

Sacred combination yogic symbols, ecological knowledge, and the Natha Sampradaya's contribution to Uttarakhand's temple architecture

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Keywords

Uttarakhand temple architecture, yogic symbolism, sacred symbiosis, ecological wisdom, Himalayan architecture, Natha sect.

Abstract

Temples in Uttarakhand have been understood as expressions of the Yogic, Tantric, and ecological consciousness of the Natha tradition. In this paper, the influence of the Himalayan region, its sacred rivers, and the philosophical aspects of yogic practices on the architectural construction of Natha temples will be examined. Principles of Natha Yoga, such as chakras, nāḍīs, and nāda, were embedded in temple architecture to bring about spiritual enlightenment and the realization of the self. While the garbhagriha is considered symbolic of the mūlādhāra chakra, the mandapa and antarala symbolize the spiritual journey of yoga practice. Examples of Devalgarh, Jogibara, SatyaNatha Peeth, Bindhara Gorakh Cave, and Siddha temples at Dehradun illustrate the connection between yoga, tantric cosmology, and ecology in Natha architecture. Local water conservation methods, like stepwells, have been adopted by the temple designs, whereas local stones and wood have been used for the construction of the temples in the mountainous terrain. Conclusively, the influence of Natha on the architectural design of temples in the Himalayas is through a Shaiva-yogic outlook, whereby the temples become centres of spirituality and ecology.

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1. Introduction

Indian temples are designed as holistic systems integrating sacred spaces, community life, and cosmic contemplation. Temple structures are guided by the Vastu and Shilpa Shastras, where proportions and directional alignments embody spiritual ideas and world order. In early Hindu texts and practices, temples are deeply interconnected with the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space, which, through rituals, establish ecological interdependence

and cultivate respect for the natural elements—land, rivers, trees, forests, and mountains. Temple complexes often serve as custodians of biodiversity and models of climate-resilient design. Temples, particularly through passive ventilation, material selection, and siting, establish humans in thermal and symbolic harmony with the environment (Dagens, 2003). Hindu temples serve not only as sacred abodes and centers of worship for deities but also as

repositories of knowledge, artistic excellence, and social values. For centuries, the customs, traditions, and practices associated with them have profoundly influenced India's socio-cultural landscape, preserving and ensuring the continuity of Indian values. Temple architecture develops through a unique continuity, as ancient canonical principles—rooted in religious and philosophical thought—guide its strict adherence. Hindu architecture spans a broad scope beyond temples to include monasteries, statues, palaces, residences, marketplaces, gardens, and urban planning. These basic principles of design are outlined in Vastu Shastra and other Sanskrit texts on architecture. These books contain essential information about aesthetics, symbolism, construction techniques, and cosmic orientation. Indian temple architecture thus thrives upon as a living tradition that fuses spiritual symbolism, artistic mastery, and cultural continuity (Barua, 2025).

1. Ecology and Design as a Temple

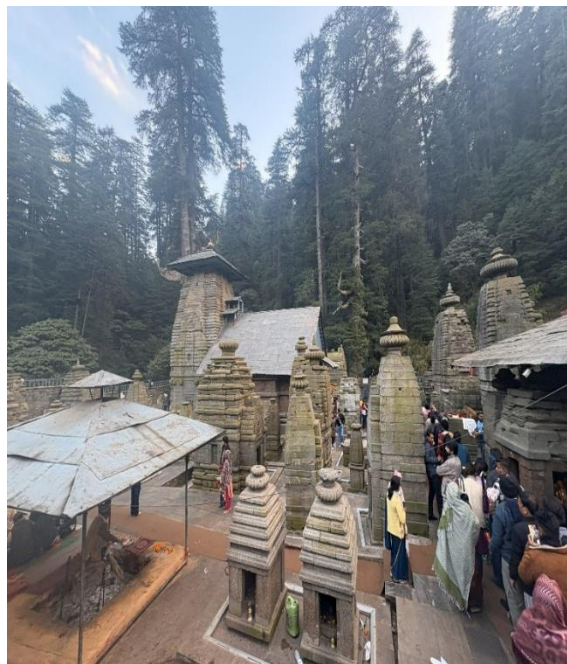


Figure 1: forests of dense pines

Temple architecture is revealed not merely as a religious building but as a living ecological ontology. Engravings of trees, creepers, flowers, animals, birds, and other creatures on walls, pillars, and spires are underscored to show that humans are formed as an integral part of nature's broader ecosystem, not as an isolated entity. Sacred forests, Kalpavriksha trees, serpent symbols, and wildlife are turned into a

