



Architectural and cultural heritage: A historical study of ancient Kashmir temples

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Abstract

Kashmir, which is commonly compared to paradise on earth, has a rich lineage of temple-built construction that signifies its peculiar mixture of artistic, culture, and spiritual traditions. In this paper, I have discussed the architectural and cultural heritage of the ancient temples of Kashmir concerning their historical development, stylistic qualities, socio-religious values, etc. Based on field recording of essential locations like Martand, Avantipur, and Shankaracharya, historical writings, such as Rajatarangini, and archaeological data, the study evaluates the role played by political rulers, trade networks, and religious movements in the creation of temples. It even ventures into discussing the symbolism behind structural designs and iconographies, and fitting these monuments into the Himalaya region's wider picture. In the paper, the concerns raised against their conservation in light of natural decay, conflict, and premature conservation neglect have also been outlined, with the suggestion of approaches to heritage management. This study combines the concept of architectural research and cultural analysis in bringing a comprehensive picture of the sacred landscape of ancient Kashmir and its historical significance that remained unchanged down the ages.

Keywords: Ancient Kashmir Temples, Architectural Heritage, Cultural and Religious Significance, Historical Development and Symbolism, Conservation and Heritage Management

Introduction

Kashmir, which is in most of the literature a Paradise on Earth, holds a special niche in the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent region. Locked by the lap of the Himalayas, it has ever for a millennium a crossroads of civilizations, where the influences of the Central Asian, Persian, Tibet, and mainland India met to give it a yet distinctive socio-cultural identity (Dani, 1989; Schofield, 2003) ^[1, 4]. It was strategically positioned in prime trade routes where cultural exchanges could occur through trade of goods, ideas, and artistic practices, adding to its cultural life (Zutshi, 2014; Rizvi, 1990) ^[5, 3]. The valley's history dates back to prehistoric settlement; however, it was prominent in written history because of the exploits of Kalhana wrote Rajatarangini, which describes the political, social, and religious activities since ancient times (Kalhana, 1961; Dani, 1989) ^[2, 1]. Kashmir enjoyed a rich artistic, architectural, and literary culture under the patronage of the Hindu dynasties, including the Karkotas, Utpala, and Loharas (Zutshi, 2014; Schofield, 2003) ^[5, 4]. Temples did not just serve as a place of worship; they also became a place of learning, art, and socialization (Rizvi, 1990; Kalhana, 1961) ^[3, 2]. The religious differences of Kashmir also characterize its cultural importance. Belonging to the Shaivite and the Vaishnave tradition, the region was also influenced by the Buddhist, Jain, and Islamic traditions, each having distinctive imprints in the area's history (Schofield, 2003; Zutshi, 2014) ^[4, 5]. This commingling created a highly advanced architectural tradition as seen in the fine fusion of Gandharan, Gupta, and native styles of Kashmir in its temples (Dani, 1989; Rizvi, 1990) ^[1, 3]. And no matter how violent the political revolutions and natural disasters may have been throughout the centuries, there are witnesses on the walls of the ancient temples' remains about the valley's golden decades (Kalhana, 1961; Schofield, 2003) ^[2, 4]. They are not only of architectural splendor but also of spiritual and intellectual flows that influenced the

history of the identity of Kashmir. The analysis of these monuments can provide the precious data about the past of the region, its cultural accomplishments, and the area's role as a cultural mediator between different worlds (Zutshi, 2014; Dani, 1989) ^[5, 1].

This study is devoted to investigating the architectural and cultural history of the antique temples of Kashmir, more specifically, it is committed to the historical development, stylistic peculiarities, and social and religious role of these objects. The area of focus includes a discussion of the temple architecture in the early historical era and the medieval period, and some of the most important buildings of these periods, which include the Martand Sun Temple, Avantiswami Temple, and so forth, Shankaracharya Temple, Payar Temple, Wangath Temples, Naranag Temple Complex, and so forth. Based on the archaeological evidence, historical chronicles, inscriptions, and other earlier publications, the study tries to interpret the unique architectural idioms of the region and the way they are connected to the religious traditions, especially to the Kashmiri Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Cultural significance of temples, as places of worship, pilgrimage, and communal existence, has also been studied as temples were the places to bind the socio-political structure of ancient Kashmir. Nonetheless, the study has some limitations that limit the scope of the research. Although the study has used primary sources where possible, it used mainly secondary sources as restrictions and limited access to specific sites of the temples are posed by physical limitations, security, and preservation issues. Most of the temple structures are in ruins, which restricts determining the total architectural structure. The inscriptions and records tend to be fragmentary, which results in interpretation problems. The objects of the study are limited to Hindu temples, and it does not encompass Buddhist and Islamic monuments of the area, except when the historical interaction of these monuments is concerned. Also, this piece is not aimed at

being exhaustive regarding technical architectural analysis, but rather on the historical and cultural aspects. Despite these limitations, the paper attempts to give a complete account of the temple heritage of ancient Kashmir in a historical light.

