

# A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CASE STUDY: THE OLDEST SUN TEMPLE IN MUMBAI

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## ABSTRACT

Lord Surya, or the Sun God, has long been regarded as one of the most important and popular celestial deities in Indian religious tradition. Since the time of the Harappan Civilization, the Indian subcontinent has witnessed the worship of various natural forces, among which the sun has held a central place as a source of light, energy, and strength. Despite this deep-rooted reverence, there are surprisingly few prominent Sun temples in India, the reasons for which remain largely unexplored. One such lesser-known temple is the 117-year-old Sri Suryanarayana Mandir located in Bhuleshwar, in the southern part of Mumbai. This temple remains relatively obscure and under-researched. The present study aims to examine the historical background and religious significance of the Sri Suryanarayana Mandir, while also exploring the various forms and practices of Saur Puja observed there. The research will draw on case studies, field visits, and relevant secondary sources to shed light on this often overlooked aspect of India's religious heritage.

**Keywords:** Lord Sun, Worship, Nature, God, Temple



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sun worship, or *Saur Puja*, has been a notable spiritual practice across civilizations and epochs, reflecting humanity's admiration for the Sun as a fundamental origin of life, energy, and healing. The Aryans and many ancient cultures worldwide, including those of Babylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Peru, and Japan have worshipped the Sun, recognizing it as a universal symbol of cosmic order and vitality. In India, the Sun God, known by various names such as *Ravi*, *Aruna*, *Bhanu*, and *Surya Narayan*, occupies a prominent place in both Vedic and Puranic traditions.<sup>1</sup> We get detailed information about *Surya Pūja* from the Vedic and non-Vedic literature. During Vedic period, gods were divided into three groups - The Terrestrial Gods, The Aerial Gods, and The Celestial Gods.<sup>2</sup> The Celestial Gods include the Dyaus, Mitra, Varuna, Savitri, Pushan, Vishnu, Aditi, Usha, Ashwins and the Surya.<sup>3</sup> Even the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* emphasize

<sup>1</sup> Dsouza, Eugene, *History of Ancient India*, Manan Prakashan, Mumbai, 2022, p. 95

<sup>2</sup> Dsouza, Eugene, *History of Ancient India*, Manan Prakashan, Mumbai, 2022, pp. 95

<sup>3</sup> Dsouza, Eugene, *History of Ancient India*, Manan Prakashan, Mumbai, 2022, pp. 95

*Surya's* divine status and his role as the giver of health, prosperity, and spiritual strength.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have different opinions about the origin of the Sun. According to Rigveda, he

is considered as a son of Lord Indra or Mitra-Varuna. But most of the scholars agree that he is the son of Sage Kashyap and Aditi.<sup>5</sup>

नूनं जनाः सुर्येन प्रसूता अयन्नर्थानि कृन्नपासि ||4||<sup>6</sup>

It means that the Sun, which awakens the entire world, also inspires people to engage in activities that lead to their economic prosperity. The Lord Sun holds significant spiritual, cultural, and practical importance. It traverses various traditions, sects, and historical periods, conveying a deep admiration for the sun as a divine entity. Lord Sun is seen as a symbol of cosmic order and regularity and can be viewed as an expression of respect for the natural laws and rhythms of the universe. Puranic Literature helps us understand multiple forms of worship. The *Markandeya Purana*<sup>7</sup> tells us the story of Lord Surya and how his unbearable light for Sanjana was regulated by the divine

sculptor Vishwakarma.<sup>8</sup> The *Vishnudharmottara Purana*<sup>9</sup> lays down the iconographical rules of making a *Surya murti*. According to the text, Lord Sun should be *Chaturbhuja* (four-armed), dressed in the style of the northern region, wearing a waist belt (*Yaviyanga*), holding a *danda* (staff), and surrounded by his family members.<sup>10</sup>

The Panchayatana system popularized by *Adi Shankracharya* includes Lord Surya, as a prominent deity, whose daily worship brings everlasting material and spiritual benefits.<sup>11</sup> Surya is also a part of the Navagraha. Some Festivals like *Chhath Puja*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Lohri*, and *Pongal* are dedicated to Surya. These celebrations involve rituals that honor the sun and express gratitude for its life-giving energy.

