

Akshardham Temple, Delhi

This vast temple complex is located near the banks of the river Yamuna. The word Akshardham means the 'abode of the divine'. It was opened in 2005.

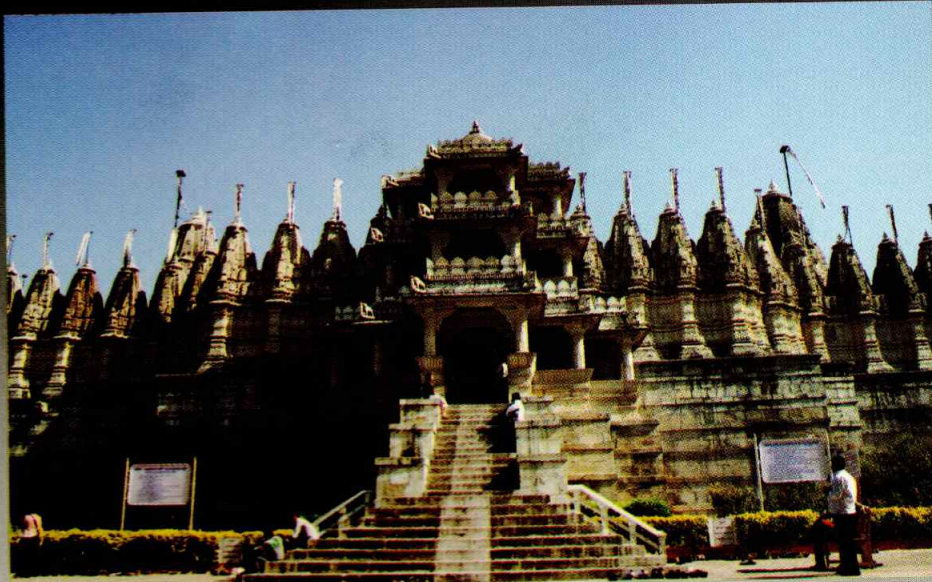
The principal deity of Akshardham is **Lord Swami Narayan**, from Gujarat, who has temples in the **U.K.** and the **U.S.A.** He is the central figure of a modern branch of Hinduism known as Swaminarayan Hinduism. He is believed by followers to be a manifestation of the divine. His idol, installed below the temple's central dome, is surrounded by statues of gurus, depicted in postures of devotion and sewa or service.

The inner sanctum or garbhagriha of the Akshardham temple has representations of Swaminarayan and his divine succession of gurus. Each figure is made of **Panch Dhatu**, or five metals, in keeping with the guidelines of the **Shilpa Shastra**, the ancient Sanskrit text on the making of deities and temples.

The gigantic temple has 234 ornately carved pillars, 9 domes, and 20,000 statues of sadhus, devotees and acharyas, as well as the statues of Sita, Rama, Radha, Krishna, Shiva, Parvati, Lakshmi and Narayan. Architecturally, the temple follows the norms set by the **Shilpa Shastra**, the treatise which gives the proportions of temple architecture, as well as the themes for the sculptures made on different parts of it.

The whole building rests on a plinth which has 148 life-sized elephants, weighing a total of 3,000 tons, as if the temple rests upon their mighty backs. This is an ancient tradition which was first seen in the 2nd century BCE at the Buddhist cave temple of Pitalkhora and in the 1st century CE at the cave temple of Karle, both in Maharashtra. **Akshardham revived the tradition.**

It uses modern technology, such as audio-visuals, to inform visitors of their philosophy and the lives of saints.



Dilwara Temples, Mount Abu, Rajasthan

The **complex of Jain temples** here comprise of the Vimal Vasahi Temple, the Tejapala Temple and the Pittalhar Temple. They are among the most deeply revered of Jain temples.

Vimal Shah, a minister of King Bhima I of Gujarat, constructed a Jain marble temple at Mount Abu. This was in the 11th century and was the first of the beautiful Dilwara Temples. Vimal Shah built this to honour Adinatha or Rishabha Dev, the first Jain tirthankara. In succeeding centuries, other Jain temples were constructed at Mount Abu.

The **Vimal Vasahi Temple**, carved entirely of white marble, was built in 1031 CE. The temple, dedicated to Lord Rishabha, has richly carved corridors, pillars, arches, and porticos. The exquisite ceilings are engraved with designs of lotus buds and flowers, as well as scenes from Jain mythology.

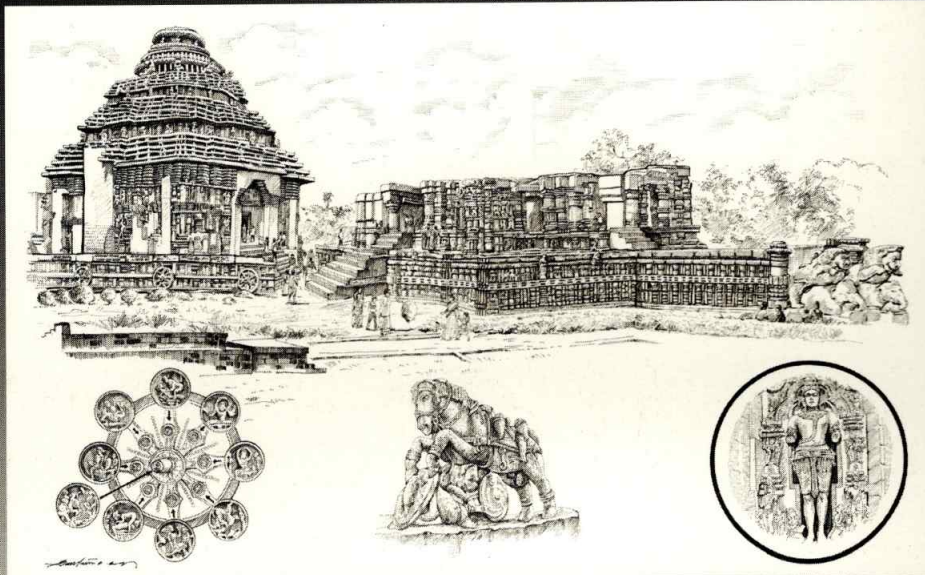
The **Luna Vasahi Temple** was built in 1230 CE by two brothers, both ministers of the ruler of Gujarat. The temple was built in memory of their late brother Luna. It was modelled on the Vimal Vasahi Temple and dedicated to the tirthankara Lord Neminatha.

