

Architectural Transformation of Syrian Christian Churches in Kerala Since the Inception of Portuguese to India: An Insight to St Mary's Forane Church Kanjoor

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Abstract

The Portuguese were the first colonists to arrive in Kerala in 1498 and they were surprised to find a well thriving Christian community in the Malabar Coast. The Portuguese being Catholics under the Pope tried every possible means to Latinize the Syrian Christians. This they did by forcefully converting the Syrian Christians to Catholics. They introduced Catholic rituals, altered the Syrian churches, and introduced Portuguese elements in the churches. This led to the formation of a hybrid architecture for the Syrian churches of Kerala. Kanjoor is one such church in Kerala which had some Portuguese influence in it. There are many artefacts found in Kanjoor church which was once brought from Portugal which includes antique round globe lamps, lampshades, bronze painting of flowers, and altar back-drop. The Western influence in the churches in Kerala can be seen only with the arrival of Portuguese. Kanjoor still has a hybrid culture and it's a real treasure for the present and the future generations. Most of the evidence found in the church truly brings back a long-forgotten history and tradition of Kanjoor. The grand elephant's entrance door, single stoned Baptism font, the pulpit, open air granite stone, relief works in the vault over the altar and much more evidence in the church proves the significance and historical value of the church. As a whole this paper is a research on the architecture and the relevance of the cultural heritage of Kanjoor church since the arrival of Portuguese to India.

Keywords: Church architecture, syrian christians, portuguese,

Introduction

The main factors contributing to the 2000 years of long back tradition in the Kanjoor church is the architecture and the archaeological sources found in the church. Until 1500 AD, the Thomas Christian community of Kerala grew under the ecclesiastical guidance of Bishops from Syria, and Persia of the Eastern Orthodox Church¹. In 1599 AD a synod was held in Udayamperoor, 'The Synod of Diamper', according to which the Syrian Christian community was brought under the Roman Pontiff. As a result of this, most of the records which were available in the church were burnt in fire by the Portuguese due to the heresy and hatred towards the Syrians. Rest of the sources were destroyed and burnt by Tipu sultan and his army during his conquest. Fortunately Tipu didn't demolish Kanjoor church and hence left some sources which are the backbone to this study.

Saint Mary's Forane church Kanjoor is one of the oldest and historically important catholic churches in Kerala. According to early documents of the church, the church was built in the early 11th century even before the arrival of the Portuguese. The records of Ernakulam-Angamaly archdiocese and Kerala Christian directory, mentions that the first church was built in 1001 AD dedicated to Mother Mary. Even though Kerala Christian Sabha has a history of about 2000 years not much evidence is available regarding the ancient church because the Portuguese destroyed many sources, palm-leaf writing could not survive much, and some were even destroyed during the invasions of Tipu Sultan.

Syrian Christian Community of Kerala

The sources of knowledge for the study of early history of Christianity in Kerala are exceedingly scanty and differ widely because they were either destroyed or disappeared during the Portuguese hegemony in Kerala. However, fairly large people agree on the fact that Christian community derived their past and origin from the East Syrian church of Persia. Cosmos in his work '*Christian Topography*' mentions that there was a Syrian community with Bishops appointed from Persia in the Malabar coast. The testimony of Cosmos, proves the fact that there was a community of Christians in the early 6th century.

In confronting the problem of origin there is tradition overruling historical evidence. There is a traditional belief that Saint Thomas the apostle visited Kerala in 52 AD and brought Christianity into Kerala. The earliest account of the tradition of the arrival of Saint Thomas to Kerala is contained in a song, popularly known as 'Thomma Parvam'. Kerala christians were also called 'Thomas Christians' by the Portuguese because of the ardent and blind faith of the group in the apostle and in the Law of Thomas (Thomma Maargam).

Yet another point raised by historians about the origin of the early Christian community is concerning the migration of Persian Christians to Kerala. One such Persian merchant was Thomas of Cana (Kanai Thomas) who is believed to have stepped into the Gods Own Country around 345 AD².

Until 1500 AD the Syrian Christians grew under the ecclesiastical guidance of bishops from Syria, Persia and of the Eastern orthodox church. After the arrival of the Portuguese they tried every means to bring Syrian christians under the Roman Pontiff.

