

ARCHITECTURE AS AN INDEX OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION Reflections on Some Monuments of Delhi, Thatta, Baltistan and Bangladesh

Ahmad Hasan Dani

Architecture is a social product in so far as all buildings are created by the cooperation of several human individuals who extend their knowledge and labour to their making. These buildings are meant to serve one or another purpose, social, economic, religious, political, etc. Still more important is the human aim to make them last for as long as they could possibly do. And as the buildings are made only once, and not demolished and rebuilt again and again, in order to be free from extravagance, all attempts are made to take advantage of all available human experience and use it as beneficially as possible within the means of the person who is seeking to erect one or another building. Such buildings should also satisfy the aesthetic sense of the builder who has developed his own perception in the cultural tradition of the society of which he is a part. Hence architecture is an art of building conceived within a given social background under a particular circumstance of the time.' The needs may be manifold but the opportunities may not be as many but whatever resources are available to him, they are all mustered and wherever technicians and other skills are available, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality, they are all hired, purchased, or forced to work, for the production of the best of edifices within the means of the builder. Apart from the humblest need of shelter when man began to build from straw cottages to mud houses, architecture deals with beautiful buildings which are landmarks in the history of human civilization. It is through them that we have an understanding of the build of a civilization *per se*. Architecture is a visual expression of a particular world-home perceived by man and achieved by the utmost cooperation of other

* Read at the First SAARC History Conference 1988 held at Dhaka from 7-9 April 1988.

men whose services he could obtain by all possible means. The final product is an achievement in common, wherein particular social, cultural and technical strains have combined together and fused into a coherent whole. It is this social aspect that distinguishes this art from others of the kind and gives it the character of an integrated cultural product.

There may be many factors governing the integration of different elements within a cultural process but what is important is the continuity in human history. As there is no break in human living, there could possibly be no break in the making of history and as such there could also not be a break in the cultural evolution of man. At any particular time a cultural picture may be unique for that moment but that is only an illusory phenomenon. In reality cultural product is a continuous process, in which emphasis could be laid on one or another factor under the motivation of one or another man belonging to one or another social group within a historical circumstance of the time. It is this human factor that gets upper hand in one or the other moment of human history and succeeds in dictating its own trend to the cultural integration of the time. That human factor is again the result of several social demands of the time. Actually when we are separating this factor and trying to look at the picture from this angle, we are viewing the picture from a social angle that arose as a result of historical circumstances and forced that particular social group to combine all efforts and muster all its energies to the creation of an edifice that could possibly be the best at that moment. A building thus becomes a product of the time but even at that moment it does not reflect an individual whim. It is an expression of a vision as viewed by the members of the society in contemporary circumstances. The uniqueness of the building expresses only the individual character of that building but that building is not a product in isolation. So far as its individuality is concerned, it becomes a reference point but as it has combined years of human experience and it is a product of human cooperation, the building as a whole presents an integration of scores of elements that have evolved in course of history and found here a particular mode of combination. The way the various elements are combined according to the choice of the members of the society is the direction of the culture which motivates that social group. This cultural setting is not limited to the domi-

nant social group particularly in architecture because of its very nature, as shown above. Hence the cultural integration, as evidenced by architecture, is not necessarily a reflection of the exclusive culture of the dominant group alone. On the other hand it reflects the total efforts of all members of the society at any given time, limited only by the dictates of the particular person or persons responsible for the creation of the building. It is this peculiar nature of architecture that distinguishes its cultural character from other fields and this nature alone qualifies architecture to be representative of the entire society as a whole irrespective of caste, creed and nationality. Thus, taken as a whole, architecture presents a picture of cultural integration of the time, and taken as an individual building, it becomes an index to the various elements and factors that go to build the cultural traditions of the society in one area or another at a particular given time.

No better example of this concept of architecture can be given than the Qutb group of monuments at Delhi, which represent the building activity of the earliest Turkish Muslim conquerors of Delhi. They introduced new types of buildings as demanded by the new conquerors according to their own socio-religious necessity and betrayed also the new technical tradition that they brought with them from their own homelands in Afghanistan and Central Asia but these buildings were erected on Indian soil with the building material locally obtained and by the masons and artisans who were almost all recruited locally. The designer could certainly not be local as the entire conceptual frame was different from the earlier buildings in India. It is therefore satisfying that a broken inscription on the Qutb Minar gives the name of Fadl Abu al-Ma'ali, who appears to have been the architect at least of the Minar. This minar follows the cultural tradition of the Ghaznavid minaret at Ghazni and Ghurid minaret of Jam at Firozkoh. And yet the minar reveals Indian hands in its execution and particularly in its decorative elements of lotus floral patterns. At the same time one should note the difference in the characteristic decorative motifs as seen in the first storey of the time of Qutb al-Din Aybak and in the second and third storeys of the time of Iltutmish. Of the later repairs and restorations those of the time of Firuz Tughluq and of Sikandar Lodi make a fundamental departure. The Minar as a whole shows the gradual evolution of a style that bears the stamp of Muslim taste of the

