Indian Religious Architecture: Social and Political Challenges

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Abstract : *The objective of this paper is to reassess the central factors which have shaped the Indian architecture. The author puts forward the concept of plurality introduced by Western art historians and argues that the diversity of the Indian architecture should not be explained in terms of religious differences, but in terms of the socio-economical situation in South Asia.* This paper seeks to reassess the general perception of Indian architecture and its relation to the formation of Indian identities. It focuses in particular on the interpretation of the concept of plurality as presented in the academic world by Western art historians.

Key words: ancient Indian, pre-Islamic, Islamic, Colonial periods

Introduction

Ever since the writings of James Fergusson (1808–1886), conventional wisdom has held that Indian architecture is one of the most famous in the world. To bring this idea to light, Western art historians have presented different architectural styles in India, including several kinds of buildings, and based their interpretations on the concept of religious plurality. Following their interpretations, one might notice that there is a sharp distinction between Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Colonial, or Indo-Saracenic, architecture. According to these distinctions, the four architectural styles correspond to four historical eras in the history of Indian architecture; they, in turn, correspond to different aspects of identity-construction: the ancient Indian, pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Colonial periods. It is quite surprising that art historians refer to this last model as "colonial" rather than "Christian." Nevertheless, it seems that describing Indian architecture using religious criteria, albeit still with regard to its pluralistic aspects, does not portray the reality. Limiting Indian architecture to temples, mosques and stupas seems to be a very selective method that contributes to immediately sharpening the differences between the components of Indian architecture. Furthermore, such a selective interpretation based on institutional architecture, which ignores other types of Indian architecture in addition to ignoring other historical periods, could not be representative of the whole of Indian architecture. This paper seeks to reassess the general perception of Indian architecture and its relation to the formation of Indian identities. It focuses in particular on the interpretation of the concept of plurality as presented in the academic world by Western art historians. In this paper, I would like to argue that socio-economic factors play a determining role in defining the architectural styles of South Asia. In the second part of the paper, I will present how the Hindu caste system can be used as a key criterion for understanding Indian architecture in all its diversity and plurality.

Indian architecture

Indian architecture as a field of research has been examined by South Asian Studies scholars in the West since the second half of the 19th century. In

around 1876, James Fergusson wrote his famous History of Indian and Eastern Architecture. His interpretation of Indian architecture seems to be the starting point for the critical history of the subject. His method is presented as follows: What I have attempted to do during the last forty years has been to apply to Indian Architecture the same principles of archaeological science which are universally adopted not only in England, but in every country in Europe […] Owing to its perfect originality and freedom from all foreign admixture or influence, I believe these principles, so universally adopted in this country, are even more applicable to the Indian styles than to the European. This method of applying universal notions of architecture to local styles of construction appears to be different from that of other historians such as Cunningham of whom it is stated that "[his] archaeological investigations also preceded within much the same framework.

However, the dominant paradigm for his work was not that of artistic progress and decline, but that of emphasising the greater value of antiquities over religious texts as sources for India's ancient history." It should be noted here that both Fergusson and Cunningham represent the shift in Western interpretation of Indian architecture from philology to archaeology, from "simply admiring the architecture" to scientific approaches to architecture. Therefore, as Tilloston observed in his Paradigms of Indian Architecture, one should insist that Fergusson's goal in his writing about Indian architecture was to inspire admiration for Indian architecture. This aim had a significant impact on the majority of architectural historians who succeeded him. In fact, the history of scholarly writing about Indian architecture could be divided into two eras: pre- and post-Fergusson. Scholars in this field could also be divided into two groups: those in support of and those opposed to Fergusson's interpretation. In order to classify the history of Indian architecture, art historians usually regard it as a portrait of two, divergent from each other, representations of the world and base their distinction on differences in cultural and spiritual identities. Islamic era is taken here as a key point in understanding styles and models of the Indian architecture. Thus, they usually classify Indian architecture into the pre-islamic period, the Islamic period and the post-Islamic (colonial) period.

These periods are also divided into sub-periods/categories: The first period is divided into two sub-styles of architecture: the Buddhist and the Hindu styles. The Buddhist period coincides with the earliest period in Indian History. The importance of king Ashoka (d. 233 AC), with regard to the political unification of India and the emergence of Buddhism as a religion there, is undeniable. With respect to architecture, the Buddhist period, which resulted from religious stratification, is also known as the first distinctive architectural model of Indian architecture. As part of an ancient architectural inheritance, Buddhism has left many ruins throughout the country; the relics of Jainism are scarce. What is more interesting is that there are only a few Brahman relics left. Thus stating that the ancient architecture of India is a Buddhist architecture is not a fallacy.

