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Restoration of Hindu Temples in South India and Its Conceptual Background

by G.R.H. WRIGHT

There is presently in Tamil Nadu a concern for the conservation of Hindu Temples which, many of them, are fine monuments. In this connection I would like to illustrate and discuss briefly one limited issue, first placing it in its proper context. As usual the background is more extensive than (and as important as) the issue. Indeed without an understanding of the background the issue does not take shape.

Any question concerning the restoration of monuments depends ultimately on the conception of a *monument* and the attendant quality, *monumentality*. According to the etymology of the word, a monument 'calls to mind', 'reminds the understanding'. It commemorates something memorable in a memorable way. That is, it calls to mind history, it does so by art.

Thus it can be seen that any monument possesses what may be termed an aesthetic character or instance to its nature and a historic instance to its nature. Both these instances open into an extended speculative background, for there is both a philosophy of history and a philosophy of art. Is every temporal circumstance unique, is history *magister vitae*? Or is history an unimportant superficial manifestation of the eternally revolving absolute? Is art based on form or feeling? Art as imitation, art as experience. What is art?

These philosophical understandings condition the concept of monumentality – or indeed may negate it. On them depends the most basic decision involved in any possible scheme of restoration: 'What, if anything, to restore?'

To this fundamental question, a brief answer in passing. Both art and history commingle in the fabric to produce a memorable quality – the monumentality. This is not to be equated solely with scale (although, of course, the scale of construction may contribute to the monumentality). The quality refers to a meaning, a significance which endures. If there is present a utilitarian significance only for the moment, then there is no monumentality and no question of conservation and restoration, for the concern of these operations is monumentality.

If it is possible to establish a category of monumentality and the monumental by reference to history and art, these concepts are not theoretical and remote from the practice of restoration of monuments. They are the basic tools of practical analysis to get from the general to the particular – to confront the problems of a particular monument. Monuments may be classified both from the standpoint of history and from the standpoint of art. Indeed they must be so classified, for clearly monumentality is very varied in expression.

Obviously on the monument's art, the constructional art embodied in its fabric, will depend the technical processes of conservation and restoration. Is the monument constructed of mud-brick, stone, wood, etc.? Is it decorated with plaster or paint, etc.?

