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Study
of the
Sources of
features
in
Kerala Churches

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**STUDY OF SOURCES OF FEATURES IN
KERALA CHURCHES.**

✓ **SPECIAL PROJECT**

by

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Roll No.91625007

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Master of Design degree in Visual
Communication

Guide

Prof. U.A.Athavankar

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN CENTRE
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APPROVAL SHEET

This special project entitled Study of Sources of Features in Kerala Churches by Satish Babusenana is approved in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Design degree in Visual Communication

Guide.....
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Internal
Examiner.....

Chairman
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Satish Babusenar.

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CHRISTIANITY IN KERALA

Christianity in Kerala has supposedly existed since the 1st century A.D. It is said that St.Thomas, Apostle of Christ came to Kodungalloor- a village port in Kerala in 52 A.D. He began by converting four high cast Brahmin families (thus called Nalillakkar) and soon a substantial number of people were converted to Christianity. St.Thomas himself is believed to have soon left for China and on his way back in Mylapore near Madras, was killed and buried there. The descendants of the converts from St.Thomas's time call themselves the Thomas Christians.

The Thomas Christians built their places of worship and supposedly settled down as a respected community living in harmony with the Hindus. The Kings of Travancore are said to have given them great honours and freedom. Certain copper-plates to this effect are in the possession of the Thomas Christians.

For these reasons, the churches which they built are very much like the Hindu temples of the region. In fact in most cases at a casual

glance the only strict differences one would notice are the use of the cross and, on close inspection, Christian motifs on the sculptured walls of the interior.

The liturgical rites of the Thomas Christians was always East Syrian. In the 4th century, one Thomas of Cana came to Kodungalloor with about three to four hundred Palestinian families. This resulted in a schism between the Syrians and the native Christians, creating the Southerners and Northerners respectively.

Roman influence began to creep in by around the 13th century. Marco Polo was the 1st Roman to appear in Malabar. But he was in the service of Kublai Khan, was an anti-Roman Venetian and had no ambitions for religious work.

The Pope sent Dominican Frair Jordanus, as a Bishop asking the Malabar Christians to end their schism and join the Roman Church. This did not have much effect.

But in 1498, the arrival of the Portuguese Admiral Vasco da Gama in Calicut paved way for the true Roman colonisation of the Kerala Church. The Portuguese soon colonised the region.

The Fransiscan and Dominican frairs and the Jesuit fathers tried to win the Malabar Christians to the Roman side. The Jesuits built a seminary near Kodungalloor where they trained Christian youth into the clergy, but the church refused to accept them, all of which added to make Alexes de Menezes, Archbishop of Goa decide to visit the Syrian churches of Kerala. He had the power of the Portuguese government and of the Inquisition behind him. Apart from destroying Syrian church records and books, he decreed the famous Synod of Diamper (Udayamperoor near Kodungalloor) where the Roman ideas were decided to be enforced.

The Romo-Syrians (called 'Pazheya Kuttukar' or Old Friends) are today called the Catholics of the Syrian-rite. The others, called the 'Puthen Kuttukar' or New Friends, are called the Jacobites.

It is the change that had taken place in the Malabar Church until this point which explains a great many of the questions this study poses.

DID ST. THOMAS COME TO KERALA?

In 2nd century A.D. some Indians wrote to Demtrius of Alexandria asking for a teacher to instruct them in the doctrines of Christianity. Consequently between 180 and 190 A.D., Pantaenus, an Aethenian stoic and principal of the Christian College of Alexandria sailed to Malabar. He is reported to have found people to whom St. Barthelomew, one of the Apostles, had preached. Writing in the 3rd century, St. Hippollytus, Bishop of Portus assigns conversions of India to St. Barthelomew, and only of Central Asia to St. Thomas. In that light it is unclear why the Christians of Kerala should prefer the name of St. Thomas to that St. Barthelomew.

The mission of St.Thomas to Malabar has been discredited by several writers (Hough, Hunter) ; some accept that the Indians whom Pantaenus met were children of converts from the 1st century. This only proves that Christianity was introduced to India in the time generally ascribed to the arrival of St.Thomas.

However several writers of old times, including Dorotheus, Bishop of Tyre (254 -313 A.D); St.Jerome (390A.D),Theodoret (430-458 A.D) associate St.Thomas with the conversions in India.

