

THE STATE OF THE ART AND THE ART OF THE STATE

AKBAR'S AMBITION TO BRIDGE THE "REALM AND RELIGION" IN THE ARTS AND THE STATE

SAMIA RAB

Georgia Institute of Technology

100

Introduction

Akbar was 14 years old when he succeeded the throne from his father, Emperor Hummayun. At the time, the Mughal Empire did not possess a definite territory. Five years later, Akbar firmly held the districts of Punjab and Multan, Ajmer in Rajasthan, the Ganga and Jamuna basin as far east as Allahbad, and also Gwalior in Central India. At the time of his death, some 50 years later, the Mughal Empire was firmly secured on a vast territory that stretched from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian sea.

In terms of the nature of activities, Akbar's reign (1556-1605) can be divided into three phases. During the first phase, roughly between the years 1556-1669, Akbar was busy expanding the territories of the empire along with experimenting various ways to provide a workable revenue system and an administrative framework for the empire. The resulting regulations have been regarded by many economic theorists as well ahead of its time.¹ Even the British retained these standards during their rule over the Indian Subcontinent and, to a certain extent, they still form the basis for the provincial division of India and Pakistan. Once Akbar had conquered and secured his throne, he started to transform the legal mechanism of the Empire. This transformation finally resulted in Akbar's historic attempt to merge the "true" principles of all religions practiced in his empire into a form of a Divine Monotheism, the *Din-i-Ilahi*.

Akbar was the grandson of Babur and the son of Hummayun. But he had to fight for his inheritance and put the Empire together piece by piece, annexing kingdom after kingdom. The task of acquiring dominion over different regions and territories was not as difficult for him as remaining in power. Akbar devoted his "heart, soul, mind and body" to this later task. Many historians have argued that Akbar did not inherit his grandfather's passion for nature and gardens, nor his father's love of poetry and painting. According to E. B. Havell, Akbar did not concern himself intimately with the art of building and art was not his dominant passion or his chief recreation.² But the accounts of Akbar's biographer, Abu Fazl,³ and the court historian, Badauni⁴ contradicts this commonly held view. Abu Fazl's *Akbarnama* and Badauni's *Tarikh-i-Badauni* are the two most crucial sources to understand the way in which Akbar ruled his

kingdom and the extent of his involvement in the architecture of his reign. These two writers often contradict each other but they still reveal those aspects of Akbar's reign that were crucial to define the characteristics of his architecture.

Crucial literary sources of Akbar's period: *Abu Fazl and Badauni*

Abu Fazl, during his time in the court, became Akbar's close praises his every act and thought. Abu Fazl was actively involved in working out the details of the *Din-i-Ilahi* with Akbar and was the one who actually performed the ceremony for converting people to the new religion. Badauni, on the other hand, regarded almost all acts and thoughts of Akbar and his ministers with immense aversion and frankly expresses them in his historical account. His *Tarikh-e-Badauni* is a general history of India (from Ghaznavides to the fortieth year of Akbar's reign). These two writers provide more than one source confirming Akbar's involvement in his architectural projects. Both writers acknowledge the fact that Akbar selected the chief *Mohandis* (architect) himself and gave a verbal account of the kind of building he wanted. And both have remarked that by the end of the *Guftago* (discussion) the *Mohandis* knew exactly what the Emperor had in mind. Another aspect that both Abu Fazl and Badauni acknowledge is that, in the architectural activities of the kingdom, Akbar encouraged the use of local building materials and the living traditions of Indian artisans. These were, to a certain extent, ignored and even looked down upon by Babur and Hummayun.

There were some key issues that deeply concerned Akbar throughout his life. Bridging the gap between "realm and religion" was one such issue, as it appears frequently in the *Akbarnama* and the *Tarikh-e-Badauni*. There could have been several influences on Akbar's quest for bridging the gap between "realm and religion". This paper touches upon three major influences: 1) the dialectic of religion in his life; 2) Akbar's early learning of the Sufi order; and 3) his contacts with the Portuguese Ambassador and the Jesuit missions.

