
Architecture and Cultural Legacy of Puthanpalli Mosque, Paravur, Kollam District, Kerala: An Archaeological Perspective

Athul S.¹, Kumbodharan S.², Mohammed Muhaseen B. S.² and Akhil K. N.²

- ¹. Department of Islamic Studies, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala – 695 581, India (Email: athulsulekha@gmail.com)
- ². Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala – 695 581, India (Email: kumbodharans@keralauniversity.ac.in; muhasin.sapien@outlook.com; akhilkn2639@gmail.com)

Received: 14 July 2023; Revised: 03 October 2023; Accepted: 31 October 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.1 (2023-24): 499-512

Abstract: *The architectural legacy of mosques in Kerala can be stretched back to medieval times. The history of Muslims in Kerala is primarily based on the cordial collaboration and economic connections between the state's rulers and the native populace. Standing tall as a testament to Kerala's Islamic cultural and architectural tradition, the Paravur mosque goes back around c. 750 years, yet its archaeological significance has been overlooked. Developing the "Islamic-Dravida Kerala" architectural style demonstrates Muslims' absorption into the local surroundings and customs. Kerala's ancient mosques have a distinctive architectural heritage that sets them apart from the Islamic architecture of northern India. One significant aspect that warrants more in-depth research is how the architectural principles of Dravidian temples were applied to the construction of the early mosques in the region. This paper tries to elucidate how the native architectural legacy of Kerala is absorbed into Islamic architecture and the background history of Muslims in the region.*

Keywords: Kerala, Islam, Arab Traders, Malik Ibn Dinar, Mappila, Mosques, Architecture

Introduction

Historical evidence suggests that Islam has a rich history in Kerala, dating back to the c. 7th century CE when Arab traders introduced the religion to the land. Speaking of the Archaeological context, the first known tangible evidence of the advent of Islam in Kerala belongs to the c. 9th century CE, from the Coast of Kodungallur (Craganore) in Central Kerala (Mohammed 2013). The Indo-Arab trade relations were more antiquated than the Roman Empire (Mohammed 2013). Miller (2016) observes that the allure of the valuable spices drove these historical voyages of Arabs to the ports of Kerala. Furthermore, the Arabs made enduring connections with the Malabar region by establishing their settlements and trade routes within the major commercial hubs of

Kerala. Notably, trade relations with Arabs had already been established in Kerala before the introduction of Islam (Babu 2021). The long-standing and extensive commercial relations between the Indians and the Arabs prompted the growth of the Islamic community in Kerala. However, Islamic culture significantly influenced Kerala's history's social, cultural, political, economic, and religious realms.

A Brief History of Islam in Kerala

The proselytisation of Islam began in 643 CE after the death of the Prophet. There are different theories existing regarding the earliest Islamic settlement of Kerala. Makhdoom (2014) put forth a reference from the Arab record, *Tuhfat-al-Mujahideen*, which states that twenty Muslims led by Malik Ibn Dinar arrived on the Malabar Coast to spread their faith. When they reached Kodungallur, they were welcomed by the local king, and it was here that the Muslim community established their first settlement and built their first Mosque, namely Cheraman Juma Masjid. Koya (1976) has a different opinion on the first Islamic settlement in India; he suggests that the Navayat clan of Arabs were the initial Muslims to settle along the Konkan coast in the early 8th century CE.

The Islamic culture in Kerala expanded its domain with the arrival of the Arab ruler Malik Ibn Dinar, who established several Islamic institutions, including mosques and *madrasas* (religious education centres). The efforts of Malik Ibn Dinar played a vital role in converting a significant local population to Islam. The arrival of the Muslim preachers called *Marakkars* during the 12th and 13th centuries CE further contributed to the expansion of Islam in Kerala by founding Islamic organisations.

However, the beginning of colonialisation, along with the expedition of the Portuguese in the 16th century CE, promoted Christianity in Kerala. Colonialisation led to the destruction of numerous mosques and other Islamic institutions, prompting many Muslims to migrate to other parts of India and the Middle East. The arrival of Muslim scholars from Arabia during the 18th and 19th centuries CE can be marked as the resurgence of Islam in Kerala. These scholars played a crucial role in the revival, development and preservation of Islamic traditions in Kerala (Koya 1976).