The study aims to trace the temple's historical evolution, examine its architectural and ritualistic features, explore devotee beliefs related to health and healing, and differentiate between traditional and contemporary worship practices. Employing a case study methodology, the research integrates field observations, interviews with temple priests and devotees, and an analysis of secondary sources including scriptures and scholarly literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Vivek Aarya, *Understanding the true meaning of Mitra-Varuna*, 2018.

<https://vedictruth.blogspot.com/2018/12/understanding-true-meaning-of-mitra.html> (Accessed on May 5, 2024.). Mitra and Varuna are important solar deities. The god of friendship, integrity, and harmony. Mitra is

sometimes depicted with solar characteristics and is associated with the light of dawn and the morning sun. The god of the sky and the guardian of cosmic order. Varuna is associated with the evening and the night. Mitra and Varuna are responsible for the sun's movement across the sky, with Mitra representing the east (sunrise) and Varuna representing the west (sunset).

<sup>5</sup> Aditi, in the Vedic phase of Indian mythology, is the personification of the infinite and mother of a group of celestial deities, the Adityas, that includes the Lord Surya.

<sup>6</sup> Pandit Mahadevshashtri Joshi, *Bhartiya Sanskriti Kosh*, Vol 8, Bhartiya Sanskriti Kosh Mandal, Pune, 1963, p.109.

<sup>7</sup> The Markandeya Purana is one of the eighteen major *Puranass*. It's notable for its philosophical depth, mythological narratives, and the inclusion of the Devi Mahatmya, a key text in Shaktism.

Bühler, G., & Pargiter, F. E., *The Markandeya Purana* (F. E. Pargiter, Trans.), Oxford University Press, London, 1904.

<sup>8</sup> Vishwakarma is a popular deity known as the divine architect, engineer, and craftsman of the gods. He is credited with building many of the mythological cities and weapons described in ancient Indian texts.

Doniger, W. (Trans.), *The Rig Veda: An anthology*, Penguin Classics, 1991, pp. 119–120.

<sup>9</sup> The Vishnudharmottara Purana is an important *Upapurana*. It is known for its encyclopedic treatment of arts, iconography, music, dance, architecture, and rituals, making it especially significant for the study of classical Indian culture.

Shah, P. (Ed. & Trans.), *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Vol. 3, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1990–1992.

<sup>10</sup> Shah, P. (Ed. & Trans.), *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Vol. 3, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1990–1992.

<sup>11</sup> Panchayatana Puja, also known as Pancha Devi Deva Puja, is a traditional system of worship within the Smarta sampradaya, one of the four major sampradayas. It consists of the worship of five deities set in a quincunx pattern, the five deities being Ganesha, Adi Shakti, Shiva, Vishnu and Surya. <https://www.advaita-vedanta.org/articles/panchatana-puja.htm> (Accessed on June 15, 2024.).

*Surya Pūja*, the worship of the Sun God, comprises an array of rituals and practices that honor *Surya* as the origin of life, energy, and healing. One of the foundational practices is the *Arghya* offering, where devotees stand facing the rising or setting sun and pour water from a vessel into their cupped hands while reciting sacred mantras such as the *Gayatri Mantra* or *Surya Ashtakshara*.<sup>12</sup> Many practitioners perform *Surya Namaskar*, a sequence of twelve yogic postures performed at sunrise. It is both a form of physical exercise and a spiritual salute to *Surya*, aligning body, breath, and mind with the sun's energy. Devotees also engage in the chanting of various *Surya* mantras including the *Aditya Hridayam*<sup>13</sup>, a powerful hymn consecrated to the Sun God that is believed to grant strength and protection.

