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Taj Mahal as a Mirror of Multiculturalism and Architectural Diversity in India

Abstract

India is known as having one of the most cultural, ethnical and religious diversities in the world. Being shaped by its long history, unique geography, diverse languages, religions, music, dance, architecture, customs and traditions which vary from one place to another within the country, it nonetheless possesses a commonality and unity. India's architecture represents a fusion of different cultures and its architecture metaphorically strives to overcome cultural and religious differences.

This paper studies the Taj Mahal as a case study of cultural fusion and diversity. Taj Mahal marks the zenith of Moghul architecture and expresses a fusion of various structural traditions. These traditions include Persian, Central Asian, pre-Moghul Indian and European architecture. Early Moghul rulers like Akbar Shah chose assimilation and incorporation rather than completely subjugating and eliminating

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the Pre-Islamic culture of India. The architectural diversity seen throughout India is a reflection and representation of the diversity and multiculturalism seen in Indian society. By scrutinizing on the Taj Mahal monument, we observe how multiculturalism in India has had strong effects on cultural identity of India including its architecture.

Keywords: architectural diversity, multiculturalism, Shahjahani (Akbari) architecture, Taj Mahal.

Introduction

According to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, multiculturalism is defined as a concept which would take in equality, harmony, diversity, and opportunity to public realms. The growth of multiculturalism is largely attributable to the 20th century but international recognition could be seen through UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of the year 2001. This Universal declaration recognizes, for the first time, cultural diversity as a “common heritage of humanity” and considers safeguarding of the same to be a concrete and ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001)

Pandey (2007:2-3) describes multiculturalism as the most significant conviction of the Universal Declaration which is the rising belief that intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of peace, and the theory of inevitable clash of cultures and civilizations is not right. Multiculturalism has emerged as a facet of changing geo-political environment, which is struggling to get rid of terrorism. Pandey believes that the provisions of multiculturalism in a constitutional system of governance are indeed challenging but its adherence could offer long lasting and practical solution to conflict situations. In any system of governance, ethnic or cultural protection has a subservient role to play with reference to constitutional mandate of peace, stability and good governance. Multiculturalism subtly refers to pluralism, which is mainly religious and ethnic but carries linguistic, behavioral and cultural elements.

Multicultural India

The roots of India's multiculturalism go back to over three thousand years to the first great invasions of South Asia by Indo-Aryan tribes. The pre-Aryan people were more likely proto-Dravidian-speaking ancestors of southern India's modern Dravidian-speaking people and may in turn have migrated to India from East Africa. As Wolpert states: "From the remains of Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, and many other Indus Valley archeological sites, we know how cultured they were, with modern sewage systems, hypocaust baths, steatite seals, burnt bricks, and glyptic art." (Wolpert, 1999: 575) Thus Indian history's first multicultural fusion was a merge of Aryan and pre-Aryan values and organizations, which through intermarriage across the eastern Gangetic plain caused the coming out of that intricate faith called Hinduism, with its gods and goddesses, caste, outcaste, and class systems, and sacred Vedic, epic, and mythological literature. (Ibid, 57^v)

The Mauryas

In 326 B.C. Alexander the Great, crossed the Indus valley with a powerful Macedonian army that occupied minor kingdoms of Punjab. The first aboriginal ruler, Chandragupta Maurya, unified all of northern India in the awakening of Alexander's rapid pulling out. Hellenistic influences continued to be reflected in Buddhist art and the Bactrian Greek coins found in the entire region, but other than that, Alexander's impact on Indic civilization was little. (Ibid, 576)

