

THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN TAMIL NADU: A HISTORICAL JOURNEY

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Abstract

Islamic architecture in Tamil Nadu was a unique synthesis of regional aesthetics and Islamic principles which give a rich confluence of diverse cultural and historical influences. From the grand mosques to the intricate tombs and minarets, Tamil Nadu's Islamic architecture showcases a blend of local craftsmanship and Islamic artistry. It highlights the role of Islamic architecture in shaping the region's developed landscape, emphasizing the use of local materials and techniques that merge seamlessly with Islamic design and elements. By investigating these architectural spectacles, the study aims to illuminate the contributions of Islamic architecture to Tamil Nadu's cultural heritage, revealing how it has adapted and thrived within a distinctive regional framework. This exploration not only enriches our understanding of Tamil Nadu's architectural history but also underscores the enduring legacy of Islamic architectural innovation in South India. This study delves into the architectural marvels of Tamil Nadu, focusing on the interplay between indigenous Tamil and Islamic architectural styles.

Keywords: *Dravidian, Islamic, Architecture, Mosques, Sufi shrines, Minaret, Dome*

Introduction

Tamil Nadu's architectural landscape bears witness to a profound cultural fusion, blending Islamic design and principles with indigenous Dravidian styles. The introduction of Islam to South India predates the medieval Sultanates, with early Muslim communities establishing roots along the Tamil Nadu coast through trade rather than conquest. This peaceful integration laid the groundwork for a distinctive architectural tradition that would evolved over centuries. From the early trading settlements in the first century Hijra to the significant architectural developments during the Delhi Sultanate and subsequent local dynasties, Tamil Nadu's Islamic architecture reflects a seamless amalgamation of Dravidian and Islamic elements. Early mosques, such as those in Kayalpattanam and Tiruchirappalli, demonstrated a blend of local Dravidian construction techniques with Islamic forms, including *domes* and *mihrabs*. This synthesis continued through the periods of the Bijapur Sultanate and the Nawabs of Arcot, producing structures that combined grandeur with local craftsmanship. The enduring legacy of Tamil Nadu's Islamic architecture is also marked by its unique adaptation of traditional Dravidian features, such as granite pillars and hypostyle halls, integrated with Islamic motifs. This fusion can be seen in the structures like the Jamia Masjids and the Nagore Dargah, underscores a rich architectural heritage that narrates a story of cultural harmony and artistic innovation.

The Emergence of Islam in Tamil Nadu

Long before the medieval Muslim Sultanates emerged through Central Asian invasions, Islam had already found a peaceful foothold in South India, particularly Tamil Nadu. The early spread of Islam was closely tied to the expansive South Indian trade networks. Arab merchants, arriving as traders rather than conquerors, integrated seamlessly into the local fabric, settling under the protection of regional rulers who granted them privileged status. The early Arab Muslim colonies, like the Yavanacheri referenced in the Tamil classic Perumgathai, symbolize the peaceful establishment of Islamic communities. As early as the first century of Hijra, a network of Muslim trading settlements began to thrive along Tamil Nadu's eastern coast, from Pulicat to Colachel in Kanyakumari. Coastal towns in Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram, and Thirunelveli became hubs of thriving Muslim

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communities. Areas such as Pulicat, Nagapattinam, Kilakkarai, and Kayalpattanam housed significant Tamil-speaking Muslim populations, who were recognized as integral parts of the local society. South Indian rulers, including the Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, Pandyas, and Zamorins, welcomed these Muslim traders, offering them special privileges in exchange for the economic benefits of seaborne trade. Arab merchants were also free to share their faith with the local population. Legendary figures such as Tamim al-Ansari and Muhammad Ukasha are believed to have migrated to Tamil Nadu as early Islamic missionaries, with their tombs still revered in Kovalam and Porto Novo. Additionally, the resting places of early Muslim saints, like Kasim Wali (624 AD) and Abdul Rahman Wali (628 AD), are found in Kanyakumari and Thirunelveli. Islam's influence also spread inland, as evidenced by an Arabic inscription from 734 AD in Tiruchirappalli, then the Chola capital of Uraiyur. Thus, Islam's presence in Tamil Nadu has deep historical roots, flourishing long before the rise of the northern Sultanates.