time and yet such a Minar could not have been erected outside India. A comparison can be made with Kalan Minaret built in 1127 at Bukhara. The two represent two different styles — the Delhi minar is replete with the stone cutter's art tradition of India and the Bukhara minar carries forward the artistic trends first seen in the tomb of the Samanid Sultan Amir Isma'il at Bukhara. Apparently the Minar at Delhi draws heavily from the Turkish Muslim architectural tradition of Afghanistan but even this first building at Delhi shows a happy amalgamation of different cultural traditions and remains a great pointer to the first cultural integration in the first Muslim capital city of Delhi.

When we pass from the minar to the masjid, to which the minar has been an adjunct as a *madhina* (place of calling to prayer), we find that the plan of the mosque is certainly borrowed from the Muslim world but the way in which the pillars have been used, one on the top of the other, is indicative of the skill in the new arrangement. Particularly a corner room in the upper storey, meant for ladies' prayers, illustrates an adaption of an entirely different social practice. And yet the Turkish Muslim commanders must have been highly pleased with the developed skill in the making of the earlier decorated pillars, full of figural and vase-and-foilage motifs, so profusely used in the mosque. In a Muslim house of prayers the figures of Hindu deities could not be kept and hence they were defaced. And yet the exuberation of the local artistic tradition is so vividly displayed here that they must have amazed the Turkish conquerors. Even the technique of constructing a domed ceiling by overlapping rings of stone is unique of its kind.

The construction of a spacious court with colonnaded iwans on all four sides, the western side having the covered *Zulla*, did not, however, satisfy the Muslim conquerors, who probably wished to prove the higher aesthetic sense of their architectural style. This motivation appears to have given an after-thought to construct an arched screen before the prayer chamber. In conception the arched screen is Muslim in design but in execution it is deeply indebted to local craftsmanship. The ogee-shaped arch itself betrays the trabeated technique of the earlier period. The fantastic sinuous lines enclosing florals in between Arabic inscriptions is a reflex of the pulsating imagery so profusely seen in the earlier Hindu temples. The screen of the time of Qutb al-Din Aybak makes a difference from

that extended by Iltutmish, by whose time it seems some masons from outside must have arrived. In the latter example the ogee-shaped arch is replaced by pointed arch. The sinuous lines are also replaced by geometric motifs borrowed from outside but the faceted corner turrets standing on double vases as well as the scroll work reveal the Indian contribution. And yet the whole spatial arrangement, thick with inscriptional and other decorative elements show the over-taste for ornamentation that had developed in India before the coming of the Muslims. Similar decoration is also seen in Central Asia. The finest example of the Central Asian decorative style can be observed in the interior of the tomb of Iltutmish. Even here one can note the Indian masons' hands. The failure to erect the dome shows the weakness of the engineers in the new technical device. In the time of Iltutmish the artistic trends made a tremendous progress but still by and large they remained dependent on local masons.

It is only in the time of Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Khalji that in the erection of 'Ala'i Darwaza the chaste decoration with arched and rectangular panels, achieved by sparse use of marble we see a complete departure from the earlier period. The interior of this building shows the adoption of true dome achieved by an alteration of pendentives and a series of arches at the corners — a technique for changing the square of the lower room into a circular base for the dome. At the same time the decoration is wholly derived from Central Asia. By the time of 'Ala' al-Din Khalji several generations of Muslims had passed in Delhi. They had also received augmentation of their population by fresh immigrants as a result of Mongol disturbances in Central Asia. This political change led to new developments in architectural tradition. The migration of new skilled workers must have led to their employment. As a result there developed a new taste. 'Ala'i Darwaza is a great pointer to this change. The whole monumental Complex of the time is an evidence of a new cultural integration.