The **Pittalhar Temple** was built by Bhima Shah, a minister of Sultan Begada of Ahmedabad. A massive statue of Rishabha Dev, the first tirthankara, was cast in five metals and installed in the temple.

The **Parshvanatha Temple** is a three-storied structure, the tallest shrine at Dilwara. The outer walls of the sanctum have beautiful sculptures in grey sandstone.

The **Mahaveer Swami Temple** is the smallest of the temples, but has the most elaborate and delicate carvings.

Tourists are attracted to the temples for their beautiful architecture and the delicacy of their carvings.



Sun Temple, Konark, Odisha

In the mid-13th century, a grand temple was built, dedicated to Lord Surya, the Sun. It was the tallest and most magnificent temple in India at that time. It was built by **King Narasimha Mahadeva I** of the Ganga Dynasty. Surya is believed to ride his chariot across the skies each day, driven by Aruna or the Dawn.

The Konark temple was conceived as the giant chariot of the sun. Twenty-four large wheels, twelve on each side, representing the twelve months of the year, were carved for the chariot. In front are seven horses, appearing to pull it forward at a spirited gallop. It is also famous for its erotic sculptures.

The tower of the Sun Temple at Konark originally stood over 200 feet tall, **higher than any other temple in India**. The hall still stands over 130 feet tall.

The great temple drew considerable admiration over the centuries. Abul Fazi, the court historian of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, visited the Konark temple and wrote in the sixteenth century, "Even those whose judgment is critical and who are difficult to please, stand astonished at this sight."

When the tower collapsed, the then British governor ordered that the temple be filled with sand to prevent more damage.

Even with the once-soaring tower lost, the Sun Temple is still **a vision of majesty and grandeur**. The structures are perfectly proportioned and covered with an endless wealth of sculpture. The beauty of the place is best summed up by Rabindranath Tagore, who said "Here, the language of stone surpasses the language of man."

Legend has it that Lord Krishna cursed Samba, one of his sons, with leprosy. For twelve years, Samba worshipped Surya, the Sun God. Pleased with his devotion, Surya healed him. In gratitude, Samba built the Sun Temple.



Kalighat Temple, Kolkata, West Bengal

This Temple is one of the 51 **Shakti Peethas**, (temples of the deity Shakti.) Bengalis are ardent worshippers of Kali.

According to legend, Sati, was the daughter of Raja Daksh Prajapati. She married Lord Shiva against the wishes of her father. Raja Daksh performed a great yagya or fire sacrifice, to which he invited all the deities, except his son-in-law, Shiva. Against His wishes, Sati attended her father's yagya and grievously insulted, she threw herself into the sacrificial fire.

Crazed with grief, Shiva cut off Daksha's head. He picked up Sati's body and **danced the tandava**, the dance of the destruction of creation. Vishnu cut the body of Sati into many pieces, so that they would fall away and Shiva could calm down. Parts of the body fell over the Indian sub-continent. **Wherever these pieces fell, there are Shakti Peethas.** Kalighat is the site where the toes of the right foot of Sati fell.

The name Kolkata is said to have been derived from the word Kalighat. The temple was on the bank of the river Hooghly. In time, the river shifted and the temple is now on the banks of a small canal, Adi Ganga, connecting to the Hooghly.

The temple was originally a small hut, but important enough to find mention in 15th and 17th century literature. The present temple, erected by the Sabarna Roy Chowdhury family, was completed in 1809.

The image of Kali, **with her tongue protruding, presents a fierce sight.** She is depicted with four hands. In one hand she holds a sword, which represents divine knowledge. In another hand, she holds the severed head of the asura king, Shumbha, who represents the demon of ignorance. With the other two hands, she blesses her devotees.



Kamakhya Temple, Guwahati, Assam

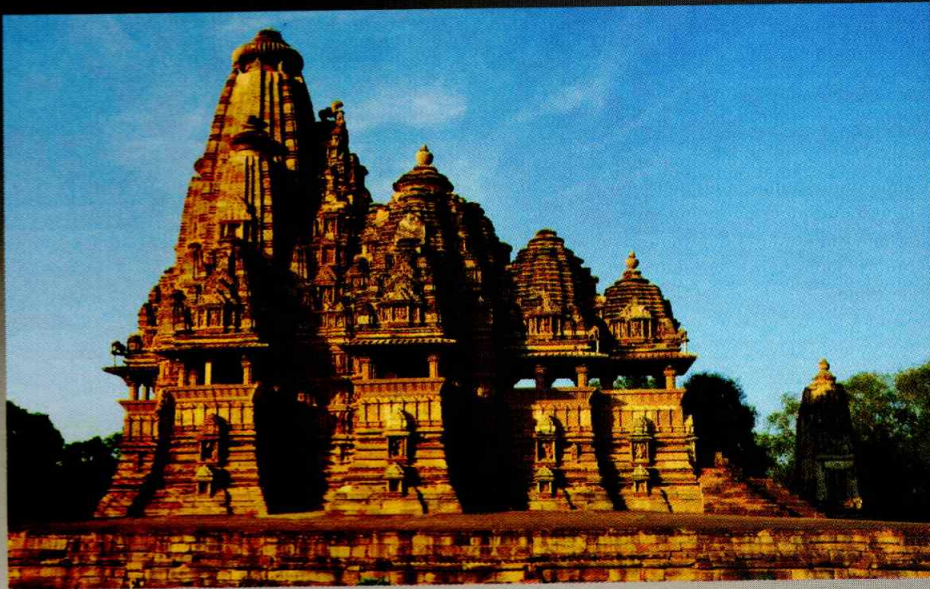
Located on Nilachal Hill, in the western part of Guwahati, it is dedicated to Shakti and is also known as Kamarupa-Kamakhya. Kamarupa is the ancient name of Assam, which was one of the greatest centres of **tantric worship**.

