

Religious Architecture and Art in South India

Meeta J

Introductory

The extent to which art and architecture develop in a society will be the extent to which the society as a whole will be considered talented. Even such ancient societies like the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese, Indian and Greek are famous in History for their attainments in the field of art. Art includes the fine arts and architecture is also an art but it is generally distinguished because of its special nature. Sculpture, painting, music, even poetry are usually treated as fine arts but architecture has its own dimensions which give it a spacious personality. Every art is associated with science. Music with the physics of sound, painting with perspective vision, literature with linguistics; similarly architecture is controlled as well as assisted by engineering. So a society which is advanced in the arts can be seen to be proficient in the sciences also. It has been therefore truly stated that architecture is the matrix of civilization. The architectural remains are the main visible records of men through the different ages of his historical evolution. When historical records fail us either on account of their scarcity or their doubtful nature we may find architecture a useful auxiliary in elucidating many obscure matters of history.

We notice different styles of architecture in the world and they differ from one another in fundamental principles and details. To the Greeks, architecture was refined perfection. Human buildings are characterized by scientific construction. Indian architecture is marked by certain features which are sui generis. First, one is struck by its spiritual content. The main purpose of the building art in India is to represent in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people. It is the objectification of mind in terms of rock, brick, mortar or timber. Secondly, the development of Hindu architecture has been mainly regional and therefore the building style was moulded by varying local conditions which were themselves the product of the availability of building material. Thirdly, Indian architecture has grown depending heavily upon the evolution of religious ideas. The extent to which the various religions in India have depended on one another for their doctrines and practices has also been the extent to which the different types of architecture like the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Jaina have influenced one another. Broadly speaking it was right for Ferguson to speak of Buddhist, Hindu etc., styles of architecture. The differences come because of the special needs of each religion. The medieval Hindu temple depends for its architectural style on the agamas, which are the quintessence of the religious formalities. Hindu architecture not only religious, but even secular is conditioned by the principles of life accepted as basic by that society. Above all even as material decided construction, climate also decided it. Though normally secular structures are characterized by considerations of utility and religious structure by religious symbolism the latter cannot be free from utilitarian considerations and the former from artistic feelings. Even secular structures, it was believed must have aesthetic qualities.

Origin of Religious Structures

Speaking of Hindu architecture as a whole there has been much difference of opinion regarding its origin. Some hold the view that Hindu religious edifices were the product of native tradition; others hold that it was influenced by foreign example. The arguments usually mentioned to support the indigenous theory are as follows:

1. Some of the important parts of the Hindu temple are (i) the kudu (ii) the vaulted roof (iii) the pyramidal nature of the sikhara. It is suggested that since the kudu has its counterpart in the Buddhist sun-window, the vaulted roof resemble the Buddhist chaityas and the pyramidal sikhara resembles the diminishing story of the Buddhist monastery. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that the Hindu temple has grown out of the Buddhist religious edifices.
2. The temple has been derived from the graveyard. In the Hindu pantheon, there are two kinds of deities; (i) the older ones even now worshipped in villages more out of fear than love and given attributes of ferocity and vengefulness and in fact more appeased than worshipped, and (ii) the more sophisticated ones obtaining an elaborate system of worship based on love. The village Gods, or at least most of them, are represented by triple stones generally hedged in by a circle of stones. The megalithic system, of burial and the stupa style go together in basic conception. It is also significant that some deities like siva are associated with the crematorium and with the ashes and skulls found there.
3. Even as the house was a derivative of the natural hollows in trees and caves in rocks, the temple itself was derived from the house. This was later sophisticated further by equating the chief resident in the temple and the head of the household, especially when the latter happened to be a king; so that Ko in Tamil means king as well as God and Koli means palace as well as temple.

Those who derive the Hindu temple from foreign sources attribute it to Egyptian influence referring to the Egyptian temples of about 1200 BC. These temples also had their gateways, walls, pillars, halls, sanctum etc.

Most of the religious edifices in ancient India are either circular, square, semi-circular or apsidal in shape and these shapes may have (or may not have) religious significance. It is customary for some scholars to derive the shapes of temples from the three types of sacrificial platforms (fire altars) known to vedic practitioners. But this ought to be treated as far-fetched, since the vedas themselves have no notion of worship in temples.

