

# A HISTORICAL STUDY ON THE TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF KERALA

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## Abstract

*Kerala is a land of temples, and temples here in a sense, were the pivot of the religious, social, economic and cultural life of the Malayalam people. The term Kerala was the first epigraphically recorded as Keralaputo (Cheras) in a 3rd-century BCE rock inscription by emperor Ashoka of Magadha. The Cheras transformed Kerala into an international trade centre by establishing trade relations across the Arabian Sea with all major Mediterranean and the Red Sea ports as well as those of the Far East. The early Cheras collapsed after repeated attacks from the neighboring Cholas and Rashtrakutas. It was mentioned as one of four independent kingdoms in southern India during Ashoka's time, the others being the Cholas, Pandyas and Satyaputras. The dominion of Cheras was located in one of the key routes of the ancient Indian Ocean trade. That Kerala's temples show a distinctive style was accepted by one and all from the very beginning.*

**Key Words:** Temple – architecture – kovil – Dravidian – Kerala – gopuram – vimana – srikoil – palikkal - mandapa

## **Introduction:**

During the early Middle Ages, Namboodiri Brahmin immigrants arrived in Kerala and shaped the society on the lines of the caste system. European trading interests of the Dutch, French and the British East India companies took centre stage during the colonial wars in India. In 1498, Vasco Da Gama established a sea route to Kozhikode during the Age of Discovery, which was also the first modern sea route from Europe to South Asia, and raised Portuguese settlements, which marked the beginning of the colonial era of India. The state of Kerala was created in 1956 from the former state of Travancore-Cochin, the Malabar district and the Kasaragod taluk of South Canara District of Madras State. In the 8th century, Adi Shankara was born at Kalady in central Kerala. He traveled extensively across the Indian subcontinent founding institutions of the widely influential philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. After the Dutch were defeated by Travancore king Marthanda Varma, the British crown gained control over Kerala through the creation of the Malabar District in northern Kerala and by allying with the newly created princely state of Travancore in the southern part of the state until India was declared independent in 1947. The Cheras regained control over Kerala in the 9th century until the kingdom was dissolved in the 12th century, after which small autonomous chiefdoms, most

notably the Kingdom of Kozhikode, arose. The port at Kozhikode acted as the gateway to the medieval South Indian coast for the Chinese, the Arabs, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the British.

### **Architecture:**

The early works of temple art in Kerala, executed in permanent materials have perished utterly beyond all doubt. And the high walls, creeping designs with flower motifs, etc. having a distinctively British flavor do not affect their total character. Among these, the temples are the most important ones and were designed by artists who brought to bear their skill on them, acquired by generations of practice. This is a serious limitation as regards the authenticity of the cultural tourism experience. Padmanabhapuram palace at Thakkalai, 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. The famous palace, Kanakakkunnu, sets a dignified example of how the constructional nuances from Holland could combine well with the local style of construction. They existed in large numbers in various parts of the country from Kanyakumari to Kasargod and were the foundation of more enduring works. Though they are not stupendous or magnificent architectural specimens, they are simple in elegance and beauty of form. Kerala from the very early days of its coming into contact with the outer world had experienced a wonderful process of cultural cross-breeding and transformed such experiences into very healthy and happy combinations and blendings. 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. The museum buildings at Thiruvananthapuram exhibit the ideal blending of the Kerala character with foreign workmanship. Their edifices were artistically conceived and delicately modeled and carved. In some of the stately buildings in the capital city of Trivandrum, the Victorian touch of architecture with the local style of structure has made a heart-to-heart fusion.

### **Kerala Style**

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. It is a change that symbolically represents the introduction of a new architectural style. 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 Dravida temples built in stone and bricks are preserved from an earlier age than the laterite, brick and timber temples, of Kerala. They may have been preceded by brick and timber constructions that have perished. 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.

### **Dravidian Style:**

Like the temples, these are also built of laterite and wood. Roofs are made of tiles and rise to a height of three talas over the gateway. 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 mukha mandapam is integrated with the gopura entrance. 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. Most of the temples seen in Kerala today have undergone several phases of renovation, given the perishable nature of the construction materials. The Kerala roof resembles those found in the Himalayan regions and those in East Asia. The dominance of the circular shrines, not seen anywhere else in India, is a unique feature of temple architecture in Kerala. Likewise, it is compared with the architecture of various Far Eastern countries. The roofs are steep and pointed and covered with copper sheets. The theory and practice of architectural construction were also compiled during this period. 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 wood sculpture in Kerala has somewhat a realistic form in the sense that it has no resemblance to the original shape of the material.