This is one of the **oldest and deeply revered of the 51 Shakti Peeths**, centres for the worship of Shakti. It is the main temple in a complex dedicated to the ten Mahavidyas, or female manifestations of supreme knowledge. Three of them are within the main temple, while the other seven have individual temples in the complex.

According to the Kalika Purana, when Shiva carried the dead body of Sati and danced the tandava, or dance of destruction, different parts of her body fell to the earth. The places where they fell became the most sacred Shakti Peethas. It is believed that her yoni, or vulva, fell on Nilachal Hill, where the Kamakhya temple is located today.

The original temple was destroyed in the early 16th century and was rebuilt by King Naranarayana, in the middle of the 17th century.

The garbhagriha, or inner sanctum, of the Kamakhya Temple is small and dark and can only be reached by steep, narrow steps. It is deep inside a cave in the rock face. There are no images of deities there, but a large rock that slopes downwards from both sides, meeting in a yoni-like depression, about 25 centimetres deep. This hollow is constantly filled with water from a perennial underground spring. It is the vulva-shaped depression that is **worshipped as the deity Kamakhya herself** and is considered as the most important abode of Shakti. The Khasi people sacrifice goats at the shrine.



Khajuraho, The Temple City, Madhya Pradesh

In the 9th and 10th centuries, the Chandela Dynasty rose to power in the ancient land of Vatsa, present-day Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Their capital city was Khajuraho, also known as the City of Temples.

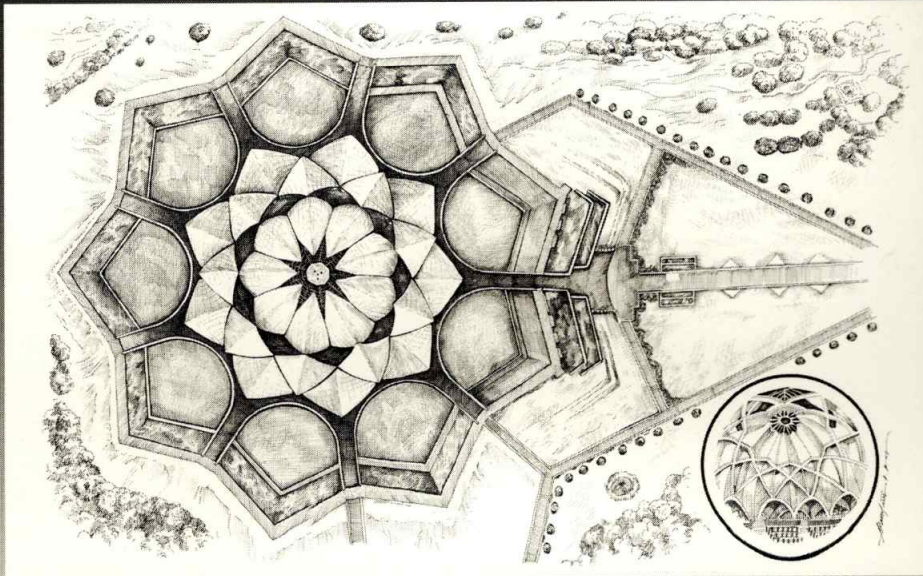
Between the 10th and 12th centuries, were created one of the most splendid temple cities in the history of the world. There were originally **85 temples at Khajuraho**, of which 25 remain.

The Lakshmana Temple, completed by 945 CE, is one of the early structures at Khajuraho. The shikhara of the temple is flanked by a number of smaller replicas. These created an effect like mountain peaks. An inscription on the temple states that this temple "rivals the peaks of the mountains of snow".

The largest and most magnificent temple in Khajuraho is the **Kandariya Mahadeva**, dedicated to Lord Shiva, said to be constructed between 1017 and 1029 CE.

The 10th century **Jain temple of Parsvanatha** was built soon after the Lakshmana Temple, and its beautiful sculptures have a striking resemblance to that temple. The numerous deities of the Hindu pantheon are represented here along with the Jain images. Next to it stands a temple dedicated to the Jain Adinatha. This is a smaller temple of a later date. The temple is girdled by three bands of sculptures, and we see images of both Hindu and Jain divinities. Ancient inscriptions show that people, within the same family, worshipped different deities.

On the walls of the temples of Khajuraho, there is a profusion of depictions of men and women, in every possible posture. They portray the rich abundance of nature and the joy of life. Mithunas, or loving couples, were seen in Indian art since the 1st century CE. In Khajuraho the depictions became more erotic.



Lotus Temple: Bahai House of Worship, Delhi

The house of worship of the Bahai faith was completed in 1986. The lotus represents the rise of purity out of the murky waters of the material world around us. It is one of the **most beautiful structures in India**.

The Bahá'í Faith was founded by **Bahá'u'lláh** in 19th-century Persia. He taught the 'Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religions and the Oneness of Mankind'.

