

Salient Features of Islamic Architecture – A Study

Vishnu S.S.

Ph.D. Research Scholar – Full Time (Reg. No.18113161081008)
Department of History and Research Centre
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629 003.
*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012,
Tamil Nadu, India.*

Dr. N. Amutha Kumari

Assistant Professor (Research Supervisor)
Department of History and Research Centre
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629 003.
*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012,
Tamil Nadu, India.*

Abstract

Islamic architecture followed the move from large tents in the countryside to huts in villages, then to buildings and long-standing monuments in cities. During this movement, architecture conveyed original features which were compatible with man's requirements, traditions and environment. It is regrettable that modern architecture has suddenly broken the link with this steady development – a break caused by the need for an easy and simple architectural style ushered into Islamic countries following the modernization of the Western city. This paper seeks to study the salient features of Islamic architecture.

Key words: *Islamic Architecture, Heritage, Modernization,
Contemporary Architecture*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic architectural heritage is a civilisational treasure that needs to be preserved and studied. We must also explain its features and benefits and work towards completing its development as to make it more suitable to the conditions of this age and its cultural plurality. Since architecture is the container of civilization and reflects the cultural identity and the creative and aesthetic levels of man, it is necessary to adhere to its originality and stave off alien architectural invasions which have transformed the character of the Islamic city, and have made of it a cosmopolitan city without any identity or soul, severed from its roots, from its environment and from human beings.

The true character of Islamic architecture reveals itself not through the mass of structural forms but through the “hidden architecture”, which is, as Ernst J. Grube, Professor of Islamic Art, University of Venice and Padua, explains, “architecture that truly exists, not when seen as monument or symbols visible to all and from all sides, but only when entered, penetrated and experienced from within... hidden architecture maybe considered the main and dominant form of truly Islamic architecture.”

Looking at the Islamic architecture from a different view point K.M. Shrimali, Professor of History, Delhi University, questions the use of the term ‘Indo-Islamic’ in the Indian context. He reads in it “the imperialist objective of fomenting a religious divide in India”, perpetuated by the European scholars, British administrator – cum-historians, art critics, etc. The use of the term Indo-Islamic architecture” to characterize the fusion of the two different cultural streams is rather jarring. A combination of unrelated components (geographical region and religion in this context) is a contrived formulation”, according to Shrimali.

The early historians of architecture in the Indian sub-continent perhaps found it easier to distinguish, by using the term “Indo-Islamic, the architecture of the sultanate, its regional variations, and of the Mughals from the architecture preceding the founding of the sultanate in A.D. 1192. No other term, however, so well covers various aspects or the architecture created by followers of Islam, irrespective of long distances separating Spain and India, Anatolia and Arabia. The Islamic architecture, spanning land between Spain and India, the steppes and Arabia is remarkable for its homogenous character. It is the faith in the prophet and Islam which holds them together and inspires their architecture.

Various factors contributed substantially to the evolution of the Islamic art in India. The Arabs who entered India had little liking for art. They could not comprehend the dignity and majesty of architecture. Contrary to this, the Turks were liberal patrons of architecture. They brought into India their system of architecture which was evolved in Persia and it was synthesized with the Hindu architecture. Wherever the Muhammadans established themselves whether in Asia or Africa or in Europe they invariably adopted to their own needs the indigenous architecture which they found prevailing there. Thus, the Muslim architecture had already become a heterogeneous product before it was introduced in India and the patronage of the Muslim rulers it assimilated in India new elements and enriched itself considerably.

The Muslims had added to the Hindu architecture the special characteristics of spaciousness, massiveness, majesty and width. The Arabs introduced mihrab or arch, dome, minar and tomb in the indigenous architecture. They had enriched design and beauty and adopted the use of coloured stones and glazed tiles to brighten the effect of colours. The endowed the buildings with has beauties of form and colour. The Muslim had evolved a architecture which was conditioned by the learning characteristics of Muslim mentality, practical needs of their religion and worship and the geography of their religion. The architecture brought to India by our Turkish conquerors was neither exclusively Muslim nor even wholly Arabian. The distinctive feature of the Muslim architecture were massive and extensive buildings aspiring domes, tall minarets, lofty portals, open courtyards, huge walls all bereft of sculpture. The Hindu architectures, on the one hand were characterized by vastness, stability majesty, magnificence, sublimity and infinite richness. The Hindus extensively

decorated their buildings with beautiful flowers, leaves and various deities. However, Muslims being conquerors, naturally introduced in buildings their own idea forms and method of construction. Their buildings were greatly influenced by indigenous art traditions and hence the new architecture that emerged was neither completely foreign nor purely Indian. It is worth-while to observe that when these two diverse cultures and architecture came into contact with each other, a new architecture developed which has been described as Indo Muslim or Indo-Islamic or Indo-Saracenic architecture.

