



## Art and Architectural study of Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple

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### ABSTRACT.

India has always been known as the great land of art, culture, and spirituality. It's truly said that a nation is celebrated in terms of its art. The art and culture of a nation show its core entity as a character that has been responsible for shaping the succeeding ages and generations. Around the world, the Indian art tradition is one of the oldest living art traditions. Since ancient times temples have served as the source for flourishing and sustaining the culture and heritage of India. The magnificence and extravagant elaborateness of the Indian temples reflect the splendid tradition of art, sculpture, and spirituality that has survived for ages. A supreme example of India's magnificent art and architectural tradition is Swaminarayan Akshardham, which is located on the banks of the sacred river Yamuna in New Delhi. It is one of the largest Hindu temple complexes in India. It was officially inaugurated on 6th November 2005. Its history and facts reflect 10,000 years old India's culture, spirituality, and architecture. It has been made in the memory of Jyotirdhar Swaminarayan Bhagwan. This paper focuses on the grandeur of art and architecture of the Swaminarayan Akshardham temple, which includes how the magnificent architecture is being created with a blend of creativity as well as science.

**Keywords:** Temple, art, architecture, construction material, design concept, Swaminarayan Akshardham, ancient building architecture, heritage

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### INTRODUCTION

Swaminarayan Akshardham is a unique complex of Indian culture in India's capital, New Delhi. It beautifully showcases Indian art, wisdom, heritage, and values as a tribute to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, a torchbearer of Indian culture. It is one of the largest Hindu temple complexes in India. Set on a vast 100-acre site, Swaminarayan Akshardham was built in only 5 years. It was officially inaugurated on 6th November 2005. Inspired and created by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, it radiates peace, beauty, joy, and divinity. Its history and facts reflect 10,000 years old India's culture, spirituality, and architecture. It has been made in the memory of Jyotirdhar Swaminarayan Bhagwan [1,2]. The construction of the Akshardham Complex was completed in just five years with the efforts of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) along with the help of thousands of artisans and BAPS volunteers. The temple is spread over an 83,342 square feet area. It consists of 350 feet long, 315 feet wide, and 141 feet high monuments, which are very attractive [3].

A Hindu temple is a symbolic house, seat, and body of divinity for Hindus. It is a structure designed to bring human beings and gods together, using symbolism to express the ideas and beliefs of Hinduism. The symbolism and structure of a Hindu temple are rooted in Vedic traditions, deploying circles and squares. It also represents recursion and equivalence of the macrocosm and the microcosm by astronomical numbers, and by "specific alignments related to the geography of the place and the presumed linkages of the deity and the patron". A temple incorporates all elements of the Hindu cosmos—presenting the good, the evil, and the human, as well as the elements of the Hindu sense of cyclic time and the essence of life—symbolically presenting dharma, kama, artha, moksha, and karma [4,5].

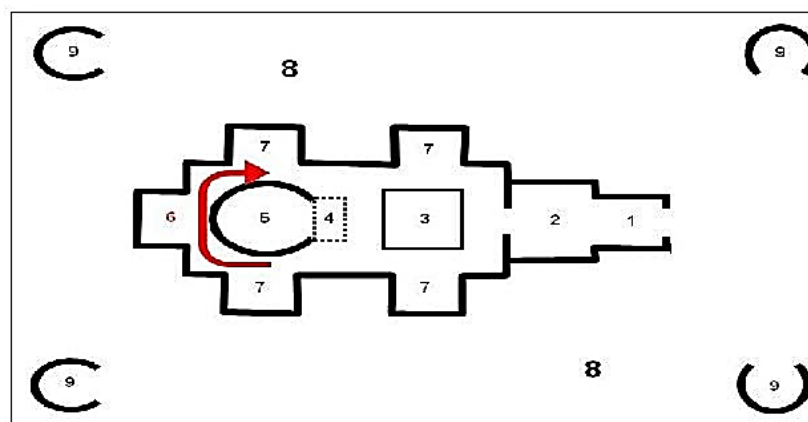
(a)



(b)



Figure 1:(a) aerial view (b) Closer view of Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)



- |                  |                      |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Ardha mandapa | 6. Pradakshina       |
| 2. Mandapa       | 7. Transepts         |
| 3. Maha mandapa  | 8. Jagati            |
| 4. Antarala      | 9. Subsidiary shrine |
| 5. Garba griha   |                      |

Figure 2:Floor Plan of Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)

