C H A P T E R VI: EARLY WOODEN MOSQUES OF KASMIR

Kashmir has an equally important and ancient tradition of wooden architecture, the uninterrupted continuity of which was facilitated by the easy availability of deodar wood in the valley. It is understandable that in ancient times, in addition to stone, wood was also used for constructing the Hindu temples and Buddhist viharas which have not survived till now due to destruction mainly by fire as we learn from Kalhana’s Rajatarangini:

“Srinagara, bereft of its mathas, shrines, houses, shops and the like was burned in a mere trice into a forest which has been burnt down. The colossal statue of the Buddha darkened by smoke and without its dwelling house was alone visible on high in the city which had been reduced to mounds of earth and it resembled a charred tree.”

All scholars agree that wooden architecture in Kashmir has a very ancient history and that, in addition to stone, it was used for constructing civic and secular buildings. Today, unfortunately with the exception of some wooden mosques that we shall be studying herebelow, there are no other manifestations of sacred buildings in wood. This has led Percy Brown and Nichols to conclude that this peculiar style of wooden mosques first came into existence with the Muhammedan occupation of the country towards the 14th and 15th centuries. We are not inclined to accept these views. In our opinion, these mosques are constructed in the ancient wooden style of Hindu temples and Buddhist viharas, and that this style was not evolved by the Muslims. A number of arguments can be forwarded in support
A structure in the same style is carved in one of the Rama-
yana panels in the interior of the Markula Devi temple which dates
from 8th - 9th century A.D. Then, there are marked similarities
between the wooden mosques and the vimana style (Type III) wooden
temples of Himachal Pradesh. Judging from the close resemblance
in architectural style, features and details, it would not be un-
reasonable to suspect that this peculiar style was practised not
only in Himachal Pradesh but over a much wider area in the Hima-
layas.7

Like our vimana style temples, these mosques are also square
or rectangular on plan. They are erected on a raised stone platform
which is a mass of masonry of definitely impressive proportions,8
for example, the Shah Hamadan mosque (pl. 120), the Pampur mosque,
the mosque of Madin Sahib, etc. The ground floor is generally a
large hall for offering worship or congregational prayers. In the
opinion of Hermann Goetz9 and Percy Brown10, this feature was
borrowed by the Muslims from the Tibetan Buddhists. D.R. Sahni
opines that the caitya-grha built by Emperor Lalitaditya Muktapida
at Parihasapura must have been a two-storeyed hall with galleries.11
The same plan and disposition of halls and galleries is observable
in some wooden mosques. These observations should not make one think
like foreign scholars that only Buddhist viharas were built in
this style. They forget that all these structures are erected on
the ruins of ancient Hindu temples,12 and it is highly probable that
they were in this style. Foreign scholars see affinities with Bud-
hist shrines because congregational worship is an essential feature
of Buddhism as also of Islam. But they overlook the fact that
even Hindu temples have halls and are surrounded by large inner
courtyards. It might be, as Percy Brown has stated, that the
Brahmanical temples in Kashmir have taken some of its character and
arrangements from the stupa courts of the Buddhist monasteries of
Gandhara. 13

All mosques have sloping pyramidal roofs rising generally
upto three tiers, on top of which there is an elevated gallery with
 pilasters on all the four sides which is used by the muezzin for
 sending out a call to his brethren for prayer. 14 Actually this fea-
ture is borrowed from vimana style temples which generally have two
or three wooden galleries of this type. The conical umbrella, the
crowning member of the vimana style temples, here undergoes a slight
variation and is transformed into a tall steeple very much resembl­
ing the sikharas of Hindu temples in the north Indian plains, capped
by a metal kalasa and a finial. Dormer windows are pierced through
the tall spire facing the cardinal directions. These were evidently
inspired by the gavajas that we see commonly in ancient Hindu tem­
ple of Payar etc. Another difference in the disposition of the
tiered roofs here is that the sloping roof of the first storey is
much broader in relation to the upper roofs. In this respect these
structures bear a striking resemblance to the Buddhist temples of
Sikkim.

A further evidence is offered by ancient Hindu temples in
stone dating from the 8th century A.D. for they are built in the
same style as the vimana style temples. We have already made this
observation in an earlier chapter. A comparison between these
temples and the wooden mosques, enables us to surmise safely that the wooden temples and viharas of the Hindus and the Buddhists, prior to their destruction by the Muslims, were constructed in this style. In the wall paintings of some early Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, dating from the 10-11th centuries A.D., we come across pictorial representations of buildings bearing a striking resemblance to the Shah Hamadan mosque. This similarity further lends support to our argument.

