

# **B. ARCHITECTURE**

## **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE**

### **Vernacular Architecture of South India**

#### **Lecture-11**

#### **Introduction of Agraharams:**

The Agraharams are fast diminishing today. It is a very rare site or either it is very organized and this is one of the examples of very rare Brahmin's settlement or the Agraharam in Kerala. So you notice that it is a whole street with the similar housing on both sides. Let us get started, An Agraharam or Agrahara is the name given to the Brahmin quarter of a heterogeneous village or to any village inhabited by Brahmins.

Agraharam is nothing but the settlement pattern that is occupied by Brahmins. The word Agraharams were also known as Chaturvedimangalams. The Agraharam is nothing but a Garland of houses. Agraharam means Garland, here it means a garland of houses. Simply meaning, it originates from the fact that the Agraharams have lines of houses on either side of the road and the temple to the village god at the center, thus resembling a garland around the temple, so essentially the settlement pattern is this. So the temple around which the houses come. So that is the reason for the origin of the name Agraharam. The garland of the houses. According to the traditional Hindu practice of architecture and town planning, an agraharam is held to be two rows of houses. There is a road, one temple on either side the other temple. The two temples essentially the Shiva and Vishnu. So both temple existed in village, so both were revolved and worshiped. The one end was the Shiva temple and the other end was the Vishnu temple and there was a road that connects both. And the houses were there on both sides, these are called Agraharams. The name literally means "a garland of houses" as you can see one temple is there, straight road on both axis among which the houses come. There is a tank on both sides. The other image of the houses on either side. The houses can be more than one storied.

So the Origin is the Brahmin settlers of south India had migrated to various parts of the sub-continent and made their settlements around temples. Brahmin's had to do everything with temples clerk work and to do with scripts and texts. Their main livelihood revolved around temples and so wherever they settled they settled around temples, as a community which handles Vedas and religious texts the Brahmins yielded power in the social hierarchy. Since they were well read and well learned and knowledgeable they happened to have a very superior hand over the social systems in which they lived. So they had the power and influence in the social hierarchy. So they were the highest just after the rulers. As the precede class they received respect from the other communities.

As I said the rulers and other communities reward and respect them a lot. So they received a royal patronage and respect. Wherever they went, the Brahmins made their settlements around temples around which their everyday life revolved. The Brahmins in Kerala can be broadly classified into two groups- the original brahmins is supposed to be from Punjab and they migrated and settled down in Andhra Pradesh. From Andhra they moved and settled down in Kerala mainly. So the Kerala became the prime source or the prime area of settling and the settlement pattern of the Agaraharams more flourished in Kerala like Paalkaad and those areas. Then on there are mainly two types of Brahmins, the Namboothiri Brahmins who claim themselves to be the true Brahmins of Kerala and the Tamil and Tulu Brahmin's who had migrated to various parts of Kerala. Since they were migrating and moving from one place to another they were called as 'paradesi Brahmins', paradesi means nothing but no mad, so they were called as Paradesi Brahmins. These are the two types of Brahmins.

So wherever these Brahmins went they settled in Agaraharam. The planning of the Agaraharams followed a grid iron or concentric ring patterns, basically the settlement patterns of two types; the temple around which concentrically or organically in some manners, they formed the housing pattern or simply in case of connecting the two temples they form grid iron patterns. So these were the two main settlement patterns. The row of houses is either single or double storied never mostly restricted to the ground. The houses with the traditional pitched roof form striking a significant profile against the sky.

So as we saw in the street both sides we had the houses with significant sloping roof it strikes at the very unique profile. The streets were narrow and formed an integral extension of the living space. The streets are not means of travel or it means in which the people move from one place to another, it is nothing but an extension of the living space of the house. So the house existed as much as the main space, the courtyard space or the kitchen space, the space before their house is vital to the house. The row houses sharing a common wall had a long verandah running along the front portion, supported by stone and wooden pillars. So again many other join family system or many other communities stay together they had a common walls both for social reasons as well as climatic reasons, climatic being they were able to shade each other and not let sun hit the walls such that the heat travels inside.

