

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MOSQUE IN THE INDO-PAK SUBCONTINENT

Ahmad Hasan Dani

Muslims built mosques wherever they went and this they have been doing in all periods of history. Such mosques of different periods are extant in different parts of South Asia. The mosque design is alien to the Subcontinent as the very institution of mosque is foreign to local concept. But the mosque architecture, although tracing its origin from outside, when rooted in the Subcontinental soil, became gradually adapted to local conditions, environment, taste and decor. Archaeology has preserved fully the whole process of adaptation from a foreign model to Indo-Muslim architectural form. Yet the mosque maintained from the beginning to the end the same conceptual model as it is based on a mode of prayer, which is One-God-centred in religious faith, Makkah-oriented in direction and congregational in social practice. These three basic Islamic requirements made the mosque different from the local house of worship, i.e. temple, which is inward looking centred at the idol installed within and meant primarily for individual worship. Hence temples could not be easily appropriated for mosques in a simple manner, as it was in the case of churches, although big temple complexes could be remodelled or reshaped to meet the new requirements, or the temple materials could be reused for the construction of mosques. Archaeology bears evidence to these readoptions and re-use.

From the first available mosque, built originally in the time of the Umayyads and exposed in the excavations at Banbhor¹ near Karachi in Sind, Pakistan, to the last important mosque built by the Mughul emperor Aurang-zib at Lahore and hence known as Badshahi Mosque,² there is a great variation in style, in composition, in decoration and in the eventual creation of the mosque design that has subsequently influenced the construction of mosques in this part of the world. The Badshahi Mosque is a culmination of the earlier Mughul congregational mosques seen at Agra (The Jahanara Masjid)³ and at Delhi (Shah Jahani Mosque),⁴ and stands as a prototype for the Mahabat Khan⁵ Mosque at Peshawar and Jami Mosque in Wah Cantonment. All these Mughul and post-Mughul mosques evolved a pattern of three bulbonds domed prayer chamber on the western side of a Central open courtyard, delimited by

a row of cloisters on the north, east and south and tall minarets, generally four at the four corners, to beacon the *Momins* (believers) to prayers.

These Mughul Mosques differ materially from the contemporary models seen at Samarqand⁶ and Bukhara⁷ but on comparison it is clear that the Mughuls brought an architectural taste that is rooted in Timurid mosque style of Central Asia and yet it is based on the historical tradition that had developed in South Asia in the pre-Mughul Muslim period. The divergence is seen in the Jami 'Mosque at Fathpur Sikri⁸ built in the time of Akbar and the Qal'a-i Kuhna Mosque at Delhi in the time of Sher Shah Sur.⁹ Their designs reflect the need of the time and express the high aspiration of majesty that marked the royal epochs of the period. In contrast the earlier Sayyid and Lodi¹⁰ mosques, as seen in Delhi, stand no comparison to them. And when we go back to the Tughluqs, the grand mosques built in the time of Firuz Shah Tughluq¹¹ in Delhi, stand as a great model of multi-domed grand mosques, meant for sheltering the growing Muslim population at the metropolitan city of Delhi. They can be matched only by such multi-domed mosque as that of Khan Jahan¹² at Bagerhat in Bangladesh. For all these earlier mosques, Delhi provided the chief model in the *Quwwat al Islam* Mosque at Mehrauli,¹³ which shows, in its three periods the changing styles and tastes of the time. The designs, as adopted in the provincial schools show great variations in readapting the original form of Delhi to the local conditions on the basis of technical skill available in different regions and on the historic architectural tradition that had grown in the past in those parts of the country.

First of all, the Banbhor mosque, which has not yet been fully described,¹⁴ should have copied the congregational mosque of the Umayyad period, as seen at Damascus, but it seems the local available space in the heart of the old city at Banbhor and the lack of technical skill led to the creation of a quadrangular type congregational mosque, having serious irregularity in its planning of the square or rectangular form and a prayer chamber, the roof of which was built on two rows of (wooden) pillars resting on stone bases, revealed in excavation. No trace of *mihrab* was found, suggesting that the model may have the earlier Kufa mosque but the side cloisters around the central open courtyard indicate a borrowing of the idea from Damascus model. This anomaly led Dr. Abdullah Chaghatai to declare that the building was perhaps a temple or monastic complex. Such a guess is nullified by the Kufi inscriptions found on the spot. On the other hand the irregularities seen at the north-east and south-east corners, where earlier period constructions have been traced, clearly prove the existence of Pre-Muslim buildings. The find of *Sivalingam* (Phallus) in stone in the midst of north-east corner ruins suggest that the earlier construction might have been a temple complex. If this can be proved by excavated material, the evidence will go a long way in substantiating the high temple of Debal, as described in *Chachnama*.¹⁵ The existence of such an earlier structure might also explain the irregular wall on this eastern

side and the gap left at the north eastern corner. The existence of a Buddhist monastery in the heart of the city is hardly possible. If such a monastery had been here its re-adaption for a mosque would have been easier and regular. The decorative features of the mosque are hardly known except that the ceramic of the Muslim period shows glazed pottery in contrast to the red polished pottery of the Pre-Muslim time. It is mainly in the calligraphy of the straight-lined Kufi inscriptions that the new decorative taste is fully engraved. Unfortunately there is no second example to see the development of this early Arab mosque architecture in South Asia. The mosque now being unearthed at Mansura¹⁶ in Sind has all the features of a congregational mosque.

