

# **An Aesthetic Analysis of Architecture and Wood Carvings: Mirkula Devi Temple, Himachal Pradesh, India**

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**ABSTRACT:** Himalayas known as abode of snow is not only a geographical feature for India rather it is abode of gods, and entrusted India a unique cultural and aesthetic dynamism. Sumptuous in forest and cultural heritage, the western part of Himalayas forming modern Himachal Pradesh preserves a rich tradition of woodcarving since hoary past. There are age-old temples made in cedar wood, which still exist in the valley of river Spiti presenting marvels of woodcarving in classical sophisticated style patronized by the royalty and other side indigenous style of native people. Thus, the said valley presents a wide range of artistic woodcarvings and a legacy of unique traditional building practice known as kath-khuni construction. Now, in recent years' modernization and developmental programme besides linking remote parts of Himachal to the main stream of Indian national development has threatened the traditional arts and heritage. This study mainly confines to the wooden temple of Mirkula Devi survived in the region of Spiti valley. The study presents holistic aesthetic view on the classical and indigenous Architecture known as Kath-Kuni and woodcarvings. There has hardly been any in depth study on folk and aboriginal art in the said area. Therefore, data collection and photographic documentation fully depended on extensive fieldwork. This became only possible with the help of local people and civil authorities in concerned region.

**KEYWORDS:** Himalayan architecture, Temple architecture, Spiti Valley, wood carvings

## **Introduction**

Himalayas known as abode of snow is not only a geographical feature for India rather it is abode of gods, and entrusted India a unique cultural and aesthetic dynamism. Sumptuous in forest and cultural heritage, the western part of Himalayas forming modern Himachal Pradesh preserves a rich tradition of woodcarving since hoary past. There are age-old temples made in cedar wood, which still exist in the valley of river Spiti presenting marvels of woodcarving in classical sophisticated style patronised by the royalty and other side indigenous style of native people. Thus, the said valley presents a wide range of artistic woodcarvings and a legacy of unique traditional building practice known as kath-khuni construction. Now, in recent years' modernisation and developmental programmes besides linking remote parts of Himachal to the main stream of Indian national development has threatened the traditional arts and heritage.

Kath-khuni is a type of cator-and-cribbage building which employs locally available wood and stone as prime materials for construction. The origin of the term is explained by O.C. Handa (2008) as '...combination of two local terms: kath and kuni. The word kath is a dialectal variation of the Sanskrit word kashtth, which means wood, and kuni is again a dialectical variation of the Sanskrit word kona, that is, an angle or a corner. Obviously, the kath-khuni wall implies it should have only wood on its corner or angles.' There are several variations observed from region to region. It is also known as kath-kona, kath-ki-kanni, koti banal in Uttarakhand etc (Sahapedia n.d.) (Figure 1).

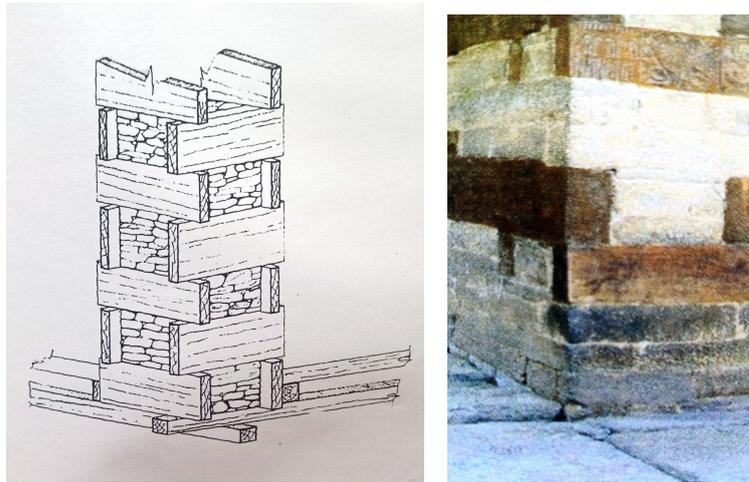


Figure 1. Arrangement of wood and stone  
 Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Drawing) and Photographer

The temple of Mirkula is situated at Udaipur in Lahoul, a small village high up in the north western Himalaya at a height of 2600 meters above mean sea level. The former name of the village was Marul or Margul, possibly name after the Miyra Nala. It was renamed as Udaipur in 1695 when Raja Udai Singh (1690-1700) annexed the part of Lahul to the Chamba state.

As per ground plan (Figure 2), the temple faces east direction, which consists of rectangular high plinth on which main shrine is erected. It is remarkable example of timber architecture. Though it bears evident traces of reconstruction and partial renovation, it has marvellously withstood, like Lakshana temple of Bharmaur in Chamba, the rigors of the climate and even the perils of human vandalism. It does not look impressive from outside but the interior preserves exquisite woodcarving and an Astadhātu idol of Markula Devi.