Sometimes, one finds the use of reverse eaves here but the commonest use of such wooden eaves is in the balikkal-mandapa of small proportions. It is not easy to lay bare the divergent architectural strains that converged to give rise to Kerala's characteristic temple-form. Temple architecture in Kerala is different from that of other regions in India. The latter category may be compared with the minute and delicate execution of the goldsmith's art. Surprisingly, the idea of a diminutive shrine fronted by a larger mandapa never reached Kerala. It is surrounded by a cloistered prakara, pierced at one or more cardinal points with a gopuradwara. A regional character in construction incorporating the Dravidian craft skills, unique forms of Buddhist buildings, design concepts of Vedic times and compatibility to the climatic conditions was finally evolved in Kerala. The

balipeetam may be located in the mukha mandapam or the outer courtyard. The central sanctum of a Keralite temple is referred to as the Sree Kovil. This prakaram also houses subsidiary shrines. Here the draftsman has practically brought his creations so to say, to the level of plastic art. The modeling is far from ideal and appears to be the combination of the Kerala style with the Nayaka tradition. A few images of Buddha come also from places like Karmudi, Mavelikara, Bharanikavu and Pallikkal situated in the Quilon-Alleppey region, once forming part of the Ay territory. But it has to be borne in mind, before suggesting any common link, that an area of heavy rainfall or snow will naturally develop sloping roofs, further, there are certain inherent patterns in timber constructions that give rise to similar external forms and features. The temples in Vizhinjam, of the ninth century, are akin to contemporary Chola shrines in Kaleyapatti, Tiruppur and sites in Pudukkottai. Later they came to be called ambalam or kshetram or sometimes tali. The outer prakaram or courtyard houses other sub-shrines, and optionally a temple tank. The compilations remain as classical texts of a living tradition to this day.

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. The history of Kerala's temple- architecture suffers from many lacunae, for, unlike the Chalukya, Pallava, Chola and other traditions, it is hardly represented by any intact monument. These varieties of the temple, based on a square plan, are representative of Dravida architecture. Temples in Kerala used to be called in earlier times as mukkalvattom. It is often believed that the architecture of Nepal and other Himalayan regions is similar to that of Kerala. With a circular plan, one sees a conical roof, while with a square plan the roof is pyramidal. The temples are not only square or rectangular but also circular, apsidal, and elliptical too in rare cases. An image of four-armed seated Ganesa from the Bhagavati temple at Tiruvalattur, District Palghat, the image of Mahishamardini from the Niramankara temple and several vimana devatas from the Tali temple at Kozhikode may be taken as representatives of this group. 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. Though in the detailed articulation of its formal structure, the Kerala temple follows its indigenous methods, the basic conceptions are not something different or extraneous from the total cultural developments of the mainland. 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 Temple architecture tradition of Kerala comes within the mainstream Indian temple building tradition. Not many deities, ascribable to the later phase, could be

examined as they are mostly under worship inside the sanctum. 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 sloping roof and the lavish use of wood in superstructures have also invested the Kerala temples with a distinct personality of their own. Kerala has evolved from its very early days its types of temple architecture each of which can be associated with some area or other in the state.

The Dravida temples are represented in several of their varieties. They are small shrines, consisting of a cell having a superstructure (the temples of Vizhinjam,) stairs led to it and sometimes a porch; or as low, spreading structures or hall temples, having a pillared interior or as high structures having several storeys, not, only in appearance, as no interior or accessible space corresponds to the pillared and diminutive storeys of these superstructures. The cloistered prakaram has a namaskara mandapam located directly in front of the sanctum. Broadly speaking, the sculptural art of the Kerala tradition may be divided into two: sculptures in the round and bas-reliefs. All the images are sthanaka-murtis and have a somewhat stumpy appearance. 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. 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. 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. Of the various parts of a temple, only the adhishtana, bhitti, and to some extent, prastara escaped the ravages of time. The flagstaff or dwaja stambham is located outside. Yet they are endowed with grace and nobility, and the architects of Kerala have never allowed them to outshine the temple proper. The shape of the roof is following the plan of the sanctum below. 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, may be seen in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam Districts. Its greater achievement is the harmonious blend of Dravida temple with the indigenous Kerala idiom in which both the compositions could still maintain their entities. The roof is constructed with wood and is covered with copper plates.

