By AMITA KANEKAR

The Goan Temple: A Unique Architecture on Its Way Out

The architecture of Goa is a heterogeneous one, the result of its long and cosmopolitan history as an Indian Ocean port, a part of the Islamicate Deccan, and then of the Portuguese empire. And one of its most distinctive and heterogeneous developments is in the realm of temple architecture. The Brahmanical temples that were built in Goa from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries were creatively inspired by Renaissance Europe (via the churches of Goa), the Bijapur Sultanate, the Mughals (via the Marathas), and the Ikkeri Nayakas, along with the local architecture. These varied vocabularies came together to produce a recognisable architectural ensemble by the end of the 19th century which spread across the region of Goa and beyond. This is why the Goan temple should be seen as an architectural type in its own right.

What is the Goan Temple?

It is important to clarify here the meaning of the term ‘Goan temple’. Because Goa is home to a variety of temple forms, from the rock-cut shrines in Khandepar of the 1st millennium CE, and the 11th century Mahadev temple at Tambdi Surla, to those built more recently. But all the temples today in Goa are not necessarily Goan. Goa was born as a distinct and coherent region only after the Portuguese conquest of 1510, expanding to reach its current area by the 18th century. The Portuguese rule is important to consider here, as it was through this political control that Goa was welded together as the region we know today, and simultaneously recognized by neighbouring political formations such as the Mughals, Marathas, and the Sultanate of Golconda. In later times, the British Raj too recognised Goa, or Portuguese India, as a separate and distinct region. Thus, the political identity of Goa could only emerge through the history of Portuguese rule over the territories and peoples that today we, and others, recognize as Goa/Goan.



Typical Goan temple, though modified to a limited extent

The temples built before 1510 belonged to various regional formations that included parts of today's Goa; e.g. the Tambdi Surla temple was built during the rule of the Kadambas over the south Konkan, when they were also feudatories of the imperial Chalukyas of Kalyana who were patrons of a distinctive Karnata Dravida language of temple architecture. The Tambdi Surla temple belongs to that architectural family.

Thus, when one speaks of the Goan temple as an architectural type, one does not refer to *all* the temples in today's Goa, but only those temples that are chronologically Goan. The term is actually inspired by Paulo Varela Gomes' usage of the term 'Goan Church' for the Portuguese-era churches in Goa (*Whitewash, Red Stone*, 2005). According to Varela Gomes, it was wrong to call them Indo-Portuguese churches, as there was little Indian or Portuguese about them; they are in fact Goan, and the result of a unique political culture, hence not to be found anywhere else in the world.

The same is true of the Goan temple. It is a form of the Hindu or Brahmanical temple, born in the 17th to late 19th centuries, and mostly in the region that became the Novas Conquistas of Goa in the 18th century. Its patrons were the powerful Saraswat community, well-entrenched in the Estado da Índia and also employed at the Peshwa's court at a time when the Marathas had captured the region. But its builders were apparently Goan artisans and craftsmen (David Kowal, 2001), some of them second- and third-generation Catholics. The Marathas and their allies were driven out of this region by the Estado over the 18th century, but this does

not seem to have affected the development, prosperity, and increase in number of these shrines.



Banner showing Temple under Construction

Although the Goan temple roughly follows the basic Brahmanical temple layout with an entrance porch, hall and sanctum laid out along an axis, the difference—and a huge one—lies in the details. It includes the basilican floor plan (like a Goan church); the European Renaissance arches, pillars, pilasters and mouldings (sourced again from the Goan churches); the Bijapuri domes, arches and pillars; the stepped tank reminiscent of the Adilshahi Goan mosques; along with typical local elements like the mud and laterite walls, and the pitched and tiled roofs.

By the late 19th or early 20th c. the Goan temple type had come into its own. The smaller temples followed a simplified version of the same, sometimes just taking the basic Goan house-form, with round arches and pitched roofs. The Goanness of these buildings lay not in their individual components that were so obviously sourced from all over, but the distinctive way they had been put together, to make a claim about the persons and communities they represented. It is notable that this is also the time when the Saraswats, already one of the pillars of Estado society, are fighting to be recognised as Brahmins in the Peshwa's court (Parag Parobo, 2015). The distinctiveness of the temples they patronised appears to be a statement of 'arrival' and prominence, in both the Brahmanical world and the European.

