

Stone, Space, and Spirituality: A Comparative Study of Jain Temple Architecture in India and England

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Abstract

This research explores the evolution and adaptation of Jain temple architecture through a comparative lens, focusing on traditional temples in India and modern Jain temples in England. Jainism, deeply rooted in India, expresses its spiritual ideals through intricate architecture and iconography, emphasizing values such as non-violence, purity, and liberation. As Jain communities migrated to England, they carried these spiritual traditions with them, reconstructing sacred spaces in a new cultural and architectural landscape.

The study investigates how temple design, spatial arrangements, materials, and the symbolism of idols have been preserved or transformed in the diaspora. It examines key case studies—such as the Jain Centre in Leicester and Shree Mahavir Swami Temple in London—against iconic temples in India like Ranakpur and Shravanabelagola. Through this comparison, the research highlights how architecture serves as both a vessel of continuity and a site of innovation, negotiating between tradition and the challenges of modernity, identity, and multicultural coexistence in the UK. By combining architectural analysis, cultural context, and interviews with community members and architects, the study offers new insights into how sacred space is created, maintained, and experienced across different geographies.

Keywords: Jain Temple Architecture, Stone, Space, and Spirituality, Multicultural Coexistence

Introduction

Background and Significance of the Study

Jainism is one of the oldest religions, built on the ideas of non-violence, seeing things from many perspectives, and strict self-discipline. Jain temples are much more than beautiful buildings; they are designed to reflect deep spiritual ideas and help guide people from the everyday world to a more spiritual one. These temples use traditional methods like sacred geometry and vastu shashtra, with key features such as tall spires (shikhara), large halls (mandapas), inner sanctums (garbhagriha), and special pillars (manastambha).

As many Jains moved away from India—especially from regions like East Africa—to settle in places like England, they started building their own temples there. These temples are not just copies of the ones in India; instead, they mix traditional Jain design with local building rules, materials, and modern construction methods. In England, these temples serve many roles: they are places for worship, centers for cultural learning, and hubs for keeping their heritage alive among younger generations.

Studying these temples is important because it shows how the Jain community keeps its traditions and faith while adapting to a new environment. This research connects areas like architecture, religious studies, and migration, and it helps us understand how sacred spaces can preserve cultural identity in a multicultural society.

Research Questions and Objectives

1. How have Jain architectural traditions been adapted in England?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Indian and British Jain temples?
3. How do architectural forms support spiritual experience and community identity?
4. What roles do idols, materials, and spatial arrangements play?

Methodology and Sources

This research employs a qualitative, comparative, and interdisciplinary methodology to understand how Jain temple architecture expresses spiritual and cultural identity in India and

England. The aim is to interpret architecture not only as a physical structure but as a living medium of philosophical, ritualistic, and community expression.

Qualitative Approach

The study is grounded in qualitative research, which is best suited for examining human experiences, cultural meanings, and symbolic expressions within sacred architecture. Unlike quantitative methods, this approach allows for depth, context, and interpretation, essential when exploring spiritual and artistic dimensions of Jain temples.

Literature Review

A thorough review of academic and cultural literature was conducted to establish the historical, architectural, and philosophical framework of Jain temples. Sources included:

Books on Jain art and architecture (e.g., A. Ghosh, S. Jain, K. K. Dixit)

Research on diaspora religious practices and identity (e.g., Raymond Williams, Steven Vertovec)

Studies of sacred space, cosmology, and ritual architecture

Articles and dissertations from Jain studies departments, architecture schools, and cultural heritage journals

The literature review helped

- Contextualize Jain architecture within broader Indian temple traditions
- Identify core architectural principles and symbolism
- Understand how religious architecture adapts in the diaspora

Fieldwork and Case Studies

Field visits were carried out in both India and the United Kingdom. Selected temples were chosen based on:

- Historical importance
- Architectural diversity
- Relevance to diaspora or modern developments

Case studies included

India:

- Ranakpur Temple, Rajasthan – marble craftsmanship and spiritual geometry

- Palitana Temples, Gujarat – pilgrimage architecture across a sacred hill
- Shravanabelagola, Karnataka – integration of natural landscape and monolithic idol worship

United Kingdom

- Jain Centre, Leicester – the first fully consecrated Jain temple in the UK
- Oshwal Temple, Potters Bar – an example of Gujarati style replication in British landscape
- Mahavir Swami Temple, London – urban adaptation and community-driven construction
- During fieldwork, the following aspects were recorded:
 - Temple layout and spatial organization
 - Use of building materials and design motifs
 - Positioning of idols, entrances, and domes
 - Adaptation to local climate, zoning laws, and funding challenges.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain insider perspectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals directly or indirectly involved in temple design and use. This format allowed for guided but flexible conversations. Participants included:

- Architects and artisans: insights on design intentions, challenges, and symbolism
- Temple trustees and planners: perspectives on funding, zoning, cultural vision
- Devotees and lay visitors: emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual experiences
- Scholars and community elders: historical and philosophical interpretations

Interview data was thematically coded and analyzed to highlight key patterns, beliefs, and cultural adaptations in both Indian and British contexts.

Visual Documentation and Architectural Analysis

Extensive visual and spatial documentation was carried out during temple visits. Tools included:

- Photographs of exterior and interior elements
- Sketches and diagrams of floor plans, elevations, and symbolic patterns
- Architectural measurements where permissible

- Digital reconstructions and overlays for comparative analysis

These visuals allowed for:

- Understanding the flow of space, orientation, and light
- Analysis of material choices (e.g., marble, sandstone, brick)
- Observation of traditional vs. modern architectural elements
- Interpretation of idol placement, scale, and symbolic alignment

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on a comparative architectural and cultural analysis of Jain temples in India and England. While Jainism has spread globally, this research specifically examines temples in two contrasting geographical and cultural settings to understand:

- The continuity and change in sacred architecture
- How architecture supports spiritual expression and community identity
- The symbolic role of space, idols, and materials

Key themes include

- Adaptation of ancient architectural principles to new environments
- Influence of migration and diaspora identity on temple design
- Interplay between tradition, modernity, and multiculturalism

The selected case studies are representative of wider trends rather than exhaustive. They were chosen for their architectural significance, accessibility, and active engagement with their communities.

The scope includes

- Architectural elements (layout, design, symbolism)
- Spatial experience and ritual usage
- Community narratives and cultural negotiations

This study does not engage in deep theological or doctrinal debates about Jainism unless directly relevant to architectural symbolism (e.g., idol iconography or cosmological geometry).

Limitations of the Study

Despite its depth, the research has the following limitations:

1. Access Constraints

Some temples, especially older or more remote ones, were difficult to access due to travel time, permissions, or monastic restrictions.

In certain locations, photography or interviews were restricted, limiting data collection.

2. Language Barriers

While interviews in the UK were conducted in English, some participants in India spoke only local languages or dialects (Gujarati, Kannada, Hindi).

Although informal translators were used, nuanced meanings may have been lost or simplified.

3. Time Constraints

The scope of fieldwork was limited by time, especially for extended observation of daily rituals, festivals, or construction processes.

Longitudinal data (e.g., how a temple's role evolves over time) was beyond the project's current timeline.

4. Focused Research Lens

The study focuses on material, spatial, and symbolic dimensions of Jain temples. It does not aim to provide a complete religious or philosophical analysis of Jainism, though it draws on key concepts where relevant.

Other aspects like gender roles, sectarian differences, or temple economics were beyond the current scope, unless they intersected with architectural choices.

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