

Sompura: Traditional Master Builders of Western India

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Abstract The text deals with Indian *Sompura*, a regional traditional community of master builders and master craftsmen working for religious trusts. They maintain and restore “living” temples in an effort to recreate the buildings. They perceive themselves as handing down building traditions from generation to generation with the help of descriptive building manuals whose descriptions and drawings are not however slavishly followed. The intention is not to produce a true replica, but to capture the spirit of the original thus creating a work of merit. The *Sompura* are not aware of the term authenticity, but they do appreciate the value of truthfulness in architecture. For a few decades now, this aspect has also been given attention in the framework of the international debate about the concept of authenticity. Spiritual connections and the continuous passing on of skills add to the variety of aspects of authenticity that have to be taken into account when debating conservation strategies in a specific local context.

Sompura

The Sompura are a regional traditional community of master builders and master craftsmen. They originate from western India and are natives of Prabhas Patan, also known as Somnath Patan. There their lineage extends back to ancient times and they were, and still are, associated with building activities of the Somnath Temple. The title *sompura* refers to their origins in native Somnath Patan, though their generic name could be any of the prevalent family names adopted by the Brahmins in this region. They are of Brahmin caste and by religion they devote themselves to the art of temple building, which is a form of Saiva worship. Members of another branch of this Sompura-Brahmin community devote themselves to performing the rituals related to worship in the Somnath temple. Thus their identity is regional

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though their works are now spread all over the country and indeed all over the world, wherever new temples dedicated to the Hindu (and other) faith are built.

Three Lineages of Sompura

Prabhashankar and Chandrakantbhai Sompura

There are several families of master builders that have been active in temple building activities in western India. One of the most prominent figures is Prabhashankar Oghadji Sompura (1896–1979), who headed the rebuilding of the Somnath Temple after Indian independence in 1947. After independence, the rebuilding of the Somnath Temple was linked with the resurgence of “Hindu” culture. A trust was established to reconstruct the temple and it virtually took on symbolic status as one of the oldest *Jyotirlinga*—a self-emerging deity of light. So this was a project of national importance for which Prabhashankar Sompura was officially appointed as the “architect” (*sthāpati*). The construction of the temple began in 1947, and its first phase was completed in 1952. Thereafter works continued till 1997, when it was fully completed. Prabhashankar, an authority on Vastu texts, has reinterpreted and published 20 books on classical Indian architecture. His works include hundreds of projects all over India in a career spanning six decades. He had four sons and grandsons and his traditions are continued today by Chandrakantbhai Sompura (b. 1943), whose father, Balwantraï, was Prabhashankar Sompura’s eldest son.

Chandrakantbhai Sompura was responsible for completing the Somnath Temple Project including its associated shrines. He designed the first great temple of the Svāminārāyaṇa sect in Gandhinagar, which was the first temple on this scale to be undertaken in India. It was built from 1978 to 1985 and followed by the Akshardham Svāminārāyaṇa Temple in Noida, Delhi. Besides, he also designed the Akshardham Svāminārāyaṇa Temple in Neasden, London (1991–1995) with a Haveli adjoining it. For the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the “World Hindu Council” founded in 1964, Chandrakantbhai also designed the famous but controversial proposal for the temple of Rama at Ayodhya, which is yet to be built. He has also headed the construction of a Hindu temple in Pittsburgh, USA (1981–1985) and a Śiva temple in Singapore (1991–1995). His design for a Sun Temple for J. C. Mills in Gwalior (1984–1988) is the one most redolent of classical traditions in the true sense of the term. He has also masterminded the huge development in Uttar Pradesh, the most recent resurgence of Buddhist shrines patronized by a section of the present political elite in Uttar Pradesh. He is one of the most important temple architects in the country today, acting as a consultant to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for important restoration and protection projects in Puri, Orissa, and other places.

