

The Importance of Everyday Practices of Religious Classification in Indian Architectural History

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In Indian architectural history, religious categorization of the buildings as Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina, and Muslim, has been the basic methodological tool for scholars. This distinction is a legacy of the British historians who used it in an initial effort to come to terms with the bewildering variety of architecture in the subcontinent. This taxonomic classification, which began in the mid-19th century and which continues to the present, has transformed buildings into religious identities. Mosques have become Muslim and Temples have become Hindu. Recent scholarship has uncovered the political motivations of the British colonialists, which underlie these divisions, and has pointed to the pitfalls of continuing with such taxonomy.¹ Should these religious affiliations be completely abandoned? Is some identification with religion vital and necessary for the everyday negotiations that enable communities of diverse belief systems to live together? In this paper, I will review how this classification of buildings as Hindu or Islamic affects the perceptions and practices of those for whom the building is not an object of study, but is alive and integrated into their daily lives. My paper focuses on a rural village Mandal, located in the northwest corner of Ahmadabad, Gujarat in India, where the religious buildings are integrated into people's daily lives as places of pilgrimage and worship. Through an analysis of residents' perceptions of the religious buildings, this paper explores the rich, layered relationship that exists between buildings and religious identity, and thus broadens the parameters of historical scholarship in architecture.

The categorization of Indian architecture as Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and so forth can be traced back to James Fergusson, who in his pioneering text entitled the *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (2 vols., 1876) turned it from a merely stylistic description to an operative category.² Architecture, for Fergusson, was fundamentally a "racial art."³ In his taxonomy, buildings resembled the races that built them. Structural clarity, simple rhythms, and large expanses of walls were not the attributes of Islamic buildings, but rather, they were the characteristics of the Muslims who built them. Similarly, a Hindu mind, considered to be mysterious, metaphysical, and transcendental, created complex Hindu forms.

The superimposition of the religious categories of 'Hindu' and 'Islamic', have fundamentally distorted the writing of the history of architecture in India. For example, any building that represents a mixture of elements from both styles is necessarily seen as a confluence of two thoughts. Fatehpur Sikri, the new capital near Agra that Akbar founded in 1571 is a case in point: a whole political history of the construction of the building complex is based on a simplified reading of the confluence of Hindu and Islamic architectural vocabulary.⁴

In turn, the superimposed religious categorization has been perpetuated by a number of misperceptions. For example, there is the repeated mention of pillage and destruction of temples by Muslims in northern and western India, and the belief that from the end of the 13th century till the close of the 16th century no Hindu or Jain temples

were built.⁵ In addition, the consistent deprecation of Hindu aesthetic vocabulary as profusely sculptural and mysterious, in comparison to the Islamic as structurally clear and expansive, within traditional western scholarship, has further reinforced this dichotomy.⁶

In medieval Indian architecture, it is true that there was a confluence of two building traditions: the trabeate, belonging to a plastic aesthetic, indigenous to the Indian subcontinent; and the arcuate, stressing surface decoration and simple volumes, developed in Central Asia. In the scholarship, however, this confluence is not described as the meeting of two building traditions, but rather interpreted as a religious and political statement of the domination of Islam over the Hindu population of the subcontinent.⁷ Thereby, architectural traditions are given successive politico-religious purposes by the scholarship: First, they are made synonymous with the predominant religions of their respective places of origin (Central Asia/Islam, India/Hinduism); and second, they are interpreted as the symbol of the triumph of Islam over Hindu India. If the superimposed religious dichotomy were de-emphasized, surely confluence of building tradition, and not the competition of religio-political entities, would inform the conclusions of scholarship.

