CHAPTER III

THE TEMPLE DOOR-FRAME: DEVELOPMENT, ESSENTIAL FEATURES AND SIGNIFICANCE

One of the most notable features of a building is its entrance doorway both for its utility and beauty. Without a doorway a building would be like a solid mass or block that would not serve any purpose at all and thus lose its utility. Beyond that, a place must be pleasing to the eye at first sight. It is a popular belief that the first impression is the last impression. Doorway at the entrance normally gives the first impression and therefore must be pleasing and decorative. Besides decoration and utility, it is also associated with man’s age old beliefs in omens – good and bad. Anyone who enters a place must face auspicious signs and the place be auspicious to the occupants. Decorations around the door served this purpose. The observation that “the doorway served as the best decorated portion of the monument in which utmost care was taken in employing decorative symbols and motifs, both for beauty and auspiciousness” is very true except that the idea of its utility has been omitted from it, perhaps because the observation is made only from the art point of view.

Traditionally, it appears, that man has taken care of all the three essential elements of a doorway viz. its utility, decoration and auspiciousness from the very beginning. Even the earliest known buildings had doorways that led to the portion from where all parts of the building were easily accessible, usually in the centre of the front. As for decoration and auspiciousness, the entrance was embellished both
with permanent and temporary features, some of which have come down to us till the present times. For instance, decorating the doors with flowers garlands, tying of festoons made of mango leaves, putting of plants at the entrance were all temporary features of this category. More durable but not permanent features were painting auspicious signs on the frame of the doorways, even making a *rāṅgolī* at the entrance and so on. It was in this tradition that the prints of hands in vermilion or turmeric were imprinted on both sides of the doorway on special occasions like marriage, birth of a child, etc. These temporary features continued on one hand but seem to have given place to permanent decorations being done in the form of door-frames. When exactly this practice started is difficult to say. The doorways of the buildings of Harappan culture were rather plain. But then, as already observed by E. Mackay\(^2\) all the buildings of the Indus civilization were marked by plainness. However, the literary references to the buildings during the Vedic age indicate that the gateways reflected artistic taste of the people who dwelt in the buildings. We have no remains of the buildings of the Mauryan period, but the description of the Mauryan palace recorded by Megasthenes in his *Indica* and attested by Hsiun Tsang some nine centuries afterwards indicate that they were highly decorated with intricate designs.

The rock-cut and other Buddhist monuments like the *stūpas* of the Mauryan and the post-Mauryan period provide an actual peep into the tradition and taste of the builders of doorways. The earliest and perhaps the best example of the same is the Lomas Rishi cave in the Barabar hills in Bihar. The beautiful façade around the entrance of the rock-cut monument is decorated with friezes of elephants and *stūpas* as also with other geometrical designs. We may draw attention to the *stūpas* at...
Sanchi, Bharhut and Amaravati also. All the stūpas on these places had highly decorated torana placed on four sides of the monument. They hardly served any purpose because a stūpa unlike other buildings is a solid mass and not to be entered in the sense as one enters a temple or other buildings. Yet these beautifully carved doorways form the masterpieces of decorative art. Even the narrative panels at Bharhut and Sanchi have numerous examples of temples and other buildings having decorated doorways. Next to these are examples in the rock-cut monuments of Western India. At places like Karle, Bhaja, Ajanta, etc. we find the façades of chaitya with chaitya-windows embellished with decorative motifs of a variety of styles.

The earliest evidence of temples in Himachal Pradesh belongs to c. 2nd century B.C. on the basis of the numismatic data as already discussed. However, the evidence of coins does not provide us any clue to the form of doorframes of these temples. But if the art of Śuṅga-Sātavāhana period is any indicator, the temple doorframes of Himachal Pradesh should also have been decorative and elaborate. Since no extant examples of temples belonging to the pre-Gupta period have survived either in Himachal Pradesh or elsewhere, it is difficult to assess their exact form. While talking about the dvāraśākhās and their evolution, M.S. Mate traces their origin in three things, viz.

a. Very simple but common mode of decorating an entrance or for that matter any building on a temporary basis;

b. The toranas or gateways commonly used in the Maurya-Śuṅga periods; and
c. The mukha-māṇḍapas or porches that stood before practically every structure in early times.  