We now pass on to another tradition that led to the formation of Mughal architecture in India. Humayun's tomb is a landmark in this direction. It shows heavy indebtedness to the Iranian style of architecture of the time in so far as the architecture introduces the concept of lightness in form by the use of a series of alcoves under which the rectangular doors open. These alcoves cut away the mass

of masonry. Its setting in the centre of a Charbagh style garden again points to foreign influence but the corner kiosks and slender turrets have a long history in the earlier architecture of the pre-Mughal period in India. In fact the garden tomb style is first seen in Sultan Sikandar Lodi's tomb. However, Humayun's tomb is the precursor of a series of buildings that culminated in the creation of the masterpiece, the Taj Mahal, that is the *summum bonum* of the cultural integration seen in the Mughal tradition of South Asia. In this final make-up there are many buildings that we have deliberately omitted just to prove that without them the cultural integration is not complete. These missing links in today's narration are the true index to the integrated whole.

So far we have been dealing with a great cultural tradition that was gradually evolving in the capital city of the great power. They show a continuous flow of new ideas, new decorative elements and adoption of new techniques. At the same time these extraneous elements were gradually moderated to suit the local taste, local environment and above all local demands of cultural integration. The Mughal architecture is the consummation of this spirit of integration that transformed the extraneous models to the requirements of the South Asian environment.

This tendency can also be illustrated by what was happening in the centres of other local kingdoms. These kingdoms carry forward the regional traditions and try to assimilate them into the developing cultural complexities of their own. And hence they do not lose their individual personality. So far they have been recognized as provincial schools as if they have branched away from an integrated central whole. This is not necessarily the case. The regional tendencies have had a long history and cultural growths have integrated round these regional factors. Hence they represent cultural diversity rather than provincial sub-cultures. The monuments of Thatta are the finest examples of this kind. The great cemetery on Makli hill presents a picture of great variety that has transformed the horizontal surface into a series of domical creations of Muslim taste but the details would show how deeply rooted are these buildings in the soil of deltaic Sind. They have all been founded on the historical traditions of the past. In fact many of the artistic elements are peculiar to the region itself and they show how much the local trends caught the imagination of the new settlers. Thatta's

cemetery buildings make a fusion that belongs to Sindhi historical heritage.

The first building at Thatta is a tomb of Isa Khan Langoti, a saint of the fourteenth century AD who migrated from Burhanpur in India and built here a *madrasah*. The square tomb with a portico shows the early style of local architectural tradition that used square stone pillars for support of the overlapping roof, capped by a lantern, copying the shape of a dome. The concept is certainly extraneous and so is the domical form itself but the whole technique of building derives from the older tradition and hence it is circumscribed by a sense of beauty that was more traditional than imported from outside. This tomb along with the remains of the columnated *madrasah* building attributed to the saint Shaykh Hammad Jamali of 14th century speak of the amalgamation of local architectural features with inscriptional decoration of the Muslims as seen on the jambs and beams. However, the main entrance betrays, in its defaced niches at the lower part of the door jambs, the indebtedness of the builders to the earlier depository of building material from the locality itself. The construction reminds us of similar makeshift arrangement seen at the Quwwat al-Islam mosque but in the present example the attempt is made to transform the square of the room to an octagon for the erection of the dome. The success shows a new tendency of cultural integration at the regional level. The dome must have been built on the technique of overlapping stones, as seen in the domical ceiling of Badi' al-Zaman's octagonal tomb, erected in 1602 AD. This building incorporates the famous local folktale of peacock fighting with a serpent, thus proving the tenacity of local tradition. The same tomb shows another scene of two ducks face to face. The tomb appears to have included several other stories but these figures have been eaten away. These local figural representations were not freaks but they were actually parts of local architectural tradition so strong that they are also observed in several other buildings. One group of monuments presents the most interesting tomb of Jam Nizam al-Din (1460—1508 AD), the famous ruler of the Samma dynasty, during whose reign Sind achieved unparalleled creative activity. The environment around this tomb is steeped in regional traditions. The back of the western wall of the tomb presents a characteristic picture of cultural integration of Sind at this time. The projection