It is important to note that the architectural tradition of Uttarakhand temple construction demonstrates a strong interaction of ecology and architectural design. Apart from being a manifestation of religious devotion, temple architectural tradition in this region shows the unity of man and his surrounding nature. It is possible to refer to the Jageshwar temple complex in the forests of dense pines as shown in figure 1 in the district of Almora as a great example of such an approach. The architectural design of these temples is adapted to the specific features of the topography, available natural resources, and environmental needs. The result was achieved as the temple architecture was put into harmony with nature. Moreover, the natural setting of the temple complex serves as an important element enhancing the aesthetic value of this place and supporting the process of religious practice and spiritual development of man (Bhatt, 2004).

symbolic realm by the temple, where the philosophy of symbiosis between human and nonhuman life is realized. Temple architecture, therefore, serves as an iconography of fertility, protection, power, and harmony, where nature becomes a tool for divinity (Chandra, 2019). The roots of such an approach in history lie in the tribal/nature-based worship tradition, whereby the worship places were hills,

stones, pillars, tree gods, and wild animals (Singh and Singh, 2025). Later on, all these symbols of nature have been incorporated into organized religious buildings and come up with great relevance to the temple's garbhagriha, mandapa, pillars, and minarets. According to experts, there is a strong cultural connection between the ancient shrines of forest-sororities and classical temples, which has been neglected by conventional architectural studies (Chandra, 2019).

It can be argued that ancient places of worship possess an innate connection with the sounds and harmony of the primordial forest, eventually developing into classical temple spires made of brick and stone. In this relationship, temples are seen not only as man-made structures, but as vibrant meeting places where nature, memory, and spirituality converge. In this context, temples are constructed as signs of culture and ecology, linking religion, environment, and aesthetics together.

2. Temples and Ecology in a Yogic Perspective

Harmony, which is sacred in nature, is responsible for the building of the temple, resulting in the unification of the temple, deity, nature, and society into one spiritual and physical being. The temple does not simply stand out as a place of worship anymore, but as an eco-center and social center. It is also viewed as a manifestation of what the individual seeks within himself, out in the open. The temple, according to the Agamas, is the body of the deity while its garbhagriha is its heart (Kramrisch, 1946).

3. Integral Integration of Nature and Divinity

Nature in its physical form is portrayed in the Agamas and Puranas as an embodiment of divine energy in the sense that trees, groves, water, and mountains not only represent physical phenomena but also are seen as living divinity. The Skanda and Matsya Puranas recognize the conservation of sacred forest

areas, trees, and water bodies as a religious obligation. Further, the placement of temples in natural environments symbolizes this (Saxena, 2004).

4. The Essential Relationship Between Temple Structure and the Human Body

Temple architecture is considered the body itself in Agamic and Tantric architecture. The sanctum, according to Mayamatam and Mansara, symbolizes the heart, the shikara is the Sahasrara Chakra, and the pradakshinapatha represents the flow of consciousness within. This same symbolism is also seen in Hatha Yoga and Natha Panthis, wherein the body and the universe are reflective of each other (Śrīvāstava RL, 1973).

5. Community Coexistence and Ethics

Sacred existence finds its expression not just in philosophy, but even in social behavior on a day-to-day basis. The preservation of sacred groves, purity of natural water resources, and social rites and ceremonies have been advocated as dharma by the Dharmashastras and Puranas. Festivals held at temples and folk customs keep the harmony intact between society, nature, and God (Das, P. 2004).

6. Art, Symbols, and the Journey of Consciousness

The temples' external architecture—Mithuna sculptures, Yakshas, Nagas, animal forms, and the Ashtadikpalas—symbolize various levels of human consciousness and natural energies. In contrast, the dim light and peaceful silence of the sanctum sanctorum resonate with the practitioner from animal consciousness to divine consciousness. This sequence is an architectural reflection of the path of spiritual practice from extroversion to introversion, described in the Tantric scriptures (Malaviya, 2021).

