



TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MALANAD REGION OF KARNATAKA - SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SHIVAMOGGA & NORTH CANANRA DISTRICTS

Dr. Ranganatha Rao H. Karad
Associate Professor, Department of History,
Government First Grade Women's College, B.H. Road, Shivamogga.

ABSTRACT

The Malanad region of Karnataka—encompassing the hilly, forested Western Ghats belt stretching across districts such as Shivamogga, Chikkamagaluru, Uttara Kannada, and parts of Hassan preserves a unique architectural landscape shaped by geography, dynastic movements, and local craft traditions. This research article examines the temple architecture of Malanad through a historical, stylistic, and regional lens, evaluating how ecological conditions, religious practices, and cultural exchanges produced a distinctive architectural vocabulary. The study integrates stylistic analyses from the Early Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Hoysala, Vijayanagara, and Keladi-Nayaka periods while emphasizing vernacular expressions and the continuity of wooden, metal, and hybrid construction traditions.



KEYWORDS: Malanad, Karnataka, temple architecture, Hoysala, Chalukya, Vijayanagara, Western Ghats, Nayaka temples, vernacular architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malanad refers to the high-rainfall, forested uplands of Karnataka. Its rugged terrain, proximity to major trade routes linking the coast and interior, and long history of dynastic influence created a rich mosaic of temple architecture. Unlike the heavily ornamented plains temples, Malanda shrines often balance stone construction with wooden superstructures, modest scale with symbolic nuance, and regional craft practices with pan-South-Indian temple idioms.

1.1 Aims and Objectives of the Study

Aims: To investigate and analyse the origin and development of temple architecture in Malnad region of Karnataka.

Objectives- To study the role and construction of architecture in the Empire of Malanad region. To analyse the structural composition and key architectural elements characteristic of Malanad region temple architecture.

1.2 Review of Literature

Adam Hardy in his work, which was published in 1995, titled “*Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation — the Karnata Dravida Tradition, 7th to 13th Centuries*”. Offers rigorous formal analysis of plan-types, superstructures and ornamentation used across Karnataka; invaluable for classifying Malanad temples within the Karnata Dravida idiom.

Gerard Foekema in his work “*A Complete Guide to Hoysala Temples*” (1996). A practical photographic and descriptive guide to Hoysala monuments with clear typological checklists used for field attributions.

George Michell in his research work which was published in 1977 “*The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms*” he has given A broad synthetic overview placing regional forms in pan-Indian perspective and useful for public-facing explanations of temple symbolism.

K. A. Nilakanta Sastri in his work “*A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*”. Essential background on political and cultural history that shaped temple patronage in Malanad.

In Karnataka State Gazetteer — Shimoga District, which list monuments, epigraphic summaries and administrative histories useful for identifying protected sites and administrative records.

1.3 Research Methodology

1. Research Design: This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design to investigate how the temple architecture in Malanad region. The approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse architectural features.

2. Data Collection Methods: Literature Review: Comprehensive analysis of existing scholarly articles, books, and reports on temple architecture and traditional construction techniques in Maland region.

Field Surveys: On site visits to selected temples to observe and document architectural features, materials used, and structural adaptations.

Interviews: Semi structured interviews with local historians, architects, temple authorities.

3. Sampling: Selection of Temples: Purposeful sampling of representative temples along the Malnad Karnataka belt, based on historical significance, architectural diversity, and accessibility. **Participants for Interviews:** Selected experts and stakeholders with knowledge about temple architecture.

4. Data Analysis: Qualitative Analyse Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and architectural observations to identify patterns of climate adaptation in temple design.

5. Tools and Techniques: Use of architectural photography, sketches, and measurement tools during field surveys. Software for data organization and thematic coding.

6. Comparative Typology: Mapping of plan, ornament typologies across the region, identification of diffusion routes of artisans from Hoysala centres, and changes under Keladi patrons.

1.4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The temples of Maland represent a rich cultural and architectural heritage that has evolved over centuries in response to the region’s unique climatic conditions. However, despite the apparent influence of the Maland climate characterized by heavy monsoon rains, high humidity, there is limited systematic research exploring how these factors have shaped the design, materials, and construction techniques of these temples. This gap in understanding poses challenges for the effective conservation and restoration of Maland temples, this study seeks to address the problem of insufficient knowledge regarding the specific ways in Maland temple architecture, with the goal of informing more sustainable conservation practices and deepening appreciation of the interplay between environment and cultural expression.