Three building types characterize most Buddhist architecture: the Chaitya Hall (place of worship), the Vihara (monastry) and the Stupa (a dome shaped

monument for worship and remembrance).The earliest surviving Stupa is the Great Stupa, which still exists in Sanchi and dates back to the first century BC.

The second historical period within Indian architecture is usually stated to be the Hindu period. This period continues until the Muslim conquests of the entire northern part of India in the 13th century. Art historians concentrate their interpretations concerning this period on the Hindu temples, which have their beginnings in Karnataka. Kamiya states that: Later, as more differentiation took place, the Dravidian/Southern style and or the Indo-Aryan [...] emerged as dominant modes [...] The pyramid formed an essential architectonic element in any temple composition – stepped in the Dravidian style, stepped and slightly curved in the northern style [...] The principles of temple architecture were codified in treatises and canons such as Manasara, Mayamatam and Vaastu Shastra.The Kanchipuram, a cluster of over a hundred religious Hindu shrines built from the 7th to 9th centuries AD by the Pallava kings in the Tamil area is an example of Hindu architecture. Meanwhile, the Islamic period is regarded as the commencement of a new style of construction known as the Islamic style, although it was not purely Islamic. In fact, Islamic architecture is mostly recognizable by the arches and domes that mark its distinctive style. Thus the similarities between the mosque, the fort and the Mausoleums, as the representations of Indian Islamic architecture, should be noted. The Red Fort in Delhi and the Taj Mahal in Agra should be mentioned as examples of this style. Percy Brown states about the colonial style that From the time that the country [India] came under British rule in the eighteenth century, buildings designed and executed in an occidental style, but adapted to suit the climatic conditions began to be erected at some of the larger centres [...] this phase was succeeding during the latter half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the construction of a considerable number of important buildings designed by British engineers, and based mainly on the style of architecture that was being practised in England[!]. However, one should make a sharp distinction between its starting point, during which the focus was on creating authority through classical prototypes, and the later period, which produced "a supposedly more responsive image through what is now termed Indo-Saracenic architecture – a mixture of Hindu, Islamic and Western elements."

How is Indian architecture presented?

Indian architecture is usually presented through different paradigms. The first and main paradigm is that of divergence, controversy and opposition. By these three terms I mean the intention of scholars to sharpen the differences between the abovementioned styles of architecture. Among the four evoked styles and époques of Indian architecture, scholars focused mainly on the gap between Muslim and Hindu architecture. In his book Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, Tara Chand presents Muslim and Hindu architecture as portraits of two distinct representations of the world and bases his distinction on differences in cultural and spiritual identities: "The Hindu is a spiritual anarchist. his worship consists in ardent self-communion [...] Hindu architecture is the objectification of this consciousness in solid mass. It is a twofold symbol of the

mystery and splendour of the deity […] The character of Muslim consciousness is as different from that of the Hindu as possible."

Considering the gap between Islam and Hinduism, Chand continues his distinction to present the impact of Islam on the Hindu architecture: "The mihrabs [niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction that Muslims should face when praying] made to stimulate Hindu shrine; the arches Hinduised often in construction, in form nearly always." To push the interpretation concerning the influence of Islam on Indian architecture as far as possible, Chand insists on the fact that this impact consequently leads to the birth of the Hindu-Muslim style which bloomed in the 17th century when Northern India "saw the erection of a number of noble edifices […] apparently the new style had now become universal and architecturally it was henceforward impossible to distinguish a building erected by the Hindus or the Muslims. Another effect of this cultural synthesis was the construction of tombs among the Hindus." Meanwhile, Chand argues that the first contacts between these two different styles was a collision of sorts: "The clash of the two divergent mentalities and their cultures resulted in the creation of a new culture […] The simple severity of the Muslim architecture was toned down, and the plastic exuberance of the Hindu was restrained." The consequence of this "clash" was that "the artistic quality of the buildings erected since the thirteenth century whether by Hindus or by Muslims is the same, although differences are introduced by considerations of purpose and use, and styles are varied according to differences of local tradition and regional peculiarities." According to Chand's interpretation, the Hindu-Muslim architectural style is the most recent and thus, the over governing style in India through to the modern era. Nevertheless, towards the end of his investigation, Chand admits the impact of the modern Western style on Indian architecture and argues that "almost every building of architectural importance erected in modern times, except of course those of the Western style, follows the Hindu-Muslim style." A possible conclusion, concerning the general character of Chand's investigation, can be drawn from the above-mentioned facts. Chand, following Fergusson in many of his main points, was interested mostly in the impact of religious factors on Indian architecture. Yet his distinction between Hindu architecture and Muslim architecture reduced architecture to a simple reflection of religious faith. In fact, Chand, like a number of South Asia historians, ignores not only the majority of Indian architecture (which consists of not only the religious but also the secular), but also the type of architecture that was referred to in the introduction as "architecture of the common people." Percy Brown briefly alluded to this point saying: "From the palatial halls of the ruling princes to the humble habitations of the majority of their subjects is a considerable step […] in the main street of the towns within the stone-building region, houses of the better class people will be found alternating with lovely temple facades and the palatial residences of noblemen […] But in the quieter side alleys of such towns as Bikanir, Jodhpur, Lashkar (Gwalior), and Ajmir, typical houses are to be found."