The Moghuls

As Wolpert (Ibid, 576) states: The Mauryan unity lasted 150 years until India was again invaded from the northwest, first by Greco-Bactrians, then by Scythians, Pahlavas, and Central Asian Kushanas, each of whom added fresh genes and weaponry to Indic civilization. None of them brought lasting change, nevertheless, because of India's vast and rich cultures, it managed to overcome and conquer its conquerors with its affluence, affection, and rich wisdom. The great exception was the Muslims, who first invaded India in 711 A.D., and in 1526, at the dawn of the great Moghul Empire, started the last movement in their conquest of India. Since Islam, like Hinduism, is a comprehensive way of life, which unites its followers within a

universal 'community' of brothers who worship the one God, Allah, a portion of its divine book is preserved in Arabic in the Quran, which was revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Islam's monotheism and social-democratic ideals contrast sharply with Hinduism's many gods and a caste system based on inequality and isolation; doctrinal differences often led to violent conflicts, which spread and continue to plague India and certainly all of South Asia today. Most villages were cells of multicultural synchronization during the era of Moghul rule and continue to be so in many states of modern India. The great world faith of Sikhism, started by Guru Nanak in the Punjab in the sixteenth century, may be viewed as the most important syncretism of Hinduism and Islam, although devout Sikhs insist on its uniquely inspired origins. Indian Muslim historians persist, furthermore, that immoral British imperial policies of divide and rule alone brought Pakistan to life and that communal conflicts in India were generated by economic utilization or fights over jobs, food, and housing rather than by religious hostility. Having more than one billion population and at least fifteen major languages, India's republic is nearly a continent than a country, much more a nation as Westerners recognize it. And in this Indian civilization, we are presented with models of rich and pacific multicultural heritage.

Influence of Islamic Culture on Indian Life

Every new attack of race or thought found the Indian nature more flexible than before, and hurried the process of synthesis. At its worst cases, the procedure led to an unconscious blending; and at its best, it brought a new and crude way of life. And as Ali describes it to be: "The process of conflict and synthesis, but intensified a thousand times, occurred with the advent of Islam in India." (Ali, 2000: 12) The impact of Islam on India was profound and thoughtful. The contact between new and old ideas forced sensitive minds to think anew about the questions in life. New religions and philosophies became visible to mark the synthesis between Hindu and Islamic thoughts. He states: "The history of India in the Middle Ages is in fact a story of assimilation and synthesis. At first under the Pathans and later on a wider scale under the Moguls, this is unmistakable in the evolution of customs and conduct, fashions and festivals, in the very preparation of

food and in social and household affairs. In the matter of dress, a new costume was evolved which shows hardly any trace of Arab or central Asian influence.” (Ibid, 14) And this synthesis was seen in their language, music, art, architecture, social and personal manners to an extent that Baber called this new way of life “the Hindustani way”.

Architectural Influence

Another evidence of synthesis between ancient India and the Moghuls was the development of architecture in northern India in the Middle Ages in comparison to the purely Hindu style found in the south. The temples of southern India show an entirely different style from the north. This does not entail that there is any single style which can be distinguished as northern or southern. It only means that, although there are a lot of differences and variations, southern architecture shows an essential identity in concept and structure. As Kabir states: “The palaces, forts, and tombs of northern India during the Middle Ages show traces of Persian influence, but in spite of their similarity to Persian models, they reveal features that are alien to the ideals of Persian architecture. Though influenced deeply by Persian tendencies, they have their basis in the traditions of ancient India.” (Kabir, 1944: 25) Northern temple architecture shows traces of curved lines, arches and circles. Though domes are rare, but the turrets are still different from the south to an extent that one could observe a similarity between the mosque and the temple in the north such that they are both well-versed by a spirit of harmony and blend and union of the two styles.

This is how Kabir describes the architecture of the north: “Economy of sculpture and other decoration in the north is not a mere accident. The emphasis is on symmetry of lines and balancing of masses. Volumes have been so disposed as to create an impression of uniformity. Architecture in the north centers on a basic idea. Its value lies in harmony of structural achievement rather than in the splendor and variety of the constituent units. It is remarkable that this synthesis could be achieved even in the case of temple architecture.” (Ibid, 26) One could say that the influence was not one-sided and while Moghul styles influenced old Indian traditions, they in return deeply affected the nature of Moghul architecture in India. “One of the main characteristics of Moslem architecture was its simplicity and severity.

