the influence of the colonisers preceded the modernists.

#### The colonial mentality

Menon, analysing the state of architectural education points out time and again the influence that the colonial model has had on the attitudes of the people. The earliest Indian "*architect*" churned out by the British art and technical schools set up in India was actually a draughtsperson with two years training (Chakrabarti: 23: 1999), groomed to assist British engineers, who themselves lacking in design acumen imitated patterns from Britain (Menon: 2000). Later in time, the Colonisers attempted a revival of Indian tradition, with the two year course expanded to a five year course (1922 onwards) that included a study of Indian architecture too (Chakrabarti: 23: 1999). Admirable though the intent, this revival predictably lacked any true understanding of the conceptual philosophy behind the indigenous arts and architecture of India. The following quote attests to it.

*"...the more clearly the principles of Composition Proportion and General Design underlying Grecian monuments are understood the more clearly will Indian students be able to grasp the principles which underlie the classical works of their own country."*  
(Woods quoted by Chakrabarti, 1999, 23)

The result was an "exotic" India *looked at* through British eyes and Indian architects trained to *look at* their own legacy through the eyes of a European, without any thought given to establishing traditional Indian architecture in its own right. What resulted from

this was a disaster for architecture and all indigenous arts, “valorising (of) western themes in Indian architecture” which Menon calls a weakness (Menon, 2000). But the biggest blow was yet to come - the attitude that architects provided “decoration” while engineers produced pragmatic solutions. Menon attributes this to the fact that Indian people, unable to understand and relate to the colonial architects’ choices merely accepted them because they were “European” and so were worthy of admiration. A pattern of western *sanction* was thus adopted – “Indian architecture was on par with the West, and therefore was worth appreciation” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 25). Menon questions the integrity of the architectural profession in India which began with such hideous roots. What has resulted is

*“...the appreciation...of the representative examples of architectural form, and not of its vocabulary”*. (Chakrabarti, 1999, 25)

What has been most surprising and a little frightening is that, the worries echoed by Coomaraswamy writing about Indian art and architecture, long before Independence in 1947 is disturbingly similar. Coomaraswamy talks about two types of influences on Indian art – external and internal. The coloniser’s attitude towards India and Indian art is considered the primary external influence. Coomaraswamy says

*“We meet first with the deliberate discouragement of Indian production where it in anyway competed with English, and sometimes even where it did not.”*  
(Coomaraswamy, 1981, 67)

He then explains this with examples from other art-forms, especially by imposition of prohibitive taxes on exports from India and nominal duties for imports from Britain that sounded the death knoll for Indian arts and crafts. Traditional textiles of India were the worst hit – the many intricately designed, hand woven silks and cottons disappeared to be replaced by British textiles, “In 1816-17 India not only clothed the whole of that vast population, but exported ≤1,659,438 worth of goods. Thirty years later the whole of this export had disappeared, and India imported four millions sterling of cotton goods.”(Dutt quoted in Coomaraswamy, 1981, 68). But architecture was hardly an issue of import or export and so definitely did not pose a threat to English markets, so one would think that it might have escaped the *deliberate discouragement*. Unfortunately, architecture unlike

artifacts which were discouraged indirectly by oppressive taxes was affected more directly. In the words of Sir George Birdwood quoted by Coomaraswamy,

*“The worst mischief () is perhaps done by the architecture foisted on the country (i.e. India) by the Government of India (i.e. British rule) which being the architecture of the state was worthy of all imitation....the Indian Government (i.e. British Government) built him (the Nawab of Bahawalpur) a palace, which is the ghastliest piece of bare classicalism it is possible to imagine, even with so many examples before us in this country (India) of the dissenting chapels and vestry halls of the last century....Holkar, in obvious emulation of this preposterous production, is building for himself a vast Italian palace in Indore...(which) will be like Trentham, or Buckingham Palace or anything else in this world but a habitation meet for the (Indian) kings.” (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 70)*

India's long history of ignoring her own strengths and blindly imitating the West had already begun. Progressing from the thrusting of European architectural models on the Indian landscape to an attempt at revival of Indian crafts, what followed suit is what Chakrabarti laments about i.e. representative form without understanding the vocabulary. Again quoting an example from Coomaraswamy,

*“The moulding round the wall, a few feet from the floor, instead of forming an actual part of the wall, as in all old work, consists entirely of plaster applied to the surface of the wall, and is already breaking away...The contractor...by way of imitation (of the Kandyan door), has fastened on to each half of the double door a half sham lintel, so that when the doors are closed, it would be just possible at a little distance to suppose that a real lintel was there.”(Coomaraswamy, 1981, 70)*

No amount of effort by European artists and architects, at faithfully and painstakingly reproducing Indian art, in journals and books could revive the lost spirit of Indian traditional art and architecture. What remained was the mere body of work while the soul had long departed.

