

Vernacular Architecture

Lecture 9

Padmanabhapuram Palace

The Padmanabhapuram palace is one of the oldest palaces in Kerala. Once the residence of the royal family of Travancore, is located in Southern India adjoining the State of Kerala, in a region with high realm, fall and a tropical climate. Padmanabhapuram palace architecture is famous for many reasons. Primarily speaking, a palace is a luxurious building, a fort rather but when you look at the Padmanabhapuram palace it does not give you a feeling any lesser, rather it shows how much importance has been given to the climate, the traditional architectural style and the building scripts that have been passed on from generation to generation. They have followed that in the design and have come up with an interpretation of the palace for this particular region which is why it is very unique. We shall go through a brief history. The palace was constructed around 1601 AD by Iravi Varma Kulasekhara Perumal who ruled between 1592 and 1609. The founder of modern Travancore, King Marthanda Varma (1706 - 1758) who ruled Travancore from 1729 to 1758, rebuilt the palace in around 1750. The reason why we are going through its history is because the Padmanabhapuram palace was not something that was built in one stretch but part by part, it evolved from one space to another based on the rulers who ruled it and it came up to its fullest potential during the rule of the King Marthanda Varma. The king dedicated the kingdom to his family deity Padmanabha. Prior to that it wasn't called the Padmanabhapuram palace, King Marthanda Varma was a devotee of Vishnu and hence named the palace in the form of Vishnu. So it's called the Padmanabhapuram palace. This is the palace, the palace looks more like a complex of cottage houses or courtyard houses but it is a palace in every other way, in terms of the scale, details, luxury, the spaces that are used, the function of each space, the articulation of spaces, the strategic location as such, the way it has been enclosed in an entire compound and also has a sacred passageway through which the King and his family members could escape in case of emergencies.

In the late 18th century, precisely in 1795 the capital of Travancore was shifted from here to Thiruvananthapuram. Initially, Padmanabhapuram Palace was the palace of the capital city but the capital was shifted from this place to Thiruvananthapuram as we all know of today. So, it lost its glory as such but still continues to be one of the examples of traditional Kerala architecture and some portions of this sprawling complex are also hallmark of traditional Kerala style architecture. Anything about the Kerala style architecture or about the Vernacular architecture or about the proper traditional architecture from the scripture of Kerala building sciences, you'll find it in the Padmanabhapuram palace. Even though no records of it exist of its exact date of origin, the initial structures within the Padmanabhapuram Palace are dated to around 1400 - 1500. The palace was at its most splendid during the reign of Marthanda Varma.

This is the palace, you'd notice the features of the palace are strategic location. This palace is located at the foothills of a mountain or a hill. The reason for placing a palace at the foothills is simply because you can prevent the enemy from attacking from all sides. So, by being placed at the foothill, the enemy is able to attack or see you from one direction, this is an important strategic location and this was followed in the Padmanabhapuram palace. You have this complete enclosure of a compound wall or a security wall, which covers the entire campus, this is another feature. The variety of styles in the group of buildings which comprise the present palace complex reflects the socio-political background in which they developed. We've seen socio cultural background, socio cultural aspects that form a reason, or a deciding factor in the Vernacular style of architecture but here the socio political background, the politics or the place being ruled by different rulers was an important aspect in which the architecture was shaped. The interesting mixture of styles evident in the later buildings are dominated by the strong unifying characteristics of indigenous building practices lending cohesion to the whole complex. As much as evolution of buildings were different from one style to another, the building practices or the methods were indigenous meaning very unique, leading cohesion to the whole complex. The way it was constructed or the building practices or the methods unified campus in more or less a single way. The palace complex is set within a fort of 186.25 acres located strategically at the base of the mountains and is defined by a high wall on the western side and by buildings and walls on the others.

Zoning and Planning

Now, we move on to zoning and planning. The main entry to the palace complex is from the West, by a high door with a pitched roof structure abutting it, as found everywhere in vernacular architecture in Kerala. We talked about the Padipura which is the entrance structure in a general or traditional house, it is the same in a bigger version too, the pitched roof structure. The first court is large and consists of stables on its sides. Usually it is a place where people receive guests, this is a palace huge in scale, so the first courtyard or open courts were used as stables for cattle or horses. From here on, a series of courtyards are established using building blocks and walls. Courtyards are the building blocks, from here on, the number of courtyards increases to form the whole palace. This incrementally increasing in privacy as it moves to the core of the complex known as Thai Kottaram (literally, the generic mother) palace of the complex. Thai Kottaram, the word Thai means mother, it literally means generic mother or the palace of the mother. Why was this called the palace of the mother? Simply because it was the initial or the first structure that came up or the first Nalukettu that was formed. The first built form in this whole palace complex was the mother palace which is why it is called so. This being the oldest structure, a two-storeyed building with a courtyard and a tank attached to it. A tank which is a very important aspect attached to it. The structure of this wooden palace,