Line meets line with an austere grace in which there is hardly any room for superfluous decoration. Even where there are embellishments, these take the form of geometrical patterns or calligraphy raised to a fine art. In the architecture of northern India this general principle undergoes an almost revolutionary change.” (Ibid) A great example of this synthesis of the two styles and a mirror of multicultural blend and union can be seen in miracles of architecture such as the Taj Mahal.

The Taj Mahal

“The Taj Mahal is the Moghuls' great contribution to world architecture, and, as the contemporary sources reveal, it was conceived as such from the very beginning.” (Koch, 2005: 128) Tagore called it a "teardrop on the cheek of time", and World-traveler Eleanor Roosevelt felt that its white marble “symbolizes the purity of real love.” (Begly, 1979: 7) Not only was the monument to be a splendid burial place for Mumtaz Mahal, Shah Jahan's beloved wife, but also it was to bear witness to the authority, might and splendor of Shah Jahan and the Moghul rule. As Edensor argues in his book entitled: *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site*, the Taj is an ideal site to study the intersection of history and tourism within the interplay of native and global culture and economy, having different kinds of narratives from the Western tradition and Taj's romantic associations and its place within architectural history, and the Western claim on the building as a world treasure owned by humankind universally, or to the variegated Indian hold on the Taj as a mosque or as a monument of India's history, and as a site of national heritage and pride. (Edensor, 1999: 239)

Persian Architecture as Expressed in the Taj Mahal

Several elements of the Taj Mahal can be recognized as Persian traditions. One element is the chaharbagh, the four quartered garden that is placed in front of the actual mausoleum which we call the Taj Mahal. The layout of the Taj complex and the apocalyptic imagery running through the Koranic inscriptions strongly suggest that the monument was conceived as a vast allegory of the Day of Resurrection, when the dead shall arise and proceed to the place of Judgment beneath the Divine Throne. (Begly, 1979: 25) The architects of this monument took this one step further with the addition of not only the garden but of

many inscriptions of those Quranic Paradise verses which decorate the mausoleum. Other Persian elements include the half and double domes, the irregular octagonal plan, and grand apses and alcoves. Despite these many extraordinary Persian contributions, the overall structure is said to be Moghul Indian and originated from the Akbari style, which first developed during Akbar's rule.

Paradisiacal Garden

The garden is laid out in geometric shapes by paved walks and long marble pools radiating from an elevated square tank in the center. The walks and pools are flanked by rows of trees that originally must have alternated slender cypresses or other evergreens with flowering deciduous varieties. The sixteen outlying squares are bounded by hedges, each becoming a little secluded paradise, a word borrowed from the Persians. One calls to mind the sparse planting seen in gardens pictured in the fifteenth-century Iranian miniatures. (Lancaster, 1956: 10) The concept of the paradisiacal garden house is uttered in the delicate flowers that appear on the dados, at the eye level of the beholder. They are carved in affective detail and symbolize naturalistic but not necessarily identifiable botanical species that transform the lower walls of the mausoleum into ever-blooming paradisiacal flower beds. (Koch, 1997: 157) The naturalistic decoration finishes in the interior, in the central group of the cenotaphs of Mumtaz and Shah Jahan and the screen that surrounds them. These are covered with spectacular flowers and plants inlaid with semi-precious stones, which were called parchin-kari by the Moghul. In the Taj Mahal, every aspect of the architecture chains the concept of the paradisiacal mansion. It is expressed in the overall planning of the complex. The waterfront garden was realized in perfect forms; thus it was raised to a level above the orb of earthly matters. The concept of the house also presides over the elaborate writings that show verses of the Quran that focus on themes of the Day of Judgment, mercy of God, the reward of the faithful, and Paradise ideas.

