

# **Culture, Philosophy and Art in Kerala as Seen Through Architecture**

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India is a vast and complex country, a pluralistic society with tremendous geo-climatic and socio-cultural diversity. Indian architecture, therefore, has manifestations that cover a rich heritage of building traditions. These traditions are spread across the country in variety of settlement patterns, institutions and dwelling types symbolizing the cultural ethos of distinct regions. Among these, Kerala in the southwestern tip of India holds a distinct position due to the richness and the development of its wooden building science. Endowed with ancient institutions of religion and culture, Kerala's traditional architecture comprises temples, palaces and dwellings built in a unique system of wooden construction. The examples found today are 200 to 400 years old but based on the dates of some temples; the typology could date back to 800 years. The homogeneity and continuity in the traditional architecture of Kerala is unusual within the country, and has been nurtured by the regional arts and crafts. The region being rich in timber, the traditional building material of Kerala is wood.

## **Culture**

In the culture of Kerala there is a rich interrelationship of religion, language, dance, music, visual arts and architecture. The built environment in the Kerala has remained comparatively less influenced by 'other' cultures. In fact, incoming people have willingly adopted the ways of the region without making a substantial dent on the Dravidian genre of architecture. In contrast, the physical environments of the

northern regions, such as Gujarat and Rajasthan, show an intermingling of native and incoming cultures. The fact that, in Kerala, the indigenous architecture houses different cultural institutions, regardless of religious biases, makes it a fascinating study.

Kerala is one of the smallest states in India, situated on the southwest coast of the country. It is elongated in shape with the Arabian Sea in the west, forming a coastline exceeding 560 km. Protected by the natural barrier of the Western Ghats in the east, it has evolved largely unaffected by the strife wrought by countless foreign invasions in the north of India. The long stretch of coastline, with its string of ports, has played a decisive role in shaping the history of Kerala. It has had trade relations with the rest of the world as far back as 3rd century B.C. due to its wealth of ivory, sandalwood and spices. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all found their way into Kerala. Today it is one of the most densely populated states in India. The people of Kerala speak Malayalam, a language derived from Tamil hundreds of years ago. It is also the most advanced state in India with lowest birth rate and the highest literacy rate.

Kerala has a warm, humid climate with a heavy monsoon for about three and a half months of the year. There are two rainy seasons. The southwest (June-August) and northeast (October-November) monsoons become the major climatic determinants.

Kerala enjoys an equable climate with the temperature varying from 22 degrees C to 33 degrees C. There is a high percentage of humidity in the coastal areas. July and January are respectively the wettest and driest months. Dense, evergreen forests, with over 600 plant species, cover almost a quarter of the land area. Paddy fields and coconut palms

dominate the plains, while up in the hills, there are plantations of areca nut, cardamom, rubber, pepper, tea and coffee. Kerala is immensely blessed by nature with beautiful beaches, rivers, backwaters, hills, wildlife sanctuaries as well as forts and palaces, monuments and shrines. It celebrates hundreds of festivals annually and is extremely rich in art and heritage. Its distinct cultural identity is reflected in its architecture.

### **Architectural Background**

The region is locally rich in timber. Therefore, the classical/religious architecture and the domestic buildings are built in wood with a minimum use of laterite stone for plinths and selected walls. There are homesteads in the rural setting and detached houses in compounds in urban areas. Typology and its variations are common in both the settings. The building structures are about one to five centuries old. There is a tremendous homogeneity and continuity in the vernacular architecture of Kerala that is unusual elsewhere within the country. The Hindu, Christian and the Muslim communities with their corresponding influences represent the richness of this genre of building art that includes a range of pragmatist to highly expressive examples. The variations have, however, given a number of forms that are complementary to one another. The craftsmen, who were highly skilled, have made creative and innovative use of wood within severe constraints laid down by the rules of building sciences. Though the principles were social rooted in Hindu scriptures, the cultural symbiosis created by a multi-religious social environment had a lot to contribute. In the process, a language has emerged with its own intonations and symbols, full of an aesthetic experience.

### **Temple Architecture of Kerala**

The typical Hindu temple of Kerala stands out among

the Indian temple typology in form, structural clarity, stylistic tradition, symbolism and most of all, in material and craftsmanship in wood. Belonging to the southern Dravidian classification, but having distinct characteristics, the Kerala temple is traditionally a neighbourhood institution of worship in the form of a precinct. The relationship between religion, society and culture are closely intertwined for the people of Kerala. Religion plays an important role in the daily life of the community where the temple complex acts as a place of sociocultural interaction. The main temple within this precinct is based on the idea of a prime deity. It is either square, rectangular, apsidal or circular in plan and may have up to three storied roof. A typical temple has an axial relationship to its surroundings as well as within its complex. It has a number of functional components, the main shrine and subshrines and is clearly demarcated by outer walls. A courtyard within a courtyard defines its center with the main deity located in the innermost courtyard. The Kerala temple complexes are not designed as urban forms unto themselves like in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu. They also have moderate wooden gate structures instead of the all masonry entrances (*Gopuram*) of Tamil Nadu. However, the concept of demarcated religious/cultural complex remains common. The precinct in Kerala possesses an elemental religious geography relating the worshipper to water, vegetation, directions and sacred spirits. It manages to blend with the settlement surroundings due to its sensitive scaling devices.

