

Renaissance Church Facades of Kerala: Seeds of Cross Cultural Alliances

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Abstract: *The dissemination of the Renaissance ideas from Italy to other parts of the world including India happened through wars, colonization, evangelization, missionary works and immigration of artists. The classical style was seen as exotic and used tremendously after colonization of India by Portuguese. We find a significant number of classical European architecture in the coastal as well as the interiors of Kerala which resulted from Portuguese influence in which the Jesuit missionaries played an important role. The resulting architecture adapted to the climate as well as the aesthetics of the region. The paper tries to understand the dissemination of Renaissance church facades to Kerala by missionaries and artists. The missionaries conceived church facades as special architectural theaters to carry out their proselytizing. The paper studies the façade of few Renaissance churches of Kerala and tries to draw parallels from the Renaissance churches of Europe.*

Keywords: Colonial Church, Kerala church architecture, Portuguese Church, Portuguese Kerala

1. Introduction

The term Renaissance implies a conscious revival of the Greco-Roman style (2002, Fletcher). Brunelleschi (1377-1446) is credited with originating the Renaissance style. Leon Battista Alberti (1402-1472) was another key proponent of Renaissance architecture. At the beginning of the Renaissance period Roman architecture was the predominate influence. After 18th century Greek influence appeared. In Italy, Renaissance went through the stages of Early Renaissance (1400-1500), High Renaissance (1490-1525), Mannerism (1520-1600) and Baroque (1600-1750), Rococo (1700 – 1760s) and Neo Classical (1750s-1850s).

Portuguese along with their catholic missionaries arrived in India bringing with them the Renaissance architecture in 1498. By 1503 they had already established their fort in Cochin and by 1511 they had established in Goa. Unlike Goa, Kerala already had its Christian churches when the Portuguese arrived, from its trade contacts with West Asia. These churches were headed by Syrian priests from West Asia. The Portuguese saw these churches as belonging to the heretics and took upon themselves the task of Latinizing these churches. Missionaries of different orders from Italy, Spain, Portugal and France including Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Augustinians, etc. flocked to India. They made changes to the liturgy along with the catechism. They also made changes to the design of the churches following model churches in Europe by addition of Renaissance facades and images to it. (2001, Bailey) This decision was taken during the Synod of Diamper in 1599 which had decrees prescribing that the churches should be modeled after the European counterparts and should have Catholic images to it. The Synod of Diamper, held at Udayamperoor., was a diocesan synod convened by Aleixo de Menezes, the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa, that created rules and regulations for the Saint Thomas Christians of the Malabar Coast, formally uniting them with the Catholic Church. This transformation was guided by the clergy of different religious orders. There are many churches in Kerala which has a pre-European superstructure and a European

façade (St. Mary's Orthodox Church, Kallloopara). Churches built during the 17th century were often copies of what Jesuits and Franciscan missionaries had made in Portugal and Spain, so the baroque style soon made its way throughout the world. (167, 1997, Chupungoo) Jesuits built many churches in Portuguese Asia on a plan derived from Rome's Gesu church, where the preaching space was maximized by widening the nave and eliminating the aisles (8, 2013, Wallach). The Gesu Church in Rome was the mother church of Jesuits. Its architect Giacomo da Vignola used Alberti's Sant' Andrea in Mantua as his prototype. The façade borrows elements from Alberti's façade at Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Gesu Church became the standard for longitudinal church built in Rome and Jesuit churches throughout the world.



Figure 1: Facade of Gesu Church, Rome.

Source: Charles Herbert Moore, Character of Renaissance Architecture, 1905

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The churches built in India in the 16th and 17th centuries followed Renaissance, Mannerist and Baroque styles. But technological and economic constraints limited their expression to the façade only (2004, Fletcher). These

churches were made of local materials using indigenous techniques. Missionaries and European artists taught the indigenous artists to copy or imitate images in the Renaissance style. People's perception of the Late Renaissance and Baroque is generally limited to Europe. But in reality there are rich artistic Renaissance and Baroque examples in the Catholic missionary areas of Asia where these styles merged with indigenous traditions creating hybrids. Most art and architecture during missionary works were produced with more or less willing participation of the indigenous communities and almost all of it can be described as hybrid. Indigenous elements prevailed, relegating European styles or ideals to the details. (2001, Bailey). Missionaries from Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium brought with them their art and traditions which added certain features to the existing structures in Kerala. (2018, Menacherry) Local artists were taught to reproduce western art in colonized states like India, Sri Lanka and Latin America (2014, Wilfred).