Hindu temples are classified depending on many styles, are situated in diverse locations, deploy different construction methods, and are adapted to different deities and regional beliefs, yet almost all of them share certain core ideas, symbolism, and themes. A large variety of Hindu temples were constructed throughout India with distinction in scale, techniques of building, and particularly the deities that were worshipped, which were the result of the differences in political, cultural, and prosperity between the towns and villages. The character of Hindu temples reflected local architectural styles and the material and skills to which they related. It is not easy to distinguish these temples otherwise due to limited information that has survived about the Hindu temple and their builders which are mostly inscribed on

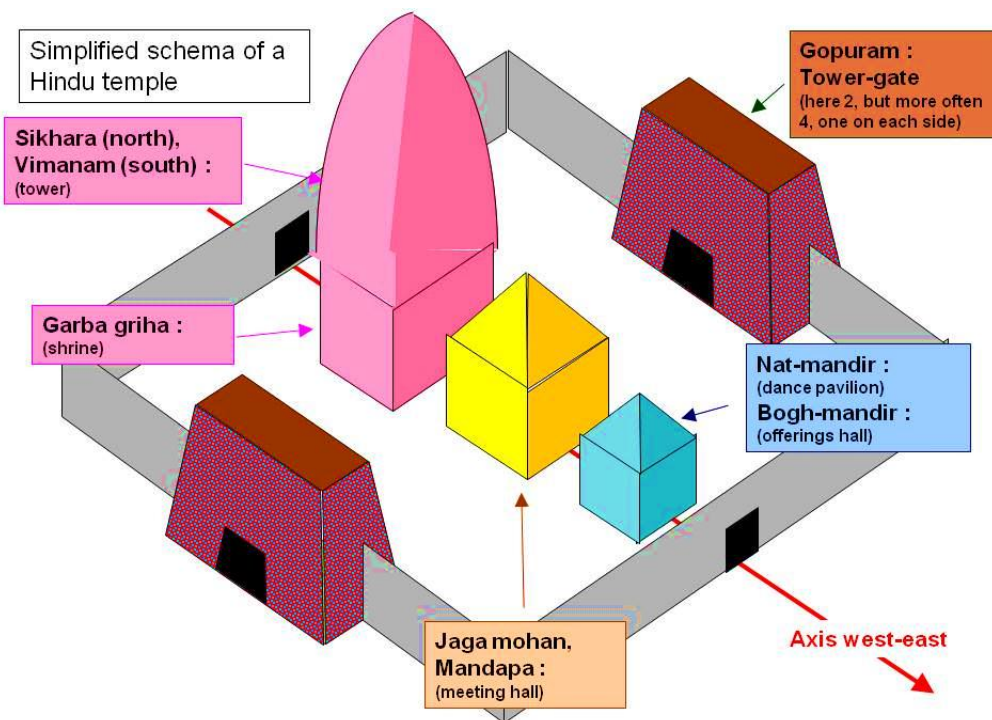
the stone slabs and metal plates and on manuscripts written on the plant leaves. The information which survived explains that the temple building, especially in stone and brick was carried out as a result of royal patronage. Building of temple in stone was an expensive affair and expresses the physical power and economic resources of the ruler. Other than royal patrons, association of wealthy merchants and group of individuals played an important role in the construction of temples [6].

In Hindu culture, a temple is not only a place of worship but they act as a center for intellectual and artistic life [7]. The temple complex housed schools, hospitals and courts for the community. The spacious halls of the temple where the place for the recitation and listening of folk tales, Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and debates. Music and dance were part of daily rituals in the temple [6].

The main forms and styles of the Hindu temple were established during 600-800 AD. The cell or shrine, the garbhagriha (usually square in plan), housed the image and was approached through a columniated porch or mandapa. The shrine was roofed with a pyramidal spire or vertically attenuated dome like structure known as sikhara. The temple as a whole was raised on a massive plinth and was often surrounded by subsidiary shrines and by an enclosing wall pierced by one or more gigantic gateway towers or gopurams. It is the outline and detailing of the sikhara and other roof-forms which determine the character of monumental Hindu architecture and give a formal as opposed to historical basis for its classification. The architecture of temples varies across India, however while the basic elements of the temple are the same, the form and scale varied. For example as in the case of the architectural elements like Sikhara (pyramidal roofs) and Gopurams (the gateways) [6].

A Hindu temple reflects a synthesis of arts, the ideals of dharma, beliefs, values, and the way of life cherished under Hinduism. It is a link between man, deities, and the Universal Purusa in a sacred space. It represents the triple-knowledge (trayi-vidya) of the Vedic vision by mapping the relationships between the cosmos (brahmanda) and the cell (pinda) by a unique plan that is based on astronomical numbers. Subhash Kak sees the temple form and its iconography to be a natural expansion of Vedic ideology related to recursion, change and equivalence [8].