Wood is used in making of the entire form of the temple. Therefore, the architecture in Kerala has developed distinct characteristics based on rules of building sciences with sophisticated construction and articulation techniques. Churches and mosques are also mainly made from wood while fitting into the overall harmony of Kerala architectural tradition. In

a typical church, the spatial organization confirms to western layout, has thick masonry walls while the roofs follow the regional tradition. The mosque, however, resembles a large and elaborate traditional domestic building and has a wooden roof with elaborate dormers. Both the church and the mosque use certain decorative and articulation elements similar to those of the Hindu temples while giving less importance to the symbolism that is found in abundance in the latter.

### **Philosophy and Spatial Concepts**

The spatiality of Kerala temple follows the general Indian philosophical concepts of the center, axis and the human relatedness to the cosmic reality. Its implementation in the built form, however, follows the Vedic religious practices. The cosmological connotation is emphasized and universalized in the temple. Its spatial organization is dictated by the symbolism of vertical axis joining the nether world with the sky as heavens in the horizontal axis following the cardinal directions. In terms of actual use, this concept of spatiality manifests through the axial approach to the main and the subsidiary deities and the ritualistic circumambulation to complete the religious visitation. Ordered sequence of the visit is emphatically observed and is as though revealing the architectural acumen of the temple form while leading the devotee to the center.

Prior to entering the inner precinct, the devotees pay respect to the main gate, the banner pole, the deities and the directional gods in the circumambulation path. During this process they are held into a ring like open space. This space is enclosed by a thick wall and four entrance gates, which while demarcating the precinct show the rooftops of the neighbourhood - the existential world of the devotees. On its inside, this space is made by the modulated mass of the temple

structures and a continuous lamp-wall holding together a rectangular basin with four symmetrically placed entrances. In a sense, the rituals in the first courtyard or the outer precinct are preparatory in nature and are towards building up the crescendo experience of the devotee. Depending on the day, occasion and most importantly the time, this space of the outer precinct and also the inner one is charged and amplified by the live temple music, scents, colours and the ritual processions followed at different times of the day. The festive religious occasions and marriages are held in this space, which is more public in nature compared to the inner precinct. The lamp wall with its own miniature roof structure on the inner side is both symbolic of the abode of the divine light of the principal deity's abode inside (especially when all the lamps are lit, this symbolism gains a meaning close to worshippers' belief in the deity) and a territorial demarcation where onwards the "God's premises" begin.

This is followed by an entry into the second courtyard or the inner precinct where the main deity along with the closer members of his/her family (sub-deities) reside. This area has a sequence starting from the banner pole and the Belikal (the sacrificial stone icon, now of symbolic value only). Through the entrance porch with the decorative ceiling a devotee enters the front wing and goes through a dark ally space that enhances his/her expectancy while helping him/her to leave behind the existential associations. One then enters the inner courtyard where a whole new spatial and ritual sequence of spirituality opens up, that of having entered the realm of personal/private spiritual space. Compared with the experience of an open and airy space of the outer precinct, here the space becomes denser and more focussed. The feeling of being enveloped and secluded is remarkable here. The void between the dominant form of the main shrine, the sub-

subsidiary structures and the enclosing isles guide the devotee for the prayer rituals while enveloping him/her through the spatial experience.

As for example, standing in front of the salutation pavilion is the moment of having entered the inner precinct without fathoming the entirety of this space. One's view is totally framed through the lattice of columns and the darkness made by the structure. The lamps and the focused view of the deity enhance the mystery in the farther darkness within the second structure that is the actual shrine the worshipper does not know the form of which. Upon further circumambulation revelation of the form of the temple/shrine and being enveloped within the courtyard's space is yet another spiritual experience that is evident of the architectural acumen.

### **Structure and Aesthetics**

The structural and the construction system of the main temple, the dance drama theatre, the elephant shelter, the salutation pavilion and the entrance gate structure demonstrate a distinct variation whereas the paraphernalia structures show close resemblances to the system followed in the secular architecture. The gate structure and the elephant shelter are more involved and sturdily built while respecting the principles of building technology, structure and workmanship of the region. Their roofs are highly embellished with carved elements. In the salutation pavilion, the decorative order of the columns and the nine square false ceiling full of wooden statutory and motifs have been cleverly enmeshed with the structure.

