



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development



- ✓ Indexed Journal
- ✓ Refereed Journal
- ✓ Peer Reviewed Journal

IJMIRD 2014; 1(7): 81-84
www.allsubjectjournal.com
Received: 10-11-2014
Accepted: 03-12-2014
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979

Nasir Raza Khan
Assistant Professor
Academy of International
Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia
(Central University),
New Delhi 110025, India

Medieval Architecture of India: A Source of History (From 12th to 18th Century)

Nasir Raza Khan

Abstract

Architecture is a record of continuous evolution. Architecture is a valuable art of expression of human mind through the ages. It is also an inseparable part of the history of any civilization. In this respect, medieval architecture of India can compare with other sources that provide information of historical importance. It reveals not only the glory and opulence of its time but other aspects of contemporary culture and civilization associated with a particular monument. A scholar of history in the course of his or her study basically takes stock of contemporary literary sources to corroborate available evidence. In the same way, he or she cannot ignore the architecture of the concerned period. We can study the monuments from the point of study of this style. Inscriptions also work as important source material to study the socio-economic condition of a particular period. Architectural development can be seen as the process of development of any civilization. Today in India monuments of difference categories, like, religious, social, public welfare [*sarai* (inns) and *baolis*, (stepwell)] are stand with their past glory and have become an integral part of the cultural heritage of our country.

Keywords: Architecture, monuments, Turks, Afghans Mughals, *sarai* (inns) and *baolis*, Harappan culture, Mosque.

1. Introduction

Architecture is a valuable art of expression of human mind through the ages. It is also an inseparable part of the history of any civilization. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica defines 'Architecture' as the art and technique of building employed to fulfil the practical and expressive requirements of civilized people.^[1]

In this respect, architecture can compare with other sources that provide information of historical importance. It reveals not only the glory and opulence of its time but other aspects of contemporary culture and civilization associated with a particular monument. A scholar of history in the course of his or her study basically takes stock of contemporary literary sources to corroborate available evidence. In the same way, he or she cannot ignore the architecture of the concerned period. We can study the monuments from the point of study of this style. Inscriptions also work as important source material to study the socio-economic condition of a particular period.

Architecture, according to Ibn Khaldun, is one of the necessary crafts. "This is the first and oldest crafts of sedentary civilizations...using houses and mansions for cover and shelter...to avert the harm arising from heat and cold, by the construction of walls and roofs that intervene between man and those things on all the sides."^[2]

R. Nath pointed out that "architecture constitutes a reliable chronicle in stone which can[not]...be forged... it is a stamp of an age and a people - of their tastes, beliefs, values, achievements, ideas and skill, everything that makes up a civilization...is most truthfully imprinted upon its monuments."^[3] Architecture, according to Ibn Khaldun, is one of the necessary crafts. "This is the first and oldest crafts of sedentary civilizations...using houses and mansions for cover and shelter...to avert the harm arising from heat and cold, by the construction of walls and roofs that intervene between man and those things on all the sides."^[4]

Prof. Mujeeb feels that architecture is a poetic instinct which combines imagination to basic need with a fair touch of delicacy.^[5] It is further elaborated by the allied arts of sculpture and painting. In Fabri view "architecture, just as painting sculpture and poetry, is a result of prevailing attitude and fashions; and each age brings forth a style that is characteristic of the people, and reflects, like a clean mirror, the taste of the makers, their faith, their hopes, their

Correspondence:

Nasir Raza Khan
Assistant Professor
Academy of International
Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia
(Central University),
New Delhi 110025, India

ideas and their stage of civilization.”^[6] When we speak about the architecture of any period and place it does not mean only the grand buildings and palaces; a small piece of creation can be called a masterpiece of architecture and it can be valuable to the historian, as can isolated remnant. The monolithic pillars of the king Ashoka are a fine example of this category.