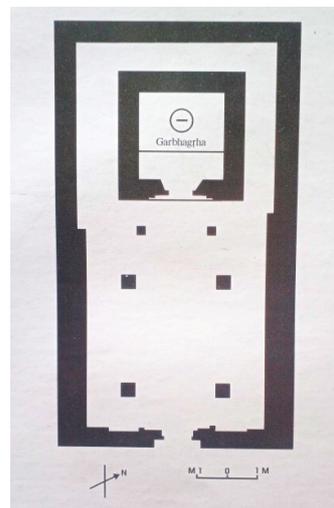


Figure 2. Ground Plan, Mirkula Devi Temple  
 Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Drawing)

A Pradaksinapatha having unequal space from the north, south and west detaches the square sanctum measuring 2.22 metre across inside, 3.20 meter by 3.26 metre outside from the enclosing walls. On the eastern side, there is a Mandapa with a broad balcony window on the south and a ceiling supported by six pillars. The whole shrine measures about 6.20 metre by 11.00 metre.

The northern walls of the sanctuary proper and mandapa have been dug almost into the hills as the interval between the wall and the hill has been filled-up with rough stones in order to

reduce the danger of snow pressure. The walls consist of rubble filled in between rafters. On the southern side, there are vertical wooden posts at wide intervals; the space between them has been covered with horizontal beams alternatively arranged with stones. The outermost west wall is bulging out and may collapse at any time.

The richness of Deodar woodcarving is truly stunning. However, they do not belong to the same period. They may be divided chronologically into two if not three groups. The first group comprises the façade of the sanctum, the ceiling panels of the Mandapa, four main pillars supporting the ceiling and two window panels. To the second group belong the architraves of the ceiling, two additional pillars in front of the façade and two Dvarapalas flanking the Mandapa.

The doorway can be seen as a further development from the Laksna and Shakti temples of Bharmour, Chamba (Postel, Neven and Mankodi 1985, 48) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Façade of the Temple  
Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Photographer)

The doorway leading to the cella measures 65 cm by 115 cm. It consists of jambs and lintels, which are not arranged in usual succession of receding one after the other but, have considerably gone under change. The outermost set of jambs is divided into three arched niches. Two lowermost niches measuring 32 cm by 96 cm are supported by miniature Yaksha between two lions on each side. They enshrine Ganga and Yamuna, standing on makara and tortoise respectively. The second set of niches measure 31 cm by 58 cm and ends in big Kirttimukha mask spouting forth foliage. The niche on the right doorjamb encloses a standing four-armed deity holding a Shakti and a pot, whereas the left hand rests on the hip.

The next two jambs composed of flowers with open-faced rosettes and lotus placed at wide intervals, run right around the doorway. The next set of doorjambs consists of five niches on both sides. These niches enclose ten Avatars of Vishnu; the right one shows Matsya, Nrsimha, Vamana, Krishna, Vishnu (with boar and lion heads perhaps Vaikuntha) and Buddha in Bhumisparsh-Mudra at the top (Singh and Sharma 2008, 109).

On the left jamb are shown Kurma, Varaha, Parasurama, Rama, and Kalki. Four lower niches end in scrollwork arches, while the topmost one ends in a horizontal lintel with a broad Kashmiri capital.

Then follow the other two friezes, which are decorated with round moulding and winding creeper. The next frame again consists of four oblong niches enclosing four dancing apsaras on each side. The innermost jamb is carved with scroll motifs.

Likewise, lintels are also carved. The second lintel is decorated with round moulding showing Kirttimukha mask in the centre, followed by lotus-petals. Below it, there are five miniature niches. Each chapel enshrines a cross-legged deity flanked by a depressed arch resting on two pillars; while on the crown of the arch is Kalasha ending in a high pinnacle stands. A

towering gable (reminiscent of a Pagoda temple) caps the whole niche, i.e. two superimposed capped triangles crowned with the Amalaka. The two peacocks have been depicted on the niches of the lateral corners. The next lintel, which has been arranged more or less in similar fashion enclose only three chapels with the deities. The four-armed deity, Mangala sitting on a ram holds two Trishuls, a sceptre and a water vessel in his four hands. The central one can easily be identified as Surya, who is sitting in a chariot drawn by seven horses and holding a sceptre and a water vessel. These eight deities are probably the figures of Grahas but their usual number is nine who are regularly placed over the entrance of the Brahminical temples.

Probably, this shrine originally was dedicated to Surya, thus Surya image was also on lintel of garbhagrha (Figure 4). The next lintel shows five figures projecting from ornamental friezes carved between the capitals of the innermost doorjamb. The main deity carved on the Lalata-Bimba represents Surya sitting on a chariot drawn by seven horses. The other figures show two Gandharvas on each side playing “cymbals, bow-harp and staff-cithara”. The innermost lintel is decorated with scroll foliage.



Figure 4. Image of Surya at Lalatabima  
Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Photographer)

The ceiling rests on four pillars. It consists of nine unequal panels of which four are smaller squares, decorated with broad lotuses; other panels are rectangles with finely carved figures (Figure 5). They form a border for the central piece.



Figure 5. Corbelled Ceiling of garbhagrha, divided into nine bays  
Source: Sharma, Shuchita (Photographer)

It is arranged in the usual lantern style by means of two sets of four triangular corner pieces, each decorated with ornamental Kirtimukha and borders of half-squares and half-rosettes. The central rosette consists of four circles of petals enclosing a centrepiece with another border of petals. The fourth circle is decorated with a chain of Vajras. The spandrels between the rosette and the corners of the quadrangle are filled with relief of flying goblins. Many details of the ceiling correspond to the ceiling of the Pandrethan temple in Kashmir, showing socio-religious interactions between these two regions (Thakur 1996, 95, 96,98).

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