Historical Phases of Islamic Conversion in Kerala

The growth of Islam in Kerala can be broadly categorised into three phases of religious conversion. The first phase consists of the *Mappila* Muslims, who have the lineage of the early Arab settlers. This phase also witnessed interactions with the Arabs, native Hindu population, and Buddhist groups, often resulting in interreligious matrimonial alliances. Dale (1980) observes that Islam and their faith gained fair acceptance in Kerala due to the behaviour of the Arab traders and their economic status quo.

The caste system of Hinduism triggered the second phase of the conversion of lower-caste Hindus to Islam. These communities who are oppressed by the caste system were impressed by the egalitarian views of Islam, resulting in the large-scale conversion in

the second phase. Local authorities welcomed their decision open-heartedly and supported the converts by giving them land and exempting them from taxes. The local support undoubtedly facilitated the growth of Muslim communities and mosques across Kerala (Dale 1980).

The third phase of Islamic growth in Kerala happened in the middle of troubles with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century CE. By the time the Portuguese reached the Malabar Coast, the Muslims of Kerala had acquired a unique syncretic tradition and their individuality was set. This period witnessed the *Mappila* Rebellion, a series of conflicts led by the Muslims of Kerala stemming from Portuguese attempts to establish a spice trade monopoly. Panikkar (1929) observed that the Muslims of Kerala, renowned as the *Mappilas*, were a unique syncretic culture established in Kerala during this phase. Their religious identity solidified in this phase, and their religious fervor increased. They left a lasting impact on Kerala's history.

In conclusion, Islam's history in Kerala is a remarkable phase of peaceful trade and socio-political progress, in contrast to military conquests in other parts of the country. The introduction of Islam to Kerala substantially contributed to the rich and diverse cultural development of Kerala. This enduring legacy has fostered the harmonious coexistence of diverse religions, shaped a multicultural social landscape and given rise to the unique *Mappila* culture (Osella 2011).

A Brief History of Early Islamic Settlements in Kollam

The historical town of Kollam, also known as Quilon, was crucial in introducing and growing Islam in Kerala. Kollam served as a thriving centre for the spice trade, drawing merchants from all over the world, including Arab merchants during the early days of Islam. The history of Malik Ibn Dinar, an early Islamic missionary, is entwined with the earliest indications of Islam in Kollam. Malik Ibn Dinar is then supposed to have constructed several mosques along the shore, one of which is said to be in Kollam (Miller 2016). Apart from the story of Malik Ibn Dinar, the evidence of early Islamic influence in Kollam is found in mosques, Muslim institutions, and Arabic in local inscriptions. The 9th-century CE construction regarded as the Old Juma Masjid in Kollam, also known as Thevalakkara *Palli*, is one such early mosque highlighting the long-standing Islamic tradition in the region (Miller 2016).

Trade and intermarriage played significant roles in the spread of Islam in Kollam, similar to the rest of Kerala. The Arab traders married local women, and their offspring, *Mappilas*, were raised in the Islamic faith. This cross-cultural interaction led to a distinct socio-cultural group with a unique identity, blending Islamic teachings with local customs and traditions (Osella 2011). The role of Kollam in the history of Islam in Kerala not only resides in its past but also its continuous contribution to the Muslim community in the region. It is home to various Islamic educational institutions, contributing significantly to Islamic scholarship in Kerala. In conclusion, the traces of Islam in Kollam encapsulate the peaceful and integrative nature of the religion's advent

in Kerala. The city's early mosques, vibrant Muslim community, and rich history of cross-cultural interaction showcase Islam's long and enduring journey in this part of the world.

The Fusion of Islamic Architecture with the Dravida-Kerala Style

In the early ages, mosques served as multifunctional spaces, housing activities such as prayer, gatherings, dialogues, and relaxation. Islamic architecture, which influences the design and construction of religious and other structures in Islamic countries, exhibits diverse styles. Arches are a principal feature in these architectural designs, from homes to mosques. These arches are often seen in the arcades enclosing courtyards.

