

Islamic Architectural Development in Mughal India: A Critical Study

Asqa Nain

M.Phil Scholar, Department of History, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan

asqanain7@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8128-9029>

Dr. Sohail Akhtar

Lecturer, Department of History, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan
sakhtar@gudgk.edu.pk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9344-7551>

Kinza Naveed

M.Phil Scholar, Department of History, Ghazi University, Dera Ghazi Khan

kinzanaveed028@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3288-8060>

Abstract

The architectural legacy of Mughal India represents one of the most stylish and well-integrated fusions in the history of Islamic architecture. It symbolizes a remarkable fusion of Islamic, Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous Indian traditions, producing a characteristic and evolving architectural identity. This study critically investigates the progression of Islamic architecture during the Mughal era (1526–1857), focusing not only on its visual and structural qualities but also on its broader cultural, intellectual, and political significance. The article explores the gradual evolution of architectural styles, beginning with the formative and experimental phase under Babur and Humayun, advancing towards the period of consolidation and innovation under Akbar, and reaching its peak of refinement and elegance during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. It further considers the shift towards simplicity and reduced

patronage under Aurangzeb. Particular attention is given to major architectural advancements, including the emphasis on symmetry, large-scale construction, double-domed structures, charbagh garden planning, and refined decorative techniques such as pietra dura inlay and calligraphic ornamentation. (Chughtai, 1980s) The study underscores that Mughal architecture was not limited to aesthetic or functional purposes it served as a significant medium for expressing imperial authority and ideological vision. The Mughal rulers consciously utilized architecture to assert political dominance, articulate religious identity, and facilitate cultural cohesion within a diverse and multi-ethnic empire. Monumental constructions such as mosques, mausoleums, forts, and urban complexes were designed to symbolize both spiritual ideals and imperial magnificence.

By examining architectural developments from Babur to Aurangzeb, the article reveals a continuous process of adaptation, continuity, and transformation, wherein earlier traditions were not discarded but reinterpreted in response to shifting socio-political and economic conditions. This demonstrates that Mughal architecture was a dynamic and responsive tradition rather than a fixed or static form. In conclusion, this study argues that Islamic architectural development in Mughal India should be understood as an ongoing process of cultural interaction, adaptation, and synthesis, through which diverse artistic and intellectual influences were harmonized into a coherent yet pluralistic architectural tradition. This enduring legacy continues to influence the architectural landscape of South Asia and provides valuable insights into the complex historical and cultural fabric of the Mughal Empire.

Keywords: Mughal Architecture, Islamic Architecture, Indo-Persian Fusion, Charbagh Planning, Imperial Symbolism

Introduction

Islamic architecture in the Indian subcontinent has a long and rich background that existed even before the Mughal Empire, especially during the period of the Delhi Sultanate. The rulers of the Sultanate made important contributions by introducing key Islamic architectural features such as

mosques, arches, domes, and planned cities. These early developments created a strong base for future architectural progress. However, it was during the Mughal period that architecture in this region entered a completely new stage, marked by greater beauty, large scale construction, and a high level of artistic perfection.

(Asher, 1992) The Mughal rulers belonged to the Timurid family of Central Asia, and they brought with them their own architectural traditions, which were strongly influenced by Persian and Central Asian styles. When they came to India, they did not simply copy these styles; instead, they **adjusted and modified them according to the local environment, climate, materials, and existing cultural traditions**. As a result, a new and unique architectural style developed that combined foreign and local elements in a balanced way.

Mughal architecture is especially known for its focus on **symmetry, balance, and geometric design**, which are important features of Islamic art. Their buildings were often large and carefully planned, showing a sense of order and power. The use of **red sandstone and white marble** became very common, giving Mughal buildings both strength and beauty. Another important feature was the development of the **charbagh garden system**, which divided gardens into four parts and was inspired by the Islamic idea of paradise.

Decoration also played an important role in Mughal architecture. Builders used **calligraphy, floral designs, geometric patterns, and pietra dura (stone inlay work)** to decorate buildings in a detailed and elegant way. These decorations were not only for beauty but also had cultural and religious meanings, making the buildings more meaningful and impressive.

This article aims to study the **historical development of Mughal architecture step by step**, from its early beginnings to its peak and later changes. It also tries to explain the wider **cultural and political importance** of this architecture, showing how it was used not only for construction but also as a way to express royal power, unity among different cultures, and religious identity.