7. Ecological Construction and Self-Reliant Systems



Figure 2: Temples based on local stones and local methods

Ancient architecture and craftsmanship emphasize the use of local materials and the conservation of natural resources. The Mayamatam and Vishnudharmottara Puranas declare tree plantation, forest conservation, and water harvesting as integral components of architectural dharma. Thus, the temple itself functions as a self-sustaining ecological system, not a medium for nature exploitation. Both the ideas of ecological architecture and self-reliant structures have been very well captured in the ancient Indian temple architecture. Adi Badri Temple in Uttarakhand can be cited as an exemplary instance of this approach. Temples were constructed utilizing local stones and local methods as shown in figure 2, and thus there were minimal needs for transportation, less usage of natural resources, and low environmental effects. Besides that, the design of temples was in line with the geographical and climatic conditions of the area to ensure durability and environmental compatibility. Moreover, the sustainable use of natural resources near the temple complex proves the self-reliance of the Indian architectural traditions. Therefore, the architecture of the Adi Badri Temple Complex represents the environmentally friendly nature of the building activities (Kathoch, 2003).

The concept of sacred symbiosis thus demonstrates that the temple, deity, nature, and human society are in harmony with each other in a shared spiritual-ecological philosophy. Here, the temple is not an inanimate structure, but a living yogic-ecological system, deeply rooted in the Agamic, Tantric, and Natha-Siddha traditions.

Ecology and Design in the Natha Tradition and Himalayan temple architecture associated with the Natha tradition can be understood not simply as a religious structure, but as an architectural manifestation of profound ecological and yogic contemplation. The artwork of trees, creepers, floral motifs, serpent symbols, birds, animals, and wildlife carved on these temples reflects the philosophical foundation wherein humans, nature, and yogic awakening exist in an integral symbiosis. The Natha Siddhas' yogic philosophy, which considers the body as a microcosm of the universe, takes visual form in temple architecture through nature-infused motifs (Purohit, 2024).

The deep interconnection between ecology and spirituality is evident in the Natha-associated temples and yoga complexes of the Himalayan region, including caves, Udiyariyas, Dhaulia rocks, forest-based monasteries, and the shrines of Kshetrapal

deities. Sacred trees, groves, streams, and mountain peaks are not merely geographical elements but centers of yogic power and Nada-Brahma experience. Temple design is thus transformed into visual theology, where principles of fertility, balance, and preservation are resonated with Tantric-Hatha yogic symbols of Natha Yoga (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017).

The natural water sources have served as a key factor that facilitated the development of an environmentally friendly nature as shown in figure 3 in the ancient sacred landscapes. Perennial spring Beengadhara, situated in proximity to the Gorakh Cave at Srinagar (Garhwal) is a perfect illustration of

the interconnection between the natural resources and the traditions of the Indian culture. The presence of such natural resources helped meet the basic needs of the people visiting the sacred place and thus promoted the sustainability of the cultural environment. On the other hand, being self-sufficient, the location became less dependent on external factors. This approach demonstrates the principles of traditional Indian culture that emphasize respect for the environment and rational usage of its resources. From this perspective, the spring Beengdhara constitutes an essential part of the environmental philosophy inherent to the sacred landscape of Gorakh Cave (Kukreti, 2005)



Figure 3: The natural water sources

The historical foundation of the Natha tradition is formed by tribal and nature-worshipping cultures. During early periods, sacred mounds, stones, columns, Naga-sthans, and flora were regarded as the main places for worship and spirituality. Over time, these places transformed into temples but kept their original ecological and yogic importance. The meditation techniques that emerged through the harmonies of the forests, the peace of caves, and the isolation of mountains materialized in the form of classical stone-brick structures. This indicates cultural cohesion and not disintegration, since the nature-based worldview of the Natha yogis was inherent in the temple designs (Kukreti, 2005). Temples of the Himalayan Natha tradition are much more than mere sites for worship; they have become symbols of what might be called sacred ecology,

where architecture, geography, and spirituality have been combined to form centers where balance and harmony with nature have been sought as a religious goal.

8. The Philosophical Foundation and Architectural Vision of the Natha Sect

Shiva-Shakti concept, Nada-Brahma, and the practice of Hatha Yoga constitute the philosophical basis of the Natha sect. In the view of the Natha yogis, Shiva signifies Supreme Consciousness, whereas Shakti represents its power and manifestation. The creation of Nada through the interaction of Shiva and Shakti forms the basic premise of cosmic consciousness in the doctrine of Natha Yoga. According to Goraksha Natha, there is no inherent dichotomy between the

physical body or Pind and the cosmos or Brahmand. Rather, the former represents varied incarnations of the latter. The harmony between body and universe has been considered central to Natha philosophy and its practice of yoga as well as architecture (Gorakhanātha, 1998).

