

The Krishna Mandir _ An investigation of its style

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Introduction:

The Krishna Mandir is located in the Patan Durbar and occupies a decisive position in defining the impression of the palace environment itself. Its own heritage value has contributed in no less measure in the UNESCO declaration of the Patan Palace Square as a World Heritage Site. Built in stone and in an unusual 'Shikhara' style, the temple is so strikingly different from the rest of the elements in the square that this has become a landmark by itself. Yet it is not discordant and blends very well with the rest of the tiered temples and the palace proper done in the traditional Malla style.

History:

Built by King Siddhinarasimha Malla, Krishna Mandir holds a special place among the 'Shikhara' style temples of Kathmandu valley and is a classical addition to the development of religious architecture of the valley. Fully done in stone, this beautiful temple, although inspired more by Indian traditions rather than local traditions, carries an overall impression, that is distinctly Nepali, a result of local touch in the details and carvings. Completed in six and a half years of constant work by a battery of skilled craftsmen, the Krishna Mandir was inaugurated in 1637 AD amid a great religious fanfare of a sacrificial 'yagna' in the Vedic tradition. So much of royal treasury was expended and given in gratitude to priests at that time that it led to the local legend that pearls rained in the 'yagnya kunda', the sacrificial square platform. One may see this platform even today, as a stone paved area with protective railing, a little to the east of the temple along its central axis. In between a grand Garuda, the mythical carrier of lord Vishnu, has been placed atop a stone pillar. The artistic excellence of sheet metal work of the figure of this Garuda matches that of the temple.

Sources of the style:

In architectural terms, although the style of the temple may be loosely classified as a 'Shikhara', the form of the temple itself is a curious blend of Shikhara, Dravida and Mughal styles and influences. Said to have been based on a prototype from Mathura, which is no longer existing, the Mughal influence is seen in the design and placement of cupolas in the various terrace levels. This is understandable as about

this time, the great building adventures of Akbar at Fatehpur-Sikri were being praised over the subcontinent and cupolas as a feature of terrace delineation were making their mark.

Krishna Mandir is a multiple shrined temple. In the tradition of the Hoysalas in Deccan, temples with multiple garbhagrihas in one sanctum level is common. Built between eleventh to thirteenth century, they form a group by themselves. Earlier in South India, terraced temples with multiple shrines with garbhagrihas disposed in different vertical levels are observed. Although rare, these temples, normally devoted to Vishnu, are however, not outside of traditional dictates. In such temples, to quote from a traditional text,

“Like a hollow cane of bamboo (venurandhravat) are the cells placed one above the other in the vertical axis of the Prasada” - Vaikhanasagama, vi.

One such temple, the Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Kanchipuram near Madras, built in eighth century, has four sanctums at each of its three terrace levels and the ground floor. Still earlier, one can see two stage double sanctum temples at Badami in Deccan and Nachna Kuthera, in West Bengal. But for the period of Krishna Mandir, it is only one of its kind and possibly reflects King Siddhinarasimha Malla's need to have a double sanctum temple for as an abode for both Krishna and Siva. His devotion for Siva and Krishna is quite obvious from Sundari Chowk, his palace court. Terraced like the Vaikuntha Perumal temple, this temple seems to borrow the concept of multiple shrines from there and may be a result of the dominance of priests from that part in his court. However, unlike this possible source, the ground floor of Krishna Mandir is a solid, a 'ghana-garbhagriha', with an 'andhakarika' around.

The discussions under location and sizing context below will make it clear that the temple is proportioned to 'perfection' according to traditional Vastusashtra rules.

The temple:

The square temple rises in three storeys over a three-stage plinth and soars to a height of 19.67 meters or about 66 feet. A short flight of steps leads one onto the ground floor. A pair of lions in the entry level and a pair of Garudas with lionine body at a higher level guard the entrance. The lowest floor is a blind storey and has a set of five blind doorways on all sides, two of which, at the centre on the east and the north, are open. The temple is a solid core in this level but has an 'andhakarika', a seven bayed collanaded circumambulatory on each side on the exterior. The provision of blind doorways or 'ghanadwars' seem to signify the construction of the ground floor as a secret or 'gupta' sanctum or crypt.