Hence since architecture as whole can be said to include most of the activities of a culture and civilization. Besides monuments of religious and social importance it comprises town planning, bridges, step-wells, *sarais* etc. with a scientific approach for the betterment of the common man. Archaeological excavations that reveal architectural techniques have become an undeniable source of historical importance, unfolding the unknown past. The excavation of ancient Babylonian civilization and of the Harappan culture in India are the best examples to prove that instead of any written information, architectural discoveries wrote some of the most important history of the past.

From the earliest times to the present day, in the evolution of architecture, six elements have wielded influence in various ways. These are the elements of geography, geology, climate, religion, society and history.^[7] Over time, architecture, evolved, moulded and adapted it to meet the changing needs of nations in their religious, political and domestic development. Geographical factors played an important part in the development of art and architecture. According to A.J. Qaisar, “climate influences the form of dwellings, a fact recognized by every architect in the past.”^[8] The social value accorded religion in society, it revealed by architecture. There is enough evidence to suggest that the lofty religious structures were not merely for worship - they became the centre of social activities as well. Religious beliefs and social practice, in turn, also played a significant role in the development of architecture. For instance, in India the architectural models adopted by the various major religio-social groups have served to distinguish them from others and establish their religious identity. For example, the vastness and openness of the mosque, signifies the congregational value of worship. We find that after the establishment of the Islamic world, different methods were adopted and developed to facilitate the evolving needs of the Faithful. The construction of the façade with a screen in front of the prayer hall, with its lofty arches and domes was meant to make the sermon of the *Imam* loud and clear to the assembled. Similarly, *minars* added to the Mosque to enhance the call or ‘*Azan*’ of the *Mu’ezzin*, in due course of time became a permanent feature and the identity common to all mosques.

The advent of Turks in India (1192 AD) was a milestone in Indian architectural history. Turks brought with them a highly developed technique of architecture from their ancestral land, Central Asia. They introduced the new technique, which was a new feature for Indian artisans. The decorative features, which were introduced by the Turks, were also different from the parent arts. Turkish and prevailing Indian practices intermingled and the consequences could even be seen in their homeland. For example in the panel of *Bibi Khanam’s* mosque in Samarqad (present day Uzbekistan), certain Indian features are to be found. The intermingling of forms is apparent in the inlay work of this mosque’s panel.

In structural terms, there are perhaps four basic dimensions for any structure, i.e., walls, columns, beams and arches.

What distinguishes one architectural form or style from other is the manner in which these dimensions are combined with the materials of construction and the subsequent type of decoration.^[9] From this point of view, the specific terms for construction used by the Turks, Afghans and Mughals in India were arches, domes, minarets, *mehrab*s, geometrical and floral patterns, and calligraphy in the Arabic and Persian languages on stone. All of these were quite distinct from such elements in pre-Turk India.^[10]

Here a basic question that arises is how to ascertain the age and period of a particular building or edifice. The answer is to be found in the history and development of architecture of the concerned period. It is the designs, features, material and techniques which basically reveal the period in which an edifice was built. For example, the Quwwat-ul-Islam (Might of Islam) mosque and the Qutb Minar are the first buildings that came to exist after the establishment of the Turkish power in India. It is evident that the Turks were not familiar with the Indian soil but they had a need for a mosque to serve their religious needs. The building plans and techniques brought by them were new and unfamiliar to the ruled, so the artisans, who were certainly Indians, took whatever was easily available from the surrounding areas and utilized it to build the mosque. Out of the result of this makeshift arrangement emerged the shape of a long, columned hall, built in corbel style and over-roofed by conical domes (which were also built in trabeated^[11] style).

In the early stages of the Sultanate period, the builders faced a serious dilemma on the issues of structural and architectural forms, and on those of building material and the system of ornamentation. It took some time before Indian artisans, on whom the builders had to depend, could get completely used to Central Asian style and design.^[12] The initial conflict between these two art form can be easily seen at the *Quwwat-ul-Islam* mosque in Delhi and *Arhai-Din-Ka-Jhopra* in Ajmer. The arches and domes are built not in arcuate style but in the prevailing corbel system. Furthermore, its building material came from the temples. The result was that the mosque when completed turned out to be almost indigenous in character and design.