Research objective

1. To trace the historical evolution of temple architecture in ancient Kashmir, identifying key dynastic contributions and stylistic influences over time.
2. To document and analyze the architectural features of major ancient temples, including design elements, construction techniques, and symbolic motifs.
3. To examine the cultural and religious significance of temples in ancient Kashmir, highlighting their role in worship, festivals, and community life.
4. To investigate the factors contributing to the decline and transformation of temple heritage, including political, religious, and environmental influences.
5. To assess the current state of preservation and conservation efforts, offering insights for safeguarding Kashmir's temple heritage for future generations.

Historical Setting of Ancient Kashmir

The ancient Kashmir history is the tapestry of dynasties, cultural assimilation, and the transformation of religion. Archaeological records and available literature sources, especially *Rajatarangini* by Kalhana (12th century CE), give detailed information about the rulers of this region, the structures of a society, and their spiritual lives (Kalhana, 1961; Dani, 1989) ^[2, 1]. By the early centuries CE, Kashmir was a political and cultural center in the northwestern Himalayas, with a fertile valley that supported thriving settlements and a position in the north fighting trade with Central Asia and northern India (Schofield, 2003; Zutshi, 2014) ^[4, 5]. The Karkota dynasty (c. 625–855 CE) heralded the significant imperial periods in the history of Kashmir, whose rulers, such as Lalitaditya Muktapida, had expanded their influence far beyond the valley (Dani, 1989; Kalhana, 1961) ^[1, 2]. This period was marked by a fantastic proliferation of temple building, which combined local indigenous forms with Gandhara and the Gupta centre. This trend of patronizing architecture was furthered through the later Utpala and Lohara dynasties, and political turbulence and invasion sometimes plagued cultural development (Rizvi, 1990; Schofield, 2003) ^[3, 4]. The area was religiously an eclectic mix. Early Kashmir also became Buddhist, though the religion existed alongside Brahmanical customs. During the early medieval period, Shaivism, especially of the Trika style, emerged as the preeminent philosophy with many religious art and literature and even temple architecture following it (Zutshi, 2014; Kalhana, 1961) ^[5, 2]. Temples of this age, like the Martand Sun Temple, Avantipur shrines, represented religious faith and political claim as they were a sign of dynastic authority (Dani, 1989; Schofield, 2003) ^[1, 4]. The location of Kashmir on trans-Himalayan trade routes allowed a gradual exchange of artistic ideas, artisans, and building methods. The Kashmiri temple architecture came to be characterized by stone carving, elaborate relief work, and careful geometry. Nevertheless, since the end of the 12th century, political divisions, invasion, and the spread introduced remarkable transformations into the religious and cultural sphere, so large-scale temple construction was exhausted. It is

necessary to consider this historical backdrop when evaluating the temples of Kashmir, which were monuments that created an inherently vibrant dialogue between politics, religion, art, and geography (Rizvi, 1990; Zutshi, 2014) ^[3, 5].