Having thus spoken about external influences, Coomaraswamy moves on to explain what he calls the internal factors that killed traditional art and architecture; the refusal of native states to employ traditional hereditary builders and the love of individuals for imitation of foreign things being chief among them. Coomaraswamy squarely places the blame for deterioration of the Indian arts on the attitudes that *Indians* developed. Says he:

*“Nothing can be more fatal to the arts than this attitude of snobbishness, or, at the best weakness, which leads us to imitate without consideration...the fact of foreign rule need not compel the Indian to acquire a foreign mind” (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 74)*

Once again what is disturbing is that after at least 60-65 years since Coomaraswamy's passionate writing, India is still in the same predicament! Today the term “European” need only be replaced by the term “Western”, and every observation made by Coomaraswamy regarding Indian attitudes towards their own art and architecture is still valid and many prominent architects still look at Indian architecture through cultivated “Western” attitudes of revivalism, not understanding the conceptual philosophy that was the starting point of the marvelous architecture of the past.

This brings us back to Menon's classification of current Indian architects' identity constructs into two – the modernist and revivalist constructs.

#### Indian Modernism:

India gained its hard-fought freedom from its colonizers and became an Independent nation-state. With it came a sense of liberation, the power to rebuild and the freedom to build India according to a brand new vision. It was an era of ‘scientific progress’ ushered in by the first President of free India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and unfortunately that meant a complete break from whatever was left of the ancient tradition. This freedom was ideally symbolized by the Modern movement which

*“...not only introduced new material and techniques...but gave a cosmetic sense of freedom by the upward thrust of the straight lines and flat clean planes of...architecture” (Doctor, 1999).*

With this came a whole new perception of architecture which was not in any way rooted in India itself, leaving no room for traditional builders and further compounded by the ‘contemporary’ architect's unfamiliarity with traditional building principles (Chakrabarti, 1999, 26). One instance cited by Chakrabarti gives a very clear idea of shift in the perception of architecture. She quotes the ideology behind the building of Chandigarh which was lauded by Nehru

*“...thinking out in new terms, trying to think in terms of light and air and ground and water and human beings, not in terms of rules and regulations laid down by our ancestors.”*

And further makes the observation that

*“Scientific rationale wiped out the validity of the traditional ethos; for example the natural elements like the sunlight, wind and rain were now mere scientific entities that participate in the biological process of living beings, rather than constituents in a traditional perception that had given birth to the Indian forms of architecture, dance and music.” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 26)*

Once again traditional Indian architecture suffered from being totally misunderstood, this time as being obsolete and superfluous, not warranting a deeper study of its philosophical and conceptual foundations. One would imagine that at least the paradigms of the enthusiastically welcomed modern movement brought to India by the *masters* themselves - Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn who designed Chandigarh and the IIM at Ahmedabad respectively - would be critically examined and adapted wherever relevant. Instead the *masters* only became the newest icons to be imitated unquestioned. What resulted was what Geeta Doctor terms as *“Le Corbusier’s deadly legacy”* – synonymous with the public works department’s concrete finish touch. K.T. Ravindran is even more scathing in his account of the Modernist’s legacy in India, calling it mere stylistic reductionism.

*” (Le Corbusier’s work imitated merely as) deep exposed concrete fins or awkwardly curved sun shades, or by the more adept to mere proportions of apertures” and Kahn’s brick facades imitated “in geometric wastefulness in plan, in endless repetitions of the arch, circle and the triangle” (Ravindran, 1987, 63)*

This perception of Modernism for the Independent India was further reinforced by Indian architects trained abroad who brought “MIT” or “Harvard” or “Liverpool” brand of Modernism to India with no concern for the local context (Menon, 1999). Thus in this Modernist school of thought, traditional Indian architectural philosophy did not stand any chance of resurrection.

