

INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview The variety of architectural forms in India is due not only to a diversity of climate and building materials, but also to religious conventions and regionalism. Still, there is uniformity to many buildings attributable to the manuals (*sastras*) that codified designs and techniques. Architectural styles from Persia, central Asia, the Arab world and Europe entered the subcontinent and influenced pre-existing styles. Hinduised mosques, Islamised palaces and Indianised colonial homes illustrate the point that architecture in India is an evolving tradition but one that produces buildings that are recognisably Indian.

Pre-history Mud-brick houses dating from about 7000 BCE at Mehrgarh (in Baluchistan, Pakistan) are the earliest surviving examples of architecture in the subcontinent. More sophisticated techniques and larger buildings have been excavated in the cities of the Indus Valley civilisation and date from about 2500 to 1500 BCE. Monumental buildings in these cities include 'citadels' and a large tank.

Buddhist

Pataliputra A gap of more than a thousand years separates the Indus Valley from the beginnings of Buddhist architecture in the 3rd c. BCE. The remains of Emperor Ashoka's palace at Pataliputra, as well as pillars and columns inscribed with his edicts, suggest that they were influenced by Persian models of the Achaemenid Empire.

Stupa The chief architectural monument of the ancient and classical periods was the *stupa*. Essentially a funeral mound housing the relics of the Buddha, the *stupa* is also the first example of a religious structure built with stone in India. The oldest and most elaborate stupa at Sanchi is 16 metres high and 37 metres in diameter. Four gateways were added about 100 CE and then decorated with scenes of the Buddha's life.

Halls and Monasteries Somewhat later, halls (*caitya*) and monasteries (*viraha*) were built under Buddhist patronage in north India. The hall at Bodh Gaya (6th-7th c. CE) and the monastery at Nalanda (c. 9th c. CE) are two of the best-known buildings.

Hindu

Temples From the middle of the first millennium CE a new kind of religious structure was built for the worship and display of Hindu and Jain divinities. These buildings were largely built with stone, although brick and mortar continued to be used in areas where stone was not readily available. Hindu and Jain temples were built according to conventions and principles laid down in special texts (*sastras*), the most important being that the overall design was a symbolic representation of the universe. Continuity with Buddhist architecture is illustrated by the early Hindu temples excavated from rock, such as those at Elephanta, near Bombay.

Development These early rock-cave temples gave way to free-standing structures, surrounded by enclosed passageways. By about 1000 CE, temples were built as large interior spaces surrounded by fortress-like walls with high, sculpted towers. Several distinct styles developed at this time in peripheral regions, in the Tamil country, Kerala, Orissa and Bengal. Greater elaboration of porches, columns, doorways, ceilings and passageways culminated in the baroque temples of south India in the 16th-18th c. CE.

Islamic

Features From about 1000 CE, Muslim rulers in north India patronised Islamic architectural forms, of which the mosque, tomb garden, mausoleum and small tomb (*dargah*) are the primary types. Common features include domes, arches, vaults and a limited range of imagery (calligraphy, geometric designs and foliation), which derive from Islamic architecture in central Asia, especially the Timurid Empire.

Qutb Minar The earliest significant Islamic monument in India still stands in Delhi. The Qutb Minar is an array of monuments first constructed in 1192 CE and later added to by various rulers. Standing at 73 metres, the Tower of Victory is the tallest brick minaret in the world. The mosque there has a typical layout of a large courtyard surrounded by colonnades.

Deccan Later regional styles developed, particularly in the independent Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan. An impressive mosque at Gulbarga is entirely covered with a dome and vaulted bays, while the tombs at Golconda are equally spectacular. Built by the Qutb Shahi rulers in the 16th and 17th centuries CE, and once furnished with carpets and chandeliers, these domed mausoleums now stand abandoned.

Mughal Islamic architecture flourished during the Mughal Empire. Friday mosques (Jami Masquid) were built in red sandstone and white marble at the Mughal capitals in Delhi, Lucknow, Lahore, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. These monumental buildings, with large enclosed spaces, stand as symbols of the grandeur of the Mughals. The best-known is the Taj Mahal, built as a tomb garden for the wife of the emperor Shah Jahan.

Forts and Palaces

Forts Fortified cities, often small cities with massive walls, began to appear all over India from the end of the first millennium CE. Nearly constant warfare, between Muslim, Hindu and later European armies in ever-changing alliances, led to these impressive citadels. Many were built on hilltops, although others, especially in the Mughal capitals and the Vijayanagar capital, were laid out on flat ground.

Palaces Palace architecture predates the arrival of Islam, but only a few examples survive. The latter palaces at Vijayanagar are the best-preserved in south India, while grand palaces (now expensive hotels) are found in Rajasthan.

European

Colonial The Portuguese built a number of baroque churches in Goa in the 16th and 17th centuries. They also built less elaborate but still impressive churches, with tall spires, all along the southeast coast. In the 18th century, the British began to build churches, civic buildings and palatial homes. The Bombay Taj Hotel, which opened in 1903, is an example of European architects using Indian architectural traditions.

Modern In the early twentieth century, New Delhi was built as the new capital of British India by Lutyens, an English architect. The new city was laid out in a symmetrical design with large roundabouts and wide avenues leading to a complex of government buildings. These buildings synthesise Hindu, Muslim and European features in a new imperial subcontinental style. In the 1960s, the French architect Le Corbusier was commissioned to build a state capital at Chandigarh, and he produced a modernist city that both fascinated and enraged critics. Indian architects took inspiration from Le Corbusier (and Louis Khan who worked in Dhaka) and experimented with modernist forms and indigenous materials, favouring brick and concrete.

Reading

Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta, 1946)

George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India* (Cambridge, 1995)

George Michell, *The Hindu Temple* (Chicago, 1988)

Philip Davies, *Splendours of the Raj: British Architecture in India, 1660-1947* (John Murray, 1985)

Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge, 1992)

George Michell and Mark Zebrowski, *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Cambridge, 1999)

Philip Davies, *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India: Islamic, Rajput, European* (Penguin, 1990)

Vibhuti Charkbarthi, *Indian Architectural Theory* (Curzon, 1998)

Herbert Ypma, *Indian Modern: Traditional Forms and Contemporary Design* (Phaidon, 1994)

Discussion questions

The history of Indian architecture contains four main strands: Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and European. Analyse the interaction of these four strands by focusing on one architectural form for each: the Buddhist stupa, the free-standing Hindu temple, the Islamic tomb garden and the Christian church. There are obvious differences in form, but consider also any similarities in function. Can all of them, for example, be seen as funerary structures?

The mosque was the great architectural achievement of the Mughals, but it was the culmination of many centuries of history. Describe this development and consider the functions of a mosque. It is, of course, a religious structure but also much more. Analyse its social, political and economic functions within Indian Muslim culture.

The Qutb Minar in Delhi is a large architectural complex, almost like an archaeological site that contains historical layers of a culture. Analyse the Qutb Minar complex by studying its various layers. Why were the different structures built at different times? Who commissioned them? And who used them?

The architectural history of Delhi may be seen as a microcosm of much of Indian history. Describe the main events in that history and then identify its fundamental elements by comparing the Mughal period with the early 20th century creation of 'New' Delhi. While both Old and New Delhi were built by conquerors with magnificent buildings and parks, analyse the differences that lie behind this obvious similarity.