Temples of the Gowda Saraswat Brahmin (GSB) Community: Their uniqueness

By U. V. KINI

Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Temple, Ullal, Karnataka, India.
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Gowda Saraswat Brahmins belong to a very ancient ethnic group of Brahmins, originally from settlements in and around the banks of the river Saraswati, a once mighty river (as satellite imagery has now shown) eulogized in the Rig Veda, the most sacred of all Hindu religious texts. When the river dried up, draught came and the resident Brahmins were forced to migrate to various parts of India including Gujarat and Goa. In the 16th century, when the Portuguese colonialists in Goa starting indulging in religious persecution and forceful proselytisation, they migrated in large numbers to settle in the coastal belts of Karnataka and Kerala. There is also historical evidence to show that Saraswats migrated from Goa to Kerala as early the 14th Century, probably as a result of attacks on Goa by Muslim Sultans during that period. The mother tongue of these Brahmins is Konkani, although many GSB families who migrated to Maharashtra from Goa, now speak Marathi and consider it as their mother tongue.

This article is written with an intention to showcase the uniqueness of temples built by members of the GSB community settled in Karnataka. An interesting thing to note is that the unique feature of the GSB temples in Karnataka, which I am going to explain later in this article, is not present in even in the Kuladevata (family deity) temples of the GSB’s which are situated in Goa. In this article, an attempt is also made to explain some of the basic tenets of Hinduism along with the information about the GSB temples, for the benefit of those not conversant with them.
Though there are different schools of philosophy in India, the rules governing temple construction are broadly the same. A Hindu Temple generally consists of:

1. The *Garbha Griha* in the centre and the *Vimana* over it.
2. The *Ardha Mantapa* in front of the *Garbha Griha*
3. The *Dhwajastambha* and the *Balipeetha*.
4. The *Rajagopura* at the main entrance of the temple.

Before we proceed to the study of GSB Temples, let us first understand a little about *Tantra Shashtra*.

When we hear the word ‘*Tantra*’, our minds conjure up images of bearded, saffron-clad, ash-smeared faces of ‘*aghori babas*’ whose *tantric* (occult) rituals include eating the flesh of the dead, meditating in cremation grounds and engaging in ‘sacred sex’. These *babas* belong to the ‘*tamasic*’ branch of *Tantra*, which is known as ‘*Shaakta Pantha*’.
The *Tantra Shashtra* as defined in our scriptures does not bear any relation to the black arts mentioned above. Our ancients considered *Tantra Shashtra* as one of the most important Hindu sacred texts and extolled it in their writings. In ancient Hindu scriptures, references to ‘*Tantra Shastra*’ and ‘*Agama*' (*)mean the same thing. Let us see what these Agamas tell us.

(*) pronounced 'Aagama’ – A as in ‘Arnauld’

Agamas explain how humankind should incorporate the principles of *Dharma* as defined in the scriptures in their daily activities. They explain that man should acknowledge his debt of gratitude to the Lord in his daily activities and direct all his energies towards obtaining liberation or *Moksha* (eternal bliss). To help man attain this, the Agamas cover a variety of subjects like devotion, meditation, philosophy of Mantras, temple-building, image-making (idol-carving), charms and spells, mystic diagrams, domestic and social observances, public festivals etc.

The Agamas are of three kinds:

1. *Vaishnava-agama*.
2. *Shaiva-agama*.
3. *Shaakta-agama*.

*Vaishnavagama* considers Vishnu as the Supreme principle. One of the most important of these Agamas is the *Pancharatragama*. This *Agama* is believed to have been preached by the Lord himself. *Vaishnavas* consider the
Agamas as authoritative as the Vedas and call them ‘apaurusheya’ i.e. not created by human intellect. Pancharatragama contains among other things, temple-building and image-making specifications and procedures, which have been explained in detail by Sri Madhwacharya in his book called ‘Tantra Sara Sangraha’ which is based on the original ‘Tantra Sara’. The original Tantra Sara is now lost to us.

The ‘Tantra Saara Sangraha’ is a relatively small work, which consists of 400 verses (shlokas) divided into 4 chapters.