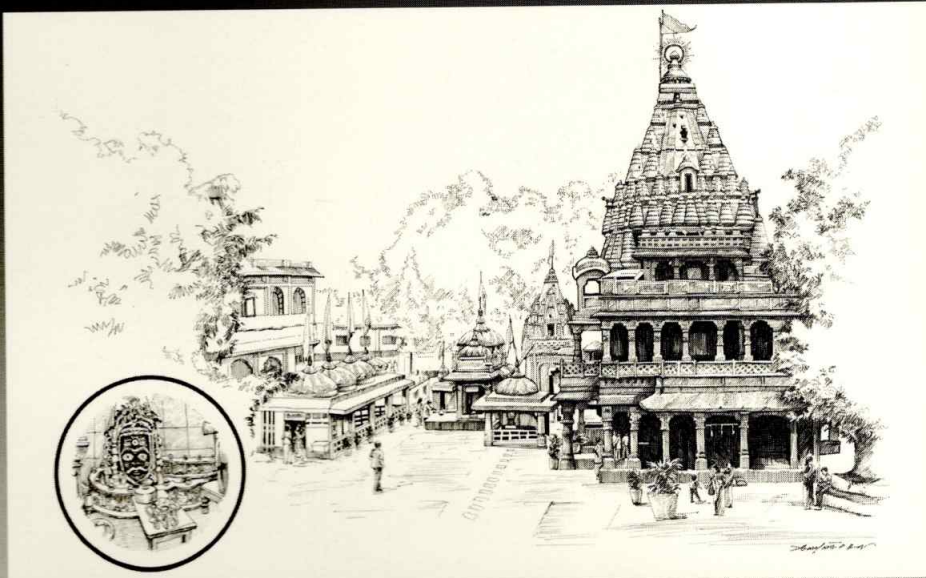
The temple is a place to worship the creator of the universe and not any particular deity. Therefore, people of all religions and races are welcome.

The building is composed of 27 free-standing marble-clad 'petals', arranged in clusters of three, to form nine sides. The marble for the structure came from the Penteli Mountains in Greece, the same stone **that was used to make the Parthenon in Athens**.

Nine doors open into a central hall, with a height of slightly over 40 meters and the capacity to hold 2,500 people. Pools of water surround the temple. At night, when the temple is lit, it gives the impression that the temple is floating on the water.

The Bahai rules stipulate that the house of worship is a gathering place where people of all religions may worship the divine, without denominational restrictions. Readings and prayers are allowed to be set to music and sung by choirs, but **no musical instruments may be played, no sermons may be delivered and ritualistic ceremonies are not allowed**.

The Lotus Temple has won numerous architectural awards and been featured in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. It is regarded as one of the most visited buildings in the world.



Mahakaleshwar Temple, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

The temple is located in on the banks of the river Kshipra, Ujjain was the capital of the ancient Avanti kingdom and is dedicated to Lord Shiva as Mahakala. Here, Shiva is the conqueror of Time and thereby, the conqueror of Life and Death.

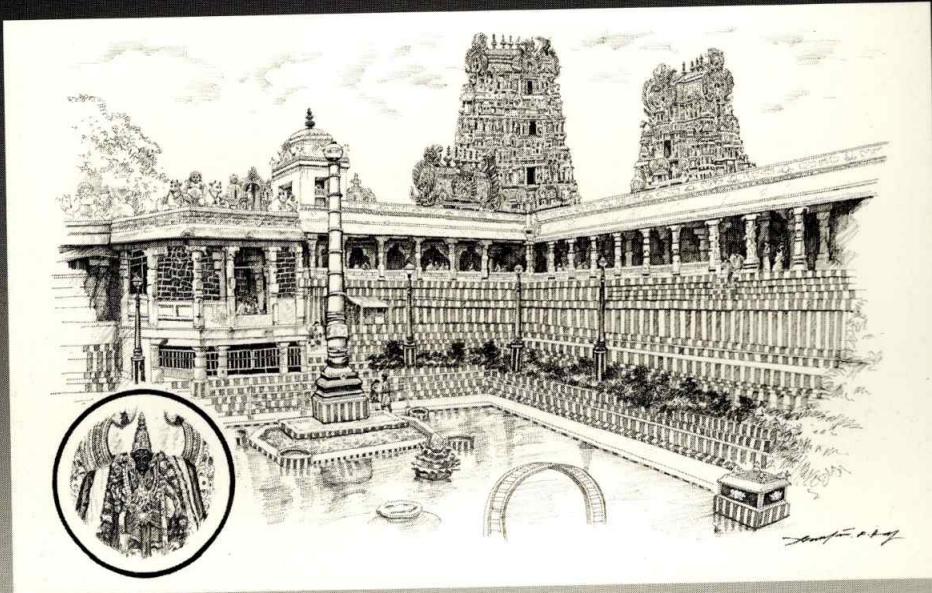
The Mahakala Temple is **one of the 12 jyotirlinga temples**. The linga here is colossal. It is not possible to trace the early history of the temple structures at this site. The Scindia rulers of Gwalior re-built it in 1736 CE and further developed the site in the mid 19th century.

The idol of Mahakaleshwar is known to be **dakshinamurti**, which means that it is **facing south**. This is a **unique feature** among the 12 Jyotirlingas, found only in Mahakaleshwar.

The temple has five levels, one of which is underground. Brass lamps illuminate the stairway going down to the garbhagriha or sanctum. At ground level, images of Ganesha, Parvati and Kartikeya are facing the west, east, and north respectively. The Nandi bull, the vahan or vehicle of Lord Shiva, is in the south. On the third level of the temple is the image of Lord Shiva, as **Nagchandreshwar**, as he is associated with the nagas, or snake deities and Chandra, the moon. This level is **opened to the public only once a year**, on Naga Panchami day, when cobras are worshipped.

On the day of **Maha Shivaratri**, a huge fair is held near the temple, and worship goes on through the night.