1.5. NEED OF THE STUDY- Maland region temple architecture is a vital part of Karnataka’s cultural and historical legacy. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also as monuments showcasing ancient craftsmanship and sustainable architectural practices. However, there is a critical need to understand how ancient builders adapted temple design and construction techniques to withstand these climatic conditions. Such knowledge is essential for several reasons

1. Preservation and Conservation: Insight into climate, responsive architectural features can guide effective restoration and conservation efforts, ensuring the longevity of these heritage sites.

2. Sustainable Architecture: Studying traditional climate adaptations provides valuable lessons for modern sustainable building practices, especially in regions facing similar environmental challenges.

3. Cultural Awareness: Understanding the influence of climate on temple architecture deepens appreciation of the interplay between environment, culture, and technology in historical contexts.

4. Policy and Planning: The study can inform policymakers and heritage authorities in formulating climate sensitive preservation policies and resource allocation. Given the increasing threats from climate change and environmental degradation, this research is timely and necessary to safeguard Maland temple heritage for future generations.

1.6. Conservation Status & Research Gaps

Conservation challenges: weather-damage, inappropriate repair, loss of original ornamentation, and lack of protective buffer zones.

Scholarly gaps: Much of the scholarship tends to focus on site descriptive tourism write ups; systematic regional architectural studies are missing. For example, the official Shimoga heritage summary mentions the 'hybrid Hoysala, Dravidian' nature of certain temples but calls for more detailed documentation.

2. TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MALANAD REGION OF KARNATAKA

2.1. Historical Background of Malanad Region

This land very rich and this became the reason for the rise some of the famous monarchical states like Satavahanas, Kadambas, Gangas, Chalukyas of Badami, Hoysalas, Chalukyas of Kalyani, and Vijayanagara empires. These monarchical states played important role in development of unique art and architecture of South India in form of Dravida architecture and Vesara architecture. Besides, the Indo Islamic architecture also had profound influence in the long annals of temple architecture of Karnataka in general and Maland region in particular.

The early Karnataka dynasties such as the Kadamba dynasty (4th–6th century CE) established foundational forms that later schools adapted. The western Chalukya Badami and Kalyani era (7th–12th century CE) brought in pan Deccan sculptural vocabularies and structural solutions the rise of the Hoysala dynasty (11th–14th century CE) saw high end craftsmanship in Karnataka; Hoysala workmanship or its echoes appear in large temple complexes and migrated artisan traditions. In the 15th–18th centuries the regional power of the Keladi Nayaka dynasty left a distinct hybrid Dravidian Hoysala idiom visible in the Keladi and Ikkeri temples. The Keladi dynasty was founded and the Vijayanagara Empire became its overlord and dominated the political seen for about two hundreds year.

2.2. Materials and Technology in Temple Construction

Regarding the use of material and technical application the temple architectures Dr. PB Desai in edited works gives information about the materials used in Chalukyas, Hoysala and later monarchical dynasties in construction of temple. From simple garbhagriha to complex temple structures, helps us to understand its evolution in brief. In Maland, local stone dominated structural material. Granite and schist were common for sancta and structural elements; timber and brick also survive in vernacular shrines and ancillary structures. The use of locally available stone allowed for robust temples but also imposed regional stylistic adaptations.

The Keladi Nayakas employed a diverse range of construction materials that reflected both regional availability and architectural traditions inherited from earlier South Indian dynasties. Granite was the principal building material and was extensively used for major structural components due to its durability and load-bearing capacity. This preference closely followed the architectural practices of the Vijayanagar Empire, under whom the Keladi Nayakas initially functioned as feudatories, and whose temple building idiom emphasized massive granite construction. Prominent examples include the Aghoreshwara Temple at Ikkeri, which was largely constructed of granite and exemplifies the robustness, monumentality, and axial planning characteristic of Nayaka period temple architecture. Alongside granite, laterite stone, readily available in the malnad region, was widely employed, particularly for fortifications, outer enclosures, citadels, and subsidiary structures. In the Aghoreshwara

temple complex, laterite was used for peripheral architectural elements and defensive features, indicating a pragmatic adaptation to local geological conditions and construction economics. Additionally, greenish grey schist was selectively used for finer sculptural and decorative work. Although granite remained the dominant structural material, soapstone facilitated intricate carvings and ornamental detailing, as observed in the sculptural components of the Rameshwara Temple at Keladi.