In his youth, Akbar had the tendency of rationalizing his inherited religion, Islam, to an extent that he would



Fig. 1. The Mughal Empire before Akbar's reign. (Source: V.A. Smith, 1917).



Fig. 2. The Mughal Empire after Akbar's reign. (Source: V.A. Smith, 1917).

indulge in severe arguments with his custodians. As Humayun's sister, Gulbadan, wrote in her autobiography, Akbar had always been very restless at heart. He would spend much time in sports and training for warfare. When it came to formal education, he refuted each one of his father's attempts. The fact that Humayun was constantly in exile and absent during Akbar's formative years made a formal education even more difficult. The only tutor Akbar agreed to study with was an Irani scholar, Mir Abdul Latif, who belonged to the family of Sayeds of Qazvin. Abdul Latif was a Sufi and, therefore, very open minded and willing to question and debate his own religious beliefs.⁵ According to Burke,⁶ he was called a "Shiah in India and a Sunni in Iran." Abdul Latif taught Akbar the principle of "peace with all" by seeking to understand the inherent qualities of all sects and races prevalent in humanity.⁷

Despite his growing quest for knowledge, Akbar remained "illiterate" for the remainder of his life. Abu Fazl tells us that the Shahinshah has an amazing memory and his favorite pastime is to listen to the biographies of his ancestors — Timur, Babur, and Humayun. He had practically memorized them before he turned twenty. In the subsequent years, however, Akbar made up for his lack of formal education by maintaining a library of 24,000 manuscripts and had books read to him regularly and kept "constant company with learned and literate men." He often cited the example of the Prophet's illiteracy and proclaimed that every Muslim should keep one of his children away from formal education.

The company of learned men often lead to discussions that Badauni found both "polemical" and "dangerous"⁸. To Abu Fazl they were "enlightened" and a characteristic manner in which the Shahinshah could grasp the good in all men.⁹ Of course, we have to be careful of both these accounts — Badauni's because of his intense aversion to the religious tolerance of the Shahinshah and Abu Fazl

because of his tendency to flatter the Shahinshah. Abu Fazl's flattering account attempts to lift the Shahinshah from mere humanity to supernatural status because he finds in Akbar a coherence of *Niyat* and *Ikhtlaq* (intention and behavior/manner).

The discussion on issues of "realm and religion" in Akbar's court

In Abu Fazl's account, the description of the various reforms initiated by the Shahinshah Akbar are almost always followed by a discussion or a verse in praise of his ability to resolve the gap between "realm and religion." Abu Fazl never defines these two words but one can get a sense from the several contexts they serve and within which they are used, that "realm" means the governmental affairs of the kingdom's subject and "religion" concerns their spiritual affairs. Describing Akbar's regulations regarding the *Krori*¹⁰ revenue and administrative system, Abu Fazl writes: "The world's lord (Akbar) every now and then augments his circumspection, and imparts new freshness to the garden of the State ... In a short time the outer world attained an excellent management and the spiritual world a new development. There was, as it were, a new palace constructed for the appreciativeness of the sovereign, and humanity was tested in the square of knowledge."¹¹

The testing of the "square of knowledge," for Akbar, was not limited to the affairs of the "realm" (government); however, it did commence here. We know from Gulbadan's autobiography that the Akbar first demonstrated an "academic" interest by listening to the memoirs of his ancestors. He spent most of his formative years in exile and captivity. His uncles placed him in custody for the first three years of his life. Once Humayun re conquered his throne, Akbar saw his uncles being punished, but none of them was executed. Each time

their lives were pardoned, they became governors of certain districts. But each time the three uncles would rebel against Humayun generating circumstances that would force him in exile. When Akbar ascended the throne, his first act in the affairs of the government was to appoint Bairam Khan, an Iranian belonging to the Shiah sect of Islam, as the *Wazir-i-Azam*.¹² In so doing, the Shahinshah made sure that the person who was second in command to him was a minority within the court. Hence, he would depend directly on the Emperor to retain his position. This seems to have become one of the characteristic ways in which Akbar appointed ministers and *Adils* in his court.