2. The Church facades of Kerala

The facades of St Francis Church at Fort Kochi, Church of Our Lady of Life at Vypin and St Mary's Syro Malabar church at Alangad, have been studied.

By the early seventeenth century there were two basic Catholic Church types. One was the Jesuit model set by the mother church in Rome - The Gesu (completed in 1580). The Gesu church was subsequently developed in later church models into richer, more deeply worked, shadow catching surfaces at churches like the Campitelli Church (completed 1667). Of the three churches studied the St Francis church at Fort Kochi is simplest followed by the Church at Vypeen. The most ornate is the Alangad Church. All three churches have the 'Pozzoan' Pediments (Pozzoan pediment is a Baroque decorative motif. It consists of a raised centre flanked by two lower volute sides. It was evolved by the Late Baroque architect and painter Andrea Pozzo). The Alangad church is richer and has more shadow catching surfaces than the Gesu model but not as rich as the Campitelli church. The second basic Catholic Church type of the 17th century was the centrally planned church like Bernini's S. Andrea al Quirinale. The second typology did not find much of a ground in Kerala as we see the Jesuit Gesu typology mostly.

The Jesuits had transported engravings of works of artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Carracci, etc. and books of classical, Renaissance and Baroque on architecture. (2010, Bailey). It should not be overlooked that the facades of churches of Kerala was greatly influenced by such artists' works even though diluted in its own version,

The architectural style of these Portuguese churches mainly dating from the 16th century and 17th century is characterized by a façade with a classical composition of three sections, without lateral towers, similar to the first churches built in Goa in conformity with the design of the Bom Jesus church of Goa. These designs were probably sourced from the works of Serlio and Vignola. (2019, Carita) A subtle increase in ornamentation is visible across the facades of the three

churches. All the three are divided into three sections. There are various storeys with projecting entablatures running across the façade marking this division. Vertical compartmentalization is done using pilasters and columns. Alangad church has double columns. There are frames, niches and bas reliefs of angels and floral elements. Details such as metopes, triglyphs, corbels and pyramids seem to be gradually added on to the facades. Gothic elements were still evident in churches built in 16th century. The Church at Vypin has a Gothic portal.

2.1 St Francis Church, Fort Kochi

St. Francis Church was the first European church to be constructed in India in 1503 AD. The first church was constructed in timber. The structure was rebuilt by Franciscans in 1516. (1962, Menon). The church went into Dutch possession and British possession subsequently. T.W. Venn in his *St. Francis Church, Cochin*, says this about the church, "It is the masonry cradle of Roman Catholicism in this country (India) as by historical repercussions it is the earliest casket of Protestantism. From this choir for the first time in Hindustan resounded the sonorous chants of Rome, as also from the pulpit was thundered out the grim gospel of Calvinism – total depravity, particular redemption, irresistible grave."

The church is a very simple and plain Neo Roman edifice. It is a tall gable towards the west with arched windows and porch, columns and pinnacle. The exteriors are not marked by flamboyant decorations as in the later period churches. Buttresses, almost six feet square at the base, support the walls, which appear to be at least four feet thick.

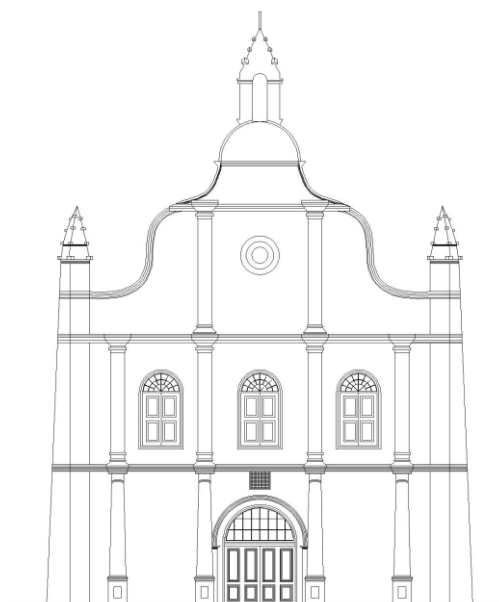


Figure 2: Facade of St Francis Church, Fort Kochi

The façade is divided into three sections in three storeys. The center bay rises up to form the Pozzoan Pediment. The vertical dividers are in the form of pilasters. The pilasters are rounded in the lower registers and they are flat in the upper registers. The pilasters seem to resemble Tuscan order. There are horizontal entablatures that run continuously from side to side separating each register. The addition of the pilasters