Chandrakantbhai's two sons, Nikhil and Ashish, the latter a trained architect, uphold these traditions and collaborate with their father. They have worked on over a hundred temples so far and thus rank among the most important temple architects in the country.

Narmadashankar Muljibhai Sompura

Narmadashankar Muljibhai Sompura (1883–1956) was another illustrious self-made master builder from Dhrangadhara. He is one of the most important Sompura and his works have been an example to his successors. His understanding and interpretation of classical texts attracted the attention of the famous ruler of Baroda, Sir Sayajirao Gaekwar, who invited him to Baroda in 1926 as a state guest and later asked him to write interpretations of the classical texts in Gujarati to make people aware of the great classical traditions of the building arts. Thus Narmadashankar wrote an important reinterpretation of the classical text *Shilpa Ratnakar* that was published in 1939 at the behest of the Late Sir Sayajirao Gaekwar. The latter appointed Narmadashankar Sompura professor of architecture at the famous Kalabhavan in Baroda in 1926, where he had started a department of architecture. In the same year, he designed the famous Kirti Mandir in Baroda as a memorial on the royal funerary site to the former rulers of Baroda. This building is an example of Indian architecture employing a classical Indian idiom for a contemporary building. During the last century there were many Indian master builders originating from the traditional schools. They worked in their own contemporary contexts to reinterpret and adapt the classical canons and idiom to the demands of their prevailing times while still adhering to an understanding of their traditional profession of master builders as one based on Indian classical philosophy. Narmadashankar is survived by his only son and three grandsons, who continue their work in the same traditions.

Amrutbhai Mulshankar Trivedi, Krushnachandra Trivedi, and Virendrabhai Trivedi

One of the other prominent families among the Sompura master builders is that of Amrutbhai Mulshankar Trivedi (1910–2003), who settled in Ahmedabad. Amrutbhai was 92 years old when I first met him in 2002. He told me about his early years in the profession and elucidated for me his approach to, and methods of, designing temples and working on temple projects.

He was involved in the restoration (Skt. *jīrṇoddhāra*) of the famous Vastupal Tejpal Temple at Dilwara at Mount Abu in Rajasthan in the 1950s. In this project he was working for the Sri Anandji Kalyanji Trust, one of the most important Jaina trusts looking after the *jīrṇoddhāra* of Jaina Temples all over the country. Like all ideal master builders, Amrutbhai was a great sculptor and had in-depth knowledge

of classical sculptural arts and iconography. His understanding and artistic quality as a sculptor are evident in his early restoration work of the ceiling of the Vastupal–Tejpal Temple *maṇḍapa*. This ceiling, with its sculptural details, is one of the most exquisite examples of marblework in the history of Jaina Temple architecture in India.

Amrutbhai was a very humble man, very acute for his age and still able to produce very accurate drawings on account of his immaculate architectural draughtsmanship. He had a keen appreciation of the proportional system defined in the classical canons. He knew the geometry and scales of the various temple parts and the positioning and the formal variations prescribed by the classical texts underlying the Indian traditions. His knowledge of the text was profound, and he had a tremendous understanding of its precepts and canons plus their applications. Furthermore, he was very creative as a designer, fully able to interpret and appreciate the departures from the canon that designers can choose depending upon their artistic abilities and different project situations. In fact, from those precepts and canons he had actually worked out his own standard reference catalogues for use by his apprentice and the successors in his family. These catalogues were like ready reckoners providing all the details and parameters of planning and designing a temple based on the availability of funds from the patrons funding the projects. Catalogues like these are now widely used by his grandsons and many other Sompura in their day-to-day work.

