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UNIQUE FEATURES OF ANCIENT TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF KASHMIR

HILAL AHMAD SHAH

Abstract:

The "Paradise of India" (i.e. Kashmir) is full of archaeological interest right from ancient period. During ancient period through the length and breadth of the Kashmir Valley, a network of Hindu Temples was spread like Shankaracharya Temple, Payar Temple, Martand Temple, Buniyar Temples, Laduv Temple, Avantisvara Temple, Avantiswami Temple, Taper Temple, Manasbal Temple, Mamal Temple, Devsar Temple, Garur Temple, Sugandesha Temple, Narag Temples, Narasthan Temple etc. In this paper the unique features of ancient temples of Kashmir in terms of style, material, designs and methods of construction has been discussed in a considerable length as compared to other parts of India.

INTRODUCTION:

The ancient Kashmiri's splendid and wonderful ruins demonstrate that the ancient Kashmiris were great architects and produced a beautiful and impressive temple architectural style, distinct as compared the temple architecture of other parts of India. (1) The ancient temples of Kashmir possess some unique features in many aspects because Kashmir since antiquity has been functioning as a cultural bridge between India on the one hand and central Asia, China and Tibet on the other hand. Consequently ancient temple architecture of Kashmir was greatly influenced by the art of these foreign countries very much, which is accepted by many national as well as international scholars like; Alexander Cunningham, Smith, Fergusson, D.R Sahani, R.C Kak, R.C Agarwal etc. (2) This is a reason that the great ancient Kashmiri architects created a distinct temple architectural style which possesses its own features but affected by both Indian as well as central Asian art styles. One more reason of these unique features of ancient temples of Kashmir is that the European art also imposed some influence on it because due to close contact of Kashmir with Gandhara Kingdom in the early centuries (3). The unique features of ancient temple architecture of Kashmir, which differ it from the other parts of India, are mentioned as under:

During ancient Kashmir the architects have always invariably choose the most natural spots for their sanctuaries than other parts of Indian (4) such as Martand Temple, Shankaracharya Temple, Payar Temple, Avantipora Temples etc. were built on superb natural sites, which are gentle slopes of grass lands, with snow mountains as a back ground and closes to fine trees and streams of cold water. The Ancient Kashmiri Architect was a wonderful gift of choosing high sites for their temple buildings so to command spacious views of the valley as also to ensure safety from the ravages of floods. (5) Perhaps they choose high grounds as much as possible so as to avoid big floods. It must be believed that in those days the rivers in Valley were much fuller of water than they are now.

In plan, the ancient Kashmiri temple is a rectangular quadrangle built in the centre of open courtyard surrounded by a range of cells on all the sides where as this plan is absent in other parts of India. (6)

The main gate, which is always equal in dimensions to main shrine, is double chambered structure and is always built in the middle of the shorter side of the Peristyle, it consists a double flight of steps one external and the other facing the temple with pyramidal roof. (7) As compared to the other monuments of

India the internal surface of the cella of Kashmiri temple is generally kept plain and externally the walls of Peristyle are also plain. (8)

All the ancient temples of Kashmir except those of Wangath and Buniyar, in which the material used is granite, are built of lime stone like Shankaracharya Temple, Martand Temple, Avantipora Temple etc. (9) These lime stones were brought from Zewan and Dachigam nala. Bricks and wood was not used. However, Mortar was used in less quantity. There exist no traces of any windows or sky light in any of the known ancient temples of the Valley. (10) The only openings therefore, that are found in the walls of these ancient temples are the door ways.

Some of the ancient temples of Kashmir such as Avantisvara Temple, Avantiswami Temple and Martand Temple possess subsidiary shrines (11). But these subsidiary shrines are usually built in an angle of the courtyard and are similar in plan to the main shrine; it is a unique feature in India. The basement of the Kashmiri temples consists of both single and double platforms as compared to the temples of other parts of India. These can be seen in Narag, Pandrathan and Payar Temples. The core of these platforms is composed of stone rubble and the walls in dressed stone. (12)

The roofs of ancient temples of Kashmir are invariably pyramidal. The Pyramidal is a double one except the roof of small temple at Naranthal which consists of a single plan pyramid. (13) Perhaps pyramidal shape of roofs was necessitated by the climate of the valley, where snowfall and heavy rain is a common feature. In this way, the pyramidal roofs of ancient temples of Kashmir are fundamentally differs from the roofs of the temples of other parts of India, which are either of the carved pyre or of the stepped roof type.

The figures or sculptures in all the ancient temples of Kashmir are almost always in an erect position, without any inscription (14) Mostly figures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses were engraved like: Shiva, Vishnu, Ganga, Yamana and Kamdev. Whereas only in two temples of Avantipora figures of King Avantivarma and his family members were engraved on some stones.

The number of flutes in the columns of different temples in the Kashmir valley is 12, 16, 20 and 24. (15) But the number of these flutes in the columns is never less than 12 nor more than 24. The shafts of the Kashmiri Pillars of these temples being almost identical with those of the Grecian – Doric and unlike anything of the class found in other parts of India (16).

The one more important and unique feature of ancient Kashmiri temples as compared to other parts of India is the unity of design. All these ancient temples are similar in terms of material, style, techniques etc. (17)

During the long period of King Lalitaditya of Karkota Dynasty, capped and simple triangular gable became a favourite motif of Kashmiri temple architecture. These gables were especially used in Sun Temple of Martand, which is a unique feature in India. (18)

In the Laduv Temple round cella was built like the Guniyar Monastery in Swat Valley which is an influence of Gandhara art and is a unique feature in India. (19)

As compared to the North and South Indian temple architecture, the Kashmiri temples have the great width of the intervals between the columns but it is constant. The inter-columniation followed in Kashmiri temples was never less than twenty four meters. (20)

The ancient temples of Kashmir are simple, attractive and impressive but smaller in size than other parts of India. (21) However, all the ancient temples of Kashmir have a single storied elevation and the double storey was never used. The temple was conceived as a single whole and after its construction afforded no scope for subsequent additions.

Another unique feature of ancient temples of Kashmir according to Stein are, irrespective all ancient temples built in the middle of water tanks. (22) Perhaps the objective of erecting in the midst of water was to place them immediately under the protection of the Nagas or snake gods, who were zealously worshiped for ages throughout Kashmir.

CONCLUSION:

The conclusion that I reach on the bases of remarks made above is that the ancient temple architecture of Kashmir represented a tradition of its own. The ancient temples of Kashmir possess some unique features as compared to other parts of India, because the great ancient Kashmiri architects used many own styles, designs, and techniques as well as local material from base to the top for the construction of their temples. But it is true that the ancient Kashmiri temple architecture is greatly affected by many foreign art styles like Bactro-Gandhra, Graeco- Egyptian and Tibetan elements than the art styles of other parts of ancient India.

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