We have to recognize here that Akbar inherited this tolerance towards the Shiah sect from Babur and from Humayun.¹³ Babur's tolerance of Shiah was partly consequential. At the time, Shah Ismail of Iran was the only support Babur had to enable him in heading towards India. Babur had been motivated early in his life to "posses Hindustan as it was once possessed by his ancestor Timur." For him, it was lost heritage and he was ready to pay any price to do so. Once in Hindustan, Babur found the country and its people "charmless" and overly mysterious and the manner of their livelihood "disorderly."¹⁴ He, by all means, wanted to change what he saw and found charmless. The disciplined simplicity that was characteristic of the several gardens constructed by Babur are witness to his attempts of ordering the Hindustan he conquered. Both Babur and Humayun differed from Akbar in the nature and intent of their conquests of India — the former kings saw their attempts as an imperial extension of the Timurid Empire in an alien land. Akbar, on the other hand, was forming a kingdom that was inherently Indian.

Akbar realized that his Empire was ethnically, religiously, linguistically diverse and ingrained in its own traditional belief systems.¹⁵ He was also aware that in order to sustain power over such a kingdom, it was important to retain both political and religious authority within the Monarchy and specifically within the powers of the Emperor. This task was officially carried out in a ceremony where the court *Ulemas* signed and authorized the *Mazbar* in 1579 affirming the authority of *Sultan-i-Adil* over the *Mujtabid*.¹⁶ The Shahinshah would, hence onwards, act as the *Peshwa* of the spiritual kingdom. The *Mazbar* cites the verse of Quran, which enjoins obedience to those who have authority over others, and the tradition, which states that whoever obeys the ruler in effect obeys God. What it does not cite, as Badauni asserts with great aversion, is the fact that the *Peshwa* does not lead the spiritual kingdom; it is the *Mujtabid* who does that. The *Mujtabid* and *Peshwa* represent distinct authorities which Akbar merged into one form: that of his own. No doubt, there was a tremendous resentment to this act from the Sunni members of the court. Nevertheless, they did confirm the *Mazbar* and sanction the inscription of political and religious authority on the Emperor's own body. Thus realizing Akbar's long-held quest to bridge the gap between "realm and religion" by becoming the mediating figure between the two realms.

The arrival of the Portugese merchants and the Jesuit Mission at Akbar's court

Many contemporary historians of the Mughal Empire have suggested that the confirmation of the *Mazbar* in 1579 was influenced by the arrival of the Jesuit Mission in Akbar's court on February 18, 1580. These historians tend to ignore the fact that much before the arrival of the Jesuit Mission, Akbar was in contact with Portugese merchants. We know that at the time Akbar ascended the throne in 1556, the Portugese were strongly established on the western coast in fortified settlements taken from the Deccan, and situated at Goa. Their fleet controlled the mercantile and pilgrim traffic of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf.¹⁷

Akbar's first contact with Portugese merchants at Cambay was in 1572.¹⁸ In 1578, the Viceroy, Dom Diogo de Menzes, responded to Akbar's letter by accrediting to Akbar's court as his ambassador Antonio Cabral. He spent some time in Fatehpur Sikri with Akbar and gave the emperor considerable information concerning Christian manners and customs emperor. "But, being a layman, he was not in a position to expound with authority the deeper matters of the faith."¹⁹ If Akbar's enthusiasm for inviting the Missions came after meeting the Ambassador, then perhaps it is the customs and manners of the Christian state that appealed to him before an interest in the Christian faith.

It is well established that the central metaphor of early modern European political discourse was that of the "body politics." Since it was thought to be self-evident that no body could be divided into competing interests of factions without risking the life of the whole, it followed that only a unitary and hierarchical organization of society could achieve peace and prosperity. "The life of the organism depended on the integration of the parts; so, too, the good of the whole required the rule of one."²⁰ The absolutist Christian rulers in Europe insisted that the power, rights, and interests of the nation were coterminous with the person of the king. We do not know what exactly the Ambassador and Akbar discussed about the manners and customs of the Christian state. What we do know is that in 1579, by affirming the *Mazbar*, the court *Ulemas* sanctioned the political and religious authority of the Mughal Emperor.²¹

The merging of the hitherto distinct authorities of "realm and religion" influenced the architecture of Akbar's reign in both a general and a specific way. In general, Akbar's policy of tolerance towards all religious sects and ethnic races encouraged an uninhibited interaction of different regional styles. At a more specific level, the buildings that were constructed under Akbar's supervision echo his quest to merge the "realm and religion."

