

Facets of Architecture of the Abode of Ascetics

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The abode or residence of ascetics is known by various terms such as *maṭha*, *āśrama*, *sthala*, *stara*, *sthāna*, *saṅgata*, *akhādā*¹ etc. Of these terms, *maṭha* is the most common and one of the ancient ones. The Śaiva ascetics of the Śaṅkarācārya order commonly apply the term *maṭha* or *maṭham* or *muttum* or *mutta* for their monasteries. The Vaiṣṇava ascetics also use the term *maṭha* for their residence.

In Sanskrit *maṭha* means a hut, cottage, retreat, hut or cell of an ascetic. It is a place where students get education, *sādhakas* perform *sādhanā*, students study religious subjects, they use the place as hostels. *Maṭhas* are also known for their temples. At present the *maṭhas* are known as the abode of *sannyāsīs* of a particular sect. It is presided over by a superior (*mahanta*) and established for the use and benefit of ascetics belonging to a particular order who generally are disciples of the superior (*mahanta*).

The *Bhagavatī Purāṇa* mentions - 'Having carefully built, a furnished *maṭha*, on some auspicious time, with rooms for sleeping and sitting dedicate the same to the twice born or the ascetics. The *maṭha* must not be built during the famine and inauspicious days. The day *maṭha* is to be founded first of all *vṛddhi śrāddha* ceremony has to be performed'.² In *Jābālika Upaniṣad* and *Vaśiṣṭhavidhāna* the abode of *sannyāsīs* are known as *giri*, *gahvāra*, *devāyatana*, *kuṭī* etc. The origin of *maṭhas* is related with the lives of *ṛṣis* or *sannyāsīs* who were educating the society roaming here and there. Later on the need of a permanent residence was felt for the purpose. The importance of the *sannyāsīs* in the society and the need of expansion of vedic religion gave birth to *maṭhas*. The contribution of Śaṅkarācārya as the progenitor of *maṭhas* is well known.

Varanasi, one of the holy city of India has a number of *maṭhas* and *akhādās*. The present paper endeavours to discuss the architecture of these *maṭhas* or *akhādās* on the basis of survey-based study. The textual references regarding the architecture of *maṭhas* are available in *Kulārṇava Tantra* only. According to text the entrance of *maṭha* should be small, the ceiling of the room should be of medium height without any window either a small perforation. It would be

cleaned with cow dung etc. On the external part of the room there must be a *maṇḍapa* with enclosure wall and a *vedī*. The text refers it as *yoga-maṭha*. This description has similarity with the present *samādhi-kakṣa* in the *maṭhas*. However, there is no description of architecture of the internal part of *maṭhas*. It seems the expansion in architecture was done later on according to need.

Among the number of *maṭhas* of Varanasi some are very simple and small examples of architecture, having only two rooms, but some are of multi-storied buildings with enough decoration on its inner parts. These buildings are examples of 17th to 20th century architecture of Varanasi. In the construction of *maṭha* buildings the stone, lime, wood and a special kind of brick, locally known as *lakhauriā*, are used. Generally the buildings are white-washed with *gerū* (red ochre). Architecturally all the *maṭhas* are similar having an entrance, courtyard, temple (in front of courtyard), *samādhi*, *dhūnī-sthala* and a well for water. A long-pillared corridor with small niches and *ghuḍiā* (bracket) as well as small rooms are the speciality of *maṭha* architecture. In some examples long corridor occupy only two sides of the courtyard while in others all the four sides are occupied with such corridors. Some *maṭhas* have secret architectural construction in the form of underground *samādhi-sthala* and stone lockers to keep the valuables. The important parts of the architecture of the *maṭhas* are discussed here under in brief :

Entrance : Generally east is accepted as better side for entrance of any building but in *maṭhas* the side for main entrance is north. It is well known that north is known as *devasthāna*. The entrances measure 5' to 12' high sometimes decorated with fine stone carvings showing floral, geometrical designs and figure. The doors of the residence of *Mahanta* are also noteworthy showing number of small bells (Fig. 1), *yantras* and deities engraved on brass. However, the doors with wood carving are also important.

Courtyard : There are examples of one to seven courtyards in the *maṭha* building. These are square and vertical in shape and measures 10' to 80' in length and width. The courtyards have temples of that particular sect, *śivaliṅga* or *caraṇapādukā* with *samādhi* and a well for water. Sometimes *dhūnī* is also the part of courtyard.

Temple : Temples are the important part of *maṭha* architecture. Some of

the *maṭhas* are known for their temples which have beautiful stone carvings and sculptures.