Shahjahani Architecture as Expressed in the Taj Mahal

To appreciate fully the architecture of the Taj, it should be viewed in the light of the Islamic building tradition. The Moslems patterned

their monuments after those of the Byzantines, just as the Romans had based theirs upon the buildings of the Hellenes, only with this difference: whereas the Romans borrowed anything and everything without reservation, the Moslems took only what fitted in with their orthodox ideas, modifying the remainder in such a way so as not to oppose their dogma. (Lancaster, 1956: 9) The principles of Shahjahani (Akbari) architecture, which interrelate directly with one another, can be identified as follows: firstly, geometrical planning and secondly: bilateral symmetry, namely, 'qarina', an Arabic word that expresses the notion of coupling and counterparts but also of mixing, thus fitting conceptually into the ideas of universal harmony that played a great role in the majestic ideology of Shah Jahan. In a typical Shahjahani qarina scheme, two symmetrical features, one mirroring the other, are arranged on both sides of a central, dominant feature. Thirdly, hierarchy: This is the superseding principle, which governs all the others. Fourthly we can realize proportional formulas expressed in triadic divisions. Fifthly: uniformity of shapes, ordered by hierarchical inflections. And sixthly and seventhly we can realize rich attention to detail and selective use of naturalism respectively, and last but not least symbolism can be understood. (Koch, 2005: 139)

First, a rational geometry is made certain by the use of grid systems based on the Shahjahani architecture. Different modules are used for the garden and the subsidiary gate to the garden. Each element plays a vital part in the composition; if just one part were missing, the balance of the entire composition would be shattered. Bilateral symmetry dominated by a central intonation has generally been known as an ordering standard of the architecture of rulers aiming at complete supremacy a symbol of the ruling force that brings stability and concord. Second, there is perfect symmetrical planning with accent on bilateral symmetry (qarina) along a central axis which is placed as the main feature. The main axis running north-south is represented by the garden canal and the bazaar street in its extension. (Jairazbhoy, 1961: 63) Third, triadic divisions bound together in proportional formulas resolve the shape of plans, elevations, and architectural ornament of the Taj. "A leitmotif is the tripartite composition consisting of a dominant feature in the center flanked by two identical elements; the

configuration relates in turn to hierarchy as well as to qarina (symmetry)." (Koch, 2005: 140) Fourth is the hierarchical grading of material, forms, and color down to the ornamental detail. Particular striking is hierarchical use of color: the only building in the whole complex faced entirely with white marble is the mausoleum. All the subsidiary structures of the Taj complex are faced with red sandstone; special features such as domes may be clad in white marble. This hierarchic use of white marble and red sandstone is typical of imperial Mughal architecture, but here it is explored with matchless cleverness. It represents the clearest link to pre-Islamic Indian concepts and expresses social stratification. The Moghuls elaborated here an architectural praxis that already had been adopted by the early sultans of Delhi and that conforms to older Indian ideas laid down in the Shastric literature. The Vishnudharmottara, an authoritative compilation composed in Kashmir in about the eighth century, recommended white-colored stone for Brahmin buildings and red for those of the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste: "White, it would seem, is opposed to red as the purity of the Brahmin is opposed to the ruling power of the Kshatriya." (Ibid, 141) The synthesis of the two colors had a positive implication. By using white and red in their buildings, the Moghuls represented themselves in the terms of the two highest levels of the Indian social system: architecturally speaking, they were the new Brahmins and the new Kshatriyas of the age. (Ibid)

Koch explains the fifth characteristic as the uniformity of shapes, ordered by hierarchical accents: for instance, only one type of columnar support, the Shahjahani column, is used in the entire complex. It has a multifaceted shaft, a muqarnas capital, and a base formed of multicusped-arched panels and is always combined with a multicusped arch which conveys the hierarchy in Hinduism. This uniformity is true of the entire architectural vocabulary and its decoration; it applies to the paneling of the walls with shallow multicusped niches and cartouches, and to the treatment of vaults. (Ibid, 142) One type of decorative facing is used for the main vaults and the half vaults of the mausoleum and gate, a network developed from points arranged in concentric circles, which Shah Jahan's authors described as qalib-kari, or mold work, because in the original plaster form of the vault the pattern was

applied by means of molds.(Ibid) Sixth, the principle of sensuous attention to detail is expressed mostly in the flowers of the mausoleum dado and in the exquisite gemstone inlay decoration of the cenotaphs of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan and the screen that surrounds them that shows both Hindu and Islamic motif.