A Hindu temple design follows a geometrical design called vastu-purusha-mandala. The name is a composite Sanskrit word with three of the most important components of the plan. Mandala means circle, Purusha is universal essence at the core of Hindu tradition, while Vastu means the dwelling structure. Vastupurushamandala is a yantra. The design lays out a Hindu temple in a symmetrical, self-repeating structure derived from central beliefs, myths, cardinality and mathematical principles.



**Figure 3:**Geometric view of Akshardham temple

### Construction Materials

The Indian temples were built with all types of materials depending upon the availability from region to region. The range of material varied from timber to mud, plaster, brick and stone during all periods and throughout India. The materials play an important role in the overall appearance, construction techniques and monumental character of these temples. As the earlier structures were fashioned from less durable materials such as timber, brick and plaster the early examples of Hindu architecture and art have mostly disappeared or are detectable only by the most fragmentary remains. However some of the relief carvings and paintings show that the earlier Hindu temples were constructed in timber and bamboo. Many of the later stone temples were modelled on wood and bamboo architecture is apparent from the carvings, roof forms and window shapes. This usage of timber and bamboo governs the form of temples mostly in the Himalayan valleys and regions of Kerala and Bengal. The remains of temples constructed in brick dates back to the centuries before the Christian era. The brick and mortar temples were constructed in the region where there was easy availability of brick and the availability of suitable stone were limited. The construction of temple in stone is the most distinctive expression of Hindu architecture. The highly evolved techniques of excavating and cutting blocks of stone constitute one of the major technical achievements associated with the history of the Hindu temple [7]. The construction in stone dates back to 2nd and 3rd centuries in the form of rock cut sanctuaries and later in the form of temples with use of stones like granite, marble, soap stone, sandstone and locally available stones. The stones were used with most intricate and ornate carvings and sculptors throughout India [6].

### Features

The major and distinct features between the north Indian temple and the south Indian temple are their superstructures. In the north the beehive shaped tower is the most distinguished element called as the sikhara. The gateways are in the north and they are plain, simple and small. The plans of the north Indian temples are based on square but the walls are sometimes broken at so many places that it gives an impression of temple being circular in plan. The tower is made up of miniature sikhara creating an amazing visual effect resembling mountain [6].

