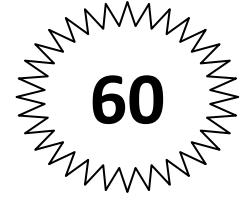


Impact of western influenced architectural design practices on the socio-cultural aspects of Tamilnadu

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Abstract:

Architecture as a discipline responds to the needs of the users physically and psychologically. Traditional building practices have been a result of climatic, social, religious and occupation of that particular people. India is a diversified country with different climatic zones, religions, languages and communities. Each community follows very rich social and cultural values. These cultural values have a strong impact on their lifestyle, arts and crafts, the architecture, etc and it is carried forward from the present to the future as a tradition. This paper tries to highlight the slowly disappearing culture and tradition followed by the people of Tamilnadu due to the western influences in architectural and urban design practices post independence. The paper concludes that, it lies in the hands of the future architects who must consider the integration of the users' way of living, their roots and tradition with respect to the regional context during the architectural design process and execution.

Introduction

“Architecture belongs to culture, not to civilization.” -Alvar Aalto.

Tamilnadu, located in Southeast India is identified as one of the oldest in India like the Indus Valley civilization that is located in the Northern part of India. It has a remarkable history in terms of its literature, culture and architecture. Ancient Tamils are considered to be the Eelamites, who were among the first agriculturists that were based in the eastern Mediterranean area. Tamilians were in close association with Indus valley people and were seafarers who traded with other countries like Java, Malaysia, China, etc. Earlier, the southern part of India was divided into three kingdoms ruled by Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas between third century to second century AD. This period was also referred to as the sangam age. During the fourth century AD, the Pallavas established their rule in the northern part of Tamil nadu with Kancheepuram as their capital. Tamil Nadu was not a single state but the Britishers called it Madras presidency pre independence and later it was split into Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh comprising Tamil and Telugu speaking regions post independence in August `1968.

Inter relationship of Religion, language and architecture of Tamils

Vernacular architecture takes the location, landscape, locally available materials, social practices, religion and occupation of the people into consideration. The knowledge gained from experience made the locals build shelters and structures that resisted climate, natural disasters and were also eco friendly. Dwellings reflect the gender based design that is found common across the culture. The family system is mostly patriarchal and so, the spaces are arranged in a way that the women are restricted to the rear end of the house. This is evident in agraharams and chettinad houses of Tamilnadu. Within hinduism itself, there are different sets of deities and religious practices. “Kuladeivam ” refers to a home God, and the people who have the same God are considered brothers in the respective community. Nature worship is followed and one such thanksgiving festival is called “Pongal Thirunal” basically to thank Sun God for the harvest. It is considered a Tamil festival which is celebrated with pride. During this, the people clean, retrofit or renovate the houses and get it ready for celebrations. The dish called sakkarai Pongal (sweet made of Rice, jaggery and milk) is cooked on the streets in front of their house early in the morning. Sugarcane, which is harvested this season, is placed next to them and prayers are



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offered to the Sun God. The second day is for thanking the cows and it is called "Mattu Pongal" - 'madu' meaning cows in Tamil. Third day is "Kaanum pongal", when people leave their homes to visit nearby rivers, markets or places.

2.1 Tamil Language

Tamil is the predominant language spoken by people of Tamilnadu and hence gets its name meaning land of the Tamilians. Brahmi scripts found in the temple inscriptions reveal that Brahmi preceded Tamil language that has evolved over thousands of years as a language. Madurai, called the Athens of the East, is one of the oldest living cities in Tamilnadu where all the customs and traditions are still followed by the people for thousands of years. All the streets and areas surrounding the Meenakshi amman temple are named after the months of the Tamil calendar .

Tamil Sangam is an academy that was established in Madurai where a group of 473 identified poets have written a wide range of poems that are composed of themes from nature to love, religion, war, etc. The Sangam period stretches from 500 BC to 200 AD. Sangam literature has two components called the agam (literally meaning inside, that is love) and puram (literally meaning outside; dealing with war) that throw light on the culture and heritage of Tamil people. Tamil holds literary supremacy among the oldest languages around the world.