Adjacent to the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque is the Qutub Minar. This was probably built to mark the victory of the Turks. When we look at the aesthetic sense of the Minar, Prof. Mujeeb rightly observes, “The Turks wanted to create a symbol of power and stability. With its upward surge, expressed in the taper and in the almost organic emergence of one storey from another, the Qutub Minar is such a symbol. But local sculpture also put its stamp on it, and those who have seen it will know that beauty is the only power that endures.”^[13]

In the middle of 13th century architectural development turned a new leaf, which is clearly evident from the *Alai Darwaza*. Built by Allauddin Khilji (1296-1316), it is a fine example of Central Asian art. In this structure, we can easily identify the amalgamation of two different art styles. Alauddin’s addition of a new concept, the “*madarsa*” (school for religious instruction), built in the Central Asian style was also a unique innovation of its kind on the new level. In the Tughlag period (1321-1414), suppressed domes were further elevated on a large neck. The use of ‘*Kalash*’ as a decorative form can be seen on the top of the domes. This is a unique characteristic of the Tughlaqs which is also repeated in the Sur era. While studying the architectural features of a particular building, much importance is to be given to two

distinct features. One is the style and the technique used and the second is the aesthetic taste of the particular building. In this context, if we examine the Alai Darwaza we find that the well-proportioned, beautiful arched doorways and the bridging of the four corners with the help of squinches^[14] are in true scientific style, while the decorative ornamentation appears like a piece of sculpture. This gives a unique character to this art which became a common feature for successive dynasties. As R. Nath observes, "Alai Darwaza is the first Muslim monument in India which marks the absorption and assimilation of several inspirations in its body fabric and which revolutionized the whole art of building by the proclaimed success of its innovations."^[15]

The architecture of Tughlaqabad is an indicator to the need for safety the emperor felt and, therefore, this decision to build a huge fort to protect himself. A study of the fort architecture of Tughlaqabad, as it exists today, reveals planning and steps for protection. Ditches were dug around the fort to keep the invaders away from the wall. Here the use of trabeate style in roofing the building is also seen in a manner, which became a model for subsequent Tughlaq architecture. In this period were also introduced the *Jharokha*^[16] (projecting balconies) as seen in the *Madrasa* of Ferozshah Tughlaq (1351-1388) in Hauz-i Khas, Delhi.

The first major change in the field of architecture took place in the period of Mohamad-bin-Tughlaq (1325-1351). Prior to this, architectural development was confined to religious as well as royal structures. Now, for the first time, we find the architectural manifestations of the schemes of public welfare. For example, a barrage called '*satpula*' was built. This was intended to regulate the supply of water from an artificial lake and was used as a reservoir during the hot season.^[17] It was a landmark in the field of public-welfare architecture which certainly has provided an inspiration towards the further development of water management and irrigation.

The basic differences in architecture of the Sultanate and Mughal period lies in approach, design and practice. The Sultanate period almost followed a uniform style, design and plan with minor changes, while the imperial Mughals experimented with different techniques and design. During Akbar's regime a serious attempt was made to combine and unite different cultural aspects into practical values. The policy of making 'peace with all' at large is most apparent in the field of fine art. Stone carving, use of brackets and beams to construct a monument became a unique feature of Akbar's architecture. In the building art of Fatehpur Sikri, we find an architectural illustration of Akbar's concept of sovereignty, clearly evident from the design and planning of the *Diwan-i Khas* in the royal palace, a square building full of sculpture. Its large central hall has a big central pillar, with an inverted lotus as its capital. This pillar is exotic from the architectural point of view and demonstrates the theory of kingship of Akbar. It allows the king seated in the centre, surrounded by his nobles on all sides, thereby reflecting that the King is the nucleus of the empire and central to its administration, with the nobles supporting him.