Performing *Surya Pūja* offers a wide range of spiritual, physical, and psychological benefits that have been valued for centuries. Spiritually, it fosters a deep sense of connection with the cosmic order and divine energy. Physically, practices associated with *Surya Pūja*, such as *Surya Namaskar*, promote cardiovascular health, improve flexibility, and enhance vitality by stimulating the body's vital energy channels. Psychologically, the rituals and meditative aspects of *Surya Pūja* encourage mindfulness, reduce stress, and foster mental clarity and focus. Culturally, the practice strengthens community bonds during festivals and collective rituals, preserving important traditions and fostering social harmony. Despite its deep historical roots, Sun worship has become relatively marginalized within the urban religious landscapes of contemporary India. This study investigates the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* in Mumbai, the city's oldest and only surviving Sun temple, as a critical case for understanding the continuity, adaptation, and cultural significance of *Saur Pūja* in a rapidly modernizing metropolis.

## 1.1. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- To trace the historical continuity of Sun worship in Mumbai through the origins and evolution of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir*.
- To examine the architectural features of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir*, identifying elements that reflect its cultural and historical uniqueness among Mumbai's temple structures.
- To document and analyze the daily rituals and festival celebrations at the temple, highlighting their religious significance and any adaptations over time.
- To investigate the belief systems associated with Sun worship, particularly its perceived healing properties, and how these influence the practices and motivations of devotees.
- To explore the cultural and spiritual significance of *Surya* worship in the lives of devotees.

## 2. HYPOTHESES

The worship of Lord *Surya* at the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* in Mumbai reflects an unbroken continuity of ancient solar worship practices in urban India.

The belief in the Sun God's healing powers, especially for skin-related ailments, continues to influence the devotional practices at the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir*, demonstrating the interplay between faith and health.

The architectural features and ritual calendar of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* exhibit distinct elements that differentiate it from other temples in Mumbai, underscoring its unique cultural and historical value.

<sup>12</sup> The Gayatri Mantra was composed by Sage Vishwamitra, one of the most revered rishis in Vedic tradition. It appears in the Rigveda (Mandala 3, Hymn 62, Verse 10), which is attributed to him. The *Surya Ashtakshara* mantra refers to an eight-syllable mantra dedicated to *Surya*, the Sun god. Though less commonly known than the Gayatri, it is used in solar worship. This helps to invoke *Surya* as the giver of health, vitality, and wisdom.

<sup>13</sup> The *Aditya Hridayam* is a sacred hymn dedicated to Lord *Surya* (the Sun God), found in the Yuddha Kanda of the *Ramayana*, composed by Sage Valmiki. It was recited by Sage Agastya to Lord Rama before his battle with Ravana, to empower him with strength and victory. The hymn glorifies the Sun as the soul of the universe and a source of energy, health, and success.

H. P., Shastri (Trans.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, Vol. 6, Motilal Banarsidass, 1952, p. 324.

### 3. SCOPE OF THE THEME

This study presents a multidimensional exploration of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir*, offering a comprehensive analysis of its religious, architectural, and cultural significance. It traces the temple's origin and evolution, highlighting its unique founding narrative rooted in personal healing and spiritual revelation.

The study further documents the temple's distinctive ritual practices, emphasizing their cyclical structure and resonance with solar rhythms. Particular attention is given to healing beliefs associated with the temple, notably its integration of health-related practices targeting skin and eye ailments, sun-gazing rituals, and an emphasis on environmental harmony. Drawing on ethnographic methods-including interviews with the resident priest and observations of devotees, the research underscores how ancient Saurya traditions are preserved and adapted within a modern urban setting.