A Synod was held in Udayamperoor, which marked the end of Syrian dominance in churches in Kerala and gave birth to a single unified code for the catholics in Kerala under the Pope of Rome.

Historical Significance of Kanjoor Church

On the banks of the great Periyar river there is a small place called Vellarappilly which was the main centre of Cochin rulers. Kanjoor shares its boundary with Vellarappilly and has got a special tradition from its geographical location itself. From the prehistoric epoch itself river banks were chosen by the people to live, and many great civilisations were also born in the banks of the river. Likewise Periyar not only served as a source for irrigation, but also provided a different culture to its inhabitants. Sixteenth century Portuguese historian Antonio de Gouvea in his book *Jornada of Dom Alexis de Menezes: A Portuguese Account of the Sixteenth Century Malabar*, mentions about the trade of 'black gold' which was the 'black pepper' exportation from Kanjoor to the outer world through sea route. On the map of Malabar, Kanjoor is spelled as 'Canhur'³

The history of Kanjoor church can be traced back from the late 9th century. Before the introduction of Malayalam language, Vattezhuthu script was widely used and there is evidence of Vattezhuthu script found in the walls (864AD) and old cemetery of Kanjoor church (1099 AD). The church has an elaborate

altar with exquisite architecture, rich carvings and beautiful paintings which are still found in the church. Shaktan Thampuran, the then ruler of Cochin, who is known as the father of modern Kochi gifted an elephant's lamp to the church. The elephant's lamp thus signifies the historical Hindu royal patronage over the Christian church. The Kanjoor church has gone through four stages of evolution forming the present-day church. The first church in Kanjoor was built in 1001 AD and it was rebuilt in 1403 AD according to the writings found in the *sheelanthi* (one of the axial timbers in the roof frame)² of madbaha (sanctuary) in the altar. During this period the ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan was motivated to destroy the Christian churches, temples and to loot all the property and gold. He was also into Kanjoor church, but it is said by ancestors that he steps back after the miracle incident from St. Sebastian. This is beautifully depicted in the mural paintings found in the church showing native army fighting the army of Tipu Sultan. Angamaly was the official headquarters of the Indian Christian community. It was shifted to Kodungalloor in 1610⁵. However due to the threat from Arabs and some other casualties, the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Kodungalloor was shifted to Kanjoor. Administrator of Archdiocese of Kodungallur 'Paiseito Do Forto' was stationed at Kanjoor. After his death, he was buried inside Kanjoor church in 1838. There is an inscription of the same seen in the church. Kanjoor church is a mixture of local and Portuguese tradition leading to the formation of a hybrid culture.

A Glimpse on the Architectural Features of the Church

Kanjoor church can be taken as a great example of the influence of Baroque architecture, portuguese architecture and elements of syrian –persian cultures. Portuguese were dominant in spreading their ideas and influence upon the Indian subjects. The architectural features of Syrian Christian churches before the advent of Europeans had some common features to that of the Hindu temples. Dr Andrews Thazhath, in his book 'The Law Of Thomas' (1987) mentions that the church is a rectangular building divided into three sections namely sanctuary, nave and porch similar to the garbhagriha, mantapa and mukhamantapa in temples.

Kanjoor has got quite a number of archeological sources and artefacts dating before the colonial era. Written records of foreign travellers give small details of the churches that existed prior to colonisation in the 15th century. Cosmos, a Byzantine traveller, visited India in 522 AD². He mentions the presence of Christian churches in Kerala, but he was unclear about the style of construction followed. Gouvea in his book '*Jornada of Dom Alexis De Menesis*' mentions that all the churches were modelled after the temples. But the true fact is that temple and church architectural features were quite similar, it might be because during that era both the communities might have used the same raw-materials and must have employed the same-craftsmen. The only difference being the cross in front of the churches. An incident to prove the fact that early Christian churches resembled similar to a temple is the misinterpretation by Vasco Da Gama regarding a temple in Calicut, where he visualises the Hindu deity and temple as worship centre of Christians.