#### The Revivalist School:

The other identity construct in the post independent architectural scene of India, according to Menon is the Revivalist school, which made its first appearance sometime after the entry of Modernism. Chakrabarti asserts that revivalism resulted because of the

*soul-searching* of modern Indian architects trained in the West, who felt a loss of identity (Chakrabarti, 1999, 28). But Menon sees these revivalist attitudes for what they truly are

*“Orientalist exercises, defined by and for, a foreign - "other" – constituency” (Menon, 1999)*

The result of such revivalist tendencies is not as could be expected, a deeper understanding of the traditional Indian architecture in terms of its conceptual philosophy but rather its formal representations. Here we go back to the writings of Coomaraswamy discussed earlier. The sham lintel on the Kandyan door he describes with disgust could be as much a part of the Revivalism under discussion here as it was of the pre-independent colonial attempt at revival of the Indian arts.

*“Architects in the country innocently traipse through the minefield of cultural representation, oblivious to the contentious issues inherent in the positions they take. When they aspire to achieve "Indianness" in their works, they seldom pause to consider the ontological significance of the quest; when they reject it, their position still bristles with their indifference to the urgent ideological and philosophical issues of contemporary cultural formations.” (Menon, 1999)*

Ultimately “architects continue to view the traditional Indian architecture from the filters of modernist parameters of appreciation” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 29) not unlike the colonizers who believed that an understanding of Greco-Roman orders could help Indians understand Indian architecture better.

Even within the Revivalist faction, two distinct phases could be discerned. The first phase was when “Indian-ness” was infused into buildings by borrowing architectural elements from built representations and sticking them on to the new buildings, purely to make them *look* Indian. This obviously was criticized by other Indian architects themselves. So in the next phase, the traditional Indian concept entered the area of architectural theory. Now, fragments of the traditional architectural concept became a defense of the theory behind contemporary *Indian* design, while the idea of traditional architecture as a complete design methodology was totally disregarded. Ironically, this was when Indian architects gained recognition in the West, which became a sanction for their fragmentary

use of traditional architectural concepts. Contemporarising traditional architectural concepts became synonymous with

*“(The) process of adopting a traditional concept minus its traditional use and meaning” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 179).*

Thus Doshi’s building for IIM Bangalore uses the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple as an analogy while Correa’s Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur makes use of the analogy of the traditional “Kund” (water tank) for its amphitheatre. While this may be a clever way of proclaiming the “Indian-ness” of the buildings themselves, the question of the appropriateness of using temples and Kunds as analogies in the context that they are used seldom arises – the adoption of traditional architectural concepts without their traditional meaning and use, yet being lauded for their defense of the architect’s theory.

What was actually happening was an unconscious but convenient division of the traditional architectural concept into the “material and spiritual” realms; “visibilia and invisibilia” which in reality are inseparable (Chakrabarti, 1999, 178 & 195). On the one hand was the perception of the traditional architectural concept as “magic” and “mystery” – the ethereal aspect and the other the interpretation of Mandalas and such as mere ground plans or utilitarian aspect. This was convenient because then

*“The spiritual aspect...can... be injected into the material aspect of another architectural programme; and the material aspect of the traditional programme can be studied without its spiritual aspects by using modern tools of architectural appreciation” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 195)*

In truth, as seen throughout this document, traditional architecture always worked as a unified whole, within which the physical, metaphysical and spiritual realms worked as an interconnected matrix for the transformation of man.

In conclusion what this section goes to show is that, in the desire to *catch up* and be *sanctioned* by the West what India is producing is either crass imitations of Western architecture or a pastiche (visual or conceptual) of all things perceived as ‘Indian’ by the Western mind. Very little has been understood of the philosophy behind the traditional architectural concept that was the *raison d’être* of the marvels of ancient India. The fact

that “Indian-ness” and originality can only be achieved through a proper understanding of the metaphysics of a concept – Indian or otherwise, is yet to be realized with “the Indian vocabulary” (Chakrabarti, 1999, 91) remaining merely skin deep. In the meantime, without any research or analytical study being encouraged, traditional architectural concepts and in their name, the architecture of the Indian sub-continent is willfully plundered.

