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# Fortifications Through Time: Exploring Kerala's Defensive Heritage

Remya S. K.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of History, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala – 695 581, India (Email: remyasuni86@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Fortifications have long been central to the survival and authority of societies worldwide, serving as defensive strongholds and cultural landmarks. In Kerala, the enduring forts built by native rulers and European colonizers alike bear witness to centuries of trade, conflict, and cultural exchange. This paper explores the defensive heritage of Kerala, analyzing the architectural diversity, strategic purpose, and cultural significance of these historic structures. Beginning with indigenous methods of fortification, the study delves into how colonial powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and British introduced new fort-building techniques that blended European styles with local materials and craftsmanship. These forts not only protected coastal towns but also became economic hubs and points of cultural synthesis, shaping Kerala's regional identity. Today, these architectural relics captivate tourists and historians as symbols of Kerala's resilience and multifaceted legacy. This paper highlights Kerala's forts as tangible links to its complex history, embodying a heritage of strength, adaptability, and intercultural dialogue.

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**Keywords:** Fortifications, Bastions, Kerala, Colonial Heritage, Architectural Styles, Cultural Exchange, Defensive Structures

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## Introduction

The idea of building forts for protection dates back to the prehistoric era. The man led a rough lifestyle and was a vagabond. After the man settled down, he transitioned from being a nomadic lifestyle to gathering food. Then, man started producing food, he encountered numerous obstacles in his life, and he made an effort to find solutions for them all. Man started to think of himself and his possessions as his own material belongings when he started to accumulate some excess material. This was a turning point in his thinking. The idea of self-protection led to the development of defence systems by humans. Self-protection eventually led to the building of fences and subsequently fortresses. Later man then faces dangers from other human groups, animals, and fellow humans. This prompted man to construct more fortifications.

Evidence shows that forts were built in India as early as the pre-Harappan era (Unnikrishnan 2019: XVIII). There are several signs of evidence pertaining to the stone

defensive walls from various locations. Fortified sites such as Kotdiji, Kalibangan provided evidence of their existence. (Bihari 2017: 2-3) The development of defensive walls accelerated throughout the Harappan era due to numerous external threats and acts of hostility. In order to stave off any attacks, Mohenjodaro and Harappa erected two towering citadels. Archaeological investigations amply demonstrated the luxuries of life and defence that these citadels offered.

The proto historic site of Dholavira is one among the five largest cities of the Indus valley civilisation (Bihari 2017:6). Dholavira was designed like a parallelogram outlined by a strong fortification made of mud bricks (Jalajkumar 2018:48). The town planning of Dholavira did not conform to the standard Harappan plan of citadel and lower town. The citadel consists of two fortified divisions on the east and west called castle and bailey respectively. For the construction of the fortifications and other structures, the Harappans at Dholavira used the locally available material.

The Vedas are where forts were first mentioned in literature. Agni and Indra are described in the Rigveda as the destroyers of forts. (D.D. Kosambi 1997: 78) Several hymns represented them as demonstrating their might by demolishing the *dasyus* or *dasas* (asuras) forts. (Singh 1993: 65) The chief Aryan God Indra is portrayed in later Vedic literature as Purandara, or the fort breaker and is said to have shattered ninety forts for his protégé Divodasa. (Jha 1977: 45) Apart from the enigmatic allusions to forts, Vedic literature offers significant insights into the forts of that age. The cities and towns of the Vedic era were encircled by fortified fortifications, according to the Rigveda.

The findings of archaeological digs provided adequate support for these literary artifacts from the Vedic era. Fortification traces are revealed by the excavations carried out at several historic sites, such as Rajgriha, Kausambi, (Umeshkumar 2011: 126) Vaisali, and Ujjain (Unnikrishnan 2019: XVIII). The type of citadels that predominated there is represented by the remnants of strong walls made of mud with sloping sills, rammed with burned bricks, strengthened by bastions and towers, square in shape, etc.

In addition to Vedic literature, the two great epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, include extensive allusions to modern forts and fortifications. The epics use phrases like "Vapra" and "chataja," which translate to "rampart of mud," to refer to the forts. The epics make frequent mention of both words. The city of Indraprastha is described as being fortified by multiple gateways, high walls, and a broad moat by the *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharata*. In relation to forts, the Ramayana city of Ayodhya, which implies impregnable or unassailable was also mentioned. The city was said to be completely encircled by a thick, impenetrable moat that was defended by enormous entrances and turrets.