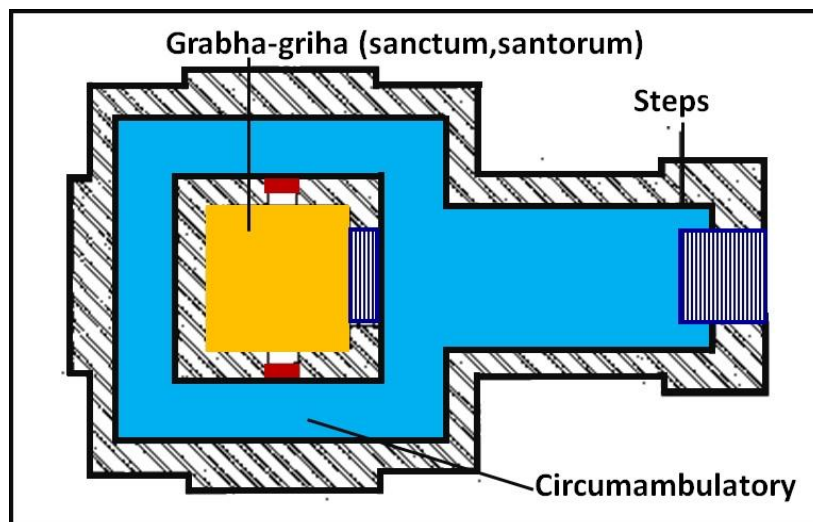
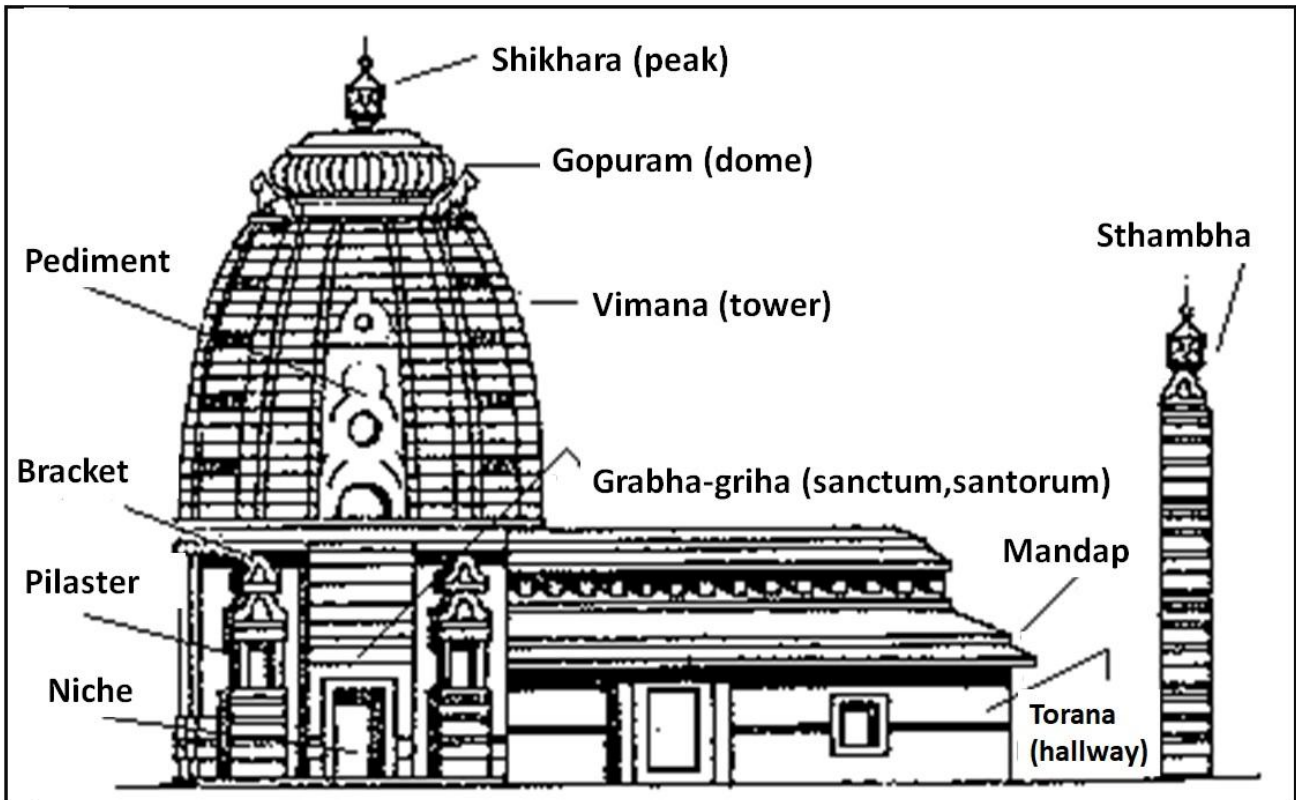


Figure 4: Features and areas of Akshardham temple

### The Structural Components

In the north Indian temples the sanctum or the garbhgriha is situated on a raised base, or a plinth (pitha) over which is the socle (vedibandha), these have different decorative mouldings, above the vedibandha is the walls of the sanctum (jangha), having prominent offsets and niches, which are further crowned by the cornice or a series of cornices (varandika) and above this is the superstructure (sikhara). On the top of the sikhara is a single piece of stone having grooves called as the amalaka which in turn is crowned with a pot and finial. The whole temple complex including the mandapas and other shrines are usually raised on a terrace (jagati) which is at times having significant heights and size. The sanctum has a flat ceiling inside and the superstructure is usually hollow from the inside to lessen the weight [6,9,10].



**Figure 5:** Various components of Akshardham temple

#### Architecture

The structure of the temple was designed in such a way that it can last for at least 1000 years more. With over 234 exquisitely carved pillars, 20 quadrilateral spaces, 9 elaborate domes, and 20,000 statues of spiritual personalities from India, the temples symbolize India's culture and spiritual prosperity. Carved motifs and images of deities, flowers, dancers, and musicians embellish the walls and ceilings of this temple [11].

Each part of the Akshardham temple complex is a work of intricate art that exhibits impeccable craftsmanship. The temple is constructed using Italian Karara marble and Rajasthani pink sandstone[5].



**Figure 6:** Architecture of Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)

It is encompassed by open gardens, a yard worked in step well style, different water bodies and different structures. There is a Yajnapurusha Kund in the Akshardham temple complex which is the largest Vagna place in the world. It consists of 108 small temples and 2870 stages. The magnificent temple has secured a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. On 17 December 2007, the Akshardham Temple was declared the largest comprehensive Hindu temple in the world by an international organization. Akshardham temple is that there are 10 gates, which according to Vedic literature represent 10 directions [3].