Celestial Constructs: The Artistry of Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture represents a vast array of religious and secular structures produced under Muslim patronage, with artists from diverse cultures, often not even adherents of Islam. While the Arabs had little indigenous art, they succeeded in unifying local architectural styles to create what we now recognize as Islamic art. Initially, in the early years of Islam, the qibla (direction of prayer) was oriented toward Jerusalem. However, following a divine revelation, Prophet Muhammad redirected it toward the Kaaba in Mecca, a small rectangular shrine central to Islamic worship. Tombs, typically consist of a single chamber topped with a dome, housing the cenotaph. Larger mausoleums often include mosques within an enclosed space called a *rouza*, inspired by the Prophet's tomb in Medina. Domes and pointed arches became signature elements of Islamic architecture, heavily influenced by the Abbasid style from 8th-century Baghdad, itself an evolution of ancient Mesopotamian vaulted architecture. This style swiftly spread throughout the Muslim world, creating a unified Islamic architectural language.

In India, the indigenous "*trabeate*" (beam-based) architecture gave way to the arcuate (arch-based) techniques introduced by Muslim builders. This shift was made possible by the introduction of mortar masonry, revolutionizing Indian construction. The Muslim influence also brought domes, replacing the pyramid-like *shikara* roofs of Hindu temples, thus transforming the architectural landscape. The Indo-Islamic architectural style that emerged in India during the 13th century produced some of the world's most iconic buildings, thanks to the ingenuity of local craftsmen and the mature development of Islamic techniques.

Early Islamic structures in India, such as the Qutub Mosque and Qutub Minar in Delhi, laid the foundation for what would become a flourishing Indo-Islamic architectural tradition. This style evolved into distinct phases—Imperial, Provincial, and Mughal—each contributing its own innovations. The Bahmani Sultanate in the Deccan (14th century) further expanded Islamic architecture in South India. Monuments like the mosques and tombs in Gulbarga and Bijapur showcase a blend of Mughal-Indo-Persian styles, with the Gol Gumbaz in Bijapur, famed for its enormous dome, being a prime example. Meanwhile, the Mughals, under patrons like Akbar and Shah Jahan, ushered in a golden age of architecture, blending Persian, Ottoman, and local Indian elements to create masterpieces like Humayun's Tomb, Fatehpur Sikri, and, most famously, the Taj Mahal. The reign of Aurangzeb marked the decline of this architectural brilliance, but the legacy of Indo-Islamic architecture continues to awe and inspire, a testament to the cultural and artistic fusion that defines the style.

The Islamic Architectural Legacy of Tamil Nadu

The influence of Islam reached peninsular India in the early years of the Hijra, as Muslims who embraced the faith sought places of worship in their towns and villages. One of the central pillars of Islam is the obligation to pray five times a day, which necessitated the creation of dedicated spaces for worship, known as "*Palli*" in Tamil. While "*Palli*" refers to any place of worship, in the Muslim context, it signifies a mosque. When local artisans were commissioned to build these mosques, they

naturally followed the traditional Dravidian architectural style, though with a key distinction: the avoidance of figurative decoration, in keeping with Islamic principles. Structurally, these mosques bore a striking resemblance to temple mandapams, featuring stone construction throughout and earning the name "*Kalluppalli*" (Kal meaning stone and Palli meaning mosque). The architectural design of these early mosques included southern and northern doorways, resembling the side entrances adorned with "*thoranas*" found in the "*Ardhamandapams*" of temples. A central feature of the western wall was the "*Mihrab*", a square-shaped niche that reflects early Persian mosque designs. Thus, these early Tamil Nadu mosques were Dravidian in style but Islamic in form. This fusion of architectural traditions persisted for centuries, supported by local rulers who patronized mosque construction. One of the earliest surviving examples of such a mosque in the Dravidian style is located in Tiruchirappalli, near Uraiyur, the former capital of the Cholas. Built in 734 A.D., this mosque is remarkably well-preserved. The tradition of mosque construction in the indigenous style continued along Tamil Nadu's coast, with early Muslim settlements like Kayalpattanam offering further evidence. Inscriptions found in the mosques there date back to the 10th century A.D., showcasing a long-standing legacy of Islamic architecture in the region.