The main temple is a highly enigmatic form, especially when circular in plan with more than one storied conical roof. The inner subsidiary structure is not revealed to the devotee who is never permitted inside. The roof, highly em-

bellished with carved elements, remains a matter of wonder because of the curved wall-plates, curved ties passing through articulated overhang of the radiating rafters along with the eave reaper for rain water disposal, the minor pendants and the decorative brackets which all are meaningful details. At the entrance of the temple the outer circular wall in masonry is substantially removed creating an even greater overhang of the roof. The recessed wall at the entry is made as a decorative wooden grill that has beautifully sculpted temple guard figures, including frescoes depicting the stories concerning the main deity. It creates a sombre atmosphere. The neck below the upper conical roof is clad with sculpted wood planks, has seated four deities in cardinal directions and the cripples/brackets supporting the overhang of the roof have sculpted figures. The nine square false ceiling is full of wooden statuary and motifs cleverly enmeshed with the structure. A number of typological variations of the temple are found in Kerala where the essence of form remains the same.

Wood is used to frame the entire building where the roof design dictates the form. After the plinth in stone masonry, the super structure starts in wood. The wall portion is erected on a wall plate with wooden panels and minor partition columns over which the top wall plate closes the wall structure. The roof follows strict rules of the typology according to the *Vāstushāshtra* scriptures that has intricate vocabulary of wooden parts. Geometric principles, formulae and calculations are involved in the design of the roof structure that has its own order. In the entire process, mathematical calculations are accurately followed since each member of the roof frame has to be conceived in exact dimension. Details of joinery are also worked out in advance to ensure an error-free assemblage of the frame. Its components comprise wall plates or multi-piece beams, rafters; cross ties and through ties,



dormers, overhangs, doors and partitions, etc., based on the logic of construction and joinery.

The roof is indigenous truss type where tying, strutting and the resting condition at the wall are important. All the wooden members have a local terminology and joinery assigned to them with which the carpenters are well versed. Shaping and articulation of the rafters and ties embellish the roof. Due to heavy rains, a close attention is paid to the projecting termination of the roof and many indigenous variations are found. The roofs of the theatre and the temple are awesome and are ingenious architectural-engineering feats. In the theatre, the dominant presence of diagonal lattice roof of deep rafters, tall and free wooden columns with partial shaft in stone and the wooden slat wall at the periphery create a somber atmosphere. Here the embellishment can be seen at its best and many a decorative elements are crafted as a matter of articulation of joinery and structural details rather than decoration per se. In this sense, ornamentation is not an applique but is a matter of fashioning and articulation of the material. The light, color and the sound are befitting the purpose. The large, pyramidal hut like roof with copper shingle sheathing looms over the humanly scaled periphery. The structures are crafted by local carpenters who acted as designers along with other craftsmen of the building trade. The highly skilled craftsmen have made creative and innovative use of wood within severe constraints laid down by ancient rules.

### **The Arts**

The traditional architecture in India has been nurtured by regional arts and crafts to award a certain sense of completeness to the life of people. The trinity of arts, crafts and architecture is not only well nourished in various regions of

India but also a live tradition in the face of modernizing forces. The post-independence period has seen the trinity increasingly becoming urbane phenomena, representing the craftsmen's logic and artistic ability behind the internalized system of making them. Not so long ago, they even represented a homogeneous socio-cultural arrangement of which the buildings were a product. Somehow, the role of art in vernacular architecture is more or less taken for granted by the society in general. While appreciating such architecture, the aesthetic and symbolic intentions are generally advanced. The artistic endeavour in the process of fashioning proper and better-made objects/buildings is seldom emphasized. Thus the logic behind the art of craftsmen/artisans remains marginally understood. Consequently the architecture of enigma rather than a way of making/fashioning becomes the priority of our visual judgment. As a result, the society dwelled in notional sense of beauty as though all artistic endeavours were for the purpose of embellishment. In Kerala the art that is found in architecture is rarely art per se. In other words the elements and motifs are not simply symbolic or decorative in nature. Ornamentation is not an applique but a matter of fashioning and purposeful articulation of the material as in the rafters and the other roof members. In fact, when used in architecture, they are integrated within the form as a matter of structure or an articulation of a particular detail.

### **Conclusions**

In the regional repertoires of wooden architecture of India, Kerala has a unique position. In northern India the architecture of parts of Himachal Pradesh and that of the neighbouring country Nepal have certain comparable aspects. In the pan-Asian context Bali, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, etc. have certain semblances both in terms of plan organization and wooden roof systems. In the general Indian context,

the temple form of Kerala is a distinct cultural object both in terms of its physicality as well as spirituality. Though the principles were rooted in the regional Hindu scriptures, the architectural symbiosis manifested in the edifices of different religions endowed continuity to the physical environment of Kerala. In the process, a regional architectural language has emerged with its own intonations and symbols of a unique aesthetic experience. A review of the residential architecture together with the religious one would point at the sound nature of the building technology, craftsmen organization and quality of skills.