

Ancient Temples of Kashmir

by Virendra Bangroo

Kashmir is bestowed with nature's bounties and the mystical environment has fascinated people irrespective of caste, creed and language. Scholars coming from far and wide have carried away with them its, immense spiritual wealth shedding the shackles of this materialistic work and merging with the ultimate.

The Kashmir valley blessed with the natural bounties is rightly celebrated as the valley of Gods. Apart from its natural beauty an added attraction are the ancient stone temples of Kashmir, noteworthy for unique architectural elements and fine stone carvings.

The Hindu temple represents the cosmological symbolism in an aesthetic grab. The Hindu temple is a symbol or rather an aggregate of various symbols. It is ritually invested with human personality (Vastupursha) and conceived in terms of human organism, which is the most evolved form. The scriptures say that the temple should be worshipped as Pursa. The names of the various limbs of the human body from the foot to the crown of the head are applied in Indian architectural texts to different parts of the temple structure.

The door of the temple is its mouth, the platform terminating the trunk to the superstructure, represents the shoulder of the Pursa; the projection, the arms and down to the wall, the leg and to the very bottom, to the lower most molding- the feet. The temple is Pursa and conceived by means of Prakrti the feminine form.

We talked about the perfect body- the Vastupursha, but it is lifeless without the resident soul. The image in the temple, the Pratima is the very life of the temple. The sanctum called Garbhagriha is the house of the womb, it is here the regeneration is effected and the higher self of the devotee is reborn

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A similar purpose is served by the superstructure, which is frequently designed as the mystical, Meru, Mandara or Kailasa- the function of which is to lead from a broad base to a point where all lines converge- the ultimate one.

The conceptualization and development of Hindu temple architecture was the result of the churning of cosmic ideas in the microcosm of natural setting. The temple was not a four-walled enclosure but an embodiment of the cosmos and the energy, which propels it. The main sanctum sanatorium, which houses the Garbhagriha, the womb, is the personification of Pursha so as to define the relationship of cosmos and man. The image placed in the Garbhagriha is the atman- the soul. The temples were laid according a well-defined plan. The temple building was a ritual and every stone laid was consecrated to God by the holy chant of the Brahmins.

Buddhism was introduced in Kashmir soon after the Buddha's demise and king Ashoka is said to have built stupas in the 3rd C.B.C. The Buddhist remains at Harwan, Hoina and Hutamer have revealed unique tiles depicting the fine workmanship.

With the background of Buddhist artistic tradition, Kashmiri artisans evolved a style of Hindu temple architecture with a distinct characteristic of its own. Kashmir temple exhibits a unique blend of foreign style and indigenous creativity that resulted in a distinctive architecture which was more suited to their geographic and climate conditions.

The temple builders of Kashmir were way ahead of their contemporaries of the plains and peninsular India. The 8th cent. Temples of Kashmir were constructed of evenly dressed ashlar masonry. Built of mammoth boulders, the joints were put together with lime mortar, which is seen at Wangat and also using steel dowels, used in the Martand temple. These engineering developments were in vogue in the neighboring Western region of Kashmir.

These refined techniques could not stand up to the rigorous climate of the region and human vandalism and only a few of the vast number of temples described eloquently by Pandit Kalhana in Rajatarangini have survived.

Kashmir lies in the heart of the Asian continent, its geographic location has been of decisive importance for trade and cultural exchange. All the main trade routes connecting eastern and central Asia with Eastern European countries of the near-east lay across the territory. There was exchange on the cultural and religious fronts as it was a meeting place of the cultural waves. The caravan routes from China, central Asia and Tibet met and this led to the great impact on their political, social and cultural structure.

The temple at Lodhu situated 20 kms from Srinagar is in the midst of a spring. The springs are considered to be sacred sites. The temple is said to be the earliest remaining stone structure.

The next stage in the temple architecture development may be studied in the Sankaracharya temple. In the Temple at Narasthan in district Pulwama, the pediment and arch motif is in process of development. Triangular canopies, sunken Trefoil niches and the enclosure wall around with prominent gateway is an approach to the final form of Hindu temple architecture of Kashmir.

7th & 8th century marked the culmination of art during the reign of Karakota rulers. Lalitaditya Muktapida (724-761 AD) ushered in an era of glory and prosperity in the kingdom. After gaining victories over Punjab and Kanauj and Bihar, he turned his attention to the bordering territories of Kashmir. He led the victorious army to Dardistan, Ladakh and Tibet. During the Karakota rule there was a crisis which brought an improvised style into being. We see a profound influence of Chinese, apparent from faces and dresses, which are typically Mongoloid. Building art was a product of influences from different classical schools viz-Greco-Roman, Gandharan, while as the sculpture iconography reflects the tremendous central Asian impact.

Lalitaditya built the famous and elegant Sun temple at Martand and Parihasakesva at his capital Parihaspara.

The Sun temple of Martand stands in the middle of a large courtyard having 86 fluted columns. The temple proper contains the garbhagrha, antarala and the main mandapa, approached by a grand flight of steps. The piliast supporting the central shrine has two tiers; both with niches having 37 divine figures.

The second golden age of temple building was brought into being by the patronage of King Avantivarman the founder of Utpala dynasty. The king built two temples one dedicated to Shiva

and other dedicated to Vishnu.

The final refinement of form and a more polished look may be seen in a group of temples erected by Sankaravarman who succeeded Avantivarman.

During subsequent years due to constant wars between the weak kings and kingdoms temple activity gradually started receding. By the beginning of the 10th century the growth of style had come to an end but small shrines to be raised without any notable architectural development.

The offshoot of the Kashmir style of architecture is found in Northern Punjab and Northwest frontier. The temples at Amb, Malot, Bilot, Kafirkot (sites presently in Pakistan) exhibit some of the architectural elements like enclosed courtyard, pyramidal roof, and trefoil arches, fluted columns showing strong affinity with that of Kashmir. The influences are also found in the Western Himalayan architecture from Ladakh to Nepal.

The traditions never die. The elements of ancient Hindu architecture of Kashmir, which were buried a millennium ago, resurfaced in the form of Muslim shrines and residential houses in succeeding periods. The traditions together with the geographical conditions play a vital role in shaping the Kashmiri character.