

# Indo-Islamic Architecture (Indian Culture Series – NCERT)

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In this article, we discuss the Indo-Islamic architecture, which is also known as Indo-Saracenic architecture. This is the last chapter (8th) of the NCERT text book 'An Introduction to Indian Art' – Part 1. This post finish our task of covering the highlights of the book in an exam-friendly manner, but we don't stop creating 'easy-to-read articles' for our readers here. We will surely come up with more articles on Indian culture (topics like Painting, Dances etc) from other sources soon.

Here we discuss about various examples of Indo-Islamic architecture, their styles, certain decoration techniques, etc. In previous posts, we have already discussed about the ancient art and architecture. Use the search bar in this website for [arts of the Mauryan Period](#), [Arts of Indus Valley Civilization](#), and medieval period [temple art and architecture](#).

## How did Indo-Islamic Architecture evolve?

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- In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Islam spread towards Spain and India.
  - Islam came to India particularly with merchants, traders, holy men and conquerors over a passage of 600 years.
  - Although by the 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslims had begun to construct in Sindh, Gujarat, etc., it was only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that large-scale building activity was begun by the Turkish state, established after the Turkish conquest of the North India.
  - A noteworthy aspect of these migrations and conquests was that Muslims absorbed many features of local culture and tradition and combined them with their own architectural features.
  - Thus, in the field of architecture, a mix of many structural techniques, stylized shapes, and surface decorations came about through constant interventions of acceptance, rejections or modifications of architectural elements.
- These architectural entities or categories showcasing multiple styles are known as **Indo-Saracenic or Indo-Islamic Architecture**.
- By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, India was already familiar with monumental construction in grandiose settings.
  - Certain techniques and embellishments were prevalent and popular, such as trabeation (the use of beam rather than arches or vaulting), brackets, and multiple pillars to support a flat roof or a small shallow dome.
  - The arches in early constructions were shaped in wood and stone, and were unable to bear the weight of the domes/top structures.
  - Such arches needed to be constructed with voussoirs (series of interlocking blocks) and fitted with keystones.

## Categories of Styles

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The study of Indo-Islamic architecture is conventionally categorized as follows:

1. **The Imperial Style (Delhi sultanate)**
2. **The Provincial styles (Mandu, Gujarat, Bengal and Jaunpur)**
3. **The Mughal Style (Delhi, Agra and Lahore)**
4. **The Deccani style (Bijapur and Golconda)**

- Amongst provincial styles, the architecture of Bengal and Jaunpur is regarded as distinct.
- Gujarat was said to have a markedly regional character for patrons borrowed elements from the regional temple traditions such as torans, lintels in mihrabs, carving of bell and chain motifs, and carved panels depicting trees, for tombs, mosques and dargahs.
- The 15<sup>th</sup> century white marble dargah of Sheikh Ahmad Khattu of Sarkhej is a good example of provincial style and it heavily influenced the forms and decoration of Mughal tombs.

## Decorative Forms

- These forms include designing on plasters through incisions or stucco.
- The designs were either left plain or covered with colours.
- Motifs were also painted on or carved in stones.
- These motifs include varieties of flowers, both from sub-continent and places outside, particularly Iran.
- The lotus bridge fringe was used to great advantage in the inner curves of the arches.
- The walls were also decorated with Cypress, Chinar, and other trees as also with flower vases.
- Many complex designs of flower motifs decorating the ceiling were also to be found on textiles and carpets.
- In the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, tiles were also used to surface the walls and the domes.
- Popular colours were blue, turquoise, green and yellow.
- Subsequently the techniques of **tessellation (mosaic designs) and pietra dura (cut and fit technique)** were made use of for surface decoration, particularly in the dado panels of the walls.

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- At times, Lapis Lazuli (a kind of blue stone) was used on the interior walls or on canopies.

Arabesque (surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils), calligraphy, Jalis (perforated stone or latticed screen), etc. were other decorative works.

## Constructing Materials

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- The walls in all buildings were extremely thick and were largely constructed of rubble masonry, which were easily available.
- These walls were then cased over with chunam or limestone plaster or dressed stone.
- An amazing ranges of stones were utilized for construction such as quartzite, sandstone, buffs, marbles, etc.
- Polychrome tiles were used to great advantage to finish the walls.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, bricks were also used for construction and in this phase there was more reliance on local materials.

## Forts

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- Building monumental forts with embattlement was a regular feature in medieval times, often symbolizing the seat of power of a king.
- When such a fort was captured by an attacking army, the vanquished ruler either lost his complete power or his sovereignty. This was because he had to accept the suzerainty of the victorious king.

Commanding heights were utilized to great advantage to construct forts.