In this vein, scholars in recent years have underscored the political motivations that underlie the categorization of Indian architecture into communal styles.⁷ These scholars point out that, for the British, the use of these communal categories advanced important political objectives, aiding in dividing the people, and thus strengthening their rule over India. Thomas Metcalf, in his book *The Imperial Vision* (1989) states that, "if all architectural elements were defined as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim', nothing remained unknown. Everything — the arch, the dome, the bracket capital, the decorative motif — had its place in the comprehensive system. What the colonial ruler had explained, he, of course, controlled."⁸

The political motivations of the British are also evident in the first few reports of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The ASI, formed in 1865, was the official body of the British Government, which was responsible for completing the survey and documentation of the historical monuments of India. In ASI's first report, Sir Alexander Cunningham outlined the motivation: "to throw light upon the early history of England's dependency; history which, as time moves on, as the country becomes more easily accessible and traversable, and as Englishmen are led to give more thought to India than such as barely suffices to hold it and govern it, will assuredly occupy, more and more, the attention of the intelligent and enquiring classes in European countries."⁹ Even scholars, who do not see the political interpretations as an adequate explanation, also agree that division of the monuments into religious categories was at first a necessary construct. They underscore that it should remain precisely that, a construct, and not become the ultimate aim in the study of Indian architectural history.

Now that the scholarship has become aware of the dangers — both its political implications and its intellectual limitations — of an architectural analysis aimed exclusively at identifying the religious pedigree of its object, it is time to rethink the whole issue of religious identity, identifiability, and its relationship to architecture. In order to demonstrate the inadequacy of both the earlier colonial religious categorization as well as the recent suggestions to completely abandon them, I have chosen an isolated, non-descript village settlement in Gujarat in India. Here the religious identification of buildings by the people points to how everyday practices of responsibility and attribution are negotiated at level that is not abstract — as in the academic classification of buildings as Hindu or Islamic. But it is a subtle negotiation of occasional exclusion and mutual neglect based on a deep religious faith in one's own belief system. This allows them to mutually co-exist without a conscious pre-occupation with the boundaries between them. By doing a detailed study of the resident's perceptions of the religious buildings, we hope to point to the problems involved in freezing buildings as "monuments of importance" under the pretext of saving them, thus divorcing them from their real inhabitants.

A rural village named Mandal is located in the northwest corner of Ahmadabad district, Gujarat, approximately 25 kilometers northwest of Viramgam. Presently the village is comprised of about 2000 inhabitants, most of whose earning members are dedicated to agriculture. The population consists of both Hindus and Muslims, living in separate areas within the boundaries of the village, and in daily contact with each other. Presently, Mandal has become a relatively isolated settlement, being located in the interior of Gujarat, and not being upon any major highways connecting the nearby important cities, such as Ahmadabad or Palanpur (Mahesana District). However, historical evidence, such as that provided by the presence of historical monuments, indicates that the village did not always occupy such a politically non-descript position.

The relatively prominent position of Mandal in the later medieval period is evidenced by the architectural remains found there. Three mosques in the village, approximately datable to the 15th through 16th centuries, were built within one kilometer of each other, indicating that there was a significant Muslim community in the settlement even during medieval times. The Jami Masjid, built in the 14th century, is the largest of the three buildings, the other two being the Sayyid-ni Masjid and the Qazi-ki Masjid. It is the presence of these monuments in Mandal as examples of Sultanate-period architecture in Gujarat, which primarily attracts the attention and the visits of occasional tourists and architectural historians to the site of the village community.¹⁰

The Jami Masjid was considered "a very poor specimen of Muhammadan architecture"¹¹ when it was first documented by the Archaeological Survey of India, and has received virtually no scholarly attention thereafter.¹² Nonetheless, it is relevant to the point raised in the present work, namely the religious identifiability of architecture. It has been discussed above that the identification of buildings by scholars as 'Hindu' or 'Islamic' has much distorted architectural analysis. However, in eschewing this classification, we may be committing an error of equal magnitude, since in the everyday lives of the people of Mandal, the historical monuments in their midst do indeed have a clear religious identity and function.

As has been the case since the medieval period, the quarters of an urban or semi-urban settlement are largely distinguished by the religious denomination of their inhabitants. It is also the case that these quarters are situated in close proximity with each other, having unofficial, fluid, and thin boundaries between them. In Mandal, the Hindu quarter is tightly pressed against the walls of the Jami Masjid, whose southern wall seems to function as an unofficial quarter boundary itself.