and entablatures render it into a classical composition. It follows the Albertian model of pilasters supporting entablatures. On either side the façade is provided with pyramidal finials. Pozzoan pediment is also topped by a spire with a niche which probably housed the patron saint during Portuguese period. (The Dutch and British being Protestants do not use statues). It follows a P-P-P-P pilaster-column sequence.

Unlike its façade the interior of the church do not follow a triple partition. There is only one single nave. The European church façade compartmentalization was more or less pasted on to the façade. The lateral dividers and horizontal entablatures together frame the façade with specific elements inside each frame whereas some of the frames are left empty. There is a hierarchy made evident through the framing. The viewer's eyes are made to focus on the central bay consisting of the semicircular arched doorway in the lower register, the semicircular arched window in the upper register, circular medallion with the clock above it and the finial with niche on the pediment above. Side bays are purposefully left empty in the lower and upper most registers.



Figure 2: St. Francis Church, Fort Kochi

There is a lack of ornamentations, bas reliefs or other stucco works unlike the other churches made later by Portuguese. Neither are there any triangular pediments above the windows or doorway unlike the churches of high Renaissance period in Europe.

2.2 Church of Our Lady of Life, Vypin

(Also known as Igreja Da Nossa Senhora Da Esperança)

The Church was constructed by The Portuguese Catholics outside the Fort in Fort Kochi when Dutch took hold of the Fort. The original structure was constructed in 1605 AD. Original structure was built in timber. This structure was rebuilt by the Portuguese missionaries. The exact year is not known.

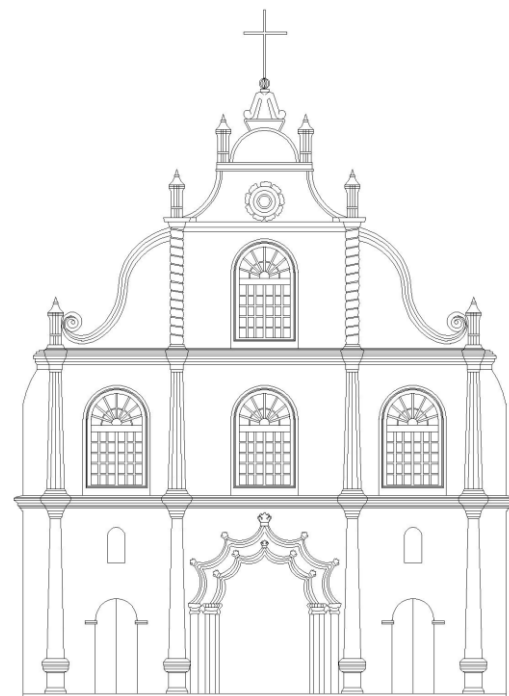


Figure 3: Facade of Church of Our Lady of Life, Vypin.
Source: Author



Figure 4: Church of Our Lady of Life, Vypin

The façade is divided into three sections in three storeys. The center bay rises up to form the Pozzoan Pediment with undulating volutes on either side as in St Francis Church.. The vertical dividers are in the form of pilasters. Unlike in St Francis Church here the pilasters take different forms in all three registers. The pilasters of the lower register follow a Tuscan style. The pilasters of the middle register are fluted like in ionic. The pilasters of the third register are spiraled and resembles solomonic columns. Solomonic columns spread throughout the Baroque period and adapted with local architecture around the world.. In Spain the solomonic column became part of Churrigueresque style – a style that evolved out of Baroque and local architecture of Spain.