The Syrian churches before the advent of Portuguese had some common indigenous features like:-

a) Orientation of the church

Most of the old churches in Kerala were built in such a way that the altar faces towards the East. From antiquity, according to Indian culture, the majority of the temples and churches were built according to architectural science. The orientation of the church is in the East-West axis, with the entrance door in the West pointing towards the main altar in the East.

b) Madbaha

The sanctuary or Madbaha of Kanjoor church was towards the East like other churches of the time and is slightly higher than the nave or Hykala. In the main altar there is evidence of relief works which are made of wood and many other materials. The Madbaha of Kanjoor church is built in an arched pattern. The roof of the Madbaha is like a pyramid.

c) Hykala

The Hykala or the nave is the body of the temple and it is where people attend the Holy Mass. Kanjoor church has four doors, two on each side, excluding the main entrance door. The Hykala and Madbaha are separated by an arched opening.

d) Vault over altar

There is a vault over the altar and it is an important feature evident in old churches of Kerala. There is an opening above the vault. In earlier days the working of the church's bell tower was through this opening. There is also relief-works found in the vault. The most important feature of Kanjoor church is the image of a double headed bird in the vault over the altar.

e) Entrance porch

The entrance porch was in front of the church. It was on both sides made of stone walls, and at times acted as the interior of the church. In earlier days, those who were restricted from entering inside the church, or those who were not baptised and those people belonging to other religious groups attended the rituals and ceremonies in the porch.

f) Gateway

The gateway was made of red stone, it was also called an elephant wall. There were lamps in the walls of the gateway, and it acted similar to a temple's surroundings. On each side of the gateway there was a cellar to store gold and other precious items. Kanjoor church had a cellar in the basement near the gateway with 14 locks in it. Only a very few people who were trained to open the lock could unlock it. The gateway and the cellar were both demolished and therefore not found in the present phase of the church.

g) Main entrance door

Towards the West-hand side of the church is a grand entrance door which is compared to the size of an elephant. The door is made of wood and on both sides there are images of St. George and Archangel Michael engraved.

h) Open air granite stone

One of the salient features of the churches built during the 11th centuries is the presence of a stone cross in front of the church. The cross is made up of a single stone, and is compared to the dwajasthambam which is found in the main entrance of the temple. Historians are of the opinion that these crosses have a Persian and Hindu influence in the technique used for its construction. Similar crosses are also found in Angamaly, Kaduthuruthy, Ramapuram, Olloor, Piravam and some other old churches in Kerala. These crosses contain images of peacocks, angels, lotuses, and other living beings. There are carvings of lotus found in the cross of Kanjoor church.

The Portuguese Entry

After the arrival of the Portuguese, changes in the liturgy, ideologies and new practices came into existence. The spatial organisation of the church also varied. Thus the new church introduced baptismal fonts, wooden statues, frescoes, priest rooms, space for choir, sacristy, the pulpit and so on. According to H. Sarkar, the new trends in church architecture after the arrival of Portuguese can be evidently seen in

the wood-works, interior and the paintings devoted to the life-story of Jesus Christ all exclusively found in the churches predominantly in Kerala.

Further, the church layout was enriched with Belfry, Open air Granite cross, Cemetery and Cemetery churches. Introduction of mural paintings in churches started after the 16th century. Nevertheless the changes made for spatial organisation and architectural character did not overthrow its indigenous character which was developed based on the Eastern Syrian Christian ecclesiastical traditions.

Mural paintings :- Introduction of mural paintings in churches happened around the 16th to 17th century roughly after the colonial entry. The main Christian churches in Kerala where we can see mural paintings are Ollur, Kottayam, Kaduthuruthi, Angamaly, Chengannur, Aakapparambu, Paliakkara, Pazhuvil, Thumpamon, Alangad, Koratty, Mulanthuruthi and Kanjoor. Before the introduction of mural paintings in churches the cross was the only source of symbolism. The post-colonial era brought a new phase to the church symbolism with statues of Saints, Biblical scenes, heaven and earth etc painted in the church walls, altar, doors and ceilings.

