

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XI · CODE 312

# Temple Architecture and Sculpture

CUET unit: Temple Architecture and Sculpture (Early Medieval to Medieval Indian Art)

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## Snapshot

- Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temple architecture and sculpture developed from the 5th to 14th centuries CE across India.
- It establishes the two principal orders — **Nagara** (north) and **Dravida** (south) — and the hybrid **Vesara** style of the Deccan, with regional sub-styles in Central India, West India, East India (Odisha, Bengal, Assam), the Hills, and the Deccan.
- Key vocabulary (garbhagriha, mandapa, shikhara, vimana, gopuram, amalaka, kalasha, panchayatana) is introduced and is heavily tested in CUET.
- Site-based factual details (Deogarh, Khajuraho, Modhera, Konark, Thanjavur, Mahabalipuram, Ellora, Pattadakal, Halebid, Nalanda, Bodhgaya, Mount Abu) routinely yield direct recall MCQs.
- Iconography (Sheshashayana, Nara-Narayan, Gajendramoksha, Nataraja, Mahishasuramardini) and dynastic patronage (Chandela, Chola, Pallava, Rashtrakuta, Solanki, Hoysala, Pala) are recurring CUET areas.
- The single largest CUET-Fine-Arts chapter by number of named monuments and the most reliable source of single-line factual MCQs.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

Most surviving ancient and medieval Indian art is religious — secular domestic dwellings of wood and clay have perished — so the focus here is on stone temples and the iconography they preserve (NCERT §Intro, p. 69). Early Brahmanical shrines are classified into three plan types: sandhara (with a pradakshinapatha or circumambulatory passage around the sanctum), nirandhara (without a pradakshinapatha), and sarvatobhadra (accessible from all four sides). Important early temple sites include Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh, Eran, Nachna-Kuthara and Udaigiri near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh (NCERT §Early Temples, pp. 69–70).

The basic form of the Hindu temple has four canonical components: the garbhagriha (literally "womb-house," the sanctum housing the main icon); the mandapa (entrance portico or colonnaded hall for the gathering of worshippers); the freestanding spire above the sanctum — a curving shikhara in the north or a pyramidal vimana in the south; and the axial vahan (mount of the principal deity) and dhvaj (standard) placed before the sanctum entrance (NCERT §Basic Form, p. 70). On this foundation NCERT

erects the master classification of Indian temples into two broad orders: Nagara (north) and Dravida (south), with the hybrid Vesara recognised by some scholars as a third Deccan order.

A short but important section on iconography explains how images of deities are studied through their symbols, attributes and mythology. The placement of subsidiary figures around the temple is fixed: in the Nagara tradition, river goddesses Ganga (on a makara) and Yamuna (on a tortoise) flank the garbhagriha entrance; in the Dravida tradition, dvarapalas (door-guardians) stand on the gopurams; mithunas (auspicious couples), navagrahas (nine planets) and yakshas guard the entrance; ashtadikpalas (the eight directional guardians) occupy positions on the outer walls. Decorative ornaments include the gavaksha (window motif), vyala or yali (composite leonine creature), kalpalata (wish-fulfilling creeper), amalaka (fluted disc) and kalasha (pot finial) (NCERT §Sculpture, Iconography and Ornamentation, pp. 70–71).

The Nagara order is then broken down into three shikhara sub-types. The latina (also called rekha-prasada) has a square base and rises curving inward to a point at the top — this is the most common Nagara shikhara form. The phamsana is broader and shorter, with a gently sloping straight-pitched roof of several slabs rising to a single point — used principally for mandapas rather than sanctums. The valabhi is a rectangular building with a wagon-vaulted roof, descended from ancient building forms such as the Buddhist rock-cut chaitya hall (NCERT §The Nagara Style, pp. 71–73).

In Central India the oldest surviving Gupta-period structural temples are at Udaigiri and Sanchi; Sanchi is the first temple recorded with a flat roof. The Deogarh temple in Lalitpur district of UP, dated to the early sixth century, is a panchayatana — a layout with a main shrine and four subsidiary shrines at the four corners (five shrines in all). It carries a curvilinear latina/rekha-prasada shikhara, is west-facing, and depicts Vishnu in three iconographic forms on its outer walls: Sheshashayana (Vishnu reclining on the serpent Shesha) on the south, Nara-Narayan on the east, and Gajendramoksha on the west (NCERT §Central India, pp. 73–74).

