

BORDERING ON VERNACULAR-THE TRADITION OF THE ORIYUR SHRINE

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Abstract

The vernacular of a place is encoded in the architecture of the built form and enriched by the cultural practices of the people. This study explores the history and tradition of the Britto cult centered at the Shrine of St John de Britto at Oriyur in the Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Devar district of Tamilnadu, South India. The religio-cultural context of the shrine and festival originating from the martyrdom in 1969 of John de Britto, today has cut across religious affiliations and is more of a vernacular tradition connecting the local castes and communities. It is this mystic aspect of the Oriyur shrine, built and supported by traditional practices that this study intends to explore.

Introduction

Vernacular architecture by definition encompasses buildings that accommodate the values, economics and ways of living of the cultures that produce them. Such architecture is related to their environmental context, material resources and technological influences (Oliver, xxiii). Thus the vernacular aspects in architecture is composed of two large components – one that defines and delineates the physical skin of the context and the other that supports and describes the functioning and activities that are accommodated within and affiliated to this physical edifice.

This paper presents a case of conflict of consensus which occurs where a largely vernacular activity built on the belief system and social structure of a place is sheltered by and within a predominantly imported traditional architecture. What is the role of architecture as in this case? Does it aide in or create barriers in the conducting of the activities / functioning of the place?

Has the architecture over the years internalized into the vernacular of the place or has it remained an external component – a reminder of its origin and thereby subtly embodying the dual nature of its existence.

These questions are explained and discussed in reference to the St. Arulanandar Shrine or St John de Britto shrine at Oriyur, in Tamilnadu, South India.

The context of religion and belief systems

Religion and religious affiliations have held a central role in the culture of India. The introduction of Christianity into the Indian subcontinent has been a predominant force of change and transition in the complex social stratification of the Indian society. The nature of meetings, interactions and adaptation that occurred during the encounters between practitioners of the world religion and the local populace has been the subject of several studies (Bayly).

The focus of this paper is the perception of Christianity as an external religion and thereby the need for creating an identity and image that is both Christian and Indian. The significant use of vernacular practices as a bridge between belief systems and religious accordance, centered around cult heads and seers is a conscious process of shifting borders and transcending communities. In the process creating a place and a tradition for themselves by bordering on religions, communities, ideologies and orthodoxies. It is this skillful selection and practice of rite and rituals, ceremonies and festivals that contributes to the large following at Oriyur.

Located at the juncture between European and Tamil Catholic and Hindu, high caste and low caste, Britto is a preeminent liminal figure andthe Tamil representation of St. John de Britto reveals a convert communities attempt to construct a local identity and cult for the European saint. (Selva.P.Raj,)

Historical evolution of the shrine

The shrine of John de Britto or the shrine of St. Arulanandar as it is locally known is located in the Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar district in Tamilnadu. The shrine is a popular pilgrim center for Tamil Catholics.

The shrine complex of John de Britto is part of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sivagangai established in 1987 after it bifurcated from the Arch diocese of Madurai. St. John de Britto is the patron saint of the diocese with a catholic population of 8.1%. Historically it was overseen by Goan priests under the Bishop of Mylapore until 1929 when it became a part of the Arch diocese of Madurai.