Due to the disrepair into which the congregational mosque has fallen, the season of monsoon rains is a particularly difficult one, both for the building and the community. The pounding of excessive water on the roof of the mosque causes spillage into the area adjacent to the southern wall, precisely where the Hindu community has put up its

dwellings. Many of the dwellings are mud-walled and metal-roofed, so that this spillage causes great inconvenience to these inhabitants, and occasional damage to their homes. The weight of the water, coming down hard atop the structures, causes loud noise and even some bending of the metal roofs. According to one villager, Diwan Yusuf Muhammad,¹³ every monsoon the Hindus of the quarter understandably complain with great vigor to the Muslims that the Jami Masjid needs repair, so that they and their homes are not unexpectedly splashed by heavy water, and damage and injury are avoided.

Even though the Muslims of the village were willing and even eager to resolve the dispute, they find themselves in a position of helpless desperation. The mosque is still the congregational mosque, and is used for Friday prayers; so the Muslims' concern for its maintenance was motivated by their concern for conducting what they considered proper worship. But, since the Jami Masjid is also recognized as an historical monument by the Archaeological Survey of India, they are forbidden to intervene in any way in its physical appearance or maintenance. Only trained conservationists of the ASI, or other designated members from the institution, have the legal jurisdiction to perform repairs upon the building. Due to Mandal's minor political and electoral importance, however, the ASI has not even sent regular surveillance deputies to check upon the monument; much less would they deploy a team of conservationists to the site.¹⁴

Herein resides a conflict, which Diwan Yusuf claims, is serious enough that it threatens to cause sectarian violence. In such an event, the rift would tear at the fabric of the village community of Hindus and Muslims — a fabric of mutual and reciprocal dependence that has been woven over the centuries. The Hindus clearly associate the Jami Masjid with the Muslim community of the village, and assign the responsibility of its upkeep to them and not to the ASI. Thus, according to their point of view, blame for the inconvenience and occasional damage which they have suffered on account of the mosque's disrepair is also assignable to the Muslims. The latter themselves accept these assignments, both of responsibility for upkeep of the building, and of blame for the inconvenience suffered by the Hindus; but they are limited by governmental institutions in exercising their responsibility for its maintenance.

For the citizens of Mandal, then — and indeed for rural Indian society in general — the built environment where religious worship is conducted, is unquestionably associable with the religious practitioners who use it, and abstractly, with the religion itself. The layer of identity of 'historical monument', added to the Jami Masjid by the Archaeological Survey, is a definition and perception of the building, which the villagers cannot integrate into their understanding, or into their actions. It would not be conceivable, for example, that they consider the mosque as a part of the national patrimony, to be preserved and valued for its function as a sign and representative of 15th-century architecture. The Hindus, especially, would not consider it within the bounds of their rights or duties to exert additional pressure upon the ASI to conduct repairs on the Jami Masjid so that the building stands for posterity. The Muslims have been made aware of the identity of the building as historical source, and, to some degree, of the necessity for its preservation in this capacity, not out of their everyday experience, but out of their dealings and frustrations with the ASI. The Jami Masjid, then, is primarily a place of worship, undeniably associated with Islam.

From the above example, Mandal serves architectural historians as encouragement toward a reassessment of the religious identification of architecture in scholarship. The religious categorization, which has been a mainstay of the study of architecture in India, clearly does not reflect the religious identification that is practiced by those for whom the building is alive and integrated into their daily lives. This dissonance does not mean that religious categorization ought to be eliminated altogether, but rather that the application and aims of this intellectual tool must be re-examined.