The architecture of Akbar's new capital at Fatehpur Sikri

The construction of Fatehpur Sikri as a suburban fortified residence of the court was Akbar's architectural response to the absorption of Gujarat into the Mughal Empire (1572-73). According to Ebba Koch, the irregular layout of Fatehpur Sikri reflects the tradition of Rajput

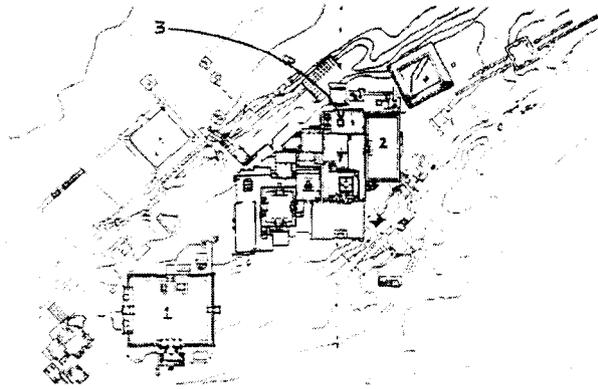


Fig. 3. The layout of Fatehpur Sikri; 1: Jami Mosque; 2. Diwan-i-Aam; 3. Diwan -IKhas. (Source: A. Petruccioli, 1988).

residences.²² It is also difficult to ignore the influence of Gujrati Sultanate architecture, which in itself provided a model for a successful synthesis of the building traditions of pre-Islamic Hindu and Jain architecture. The choice of red sandstone provided a unifying hue to the unrestrained synthesis of distinct regional styles.

Fatehpur Sikri was no doubt Akbar's most ambitious architectural project. This new capital city near the village of Sikri, 26 miles from Agra, was to mark the birthplace of his longed-for sons, Salim (Jehangir) and Murad. This was also the site of the Sufi Saint Chisti who predicted the birth of the royal princes. In Abu Fazl's words, "the Shahinshah's holy heart desired to give outward splendor to this spot which possessed spiritual grandeur."²³

The greater part of the palace-city was planned and begun in 1569 and proceeded with much speed. Nearly seven miles in circumference, the city is built on a rocky sandstone ridge running northeast to southwest. There were at the most nine gates, of which only four still exist. The visitor, entering by the Agra Gate at the northeast corner, goes through the bazaar, passes under the music gallery, *Naubat Khana*, and proceeds to the public audience hall, *Diwan-i-Aam*. The same access, continuing in the south westerly direction, traverses another quadrangle, passing between Akbar's bedroom, *Khwabgab*, on the north and the record room, *Daftar Khana*, on the south. It then arrives at the Buland Darwaza leading directly into the Jami Masjid.

The complex of Fatehpur Sikri includes a series of independent but linked spaces used for both domestic and administrative purposes: the ladies quarters, *Zanan Khana*, the private audience hall, *Diwan-i-Khas*, the adjoining public chamber, *Diwan-i-Aam*. These spaces are located to the west and extend in the direction of the Great Mosque. The entire complex comprises construction and thematic features that are borrowed from Hindu and Jain architecture and most of the buildings are constructed with red sandstone. The exception to this is the Mausoleum of Salim Chisti where the columns, screens and the struts of the porch are constructed with white marble.