2.2 Landforms

According to the sangam literature, the landforms of Tamilnadu are classified into five types as Kuringi (Mountainous Region), Mullai (Forests), Marutham (cropland), Neithal (seashore) and Palai (Drylands). The people's food, clothing, shelter and traditions were influenced by the context and their occupation. The settlements and the clan established their forte depending on the landform, whether on the hills or on the seashore , each had an identity of its own. The shelters of tribes in hills were completely different from the shelters of the fishermen settlements.

2.3 Temples and landforms

Lord Murugan , the youngest son of Lord Shiva, resides in six different places namely Pazhani (hill), Tiruchendur (on the seashore), Tiruparankundram (hillock), Thiruthani, Pazhamudhir solai and Swamimalai. The pilgrims walk long distances as part of an offering to the Gods and this is common for many temples. There are manapas, where food is offered for free to the pilgrims and different sets of mandapas where traditional music is played in the dawn to wake up the God and also in the dusk to put him to sleep.

Marraiges are conducted for Gods like in the famous Meenakshi Sundareswarar tihrukalyanam at Meenakshi amman temple. The entire city of Madurai city is busy with preparations. As it happens in the peak summer, water is sprayed on the pilgrims in the streets, people disguise themselves as Gods and goddesses, there are many shops that spring and the city becomes very lively.

2.4 Water management

River Vaigai is still alive because of the Kallazhagar festival that happens after Meenakshi amman's marriage. It is a way of protecting the water bodies , creating temple tanks to store water, canals that dealt with storm water management, etc. Compared to Chennai where most of the lakes have vanished and filled with buildings, religious practices seems to have saved water bodies in many cases.

Settlements

Every ancient settlement has grown organically in its own way. The site, climate, social life, religion, occupation are some of the factors that influence planning. Hot dry climatic zones like



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Jaisalmer in Rajasthan made people build their havelis in narrow streets so that they mutually shaded each other to avoid harsh radiation inside the houses (Sinha, Jai B.P, and Rajesh kumar, 2004). The walls are textured and openings are found smaller in size. This allows diffused light and cuts down the heat to the interiors.

In a warm humid climate like Chennai, courtyards and larger openings enable cross ventilation to reduce the effects of humidity on the body. Courtyards, called Muttrams, had Tulasi herb grown at the center, where women offered prayers early in the morning after bath. The women gathered around the muttram to do household activities and also it was a semi enclosed space allowing them to enjoy the outdoors from indoors.

3.1 Settlement planning

The varna system created by the Aryans divided the people into four sects namely Brahmans (priests),Kshatriyas(warriors),Vysyas (traders) and Shudras (artisans and laborers) depending on their occupation. This hierarchy created a clear distinction in the street layouts and location of residences. The Brahmans were placed next to the temples, mostly at the center of a place, like in the temple towns of Madurai,Srirangam,etc. The second circle was for the amenities or shops that served the temples, the third circle being the residences.The shudras were considered to be untouchables and were not permitted to enter the temples, streets and were always kept away from the village or city. The proportioning systems and the planning of houses were in such a way that the class and community of the residents could be easily identified from the facade.

Chennai developed as a city only after the British East India company wanted to expand its trade. Originally known as Chennapatnam, the city expanded organically. it was driven by trade needs, industries, transportation of the goods, export and then dwellings. Later, it became the most prominent city offering education, trade, politics,etc. There are traditional settlements found along the Kapaleswarar temple at Mylaopre, Triplicane which are lively even today with ancient practices. Mylapore temple tank still works fine as a water management system.

3.1.2 Examples of settlement pattern based on Landforms

3.1.2.1 Plains

Madurai is a grid planned city, with Meenakshi amman temple as the nucleus. Srirangam, is another such planned temple city influenced by religious practies. The kings were the ones who employed priests who in turn performed rituals for the safety and prosperity of the kings. There are temple cars carrying idols that are taken around the city . The streets are designed wide enough for that. As pedestrians were more in number eaerlier and so, the spaces relate more to pedestrians than vehicles.

3.1.2.2 Fishing community -Neithal landform

The fishing community spent most of the time outdoors where they had to store and mend the fishing nets,sell fish and also have an eye on the sea. Their huts had building materials that were basically thatch from palm trees. Palm trees have the capacity to prevent soil erosion and retain the water table (Sayam et.al, 2021). These trees were abundant a long time ago and almost all parts of the trees were used for shelter, food and paper made from leaves for writing. The palm tree being the state tree of Tamilnadu is facing extinction and the government has taken initiative "Palmyrah Development Mission" in replanting 76 lakh seeds along the water bodies and road side.