Historical Background

The Mughal Empire started in 1526 when Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi in the First Battle of Panipat. This victory was very important because it not only brought a new ruling power to the Indian subcontinent but also

introduced new cultural and architectural ideas. Babur had a strong interest in nature, gardens, and building design. Even though his rule did not last long, he played an important role in setting the early base for Mughal architecture. After Babur, his son Humayun became the ruler, but his time was full of political problems. At one point, he had to leave India and live in Persia. During his stay there, he was greatly influenced by Persian culture and architectural styles. When he returned and regained his throne, these influences became part of Mughal architecture. His tomb in Delhi is one of the earliest important Mughal buildings and later became a model for future architectural designs.

(Koch, 1991) Discussed the Mughal Empire became strongest during the time of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. Akbar was a powerful ruler who worked to unite different cultures and traditions. In architecture, he encouraged new ideas and combined Islamic and local Indian styles. His period is known for creativity and experimentation, which helped in forming a strong Mughal architectural identity.

Jahangir, who came after Akbar, was more interested in beauty, decoration, and gardens rather than large buildings. His time is considered a period of improvement and elegance, where earlier architectural styles were made more detailed and refined.

The rule of Shah Jahan is known as the golden period of Mughal architecture. During his time, buildings became more beautiful, balanced, and perfect in design. He focused a lot on symmetry and the use of white marble. Many famous structures, including grand mosques, forts, and tombs, were built during his reign, showing the highest level of Mughal artistic skill.

However, during the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire started to decline. He was more focused on political control and military matters than on art and architecture. Because of this, fewer large and decorative buildings were constructed, and the style became simpler compared to earlier rulers.

In summary, every Mughal ruler contributed in his own way to the development of architecture. Their personal interests, political aims, and religious beliefs influenced the kind of buildings they created. This is why Mughal architecture shows both **continuity and change**, as it developed step by step over time according to the priorities of different rulers.

Early Phase: Babur and Humayun

Babur, who established the Mughal Empire, had a deep interest in nature, gardens, and building styles. His ideas were strongly shaped by the **Timurid culture of Central Asia**, where gardens were an important part of royal life. Even though Babur ruled India for a short period, his influence was very important in the beginning stage of Mughal architecture.

One of his main contributions was the introduction of **planned and organized gardens** in the Indian subcontinent. He introduced the **charbagh system**, which divided the garden into four equal parts with the help of water streams and walkways. This design was not only made for visual beauty but also had a strong symbolic meaning, as it represented the concept of **heaven (paradise) in Islamic teachings**. Babur's gardens showed a sense of balance, order, and neat planning, which later became a key feature of Mughal architectural style. After Babur, his son Humayun came to power, but his rule was full of difficulties and political conflicts. Due to these problems, he could not focus much on building activities during his lifetime. However, his role in the history of Mughal architecture is still very important.

(Nath, 1982–2005) The most important architectural contribution connected to Humayun came after his death. His wife, Haji Begum, built his tomb in Delhi in his memory. This tomb is considered a **major milestone in Mughal architecture**. It was the first example in the subcontinent where a **tomb was combined with a formal garden layout** in a complete and planned way. The building was placed at the center of a charbagh garden, showing a clear connection between architecture and nature.

Humayun's Tomb also introduced several important features, such as a large central dome, a well-balanced and symmetrical design, and the use of both red sandstone and white marble. These elements later became common in Mughal buildings. In many ways, this tomb worked as a **pattern for future constructions**, especially for later famous monuments like the Taj Mahal.

In conclusion, the time of Babur and Humayun represents the **initial phase of Mughal architecture**, where basic ideas and styles were first introduced and developed. Although the number of buildings from this period is not very large, their contributions were very important because they created a strong

base for the more advanced and beautiful architectural works of later Mughal rulers.

The Akbari Synthesis

Emperor Akbar, who ruled from 1556 to 1605, had a very important role in the growth and development of Mughal architecture. His time is known for creativity, new ideas, and the blending of different architectural styles. Akbar was a broad-minded ruler who supported the use of ideas from various cultures and religions. Because of this attitude, architecture during his rule became more rich, diverse, and unique.

(Michell, 1978) A key feature of Akbar's architectural style is the **mixing of different traditions**. His buildings were mainly made from **red sandstone**, which gave them a strong and attractive look. Along with this, he included design features from **Hindu, Jain, and Persian architecture**, such as carved pillars, brackets, detailed patterns, and arches. This combination created a new Mughal style that showed both local Indian and foreign influences in a balanced way.

