

The similarities between Sikh and Persian Architecture

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Due to its rich soil and cultural heritage India has always been a source of foreign invasions, cultural ambassadors, poets, historians, painters and other curious travellers. These foreign interactions have always left a mark on our cultural fabric. One such undeniable association has been the Mughal Empire and its long period of rule in India. During their various political wars and other social obligations Mughal rulers sometimes took shelter in the vast and beautiful country of Iran and while returning back, they brought with them various architects, painters and other cultural ambassadors who left behind an undeniable mark on the fabric of Indian heritage.

During the Mughal reign, another religion that was flourishing outside any political influence was Sikhism. All ten Gurus lived during Mughal rule, in an era where Persian was the single most important cosmopolitan language. Anyone that hoped to be involved in the politics and poetics of the time needed to use Persian to communicate their aims. We know for sure that Guru Nanak Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Sahib were fluent in Persian from their recorded wisdom in Persian, and we also see proof that Guru Arjan Sahib was a prolific Persian writer, who wrote numerous Persian *shabads* or hymns of wisdom in Guru Granth Sahib. There are further Persian *shabads* in Guru Granth Sahib that can be accredited to Bhagat Nam Dev, Bhagat Kabir, and Bhagat Farid. Since the time zone of these both was almost parallel, there can be seen some similarities between their architecture. To understand this similarity what better examples than the beautiful architecture of the sacred Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden temple) in Amritsar and the revered Imamzadeh Saleh shrine in Tehran.

The Sri Harmandir Sahib stands in the midst of a beautiful waterbody called Amritsar or *amrit sarovar*, from where the city derives its name. The shrine displays influences of different architectural styles, including Indo-Islamic Mughal architecture. The Harmandir Sahib is an open house of worship for all men and women, from all walks of life and faith. It has a square plan with four entrances with a circumambulation path around the pool. The complex is a collection of buildings around the sanctum and the pool. One of these is The *Akal Takht*, the chief center of religious authority of Sikhism. Additional buildings include various *Bungas* or Fortifications, different memorials marking historical events, a clock tower, a library the offices of Gurdwara Committee, a Museum

and a *langar* – a free Sikh community run kitchen that serves a simple vegetarian meal to all visitors without discrimination. Over 100,000 people visit the holy shrine daily for worship. The Gurdwara complex has been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its application is pending on the tentative list of UNESCO.

The Imamzadeh Saleh Shrine is one of the many Imamzadeh mosques in Iran and is one of the most popular Shia Muslim shrines in northern Tehran. The main mausoleum building includes a large rectangular building with thick walls and solid inner space of almost 5.6 square meters. In the year 700 AH Imam Zadeh Saleh there is an inscription that appears in the repair and alteration of entries has gone according to which the Kingdom of Ghazan Khan was at the same time. Imam Zadeh Saleh large wooden box inside the tomb probably belonged to the era of the late Safavid or Afsharid dynasties. Silver enshrine the eastern and north-eastern and western sides have netted enclosure is decorated with silver and wood lattice south side of the endowment of the late Mr. Mirza Saeed Khan, foreign minister late Qajar. The shrine is located on the north side entrance porch and the porch of the sanctuary, the tablet is rectangular adobe tile on its history in 1210 AH and the name of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar has been engraved on it.

In order to enter the outer *parikarma* or veranda of Sri Harmandir Sahib every individual has to cover their heads and wash their hands and feet. Once they are done with this, they come to the steps and they walk down a few steps to enter through a *deorhi* or an entrance gateway, through which one has to pass before reaching the shrine. The *deorhi* is an arch-like structure. The visitors get the first glimpse of the sanctum sanctorum or *Darbar* from the *deorhi*. This arch can also be seen when we enter the Imamzadeh Saleh shrine. These arches are visible at different points of importance within the shrines.

Similarities in the building do not end just at the entrance. Inside the Inner sanctorum of both buildings we can find an ambience of tranquillity and a soothing peace as we look and reflect towards God. The architecture aids that as we find carpets and chandeliers that add to the beauty and ambience of the place.

The roof of both, the mosque and the *Darbar* or Court of the Guru, has exquisite work.

A mixture of *Jaratkari*, a form of intricate in-lay work; *gach*, plaster-of-Paris work; *tukri* work; fresco-painting; and *pinjra*, lattice work are used for the decoration in and around Sri Harmandir Sahib. *Jaratkari* is a technique of studding semi-precious and coloured stones into marbles slabs. These slabs often have florid or geometrical borders which enclose delicate in-lay work using floral shapes and patterns. Beautiful designs are made on the walls with *gach* which is subsequently gilded. Excellent examples of this work can be seen in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Sometimes, the *gach*-work is

rendered highly ornamental by means of coloured and mirrored cut-glass as well as semi-precious stones. This is called *tukri* (small piece) work.

Sikh architecture represents the last flicker of religious architecture in India. The Golden Temple at Amritsar is its most celebrated example as this is the only monument in which all the characteristics of the style are fully represented.

Although Sikh architecture undoubtedly originated with the idea of devotion, it underwent a certain transformation. Sikhs were given the mandate of being Saint Soldiers by Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, due to which the architecture assumed the character of military fortification, in its later stages, which was reflected in a number of buildings throughout Punjab.

As a style of building-design, Sikh architecture might strike the lay onlooker as eclectic, a mixture of the best features picked up from here and there. But, it has more depth than meets the casual eye. While it shares Islam's stringent and uncompromising monotheism through austerity, it also celebrates its youthfulness and vitality with the playful polytheism of Hinduism. Eclecticism might have been its starting-point, but Sikh architecture has flourished to a state of artistic autonomy so as to work out its own stylistic idiosyncrasies. Inspired by Guru Nanak Sahib's creative outlook, Sikh architecture is a silent blend of humanism and spirituality.

Sikh architecture reflects a lively blend of Mughal and Rajput styles. Onion-shaped domes, multi-foil arches, paired pilasters, in-lay work frescoes, etc. undoubtedly follow from Mughal influence, more specifically of Emperor-Architect Shah Jehan's period, while oriel windows, bracket-supported eaves at the string-course, chhatris, richly-ornamented friezes, etc. are reminiscent of elements of Rajput architecture such as is seen in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, and other places in Rajasthan.

Use of water as an element of design has been frequently exploited in Mughal and Hindu architecture, but nowhere in so lively a manner as in Sikh architecture. Water becomes a *sine qua non* of Sikh building-design, as in the Golden Temple at a time and not merely an appendage to the main shrine. The gurdwara is placed lower down than the structures in the vicinity, unlike the masjid which are usually placed on raised platforms.

Thus, we can say that Iranian architecture displays great variety, both structural and aesthetic, from a variety of traditions and experience. Without sudden innovations, and despite the repeated trauma of invasions and cultural shocks, it has achieved "an individuality distinct from that of other Muslim countries". Its paramount virtues are: "a marked feeling for form and scale; structural inventiveness, especially

in vault and dome construction; a genius for decoration with a freedom and success not rivalled in any other architecture". On the other hand Sikh Architecture is a style of architecture that is characterized with values of progressiveness, exquisite intricacy, austere beauty and logical flowing lines. Due to its progressive style, it is constantly evolving into many newly developing branches with new contemporary styles. Although Sikh architecture was initially developed within Sikhism its style has been used in many non-religious buildings due to its beauty. 300 years ago, Sikh architecture was distinguished for its many curves and straight lines; Shri Kesgarh Sahib and the Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) are prime examples.

Reference:

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