Following the drafting of the political treaties, the leaders of the Indian states became increasingly knowledgeable about forts. The *Sapthanga* theory proposed by Kautilya in

his *Arthashastra* clarified a state's seven fundamental components. They are *janapathas* or land, *durga* or forts, *kosa* or treasury, *danda* or army, *mitra* or allies, *amathyas* or ministers, and king or sovereign. Details regarding forts are also provided by political treaties, *smritis*, and law books. The rulers of India at the time were greatly influenced by these works. They started building forts after getting ideas from these works. Many forts were constructed under the Mahajanapadas' rule. The most significant ones are Kausambi, Ujjain, Varanasi, and Pataliputra. (Sen 1999: 104) The raft of fort construction took on new dimensions during the rise of ancient empires such as the Maurya's. Threats to the empires came from both inside and outside the nation. Kings such as Asoka, Bindusara, and Chandra Gupta Maurya erected sophisticated forts to secure the nation. In his *Indica*, Megasthenese paints a vivid picture of the forts that were built at Pataliputra. In his *Arthasasthra*, Kautilya also mentions detailed descriptions of the forts (Ratanlal Mishra 2008: 2).

One of the first Indian writings that emphasizes the value of the army and forts in state defences may be *Arthashastra*. Kautilya divided forts into four categories based on their geographical locations: water forts (*Audaka*), hill forts (*Parvata*), desert forts (*Dhanava*), and forest forts (*Vana*). (Vinaykumar 2018: 2) The building of the fort's moat, rampart parapet, bastion, gates, and other structures is outlined in detail in *Arthashastra*, along with the rules and regulations that must be adhered to. Aside from Kautilya's *Arthasasthra*, other books that address the variety, function, and significance of forts in politics include *Puranas*, *Dharma sastras*, *Manu Smriti*, *Manasara*, and others (Vinaykumar 2018: 2).

Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, and Yeu-chis were among the foreigners who arrived in India and constructed forts for defensive purposes. The Gupta emperors made significant contributions to the building of forts as well. Puranic literature, such as the *Agnipurana* and *Matsyapurana*, mentions the Gupta emperors' building of forts.

In the Middle Ages, kings made significant contributions to the building of fortifications. Numerous forts were built by dynasties like the Rajputs, Chauhans, and Gurjara Pratiharas. These forts are still standing as magnificent reminders of the past. Numerous forts were either rebuilt or modified in Gulberga, Dulatabad, Gawilgarh, Narnala, Parenda, Raichur, etc., to meet the defence requirements. (Chopra 1979:221) Fort building reached its pinnacle with the arrival of Muslims such as the Turks, sultanate emperors, and the Mughals. Kings like Shajahan and Akbar contributed significantly to the building of the fort. The forts of Allahabad, Lahore, and Agra (Bhalla 2020: 74) provided proof of these kings' contributions. Shajahan's Redfort continued to be his greatest contribution and endured.

### **Fortification in South India: Kerala's Defensive Heritage**

Unlike its northern counterpart, South India was less active in the field of fort construction. However, the Tamil Nadu and Andhra kingdoms (Meesala 2019: 2) built a few forts that functioned as the hub of their offensive and defensive activities. The

South has such literature, same as the northern smritis and political treaties. Thiruvalluvar has developed a few theories about state governance in *Thirukural*. He believed that a perfect fort was a pre-requisite for the state. Sangam literature has the oldest known mention of forts and military tactics. According to a passage in *Tolkappiyam*, the tribal leaders defended locations, cities, and villages against intruders and robbers. (Iyyengar 1925: 79) It is said that the towns of Kaveripatanam, Karur, and Madurai were well fortified. (Ajithkumar 2017: 23) In locations like Ezhimalai Kollimalai, Kutiramale Potiyilmmalai, etc., there are also references to the existence of hill forts encircled by agricultural communities and zones. (Narayan 1977:9) According to Sangam literature, regular forests of trees with a moat separating them encircled walled cities.