In the precincts of the Mahakaleshwar temple is the Shri Swapaneshwar Mahadev temple, where devotees pray to Shiva as Mahakaal. It is believed that prasada offered here can be re-offered, unlike all other shrines.



Meenakshi Temple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

This vast Hindu temple is located on the banks of the river Vaigai. It is also the most beautiful example of temple architecture. The Government of India puts it on the cover of the booklets for tourists!

The temple complex is built around two shrines: one dedicated to Shiva as Sundareshvara, the 'Beautiful Lord', and the other to his spouse Parvati, as Meenakshi, the '**Fish-Eyed One**', denoting the shape of her eyes. Every evening Meenakshi is placed in a bed chamber for the night. Shiva, symbolised by the image of his feet, is then carried to her. In the morning, they are awakened by the singing of devotional songs.

The Meenakshi Temple is one of the greatest achievements of temple building of the Nayaka period. The present structure was created in the reign of Thirumalai Nayaka, in the mid-17th century. It has the **largest covered area of any temple in India**. The original temple is said to date back 2,500 years.

The vast temple has **eight impressive gopuras, or gateway towers**, one of which rises to almost 200 feet (61 meters). The gopuras are covered with hundreds of sculptures. Temple authorities estimate that there are thirty-three million sculptures in the Meenakshi complex. If that number is not based upon an actual count, a view of the temple does indeed convey such an impression.

In the Nayaka period, the temples were made with spectacular halls with numerous sculpted pillars. In the Meenakshi Temple complex, an Ayiramkaal Mandapam, or '**Hall of a Thousand Pillars**', has almost exactly that number of massive sculpted columns. Carved out of large slabs of granite, each pillar is a monumental work of art.

Once in twelve years, the temple is re-consecrated to maintain its sacred nature. At that time, the thousands of sculptures on the great gopuras are repaired, repainted and even replaced. It is a living and evolving temple till today.



Shrinathji Temple, Nathdwara, Rajasthan

Located in the Aravalli hills, on the banks of the river Banas. the town is famous for its temple to Lord Krishna, as a 7-year-old. Nathdwara means 'Gateway to the Lord'

His swarup, or 'divine statue', is said to have **manifested itself at Govardhan Hill near the ancient city of Mathura**. The hill figures prominently in stories of his childhood. The deity was originally worshipped here, until, in 1672 CE, He was moved to the present location.

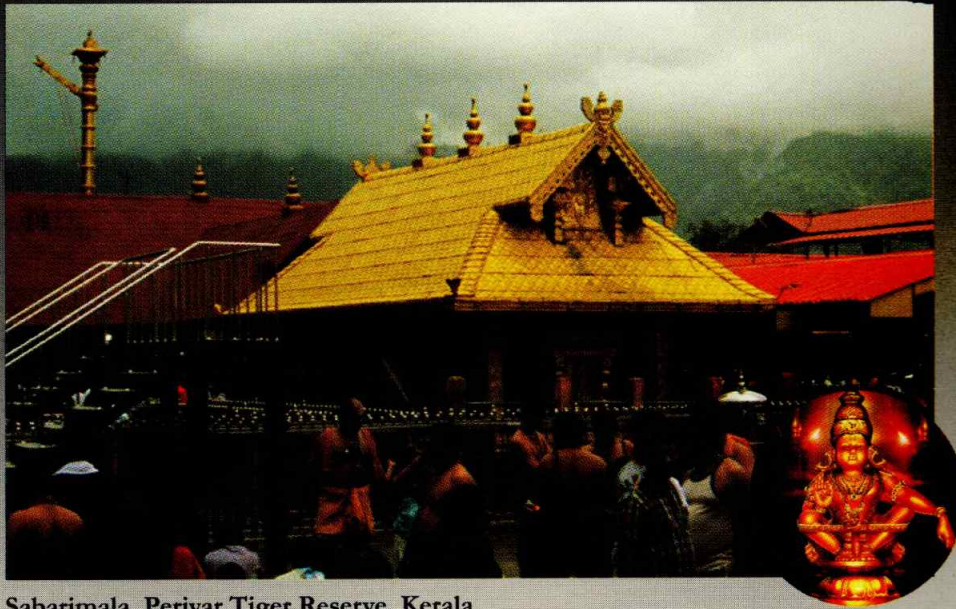
During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, He was taken from Uttar Pradesh to Rajasthan, first by boat on the river Yamuna and then in a bullock cart. When the deity reached the village Sihad (or Sinhad), **the wheels of the bullock cart sank in the mud and all efforts failed to move it any further.**

The accompanying priests realised that this place was the Lord's chosen spot. Accordingly a temple was built there, protected by Maharana Raj Singh, the ruler of Mewar.

Shrinathji Temple is also known as 'Haveli (mansion) of Shrinathji'. The term was used because the temple is in a fortified mansion.

Shrinathji is not seen as an impersonal God. His worship is not like it is in temples. Shrinathji is **seen as Thakur or Lord of the Haveli and service is offered** instead of worship. Like a normal household, it has a chariot (the original in which Shrinathji arrived in Singhar), a store rooms for milk, betel, flowers and sugar and sweetmeats. There is a functional kitchen, a jewellery chamber, a treasury, a stable for horses, a drawing room, a gold and silver grinding wheel for various flours.

Shrinathji is addressed by the honorific 'Thakurji'. His name is not uttered as a mark of respect and reverence.



Sabarimala, Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala

Sri Dharma Sastha Temple is dedicated to **Lord Ayyappa**, is on a hilltop at an approximate altitude of 3,000 feet (915 meters) in the Western Ghats. It is the most famous of 108 temples dedicated to Lord Sastha.

The temple is situated amid 18 hills and is surrounded by dense forests. **There are temples on each of the hills surrounding Sabarimala**, many of which are still functioning. Remnants of old temples survive on other hills.