Amrutbhai had an innate ability to estimate the quality and strength of stones and other material by just looking at them. This was enough to identify their origins and also their density in terms of weight. His knowledge of geology and the soil was also intuitive, enabling him to assess the foundation requirements for buildings erected in different soils. His perception of the structure was both formal and dictated by its mass requirements for stability. Though Indian temple forms were essentially designed for horizontal spans and vertical load transference only, he designed some amazing single-span floors, equipping them with structural innovations while maintaining the basic principle of designing structures (Fig. 1). The

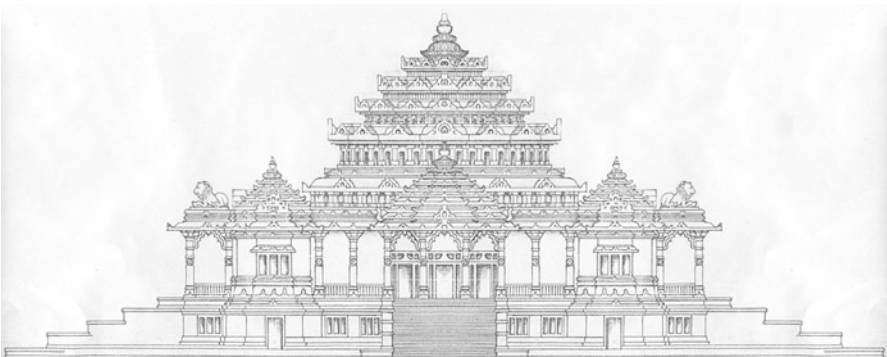


Fig. 1 Drawing of proposed front elevation of Vallabh Smarak at Delhi with dome. The external design of the actual temple building was realized with a stepped roof, 1979. Drawing by Amrutlal Mulshankar Trivedi

Fig. 2 Vallabh Smarak at Delhi. Porch. Photos by Virendrabhai Trivedi, ca. 1990

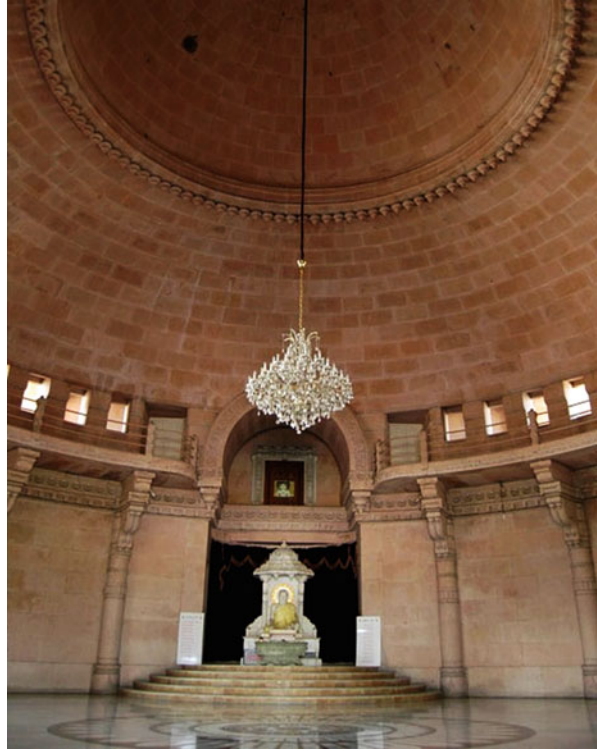


main hall (Figs. 2 and 3) of Vallabh Smarak Jain Mandir (started in 1979, completed in 1988) (Fig. 1) on G. T. Karnal Road near Delhi is a brilliant example of his ingenuity as a structural designer.

Amongst many of the institutional buildings he designed, the small museum at the foot hill of Śatrunjaya in Palitana is a very significant example. It is a simple building with a very fine central hall and a domical ceiling admitting light from the roof. Amrutbhai also participated in a competition for the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial at Rajghat in Delhi in 1957, where his entry won the second prize. He was also an advisor for the Radhasvami Temple now being built in Agra. He was an active promoter of welfare for his own community and member of an educational trust looking after the younger generation of Sompura so that their traditions can be cultivated.