NOTES

- ¹Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*, Los Angeles, 1989; Ritu Bhatt and Sonit Bafna, "Post-Colonial Narratives of Indian Architecture," *Architecture + Design*, Nov-Dec, 1995, pp. 85-89.
- ²James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Far Eastern Architecture* London, 1876. Fergusson, however, later recognized the simplification that such classification entails. In a lecture given to the Royal Society of Arts entitled, "On the Study of Indian Architecture," Fergusson said, "I learnt that there was not only one Hindu and one Mohammedan style in India, but several species of class; that these occupied well-defined local provinces, and belonged each to ascertained ethnological divisions of the people." Reprinted in James Fergusson, *On the Study of Indian Architecture* Delhi, 1977, pp. 5-6. However, it was not long before architectural historians were casually writing about two fundamentally different architectures in India, each identified with a religious community. See, for example, Bannister Fletcher's *History of World Architecture on the Comparative Method* London: 1899, pp. 889-909.
- ³Fergusson, "Introduction", pp.3-49.
- ⁴The tradition of studying Fatehpur Sikri as a confluence of Hindu and Islamic styles was criticized in an issue of *MARG*, v.38, no. 2, entitled *Akbar and Fatehpur Sikri*, Bombay, 1986. This approach was found to be too simplistic to define the profusion of styles in Akbar's palaces. Fatehpur Sikri's eclecticism was attributed to several factors: the formative character of the Mughal court, Akbar's support for experimentation in the arts, and his fascination with his Timurid ancestry. Furthermore, some authors have suggested that the British projection of *Fatehpur Sikri* as a representation of the Akbar's religious tolerance was politically motivated. Its role was to legitimize British rule over India. See, for example, Thomas Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*
- ⁵Alka Patel, "Archaeological Survey and Art Historical Analysis of Early Islamic Architecture of Western India," Annual Conference of the College Art Association: New York, February 12-15, 1997.
- ⁶Partha Mitter in *Much Maligned Monsters* (1977) points out that while Islamic art in the form of Mughal paintings and descriptions of Mughal architecture was acceptable to the Europeans and even found admirers, Hindu art still presented problems of accommodation to Western aesthetics. Most particularly Mitter attributes the resistance of Western historians to Hindu iconography and to profuse ornamental sculpture of South Indian temples to a fundamental classical bias in the Western art historical tradition. See Partha Mitter, "Western Bias in the Study of South Indian Aesthetics," *South Asian Review* Vol 6, 1973, pp.125-136.
- ⁷Anthony Welch & Howard Crane, "The Tughluqs: Master Builders of the Delhi Sultanate," *Muqarnas* I (1983).
- ⁷Same as footnote 1
- ⁸Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision*, p.52.
- ⁹Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, I (1862-63) [Four Reports Made During The Years 1862-65].
- ¹⁰The mosques of Mandal first seem to have been noticed at the end of the 19th century, when the still British-governed Archaeological Survey of India conducted prospections in Gujarat. Cf. J. Burgess, *Archaeological Survey of India* (New Imperial Series) vol. 33, (*Archaeological Survey of Western India* vol. 8), *The Muhammadan Architecture of Ahmadabad*, vol. 2 (1905), pp. 92-93.
- ¹¹*Idem*, p. 92.
- ¹²As stated above, scholarship on the medieval architecture of the northern sub-continent, continues to base a large proportion of its analysis on the religious categorization of the buildings. Within this general trend, the rigidity and inaccuracy of this categorization becomes apparent: Most studies of 'Islamic' architecture focus upon the Tughluq buildings of Delhi, as these fit more readily into the definition of Islamic architecture. The buildings of the western region unfortunately do not fall so easily into this definition, and hence have received only cursory attention in the scholarship. Cf. especially A. Welch & H. Crane, *op. cit.* (1983).
- ¹³The majority of information regarding this state of affairs in the vicinity of the Jami Masjid was obtained through a personal interview with Diwan Yusuf Muhammad on October 1, 1997. In addition to his occupation as a tailor, which was carried on by the male members of his family for generations, Diwan Yusuf was part of the Khidmat al-Azhar Committee, based at the Jami Masjid, and encharged with all matters involving the building. In this capacity, he was also considered the spokesperson for the Muslim community of Mandal.
- ¹⁴Diwan Yusuf Muhammad, interviewed by Alka Patel 1-X-97. For a similar analysis, see Ritu Bhatt and Alka Patel, "How Buildings Divide and Unite Us," *Threshold* 17 The Critical Journal of MIT Department of Architecture, pp.47-51.