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TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF KERALA— AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract Temples have held an important place in the life of Keralites. Several temples in Kerala trace their origins to antiquity. However, they were renovated frequently and the current structures that are seen are vastly a result of the numerous renovations. The history of Kerala dates back to the Cheras of the third century BC. The temples of Kerala are referenced in the works of the Tamil Alwar Saints and the Nayanar Saints. Kulasekhara Alwar and Cheraman Perumaal (one of the Nayanars) belonged to the Cheras of the ninth century AD. There are several works on temple architecture written in Kerala during the 15th and the 16th centuries.

Key Words –Cheras, Alwar, Nayanar, Ambalam, Ay Kingdom, Sastras

INTRODUCTION

The history of Kerala dates back to the Cheras of the third century BC. The temples of Kerala are referenced in the works of the Tamil Alwar Saints and the Nayanar Saints. Kulasekhara Alwar and Cheraman Perumaal (one of the Nayanars) belonged to the Cheras of the ninth century AD. There are several works on temple architecture written in Kerala during the 15th and the 16th centuries. The Bhakti literature of the 16th century played an important role in the temple culture of Kerala. The Maharajas of Travancore were ardent patrons of temples.

Temples have held an important place in the life of Keralites. Several temples in Kerala trace their origins to antiquity. However, they were renovated frequently and the current structures that are seen are vastly a result of the numerous renovations.

Temples have an important place in the lives of Keralites for centuries and there are numerous old temples dating back to centuries built by several kings belonging to different dynasties. There are some temples modeled after Dravidian style too, prevalent in neighboring Tamil Nadu. Though Agama Sastra tradition of worship is followed in numerous temples, 'Tantric tradition' of worship is quite prevalent, notably at Kali or Bhagavathy Amman (Goddess) temples. There is a wise saying in Tamil " Kovil ellaatha ooril kudi errukka vendaam" meaning never live in a place where there is no temple or ambalam. This is also true of Kerala. A part of their social life is also associated with temples where there is space for dance or Koothu recitals.

Temple architecture is normally defined by Temple Sastras that recommend certain designs pertaining to the location of sanctum, prakara (walk path around the main shrine), flag staff, etc. In Kerala the temple architecture is unique and different from that of other regions. Largely dictated by the geographical location and climate of the region that has lots of wooded areas, blessed with the bounties of the South West monsoons, here the structure of the temples is suitable to the coastal and rainy environment all within the ambit of temple Sastras. The wooden roofs are steep and pointed, and covered with copper sheets. The

slanting roofs extend at least 2 feet out beyond the walls so that they will be kept dry free from rain and sun shine. The roof designs resemble those found in the Himalayan regions and those in East Asia. It is a way to counter the vagaries of climate, hot summer, high humidity, heavy downpour, etc.

TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

The variety of temples, numbering more than 2000 dotting the Kerala state has no match with any other regions of India. In its stylistic development, the temple architecture can be divided into three phases. The first phase is that of rock-cut temples. This earliest form is contemporary to Buddhist cave temples. Rock-cut temples are mainly located in southern Kerala - at Vizhinjam and Ayirurpara near Tiruvananthapuram, Kottukal near Kollam and Kaviyoor near Alappuzha. Of these the one at Kaviyoor is the best example. The Kaviyoor cave temple dedicated to *Siva* comprises of a shrine room and a spacious *ardhamandapa* arranged axially facing the west. On the pillared facade as well as on the walls inside the *ardhamandapa* are sculptured reliefs of the donor, a bearded *rishi*, a seated four armed *Ganesh* and *dwarapalas*. The other cave temples also have this general pattern of a shrine and an ante-room and they are associated with *Siva* worship. In the north similar rock-cut temples of *saiva* cult are seen at Trikkur in Trissur district. Historically the cave architecture in India begins with Buddhism and the technique of rock-cut architecture in Kerala seems to be a continuation of similar works in Tamil Nadu under the Pandyas. The rock-cut temples are all dated prior to the eighth century A.D.

The structural temples appear in the second phase spanning the eighth to tenth centuries, and patronized by the Chera, Ay and *Mushika* chieftains. The earliest temples had a unitary shrine or a *srikovil*. In rare cases a porch or *ardhamandapa* is seen attached to the shrine. A detached *namaskara mandapa* is generally built in front of the *srikovil*. A quadrangular building – *nalambalam*- encloses the *srikovil* and the *namaskara mandapa*. At the entrance to the *nalambalam* is located the altar stone - *balikkal*. This basic plan composition of the Kerala temple is seen emerging in this phase.

The *srikovil* may be built in different plan shapes - square, rectangular and circular. Of these the square plan shows an even distribution throughout Kerala state. The square shape is basically the form of the *vedic* fire altar and strongly suggest the *vedic* mooring. It is categorized as the *nagara* style of temple in the architectural texts. The rectangular plan is favored for the *Ananthasai Vishnu* and the *Sapta matrikas*. The circular plan and the apsidal plan are rare in other parts of India and unknown even in the civil architecture of Kerala, but they constitute an important group of temples. The circular plan shows a greater preponderance in the southern part of Kerala, in regions once under the influence of Buddhism. The apsidal plan is a combination of the semi-circle and the square and it is seen distributed sporadically all over the coastal region. The circular temples belong to the *vasara* category. A variation of circle-ellipse is also seen as an exception in the *Siva* shrine at Vaikom. Polygonal shapes belonging to the *Dravida* category are also adopted rarely in temple plans but they find use as a feature of *shikhara*.

