



കൊച്ചിയിലെ മുസ്ലീം പള്ളികൾ
MOSQUES COCHIN
of

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life remain intact. With the rapid changes urban India is undergoing, these neighbourhoods are among the few that maintain physical evidence of the historic townscape. This book documents not only the mosques, but also the vibrant communities that support them.

Sited in compounds replete with coconut palms, the mosques offer an oasis of tranquility in the densely populated neighbourhoods. Large wood-framed pyramidal roofs, deep overhangs, and fine wooden craftsmanship distinguish a Kerala vernacular that reflects the climate, the culture and the materials of the place. The adoption and adaptation of the local vernacular by the Muslim congregations for their mosques is an undocumented and unappreciated phenomenon. Rarely mentioned in architectural histories or heritage surveys, the mosques' lack of recognition exposes a persistent prejudice against the humble vernacular. Recently, many of these fine old buildings have been demolished or remodelled; replaced by generic concrete structures that mirror nothing of the local history. Each of the mosque communities stewards a beloved house of worship with countless years of useful service ahead. Leaders should be encouraged in their role as custodians of an irreplaceable architectural heritage, proof of centuries of peaceful existence.

“The past ... is evidence that a society has existed. Wipe it away and a culture begins to feel, like a man without a memory, shallow and superficial.”

Donald Appleyard

TRADERS, SPICES AND MOSQUES

“They came to Malabar for ginger, cinnamon, arecanut, coconut, sandalwood, teak, incense, silk, cotton, ivory, jewels, and particularly black pepper...”

“What shall I say? The greatness of India is beyond description.”

Bindu Malieckal



One of the many streetside traders of Kerala.



Rooftop view of Cutchi Hanafi Mosque.

At the time of the Europeans arrival on the Indian peninsula there were three types of structures visible in Kerala: the common mud and thatch hut, more substantial houses, and religious buildings. In sixteenth century Cochin only the houses of nobles and the temples had stone walls and clay tile roofs. An exception was made for Muslim merchants who were allowed to build walls of stone. Over the centuries everyone began to build their houses with stone walls. Following a detailed science of proportion and principles of construction, the houses adhered to a hierarchy of plans: a rectangle forms the basic plan, then advances to an L or C plan, and then to the completely surrounded courtyard. The more courtyards a home had, the wealthier the owner. It was said that if a home had more than one courtyard it was the home of a nobleman. A palace was a house of many courtyards. Whereas most homes were one-storey, a two-storey home was another indicator of wealth. Two-storey homes often had a one-storey veranda that wrapped two or more sides. Religious buildings used the same structural system as the courtyard homes, albeit highly decorated. Jewish and Islamic traders based their synagogues and mosques on adaptations of vernacular plans. Interestingly the surviving Christian churches tend to show much less adherence to the local vernacular.

The house form was opened up to create a large interior hall for worship where the faithful could gather to pray. To show the importance of the building, floor heights were raised.



Left: Entry hall at Ponnani Juma Masjid.



Right: Mihrab and mimbar at Chakarayidukku, a collection of old and new light fixtures can be seen hanging from the wooden ceiling.

The old mosques were typically two-storied, although many started their lives as one-storey structures which were expanded in later centuries. Usually, one-storey verandas (or colonnades) enveloped the building to provide shaded space for discussion and/or prayer. These verandas became an important part of the composition and, as more space was needed, were often enclosed. A large front porch formed the entrance to the prayer hall, although this space was also used for prayer. The wall between the entrance and the prayer hall served as a bearing wall for second floor beams as columns disappeared from the interior. The upper floor was used for study, for visiting scholars, and for overflow crowds at Friday prayer. Many of the mosques repeated a smaller version of the *mihrab* upstairs. Balustered openings in the floor allowed the voice of the imam preaching below to reach the worshipers above.

Houses were built on a granite base, with laterite block walls, and a timber pitched roof. The walls of the mosque were also built of laterite, the porous, easily worked and abundant Kerala stone, and plastered in mud and lime plaster. A granite plinth raised the structure above the ground for protection from dampness, monsoon floods and insects. House columns were wood with a stone plinth. Mosques used wood columns and also granite, a popular variant for temples. Wooden brackets cap the columns, the more elaborate the carvings the more prestigious the building. As availability of timber changed, the shape of the mosque columns was transformed from large sculpted timbers to a simpler slimmer form. Interior posts disappeared in later mosques, with floor loads handled by beams spanning from wall to wall. The upper floors of the mosque were framed with large, exposed, squared off timbers. Joists running