



DELHI SULTANATE II. ARCHITECTURE

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Although parts of the Indian subcontinent had experienced the impact of Persian culture since the invasion by the Ghaznavid sultan Maḥmūd (388-421/998-1030) in the 10th century, Delhi was little affected before 588/1192, when the Ghurid general [Qoṭb-al-Dīn Aybak](#) defeated Prithvi Raj Chauhan, the last Hindu ruler of the city. By 589/1193 Aybak had taken Delhi itself and had established Islam as the new state religion; the Friday sermon (*koṭba*) was read in the name of the Ghurid ruler Mo'ezz-al-Dīn Moḥammad (569-602/1173/1206). Medieval Persian institutions, already established in Ghurid Afghanistan, were also implanted in Delhi (see i, above).

The Ghurids. Among the first acts of the new conqueror was the construction of a mosque, known today as the Qowwat-al-Eslām, on a temple plinth in the citadel of the former Chauhan rulers. In its initial phase it consisted of a prayer chamber, an open courtyard, and galleries on the south, north, and east sides; according to a Persian inscription dated 587/1191, the supports of the galleries were taken from twenty-seven dismantled temples (Page, p. 29), but it is possible that this inscription was added later (Horovitz, p. 13). A second inscription suggests that much of this phase had been completed by 592/1196 (Page, p. 29). The mosque was probably modeled loosely on the Saljuq mosques of Persia, with an arcaded screen that was visually related to them (Tsukinowa, p. 37); nevertheless, owing to the predominant use of spolia that



were trabeated, not arcuated, the mosque had the aspect of a rearranged Hindu temple. Aybak was evidently dissatisfied with this appearance, for in front of the trabeated prayer chamber he inserted an enormous screen pierced by five corbeled arches, the central one larger than the others, dated 20 Du'l-qa'da 594/23 September 1198; as a result the courtyard facade of the sanctuary approximated those of the great Saljuq mosques in Persia, for example, the congregational mosque at Isfahan (Tsukinowa, pp. 45, 57; [Plate XX](#)). The decorative motifs and calligraphy on this screen are closely related to those on other Ghurid structures in Afghanistan (e.g., the Šāh-e Mašhad *madrasa*, or religious school, in Ġarjestān, dated 561/1165-66; Casimir and Glatzer). At the same time that he inserted the screen Aybak also began construction of an enormous minaret, known today as Qoṭb Menār, south of the mosque. It has been proposed that this structure may originally have been intended to serve as his tomb, in the tradition of the Persian tomb towers like the Gonbad-e Qābūs in Gorgān (Trousdale, p. 104).

Aybak's successor, Šams-al-Dīn Iltutmiš (607-33/1211-36), greatly enlarged the mosque and completed the Qoṭb Menār, about 626/1229. The extensions of the Qowwat-al-Eslām generally followed the same scheme as the original; the first courtyard was surrounded on the north, east, and south by a larger porticoed courtyard, which also enclosed the minaret, and the sanctuary was extended on either side, with new mihrabs and extensions of the arcaded screen.

The completed minaret reached an estimated height of 79 m. (Cunningham, pp. 196-97). Its tapering form and height recall the "minaret" at Jām (65 m high), erected in 526/1132 by the Ghurid Ġiāṭ-al-Dīn Moḥammad b. Sām (558-99/1163-202; Maricq and Wiet, p. 27; [Plate XXI](#)), and the alternating curved and angular projecting forms of its base are clearly related to those of the minaret of Ḳvāja Sīāhpūš in Afghan Sīstān (Nath, 1978, p. 25). Unlike the brick minarets of Afghanistan and Persia, however, the Qoṭb Menār was constructed of red and pink local stone. This monument may be interpreted as an expression of the victory of Islam in infidel India, as well as a declaration of the newly established supremacy of Mo'ezz-al-Dīn Moḥammad and later of Iltutmiš himself. The historical inscriptions on the minaret indicate that first the Ghurid overlords and later the independent Iltutmiš considered themselves part of the greater Persian and Islamic world and adopted Persian royal titulary. For example, in four separate places the ruler is proclaimed as master of Arabs and non-Arabs (*'arab o 'ajam*; *Page*, pp. 30-33).

Persian influence on the architecture of the newly established Ghurid splinter



state in Delhi was manifest in the very types of buildings constructed, particularly mausolea. Iltutmīš built tombs for himself and his son Nāṣer-al-Dīn Maḥmūd but in quite different styles. That for Nāṣer-al-Dīn at Malikpur, dated 629/1231 and known locally as Solṭān Ġārī, consists of an underground crypt and heavy enclosure walls that give the appearance of being fortified; it is difficult to trace these features to any specific tradition, but there may have been links with contemporary tombs, probably built originally as *rebāṭs* (fortified outposts) in the Multan region, which had been under Ghurid domination since 571/1175-76 (Edwards, p. 192; Bosworth, *Later Ghaznavids*, p. 29). In any event, according to the later chronicle of the Tughluqīd Fīrūz Shah (*Fotūḥat-e fīrūzšāhī*, apud Navqī, p. 6), the tomb was established as a *madrasa*, an institution that had originated in Persia. Iltutmīš's own tomb, a square stone structure originally surmounted by a corbeled dome, recalls in plan and elevation tombs in persianized Central Asia, for example, the mausoleum of the Samanids at Bukhara (Pope, *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 264; [Plate XXII](#)).