Khajuraho is the next great Central Indian centre, built by the Chandela kings in the tenth century. The Lakshmana temple (954 CE), built by King Dhanga and dedicated to Vishnu, is a panchayatana on a high platform with shikharas that rise in curved pyramidal fashion, topped by amalaka and kalasha. The Kandariya Mahadeo temple is recognised as the epitome of Central Indian Nagara architecture, and the Khajuraho group is internationally known for its sensuous mithuna sculptures. The Chausanth Yogini temple at Khajuraho — pre-tenth century, built of granite — is dedicated to the sixty-four yoginis of the Tantric cult that proliferated after the seventh century (NCERT §Central India, pp. 74–75).

West India covers Gujarat, Rajasthan and western MP. Sandstone is the commonest material; grey-black basalt was used in the tenth to twelfth centuries; soft white marble was the preferred medium of the Jain temples at Mount Abu (Dilwara) and Ranakpur in the fifteenth century. Samlaji in Gujarat is an important art-historical site with grey

schist sculptures of the sixth to eighth centuries. The Sun temple at Modhera, built by Raja Bhimdev I of the Solanki dynasty in 1026 CE, has a surya kund (stepped tank) at its front with 108 miniature shrines on its sides, a torana arch leading to the temple, and a sabha mandapa open on all sides; at the equinoxes the sun shines directly into the garbhagriha (NCERT §West India, pp. 75–76).

East India comprises Assam, Bengal and Odisha. The earliest Assam temple remnant is the sixth-century door frame at DaParvatia near Tezpur. The Ahom style (twelfth to fourteenth centuries) emerged from a fusion of Tai migration and Pala style; the Kamakhya temple — a major Shakti Peeth — is dated to the seventeenth century. Bengal develops a Pala style (ninth to eleventh centuries) and a Sena style (mid-eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries), along with a Vanga local style; the terracotta temples of Vishnupur (seventeenth century) are distinguished by their Bangla curved bamboo-roof shape. Odisha temples are organised into three orders: rekhapida, pidhadeul and khakra. The shikhara is called deul, the mandapa is called jagamohana, the ground plan is square, the crowning mastaka is circular, and the interiors are plain. The Sun temple at Konark (c. 1240) had a shikhara that reached about 70 m before collapsing in the nineteenth century; its surviving jagamohana is the largest enclosed space in Hindu architecture, and the structure was conceived as a processional chariot of the Sun god — twelve pairs of carved wheels and seven horses give it the form of a giant ratha (NCERT §East India, pp. 76–80).

The Hills section covers Kumaon, Garhwal, Himachal and Kashmir, where a mix of Gandhara, post-Gupta and local wooden traditions produced distinctive forms. Pandrethan in Kashmir (Karkota period, eighth–ninth century) is built on a plinth in the middle of a tank, with a peaked roof slanting outward and a restrained ornament programme of an elephant row and a decorated doorway. The Chamba Lakshana-Devi Mandir, built under Meruvarman in the seventh century, shows Mahishasuramardini and Narasimha images that bear post-Gupta and Kashmiri-metal influences. Jageshwar near Almora and Champavat in Pithoragarh are Kumaon Nagara examples (NCERT §The Hills, pp. 80–82).

The Dravida temple is then described. It is enclosed by a compound wall; the entrance gateway is the gopuram; the main tower above the sanctum is the pyramidal vimana; and the term shikhara in the Dravida context refers only to the crowning element shaped as a stupika or octagonal cupola — a distinction that CUET examiners frequently exploit. Dvarapalas guard the entrance; a water tank is a standard feature inside the complex; in mature complexes the oldest central tower is the smallest, with later kings adding ever-larger gopurams on the outer enclosures (Srirangam at Tiruchirapalli has seven concentric enclosure walls) (NCERT §The Dravida Style, pp. 82–83). Dravida sub-shapes of the sanctum include kuta/caturasra (square), shala/ayatasra (rectangular), gaja-prishta/vrittayata (apsidal with a horseshoe nasi), vritta (circular) and ashtasra (octagonal).