### 4. LIMITATIONS

This study is based on a single case study and may not be representative of broader Saurya traditions or Surya temples across India. Devotee perceptions of healing are primarily anecdotal and are not corroborated by clinical or medical evidence. The research relied heavily on interviews with a single resident priest and was conducted over a limited fieldwork period, which may have constrained the diversity of perspectives captured. Furthermore, due to the temple's location in a densely populated urban area, its interactions with the surrounding environment, though potentially significant for understanding ritual experience and spatial dynamics, were not examined in depth. Finally, the scarcity of archival material about the temple's early years limits the ability to reconstruct its founding history and patterns of patronage in full detail.

### 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature. It aims to investigate the historical, cultural, architectural, and ritualistic significance of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* in Bhuleshwar, Mumbai. The research will also explore the broader context of *Saur Puja* (Sun worship), examining its historical continuity and its marginalization in modern urban religious life. The study focuses on tracing the historical evolution of the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* in Mumbai, exploring its architectural features, daily rituals, and major festivals. It also aims to understand the beliefs of devotees, particularly the association of Sun worship with healing, while examining the distinction between traditional practices and those that have been adapted over time within the temple's ritual and cultural framework. The research will be based on a case study approach, combining field observations, interviews with temple priests and devotees, and the analysis of secondary sources such as historical texts, academic articles, and archival records.

### 6. FINDINGS (RESULTS)

The *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir*, located in the narrow lanes of *Bhuleshwar* in South Mumbai, stands as the city's oldest and one of its only surviving temples dedicated to Lord Surya, the Sun God. Despite its historical and cultural richness, the temple remains relatively lesser-known in the mainstream religious landscape of Mumbai. Built in 1899 by philanthropist Harjivan Vasanti Maniyar, the temple's origin is closely tied to a personal spiritual journey<sup>14</sup>. Suffering from vitiligo, Maniyar was advised by his spiritual teacher to construct a temple dedicated to the Sun God revered as 'Arogya Dev', the deity of health and healing.<sup>15</sup> Devoted to this cause, Maniyar began construction, reportedly

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<sup>14</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

experiencing relief from his ailment before passing away. The temple was eventually completed by his wife, and today the temple is managed by a trust.<sup>16</sup>

The temple architecture reflects significant symbolism and iconography. Its outer walls are adorned with 49 rishis, each depicted with distinct mudras and objects.<sup>17</sup> The sanctum sanctorum features a grand idol of Surya seated on a single-wheeled chariot pulled by seven horses, driven by *Aruna*.<sup>18</sup> The shikhara (temple tower) is guarded by the Ashta-Dikpalakas, or eight directional deities *Brahma*, *Kalbhairava*, *Yamaraja*, *Vishwakarma*, *Shiva*, *Agni*, *Vishnu*, and *Yagnya Narayan* emphasizing the temple's alignment with Vedic cosmology.<sup>19</sup>

The temple is open for everybody from morning 6 am to 12 pm and from afternoon 4 pm to Sunset. Currently, the temple has only one Priest, *Pandit Parimal Purohit*, who performs all the *Pūja* in the temple. He has been working in the temple since 1981, for almost 45 years.<sup>20</sup> According to him, the temple was built in 1899 by Harjivan Vasanji Maniyar. No changes have been made to the temple's architecture since it was erected. He believes that there are different ways of worshipping the sun god, and the rituals performed can change from temple to temple like in the Suryanarayan temple *Surya Pūja* is performed. and he every day performs *Trikal Havan* at sunrise, then in the afternoon, and the evening before sunset.<sup>21</sup> *Surya Sankranti* is a festival that is celebrated in the temple on the 14th, and 15th of every month by performing havan for twelve hours. Various fruits like pomegranate, wheat, jaggery, and green vegetables are offered to Lord Sun as *naivedya* or Sacred Offerings. Rice porridge is given as *prasad* to all the devotees. There is a board of instructions at the entrance that lists the practices that should be avoided in the temple, like wearing black clothing or carrying leather objects like belts, wallets.