These gates suggest that goodness will continue to come from all directions. Akshardham Temple is surrounded by Narayan Sarovar, which is a lake and carries water from 151 lakes in India. There are 108 faces of cows placed along the lakes which represent 108 Hindu deities. It has a 3,000-foot-long orbital path for Parikrama made up of red stones brought from Rajasthan. It also has a two storey building, with 1,152 pillars and 145 windows [3].

Swaminarayan Akshardham was designed in accordance with the Nagaradi style of architecture, with unique additions and changes to the ghumrats, samvarans, sthambhs, mandovar , peeth, up-peeth and other parts [12].

1. It was decided to have Mandovar to be designed according to the ancient Nagaradi style with ornately carved layers. The kanpith, kumbhs, kalashes, jangha, chhaja would also be carved profusely [12-15].

2. Besides having carved layers of the mandovar another decision was to have murtis installed in the jangha. The recesses for the murtis would be decorated with ornate pillars. After due research the murtis of India's rishis, acharyas, avatars and great personalities would be made and installed [12-15].

3. In the mandapams of the nine domes, six types of different carved pillars were designed by the Akshardham team to provide different experiences. The team of sadhus decided upon the designs in alliance with ancient Indian architecture, namely: (1) the small dome by the main entrance to the mandir would have octagonal pillars and the recesses of the pillars would have beautiful murtis, (2) the central dome area and porch of the main entrance would have quadrangle pillars and its recesses would have ornate murtis, (3) the dome behind the central dome would have ornately carved octagonal pillars with no murtis carved into them, (4) to the right of the central dome there would be thin pillars and quadrangle pillars with delicately carved murtis installed in them, (5) to the left of the central dome the pillars would have less broad layers with small carved murtis in them. The 25 ft high pillars would be ornately carved at their corners and middle parts [12-15].

4. It was decided to have two tall profusely carved pillars in front of the main entrance with samvarans on top. There would also be pillars and samvarans on the two side porches of the mandir. The pillars would be carved similarly to the pillars at Oshiya and Modhera mandirs [12-15].

5. It was decided to have an intricately carved kakshasan [12-15].

6. No kamans, torans or brackets were to be placed on top of the upper base of the pillars. Instead, murtis of the 500 paramhansas would be installed [12-15].

7. It was decided that the inside of four of the domes be saucer-shaped with traditional ornate designs. And the inside of the other domes is decorated with in-depth carvings of the symbols of Sanatan Dharma [12-15].

8. The pink sandstone mandir would have marble stone inside. The pillars and their upper bases would be made of marble. The floors would also be of marble, while the beams would be made of pink stone. Later Pramukh Swami Maharaj suggested that the beams and all the domes be made out of marble [12-15].

9. Instead of the norm of having one plinth in ancient mandirs it was decided to have two plinths. The lower plinth would comprise stone elephants. After extensive research, the Akshardham team of sadhus designed a creative and unique plinth supported by stone elephants [12-15].

10. Everyone felt that instead of having a low mandir with a royal palatial look it would be better to have a higher structure. The design with its present height of 141 ft. [12-15].

11. After due research on ancient mandirs it was decided to have a 30 ft high parikrama (colonnade) bearing in mind the height of the Akshardham mandir. From the observation of a portion set up at the workshop in Pindvada, it was decided to have galleries and samvarans to crown it [12-15].

#### **Different Tourist Attractions in Akshardham Temple:**

Apart from the temple, there are many more tourist attractions in the complex. It has water shows, theme gardens, hall of value, IMAX films of Swaminarayan's life, cultural boat rides, and more. The main attraction of the complex is the temple, which is beautifully decorated with carved sculptures of dancers, deities, creatures, flora, and more. The temple is built of Rajasthani sandstone (pink color) and Italian Karara marble. The temple has 234 pillars, 2000 god statues, nine domes, and more. There are 148 man-eating elephant statues in the temple, which weigh a total of 3000 tons [15].

**Garbhagruh:** The main deity in the central dome is Swaminarayan. The deities are surrounded by many idols with the composition of five different metals. Seated in the centre of the Mandir is the serene, 11 ft-high, gold-plated murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Also consecrated are the elegant murtis of Shri Radha-Krishna, Shri Sita-Ram, Shri LakshmiNarayan and Shri Parvati-Shiv.