The First Chapter deals with Mahamantras and the system of offering pooja. The Second explains how to perform ‘hOma’, specifying the measurements of the ‘yajna kunda’. The Third deals with all aspects of temple architecture right from choosing the ideal location to the precise measurements of the structure. The measurements of the ‘prathima’ (idol) to be installed and the size of each and every part of the ‘prathima’ have been defined with precision. In the Final chapter Sri Madhwacharya has listed about 70 ‘saatvic’ mantras to enhance the aura of holiness of the place.

Vaishnava GSB Temples, dedicated to different manifestations of Lord Vishnu viz. Sri Venkataramana, Sri Lakshminarasimha, Veera Vithala etc., situated in and around Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka adhere to these standards of temple-architecture. Interestingly however, one aspect of their layout is unique, which we shall see presently.
The chief deities of these GSB temples, installed in the Garbha Griha, are usually one or more of the following:

Sri Venkataramana with His consorts, Sridevi and Bhoodevi.

Sri Lakshmi Narayana
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Sri Lakshmi Narasimha

Sri Vithala (Sri Veera Vithala in some temples)
What makes these GSB Temples unique is the installation of four additional deities in the inner corners of the structure encircling the ‘Garbha Griha’ (sanctum sanctorum). In these GSB temples, one finds what are collectively called as ‘Parivaar Devatas’ installed in the inner four corners of this structure.

They are, in clockwise order:

**Sri Hanuman** - The first deity situated at the left corner as you face the Garbha Griha, which is the front-right corner of the chief deity.

**Sri Ganapathi** - the second deity as you proceed to circumambulate the Garbha Griha, which is the rear-right corner of the chief deity.

**Sri Lakshmi** - the third deity you encounter as you proceed to the rear-left corner of the Chief deity.

**Sri Garuda** – The fourth one you come across at the front left of the chief deity.
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The illustration below will give an idea of the general layout of the inner structure of these GSB temples.
Sri Hanuman occupies an important place in the Maadhwa system of worship next only to Lord Vishnu and Shri Lakshmi. He is the son of Vayu. One of the foremost doctrines of Maadhwa Philosophy is “Hari Sarvottama, Vayu Jivottama”. (Vishnu (Hari) is the Supreme entity and Vayu (Sri Hanuman) is the foremost among all Jivas.) Sri Madhwacharya differed with the ‘Advaita’ (Monism, as some call it) principle, which considers human soul as part of the Super-Soul (Brahman), who labors under the delusion (Maya) that is the materialistic world. Sri Madhwacharya preached that Paramatma (Super soul) and ‘jiva’ (soul) can never be one. The latter is always subservient to the former. They will never be one whether in this life or hereafter, as preached by Sri Adi Shankaracharya. Sri Madhwacharya also dismissed the theory that the world was an unreal entity and an illusion. Vishnu is the Supreme entity and Vayu (Sri Hanuman) is the foremost among all Jivas. The functions and sensory organs of the human body are governed by various presiding deities referred to as ‘abhimani devathas’. Sri Hanuman, also referred to as ‘Mukhya Prana’, is the abhimani devatha of the Prana in the body. The other senses can function only as long as there is Prana in the body. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad emphasizes the authenticity of the 'Prana' concept saying "Prano Vai Jyeshhascha Shresthascha". (Prana is the higher-ranking and also the greatest.)
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SRI GANAPATHI

Sri Ganapathi is the deity of ‘Aakash / Ether’, one of the Pancha Bhootas, (The sky, which is one of the five elements). Sri Ganapathi is also regarded as the Lord of the Mooladhara Chakra in the human body. It is only through His benevolence can one proceed ahead in the awakening of the Charkas in one’s body. The Puranas say that Sri Ganapathi was born as Charudeshna, the son of Sri Krishna and Rukmini.

SRI LAKSHMI

She is the consort of Vishnu. Lakshmi is at the top of the hierarchy of heavenly beings (which is explained below), next only to Vishnu who is also called as Sriman Narayana. She is considered to be ‘nityamukta’. i.e. not affected by the bondage of rebirths, while all other heavenly beings (lesser to her) are. It is believed that praying to Sri Vishnu and Lakshmi together is more beneficial in effect.

SRI GARUDA

Garuda is the vahana (mount) of Shri Vishnu. Unlike Shiva temples where his ‘vahana’, Nandi, sits outside facing the sanctum sanctorum, GSB temples have Sri Vishnu’s vahana (mount) in a separate ‘kaksha’, inside the temple.