In the same category of investigation with Chand, we can classify Percy Brown's approach who went further than Tara Chand and exposed where and how Muslim and Hindu architecture diverged. In his often reprinted Indian Architecture, he argues that: Of the various civilisations with which the Mohammedans came into contact in the course of their world-conquest, none could have been more diametrically opposed to their ideals than that of the people of India. [the author considers this opposition as an opposition of realism with idealism, of the material with the visionary, of the concern with the abstract] […] nothing could illustrate more graphically the religious and racial diversity, or emphasize more decisively the principles underlying the consciousness of each community, than the contrast between their perspective of worship, as represented by the mosque on the one hand, and the temple on the other. […] compared with the clarity of the mosque, the temple is an abode of mystery; the courts of the former are open to light and air, with many doorways inviting publicity, the latter encloses "a phantasm of massive darkness," having sombre passages leading to dim cells, jealously guarded and remote. The mosque has no need of a central shrine, it is sufficient for the devotee to turn in the direction of Mecca, but the focal point of the temple is sacred chamber often deep within the labyrinth of its endless corridors. Architecturally the mosque is wholly visible and intelligible, while the temple is not infrequently introspective, complex, and indeterminate.

Beyond religious criterion

Aside from the religious criterion of classification, which dominates the interpretation of Indian architecture, there are some other criteria for classification, which were often applied in order to show the plurality within Indian architecture. Readingthe majority of Western investigations written in the last few decades on the above mentioned periods of the Indian architecture, one easily notices that great efforts have been exerted on the part of art historians, anthropologists and South Asian Studies scholars to combine religious criteria with other criteria such as geographical or historical considerations, in order to produce an equilibrium between religious and secular factors. In the first paragraph of this paper, I listed the four epochs within the history of Indian architecture. Historically, these epochs, although presented as distinct by historians, have many points in common. The Buddhist style, for example, has influenced the Hindu architectural style; Muslim architecture, although believed to have its origins outside of India (in particular from the Iranian and central Asian styles), was nevertheless, adopted by Hindus in building their forts and tombs. This assumption is not limited to Muslim architectural style however, historians of Indian architecture faced the same problem with divergence regarding the colonial style: Although they were supposed to assist in the adoption of the Western style, the British tried to adopt the Indian style for their buildings. Percy Brown argues, "It was, however, towards the latter part of the nineteenth century that a movement began having as its object the utilization of the indigenous style of the country in preference to the foreign styles hitherto almost invariably employed."The purpose of such a process was not purely aesthetic. The British were aware of the fact that the best way to let the indigenous people feel familiar

with the new governors was to use indigenous models for their buildings. Albert Hall in Jaipur, which was built from 1881–1886 by Lt. Swinton Jacob, an officer in the British army, is an example of this idea. Although built by the British, this building married Indian architecture with British architecture.

Conclusion

Summing up, it could be said that Indian architecture, as presented by art historians, is too often presented by famous visages of its majestic and monumental buildings. Moreover, historians were more fascinated by the impact of religious factors on the architectural scene than by any other factors involved in the construction and design process. Due to their mostly one-dimensional investigations, their research findings could not be representative of the Indian architecture. Furthermore, these representations show plurality as a leading concept of interpretation in question. However, art historians have mostly limited this concept to religious plurality and failed to notice other aspects. I also argued that the socio-economic criterion could be efficient in describing Indian architecture. The investigation based on this criterion shows how important it is to consider people not on the basis of their religion, but rather on their socio-economic situation. Such an approach could facilitate the understanding of Indian architecture as it reflects the plurality based on socio-economic criteria that can be used in every location and era and because it is applicable to all types of buildings in India.

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