St.Thomas is credited with creating and consecrating 7 churches in Kerala. These are in Kodungalloor, Kollam, Chayal, Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Parur and Palayur.

Possible explanations for the Christians of Kerala calling themselves Thomas Christians also exist.

Sir. William Hunter who wrote ' The Indian Empire' says that the conversions took place sometime in the 2nd century (without associating any particular person with it) but that the name 'St. Thomas

Christians' was adopted much later, in the 8th century.

He points out that the Manichaeen Thomas in the 3rd century and the Armenian Thomas in the 8th century who rebuilt the Malabar church endeared that name to the Christians of Southern India.

Supposedly in the 4th century, Thomas Cana, an Aramaean or Syrian merchant, who along the course of his journies, observed the poor state of the Christians in Kerala, had returned with a flock of priests and a few hundred Palestinian families. His children from his subsequent two Indian wives, have continued to separate themselves as the Northerners and the Southerners.

So the question of whether St. Thomas the Apostle himself came to India is unimportant, except to a student of theological history. The fact remains that Christianity has flourished in Kerala since atleast the 2nd century A.D

THE TEMPLES, THE CHURCHES AND SIMILARITIES

Kerala is a large strip of land of about 300 miles and around 30 miles wide on the west coast of India. It is protected on the sides by the Western-ghats which give it very heavy monsoons twice a year. More importantly, the Western ghats prevented easy access to Kerala from the other parts of the country. This resulted in a certain independence in cultural, architectural and artistic directions of the Kerala tradition. Even Buddhism which spread all over the subcontinent took about 200 more years to reach Kerala, and then, through Ceylon.

But Kerala being a coastal region had excellent trade links with the West through its ports. Yet a striking factor is revealed in the nature of the architecture of Kerala. This is the strange and curious shape of its roofs. The roofs are gabled and boat shaped. Even when not tiled, the roof thatched with coconut palm leaf has this peculiar appearance, which has prompted visitors to call it 'pagoda-like'.

An almost exact parallel of this type of architecture exists in the Himalayan regions of Nepal, though the distance of over thirteen hundred miles between them indeed is baffling. Yet there are some possible explanations for this similarity. One attributes this to contacts with China through the sea. The presence of Chinese-nets for fishing in areas around Cochin, even to this day, is indicative of such a connection having existed.

The other explanation argues on a supposed anthropological connection between the Nayar community of Kerala and the Newars of Nepal, showing many social and cultural similarities including the fact that women of both tribes may, until recent times, marry several times and yet be considered chaste.

The peculiar shape of the roof, seen from the front is curved inwards at the centre, such that it has the appearance of a boat. This is most pronounced in the regions of Central Travancore.

It is also notable that Travancore which is well connected by the backwaters is known as 'Vanchinadu'

or the land of the boat and the Maharajah is known as 'Vancheeswaran', the Lord of the Boat.

As wood had always been amply available in the extremely fertile region of Kerala, it (mainly teak) has been used as the chief raw material for domestic and temple construction. This has resulted in the fact that we have no records of the architecture of Kerala before the 11th century. The earliest relics that have survived are the cave temples cut in rock from the 8th century.

The oldest Churches in Kerala still look like their Hindu counterparts, with the chief distinguishing feature (and sometimes the only one) being the cross at the very top.

Kerala Christianity, as has been noted above had been of the Syrian influence and yet much of the old church architecture is very much Hindu. What are known now as the earliest churches were also rebuilt time to time and now exist as they were renovated in many subsequent centuries. To start with, here is a

brief and general description of the early Syrian churches of Kerala.

Generally, entrance is on the west, with an ornate wooden door inlaid with floral studs and much carving. The line between the nave (main area) and the sanctum sanctorum (called madubaha) is marked by a low wall or a chain. The madubaha is usually a little raised above the rest of the church. A lamp is hung from the roof, the baptismal font usually made of wood and covered by a cloth when not in use, is kept at the south side of the chancel.

Many of the seven churches which St. Thomas himself is claimed to have established have been altered and new additions have been made in more modern or Roman ways in some, that the original and culturally valuable appearance of most of them has been lost now. Yet features in some churches bear such close resemblance to Hindu temples that Hindus and Christians alike marvel at it.

This study is based on travel of the central and southern Travancore regions. The points of interest were the aspects within the architecture which showed this similarity.

