

# SYNCRETISM IN THE RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE OF KASHMIR

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## ABSTRACT

The architecture of Kashmir is a splendid and worth-studying amalgam of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic artwork drawn against the picturesque landscape. The Sanskrit texts of *Nilamata Purana* and *Rajatarangini*, depict Kashmir as a sacred space created by the Divine intervention and the idea was carried forward by Muslim historians, by referring to Kashmir as Jannat, meaning Eternal bliss, therefore the ancient architecture of Kashmir, intrinsically carries a spiritual touch and mostly revolves around the colors of religion itself. The induction of Buddhism in Kashmir dates back to 245 BC, followed by the Hindu rule from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> CE and then the Muslim rule from 12<sup>th</sup> CE onwards, and the architecture thus produced has elements of their respective religious traces and values, vernacularity and mutual inspirations, and their own particular influences, which gives the architecture of Kashmir its distinctive style. The Buddhist Chaitya halls inspired the temples as well the mosques of Medieval Kashmir, the indigenous pyramidal roofs of Sufi shrines are visible in the Hindu temples of the Medieval age, thus blurring the narrow classifications of architecture, making it a product of human creativity and aesthetics and an everyone's enterprise creating the assimilation of distinct elements of artwork. Kashmir has not only witnessed combination of architectural styles during different reigns but the continuity of built forms by successive faiths, depicting the mutual respect of different sets of beliefs towards the prosperity of the Sacred space, that Kashmir has been. Syncretism in Religious architecture is a conscious quality of union of distinct systems of beliefs, an uplifting way of promoting and maintaining the atmosphere of a peaceful and harmonious co-existence, it is not only an incidence of the past but a vision for a prosperous future as well while embracing the rich diversity we have around us. This paper attempts to bring out the varied aspects of the religious architecture of Kashmir and process of Syncretization, while tracing some major influences and borrowings thereof.

**Key Words:** Religious Architecture, Syncretism, Medieval Kashmir.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture, in the words of Postmodern architect, Frank Gehry, “should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness.”<sup>i</sup> Such characterization of architecture not only illustrates myriad facets of time and space but also assists in discerning the trajectory of its pattern. Architecture in the simplest form is a kaleidoscope which deciphers numerous colors and shades of history. The architectural landscape of Kashmir is a fine mixture of past details, vernacularity and additions of the modern world. This complex blend not only mirrors the valley’s diverse history but also highlights its ability to adapt and respond to changing societal and aesthetic trends. In the following sections, the article will explore how various religious traditions have influenced the character and structure of Kashmiri architecture.

## 2. BUDDHISM AND BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN KASHMIR

According to many Buddhist texts, the introduction of Buddhism to Kashmir can be traced back to Majjhantika, the pupil of Ananda. After the Third Buddhist council came to an end, Ashoka dispatched missionaries to various kingdoms so that Buddhism may be disseminated throughout. Majjhantika was dispatched to Kashmir and Gandhara region for the dissemination. Even though some sources trace the origin of Buddhism in Kashmir, to the period of Ashoka but as per Kalhana’s *Rajatarangni*, Buddha Viharas were seen before the period of Ashoka.<sup>ii</sup> Famed Kashmiri Buddhists include Smrityakara Siddha, who was also a professor at Vikramshila University, a famous Buddhist Vihara, Vamana Bhatta, Udbhatta, Kayyata and Jayanta Bhatta. As of 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, Kashmir was a Buddhist-dominated region, and even majority of Viharas are not visible today but some remnants of them can be seen in the form of: Jalora Vihara at Zalur Zainageer, in Baramulla District, Vitastara in Anantnag District, Narvora Vihara in District Srinagar. During Huang Suang’s stay in Srinagar, he is said to have stayed in Jinder Vihara, a Buddhist temple with a huge idol of Buddha within it.<sup>iii</sup> The crucial Buddhist Council which divided Buddhism into the Mahayana Sect, which believed in the Divinity of Buddha and encouraged his worship and the Hinayana Sect, which focused on salvation and Nirvana, and led to the systematized translation of Abhidharma texts from Prakrit to Sanskrit, was held at Kundalvana, present name, Harvan, Srinagar in 72 CE under the patronage of Kushan King, Kanishka.