The temple, according to the Natha Yoga theology, is not only an abode for God, but it is the external expression of the inner pilgrimage made by the yogi. Here, in this view, the sanctum sanctorum is the center of consciousness or heart cavity, whereas the shikhara is the elevation of the Sahasrara chakra. At the same time, the act of circumambulating around the temple takes on the form of a cycle of spiritual ascension. This makes temple architecture a dynamic representation of yogic experience, leading to both internal and external journeys (Feuerstein, 1998).

Architecture was one such activity undertaken by Natha yogis as a spiritually elevated practice, wherein the factors of place, time, and consciousness of the individual became synchronized in triple harmony. The form of Natha temples as well as their yoga grounds was designed not only according to the principles of architecture but also in keeping with the distinct energy present at the particular location, its topography, caves, rocks, flow of water, and the fold memory of the region (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017).

The Natha sect's architectural consciousness is described in terms of harmony between classical and folk forms of architecture. Architectural consciousness in the Natha sect is seen to go beyond architectural conventions derived from texts as well as from informal folds in architecture. Rather, it is viewed as a living philosophy informed by yogic consciousness, energy of place, and community memory in a tri-fold relationship.

9. Yogic Symbolism and Temple Structure

In the Natha yogic philosophy, the design of temples is not just an architectural aspect, but is viewed more as a manifestation of body philosophy in architectural form. According to Natha yoga philosophy, the human body is considered the medium of realization of the spirit, and the temple can be considered an architectural representation of harmony between the human body and the universe.

Every component of the temple has yogic significance attached to it, hence, externalization of the practitioner's internal experience.

The spire of the temple is analogous to the spine according to the Natha yogic philosophy. This rising structure reflects the movement of Kundalini energy from its origin to Brahmarandhra or Sahasrara chakra, which marks the union of Shiva and Shakti. Thus, Shikhara becomes a symbol of consciousness, power, and spiritual enlightenment in Yogic architecture, as shown in Natha yoga texts (Śrīvāstava RL, 1973).

Sanctum Sanctorum is seen to be located in the Natha path within the region of the heart known as Hrida Guha. The dark light, the peacefulness of the area, and the confined space enable one to detach from external sense organs and direct one's mind towards meditative practices (Svātmārāma, 1942).

The Natha School considers the mandapa and antarala as conduits for vital energy vibrations. The practice of entering the temple starts from outer consciousness and moves on to the inner plane. This is in line with the process that takes place in yoga practices, where consciousness expands outwards first and then moves inward. The space meant for communal worship and the seclusion of the sanctuary together form the physical manifestation of this inner transformation of consciousness (Shukla, 2013).

Symbolism like linga, trishul, damaru, and nada is not only a form of religious symbolism, but it also symbolizes yogic sound theory (nada yoga) and tantric consciousness. The damaru and nada symbol stand for the anahata sound, which is known as the basic foundation of cosmic consciousness in Natha yoga. In other words, through its material and abstract constructions, the temple architecture is a manifestation of Nada-Brahma (Swami Satyadharma Saraswati, 2019). Natha practices elevate the temple from a mere religious building to a living yogic practice aimed at balancing the body, mind, and soul of the yogi with the cosmos. The practice encompasses the three realms of architecture, symbolism, and meditation according to the distinctive Natha perspective.

Yogic and spiritual symbols are used extensively throughout the different aspects of temple architecture. Such symbols represent some of the

philosophies (See Table No. 1) that include meditations, spiritual ascent, cosmic order, and the

oneness of the soul with the Supreme Being. (Singh, 2022).

Table 1: Yogic and Spiritual Symbolism in Temple Architectural Elements.