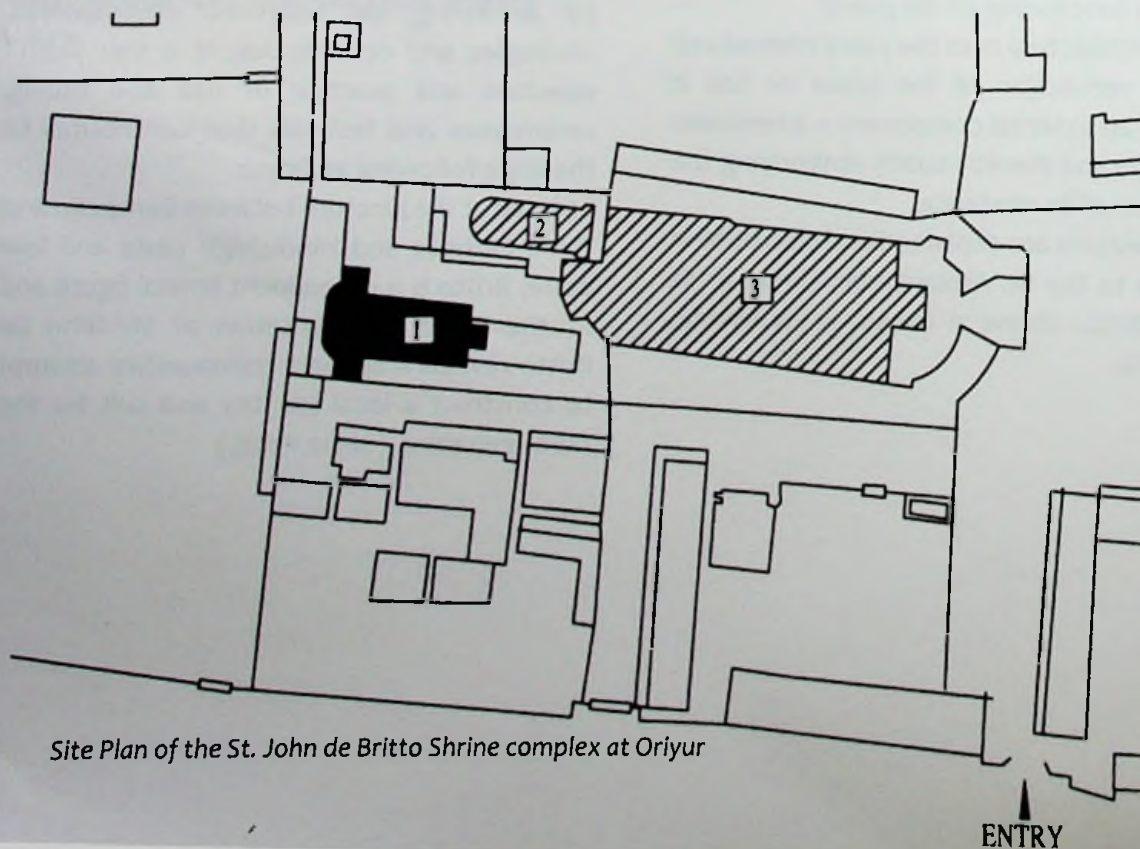
The shrine at Oriyur has a following from various castes such as the Pallars, Udayars, Kallars and Vellalars. "A notable feature of the Britto cult is that it is centered around caste identities rather than religious affiliations" (P.Ray, pg 87).

At present the shrine complex consists of –

1. Church of Our Lady of good health (Queen of Health) or the Martyrdom church.
2. The Beatification Church built in 1890.
3. The Canonization church built to commemorate the canonization of St. Britto on June 22, 1947.

History of St. John de Britto

Saint John de Britto was born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1647. He volunteered for the missions in India and was sent to Madura in 1673. Upon arriving in India John de Britto studied the complex caste system of the Indian society, and realized that the major population of Christian converts at the time belonged to the lower caste. In his attempts to access the strata of upper caste, Britto followed the example set by Robert de Nobili, one of the most successful missionaries who initiated conversions as early as 1601 by imitating the



Site Plan of the St. John de Britto Shrine complex at Oriyur

culture and lifestyle of a Hindu Sanyasi.

Britto too converted himself into a 'pandara swami' wearing a saffron cloak and living an indigenous lifestyle. Britto succeeded in establishing many stations and converting a large population, eventually accruing the wrath of the Raja of Ramnad who had him impaled on a stake after decapitation (Bayly, 1989, 403).

Following the martyrdom of de Britto, the Britto cult acquired new sacral powers that was celebrated and supported by local legends and folk songs. Regardless of their religious affiliations, people of the region - Hindus and Christians alike - regard Saint John de Britto as their favorite clan / family deity (P. Raj, pg 87).