Temple guidelines reflect a focus on purity and symbolism; black clothing and leather items are discouraged, preserving ritual sanctity.<sup>22</sup> The priest emphasizes Surya's connection to health, especially skin and eye ailments, advising a few remedies which can be useful for devotees with skin disease and eye problems. The devotees should engage in sun-gazing practices at dawn and dusk, while barefoot and wearing white clothing.<sup>23</sup> These recommendations reveal the intersection of faith, body, and environment, and support the hypothesis that Surya worship is viewed not only as a spiritual practice but also as a path to physical well-being.

He also mentioned that those who worship Surya Dev cannot see the darkness, their body always receives both positive energy and immunity, so they do not fall sick.

This case study draws from field interviews, ritual observations, and secondary literature, aligning with the objectives of documenting religious continuity, understanding adaptive rituals, and situating the temple within a larger framework of Saurya traditions in India. Through this lens, the *Sri Suryanarayana Mandir* emerges not merely as a sacred structure but as a living repository of a fading yet resilient devotional tradition in the heart of a rapidly modernizing city.

<sup>16</sup>[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.myyatradiary.com/2022/02/ancient-shree-suryanarayan-temple-bhuleshwar-mumbai.html%23google\\_vignette&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1725467994175097&usg=AOvVaw039Cle5iXmB5FcOqolCOZc](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.myyatradiary.com/2022/02/ancient-shree-suryanarayan-temple-bhuleshwar-mumbai.html%23google_vignette&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1725467994175097&usg=AOvVaw039Cle5iXmB5FcOqolCOZc) (Assessed on July 12, 2024.)

<sup>17</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> *Trikal Havan* is a type of ritual in which offerings are made thrice a day at specific points of time.

In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Havan, also known as homa or homam, is a Sanskrit word that refers to any ritual wherein offerings are made into a consecrated fire. The word comes from the Sanskrit root word hu, meaning "to offer" or "to present."

[https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/6783/havan#google\\_vignette](https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/6783/havan#google_vignette) (Accessed on July 3, 2024.).

<sup>23</sup> In an Interview with Parimal Purohit, Temple Priest at Sri Suryanarayana Temple, Bhuleshwar on June 11, 2024.



## 7. CONCLUSION

Lord Sun, known by various names such as *Ravi*, *Aruna*, *Bhanu*, *Pusha*, *Hiranyagarbha*, *Marichin*, *Aditya*, and *Bhaskara*, holds a unique place in Indian spiritual traditions. Lord Surya has been worshipped since ancient times, and is revered as a universal source of light and blessings, accessible to all. This inclusive nature of Surya worship forms the foundation of *Saur Pūja*, practiced widely across India and exemplified by the *Sri Surya Narayan Mandir*, Mumbai's oldest and only Sun temple.

Guided by the research objectives, this study traced the historical evolution of the temple, documented its architectural features and rituals, explored devotee beliefs regarding Surya's healing powers, and examined the distinctions between traditional and adapted worship practices. Using a case study methodology, combining field observations, interviews with temple priests and devotees, and analysis of secondary sources, the study sought to validate key hypotheses related to the continuity of solar worship traditions, marginalization within urban religious landscapes, and the cultural significance of Surya's healing symbolism.

The *Sri Surya Narayan Mandir* embodies historical continuity through its preserved architecture and ritual calendar, while daily practices such as the *Trikal Havan* highlight the temple's ongoing spiritual vitality. Devotees' belief in Surya as the '*Arogya Dev*' manifests in rituals aimed at healing skin and eye ailments, confirming the temple's role in integrating faith with health. However, the study also notes the marginalization of *Saur Pūja* in broader city-wide religious practices, underscoring the importance of preserving this unique cultural heritage for future generations. The temple's preservation is thus critical not only as a site of worship but as a symbol of Mumbai's diverse religious history and the enduring human quest for health, harmony, and spiritual well-being.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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