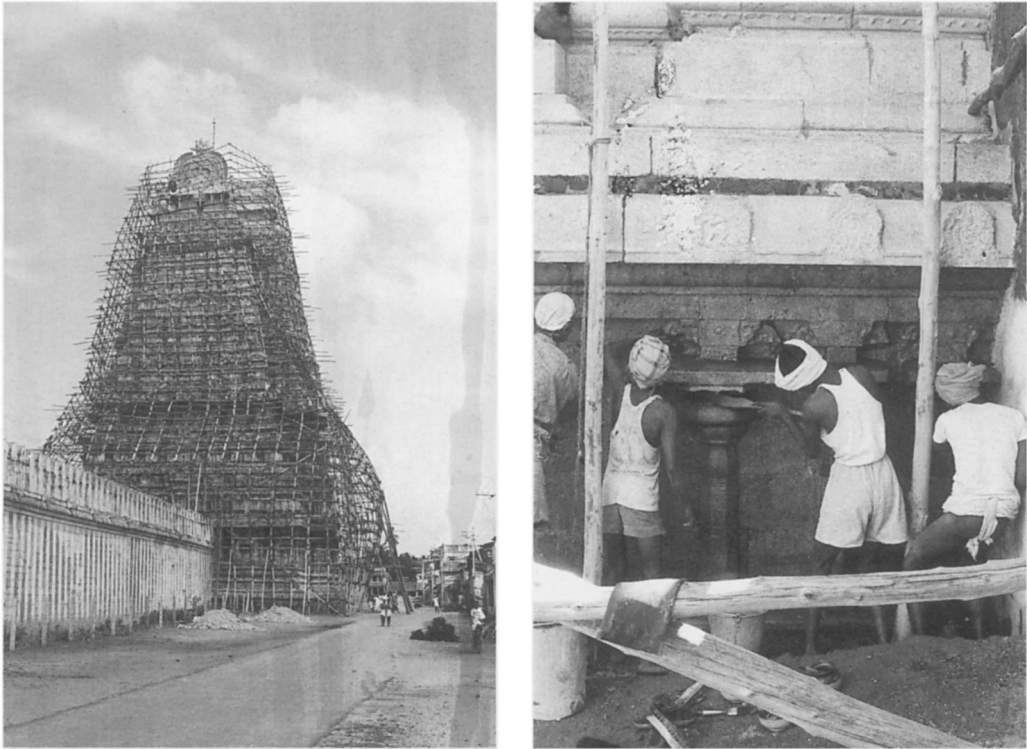


Fig. 1 - The East Gate in the outer enclosure wall of Srirangam Temple at Tiruchirapali, the Vellai Gopura (= White Gate Tower), shown completely scattolded for restoration work. The lower part is out of fine stone masonry and the upper part is in delicate ornamental plaster-work.

Fig. 2 - Fine stone masonry revealed by removal of illicit daubing and painting.

It is not so apparent that the historical condition of the monument dictates the overall aims of conservation and restoration. But this is so, for the history of the monument determines the function it fulfils in modern society, and (with restored monuments as with all structures) function determines form.

History is continuous, but in this connection, as in all others, it must be divided for purposes of study, with the understanding that, in reality, the divisions merge one into the other. According to its historical instance, a monument may be apportioned to one of three classes, and for convenience the following designations may be employed.

Archaeological ruins where vestiges only of an ancient structure survive and the original integrity cannot be regained. The ruins have become a monument in themselves. *Ruined monuments* where sufficient of the fabric remains so that the original integrity can be appreciated, but the building no longer performs the social function for which it was constructed. *Living monuments*, where the structure is still in use for its designed purpose (temple, palace, etc.) but the art by which it was constructed no longer subsists. There is, indeed, historically speaking a further category of monuments – *modern monuments*. But



Fig. 3 - Fine plaster ornament begins to be manifest during cleaning.



Fig. 4 - Artistic merit of ornament becomes apparent when overlay removed.

these, since they are constructed entirely within the historical and artistic forms of contemporary society, need no restoration. If they are damaged, they may be renovated in the manner of any other contemporary building (and likewise maintained).

With these considerations, Hindu temples, the particular field of restoration at issue, have been given the necessary categorical definition. They are living monuments mainly of stone construction (Fig. 1).

Since they are at one and the same time monuments and centres of religion, i.e. they are living, religious monuments, an additional understanding must be imported to inform this definition – the understanding of religion. And not only this understanding in itself. The history and art, which constitute that monumentality, are here connected with religion. Thus there comes in point very strongly the question what is considered to be the proper relation of history to religion (is religion in history or beyond history or both; is it a timeless absolute or is it relative to social institutions, etc.?). and the question what is the proper relation of art to religion (is there a separate religious art etc.?). Finally in this connection it must be noted that on occasion both history and art can be and have been made substitutes for religion. In which event an ancient monument may well come to be worshipped in itself rather than remain a place of religious worship.

In defining the concept of a monument it has been seen in passing that the subject of restoration is *monumentality* and that the reason for restoration is the *enduring significance* which is a *sine qua non* of monumentality, is indeed a definition of monumentality. It now remains to clarify the operation, the *modus operandi*: What is restoration? How are monuments to be restored?

In conceptual terms the operation of restoring monuments consists in making evident and appreciable to the best advantage every surviving monumental attribute. This is in no way idealist, or idealizing, it is an operation *in rem*. Restoration is integration or re-integration of the monumentality destined by art and history, to the exclusion and elimination of all non-monumental accidents.

To operate in this way it must be possible to lay hands on these attributes of monumentality. Wherein are they resident? They are manifest in the *structure* and in the *aspect* of the monument. These two necessary concepts are self-evident, although the metaphysics of their relation is by no means simple. One is not substance and the other quality. They are both equally substantial, and the one cannot exist apart from the other. There can be no aspect without structure, and there can be no structure without aspect. However, it is very possible to change one without changing the other. The aspect may be damaged without affecting the structure and *vice versa*.

Unless a defect has developed in the structural stability or in the aspect of a monument, it needs no restoration. How, then, do such defects develop? What are the causative agents? That which makes mars. The agents which damage and destroy the structure and aspect of monuments are those which create monumentality. They are multitudinous, they are all the children of time – the acts of men and the processes of nature (a dichotomy of great practical importance).