It seems probable, but has not been confirmed, that the marble was veneered over the original form of the

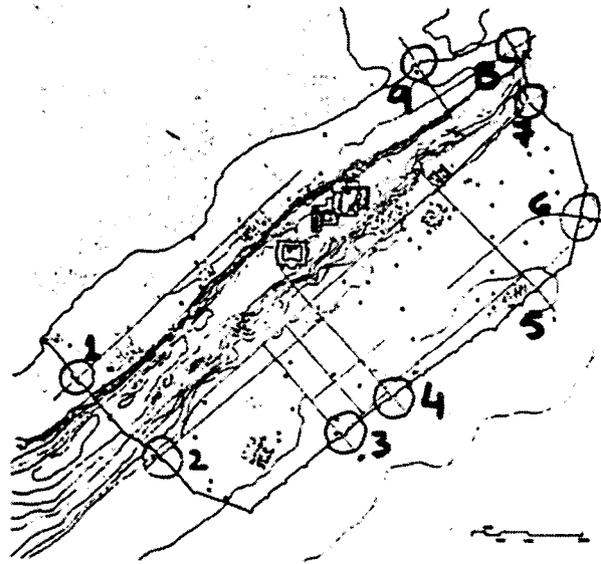


Fig. 4. Buland Darwaza, entrance to the Jami Mosque. (Source: A. Petruccioli, 1988).

tomb during Shah Jahan's reign. S.M. Latif has argued that the exquisite marble lattice dates from 1606, a year after Akbar's death. Smith has also observed that the dome is built of red sand stone, originally coated with cement, but now veneered with marble. In terms of the materials of construction, stylistic features and the nature of surface decoration, this tomb and the Jami Mosque stand apart from the rest of the complex. Though constructed primarily in red sandstone, the surface decoration of the Jami Mosque contains inlay work and the use of color dominates. The central court of the mosque is flanked by arcades styled with characteristic pointed arches.

The symbolic, metaphorical and textual reading of the Diwan-i-Khas at Fatehpur Sikri

Perhaps the most remarkable and symbolic building in the complex is the *Diwan-i-Khas*, located in the court adjacent to the *Diwan-i-Aam*. A few historians have mistakenly suggested that the *Ibadat Khana* discussed by Abu Fazl and Badauni was the same as *Diwan-i-Khas*. But the description of the *Ibadat Khana* by Abu Fazl and Badauni suggests a building that is in the emperor's residential chamber, next to the *anup talao*.

Of all the buildings constructed during Akbar's reign, *Diwan-i-Khas* seems to be the most curious and controversial building for the later-day historians. Some have called it the Shahinshah's "whim,"²⁴ some see it as representing his "dominion over the four quarters"²⁵ and "his desire for the bizarre."²⁶ However, all these sources do acknowledge the fact that it was Akbar's "whim," "desire," or "symbol." Moreover, Abu Fazl notes that the entire complex of Fatehpur Sikri was dear to the Shahinshah's heart. Badauni mentions the date on which the city was laid, but his is a very short account for that whole year.²⁷

The *Diwan-i-Khas*, when viewed from the outside

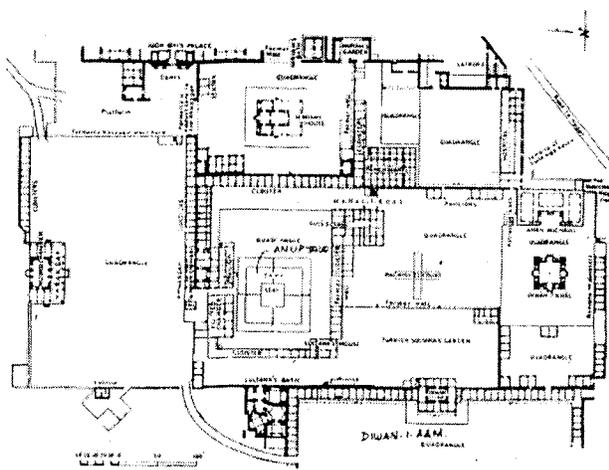


Fig. 5. Fatehpur Sikri, domestic and administrative complex. (Source: R.A. Jairazbhoy, 1974).

104

appears as a double-storied building, with a domed kiosk at each corner. The interior, however, is a single space room divided at about half its height by a gallery on brackets continued around its four sides. A massive octagonal column, elaborately carved, rises from the center of the room and extends as high as the sills of the upper windows. It is surmounted by an enormous circular capital composed of three tiers of radiating brackets, each tier projecting above and in front of that below.

