

## Temples of Barkur as Public Places: An Inquiry through social and space syntax studies

*Pratyush Shankar*

CEPT, Ahmedabad, India  
pratyushshankar@hotmail.com

### Abstract

The design of public places in contemporary Indian cities has either been based on a rather alien baroque concept of “Parks & Garden” or medieval European and modernist idea of public “squares and plazas”. The idea of public places as seen in different regions of India, in its history has still not been typified or analyzed. For example the temple complex of Chidambaram or Padmanabhanpuram not only house the place of worship but due to their sheer size, spatial organization and articulation of built form, behave like small cities or parts of a city which supports a range of social intercourse.

The temples in south India due to the socio-political characteristics of the region have usually enjoyed an unbroken relationship with the immediate and neighboring communities in terms of its symbolism, usage and patronage. Temples of the town of Barkur, situated in South Karnataka are nearly 400 to 800 year old. It becomes important to understand the public nature of these places of worship.

To inquire into the idea and typology of a public place as manifested in the temple complex at Barkur, the paper first explores the social dimension of the immediate community with respect to the relationship of the family ceremonies, worships, daily rituals, and community activities with the usage of temple space. This has been done through documentation and analysis of relevant social parameters as correlated to the use of temple complex or its foregrounds (temple precinct). It is interesting to find that for the community the temple complex serves as a very important and frequent place for much different range of non-religious activities, which are usually not associated with a place of worship in other cultures.

The second analysis has been done at the level of understanding the grammar of the temple space itself, with the objective of analyzing its response towards supporting and fostering public activities. The investigation has been carried out of the temple complex in term of its setting in the landscape (here the large temple complex are very much part of the community fabric and not exclusive buildings at vantage points) and also in terms of its spatial relationships. For example a study of the Garbha Grah (Sanctum center) in relation with the larger gathering spaces within the temple complex reveal a very interesting notion of very subtle demarcation between the sacred and the public zones (the idea of worship in these temples being that at an individual’s level rather than as a congregation of community). Similar studies have been carried out to understand the syntax of enclosure, inert spaces like colonnade, verandahs, courts and plinths and its correlation with public use of the space thus created. The paper gives interesting insight into the manner in which many very subtle but yet extremely effective gestures due to the spatial organizational principles of temple complex at Barkur accommodate majority of the public activities of the community.