### **Srikovil:**

The 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 Kerala temple has srikovil as its main core, which usually stands on an east-west axis and the plan may be the square, rectangular, circular, elliptical, or apsidal ground plan. This interdependence or the reciprocal relationship between environment and architecture can be further noticed in the construction of superstructures in Kerala temples. It is made up of wooden planks overlapping one another and covered over by clinker tiles or tiles highly heated in kilns with a glazy smooth surface that makes them waterproof. The architectural style of Kerala temples has an inherent simplicity that becomes very conspicuous when juxtaposed to the exuberance of the Nagara, Vasara and Dravida temple styles. The two monsoons a year, and the moisture of Kerala weather have 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. 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. 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. In explaining this, the influence of the natural environment upon the temple form has to be recognized along with the socio-historical developments. 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.

### **Special Features:**

This temple of granite has renovated the superstructure of a later period. The Niramankara temple of eleventh century A.D. All these structures are set up on a very wide terrace. Because of its flat ceiling, the three stroyed pyramidal superstructure becomes invisible from inside. They are overshadowed by a deep and long roll cornice and this has a lowering effect on the superstructure. This sandharaprasada has an inner covered ambulatory in addition to the one outside. On the whole, the Dravida temples in Kerala of this phase do not show much development from the previous phase. has to be taken as a development from the vizhinjam type of temples. is raised on a circular paved disc which forms the outer path of circumambulation. In the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, when the state underwent a political revival, rising out of which, technical indigenization of its art idioms was consciously adapted in such a way that it did not violate either the earlier architectural tradition or the essential character and symbolism of the cult traditions of Kerala. It is a square

nirandhara temple built in Dravida style with octagonal sikhara, made of one piece of stone. The Siva temple at Tiruvanjikulam is one of the most ornate specimens and retains many of its older features despite the subsequent renovations. Thus, the inner garbhagriha or the core temple has become completely a separate entity with its characteristics and sometimes with an exclusive flight of steps. Alongside the Kerala style of temples, a few south Indian temple types were also built during this phase. Invariably, it is an example of miniature Dravida vimanas, either circular or apsidal in plan with an independent griva and sikhara, and occasionally it has its adisthana and other components peculiar to a south Indian temple. Their original form unlike the indigenous Kerala temples of this phase is preserved and thus facilitates a study of its structure. Kerala temples of this phase represent the synthesis of the two styles-Dravida and Kerala-styled temples with sloping roofs. Interesting developments occurred in the layout of the structural temple patterns during this period. Another example of the Dravida vimana of this phase is the Kattilmadam at Chalapuram.

The Subramanya shrine at Manjeri with an inscription of the twelfth century on the stone adhisthana, is a circular double-storeyed vimana of the Sravatobhadra type having four functional doors. The pradakshinapatha around the square garbhagriha inside has a row of twelve columns. Kerala style temples ascribed to the middle phase, as in the early period, continued to be built variously on four-sided, circular and apsidal ground plans. And thus, the developments which took place in the earlier periods have got further elaboration and enrichment. The Parasurama temple at Tiruvallam, with an inscription of thirteenth-century, consists of a circular shrine combined with a rectangular mandapa. The inner wall of the inner shrine is of the square plan and is surmounted by an octagonal sikhara. The three storeys consist on each level of an interior prism of stone masonry to which is attached a parapet composed of small shrines. The square stone kuts on the top without enrichment are similar to those of Vizhinjam. Temple at Parthivasekharapuram of tenth century A.D. The superstructures have projected niche in the centre. The superstructure has a square dome shape together with its dormer windows and finial-like portion, all of which are solid. In Vizhinjam, the base, the pilasters and pillars in the corners, the porch as well as the entablature and roll cornices are of stone. The temples at Vizhinjam of the ninth century are based on a square plan built in brick and stone. The walls are of brick masonry and also the superstructure.