The earliest arches in Islamic architecture were semi-circular and drew inspiration from Roman and Byzantine architecture. However, Muslims quickly innovated new arch types that served functional purposes and contributed to aesthetic beauty. Early Islamic structures borrowed elements from contemporary designs and patterns, enhancing and modifying them. These innovations found their way into global architecture, influencing both Islamic and non-Islamic structures. This influence had a lasting impact on European architecture for centuries (Rahman 2015).

The Indian influence on Islamic architecture is prominently demonstrated in the early mosques in the country. Notably, symbolically rich Hindu architectural elements, such as the *kalasa* pinnacle, were incorporated into medieval mosques during the Tughlaq period. This integration is a remarkable example of these two traditions' cultural and architectural exchange (Grover 1996).

In contrast to the prevalent domes and minarets in North India and Middle Eastern Mosques, the Islamic architecture in Kerala features a distinctive architectural style. The geography and climate of the Kerala region played a vital role in the development of the 'Kerala-Islamic' architectural style. The Hindu architecture in Kerala is influenced by the two monsoon seasons that occur in a year. Due to the heavy rainfall in Kerala, the standard Dravida style of architecture of South India cannot be applied. As a result, the Architects of early Kerala developed a new style, the Dravida-Kerala style, characterised by sloping roofs. Similarly, the Islamic architecture in Kerala also adopted sloping roofs instead of the heavy domes and tall minarets in building mosques. This architectural style can be referred to as 'Islamic-Dravida Kerala' architecture. The characteristic features of the 'Islamic-Dravida Kerala' architecture were sloping roofs covered with terracotta roof tiles or copper sheets. Speaking of the plan, these mosques' prayer hall, called '*palliyara*,' maintains a minimalist design following Islamic principles, devoid of intricate carvings or decorations. Sometimes, the traditional '*nera*' or pulpit is replaced by a wooden '*mimbar*,' showcasing the integration of local carpentry skills with Islamic traditions (Kunhali 1986).

Furthermore, the '*makha*,' characterised by square windows decorated with wooden carvings, displays the harmonious blend of local craftsmanship with Islamic architecture. The '*makha*' enhances the visual appeal and serves a practical purpose by

facilitating air circulation in Kerala's tropical climate (Miller 2016). The mosques in Kollam, as well as those across the state, stand as tangible symbols of the region's rich cultural history, embodying an architectural fusion that harmoniously combines Islamic principles with indigenous architectural styles, resulting in a unique and enduring form of Indo-Islamic architecture in Kerala (Table 1).

Puthanpalli in Paravur, Kollam District, Kerala

Paravur Puthanpalli, a c. 750-year-old mosque in Paravur Thekkumbhagam, a coastal town in Southern Kerala, is nestled in the southern part of Kollam district near Thiruvananthapuram district. It is around 10 kilometres south of Thankassery Lighthouse, 10 kilometres north of Varkala Cliff, and west of Lake Idava Nadayara, at Latitude 8° 48.0' N and Longitude 76° 42.0' E. This mosque uniquely blends Islamic and traditional Kerala architectural styles, constructed primarily with teak wood (Figures 1 and 7).

Table 1: Major mediaeval mosques of Kerala and their unique features

Major mediaeval mosques in Kerala	Significant features of the early mosques
1. Cheraman Juma Masjid, Paravur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatched roofs to address the climate of Kerala. • Use of wood in construction. Carvings are abiding Islamic tradition of aniconism. • Striking similarities with the traditional temple architecture plan of Kerala. • Ponds were used for ablution. The <i>pushkarni</i>- style pond at Ichalanged Mosque, Kasaragod, is an example. • Use of stylised stone pillars for construction. • Absence of north Indian Islamic architectural elements like open courtyards, <i>Minarets</i> and domes.
2. Malik Dinar mosque, Thalangara	
3. Odathil palli, Thalasseri, Kannur	
4. Kuttichira mosque, Kozhikode	
5. Pazhayangadi mosque, Kondotty	
6. Mamburam Mosque, Thirurangadi	
7. Ponnani Juma masjid	
8. Khizar Juma Masjid, Kasaragod	
9. Ichalanged Mosque, Kasaragod	
10. Kakkulangara mosque, Valapattanam	
11. Korome mosque, Wayanad	
12. Moideen Palli Juma masjid, Kannur	
13. Odathil Palli, Thalassery	
14. Kunjali Marakkar Mosque, Vadakara	
15. Mishkal Palli, Kozhikode	

