

Medieval Stone Temples of Kashmir

Simple Forms in Stone



The medieval stone temples of Kashmir provide us with evidence that there once existed a rich tradition of design and construction, embellished by fine sculptural work and pure structured forms.

As far back as the 12TH Century CE, Kalhana, the famous historian-poet, wrote in his *Rajtaringini* (1148 – 49 CE) about many grand stone temples built in Kashmir during the medieval period. Of course, much has changed since then as most of those magnificent structures have either vanished or are in ruins due to vandalism, nature's fury and just the poor quality of the materials that had been used. However, a few still stand in different states of preservation at places like Martand, Avantipur, Pattan, Buniar, Pandrethan and Payar, reflecting not only the remarkable temple construction activity that once existed in Kashmir but also showcasing a distinct architectural style. This style, while being inspired by foreign elements (as Kashmir is strategically located on one of the arteries of the ancient Silk-Route), also assimilated the essential features of indigenous temple architectural styles.



Avantiswami temple

The Kashmiri Temple style, which attained maturity in the elaborate temples like Martand, Avantiswamin, Avantisvara, Shankargaurishvar and others, had many characteristic features. All of them were located inside a stone-paved rectangular courtyard, surrounded by a range of small cells fronted with a colonnade (row of columns). Each of the cells stood on a raised base and was designed as small temples by themselves, each with a deity placed on a pedestal. This layout is believed to have been influenced by the Greek architecture and the Gandharan Buddhist monasteries.



Avantiswami temple, Avantipur

The Praveshdwara (gateway) to the temple complex was constructed as a prominent and imposing structure that matched the size of the main shrine. It was built on a raised platform and had two sets of staircases, one leading to it from outside and the other descending to the temple courtyard. The staircases were flanked by a plain slope attached to sculptured sidewalls. The praveshdwara was further divided into two chambers by a cross wall with a rectangular opening in the middle, allowing one to enter the temple courtyard.

Similarly, the main shrines were also built on an adhisthana (raised platform) with a single or double base, with the staircase leading to the adhisthana flanked by un-carved incline. The main shrine consisted of a single square chamber, which was the garbha-griha (sanctum-sanctorum) with or without a small mandapa (hall in front). Externally, the design of the sanctum was based on a tri-ratha (triple projection) plan. Its external walls had trefoil arches (three lobes divided by cusps) enclosed in steep triangular pediments. In addition to the main shrine, other subsidiary shrines were also built inside the temple courtyard.

Walls of the temple were built of enormous dressed limestone blocks arranged in horizontal courses and bonded by lime mortars and metal dowels and with the exception of the internal walls of the garbh-griha, the surface walls of other parts of the temple were profusely carved. They were decorated with miniature shrines often representing the elevation of the temples itself – sculptural reliefs, geometrical and floral patterns, rows of geese, rosette and kirtimukhas.

The first and most important phase of the temple constructing in Kashmir took place during the stable and prosperous reign of the mighty ruler Lalitaditya (724 – 760 CE) of the Karkota Dynasty. Kalhana describes at least four magnificent temples in his capital, Parihaspura. Sadly, all these – Parihasaeshava, Muktakeshava, Mahavaraha and Govardhanadhara – have been reduced to their plinth level, surrounded by heaps of rubble. If these temples were intact today, they certainly would have been the grandest in Kashmir. That status rests with the Martand

(Sun God) temple, also built by Lalitaditya in the 8TH Century CE on the Karewa (plateau) of Mattan, 10 Kms. From Anantang. With a dramatic mountainous backdrop, the temple overlooks beautiful plains before it, set as it is between the two contrasting physical features with its characteristic grandness, simplicity and unity of style. This harmony of design has prompted art-historians to regard Martand as the inspiring model for temples built in succeeding ages in the valley.



Side view of the sun temple, martand

The ruined temple stands in a rectangular courtyard (80 m. X 60 m.), the biggest amongst the extant temples, with a huge praveshdwara on the western side of the courtyard. It is surrounded by eighty four cells, all with huge columns standing in front of them. In between the imposing gateway and the main temple is a shallow water tank. A flight of steps leads to adhisthana, which supports three structures of the temple, namely the mandapa, antarala (vestibule) and garbhagriha. Interestingly, the rectangular and spacious mandapa is also flanked by two side chambers. This arrangement is unique to this temple as in all other cases the main temple consists of only a garbhagriha, with or without a mandapa.

The mandapa and the antarala are open on all four sides, while the garbhagriha is closed on three sides. Externally, the latter is tri-ratha in plan but square inside. Its three external walls depict trefoil niches, which once housed the idols of the parshva-devatas (subsidiary gods).

In contrast to the plain interiors of the garbhagriha, the mandapa, antarala and praveshdwara are decorated, both externally and internally, with exquisitely carved miniature shrines containing trefoil arches enclosed by triangular pediments. Each shrine contained the image of a Hindu deity, with its unique mounts and attributed, in the company of attendants. In addition, various other themes like amorous couples, kinnars (half man – half bird), ganas (dwarfs) and animals were depicted. The adhisthana of the temple is also abundantly carved on all the sides and broadly depicts the same decorative motifs as on the other parts of the temple.