Architectural Evolution of Temples in Kashmir

Ancient Kashmir temple architecture can be defined as a very peculiar blend of native Himalayan culture and foreign creative influx, which took centuries to develop under different political and religious conditions (Kalhana, 1961; Dani, 1989) ^[2, 1]. A distinctive and austere idiom of Kashmiri temples was the result, marked by simplicity of structure, accuracy of cubage, and fineness of carving in stone work. The very early period of temple construction was under the influence of Gandharan and early Gupta art (4th–6th century CE), and it is a case of sharing cultural space with Buddhist and Brahmanical motifs simultaneously (Rizvi, 1990; Schofield, 2003) ^[3, 4]. The experimentation with the form of the period established a precedent for subsequent Hindu architecture of temples. A significant change was the period of the Karkota dynasty (7th–9th centuries CE), the Karkota monarchs, like Lalitaditya Muktapida, initiated such monumental temples as the Martand Sun Temple (Dani, 1989; Kalhana, 1961) ^[1, 2]. A feature of this era is the employment of large blocks of limestone, trefoil arches, fluted shafts, and closely worked pediments. The temples tended to be set on tall plinths, with colonnaded peristyles around them and without a central superstructure, perhaps to avoid climatic and earthquake effects on one. These designs were perfected by the Utpala and Lohara dynasties (9th–12th centuries CE), who created shrines like Avantipur, Pattan, and Payar shrines (Zutshi, 2014; Schofield, 2003) ^[5, 4]. It was more florid and geometric, but still had the characteristic Kashmiri combination of magnificence and reticence in its architecture. Sacred thresholds were marked with a ubiquitous stylistic feature, the trefoil arch, and some temples incorporated pyramidal roofs as a Himalayan response to the shikhara. The design of the temples of Kashmir was not only a design of beauty, but it was also highly symbolic. These issues of water tank, sun axial orientation, and iconographic programs in sculpture had cosmological ideas based on Shaivism and Vaishnavism (Rizvi, 1990; Kalhana, 1961) ^[3, 2]. The architecture evolution, therefore, reflected the philosophical changes of the region, including the Buddhist influence, followed by the dominance of the Shaiva way of thinking. By the late 12th century, political instability and changing religious dynamics curtailed temple construction. Many structures fell into disuse or ruin, yet their surviving remains continue to bear testimony to an architectural tradition that harmonized functionality, spirituality, and artistic refinement in the challenging Himalayan environment (Dani, 1989; Zutshi, 2014) ^[1, 5].

Major Ancient Temples of Kashmir

The ancient Kashmiri architectural and cultural identity has been visibly frozen in its temple complexes, which can be regarded as a living testament to the ancient religious heritage of the valley and the sparkle of its artistry (Kalhana, 1961; Schofield, 2003) ^[2, 4]. The most iconic of these is the Martand Sun Temple, built by the Karkota ruler King Lalitaditya Muktapida of the same dynasty, in the 8th century CE. This majestic temple was dedicated to the Sun

God and is an architectural construction of Gandhara, Gupta, and native Kashmiri styles (Dani, 1989; Zutshi, 2014) ^[1, 5]. Its colonnaded courtyard and panoramic site projected royal authority and worship of the sun. The Shankaracharya Temple, located on the Shankaracharya Hill, carries the stratum of the history that dates back to possibly the Mauryan age, and it has been restored many times by the rulers. Devoted to Lord Shiva, it has been one of the significant pilgrimage places, combining simplicity of design with high religious meanings (Rizvi, 1990; Kalhana, 1961) ^[3, 2]. Its tactical location also associates the temple with the historical standing of the temple as a spiritual watchtower of Srinagar. The Avantiswami Temple, which was constructed during the 9th century CE by Avantivarman, the king of the Vaishnavite tradition, is a masterpiece. Its elaborate stone carvings, gateways, and symmetrical planning testify to art and theological piety (Schofield, 2003; Dani, 1989) ^[4, 1]. Although it is in bad shape, it has much to contribute to medieval Kashmiri aesthetics. Other areas of interest considered excellent examples are the Payar Temple, the Wangath temples, and the Naranag Temple complex, which illuminates the geographical variety of sacred construction in Kashmir (Zutshi, 2014; Kalhana, 1961) ^[5, 2]. These temples are usually found in isolated or mountainous regions, and show some adaptation to local geology and certain characteristic Kashmiri stylistic features, such as the use of trefoil arches or of very neatly-dressed stone masons' work. Inscriptions, sculpture, and motifs ornamenting many of these structures continue to tell many stories of mythology, royal patronage of buildings, and cultural interaction between India and the outside world, particularly Central Asia and northern India (Dani, 1989; Schofield, 2003) ^[1, 4]. Although these monuments have been battered by weathering, neglect, and upheavals in history, their fragments are still important and relevant in knowing ancient Kashmir's spiritual and artistic heritage (Rizvi, 1990; Zutshi, 2014) ^[3, 5].