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There is a view that the worship of these five deities is called *Panchayatana* Pooja. *Panchayatana* system of pooja is practiced by Smartas who follow the *Advaita Philosophy*. In this system of pooja, five (*pancha*) deities are worshipped viz, Vishnu, Shiva, Ambika, Surya and Ganesh who are placed in a predetermined order on the Altar. Vishnu grants *Moksha*, Shiva-Knowledge, Ambika-Wealth, Surya-Health and Ganapathi-Remover of obstacles (*nirvighnataa*).

The order of placement of the idols and their pooja is thus prescribed and must be strictly followed or else it is inauspicious for the worshipper, as explained in this shloka.

*ravirvinaayakashchandaI eeshO vishNusthu panchama:*

*anukramENa pUjyantE vyutkramEtu mahad bhayam*

There are 5 types of *Panchayatana* poojas viz *Vishnu Panchayatana, Shiva Panchayatana, Shakti Panchayatana, Surya Panchayatana* and *Ganesh Panchayatana* where the deity after whom the panchayatana is named, is placed in the centre. In each type, the Kuladeva of the ‘*aaradhaka*’ (worshipper) is placed in the centre and the other deities are placed at specific places around the main deity.
Sri Shankaracharya later added Sri Kartikeya to the five deities and established the ‘ShaNmata’ system of pooja.

I took an opportunity to seek enlightenment from His Holiness Srimad Sudhindra Teertha Swamiji of Sri Kashi Math, about panchayatans in GSB temples. His Holiness explained that even though five deities were propitiated, it was not Panchayatana Pooja. The Panchayatana Pooja is performed only by those following the Advaita system. The outer four deities have been installed because each has a special place in Maadhwa tradition as explained above.

This view is borne out by the fact that in Panchayatana Pooja of the Advaitins, all the deities are placed in their predetermined places on a single tiered altar, whereas in GSB Maadhwa temples, the ‘parivara devas’ are given separate ‘kakshas’ outside the Garbha Griha.

An important aspect of the Dwaita philosophy is the acknowledgement of a hierarchy (gradation) of souls, known as ‘Taaratamya’. There are 32 tiers in this hierarchy in which the jiva (ordinary mortal) is not included. The hierarchy is as follows:

1. Sriman Narayan
2. Goddess Lakshmi
3. Brahma and Vaayu
4. Saraswati and wife of Vayu, Bharati
5. Garuda, Shesha and Rudra (Shiva)
6. ..
7. ..
8. Indra .......
9. ..
18. Ganapathi
19. ....Harsishchandra, Prahlad, Parikshit etc.
20. etc

The list is very large and I have just given a few names to as to give an idea as to what hierarchy is. Some tiers have many names in them. All those in one tier are equal in status. The status diminishes as we go lower.

In all the Maadhwa GSB temples referred to in this ebook, this hierarchy is observed while performing pooja. As informed earlier, the chief deity in the Garbha Griha is one of the many forms of Sriman Narayana. So the first pooja / aarati is offered to Him. The next pooja is to Sri Lakshmi who is next in the hierarchy, followed by Sri Hanuman, Sri Garuda and finally Sri Ganapathi.

A few photographs of Sri Tirumalatatha Lakshmi Narasimha Temple, Ullal (near Mangalore), have been appended at the end of this ebook to explain what I have written above. Now this temple is unique in one more aspect. In all
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Vaishnava GSB temples, we find the icons of Dwarapalakas, Jai and Vijay, on pedestals just outside the Garbha Griha. But in this temple we find silver plated statues of Prahlad and Dhruva instead. Jai and Vijay have been placed outside the inner door of the Garbha Griha, which can be seen in the pictures. More pictures can be seen at the end of this ebook.

In the Garbha Griha, deities are placed in three tiers. They are actually different manifestations of the same Sriman Narayana.

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The Ullal Temple has Sri Venkataramana along with His consorts Bhoodevi and Sridevi placed on the top. His icon is not brought out of the Garbha Griha.

In the middle is Sri Lakshmi Narasimha, the presiding Deity (Pradhana Deva) of the Temple. His icon is also not brought out of the Garbha Griha.