Historical records from the *Thulaams* of *Akappali* of the mosque reveal that it was built in *Hijira* 683 (1283 or 1284 CE) under the guidance of the Paravur Puthanveedu family, who were influential feudal elites engaged in the shipping trade. Recognising their commercial significance in the region, Travancore Royal Heredity conferred them with the position of *Naduvazhi*. The members of the Puthanveedu family had control over the coastal belt of the Muslim occupation area in Thiruvananthapuram to the *Jonaka* clan (Muslims) regions in Mayyanadu, Kollam district (Niyas Pers. Comm.). The mosque managed six *Jama-At-Mahals*, i.e., Paravur Thekkumbhagam, Paravur Vadakkumbhagam, Pozhikkara, Nellettil, Kalakkode, and Mayyanadu. In 1950, the management was handed over to the *Mahallu-Jama-At*. Before this, religious scholars of Puthenveedu House oversaw the mosque. The adjacent graveyard served as the final

resting place for the *Jama-Ath* members, and a nearby lake, Karikayal, was created to facilitate schooners' access to the shore. Remarkably, the granite lamps used to illuminate the mosque until the installation of electricity in 1975 are still preserved. Paravur Puthanpalli holds cultural significance for Kollam's Muslim community, serving as a hub for communal activities, religious celebrations, and Islamic festivals. In conclusion, Paravur Puthanpalli in Kollam symbolises the enduring history of Arab traders in Kerala and the deep-rooted Islamic traditions. It is a pillar of the region's harmonious coexistence and mutual respect among different religions and cultures.

The architecture of the Paravur Mosque is characterised by two main enclosures: the *Akappalli*, which is the inner enclosure, and the *Purampalli*, or outer enclosure (Figures 2 and 3). The roof of the mosque is made of thatched tiles as visualised in the elevation plan below (Figure 4).



Figure 1: Architecture of Puthanpalli in Paravur

The *Akappalli*: The *akappalli* serves as the central area for offering prayers within the mosque. It is a rectangular room on two floors (Figure 4).

The Lower Floor

This floor of the *akappalli* measures 7x4 meters in circumference and has nine doors, all of which open to the second enclosure, known as the *purampalli*. Among these doors, three are in the eastern entrance wall, while the other walls each have two doors. Key architectural elements on the lower floor include the *mimbar* and *mihrab* (Figure 5).

***Mimbar*:** The *mimbar* is a pulpit or raised platform designed like a staircase where the imam delivers his Friday sermon. It is a simple stone structure in the mosque (Figure 2 and Figure 5).