of the mihrab wall in three different stages makes a fusion of several factors. The entrance on its right is completely borrowed from some earlier building while three windows above represent three different styles. Again the horizontal decorations are a happy mixture of different tendencies. One of them shows a row of ducks carried also on the northern face. The detail of the *mihrab* projection shows the assimilation of two miniature *shikhar* type models as decorative elements — an entirely new feature seen among other highly ornate pillarettes. The door entrance presents, at its door step, a half-moon element that is normally seen in Hindu temples. Here it forms a decorative element. The interior of the tomb building is still more important. Above the mihrab is the oriel window erected in a style of a lion-throne but without the lions. In between this oriel window and the *mihrab* can be seen three horizontal rows of decoration in which rosettes and arches dominate — a happy integration of designs in a frieze. The *mihrab* itself is a deep arched niche in two depths with Arabic inscription at the tympanum of the outer niche, but that of the inner niche again shows an inter-play of rosettes. The outer niche is flanked by a highly ornate pillarette of local style, probably meant for a candlestick. Both the arches, outer and inner, which are pointed and slightly ogee-shaped, spring from the capital post, the inner posts are doubled while the outer ones are marked by scroll work. However, the most important is the traditional setting above the capital just where the arches spring. Normally this place is reserved for a goose but such a bird figure would be inappropriate in such a mihrab and hence the space has been intelligently filled by a curve and a thickness. The inner face of the mihrab is replete with ornamentation that belongs to Sind itself. The entire design is a masterpiece of decorative art that goes back to a rich regional tradition. The phase of transition, as seen at the corner, shows again the overlapping stones to make the arched squinch but the local masons hardly show proficiency in erecting such a big dome over the square building. It is therefore doubtful whether the dome was ever built.

In form and conception the tomb of Jam Nizam al-Din is Muslim but it is built on the older technology of corbelling, beam and bracket. While the masons erected this Muslim tomb, they illustrated how entirely new type of building could be created on older techniques. However, the most pleasing feature is the manner

in which contradictory decorative features have been integrated to ornament this Muslim building without violating any Islamic principle. In this building we find a consummation of cultural traditions borrowed from outside but now deeply rooted in the native soil. This represents the peak of cultural integration in Sind.

Now we come to the importation of another tradition as illustrated in the design of the oblong-shaped Dabgir Mosque, built by Khusrau Khan Charkas in 1588 AD. By this time the three-domed mosque had become very common but here again in the technique of making glazed tiles, which was imported from Central Asia through Kandahar and Herat, the decorative designs presented are very instructive. The glazed tile work became so pervasive in Sind that it found a new home here. In this decoration the richness of art motifs, both geometric and floral, although inspired by the Timurid school of designs in Samarkand, became the main character of Sind tiles. On the other hand the soffits of the arch depict an imitation of carpet design obviously borrowed from outside but so surreptitiously integrated into the overall picture that it became a part and parcel of the local tradition.

To take extreme example of an extraneous imposition, we may refer to the Jami' Mosque at Thatta built at the order of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan between 1644 and 1647 AD. This mosque is set in a garden inspired by Mughal love for fountains and pools but the whole eastern facade is flat with a single dome relieving the horizon and some alcoves cutting the mass of the structure. In plan it is longitudinal with east-west axis having longer side. The *iwans*, which have double bay and covered domes, are connected with the single-domed *Zullah* in such a fashion that the sound from near the pulpit is echoed all over the interior of the mosque. This is a unique engineering achievement. More important is the ceiling decoration at the half-dome just behind the eastern entrance. The first shows a series of zigzag lines encircling the main rosette at the apex. But the second one presents a starry sky circumscribed by interlaced arches, the latter seen in many other local buildings. This astronomical depiction probably originated from the Timurid astronomical experiments from Samarkand and copied by the Mughals in Agra, Delhi and Lahore. Here it is shown in glazed tile work. When we compare this with the rich decoration at the mihrab chamber, the taste of the local craftsmen is too obvious to be missed. This tile

decoration had at least a century long tradition in Thatta and shows that this art was borrowed directly from Central Asia and became integrated in local tradition. Today Sind tiles have a special place in the local decorative art.

These few monuments are milestones in the development of regional tradition. Many new elements were borrowed from outside and some were even imposed but all of them became so inseparably assimilated into local historic tradition that they do not show any break or disconformity in the continuous process of human history. They represent only new cultural integration of a type that belongs to Sind. The tradition is not a provincial version of the Imperial Mughal style. It is the regional development of a school that expresses the historic trends of the people who chose Sind as their home.