The *namaskara mandapa* is a square shaped pavilion with a raised platform, a set of pillars and a pyramidal roof. The size of the *mandapa* is decided by the width of the shrine cell. The pavilion in its simplest form has four corner pillars; but larger pavilions are provided with two sets of pillars - four inside and twelve outside. Pavilions of circular, elliptical and polygonal shapes are mentioned in the texts, but they are not seen in Kerala temples.

The shrine and the *mandapa* building are enclosed in a rectangular structure called the *Nalambalam* or *Chuttambalam*. Functionally the rear and side halls of the *nalambalam* serve for various activities related to the ritualistic worship. The front hall is pierced with the entry, dividing it into two parts. These two halls – *agrasalas*- are used for feeding Brahmans, performing *yagas* and sometimes for staging temple arts such as *koothu*.

The middle phase of the evolution of the temples is characterized by the emergence of the *sandhara* shrine. In the unitary shrine of the earlier type - *nirendhara* - there is a cell with a single doorway to the cell. But in the *sandhara* shrine the cell has twin wells leaving a passage in between them. Also there are often four functional doors on all the four cardinal directions and pierced windows to provide subdued light in the passage. Sometimes the functional door on the sides and the rear are replaced by pseudo doors- *ganadwaras*

- decorated in the pattern of real doors. The concept of the storeyed temple is also seen in this phase. The tower of the shrinerises to the second storey with a separate upper roof forming a *dwitala* (two storeyed) temple. There is a unique example of *thrithala* (three storeyed temple) - *Siva* shrine at Peruvanam with lower two storeys of square plan and the third storey of octagonal form.

In the last phase, (1300-1800 A.D.) the stylistic development reached its zenith with greater complexity in the temple layout and elaboration of detail. The *vilakkumadam*, the palisade structure fixed with rows of oil lamps is added beyond the *nalambalam* as an outer ring. The Altar stone is also housed in a pillared structure - *balikkal mandapam* - in front of the *agrasala* (*valiyambalam*). A *deepastambham* and *dwajastambham* (the lamp post and flag mast) are added in front of the *balikkal mandapam*. The temple is now fully enclosed in a massive wall (*prakara*) pierced with gate houses or *gopuras*. The *gopuram* is usually two storeyed which served two purposes. The ground floor was an open space generally used as a platform for temple dances such as *ottan thullal* during festivals. The upper floor with wooden trails covering the sides functioned as a *Kottupura* - a hall for beating drums.

Within the *prakara*, but beyond the *vilakkumadam*, stood the secondary shrines of *parivara devathas* in their assigned positions. These were unitary cells, in general, though in a few cases each became a full-fledged shrine as in the case of *Krishna* shrine in the *Siva* temple at Tali, Kozhikode. The last phase culminated in the concept of the composite shrines. Herein two or three shrines of equal importance are seen cloistered inside a common *nalambalam*. The typical example of this is the Vadakkumnatha temple at Trissur, where in three shrines dedicated to *Siva*, *Rama* and *Sankaranarayana* are located inside the *nalambalam*. The *prakara* may also contain temple tanks, *vedapadasalas* and dining halls. Paradoxically some shrines have not a single secondary shrine - the unique example being the *Bharatha* shrine at Irinjalakkuda.

A significant feature of big temple complexes is the presence of a theatre hall - *Koothambalam* - meant for dance, musical performance and religious recitals. This is a unique edifice of Kerala architecture, distinct from the *natyasabha* or *natyamandir* seen in north Indian temples of this period. *Koothambalam* is a large pillared hall with a high roof. Inside the hall is a stage structure - *rangamandapam* - for the performances. The stage as well as the pillars is ornately decorated. Visual and acoustic considerations are incorporated in the layout of the pillars and construction details so that the performances can be enjoyed by the spectators without discomfort and distortion. The *koothambalam* design seems to have been based on the cannons given in the *Natyastra* of Bharata Muni.

In the 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, sculptured corridors and ornate *mandapas* - all in granitestone - 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 structures 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 *garbhagrhiha* cell. The width of this cell is the basic module of the dimensional system. In plan composition, the width of the shrine, the open space around it, the position and sizes of the surrounding structures, are all related to the standard module. In vertical composition, this dimensional co-ordination is carried right up to the minute construction details such as the size of the pillars, wall plates, rafters etc. The canonical rules of the proportionate system are given in the treatises and preserved by the skilled craftsmen. This 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 types - mouldings, sculptures and painting. The moulding is typically seen in the plinth where in horizontal bands 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 sculptural 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 finials. 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 seem to 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.

Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple is the imposing seven-storied tower built by Raja Marthanda Varma in 1733 A.D that makes it by far the most impressive landmark around the city. The Hindus have held the temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, sacred from antiquity. There are innumerable pillars, intricate carvings and mural paintings. Only Hindus are allowed inside and dress regulations are strictly followed. A large market, lines the street in front and the pool beside it is for ritual bathing.

This temple has been sung by the Vaishnavite Alwar Saints. This is the largest temple in Kerala and it exhibits several Dravidian architectural features, particularly the massive Gopuram. Vishnu is worshipped in a reclining pose and is seen through three doors. Much of the structure today is a result of renovations of the 18th century. The *mandapams* and the corridors have fine works of sculpture and the outside of the sanctum is decorated with murals. This temple has been sung by the Tamil Alwar Saints and is revered as one of the 108 shrines held sacred in the Sree Vaishnavite tradition. This temple has been patronized by the Travancore Royal Family and the rulers of Travancore have traditionally ruled over their province, only as subordinates to the Deity Padmanabha. The Royal Composer and King Swati Tirunal have composed several kritis (songs) in praise of this deity.

CONCLUSION

Temples have held an important place in the life of Keralites. Several temples in Kerala trace their origins to antiquity. However, they were renovated frequently and the current structures that are seen are vastly a result of the numerous renovations.

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