Cultural and Religious Significance

The temples of Kashmir are the ancient places of worship, but the temples also acted as the centres of religious life, pilgrimage, and interaction among people. The shrines acted as the capstone to the spiritual identity of the region; they drew pilgrims, who were associated throughout the subcontinent and beyond (Kalhana, 1961; Zutshi, 2014) ^[2, 5]. The temple visits to pilgrimage sites like the Martand Sun Temple, Shankaracharya Temple, and Naranag complex further upheld individuals and culture solidarity, thus becoming the centers of spiritual activities. The main events in the temple's life were the festivals and rituals. Seasonal festivals, festivals of harvest, and other religious festivities were related to temple calendars and made it communal (Rather, 2024; Bhat, 2022) ^[7, 8]. Socio-political events also took place in the temples, as the rulers, with the help of spectacular rituals and donations, demonstrated their piety, legitimacy, and patronage, and took the creation of temples as their projects. These forms of practice strengthened the relationship between politics and religion. The temples possessed iconography and sculptures that were full of symbolism. The sculpted panels that featured images of the gods, heavenly creatures, and mythological stories translated the theological ideas and ethical ideals. Symbols like the lotus, sun disc, and the trident had rich meanings associating the god's abilities with the cosmic law. In

addition to adding aesthetic value, this visual language acted as a learning resource to the devotees and visitors. One typical characteristic of the tradition of temples in Kashmir was how they were strongly connected with the Kashmir Shaivism. Most temples reflected the philosophical beliefs of this belief system in their way of inception and allegory, where the space was used to reflect metaphysical beliefs. Sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) was commonly regarded as the cosmic centre, and it connected the devotee to the universal consciousness. Syncretic features would be observed even in Vaishnavite temples, which emerged as evidence of the pluralistic spirituality of Kashmir (Dar, 2021; Malik, 2023) ^[11, 9]. In this way, the Kashmir temples of ancient times were a fairly colorful center, where architecture, religion, politics, and culture were connected, and their remnants still inspire both the study process and the sense of spiritual admiration.

Decline and Transformation

The weakening of the position of temples in ancient Kashmir started in the Middle Ages, which were characterized by both waves of domestic political instability and foreign invasions (Schofield, 2003; Rizvi, 1990) ^[4, 3]. Since the end of the 14th century, there was a tendency to demolish several monumental temples, which started in the late 14th century when the new ruling forces appeared (especially during the time of the Sultanate). The demolition of temples like the Martand Sun Temple and numerous smaller shrines was intentional, whether because of their symbolic belonging to previous dynasties or because their stone of such high quality was needed to build new ones. Natural disasters further led to the physical degradation of most sites, such as earthquakes. Cultural changes based on religion and politics were another reason that transformed the cultural background of the region. As the Islamization of Kashmir facilitated the development of new and fertile artistic traditions, it also decreased the amount of patronage available to the Hindu temples in their maintenance and creation (Dani, 1989; Zutshi, 2014) ^[1, 5]. The evolution in worship and the lessening of pilgrimage activity resulted in the abandonment of what had previously been dynamic temple complexes. Some temples no longer did the work of active shrines, but were a history lesson to the present. Temple locations were also converted to non-religious or new religious purposes. Temple courtyards were transformed into civic space or garrison or made into agricultural land, thus representing adaptive reuse in response to the alternate socio-political realities. Local infrastructure incorporated the architectural remains, frequently deprived of idols and sacred things. Commenting on this decrease, oral traditions were essential in keeping the memory of these holy places. The tales about deities, kings, and miracles in the temples went on through folklore, legends, and devotional songs. These stories provided sustenance to the continuity of their culture so that when the physical structures failed to exist or were changed, they remained preserved in the memories of the people of Kashmir (Kalhana, 1961; Hardy, 2009) ^[2, 15].

Archaeological Studies and Preservation Efforts

Only through the early archaeology and history scholars who made the initial research steps in ancient Kashmir temples was the study of those temples possible. Scholars like Aurel Stein and R.C. Kak went to great lengths to

survey and catalogue archaeologically important temple sites, like Martand, Avantismwami, and Naranag (Dani, 1989; Kalhana, 1961) ^[1, 2]. Not only was the knowledge of the architectural layouts preserved through their detailed sketches, photographs, and descriptions, but also of great assistance in interpreting inscriptions and the influence of style. The records are vital now since most structures have been exposed to further damage. Archaeological excavations in the past few decades have provided more knowledge about the temple's history in Kashmir (Rather, 2024; Dar, 2021) ^[7, 11]. Excavations in the field have identified pieces of sculpture, foundations of minor shrines, ruins of ancient drainage and courtyard structures, and better insights into the construction features and spatial planning. Trade and cultural exchanges between Kashmir and other parts of the world, including Central Asia and North India, can be seen in terms of artistic themes and styles of buildings based on some of the discoveries. These developments notwithstanding, there is still a big challenge to conservation. Stone structures have been under a toll of weathering caused by forceful winters in Kashmir, uncontrolled vegetation, and erosion. These sites have also been threatened by neglect, encroachment, and the influence of regional hostilities. Their preservation is also at risk of artifact looting and unregulated tourism. Steps taken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and other heritage organizations include fencing of sites, structural stabilization, and limited restoration work. Publicity and benefits related to incorporating the sites into heritage tours are set up to create communal interest in conservation. Nevertheless, protection of the long-term needs a more comprehensive method with the participation of the people on one side, legal enforcement on the other, and long-term conservation practices about the historical integrity to maintain and civilization sense of these sacred monuments (Zutshi, 2014; Bhat, 2022) ^[5, 8].