The first systematic and comprehensive historical study of Indian architecture from a colonial perspective was undertaken by James Fergusson. He was a Scottish Indigo planter who, between 1835 and 1847 A.D, travelled widely, observed architects and workmen engaged in the construction of temples and conducted extensive survey of the different types of ancient buildings in India. Fergusson's first major publication on the history of Indian architecture, *On the Rock-cul-Temples of India*, presented as a lecture in 1843, appeared in 1846.

He not only compiled the first *Illustrated History of Indian Architecture*, but also evolved a system of classification of buildings which, for many years, remained the only tool for architectural surveys with his successors in the field. Fergusson's most detailed and representative study was his *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, whose first edition appeared in 1876.

The use of an "Indian style" could indeed be observed in a range of buildings during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in private homes, market halls, garden pavilions, conservatories, gateways, buildings for entertainment. As an architecture practice this was more wide spread than is usually believed. Throughout this period and into the early twentieth century, questions on the appropriateness of Indian styles – Hindu, Indo – saracenic or Anglo Indian, as they were popularly labeled – in English architecture continued to figure in the in discussions and debates amongst planners, architects and engineers.

Fergusson divided the history of Indian architecture into certain broad phase; the first phase, dating from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. and coinciding with the construction of the Buddhist monuments at Sanchi, Bharhut and Amaravati, marked the highest level of artistic achievement. All subsequent architecture until the coming of Islam was designated 'Hindu' by Fergusson and classified into stylistic groups following ethnic categories: the northern or Indo-Aryan; the southern or Dravidian; and a third racial group whom he names Dasyus, these neither Aryan nor Dravidian but interior to both.

The narrative of continuous decline, which formed a central principle of the first half of Fergusson's 'History' is interrupted by the author's handling of the Turkish conquest of northern India in the twelfth century. The advent of Islam, according to Fergusson, infused of fresh vigour in Indian architecture as it freed the artist from the 'trammells of puranic mythology. While Fergusson shared in a large sense the European ambivalence to Islam, his attitude to 'Muslim' architecture in the Indian subcontinent is on the whole positive. It is not insignificant that he uses the term Saracenic to collectively designate the styles and traditions of architecture brought by the Turks to India the term had a long pedigree going back to the European confrontation with Islam in the Middle Ages. At the same time,

characterizations of Islamic architecture in Arabia, North Africa and Southern Europe had become the subject of a number of monographs by the time Fergusson wrote his History. While to Fergusson Islam in India meant once more the racial absorption of outsiders within the indigenous populace, this did not lead to degeneration. Islam, in relation to Hinduism, stood for a positive cultural force for a variety of reasons; like Christianity, it was a semitic faith, it had a longer exposure to currents of European rationalism, and therefore it had a more perfect architecture. Above all, what enabled a greater appreciation of Islamic building traditions (as they were viewed through the prism of European aesthetics) was the successful assimilation, as they appropriated extant Roman buildings, of arcuate technique by structures that had come up in the regions conquered by Islam.

Fergusson's study of Indian architecture has been quite massively authoritative and influential. It came to bear decisively on writings, as also on architecture policies, of the British Raj during the subsequent decades – as Metcalfe's exhaustive study has shown. About a decade after Fergusson's History, Vincent Smith published a long article pointing to the ways in which not only architecture and the plastic arts, but also the fields of numismatics, religion, poetry, science and philosophy owed whatever artistic merit they possessed to Graeco Roman influence. In 1910 A.D. a second, revised and enlarged edition of The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, with an introduction by Fergusson's student James Burgess appeared and provided renewed vigour to views about the largely derivative nature of Indian architecture. These were now on their way to becoming established as an orthodoxy.

The valuable groundwork for the study of Indian architecture laid by Fergusson and Havell provided an impulse to a number of enterprises in the early twentieth century. As early as 1846 A.D. Fergusson had expressed a concern to preserve ancient monuments from decay and vandalism. Several writings on architecture from the 1840s were linked to programmes of conservation pioneered by the archaeological survey of India since the time Fergusson's disciple, James Burgess, succeeded Alexander Cunningham as Director of the survey in 1886. From 1902 till 1938, Annual Reports dealing with three subjects – conservation, epigraphy, exploration and research appeared regularly. In addition, a separate series entitled Memories of the Archaeological Survey of India, published from 1919, furnished a mass of documentation on architectural remains.

