

By AMITA KANEKAR




The Remarkable Syncretism in Goa's Early Modern Architecture

There is a tendency in South Asia to privilege the early in architecture, as George Michell mentions in his recent book, *Late Temple Architecture of India* (2015), as if beginnings are more important than later developments. And even when later works are examined it is usually in comparison with the earlier, as a linear progression, or – more often than not – a regression. This attitude of course fits in very well with the nationalist approach to Goa's history, i.e. with the concerted effort to show that Goa has always been a part of India despite 450 years of Portuguese rule, and despite the non-existence of, both, Goa and today's India before the Portuguese arrived. Thanks to this tendency, and the concurrent emphasis on the 'Indian' in Goa's 'ancient' heritage, many people might be unaware that Goa is the home of a unique tradition of architecture of the early modern period. Old Goa is well known, of course, as a UNESCO world heritage site, but Goa's remarkable heritage goes beyond Old Goa, to its own unique church tradition, its own mosque tradition, and its own temple tradition, all of which developed in connection to one another.

This latter point, i.e. the influence of different building types on one another, counters the neat compartmentalisation that even architects tend to do, seeing temples as related to only temples, mosques to mosques, and so on. And here we come to another shibboleth of architectural history in South Asia – the religious style. Designating of style, in which aesthetic or formal elements are grouped together as a tradition, is a long-popular way of evaluating buildings. But while European stylistic identification is roughly based on era and elements, in India it is common to connect style with religion – thus 'Hindu architecture' and 'Muslim architecture' are terms heard not just among laypeople but even among teachers of architecture. This of course ignores the fact that there are multiple traditions of both mosque- and temple-building, also that the latter was fundamentally influenced by Buddhist monuments. And it also ignores the still-vibrant heritage of the early modern period, not just in Goa but all over South Asia, which directly challenges such narrow-mindedness.

Even before the sixteenth century, Vijayanagara, true to its Islamicate culture, was adopting Deccan Sultanate forms and systems in secular building, while the Sultnates themselves looked towards Persia and China for inspiration. Things became more heterogenous later, with the Ikkeri Nayakas probably the first to use Sultanate forms in temples. By this point,



European influences had also arrived in South Asia, as can be seen in the later works of the Mughals, which included Persian, Central Asian, Gujarati, Bangla, Deccani, and also European elements of design. This became the norm, with even socially conservative and casteist regimes, like the Peshvas of Pune and the Jaipur rajas, founding temples that closely resemble Sultanate mosques and Mughal baradaris.

For, syncretic architecture does not imply a liberal society, just a connected one. Architecture has always been about power; architectural syncretism was usually about connecting elites to other elites. But it does negate the huge importance that we ascribe today to religious difference.

An even more intense syncretism can be seen in Goa, perhaps because of its history as a centre of global trade. This begins with the Goan mosque, also called the Adilshahi mosque. As Mehrdad Shokoohy points out in his study of the Safa Masjid of Ponda (1997), the architecture here blends Malabar Islamic traditions of intricate timberwork (and details influenced by South-East Asia), with Bijapuri arches and tank. Bijapur is in fact the common element that links Goan mosques, churches and temples, with the tiered corner towers of the Gol Gumbaz reflected in the tiered forms of church facades as well as the lamp-towers of the big temples. The latter, being the latest of the trio, were strongly influenced by the churches as well, displaying their classical orders and nave-and-aisle layouts alongside Bijapuri domes, arches, tanks and lamp-towers, even as they roughly follow spatial arrangements for brahmanical shrines in the larger region.

Given such a rich heritage, it would be good to see a concerted effort for its protection. The churches and mosques do appear somewhat protected, though one might cavil at the errors in reconstruction efforts, as at the Safa Masjid. The temples however are another story, with many temple trusts as well as architects trying to replace them with grander structures that emulate the temple forms of Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and elsewhere, or even replicas of old local ones like the Tambdi Surla temple. As Leanne Alcasoas points out in her study of contemporary Goan temples (Goa College of Architecture, unpublished B. Arch. dissertation (2013)), the current boom of renovation includes expansion as well as complete rebuilding, in order to produce showy spectacles that can be seen anywhere in India.

But why? One reason might be the money in renovation, or the hope that jazzier architecture will attract bigger crowds. But along with this is the complaint that Goan temples are not 'authentic' or 'Hindu' enough.

Such are our times. The Vijayanagara kings who identified themselves as Hindu, or Aurangzeb who similarly identified with Islam, did not see their architecture as belonging to a religion. This bigoted and ahistorical outlook belongs to today; and it is likely to cost us more than just some architectural heritage.

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