Several southern kingdoms, including the Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas, Satavahanas, Yadavas, Kakathias, Hoysalas, and others, built artificial walls or fortifications to defend their capital cities and other significant locations at different points in history. The forts at Madurai, Uraiyr, and Vanchi were the most significant instances of them. Their most significant chieftains built their own forts in their spheres of control in addition to the South's rulers. These forts were made to be strong and durable and typically built during times of peace. They garrisoned their capital cities with well-trained soldiers once they had fortified them.

The main political centres of medieval Kerala were fortified: Vizhinjam, the capital of the Ays, Kollam, the capital of the Venad kings, and Mahodayapuram, the city of Kulasekhara. (Menon 1967: 126) For their own political purposes, the ruling class erected forts. In Kerala, foreign settlers as well as native chieftains-built forts as a means of commerce. Thus, Indians generally built forts using an entirely indigenous method up to the Middle Ages. It was only with the advent of the Turks and Mughals that the areas of fort construction began to become dominated by foreign forces. However, the art of fort building underwent a transformation with the arrival of the Europeans. They employed artillery as a potent weapon and created the prevalent European style. This significantly strengthened the fortifications. The most notable examples of this flamboyant architecture are the Portuguese fort at Goa and the English forts at Madras and Calcutta.

Kerala had rarely felt the need to establish artificial safeguards because it was a region protected by nature. However, the looming foreign attacks and internal strife among the kings of Kerala compelled them to build their own strongholds. The ancient literature frequently mentions Kerala's association with forts. It has been noted that Kerala established connections with the forts throughout the Perumal Period. (Logan 1887: 262) It is thought that the third Perumals from Pandya country constructed Kerala's first fort. Many of his successors, including Mata Perumal, Eli Perumal, Vijayan Perumal, Vallaban Perumal, Harischandra Perumal, etc., followed his lead. These forts are all classified as "redoubts" by historians since they are made of mud. Therefore, these forts served as the ancient monarchs' bastion for both offensive and

defensive purposes. After the ancient empire of Kerala fell apart, the entire region was split up into several states, including Canannore, Calicut, Quilon, Venad, etc. These divisions' rulers all built their own forts. Along with this, they strengthened the walls and defence systems of their palaces.

Kerala's fortresses display a distinctive architectural design that combines elements of foreign influences and native methods from the many empires that have influenced the area over the years. Kerala, an Indian state on the southwest coast, has a long history of cultural and commercial exchange that dates back centuries. This has had a big impact on the development of Kerala's architecture, especially in the area of fortifications. They built sturdy, medium-sized European forts in the European pattern, with far superior technology and resources. At this light, it is especially important to remember that Fort Manuel at Cochin (Dias 2013: 70) was the first European fort ever constructed in India, situated in Kerala. (Innes 1908: 430) As a result, Kerala's fort architecture changed in style. This new style was also adopted by the local rulers. Fortifications became more robust and well-built, and they spread across the entire nation.

Upon examining the forts collectively, it is discovered that their shapes differ. For instance, Vattakotta, Palakkad Fort, Saint Anjelo, and Pallipuram Fort are circular, rectangular, triangular, and hexagonal forts that were constructed in Kerala. (George 2021: 7415) Water forts, known in Malayalam as *Kutti-kotta*, were constructed in addition to these land forts. The main forts in Kerala can be divided into three categories for practical reasons: those that are still standing, those that continue to stand despite being destroyed or abandoned, and those that are only recognized by the names of the locations in which they are situated. The aforementioned characteristics are exemplified by Tipu's Fort in Palakkad, the Cranganore Fort, and the Cochin Fort in the following sequence. Here are some key features and characteristics of the architectural style used in fortifications in Kerala:

**Components and Building Methods:** Rich laterite stone was one of the main local materials used to construct Kerala's defences. Due of its strength and resistance to weathering, laterite was used for both the structural walls and the decorative elements. Wood, stone, and lime mortar were also commonly utilized. The earliest forts in Kerala seem to have been constructed from wood and mud, and this construction method persisted long when the Portuguese arrived. It is known that lateritic stone was used to modify the Portuguese forts at Kannur and Cochin after they were first constructed out of wood, including coconut (Ajit Kumar 2017: 29). Mud was the next most common material used to build fort ramparts. Prior to being built of stone, the Travancore dynasty's forts at Padmanabhapuram, Udayagiri, and Trivandrum were all made of mud (Ajit Kumar 2017: 30).