Recently a Ghaznavid period mosque has been excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission at Udegram in Swat, Pakistan, on some height over a neighbouring hill near a medieval fort, which has also yielded a stone lamp on a tall stand, bearing Kufic inscription of the time of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna.

A study of the *Quwwat al Islam* Mosque of Mehrauli in Delhi reveals entirely different kind of taste, as, according to the inscription, it was built out of the materials taken from 40 temples. The existing stone pillars, with chain and bell motifs, vase capitals and bases and many empty niches with broken idols testify to the inscriptional evidence. Mr. Page tried to prove that the mosque, in its western half, actually incorporates the original plinth of an earlier temple. This he suggested on his tracing a row of diamond pattern that vanishes in the middle of the plinth. A thorough examination disproves this thesis although it is possible that a temple complex might have been in existence in its neighbourhood. The presence of the Mehrauli Iron Pillar in the courtyard of the mosque suggested that it stood on the *Vishnu padagiri*, probably not far from a temple. But the pillar could hardly be within the temple.

The mosque, as constructed in the time of Qutb al-Din Aybak, shows the urgency of the time and an odour to prove the strength of Muslim arms and makes a cultural break from the earlier concepts. The house of idols must give place to a house of devoted to One Supreme God and hence all visual expressions connected with idol worship should disappear. And yet the new building was to use the older materials, to be constructed by old craftsmen, on the basis of the existing technical skill by using the taste and decoration of the past in combination with new artistic forms and modelled in a plan to meet the new practices of congregational prayers. How these various aspects have been combined in this mosque can be seen in the re-erection of pillars, one above the other, the construction of the false dome, ring upon ring, the flat roof of the prayer chamber, with flat slabs placed on corbel system and the beautiful arched *maqsura* — the last alone adding Islamic colour to the whole building. It is in the beautiful ogee-shaped arches that a concept of open space is clearly symbolized but the detail of the carving on the stone shows a harmonious blend of Arabic calligraphy and geometric patterns that must have been dicta-

ted by the Muslim designer. And yet the detailed execution was carried out by local craftsmen as is clear from the floral ends of the letter verticals, the sinuous creeper and many leafy designs that derive from the local taste. In fact the overdose of decoration on this screen shows more the romantic stone carver's art of Indian style than the Seljuqian taste of Central Asia. It is in the neighbouring Qutb Minar that the Ghurid style, as seen in the minaret of Firuz Koh,¹⁷ is writ large, although in the detail of calligraphic expression it comes closer to the *maqsura*.

When we pass on to the time of Iltutmish, we have a number of monuments at Delhi that bear witness to the development of the style. The first is the extension of this mosque itself, the second is the tomb of Iltutmish himself and the third is the mosque around Sultan Ghuri's Tomb. If we go outside Delhi, the Arha'i-Din-ka-Jhonpra mosque at Ajmer exhibits a design very similar to, and yet different from the type of Qutb al-Din Aybak's mosque at Mehrauli but the *Jami'* Mosque at Badaun, built by Iltutmish, although much renovated later, maintains some features of the latter's reign. The stone pillars of the time of Iltutmish at *Quwwat al Islam* mosque show the poverty of style but the extension of the *maqsura* is much more improved — an improvement in taste and execution that is fully justified in the tomb of Iltutmish. The tomb decoration is certainly derived from the Samanid art of Bukhara although the execution in the tomb of Sultan Isma'il is superb and clear-cut with deep effect of light and shade. On the other hand the mosque at Sultan Ghuri's tomb shows the first use of marble but the dome is still based on carbel system. In the tomb of Iltutmish corner pendentives are seen and an attempt is made to provide all the technical requirements for the erection of a true dome, but it appears that the dome could not be built. The first true dome is seen only in the tomb of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban at Delhi. The next extension of the *Quwwat al-Islam* mosque at Mehrauli took place in the time of 'Ala al-Din Khalji when the Mongol eruption in Central Asia had completely changed the ethnic character of the Muslim population in South Asia and many Turks had taken refuge in Delhi. They introduced the new Seljuqian taste, so vividly expressed in the decoration and style of the 'Ala'i Darwaza and the half-finished 'Ala'i Minar. The concept of the true dome on pendentives, the stone engravings of geometric patterns, the beautiful arches at the doors and still effective arched niches that stand in two rows on either side of the entrance, all heighten the beauty of the gateway that appears to be a monument in its individual capacity. The sinuous line decorations of the earlier period all vanished and gave place to deep cut carvings of definite geometric forms.