**(A) VIHARA**

Early Buddhist dwelling, with open court and multiple entrances and exits. In itself Vihara is a Sanskrit word, meaning - separation, arrangement, distribution. The usual layout of Vihara consists of a large communal prayer hall, encircled by a row of cells, the cells were used for the dining, meditation and residential purposes by the monks. Kalhana records that the Kushan Kings, Huska, Jushka and Kanishka built Viharas and monasteries in the cities founded by them, carrying their name as, Hushkapura (Ushkar) in District Baramulla, Jushkapura (Zukur) in District Srinagar and Kanishkapura (Kanispura) in District Baramulla.<sup>iv</sup>

**(B) CHAITYAS**

They were the places of worship and adjacent to them were the funeral monuments called the Stupas, which contained the sacred relics of the Buddha. One of the most famous and ASI recognised 'Ancient Stupa, Chaitya and Monastery', is Parihaspur, the capital of the King Lalitaditya Muktapida of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.

### 3. HINDUISM AND HINDU ARCHITECTURE IN KASHMIR

As mentioned in *Rajatarangini*, dynasties of Ancient Kashmir start from the epic of Mahabharata and towards the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Kashmir witnessed the rule of Naga Karkota Dynasty, whose prominent ruler was Lalitaditya, who gave protection to both Buddhism and Hinduism, followed by Utpala Dynasty and then Lohara Dynasty, under which Buddhism declined. The Naga Karkota Dynasty gave Kashmir, Martund Sun Temple, a protected monument under the Archaeological Survey of India and recognized as a 'Site of National Importance'. The Martand temple also known as Pandou Laidan, is dedicated to Surya, the chief solar Deity and was built by the prominent ruler of Karkota Dynasty, Lalitaditya Muktapida during the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE near District Anantnag. Apart from that, Lalitaditya ordered the construction of shrines honoring the numerous manifestations of Vishnu, like in Darpitapura, he created a shrine dedicated to Keshava, similarly Bhutesha shrine came up at Wantangh.<sup>v</sup> Avantivarman, the founder of the Utpala Dynasty, built the Avantiswami Temple, which in itself consisted of two temples, one dedicated to Vishnu and another one to Shiva. Utpala Dynasty gave important religious monuments in the form of: Shiva Temple of Samkarapura, (modern-day Pattan), built by Samkaravarman and the Vishnu Temple of Meruwardhanasvamin (modern-day Pandrethan), built by Meruwardhana. From the Lohara Dynasty, King Ananta's Queen,

Suryamati founded many Shiva temples and a matha (monastery) provided with an agraha (donated land). Similarly King Kalasa built Shiva temples at Vijayaksetra.<sup>vi</sup>

#### **4. ISLAM AND ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN KASHMIR**

Islam took its roots in Kashmir, when in 1339, Shah Mir set up the Shah Mir Dynasty and Syed Abd al-Rahman, the celebrated “Bulbul Shah”, arriving from Turkestan with 1000 men, succeeded in permanently establishing the religion of Islam in Kashmir, after almost four thousand years of Hindu rule.<sup>vii</sup> Jamia Masjid in Srinagar, is the fascinating representation of wooden structure, built by Sultan Sikander in 1339 C.E.<sup>viii</sup> the chief designer of the mosque was Sadaruddin Harasani.<sup>ix</sup> Sultan Sikander also built the Khanqah of Mir Syed Ali Hamdani in 799 C.E. which later came to be known as Khanqah-i-Moulla.<sup>x</sup> This architectural style of the Khanqah was an example and a pioneer and adopted by the subsequent Kashmiri rulers till the time of Muhammad Shah.<sup>xi</sup> The Pathar Masjid structure built by Nur Jehan in 1622 C.E. represents the Mughal architectural and artistic value of mosques in Agra, Delhi and Lahore.<sup>xii</sup>

#### **5. UNIFICATION IN THE RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE**

The Chaityas have been to the Buddhists what Khanqahs have been to the Muslims, both were multipurpose in nature, both commanded a position of higher learning and place of meditation in the society. The Chaityas provided residential accommodation to the monks as well as served as a place of spiritual and worldly training, and the Khanqahs, which started appearing in Central Asia as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE served the same purpose. Both Chaityas and Khanqahs were thus built on a large monumental scale. Chaityas consisted of a funeral monumental called Stupa which contained the sacred relics of the Buddha, and the same concept is seen in Khanqahs and shrines in Kashmir where sacred relics of Sufis are being kept and preserved. The religious monuments in Kashmir are mostly seen around or on the banks of the river Jhelum, the river itself being a mode of transportation and used for the purpose of ablution and purification by different religions eg: Khanqah-i-Moulla and Durga Nag Temple. Some monuments are also seen present away from the worldly noises, in lush green mountains. On high altitude e.g. Khanqah of Sheikh Hamza Makhdumi, Shankaracharya Temple and the Kundalvan Harwan Buddhist Monastery. Up to the period of Mughals, we see heavy dependence of architecture on wood especially timber and plenty use of stones and mud-plastering, so much so that new monuments were frequently built on the ruins of unused structures,