A study of Indian architectures is, so far as the Hindu period at least is concerned, the study of temple architecture. Another way of expressing this is to say that the Hindus neglected secular architecture. The temple architecture itself does not straightaway appeal as an object of beauty to a mind unaccustomed to the tradition which created the temple; for in the Hindu temple there is a lot of symbolism which apart from the symbolism may have not meaning or appeal; and the religious symbolism is esoteric and unintelligible to the uninitiated. Some say that the Hindu temple is a microcosm, a kind of magic replica of some unseen region or sacred being; "The

proportions or motifs employed are governed by this mystic necessity to conform to an ideal pattern calculated to secure full harmony of the structure with the cosmos that it reproduces.” This statement could be the essence of spiritual wisdom in the context of the temple or mere bombast. It is possible to give symbolism to the temple and then say that the temple symbolizes it.

The Stupa

The religious buildings of ancient India may be chronologically classified under three of a burial or tumulus enclosing within it the relics of the respected dead. It is commonly associated with Buddhism and Jainism, more particularly with the former, and Buddhist stupas have been found in many places in India, as also in Ceylon, Burma, Indonesia and China. Stupas, are of three kinds, sariraka stupas enshrining bodily relics of particularly the founders of religions, paribhogika stupas erected over the articles such as the begging bowl or staff of such persons and pariatrika stupas which were erected over spots visited by the founder or his disciples.

The most important part of the stupa is the hemispherical dome. It is surmounted by a square railing called harmika which encloses, one or more shafts of the crowning umbrella. The dome is supported by one or more cylindrical or square plinths. There are also railings enclosing the perambulatory passages. While the earlier stupas were just hemispherical with a low base the later stupas took it more cylindrical form. The decorative elements also were multiplied.

The South Indian stupas are characterized by the lion pillars at the gateways and the five ayuka pillars standing on each of the projections at the four cardinal points. The dome of the Ceylon stupas is bell shaped. The cardinal points have architectural projections. They have rows of stone pillars, apparently for carrying a roof over the stupa. Beside, there are seen moonstones and figures of Yakshas carrying a puranaghata.

The earliest examples of stupas in South India are found at Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Bhattipolu, Jaggayapeta, Salihundam and a few other places. The stupa at Amaravati was dismantled by a local zamindar in the last century, but panels of stones containing sculptures while the others are now in the British Museum, London, and the Government Museum, Madras. The sculptures at all the places are either in marble or sandstone.

The Viharas and Chaityas

The next type of religious edifices gets better representation in South India. They are usually called cave temples and are found in the Deccan. They are Buddhist. There are two types among them namely viharas (monasteries) and chaitya halls. The vihara had a verandah in front. It was a big hall with square cells cut in the rock to accommodate ascetics. The chaitya on the other hand was a vaulted congregation hall with an apsidal back, and a rock hewn stupa at one end. It is divided into a nave and side – aisles by rows of pillars. Light and air are let in through windows over the door – ways. The earlier chaityas which were Hinayanist in character bear less ornamentation and are imitative of wooden models. In fact wooden girders are used in some of them. In later chaityas there are found sculptures particularly on the tops of pillars. The most important among them are those at Nasik and Karle. Probably they may be assigned to the first

and second centuries AD. The viharas of a later period contain a shrine chamber with a pillared assembly hall in front. Buddhist images were carved on the walls. Though in the earlier stages the viharas were single storeyed, caves with two or three storeys were made in later times. Some of the caves of Ajanta are of this variety. Though most of them were Buddhist caves some were Brahmanical also. Most of these caves are found in the Western Ghats which were probably very well suited for such excavation. The traditions of excavation continued till about the tenth century. The places when these caves are found are Bhaja, Bedsa, Junnar, Karle, Elephanta, Kanheri, Nasik, Ajanta Ellora, Auangabad, Ter, Chezarla etc. The earliest examples of the temple architecture in the Deccan are seen in the temple complex at Aihole, Pattadakal and Badami.

