



Title:

"The Architecture of New Mosques in Kerala: appropriated aesthetics in the aftermath of urbanisation and globalisation"

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Abstract

In recent times, the architectural features of the old mosques in Kerala, India are in the process of being replaced. Traditional mosques were built in timber and like other religious structures in Kerala emerged from domestic traditions and evolved from local climate, materials, culture and traditions of craft. In the newly constructed mosques, the use of arches, domes and minarets are projected as the *only* legitimate symbols of Islamic culture and tradition. The emerging aesthetics specific to new mosques fuelled by a rising affluence- built in modern materials, disregarding local sensibilities is at variance with the traditional. Newly constructed mosques display a larger than life, monumental language without concern for the classical proportions of the very architectural elements they employ. Architectural choices made by communities of the Malabar are significant, as they point to a rapidly transforming social structure in the light of urbanization and globalization.

Key Words

New Mosques in Kerala, Monumental, Reconstruction, Traditional timber aesthetics, Globalisation

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1.0 Introduction

Kerala is in the middle of a mosque building boom. Proposals for new mosques and the redevelopment of older structures have consequences on the urban landscape of this west coast state. New money has brought a taste for garish colours and buildings in concrete, construction that shouts out loud in an already urban cacophony. There are pan-Indian and pan-global influences sweeping across Kerala fuelled by migration to the rest of India and abroad.

The proximity of the several religions that provide the cultural heritage of Kerala have co-existed for centuries. Kerala is known to be steeped in tradition and its rich culture has had a low-key expression. Malayali cultural expression in terms of clothes, food, festivals, dwellings and places of worship has been traditionally quiet, simple, restrained and unassuming. Verdant countryside and white clothes characterises the aesthetic sensibilities of Malayalis.

Kerala's architecture has a quality of blending in with this landscape, with low height buildings, white washed walls and timber roofs with deep overhangs. In recent times this is rapidly changing. Economic changes have brought in tastes that are alien, incongruent and irreverent of the existing living tradition. The aesthetic sensibilities in urban areas and popular taste now prefers outlandish rather than restrained. New mosque architecture in Kerala seems to be following a similar trend. This paper examines the characteristics of traditional Kerala mosque architecture and its aesthetic legacy that is now being replaced by an alien larger than life aesthetic- the result of economic upswings, global exposure and exaggerated aspirations of the community.

2.0 The Muslim Community in Kerala & the establishment of Early Mosques

Islam arrived on the Malabar Coast five centuries before its political domination in northern India. It almost certainly had early converts here before anywhere outside Arabia. This is not surprising, considering the proximity of the two coastlines and existing trade links from pre-Islamic times. Arab merchants traded Indian spice with other parts of the known world. A number of them set up households in the Malabar as well, and it is through them that Islam's message reached India (Sarkar, 1992). According to legend, Malik-ibn-Dinar, a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad landed at Cranganur (Kodungallur) in AD 642-643 or Hijri 22, and influenced the Chera king, Cheraman Perumal to accept Islam (Shokoohy, 2003, p. 141).

Malik-ibn-Dinar built the first mosque there. This was followed by eleven more along the coast (Kutiayamu, 1979). These mosques are some of the oldest to be established, not

only in India but also in the Islamic world. It is interesting to compare this story with that of Mar Thom, or St. Thomas, one of Christ's apostles, who according to legend, arrived on Kerala's shores in AD 52 and established a church.

Islam spread in Kerala through migration from Arabia and the gradual conversion of native populations. By the twelfth century AD, there were at least ten major settlements of Muslims distributed from Kollam (Quilon) in the south to Kasargod in the north. From around this time, the Zamorins ruled Calicut. Here, Arab merchants shipped pepper, cardamom, cinnamon and ginger. Each settlement developed with a mosque as its centre (Sarkar, 1992). Mosque building in Kerala reached its zenith between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries- the period of Arab supremacy in maritime trade with the Malabar.