In the Hall of Values or Sahajanand Darshan, robots displaying the life of Swaminarayan are displayed. The hall's elements teach non-violence, prayer, vegetarianism, ethics, and others. There are 3D dioramas that use light and sound effects, music, and dialogue. The hall is also the world's smallest robot in the form of Shanaishmam Maharaj, the child version of Swaminarayan [16]. Neelkanth Darshan Theater is a 40-minute film about the pilgrimage performed by Swaminarayan. The film is screened in Vishal Screen and IMAX theaters. Outside the theater is a large bronze statue of a Hindu deity. The cultural boat ride lasts for 15 minutes, including robots explaining the Indian way of life during the Vedic period. It also explains the contribution of many eminent people in various fields of study. It also exhibits the world's first university, Taxila. The boat ride then focuses on middle age and then-current modern development. Yajnapurusha Kund or musical fountain is the biggest step in the country. In the morning, this Kadam Kuan is a resting place for pilgrims. In the evening, a grand water show for 24 minutes takes place with media explaining the life of a Hindu sage. Music fountains include water jets, underwater flames, live actors, and others [16]. The Garden of India is full of bronze statues of various styles of deities, freedom fighters, warriors, national figures and others. Other notable elements of this complex are Dhansa Udyan, Narayan Sarovar Lake, Premwati Food Court, and others.

**Ten Gates:** Representing the ten principal directions described in Indian culture, the Ten Gates reflect the Vedic sentiment of inviting goodness from everywhere to all visitors.

**Bhakti Dwar:** The Gate of Devotion celebrates the Vedic tradition of dual worship. Offering devotion to God and his choicest Devotee is a genuine form of worship. Honoring this custom, 208 sculpted dual forms of God and His devotee decorate this splendid gate.

**Mayur Dwar:** The peacock is a symbol of beauty and purity. It is also the national bird of India. The two Mayur Dwars (Peacock Gates) pay tribute to the joy and color peacocks add to life. A total of 869 sculpted peacocks adorn each of the beautiful gates.

**Footprints:** Between the two Mayur Dwars are the holy footprints of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in memory of his incarnation on earth. They are carved out of white marble and bear the 16 sacred signs of God. Water is continuously showered on them from four auspicious conch shells in tribute to his inspiring life and work.

**Mandovar:** The ornate external wall (Mandovar) of the Mandir is 611 ft long and 25 ft high. It comprises 4,287 carved stones and includes 48 murtis of Ganeshji, and 200 sculpted figures of India's great rishis, sadhus, devotees, acharyas and divine incarnations.

**Gajendra Peeth:** The Akshardham Mandir rests on the unique 1,070 ft long Gajendra Peeth, which comprises 148 sculpted stone elephants, and dozens of other sculptures of people, animals and birds weighing in excess of 3,000 tons. It pays tribute to the glory of elephants and nature in Indian culture [4, 17].

**Yagnapurush Kund & Sahaj Anand:** The large lotus-shaped Yagnapurush Kund is a replica of a traditional yagna kund. Every evening it is transformed into the spectacular 'Sahaj Anand Water Show', which creatively blends lasers, lights, fire, fountains, projections and live acting to portray an enthralling spiritual message from the Upanishads. Adjacent to the kund is the inspiring 27 ft high metallic murti of Neelkanth Varni, the teenage-yogi form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan [18]. The duration of the water show is 25 minutes.

**Narayan Sarovar:** Narayan Sarovar surrounds the Akshardham Monument on three sides. The holy waters of 151 rivers, lakes and stepwells of India, visited by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, have been ritually added to Narayan Sarovar. Water flows into the Narayan Sarovar through 108 gaumukhs on the side and back walls of the Mandir.

**Abhishek Mandapam:** Offer prayers and make wishes while ritually pouring Ganga water on the enchanting murti of Neelkanth Varni – a teenage-yogi.