It is known below the open sanctum, Hindu temples built or assumed the existence of a gupta sanctum to represent 'Tamas' the primordial darkness, from which every thing came into being. There are several temples in India with inaccessible sanctum at the lowest level of the temple.

The collonade has eight octagonal stone pillars on each side, a total of twentyeight pillars. Finished to a polish and with no carving, the pillars rise from a thin octagonal base and have a thin eight petalled lotus capital with typically Nepalese brackets ('metha') supporting the lintel beam going continuously all round. The carving motifs on all the brackets in the ground storey are garuda in the centre and cranes and swans entwining themselves around creepers and laurels. The beams are carved profusely and depict scenes from the Ramayana and the heroic episodes of Rama, in a series of sequential pictorial frames done in low relief. Each frame is captioned in the regular Newari script. Over the lintel beam a series of horizontal bands, including the chain of lotus petals, corbel out to support a sloping cornice chajja. They support the perforated stone railing provided around the terrace of the upper level. The perforations are a replica in stone of the typical Nepali 'Tikijhya' pattern with the divider upstands carved with various motifs such as Krisna in various poses, Ganesa, Astamatrikas, Astavairabs etc.

Entering into the doorway on the east, one reaches a landing like space with narrow interior stairways immediately leading to upper level. As the temple was built for the exclusive use of King Siddhinarasimha Malla, the east stairway was probably meant for him and the north stairway the priest's. Rather cramped, the steep stairs lead to the terrace formed by recessing the core by one bay in the upper floor. This terrace is embellished with eight well proportioned cupolas or kiosks located at the centers of its four sides and at four corners. The kiosks and the colonnade are all rested on stone pillars similar in proportion and detailing to those in the ground floor. Numbering to a total of forty, twenty of the pillars form the circumambulatory colonnade and the remaining twenty rise up from the terrace railings to support the kiosks. The lintel-frieze over the colonnade and kiosk pillars are carved in excellent relief, much like the lower lintel. Here, however, the theme is the Mahabharata and the heroic deeds of Krishna. The circumambulatory is five bayed. The sanctum room is shaped like a cross, reflecting the heavy structure above, and houses a beautiful image of Lord Krishna with his consorts, Rukmini and Satyabhama. It is approached through a richly carved door on the east. The sanctum is not publicly accessed and one offers worship from outside the door. The temple attendants and the priests do the actual ritual worship in the sanctum room. The outer periphery of the sanctum wall is divided into alcoves, within which are housed the images of gods depicting the ten

incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Starting from the northeast corner and going clockwise, one would see Matsya-incarnation, door way to sanctum, Kurma-incarnation, Baraha-incarnation, Narasimha incarnation, Parasuram, Rama, Balarama, Lord Buddha and Kalki-incarnation. In Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu has yet to manifest himself in the form of Kalki and this will happen at the end of the current mythological eon called the Kaliyuga and the express purpose is always to re-establish the rule of 'Dharma'. At every juncture of religious and 'Dharma' crisis, Lord Vishnu has reincarnated himself and will reincarnate. To quote Krishna, from the Mahabharata:

**“Whenever spirituality decays and materialism is rampant, then,
O Arjuna ! I reincarnate Myself”** - (chapter: iv, Verse 7)

It is the kiosks laid around the terrace that give a great visual appeal to the viewer. The corner kiosks are domed and the centre kiosks roofs are shaped like a low pyramid. Each cupola is crowned with a glittering gold plated copper Gajura, a hallmark of Nepalese temples. The carved frieze, now not in four long straight side segments like in the lower floor, is in several short segments, which move in and out around the exterior of the colonnade and the kiosks.