similarly temples came up on the ruins of monasteries vice-versa and mosques came up on the ruins of temples and monasteries. This might have been an unconscious attempt towards syncretism but it definitely was a pioneering example of sustainable architecture in the medieval times. The stone architecture flourished during the Buddhist rule. The Monastery at Kundalvan has diaper pebble masonry, where large size stones are inserted in the middle of an arrangement of pebbles in order to make the structure more solid and durable. The ancient Stupa assignable to 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, at Malangpora, Pulwama rises from a square base with re-entrant angles, providing support.<sup>xiii</sup> The scale of Architectural layout is massive but not much decorative artwork is seen around this period.

The temple of Pratapaswamin, assignable to 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE, at Waripora, District Baramulla is enclosed by a peristyle,<sup>xiv</sup> a space such as a court, which is a common feature in Chaitya/Stupa architecture. Towards the period of temple architecture, ornamentation is seen frequently. The 9<sup>th</sup> century CE temple built by the Utpala King Shankaravarman, has columns at the entrance elaborately sculpted, the temple again is built in the peristyle and rises from a square base.<sup>xv</sup> Towards the 15<sup>th</sup> century monument of the Tomb of Zainul Abideen's mother, the monument again is on a square base and is a huge stone structure with two entrances, one towards the riverside and other towards the roadside,<sup>xvi</sup> a feature common in temple architecture, where one entrance faces the spring or river, peristyle is also seen. Another 15<sup>th</sup> Century monument is that of Khanqah-i-Moulla, is on a square base and like the temple architecture, its entrance is sculpted and carved out and it is built in peristyle as well. Another interesting feature is how the concept of giving support to a structure remained the same but got updated in different periods with the availability of new materials. During the Buddhist period, the Chaityas and monasteries were supported and held together by diaper rubble masonry, which got updated to putting huge stones in between an arrangement of stones, for the same purpose in the Hindu period, further developed into Timber-lacing as seen in the Khanqahs, where wooden logs were adjusted across the structure internally, in Kashmir popularly known as the Narkoot, this feature helped the structures in absorbing the shocks of earthquakes and other temporal activities. The ceilings of Khanqahs are supported by wooden columns generally four in number, a feature seen in most of the temples of medieval Kashmir. Also the whole structure of Khanqahs is surmounted by a multi-tiered pyramidal roof instead of domes, a feature very Islamic in nature, as in the case of Jamia Masjid and Khanqah-i-Moulla, an open square pavilion popularly known as Brangh is at the centre, formally establishing the continuity of the Hindu and the Buddhist building styles. Even though, many Buddhist sanctuaries and early temples are in ruins now, but still to this day, many Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim places of worship co-exist together in a same geographical horizon, for example the ASI

protected Bumazuv cave and Temples in Mattan, South Kashmir, is also a shrine of Baba Bamdin Sahib, the disciple of Sheikh Nur-ud-din, the founder of the Rishi Order in Kashmir. The first bridge across the Jhelum, Aali Kadal built by Sultan Ali Shah in 1415 AD, has Batyar Mandir, Woosi Saab's shrine, Naraan Joo Mandir and Bulbul Shah's shrine facing towards each other or adjacent to each other. The Zainakadal bridge commissioned by Sultan Zain-ul-Abideen Badshah in 1427 AD, has the shrine of Shah-i-Hamadan and a temple in its background.<sup>xvii</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The architecture of Kashmir is intricate and enigmatic, fully representing the idea that architecture is a collective rather than a personal endeavor, a conscious rather than an incidental creation. Syncretism serves as the solution to the questions of 'how' and 'why' that arises, giving rise to a plethora of new styles. Syncretism, in the context of Kashmiri architecture, intricately weaves the threads of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic influences. As a result, the architectural landscape of Kashmir becomes a unique blend where the individual essence of each cultural facet is not only retained but also enhanced, portraying a vibrant tapestry of history, spirituality, and cultural exchange.

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

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