The Pallavas (active in Andhra and Tamil Nadu from the second century CE, better documented in the sixth to eighth centuries) began with rock-cut buildings and

progressed to structural temples. Mahendravarman I was contemporary with the Chalukya Pulakesin II. Narasimhavarman I, also called Mamalla (c. 640 CE), inaugurated Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram). The Shore Temple at Mahabalipuram was built under Narasimhavarman II / Rajasimha (700–728 CE) and houses three shrines — two for Shiva and one for Vishnu as Anantashayana (NCERT §Dravida, pp. 83–85).

The Chola Brahadeeshwara temple (Rajarajeswara) at Thanjavur was completed c. 1009 CE by Rajaraja Chola; it is the largest and tallest of all Indian temples, with a pyramidal multi-storeyed vimana rising about 70 m, topped by an octagonal monolithic shikhara. It is the first temple to feature two large gopuras, and its kalasha is about 3.08 m tall. The main deity is a Shiva lingam in a two-storeyed sanctum (NCERT §Dravida, p. 85).

The Deccan section introduces the Vesara hybrid style, popular after the mid-seventh century. The Rashtrakutas (from c. 750 CE) built the Kailashnath temple at Ellora — a complete Dravida monolith carved from the living rock, with a vimana about 30 m tall, a Nandi shrine and a gopuram-like gateway (NCERT §Deccan, p. 86). The Western Chalukyas began with Pulakesin I, who founded the Chalukya kingdom by securing the land around Badami in 543 CE. The Ravana Phadi cave at Aihole carries a famous Nataraja with the saptamatrikas. The Virupaksha temple at Pattadakal was built by Vikramaditya II's queen Loka Mahadevi between 733 and 744 CE, and is a fine Dravida example. Other Pattadakal works include the Papnath temple dedicated to Shiva. At Aihole, the Durga temple has an apsidal chaitya-like shrine combined with a Nagara-like shikhara, while the Lad Khan temple is inspired by wooden hill-temple forms (NCERT §Deccan, pp. 87–88).

The Hoysalas of Mysore (twelfth to thirteenth centuries) built at Belur, Halebid and Somnathpuram. Their plans are stellate (star-shaped), and they carved in soft soapstone. The Hoysaleswara temple at Halebid (1150 CE) is dedicated to Shiva Nataraja and is a double building, each component preceded by a Nandi pavilion and a hall for music and dance. Hoysala temples are typical Vesara hybrids — neither purely Dravida nor purely Nagara. The Vijayanagara empire, founded in 1336 CE, synthesised Dravida tradition with Sultanate-era Islamic architectural vocabulary; foreign visitors who left accounts include Niccolo di Conti, Domingo Paes, Fernao Nuniz, Duarte Barbosa and Abd al-Razzaq (NCERT §Hoysala/Vijayanagara, pp. 89–90).

Buddhist and Jain developments complete the picture. The Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya has been variously restored, with major Pala sculptures of the eighth century and a colonial-era reconstruction; it is narrow like a Nagara temple but rises straight without curving like a Dravida vimana — an architectural hybrid. The Nalanda mahavihara was founded by Kumaragupta I in the fifth century according to Xuan Zang's account, and taught all three doctrines — Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Nalanda bronzes of the seventh to twelfth centuries are major examples of Pala-period metal sculpture. Sirpur in Chhattisgarh (550–800 CE) is an early Odisha-style site. Other Odishan Buddhist sites include Lalitagiri, Vajragiri and Ratnagiri. Nagapattinam remained a Buddhist port-town up to the Chola period (NCERT §Buddhist/Jain, pp. 90–94).