Considering the similarities of Kerala Churches and Hindu temples of the region, the various factors of similarity are treated below.

THE PLAN:

It was not until the 19th century that the cruciform plan of the Roman churches crept into Kerala Church architecture. Before this the main interior of the church consisted in a rectangular area for the congregation (the nave) and a slightly raised region for the altar in front. There were no aisles on the sides. There would be an entrance from either side and from the front. There would also be an entrance for the priest into the sanctum of the church through a small, but thick side door. This is most like the Hindu temple, except that the Garbha Griha would not have any such entrance from the side.

The St. Raphael's Cathedral in Quilon is a recently constructed church which revels in its adaptation of Hindu artistic and architectural notions. The plan of the interior of this church is a square area for the congregation, built in the same manner as the Hindu temple.

The Kallooppara church supposedly has gopurams and the other accessories which make it the only one in Kerala totally free of foreign influences. The roof is similar to that of the Kodungalloor Bhagavati Temple. The next addition was the Mukhamandapam which is a porch like structure at the entrance of the church. This is a very temple-like construction. There may be up to three of these for a church. The Chengannur old church and the Kadamattom church are the good examples for this.

Side aisles were soon constructed just outside the main wall like the 'Chuttambalam' in a temple. Example is seen at the Paliakara church and the Puthencavu church.

STAMBHAS

These are large pillor-like granite constructions planted in front of a temple. These exist also in many old churches. Here the shape of the cross has been adopted. These crosses usually taper off at the top. In the lowest level, the base, interesting floral designs, usually of the lotus are seen very reminiscent of the lotus motif in temple flag poles and on lamps.

Good examples of these granite crosses exist at Chengannur Old church and at the St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church at Niranam. The people of these regions are understandably proud of these crosses. There are other motifs sculptured into the base of the crosses. These are birds - peacocks which are associated with the death or martyrdom of St. Thomas in Mylapore (the city of the peacock). This association may perhaps explain the motif. The crucifixion scene is also sometimes depicted on the base; as also hunting scenes. The church of Puthenchira was built in 400 A.D. but the year of erection of the cross can not be specified. The crosses of Edappaly, Malayattoor and Ambazhakkad were supposedly erected around the 6th century, based on their architectural style.

VILAKKUMADAS

These are stambhas which are shaped like lamps and are lit at night. Many oil containers are sculpted into these Vilakkumadas or 'deepastambhas'. Vilakkumadas are supposedly a unique feature of Kerala temples.

The Kodungalloor Bhagavati temple has many of these and the Niranam Church has them in very prominent positions - right in the centre of the vast front

yard of the church. These are beautifully carved out in the single pieces of granite complete with the oil

lamps in them. The lighting of the Vilakkumadas at night charges the atmosphere with a deep spirituality. These Stambhas now exist in temples, cast in metal also.

The Christians used to obtain the oil used in these lamps as an offering and apply it to their forehead, in a typically Hindu gesture.

Stambhas have many steps. Upto 14 have been observed.

MUKHAMANDAPA

This is a porch-like construction in front of a Kerala temple. It has a tiled roof with gables, supported by pillars on the sides.

The main gable on the Mukhamandapa is usually beautifully decorated by wood carving. There are figures carved in it. This is called the Mondaya.

The use of the mukhaamandapa and the mondaya exists in many old churches, foremost of them being the Kadamattam church and the Chengannur old Syrian church.

In the Chengannur old church the Mukhamandapam is made mostly of stone and has relief sculpture done on it. These show certain persons and animals, peacocks, ships etc. which probably try to tell a story, perhaps the story of the acts of St. Thomas.

The 'mukhavara' (or outline) is the series of projections at the edge of the 'mondaya'. These have the cross at the very top and other shapes on either side.

THE ARTHAMANDAPA

This is the outer entrance to the temple and is part of the wall of the temple. The Arthamandapa is also decorated with much wood carving. The Chengannur Old church has a very good example of the Arthamandapa.

There are many human figures carved in relief on the stone pillars, presumably St. Paul and St. Peter who act in place of the dwarapalas of the temples (guardians of the door). A new example of the arthmandapa can be seen at St. John's cathedral,

Tiruvalla which was designed by Mr. Laurie Baker. This church, unlike most other churches and temples is located below the road level. The arthamandapa in this case, leads below.