We may now take the region of Baltistan where Islam was popularized by the saint Sayyid 'Ali Hamadani in 14th Century AD. He came to Baltistan through Kashmir probably on his way to Kashgar. With him came his disciples who practised various skills. But it seems the older craftsmen of Kashmir had a rich tradition and hence their wooden architectural tradition remained the dominant mode of expression. The hand of these very Kashmiri craftsmen is also seen in the Chakchan mosque built at Khaplu in Baltistan and is usually attributed to the saint. This oblong mosque appears to have been founded on the square base of an earlier building but the present structure is a fine example of painted wooden architecture with pillared verandahs on three sides of the main prayer chamber. It is the lantern on the roof that is typical of the Kashmiri style of architecture. The lantern shows the sloping roof over a hexagonal pavilion, topped over by a long pyramidal pinnacle, exactly copying Hindu pyramidal *Sikhara*. This type became so integrated in the architecture of Baltistan that it is seen in mosques, tombs and also Jama'at Khanas. From here it was carried to Gilgit and Hunza. The interior of the verandah shows the horizontal rows of decoration and highly ornamented doorway. A nearer view of the eastern facade shows the juxtaposition of the wooden beams in between stone masonry and rows of pillars supporting the scalloped arches and above them screens with multifarious geometric designs. A still closer look shows the dexterity of hand in producing the detail of geometric motifs. The

door jambs of the windows and also the horizontal frieze are replete with fine workmanship. Two windows of the side aisles present an intricacy of scroll work that is an excellent creation in carpentry.

These monuments in Baltistan show an influence from the neighbouring region of Kashmir. According to Shah Rais Khan, the author of *Ta'rikh-i Gilgit*, the local rulers of Gilgit imported craftsmen from Kashmir for the erection of buildings in this region. However, the craftsmen who came here, made the region their home and they developed a style of wooden architecture that finally became localized. It became a part of the trans-Himalayan regional tradition. In course of time the imported style developed new forms that became integrated into the local culture.

From a study of these regional examples when we come to deltaic Bengal, the mosques, tombs and their decorative features speak highly of a character that could develop only in this deltaic land of humid climate. The new forms of Muslim buildings were introduced from outside and so were introduced new decorative patterns. However, the buildings in due course became integrated into the brick architecture of the land and the surface ornamentation became merged into the terracotta art of the region. A fine collection of terracotta designs is found at the Adina mosque at Hadrat Pandua. The Bagha mosque, built in 1523 AD. by the Bengal Sultan Nusrat Shah, represents the typical Bengali brick style with five doorways on the east, set in alternate decorative patterns. The curved parapet is the special characteristic of Bengal, which is emphasized by corner towers, capped by cupola. The *mihrab* is highly ornate. The hanging design develops the idea of hanging lamp but it is set within an arched panel with the tympanum showing richness in fruits. The three-domed Mughal mosque shows a variation in having horizontal battlemented parapets but the corner towers provide a link with the old building. One panel shows a variety of hanging lamp designs set within a pillared arched niche, all within a rectangular frame having a scroll design. The tympanums of the *mihrab* present profuse overgrowth of creepers wrought in terra-cotta. The typical product of Husayn Shahi reign is the Chota Sona Masjid at Gaur built by Wali Muhammad, son of Ali. The mosque not only carries forward the design seen in the Bagha mosque but it also incorporates *chauchala* type hut roofing

over its central nave, thus bringing the mosque design to a level of typical Bengali bamboo architecture. At the same time the terracotta art is here worked on stone. The second building represents the Mughal period development. It is the Jami Mosque built near the dargah of Pir Ali Shahanshah Baba Kashmiri by Sayyid Khan Panni, son of Bayazid Khan Panni, in 1609 AD. The mosque shows the Mughal period dome with extended corner turrets but the parapets which are curved, display merlons and the eastern face has typical decorative panels above three arched entrances. There is a gulf of difference between the Husayn Shahi mosque and this Mughal mosque but the two represent two sub-styles of the regional architecture.

The architecture of Bengal shows an integration of different features that ultimately merged into the local style. It gave to the land an individual character that can be appreciated only when we view them as part of cultural integration. The different buildings present the different stages in the development but all of them as a whole stamp them with a taste that belongs to the deltaic land of Bengal.

The different styles of architecture, as have been selected here, have so far been treated as belonging to provincial schools as if they were each deriving from the imperial style at Delhi. This concept hardly holds good. The different regions have in fact developed through history their own particular characters which culminated in the integration of regional cultures. As each region has its own geographic setting, it develops its own features, and when particular socio-political circumstances help in promoting their own ways of living, the different characters combine and lead to the production of integrated culture. Architecture of the different regions has preserved the main evidence through which cultural development can be traced. It is the fusion of the different elements that makes the regional grouping a perfect whole. Such a cultural setting has a long history in South Asia. It is this particular aspect of historical growth that has created cultural diversity.