*“Everyone knows that architecture is a synthesis of all the arts...It is on architecture of today that the preservation of Indian art semblance of healthy life now hinges”*  
(Coomaraswamy, 1910, [www.](#))

Said Coomaraswamy at the Fifth Annual Industrial conference held in Allahabad in 1910 and lamented the tendency to make “of our country a mere suburb of Birmingham and Paris”. “Architecture is the mistress of all arts” he declared “and where architecture is neglected the lesser arts must also perish” (Coomaraswamy, 1981). Almost a century later it is still being discussed, so one cannot help but ask **what lessons have we learnt?**

## Conclusion

The greatness of history lies in its ability to teach us lessons. It affords us an opportunity to analyse what was done before us so that we may not make the same mistakes that were made before us by our predecessors. But today architects in India seem to think that they are autonomous and creative, doing what they want without regarding the fact that they are in fact building on centuries of history (Menon, 2005). Consequently the lessons of history are repeatedly being ignored. A survey of the dismal architectural scene in India and the possible reasons for this decline (as elucidated in the previous chapter) might have some important clues to help improve the situation at hand.

### Respect for tradition:

Every ideal in the present arises out of a continuum with the past and the aspiration for a better future. Traditions in their various forms are the living entities of culture, becoming those very bridges between the past and future while rooting the individual in the present. To ignore tradition is to break the connection with the past and ultimately to break the bridge of culture. If culture is the pattern of human response to its defined environment in which both the subtle human mind and aesthetics are manifested (Ramanathan, 2002), then throughout history culture has been both the generative force and the culmination of all artistic statements. Culture and so tradition cannot then be ignored; in fact they become one of the most important aspects in the creation of architecture.

*“Experiments carried out by societies who denied their past, failed to deliver solutions that can creatively bring people and nature together into a mutually enriching relationship. They have, in fact, proved destructive to the people and the environment.”*  
(Ananth, 2001, 22)

The fact that architects are, time and again, trying to *revive* the architecture of the land is proof enough of the fact that connection with tradition and the past *is* sought and is essential. Does that mean that Indian architecture should return to the past? Of course not, such an exercise is not only impossible but utterly absurd. Change is inevitable. Every era has its own achievements which should never be belittled but can verily serve to enrich culture, keeping the traditions alive. Traditions in other art-forms in India e.g. music and dance continue to thrive because in these fields, tradition is constantly re-inventing itself.

But this re-invention has to start from the roots – only *an understanding of the fundamentals of the tradition* itself will enable any contemporarising of tradition. The expressions of culture may change with changing times but what they express remains a constant which become the first principles of any art-form, including architecture. In order to create architecture that is rooted in culture, embodying the “whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features” (Intergovernmental conference, 1998) of a society, one has to return to the roots of the tradition itself, critically examine it and begin the creative journey from the first principles of architecture as understood from it.

Doing away with imitation:

*“There is ample evidence to show that the conquered races go away from their own strengths to imitate their conquerors, assuming that all they held in the past was dysfunctional” (Ananth, 2001, 16)*

History cannot be changed; it is inherited. The colonial times were a difficult period in the history of India and had far reaching effects for the arts and crafts of India, including architecture. During the 60 years since freedom, India has tried to rebuild herself with a new vision. This vision unfortunately had no place for the ancient architectural tradition to renew itself, but it was a result of its times. If the vision appears to be flawed today, then it is because times have changed. And with it India’s agenda for architecture also has to change. The first change should probably be in trying to get rid of the desire to *catch-up* with the West. In this hurry to *catch up*, what ends up being designed and built in *modern* India are bland imitations of Modern/International Style buildings in the Western world. Unfortunately this only works in the opposite direction for the architect wanting acceptance and recognition from his Western counterparts because the buildings seldom arise from a critical understanding of the premises of the styles they emulate. If a building from India has to truly stand up in a global arena while simultaneously relating to the people it was built for, then its design has to relate to its context and has to evolve out of it.

