



Located atop a hillock, the sacred Babulnath Temple looms over the city at nearly 1000 feet above sea level. Taking the name Tekriwala in some texts (Sheppard 1917, 24), the temple evokes a spiritual journey akin to Mount Kailash, Lord Shiva's eternal abode. The Hindus believe the temple is an earthy resemblance of Mount Kailash (Gupta 2022). Due to the hilly slopes, the entrance hall is lower than the rest of the temple. On any given day, one can hear ardent devotees chanting "Om Namah Shivaay" as they climb 108 steps (a sacred number in Hinduism) to reach the temple.

Facing the Arabian Sea, the hills boasted a rich tropical foliage, including a grove of *Acacia arabica*, commonly known as Babhul, which was revered, likely serving as inspiration for the construction of the 'Babhalnath' shrine (Edwardes 1902, 40). Some attribute the establishment of the temple to the discovery of a black lingam around the year 1780 during the construction of the Hornby Vellard, Bombay Reclamation Project. A Marathi Carpenter named Babul uncovered the lingam. After clearing the terrace, he built a modest shrine with the deity within. Consequently, the temple is referred to as Babulnath or Babul's Lord in recognition of its discoverer and founder. A keeper, a Gujarat Brahman from the Audich Sahastra division, was appointed to oversee the temple (Raghunathji 1895, 38).

The Mumbai Parsi Panchayat acquired the North and East vacant land to build the Tower of Silence. With time, disagreements emerged between the priests (Pujaris) of the Babulnath Temple and the neighbouring Parsis. Seeking resolution, the temple priests approached Shrimant Malharrao Gaikwad, the king of Baroda (Vadodara) residing in Walkeshwar. With the assistance of Shrimant Malharrao, they filed a legal case in the Mumbai High Court to address the differences (Shree Babulnath Mandir Charities 2014).



The court favoured the Babulnath temple, and to mark this victory, someone from the Bhatia community assumed the responsibility of a new and more expansive temple project in 1836.

Sharing his dream, he garnered support from the affluent communities of Banias and Bhatas. The expansion project was completed successfully around 1840, primarily through financial contributions from the Gujarati trading communities. The construction made significant progress, featuring a splendid stone cross-carved shrine with a dome and spire, complemented by a roofed shrine encircling a terrace supported by intricately designed stone pillars. An elegant stone-pillared hall was also added. The builders expanded the temple surroundings and built stone benches (Raghunathji 1895, 38). There are plaques in the temples of people who offered more than 100 rupees during that time.

The temple underwent numerous renovations, incorporating additional structures into the temple complex. The temple was the tallest structure in Mumbai until 1890 when a lightning strike destroyed its gopuram (Gupta 2022). In 1900, a lofty spire was placed to enhance its magnificence (Babulnath. co 2023). The temple is constructed in the Gujarat-nagari style,

consisting of three main parts: the Garbhagriha housing the Lingam, the Sabha Mandap with a Nandi, and the Gudh Mandap with an Antaraal, a passage dividing the space between two Components (Gandhi 2010, 140-141). The temple complex includes the main temple, a Dharamshala, a congregation hall, a smaller temple, and two deepstambhas (a tall structure with brackets for oil lamps). Two peacock statues (vehicles of Shiva's son, Kartikeya) stand as Dwarpalas (guards). The shikhara has clusters of smaller shikhara (urusringa) at every angle. The standout features are the Jharokhas protruding from the main shikhara at different levels.

The two deepstambhas, influenced by Konkan architecture but built in the Gujarati style, were constructed in 1908 by Oza Mulji Asharam of Morvi in Saurashtra. In an interview with Historian Usha Vijaylakshmi, she mentions



that the temples of Mumbai during this period showcase prominent Nagara-style architecture because most of the artisans employed were Rajasthani (Vijaylakshmi 2023). These deepstambhas, topped with Tulsi Kyaris, are a rare occurrence. Another Tulsi Kyari, built in AD 1906 by Mathuradas Kalyanji, stands alone at the base of one of the deepstambhas (Gandhi 2010, 141). In 2016, a significant restoration encompassed the restoration of the intricate carvings and murals adorning the temple. Additionally, the temple installed a state-of-the-art light and sound system. Better access to the temple was possible because of the incorporation of modern amenities, such as air conditioning and elevators (Joshi 2023).



The primary deity of worship is the Shivlingam, adorned with a protective brass covering. Apart from the main Shivlingam, idols of Parvati and Ganesh, which were excavated at the site along with the Shivlingam, are also placed there. Positioned in the hall opposite the shrine is a black stone bull featuring silver-plated horns, while a stone carved with a tortoise lies between the bull and the shrine. At the temple wall at the back stands a stone representation of Maruti (Raghunathji 1895, 37). The pillars and ceiling of the temple are made of limestone and marble sourced from Rajasthan and decorated with scenes from Hindu mythology (Gupta 2022). The main door, the arches by the side windows, and the corners of the temple are decorated with pictures of gods and goddesses, along with different images of Durga Mahishasuramardini (Rohatgi, Godrej and Mehrotra 1997, 175).

The temple attracts crowds from all over the country during the festivals of Shivaratri and Shrivani Somvaar. The other prime day is Pethori Aamavasya, the last of Badrapad (August-September). The people accept the prasada with joy and devotion (Ranganathan 2009, 82). For the devotees, the jyot (light) of the diya (oil lamp) is the flame that flickers with hope and radiates the warmth of belief, lighting the path even in the darkest moment. In 1966, Mumbai experienced a severe drought. The devotees resorted to fetching water from the temple well. Climbing the steps, they carried the water to offer the Shivlingam, situated within the sacred Garbhagriha. From the break of dawn, the people tirelessly poured water onto the Shivlingam until it submerged. As the water level reached the toes of the idol of Mother Parvati, the black clouds swiftly gathered in the sky, heralding the onset of heavy rainfall. This extraordinary occurrence, remembered even today, is regarded not merely as a miracle but as a manifestation of divine blessings for those who earnestly pray (Shree Babulnath Mandir Charities 2014).

The 350-year-old idol is presently exhibiting signs of weathering, leading the temple authorities to implement restrictions on the Abhishek ritual. Babulnath has entrusted IIT-Bombay to address the deterioration of its ancient Shivlingam (Jaishinghani 2023). The team advised discontinuing offerings containing leachable elements to safeguard the integrity of the idols and prevent them from deteriorating. The report indicated that prolonged use of contaminated materials as offerings could damage the idols. The Shivlingam, as per the report, has experienced significant wear and tear. Since then, the temple authorities and devotees have been paying attention to the maintenance of the temple and the lingam.

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