Akbar's buildings were not only made for appearance but also to express his ideas and policies. He wanted to unite people from different backgrounds, and this idea is clearly shown in his architecture. His buildings reflect a sense of harmony between Islamic and local styles, which connects with his policy of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

The most important example of Akbar's architectural work is the city of **Fatehpur Sikri**, which he built as his capital. This city is a large and well-planned complex that includes royal residences, official buildings, mosques, open spaces, and courtyards. Each part of the city shows careful design and a mixture of different architectural elements. The planning of the city shows order, control, and the strength of the Mughal Empire.

One of the most famous buildings in Fatehpur Sikri is the **Buland Darwaza**, a huge and impressive entrance gate. It was built to celebrate Akbar's success in Gujarat. This structure is important not only because of its large size and beauty but also because of its meaning. It stands as a symbol of Akbar's **power and authority**, and also shows his message of acceptance and respect for different religions and cultures.

In conclusion, Akbar's period is seen as a very important stage in Mughal architecture. During his rule, architecture became more creative, meaningful, and inclusive. His way of combining different styles helped to build a strong base for future Mughal architecture, which later reached its highest level during the reign of Shah Jahan.

Jahangir and Reforms of the Style

Emperor Jahangir, who ruled from 1605 to 1627, had an important role in shaping Mughal architecture, but his style was different from the rulers before him. He was less interested in building very large and grand structures and more focused on **gardens, decoration, and artistic detail**. Because of this, his time is known as a period when Mughal architecture became more polished, fine, and graceful.

(Rizvi, 1987) During Jahangir's rule, there was a noticeable change in architectural style. The buildings of Akbar were strong, heavy, and mostly built with red sandstone, but in Jahangir's period, architecture became more **light, elegant, and decorative**. More attention was given to surface design, fine work, and beauty. The use of **white marble** increased, which gave buildings a cleaner and more attractive look.

Jahangir had a strong love for nature, especially flowers and plants, and this interest appeared in architectural decoration. Buildings were decorated with **natural-looking floral designs, carvings, and detailed patterns**, which made them more artistic and pleasing. The style of this period shows a clear move towards beauty and refinement instead of size and strength.

One of the most important examples from Jahangir's time is the **Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah in Agra**. This building is often called an **early example or model for the Taj Mahal** because it introduced many new features that later became very important in Mughal architecture. It was among the first buildings where **white marble was widely used instead of red sandstone**.

Another key feature of this tomb is the use of **pietra dura (inlay work)**, where small pieces of colored stones are placed into the marble to create beautiful and detailed designs. This technique added a new level of decoration and became very popular in later Mughal buildings, especially in the Taj Mahal.

The Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah clearly shows the **shift from Akbar's strong and bold architectural style to a softer and more refined style**, which later

reached its highest level during Shah Jahan's reign. It represents an important stage in the development of Mughal architecture where beauty and detail became more important.

In conclusion, Jahangir's period is important because it brought **improvement, softness, and artistic beauty** to Mughal architecture. Even though fewer large buildings were made, the changes during his time helped prepare the way for the most advanced and elegant Mughal architecture in the later period.

The Peak under Shah Jahan

The period of Emperor Shah Jahan, from 1628 to 1658, is seen as the highest point of Mughal architecture. It is considered the **most developed and most successful stage** of architectural growth in the Mughal Empire. His time is famous for **great magnificence, perfect balance, clear symmetry, and wide use of white marble**.

During Shah Jahan's rule, building design became more refined, elegant, and carefully organized. Special attention was given to proportion, harmony, and overall beauty. The use of **white marble increased greatly**, while the earlier red sandstone became less common. Because of this change, Mughal buildings looked more bright, smooth, and luxurious. Decoration also became more detailed, including fine carving, floral patterns, and artistic stone inlay work.

(Qureshi, 1966) The most famous example of Shah Jahan's architectural work is the **Taj Mahal**, which he built in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. This building is one of the most well-known monuments in the world and represents the highest level of Mughal architectural skill. The Taj Mahal is known for its **perfect balance, symmetrical design, and beautiful structure**. Every part of the building is carefully planned, and the decoration is very fine and detailed. It shows the ideal form of beauty in Mughal architecture.

Apart from the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan also constructed other important buildings that reflect his architectural vision. One of these is the **Red Fort in Delhi**, which was used as the royal palace and the main center of government. This large complex includes palaces, halls, gardens, and administrative areas. It shows the strength, organization, and authority of the Mughal Empire.

