

Temple Architecture of Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala is a land of temples, and temples were the pivot of religious, social, economic and cultural life of the Malayalam people. That Kerala's temples show a distinctive style was accepted by one and all from the very beginning. Kerala's architecture is an ensemble of simplicity and elegance. It is tailored to suit Kerala's climate and culture. The time-tested dexterity of Kerala's master architectures is ostensible in the construction of umpteen temples, mosques and churches bestrewn across the state. The characteristic regional expression of Kerala architecture results from the geographical, climatic and historic factors. This paper seeks to study the history of temple architecture and its impact on the people of Kerala.

Key words:

Kerala, Temple Architecture, Culture, Contemporary Architecture, Kerala Tradition

INTRODUCTION

Kerala abounds in splendid architectural monuments. The State is dotted with prehistoric megaliths, tombs, caves, temples, mosques, churches, theatres, houses, palaces and public buildings, built and renovated over centuries representing a panorama of architectural development. "The aesthetic appeal of these buildings mainly arise from the simplicity of form and functional perfection. The characteristic regional expression of Kerala architecture results from the geographical, climatic and historic factors. The form of the buildings with low walls, sloping roof and projecting eaves was mostly evolved from climatic considerations for protection from excessive rain and intense solar radiation. The setting of the buildings in the open garden plot

was again necessitated by the requirement of wind for giving comfort in the humid climate (Balagopal Prabhu, 1999). The architecture of Kerala used to be of a humble scale, merging with nature. Now, amid lush green vegetation has come up sprawling structures with mind-blowing designs.

In the words of K.V. Eapen (1980), “Kerala has made substantial contribution to the science in architecture. In Kerala, architecture could be noted a confluence of various influences all processed and transmuted by the demands of local conditions and local culture. The ancient temples of Kerala bear witness to the high level of proficiency attained by the people in sculpture and engraving.”

Kerala architecture comprises temples and dwelling houses, which latter until the middle of the 16th century at least, were built of mud; the local convention required that houses of wood and stone were built only for Kings and Gods. Every one else had to live in mud houses (i.e. temporary structures)

Contemporary architecture of Kerala displays two diverse trends. The first one is derived from a modernistic style emphasizing concrete as the medium of construction and linear, cubical or curvilinear shapes for expressing forms. This trend prevails in the whole country. There is also an alternate stream which digs into the traditional style and tries to engage in the revival of functional architecture. Doyens like Laury Baker advocated the latter trend through the use of indigenous materials, adoption of traditional techniques and matching of climatic needs in architecture. Baker houses-which are cost effective and nature friendly gained immense coinage in Kerala.

Architecture stands out as an expression of social values. Kerala has witnessed constant changes in the architectural patterns, yet a distinct regional character has evolved, influenced by the indigenous materials, climate and aesthetic values. Innovations in technology and the synthesis of evolved architecture have posed a challenging proposition to contemporary architecture. The regional character acquired through the ages is put to test as there are several undercurrents as regards social values of simplicity, functional perfection and aesthetics. But as of now, the diverse tastes and interests of people of Kerala and the immigrants from outside the state are manifested in an admixture of skyliners and traditional Kerala architecture giving emphasis to the use of natural elements.

The building materials normally available for construction in Kerala are stones, timber, clay and palm leaves. The availability of granite is restricted mostly to the highlands and only marginally in other parts. Balagopal Prabhu is of the view that the skill in quarrying, dressing and sculpturing of stone is scarce in Kerala. Laterite is abundant in many zones of Kerala. Laterite blocks may be bonded in mortars of shell lime, which have been the classic joining material used in traditional buildings. Lime mortar can be improved in strength and endurance by admixtures of vegetable juices.

Such enriched, mortars were used for plastering or for serving as the base for mural painting and low relief work. Many palaces and temples of Kerala stand testimony to his Timber, since ages, is the prime structural material of Kerala

abundantly available a many varieties from bamboo to teak. Prabhu states that “Perhaps the skillful choice of timber, accurate joinery, artful assembly and delicate carving of wood work for columns, walls and roofs frames are the unique characteristics of Kerala architecture.”