The temple is open to all, irrespective of caste or creed. **Pilgrims practice austerities for 41 days**, to cleanse their minds and bodies, before going to Sabarimala. To enter the temple, the pilgrim must climb eighteen holy steps. Each of these steps represents a desire which one must conquer. **Only those who observe the ritual of 41 days of austerity may climb these steps.** Pilgrims have to walk through the forest as there is no motorable road beyond a point.

This is one of the largest annual pilgrimages in the world. It is estimated that **over 100 million devotees visit the temple every year.**

Sabarimala pilgrims can be identified by their black, blue or saffron clothing. They do not shave until the completion of the pilgrimage, and they smear ash on their foreheads.

The temple was rebuilt after a fire in 1950. The earlier stone image of the deity was replaced with an idol about 18 inches (45 cms) high, made from panchdhatu, an alloy of five metals.

The temple is open for worship **only during the first five days of every Malayalam month** and on the days of Mandalapooja (approximately 15 November to 26 December), Makaravilakku or Makara Sankranti (14th January) and Chitra Vishu (14th April).



Sarnath, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

This is **one of the four most holy places for all Buddhists**, the other three being Lumbini, Bodhi Gaya and Kushinagar.

Today, there are a number of recent Buddhist temples in Sarnath. **Many of these are built and maintained by monks from other Buddhist countries.** The Archeological Survey of India Museum at this site has some of the finest Buddhist art in the world.

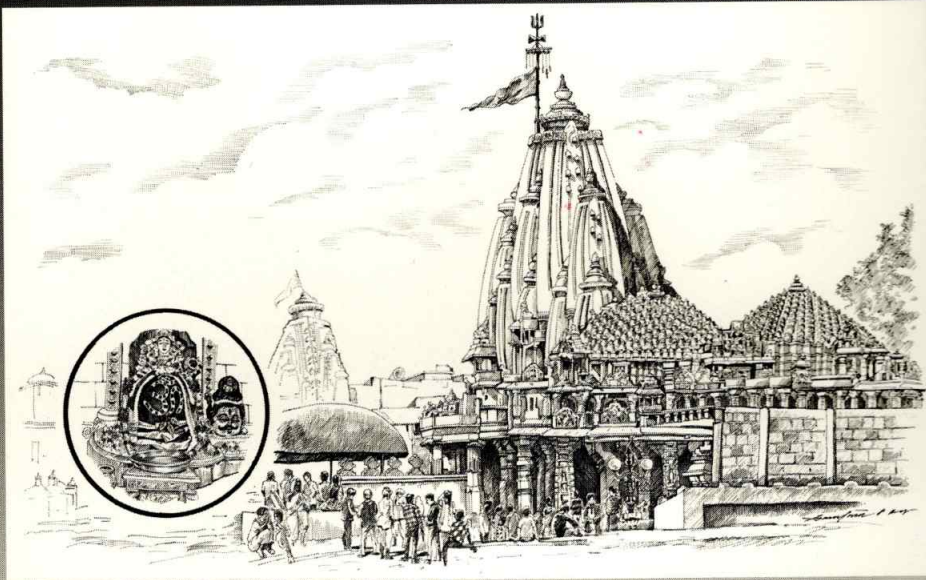
The Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath is **on the outskirts of the holy city of Varanasi.** This stupa marks the spot where the Buddha delivered his first sermon to his five companions. This event is known as the DharmachakraPravartin, or 'the setting into motion the wheel of law'.

The original stupa is believed to have been built in the 3rd century BCE by Emperor Ashoka. The present stupa is much larger than the original one and was probably made in the middle of the first millennium CE.

The Buddha spoke of Four Noble Truths. He said there is Duhkha, or suffering. There is Samudaya, or the cause of suffering. There is Nirodha, or the removal of the cause of suffering and there is Marg, or the Eight-fold Path, leading to the removal of the cause of suffering. This sermon was the foundation of Buddhism.

By the 1st century CE, Sarnath was an important centre of Buddhist philosophy and art. It continued as a great centre through the Gupta Period, from the 4th to 6th centuries CE. In the 7th century, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang visited Sarnath and wrote about the splendour of the city.

The illustration is of the Japanese Temple and the Stupa is on the right.



Somnath Temple, Veraval, Gujarat

The temple has the first and most revered of the twelve Jyotirlingas. It has been a pilgrimage centre since time immemorial, at the confluence of the mythological Saraswati, Hiranya and Kapila rivers.

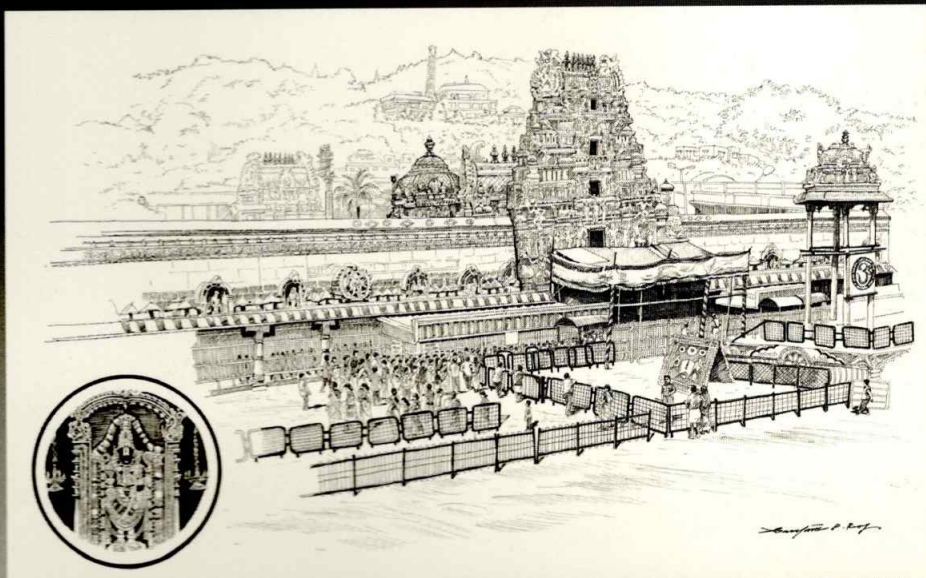
Somnath means 'Lord of the Moon', who is said to have worshipped this Shivaling. This is also believed to be the place where Lord Krishna gave up his mortal body.