In the Tamil country as also in south Andhra Pradesh there appear to have exist contains numerous references to temples, deities consecrated in them and the festivals conducted in their honour; but unfortunately those temples do not exist now. Most probably they were made of perishable material like wood and therefore they perished in course of time. It is not even easy to get any clue with regards to their shape or size. However, the bas reliefs from Amaravati, Jaggyapet, Nagarjunakonda and Goli contain different examples of architecture which include figgerent types of religious shrines and they may probably be able to suggest the types of religious edificies that existed in early south india. In early Hindu religious structures stone was not used. No Hindu stone monuments rock-cut or structural are found in the Tamil Country dating from a time anterior to the sixth century AD, though the stone had come into use as may be seen from the Yupas (sacrificial posts) in distant Bomeo, even a century earlier.

But the need for the use of the permanent medium of stone in the making of temples was realized more and more and stone came to be used in such construction in South India from about the beginning of the 7th century. The first king associated with the practice of making temples of stone in the Tamil country was Mahendravarman I (c 580-630). The period of the Pallavas was probably the most creative epoch in the history of South India which was marked by the revival of Saivism and Vaishnavism led by an efflorescence of literary activity and development of art, architecture, sculpture and painting, though on the political side it was marked by frequent wars between the pallavas, pandyas, gangas and the Western Chalukyas and later the Rashtrakutas and many minor dynasties that rules over different parts of South India.

Evolution of temple architecture

Mahendravarman who calls himself Vichitrachitta (curious of inventive minded) extols himself for the achievement of the excavation of cave temples without using brick, morta, metal or wood. The temple architecture that was thus started in South India had a continuous history since then. It is generally classified into group according to the names of the dynasties of kings. It's usually said that the pallavas period (AD 600 – AD 850) is that of sculptured rock, the early Chola period (AD 580- AD1100) that of grand vimanas, the later Chola and Imperial Pandya period (AD 1100 – AD 1350) that of the most beautiful gopuras end of the vijayanagar period (AD 1350 – AD 1600) that of mantapas and pillared halls and the Nayak period as also the modern period after 1600 as that of corridors.

Mahendravarman excavated in living rocks a number of cave temples which are simple in their plan and decoration, each of them consists of a pillared verandah in front and a shrine cut into its back. The pillars are thick and not more than seven feet in height. They are divided into three sections, the lower and the upper ones being cubical squares in shape and the middle one octagonal, being beveled on four sides. The two sadurams are ornamented by engraved lotus medallions. The extreme columns are pilasters. In some cases the front verandah consists of two parts of the Mahamantapa and the Ardhmantapa. Each cave temple has one or three or five cells or shrines cut in the rock. On the top of the pillars and pilasters are placed massive potikas or corbels. The kudu arches are found engraved on the Kapota in a few cases. On either side of the entrance to the cells in some of the caves are found sculptured figures of two dvarapalakas. Such cave temples were excavated during the days of Mahendravarman's successors also, namely Narasimhavarman I, Paramesvaravarman I, and Narasimhavarman II. The general architectural feature of these temples are practically the same as those of the earlier ones, except for the fact that the pillars are found to be thinner and taller, sometimes flatter with an oblong section. The space between them is wider. During the days of Narasimhavarman II (AD 630 – AD 668). This rock-cut cave architecture reached its zenith in the Tamil country. The best examples of this group are confined to Mahabalipuram and are characterized by greater advance with regards to their components and general execution. "On their façade is a roll cornice ornamented with a kudu motif which is surmounted by a parapet formed of model shrines a long one alternating with a short one. The mural surface between the pilasters was utilized for the carving of edifying sculptures. The pilasters were utilized for the carving of sculptures. The pilasters of some of the mantapas are also adorned with sculptural figures of high quality. Among them particular mention may be made of Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahisha, Krishna raising the govardhana, Vishnu as Anantasayin and the incarnation of Vishnu as Varaha.