The main focus of the church is the Gothic portal. The Church of our Lady of Hope in Mattancherry has a similar Gothic portal. There are horizontal entablatures that run continuously from side to side separating each register. The pilasters end in pyramidal finials. The lateral pilasters and the

horizontal entablature create many frames with each frame consisting of an element. The central frame has the gothic portal. The adjacent frames have small doorways each with small semicircular arched niche above each of it. The niche is empty now. It would have been probably used to hold statues. The three frames in central register have semicircular arched windows. The central frame in the third register also has the same semicircular arched window. Its adjacent two frames have volutes on either side. Pozzoan pediment has a circular oculus in the centre and is topped by an undulating finial on which stands the Latin cross. It follows a P-P-P-P pilaster-column sequence.

2.3 St. Mary's Syro Malabar Church, Alangad

The Alangad church was first constructed in 1300 A.D. This small structure was soon renovated in 1400 A.D. This church was the existing structure when the Portuguese had arrived. The same church was damaged during Tippu's invasion in 1790. Its Madbaha (altar) was rebuilt and some modifications were made later but the roof was not rebuilt. (2019, Payyappily).

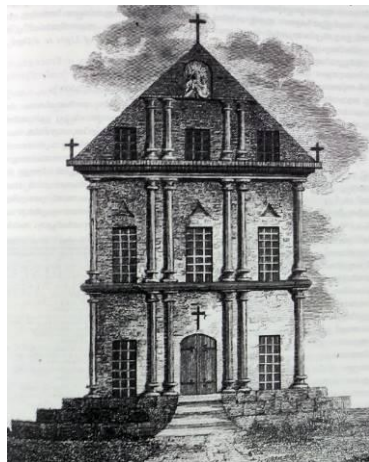


Figure 5: Old Alangad church drawn by Rev Buchanan in 1806

In the book *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan* by Rev. Hugh Pearson a sketch of old Alangad church has been published which was drawn by Rev Buchanan in 1806. The façade of this sketch is quite different from the existing façade. If the sketch is accurate and if we are to assume that the existing façade is different from the drawing then the existing church facade would be from after 1806. Baroque style would have reached Alangad at a much later period from its European counterparts. The façade in the sketch is more of an early renaissance style with a large triangular pediment sitting over two registers. There are three bays and two storeys surmounted by the large pediment. Triangular pedimented façades were the usual typology in Europe during the Renaissance period. The curvilinear variant of the pediment found in the present church must have been a Malabari alteration perhaps introduced by the missionaries. The present church had a cruciform plan, but the transepts and the central altar portion were demolished recently to make space for a new church.

The façade of the present church is divided into four storeys and three bays. Central bay rises up to form a tripartite pedimented gable with scroll bracket decorations on either side of the bay termed as 'Pozzoan pediment' - a Baroque decorative motif. It consists of a raised centre flanked by two lower volute sides. The vertical dividers in the form of paired columns when flanking the central bay and single pilasters at the two ends of the façade accentuate the bays. They are stacked up in continuous lines running through three storeys and are interwoven with unbroken cornice lines. This verticality of the façade was propagated by Alberti one of the main proponents of Renaissance. The addition of the vertical elements also brings it closer to a classical composition. Unlike in Albertian models there are columns used for ornamentation in Alangad church instead of its flatter pilaster version that goes against the rule of Alberti that the proper topping for columns is the lintel. (1995, Kostov). These double columns and pilasters are topped by small pyramidal spires surmounted by miniature pointed dome shaped finials. The double columns decrease in size as it repeats in successive upper storeys. The sequence of pilaster-column is interesting (P-CC-CC-P) and certainly contributes to the monumental appearance of the facade.



Figure 6: Facade of St Mary's Church, Alangad.
Source: Author

The capital of the columns resembles a Corinthian order with acanthus leaf decorations. The shaft is fluted. The base has acanthus leaf decorations unlike any of the classical orders. These leaf decorations in the base could be a later addition because these are missing in the columns of the third register. Many features if not in the right proportions have been carried over from the 14th century church of S. Maria Novella by Alberti to the Alangad church by the missionaries. The general design of S. Maria Novella was a start to the Renaissance Church architecture in Europe. It was the first

time that Renaissance could be captured into a church structure successfully by introducing the triumphal arch façade to take care of the triple partition behind along with a second bay above the central door bay to take care of the increased height of the nave and flank it with segmental wedges of masonry that would mask the lean to roofs of the aisles. Many churches of Kerala did not at the time have a triple partition. It was not divided into nave and aisles. The Renaissance façade with its multiple bays and storeys was more or less copied and attached to the existing rectangular church forms. Most of the time an attic was present above the entrance portion of the Kerala church. But there was no height difference between the nave and the nonexistent aisle. Alangad church does have a triple partition in the inside. It is divided into a wide nave and smaller naves on either side which corresponds to the façade. There is one single gable end roof which is hidden behind the façade. The plan itself corresponds to that of a European church.