A typical agraharam consists of row houses with sloping roofs and common walls lining a street. The planning of an agraharam is dictated by the temple which forms the focal point of the colony. So the temple governs the way in which the planning comes out for the agraharam. The streets are aligned east-west with the row houses clustered along either side. So the streets are in east and west, the houses obviously comes in the north south axis helping against the inhibit of heat in sun intense pattern from falling inside the house. The backyard of the houses are linked by narrow lanes. In between was the main street which connecting entrance of the houses. They were also the subsidy streets which were behind their house which form the scavenger lanes or the lanes in which the drainage passed out or which cleared out. The streets in front of the houses transform themselves into an active community space serving as a commercial space for vendors, a play area for children, a meeting place for elders, and venues for religious processions and meeting. So the space in front of the house on the street forms the integral part of the house.

For example it forms the place for the kids to play which is normal, a commercial place for vendors which is also normal, a meeting place for elders which is not so common and venues for religious precession and meetings, so this is unique, the brahmins conducted the religious precessions, meetings and debates in front of their houses on the street. So the space is extended and became the vital part of the houses. Also seen is that closely built structures offer a high degree of security and facilitate community interaction, as community even though they were well read and

had influence in the power of social hierarchy, there were very few or smaller group of a people or in other words they were in a minority. So they had to stick together for security and community purposes. Not only that Brahmin went from one place to another, the brahmins are settled together were actually family. That is also another reason they stuck together and had common walls.

So as I said the streets with the temple at the end slopping roofed houses and the thinnai. The thinnai extends as the space of the houses into the street. The compact cluster houses were designed with common walls to maximize the use of space. Houses are characterized by symmetry and decorative features, such as moldings, cornices, and large openings. So we have seen a lot of vernacular architecture or mansion based architecture which has lot of embellishments and very rich carving in ornamentation. The ornamentation or the decorative features might be relatively less but was also an important aspect. The front space of each house is divided into an outer and inner veranda with raised plinth used as a seating area. The overhang provides shelter from rain and reduces the glare in the building. The inner veranda serves as a study or guest room and provides access to the upper floor. So basically the outer portion secludes the set of activities, the inner veranda serves the set of activities.

The Rezhi or the central space is the coolest area in a typical agraharam house. This private, ceremonial, and the community space also accommodates the storage facility. So unlike the other types of vernacular architecture that we study was the central courtyard was the main space, in the agraharam kind of architecture, the courtyards are present they happened to be the part of the rezhi or the central space. The central space is the huge central area is almost covered with little bit of ventilation coming from the courtyard happen to be the most important space in the agraharam settlement dwelling unit. The central courtyard is the source of natural light. It doubles up as a space where the family members gather to relax. The built space around the central courtyard is utilized for dining. So the courtyard was present and had a set of activities. The small kitchen is an extension to the main built space and has the direct access to the well.

So these are all immediate space not separated by different courtyards or different halls as such they verges as extra spaces. A street view as we are talking about, you can see that people sat in front of the houses they

interacted with the other people. The street was an important part of the living area. So it was an extended living area. The house has a verandah at the entrance for social activities as I said, it also acts as a transition from the street to the dwelling. So we need a transition from one space to any space in any case, here the thinnai or the race platform or the verandah acts as the one. A passage which starts at the street face, runs through the house ending at the backyard.

So the clear vision or the extended vision through the architecture of the dwelling unit is present of which acts as a visual connection. The evolution of the particular type of topology may speak about the social position of the Brahmin community. As I said they are minority when compared to the local indigenous population. Anywhere they go and settle, when compared to the local population they are the minority. When they move to the major settlements they have the tendency among the members of the community to settle together to ensure safety. To ensure safety not be threatened or attacked by anyone else, but they stay together.

### **Agaraharams – Settlement Pattern:**

The another reason behind this was that in most cases, the early migrant to the particular place may be the members of the same family as I said, and thus when they settle down in an alien land, they automatically evolved into a close knit community whose principles were based on strict religious norms. Then the settlement pattern, Tindappad is the observance of certain distances between the various castes in order to avoid pollution by contact social position of the community, their association with the temple and of course the patronage of the royals. So as much as it was orthodox still it was followed and also they kept from other caste people or people such as cleaners or people who tend to spread diseases as such as the precaution they did this, they stayed away from them, so this was the another reason they stayed together and stayed away from other people.