The monuments and buildings of Fatehpur Sikri are also the visual embodiment of various regional styles of architecture in a pre-meditated manner to achieve a harmonious blend. Various regional features such as the Char Chala Chaat (Vagun Vaulted Roof) of Bengal, the *jalis* (perforated screens) of Gujarat, the *chattris* of Rajasthan and the high and solid building style of Malwa are evident in various monuments. The use of marble and pietra dura work carried

out with semi-precious stones to enhance the beauty of the monuments is a further proof of the advent of technical skill in this period. It also testifies to the economic prosperity of the empire.

In order to elucidate our point, we must look for a while at provincial architecture that came to exist between the 13th and 14th centuries. The art historian Percy Brown rightly describes provincial architecture as "that mode of building practice in some of the more self-contained portions of the country, usually after their governors had thrown off the allegiance to Delhi, and proceeded to develop a form of architecture in accordance with their individual ideas."^[18]

Of the several factors that served as a platform in the development of a provincial style, major influence was the parental art of Delhi. Where a province was for a long period more closely associated with central power, the effect of Sultanate architecture became more strongly marked, while in the more distant parts of the country, this influence was less noticeable. Another important factor in the establishment of the provincial style was the character and degree of the indigenous art prevailing in the concerned province.^[19] Yet another factor that came into play was the climatic conditions, which naturally affected the character of the building art.

In architecture, changes in different regions took place due to various respective regional influences. For example, between the 13th-15th centuries, we find that at a time when Central Asian art was being given more importance in Delhi, Gujarat was witnessing an emphasis on sculptural art. Rani Separi (also known as Rani Sabari) mosque in Ahmadabad, built in the composition of arcuated^[20] and trabeate style, is a fine example of sculptural art. Another notable feature of this mosque is the presence of sculptures of two swans placed on either side of its entrance. As per Hindu belief, swans are the vehicle of the Goddess of Learning, *Saraswati*. Since the mosque was also being used as a *madarsa* or place of learning, we find the use of the sculptures of swans to denote a place of learning. Despite religious restrictions, the rulers did not hesitate to adopt symbols that were already well-recognized by the majority of their subjects. The work of stone *jalis* (perforated screens) is also a notable feature of Gujarat architecture. Fine examples are to be seen at the mosques of Sayyid Usman (1461 AD), Rani Separi and Sidi Sayyid mosque (1515 AD). Here the *jali* work takes on gold filigree like delicacy. The use of perforated stone screen gave it a world-wide reputation. Havell pointed out that, "These are hardly less beautiful than the stained glass of the Western Gothic schro, with which Indo-Mohammadan architecture has many affinities and fulfilling a similar aesthetic idea with the modification necessitated by the requirement of a tropical climate."^[21]

In Malwa, there is lack of evidence of any tradition of regional art, and no specimens of architecture from ancient times exist. Therefore, the Muslim rulers of Malwa were constrained to look towards the Sultanate architecture of Delhi for inspiration. Several of their monuments show the impact of the Tughlaq style, with buttressed walls and narrow, lofty archways.^[22] A distinguishing feature is the attempt to give a visually recognizable shape to monuments as seen in Jahaz Mahal, Hindola Mahal etc. In Hindola Mahal, buttressed walls and roofs are designed to give the impression that the entire building is swaying. Another distinct development has been the high, raised plinth of buildings, not seen elsewhere till now.

In Rajasthan, Amber Palace and *Ganesh Pol* give an impression that the style flourishing under the Mughals has been conscientiously given a regional colour. This is because the regional governors under the Mughals tried to represent Imperial presence as well as their presence as the lord and master in the region. Another example is in Bihar where Mansingh, in the fort of Rohtasgarh, built a palace which is a replica of Fatehpur Sikri. Although this palace is inferior as far as the building material used is concerned, but the design itself shows Mughal presence in the area.