Temple Structure Elements	Yogic Symbolism	Philosophical/Spiritual Meaning
Pathway	Hatha Yogic Journey	The practitioner's gradual yogic ascension through austerity, discipline, and purification of the body and mind.
Temple (Complete Form)	Yogic Body (Microcosm)	The Unity of the Human Body and the Universe (Microcosm–Macrocosm)
Entrance Gate (Gopura/Torana)	The Limit of Sense Control	The Beginning of the Introverted Journey from the External World.
Uttaranga: Forehead Image	Ajna Chakra	The practitioner's gradual yogic ascension through austerity, discipline, and purification of the body and mind.
Pradakshina Path	Nadi System	The Circulation and Balance of Prana Energy.
Mandap	Asana and Pranayama Area	Preparation for Sadhana, Group Practice.
Stambha	The Spine	The Foundation of Consciousness, Stability.
Garbhagriha	The Heart-Cavity	Meditation, Concentration, and Control of the Mind.
Shivalinga/Mool Idol	Nada-Bindu/Seed-Tattva	The Origin of Creation, the Unity of Shiva and Shakti.
Garbhagriha	Decay of extroversion	The State of Sense Control and Meditation.
Shivalinga/Mool Murti	Sound-Bindu (Seed-Element)	the root of creation, the union of Shiva and Shakti.
Low Light (Sankragriha)	Control of the senses	a state of meditation, the decline of extroversion.
Shikhra	The peak of the Sahasrara Chakra:	The rise of Kundalini.
Kalash	Amrit (Nectar)	the state of perfection, Brahman knowledge.
Temple facing east	Sun-Prana (Life-Energy) and awakening.	Life-Energy and Awakening.
Bell, Conch	Sound-Brahma (Mind-Purification),	meditation establishment.
Idol's Posture	Yoga Mudra	Mental State and spiritual gestures.
Jewellery, Crown	Chakra-Element (Subtle)	indicates subtle energy centers.
Bhairava, Kshetrapal (Kshetrapal)	Protector of life	Tantric protection, time control.
Natural Site (Cave, River, Mountain)	Ida, Pingala, and Sushumna.	Yoga practice with natural energies.
Dance Mudras (Nataraja)	Sound and rhythm	The vibration of creation.
Circumambulation Direction	Prana-Move	Time, and the Cycle of Consciousness.

10. Ecological Knowledge and Himalayan Temple Architecture

Ecological equilibrium, as well as elemental harmony, plays a vital role in ancient Indian architecture and Puranic texts in terms of site selection and construction of temples. The Manasara school of architecture considers ecological aspects along with natural topography and harmonization of the five

elements as an integral part of the construction of temples (Acharya, 1995). Confluences of rivers, forests, and groves of trees are considered highly sacred spaces for religious practices according to the Skanda Purana and Matsya Purana. The merging of rivers like the Kaveri and Narmada is consistently extolled in the Skanda Purana, whereas the forest hermitage and sacred grove sites are mentioned in the Matsya Purana as being most appropriate for

religious practice (Saxena, 2004).

In recent interpretations, these principles are seen in terms of history and adaptation of the environment. According to Kramrisch (1976), Hindu temples are symbolically designed to represent the five elements. On the other hand, Hardy (1995) has argued that temple styles were created in perfect coordination with geographical conditions. Dry stone walls in Himalayan vernacular architecture are also found to have suited the environmental balance and seismic stability (Jain, 2010). Overall, it can be seen that Himalayan temple architecture is a manifestation of sacred ecology.

Temple sites in India were chosen based on the concept given by Kramrisch (1946) and Michell (1988), whereby the choice did not depend only on faith but rather on an insight into the natural energy, the movement of water, and the balancing forces of the geomorphology. The Himalayan environment makes this concept even more powerful because meditative environments are provided naturally by the surroundings (Vidyarthi, 1979).

Temple architecture of the Himalayas reflects the proper balance and harmony between the five elements, which include Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space (Michell, 1988). The element Earth finds expression in terms of indigenous stones and wood used to build temples, while Water is activated using local water bodies or rivers meeting each other. Fire is invoked through the presence of sun worshiping sanctuaries, lighted lamps, and Yagna, while Air manifests through open structures and proper ventilation (Feuerstein, 1998).

Temple building within the Himalayan region, characterized by earthquakes, was an adaptation made by the builders and not contrary to the forces of nature. Resistance against seismic activity through the use of dry masonry, low-rise, strong walls, and inclined roofs is evident, whereas there is also sheltering against the effects of snowfall and rainfall offered by such architectural structures. Anthropocentric dominance is completely ruled out by this style of architectural expression, whereas harmony between the surrounding environmental surroundings, geographic dangers, and indigenous traditional practices is what is advocated for.