The extensive use of clay are also found-for walling, in filling, the timber floors and making bricks and tiles after pugging and tempering with admixtures. The effective use of palm leaves could be seen in thatching of roofs and in the making of partition walls. Due to the limitations of the materials, a mixed mode of construction evolved in Kerala architecture. The stone work could be seen restricted to the plinth even in temples. Laterite was used for the construction of walls. The roof structure in timber was covered with palm leaf thatching for most buildings and tiles were rarely used for palaces or temples. The exterior of the laterite walls were either left as such or plastered with lime mortar to serve as the base for mural painting. The sculpturing of the stone was mainly moulding in horizontal bands in the plinth portion (adhistsans), while the caving of timber covered all elements – pillars, beams, ceiling rafters and the supporting brackets. The Kerala murals are essentially paintings with vegetable dyes on wet walls in subdued shades of brown. The indigenous raw materials and their projection as enduring media for architectural expression, through the ages became the dominant feature of the Kerala style.

In the words of Chummar Choondal (2003): “The architectural treatise of tribes of Kerala is really indigenous and reflects the essence of their social circumstances and westle. ‘Erumadom’ – made stop trees and used as a watch tower is made of bamboo, sugar cane grass, etc.” Such structures are modified as tree houses and is very popular as supplementary accommodation among tourists.

Historic Factors of Development

The locational feature of Kerala influenced the social development and indirectly the style of construction. In the ancient period the sea and the ghats formed impenetrable barriers paving the way for the evolution of an isolated culture of Proto Dravidians contemporary to the Harappan civilization. The museum buildings at Thiruvananthapuram exhibit the ideal blending of the Kerala character with the foreign workmanship. And the high walls, creeping designs with flower motifs, etc. having a distinctive British flavor do not affect their total character. Padmanabhapuram palace at Takkala, which is now in Tamil Nadu, is an old palace preserved as an archeological monument with the typical architectural qualities of Kerala tradition, like the broad pathway to the frontage, walls resembling those of the temple, gabled roof, etc. In fact, the areas south of Kerala, which now belong to Tamil Nadu, have very prominent temple structures which constitute a combination of Kerala and Tamil architecture, like the Subrahmanya temple at Kumarakovil, the Devi temple at Kanyakumari, etc. However, the old dwelling house in this area, especially those of Nayers, have pure Kerala architecture.

The Kerala style is noted for its simplicity and is different from the Dravidian gopuram structure having columns with carved deific figures stretching to reach heaven in all its largeness and elaborateness. The Tamil concept of architecture was

first brought to Kerala in the late sixteenth century when the work of the present gopuram was introduced in the Sri Padmanabha temple at Trivandrum. It is a change which symbolically represents the introduction of a new architectural style.

Temple Architecture of Kerala

In the words of R.V. Poduval: “The early works of art in Kerala, executed in permanent materials have perished utterly beyond all doubt. They existed in large numbers in various parts of the country from Kaniyakumari to Kasargod, and were the foundation of more enduring works. Among these, the temples are the most important ones, and were designed by artists who brought to bear their skill on them, acquired by generation of practice. Their edifices were artistically conceived and delicately modeled and carved. Though they are not stupendous or magnificent architectural specimens, they are simple in elegance and beauty of form. Dated structural monuments are rather rare in Kerala, and those existing now were subjected to extensive modifications, and alterations from time to time, that it is difficult or impossible to fix their dates with any accuracy. This is a serious limitation as regards the authenticity of cultural tourism experience. The structures, sculptures and monuments have undergone revitalization and restoration and hence to trace the original form is too difficult. What is left now is outstanding symbols offering certain aesthetic delight. Most of the temples in Kerala built on the indigenous gable style of architecture were originally constructed entirely of wood and much of the stone temples in existence are as Dr. Kramrisch has pointed out close imitations of the wooden ones. “The temples and other structures with the gable roofs lack both the costliness and grandeur of the Dravidian structures, but they are neat and simple, with provision for admitting plenty of light and fresh air, and in these respects are undoubtedly superior to the costly edifices of the Dravidian style. This indigenous style is peculiar to Kerala and indeed the like of it is not known to exist anywhere else in India. The chief characteristic of this style is that wood enters largely into its construction” (Travancore State Manual, Vol.1).

Temples in Kerala were the pivot of religious, social, economic and cultural life of the Malayalam people. That Kerala’s temples show a distinctive style was accepted by one and all from the very beginning. It is largely the local adaptation of the Dravida or south Indian tradition, considerably influenced by various geographical factors like the high precipitation, the availability of laterite formation and dense jungles. It is not easy to lay bare the divergent architectural strains formation and dense jungles. It is not easy to lay bare the divergent architectural strains that converged to give rise to Kerala’s characteristic temple-form. Furthermore, the nebulous political history of the early phase and some sort of historical isolation have made the story of its architecture devoid of true perspective. It is often believed that the architecture of Nepal and other Himalayan regions is similar to that of Kerala. Likewise, it is compared with the architecture of various Far Eastern countries. But it has to be borne in mind, before suggesting any common like that an area of heavy rainfall or snow will naturally develop sloping roofs, further, there are certain inherent

patterns in timber constructions which give rise to similar external forms and features. A few images of Budha come also from places like Karmudi, Mavelikara, Bharanikavu and Pallikkal situated in the Quilon-Alleppey region, once forming part of the Ay territory.