Timber constituted an important secondary material, reflecting long standing building traditions of the Western Ghats and coastal Karnataka. High quality woods such as teakwood and rosewood were employed for pillars, beams, ceilings, and other structural and ornamental elements, particularly in mandapas and palace interiors. The Keladi temple complex notably preserves an exquisitely carved rosewood ceiling in the Parvati Temple, which exemplifies the advanced woodcraft and aesthetic refinement patronized by the Nayakas.

Bricks and lime mortar were commonly used in smaller shrines, superstructures, and later architectural additions. Lime mortar of this period was technologically sophisticated, often incorporating organic additives such as plant extracts containing carbohydrates and proteins to improve binding strength, elasticity, and longevity. Stucco was extensively applied over brick and stone surfaces, particularly on gopurams, to create elaborate figures of deities, demons, animals, and mythological narratives.

Construction Techniques of Malnad region is: Interlocking granite masonry for plinths, Mortise-and-tenon wooden joints for mandapa roofs, Copper-sheet cladding to protect vimanas, Use of laterite blocks in some subregions. These demonstrate the technical adaptation to climate and terrain.

Conservation Challenges: Malnad temples face: Excessive moisture and biological growth, Timber decay due to high humidity, Unregulated modern renovations, Loss of wooden sculpture due to termites and fungal attacks, Conservation requires climate-sensitive techniques, traditional carpentry skills, and careful restoration guidelines.

2.3 Ecological and Material Context

The Western Ghats' heavy monsoon rains, dense forests, and abundant wood resources profoundly influenced temple construction. Key architectural impacts include: Preference for durable granite and schist for structural components. Extensive use of hardwood for superstructures, mantapas, and decorative brackets. Steep roof forms to withstand rainfall. This ecological adaptation distinguishes Malnad temples from the high-soapstone decorative idiom in the Karnataka plains.

2.4. Architectural Typologies

Single-Shrine Temples: These temples typically consist of Garbhagriha, Antarala, Simple mandapa supported by wooden or granite pillars, Minimal external ornamentation. **Multi-Shrine Complexes:** In centres influenced by Hoysala and Vijayanagara patronage, larger trikuta or chatuskuta complexes appear, though often scaled modestly to suit hilly terrain. **Wooden Temples and Hybrid Structures:** Uniquely Malanadu features include: Wooden mandapas with intricate carvings, Compound walls and gateways framed with timber, Roofs clad in tiles or copper sheets. This hybrid stone-and-wood construction is a hallmark of Keladi-Nayaka architecture.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1. Architectural Features of Malnad Temples: The temple architecture of the Malnad region of Karnataka is predominantly characterized by the Hoysala style, an offshoot of the Karnata Dravida or Vesara tradition. This style, which flourished from the 11th to the 14th centuries, is known for its intricate carvings, unique star-shaped plans, and the use of soft soapstone as a primary building material.

3.2. Plan and Elevation

Stellate Plan: A prominent feature is the temple's ground plan, often a staggered square or a star shape, which creates numerous angles and recesses along the outer walls. This design maximizes the surface area available for intricate carvings and creates a dynamic play of light and shadow.

Raised Platform: Most of the temples are built on a raised platform called a jagati. This platform serves as a circumambulatory path for devotees and also follows the complex.

Vimana and Shikhara: The *vimana* tower is typically pyramidal and multi-tiered, often described as having an undulating or curved profile, which is distinct from the vertical *shikhara* of North Indian temples. The towers were historically topped with a kalasha, although many superstructures have not survived intact.

Lathe-Turned Pillars: The mantapas of the temples feature numerous pillars, many of which are lathe-turned into various circular or multifaceted shapes. No two pillars are identical, showcasing the artisans' innovation.

4. MAJOR TEMPLES IN THE MALNAD REGION: SHIMOGA AND NORTH CANARA DISTRICTS

The Malnad region of Karnataka, particularly Shimoga and North Canara districts, is known for its rich temple architecture influenced by the Kadambas, Chalukyas, Hoysalas, and Keladi Nayakas. The temples reflect a blend of Dravidian, Vesara, and regional Malnad architectural traditions.

Keladi Rameshwara Temple is Built in the 16th century by the Keladi Nayakas, this temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Features of this temple is Combination of Dravidian and Hoysala styles, Ornate pillared mandapa, Intricate stone carvings and use of granite suited to Malnad climate. It reflects the political and cultural power of the Keladi dynasty.

