

Text and Discourse in 19th- and 20th-Century Indian Architectural Studies

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One of the most enigmatic documents on the study of Indian architecture is an essay by a relatively unknown Indian, Ram Raz, which appeared in 1834 under the title "An Essay on the Architecture of Hindus."¹ Though well received by his contemporaries, the essay had a very limited impact on the newly developing field of scholarship on Indian architecture, and gradually came to be seen as a historical curiosity.²

Still, the document remains significant for a number of reasons—that its author was an Indian; that it was the first serious attempt to describe Indian architecture independently, and in its own terms; and above all, that it deals with an issue that makes it quite anachronistic, i.e., the deciphering of traditional manuals of *Shilpashastra*. The term *Shilpashatra* refers to a traditional body of writing, mostly canonical, which deals with the knowledge, techniques, and precepts related to the conception and construction of buildings. The topics discussed within these writings include painting, sculpture, and town planning, in addition to architecture. Many texts on the topic of *Shilpashastra* were produced from the 6th century onwards, both in Sanskrit and various other regional languages. However, most of these texts were not available to the general public at large as the medieval Hindu society increasingly proscribed the propagation of knowledge to castes other than the Brahmin. By the early 18th century, these texts had become virtually obscure and maintained in close secrecy by families of priests, most of whom had almost no association to the building practice. And though fragments of these texts were available to masons and craftsmen, these dealt mostly with canonical rules of proportions and construction.

Ram Raz is generally regarded as the first person to attempt a comprehensive translation these texts into a modern language.³ At the time he was working, however, the project failed to excite much interest amongst his contemporaries. Although the documentation and study of Indian architecture was well underway through the second half of the 19th century, it is only with the dawn of the 20th century that one finds a rekindling of interest in the traditional texts. In 1901, P.K. Acharya produced the first complete translation of a *Shilpashastra* treatise, the *Manasara*.⁴ And in the first decades of the 20th century Coomaraswamy, publishing extensively on the theory of Indian art, depended heavily on interpretations of several texts such as *Shukraniti* and the *Puranas*.⁵ Even populist authors such as Havell acknowledged the importance of these texts to the understanding of sub-continental architecture.⁶ But it was only in 1946 that Stella Kramrisch, in her seminal work on "The Hindu Temple" addressed the very project that Ram Raz had adumbrated—that of defining a comprehensive and complete Hindu theory of architecture based on the interpretation of ancient texts on the subject.⁷ Kramrisch's work remains, to this date, the prime source for both, the understanding of the symbolic aspects of the Hindu temple, as well as interpretations of *Shilpashastra* texts.

Scholars writing on the modern historiography of Indian architecture, thus have tended to look at the *Essay* of Ram Raz as an anachronistic document, seemingly ahead of its time in its intentions.⁸ Within an overall picture of a field that progressed gradually through history as more and accurate knowledge about Indian architecture became available, Ram Raz's work seems to occur in a niche of its own.

Our attempt in this paper is to re-examine the position of Ram Raz within the historiography of Indian architecture. Based on two sets of comparisons—one, that of his drawings with other contemporary representations of monuments, and the other, his *Essay* with *The Hindu Temple* of Kramrisch—we will attempt to show that despite addressing the same project, his work is significantly different from that of Kramrisch, and again, despite appearances, shares similar epistemological constructs with his contemporaries. The point, moreover, is not merely to understand Ram Raz's work better, but through his work gain insights into the development of the historiography of Indian architecture.

RAM RAZ AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the interiors of the subcontinent were opening up to intrepid travelers from the west. It is at this time that we can see a glimmering of serious interest in the architectural monuments of the subcontinent. Descriptions of the caves at Elephanta and Kanheri in Maharashtra, the Mughal monuments in North India and the temple towns of the South found their way regularly in the letters of travelers, dispatches from army officers and civil servants posted in the remote interiors, as well as the reports of savants leading scientific expeditions into unexplored territories.⁹

While a great number of descriptions of these monuments were verbal in nature, this is also the period when a purposeful documentation of the monuments began. One finds amongst these, not only impressionistic views taken by painters in search for the picturesque, but also carefully drawn plans, sections, elevations, and details.¹⁰ These visual representations of the monuments, not much constrained by methodological rigor, offer us crucial insights into the nature of the discourse of the monuments of the time.