**Defensive Structures:** High walls with strategically positioned bastions characterize Kerala's fortifications. Both indigenous and European forts shared bastions. To fortify the rampart walls, bastions were placed at regular intervals. Strong defence against outside dangers was the goal of the design, which included reinforced gates, walls, and

moats where practical. Usually protruding from the rampart walls, the bastions are taller than them. This makes it easier to blanket the terrain and wall segments between bastions with missiles. There are typically more bastions in the forts built by local chieftains, such as Bakel, Hosaurg, Palaghat, etc. There are fewer bastions at the European forts in Kerala, such as Thalassery, Kannur, and Anjengo.

**Gateways and Entrances:** Forts erected by native chieftains, such as Bekal, Chandragiri, and Palaghat, have two entrances, whereas European-built forts, such as Kannur, Thalassery, and Anjengo, have just one. Kerala's fort entrances, or gates, are frequently ornate and reinforced with sturdy metal or timber doors. Depending on when they were built or altered, these gateways typically include a mix of Portuguese, Dutch, or British architectural elements combined with indigenous Kerala styles.

**Roofing and Decorative Elements:** Kerala's architecture is known for its sloping roofs covered in red-coloured tiles. The roof structures inside the forts likewise follow this style, giving the fortifications a uniform appearance and aesthetic coherence. Kerala's architecture is renowned for its finely detailed sculptures and wood carvings. These ornamental features are frequently found in fortifications in the form of relief work that adorns walls, ceilings, and pillars and represents regional themes, mythological characters, and cultural icons.

Kerala's forts frequently coexist peacefully with the surrounding terrain, in contrast to many European fortifications that are distinctly visible. They are made with an awareness of the local climate and natural surroundings in mind, while still being aesthetically pleasing. All of these forts came to symbolize inventive architecture and intercultural exchange in Kerala in addition to their protective purposes. In short, the architectural style of Kerala's fortifications is a testament to the region's extensive history of trade, cross-cultural interaction, and defensive strategies. It combines indigenous craftsmanship with inspirations from many foreign powers to construct buildings that are not only functional but also aesthetically pleasing and historically significant.

Native and European-built forts are the two types of forts found in Kerala. Forts were constructed by significant native ruling dynasties, such as the Ays, the Nayaks of Bednur, the Travancore kings, the Cochin rulers, and the Mysore rulers. In the Kasarcode district, the Bednur Nayaks constructed the greatest number of forts. Of all the Nayak forts, Bakel was the biggest. It appears that the forts constructed by the Zamorine at Calicut, the Cochin rulers at Tripunithura, and the Travancore kings were all centred around temples. Although the Portuguese were the first European powers to visit Kerala, they first built their forts at Cochin and Kannur using the indigenous timber construction technology. Later, they built forts using lime mortar and laterite stone. The bastions of European forts were confined to two or four sides. On their walls or bastions, several European forts have light masts or light houses erected to hoist indicators to ships cruising the coast. One feature of Portuguese forts was the castle stay, or an observation tower.

## Conclusion

The forts of Kerala serve as enduring symbols of the region's intricate history of defense, trade, and cultural fusion. These fortifications, initially inspired by indigenous defensive strategies and later influenced by successive waves of European colonization, reflect a unique architectural blend of local and foreign techniques. The forts not only protected Kerala's coastal towns from military threats but also became focal points of economic activity and cultural interaction, influencing the development of regional identity. Each structure, from the sprawling Bekal Fort to the fortified palaces of Travancore, embodies a distinct period in Kerala's past, illustrating the adaptability and resilience of local builders in the face of changing political landscapes and technological advancements.

Today, Kerala's forts stand as valuable archaeological sites and cultural landmarks, attracting the interest of tourists, historians, and scholars alike. They offer insights into the evolution of defensive architecture, highlighting the technical ingenuity and aesthetic sensibilities of their creators. The synthesis of indigenous methods with Portuguese, Dutch, and British fort-building techniques reveals a legacy of intercultural exchange, where each style left an indelible mark on Kerala's landscape. As tangible connections to a complex history, these forts remind us of Kerala's role as a nexus of trade, influence, and cultural convergence in the Indian Ocean world. Preserving and studying these structures is crucial not only for understanding Kerala's heritage but also for appreciating the broader historical narratives of resilience, adaptation, and cultural synthesis that they represent.

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