Whereas there is no doubt about the first two points, the third requires some discussion. How far can we treat the mukha-māṇḍapa as a part of doorframes or how to treat their embellishments is a complicated issue and we shall revert to it later on with reference to Himachal Pradesh.

Tracing the evolution of temple door-frames, V.S. Agrawala says that in the early Gupta period, the entrance of the temple sanctum was provided with attendant sculptures on doorjambs, lintel and threshold. He further observed that the side jambs of the doorway, are at first single then they are divided into two, three portions upto nine. Each portion was called a sākhā, each having a separate name after the motifs that occupied it. For instance the patralati sākhā, mithuna sākhā, pratihārī-sākhā and so on. The pramatha sākhā with dancing gana figures, dampati-sākhāī with mithuna figures and patralati-sākhā, the band of convention alised foliated scrolls were the most popular motifs. In addition the depiction of the river goddesses Gāṅgā and Yamunā on the right and left sides of the doorway respectively also became a very popular style during and after the Gupta period. At another place the eminent art-historian remarked that, “indeed with the emergence of the flat roofed small shrines in the Gupta period (4th century A.D.), the framework of the entrance to the temple received special attention and various elements of decoration were introduced to impart beauty grace and life to the architectural portion leading to the deity in the shrine.”

Of the various parts of the door-frame he refers to, besides the dvārasākhās mentioned above, the image in the centre of the lintel,
lalāṭabimba, attendant figures at the base occupying the lower one fourth portion of the jamb, pratihāri or dvārapālas, auspicious birds on wing, māṅgalyavīhaga (usually flying geese), auspicious tree, Śrīvriksha, stylised svastika, full vase, pūrna-kalasa, amorous couples, mithunas, rosettes, phulavallī, etc.

These details, all or in part, are invariably found in the doorframes from the Gupta period onwards till we reach the most elaborate doorframes of c. 12th century A.D. such as those found in the temples of Khajuraho and Orissa. Despite the fact that the textual description in the works on vāstuśāstra specifically lay down the iconography of the doorframes and apparently most of them look similar, yet a close examination reveals a large variety with some interesting details, of the textual description, for instance, the Brihatsamhitā of Varāhamihira, a work of the sixth century A.D. lays down that “one-quarter of the doorjambs is occupied by Pratihāri figures. The rest of decorations consist of auspicious birds, śrīvriksha, svastika, Pūrṇaghaṭa, mithuna, patravallī and dwarfish figures.” A later work on architecture Mayamattam, edited and translated by Bettina Baumer and others has a full chapter devoted to the architecture of the gateways. Likewise there are numerous literary texts on the subject mostly of the early medieval period.

A little comparison of the doorframes of the temples in Himachal Pradesh with those of other parts here shall throw light on the fact that they were modelled after the injunctions laid down in the texts while following the known examples and at the same time maintained their own individuality. The earliest doorframes are plain without any decorative motifs on them. There are numerous such examples in north

53
India. \(^8\) Himachal Pradesh too has some known examples. For instance, the temples at Dhabas in Shimla district assignable to the seventh century A.D. have plain door-frames. However, we must note here that the plain doorjambs do not necessarily mean an early date. There can be numerous other factors involved. For example, the two small shrines on the right bank of river Bishkalti at Parahat near Hatkoti have absolutely plain doorframes. But their overall architecture does not permit us to put them earlier than the end of the 8\(^{th}\) or early 9\(^{th}\) century A.D.