the building material used throughout is wood. It is more or less a wooden palace, than just being a palace. It attains the status of the mother by virtue of the fact that it forms a centre piece in the Vaastu Purshaman. Apart from also being the oldest structure, it is also the central piece of the architecture, which is also another reason why it is called the mother palace. The Vaasthu Purshamandala, the principles they follow form the basis of the design of the entire palace compound. The Brahmasthana is nothing but the central space, sthana means space, Brahma is referred to the main energy flowing through the house. The Brahmasthana or the central crossing point of the two main axis falls immediately outside the structure, in line with the main entry and the side entries punctured in the buildings on all sides. All these fall in place, the same point is also crossed tangentially by another esoteric axis, established by openings by generic palaces. Esoteric axis established by openings at the generic palace. So, axis lines formed throughout the compound against each other, thus forming the main Brahmasthana. These are all aligned with the Brahmasthana. You can see this is a plan. This portion is the Thai Kottaram. You can see the axis across through with that line, that is the main axis. The structures that come around, that evolved later happened to be the open court through which the stables were. The king's council, the kitchen areas, the storage areas, the other library areas, the guest areas, merchandise areas and also areas with respect to performance and entertainment. This is the beautiful section of the whole palace, this is the west, you have the table area, the King's council, the mother palace or the Thai kottaram, then the kitchen and storage area. Then you have the pond, which is the important aspect. Then, later on, a structure was developed which is actually a large granary hall, now a museum. These are roof plans. In the roof plans today, we have a lot of flat structures whether or not the climate dictates it. You can see, even in a palace of such huge scale, it is completely covered with pitched roofs or slanting roofs as a response to the climate. We talked about single storey mansions, two storey mansions, this is a palace, so it has three or storeys in structure. The verandahs are typical. The slow proof is such that it comes down to protect even the verandah such that the rain does not affect it. You can see the structural way in which the building is supported. Below you have the section in which you can see the Nalukettu or the courtyard. These are the spaces around the courtyard and this is the courtyard, the main one. Attic spaces or storage spaces are also there. This structure forms the basic reference point in relation to which the location and openings of other structures in the complex are axed. At first sight, the palace complex appears to be without any rationale in its layout and disposition. But it gains focus instantly when one discovers the esoteric rules. The 'Thatchu Sasthram' which we already talked about, the building science and the carpentry science, this was an important principle guideline for the building of the palace.

Now, we will talk about various spaces in particular, the Mannarasala or the King's council, the Thai Kottaram, the Mother's Palace, the Natakala or the Performance hall, the four-storeyed

building at the centre of the palace complex which happens to be the bedroom and the pleasure room of the King. The Thekke Kottaram or the Southern Palace. The King council is the most beautiful chamber, it has beautiful windows, coloured mica which kept the heat out and the dust as well. To keep the dust at bay in today's times calls for Mica, a very important material that is used, it was used back then as well. Delicate and beautiful lattice work can be seen all over the council chamber. The floor is also beautifully done, with a fine and perfect finish. The floor is made of a mixture of varied substances including burnt coconut shells, egg whites and so on. The materials were very diverse and they used whichever was available. The remarkable aspect is that this particular floor finish and texture could not be duplicated in any other construction. This unique floor has not been duplicated anywhere, as in they were not able to find out what went into the making of this floor. You can see a completely roof dominated palace.

Next, the mother's palace, designed in traditional Kerala style, the Nalukettu. The oldest construction and is believed to be constructed around the 16th century. This was the first structure to have come up back then. In the inner courtyard, sloping roofs from all four sides taper down. Four pillars on four corners support the roof. The Nalukettu courtyard has the roof sloped as much as possible to protect it from one end. This is supported by the pillars that are intricately and ornately covered. On the south-west corner of the mother's palace, there is a relatively small room called the chamber of solitude or 'ekantha mandapam'.

The main structure, the central structure. Then, we talked about the Natakala which is the Hall of Performance and the Uppirikka Maliga, the four-storeyed central building, this is where the bedrooms were placed, this is where they built treasury under the King's watch was also present.

The principles of Vasthu Sasthra followed East and North-East placement, water tanks are located to the east of the structures. Surface water drainage and sewage disposal all laid towards the south East. Another significant structure which forms an annexe to the palace complex by virtue of its location is the thekke kottam or the southern palace. As the name implies, it is located on the south of the main palace building and interestingly falls outside the Vaastu Purusha mandala like hall where foreigners were received.

The Nalukettu itself had a tank of its own. This as a huge structure had tank of its own. This was used as a way to cool the wind that was coming in. The internal courts are rather small and serve mainly as ventilation zones and the ritualistic function of being the griha nabhi or the navel of the house. The Nalukettu is the main courtyard and there are other courtyards which form along the esoteric axis, just happen to be the navel of the house.

