

CULTURE OF ODISHA

Architecture of Mukteswar Temple

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • March 22, 2018 • 5 min read

Muktesvara temple is a one-of-a-kind structure in Odisha's temple architecture. It was designed with such grace that it became one of India's most beautiful temples. The temple's gate was well-designed, and its balance and design lend it a grandiose appearance. The Vimana is elevated on a platform. The ground plan is square. The base is divided into five sections: Khura, Kumbha, Pata, Kani, and Vasanta. These five divisions were not present in earlier temple divisions. Recessed within the pilasters are Gaja Simha and Naga columns.

Mukteswar Temple, Bhubaneswar

Credit: Subhasish Panigrahi

The niches in this temple are empty and devoid of Parsvadevatas (side deities). The Sikhara is concise. It is adorned with four Natarajas and four Kirtti-mukhas on each of its four facades. The Nataraja figure from the western facade has been detached and housed within the same temple grounds in a miniature temple. It is devoid of Anga-sikhara (replica of the main tower). The ground plan of the Muktesvara temple is shaped like a star.

When the pyramidal roof of The Muktesvara Temple ascends, the steps of the pyramidal roof recede. The temple is adorned with amlaka. The northern and southern sides of the Badas are framed by pilasters, each of which contains a square-shaped perforated window. The portions of the roof above the windows are divided into two tiers by steps (pidhas) and are crowned with lion images. Gaja-simha and Nagacolumns are depicted in the recesses between the pilasters. The Torana (gate) is a distinctive feature of Muktesvara's temple. It is located in front of the Jagamohana.

Torana Decoration of Mukteswar Temple

Credit: Wikipedia

Each pillar's basement contains a miniature shrine with twin Gaja-simha figures atop. Each of the sixteen-sided shafts is composed of four stone blocks and features Kirtti-mukhas at its apex. On both sides of the topmost blocks are imposed Vedika, Amlaka, and a spreading lotus capital. Each arch features a protruding Makara-mukha, which is quite distinct in Muktesvara's Torana.

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Architectural Specifications and Design Elements

One of the primary reasons Mukteshvara Temple is also known as the “Gem of Odisha architecture” is due to its architecture. The temple faces west and is built in a basement beneath a cluster of temples. The pyramidal roof of the temple’s jagamohana was the first of its kind, superseding the traditional two-tier structure. The temple is diminutive in comparison to other temples in Bhubaneswar. The temple is surrounded by an octagonal compound wall adorned with intricate carvings. It is believed that the experimentation with the newer pattern in the temple demonstrated a mature phase in comparison to its predecessors and culminated in the replication of similar patterns in the city’s later temples. The temple features a porch known as torana that serves as the entrance to the octagonal compound. The temple is composed of two structures: the vimana (structure above the sanctum) and the mukhasala, or leading hall, both of which are elevated. The temple is the first of its kind to be constructed in the pithadeula style.

Porch

The torana, or arched gateway, is the most prominent feature of the Mukteshvara Temple, dating from approximately 900 CE and demonstrating the influence of Buddhist architecture. The arched gateway is flanked by thick pillars adorned with beads and other ornaments carved on statues of smiling women in languorous repose. Porches are enclosed chambers with a low, massive roof and internal pillars. Vertical and horizontal lines are skillfully combined to lend dignity to buildings of moderate height. This temple is the best example of the early astylar style. The gateway is adorned with sculptures ranging from elaborate scrolls to pleasant female forms and monkey and peacock figures. The front and back of the arch are both designed similarly.

Torana of Mukteswar Temple
Credit: Abhishek

Vimana

The Vimana has a square plan and is raised on a platform with pilasters on each façade. The shikara is diminutive in comparison to other temples; it is adorned with four Natarajas and four kirthimukhas on each of its four faces. The kalasa is located on the shikara's top portion. The shikara stands 10.5 metres (34 feet) tall and is intricately sculpted with decorative patterns, architectural patterns, and sculpted figures on every inch. Perhaps developed here, a new type of decoration known as bho became a prominent feature in later Odishan temples. It is an ornate chaitya window with masked demon and dwarf figures adorning the top.

Sanctum

The sanctum is sculpted with lovely damsels displaying feminine allure and entwined with nagas and neginis. On the inside, the sanctum is cubical, with offset walls on the outside.

Jagamohana

This unique tenth-century temple is one of the smallest and most compact temples in the world. The jagamohana stands at a height of 35 metres (115 feet). It is intricately carved by Vishwakarma Moharana sculptors. The temple is considered a jewel of Nagara architecture in Kalinga. Except for its jagamohana's rectangular plan, it is the earliest example of what might be called the proper Odisha temple type; a vimana with a curved spire and a jagamohana with a stepped pyramidal roof. The red sandstone of the temple is encrusted with exquisite carvings of lean sadhus or holy men and voluptuous women. Ganga and Yamuna are carved alongside Chanda and Prachanda. In front of the jagamohana, the torana is present. On the jagamohana's lintel is a figure of Lakulisa seated in bhumisparamudra and holding a lakuta. The structure also features sculptures of Gajalakshmi, Rahu, and Ketu. A small extension from the jagamohana's side roof depicts a lion sitting on its hind legs. The structure's exterior walls are adorned with pilasters adorned with nagas and neginis.

Others

The inner sanctum's doorway is guarded by an image of Ketu with three hooded snakes, who is frequently referred to as the ninth planet in Hindu mythology. A tank is located on the temple's eastern side, and a well is located on the temple's south-western corner. A dip in the first, referred to as the Marichi Kunda, is believed to cure female infertility. Within the temple complex, there are additional shrines with lingams that were used as offering shrines. The temple's entrance is ornate. The temple is surrounded by a low compound wall that follows the temple's contours. The temple is embellished with sculptures on both the inside and outside of the structure. The compound's walls create a very small passageway that separates the shrine from the rest.

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