The Rathas

The period of Narasimhavarman also saw the excavation at Mahabalipuram of a new type of monolithic temple known as rathas which were really rock-cut models of structural temples. They are nine in number and of them five are named respectively after the Pandava brothers, while the other four are respectively called Ganesaratha, Southern Pidariratha, Valaiyankuttai ratha and northern pidari ratha. "The rathas have a unique significance in the history of Indian art and architecture. Abounding in immense architectural potentialities and adorned with sculptural art of a truly classical quality, these monuments not only laid the foundation of the South Indian architecture but influenced to a considerable extent the development of art in the islands of Indonesia." The Draupadi (Durga) ratha has the shape of a thatched hut. The Arjuna ratha is a more developed structure and anticipates the later examples of temple Vimanas. The Sahadeva ratha has an apsidal plan. The Bhima ratha has the shape of a wagon and is the predecessor of the gopuras of later times. The Dharmaraja ratha has three storeys. The pillars of these rathas are comparatively very slender, and have seated lions at their base.

Structural Temples

From about the end of the seventh century i.e., from the days of Narasimhavarman II, structural temples came to be constructed. They are usually grouped under two heads, the pre-Rajasimha group (C.600-700) and the Rajasimha group (C.700-800). Among the temples in the former group there are three at Mahabalipuram, two at Kanchipura and one at Panamalai. The first of these is the Jalasayanesvara temple usually called the shore temple at Mahabalipuram. This cynosure of the mariners has evolved a beautiful and rhythmic Vimana. The temple is characterised by its pillars with rampant lions, the prismatic Linga in the sanctum facing the sea and the surrounding wall which is surmounted by couchant bulls. Pallava art reached its maturity in the temples of Kailasanatha and Vaikunthaperumal both at Kanchipuram. The main building of the kailasanatha temple has again a pyramidal sikhara which became the distinctive feature of the Dravidian architecture. It is also noted for its beauty of decoration and numerous puranic sculptures. The Vaikunthaperumal temple which is the most integrated temple of the period displays an economy in the disposal of its parts together with a skillful marshalling of the main element so as to produce a unity of conception, which has resulted in a building having considerable architectural merits". The pillars in this temple show seated lions at their base and palagai or cushion capital at their tops.

Towered Temples

The later pallava period was not marked by the construction of really attractive temples. But during that period temple architecture developed in the Chola country and a number of structural temples were constructed. They are dominated by the Vimana rising over the garbhagriha or sanctum. All these are small. But they are very compete in their formation and display a freshness and spirit in marked contrast to the last production of the declaring style of the pallavas. So much so they appear to herald either a new some stimulation received from another source. All the temples in the group shows by their treatment a close affinity to those of the more distant chalukyas than to their predecessors, the pallavas. Most of the temples of this period are found in the present Tanjore and Tiruchirapalli district though some are found. The construction of subshrines in the main temple because a characteristic feature of this period. The capital and the abacus undergo some changes.

The period of the imperial Cholas was easily the golden age of temple construction in the Tamil country and South Indian art reached its highest watermark them. The number of temples constructed during this period was large and they are found in different places in south India. The two great temples respectively at Tanjore and Gangarikondacholapuram (the letter a dilapidated village in the Tiruchirapalli district) are the most developed and representative of the Dravidian style of architecture and compared to the smaller temples of the same period they are as cathedrals to village church. The great temple of Brihadisvara at Tanjore was begun by Rajaraja I in 1003 and completed about 1010. The temple covers an areas of 500 feet by 250 feet. The Vimana which of dominates the temple rises over the garbhagriha to a height of 190 feet. It consists of three parts. A vertical base covering an area of 82 feet square rises perpendicularly to a height of 50 feet is surmounted by a pyramidal body in thirteen diminishing

tiers and is crowned by a huge monolithic bulbous dome composed of a single block of stone. Over the dome is placed a puraghata or Kslast of stone. “This great temple of Tanjore is really the finest single creation of the Dravidians craftman; the Tanjore Vimana is also a touchstone of Indian architecture as a whole”.

The temple at Gangaikindacholapuram which is called the feminine counterpart of the Tanjore temple was constructed by Rajendra, the son of Rajaraja within twenty years after the construction of the latter, and contains many of its characteristic features. It forms a rectangle 340 feet long and 100 feet wide. Inside the temple are a big mantapa measuring 175 feet by 95 feet and a garbhagriha with a square plan of 100 feet side. The tall vimanas over the sanctum rises to a height of 160 feet and contains rich curves instead of the straight lines which mark the façade of the Tanjore tower. Each is the final and absolute vision of its creator made manifest through the medium of structural form, the one symbolizing conscious might, the other subconscious grace, but both dictated by that “divinity which has seized the soul”.