Islamic architecture made its way to Tamil Nadu in the early fourteenth century with the invasion led by Malik Kafur, commander of Alauddin Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi. His 1311 A.D. campaign into the Mabar region, followed by the establishment of the Madurai Sultanate in 1323 A.D., marked the beginning of Islamic architectural influence in the region. Domes and arches, hallmark features of Islamic architecture, first appeared in the tombs of Alaudin Udawji (1338-1339 A.D.) and Alaudin Sikandar Shah (1372-73 A.D.) in Madurai. These structures exemplify the harmonious blending of Dravidian and Islamic art forms, laying the groundwork for the unique architectural evolution that would follow.

The next significant development came with the Bijapur Sultanate's control over northern Tamil Nadu in the seventeenth century. Ginjee, a strategic centre in South Arcot district, became a hub of Bijapur's architectural style, characterized by majestic, spherical domes and distinctive four-centered arches. The architecture of this period, marked by refined elegance and structural innovation, showcased a mature Islamic aesthetic, particularly in the use of turrets and bulbous domes. By the late sixteenth century, the Nawabs of Arcot introduced a new wave of Islamic architecture, with the construction of numerous mosques and tombs. While Dravidian elements, such as stone pillars and indigenous building techniques, continued to dominate, they were seamlessly integrated into Islamic structures. The Jamia Masjid at Kilakkarai, built in the seventeenth century, is a testament to this synthesis, reflecting the collaborative artistry of Tamil artisans who embraced the blending of Islamic and local traditions.

This amalgamation of Dravidian and Islamic styles highlights the Tamil Nadu's rich cultural diversity and the exceptional craftsmanship of southern artisans, whose work exemplifies a peaceful coexistence of religious and artistic traditions. A large number mosques and tombs constructed across Tamil Nadu over centuries, the region's Islamic architecture developed a distinct identity. This blend of Dravidian and Islamic elements has given rise to a unique architectural style, aptly referred to as "Indo-Dravidian Islamic Art" in the history of Indian architecture. During the British colonial period, a desire emerged to merge Western architectural ideas with Indian aesthetics, leading to an eclectic blend of styles. Borrowing elements from classical traditions to late Mughal influences, this fusion resulted in the creation of striking yet sometimes unconventional structures. Notable examples of this Indo-Islamic "*Saracenic*" style can be seen in the Madras University Senate Hall, the Nawab's palace complex (now the Chepauk Office Complex), Amir Mahal, and the High Court in Chennai.

In the modern era, mosque construction became a central activity for Muslim builders, though domes were used sparingly. With expanding Muslim populations in towns and cities, numerous mosques sprang up, employing contemporary masonry techniques that heavily relied on brick and lime mortar. While arches became a standard feature, their artistic and aesthetic appeal diminished compared to earlier periods. The ceilings transitioned to vaulted designs, replacing the traditional horizontal stone slabs, and pillars were crafted in varied shapes, both square and round. Walls were polished with a unique mixture of lime paste and egg yolk, giving them a smooth finish. Minarets evolved into ornamental features, and most mosques displayed a grand facade with two "*Minars*". Some mosques featured four "*Minars*" or multiple minarets along the parapet walls, while others

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opted for a single towering “*Minar*”. However, these designs often reflected local preferences and builders' tastes, sometimes lacking the clarity and elegance of earlier architectural forms.