Figure 7: St. Mary's Church, Alangad

Each end bay has, in the lower register, a rectangular frame with the relief of a large winged angel in the centre. This frame is mounted by semicircular entablature with scroll decorations in relief work. Inside each of the end bays in the second register has a rectangular stained glass window with the painting of a cross inside a quatrefoil shape; the quatrefoil painting here could be representing the Christian symbolism of the four evangelists- Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. (2002, Steffler). Quatrefoil gained popularity during the Gothic Renaissance periods. The stained glass window is surmounted by triangular pediment with relief of the winged angel inside it. This feature of a rectangular window surmounted by triangular pediment is a very popular Renaissance feature of Italy, Rome and Venice like in the Palazzo Farnese, one of the most important High Renaissance palaces in Rome built by some of the most prominent Italian architects of 16th century including Michelangelo, Vignola and Porta features alternating triangular and segmental pediments that cap its windows of the piano nobile.

The central bay has a sequence of arch-rectangle-medallion-niche which is commonly seen in many of the Baroque churches. The central bay has the bell arched door opening in

the lower register. Above it is rectangular stained glass window with the painting of Mary with Child. This is surmounted by the same triangular pediment with the winged angel. The central bay of the third register has three circular medallions, the center one being bigger than the other two denoting its importance. The central medallion has bas relief of a dove. There is a bas relief of the large winged angel above the central medallion. The smaller two medallions on either side have bas reliefs of abstract angel shape. The horizontal entablature of the below register becomes the base of the above register. There are three sets of entablatures. All three entablatures have an array of decorative scrolling masonry brackets seemingly supporting it above the wall.

There is a concave niche for sculpture in the center of the pediment above the central bay. It has a sculpture of Mary with the Child. This niche is flanked by miniature columns on either side. The niche has a smaller triangular pediment above it flanked by scroll detailing. On top of the entablature stands a rectangular base that holds the Latin cross.

3. Conclusion

In the Renaissance era Europe looked up to the classical times. The past became a model for the present and its ideologies. Europe imposed its dream of itself on the other worlds it encountered. The introduction of Renaissance in Kerala could be seen as one such attempt of imposing the classical orders which the Western world thought as the ideal art. The transfer of different stages of Renaissance development in Europe reached Kerala at different periods, sometimes the styles overlapping with each other. Whether or not the foreign elements were imposed forcefully upon the natives, the art and architecture have survived and is still revered if not with increasing regard even after the natives succeeded in throwing off the yoke of European colonialism.

The missionary's imitation of the facades from Europe was never perfect. The slippages and imperfections caused by translation of forms across space resulted in creation of new and innovative models. Not only the material aspects but the spiritual aspect too was recreated in a new space in a new cultural setting like Kerala. This gave new meanings to the forms. The native audience reacted favorably to the novelty of the style. The church forms represent the artists' fluency in interpreting traditional motifs of indigenous church architecture in the Baroque aesthetic idiom. Here the art is not just a sum of European style and indigenous elements; rather it represents an international cultural convergence as can be seen in the acanthus leaves renderings in a Kerala context required it to have an Indian aesthetics yet recognizing its foreign origin. The addition of ornamentations and shadow catching surfaces is seen to be increasing across the three churches. St Francis church is void of any details whereas the church at Alangad is ornamented with stucco works, double columns, frames with triangular pediments reminiscent of the high renaissance period and medallions. When art is a hybrid of two or more cultures, it is hard to categorize it under either one and hence often results in being ignored or neglected. These objects of art stand out as they do not easily merge with the rest of its

context and yet somehow it has been made part of the culture. Here the Renaissance church facades of Kerala can indeed be seen as seeds of cross cultural alliances of the coast.

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