- Another feature was concentric circles of outer walls as in Golconda that the enemy had to breach these at all stages before getting in.

- Some of the famous forts are the **Fort of Chittor (Rajasthan), Gwalior (MP), Daulatabad-earlier Devgiri (Maharashtra), and Golconda (Hyderabad).**

**The Chittorgarh fort is the largest fort in Asia** and was occupied for the longest length of time as the seat of power.

## Minars

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- Another form of sthamba or tower was the minar, a common feature in the sub-continent.
- The most striking minars of medieval times are the **Qutub Minar in Delhi and Chand Minar at Daulatabad.**

The everyday use of the minar was for the **azaan or call to prayer.**

- Its phenomenal height, however, symbolized the might and power of the ruler.

### Eg: Qutub Minar

- It was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Qutub complex in which the minar is present is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The construction of the bottom storey of the minar was started by **Qutub-ud-din Aibak** (Delhi Sultanate) and his successor **Iltumish** completed it by adding three more storeys.
- However **Firoz Shah Tughlaq** replaced the top storey which was damaged in a lightning and also added one more storey.
- Hence now it has five storeys and a height of nearly 234 feet (about 73 m) making it the second tallest minar in India (first is Fateh Burj, Punjab).
- The Qutub Minar also came to be associated with the much revered saint of Delhi, **Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki**.
- The minar is a mixture of polygonal and circular shapes.
- It is largely built on **red and buff stone** with some use of marble in the upper
- storeys. It is characterized by high decorative balconies and bands of inscriptions intertwined with foliated designs.

### Eg: Chand minar

- It was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Ala-ud-din Bahmani.
- It is a 210 feet high (about 30 m) tapering tower divided into four storeys. It is painted in
- peach now.
- Its façade once boasted of chevron patterning on the encaustic tile work and bold band of Quranic verses.

Although it looked like an Iranian monument, it was the combined handiwork of local architects with those from Delhi and Iran.

### Tombs

- Monumental structures over graves of rulers and royalty was a popular feature of medieval India.
- Some well known examples of such tombs are those of Ghyasuddin Tughlaq, Humayun, Adur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Akbar, and Itmaduddaula.
- The idea behind the tomb was eternal paradise as a reward for the true believer on the Day of Judgment. This leads to the paradisiacal imagery for tombs.
- Beginning with the introduction of Quranic verses on the walls, the tomb was subsequently placed with paradisiacal elements such as garden or near a water body or both, as in the case of Taj Mahal.

- They were not only intended to signify peace and happiness in the next world,
- but also to showcase the majesty, grandeur and might of the person buried there.

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- Taj Mahal was built in Agra by Shah Jahan as a mausoleum (a kind of large tomb) for his deceased wife Mumtaz Mahal.
- It was commissioned in the year of 1632 and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Taj Mahal was the apogee of the evolutionary architectural process in medieval India.
- The Taj complex is entered through a monumental red sandstone gateway, the opening arch of which beautifully frames the mausoleum.
- The tomb is laid out in a Chahar Bagh (garden), crisscrossed with paths and water courses, interspersed with pools and fountains.
- The structure is placed on the northern extremity of the bagh instead of the middle to take the advantage of the river bank (Yamuna).
- The straight path through the bagh reaches the plinth of the tomb.
- At the corners of the terrace stand four tall minarets, one hundred and thirty two feet high.
- The main body of the building is topped with a drum and a dome and four cupolas forming a beautiful skyline.
- Towards the west of the white marble faced tomb lies a red sandstone mosque and a similar construction in the east to maintain balance.
- The marbles for the building was quarried from the **Makrana Mines, Rajasthan.**
- The inner arrangement of the mausoleum consists of a crypt below and a vaulted, octagonal tomb chamber, with a room at each angle, all connected by corridors.
- Light to every part of the building is obtained by means of carved and perforated Jalis, set in the arched recesses of the interior.
- Four types of embellishments have been used with great effect for the interior and exterior surfaces of the Taj Mahal.  
These are stone carvings in high and low relief on the walls, the delicate carving of marble into jalis and graceful volutes (spiral ornament on the pillars), and the creation of arabesque with **pietra dura** on walls and tombstones and geometric designs with tessellation.
- The art of calligraphy is used with the inlay of jasper in white marble to unite Quranic verses.
- Calligraphy provides a decorative element on the walls and a continuous connection with the almighty.

**Eg: Gol Gumbad, Karnataka**

- It is situated in the Bijapur district of Karnataka.