Let us take, for example, some documentation drawings of *gopurams* produced roughly between 1770s and 1830s. The *gopurams* are huge towers over entrance gateways to the large urban temple complexes in South Indian cities. Most rise to notable heights in a more or less pyramidal form, and are the sites for some of the most exuberant iconographical sculptures on the buildings. Figure 1a is from the travel account of Le Gentil, a French savant who led an expedition to India from 1760 to 1768, recording both natural phenomena and the culture.¹¹ His account was published in 1779 and

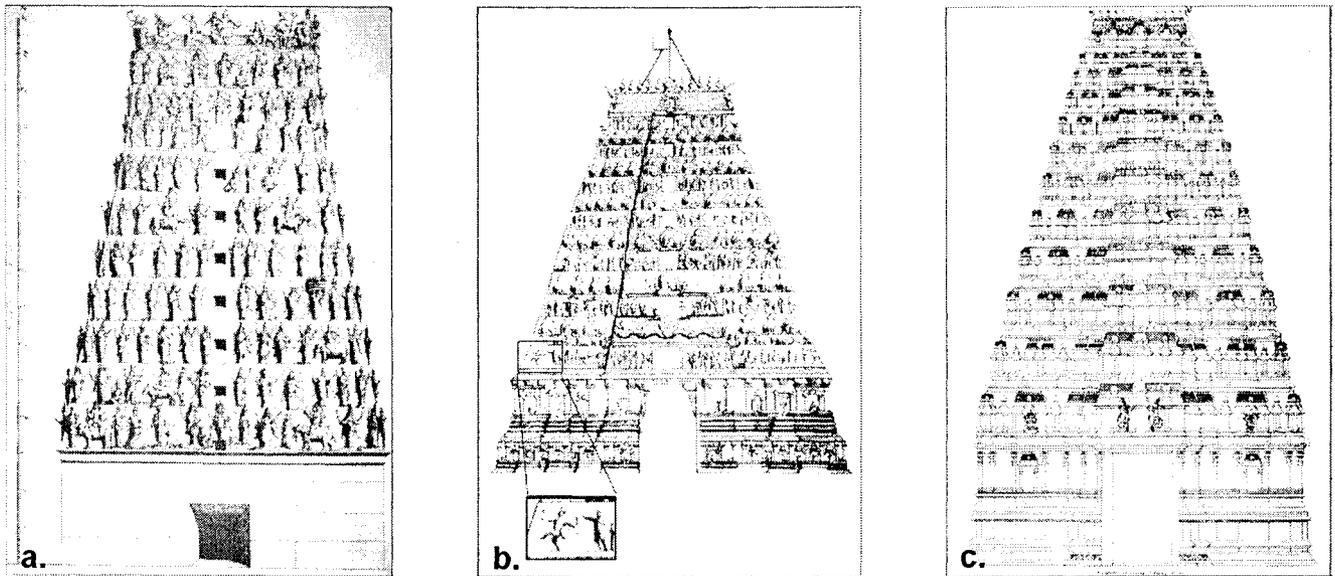


Fig. 1. Measure drawings of *gopurams* produced between 1770-1840.

the note on the architecture of the Coromandal coast included this depiction of the *gopuram* of Velnour temple. Figure 1b refers to another measured drawing, this time of the Chidambaram temple *gopuram*, produced by Du Rocher de la Perigne, a French army engineer.¹² The differences between the two “accurate” measured drawings are quite telling. For Le Gentil, a scholar and savant, it is obviously the iconography of the temple that was of key interest. There is a painstaking delineation of figural sculptures - although the poses of the deities and the manner in which they have been placed suggest influences of the series of Hindu pantheon that came out during this period.¹³ The architectural forms, however, are very schematically recorded and even those with little accuracy. The overall visual effect, as a matter of fact, is not even close to the actual building.

For Perigne, the crucial issue here was not iconography but the formal nature of the building. His drawing seems to be more faithful than that of Le Gentil, but a careful look reveals a lack of accuracy in details in comparison to it. The figural representations are obviously fanciful. Most bear little resemblance to Hindu deities and one can even spot dancing devils and draped figures from the Greco-Roman traditions. A critical question during this period was the contention that the origin of architecture may lie in ancient India, and that these *gopurams* might be the forerunners of the Egyptian pyramids.¹⁴ It was as an evidence for this theory that Perigne was moved to make an authentic measured drawing of the temple. Despite this formal interest in the monument, the actual recording of architectural details in this drawing is rather sketchy and capricious. Although the overall forms of the seven storeys and the undulating nature of the facade is convincingly indicated, the actual elements that would go into its making are not drawn correctly.

