

Mughal Architecture I

Precedents, Sources and Influences

In 1526 a descendant of the Iranian house of Timur, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur defeated the last ruler of the Lodi dynasty at the first battle at Panipat. In contemporary eyes Babur's victory over Ibrahim Lodi was brought about merely changes in ruling power. However, well before the year 1600, during the reign of Babur's grandson, Akbar, it was clear that Mughal rule made a substantial impact on the cultural, economic, and political development of the lands it controlled. To quote Catherine B. Asher, "In the realm of architecture, the Mughals achieved master-builder status, producing monuments such as the Taj Mahal, which even today is considered one of the world's most magnificent buildings."

Unlike the contemporary and powerful Islamic rulers of Iran and Turkey, the Safavids and Ottomans, the Mughals ruled a land dominated by non-Muslims, largely Hindus. According to Asher, "Over their 300-year rule, Mughal attitudes toward the indigenous Indian population - Hindu and Muslim — varied; so did Mughal adaptation of earlier Indian art forms." During the earliest days of Mughal patronage, little attention was paid to India's non-Islamic architectural traditions. However, during the reign of the third Mughal ruler, Akbar (1556-1605), indigenous Indian elements, both Hindu and Muslim, were incorporated consciously into Mughal structures. Mughal architecture is the product of innovative genius that borrowed from Indian, Timurid and even European sources.

Catherine Asher has discerned several sources or precedents that inspired Mughal Architecture.

1. The Delhi Sultanate, 1192-1451

a) Among the earliest remaining Islamic monuments in India are the foundations of walled city and mosque at Banbhore near Thatta in Sind, Pakistan. The site was commenced shortly after the birth of Islam, and is probably the earliest Arab

settlement in the South Asian continent.

b) Other remains indicating an early Islamic presence include a tomb dated to the mid-twelfth century found at Bhadreswar in the coastal regions of Gujarat in western India.

c) However, in 1192, Qutb al-Din Aibek, a military commander of Muhammad of Ghori, defeated Prithviraj Chauhan in the second battle of Taraori. Within a few years, a great deal of north India was under Ghori control, and in 1206 Aibek asserted his independence from the Ghorids, declaring himself Sultan of India. He and his successors built architecture that served as one foundation of Mughal art. Among the first concerns of the conqueror was the construction of a congregational mosque, necessary for the legitimization of the sultan in this newly acquired territory. Aibek's first mosque, significantly now called the Quwwat al-Islam or Might of Islam, was erected in Delhi, the capital of the new Turkish rulers. Constructed from the architectural members of temples, the mosque in its first phases appears to be modeled loosely on a common form of Ghori-period mosques. Such mosques, following a general Iranian fashion, had a central open courtyard surrounded by cloistered halls on three sides; the prayer chamber was on the fourth side.

d) A rapidly growing Muslim population necessitated a larger mosque. Thus Aibek's structure was doubled in size by his son-in-law and successor, Iltutmish. Under Iltutmish, the subcontinent's first monumental tombs were built. The Qutb Minar was both constructed under Aibek and Iltutmish. No major Islamic structures remain in India that date between the death of Iltutmish in 1235 and the beginning of the fourteenth century.

e) However, under the Khalji Sultan Alauddin (ruled 1296-1316), architecture assumed renewed importance. Alauddin expanded the Quwwat al-Islam mosque to triple its original size and added the Alai Darwaza. By the Khalji period, Indo-Islamic culture had come into its own. Underscoring this is the contemporary work of Amir

Khusrau, still considered one of the greatest Indian poets. Writing in Persian, the official language of most Muslim courts and kings in India, Khusrau used motifs such as the parrot, mangoes and flowers only found in India to supplement Persianate imagery, such as cedars and tulips, alien to the subcontinent. By this time, many motifs - architectural and literary - had no strictly sectarian connotation. To call a motif Hindu or Muslim has little meaning, for elements such as the lotus or even trabeated architecture, still found in parts of Ala al-Din's extension to the Quwwat al-Islam mosque, are now part of a well-established architectural tradition developed under the Indian sultans.

f) Following the Khaljis, the Tughluqs emerged as the ruling power. In general, architecture under the Tughluqs became increasingly austere into the fourteenth century. For example, richly carved stone facades and interiors were replaced with plain stucco veneers, and Quranic inscriptions rarely embellished any structure. Few of the architectural forms and little of the ornamentation developed in their reign appear to have had any direct bearing on Mughal buildings. Nevertheless, the work of the Tughluqs foreshadows aspects of Mughal architecture.