The history of Kerala's temple-architecture suffers from many a lacunae, for in like the Chalukya, Pallava, Chola and other traditions, it is hardly represented by any infact monument. Of the various parts of a temple, only the adhishtana, bhitti, and to some extent, prastara escaped the ravages of time. These parts are made of stone, while the superstructure is built mainly of timber, which naturally needs periodical replacement or alteration. Compared to Tamil Nadu, the gopuras of Kerala are insignificant in height and dimensions. Yet they are endowed with grace and nobility, and the architects of Kerala have never allowed them to outshine the temple proper. Like the temples, these are also built of laterite and wood. Roots are made of tiles, and rise to a height of three talas over the gateway. Sometimes, one find the use of reverse saves here but the commonest use of such wooden eaves is in the balikkal-mandapa of small proportions. Surprisingly, the idea of diminutive shrine fronted by a larger mandapa never reached Kerala. Its greater achievement is the harmonious blend of Dravida temple with the indigenous Kerala idiom in which the compositions could still maintain their individual entities.

Broadly speaking, the sculptural art of the Kerala tradition may be divided into two: sculptures in the round and bas-reliefs. Under the first group may be included deities, dvara-palas and bhuta-ganas. Not many deities, ascribable to the later phase, could be examined as they are mostly under worship inside the sanctum. An image of four-armed seated Ganesa from the Bhagavati temple at Tiruvalattur, District Palghat, the image of Mahishamardini from the Niramankara temple and a number of vimanadevatas from the Tali temple at Kozhikode may be taken as representatives of this group. In the last-mentioned temple can be seen deities like Ganesa, Subrahmanya, Vishnu, four-armed Siva standing below multi-headed snake, Parvati, Rama, Saraswati and other images in stone fixed on the southern and northern walls of the projecting mukha-mandapa. All the images are sthanaka-murtis and have somewhat stumpy appearance. The modeling is far from ideal and appears to be the combination of the Kerala style with the Nayaka tradition.

In sculptural content, there are only a few shrines, akin to the Kerala style of temples, that can rival the artistic wealth of the Suchindram temple. This tradition of sculptural art must have come into existence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period of Kerala's prosperity, and also of conflict with European ideals. The wood-sculpture in Kerala has somewhat a realistic form in the sense that it has no resemblance to the original shape of the material. Here the draftsman has practically brought his creations so to say, to the level of plastic art. Like the stone-sculpture, the wood-carvings of Kerala followed the tradition of making images in the round as well as in the reliefs. The latter category may be compared with the minute and delicate execution of the goldsmith's art.

Temple architecture in Kerala is different from that of other regions in India. Largely dictated by the geography of the region that abounds in forests blessed with

the bounties of the monsoons, the structure of the temples in Kerala is distinctive. The roofs are steep and pointed, and covered with copper sheets. The Kerala roof resembles those found in the Himalayan regions and those in East Asia. The shape of the roof is in accordance with the plan of the sanctum below. With a circular plan, one sees a conical roof, while with a square plan the roof is pyramidal. The roof is constructed with wood and is covered with copper plates. Most of the temples seen in Kerala today, have undergone several phases of renovation, given the perishable nature of the construction materials. The central sanctum of a Keralite temple is referred to as the Sree Kovil. It is surrounded by a cloistered prakara, pierced at one or more cardinal points with a gopuradwara. The cloistered prakaram has a namaskara mandapam located directly in front of the sanctum. This prakaram also houses subsidiary shrines. The mukha mandapam is integrated with the gopura entrance. The flagstaff of dwaja stambham is located outside. The balipitham may be located in the mukhamandapam or in the outer courtyard. The outer prakaram or courtyard houses other subshrines, and optionally a temple tank.