11. Trees, Forests, and Biological Symbols in the Natha Tradition

Trees, forests, and animals are all seen as partners in the process of spirituality by the Natha sect. In temple sites, the worship of trees, including peepal, Deodar, Rhododendron, and mango, is considered crucial from a religious as well as environmental perspective. Through these trees, not only are green surroundings, but also life energy and spiritual power represented. Animal and bird symbols such as Nandi, the serpent, the lion, and Garuda are featured in Natha temples not merely as decoration but as carriers of religious and ethical meaning. Power and devotion are embodied by Nandi, knowledge and protection are signified by the serpent, and courage and strength are represented by the lion. Together, these symbols are understood to reflect the Natha traditions' ecological and cultural harmony between humans and animals (Fowler-Smith, 2018).

Temple carvings are extended through vines, garlands, and animal figures. Through these elements, visual metaphors of human-nature symbiosis are created, and bio-symbols are made to move beyond ornamentation so that conservation-minded public morality and natural balance are embodied. In the Natha tradition, a synergy among religion, art, and ecology is produced by trees, wildlife, and biosymbols together, through which consciousness is awakened, and moral ideals are shaped in practitioners and communities (Briggs, 1938).

The architecture of temples in the Himalayas showcases an amazing blending of ecology and yoga philosophy. The choice of construction material, the alignment of the architecture with the landscape, the sustainable use of natural sources, and the inclusion of sacred natural elements are all indicative of an environmentally sensitive tradition. Moreover, the design of the temple architecture also represents the ideas related to yoga, spirituality, human connection with nature, and the universe. Ecological and yogic elements in Himalayan temple architecture have been outlined in Table 2 (Mahajan & Mane, 2023).

Table 2: Ecological and Yogic Dimensions of Himalayan Temple Architecture.

S. No.	Ecological Element	Himalayan Context	Expression in Temple Architecture	Yogic / Cultural Significance
1.	Site Selection	Riverbanks, confluences, hills	Construction of temples at natural energy centers	Pilgrimage sites are the confluence of nature and consciousness
2.	Directional Alignment	Sunrise–sunset axis, mountain ranges	East-facing sanctum (garbha-grha)	Solar prāṇa and awakening of consciousness
3.	Water Sources	Springs, tanks, natural streams	Sacred ponds, water tanks, <i>naulas</i> within the temple premises	Purification and flow of vital energy
4.	Vegetation	Deodar, Peepal, Buransh (Rhododendron)	Preservation and ritual planting of sacred trees	Forest deities and ecological conservation
5.	Construction Materials	Local stone and timber	Dry stone masonry and stone–wood composite structures	Harmonious coexistence with nature
6.	Topography	Slopes, rocks, caves	Cave temples and rock-based structures	Austerity, yogic solitude, and spiritual discipline
7.	Climatic Adaptation	Rainfall, snowfall, earthquakes	Thick walls, sloping roofs	Structural stability and ecological balance
8.	Sound Ecology	Echoes, resonance	Acoustic resonance within the sanctum	Nāda-Brahman and mantra-based spiritual practice
9.	Human–Fauna Coexistence	Serpents, birds, wild animals	Nāga iconography and guardian deities (<i>Kṣetrapālas</i>)	Protection, reverence, and fear regulation
10.	Pilgrimage Routes	Footpaths, mountainous trails	Temples accessible through difficult ascents	Spiritual journey as ascetic practice and self-purification

12. Conclusion

Uttarakhand's temples are presented in this study as integrated centers of yogic practice and ecological knowledge. This synthesis is shown to have been embodied by the Natha sect through its philosophy, architecture, ritual, and sacred landscapes. In the sacred meld: Yogic Symbols, Ecological Knowledge, and the Temple Architecture of Uttarakhand, the Himalayas are demonstrated to have been understood and cultivated by Natha yogis as vibrant yogic ecosystems. Temple sites are shown to have been selected in mountain streams, caves, confluences, forest margins, and lofty peaks, thereby revealing ecology to have been integral to practice rather than treated as an external resource. Eastward

temple alignments, natural water sources, local stone material, and earthquake-adaptive construction are further used to underscore the Natha sect's environmentally sensitive architectural vision. The yogic symbols like Nada, Kundalini, Naga, Kshetrapal Bhairava, and the concept of gurus become part of the temple's architectural design, and hence, the Natha temples become landmarks of spiritual practice. Sanctum sanctorum is symbolic of the yogic body in which both the external universe and the internal universe merge. Therefore, the structure of the temple turns into a map of yoga. The contribution of the Natha sect lies in the balance created through purity, nature, and wisdom. This eco-yogic idea is presented in the light of the contemporary world, plagued with ecological

disasters and cultural degradation.

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