The top of the central pillar is about 10 feet in diameter. From it four stone beams, each ten feet long, radiate to the corners of the building. The central capital receives these radiating "bridges" at the four corners on the three-tier corbel brackets. Each bracket in this composition is identical to the brackets that hold the balconies of the tower of Sidi Bashir's Mosque in Ahmadabad.

The elaborately decorated column, uniquely suspended between the lower hall and the and upper gallery, is in effect Akbar's throne. Tradition affirms that Akbar, comfortably seated on cushions and rugs, occupied this central space, while a minister stood at each corner of the room awaiting his orders.²⁸ The lower section of the hall was meant for the remaining dignitaries and scholars of the court who could not directly observe the emperor but could feel his presence. Some historians say that this was Akbar's way of insuring that these scholars could debate issues related to the affairs of the state and argue amongst each other without the fear of the Shahinshah. This is probably true because it certainly is a very peculiar positioning of a throne. In a private audience hall, due to the nature of the meeting, direct visual contact is usually maintained, as we can see in almost all the fortress-palaces constructed by Mughals.

From the outside, the building looks as though it is two separate spaces, one above the other. On entering the building one realizes that it is actually a single space. By suspending the throne in the middle of the single double-height space, the architect of the *Diwan-i-Khas* has created a metaphorical link between the realm of the kingdom on earth and roof of the heaven above. These

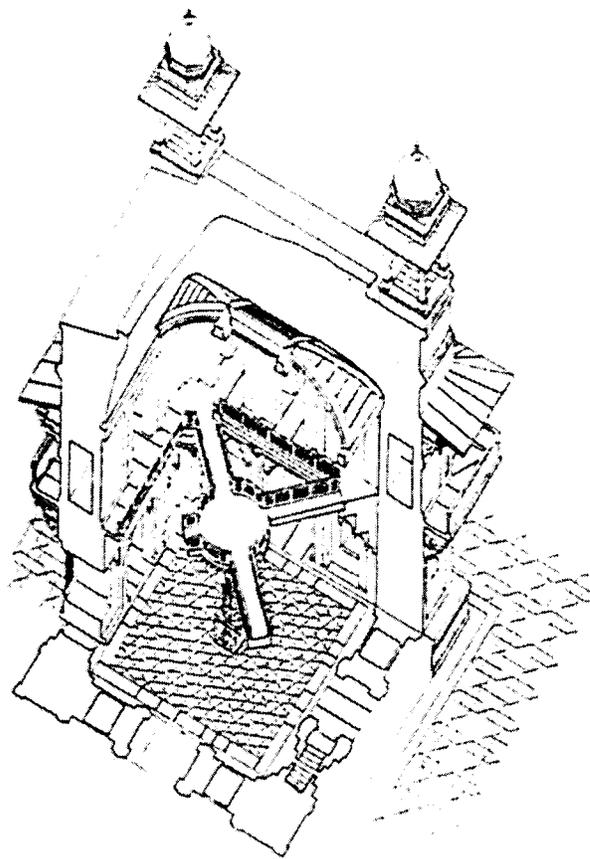


Fig. 6. The interior of Diwan-i-Khas. (Source: A. Petruccioli, 1988).

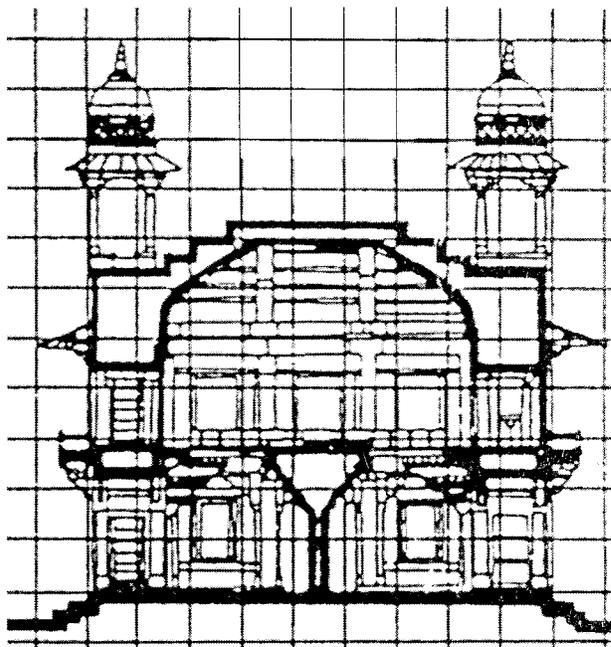


Fig. 7. The central column of Diwan-i-Khas (Source: A. Petruccioli, 1988).