There is a huge pond that is present. We talk about the building materials. Carpentry, the most developed of building sciences and plays a major role in construction. The large availability of wood, the documentation of scripts make carpentry very advance. The type of wood, relative positions to each other, various use functions, particular type of wood, types of wood pertaining to the type of user were all specified in the texts. It was very systematic. The walls are made of laterite, granite or bricks or a combination of them all. The walls form a small portion of the total visible structure and the roof forms dominate all other elements. Wood and stone pillars support the wooden roof structure, and the walls are infilled with brick or laterite and in some cases, with non structural wooden screens. Wood not only being a ribbed latice screen, they also act as structural supports. These screens filter the light inside, the wooden ribbed screens present filter the light coming from outside, prevent the privacy, they allow unhindered breeze. The carpenters worked out the most complicated angle of rafter positions, hotels for interconnecting members in changing positions on the ground. What they did was, they made sure these screens were in every way functional, utilitarian and responsive to the client. They also made sure, they were very unique. The decorative wooden false ceilings are provided in some important rooms which help insulate them. False ceilings were present, not to hide anything as such, they were used for the single purpose of acting as an insulating layer along with the roof.

Koothambalams

Now, we will move on to the Koothambalams. Koothambalams are nothing but performing theatres. Unlike temples in most other countries, the temples in Kerala were the first typical architecture form that developed, made sure that they had performances spaces for the temple. The temples were never separated from performance theatres and performance theatres became a significant feature in temples. This was because they believed dance, the Bharatnatyam is supposed to be inherent and important aspect of devotion and worship. That's how the Koothambalams became an important part of the temple architecture. Hindu temple is a unique place of reverence and veneration and they follow various rituals, more often that not hindu temples are used for performing dances. Even in South India, in other temples, dances are performed but separate, dedicated spaces as such are not present. But in Kerala this an important feature. Other than Kerala, there are no separate spaces or theatres in other states. No separate as such in other temples. The temple tradition of Kerala is altogether different and unique in its own way. For centuries, temples have been designed in such a way as to allow staging art forms on the temple premises. The debut performance by the artists were supposedly dedicated to their idols. This as you see is a performing arts theatre of a modern sense in a traditional era. It's a huge hall with slanting roofs to protect from the rain. Wooden lattice screens which act as ventilation promoters and also the intricate carving at the gables, keystone areas, etc.

So, the Koothambalam, an integral part of Kerala temple culture supposedly the idols dance in unison. The Kerala architecture tradition brings out the indisputable fact that the dance and the Hindu religion are inseparable. The Koothambalam plays a major role in educating visitors on the rich legends of the Indian cultural fabric. From that era, it was an important aspect of temple architecture. So, it became a way to depict stories through dances to various people, to educate the poor people and now it has scaled to the extent of educating tourists or people from other countries. Famous Koothambalam are like Thirunakkara, Harippad, Kidangoor, Arpookkara and Irinjalakuda, are famous for their sculptures. Apart from simply having lattice screens, they also made sure that the supporting pillars inside the structures are decorated with sculptures. This is an image of the Koothambalam. A Koothambalam is exclusively a big wall, surrounded by wooden lattice screens and sloped roof structure. Inside the Koothambalam, the space is divided into two parts. One is the performance area, the other is the viewing area. Besides the aforesaid, it also accessory spaces such as modern day green room, changing areas, transition spaces between each dance, etc. The space where the performance happens is raised higher to a main level simple because they must raise their level of performance where it is viewable by everybody. They are separated by four pillars and also a separate roof for themselves. These pillars are intricately carved, they have lamps, features of traditional and religious beliefs can be expressed in terms of sculptures. They also space on the raised platform for the musicians and the dancers and stage artists. Koothambalam are built according to Natya Shastra of Sage Bharata. They have traditional scripts for each building science. Natyasastra or Bharatnatyam was something that was written and scripted by Sage Bharata. He has also scripted and listed out the architectural features for the building of Koothambalam. Bharata's Natyashastra describes the features of a Koothambalam. The hall is usually about 16 meter long and 12 meter wide, 4-meter square raised platform supported by pillars in the centre. The Koothambalam at the Irinjalakuda is one of the best examples of traditional performance theatre. It lies within the cloister of the temple, more precisely within the Panca Prakaras of the temple. Not only is it near the temple, it comes in the very axial surrounding pathways of the main shrine. The size of Koothambalam may vary from temples to temples.

You can see the huge hall in the picture, the hall within the hall. Stage artists performing and practicing. You can see how much light and ventilation are inside, without providing any artificial support or light is provided. A square platform with a separate pyramidal roof. They had a separate roof, this is called the Natya Mandapam. The floor of the hall has two equal portions, two portions for viewing the performances. The design and plan of the Koothambalam is typical to the Kerala tradition of temple architecture. As much as it was

present in the temple compound, it also followed the temple architecture features. Tantra Samuccaya is Vastu Shastra prescription for temples.