The temple is believed to have been built sometime around AD 4. Remains, found from the region and the writings of Indians and foreigners, suggest that the place was an **Aryan colony of ancient times**. Somnath is one of the oldest pilgrimage spots in India and finds mention in ancient texts, including the Shivapurana, Skandapurana and Shrimad Bhagvat Gita.

Legend has it that the original temple of Somnath was built by the Moon God and was made of gold. After it was razed to the ground, it was rebuilt with silver, by Ravana, the king of Lanka. When the silver temple was demolished, it was reconstructed in wood by Lord Krishna. In the 10th century it is believed to have been rebuilt in stone by King Bhimdev Solanki.

Tales of the **great wealth of the temple** attracted a series of invaders, who looted it over the centuries. **Mohammed of Ghazni raided it seven times** between 1000 and 1027 CE. then came Afzal Khan, the army commander of Ala-ud-din Khilji and later, there was Aurangzeb. It is said that the temple was looted and destroyed as many as seventeen times.

The present temple was reconstructed in the Chalukya style of architecture and was completed in **May, 1951**. Commanding a breathtaking view from the tip of the Saurashtra Peninsula, kissed by the waves of the Arabian Sea, the temple has an imposing shikhara, or tower, nearly 50 meters tall.



Sri Venkateswara Swamy Temple, Tirupati , Andhra Pradesh

The temple is in the hilly town of Tirumala and is dedicated to Lord Vishnu as Venkateswara, also known as Balaji and 'Lord of the Seven Hills'. Lord Venkateswara is known by other names, including Govinda, Lord Venkateswara's eyes are kept covered, as it is believed that his gaze is so intense that it would scorch the universe. The temple is also called the Tirumala Temple, Tirupati Temple and Tirupati Balaji Temple.

According to the ancient Sanskrit text, the VarahaPurana, Lord Rama resided here along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana, on their return from Lanka. This is believed to have been in the TretaYug, or the second of the four yugs or 'ages of mankind'. We are presently living in the Kali Yug, the fourth yug.

The town was an established centre of Vaishnavism and was praised by the Tamil devotional poet-saints, the Alvars. It is believed that the temple rites were formalised by the saint Ramanujacharya in the 11th century.

The temple was expanded and renovated by numerous kings, over the centuries. Inscriptions in **Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada** are found in the temple complex, which specify the contributions of Pallava rulers of around the 9th century, Chola rulers of the 10th century and the rulers of Vijayanagara in the 14th century.

Devotees flock to the temple in large numbers. Their offerings make it the richest shrine in India. In gratitude for wishes which have been fulfilled, devotees sacrifice their hair at the temple, which earns the temple **US \$6 million annually, by auctioning the hair.**

The temple is one of the most important and **most-visited pilgrimage spots in India.** The temple trust of Tirupati runs many charitable and educational institutions and universities.



Hawai Jahaz Gurudwara, Jalandar, Punjab

Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh Gurudwara in Talhan Village near Jalandhar in the northern Indian state of Punjab, is a unique place of worship. Here, devotees make offerings of miniature aircraft at the shrine, to fulfil their dreams of going abroad.

Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh Gurudwara looks like a typical Sikh shrine, with pristine white domes. It is famous as the Hawai Jahaz Gurudwara, or the 'Aeroplane Gurudwara'. The gurudwara is now a symbol of hope for a brighter and prosperous future, somewhere in the USA, Canada, UK or Germany.

It is believed that if you give a toy aeroplane here as prasad, or offering, you can be "assured" of a visa. This makes devotees flock to the shrine from across Punjab's Doaba region, with miniature aircraft as offerings. Six million persons from this area are known to have settled abroad and it is said that every family of this region has at least one member living overseas.

The gate to Talhan village has a cement model of a **British Airways aircraft** on top of it. Shops selling toy models of aeroplanes of international carriers, such as Lufthansa, British Airways, Air Canada and others, line the road heading to the Gurudwara. It is said that a visitor from Ludhiana once came here and promised that he would offer a model of an aeroplane if his wish of getting a USA visa was fulfilled. Four days later, he came back with a large model of an aircraft and offered it as prasad, for getting the visa. The news spread, and it became a tradition.



Karni Mata Temple, Deshnoke, Bikaner, Rajasthan

Located at Deshnoke, 30 km from Bikaner, in Rajasthan, India. It is also known as the **Temple of Rats**. The temple is famous for the 25,000 black rats that live and are revered in the temple. These holy rats are called kabbas, and many people travel great distances to pay their respects. The temple draws visitors from across the country for blessings, and tourists from around the world.

Local folklore explains the legend of the rats. A 20,000 strong army deserted a nearby battle and ran to Deshnoke. The sin of desertion was punishable by death. **Karni Mata spared their lives but turned them into rats**, and offered them the temple as place to stay. The army of soldiers expressed their gratitude and promised to serve Karni Mata evermore.

The building was completed in its current form in the early 20th century in the late Mughal style by Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner. The front of the temple has a beautiful marble facade, with solid silver doors built by Maharaja Ganga Singh. Across the doorway are more silver doors with panels depicting the various legends of the Goddess. The image of the Goddess is enshrined in the inner sanctum.