Later Chola Structures

Two more temples of the Chola period deserves mention here: the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram and the Kampaharesvara temple at Tribhuvanam, both in the Tanjore District. While the former marks in many ways the transition from the full plenitude of the Chola style as seen in Tanjore and Gangaiknodacholapuram to the great temple complexes of post-chola epoch; the latter as a whole is a veritable sculpture gallery of varied iconography and is the last temple to preserve the predominance of the Vimana characteristic of the chola style of architecture. The images that were made during this period were those Nataraj, various aspects of Siva, Brahma, Sapta-matrikas, Sita etc.

The Pandyan Style

The significant feature of the temples of the Pandya period is the dominance of the monumental gateway or gopuram at the entrance to temples which dwarfed the Vimana over the central sancturary. These gopurams were treated with rich plastic decoration and were surmounted by a barrel vaulted roof with gable end originally derived from the example of the Buddhist chaitya hall. The gopura in the second enclosure of the temple at Jambukesvaram near Tiruchirapalli and the eastern gopura of the temple at Chidambaram contain characteristic feature of this development.

The Hoysala Style

During this period another type of architecture developed in the Karnataka country under the Hoysalas. Hence it is called the Hoysala style of architecture. In the construction of the Hoysala temple a dark stone of a very fine grain was used. The temple example of which are found in Halebid, Belur and Somanathpur are all structured on star-shaped for polygonal) plinth built in triplicate or quadruplicate tiers.

The shrines are surrounded by a high and broad pradakshina patha. The temple have an excellent finish and contain many exquisitely carved sculptures.

Portraits

In south India a number of portrait sculptures are found. In the Varaha cave at Mahabalipuram are two sculptured royal male figure each with their two queens. Below each of the male figures there is an inscription. One reads “Sri Simha Vinna Pottrairajan: and the other “Sri Mahendra Pottrairajan”. They have been identified in three different ways by scholars. The sculptures are typical of the excellence attained in the art of portraiture under the pallavas. The chola sculptors excelled their pallava counterparts in portraiture as is testified to by the brilliant pieces of art at Srinivasanallur and Kumbakonam. The portrait of Tirukkarrali-piccan in the temple of Tiruvaduturai which indicated the realistic reproduction of the facial traits practiced by the artists of the tenth century, and the beautiful bronze statue in the Kalahasti temple representing Chola-madevi, the queen of Rajaraja I are respectively considered to be the earliest dated portrait and metal images of the Chola period. However this art was never seriously practiced in South India.

Painting

The art of painting both monochrome and polychrome is very old. The earliest surviving examples in India date from the first and second centuries BC and are seen in the caves at Ajanta which however are not frescoes. The themes of these are dominantly Buddhist. The painting help us to understand some aspects of the religious and social life of the people.

In south India literary evidences testifying to the extent and excellence of early murals are extensive but our knowledge of them is still meagre since none of the specimens survives. The cave temples of Tirumayam and Mamandur and the Structural temples of Panamalai, Kanchipuram and Mamallapuram contain fragmentary Pallava painting which may be dated the seventh and eighth centuries. The paintings in the cave temples at Sittannaval are attributed by some scholars to the pallavas. But some consider them to be the pandya origin. Of the Chola painting the most significant and representative are those in the circumambulatory passage round the sanctum of the Tanjore temple, first brought to our notice some twenty-five years ago. This art was continued and given imperial patronage in the Vijayanagar period also; but still some decline in the art was not imperceptible. A few surviving examples of it worth mentioning are found today at Hampi, Somapalle, Lepakshi, Tirupparuttikulam, Anegudi and Kanchipuram.

The south Indian painting is technically different from the famous paintings of Ajanta, Sigiriya, Bagh, Badami and Ellora.”Here the Ground Plaster is of coarser lime mortar below, with a finer coat of lime wash above it on which the pigments have been laid. The absence of any adhesive such as gum or glue in the laying of the pigments is the important feature that distinguishes them from the paintings in the Deccan and Ceylon”.