Festivals and celebrations at Britto shrine :

The popularity of the Britto shrine as a Catholic pilgrim center is attributed to the sacral powers of healing and fertility that are attributed to Saint John de Britto and his martyrdom at Oriyur. Every Wednesday of the week is an auspicious day as it is the martyrdom day of St. Britto. The other three annual shrine festivals are the feast of St. John de Britto (Jan 26 - Feb 4), the anniversary of the canonization of Britto (Jun 20 - Jun 22) and the feast of nativity of Mary (Aug 30 - Sep 8).

Rites and rituals at Britto shrine

Influences from indigenous Hindu religious practices -

- a) Pilgrims offering animal sacrifices during these occasions is a common practice. According to studies the number of animal sacrifices ranges between 600 - 800 goats

and countless chickens during the annual September festival.

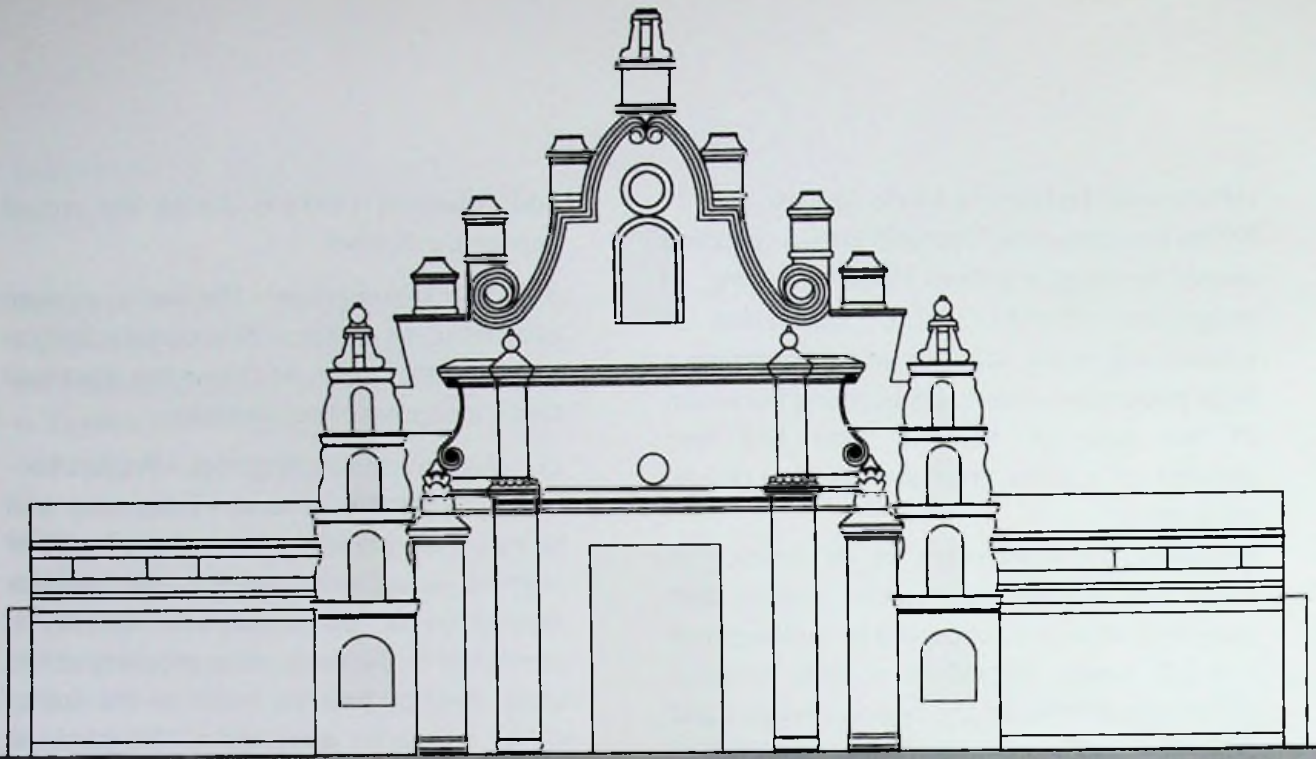
- b) Hair sharing rites - The hair as a token of offering is a common devotional activity in most parts of India. At Oriyur too this ritual forms a popular pilgrim activity.