3.0 Traditional Mosques

The traditional mosques in Kerala are different from those in the imperial and provincial Indo-Islamic styles throughout the sub-continent. Religious architecture in Kerala emerged from domestic traditions. In traditional dwellings like *Nalakettus*, the concerns of torrential rain and the need for ventilation found expression in remarkable roof and wall elements, executed in abundantly available timber. In Kerala, the temples, churches and mosques (*palli*) take from an architecture evolved from local climate, materials, culture and traditions of craft. Local artisans well versed with the craft constructed mosques under instructions of Muslim religious heads. Their requirements were functional and simple. The existing models for places of worship were temple gateways (*gopura*) or theatre halls (*koothambalam*), and these were adapted for the new religion (Dalvi, 2006).



Fig.1
Nalakettu-Traditional House



Fig. 2
Gopura of Thali Temple,
Kozhikode



Fig. 3
Mosque, Thazhathangady,
Kottayam

A traditional mosque in the Malabar comprises of a rectangular prayer hall with a *mihrab* on the western wall and enclosed verandahs on the sides that serve as spill-over space. A front verandah facing the street becomes a transition space that often leads to a front hall preceding the main prayer hall. An ablution tank is accommodated on one side. The entire structure is raised on a tall plinth/base, similar to the *adhithana* of a temple. The

walls are made of laterite blocks and then lime plastered. The tiled roof has elaborately carved gables. The structural system for the halls is of timber posts, beams and brackets. Often the columns are square or octagonal as in *mandapa* pillars. Nakhudas or ship builders sculpted the *mimbars* in many mosques, representing the very best skills in wood-carving.

Most of the notable mosques on the Malabar Coast are in Kozhikode (Calicut), Mallapuram, Thalassery and Cochin. Built about three to six centuries ago their extant form is a result of periodic repairs and reconstruction as is the case with timber construction. A brief case study of two mosques in Kuttichira, a Mappila neighbourhood in Kozhikode is presented here.



Fig. 4
Mishkaal Palli, Kuttichira,
Kozhikode



Fig. 5
Mishkaal Palli: Detail
of woodwork in gable



Fig.6
Mishkaal Palli: Prayer Hall
on the lower floor

In Kuttichira, centered on the sacred Kuttichira tank, there are several mosques, all traditionally built in timber. The Mishkaal Palli is the largest with a rectangular prayer hall and tiled roofs at four levels- housing subsidiary spaces. The existing building is dated as 1578 (Shokoohy, 2003, p. 166). It sits in close association with the tank. Not very far is the Jamaat Palli, the Friday mosque, on the other side of the tank. Smaller in size and at awkward angle to the narrow street, proclaiming an exact orientation to Mecca. Its front porch is marked by a heavily carved gable; matched by an exquisite timber ceiling, with floral, geometric and calligraphic motifs. It has two light wells, one over the ablution tank and another inside the prayer hall. The forms of the light wells remind us of the tight courtyards of the domestic *Nallakettu* with roof overhangs sloping down from all four sides. The oldest inscription in the mosque dates from 1480-81 carved on a wooden lintel in the ante chamber (Shokoohy, 2003, p. 176).



Fig. 7
Jamaat Palli, Kuttichira



Fig.8
Jamaat Palli: Detail of Column
& Ceiling

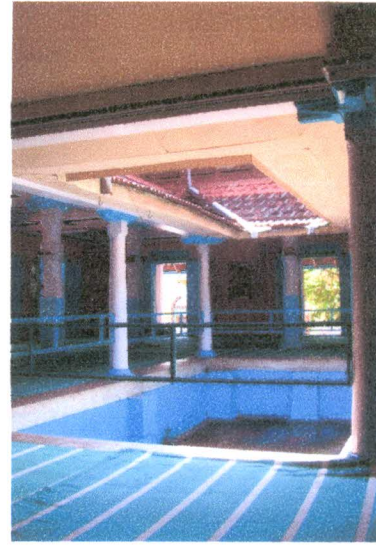


Fig. 9
Jamaat Palli: Interior Space
& Ceiling

They display a form of religious architecture that is non-monumental. They fit snugly into the urban fabric instead of towering above it. Other than functionally determined forms, they show no need to proclaim a religious identity. This architecture was the need of religion, but the product was of local culture and context. This pattern can be seen in other parts of the western coast, especially in Konkan in Maharashtra where religious architecture of different faiths display a similar non-monumentality and a common language based on aesthetics of timber.