At the bottom is Sri Vittal. This murthi called the ‘utsava murthi’, is the one which is brought out of the temple, in the palanquin, for all its various functions. It is also the one which is taken up on the Chariot (Ratha) during the
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Car Festival of the temple. This system, in which only a particular deity is brought out of the temple for any of its functions, is followed by all GSB temples. *(inset: Car Festival at Ullal Temple)*

The system of installing the ‘*parivara deva*’ as found in GSB temples is not mentioned in the abovementioned book by Sri Madhwacharya. However, such practice is not prohibited either. In fact during pooja, a Vaishnava, in addition to offering prayers to Vishnu, is required to offer prayers to a host of other deities called ‘*Abhimaani Devata(s)*’ in which the above Parivaara Deva(s) are included.

The answer to the question as to why the GSB’s adopted this style in their temple architecture is not readily available. I guess it must be somewhere buried in some old books. I am trying to unearth this ‘mystery’ and will inform readers when I find the answers.

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As I have written about hierarchy among divine beings above, I think I’ll offer some more of my thoughts on this subject.

Non-Hindus refer, not very respectfully though, to Sanatana Dharma’s numerous Gods and Goddesses and call it a polytheistic religion. Many Hindus tend to be apologetic and embarrassed by this, which I think is totally unwarranted. This embarrassment stems from a total lack of knowledge of the basics of our own religion.

As said earlier, one of the chief tenets of Dwaita philosophy is Gradation of souls in the astral plane. The ultimate goal for any adherent of Sanatana Dharma is attainment of Moksha. Moksha, according to Dwaita, is the state of being in which the soul, after accumulating requisite amount of ‘punya’ (*) is released from the bondage of rebirth and is given a place near God where it enjoys eternal bliss. Moksha, according to Dwaita, can be granted only by Vishnu and not by any lesser ‘gods’. This shows that there is only One omnipotent power in the universe. Advaita differs from Dwaita by saying, in Moksha, the soul merges (becomes one) with the one God of the universe.

[*punya’ can be described as the credit accumulated by your good deeds on earth, in your account in the Bank of Heaven]
According to Dwaita there is only ONE God. He is Vishnu. All other beings, mortal or supernatural, are lesser to Him. Such beings may be Devas, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Kinnaras, Brahmarishis and a host of other atmas and jivas. Vishnu is not a mere Deva. He is the Paramatma. All the powers of these lesser celestial beings flow from Him. If a person desires moksha, he/she should pray directly to Him. Lesser gods cannot grant you that because their powers are limited. (Bhagavad Gita - Jnana Vijnana Yoga – Chapter 7 Verses 20-23)

Advaita differs fundamentally from Dwaita in almost all respects. But when it comes to God, it also says that there is only one superpower up there referred to as ‘Brahman’. All the other forms of God are just sort of illusions because of the power of Maya of Brahman.

So we can see that both these foremost philosophies of Sanatana Dharma refer to One God only.

There are many references to the existence of One God only in the Vedas. For eg. the following verse can be found in the Rig Veda, the oldest and the most sacred of all Hindu Scriptures:

\[ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti\]

The Truth (God) is one; however scholars express it in different ways. [RV 1.164.46]
Christianity professes belief in One God. However, it also acknowledges the existence of lesser heavenly beings which are organized into several orders or Angelic Choirs. These beings are called Angels. There are three major orders (or choirs) among Angels given below in descending order of rank:

In the First Order, which is the closest to God, are:

- Seraphim
- Cherubim
- Thrones

In the Second (lower) Order, are:

- Dominions
- Virtues
- Powers
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In the Third Order, are:

- Principalities
- Archangels
- Angels

These angles have names like Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Jophiel, Chamuel etc. Lucifer was originally an angel of the First Order and after a falling out with God was banished to hell after which he became known as Satan.

Each type of angel has separate duties assigned to it. Moreover, every Christian believer has a personal guardian angel assigned to him at his/her at Baptism. Now, how many Christians are there in this world? And they laugh at just (?) 33 million Hindu deities (lesser Gods)!

