

# AN INSIGHT INTO THE ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF THE TEMPLES OF KASHMIR AS EXPLAINED BY SIR ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM

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**Abstract:** India has a vivid culture, and a rich heritage spread across the entire country. This research, into the distinct temple architecture of the Kashmir temples as outlined by the father of Indian archaeology, Sir Alexander Cunningham, aims to map the styles and sculpture of these temples. The paper offers an analysis of Cunningham's detailed study, which he embellished with drawings and diagrams, on the Kashmir temples. The details of Cunningham's work have been succinctly presented, with an explanation on their relevance in the continuous study of the heritage of Kashmir.

**Keywords:** Kashmir temple, Arian Order, Grecian influence, Temple of Martand

## I) Introduction

Alexander Cunningham was the pioneer of archaeology in India, beginning his researches firstly as Archaeological Surveyor in 1861 for a brief span of four years and later as first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1871. During his initial tenure as the Archaeological Surveyor, he accomplished the surveys and identifications of various significant ancient sites in India, attempting to shed light on several aspects of India's history and culture.

One of his more ambitious attempts, noted for its 'valuable plans and drawings', was a work titled 'An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture as exhibited in the temples of Kashmir'. He was fascinated by the architectural remains of the temples in Kashmir, which displayed a deep influence of Grecian Art and the Arian order of Architecture. His work, replete with the state and the appearance of the temples and other principal buildings of Kashmir, offers a vivid insight into the edifices that formed the basis of his Kashmirian study.

## II) Kashmir temples and the influence of the Ariaostyle

In his description of the Kashmir temples, Cunningham outlined several features as characteristic to the Kashmirian style which he ventured to categorize as the 'Arian Order'. The 'most characteristic feature,' in

Cunningham's opinion was uniform intercolumnar interval of four diameters, which was known to the Greeks as Ariaostyle. Ariaostyle, assumed Cunningham, was better suited as a derivative of 'Arian columnar interval', the basic reason of the characterization of the Kashmirian style as the "ARIAN ORDER." (1) The other features, Cunningham pointed at the lofty pyramidal pediments and the great width of the intercolumniations. The Kashmirian fanes were distinguished by the 'graceful elegance of their outlines', by 'the massive boldness of their parts' and by the 'happy propriety of their decorations'. Cunningham described the Kashmir pillar as, 'distinguished from all Indian pillars by having a base, shaft and capital and each, besides bearing a certain proportion to the diameter.' (2)

### III) Cunningham's detailed description of various ancient temples in Kashmir

There was a marked distinction in form between the ancient temples of *Jyeshtheswara* on the Takht-i-Suliman and the temple of *Martand* and other temples of a much later date. (3) Cunningham thus attempted to trace a gradual transformation in features from the ancient type to the later temples. In his description of the enclosure of the *Jyeshtheswara* temple at Takht-i-Suliman hill, Cunningham recorded a total number of 84 recesses, with twelve each in seven unbroken sides of the octagonal enclosure. In each of these he presumed that there once existed a miniature lingam or emblem of Siva, as in the larger chambers of the Saiva temples at Avantipura and Pathan. About this ancient pattern he observed thus: 'In this primitive example I think I can trace the germs of that style of enclosure, which, by gradual development was afterwards expanded into the noble colonnade of Martand'. (4)

Dealing individually with the 'enclosures' of the Kashmir temples, Cunningham further stated: 'During this long period (900 years - interval between the dates of erection of the ancient and later temples), there must have been a constant and yet gradual succession of improvements which at last resulted in the production of one of the noblest of enclosures in the world.' (5) He certainly exaggerated in his admiration of the temple of Martand.