Basically, temple architecture tradition of Kerala comes within the mainstream of Indian temple building tradition. Though, in the detailed articulation of its formal structure, Kerala temple follows its own indigenous methods, the basic conceptions are not something different or extraneous from the total cultural developments of the mainland. Temples in Kerala used to be called in earlier times as mukkalvattom. Later they came to be called ambalam or kshetram or sometimes tali. The Kerala temple has srikovil as its main core, which usually stands in east-west axis and the plan may be square, rectangular, circular, elliptical or apsidal ground plan. Compared to the other temple styles in the mainland like Dravida, Nagara and Vasara, Kerala temple tradition has distinct characteristics especially in their formal structure. The architectural style of Kerala temples has an inherent simplicity which becomes very conspicuous when juxtaposed to the exuberance of the Nagara, Vasara and Dravida temple styles. In explaining this, influence of the natural environment upon the temple form has to be recognized along with the socio-historical developments.

This interdependence or the reciprocal relationship between environment and architecture can be further noticed in the construction of superstructures in Kerala temples. The two monsoons a year, and the moisture of Kerala weather has a direct bearing on the use of sloping roofs and the selection of raw materials by which the superstructure is being constructed. The superstructure as a conspicuous example shows an accurate usage of indigenous raw materials like timber and tiles to go with the climate conditions. Vast majority of temples have their bases built of granite, the walls made either of wood, bricks and stucco or laterite. The sloping superstructure made of wooden planks, tiles or sheet metal on timber frames, are adopted to suit the high rainfall of the region. The roof timbers rest directly on the wall and coverage in gable form to meet at the top. The roofing material covering the timber framework is clinker built. It is made up of wooden planks overlapping one another, and covered over by clinker tiles or lies highly heated in kilns with a glazy smooth surface that makes them water proof. The details given above substantiate that the raw materials used are meant to withstand the damp weather. Unlike the other architectural traditions in the mainland the design of Kerala temples shows a close similarity with the domestic architecture of the region. The earliest studies of Kerala temples include

references to houses, with Stella Kramrisch pointing out the nalukettu and ettukettu houses, with four or eight wings, apartments on rooms, were built according to requirements of the classical Vastusastra, the architectural treatise. This closeness of layout between the secular and religious architecture are not in fact uncommon when considering other traditions all round the world. In fact, the major architectural traditions like Greek, Japanese, Chinese and Islamic; show the evidences of this inter-relationship. Further, the first mosque in Arabia was designed after the prophet's house. In Kerala, however, logical hypotheses are needed to identify any sort of relationship between the two. The surviving Nair houses have many structural elements like raised foundations, wall and ceiling carvings, steeply sloping roofs, etc, that are reminiscent of temple architecture. The building materials used in the sacred and domestic architecture, viz timber, laterite, brick and stucco are also the same, and thus create identical textural surfaces. Most conspicuous similarity between the two is in the presence of the inner courtyard that is open to the sky. The courtyard in both the cases is depressed slightly, but in the case of temple design it encloses the srikovil and provides space for circumambulation while in domestic types, it is entirely an open space except for the presence of a pedestal to grow the sacred tulasi plant. Functionally, space thus constructed within the architecture provides the interior with proper air and light. Here, the light is being enclosed in the architectural form and its rays, streaming forth at predetermined points are compressed, and attenuated and thus creating an air of openness within the architectural complex.

Most of the temples, some with original adisthatna, dating from eighth-ninth centuries of the Christian era, have considerably renovated superstructures, and as a result do not reveal much of their original forms. Moreover, the inscriptions of Kerala temples are often restricted only to the plinth of the temples. This is so because the very format of the temples largely using laterite, stucco and timber prevent epigraph from being engraved on the body of the temple. Inscriptional evidences of the ninth-tenth centuries, clearly inform us of the beginning of temple building in Kerala. The cave temples of seventh-eighth centuries in Kerala on hard granite medium imbibed direct inspiration from Tamil country especially the Pandyas of Madurai through the passes in the Western Ghats which link Kerala with Tamil plains. Nevertheless, Kerala rock-cut architecture could evolve certain distinct mannerisms of its own. When one views the Kerala tradition of rock-cut architecture in the wider context of the mainland, i.e., in comparison to the rockcut architecture of Mahabalipuram, Ellora and Elephanta, it is seen that the quantum of its contribution is minimal. This is due to the limitation of the very granite medium used. The Kerala temple could, however, overcome this limitation in the subsequent centuries by making use of the indigenous raw materials like timber, brick and stucco, laterite etc, which formed more versatile media, functionally as well as structurally.