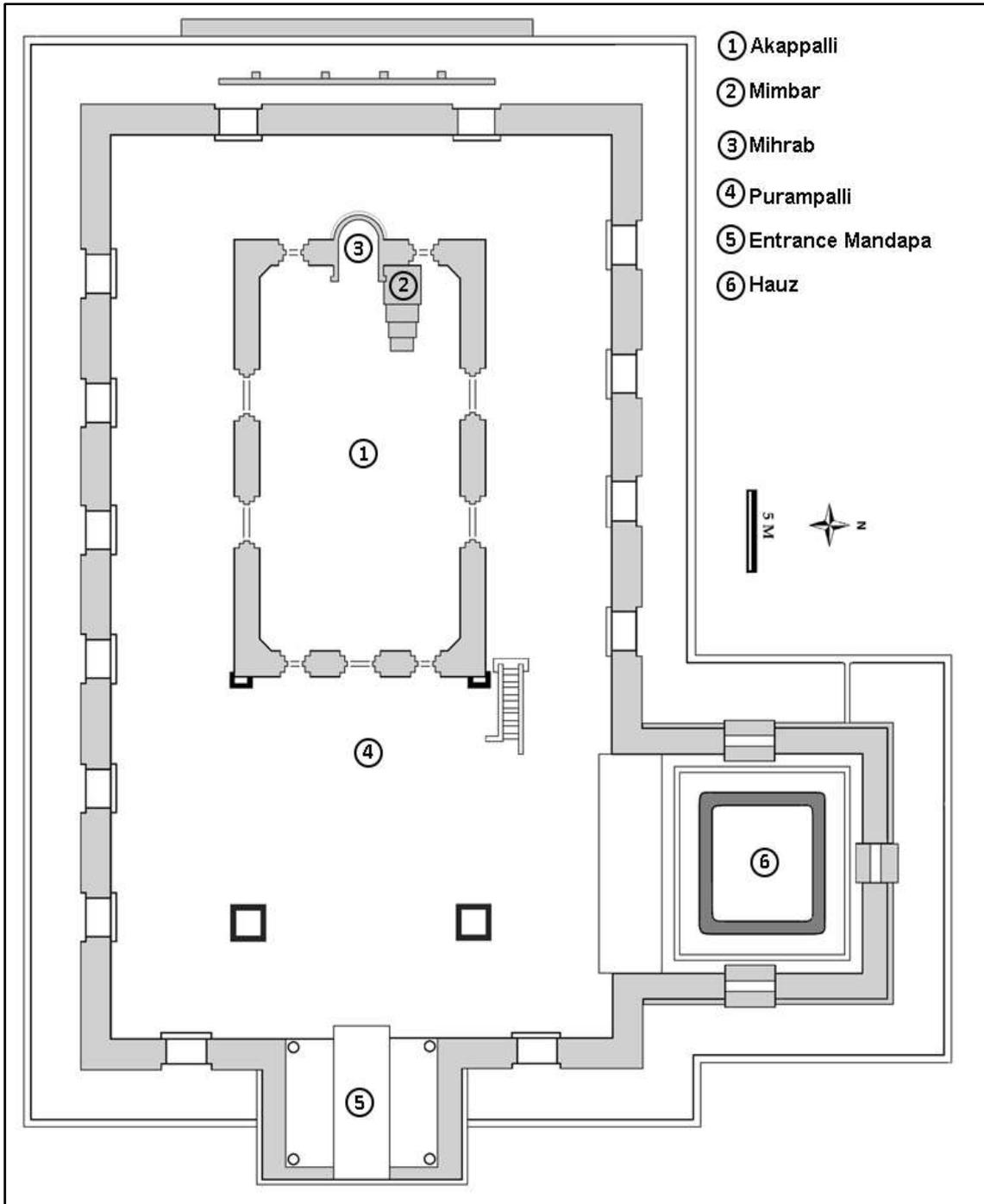


Figure 2: Ground Plan of Puthanpalli in Paravur

Mihrab: The *mihrab* is a niche in the *qibla* wall that indicates the direction of the holy Mecca. Conventional Islamic architecture is adorned with intricate calligraphic ornamentation and artwork. However, at the Paravur mosque, the *mihrab* is a plain and functional structure without artistic embellishments (Figures 2 and 5).

In summary, the lower floor of the *akappalli* is constructed in line with typical Islamic architectural principles.