THE ROOF

The roofs of the Kerala temples are tiled and gabled. They appear boat-shaped and pagoda-like. The old churches usually have such roofs which come very low over the entrance.

Another type of roof which some Kerala temples have is the conical roof which comes down over the entrance, like an empty cone placed over a cylinder. There are many such temples in Kerala. The recent St. John's cathedral again has a largely circular base and a conical roof which comes over it.

THE KODIMARAM

This is the flagstaff of the temple. Originally these were made in wood, and hence the name (Kodi: flag; Maram : wood). But soon these began to be made in copper and brass and covered with gold-leaf, etc.

During festivals, the temple flag would be hoisted to indicate that festivity is on. The same thing happens in many churches. The only difference between the Kodimaram of the church and of the temple is the cross placed at the top of the former. These flag-staffs may be between 30 to 40 feet in height. The kodimaram of the churches in Edathua (St.George's church), Changanasseri and Parur are famous for their good craftsmanship.

However, in the present time, many wooden flagstaffs have been replaced by G.I pipes of 3 to 4 inches diameter and, as usual, 30 to 40 feet tall, with a horizontal member just near the top, giving the staff the appearance of a cross.

The Kodimaram of the St.Gregorius Orthodox Syrian Church, Parumala has its flagstaff quite far from the main church complex, in a strategic position at the turn in the path leading to the church.

The St. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral, Puthencavu established about 200 years ago also has a good flagstaff at the front.

THE POND

Brahmins were used to taking a bath before entering their temples. And hence the presence of temple ponds in many Hindu temples. These are called 'ambalakkulam' (or temple pond).

Similarly, Pallikulams (or church-ponds) exist in many churches. Though now-a-days people do not worry too much about such rituals, at one time, these ponds, played a very important role in the religious life of the people.

KOTTUPURAS

The Kottupura or the musical room was a small enclosure for the musicians, who were usually from the lower castes, to stand and play their music from, so as to propitiate the gods. These exist in

Christian churches also. Here also, the musicians from the supposedly 'low' castes were had to make their music during church ceremonies from these kottupuras, showing the similarity in attitudes of both sections towards people of the lower castes. Their structures are usually with very low roof. Examples of kottupuras can be seen in a few churches including the church at Palai.

AYUDHAPURAS

These are small constructions at the entrance to some old churches and temples where the devout would leave their weapons before entering the sacred ground. The Thomas Christians were supposedly permitted by the Maharajah to carry their arms around. Some of them were said to be soldiers.

OTHER FEATURES

One interesting thing which was noticed was the ventilation area of the Paliakkara St. George Orthodox Church, established in 18th century. The balustrade like motif on it where the negative and positive spaces intermingle harmoniously was seen

almost exactly repeated in an old Namboothiri illam (home) near Kottayam. The illam is also supposedly about 300 years old.

This amount of material and close similarities between Christian and Hindu places of worship is sufficient to show that the Christian church of Kerala has borrowed greatly from Hindu temple architecture; and it has largely maintained its old Hindu identity in a remote way. This is a fact which Christian historians concede.

At this point an attempt is made to explain why this was so. St. Thomas is known to have been an architect of good standing. And so it does seem strange that the churches he established, (if indeed it was he) in Kerala should be so very different from anything from his native land and look almost identical to temples.

A possibility is that the workers were all Hindu and yet that does not seem a very plausible explanation. What does seem likely however is that the churches chose to look like temples out of two good reasons.

- (i) the Power Factor in society
- (ii) The subversive introduction of Faith

These conjectures are elaborated below.

POWER FACTOR IN SOCIETY

It is believed that many of the early Christian converts were from the high Brahmin classes. After conversion of these families took place and they accepted the sovereignty of the church, the Christians automatically would have been excluded from the elitist social class of the Hindus. Thereby they lost the social power which they had commanded. Alternatively, having been used to a certain social standing, the converted Christians continued to live in accordance with the ways of the caste-ridden society in which they wished to claim a high position

The reason for the Thomas Christians to have reached such a decision as regarding their social behaviour would have been the kind of excommunication they faced from the high caste Hindus from whom they had split.

Maintaining equality with the caste Hindus would have been possible only by Christians practising casteism.

This is easily illustrated by the presence of the 'Kottupuras' in church which are music-houses where the lower-caste musicians would have to stay and play from.

