

# EARLY MODERN INDIAN CULTURE

*Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.*

(1500-1800 CE)

## Architecture

**Hindu** Some of the most ornate Hindu structures were built during this period, which saw a baroque elaboration of porches, columns, doorways, ceilings and passageways. Most of these buildings appeared in south India, where architecture developed with minimal Islamic influence. Splendid examples are the temple and palace at Madurai in Tamil Nadu and those at Trivandrum and Padmanabhapuram in Kerala (all 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

**Mughal** Indo-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.

**Regional** Regional Indo-Islamic styles also 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 domed tombs at Golconda are equally spectacular. Built by the Qutb Shahi rulers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and once furnished with carpets and chandeliers, these now abandoned mausoleums stand as symbols of a past glory.

**European** In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, shortly after they arrived on the west coast of India, the Portuguese built a number of baroque churches. They also built less elaborate but still impressive churches with tall spires in Madras and all along the southeast and southwest coasts.

## Sculpture

**South** The regional (or Nayaka) temples built during the early modern era in south India are distinguished by new kinds of sculpture. Royal and heroic figures, part of the emerging tradition of portraiture, were rendered in stone statues and carved on temple pillars. An outstanding example of the latter is the 'Hall of 1000 Pillars' at the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, showing local warrior-rulers seated on horse-back, as well as images of Siva and other deities.

**North** Sculpture under the Mughals also displayed a similar interest in large-scale human figures. Rajput heroes are shown seated on stone elephants at the gate to Agra Fort, and life-size marble statues of other Rajput warriors were erected in the palace garden at Agra. A more distinctly Islamic development was the decorative relief carving that embellished Mughal buildings, such as the delicate marble work on the walls of Akbar's tomb at Sikandra. Carved white marble stone was equally fashionable, as exemplified by the screen-work at the Taj Mahal.

## Mosaic

Mosaic and inlay decoration were another innovative feature of Mughal buildings. In the time of Akbar (r. 1556-1605), mosaics were made from small tesserae that were combined in Persian geometrical patterns. But in Jahangir's reign (1605-1627) *pietra-dura* began to be utilized for inlay work. Fine early examples are the water Palace at Udaipur and Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb at Agra. Many of Shah Jahan's (r. 1627-1658) buildings in the forts of Delhi and Agra were also decorated with *pietra-dura* inlay.

### Painting

**Hindu** The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the *bhakti* movement that developed in north India from the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE onward. Krishna and Radha, in particular, are wonderfully rendered on versions of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and a whole new genre of painting (*ragamala*) appeared, in which a series of images symbolised musical modes.

**Mughal** The Mughal Empire brought a significant change to painting. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, book-painting superseded wall-painting as the favoured form and developed into a visual art altogether separate from manuscripts and books. Even the names of individual artists were recorded. These changes were largely engineered by the eclectic genius of the Akbar (r. 1556-1605), the Mughal ruler who assembled a large contingent of artists from all over his empire and put them under the instruction of a Persian master-painter, supervised by himself. Later Mughal emperors continued to patronise 'miniature' painting, as did local rulers in the Deccan and Rajasthan.

### Music

**Hindustani** As with many other art forms, Hindustani (or north Indian) music reached a high point during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Most musicians today trace their lineage from Tansen, the great vocalist and instrumentalist at Akbar's court. However, the popular style of singing known as *khyal* and the modern style of playing the *sitar* both developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Carnatic** Historical evidence of early south Indian music is scant, but Purandara Dasa (1484-1564 CE) is considered the founder. Modern Carnatic music derives from the Maratha court at Thanjavur in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when three men composed the repertoire that defines the tradition today: Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835).

### Dance-Drama

**Regional** During this period of minor courts, dance and dance-drama forms evolved in many regions. Joining the already existing forms (Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu, Orissi in Orissa and Mohiniyattam in Kerala) were Kathakali in Kerala, Kathak in the Hindi heartland, Manipuri in the northeast state of Manipur and Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh. Most of these traditions combine body movements with narrative storytelling, supplemented by spectacular costumes, face-paint and headdress.