- c) Fertility and healing rites - Prayers for fertility - fertility of land, cattle, crop and human is the prime purpose of about 50% of pilgrims who visit Oriyur. This popular association of the shrine with fertility is attributed to the miraculous property of the blood shed by John de Britto on the soil of Oriyur during his martyrdom. The symbolic connotation of the Red Sand Saint is associated with his magical powers of healing and fertility. Some of the popular fertility rites performed is the coconut sapling rite, cattle procession rite.

- d) Cradle rites - One of the other rites performed for debt payment is the baby cradle rite in which the child is dedicated to the saint

Catholic pilgrims import a series of Hindu rites and ritual idioms into their pilgrimage practices and direct them to the European martyr-saint, investing in him certain indigenous religious ideas, powers, and meanings - largely derived from village Hinduism - so that the European saint resembles in personality, power, and function, the tutelary deities of Hinduism.

Besides Catholics, the above mentioned rites are also observed by many Hindus. While these rituals are performed within the premises of the church, they are conspicuously marked by the absence of shrine priests. The priests prefer to symbolically distance themselves from these rituals as the context and manner of conduct resembles predominant Hindu and pagan origins, Priests of the shrine observe



FRONT ELEVATION

Front Façade of the Shrine of St John De Britto



that official catholic rituals like the Mass and sacrament have only secondary importance (J. Ray, 103).

Architecture of the Britto shrine

Although the exact date and origin of the shrine of St Britto is unavailable, official records date the first physical structure as a small 'beedam' built on the exact spot where he was beheaded. Initially permission to build the church was denied by the Sethupathi but later during the reign of Muthuvijay Ranganatha Sethupathi a small temple along with a tower was built in 1734. the front façade was later

View of front access to the St Britto shrine.



Church of St. Francis, Early Portuguese architecture



Luz church of our lady of light, Mylapore, Early Portuguese architecture

renovated in 1770.

The architectural characteristics of the church is a direct derivative of the Early Portuguese architecture witnessed in other parts of India such as Goa, Diu and Mylapore. The church has a symmetrical façade with the early forms of stunted bell towers, the front faced is a mere pseudo wall that hides the barrel vaulting atop the main aisle. This wall is decorated with typical Baroque ornamentation such as the steep curvilinear forms interspersed with small modules of vase patterns.

The overall façade is broken into a two storey structure height demarcated by round column pilasters. The use of small circular openings is another notable feature of early Portuguese Church architecture as evident in the St Francis church Goa, St Paul's church Diu etc...

Conclusion

Paul Oliver has argued that there is no such thing as a traditional building but rather

buildings that embody certain vernacular traditions. (Oliver, xviii). Similarly Nezar Al Sayyad argues against the etymological classification of vernacular; which requires the artifact to be native and unique to a specific place, produced without the need for imported components and processes. He calls for the recalibration of such aspects of the vernacular in the light of culture and tradition becoming much less-place rooted in contemporary context. (Asquith & Vellinga, xvii) The case of the shrine of John de Britto is a classic example of vernacular bordering on tradition and vice-versa as has been discussed above. While the architecture of the place is a symbolic reflection of the culture and the traditional values that produced it, the living tradition of the people itself is a reflection of the vernacular culture of the community that uses, nourishes and lends a distinct identity to the place. Eventually taking us back to the beginning of this discussion - Has the architecture over the years internalized into the vernacular of the place or has it remained an external component - a reminder of its

origin and thereby subtly embodying the dual nature of its existence. While the architecture is a constant reminder of the religious affiliation of the place, to the people whose belief system surpasses the official norms of religion, it is but a mere backdrop, a setting for the events to be carried out. Unlike the case examples of iconic and landmark buildings where the structure itself evokes certain emotions and associations, in places

such as Oriyur the notional conception of the power of the place, built and supported by the vernacular practices is more significant than any other concept of space.

In Oriyur is evident a model for the evolution of a vernacular that is beyond-culture and beyond-religion, transgressing borders and transcending established norms of communal practice.

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