Comparative Perspective

Kashmir temples have various distinctive features that distinguish the region of Kashmir and the rest of India. In contrast to the North Indian temple with its towering shikharas or the South Indian temple with its massive Dravidian mandapas, Kashmiri temples are oftentimes characterized by trefoil arches, steeply sloping pitched roofs, and their compact sanctums as a means of adaptation to the heavy snow and topography of the region (Gupta *Period Influence on Kashmiri Architecture*, n.d.; Kennedy, 2021) ^[10]. A wonderfully rich dressing of fine stone and carvings of surpassing refinement are other characteristics of Kashmir temples, and, in them, active utility is happily mingled with elegant forms. Moreover, building the temple amid natural scenes in the form of hilltop, riverbank, and terrace has revealed an aspect of coordination between architecture and geography that is unlikely to be found in the rest of India. Nevertheless, Kashmir's sacred architecture is similar to Central Asian and Himalayan architecture. Other aspects like colonnaded courtyards, domed buildings, and sculptural designs indicate cross-cultural communication with the trade routes involving Gandhara and Silk Road territories (Lone & Shrivastava, 2023; Hardy, 2009) ^[14, 15]. More commonly, symbolic representations of the heavens and cosmology are feature in temples, reminiscent of those seen in Buddhist stupas and Himalayan

monastic plans, which may represent syncretism of religious and artistic influences occurring over millennia. The architecture of Kashmir was also innovativeness, which spread to the neighboring areas. Such carved stone panels, trefoil arches, and rich iconography also date back to the construction of temples in northern Himachal Pradesh and part of western Punjab. The emphasis on aesthetic balance in proportion, roof tiling, and sculptural storytelling enriched the general subcontinental architectural vocabulary, showing Kashmir to be a recipient and a contributor to the cultural exchange of the sacred building. So, a comparative approach brings out how the region of Kashmir adapted its way of integrating, how it communicated with flora and fauna across various cultures, and more importantly, its influence on other regions in terms of architectural practices away in the valley, which validates the past and artistry of Temples located in Kashmir (Malik, 2023; Rather, 2024) ^[9, 7].

Conclusion

The temples in Kashmir resemble an outstanding combination of history, architecture, and culture. Historically, they trace the existence of eminent dynasties like Karkotas and Utpalas and address the respective period's religious, political, and social ethos. The combination of finely decorated stonework, trefoil arches, sloping roofs, and detailed carvings in the architecture of these temples is unique to the region and the mountainous terrain, as well as the climate. The artistic features, including panels and sculpted and symbolic motifs, allude to a mixture of local craftsmanship and Central Asian, Gandhara, and other aspects of the Indian culture. On a cultural and religious basis, the temples in Kashmir were important places of worship, pilgrimage, and where people would socialize. They supported religious celebrations, ceremonies, and socio-political events, and their iconography transferred theological values and ethical doctrines. The interaction between temple design and Kashmiri Shaivism illustrates how temple design was worked out to reflect the metaphysical concepts, associating the believer with cosmic awareness. Although most temples deteriorated because of invasions or even the change in religion and politics, and the natural wearing away of temples, oral tradition and folklore helped retain temples' spiritual and historical value. Linking it with the future generations, preserving this heritage is essential as a reminder that Kashmir always had a rich past and can also help this future generation gain its cultural identity and inspiration. To prevent further destruction of these monuments, conservation should incorporate archaeological studies, community involvement, a legal framework, and sustainable tourism to protect the monuments. Future studies will have the opportunity to enter little-known temple places, make comparative work with the Himalayan and Central Asian architecture, and study the digital documentation as a means of virtual preservation. The insertion of interdisciplinary methods by mixing history, art history, archaeology, and cultural studies will guarantee an inclusive knowledge of the history of Kashmir temples. Preservation and appropriate reverence of these sacred spaces pays respect to the tradition of a civilization that combined spirituality, art, and architecture innovation in which Kashmiri people expressed themselves like no one else.

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