Though weathered, some of the reliefs still showcase the beautiful sculptural art of medieval Kashmir. The river-Goddess Ganga, carved on the northern-internal wall of the antarala, immediately draws the attention of the visitor with her graceful posture. Standing on makara (her crocodile mount), the goddess is flanked by two attendants and carries her usual emblems – a stalk of lotus and a water pot – in her hands. Correspondingly, on the southern wall of the antarala, is carved the river-goddess Yamuna on kachchhpa (her tortoise mount). The depiction of Ganga and Yamuna as river Goddesses on the temple walls underlines the continuity of a sculptural tradition, which began with the classical Gupta period and continued till the medieval period.

The next Golden Age of temple building was seen in the reign of King Avantivarman (855 – 883 CE), of the Utpala Dynasty. Two impressive temples, Avantishwamin – Vishnu and Avantipshvara – Shiva, were built during the 9TH Century CE at Avantipur, a city founded by the King, which lies on the banks of the river Jhelum, twenty eight Km. south-east of Srinagar. Located close to each other, the two temples have suffered immensely due to ruthless vandalism, accentuated by large-scale deduction. Only the foundation platforms of the main shrine and parts of the praveshdwara have survived.

Both the temples have a similar plan and layout, conceived as panchayatana shrines (central shrine with subsidiary shrines at four corners). This pattern seems to be inspired by the Dasahavatara Temple, at Deogarh, of the Gupta period. The temples differ, however, in the arrangements of the staircase leading to the adhisthana of the sanctum. While Avantishwamin has a single staircase from western side, the Avantishvara has steps from all the four sides. Of the two, the Avantishwamin is more ornate and better preserved.



Kamdeva with his Consorts, Avantishwami Temple

Today, this fine sculptural art has crumbled because the poor quality of the stone used was unable to withstand the constant exposure to the natural elements. A few still stand, like the sculpted relief depicting Kamdeva (god of love) sitting with two of his wives (Rati and Priti) on the northern sidewalls of the adhisthana fine art of Kashmiri artisans. The six-armed Kamdeva, wears a long garland and carries pushpa-bana (floral-arrows) and dhanu (bow) in his uppermost right and left hands. His bejeweled wives carry a garland in one of their hands. The fluted pillars, which stood in front of the sixty-nine cells surrounding the courtyard of the Avantishwamin Temple, were beautifully decorated least nine distinct patterns, which include geometrical, floral and bird motifs can still be noticed on the surviving parts of these pillars.

The third important temple-building phase took place in the 10TH Century CE, during the reign of King Shankaravarman, when three Shiva Temples were built in Pattan, located some 30 Km. west of Srinagar. The remains of only two of these, namely Shankargaurishvar and Sugandhesha can still be seen. The former, larger, was built by the King himself and the latter by queen Sugandha. Both follow the general architectural style of the grand temples built earlier but are designed on a smaller scale. Only the superstructure of the Shankargaurishvar Temple can be seen at present as its base is buried below the ground. One of the noticeable features of this temple of the set of nine circular holes arranged in three rows on the floor of the garbh-griha, which perhaps indicates the points where the pedestal of the presiding deity was fixed.

In later years, due to continuous wars, there was no stable regime to patronize the building of grand temples. As a result, only small or monolithic temples were constructed and no significant architectural development took place. Ironically, the miniscule size of such temples at Pandrethan and Payer helped them escape vandalism.



Shiva temple, Pandrethan

Pandrethan Temple, dated 10TH Century CE, is located in the present cantonment area of Srinagar at the site of Puranadhisthana (old capital), denoting the ancient capital Srinagari, believed to be founded by Emperor Ashoka. Payer Temple, dated 11TH Century CE, is located 20 Km. west of Avantipur. Though similar in design to the Pandrethan Temple, it is smaller. Both these temples are of the mandapa type (open on all sides) unlike the bigger temples whose sanctum had only a single opening. These temples do not have any separate praveshdwara or mandapa. The essential architectural elements of the earlier grand temples like trefoil arches, which also provided structural strength, were now used as simple decorative features.

Shiva is the presiding deity of both these temples; representation of Lakulisha (the venerated Pashupata Teacher) in the trefoil niche on the *lalata-bimba* (middle of doorjamb lintel) confirms this. Depiction of this sort was visible even in the imperial Gupta period, strengthening the belief that indigenous influences have had an impact on the design and building of Kashmiri temples.



Avantisvami temple, payar

The temples at Pandrethan and Payar are unique treasures, as their intact roofs, a rarity in Kashmir, give specific ideas about the roofs of all other Kashmiri temples. The straight lined pyramidal roofs of these temples are divided into two sections with small projecting trefoil niches decorating each of the four sides of the upper section. Such pyramidal roofs are imitations of the earlier wooden houses and temples of Kashmir, designed to prevent the accumulation of heavy rain and snow. Though the topping element of the Pandrethan Temple is lost, it is intact in the case of the Payar Temple, in the form of an amalaka (ribbed melon).

The inclemency of time persists, sparing sometimes the creative brilliance⁴ of ages past, leaving behind remnants in stone of the magnificent medieval temples of Kashmir, organically integrating varied traditions, but keeping alive an unbroken link with their indigenous past.