Kilamanakkudi is a fishing village located next to Nagerkoil in the Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu. After the Tsunami wiped off the coastal settlements in December 2004, the fishermen settlements have been planned and sponsored by the NGOs. The planning and architectural design does not seem to integrate the context which is the backbone of architecture (Sheth et.al, 2006). The houses are located



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away from the seashore and are placed in a typical grid arrangement contrary to the linear organization along the coastline earlier. The houses are made of brick walls and concrete roof slabs ; the layout of houses with a typical living room, bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom like any other houses that can be found anywhere in the world. The only space that distinguishes the fishermen's houses from other houses is the outdoor space where a group of people sit around and mend the nets.

The most commonly used symbol is the cross in the facade of the house reflecting the religion (christianity) of the family . In any space, the dynamics of the activities and human behavior gets modified when the proximity of spaces is changed.

3.1.2.3 Toda community - Kurinji landform

Nilgris is a hilly region comprising many peaks , with Dotabetta at its highest level and lowlands of Tamilnadu,Kerala and Karnataka on three sides. In Nilgris, the Todas are a tribe whose occupation is buffalo rearing . They make and sell milk products like curd,ghee and sell it to other tribes. The huts of Todas called 'Arsh' houses employ an indigenous method of construction. The toda huts have a rectangular plan, consisting of two rooms. The locally available materials like stone, local grass and bamboo are used for construction. The facade is decorated with murals and has an explicit symbol marking the entrance. Barrel shaped thatch roof sits on the linear plan. In this house, the women are not allowed to enter the inner room and the room located near the entrance alone is shared by the family (Mishra, S.K., Priyadarshani, S.(2020).

Vernacular Architecture of Tamilnadu

Dravidian architecture mostly comprises south Indian temple architecture and vernacular architecture is predominantly chettinad houses and agraharams in Tamilnadu.

4.1 Chettinad architecture

The Chettinad houses of the Chettiyar community are located in and around Karaikudi and Sivagangai areas. Chettiars are basically traders who sailed to far off countries and brought riches home.The residential architecture of chettiars, "Chettinad house" is representative of their wealth, social status, their traditions and their family values. Chettinad houses have an unique architectural design that is climate responsive and has excellent water management strategies. The presence of courtyards , clerestories, a large number of rooms, kitchens and gathering spaces are still used to hold weddings and to exhibit the dowry thereby. The residential architecture of Chettinad, thus, is the result of the socio-cultural parameters and all the symbols associated there,reflect the same. They stand proof to the context and have an unique identity of their own.

4.2 Agraharams

Agraharams refer to the residences of brahmans, who stayed next to the temples. The houses are linear by organization and have wall to wall construction. They have courtyards that bring light and ventilation that are obstructed due to the wall to wall construction. The courtyard serves as a social gathering space for dining, conversing, cooking, drying clothes, etc. The toilets are always placed at the end of the house for sanitation and hygiene purposes.The houses use a proportioning system called the "kettu"(Priya, 2006)

Traditional practices of Tamilnadu

The streets were always sprinkled with water (mixed with cow dung), the practice which we still see in towns and villages, if not in urban areas. Cow dung is supposed to be a traditional disinfectant. People also used turmeric in addition on the floor or on the doors. Kolam or rangoli, is drawn on the streets in



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front of the houses as a decoration or visual art . The rice powder was used earlier , in order to feed the ants and insects that are found on the streets, later limestone powder replaced rice flour for various reasons, one being the price.

Vastu shastra

People followed the traditional planning principles as given in Vastu shastra which is considered the Bible for residential planning. The dimensions and cardinal directions specified for each space are fervently adopted to prevent negative impact on the residents' health and wealth , to prevent offending the spirit called vastu. Most of the houses had a thinnai or an open seating area, primarily for the passers by to rest. In ancient times, pilgrims were kept in mind and thinnais were used by them to rest. The residents also offered food for the pilgrims as an act of charity or out of piety. In a way Thinnais also acted as social spaces in the streets.

Traditional versus contemporary space design of Residences

7.1 Thinnai

In traditional/ vernacular houses of Tamilnadu, the main hall or living area of the house is usually approached through a shaded area with a raised platform (called Thinnai). The 'Thinnai' serves as a separation space between the main usable spaces of the house and the street. The shaded area (Thinnai) with ample natural lighting and ventilation act as a social interaction space, working area and buffer from heat and sound.