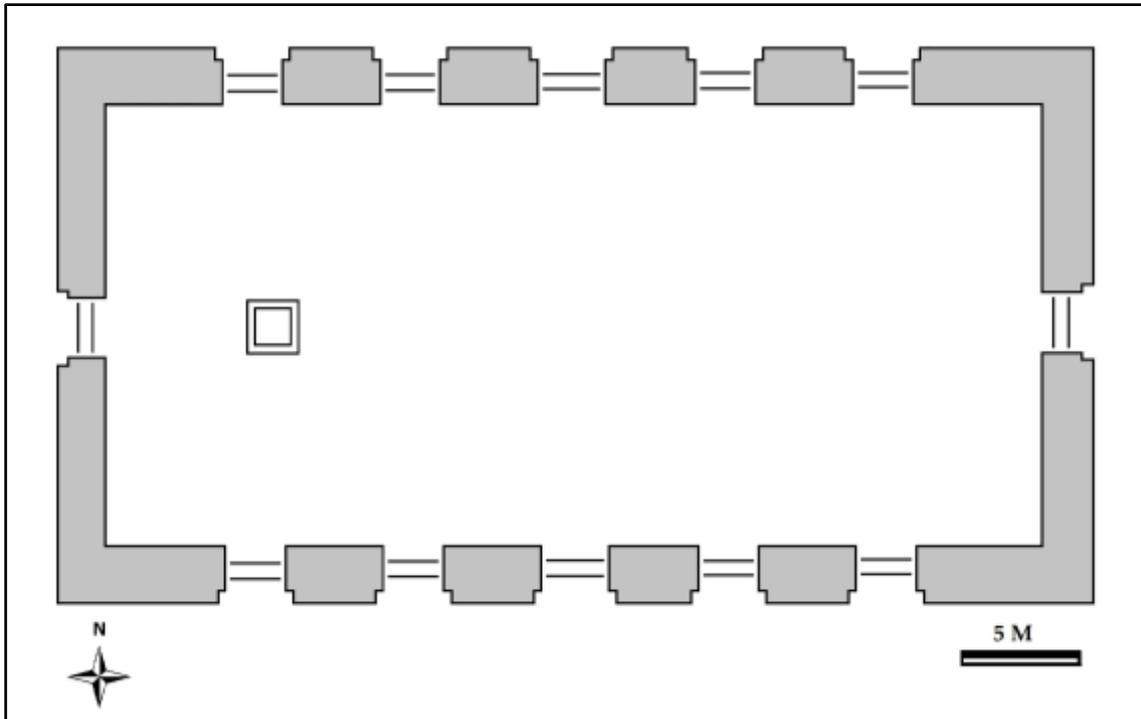


Figure 3: Upper Floor of the *akappali* of Puthanpalli in Paravur

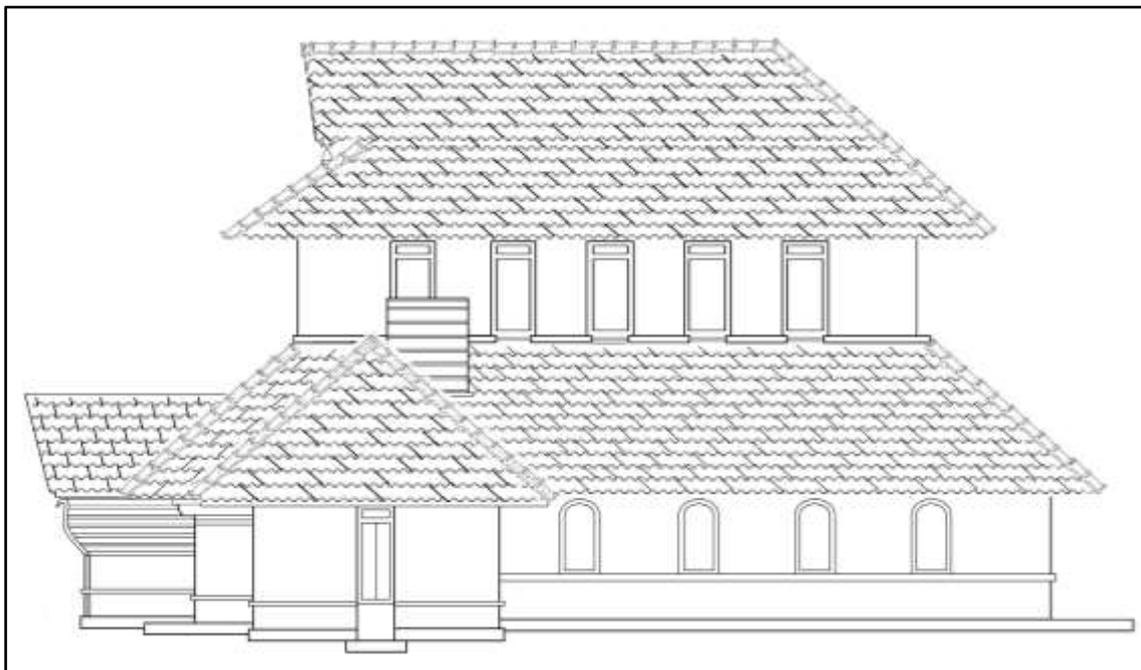


Figure 4: Elevation Plan of Puthanpalli in Paravur

The Upper Floor

The upper floor has dimensions almost identical to the lower floor. This floor serves as the prominent part of the mosque, and it is here that the call to prayer (*adhan*) is made. Before the construction of other concrete mosques in the area, this mosque was the place from which the call to prayer for Paravur was initiated. This hall on the upper

floor features twelve windows: five on each of the south and north walls and one on each east and west. These windows play a crucial role in allowing air circulation within the room and in carrying the sound of prayers to the outside world. The architectural design of this structure is a result of the fusion of Islamic and Dravida-Kerala architectural influences (Figure 3).



Figure 5: View of *akampalli* with *mihrab* and *minbar*

Purampalli: The *purampalli* can be described as an enclosure or covering for the *akappalli*, essentially placing the *akappalli* within it. This rectangular structure measures 14 x 8 meters and is comprised of several key components.

The Courtyard: Positioned in front of the *akappalli* entrance, this courtyard resembles the *valiyambalam* found in Dravida-Kerala temples. Two intricately carved wooden pillars at the centre of this courtyard reflect indigenous craftsmanship (Figure 2 and Figure 4).

The Narrow Passage: Encircling the south, west, and north sides of the *akappalli*, the *purampalli* features a narrow passage connecting to the courtyard in the east. This layout is like the *sandhara padakshinapada* or circumambulatory path in Dravida-Kerala temples. The northern passage within the *purampalli* contains a wooden stairway connecting the lower and upper floors of the *akappalli* (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Right corridor and stair to the upper tier Figure 7: Side profile of the mosque