Aghoreshwara Temple at Ikkeri: The Aghoreshwara Temple in Ikkeri demonstrates a fusion of Vijayanagar massing and local craft techniques. Constructed in the 16th century, this is one of the finest examples of Keladi architecture.

Features: Vesara style architecture, massive stone pillars, Sculptural panels depicting Shaiva themes, Spacious prakara.

Rameshwara Temple- located in Thirthahalli town, this temple offers a comparative architectural model. This is Ancient Shaiva temple near River Tunga and Dravidian sanctum plan with Granite walls and carved doorframes and Mandapa with lathe-turned style pillars influenced by Hoysala and Vijayanagara idiom. Architectural Significance of this temple is Represents transition from early medieval to later Nayaka period architecture and more structured and historically layered than village shrines

Kalanatheshwara Temple at Argha- Araga village in Thirthahalli taluk lies in the core Malnad belt of the Western Ghats. Temple architecture here reflects heavy rainfall, forest ecology, local granite availability, and strong village-based ritual traditions. Most shrines are medium or small-scale structures that combine Dravidian planning with Malnad vernacular roofing systems. Temple plan is Simple garbhagriha, ardhmandapa and small navaranga and Material is used Locally quarried granite blocks Superstructure is Modest Dravidian-style shikhara Roofing is Sloped tiled or sheet roofing over mandapa Pillars is Plain square granite pillars with minimal ornamentation.

Lakshmi Venkataramana Temple the Plan is Sanctum, Mukha mandapa sometimes circumambulatory path. Materials used for this temple Granite base; laterite or brick superstructure in some sections. Roofing is Steep sloping roof with Mangalore tiles.

Architectural Significance of these temples are Hill temples in Malnad emphasize visual dominance and pilgrimage experience. Combines Dravidian sanctum plan with Kerala-Malnad sloped roof typology. Less sculptural density compared to Hoysala temples; emphasis is devotional rather than ornamental. These Temples are Climate Adaptation- Heavy rainfall, steep sloping roofs, raised granite plinths to prevent water damage, Material Used Granite for sanctum and plinth, Laterite blocks in secondary structures, Timber beams for roofing support, Limited sculptural decoration, Focus on ritual utility over monumental aesthetics, Functional mandapas for village gatherings

Mahabaleshwar Temple at Gokarna- An important Shaiva pilgrimage center, associated with the Atmalinga. Temple Architecture Features are Dravidian style temple, Tall shikhara, Granite construction and Significant pilgrimage centre in South India.

Chaturmukha Basadi A 16th-century Jain temple built during the Salva's of Gerusoppa in Honnavara Taluk Architectural Features are Four-faced structure, Symmetrical architecture and Granite construction its Represents Jain architectural tradition in Malnad

Chandranath Basadi at Bhatkal - A significant Jain temple in Bhatkal. The Architectural Features are Classical Jain architectural layout, Carved pillars and Regional stylistic adaptation.

5. Comparative Analysis and Themes This study highlights several cross-regional themes: Political Patronage vs. Local Innovation: Dynastic support established major centres, but village artisans and ritual communities sustained vernacular temple building. Climate and Materiality: Heavy monsoon influenced roof forms, stone selection, and structural robustness. Ritual Pluralism: Coexistence of Shaiva, Vaishnava, Shakta, and even Jaina traditions in the religious landscape.

6. CONCLUSION

Temples in Malanad reflect a dynamic architectural and cultural continuity shaped by geography, polity, and ritual practice. The region's temple heritage enriches Karnataka's broader architectural narrative, bridging interior plateaus and coastal lowlands. Future research should map lesser-studied rural shrines and conservation needs to expand understanding of Malnad temple legacy. They reflect a continuous dialogue between ecology, craftsmanship, dynastic influence and ritual life. Unlike major temple centres in the plains, Malnad temples embody subtle aesthetic traditions and hybrid styles born of necessity and cultural adaptation. Their study enriches our understanding of Karnataka's architectural diversity and highlights urgent conservation needs. These temples represent a significant phase in Karnataka's temple architecture. While Shimoga temples highlight Keladi Nayaka patronage and Shaiva traditions, North Canara exhibits both Hindu and Jain architectural developments. Together, they illustrate the cultural diversity and architectural adaptation of the Malnad region.

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