Kanjoor church has some of the finest murals in terms of colour and elegance. On either side of the elephant gate at the entrance of Kanjoor church is a picture of the Travancore army chasing the Mysore army. Of particular importance is the depiction of artillery led by Dutch commander Delanoy and the infantry led by Ayyappan Marthanda Pillai – Diwan of Marthanda Varma and later Karthika thirunal Raja, who fought against Tipu's army. Kanjoor murals are famous for their special use of iron-based cut stones for the manufacture of paints. The top of the madbaha of the church is adorned with beautiful paintings of angels, painted with fruit juice and gold dust.

Baptismal font :- The colossal single-stoned baptismal font was initially placed next to the giant elephant door of Kanjoor church. Baptismal font was an addition brought out by European missionaries from the 15th century onwards. Though it's a foreign edition we can see elements of indigenous styles incorporating the traditional lotus symbolism. The pedestal of baptismal font of Kanjoor has carvings of lion heads which carry the font on their head. This traditional symbolism is often associated with Buddhism. The most famous art object in India is the four lions facing outwards on the top of the Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath, many historians compare this to the baptismal font in Kanjoor as an influence of Buddhism in the architecture of Syrian Christian churches.

Pulpit :- In the absence of loudspeakers, the pulpit acted as a means of sharing the message of clergy in a way that was clearly audible to all. Pulpits were introduced by the Portuguese and it is placed in the central part of the church close to the wall. It is in the shape of a columbine flower. The pulpit in Kanjoor church is also in the shape of a flower blossoming on a plant from the mouth of an elephant. The canopy or umbrella is attached to the pulpit in such a way that the dove symbolises the Holy Spirit on its lips. Similar pulpits can be found only in very few churches in Kerala like the ones at St Mary's Church in Champakulam and the wooden carved pulpit at St Antony's church at Ollur. They are found to be carved in the shapes resembling flowers, elephants, etc with religious paintings³.

The architectural styles followed by Syrian Christian churches before the colonial era and post-colonial era are noteworthy. Pre-colonial Syrian churches were quite similar to temples because they didn't have any other option other than following local architecture. There was also an incorporation of elements of Eastern church. The colonial entry tried to give a new shape and form to the church. The Portuguese were the first to land in Kerala, following the Synod of Diamper, the Portuguese were successful in bringing their concept of 'one shepherd and one flock upon the earth'. They brought out grand baroque style with spatial organisations and high ornamentation. Lots of statues, symbols and structures inside the church

gained momentum during the colonial era. Kanjoor has fulfilled all these characteristics. What one must understand is that Portuguese missionaries were keen to transfer their ideas to the artisans and workers who were much familiar with indigenous techniques and construction methods. This resulted in an amalgamation of West, East and the local styles. This peculiar characteristic can be seen only in a handful of churches in Kerala which are dated back to the pre-colonial time. Kanjoor is truly an example for this kind of architecture. Many of the structures inside the church, if remained were to be a true gold, but they got damaged and demolished during the span of time. Nevertheless the church has tried to keep up its heritage and prestige over time.

Conclusion

‘Sitz im Leben’ is a famous German phrase which is frequently used in theological studies. A term used mainly in Biblical criticism, to signify the circumstances (often in the life of a community) in which a particular story, saying, etc., was either created or preserved and transmitted. If one wants to understand any fact or event in its comprehensive context, one must learn the background around it. It is not enough to understand Kanjoor church alone, but it is also necessary to understand the history, background and of the Syrian church of India. Religion always acted as a backbone in the progress of a society and development of culture. Temples and churches do play a vital role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the people of Kerala. Kanjoor church is also no exception in this case. There is a lack of written evidence available in the churches because most of the events were orally transmitted from generation to generation either in the form of some stories or as art. Kanjoor church is a blend of many different cultures and it is evident in the architecture of the church. This centuries-old church is certainly a true spirit of immortality.

Endnotes

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2. Fr Mulavarikkal Thomas, “Marthoma sleehayum kraisthava sabhayumn”, pg.21
3. Thachil Jomon, “Kanjoor Kraisthava Pazhama”, pg.14
4. Fr. Mulavarackal Thomas, “Marthoma sleehayum kraisthava sabhayum”, pg.117

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