7.2 Living area

The living area is usually a large hall provided with the central courtyard for natural lighting and ventilation. The prime rooms are surrounded along the hall spaces with small windows for cross ventilation. The spaces were designed to live without the dependence of artificial lighting, fans and air conditioners.

7.3 Toilets

In traditional houses of Tamil nadu, only bathrooms and washing were provided within the residential plot and located in the backyard (mostly in the north-western region), isolated from the house as a matter of hygiene. These spaces did not have roof coverings and were mostly left open to the sky so that the spaces get dried sooner. The practices were more sustainable earlier than today.

7.4 Dining area

Dining area and dining table is just an attitude passed by British to the Indians. People fancy having a dining table but they act only as a storage cabinet in most of the houses. Architectural design blindly takes this into account forgetting the culture of the people who very much eat sitting on the floor. this is appreciated by the doctors as a good practice for health.

Cultural practices and their values.

The people of Tamilnadu practiced certain social and cultural factors that had a greater impact on the health and well-being of the community as a whole. During the pre-independence period, only the well off people used furniture for seating and sleeping in the interiors. Most of the houses used mats or jamukkalam (blanket) for people to sit on the floor. People dined on the floor and banana leaves were used as plates. Research has proven that sitting on the floor with crossed legs (Sukhasana) helps in improving our digestion process, blood circulation, improves posture, relaxes mind and body.

The people washed their feet and hands as soon as they entered the house to ward off infections. There was no toilet as such in the houses and people went outside the village or in the open to defecate. Later



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toilets were constructed with Indian water closets which needed people to squat. In the past twenty years, there is a tremendous increase in the use of European water closet for its ease of use. There are more health benefits in using Indian water closets than European water closets. Some of them are easy digestion, hygienic, strengthening of legs, prevent colon cancer, etc.(Jain and Agarwal (2018), Hitender et.al (2020)

When there is a death at the house, only the men go to the cremation ground . The entire house is washed with water and cow urine is sprinkled to ward off infection. Everyone is required to take a head shower compulsorily. Turmeric is used everywhere , in cooking, for religious ceremonies, rituals, etc. (Jain and Agarwal (2018). During covid lockdown, people frantically followed these for sanitizing. High windows, clerestories, courtyards help in daylight and cross ventilation thus being climate responsive. Daylight helps in altering sleep cycle, provides Vitamin D, and helps improve mental well being of the users.

Role of architectural education

The Sir J.J School of Architecture (originally called the Government College of Art) in Bombay was the first modern school to introduce a structured course in architecture. Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy established the first formal art and architectural institution in Bombay in 1896 which later was reorganized in 1913. In Tamilnadu, the first Architectural institution was affiliated to University of Madras in 1957 and later it became part of Anna University departments in 1978.

Medium of Instruction

Invariably, all architectural institutions' medium of instruction is English.The curriculum of the institutions earlier focused more on the English way of designing, European history was elaborate and all institutions still have English medium of instruction. The templates that are used by architects for furniture, fittings, etc are replicas of what Europeans used in their respective places. Integration of cultural parameters are not evident in the post independent architecture in Tamilnadu both . Indo saracenic architecture evolved when British engineers who worked with the Public works department combined Indian and Islamic elements of Architecture in the civic buildings so that the buildings visually appealed to the general public

To be able to think in one's own language and to understand the history of their own is crucial for architects in design thinking. Vernacular architecture evolved over time from the experiences and experiments that took place in building. So, the buildings have stood the tests of time and still are climate responsive. The formal education,too, that has evolved over time tries to incorporate many theory and practical courses trying to balance history and contemporary studies. It needs to give more allowance to regional studies in terms of the institutions' own location, surroundings, culture and way of life, not just in theory but in design.

There was no concept of bedrooms and dining rooms in south Indian houses before ; but because of the British way of thinking, we get to design drawing rooms, bedrooms, dining rooms and modular kitchens. Kitchen utensils and appliances have been upgraded because of the advancements in today's world ;there are very less number of joint families, more small nuclear families and the shift in attitude for having a permanent house for many generations is changing. Master architects were able to create great architecture even without formal education.