Hauz, Water Tank: In the northeast corner of the *purampalli*, there is an extension in a square shape to house the *hauz* or water tank. The structure enclosing the *hauz* measures 4 x 4 meters and provides three doorways in the north, east, and west for access to the *purampalli* (Figure 2).

The Entrance Mandapa: Adjacent to the superstructure of the *hauz*, another extension can be found in the entrance area of the *purampalli*. This rectangular structure measures 4 x 3 meters and features a wooden finish, wooden grilles, and gable designs like the *balikkal mandapas* in Kerala-style temples (Figure 3).

The *purampalli* boasts 14 windows: six in the south, four in the north, and two on each of the east and west walls. The primary entrance to the mosque is situated on the east wall of the *purampalli* (Figure 2 and Figure 8).

Regarding the mosque's elevation, the superstructure walls are constructed with *surkhi*, and the roofs for both the lower and upper floors are covered with terracotta tiles. Notably, the mosque's beams and pillars are a striking feature. A beam is at the top of each of the four teak wood pillars, measuring two square feet wide. These beams are two feet in both height and width. Attached to these beams are heavy wooden grills, and a roof extends to both floors, supported by rafters (Figure 2 and Figure 10). These rafters, each one foot wide, are fashioned after the masts of Kerala snake boats. The mosque finds support from four wooden pillars, each crafted from a sturdy single log and affixed to rectangular granite slabs (Figure 11).



Figure 8: Woodworked front entrance

Legend has it that *Gajaveera's* feet hollowed out the granite rock, and these large logs were raised with the assistance of elephants to fix the roof. Additionally, on the second floor's roof of the mosque, a beautiful gable is intricately carved with miniature pillars and grilles, reminiscent of Kerala-style wooden art (Figure 9). The light source inside the mosque was stone lamps light (Figure 12).