The issue of modernity in architecture is associated with originality. Architecture seems to be more expressive of identity. The modernisation of architecture should not imply forsaking cultural identity, especially if this identity is reflected through sublime religious values and authentic heritage. The association of modernity with identity is not difficult. Even Western modernity yearns today to return to roots.

Modernity in Western architecture has reached an excessive degree in breaking links with traditions, nature and human beings; the modern city has been metamorphosed into a group of abstract architectural blocks. External architecture has lost its traditional character which marked it in Europe from the Classical Eras to Renaissance, to the Baroque, to Neo-classicism and the Victorian age. A new trend, however, has appeared which calls for a return to identity, to the architectural forms

that are in harmony with the cultural and human environment. This new trend calls equally for the nourishment of the historical memory which determines architectural identity both as form and as creativity. Architects now say that a house is a social and architectural unit that does not exist in a social vacuum. As such it fulfils three functions: meeting the others, cohabiting with them, and privacy. Life determines different architectural features according to time and place. The language of architecture is the language of memory. Philosopher Schultz says: "Our age does not require a new language chosen from amongst authentic examples, which we freely interpret on the basis of various memories." Interpretation here means disclosure of hidden relations more than it means a free creativity. Mies Van der Rohe, a German architect, says: "Architecture must comply with and serve life and should not impose anything on people and society", thus justifying modernity which associated architecture with functionality. This is to say that architecture deviated from its authentic character and strayed into the world of invention and abstraction.

Modernist architecture broke indefinitely with the language of architecture, this historical language which has always expressed the concerns of human beings for whom it has been set up in the first place. Hence, modern architecture remains without a language and hence without identity, for it is language that reflects identity. Critics found that modern architecture has got no identity and does not help man live in his social and historical environment. In the past, architecture expressed a national meaning; nowadays it has, in the words of Heidegger, become "The house of being, of 'Zein'".

The neglect of the language of historical memory in modern architecture has prompted the architect to compensate for history by industrial incentives. Thus, modern architecture has become a hobby and a hazardous adventure. The slogans of modernity have become dogmatic.

The architect Jencks was the first to announce the end of modernity and to call for Post-Modernism. His call touched a sensitive chord in peoples feelings, who were trying to find their cultural selves. The historian Toynbee coined the term "post-modern" in 1938 to point to globalization and cultural pluralism as logical phases in the nature of the cyclical development of history. Opinions as to the definition of architectural post-modernism were numerous. But the common trend calls for associating the old with the new, i.e. authenticity with modernity. It is not possible to call only for the revival of the old in a world where techniques are self-imposing. But with the old, we have several choices. This plurality of Post-Modern architecture makes architecture renewable and as varied as the various cultures that make up the world today.

It seems that the call for modernity and authenticity in Islamic architecture is consonant with the call for Post-Modernism. This blend sounded attractive to some Muslim architects, be they students or professors. They even subscribed to the views of philosophers and architects advocating Post-Modernism. And they did not go back to the views and applications found in the Islamic architectural tradition. Thus, they surrendered once more to dependency and were deprived of the opportunity to convey their cultural identity in modern architecture which they erroneously took for Islamic architecture.

Muslim Scholars were conscious of the gravity of the architectural dependency on the West. Ali Basha Mubarak was the first to call attention to dependency in architecture. He said: "People have followed the Rumi style in their buildings and abandoned the ancient style." "When Europeans entered Egypt in droves, following the introduction of railways, the forms of buildings changed as each European tried to build his house according to the style used in his own country. Hence the sheer variety in the architectural styles used." In fact, the propagation of the Western style goes back to the effect of colonization and economic openness. The call for Westernisation was very effective in architecture. Officials and well-to-do people sent for foreign architects to construct their houses in all the Islamic countries. As a result, a style called 'colonial' came into being. This is the hybrid style, the buildings of which we still find in modern quarters of Islamic cities.

The call for authenticity starts by awakening our historical awareness of Islamic architecture. It is regretted that our architectural culture relies on studying Western architectural history more than it relies on Islamic architectural history. This is manifest in secondary school and university curricula which give importance to theories of international architecture without delving into Islamic architecture.

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