The Kaḷjīs. Although the buildings discussed above were clearly modeled on Persian prototypes, indigenous Indian building techniques were still in use, often in modified form (e.g., the corbeled dome of Iltutmīš's tomb). By the turn of the 14th century true vaulting techniques, including the use of keystones, had been mastered, as attested by the southern gateway known as 'Alā'ī Darvāza (710/1311), part of the final extension to the Qowwat al-Eslām by 'Alā'-al-Dīn Kaḷjī (695-715/1296-1316). The facade of the gateway is embellished with carved red and white stone, reflecting the tradition of contrasting bands of colored stone in Syria and Anatolia, probably familiar through artisans or patrons fleeing the Mongols. 'Alā'-al-Dīn's uncompleted enlargement of the mosque, like that of Iltutmīš before him, did not change the original character of the building, however. Persian inscriptions on the facade, in which he is referred to as a "king of Darius-like splendor," underscore his strong attachment to the Persian cultural realm (Page, p. 34).

Aside from royally endowed buildings little is known about architecture in Delhi during the early Sultanate and Kaḷjī periods. Knowledge of painting and the applied arts is also minimal. From coins it appears that indigenous motifs sometimes appeared on standard Islamic coin types like those minted under the Ghaznavids and Ghurids (Wright, esp. pp. 68-69).

The Tughluqids. Although the Tughluqids were dynamic patrons of architecture, the increasing austerity of their imperial buildings evoked few Persian forms other than those already current in Delhi. For example, the



mosque of Moḥammad Shah II (725-52/1325-51) in Begumpur, in a southern suburb of the city, is only an elaboration of the Saljuq-inspired mosque type developed earlier in the sultanate period (Welch and Crane, p. 130). The leading architectural patron of the dynasty, Fīrūz Shah (752-90/1351-88), did, however, develop an elaborate building program of explicitly Persian inspiration. In keeping with the image of an ideal ruler portrayed in such Persian texts as Neẓām-al-Molk's *Sīar al-molūk*, he concerned himself with building canals, wells, sluices, forts, *madrasas*, mosques, and other public amenities, though in reality much of this activity was designed to divert attention from his shrinking domain and political impotence (Asher, 1992, p. 7).

One building type that probably reflected actual Persian prototypes was the octagonal tomb, which became increasingly popular in pre-Mughal Delhi. It consisted of a central chamber surrounded by a veranda. Important examples are the tombs of the general Ẓafar Khan (built 723-25/1323-25) and Kān-e Jahān Telangānī (d. 770/1368), prime minister under Fīrūz Shah. The type appears to have been ultimately derived from such Persian tombs as that at Naṭanz (dated 389/999), now incorporated into a later mosque (Blair, p. 47). The mode of transmission is unclear, though it is notable that a type once favored for saints in Persia was used for royalty and high-ranking secular figures in India.

The later sultanate. After the invasion of Tīmūr in 801/1398 the prestige of Delhi suffered considerably. Some octagonal tombs were built in the persianate tradition established by Fīrūz Shah, notably those of Mobārak Shah (824-38/1421-35), Sekandar Shah Lōdī (894-923/1489-1517; [Plate XXIII](#)), and the high-ranking ʿĪsā Khan Nīāzī (954/1547-48). Particularly under Sekandar Shah there was an attempt to revive the city's fortunes. The Afghan Šīr Shah Sūr, who temporarily ousted the Mughals from India, ruled Delhi in the years 947-52/1540-45; he built the Qal'a-ye kohna mosque in the Dīn-panāh section of the city. The sanctuary consists of a single-aisled sanctuary of three bays; it is unique to India, but at that time the building type was favored specifically by Afghan families like the Sūrīs. The ornamentation may also reveal Persian influence (Asher, 1989, pp. 74-75). The exterior and interior are richly faced with red and white stones, some of which are inlaid in intricate geometric patterns reminiscent of tile patterns on Timurid buildings.



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Plate XX. Screen on the courtyard of the Qowwat al-Eslām mosque, Delhi, added by the Ghurid Qoṭb-al-Dīn Aybak, 594/1198. Photograph C. B. Asher.

Plate XXI. Remains of the Qoṭb Menār, Qowwat al-Eslām mosque, Delhi, begun by Qoṭb-al-Dīn Aybak, ca. 1200, completed by Šams-al-Dīn Iltutmiš ca. 626/1229. Photograph C. B. Asher.

Plate XXII. Facade, tomb of Iltutmiš, in the Qowwat al-Eslām mosque, Delhi, ca. 1225. Photograph C. B. Asher.



Plate XXIII. Tomb of Sekandar Shah Lōdī, in the Bāḡ-e Jor, known today as the Lodi Gardens, Delhi, ca. 1517. Photograph C. B. Asher.