4.0 New Mosques & Renovations of Old Mosques



Fig.10
New mosques in the townscapes

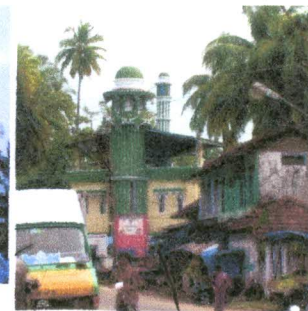


Fig.11
New mosque on the outskirts
of Kuttichira, Kozhikode

In recent times, a number of traditional mosques have been replaced or reconstructed. Also, many new mosques have been constructed, and many more are in the pipeline; most of which are in modern materials like RCC, brick and glass. The architectural language of these mosques has no resemblance with the traditional one nor is there an

attempt to create an alternative modern aesthetic expression. Built using an arbitrary mix of disproportionate elements, painted in garish colours, they resemble marriage halls or shopping centres rather than places of worship. The only markers of spiritual function are looming minarets and arches, which neither belong to local tradition nor are an expression of the possibilities of new materials now used for construction. Simultaneously, in towns and cities, domestic architecture is also being built in the same loud manner in sharp contrast to the scale and structure of the traditional low key character.

Why are the cultural forces that once determined the form of traditional mosques no longer operative? A community's aspirations expressed in an assertive distinct identity other than one accepted over the centuries has political and economic causes. Architectural choices made by communities of the Malabar are significant, as they point to a rapidly transforming social structure in the light of urbanization and globalization.

5.0 Analysis of the Emerging Aesthetics

The following examples of new mosques are selected for a detailed analysis:

5.1 Palayam Palli (mosque), Thiruvananthapuram (Reconstructed in 1964)



Fig.12
Palayam Mosque,
Thiruvananthapuram



Fig. 13
Beema Palli, Thiruvananthapuram

This mosque is the key example of changing attitude towards traditional forms of mosque building in post-independence Kerala. This 17th century mosque was renovated with state patronage and pomp to resemble a Mughal monument- both in the choice of elements like dome, arches, minarets and chhatris and also in its scale.

"The First Chief Engineer of Kerala, Kuttiammu took the initiative to renovate the mosque and the Chief Architect to the Government, J.C. Alexander designed the structure, assisted by Govindan. It thus became a symbol of unity among religions from the very beginning of its construction. P.P. Chummar provided financial support to Govindan in executing the contract.

The mosque was erected in close proximity to a temple of Lord Ganesha and St. Joseph's Cathedral" (Maheswari, 2006).

This rhetoric of 'unity among religions' was in vogue immediately after independence. Ironically, it is vested in a new architecture that dismantles the old syncretic traditions common to temples and mosques to invent a new language that uses alien elements to proclaim a distinct religious identity. The description of the mosque in various popular websites on the city of Thiruvananthapuram cite it as an example of harmony between communities because a temple and a church are just nearby. The harmony that was in-built for centuries in the urban form and character is now dependent on facile and naive homilies. One can attribute this urge to the phenomenon of changing urban form and loss of traditional aesthetic which was unconsciously self-similar among different religions. The engineered element of aesthetics now causes the invention of forced symbols of 'unity'.

The reconstructed Palayam mosque not only ushered in this new fashion in mosque building but also became instrumental in popularizing it.

"The then President of India, Dr. Zakkir Hussain inaugurated the mosque in 1964. When the renovation was complete, everyone wanted to have a similar structure, with domes and minarets, facing Mecca, the Holy Land" (Maheswari, 2006).

The contractor Govindan's son Gopalakrishnan, a 'self-made' architect who has designed 76 mosques in Kerala was clearly inspired by the example of Palayam mosque. His construction of the Beema Palli in Thiruvananthapuram, has huge domes, a massive façade and tall *minars* (132 ft.).