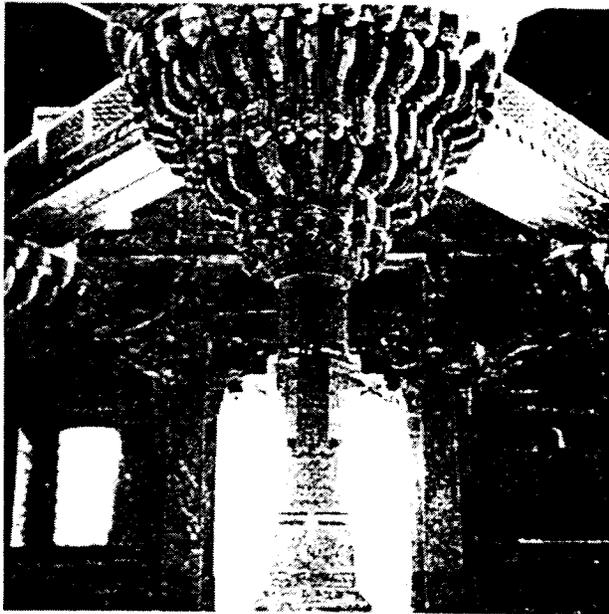


Fig. 8. Fatehpur Sikri, the central column of Diwan-i-Khas, constructed in the late 16th century. (Source: E. Koch, 1991).

two spheres are linked by the mediating body of Emperor Akbar who was the *Peshwa* of the kingdom on matters of state as well as of religion. Seated upon the main architectural object in this building, the central capital, Akbar aspired to bridge the gap between the "realm and religion."

Besides the symbolic connotations underlying the architecture of *Diwan-i-Khas*, the material of construction of most buildings in Fatehpur Sikri complex unifies the stylistic contrasts that is created by the use of heterogeneous architectural styles. The red sandstone is simultaneously molded into the ornamental motifs of Gujarat and the vernacular tradition of Central Timurid architecture. The sandstone medium harmonized the unrestrained eclecticism of artists in Akbar's reign. It is not just a coincidence that traditionally and symbolically, red was the color reserved for the tents of the emperor. During Akbar's reign, architecture became a mirror of the affairs of the state and his ambition to merge these affairs with the spiritual needs of his Empire. While his short-lived residence at Fatehpur Sikri was an architectural response to reflect the different regions that comprised the Empire, the architecture of *Diwan-i-Khas* reflects his ambition to bridge the gap between the "realm and religion."

NOTES

- ¹ Srivastava, Ashirbadi Lal. *Akbar The Great: Political History, 1542-1605 A.D.*, Vol. I, (Delhi: Shiva Lal Agarwala & Co., 1962), pp. 23-51.
- ² Havell, E.B. *Indian Architecture* (London: 1913), p. 163.
- ³ Abu Fazl. *Akbarnama*, (1560-1590), translated from Persian by H. Beveridge. (Calcutta, 1873).
- ⁴ Badauni. *Tarikh-i-Badayuni*; (1575-1605), (New Delhi, 1968).
- ⁵ Sufi is a Muslim who lays emphasis upon the importance of the

