

Describe the salient features of Indian Architecture in the Sultanate Period.

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century may be said to have marked a new phase in the cultural development of the country. As both the Turks and the Indians had well developed ideas of art and architecture, their interaction ushered in a long process of initial misunderstanding and confrontation followed by mutual understanding and assimilation.

The most important source for the study of architecture are the surviving remains of buildings or monuments as they enable us to grasp architectural techniques and style of a particular period. Of these, mosques are the most representative forms of architecture as they are primarily a fusion of the Indian and Seljuk traditions often termed as Indo-Islamic. Eminent art historian Monica Juneja argues that the construction of the public mosque should be seen as part of a pattern of the conquest and 'symbolic appropriation' of an alien country. Examples of these are the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque near Qutub Minar in Delhi and the building at Ajmer called Arhai Din Ka Jhonpra. The former had been a temple, and the latter a monastery. With its construction commencing in 1193, the Quwwat-ul-Islam masjid is the first mosque to be built in Delhi after the Muslim conquest and one of the finest example of the fusion of Hindu and Islamic art.

The most important feature of Indian architecture in the sultanate period is the use of arch and dome on a wide scale. Neither the arch nor the dome was a Turkish or Muslim invention. The Arabs borrowed them from Rome through the Byzantine empire, developed them and made them their own. The arch and the dome dispensed with the need for a large number of pillars to support the roof and enabled the construction of a large halls with a clear view such as mosques and palaces. True the arch and the dome were known to the Indians earlier but they were not used then on a large scale.

In the sphere of decoration, the Turks used geometrical and floral designs, combining them with panels of inscriptions containing verses from the Quran. Thus the Arabic script itself became a work of art. They also freely borrowed Hindu motifs such as the bell, swastika, lotus etc and the skill of Indian stone-cutters was fully used for the purpose. The Turks also added colour to their buildings by using red sandstone, yellow sandstone and marble was used for decoration of these buildings.

The most magnificent building constructed by the Turks in the thirteenth century was the Qutub Minar. The construction of this tapering tower, was started by Qutubuddin Aibak, but finally completed by Iltutmish in 1215. The 240 feet high complete minar is adorned with motifs on arches and writings in Arabic script. Among the monuments of Iltutmish mention must be made of his mausoleum at Delhi which is the most ornate monument of early Indo-Islamic art. In the opinion of Vipul Singh, the first true Islamic arch made its appearance in the mausoleum of Balban built around 1287-88.

The next landmark in the development of Indo-Islamic architecture was seen in the regime of Alauddin Khalji. By this time Indian craftsmen and masons had mastered the art of fitting their beautiful style of embellishments to Islamic architectural forms. The fusion of the best features of

these two styles is found in the Alai Darwaza built by Alauddin Khalji as an entrance door to the Qutab. It is the first building to employ geometric ornamentation with intricate carvings in red sandstone and marble. Percy Brown has noted that in the buildings of the Khalji period a new method of stone masonry was used like the use of dressed stone slabs which became a characteristic feature of the late medieval period buildings. Calligraphy is an important element of decorative art in the buildings of this period and koranic sayings are inscribed on buildings in a variety of materials like stone and painting.

There was great building activity in the Tughlaq period which marked the climax of the Delhi Sultanate as well as the beginning of its decline. Ghiyasuddin and Mohammad Tughlaq built the huge palace fortress complex called Tughlaqabad. The tomb of Ghiyasuddin marks a new trend in architecture as to have a good skyline the building was put upon a high platform and its beauty was enhanced by a marble dome. A striking feature of the Tughlaq architecture was the sloping walls. This is called 'batter' and it gives the effect of strength and solidity to the building. The arch beam combination is another hallmark of the Tughlaq style. The Tughlaqs also introduced tiles as an element of decoration. The Tughlaqs did not generally use the costly redstone in their buildings but the cheaper and more easily available greystone. Their buildings have minimum of decoration. The buildings of Firuz Tughlaq such as the Hauz Khas or the fort called Firozshah Kotla were different in style from early Tughlaqs. In fact Indo-Islamic architecture underwent a distinct change in the Tughlaq period as the monuments were now marked by rigid simplicity in striking contrast to the elaborate ornamentation of the earlier period.

After the death of Firozshah Tughlaq in 1388, the Sultanate became politically unstable. However what is worth noting is that, by this time, an independent style of architecture had emerged in India, combining many of the new devices brought by the Turks with the indigenous forms. The Lodis developed this tradition further when a large number of tombs were built in and around Delhi and were placed on a high platform. Some of the tombs were placed in the midst of gardens and the Lodi Garden is an example of this. The domes were now bigger in size and elevation. An important feature of the monuments of Lodis was the introduction of double dome which greatly influenced later buildings. Some of the tombs were of an octagonal shape. Many of these features were adopted by the Mughals and their culmination is to be found in the Taj Mahal built by Shah Jahan. The Delhi Sultanate came to an end in 1526 at the first battle of Panipat and this also signaled the end of the Sultanate style of architecture.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that even though the Muslims had evolved a distinct style of architecture, they could not ignore the influence of Hindu architectural ideals in India as they had brought with them soldiers for military conquests and not artists or architects. Hence they had to employ Hindu craftsmen in order to give a concrete shape to their artistic needs. While Hindu influences naturally crept in, the Muslim features like the use of brick and mortar, arches, domes, minarets and geometric designs enriched and added a new dimension to Indian architecture in the Sultanate period.