"It took 18 years to complete. It was Percy Brown's Indo-Islamic Architecture in India that triggered my inspiration," admits Gopalakrishnan and explains: "It was constructed in the Indo-Saracenic style which specifies minars, domes (should be three quarter of a sphere), ceilings with lotus motifs, calligraphy, and jalli pillars..." (Maheswari, 2006)

The Indo-Saracenic is a 19th century form of colonial architecture - a mish-mash of elements from Indo-Islamic architecture- promoted by the British to showcase them as indigenous rulers. This style borrowed elements from various historical Indo-Islamic monuments from the North, Ahmedabad, Bijapur etc., in an eclectic blend and invented a new language for secular public buildings like in Madras, for example, where an Art Museum was built to resemble the Buland Darwaza from Fatehpur Sikri. The British

themselves later abandoned this style. In this context, Gopalakrishnan's choice of style is not only anachronistic but also symbolically misleading.

5.2 Vavar Mosque, Erumeli, Kerala



Fig 14
Vavar Mosque, Erumeli



Fig 15
Sabrimala pilgrims visiting Vavar mosque

This newly constructed mosque in Sabrimala, also designed by Gopalakrishnan, marks the significant personality of Saint Vavar- a Muslim saint who was according to legend, a friend of Lord Ayappa. This mosque is an important landmark for completing the pilgrimage. That during the pilgrimage season, this place of Muslim worship is actually flooded by Hindu devotees in typical pilgrim attire is certainly a significant marker of social and religious syncretism. The architectural expression aspires for a blend of Mughal palaces and Rajput haveli elements. The verdant environs of Sabrimala have undergone several changes and this new development in concrete has altered the traditional low key, timber character. The form of this monumental mosque suggests contrary meanings in syncretism.

5.3 Sheikh Masjid at Karunagappally, Kollam (2006-07)



Fig 16
Sheikh Masjid, Kollam

This newly constructed mosque has become well-known as 'The Taj Mahal of Kerala'. Its form is largely borrowed from that of the Taj, complete with the flanking structures- with a liberal sprinkling of additional chhatris and miniature minarets as also some European gables. Not only are the elements alien but ironically, it is forgotten that the Taj is a mausoleum (tomb) and not a mosque. Copying the Taj is always fraught, it is almost impossible to recreate its context, its proportions, its compositional spacing with the flanking mosque, jawab and gateways. Here, the architect, undaunted by this challenge has proudly presented the people of Kollam with this imitation.

5.4 Markazu-Ssaquafathi-Ssunniyyah's Knowledge City Complex at Karanthur near Kozhikode

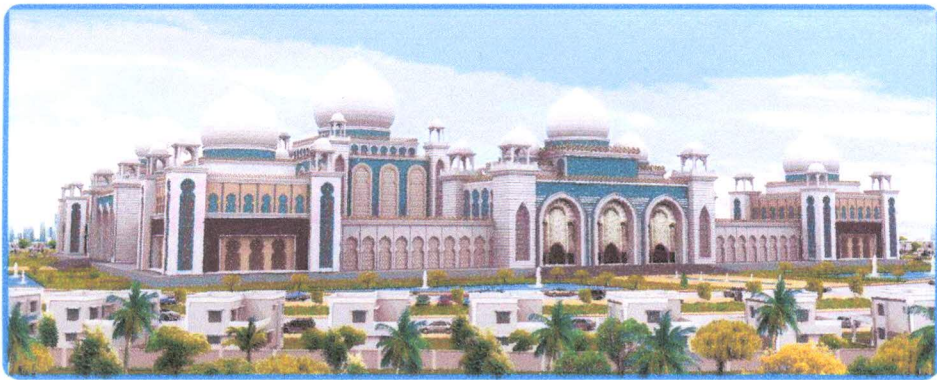


Fig 17
Proposal for 'the largest Mosque in India', Markaz knowledge city, Kozhikode

The Sunni Markaz, an influential charitable trust (operating since 1978 in Kozhikode and running an educational set-up) has a proposal to build a knowledge city complex on 600 acres of land. The complex will consist of colleges, township and malls. The highlight of this complex is to be a grand mosque with an area of about 25,000 sq.mt., providing accommodation 25,000 to 30,000 devotees at prayer-time. The estimated cost of construction is Rs. 40 crore which is being endowed by the members of the community residing in the Gulf countries. (Source: <http://markazonline.in/grandmasjid.php>)

The architect Riyaz Mohammad is quoted in a news report: *"The mosque is planned on a 12 acre plot. Eight acres will be set apart for landscaping and host a Mughal-style garden. The main structure will be confined to 4 acres"* (TOI News Report, 2011). According to the architect, *"It would strictly follow the green-building concept so that the built-up area will harmoniously blend with the greenery around. Mosque building alone would cover an area of 4 acres, it would surrounded by a green-belt and beautiful garden of eight acres."* (Warsi, 2011)

Several readings can be drawn from this proposal.