This can be elaborated by considering the case of a Christian parish near Trichur which is mentioned by James Menachery: The parish had an area of about 2 square miles and all the inhabitants paid tax to the church. Symbolically, the church was placed at the very centre of the village. There were only 5 non-Christian families in the village. The goldsmith, the blacksmith, the dhobie, and the carpenter. Each of these had to work for the parishioners and during festivals, for the church. This seems to be a clear case of the feudalistic Hindu community with the sovereign now replaced by the church.

The Malabar Christians have copper plate documents which prove that the Maharajah of Travancore had given them the right to possess several items within the church like the banyan tree and the 'althara' the platform around it; and to carry arms, to wear certain jewellery etc. All these show they were treated quite well by the King.

We can now go to the second argument.

THE SUBVERSIVE INTRODUCTION OF FAITH

When a new and radically different faith such as Christianity was introduced into Kerala, it would have required that the transition be smooth.

Society always has an opposition to change. That is the inertia of social mores. Yet society also has a side to it which has, a specific need or propensity for change. These two diametrically opposite notions are by their interaction, the motive forces of social change.

But it is clear that such change would have to be made in a socially acceptable manner. This would explain why the Christians made their churches so like the temples and yet a little different.

CHANGES IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

The coming of the Portuguese in the early 16th century resulted in changes in the church of Kerala. The Portuguese considered the Syrian Christians to be pagan and their churches which looked like temples, likewise pagan too. So when the opportunity came as it did with the Synod of Diamper decreed by the Archbishop of Goa, they decided that the churches should be changed in every way.

There had been until then an oriental aspect to the sanctum sanctorum (as in Egypt and in India) an aspect of mystery as indicated by the darkness in that chamber. This was the case with the Syrian Churches in Kerala. Also these churches had the Persian cross in the altar and no other images.

The Synod wished that the churches be painted, the sanctum brightened up and the nave painted and given images in wood and clay. They believed in the brightness of the risen Christ. In any case these changes were made, but they only resulted in minor or no changes. The plan of the Kerala church never

adopted the cruciform of the Romans. So, the Synod decided to build new facades.

But this did not really create much of the desired effect as no examples of Gothic or renaissance architecture, which were common in Europe at that time can be seen in the old Kerala churches.

It was in the late 19th century that the Kerala church became truly indigenous, by having their own religious heads. But paradoxically it is the churches built in this period and the early 20th century which show western influences. Whether as an attempt to prove their cultural independence or not, these churches adopted an eclectic building style.

In recent years there have been cries to indigenise the church. A great and dedicated example of this in an active manner was the work of Bishop Jerome of the Quilon Diocese.

The Bishop had a cathedral built which borrowed greatly from Hindu traditions. The St. Raphael's Cathedral in Quilon has several interesting features.

The nave is square shaped and the pulpit has the lotus motif on it. The tabernacle is also thus shaped. Behind the altar is the image of two swans

(known in Hindu tradition to be able to separate milk from water) with the legend on the wall ' NEER KSHEER VIVEK' in Sanskrit.

The entrance to the church has two water ponds on either side so that feet may be washed (another Hindu-associated tradition). The back has a false door shaped like a temple door. There is also the Malayalam 'OM' written above it.. The top of the church is shaped like a gopuram in the Orissa temple style. On top of the Gopuram is a lotus and on its sides three white bands like the shaivite marks on a shiva lingam.

This cathedral is the pride of the seminarians to whom it is mainly attached.

Bishop Jerome also had a picture of the Virgin Mary and Child made. The Virgin wears what is close to an Indian sari and stands on a lotus in the posture of Yashoda with the boy Krishna. Even the little diadem on the young Jesus's head make this association clear.

CONCLUSION

In spite of all the arguments and conflicts within the various churches in Kerala on the aspect of indigenisation, it is clear that architecturally, the contribution of the Kerala Christians lay in suitably adapting the temple architecture to suit their social and religious needs. The old churches are still the pride of the Christians of the area. In modern Kerala church building, the St. Raphael's Cathedral and, more so, the St. John's Cathedral, Tiruvalla designed by Mr. Laurle Bakar stand out as classic example of fine taste and sound common sense.

The Kerala Christians have a cultural identity of their own. Their religion is as old as Christianity itself and if they have not been treated well in European histories of Christianity, the reasons lie elsewhere, not in their social, cultural and artistic abilities.

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