From the central Kerala group, the one at Kaviyur (later half of eighth century) is a well finished example, the reliefs of which show a mature plastic tradition. This Saivite cave comprises of a shrine with a linga, an ardhmandapam and a pillared façade, all arranged axially facing the west. The floor of the cave is a few feet above the natural ground level and is approached by a flight of steps. The pillars in the façade divide the breadth of the cave into three openings of an almost equal distance from one another. Walls of this spacious ardhmandapam contain reliefs of the donor

or chieftain, a bearded rishi, a seated four armed Ganesa, and the dwarapalas. The style of these sculptures clearly shows an indubitable Pandyan influence. Sarkar points out the close resemblance between the dwarapala figure at Kaviyur and the one noticed at Sevelpatti and Tirumalapura, both in the Pandyan territory. Soundara Rajan also has the same opinion, and goes further to say that: "The examples of the central Kerala groups have strong Pandyan influence, except for two factors: the lingam is often of the arsha type with a tapering top and the pitha is of multiple cut stone masonry blocks and these distinctive features link them closely and directly with Pandyan country.

In southernmost Kerala, the temple architecture was also influenced by the developments in Tamil Nadu. At Sucheendram and Thiruvananthapuram this influence is clearly seen. Herein lofty enclosures, sculptures corridors and ornate mandapas all in granite stone practically conceal the view of the original main shrine in typical Kerala style. The entrance tower-gopuram-also rises to lofty heights in a style distinct from that of the humble two storeyed structure seen elsewhere.

Technically, the most important feature of the temple architecture of Kerala is the construction technique using a dimensional standardization. The nucleus of the temple plan is the shrine containing the garbhagriha cell. The canonical rules of the proportionate system are given in the treatises and preserved by the skilled craftsmen. The proportionate system has ensured uniformity in architectural style irrespective of the geographical distribution and scale of construction.

Temple architecture is a synthesis of engineering and decorative arts. The decorative elements of the Kerala temples are of three type-mouldings, sculptures and painting. The moulding is typically seen in the plinth where in horizontal hands of circular and rectangular projections and recesses in varying proportions help to emphasize the form of the adisthana. Occasionally this plinth is raised over a secondary platform-upapeedam-with similar treatment. Mouldings are also seen in the mandapam, the hand rails of the steps (sopanam) and even in the drain channel (pranala) or the shrine cell.

The sculptural work is of two types. One category is the low relief done on the outer walls of the shrine with masonry set in lime mortar and finished with plaster and painting. The second is the sculpturing of the timber elements – the rafter ends, the brackets, the timber columns and their capitals, door frames, wall plates and beams. Decorative sculpture work is seen best in the ceiling panels of the mandapas. Exquisite lacquer work in brick red and black colour was adopted for turned columns of timber. Metal craft was also used in sculpturing idols, motifs, cladding and fenials. All sculptural works were done strictly according to the canons of proportions (ashtathala, navathala and dasathala system) applicable to different figures of men gods and goddesses, prescribed in texts. The painting was executed in organic pigments on walls when the plaster was still wet-in soft subdued colours, making them into a class designated as Kerala murals. The theme of these paintings is invariably mythological and the epic stories unfold as one goes around the temple in circumambulations. The moulding, sculpture and painting are also taken in vertical compositions to emphasize the different storey heights, projecting dormer windows

which break the sloping roof and the crowning finial. But in all cases the decoration is secondary to the structural form. The sculptured walls are protected by the projecting caves which keep them in shade in sharp contrast with the bright sunlit exterior. This helps to impart the overall perceptual experience of light and shade, revealing details only gradually to a keen observer.

In point of size and the effect arising from it, the temples in the indigenous gable style of architecture are not in the same category as the lofty structures of the Dravidian style. Many are low in elevation but some of them are of great extent. The pediment is generally of laterite, but woodwork with singular neatness enters largely into their composition. The Shiva temples at Vaikom, Trichur and Ettumanur are the finest examples of this style of architecture.

CONCLUSION

Kerala has evolved from very early days its own types of temple architecture each of which can be associated with some area or other in the state. The Kerala temples look very much different from those of Tamil Nadu in so far as the majestic gopuram is generally conspicuous by its absence. The temples are not only square or rectangular but also circular, apsidal, and elliptical too in rare cases. The dominance of the circular shrines, not seen anywhere else in India, is a unique feature of temple architecture in Kerala.

It may also be noted that the majority of the Kerala temples have walls made of laterite blocks, but some made entirely on granite, except the superstructures, maybe seen in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam Districts. In the Kottayam and Alleppey areas many temples have their walls made entirely of wood and they are rich in wood-carvings, representing puranic stories. The sloping roof and the lavish use of wood in superstructures have also invested the Kerala temples with a distinct personality of their own.

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