Another important structure from his time is the **Jama Masjid in Delhi**, which is one of the largest mosques in India. It was built with careful planning and strong architectural skill, showing a clear sense of symmetry and

grand design. This mosque represents both religious importance and imperial power, showing Shah Jahan's aim to connect faith with kingship.

In conclusion, Shah Jahan's period is known as the **golden age of Mughal architecture**. During his reign, architecture reached its highest level in terms of beauty, design, and artistic quality. His buildings show a perfect combination of strength, elegance, and fine craftsmanship, which makes this period the most important stage in Mughal architectural history.

Aurangzeb and the Collapse of Mughal Building Traditions Emperor

Aurangzeb, who ruled from 1658 to 1707, followed a **simpler and strict style** in relation to architecture. Unlike earlier Mughal rulers, he showed less interest in building large, grand, and highly decorative monuments. Because of this approach, the level of architectural development during his reign became slower and less active compared to previous emperors.

Even though some construction work was carried out during his rule, the buildings were usually **less impressive in scale, design, and artistic detail**. They did not reflect the same creativity, elegance, and innovation that was seen in the periods of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. The focus of the empire gradually shifted more towards administration, governance, and military affairs instead of architectural development.

The reign of Aurangzeb shows a clear change in Mughal building traditions. Earlier Mughal rulers used architecture as an important way to show **royal power, cultural identity, and artistic achievement**, but during Aurangzeb's time this tradition became weaker. As a result, fewer major and impressive monuments were constructed, and architectural style became more **plain, simple, and less decorative**.

(Rizvi, 1978–1983) This reduction in architectural activity is also connected to the **larger political and economic situation** of the empire at that time. During Aurangzeb's rule, the Mughal Empire faced many difficulties, including long wars, administrative pressure, and financial problems. These challenges reduced the resources and attention available for large building projects.

In conclusion, the period of Aurangzeb represents a **decline in Mughal architectural patronage and development**. Although some buildings were still made, they did not reach the same level of beauty, innovation, and grandeur

as earlier Mughal architecture. This period marks the beginning of a slow decline in the rich architectural tradition of the Mughal Empire.

Key Architectural Features

1. Building Materials and Construction Methods

Mughal architecture is well known for the use of **red sandstone and white marble**. Over time, there was a clear change in preference from sandstone toward marble, which shows a shift in style toward more elegance and refined appearance. Mughal builders also used several advanced decorative techniques, such as **pietra dura (stone inlay work)**, **decorative writing (calligraphy)**, and **detailed stone carving**. These techniques made the buildings more attractive, artistic, and visually rich.

2. Structural Design Features

The important structural parts of Mughal buildings include **domes, arches, minarets, and iwans (large arched entrances or halls)**. (Khan, 1990) A special feature of this architecture is the use of the **double dome system**, which helped make buildings look grand from the outside while keeping proper balance and proportion inside. Mughal architecture is also strongly based on **symmetry and planned layout**, where buildings are designed in a balanced and well-organized manner.

3. Gardens and Urban Layout Planning

The famous **charbagh garden style**, which divides space into four equal sections, represents the Islamic idea of paradise and peace. Mughal rulers also paid attention to city planning. Their cities were designed with a strong sense of **order, structure, and easy movement**, ensuring that residential areas, official buildings, and religious places were properly arranged and easy to access.

4. Decorative Arts and Ornamentation

Decoration played a very important role in Mughal architectural style. Buildings were decorated with **flower designs, geometric shapes, and Quranic inscriptions**, which added both beauty and meaning. These decorative elements were carefully combined to create a sense of **balance, harmony, and artistic unity**, making Mughal buildings visually impressive and culturally meaningful.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Mughal architecture was not only created for beauty or construction purposes, but it also worked as a **strong visual expression of political authority and religious identity**. Through large and impressive buildings, Mughal rulers showed their power, strength, and control over the empire. These structures were also used as a way to make their rule more acceptable and respected among the people. In this way, architecture became a **tool of governance and legitimacy**, helping emperors to strengthen their position in society.

(Hashmi, 1989)At the same time, Mughal buildings also played an important role in promoting **cultural unity and social connection**. The architecture of this period clearly shows a mixture of **Islamic artistic traditions with local Indian design elements**. This combination was not accidental; it was a result of interaction between different cultures living in the same empire. Because of this blending, Mughal architecture reflects a society where **diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic groups coexisted and influenced each other**.

In this way, Mughal architecture represents a **pluralistic cultural system**, meaning a society made up of many different traditions living together. The buildings created during this time show how these different influences were merged into one artistic and architectural form, producing a unique and balanced style.