Then there are certain features and details that link these mosques with the wooden temples of Himachal Pradesh such as the wooden door-ways which have successively receding frames usually seven in number. The stone temples of Kashmir do not have this kind of doorways, but these structures and the early Buddhist temples of Alchi in Ladakh suggest that this feature handed down by the Gupta period architects continued to figure in wooden architecture of Kashmir as also in Himachal Pradesh where this tradition has continued uninterrupted till the present century as we have already seen in a previous chapter. This feature also indicates the strong sway of traditional practices that remain unaffected by the imposition of other religions. An interesting feature common to all these mosques are the wooden bells hanging from the corners of the eaves. Fergusson and other foreign scholars think that this feature was a legacy of Buddhist viharas of Kashmir, but in our opinion these carved wooden bells are an integral part of the wooden architecture of western Himalaya and figured commonly on Hindu temples as we have already seen in our study of Himachal wooden temples. The gargoyles projecting from the roof beam-ends in the shape of makara heads, wooden fringes, overhanging eaves and balconies are...
some of the features common to Himachal wooden temples. The cornices are constructed exactly as in the Alchi monasteries. All these features clearly suggest that the indigenous tradition of wooden architecture was so firmly established and rooted in the soil that even after the advent of Islam, no outside influence could completely obliterate it.

The same observations have been made by various scholars. Percy Brown has argued:

"The indigenous style mainly composed of timber and designed and constructed according to tradition took nothing from intruding productions... and remained unaffected by any influences from without, either Persian or Mughal."

R.C. Kak rightly observed:

"It is of course not impossible for a new religion to commence an architecture of its own, but the chances are overwhelmingly in favour of its utilising at least in the initial stages the older models and adapting them to its purposes... This happened in the case of Buddhism and Islam supplanted Hinduism with the accession of Shah Mir. The Muslims borrowed the materials and techniques of the Hindu shrines but retained the form of Hindu temple as far as it was compatible with their religious requirements." 18

The following structural imperatives pointed out by Goetz support the above observations:

"In Kashmir, this adaptation led to very different results, because it was evolved from the previous Hindu and Buddhist wooden architecture of which, unfortunately, no original monument survives but which we know from its echo in the art of Lahul, Ladakh, Spiti and western Tibet. Its basic type is a blockhouse, constructed of heaps of gigantic logs, enclosing a vast hall for the images and covered with a low pyramidal roof of turf, from which a curious high spire rises. It was merely necessary to transform the image hall into a prayer hall for the Muslim congregation... the whole structure with its odd spire and the wooden bells on the corners of the roof evoke the memory of Buddhist temples and chortens.

This analysis further emphasises the probability of Hindu and Buddhist origins of these sacred structures in wood. It is not
possible to give a chronological account of these wooden mosques as there are very few old specimens, of which we shall study only the mosques of Shah Hamadan and Jama Masjid as the most representative specimens. The Pampur mosque and the mosque of Shah Nur-ud-din popularly known as Charar-e-sarif are fairly old structures, about 350 years old. The former stands on a basement composed of temple spoils. The upper portion is constructed of wood and bricks. It has a genuinely ancient appearance, to which the side walls contribute a great deal. The facade comprises wooden arched balconies which seem to have been added in later times. The Charar-e-sarif is a rectangular double-storeyed structure erected on a brick platform. Its walls are built of hewn timber placed transversely. The plain interior is covered with woodwork and the windows display trellis work. Its roof rising in tiers is supported by four pillars of hewn deodar wood.

Before undertaking a detailed study of the two mosques, we may mention that all the mosques built in later periods and the ones being built now are modelled after the Shah Hamadan mosque and the style is very uniform. The tombs (ziarat) are also being constructed in the same architectural style.

Shah Hamadan Mosque, Srinagar

Between the 3rd and 4th bridges on the right bank of the Jhelum river stands the wooden mosque (pl.120) built in honour of a Persian saint named Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani who lived in the 14th century A.D. The dates mentioned on the entrance are 1383 A.D., the equivalent of 774 A.H. This should not lead us to think that
the present structure belongs to the time traditionally ascribed to it. The building has been renovated and reconstructed several times over the centuries. This kind of constant additions and alterations are a permanent feature of the sacred buildings all over the Himalayan region and makes the task of guessing about the date of the original structure extremely hazardous. The central portion is said to be 400 years old. And there is no doubt that inspite of its restorations, the mosque is a typical and truthful example of the style, barring minor details such as modern turned balusters, mirror and glazed work on the walls of the mausoleum, the paint and the cloisters, all of which are later additions.

Built on the ruins of an ancient Hindu temple of Kali, the structure stands on a massive stone platform. It is two storeys high and rises up to the height of 125 ft. above the ground. The superstructure is built mainly of square timber slabs, the interstices being neatly filled in with bricks. It stands within a large compound, entrance to which is gained by an arched gateway (pl.121) facing the doorway to the interior hall.