For those communities unable to afford high expenditure but still approaching him to design their temples, he made free use of plain cement concrete blocks cast in rubber molds taken from highly-carved stone forms to recreate similar artistry at a cheaper cost. The molds provided the same form and appearance for the temples, which looked like stone temples when painted. His versatility and his ability to change with the changing times while adhering to the philosophy and principles of

Fig. 3 Vallabh Smarak at Delhi. Main hall in their present state. Photos by Virendrabhai Trivedi, ca. 1990



classical architecture confirmed his connections with his ancestral origins. At the same time, he was an ardent contemporary, absorbing the novelties associated with advancement and progress with a discreet sense of traditional roots ensuring continuity in change and cultivating traditional leanings without denying the claims of contemporary culture.

Amrutbhai had three sons whom he trained in the traditional temple building arts. His son Krushnachandra Trivedi (1936–2009) was later employed by the trust as the master builder looking after *jīrṇoddhāra* activities. In fact, my association with this family came about through Krushnachandra when I was studying the Mahavir Swami temple at Osiya in Rajasthan in the early 1980s and witnessed the *jīrṇoddhāra* of the front *maṇḍapa* of the Mahavir Temple at Osiya which was being enlarged. Some of the pillars of the main shrine were very badly damaged due to the aging of the stones (Fig. 4a). Krushnachandra had them copied and refitted. The replicas (Fig. 4b) were so precise and accorded so well with the original that I resolved to find out more about the restoration work and the way original material was being used to make the replicas. The Mahavir Temple at Osiya is one of the most important examples of the *Pratihara* tradition, an important post-Gupta revival school with its origins dating back to the seventh century. The Mahavir Temple is also the oldest surviving Jaina shrine with a very high status for Jaina

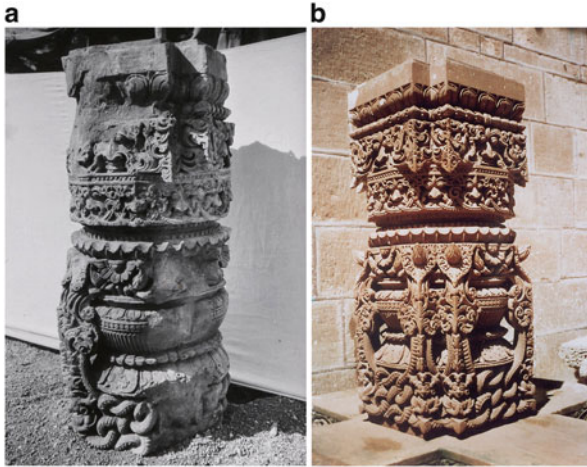


Fig. 4 a and b. Osiya, an ancient town located in the Thar desert of Rajasthan. The entrance hall (*maṇḍapa*) of the Mahavir Temple, built in 783 CE by King Vatsaraja of the Gurjara Pratihara dynasty, was restored by Krushnachandra Trivedi in 1975. The project included the replication (*right*) of fragmented columns (*left*). Outstanding craftsmanship ensured seamless visual continuity in the temple. The incorporation of a chipped fragment would have offended the religious sensibilities of the Jain community. Photos by Krushnachandra Trivedi, ca. 1975

pilgrims. The restoration work was looked after by Krushnachandra and the parts required for replacement were produced in a sculptor's yard in Palitana, the famous Jaina pilgrimage town in southwest Saurashtra.

In the aftermath, I also met Arvindkumar Iswarlal Acharya (Fig. 5), Krushnachandra's son-in-law, a stone sculptor and master craftsman with a workshop in Palitana. He was engaged in producing exact replicas for the parts to be replaced in the temple at Osiya.

Arvindkumar's grandfather Kantilal was the chief assistant of Prabhashankar Sompura (referred to earlier) when he was working on Somnath and devising his plans for the Somnath Temple in 1947. Comparing the original is helpful for an understanding of the philosophy behind his work. He learned his craft from his forefathers, their supreme ancestor being Visvakarma, the supreme creator. They uphold the quality of their work by giving the best they have to offer in terms of talent and imagination. They feel this to be their duty to their ancestors, who passed the craftsmanship and knowledge on to them. They always believe in learning from the past and recreating the originals as an homage to their forefathers. This is why for them creating a replica is not merely "copying" something. A replica is fashioned by drawing upon their excellent craftsmanship, by perceiving the spirit of the work, and applying their imagination to recapturing the spirit of the object or the form of the temple in true service to their ancestral heritage.