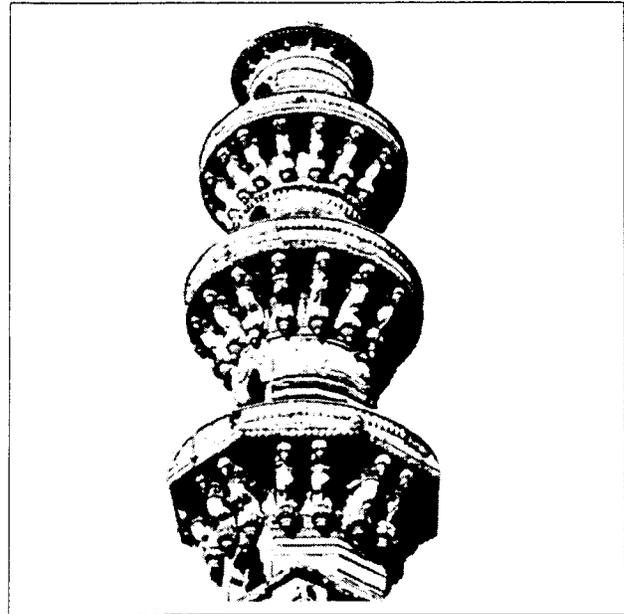


Fig. 9. Ahmadabad, one of the minarets from Sidi Bashir's mosque, constructed in the late 15th century. (Source: E. Koch, 1991).

content, meaning and spirit of Islamic religious practices as opposed to their formal observance.

- ⁶ Burke, S.M. *Akbar: The Greatest Mogal* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1989). Burke cites the *Ain-i-Akbari* (Vol. 1, p. 496) as his source for this comment.
- ⁷ Abu Fazl, *Akbarnama*, op.cit., Vol. 3, p. 315.
- ⁸ Badauni, *Tarikh-i-Badayuni*, op.cit., p. 517.
- ⁹ Abu Fazl, *Akbarnama*, op.cit., p. 157.
- ¹⁰ The *Krori* system was based on the State's claim on the peasant to which the peasant was not directly responsible, rather, it was the responsibility of the appointed Mansabdar. This was an innovating reform which is discussed by Srivastva in op.cit., pp. 121-150. Also see, Haig, Wolseley & Burn, Richard (ed.) *The Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1937), Vol. IV, p. 543.
- ¹¹ Abu Fazl, *Akbarnama*, op.cit., p. 559-600. It is also at this point that he composes the following verse:
*"Hail! the garden of two worlds rejoices because of thee,
 The foundation of life is firm because of thee.
 Solomon had a ring, thou hast faith, Alexander had his mirror,
 thou the code,
 Alexander with his mirror, Kaikusru with his cup,
 Have not seen what thou art beholding for many days.*
- ¹² Badauni, *Tarikh-i-Badayuni*, op.cit.
- ¹³ For details on Babur's temporary conversion to Shiahism and Humayun's confidence on Bairam Khan, see Srivastava, op.cit., pp. 21-151; and Elliot & Dowson (ed.) *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, (1938).
- ¹⁴ Babur; "Baburnama" from excerpts in Elliot & Dowson, *ibid*.
- ¹⁵ According to Badauni's account, 1981. Akbar had commissioned his court scholars to draft out a new language which could be understood and spoken by most of his subjects. The resultant language seems to be URDU which was a mixture of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian transcribed into an Arabic script for the affairs of the court.

¹⁶ Abul Fazl, op.cit, Vol. 3, p. 55-6

¹⁷ Sewell, *The Forgotten Empire*, (1900).

¹⁸ Bartoli (1714) as cited in Smith, Vincent. *Akbar - The Great Mogul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917 and 1926), p. 136.

¹⁹ Smith, Vincent. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁰ Landes, Joan; *Women and the Public Sphere*, (1988).

²¹ Both Badauni and Abul Fazl have noted a strange occurrence in the life of the Shahinshah on April 22, 1578, while leading a *qamargah* hunt. Badauni describes it as a "strange fit" and Abul Fazl calls it a "jazba"

²² Koch, Ebba, *Mughal Architecture* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991), p. 56

²³ Abu Fazl. *Akbarnama*, op.cit., Vol. II, p. 560.

²⁴ Smith, Vincent. op.cit., p. 444.

²⁵ Brown, Percy; "The Mughal Period - Akbar the Great"; in *Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)*, (Bombay, 1942), p. 103.

²⁶ Haig, Wolseley & Burn, Richard (ed.) *The Cambridge History of India*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1937), Vol. IV, p. 543.

²⁷ It is quite possible that this section was heavily edited by Elliot & Dowson.

²⁸ Smith, Vincent. op.cit. p. 444.