The Religious Practices in the Islamic Architecture of Tamil Nadu

The religious customs and practices observed in mosques and dargahs (tomb shrines) are integral to understanding the purpose for which these architectural structures were created. Mosques, as symbols of both Islamic religion and art, also serve not only as places of worship but also as educational centres where Islamic principles, including Arabic and theology, are taught. Rooted in the tradition of Islam “*sunnah*”, the mosques follow strict adherence to Islamic law, which prescribes five daily prayers. These spaces, deeply woven into the fabric of Muslim life, stand as testaments to the faith, designed to inspire devotion and discipline. Tomb shrines, or dargahs, serve a different but equally significant religious function. These shrines, which house the remains of Muslim saints or “*Wali*” (also known as Auliya or Antavar), blend elements of high Islamic practice with the local folk traditions of the Muslim masses. Dargahs are regarded as sacred places of power and blessings “*Barakah*”, where pilgrims seek miraculous cures, spiritual solace, and divine intervention. The rituals performed at these shrines, such as “*ziarath*” (homage to the dead), involve reciting verses from the Quran to honour the saint and petition God for eternal peace on their behalf. Over time, these saints have come to be venerated as men of God, and their shrines have evolved into sites of celebration, marked by festivals like “*Kanthuri, Urus, and Santhanakkudu*”(Sandal anointing), drawing parallels with the Hindu Guru Pooja. These festivals bring together diverse communities, and the dargahs, such as those in Nagore, Ervadi, Madurai, and Kayalpattanam, have become sanctuaries for people seeking healing—both mental and physical—regardless of religion. The blending of local Dravidian social customs with Islamic traditions is mirrored in the architecture of these sacred sites, creating a unique cultural and spiritual panorama in Tamil Nadu’s history. This dynamic fusion of religious practice and architectural style highlights the inclusive and multi-faceted nature of Tamil Nadu’s Islamic heritage, where faith, art, and community meet.

Sacred Spaces: An Exploration of Mosques and Sufi Shrines in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is home to a rich embroidery of Islamic heritage, as reflected in its ancient mosques and Sufi shrines. Among the earliest is the “*Irattaikulam Palli*”, an ancient mosque in Kayalpattanam, whose architectural style and 13th-century inscriptions suggest its origins date back to the same period. Another prominent site is the “*Juma Masjid*” at Kayalpattanam, a mosque with a complex history. While tradition and a later inscription claim it was established in 843 A.D., another source dates its construction to 1336-37 A.D. Moving closer to the shoreline, the “*Syed Sirajuddin Wali Dargah*” presents an intriguing transformation from an early mosque to a dargah. The dargah’s layout closely mirrors that of a temple complex, with the main tomb chamber retaining the original mosque’s architectural plan.

In Valikantapuram, the *Fort Mosque* stands as a historical monument, believed to have been constructed by the Jaghirdars of the Nawabs of Arcot. This mosque played a significant role in the Anglo-French conflicts of the 1750s. Another site of immense spiritual and architectural significance is the “*Dargah of Nathhar Wali*”. This square granite structure, with walls 20 feet high, supports a grand bulbous dome 30 feet in diameter, which rises from cross beams placed at the corners. Inside, the tombs of the saint Nathhar Wali and his master, Shams Goya, rest in serene solitude. The structure’s verandah is supported by high pillars in the Dravidian style, while the dome’s lotus-pedestal base reflects the influence of Bijapur architecture.

One of the most revered Sufi shrines in Tamil Nadu is the “*Nagore Dargah*”, dedicated to Shahul Hameed, also known as Meeran Sahib Wali or Nagore Andavar. The shrine features five towering square minarets and large halls with round pillars reminiscent of Tamil temple architecture. This fusion of Islamic and Tamil styles makes the Nagore Dargah a striking example of cross-cultural architectural blending. In Thirunelveli-Pettai, the “*Mohamed Nainar Mosque*” stands as a testament to the enduring influence of Dravidian style, even in the construction of mosques as late as the 19th

century. Its grandeur reflects the seamless integration of local architectural traditions into Islamic religious structures.