The Agaraharams built around the temples were either arranged along the three sides of the main temple, otherwise, the most commonly seen pattern is the concentric circles around the temple. So either its axial streets as three sides or as the concentric circles that's how the street of the Agaraharams was arranged. The Agaraharams were often built on land donated by the royals and often the land was divided amongst the migrant Brahmins based on the social hierarchy, so not only they have hierarchy

among them, they have large groups of people or the communities of people, within their own community of people they had a social hierarchy, usually the head of the community stayed near the palace complex, near the ruler, or near the temple and subsequently the other people or the other social hierarchy order people came along. To show that they are also from the Kerala architecture, but still distinct in terms of being different from Nalukettu house, we have talked a lot about the Nalukettu house. Now we just talk about how the Agaraharams is different, here we have two plans we have talked about Nalukettu house, it is a central courtyard with halls around. Here you notice that Agaraharams has actually a linear plan. We talked about the outer verandah the inner verandah, store, then the Rezhi with the small courtyard then the dining which is connected to the kitchen and another courtyard near the toilets.

This is actually not a courtyard but rather the open space. Then the storage or the cattle space comes. So this plan is essentially linear and does not come around the arrangement of courtyard and rather the courtyard forms the smaller space in the settlement planning. In Nalukettu the courtyard acts as the main building unit around which the halls are developed. The courtyard happens to be the part of the Rezhi or the main central space. The planning and architecture of these two housing patterns have evolved over time taking into consideration various parameters like the local climate conditions, availability of local building materials and the skill employed in the construction. So as much as the social things affect the planning what also affects the local climate, the availability of local building materials and off course which become the very important factor in the coming age of architecture which is in important consideration today and the skill employed in the construction of these buildings.

The courtyard has some religious association too, traditionally in Vastu and Devasthanam, the devasthanam simply we hear about the devasthanam or the brahmasthanam which is central space and it is the most sacred space. The sacred tulsi planted and worshipped in the center of the courtyard. The courtyard has provisions of taps for ablution and also outlets for water drainage which takes the rain water outside. As I said, the drainage pipes take the water outside and also lead to the scavengers and another courtyard which is larger in size seen next to the kitchen and toilet which function as the washing and bathing space. Another courtyard which is near the toilet dedicated to be open around for washing spaces. Here is the typical dwelling

unit and linear plan and also a cut view section. The spatial planning of the Agaraharams follows a linear pattern with rooms arranged one after the other not around the courtyard like in the Nalukettu.

A passage which starts at the street face, runs through the houses ending at the backyard. There are some open spaces too, in the form of sunken courtyards which are highly functional. I just name the spaces basically the thinna or the outer verandah's, the Akamthinna or the inner verandah, the Machil is not but an antique a storage space which goes from the inner verandah up. It is nothing but an antique space usually used as the storage space but sometimes when there are newly married people these spaces are used. Then the Anganam or the Rezhi with the courtyard, the adukkula which is nothing but the kitchen area. Here again you look at the thinna, Agamthinna, Rezhi and Anadanam, the Adukulla, the work area and the toilets and the open area near the toilets. So before the thinna the Puramthinna comes, the long corridor/verandah running in front of the Agaraharams. Essentially the space before the building which serves as the extension of the living to the street which is called as the Puramthinna. This space also acted as the community gathering place where the men assembled for religious discourse.

So near the thinnai the people of brahmin's are assembled for religious discussions and for prayers, etc., this place is called the puramthinna. Then the Akamthinna, the small room next to it. It incorporates the stairway leading to the upper storey. The Rezhi is the central room in Agaraharams which we discussed. then the Thalam is the space around the courtyard, the homakundam or the place for the sacrificial fires located here. The Yagnas we talked about, the Yagnas space near the south east usually in Nalukettu houses similarly they placed near the open spaces where the smokes can go away. Then the Muttam, the courtyard is a part of the Rezhi itself. So not like the Nalukettu, the courtyard is the main that hall surrounded. The courtyard is the part of the Rezhi and there is no separation between these two spaces. Then the Adukulla is the kitchen, the Kuchil, these are the rooms located at the extreme end, where the ladies during their menstruation are housed.

