

Architectural Study of ancient Synagogues of Kerala – Conservation / Preservation

INTRODUCTION

The Synagogues in Kerala are symbols in the cultural history of Kerala by the Jews settled in this land since more than 2000 years, who controlled a major portion of ancient Spice Trade and were eminent part of ancient cultural fabric of Kerala. The Synagogues are long standing examples of syncretic cultural history and religious tolerance of rulers and people of Kerala.

The architecture used in Synagogues in Kerala is a blend of traditional Jewish synagogue architecture and Kerala architectural style. It is positively inspired by the prevailing culture of Kerala - from building materials, use of crafts and decoration, and in response to local climate.

There are known eight still existing Synagogues in Kerala. Each one is unique in construction and architecture yet sharing a blend of Jewish and Keralite traditions in common. Among these eight Synagogues only one is still functioning towards religious purposes as they were originally intended for. Some of them are open to public visit as souvenirs of Kerala's rich cosmopolitan cultural heritage and all of them possessing great value as part of vibrant trade and cultural history of Kerala.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is believed that the first Synagogue in India built in the 4th century in Kodungallur around where the ancient prominent trade centre and port town of 'Muziris' situated. Many of these old Synagogues are lost over the period and some of them identified from the recorded history and oral traditions. At present only eight of the old Synagogues still exist at least in part. One of which was demolished after 1955 to construct a contemporary building. After the Jews who lived around these Synagogues migrated to the newly established nation of Israel after 1948, the Synagogues were in dilapidated condition. Some efforts are being made by local people and local bodies to keep the existing ones in good shape.

These Synagogues are relics of a vibrant past in the history of Kerala. The descendants of migrated Jewish population in search of roots of their ancestors and visitors from other parts of the world who are interested in richness and evolution of culture of Kerala are attracted to these historical monuments.

Rigorous efforts are needed to identify, preserve and protect the architectural distinctness and cultural heritage of Synagogues in Kerala. The values imparted by them cannot be replicated by new construction. Therefore conservation or preservation of these historical marks is a necessity before us whether they are viewed from the cultural, historical or architectural points. Also they have great potential in promotion of tourism in Kerala.

OBJECTIVES

The focus of this research is to adopt UNESCO conservation techniques in context of identifying the right criteria for preservation of the Synagogues of Kerala and to boost the Heritage Tourism value. This research proposes to do the following:-

1. To develop the intangible and tangible cultural and natural heritage properties that Synagogues of Kerala are having.
2. To analyze and compare the different and successfully applied preservation/conservation techniques needed for these Synagogues to be saved for the future generations.
3. To develop preservation / conservation techniques needed for these Synagogues to be saved for the future generations.
4. To evolve the criteria for the Synagogues in Kerala to be listed on the World Heritage Sites list by UNESCO and to be recommended for to be included in the list.
5. To project the importance of these Synagogues in the history of Jewish community in India, this will help in promotion of heritage tourism in Kerala along with inclusion in UNESCO World Heritage Sites list.
6. To find out and evaluate influence of Jewish architecture and tradition in other contemporary buildings if any.

METHODOLOGY

1. Case Study of available Synagogues in Kerala

Proposed research technique is field research (live case study) and secondary research is desk research. (The history of Jews in Kerala and their cultural background various rituals in Jewish custom). The comparative study of these buildings and the type of architecture relating to the builders and location is to be identified.

For Value assessment of these sites various method of conservation is to be studied in detail and implemented. The emotional values of these buildings are to be considered.

2. Data collection technique

Data collection from respondents, Interview details, Data analysis and labeling method.

3. Conservation or Preservation of these buildings - Recommendations

Study on the conservation methods and values and incorporating them to the above studies. The conservation of these buildings is the need of the hour as the conservation facility of reuse.

4. Study of UNESCO grading system

A detailed study of the UNESCO grading system for recommending these buildings for World Heritage Sites list.

References

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