Seraphim are the topmost in the hierarchy and are closest to God. They are described as very tall having four faces and six wings. Cherubim were also originally depicted as having four faces (human, lion, bull and eagle), four wings and ox’s feet. In later times however, the Cherubs have been pictured as chubby, rosy-faced, winged infants. And they make fun of Hindu Gods with non-human faces and multiple arms!!
This misconception about Hinduism being a polytheistic religion probably stems from the fact that the English Language has no names in its vocabulary for the groups of heavenly beings mentioned in Hindu philosophy. While ancient Indian philosophers had recognised the different classes of beings in the astral plane and gave different names to them in Sanskrit, the West put them all under one umbrella and called them all as Gods. Whether it was from a total lack of understanding of Hindu philosophy or with a malafide intention to denigrate Hinduism, one cannot say.

A proper study of Hindu Philosophy will show that there is only one God referred to as “Paramatma” or “Brahman” and the rest are mere ‘Deva(s)’ and other beings named above. In fact, one can liken the Hindu pantheon to a well run corporation. In a corporation, there is the CEO, the Boss, at the top, who has absolute power. Then there are Vice Presidents, General Managers, AGMs, DGMs, Managers, Officers, Clerks and other menial staff. Each has a specific job assigned to him. The power of the Head of each Department is limited to the area of work assigned to him. He has power to give small petty benefits to those working under him, like allowing someone to go home for the day early, sanctioning leave, sanctioning petty expenses etc. He cannot interfere in another’s area. Only the the Boss can elevate an employee to a higher position. If a particular Head of the Department would like to promote a deserving employee, he has to bring his case to the Boss, who is the only person who can approve it.
Likewise according to ancient Indian Philosophy, there is the “Paramatma” at the top of the hierarchy. All others are subservient to Him. Each has been assigned separate areas of work. Eg. Vayu is the Lord of the winds, Indra is the Lord of Thunder, Varuna is the Lord of rain and the oceans etc, Agni is the Lord of the fire and the carrier of all things offered in the ‘yagna’. All these beings report to and are under the control of ‘Paramatma’. These lesser Heavenly Beings have the power to give humankind only limited material benefits and only He has the power to grant eternal bliss to any deserving humanbeing.

This is, in fact, ’Corporate Governance’, at its best and you thought Corporate Governance is a modern day concept?

Photos: U. V. Kini and ‘Abhayahastha’, a souvenir published by the Ullal Temple.
The Dhwajasthambha and Deepa before the entrance to the inner structure surrounding the Garbha Griha.
The Sanctum Sanctorum (Garbha Griha) is situated in the Centre. Around the Sanctum is the passage where a worshipper makes his circumambulation. The Tulasi Vrundavan at the left of the picture can also be seen.
This picture indicates where the ‘Parivara Devas’ are installed around the four corners around the Garbha Griha.
A view of the ‘Kaksha’ of Sri Hanuman. Bhatmam performing the daily aarati and a closeup (inset)
The Kaksha of Sri Ganapathi. The daily arati and a close-up (inset).
The Kaksha of Sri Lakshmi. The daily arati and a close-up (inset).
The Kaksha of Sri Garuda. The daily arati and a close-up (inset).
The Presiding Deity of Tirumala Tatha Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Temple, Ullal.

Sri Lakshminarasimha along with Prahlad.
It is said that this is the only idol of Sri Lakshminarasimha which has Prahlad before it.
The Deities inside the Garbha Griha.

1. Sri Venkataramana
2. Sri Lakshminarasimha
3. Sri Vithala

...in full splendour.
Arati to the Main Deities.
A unique feature of this temple is, instead of the statues of Jai and Vijay (Dwarapalakas), there are statues of Dhruv and Prahlad just outside the door of the Garbha Griha.

Jai and Vijay have been placed outside the 2nd door of the Garbha Griha.

(The doors have been numbered for benefit of the viewers)
Before arati, Naivedya (food offering) is offered to the Lord. The curtain is lowered during this time.
Naivedya is also offered to the Parivaara Devatas in their respective kakshas.
‘Ranpakooda’ - Where the Bhatmaam takes his cleansing bath and prepares Naivedya for the Lord.
Pictures of the Subramanya Shrine at the back of the Temple

‘Abhisheka’ ceremony during ‘Naag Panchami’.
The mandatory ‘vaadya’ playing during aarati / pooja.