#### (i) Common features of Kashmir temple architecture

Cunningham's description of the architecture of the Kashmir temples brings to notice certain features which were common to them. For instance, his observations on the general appearance of the Bhaumajo temple; 'It is surmounted by a pediment, of which the tympanum is occupied with the trefoiled decoration common to all the Kashmirian buildings' (6) In his observations of the architectural form of the roof of the temple at Pandrethan, Cunningham stated; 'Each portion would then have possessed its own ornament; the upper one being crowned by the melon-like fruit common to all the Kashmirian buildings.' (7) At the same time the variations in architectural disposition were equally apparent. In the interior arrangement of the temple at Pandrethan, Cunningham discerned the position of the southern doorway different from that in other temples. (8) He recorded thus:

'The usual, I believe the invariable practice of the Hindu architects, was to place the entrance of a temple either to the eastward or to the westward, such in fact in the arrangement of all the other temples

in Kashmir; and I am, therefore, puzzled to say what could have been the object of the present variation.' (9)

Further, Cunningham found the pyramidal roof of the Bhaumajo temple as extremely low, its 'height being only one half of the breadth of the temple, instead of being exactly equal to it, ' as noticed in most other temples. Cunningham further noted: 'Like them it is broken into two portions; but it wants the dividing band of ornament, which characterizes all the other temple roofs.' (10)

A temple could be judged as grand temple upon the basis of its architectural features. Cunningham considered the temple of Martand as the most striking of all the existing remains of Kashmirian grandeur, owing to its size and situation. In the noble temples he wrote: 'There are no petty confused details: but all are distinct and massive and most admirably suited to the general character of the building.' (11)

### **(ii) Sculpture style displayed in the Kashmir temples**

The sculptures represented in the temples are equally noteworthy. At the temple of Payach (12) Cunningham noticed, 'single naked and winged figures (of rather spirited execution) in the spandrils', who appear to be supporting the roof with their outstretched arms and legs. Cunningham identified them as Yakshas, the demigod inhabitants of mount Kailasa - which was the favourite residence of Siva. (13) At the temple of Martand Cunningham observed: 'The impostes were surmounted by human-headed birds facing each other; and a similar bird looking in the front ornamented the horizontal mouldings of the pediments'. (14)

Cunningham's observations of the sculptured ceiling of the temple at Pandrethan was more precise. The ceiling made of nine blocks had its smaller angles occupied by naked human figures, in a way similar to the Payach ceiling but devoid of wings. He notes the figures as having 'only one leg and one arm outstretched,' which offers more variety than the other treatment at Payach'. He wrote further: 'Each of the larger angle is filled with two figures holding out a garland which falls in a graceful loop between them.' (15)

### **IV) Conclusion**

Cunningham's work aimed to describe the temples of Kashmir, with an attempt at tracing the Grecian influence represented in their architectural features, ornamentation and sculpture. The description of all the temples was accompanied by drawing and hand-made sketches, which are notable even today, for their clarity and neatness of execution. However, Cunningham's work, mostly descriptive and narrative, did not garner wide acceptance at the time. Several of his hypothesis were found to be fallacious but the magnitude of the work undertaken while still in active military service is very commendable. Undoubtedly, this study can be considered of greater significance today, as it offers a detailed account of the Kashmirian temples, their structure, their age, their style, christened as the Arian Order by Cunningham, and vivid details as well as notable drawings. The legacy of this work is that it continues to serve as an invaluable source of knowledge regarding the Kashmir temples, which can be consulted and further expanded upon by historians and archaeologists. (16)