- It is the mausoleum of Muhammed Adil Shah, the 7<sup>th</sup> sultan of the Adil Shahi Dynasty of Bijapur (1498-1686).
- Built by the ruler himself, it is a striking edifice in spite of being unfinished.
- The tomb is a complex building such as a gateway, a Naqqar Khana, a mosque and a sarai located within a large walled garden.
- Gumbad is a square building topped with a circular drum over which rests a majestic dome, giving the building its nomenclature.
- It is built of **dark grey basalt** and decorated plaster work.
- The dome of Gol Gumbad is the largest in the world.
- The building has an amazing acoustical system. Along with the drum of the dome, there is a whispering gallery where sounds get magnified and echoed many times over.

Gol Gumbad is a fine convergence of many styles located in medieval India. While its structural peculiarities of dome, arches, geometric proportions and load bearing techniques suggest Timurid and Persian styles, it is made of local material and is decorated with surface embellishments popular in Deccan.

## Sarais

- Sarais were largely built on a simple square or a rectangular plan and were meant to provide temporary accommodation for Indian and foreign travelers, pilgrims, merchants, traders, etc.
- They were public domains which thronged with people of varied cultural backgrounds.
- This led to cross cultural interaction, influence and syncretic tendencies in the cultural mores of the times and at the level of people.

## Structures for common people

- One of the architectural features of medieval India was also a coming together of styles, techniques, and decorations in public and private spaces for non-royal sections of the society. These include buildings for domestic usage, temples, mosques, Khanqahs and dargahs, commemorative gateways, pavilions in the buildings and gardens, bazaars, etc.

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## Jama Masjid

- Large mosques spanning huge spaces also dotted the landscapes of the Indian sub-continent in medieval times.

- **Congregational prayers were held here every Friday** afternoon, which required the presence of minimum of forty Muslim male adults.
- At the time of prayers, a khutba was read out in the name of the ruler and his laws for the realm were also read out.
- In medieval times, a city had one Jama Masjid which, along with its immediate surroundings, became the focus of the lives of the people, both Muslim and Non-Muslim.
- This happened because a lot of commercial and cultural exchanges were concentrated here besides religious and indirect political activity.
- Generally, such a mosque was large with an open courtyard, surrounded on three sides by cloisters and the Qibla Liwan in the west.
- It was here that the mihrab and mimbar for the Imam were located.
- **People faced the mihrab** while offering prayers as it indicated the direction of the **Kaaba in Mecca**.

#### Additional Note: Architecture in Mandu, Madhya Pradesh = Provincial Style

- The city of Mandu is located in Madhya Pradesh, at an elevation of over 2000 feet and overlooks the Malwa Plateau to the north and the Narmada valley to the south. Mandu's natural defence encouraged consistent habitation by Parmana Rajputs, Afghans, and Mughals.
- As the capital city of the Ghauri Dynasty (1401-1561) founded by Hoshang Shah, it acquired a lot of fame.
- Mandu was associated with the romance of Sultan Baz Bahadur and Rani Rupamati.
- The Mughals resorted to it for pleasure during the monsoon season.

#### Art and Architectures of Mandu

- Mandu is a typical representation of the medieval provincial style of art and architecture.
- It was a complex mix of official and residential-cum-pleasure palace, pavilions, light and airy, so that these buildings did not retain heat. Local stone and marble were used to great advantage.
- The royal enclave located in the city comprised the most complete and romantic set of buildings, a cluster of palaces and attendant structures, official and residential, built around two artificial lakes.

#### Eg: The Hindola Mahal, Mandu

- It looks like a railway viaduct bridge with its disproportionately large buttresses supporting the walls.
- This was the audience hall of the Sultan and the place where he showed himself to his subjects.
- Batter was used very effectively to give an impression of swinging (Hindola) walls.

### **Eg: Jahaaz Mahal, Mandu**

- It is an elegant two storey '**Ship Palace**' between two reservoirs, with open pavilion, balconies overhanging the water and a terrace.
- It was built by **Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khilji** and was possibly used as his harem and the ultimate pleasure and recreation resort.
- It had a complex arrangement of watercourses and a terrace swimming pool.

### **Eg: Rani Rupamati's Pavilion, Mandu**

- Rani Rupamati's double pavilion perched on the southern embattlements afforded a beautiful view of the Narmada valley.
- Baz Bahadur's Palace had a wide courtyard ringed with halls and terrace.

### **Eg: Hoshang Shah's Tomb, Mandu**

- It is a majestic structure with a beautiful dome, marble jali work, porticos, courts, and towers.
- It is regarded as an example of the robustness of Afghan structures, but its lattice works, carved brackets and torans lend it a softer hue.

### **Eg: Jama Masjid, Mandu**

- It was built on a large scale to accommodate many worshippers for Friday prayers.
- The building is faced with red sandstone.
- The Mimbar (where Imam stands to deliver sermons) in the Quibla liwan (a long narrow hall) is supported on carved brackets and the Mihrab has a lotus bud fringe.