So the medical conditions also looked into the women had menstruation issues like they have to be cleaned so they are kept or housed in a separate room from the rest of the houses, so they had separate spaces for these

also. Then Machil is the attic room. The stairway from the Akamthinna leads to the Machil. This room is assigned for the use of newly wedded couples. Then Kottil, the independent structure located at the extreme end. So I talked about open space and after which the cattle or storage space was there. In the old days the Agaraharams did not have toilets associated with the house and the system of scavengers lanes thus came into existence. Those days toilets are not happened to be attached within the main living space and the scavengers used to come out and clear out them necessary.

So again we can have look at the plan and the section, the thinnai and the Akamthinnai at the staircase, here you have the Rezhi the central space of the courtyard, the Anganam or the Muttam, then we have the Adukalla. Then we move on to the toilets and then the Kottil. So the Machil comes above in this plan, you can see the section the machil. So the scavenger lane that I talked about this here. The Kottil is the storage space or where the cattle is kept. The sense of sharing the spaces is then best exhibited in the design of the Puramthinna. So again to specify the way in which they use space, the Puramthinna is the very good example. The long connected verandah running in front of all the houses of the Agaraharams. The Puramthinna was an interstitial space which connected the street and the interiors of the house and this was also the place where religious as well as philosophical debates were held.

So I have mentioned the couple of times already that this space was happens to be were people discussed and the people are talked, have religious discussions and debates etc., the culture of living together and also played a important role in the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Agaraharams. So as much as the structure and everything was shared their lives and habits together. They have bhajanamadhoms or prayer halls which also was a place where the people from the settlement gathered for the festivals and during important occasions. Apart from having the sharing systems within their houses or in the interstitial space of the thinnai they also had bhajan halls or prayer halls for which they discussed for this. So as you can see, this is the streets have the Agaraharams style houses on both the sides, they have decorated and they have slopped roofs. You can see that the street is an important part of the houses of life. For example in this case for a festival all the houses are decorated such that they happened to be part single house not separately decorated as such. So each house has a rice drawing in front of the house which makes even more coherence to the

rest of the buildings. You can see the lady is coming out with the rice drawing which is called the kolams. These are usually drawings which encourages and promotes auspicious prosperity to come in to the house. And also they serves as the fodder feed for ants and birds. The culture was an important aspect for which the whole space turned out to be. The agraharams were introvert settlements, often open to the members of the particular caste group, however within the introvert settlement there were designed built and open spaces that well catered to the needs of the settlers.

So as much as they were introverted they were secluded from the other communities of the people, within themselves they were very open and they had spaces which reflected that. The streets were also a part of the life of the Brahmin communities as many of the important religious functions and marriage feasts were conducted in the streets. So lot of festivals and lot of functions related to religion, wedding events wedding feasts to be happen on the streets. This makes an important space. The Arippodikolam, a painted prayer. It is believed that drawing a kolam in front of the house brings prosperity. Moreover, they provide food for insects and birds. So we will talk briefly about the construction material. All houses are shared a common wall and were made of 'cheekalkatta' a strong locally available building material, these blocks were cemented with lime plaster and the plinth in which the house stood was made of large granite blocks, which were laid in a special manner, which is very efficient that the centuries old houses had not been affected by the earthquakes. So here again the common walls, proper distribution of loads made sure that they are efficient to earthquakes and the 'Cheekalkatta' the very old wood is easily and locally available material, this was cemented with lime plaster.

So the main mode of the plaster of those was the lime plaster and the plinth in which the house stood was made of large granite blocks. These days we have slope footing, the footing as such, those days they had a whole huge and large knit block upon which the plinth was built. In old days the roofs were thatched and the supporting pillars and mezzanine floors were made of timber. Later thatch roofs were replaced by Mangalore tiles. So initially the wooden supporting were common, the mezzanine floors were also made of wood. The roof was generally made of thatch later on they become Mangalore titles they were more easily available and durable.