This is touted to be largest mosque in India. The scale of the building is unprecedented and many more times in size than any other religious building in Kerala. From modestly sized, neighbourhood community centric, domestic scaled places of worship, this proposed mosque has come a really long way. The image on the website shows the mosque as a giant structure, completely dwarfing the houses in the town ship. The proposed capacity of 30,000 also signals a shift from the decentralised, local and smaller congregation to a centralised one. This itself is an indicator of forces of globalisation.

The size and grandeur is the projection of the aspirations of the expatriate and nouveau-riche community. Invoking Mughal Architecture in this context is indicative of an assertion of socio-economic might and also an identity which has grown politically global and pan-Islamic.

It is ironic that in a land of lush greenery, wetlands and backwaters one needs to rely on imagery of formal Mughal geometric garden to claim **Green** credentials. Also, a built volume of this size accommodating thousands of people, with fenestrations covered with fixed glazing would have to rely on mechanical lighting and ventilation. In the absence of roof overhangs, how will this Mughal styled building respond to a five month long monsoon with over 3,000mm of average annual rainfall?

6.0 Conservation Versus Reconstruction



Fig 18
Cheraman Jumma Masjid, Kodungallur:
Present form

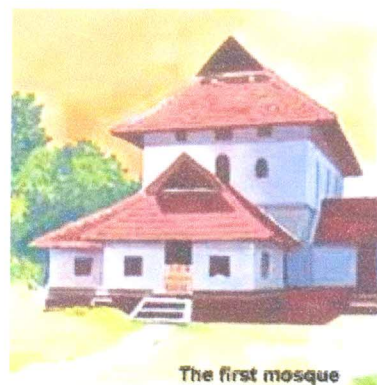


Fig 19
Cheraman Jumma Masjid, Kodungallur
Sketch of the old structure

The Government of Kerala has recently floated the 'Muziris Cultural Heritage Conservation Project' aimed at preservation and restoration of heritage sites spread over a large area in Ernakulam and Thrissur districts of Kerala. These were the oldest heritage sites in the State (linked to ancient Roman port of Muziris) that carry many remnants of the past (Mathew, 2009).

The Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur, believed to be the country's first and oldest mosque, is one of the structures under consideration for restoration. The mosque was first renovated in the 11th Century AD, and later in 1974, The Masjid president P.A. Mohammed Sayed is quoted, "*An extension was added after demolishing the front portion of the old mosque during renovation. The ancient part of the mosque, including the sanctum sanctorum, was left untouched.*" (News Report, 2011) It was renovated later in 1996, and in 2003, by adding extensions to accommodate more devotees.

The systematic restoration and preservation of old and traditional mosques as living heritage is a positive step in recognising the communities value vested in them. Yet, the methods and strategies adopted remain debatable. According to the same news report, the renovated mosque would have two underground prayer halls, with a capacity of 3,000 people. While the oldest part will be restored, the desire for a grand size still remains.

7.0 Conclusions

According to Fels (Fels, 2011, p. 65) at least half of the old mosques in Cochin have been demolished. This is becoming an increasing trend throughout the state. Kerala expatriates working in Middle Eastern countries give large donations to local mosques, both as acts of devotion as well as a display of new found economic status. These funds have, almost always, encouraged new construction, either to reconstruct the old, or to build completely new mosques.

It is here that traditional mosques and their extant heritage is most under-appreciated. The special timber constructions of the older mosques are often cited as hard to maintain and keep in good repair. Instead, even religious leaders feel that the problems of moist walls and roof maintenance could only be solved with a new building (Fels, 2011, p. 65).

For the new global donors, vernacular mosques are perceived as deficient in appropriate Islamic pedigree. It is suggested that the old timber mosques look too much like temples and need to be dismantled to give way to an 'Islamic' replacement.