2. The successor states of the Tughluqs

a) As central Tughluq authority over regional territories weakened, Tughluq governors asserted their independence, creating a series of successor states. In the case of Deccani and Bengali governors, ties were severed with the Tughluq masters as early as the mid-fourteenth century and most of these regions remained autonomous until the very beginning of the Mughal period.

b) Structures constructed in these areas during Tughluq domination or shortly thereafter are modeled closely on the Tughluq architecture of Delhi. For example, the first congregational mosque of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty (1352-1415; 1433-86) in Bengal, the Adina mosque of Pandua built in 1374, is inspired in both plan and overall appearance by Muhammad Shah Tughluq's congregational mosque in Delhi, the Begumpuri mosque (c. 1343) as was the early- fourteenth century Atala mosque

in Jaunpur, the first congregational mosque of the Sharqi dynasty.

c) However, buildings constructed after the initial phase of independence generally use plans and motifs indigenous to their area. This is a pattern also reflected in some of the late Mughal architecture of the provinces. The most dramatic examples of distinctly regional style are found in the architectural traditions of Bengal and Gujarat.

e) In Bengal, the form of the village hut with its sloping roof, well suited for heavy rains, was adapted for tombs and mosques. Similar roofs called *bangala* in Mughal documents are common in Mughal architecture commencing around the mid-seventeenth century.

f) A few motifs - among them the bell and chain - are common to the architecture of both Sultanate Bengal and the Mughals and these motifs are seen also in the Sultanate architecture of other realms, notably Gujarat.

g) In Gujarat, as in Bengal, architecture under the newly established Ahmad Shahi dynasty (1408—1578) assumed a distinctly regional character. Features found commonly on tombs, mosques and saints' shrines (*dargahs*) include ones such as serpentine-like gateways (*toranas*) or lintels above prayer niches (mihrabs), bell-and-chain motifs carved on pillars and walls, pillars supporting corbelled domes and ceiling insets, and carved panels often depicting trees, all ultimately derived from Gujarati temple traditions.

h) Because of these borrowings, some scholars have assumed a conscious and continued Hindu influence. However according to Asher, these features were first used by local Hindu artisans contracted to work on the Islamic architecture of the area, and their form became assimilated into the standard architectural repertoire. Thus when many of these same ideas appear in the architecture of Akbar, there is no reason to associate them with any particular sectarian tradition.

3. Immediate Mughal precedents: the Lodi and Sur traditions

After some hundred years, during which Delhi enjoyed little prestige, the Afghan-descended Lodi dynasty (1451-1526) made vigorous efforts to revive the city's status. The revival of Delhi was accelerated under the reigns of the first two Mughals, Babur and Humayun, who succeeded the Lodis. Following their reign, however, Mughal authority in India was briefly interrupted when the Delhi throne was assumed in 1540 by the Afghan ruler, Sher Shah Sur and his successors (1538-55). Under the Lodis a new type of mosque developed, one that ultimately became a major type in Mughal India. In lieu of the large congregational mosque favored under earlier Sultanate dynasties, small single-aisled mosques composed usually of three or five bays were constructed.

4. Non-Islamic sources

Secular architecture erected at this time under Hindu patrons had a substantial impact on subsequent secular buildings, notably those of the Mughals. One example, a magnificent one, is the Man Mandir palace built in Gwalior by Raja Man Singh Tomar. Among the few buildings admired by Babur in India, the palace is rightly regarded as having influenced Akbar in the design of his own palaces. Situated atop the high flat plateau of the ancient Gwalior fort, the palace's exterior is marked with a series of circular buttresses each surmounted by a high domed *chattri*, and the facade is embellished with tiles glazed predominantly blue or yellow. While the Gwalior palace's exterior influenced the inlaid mosaic facade of the Delhi gate in Akbar's Agra fort, the interior of this palace had an even greater impact on Akbar's architecture. The main body of the palace consists of a series of small connecting courtyards around whose perimeter are galleries containing rooms. These rooms have essentially flat roofs, a type that reappears in Akbar's Agra and Fatehpur Sikri palaces. Like subsequent Mughal palaces, the Gwalior palace makes use of animal brackets supporting the gallery eaves (*chajjas*), probably ultimately modeled on *torana* motifs, that are used both as wall ornamentation as well as functional devices.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MUGHAL ARCHITECTURE

In spite of a long-standing Islamic heritage in India, Mughal rulers considered themselves the rightful heirs of the Iranian Timurid tradition, which they felt was superior to Indo-Islamic culture. Important among Timurid artistic traditions adopted by the Mughals are those that had been maintained and further refined by a Timurid successor state, the Shaibanis of Bukhara. Their rule was contemporary with the beginnings of a Mughal domination of India. The Mughal Architecture in India developed certain characteristics that set it apart from all previous architectural styles. The first visually identifiable feature of Mughal architecture was the large scale use of the arches and domes. Domes and arches were introduced by the Delhi Sultanate but the Mughals brought about a radical change. This is seen in the use of double domes that added greatly to the splendour of Mughal Architecture. Sultani domes were flat low pitched while Mughal domes were grand and bulbous. The second feature was the large scale use of red sandstone unlike the previous usage of yellow sandstone. The third feature was the large scale use of white marble which was imported as building material. The heritage bequeathed to the new Mughal rulers and their subjects was a rich and varied one. It included Iranian, indigenous Indian and eventually even European forms and symbolism. This will be treated separately in the subsequent study materials.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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