As an excellent example of beautifully carved door-frame of the Gupta period, the Vishnu temple of Deogarh is invariably cited. \(^9\) It has five śākhās including patralatā, mithuna, pratihārī and phulavallī śākhās. On the lalātabimba Vishnu seated on Śeshaṅgā is shown in a beautiful and unusual manner. Male and female doorkeepers are shown at the base of the doorjambs. Those on the inner side are taller and the rest are in receding dimensions. The river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā are shown on the top of the outermost śākhās on each side. We have an interesting parallel from Himachal Pradesh, where the only such representation of the river goddesses is found in the doorframe of the Śiva temple at Sawara in Shimla district. This temple is also datable to the seventh century A.D. Even in the cave 3 at Udayagiri near Vidisha we have representation of the river goddesses on the top of the doorjambs as early as c. 5\(^{th}\) century A.D. This Gupta idiom of the representation of Gaṅgā and Yamunā was soon discarded in favour of their images being shown on the base of the doorjambs. We have several examples of their depiction at the base or even on the each side of the mukhamantapa in Himachal Pradesh. The most beautiful examples come from the Viśvēśvara Mahādeva temple, Bajaura and the
Vaidyanātha Śiva temple, Baijnath. We have their representation even in the wooden temples like that of Dakshinēśvara at Nirmand and degenerated form at Maṇi Maheśa, Bharmaur. One cannot help but note that the portraiture of the river goddesses on doorframes in conspicuous by their absence at Masrur rock-cut complex. Even in the temple of Lakṣaṇā Devī at Bharmaur, Gaṅgā and Yamunā are not to be found on the doorframes.

Same is the case with the image on lalāṭabimba. Most of the temples in Himachal Pradesh have the image of Gaṇeśa in the centre on the lintel. However, as we have noted in the case of Deogarh Vishṇu temple, where Vishṇu and not Gaṇeśa is shown on the lalāṭabimba, in Himachal Pradesh, we do not find an image of Gaṇeśa on lalāṭabimba in any of the doorframes at Masrur. The favourite subject of artists over there was depiction of panels of either male or female deities both Śaiva and Vaishṇava. The wooden temples at Bharmaur and Chatrarhi are nearer to the Gupta temples in date and also in style. The image of Gaṇeśa is not to be found on the lalāṭabimba either at Lakṣaṇā or Śakti Devī. Interestingly the trefoiled pediment on the façade of Lakṣaṇā Devī temple has an exquisite image of Vishṇu in Kashmiri idiom. The tradition lingers on. In the Hari Rai temple at Chamba, which is quite late, we have the image of Vishṇu and Lakshmi on the lalāṭabimba flanked by those of Brahmā-Sarasvatī and Śiva-Pārvatī on the left and right corners respectively. However, most of the Chamba temples assignable to the 10th century onwards, like those in the Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa complex, have a Gaṇeśa image on the lalāṭabimba.
The post-Gupta and Pratihāra periods saw the development of doorframes throughout India. Now the images on the lalātabimba and also those of Gaṅgā-Yamunā and dvārapālas on the base of the doorjams became standardised though more elaborate. For instance, the frame of the doorway of Teli-ka-Mandir at Gwarlior has beautiful images of Gaṅgā and Yamunā with umbrella bearing female attendants and male dvārapālas. Even the Chaturbhujā temple at Gwalior, though small in dimensions, has an ornate doorframe. The Madhukeśvara temple, Mukhalingam assignable to early 9th century A.D. has very interesting and elaborate carvings on its doorway. The śālabhaṇjiṇikās and the mithuna couples depicted on the doorways are beautiful and artistic. Even the doorkeepers and the river goddesses are charming.

Another feature introduced during this period was the depiction of the navagrahas on the door-lintels. The Somanātha temple, Baramba has a beautiful panel of seated navagrahas in niches on the lintel. Its tri-sākhā doorframe has foliated and rosette designs without any dampati sākhā or Gaṅgā and Yamunā. It has beautiful Śaiva doorkeepers at base on each side of the doorway. The temple has been assigned to the beginning of the 9th century A.D. From this time onwards the depiction of the navagrahas became a popular feature and we find numerous examples of the same in the temples of Himachal Pradesh. However, taking liberty, or may be due to ignorance of the injunctions, in certain cases the order of the navagrahas is disturbed. Besides the description we are going to give in the following chapters, one may notice such a departure in the 15th century temple doorframe at Hiḍimbā Devī temple at Manali.
The next stage of development of the door-frames start from the tenth century A.D. onwards. Now the depiction became very elaborate, though one finds the touch of the classical idiom on decline hence onwards. One may point to the elaborate doorframe of the Jarai Math temple, Barwasagar datable to the beginning of the tenth century, as one of the numerous examples. The temples of Khajuraho like the Lakshmana temple also fall in the same category. But we do not find such fine doorframes in the contemporary temples of Chamba like Champāvatī, Chandragupta etc. where the workmanship is rather crude. This development reached its zenith by the 13th century A.D. after which a period of decline seems to have set in. A good example of the elaborate decorative doorframe may be cited, though wooden, from the Dakshineśvara Mahādeva temple at Nirmand. The place that boasts of its antiquity at least from the Gupta period has examples of doorframes from the late medieval period.