The schools need to balance the on campus and on site studies. and visits for assessments. More practical lessons and hands on training should be mandated than the theory based learning.Earlier people always felt the materials in the site during construction Unless, the students are made aware of their surroundings and are sensitive than



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Lessons from traditional practices

10.1 Climate responsiveness

Use of thermal mass or thick walls helps in time lag for heat transfer inside the buildings

Clerestory windows enable stack effect letting hot air outside

Thinnai or verandahs prevent direct heat gain and improves indoor thermal comfort

Larger windows and courtyards enable cross ventilation

They create an unique identity of the place and architecture

10.2 Form follows culture - the spatial layout, artistic detailing of doors, wall paintings, symbols give a visual clue of the users' culture

Traditional practices are healthy, eco friendly, sustainable in their own ways because of their wisdom from experience.

10.3 Transition of Social spaces

There is no provision nowadays for thinnais due to lack of land or for security reasons. We are greeted by the "Beware of dogs" or "CCTV surveillance" boards in front of the house. .Urbanization and growing crimes have led to cautious or conscious design in this way.

10.3.1 No more child friendly streets

Earlier the streets were active with children playing, vendors selling vegetables, elders chatting on their doorsteps, etc. The natural surveillance that existed is not found anymore. Streets have become roadways and not pathways, where vehicular movement dominates the pedestrian movement. Children are not allowed by their parents to use the streets for fear of crime and safety, so we find an increase in the number of neighborhood parks. In cities, it is ironic that one needs to travel to the park for walking or playing which usually happens on the streets. The children are mostly accompanied by their elder siblings or grandparents ;this results in more of indoor activities. COVID 19 and lockdown have ensured access of social media apps and internet data to every nook and corner of the country. Lack of interaction with neighbors also results in the social skills of the younger children.

10.4 Traditional Tamil games

There are many traditional Tamil games that have been forgotten on the go, both at home and school. The play area or the playground design in schools does not consider the cultural inputs. Most of the schools do not have designated playgrounds of their own or share it with other schools. play grounds

10.4.1 Parks more than just a play area

The government reserves open spaces for such public activities but then the layout of the parks still needs to be improved other than providing play area, jogging paths alone. Opportunities for reading, working with charging points can also be integrated so that the students can afford to use the space. Parks need to be designed as spaces where traditional games can be played rather than the ready made swings, slides, seesaws. Parks need to allow people to sit comfortably on the ground, or even read books from a small library there itself and celebrate festivals. there could be awareness campaigns, etc where parks can act as real social spaces.

10.5 Ergonomics and standards

Most of the Architects and architecture students in Tamilnadu use anthropometric standards developed by English or Americans vehemently in their design. There is no questioning of the basics while designing for the native users. Time savers standards, Neuferts standards are some of the references that



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are followed in academia. There are many Indian women who use stool in the kitchens to reach the kitchen cabinets or even to look into the pressure cooker while cooking. The height of the countertop is not considered or custom made for an average Indian woman, as a result they suffer from arm pain, back pain, etc. Work triangle is an important parameter in kitchen design but we need to understand that there is more to an Indian kitchen than cooking alone (Chuchra, Rimmy, and Navreet Kaur. (2016)), (Gazala Bhoje, 2015) .

Conclusion:

The paper tries to identify various factors that influence the architectural design practices that are prevalent in Tamilnadu post independence and after formal education was introduced. Earlier, vernacular methods were adopted and after industrialization, new materials like concrete, steel and glass replaced structural timber, stones. The houses are mostly designed by civil engineers, masons and the clients themselves. Architects as new professionals catered to the upper class of the society and tried to imitate the western plans consisting of living, bedroom, kitchen , dining and toilets. The complexity of design slowly increases and less importance is given to climate responsiveness and cultural aspects. Every house seems to be the same nowadays; however few architects have tried to integrate the essence of traditional practices with contemporary design. Institutions imparting Architectural education needs to inculcate Tamil values, Tamil traditions and also introduce more Tamil books in the library. Medium of instruction should be flexible for a student or architect to understand the local or regional practices. the institutions need to impart Tamil mediu of instruction, gget submissions both i english and regional language, discourage western way of thinking. Even though amny architects have been trying to practice critical regioanlism, the students mut be made to THINK. The renovations, new construction can address the issues and dsign buildings that have identity , sustainability and essence of vernacular elements of that particular community. then Architecture could never be alien.

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