The temples still stand today and attract increasing numbers of visitors/devotees, thanks not least to their inclusion in government-organised tourism circuits. But their architecture is disappearing, and being replaced by forms from various parts of India. It is a process that began soon after 1961, when Goa was annexed by India. Leanne Alcasoas points out, in her B.Arch dissertation on post-1961 temple architecture in Goa, that there were two distinct phases of temple-building after 1961, the first soon after 1961, and the second beginning from the 1990s. This roughly applies to the renovation of old temples too.

The process has been aided by the fact that most of them are considered to be owned by their respective mahazans (literally ‘great people’; mostly members of the Saraswat caste who claim to be descendents of the founders). Most are also not protected under heritage laws, though centuries old. There are cases where such protection existed, but the temple trusts were able to get it removed, e.g. the Mangueshi temple (Kerkar, 2014).



Banner showing Temple under Construction

The first period, from 1961 to the 1980s, saw some rebuilding, with the introduction of Indian forms like the latina tower, which is the curved tower over the temple sanctum common in north India. An example is the completely rebuilt Damodar temple of Zambaulim and Panjim’s Mahalaxmi.

The 1990s onwards see a great number of new temples and also much rebuilding of old ones, but what happens now is on a different scale. It is temple as spectacle, or Indianisation along

with monumentality and showiness. The look now is varied, from Malabar-style pitched roof compositions, to elaborate domical compositions using some elements from the Goan repertoire—like balcãos—but without the understanding of proportions and scale visible in the original, and mixed up with Indian elements.

For example, the rebuilding of the Shantadurga Ballikarin, in Balli, begun in 2013, sees a Goan house-form being replaced by a mix of the Buddhist chaitya and the Tamil Dravida temple, with a dome on a Sanchi-stupa-like railing and a barrel vault over the hall, along with horseshoe arches and Tamil cornices. Another example is the Saptakoteshvar in Fatorpa, formerly a small shrine with a house-form, now on its way to becoming a great one reminiscent of Tambdi Surla and the Karnata Dravida tradition.

The politics behind architectural transformation

The fact that Goan temples are being rebuilt in a recognizably Indian avatar since 1961 is not really surprising, given the deep connection between Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian nationalism. As G. Aloysius has pointed out, Indian nationalism is cultural nationalism, less about political rights then about celebrating culture and traditions, especially the culture of the dominant castes (Aloysius, 1998). Another relevant aspect of Indian nationalism is that it always harks to a mythical Hindu golden age before the arrivals of Islam and the Europeans. What this means is that to be a true Indian nationalist is to be Hindu and Brahmanical, while Islam, Christianity and Europeaness are all correspondingly un-Indian.

In this situation, Brahmanical temples are symbols of nationalism. Enlarging and Indianising them is a political and nationalist statement about Goa being Indian. Erasing the proof of Goa’s heterogenous past, e.g. its multi-referenced architecture, makes Goa more Indian.

Thus the rebuilding of Goan temples in Indian styles from 1961. But with the rise of Hindutva from the late 1980s, this celebration of Brahmanical Hinduism as nationalism is more blatant. There is also more political support for temple construction and reconstruction. However, the rise of Indian tourism in Goa in the same period, and the packaging of Goa as a European holiday paradise for Indians, has seen a new popularity for ‘Indo-Portuguese’ architecture. The result is the development of temple as extravaganza, but with a recovery of some old

Goan architectural elements like tiled roofs, balcãos, and the grand manorial composition, along with the introduction of new ones like exposed laterite. Domes may be included, but usually not Goan ones.

To conclude, the multi-referenced architecture of Goa's Brahmanical temples harked not only to the multiple worlds that have gone to make up Goa's culture, but especially to the aspirations and self-image of one of the most dominant communities of the region. The change in architecture of these temples thus reflects big changes on both these fronts. And we should be attentive to these changes, for they are a pointer to the way the Goan Hindu of today is being framed.

(First published in *Goa Today*, dt: August, 2017. Pics by Amita Kanekar)

Share this...
Facebook
Whatsapp
Print
Email
Twitter
Reddit