**NOTES AND REFERENCES:**

1. An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture as exhibited in the Temples of Kashmir, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (JASB), 1848, XVII, Pt. II, Calcutta: pp. 241ff.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, p. 290.
4. Ibid, p. 250.
5. Ibid, p. 312. While assessing Cunningham's assignment of the origin of the smaller shrine among the *Bum'zu* temples to the time of the commencement of the Christian era, Pdt. Daya Ram Sahni found this suggestion as erroneous in the light of the investigations of Sir Aural Stein and John Marshall, which disproved such an early existence of the shrine. They proposed the temple to be of later date than that of Bhima Sahi, the maternal grandfather of Didda, queen of Kshemagupta (A.D. 950-958). Of the style of the building, a comparison with other authenticated styles revealed to be an exponent of the latest specimens of the Kashmirian Hindu architecture. Hence, the temple is assigned to a period later than those of *Payar*, *Kother* and *Mamal* with its earliest date not preceding the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1915-16, XV, New Delhi, 1917, p. 77.
6. An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture etc., p. 253.
7. Ibid, p. 287. Here, the ornamental feature described by Cunningham as a 'melon-like fruit' was actually found to be 'a conventionalized kind of water-pot' ribbed sometimes in the body, which is suggested as the crowning feature of the Kashmir temples. ASI, Annual Report, XV, p. 54.
8. Later examination of the interior of this temple revealed that the cult image in the form of a Siva linga had its pedestal in the central portion of a seven feet square area. Cunningham's proposition about the northern door kept closed on account of the image positioned on that side proved to hypothetical. ASI, Annual Report XV, pp. 74-75.
9. An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture, p. 287.
10. Ibid, p. 253. Regarding Cunningham's proposition of a wide area occupied by the *Avantesvara* temple making it the loftiest structure in Kashmir, Pdt. Daya Ram's analysis showed that the said temple had attached to each of the corners of its basement (on which the sanctum stood) a platform of 16 feet square which is stated to have supported a smaller subsidiary shrine. It was the hollow spaces between these shrines and the stairs which made Cunningham formulate his deductions. ASI, Annual Report, XV, p. 70. Further, Cunningham's suspicions about the existence of peristyle around the sanctum was corroborated by the excavations of Pdt. Daya Ram. Ibid, p. 71.
11. An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture, p. 258.
12. Pdt. Daya Ram Sahni was opposed to the identification of this temple by Cunningham, propounded by the latter on the basis of an unknown tradition attributing the prayer temple to a certain Raja *Nal* or *Nar*. Cunningham's identification of the shrine as the temple of *Narendraswami* founded by *Narendraditya*,

whose reign he fixed between 480 and 493 AD. Furthermore, the assignment of the shrine to Lord Siva by Cunningham also proved erroneous which the latter derived from *swami* denoting Siva. Pdt. Daya Ram stated that *swami* is used for Lord Vishnu, and not Lord Siva. Stronger evidence against Cunningham's identification was found in the style of construction which Pdt. Daya Ram found similar to the temple at *Puranadishthana*. ASI, Annual Report, XV, pp. 75-76. Though Pdt. Daya Ram alludes to Cunningham's observations that the figure of bulls on the capitals of the pilasters flanking the doorways were intended to emphasize the Saiva character of the building. Ibid, p. 76 & 137.

13. An Essay on the Arian Order of Architecture, p. 258.

14. Ibid, p. 271.

15. Ibid, p. 288. Here Pdt. Daya Ram highlighted the wrong depiction by Cunningham and Bishop Cowie of the angels as naked in their sketches of the ceilings of the Siva temple at *Puranadishthana*, which were clearly clad in a dhoti and scarf. Cunningham wrongly showed the lotus stalk, borne by each of the figures in the angels of the middle square in the left hand, as held differently in the right or the left hand. Bishop Cowie mistook it for drapery. ASI, Annual Report, XV, p. 74. Referring to the ornamentation of the Kashmir temples, Pdt. Daya Ram suggested that the features cited as dentils by Cunningham in the Kashmiri cornices were the upright sides of miniature trefoils, quite different from the tooth like ornaments in the Ionic and Corinthian cornices frequently adorned with head and other devices. He gave some examples of the correct pattern as exhibited in the temples of *Avantipura* and *Parihaspura*. Ibid, p. 52.

16. A later work of note, S. Luckvinder Singh Sodhi, *The History of Ancient Kashmir*, New Delhi, 2011.