Lastly, the “*Tippu Mastan Wali Dargah*” in Arcot, built in 1728 by Nawab Sadathullah Khan, holds great historical significance. The dargah is said to have been venerated by Hyder Ali of Mysore, as it was through the blessings of Tippu Mastan Wali that his son, Tippu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, was born. These sacred sites are not only centers of devotion but also living testaments to the rich cultural and architectural heritage of Tamil Nadu’s Islamic community. The Islamic architecture of Tamil Nadu stands as a testament to cultural syncretism, blending the elegance of Islamic design with the distinct local Dravidian style. This unique fusion creates architectural forms that are distinctive to the region, where indigenous materials and craftsmanship merge seamlessly with Islamic aesthetics. Key features include:

1. Domes and Minarets

- The most prominent and iconic elements of Islamic architecture, domes and minarets, feature prominently in mosques and tombs. The dome, often spherical or bulbous, represents the heavens, while the towering minarets serve both as architectural highlights and a place for the call to prayer.

2. Mihrab and Minbar

- The “Mihrab”, a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca “*Qibla*”, is an essential feature of Islamic prayer halls. The “*Minbar*”, a raised platform or pulpit from which the Friday sermon “*khutbah*” is delivered, is another typical element found in the interior.

3. Calligraphy and Arabesque Designs

- Islamic calligraphy, especially Arabic inscriptions from the Quran, adorn many buildings, particularly on the walls of mosques and tombs. Intricate (arabesques), a style of decoration using rhythmic, flowing designs of floral and geometric patterns, are often combined with calligraphic elements to embellish surfaces.

4. Archways

- Arches, particularly multi-lobed and four-centered arches, are typical in Tamil Nadu’s Islamic architecture. These arches often reflect a combination of Islamic styles with regional variations.

5. Synthesis of Dravidian Elements

- Tamil Nadu’s Islamic structures often incorporate local materials and craftsmanship, resulting in a harmonious blend of Dravidian and Islamic art forms. For example, mosques built with granite and local stone display the skill of Tamil artisans while retaining essential Islamic design principles.

6. Fixed Pillars

- The use of pillars is influenced by the Dravidian architectural style, particularly in mosques where stone columns feature heavily. However, unlike Hindu temples, these pillars usually lack figurative sculpture, in keeping with Islamic aniconism.

7. Hypostyle Halls

- Many mosques, like the Juma Masjid at Kilakkarai, feature hypostyle halls, where rows of pillars support the roof, creating vast spaces for communal prayer.

8. Tombs and Mausoleums

- Mausoleums and tombs, particularly those of notable Islamic figures, are significant in Tamil Nadu’s Islamic architecture. These structures often feature domes and intricate carvings, merging local styles with Islamic memorial architecture.

9. Use of Local Stone and Materials

- Local stone such as granite and lime mortar is used in the construction of Islamic structures, reflecting the region's natural resources and merging them with Islamic architectural practices.

Overall, Islamic architecture in Tamil Nadu is characterized by its regional adaptations and cultural synthesis, creating a distinctive architectural heritage that reflects the interaction between Islamic and Dravidian traditions.

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Conclusion

The peaceful introduction of Islam into Tamil Nadu was through Arab traders which was rooted far before the coming of medieval Muslim Sultanates. Their settlement illustrated a harmonious integration of faith, trade, and culture in the coastal region and spreading to urban centers widely. This early Islamic presence, embedded in coastal trade networks, reflects a unique synergy between Tamil rulers and Arab merchants. The privileges granted to them and allowed to share their faith by the rulers was again a fine example for synergy between the traders and rulers. Islamic architecture in Tamil Nadu also reflects a cultural fusion between locals and Islamic architecture. Early mosques, built by local artisans, blended Dravidian craftsmanship with Islamic principles, creating structures that were Islamic in purpose but Dravidian in style. These architectural forms evolved over centuries, incorporating elements such as domes, arches, and minarets, while maintaining local materials and craftsmanship. The resulting Indo-Dravidian Islamic style is a testament to Tamil Nadu's ability to blend diverse traditions, fostering peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange. This legacy of architectural and spiritual synthesis, reflected in mosques, dargahs, and tombs which remains a defining feature of Tamil Nadu's Islamic heritage, symbolizing unity through diversity.

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