*“Indian art can only revive and flourish if it is beloved by Indians themselves” (Coomaraswamy, 1981, 77)*

To do away with imitation and seek an authentic architecture rooted in Indian culture and values, one needs to be proud of one's heritage and not try to mask its glory. This pride has to be cultivated right from the start in architectural schools, which brings us to the next step in the attempt to learn lessons from history.

#### Speaking the same language:

The basis for any communication is language. When an idea is communicated by one person to another, it should be done in a language that is understood by both. Otherwise the greatness of the idea will remain unrealised. When architecture (and all art forms) is perceived as a means of communication of an idea, this idea can be intensely realised only when the architect and the user understand the language in which the architecture is communicated. When Le Corbusier built his modernistic icons in India with large scale openings, he wanted to imbue the public buildings with a sense of grandeur and awe. But obviously he did not speak the language of the Indian people. The users of the building had to contend with cows that strayed into their offices through the wide open entrances! The beauty and success of architecture to a large extent is dependent on the architect's understanding of the users and his ability to communicate this effectively. In traditional architecture, the architect and the user were expected to be of the "*same mould*". If today architects are widely perceived as being an extravaganza, employed only by those who can afford to waste space in fancy designs, then definitely the architect and the common man are not sharing the same space. The architect of today seems to have little insight into the impulses of the people for whom he designs. One possible explanation for this predicament could be the outdated educational setup in which architects are groomed.

*"The problem with the present educational system is that there is a widening gap between what an architecture degree assures and what the architectural educational system delivers. In earlier days the traditional guild system ensured quality, both through the pride of the craftsmen and the mediation of market forces" (Menon, 2000)*

A proper exploration of the state of architectural education in India is beyond the scope of this document but a cursory glance reveals many inherent disabilities. The many architectural schools in India follow a standard syllabus prescribed by the state departments of technical education. What this achieves is a standard brand of architects

undifferentiated in their skill, irrespective of the context in which their college operates. Educated uniformly in the various international styles, not encouraged to critically engage with the local context, these architects during the five years of acquired knowledge, lose touch with the pulse of the people.

This only further perpetuates the colonial model of vocational education, marginalising the role of architects in the building process and not equipping him/her to address the problems of contemporary society.

*“...the senseless attempt to turn an Oriental into a bad imitation of a Western mind.” (Sir Craik quoted in Coomaraswamy, 103, 1981).*

Yet this role for the architect is of paramount importance for in a developing and multi-cultural nation like India, architects need to take the helm and enrich people's lives. What the education system achieves today is downright dangerous for the apprentices are not trained “in critical capabilities such as discursive thinking, analysis, and discerning judgement” (Menon, www). Only when the educational systems recognise this will the syllabi be rethought to meet the necessary ends and only when the educational system is revamped will India be able to produce architects who understand the language of the people, engage with their issues and make architecture that relates intimately to themselves and their lives.

An understanding of the impulses behind the indigenous art of building of ancient India, its metaphysical moorings and conceptual validity at architectural schools will go a long way in re-instating the pride in the profession. It will erase the dichotomy between the culture in which the students are brought up and the cultural premises of international architecture that they are taught by enabling the development of critical understanding based on one's own life experiences. In the end this will equip the architect to formulate his/her own personal theory that will guide design decisions in creating an architecture that is in tune with the impulses of the people for whom it is created and positively influence the constant search for identity,

Understanding metaphysics:

Metaphysics is the philosophy that deals with the understanding of the ideas of existence and truth. Metaphysics may not find a place in primitive societies which are impulsive and live constantly in the present, but in societies like India with an enduring legacy of philosophic speculation, metaphysics becomes an important aspect deeply influencing the conscious activity of place-making. As seen in this document, the very seed of traditional Indian architecture lies in its metaphysical truth. From this seed of metaphysics, understood by every artist and architect, does the tree of art grow and flower.

Metaphysics then becomes a legitimate field of enquiry for all architects. This was Coomaraswamy's aspiration for Indian art education many decades ago and still holds its ground today. Maybe an understanding of metaphysics is needed more today than ever before when architects who give form to the aspirations of people and relate to the *being* in them are failing in their task of producing identifiable environments that enable every individual in his efforts to enrich his life and transcend the physicality of this material life. If the metaphysics of art is understood intrinsically in its own merit, then the other skills acquired as an architect will make sure that an individual's body, senses, mind, intellect and *Being* are all adequately housed.