Corridor : The pillared corridor is an important part of the architecture of *maṭhas*. The corridor serves various purposes like *bhoja-bhaṇḍārā*, study, rest place etc. Sometimes pillared corridors have a small platform for the chief of *maṭha* (*mahanta*). In some examples corridors have *dhūnī-sthala* and *samādhi*. The small niches and *ghuḍiās* attached with corridors have specific purpose.

Pillars : The examples of square, round, faceted pillars may be seen in the corridors of *maṭhas*. Sometimes they are plain and sometimes show beautiful decoration in stone. The most common designs for the decoration of pillars are *ghaṭa-pallava* and hanging chains with bells. These pillars are constructed with wood and stone both. In some of the *maṭhas* decorated pillars are used for hanging heavy bells of the *maṭhas* (Fig. 2).

Bracket : Stone brackets have an important role in the architecture of *maṭha* or *akhādā*. The brackets attached to pillars hold the load of railing (*bārajā*) or veranda. These brackets are the beautiful examples of stone art carving. There are examples showing elephant figures (*gajākṛti*), female figures (*putalī*), and floral designs (Fig. 3). It may be noted that elephant shaped brackets are seen in Lahore and Agra forts also. There are examples of small brackets having holes. Such brackets are used for holding the rod of flags of the *maṭha*. The small *ghuḍiyās* are used as the part of rooms of *sannyāsīs* and corridor. The *sannyāsīs* hang their cloths on it and keep their *daṇḍa* straight with its help.

Beams : The stone and wood both are used for beams of the rooms and corridors. Generally beams are plain but sometimes they show *betel*-shaped motif on them either in stone or in wood.

Bārajā (Railing) : Some *maṭhas* have *bārajās*. The *bārajās* are used for *mahanta darśana*. The *bārajās* show beautiful stone carving with floral, geometrical and figural examples along with *jālī* work. Some of the *bārajās* show motifs used in Banaras Brocades. In Banaras one of the *maṭhas* is known as *Bārajā maṭha* near Aurangabad locality. The *maṭha* is famous for its *bārajā* which has an interesting story behind it. It is said that the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb destroyed the *bārajā* of this *maṭha* during the destruction of temples and *maṭhas* in Banaras. For this act he faced great protest of ascetics and local people. As a

result he ordered if the destructed *bārajā* will be rebuilt within one night the remaining part of the *maṭha* will not be touched and with the help of local people the *bārajā* was reconstructed on the same night. Subsequently the *maṭha* was termed as *Bārajā maṭha*.

Room : The room (for *sannyāsīs*) attached with corridors are important part of the architecture of *maṭhas*. The rooms have small entrance with doors or without doors and low ceilings, about 8' high. Sometimes they are attached with niches to keep *kamaṇḍalas* and wooden or small stone *ghuḍiyās* to hold *daṇḍa* and *uttarīya*. There is no provision for light in rooms. Such rooms remind us the architecture of Buddhist *Vihāras*. In rare cases a small window is found. The *maṭhas* with multistoried buildings have three-roofed halls. Such halls serve the purpose of the place of meetings, preachings and *bhoja* or *bhaṇḍārās*. In the *maṭhas* the residence of the chief of *maṭha* (*mahanta*) stands on the first or second floor. The places for kitchen, store, *bhāṇḍāra-grhas*, and bathrooms stand on the ground floor. The upper storeys are used for the rooms of deities, *sanyāsīs*, students and guests. The stairs in the *maṭhas* are always small having a *jharokhā* for light.

The *maṭhas* not only represent the 17th-20th century architecture of Banaras but they have a good treasure of art. In their treasures the example of sculptures, from Gupta to medieval period, decorative art examples including gold, silver, copper and glass objects, Mughal *farmāns*, illustrated and unillustrated palm leaf and paper manuscripts, arms and amuniums, paintings (wall and miniature on paper and glass), and ritual objects may be seen.

References

1. The *akhāḍā* is used for a special type of monastic organization, particularly of the once-fighting ascetics.
2. Surjit Sinha, Baidyanath Saraswati, *Ascetics of Kashi*, Varanasi, 1978, p.44.



Fig. 1- Door with bells, Annapūrṇā *maṭha/mandira*, Banaras



Fig. 2- Metal bell hanging from the stone bracket, Śitaladāsa kā Akhāḍa, Banaras

Fig. 3- Bracket with elephant figure, Kumāra Svāmī *maṭha*, Banaras