However, still more fundamental change came in the time of the Tughluqs, when with the enthronement of Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq, who was earlier a warden of the marches in Dipalpur and Multan, architecture assumed military character. The monuments assumed military character by having walls, robust in appearance to give the effect of strength, valour and spirit of challenge

and yet simple and monotonous in appearance. Stone facing give place to plaster and glitter. It is in the plaster that one now finds Arabesque decoration, as seen in the Firuzian mosque within the Lodi Park. With the influx of population from Central Asia grand mosques, like the Khirki Masjid in Delhi, came into existence. The domes began to get height through the intercession of high drums. The panelled walls and decorations in the ceiling of the dome became common in the time of the Lodis. Firuzian type of arch-and beam construction at the door ways assumed popularity. But no double dome is seen in this period, as is wrongly noted by Percy Brown¹⁸ in the case of Sultan Sikandar Lodi's tomb at Delhi.

When we leave Delhi and go to provincial schools, the local adoptions become much more varied. In the case of Bengal the Adina mosque at Hazrat Pandua, built in the time of Sikandar Shah,¹⁹ is the only mosque built in the traditional pattern of quadrangular plan around a central open courtyard. But this again has a central long nave in the middle of the prayer chamber on the west. All other mosques gave up this design and confined to the main covered part of the prayer chamber so as to suit the heavy monsoon climate of the region. Similarly the parapet here became curved as seen in several mosques. And again the decorations copy the terra-cotta art of Bengal, whether in brick or in stone.

In Sind the first existing mosque²⁰ at Thatta copies the Tughluq style but other buildings in stone show a medley of engravings on stone. The famous tomb of Jam Nizam al-Din incorporates little Sikhara (temple spire) as a decorative motif in the corners of the outer *mihrab*. The second mosque built in the time of Khusrau Khan Charkas in 1588 has a threedomed design with beautiful glittering tiles. But the best specimen is the Shah Jahani Mosque at Thatta that is superb in its glittering tiles as it is grand in its multidomed cloisters, tall fronton at the prayer chamber, which has long domed aisles.

In Kashmir and trans-Himalayan regions of the north the mosque design copies the wooden architecture of this zone. Here on the top of the prayer chamber we find a clerestory²¹ in wood, copying the pyramidal shape of the temple spire. The interior shows rich decoration in wood carving and betrays the finesse that can be worked only by Kashmiri craftsmen. No dome is seen over the buildings but all stress is on the main prayer chamber that is covered by wooden planks or beams arranged in corbel style.

In Gujerat the style is still varied and shows the adoption of the earlier wood or stone carving in the detail of *mihrabs* and the pillars that support the roof. The most attractive is the wholesale copying of the entire tree design with its elaborate branches and leaves.

Thus the mosques built in South Asia, although deriving their model and decoration from outside, became fully adapted to the local conditions in different parts of South Asia. In this adaptation local taste and skill as well as raw material played as much part as the arrival of new tastes, forms and decorations

in the succeeding periods. Hence right upto the end of the Mughul period new types can be seen as in the mosques and *dalans* at Lakhnow but with the passage of time these mosques became completely acclimatized to the soil of South Asia.

NOTES

1. F.A. Khan, *Preliminary Report on Banbhor*, Karachi, 1976, pp. 24-30.
2. M. Abdullah Chaghatai, *The Badshahi Masjid, History and Architecture*, Lahore, 1972.
3. E.B. Havell, *A Hand book to Agra and the Taj*, Calcutta, 1924, pp. 68-69.
4. Azizur Rahman, *History of Juma Masjid and Interpretation of Muslim Devotion*, Delhi, 1936.
5. A.H. Dani, *Peshawar, the Historic City of the Frontier*, Peshawar, 1969, pp. 174-75.
6. G.A. Pugachenkova, *Chefs-d' oeuvre d' architecture de l' Asie Central*, UNESCO, p. 106.
7. G.A. Pugachenkova, *Podrevnim Pamytnikam Samarkand, Bukhara, Moscow*, 1968.
8. E.B. Havell, *op.cit.*, pp. 126-30; Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture* (Islamic Period), Bombay.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. e.g., The Khirki Masjid see *Ibid.*
12. A.H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture of Bengal*, Dacca, 1961, pp. 144-147.
13. J.A. Page, *Historical Memoir on the Qutb*, (*Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*), No. 22.
14. See S.M. Ashfaque: 'The Grand Mosque of Banbhore', *Pakistan Archaeology*, vol. VI, 1969, pp. 198-209.
15. *Chachnamah Urdu Tr.*, Akhtar Rizvi, Hyderabad, 1963, pp. 138-140.
16. Only brief report of the earlier excavation published in *Pakistan Archaeology*, vol VI, 1969, pp. 198-209.
17. Andre Maric and G. Wiet: *La Minaret de Djam*, Paris, 1959.
18. *Indian Architecture, op. cit.*,
19. A.H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture of Bengal, op.cit.*, pp. 55-77.
20. A.H. Dani, *Thatta, Islamic Architecture*, Islamabad, 1982, pp. 48-49.
21. Ram Chandra Kak, *Ancient Monuments of Kashmir*, New Delhi Reprint, 1971, pp. 84-87. See *Jamia Masjid* at Srinagar.