These drawbacks are immediately perceptible when we compare this illustration with Ram Raz’s drawing of a seven storeyed *gopuram* (Figure 1c). Interestingly enough, in Ram Raz’s drawing, there is almost no depiction of the religious imagery that so dominated the drawings of the Europeans; instead the facade is built up from carefully delineated architectural elements. The drawing exhibits an obvious concern for the constructional aspects of these *gopurams*. This point is interesting because the drawing is informed not by an actual building but by treatises written on the subject.

An ironic situation, therefore, is apparent here. On the one hand, we have a range of enthusiasts, carefully describing, drawing, and studying historical monuments, but contributing little to the contem-

porary architectural discourse, and on the other hand, a philologist, deciphering some ancient fragmentary texts, making a fundamental contribution to the sub-continental architectural discourse at this time.

It is this paradox that presents us with a clue towards understanding the architectural thought of the period. It appears, at least for those concerned with Indian architecture, that the term “architecture” was understood as a “canon”—a codified set of rules that defined a practice. This is in sharp contrast with the way it was understood just half a century later, when it came to mean the similarities and differences of a corpus of buildings. This semantic shift makes it possible to comprehend the lack of attention given to texts during the later half of the 19th century. But if the architectural discourse of the early 19th century is characterized by a primacy given to texts as against buildings, how do we explain the renewed interest in texts during the 20th century? It may appear, at first, that architecture came to be seen as a textual construct once again, but a closer look reveals that the reading of the texts in both these periods is fundamentally different. Once again, a comparison of Ram Raz’s work this time with the Hindu temple of Kramrisch, gives us clues to what these differences were.

RAM RAZ AND STELLA KRAMRISCH

Ram Raz had initially started with the idea of collecting all the known texts and translating them in order to comprehensively describe the Hindu conception of architecture. But as he encountered increasing difficulties in tracing, compiling and collating innumerable fragments of texts, he realized the enormity of this task.¹⁵ Finally, after a consideration of the material at hand, he changed his project to the translation of a single complete text—the *Mansara*—which, to his mind, best represented the conception of architecture in the entire corpus of *Shilpashastra*. His essay is essentially a description of the contents of this text. After describing each of the chapters of the text in turn, he ends with a series of plates that illustrate the contents of the individual chapters. He offers few interpretations or comments on the material apart from a brief discussion on the relationship between Egyptian pyramids and the Hindu temple superstructures.

Kramrisch’s book shares Ram Raz’s concern for describing a theory of Hindu architecture through a reading of its texts. But, unlike him, she relies on material culled from Sanskrit literature at