While old mosques are being reconstructed in new materials like concrete, many new mosques are being built. Most of these are over-scaled and built for visual impact, rather than blending in with the surroundings as their forebears inevitably did.

Recently projects with state funding are mooted to preserve the heritage of old mosques or to restore them. However, the desire for modern day addition in concrete hasn't gone. In fact they are somehow a part of this preservation effort.

The mosque's core functions are also undergoing change. Earlier, the mosque was a place of daily worship or Friday prayer for a small congregation in a local area. Today, they have morphed into veritable social centres with didactic, cultural, economic and political functions rather than the mere spiritual. They serve a much larger number of congregants. Information technology is put to full use. Many new mosques have their own websites. New mosques now qualify themselves by size, the amount of money spent and how large a number of people can pray at a time.

This is also noticeable in the systematic erasure of local variations in religious practices to promote a more uniform, so-called 'pure' –back to the roots religion. Heterodoxy is giving way to orthodoxy. Architecturally this has paradoxical results:

The erstwhile local character of the mosques has given way to a more global language in its architecture. Traditional religious architecture in Kerala displayed an unself-conscious *self-similarity and homogeneity of local character*, not unlike the temples, churches and synagogues in its vicinity. Today, each structure is designed to proclaim a unique religious identity clearly separating it from its local counterparts, and, at the same time aspiring to become part of a pan-Indian or Global Islamic Ummah. Most of the new mosques designers choose to adopt an aesthetic that is largely derivative of monumental Mughal edifices.

Such kind of a universal Global language in Islamic architecture has no basis in history. The search for such a unifying language is a recent trend and its creation relies on forms of 'imagined' tradition. Regrettably, this invented language is without grace, proportions, harmony, balance or beauty. The aesthetic is a bloated Orientalist Arabian-nights fantasy.

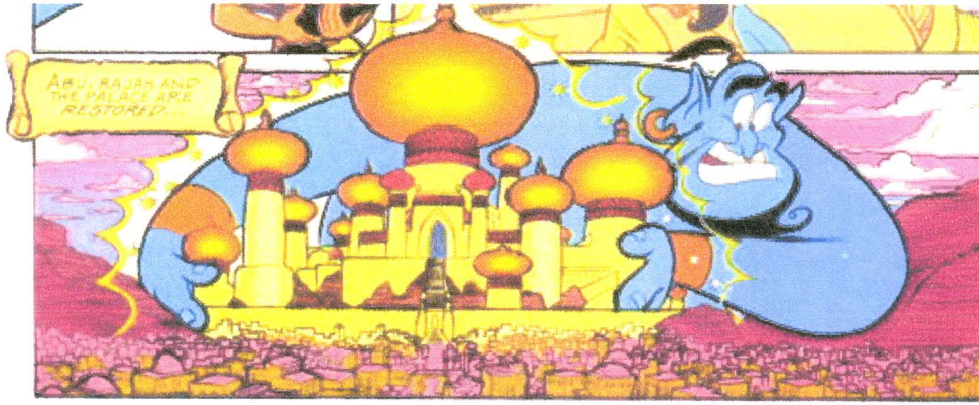


Fig. 20

Arabian Night fantasy

These new structures fail to respond to local climate, and will inevitably have to rely on mechanical systems to light and ventilate; this in a region where power supply is almost never guaranteed. These new mosque structures are not only aesthetic eye-sores but also environmental disasters. They go against the very grain of sustainable cityscapes.

Kerala's mosques have always been integral to neighbourhoods and centres of community life. In an increasingly globalized world, they cannot remain isolated from the winds of change affecting the rest of the urban character. As the maintenance and upkeep of these structures is paid for by the community itself, it is the communities' changing values and aspirations that are bound to influence the new architecture. In the end the growth of new mosque architecture in Kerala today is a reflection of the many faithful who are both culturally as well as economically fuelling these growth engines.

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Annexture 1: List of Images

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Undertaking

This is to state that the paper titled, "The Architecture of New Mosques in Kerala: appropriated aesthetics in the aftermath of urbanisation and globalisation", is my original work.

Smita Dalvi