Architectural style also reflects the economic prosperity of the rulers during any given period. For example, in the buildings of Qutubuddin Aibak and Iltutmish, we do not find any sequence due to their uncertain sources of revenue. Allauddin Khilji's increased prosperity due to stable political conditions, a consolidated empire and assured quantum of revenue is reflected in his architecture. Buildings during the reign of Firoz Shah Tughlaq were built with rubble and plastered with lime and mortar because the extensive amount of architectural projects undertaken by him could not be supported by the shrunken revenue under an already declining Sultanate. The Sayyids could never achieve political stability, and therefore we find no major monument built by them. In comparison to the Sayyids and Lodis, the Sur dynasty was more stable, and this is also seen in their monuments. They built two huge forts and several small fortresses in different areas of their empire. They also built tombs and several *sarais* and *baolis* for public welfare.

The difference in economic stature of the Sultanate and Mughal periods is brought out by their monuments. The Akbar's Fatehpur Sikri was undertaken as a project where each and every detail was planned. Taj Mahal's construction was supervised by a special department set up exclusively for the purpose. Minute details of expenses on each and every item were recorded. Aurangzeb was greatly impressed by the Taj Mahal and he copied its design in the tomb of his wife Rabbia Durrani. Situated in Aurangabad, the tomb (Bibi Ka Maqbara) is, however, lacking in the finesse of the Taj. The building material used is much inferior, and use of marble at the first glance appears to be miserly. This is not because of Aurangzeb's lack of aesthetic sense, but due to the heavy financial burden of the war he was waging at that time in the Deccan.

2. Conclusion

If we confine medieval architecture of India architecture only within the framework of religion, we tend to overlook certain important features and their basic concepts. In the medieval period, the monuments that came into existence are marked by an amalgamation of different artistic concepts. Present in different areas and regions of the country, these silent historical monuments, which, more or less, have survived the vagaries of a thousand years of Time, stand witness to the skills of their architects and artisans, who conceived, planned and brought them into existence with meticulous care. Today these monuments stand with their past glory and have become an integral part of the cultural heritage of our country.

3. Reference

1. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edn. Chicago, 1987; 8:932.
2. Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddima*, eng. trs. F. Rosenthal, New York, 1958; 2:355.

3. Nath R. *Historiographical study of Indo Muslim Architecture*, 2nd edn., Jaipur, 1991, 21.
4. Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddima*, eng. trs. F. Rosenthal, New York, 1958; 2:355.
5. Mujeeb M. "The Qutub Complex as a Social Document" in *Islamic Influence on Indian Society*, Meerut, 1972, 116.
6. Charles Fabri. *An Introduction to Indian Architecture*, (Aligarh: AMU, 1963, 1.
7. Fletcher B. *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, London, 1961, 4.
8. Qaisar AJ. *Building Construction in Mughal India*, (Delhi Oxford University Press), 1988, 1.
9. Donald Hill. *A History of Engineering in Classical & Medieval Terms*, London, 1984, 98.
10. *Building Construction in Mughal India*, 1.
11. An arch constructed with a post and lintel. It is a contrast of arcuate. An arch constructed with a post and lintel. It is a contrast of arcuate.
12. Ziauddin Desai. *Mosques of India*, Delhi: Publication Division, 3rd edn., 1979, 14.
13. "The Qutub Complex as a Social Document", 121.
14. An arch placed diagonally at the internal angles of towers to bring them from the square to support the octagonal spire.
15. Nath R. *History of Sultanate Architecture*, Delhi, 1978, 74.
16. A platform projecting from a wall, supported by bracket or column.
17. *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, 1st edn., 1847, Republished 1854, ed. Khaliq Anjum, New Delhi, 1990; 3(2):332.
18. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture in Islamic Period*, Delhi, 1956, 32.
19. Sundar Rajan KV. *Islam Builder in India (A Cultural Study of Islamic Architecture)*, Delhi, 1983, 19.
20. A term applied to a building dependent structurally on the use of arches or the arch principle in contrast to a trabeated building.
21. Hovel EB. *Indian Architecture through the Ages*, Delhi, 1978, 12.1.
22. John Marshall. "The Monuments of Muslim India" in *Cambridge History of India*, ed. Haig, Vol. III, (Delhi, 1965, 617.