At the back of the sanctum, a doorway leads into the alcove with the image of Rama and a narrower stairway provides access to the third level. This floor is also recessed to form a terrace again all round. The terrace is also provided with eight cupolas as in the lower level. The sanctum here is octagonal in shape and has a three bayed colonnaded circumambulatory within the terrace. In the center of the sanctum room on a raised 'vedi' is enshrined a simple Siva 'linga'. The room is roofed with a dome on the inside and it is flattened on top to take the Shikhara above. Like in the second level, the corner cupolas are domed and the central ones are pyramidal. Here only the outer faces of cupola lintels are carved in relief and the theme is 'Siva lingas'. Each of the one hundred and eight Siva lingas have been captioned with its name and includes all the famous Siva tirthas. It is believed that paying obeisance to the lord in this sanctum is equivalent to visiting all the Siva tirthas or power places.

Above this floor is not accessible but does contain an unused sanctum, like at Vaikuntha Perumal. It is said that an Avalokiteshwara image was housed there sometime in history but has since been lost. Remnants of this change can be seen in the continued positioning of small four Karunamaya images at the outer face of the chhajja of the central cupolas in the upper level. The uppermost storey has a slender and towering shikhara over the central core. The shikhara is a plain saptaratha type and is crowned with a huge 'double ghanta' Gajura. The

sikhara is designed with portico like structures in the four cardinal directions and guardian goddesses astride gigantic sculpturesque stone lions, reminiscent of Orrisan temples, are seen in the four corners. Each of the portico-like 'ardhamandapas' have a bell-shaped roof and carry a gold plated Garuda like those on the cupolas. The inclusion of these portico-like structures does indicate the intension of the builder to use the small sanctum inside to house some unaccessed image. The positioning would be usual for Virinchinarayana or Brahman.

Locational Geometry and size:

Krishna Mandir has been positioned in the middle space between the two temples that were already existing in the palace square by this time, the Char-Narayan temple (1566 AD) located to its south and the Visweswara temple (1627) located to its north. The temple was the second major project of King Siddhinarasimha Malla following the construction of Sundari Chowk, his palace court. Its location so far to the north from his palace courtyard, which was also designed to face north towards the Mulchowk, is a result of the location of the major throughfare crossing of the then Patan town on the northern end of the palace square. It was only later that the Mangal bazaar end was developed and the strategic importance of the northern end of the square reduced.

Krishna Mandir is not facing cardinal directions squarely. It faces north of east by about 12.95 degrees. This is nearly perpendicular to the planning parallel of the palace building. The perpendicular axis of the Visweswara temple intersects the axis of Krishna temple at the point occupied by the pillar carrying the Garuda. Another interesting coincidence is that the axial line of this temple and the line due North from center of the courtyard of Sundari Chowk intersect at the center of the 'yagnya kunda' in front of the temple. From such observations, it may be concluded that Krishna Mandir was located at its place in reference with the Visweswara Temple, and the Sundari Chowk and is oriented slightly off the cardinal directions due it the already existing planning parallel which was inclined at 14.03 degrees off the cardinal north. The overall size of the stone paving, traditionally called 'Jagati', around Krishna Mandir is 15.75 meters, a size equal to 4/5ths of the Sundari Chowk sides which measures 19.67 meters. The Krishna Mandir rises to a height of 15.75 meters to the traditional 'Amla' level (in this temple represented by cornice sets over which the Gajura is placed) and including the Gajura reaches to a total height of 19.67 meters also.

The sanctum sizing show an octave relationship, the sanctum room with Siva linga in second terrace, the main sanctum room with Krishna in the first terrace and the blind sanctum in the ground level showing a 1:2:4

proportioning. Judging from the disposition of the cupolas and the cross shaped sanctum room, the main floor seems to have been adapted from Mandapa plans in the 'Sarvatovadra' pattern from 'Vishnudharmottara', but here the except for the central garbhagriha and its shikhara, all other corner corner garbhagrihas and axial mandapas have been architecturally developed as kiosks around the colonnade.

Conclusion:

Thus the Krishna Mandir comes as an object of art. Its terraced shikhara with the geometrically distributed cupolas and the glitter of their twentyone gilded gajuras present an impression of etherial lightness and slenderness to the visitors. The sculptural beauty of the temple is further accentuated by its profusely carved exterior. To the devouts, the theme of the carvings present the temple as a heavenly object worthy of great veneration.