Square on plan, 70 ft. on one side, the mosque consists of a rectangular hall occupying the central portion while on both the sides are wooden cloisters added later. Two or three steps lead one to the veranda in front of the wooden doorway opening into the interior hall. The remarkable features of this doorway are its successively receding jambs and lintels. The door frames are seven in number (we noticed the same thing in the Pampur mosque) and plain and unornamented; this contributes to the austere appearance of the mosque. The recession of the frames is not deep.
The interior hall is entirely covered with wooden panelling consisting of geometrical patterns. Its ceiling is of special interest for it is finely decorated with thin pieces of wood worked into geometrical patterns and beautifully painted with flowers in different colours. This is known as Khatamband work. A peculiar feature of the wooden architecture of Kashmir, the earliest and the best specimen of Khatamband work exists in the mosque of Madin Sahib in Srinagar. Four massive wooden pillars, each hewn out of a single deodar trunk, form a square bay in the centre of the hall. The octagonal pillars (pl.126) have bases carved with lotus petals and sixteen-sided capitals with acanthus leaf decorations.

The walls are formed of logs, trimmed square and laid in alternate courses, the log-ends producing the effect of a diaper pattern on the sides of the exterior. The same construction technique is followed in the Pampur mosque (pl.136). Under the eaves is a heavy cornice also built of logs, corbelled out from the wall-face on timbers laid cross-wise so that their butt-ends form an elementary kind of dentil course. This technique was evolved to solidify the structure. Around these walls on the first and second storeys, we see arcades, verandas and porticos, their panels filled with lattice-work (pinjara) and carved wooden insertions. The balconies, window openings and balustrades are filled with elaborate jali screens, the patterns of which are formed by little pieces of wood fitted together. All these features contribute to the impressiveness of the facade. In the centre of the first storey on the facade is a hexagonal shaped projecting bow window (bukharca), from the eaves corners of which hang carved wooden bells. In fact,
the angles of the eaves all over the structure are ornamented with similar wooden bells suspended from the corners.

The mosque is covered by a pyramidal roof rising in three tiers; from the centre of the 3rd roof rises the steeple surmounted by the finial capped with brass. The four corners of each tiered roof are finished by gargoyles fashioned in the elegant shape of makaras. A remarkable feature of the steeple are the dormer windows projecting from each of the four sides. This feature is evidently borrowed from the ancient Hindu temples in stone where the dormer windows have a trefoliated form, e.g. Siva temple of Pandrethan (pl.55). The cornices are very heavy being formed of logs corbelled out from the wall face on timbers laid cross-wise. The butt-ends of the cross timbers form a dented course and the space between them is filled with elaborate carvings. The same feature is noticeable in most wooden mosques, the best examples being the mosque of Madin Sahib and the Pampur mosque.

From the centre of its tiered roofs rises the tall steeple covered with wooden planks which is fortunate that they now have not been replaced by metal sheets that are used in recently built mosques. It is possible that the model and inspiration for constructing this kind of steeple came from the curvilinear shape of the sikha surmounting the Sankaracarya temple. We are more inclined to accept Ferguson's view that the roof of this mosque is probably similar to that which once covered the sun temple of Martand and the crowning ornament is evidently a reminiscence of the Svayambhunath temple in Nepal. 23
Jama Masjid, Srinagar

A short distance from the right bank of Jhelum river between the bend of the river and the Hariparbat fort is situated the Jama Masjid (pl.127) said to have been founded by Sikandar Butsikan around 1400. It is said to have been originally constructed entirely of wood. Although destroyed and reconstructed a number of times over the centuries, drastic changes do not seem to have taken place in its composition, style and original plan, which was designed by a famous architect named Sadr-ud-din-Khurasani.

It is a huge structure enclosing a square courtyard. Its outer walls display an enormous mass of plain brickwork painted grey. In the middle of north, south and east sides, there are projecting entrances with a series of small arched balconies on their upper portions. This main entrance on the south is a recessed portico which leads one across the colonnade forming the southern cloisters into the inner courtyard. The principal mosque called the minar faces Mecca. Its roof and steeple are constructed exactly like that of the Shah Hamadan mosque and it has two wooden kiosks octagonal in shape, from the eaves corners of which hang wooden bells. Similar steeples and tiered roofs summount each structure in the centre of the three sides.

The most impressive feature of this mosque are the massive pillars in the interior(pl.131) each hewn out of a single deodar trunk. Originally it is said they were 378 in number; now only 370 remain. All the columns are fashioned alike, plain and unornamented. They go a long way to contribute to the magnificance stateliness and grandiose proportions of this structure.
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