When defects in the structure or aspect have impaired the monumentality, what are the processes by which this monumentality may be restored? Considered individually, they may be of infinite variety, but their mode of operation is again twofold. The processes may remove something which is damaging to the structure or the aspect of a monument, the process may add something which will benefit the structure or the aspect of a monument. Restoration operates by removal and by addition; by removal of (and only of) the non-essential, the non-monumentality. It achieves its aims with an economy of means, for it is itself an art.

All these matters must be thought about before proceeding to the restoration of any monument, otherwise there can be nothing systematic in the work. On the other hand, if these categories and concepts have been realized, it is unlikely that any particular monument or group of monuments will present problems difficult to identify and resolve.

So much for the background. Consider now the Hindu Temples of Tamil Nadu and their restoration. With reference to the above determined categories the characteristic situation can be put in a nutshell. The temples are living monuments; the damage suffered is almost entirely restricted to their aspect; it is caused very largely by the (recent) acts of man; the restoration indicated must proceed in the main by way of removal (Figs. 2-5).

Recent reports have drawn attention to this state of affairs. 'It is the aspect of these monuments which demands attention and that, as may be expected, almost entirely due to the acts and omissions of man. Destruction, dilapidation, village-style *redecorations* etc. all continue to negate the aspect of monumentality etc.'. Again, 'it has been indicated that the damage and deterioration to the monumental quality of this temple has been due in the main

to human rather than the natural causes. This is true generally of monuments which remain in use or in a built-up area – and it is certainly true of the generality of Hindu temples in South India. Crude blockings, walling up of colonnades, partition walls dividing what was designed as a unit, monumental façades cut up or screened off by ramshackle barriers and enclosures or hidden by accretions etc.’

Indeed if the work of restoration must proceed without any basic understanding and a rule of thumb is needed, then it would be this. Restoration should be by way of removal only. Do not add anything to the aspect of the monument and remove everything visible added by man during in the present century beginning with the most recent addition.

The syndrome here outlined may not appear at all strange to those familiar with ancient monuments and their care. It is, however, very strange to the local layman. For it transpires that the local layman has himself formed subconsciously a concept of restoration of monuments. This concept can be expressed in a syndrome exactly opposite to that set out as actually obtaining, viz., the damage suffered by these temples concerns their structure (they are likely to collapse or crumble); this is due to natural causes (like the decay of all old things); thus restoration must proceed by way of adding something to give them strength.

Here then is the aspect of the restoration of Hindu temples brought to issue. The concept that such monuments are to be restored by removing material from them seems downright bizarre to the ordinary man. Yet it is a necessity that the reality of the concept should be demonstrated. This question is worth a brief discussion on two grounds; it is a vital question in the context, and, in turn, the context offers an exceptional facility for resolving the question. The facility is provided by Hindu Advaitic thought.

A monument calls to mind something of enduring significance which in some way, in some measure is embodied in it – with which it is identical. This phenomenon is expressed (alas! neither clearly nor convincingly) in one word, *culture*. If this imponderable entity were taken as a basis, it is possible to develop an analogy entirely within the concepts of Advaitic philosophy, which will demonstrate with the greatest force imaginable the cogency of restoration by way of removal.

The culture in question can be likened to *brahman* (although, of course, on the Advaitic analysis *per se* it is exactly *māyā*. The essential existence of any monument, its monumentality,



Fig. 5 - Noble and delicate moulded plaster detail (greater than life size) revealed by stripping away illicit surface overlay.

is then *ātman*. Thus the problem of restoration is clearly to reveal the *ātman*; and in revealing it to show that *ātman* and *brahman*, monument and culture are one in source, admitting no secondary derivation.

The analogy insists that this process is one of removal. By the removal of the non-essential *sheaths* (*kośa*) the true reality, *ātman*, reappears. The *Rājaputra*, whose true nature was concealed by error, now stands revealed in his true nature. Or, to use the apposite simile of Śaṅkara (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, vv. 149-50), the pool of water covered by sedge does not shine forth; but when the non-essential, accidental covering of sedge is removed the clear water becomes visible for what it always has been. Nothing in its nature has been changed, only it has been revealed.

The state of revealed monumentality may well be termed *kaivalya* the state of being pure, uncovered entire. By the process of removal the monument has achieved wholeness, integration. Isolated from what does not belong to it (*kleśa*), it is no longer *kliṣṭa* – *not itself*; it has been restored to itself.