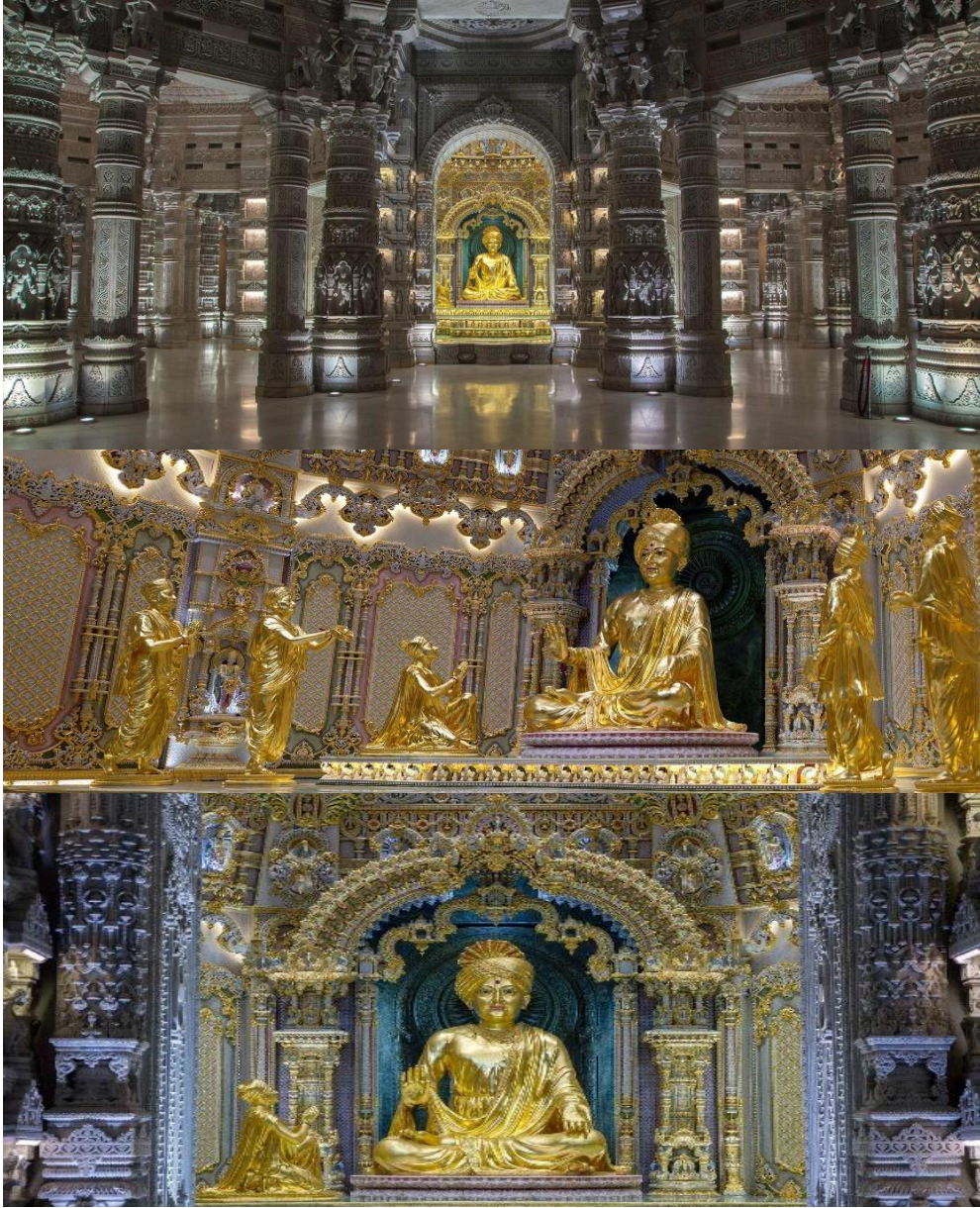
**Parikrama:** An impressive two-tier colonnade in red stone encircles the Mandir. Each tier is 3,000 ft long with 1,152 pillars and 145 viewing windows.

**Yogihriday Kamal:** Situated amid beautifully manicured lawns, this 8-petal lotus-shaped creation inspires Faith in God and Faith in Man through the wisdom of the scriptures, sages and other great thinkers of the world [18-19].

**Bharat Upvan- Cultural Garden:** Opposite the Mandir lies Bharat Upvan. It comprises 22 acres of beautifully cultivated and artistically designed lawns, trees, plants and shrubs. The garden displays 65 bronze statues of India's great men, women and children, whose lives inspire all to nobler heights. The view of the Akshardham Mandir from here is majestic 18-19].