The ancient Indian architectural concept of "art as experience" was the result of a profound philosophy: the way it addressed the body of the individual, was sensitive to him and his cultural and environmental context, anchored him within the cosmos and his immediate surrounding, held deep meanings for him, made every space a celebration of his everyday life and became a vehicle for transcendence and realisation of the Ultimate reality speak of its evolvement from a deep understanding of the nature of man's existence in this world and the truth/reality of it – an understanding of metaphysics.

This is arguably the most important lesson that history has for us and the crux of this thesis: The ancient concept of "art as experience" as the generative force behind the creation of the marvels of ancient India was the result of the profound metaphysics on which it was built. It has relevance especially in the chaos of the current architectural scene in India, for the questions of culture, identity, context and meaning that are

troubling the minds of thinking architects may well be eased by the examination of the metaphysics of the Indian architectural tradition, enabling the re-invention of the tradition itself and re-uniting man with the primary forces within him. True architecture stems from the clear communication of an idea giving rise to a wholesome experience that integrates the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, sensorial and physical.

## Areas of further research

This research does not presume to have found all the answers, for the deeper one delves into the depths of Indian art and philosophy the more one tends to re-configure one's conclusions and preconceptions. Yet every attempt has been made within the two year time frame to arrive at certain interim conclusions while the broader questions await answers through the continued quest of a lifetime (or more).

A few areas that may be identified as holding the potential for immediate future research at the next level are:

1. This research only skims the surface of the traditional Hindu architectural concept. A further exploration of traditional architectural concepts stemming from a philosophical viewpoint would yield a deeper understanding of the traditional concepts and the contexts in which they worked. This, it is hoped would be invaluable in enabling a re-invention of tradition that is adapted to help the present day identity crisis situation.
2. The parallels between Indian and Non-Indian conceptions of architecture based on Metaphysics have only been touched upon in this document. There is a huge scope for further research in that area that aims at discovering the 'Universals' in architecture that encompass many world wide conceptions of architecture.
3. The post colonial struggle with identity is not unique to India alone. Many of the so called 'developing' nations are faced with similar situations, so comparative studies of the post colonial societies of the world; their architecture and identity issues; their loss of tradition etc. that highlights similarities and differences may help the various nations to learn from each other.
4. The works of many contemporary architects in India like Charles Correa and B.V. Doshi tries to integrate traditional concepts with perceived contemporary lifestyles. A more detailed study of their work and the role of tradition in it may also be a useful area of further research.

Penetrate deeper to know the truth, know the physical first then the spiritual,  
He who knows the first vital thread, binding all the things formed in shape, colour and words,  
knows only the physical form of the universe, and knows very little,  
But he, who goes deeper and perceives the string inside the string, the thin web binding separate  
life forces with cords of unity knows the real entity.

Rg Veda – 8.58.2

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9 July 2007.

#### IV. Photos:

Fig 1 - 3, 9 - 11, 20 - 27, 29 - 31, 35, 37, 39- 44, 48 and 49: All taken by the author's family in India, mostly in the temple town of Srirangam in Trichy, South India.

Fig 28, 32, 33, 34: All taken by the author's acquaintance Mr. S. Shivaram in the city of Madurai in 2006.

Some photos were taken from popular movies considered to be reflection of real life in South India, since the author was unable to photograph the necessary scenes in person while in India.

Fig 4, 15, 16, 18, 36 and 38: from the Tamil movie *Karakattakaran*

Fig 5, 7, 14 and 17: from the Tamil movie *Autograph*

Fig 8 and 19: from the Tamil movie *Pandavar Bhoomi*

Fig 12 and 45: from the Tamil movie *Yejaman*

Fig 6: from the Tamil movie *Azhagi*

Fig 13: from the Tamil movie *Virumandi*

Fig 47: from the Tamil movie *Amaidhipadai*.

#### V. Architectural Drawings:

All architectural drawings have been derived from measured and documented drawings from the following unpublished source:

Sivaraman, Kunkuma Devi, "integrating the cultural significance of the temple town of srirangam with the existing planning and development framework", M.Arch Thesis submitted in 2006 to the Department of Architectural Conservation, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, India.