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Art and Architecture Under Poonjar Palace

Abstract: The study entitled “Art and Architecture under Poonjar Palace” discussed about the royal patronage of Art and Architecture under the rajas of Poonjar. Palace and its temples included simple Kerala art and Kerala style of Architecture. The famous Mangaladevi temple once a part of the Royal Family. Mangaladevi alias Kannaki is their family deity.

Key words: Punyaru, Mangaladevi, droni, Chittuvilakku, Karuppa Swami, Panchaloha, Ettukettu, Chitrapoottu, Padippura Malika, Garbha griha, Ardhamandapa

Introduction

Poonjar is situated in the North West frontier of Kottayam District of Kerala. From the medieval times it was ruled by a Royal Family fled from Madurai. At the time they ruled over the parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The first ruler named Manavikrama bought the place from Thekkumkoor Province.

“It is consider that the Poonjar royal family was originated approximately 1160 AD. The royal family has its own social and cultural backgrounds. They try to make harmony among people and they patronize art and architecture”¹. They constructed various palaces and temples

¹ P Sreejith, interview, member of Poonjar Palace, 27th December 2011

and the royal family also connected to the famous Mangaladevi temple. They believed in mangaladevi as their family goddess. There temples and palaces are the true examples of Kerala style art and Architecture.

Poonjar was one of the princely state under Travancore and a deep connection with them. They had a proud history. They worshipped Madurai Meenakshi. Investigator's objective is to study about the art and Architecture of Poonjar palace. For this, investigator interviewed the family members of Poonjar family and referred books about the royal family.

Geography

In the medieval times the territory of Poonjar includes the parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. "The name poonjar derived from 'Punyar' and situated the bank of river Meenachil, in Sanskrit the land was known as punyanadeepuram"². In the period of Portuguese and Dutch high quality pepper was collected from the bank of Meenachil. It was a main trade rout at that time.

Origin

The royal kingdom was started approximately in 1160 AD after 1800 AD it was starting to distract because "according to their mythological belief by the destruction of Mangaladevi temple poonjar brings destruction and calamities"³. Mangaladevi is the home deity of the royal family. The historians tells that poonjar rulers were the descendants of Pandya Kings at the Sangam period. They fled from Madurai since there was a war upon their lands with Cholas. They gave a great importance to goddess Madurai meenakshi, the temple was constructed during the period of Pandya.

The fled king Manavikrama settled many places of Kerala. After the death of Manavikrama he was succeeded by his son Kulashekhara. He was a wishing person and he

² P R Ramavarma Raja, interview, Poonjar Valiya Raja, 7 January 2012

³ P R Ramavarma Raja, *Poonjar Rajakudumba Charitavalokanam*, (mal.) Poonjar Koyikkal Trust, 1988, p.16

wanted to get back all the prosperity. He came to know that the Province of Poonjar was for sale following the death of its chieftain. With the help of the fortune his family had bought from Madurai, he bought the Poonjar from Thekkumkoor king and became the king of Poonjar. According to A Sreedhara Menon “Manavikrama Kulashekhara Perumal accured the tract of Poonjar in the present Meenachil taluk and also the whole of the high ranges from the Thekkumkoor raja and exercised sovereign powers over the area”.⁴

Kulashekhara was a great devotee of Madurai Meenakshi. The first thing he did after acquiring the throne was to construct a temple in the banks of Meenachil in the name of goddess Meenakshi. And also built a beautiful palace and fort on surroundings in 1800 it was reduced its power and become a small principality. “The Poonjar family became subject to Travancore with the conquest and annexation of Thekkumkoor and vadakkumkoor by Marthanda Varma in 1749-50”⁵. In 1956 it was joined in Thiru-Kochi and then become a part of Kerala State.

Development of Art

The royal family gave importance to the art works. Within the palace an extraordinary royal collection of antiques and exquisite furniture including a Palanquin, a droni carved out of a single piece of wood for Ayurvedic massages, huge chandeliers, Palm leaf engravings, jewel boxes, varieties of lamps, sculptures of Nataraja, grain measures, statues and weapons. A unique conch preserved here is taken out once a year for ritualistic purposes.

Near the palace is a temple of Meenakshi. The idol was the replica of Madurai Meenakshi. Various sculptures carved on the temple walls. It narrates the stories from the Puranas. A Chittuvilakku carved out on the stone walls of Sastha temple also situated near the Palace. Such rock cut lamps are very rare. Nowadays palace attached a museum of art antiquities.

⁴ A Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, DC Books, Kottayam, 1967, p.166

⁵ *ibid*

Another important art works related to the royal family are the sculptures of Mangaladevi temple. Mangaladevi also known as Kannaki an incarnation of goddess Parvathy, a leading character of Tamil epic Silapathikaram written by ilanko adikal. The sculptures are carved on stone walls. In the temple complex other idols are Karuppa swami, he was sitting in entering complex. On the left side the temple of Lord Shiva. There is also a Sanctum of Lord Ganapathi. The idol of Mangaladevi made of Panchaloha.

Architectural Contributions

Temple and Palace of poonjar are built in the ancient Tamil and Kerala style of Architecture. The Mangaladevi temple of Kumaly, poonjar Dharmasasta temple, poonjar Madurai meenakshi temple, Kanjiramattom Palace and so called Padippura Malika are best example of South Indian Vasthu shilpa.

Wood is mostly used for the construction of Palace. The Kanjiramattom Palace and Padippura Malika were the example of Kerala style Ettukettu. The pillars are decorated with floral carvings and doors with Chitrapoottu. The steps of the temple pond of Dharmasasta temple are unique and made of single stone

Architectural style of Mangaladevi temple

Mangaladevi temple one of the magnificent example of beautiful stone architecture. The temple architecture is like Pandyan Architecture, but there are no definite records of the time of its construction. It was situated on the border of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It opens only in Chitra pournamy festival and one in a year.

It consist of four shrines of different sizes and orientation confined to a well-defined prakara with a fairly large size Gopuradwara. Among the four temples, one is large facing east with a covered Garbha Griha, Ardhamandapa and open courtyard. The image of the shrine is

made of soft granite. There are other two such shrine also in the complex. It has a great architectural value. The department of Archaeology declared it as a protected monument.

Conclusion

Poonjar rulers considered as the descendants of Pandyas came to Kerala. Then they developed a society in and around Poonjar. They gave many contributions to the society. They are great patrons of art and architecture. They carved many sculptures on the walls of temples and Palaces found many antiquities. There Palaces and temples are the fine examples of Kerala and Tamil style of architecture. These structures are resembles the artistic aptitude of the Poonjar rulers.

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