Krushnachandra's two sons Virendrabhai (b. 1959) and Devdutt (b. 1964) are also involved in traditional temple building and were trained by their grandfather



Fig. 5 Śatrunjaya in Gujarat: Sculptor Arvindkumar Acharya in his workshop. He holds up a copy of Mulk Anand’s *Homage to Khajuraho*, first published in 1960, for comparison of an original sculpture with his replica (second from left). Photo by Niels Gutschow, 21 November 2009

Amrutbhai Trivedi. Virendrabhai is a civil engineer by education but he has also plumped for the temple building profession and calls himself a “temple architect.” Devdutt was trained as a modern architect at a school of architecture and happened to be my student briefly in Ahmedabad. He has also undergone the family training but ultimately prefers contemporary architecture. Thus, though the family has upheld traditional temple construction, one wonders how much longer this will still be the case after this generation.

Virendrabhai works as a temple architect with a very large temple-building contractor in Ahmedabad who also owns marble mines and stone quarries in Rajasthan. This firm has state-of-the-art Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) machines to sculpt stones and produce parts of temples designed by Virendrabhai (see the article by Katharina Weiler in this volume). They employ a CNC machine expert who translates the drawings for execution on the machines. Temples of monumental dimensions are prefabricated in this factory and transported by a team of masons who help assemble them on site all over the world. The entire enterprise is now an assembly-line business, but the finishing of all the parts is done by female polishers. A contemporary Sompura is now a person who still imagines and designs temples in a traditional manner but who employs computer operators to produce AutoCAD drawings which are then used by the CNC experts to transfer them to machines. This way, the whole production process is



Fig. 6 Akshardam in Noida near Delhi. The site was designed by Virendrabhai Trivedi and constructed from 2000 to 2005. The building involved hundreds of craftsman. The sandstone was quarried and crafted in Rajasthan. Photo by Virendrabhai Trivedi

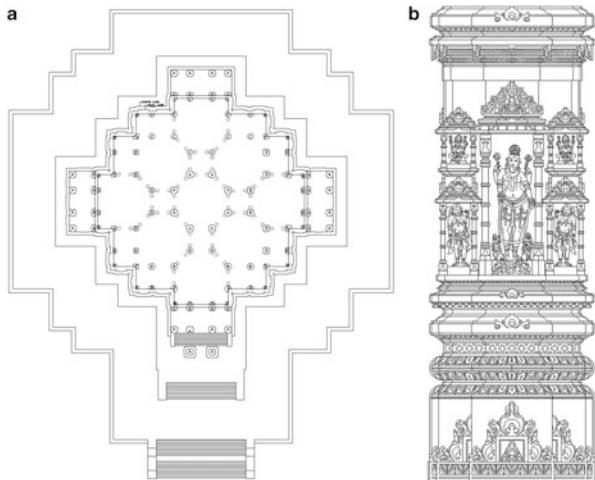


Fig. 7 (a) Groundplan of Akshardam in Noida near Delhi. Design by Krushnachandra Trivedi. (b) Detail of the ornate external wall (*mandovar*) of the Akshardam temple (*mandir*) in Noida near Delhi. The architect drew his inspiration from the repertory of traditional forms. Design by Krushnachandra Trivedi

greatly speeded up. Manually finished parts are shipped and assembled by masons who are trained in assembling the entire temple wherever it needs to go.

Virendrabhai's most important work so far is the monumental Akshardham temple (Figs. 6, 7a, b) in Noida (2000–2005) near Delhi, which is world famous. He is involved in many such large projects nationally and internationally connected with Jain, Svāminārāyaṇa, and Shikh religious shrines across the world.