Comparative Analysis with Pre-Mughal Architecture

When Mughal architecture is compared with the earlier architectural style of the **Delhi Sultanate period**, clear differences can be seen in design, planning, and artistic expression. Mughal buildings show a much higher level of **refinement, balance, symmetry, and careful use of space**. Their structures are more organized and visually harmonious, which gives them a more elegant appearance.

On the other hand, the architecture of the Delhi Sultanate was mainly focused on **practical needs, strength, and simplicity**. Buildings from that period were usually less decorative and more functional in nature. The main aim was to create strong and useful structures rather than highly artistic ones. Mughal architecture, however, developed in a different direction. It combined both **functionality and artistic beauty**, giving equal importance to structure

and decoration. Mughal buildings were designed not only to serve practical purposes such as residence, worship, or administration, but also to express **symbolic meanings such as power, cultural identity, and aesthetic excellence**. This makes Mughal architecture more advanced and visually rich compared to earlier styles.

Legacy and Influence

The impact of Mughal architecture did not end with the decline of the Mughal Empire. Instead, its style, design principles, and artistic features continued to influence later architectural developments in South Asia. Even during the colonial period, many buildings show the **influence of Mughal design elements**, such as domes, arches, and decorative patterns. In modern times as well, Mughal architectural ideas can still be seen in various public buildings and cultural structures.

(Dani, 2007) The influence of Mughal architecture extends beyond the borders of South Asia, and its most iconic masterpieces have been declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This international recognition highlights a mastery of design and engineering that remains unparalleled. Today, these sites are more than just historical monuments; they are active centers of inquiry and wonder. They serve as powerful reminders of a dynamic imperial landscape and stand as enduring symbols of an architectural tradition that harmonized diverse cultural influences into a unique and magnificent style.

Conclusion

The growth and development of Islamic architecture in Mughal India represents a very important and significant period in the history of art and building design. It shows a long process in which different styles, ideas, and traditions were combined to form a unique and well-developed architectural identity. This tradition reflects a continuous **interaction between cultural influences, new construction techniques, and the political aims of the Mughal rulers**.

During the Mughal era, architecture was not only used for building structures but also worked as a strong way of expressing ideas and authority. Mughal emperors played an important role in changing and improving the architectural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Through their constructions, they introduced new styles, developed better design methods,

and created monuments that joined beauty with meaning. Because of this, they left behind a rich architectural heritage that is still valued and studied in the present time.

(Ahmad, 1964)Mughal architecture also gives a clear understanding of the **social, cultural, and political situation of that period**. It shows how rulers used buildings to display their power, strengthen their rule, and bring different cultural groups closer together. At the same time, it reflects the mixed nature of Mughal society, where Islamic, Persian, Central Asian, and local Indian traditions were blended into one shared artistic system.

In addition, this architectural heritage shows the long-lasting importance of history and monuments in shaping **cultural identity and historical awareness**. Mughal buildings are not only old structures; they are symbols of artistic skill, cultural exchange, and historical memory. They continue to influence modern building styles and remain an important source of learning and inspiration for researchers, historians, and architects.

In conclusion, Mughal Islamic architecture is not just a part of history, but a living heritage that connects the past with the present. It is a strong example of how architecture can express power, culture, religion, and artistic beauty at the same time.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, A. (1964). *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Asher, C. B. (1992). *Architecture of Mughal India* . Cambridge: : Cambridge University Press.
- Chughtai, M. A. (1980s). *Islamic Art and Architecture in the Subcontinent* . Lahore : (Various editions; commonly Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Dani, A. H. (2007). *History of Pakistan: Pakistan Through Ages*. Lahore : Sang-e-Meel.
- Hashmi, T. u.-H. (1989). *Islamic Civilization in South Asia*. Dhaka : University Press Limited Year.
- Khan, A. N. (1990). *Islamic Architecture in South Asia: Pakistan Perspective*. Islamabad : National Hijra Council.
- Koch, E. (1991). *Mughal Architecture: An Outline of Its History and Development (1526–1858)*. Munich : Prestel.

- Michell, G. (1978). *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Nath, R. (1982–2005). *History of Mughal Architecture (Vols. I–III)*. New Delhi: Abhinav.
- Qureshi, I. H. (1966). *The Administration of the Mughal Empire*. Karachi : Karachi University Press Yea.
- Rizvi, S. A. (1978–1983). *A History of Sufism in India (Vol. I & II)*. New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Rizvi, S. A. (1987). *The Wonder That Was India (Vol. II: Islamic Period)*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.