

KERALA TEMPLES

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The evolution of Kerala temple architecture can be traced to the residential architecture as evidenced by the common architectural style...

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All over India there is a distinct difference in the treatment of traditional residential and religious buildings. The residential buildings are comparatively smaller in size and conform to the human scale. They are visually subservient and simple in detailing. On the other hand religious buildings are larger in scale, proportion and size. They visually dominate the skyline. The general planning of these built forms are also different. In contrast to this general convention, in Kerala traditional buildings, both residential and religious are comparable in size, scale, general planning, and arrangement and treatment of various spaces. The grandeur of the Gopurams and Ghharas which soar to the skies, large built up areas of Mandapas rich carving and decoration to the exterior and interiors of the walls of the temple complex from other parts of India are in sharp contrast to the simple structures, and simpler decorations of the Kerala temples.

Development of Kerala Temples

In Kerala temple cult developed very late and the first structural temples appeared very late (as late as the 19th century AD). At the same time residential architecture has developed from very ancient time. The Nalukettu form of residential buildings has been established as the house form of the elite.

The temple with its sanctum in the open courtyard surrounded by a row of built space is identical with its sanctum in the open courtyard and salas around it. The transition from ritualistic to residential to religious can be found from the study of Nalukettus constructed at various periods. Ancient Nalukettus are identical with a Yagamandapa with a central open space for the fire altar for the conduct of Yagas and Yagnas. The existence of number of structures of hi form along with the existence of a number of Vaidic families who perform yagas as part of their daily rituals prove this point. The later Nalukettus shows decline in ritualistic activity and increase in domestic activities. A fully developed Nalukettu of later period shows different spaces like storage, kitchen, hall for ritualistic activities, space for entertaining guests etc. The religious significance attached to the central courtyard remained unchanged. The position of a mandapam with a deity seen in the later Nalukettus shows the significance of this aspect. This central open mandapam later changed to the santum of a Kerala temple. Existence of a number of Nalukettus with a shrine in the courtyard prove that this is not an exceptional situation but shows the transitional phase of the temple from the residential building.

In early period temple was part of private worship and forms part of the residential complex. Later when temples have been constructed independently this form was taken as the prototype

Development of temple in Kerala

The temple cult in Kerala is comparatively of a later period. While temples were constructed in other parts of India, the indigenous form of worship continued in Kerala. The temple cult evolved in Kerala as late as 9th century AD as part of the Bhakti movement. Though late in its origin it is based on the Vedic rituals and worship. In ancient Kerala a form of nature worship existed side by side with the vedic rituals. The former was local while the latter was introduced after the migration of the vaidik bhramans in 1st century AD along with the introduction of the Nalukettu form of residences. The existence of a Kavu (literally meaning a small forest) with every ancient settlement (Tharavad) points to the existing nature worship in a private form. Snake gods and female deities are worshiped in these Kavus. These Kavus were square in shape and had a platform very similar to that of the fire altar. The term Kavu is later associated with the temples dedicated to the Goddesses, e.g. Paramelkkavu in Thrissur, Panachikavu in Kottayam, are all devi temples. During the Bhakti movement when temples were required to be constructed the confusion of the two forms of worship i.e. the nature worship and vedic rituals took place. Due to the isolated geographical position of Kerala development elsewhere has not influenced the temple architecture. The fact that temple rituals followed in Kerala are of Vaidic and not Agamic as in other parts of India, points to the uniqueness of the cult. The emergence of the Kerala temple cult is the natural outcome of the aspirations of the people in a changing society. While in other parts of India temples were constructed by Kings as an external expression of their supremacy in Kerala, it retained its private existence and has contributed to the simplicity and uniqueness of the style. The earlier temples were constructed within the Tharavad and is dedicated to the (Paradevta) guardian deity of the family. The strong psychological bond existed between the family and the Paradevta where the deity forms part of the family. Naturally in the beginning when structural temples were constructed they occupied the Brahmasthalam of their residence in the courtyard. A number of temples of this kind found all over Kerala points to this fact. Later when Temples have been constructed independently this form was taken as prototype.

When social requirement necessitated the construction of temples for public worship. These nalukettu shrines acted as prototypes for design. When principles of temple construction codified by Chennasu Narayanan Nambuhirippad in the 16th century AD he also had taken Nalukettu as the prototype. This codified book Tantrasamuchayam specifies three distinctive spaces in a temple complex. They are Antharhara or inner space, Madhyahar or middle space and Baharaya or outer space.

Antharhara consists of sanctum sanctorum. Balivattom or circumambulatory space surrounded by chuttamabalam built area for ritualistic activities and occupy a space of 3 x 3 padams. Functions conducted in this space is purely religious and ritualistic. Entry to this area is also restricted.

Madhyahara consists of semi religious space like valiyambalam where cultural activities associated with the temples rituals are conducted. Though restricted it accommodates more people

Bahirhara consists of 15 x 15 padams and is enclosed by huge outer walls and Gopurams. Temples festivals are conducted here, this area is purely social space where entry is not restricted.

As per the activity of the matrix the inner space is religious, the middle space is quasi religious and the outer space is dominantly public nonreligious.



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This categorisation is very identical to that followed in a Nalakettu. The inner courtyard is private and religious and is surrounded by built space used for semi religious and domestic activities while the outer space is purely public. The entire space is enclosed by huge walls and provided by a padipurra or a entrance gate.

Gradually changed from a place of private worship to that of public worship. As a result changes to cater to the additional requirements are also incorporated. Provision of more than one sanctum in the Antharhara and the provision of additional deities in the Bahirhara are examples. The addition of Gottupura (dining hall) Koothambalam (auditorium) can be attributed to the final stage when temples became the centre of social activities of a village.

Conclusion

The evolution of Kerala temple architecture can be traced to the residential architecture as evidenced by the common architectural style. In general planning, Layout, and the construction techniques this is very evident. The later ones are different from the earlier ones especially in the treatment of structures in Bahirhara. But the Antharhara bear striking similarity to the inner space in a Nalakettu. The simplicity and the efficiency of the structures show the basic character of Kerala architecture Each structure, be it a Goppuram or Oottupura is functional.