Virendrabhai also restores historic temples, employing the traditional philosophy of recreating the original character of the works of his ancestors. Wherever he works in western India, he encourages people to undergo training in the relevant craftsmanship. The foremen for all these construction sites are from within the family, but craftsmen with the requisite skills and abilities are hired to deal with the temple artworks. There are no strict lineage or caste restrictions on people joining in and learning the requisite craft skills. Sons of farmers, for example, are offered work opportunities in temple building activities, including the work on sculptures. In this sense, the Sompura no longer consider temple arts to be a jealously guarded family domain but allow other craftsmen from different backgrounds to participate in these activities. Over the passage of time, this policy has greatly enlarged the resource group available to meet the increasing demands of temple building activities all over the country.

The contemporary expansion in the followers of various faiths within larger mainstream Hinduism, like Swaminarayan, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and Jaina has triggered temple-building activities all over India and in places abroad with large communities of Indians. Most of the places of worship subscribe to classical Indian imagery, and this has substantially expanded the activities of these families and the associated professionals who have acquired the requisite skills and abilities to uphold the traditions. Large groups of temple-building contractors have established their construction yards in regions where stone is abundantly available. Accordingly, Rajasthan and Gujarat have become centers of temple-building activity with the capacity to cater to these increasing demands.

Conclusion

The master builders of the Sompura community perceive themselves as handing down building traditions from generation to generation. As the ancient texts were rarely illustrated, they started producing illustrated handbooks in the early twentieth century. The descriptions and drawings in these manuals, however, were not slavishly followed. Similar to the ancient *Śilpa Śāstra* texts, the South Indian Mayamata of the twelfth century or the seventeenth century Śilparatnaśā from Orissa, the lavishly illustrated manuals of the Sompura were intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Recent discussions with Sompura who have now bestowed on themselves the title of temple architect demonstrate considerable

liberties in their approach to the design of details.¹ This is also true of the column fragments illustrated above. The intention was not to produce a true replica but to capture the spirit of the original. The Sompura are not aware of the term authenticity, but they would claim truthfulness to be the supreme value, an idea that has also gained ground in international debate. An essential requirement is that such truthfulness must encompass the kind of spirit that will arouse religious sentiments.

In general, Sompura master builders do not inhabit the world of conservation. They do not work within the framework of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) but for religious trusts. They are engaged to maintain and restore temples classified as part of the living heritage. They do not preserve ruins, they recreate buildings. Their work is widely covered by the Sanskrit term *jñāoddhāra*, a rather ill-defined concept applicable to any intervention from mere maintenance to repair and replacement. All these activities are of course very deserving, and this merit is publicized by inscriptions naming the respective donor and his/her *jñāoddhāra* activity without going into detail on the nature of the work.

Since the design for a new and much larger temple on the site of the ancient Somnāth temple in 1947 at the latest, the Sompura have claimed status of master builders who design their structures in line with age-old traditions. The image of Viśvakarma, the celestial architect, is found in the text mentioned above with vermilion marks indicating repeated veneration. Viśvakarma is considered the author of all treatises and the master builders claim that they act as his tool. Such spiritual connection and the continuous passing on of skills from father to son add to the aspects of authenticity that have to be taken into account when debating conservation strategies in a specific local context.

A critical question remains. To what extent does the spirit of the architecture get lost in cases where Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) machines take over to simply save time and money. Hundreds if not thousands of temples are being built at present in India with substandard workmanship. Handicraft work is reduced to surface treatment, while the profiles are industrial replicas. The Sompura may have arrived at a turning point in their tradition, sundering careful restoration and replacement from automated mass production.

¹The way of considering ancient prototypes to proof original design intentions since the late nineteenth century has been changed by a growing tendency to consult picture books which combine ancient texts and graphics drawn by painters who may have been trained under the colonial system.