If one rat is killed, it must be replaced with one made of silver. There are a few white rats, which are considered to be especially holy. They are believed to be the manifestations of Karni Mata herself and her four sons. Sighting them is a special blessing and visitors try to bring them forth, offering sweet prasad.



Bullet Banna Mandir, Jodhpur, Rajasthan

The shrine to Om Banna is also known as 'Bullet Banna Mandir', near Jodhpur in Rajasthan. What is most unusual is that the object of worship is a motorcycle, a Royal Enfield Bullet, giving the shrine its name.

Every day, people from nearby villages and travellers from afar, stop and pray to the bike and its late owner Om Singh, for safe journeys. They leave offerings, which in some cases are small bottles of alcohol.

Devotees also **apply a tilak and tie a red thread on the motorcycle**. Folk songs about Om Banna have been composed and are sung by the people of the region.

More than two decades ago, Om Singh Rathore, also known as Om Banna, was travelling on National Highway 65, when he lost control of his motorcycle and hit a tree. Om Banna was killed instantly and the bike fell into a ditch. The local police took the bike to the police station. The next day, it had disappeared from the police station and was found at the accident site. The police took the motorcycle away again, emptied its fuel tank and secured it with a lock and chain. The next morning it had disappeared again and was found in the ditch. The story goes that the motorcycle kept returning to the same ditch. It foiled every attempt by the police to keep it at their station.

For the local populace, this was a miracle. They began to worship the 'Bullet Bike'. News of the miraculous motorcycle spread to nearby villages and some time later a temple was built to house the bike. The temple is known as 'Bullet Baba's Temple'. **It is believed that Om Banna's spirit helps travellers in distress.**



Ravana Temple, Jodhpur, Rajasthan

This shrine sees daily worship of Ravana. Legend has it that Jodhpur is the hometown of Ravana's wife **Mandodari, daughter of the King of Mandore**, the ancient capital of Marwar.

Shiva **Tandava Stotra** is a Hindu hymn that describes Lord Shiva's power and beauty. It is believed to have been composed by Ravana and is recited by devotees of Shiva in Indian households till today. Ravana is known to have been the greatest of scholars and an ardent devotee of Shiva.

Valmiki, the writer of the Ramayana, describes Ravana as a grand, almost glorious, imperial lord. He was **born to the great sage Vishrava** and the demon princess Kaikesi. He is depicted with ten heads to signify his vast knowledge. Ravana was also known to be a great ruler and his kingdom of Lanka was described as 'golden' and most prosperous. Besides, he was known to be a maestro of the veena, a stringed musical instrument. He was the author of the seminal treatise on astrology, called the **Ravana Samhita**. He is also famous as the author of Arka Prakasham, a major work on Siddha medicine.

When Hanuman first sees Ravana, he describes him in great detail, with wonder and amazement, remarking on his beauty, majesty and grandeur. Some regard Ravana as a kind of tragic hero with strong positive qualities.

There is an altar at Mandore known as **Ravana Ki Chanwari**, where it is believed that Ravana married Mandodari. It is believed that the Maudgil Brahmins came from Lanka to Mandore for the wedding. They moved to Jodhpur when the city was founded in the 15th century. They claim that their ancestors performed the annual homage to his memory, during **Dussehra**, which marks the day that **Ravana was killed**.



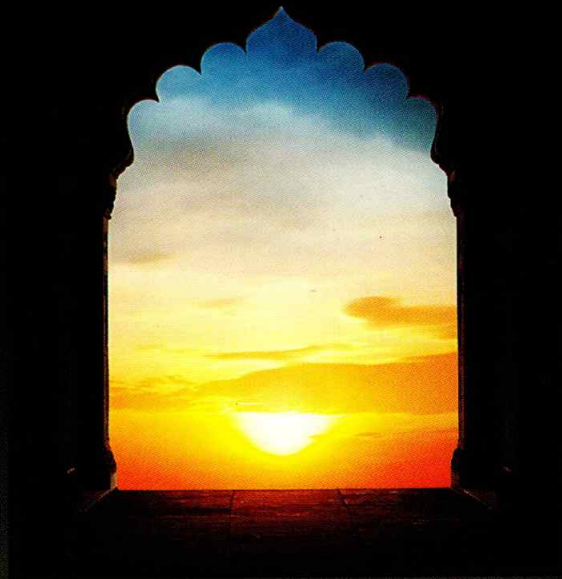
Stambheshwar Mahadev Temple, Kavi Kamboi, Gujarat

This 150-year old **Shiva shrine** is flanked by the Arabian Sea on one side and the Bay of Cambay on the other. It is one of the most unusual Shiva temples in the country, as it can **only be seen at low tides**. At high tide, it is totally submerged, thus earning the name 'the disappearing temple of Shiva'. Here, Mother Nature herself performs the **jal abhishekh**, or ritual bathing of the Shivalinga.

Access to the temple is through a walkway from the beach, which is also submerged at high tide. Worshippers stay till the last minute, to see the linga submerged by the sea. Then they have to run across the walkway, while it is being covered by the rising sea.

The Shivalinga is protected by a beautiful silver cobra, with its hood extended and ten heads. Jasmine flowers cover the hood and are held in place by rudraksha garlands, which are retrieved before high tide. The flowers on the linga are taken by the sea and the tilaks, or holy markings, are washed away by the waters. The Shivalinga is **wrapped in plastic sheeting to prevent erosion**.

Devotees are fascinated and wait to see the **ebbing tide**, when the 4-foot high **Shivalinga starts emerging out of the sea**, inch by inch. A visit to the temple should be planned in such a way that one gets to see the disappearing and the reappearing of the temple. One must see the temple and the Shivalinga, in its full glory framed by the shimmering sea and when the night engulfs it.



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