Here ornament remained true to its real objective, to overspread the form in such a way as to reveal, enhance and enliven it, by throwing out over its broad areas intricate networks of exquisite lines and rhythmic figures in clear and joyous hues. Following long-established indigenous techniques, in the Near East and Persia these designs were executed in glazed tiles and faience, and in India-as we have seen-in stone inlay.(Lancaster, 1956: 10)Seventh, in the Taj the selective use of naturalism emphasizes hierarchy. The most naturalistic decor appears in the chief building of the whole complex, the mausoleum. Eighth is the sophisticated representation in the architectural program, the concept of the mausoleum as earthly consciousness of the hall of Mumtaz in the garden of heaven.

Pre-Islamic Indian Attributes

One can see that rather than entirely subduing and destroying the Pre Islamic culture of India, early Moghul rulers like Akbar preferred to assimilate the pre Islamic cultures. Some of the Hindu attributes include Chhatris (elements that top towers, usually with a dome), Guldastas (flower-like elements), and making use of an inverted lotus to decorate the tops of the columns. Another Hindu feature is the frontal view octagonal because the Hindus believe in ten directions. The pinnacle pointing to the heaven and the foundation to the hereafter, plus the eight surface directions make the ten directions. Divinity and royalty are believed to hold sway in all those 10 directions. Hence in Hindu tradition, buildings connected with royalty and divinity must have some octagonal features or the buildings themselves should be octagonal. The third Hindu feature is the dome of the Taj Mahal which has a trident pinnacle made of a metal. This pinnacle has been understood by many to be an Islamic symbol, but some have argued that it is also a Hindu sign. Also the full scale shape of this pinnacle is inlaid in the eastern courtyard.As Knaap States: “A close up of the upper portion of the pinnacle of the Taj Mahal, photographed from the

parapet beneath the dome. The Hindu horizontal crescent and the coconut top together look like a trident from the garden level. Islamic crescents are always oblique. The coconut, the bent mango leaves under it and the supporting Kalash (water pot) are exclusive Hindu motifs. Also some believe that it is the symbol of Islam with the Allah inscription.” (Knaap, 2008) The other Hindu features are the corridors and Dhatura Flower. Corridors are typically Hindu and may be seen in any ancient Hindu capital which have special names for the eight directions and celestial guards assigned to each and the Dhatura flower is also the symbol of Hindu Shiva worship which recalls the “Om” sign. Characteristics of Rajput style are also visible in the wall decorations and the typical Rajput towers. (Ibid) Last but not least, the interior Paintings painted on the ceiling of some locked rooms in the underground rooms below the marble podium of the Taj Mahal show traces of elephant’s trunks, which would point to Ganesh, the God of Hindus.

Conclusions

The Taj Mahal is mainly thought of in terms of Islamic architecture. As mentioned in the examples, although Islamic architecture is more prominent in the Taj Mahal, traces of Persian, Hindu, British and Akbari style are also evident in the structure. The Taj Mahal explicitly represents its spirit and strongest feature of the capability of Islam and its leaders to undertake into foreign regions and bond the best characteristics of the place with their own to create exclusive pieces of art. The Taj Mahal is often renowned as a memorial of love but it can also be viewed as a synthesis of architectural traditions and a memorial of multiculturalism. This can be said about numerous Islamic structures and many architectural monuments though The Taj can be a great example of this. While many of these monuments have been destroyed and forgotten during thousands or hundreds of years, the beautiful synthesis of cultures is again seen in the perfection and astonishment of the Taj and one should not forget to ask oneself that if that sort of fusion were accomplished in the form of an art or architecture, then one would ponder to think of the Taj as a symbol of multiculturalism and cultural diversity and as a solution to today’s conflicts and wars throughout the world.

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