### **Architectural Layout:**

The western half dedicated to Siva has its door opening and flight of steps in front with a detached namaskara mandapam. Moreover, this temple complex is a clear testimony of the synthesis and co-existence

of various Brahmanical cults, as evinced from the cult images and ritual practices seen there. The circular srikovil of Siva northernmost of the row has its garbhagriha divided by a transverse diagonal wall. The number of sub-shrines in some examples increased to no less than ten as in the case of the Siva temple at Trikkandiyur. The extant buildings, however, do not seem to be more ancient than the thirteenth century. In the Vadakkumnatha complex the three independent srikovils in the north-south axis, are being dedicated respectively to Siva, Sankaranarayana and Rama. The eastern half is dedicated to Parvati, with the door opening on the east. The earlier tradition of having functional doors on all four sides was eliminated in this final phase. The southernmost of the group is the temple dedicated to Rama, square in plan, with its adhistana, walls and prastara reliefs on the side and the rear faces corresponding to the door opening on the west, have ghanadwaras inset between the pilasters carrying the sala motif on top. In some temples, especially in south Kerala, there is another pillared structure, the balikkalmandapam in front of the valiyambalam providing the main entrance into the temple proper. Many a Srikoil is raised above steps which are inscribed and whose carvings together with the inscriptions prove them to be earlier by centuries than the present shrine which is a reconstruction identical in plan with the original building. The large edifice the koothambalam meant for the performance of visual arts also can be seen in some large temple complexes. The last phase also witnesses the concept of the composite shrine, as well as the practice of dedicating one complex to more than one God. The indigenous temples are four-sided or circular; the latter shape is possibly the more ancient the garbhagraha, however, is always square. twelfth century, though its foundation could have been much older. As one of the most unique ancient temples of Kerala, Vadakkumnatha temple has all the features attributable to a temple that has all the elements of the panichaprakara scheme. The slopy conical roof of metal sheet covers these by its overhanging caves supported by brackets sprung from the walls at intervals. The temple complex stands on a hillock in the centre of Thrissur town. According to the inscriptional evidence, the temple is known to have been in existence from A.D.

The difference lies in their roofs (although the Niramankara temple had a pitched roof of timber, its garbhagriha, the innermost sanctuary, is domed). These are enclosed by a common enclosure (nalambalam). The share of the indigenous tradition of the architecture of Malabar, ancient Kerala, in the temples of Travancore may be gauged by comparing a temple in Dravida style with one built in the Kerala manner. Along with the elaboration in the temple layout, other arts like mural painting and wood carving also got much attention in this phase. The Shiva temples at Vaikom, Trichur and Ettumanur are the finest examples of



this style of architecture. The inner wall, rising further above the outer wall, carries the immense conical roof or sikhara with a single metal stupid on the top. Similarly, the entire site plan of these temples of the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries is to be thought of as faithfully following the prescriptions and practices of earlier centuries. In the architectural layout of such an evolved Kerala temple, the srikovil forms the nucleus while the other components like the open-air pradakshinapatha, the nalambalam, the vilakkumadam, the paved outer pradakshinavazhy, koothambalam and prakaras are aligned in orderly succession centering the main shrine. The walls of the Niramankara Temple were built in the fourteenth century and those of the Srikoil (temple) at Vaikom belong to the same family. The northern and southern cardinal points have ghanadwaras. This complex is clear evidence of the ever-expanding structural vistas in accordance with the evolving functional needs. Due to various reasons, one of the most important temple complexes of this period is the Vadakkumnatha temple at Thrissur. In front of the balikkal mandapam in some cases, the dwajastambam and Deepa stambam also can be seen. In their plan, the indigenous temples in Travancore are complete to this day. On the stone adisthana, the outer sanctum wall and the prastara shows the characteristic reliefs of pilasters, and miniature shrines of the kuta, sala and panjara models.

### **Conclusion:**

The temple Architectural resources of Kerala are great embellishments that entice cultural tourists to God's Own Country. Thus, Kerala has made its enamoring and signature presence in all the subtle and finest aspects of temple Architecture. Only if tradition is understood thoroughly, can the good elements be preserved and the bad discarded. What is needed is not a complete revival but collection, documentation and objective analysis of ritualistic art forms leading to dissemination of knowledge about them. Time instead will decide their fate. Neither blind acceptance nor outright rejection of tradition is desirable. At the same time, the beautiful architectural style of Kerala is a source of the purest joy and inspiration. Architecture must be considered as the most social and magnificent of Kerala Arts. It combines utility with beauty and promotes social communion and unity. Superficial changes that overcome society cannot remove deep-rooted beliefs and the art forms that project them.

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