Figure 9: Nasika with intriguing carvings



Figure 10: Wooden pillar in *purampalli*



Figure 11: View of *purampalli* and corridor

Discussion and Conclusion

The history of Muslims in Kerala is deeply rooted in trade relations and harmonious cooperation between the rulers and the indigenous population of Kerala. The Paravur mosque, which dates to c. 750 years, is a standing-tall example of Kerala's Islamic

cultural and architectural legacy, which has been neglected from an archaeological perspective. The evolution of the 'Islamic-Dravida Kerala' architectural style convincingly illustrates cultural assimilation that Muslims adapted from the native customs and environment. The early mosques in Kerala hold a unique architectural legacy that differs from the northern Indian Islamic architecture. How the Dravidian temple architectural rationale was adopted for the construction of early mosques in the region is a noteworthy feature that needs to be studied in further length. The Paravur Juma Masjid has striking architectural similarities in its conception and execution, as discussed above. The basic layout plan of the mosque bears classic features of the mediaeval temple architecture essentials like entrance *mandapa*, distinctions like *purampalli* and *akampalli*, interior design and functional elements like wooden pillars and carvings. The aesthetic design elements inside the mosque, such as floral designs and symbols, were the bare minimum, and they closely followed the Islamic ideology of motif decoration. The twenty-seven windows provided adequate air circulation inside the mosque, a common feature in early Kerala mosques. The same pattern of window design is observed in contemporary mosques like Kuttichira mosque, Kozhikkode, Odathil palli in Kannur and Mamburam mosque in Thirurangadi.



Figure 12: Stone lamp used in the mosque

Unlike the designs of contemporary mediaeval mosques in the Indian subcontinent, which have a large dome, *minarets* and open courtyard, the Kerala Muslim architecture is grounded in adapting to the regional climatic conditions and architectural legacy of native culture. Apart from these architectural features, this mosque carries a history of at least a thousand years of cultural legacy of Muslims inhabiting the shores of present-day Kollam district and Thiruvananthapuram. A long list of travelogues, exemplary archaeological evidence for trade contacts and settlement history forerun the legacy of

Paravur Juma Masjid. This research paper elucidated the archaeological heritage of Paravur Juma Masjid, its unexplored significance with traditional architectural elements of Kerala and its underlying cultural significance.

References

- Babu, F. 2021. Early Arab trade with India: With Special Reference to Kerala. *International Journal of History* 3 (2), pp. 1–4.
- Dales, S. F. 1980. *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar*. Clarendon Press. London.
- Grover, S. 1996. *Islamic Architecture in India*. Align Publication. New Delhi.
- Koya, S. M. 1976. Muslims of the Malabar Coast as Descendants of the Arabs. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 37: 195–200.
- Kugle, S. 2006. Islamic Communities in South Asia. M. Juergensmeyers (Ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religion*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.
- Kunhali, V. 1986. *Muslim communities in Kerala to 1798*. Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation. Aligarh Muslim University. Aligarh.
- Miller, R. E. 2016. *Mappila Muslim Culture: How a historic Muslim Community in India has Blended Tradition and Modernity*. State University of New York Press. Albany.
- Mohammed, T. 2013. *Mappila Samudhayam: Charithram Samskaram*. Islamic Publishing House. Kozhikode.
- Nainar, S. M. H. 2005. *Tuhfatul Mujahideen: A Historical Epic of Sixteenth Century*. Other Books. Calicut.
- Niyas, P. S. 2023. *Personal Communication*.
- Osella, F. and C. Osella. 2013. Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India. *Islamic Reform in South Asia*. pp. 139-170. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Panikkar, K. M. 1929. *Malabar and the Portuguese: Being a History of the Relations of the Portuguese with Malabar from 1500 to 1663*. D. B. Taraporevala Sons and Co. Bombay.
- Saidalavi, P. C. 2017. Muslim Social Organisation and Cultural Islamisation in Malabar. *South Asia Research* 37(1): 19-36.
- Zarilli, P. 2000. *Kathakali Dance-Drama Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*. Routledge. London.