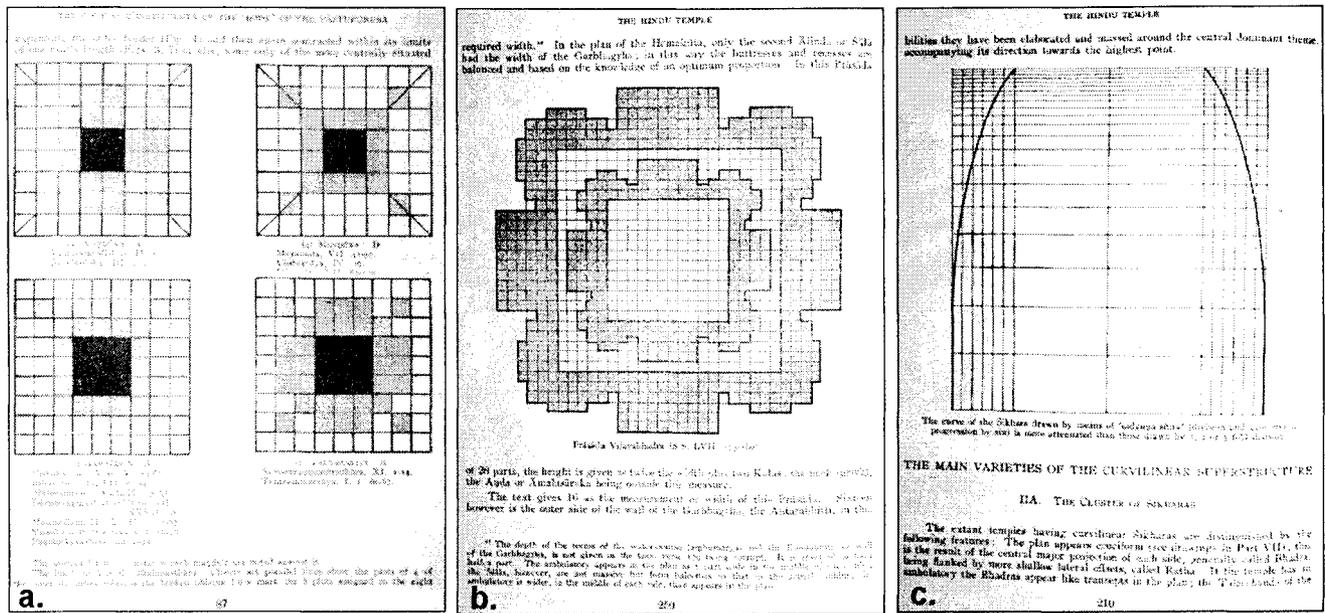


Fig. 3. Illustrations from Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*.

structure, the object of his enterprise, is synthetic in its intent i.e. geared towards the production of a complete built form. By the same token, Kramrisch's effort is synthetic. She takes fragments of knowledge from various texts and *constructs* a theory in a new form. This theory itself, however, is analytical in nature. In other words the intention behind it is the interpretation of built form.

This interpretation points to the fact that there is a general difference between the manner in which the two authors approach the historical texts. Ram Raz treats the texts as canonical treatises comparable to the Vitruvian texts on architecture, while Stella Kramrisch's approach is interpretive. For her, the texts are meaningful in their theoretical content rather than their prescriptive content. Moreover, the very corpus of texts that the two authors examine is different. For Ram Raz and other scholars of that age, the texts represented complete and pre-existing fields of knowledge; it is significant that Ram Raz, in all the texts that he collected, restricted himself to those that dealt directly with the *Shilpashastra*.¹⁶ In comparison, by the early 20th century this exclusive definition of the *Shilpashastra* had already given way to a more nebulously defined subject matter; Kramrisch looks for pertinent references to *Shilpashastra* in texts concerned with other subjects, such as astronomical text, *Brhat Samhita*, the *Vedas*, and the *Puranas*.

To summarize, Ram Raz's project, although different in its intentions and subject matter from those of his contemporaries, is much closer to them in an epistemological sense than to Kramrisch. This goes against the accepted historical version where historiography of Indian architecture is accepted as a given field that shows a consistent development from the early nineteenth century to the present. Rather, the development of studies of Indian architecture seem to have moved chronologically through a series of discourses, each entailing substantial semantic shifts, even in the basic definition of the term "architecture." Ram Raz's work then can be situated in a discourse that was not only based upon a textual definition of architecture but characterized by a canonical view of texts, a focus on their visible aspects, and a concern with placing these texts within a chronological and typological framework.

NOTES

- Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (New Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972 – original edition London: 1834).
- Owen Jones, "Observations on the Collections of Indian Examples" in *The Catalogue of Ornamental Art* (London: 1856).
- Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (1972), pp. 1-3.
- P.K. Acharya, *The Architecture of the Mansara* (London: 1901).
- Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (London: 1924). Also, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (London: 1927); *The Transformation of the Nature in Art* (Cambridge, MA: 1934).
- E.B. Havell, *A Handbook of Indian Art* (London: 1920).
- Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1946).
- Pramod Chandra, *On the Study of Indian Art* (Cambridge, MA: 1983). Also Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Pratima Joshi, "Problems in South Asian Architectural Historiography" in *A+D* (May-June 1989):53-59.
- Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 105-180.
- J. Blunt, "A Description of the Cuttub Minar" in *Asiatic Researches* 4 (1798). Also W. Chambers, "Some Account of the Sculptures and Ruins at Mavalipuram" in *Asiatic Researches* 1 (1788); M. Kittoe, *Illustrations of Indian Architecture* (Calcutta: 1838).
- Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 113-115.
- Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 95-197.
- E. Moor, *The Hindu Pantheon* (London: 1810).
- Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (1972), p. 13. See also discussion in Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, pp. 195-197.
- Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*, p. 3.
- The lists of texts that he examined is therefore quite short, including four texts that were complete (*Mansara*, *Mayamata*, *Kashyapa*, *Vayghanasa*) and fragments from some other texts.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

- Fig. 1. Pramod Chandra, *On the Study of Indian Art* (Cambridge, MA: 1983).
 Fig. 2. Ram Raz, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (New Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972 – original edition London: 1834).
 Fig. 3. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1946).