**Content** Overwhelmingly these traditions draw their content from Hindu myths and the two epics. The best-known of these dance-drama traditions is Kathakali, which began in 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE in Kerala. A similarly famous form in north India is Ram Lila, which was adapted from the Hindi *Ramcaritmanas* written by Tulsi Das in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

### Print

The printed book was introduced to India in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century by Portuguese

missionaries in Goa, and soon religious tracts (the Apostle's Creed, for example) were being published in Indian languages in both Roman and Tamil scripts. Only about 40 books (mostly in Latin, Konkani and Portuguese) were printed in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but this changed when Protestant missionaries set up a printing press in 1712 at Tranquebar on the southeast coast. By 1800, several presses in Madras and Calcutta were turning out hundreds of books (including translations, popular tales, geography, history and science).

### Religion

**Hinduism** Devotionalism continued to spread during this period, especially to the eastern corners of the subcontinent. Chaitanya in Bengal and Sankaradeva in Assam led popular movements promoting the worship of Visnu. In south India, the many little kingdoms supported local cults and the production of regional versions of Sanskrit myths, particularly in Tamil.

**Islam** The Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) encouraged a new kind of religion and court culture. He appointed officials from a wide range of backgrounds—Hindu, Muslim, Shia, Sunni, Persian, Afghan, Sufi, European—and he gathered around him scholars, theologians and poets from an equally diverse spectrum. Largely inspired by Sufi Islam, he encouraged a more tolerant Islam and abolished the traditional tax on non-Muslims. While other Mughal rulers took a more strident approach to non-Muslim populations, the cults of the Sufi saints still managed to form a bridge between Hindu communities and their Muslim rulers.

**Christianity** Although largely confined to the southwest and southeast coasts, especially to the towns of Madras, Cochin and Goa, Christianity gradually found a place in Indian society. Numbers of converts were few by 1800, but missionaries made major contributions to the study of regional languages and literatures by printing bilingual grammars and dictionaries, as well as various texts in Indian scripts. Controversy over the extent to which missionaries made concessions to local cultural practices led to the Jesuits being withdrawn from India (and other parts of the world) during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Reading

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

C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1990)

Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge, 1992)

Stuart Cary Welch, *India: Art and Culture, 1300-1900* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985)

Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (OUP, 2010)

Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)

Axel Michaels, *Hinduism. Past and Present* (Princeton, 2004)

Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Chicago, 1990)

Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2005)

Bonnie Wade, *Khyal: Creativity within North India's Classical Music* (Cambridge, 1984)

David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, 1980)

Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (OUP, Delhi, 1992)

## Discussion questions

Analyse the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar as a catalyst for cultural change. Identity its features and describe their novelty. Then assess the impact such an innovative and powerful court had on the surrounding culture.

One of the new influences in that Mughal court was the presence of Europeans. The Portuguese arrived at the beginning of the early modern period, and by the end the French, Dutch and English had established themselves. Analyse the origins of this colonialism by studying the Portuguese at Goa and Cochin on the west coast and Madras on the east coast, and their contacts with the Mughal and Vijayanagar empires. What was the nature of their interactions with local populations and courts? Were those first encounters with Indians a harbinger of what would come later? Compare this early colonialism in India with one other similar case (for example, in west Africa, Mesoamerica or Indonesia).

One of the major cultural achievements in this period was the Mughal miniature. Study the history of this art form, from its Persian origins to its early development under the Delhi Sultanate and then its 20<sup>th</sup>-century status as a favourite possession among elites in metropolitan centres all over the world. Analyse the reasons for its success as both an art form and a cultural symbol.

Sculpture in both Hindu and Islamic traditions took a distinctive turn during the early modern period. Large, life-size forms of historical and legendary warriors and rulers, as well as mythological deities, appeared for the first time. Some scholars have suggested that this development reflects a broader shift toward life-stories and biography in the period. Analyse these concurrent developments in sculpture and literature to determine whether they are related.