Jain monuments include the Gomateshwara (Bahubali) at Sravana Belagola — an 18 m / 57 ft monolithic granite statue commissioned by Camundaraya (General and Prime Minister of the Ganga kings of Mysore). The Mount Abu Jain temples were built by Vimal Shah, with plain exteriors and ornate marble interiors; the Shatrunjay hills near Palitana in Kathiawar form one of the largest Jain pilgrimage complexes; Jain shrines also occur at Ellora, Aihole, Deogarh, Khajuraho, Chanderi and Gwalior (NCERT §Jain monuments, pp. 94–95).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Garbhagriha	"Womb-house" sanctum housing the main icon	70
Mandapa	Portico/colonnaded hall before the sanctum	70
Shikhara	Curving spire in Nagara temples; crown cupola in Dravida	70, 82
Vimana	Pyramidal stepped tower in Dravida temples	70
Gopuram	Entrance gateway tower in Dravida compound wall	82
Latina / Rekha-prasada	Most common Nagara shikhara — square base curving inward	72
Phamsana	Nagara sub-type with straight-slope roof of slabs	72
Valabhi	Rectangular wagon-vaulted Nagara sub-type	72
Panchayatana	Five-shrine layout (main + 4 corner shrines)	73
Amalaka	Fluted horizontal disc atop Nagara shikhara	74
Kalasha	Vase finial above amalaka	74
Mithuna	Embracing/erotic couple sculpture, auspicious	74
Deul	Odishan term for shikhara	79
Jagamohana	Odishan term for mandapa	79
Mastaka	Crowning circular section of Odishan superstructure	79
Vesara	Hybrid Deccan style, post mid-7th c.	86
Mahavihara	Complex of several monasteries (e.g. Nalanda)	92
Sandhara / Nirandhara / Sarvatobhadra	Plan types: with / without circumambulation / all-sides	70
Stupika	Crown cupola of Dravida vimana	82
Dvarapala	Door-guardian sculpture on a Dravida gopuram	82
Sheshashayana	Vishnu reclining on serpent Shesha (Deogarh, south wall)	74

Term	Definition	Page
Nara-Narayan	Vishnu dual-form panel (Deogarh, east wall)	74
Gajendramoksha	Vishnu rescuing the elephant-king (Deogarh, west wall)	74
Chausanth Yogini	Sixty-four-Yogini Tantric temple, Khajuraho granite	75
Surya Kund	Stepped tank with 108 miniature shrines at Modhera	76

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

CUET aspirants should be able to draw two labelled cross-sections from memory. The Nagara temple section (p. 70) progresses, bottom to top, through: jagati (platform) → pitha (lower base) → garbhagriha (sanctum) → shikhara (curving spire, latina/rekha-prasada type) → amalaka (fluted disc) → kalasha (pot finial). The Dravida temple section (p. 82) is enclosed by a compound wall; the visitor enters through one or more gopurams of increasing scale toward the periphery, crosses the mandapa, and arrives at the garbhagriha over which rises the pyramidal multi-storeyed vimana, topped by the crowning stupika (the "shikhara" in Dravida usage). Around the temple is a water tank.

The map of Temple Architecture in India (chapter opener) is essential for locating the major sites — Khajuraho, Konark, Modhera, Mahabalipuram, Thanjavur, Pattadakal, Aihole, Badami, Halebid, Belur, Somnathpuram, Ellora, Bodhgaya, Sravana Belagola, Mount Abu, Ranakpur, Nalanda, Sirpur, Ratnagiri. The plan progression diagram (p. 72) shows the development of the single-tower temple into the mature Nagara "mountain-peak" cluster where the main shikhara is surrounded by progressively shorter subsidiary shikharas, producing a Mount-Meru silhouette. A separate panchayatana diagram (Deogarh) shows the central garbhagriha plus the four corner shrines on a single jagati. The Konark chariot plan should be memorised as 12 pairs of wheels and 7 horses, signifying the twelve months and seven days of the week.

### 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- The word shikhara in Nagara denotes the entire curving spire; in Dravida it denotes only the crown cupola (stupika). NCERT distinguishes on p. 82.
- Amalaka (Nagara) vs Stupika (Dravida) as crowning element — easy to swap.
- Khajuraho's Lakshmana temple (954 CE, Dhanga, Vishnu) is often confused with Kandariya Mahadeo (Shiva). Both Chandela but different deities.
- Sun temple Modhera (Solanki, Bhimdev I, 1026) vs Sun temple Konark (Odisha, c. 1240). Different dynasties and centuries.
- Valabhi (wagon-vaulted) is a Nagara sub-type — not Dravida.
- Vesara is hybrid Deccan, NOT a synonym for Hoysala alone.

- Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya is neither purely Nagara nor purely Dravida — narrow like Nagara but rises straight like Dravida.
- Brahadeeshwara was built by Rajaraja Chola (c. 1009); Gangaikondacholapuram by his son Rajendra Chola.
- Virupaksha at Pattadakal was built by Queen Loka Mahadevi, wife of Vikramaditya II.
- Kailashnath at Ellora is Rashtrakuta (c. 8th c. CE), not Pallava (the Pallava Kailasanatha at Kanchipuram is a separate temple).
- The three Vishnu panels at Deogarh: Sheshashayana SOUTH, Nara-Narayan EAST, Gajendramoksha WEST. NTA shuffles directions.
- Sun shines into the Modhera garbhagriha at the equinoxes (not solstices).

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Deogarh Vishnu Temple	Early 6th c. CE	Panchayatana, Sheshashayana panel	73–74
Sheshashayana Vishnu, Deogarh	Early 6th c. CE	Vishnu reclining on Shesha	74
Nara-Narayan, Deogarh	Early 6th c. CE	Vishnu dual form	74
Gajendramoksha, Deogarh	Early 6th c. CE	Vishnu rescuing elephant-king	74
King Dhanga (patron)	954 CE	Built Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho	74
Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho	954 CE, Chandela	Panchayatana Vishnu temple	74
Kandariya Mahadeo, Khajuraho	10th c. CE, Chandela	Epitome of mature Central Indian Nagara	74
Chausanth Yogini, Khajuraho	Pre-10th c. CE	Tantric 64-Yogini granite temple	75
Sun temple, Modhera	1026 CE, Solanki	Surya Kund, 108 mini-shrines, equinox sun	76
Raja Bhimdev I (patron)	11th c. CE	Solanki king, Modhera	76
Sun temple, Konark	c. 1240 CE, Eastern Ganga	Chariot of Surya, 12 wheels, 7 horses	79–80
Pandrethan temple, Kashmir	8th–9th c. CE, Karkota	Peaked roof on plinth in tank	80
Lakshana-Devi Mandir, Chamba	7th c. CE, Meruvarman	Mahishasuramardini, Narasimha images	81

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Mahabalipuram Shore Temple	700–728 CE, Pallava	Built by Narasimhavarman II / Rajasimha	84–85
Brahadeeshwara temple, Thanjavur	c. 1009 CE, Chola	Largest Indian temple, Rajaraja Chola	85
Kailashnath temple, Ellora	c. 8th c. CE, Rashtrakuta	Monolithic Dravida rock-cut temple	86
Virupaksha temple, Pattadakal	733–744 CE, Chalukya	Built by Queen Loka Mahadevi	88
Papnath temple, Pattadakal	Chalukya	Shiva temple	88
Durga temple, Aihole	Chalukya	Apsidal shrine, Nagara-like shikhara	88
Lad Khan temple, Aihole	Chalukya	Wooden-hill-temple-inspired	88
Hoysaleswara temple, Halebid	1150 CE, Hoysala	Stellate Vesara, soapstone	89
Belur Chennakeshava	Hoysala	Stellate soapstone temple	89
Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya	Pala 8th c. CE / Colonial restoration	Narrow Nagara-Dravida hybrid	91
Gomateshwara (Bahubali), Sravana Belagola	18 m monolith	Commissioned by Camundaraya	94
Mount Abu Dilwara Jain temples	11th–13th c. CE, Vimal Shah	Marble interior ornament	94

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is one of the heaviest CUET Fine Arts scoring areas, typically yielding 5–7 MCQs per year in CUET 2023–25. Questions usually test (i) direct factual recall of temple–dynasty–site–date matches (Modhera/Solanki/Bhimdev I, Brahadeeshwara/Rajaraja Chola/1009, Lakshmana/Dhanga/954), (ii) Nagara vs Dravida feature differentiation, (iii) iconographic placements (Ganga–Yamuna, Sheshashayana, Nataraja), and (iv) sub-style terminology (latina, phamsana, valabhi, rekhapida, pidhadeul, khakra, vesara). CUET 2024 used a four-statement Lakshmana-temple question; CUET 2025 included a match-the-following on stellate Hoysala temples.