Of the peculiar features of the doorframes of temples in western Himalayas, one may note the depiction of the deities including the river goddesses Gāṅgā and Yamunā. While following the style prevalent throughout contemporary north India, some small but significant traits have been introduced. For instance the depiction of three pronged crowns on the heads of the deities is very peculiar to this region. We start finding the examples of such a diadem right from the 7th century A.D. at Bharmaur and continue to have them till the end of the period under discussion in the images at Baijnath, through Masrur, Kullu, Shimla and Chamba images. Even afterwards their depiction is common feature in Himachal Pradesh. Likewise other attributes like weapons,
dress and ornaments of local type are depicted, thanks to the originality of the local artists.

Most of the early temples had a porch or *mukhamandapa* also called *ardhamandapa* in front of the sanctum. M.S. Mate, as referred to above, takes them as a part of the *dvāraśāthas* when he discusses the evolution and development of the same. In the later texts on *vāstu* or *śilpaśāstras* while discussing the plan of a temple provide for *mukhamandapa, mandapa* (with various enlargements of the plan such as *bhogamandapa, nāṭamandapa, kalyāṇamandapa*, etc.), *antarāla* and the sanctum sanctorum. Here, the *mukhamandapa* or *ardhamandapa* becomes a separate unit of the plan and cannot be equated with the door frame of a temple. They have their own architectural features. On the other hand the early temples comprised of a plain cella without any front porch or enclosures. The porch was added to the front of sanctum perhaps not as a separate unit of the plan but as an extended part of the sanctum. In some cases where we have small *mukhamandapa* the doorway proper has been done away with. The Chandraśekhara temple at Saho in Chamba, for example, has no proper doorway of the sanctum. In its place there are two big pillars at the entrance to the sanctum and beautifully carved panels on each side behind the pillars. This arrangement, despite the existence of a circumambulatory around the sanctum, serves the purpose of both the *mukhamandapa* as well as the doorway. Even in the temples at Bajaura (Kullu) and Chamba the *mukhamandapa* is invariably small and mingle with the entrance. The carvings on the entrance of the *mukhamandapa* also attest the same. The river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā, as per the early examples of the Gupta temples, should occur on both sides of the doorframe. But in
many cases, even where proper doorways to the sanctum exist, they are carvied on the entrance of the porch on each side. At Bajaura in the Viśveśvara Mahādeva temple the river goddesses are beautifully depicted on the sides of the porch but are absent on the doorframe of the sanctum. The same arrangement is to be found at Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Chamba. In the Vaidyanātha Śiva temple at Baijnath towards the end of the 12th century A.D. we find the depiction of the river goddesses on the walls of antarāla as well as on the doorframe. It may indicate a trend and its development. Initially mukhamāṇḍapa served the purpose of the entrance and was decorated accordingly. With the doorway becoming a separate member and the doorframes being enlarged and elaborately beautified some repetition of carvings was natural but the significance of the porch was kept intact and treated almost as a doorway to the temple.

In summing up we find the doorframes as an essential feature that mark the auspicious entrance to the abode of god in temples. Stella Kramrisch has beautifully put it saying that as one approaches the image or Liṅga in the garbhagriha, it appears framed by the door which leads to this innermost sanctuary with the wings of the wooden door opened, the image is seen by the devotee in the middle of the door; the frame of the door also serving as the frame of the image; the distance between the door and the image is translated into colour and atmosphere having the image for its centre. This picture is framed by the doorway with its carvings on sill, jambs and lintel.
Notes & References:

3. Supra, Chapter II.
14. See infra, Chapter VI.