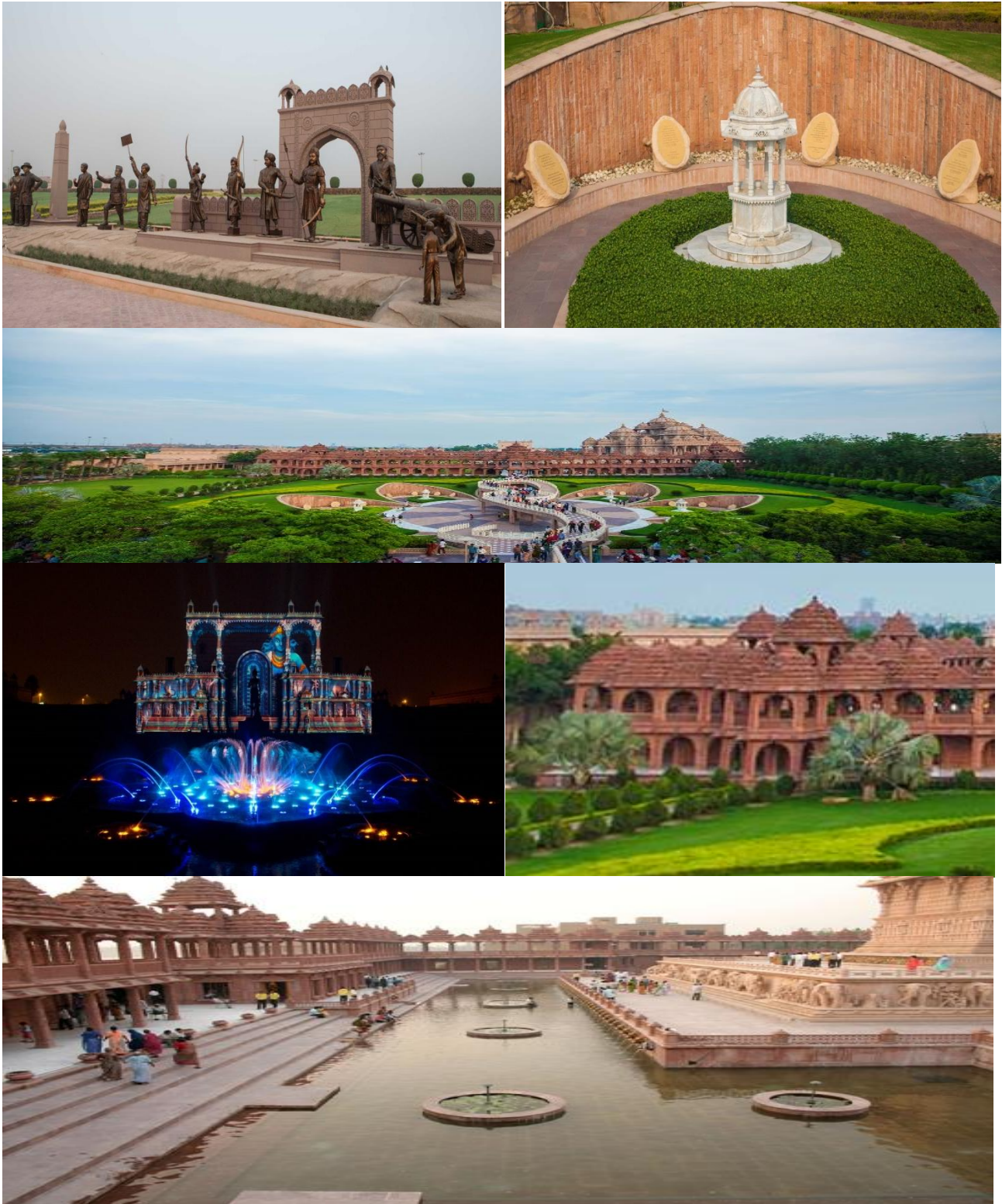
**Figure 7:** Different kinds of carvings on the walls, windows and pillars of Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)



**Figure 8:**The main deity in the Garbhagruih of Swaminarayan. (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)



**Figure 9:** Different tourist attractions apart from the temple, starting from the left are Ten gates, Bhakti Dwar, Mayur Dwar, Footprints, Mandovar and Gajedra at Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)



**Figure 10:** Different tourist attractions apart from the temple, starting from the left are Yagnapurush Kund & Sahaj Anand, Narayan Sarovar, Abhishek Mandapam, Yogihriday Kamal, Parikrama, and Bharat Upvan - Cultural Garden at Akshardham temple (image courtesy: <https://akshardham.com/>)

## CONCLUSION

Indian temples are considered to be having the most magnificent and vivid architecture. Considering, all forms of art architecture temples always lead as they have ornateness ways to attract the researchers and common people towards their splendid carvings and architecture. The magnificent stone structures of mandirs have very special relevance in the development of art, culture, and civilization. The purpose of this study was to provide a detailed knowledge about the expressions and cultural relevance through concepts of space and form and formal attributes and symbols. Preserving

these great architectural and cultural buildings is very important and so is studying the history and culture behind their construction. As art is the reflection of the life of the people and also the storehouse of their noblest thoughts. The important contribution of the temple is to promote creative art, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance, culture, and religious activities. The architecture of India is rooted in its history, culture, and religion so, detailed studies of temples and ancient buildings would lead to a better understanding of the art and architecture.

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