

The Minaret as a Vital Element of Islamic Architecture in the Indian Sub-Continent

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Abstract: The mosque is the Islamic building Par Excellence, and as such the key to Islamic Architecture. This is the building type that most frequently reflects the impact of the many distinct local architectural traditions, which together shaped the Islamic Architecture.

Minarets are the part and parcel of the present day mosques. The minaret appeared in Islamic Architecture at very early times. Although it was not an essential part of the mosque during the life time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and even for sometime in the period after Him. The first minaret appeared during the rule of Caliph Mu'awiya. There are, however, conflicting views as to exactly where, when and by whom were the first minarets built. The minarets were/are built for monumental purposes and became permanent features of the mosques buildings. The minarets have become essential and integral parts of the mosques in the Indian Sub-Continent as like anywhere in the world. These minarets are being built in the varied geographical and cultural environments. The Muslim architects happily used, for these minarets, forms that had already been acclimatized in their parent cultures. Muslim architects did not invent the new forms. They rather preferred to refine the existing ones with the highest degree of proportion and integrity to the main building. They had, therefore, gone through the state of transition in adapting the minaret forms, keeping their cultural richness and transforming them into a religious identity that is most suited to Islamic buildings. This paper reviews the mosque architecture in general, the evolution of Islamic architecture in the Indian sub-continent, the various functional aspects of minarets and the forms that had been and are being used by the Muslim architects in the Indian sub-continent in order to determine their roots and the process of transformation by which it has been recognised as a vital elements in the Islamic buildings in the region, and especially mosques.

Introduction

With the advent of Islam in India, an era ended and the old order passed. And in no country was the movement of Islamization more epoch-making, as the various civilizations with which the Muslims came into contact did oppose their ideals, than that of India. Apart from the fact that the Islamic movement was of relatively recent growth, forcing itself on the ancient and firmly established social and religious structure of India, it also postulates a clashing of fundamental convictions. In fact it was a conflict of realism with idealism, of the material with the visionary and of the concrete with the abstract. Nothing could illustrate more graphically the religious and racial diversity than the contrast between their respective places of worship, as represented by the Mosque on the one hand, and the temple on the other. Hindu ritual prayer is fundamentally different from Muslim religious practice. The former is based on individual worship but the latter prescribes communal or congregational prayer. Consequently, the Hindu temple is relatively narrow and congested while the Mosque is broad and spacious. The former is dark and cell-like with a closed mysterious atmosphere but the latter was open to the sky, brightly lit and well-ventilated. ^[1, p 34]

Architecturally, the mosque is wholly visible and intelligible. The representation of natural forms is prohibited by Islamic usage. Decorative lettering attained its highest form in the sculptured texts on the Muslim places of worship. They broke up their wall surfaces in patterns of different coloured marbles, and also applied schemes of painted plaster and brilliantly glazed tiles. ^[2, p 1]

The importance of Indo-Islamic architecture will be appreciated when it is realized that India produced more notable buildings than all the other countries that came under the influence of Islam. Two factors were largely responsible for their brilliant exposition of the style in India. Firstly, its late development, and the remarkable genius of the indigenous craftsmen in the second place. The real excellence of Indo-Islamic architecture was due to second factor - the living knowledge and skill possessed by the Indian craftsmen, particularly in the art of working on stone in which they were unequalled. These workmen played grandly and magnificently with their material to express their plastic genius, more than putting efforts in building construction, so that they present an appearance more sculpturesque than architectural. How this manipulative skill was adapted and directed to the production of scientific as well as artistic architecture, can be seen in the monuments that arose in India under Islamic rule.

The materials that muslim builders had at their disposal depended on the area in which they were working. They included stone, rubble, baked bricks, unbaked bricks, clay and timber. ^[3, p 73] That most of the Islamic architecture in India is composed of masonry formed of dressed stone is significant as Islamic buildings in other countries, with certain exceptions, were largely constructed of brick and rubble. ^[2, p 2] Islamic architecture in India is represented by many different types of buildings. The two conventional divisions are Religious and Secular. Those of a religious nature consist of two-kinds only: the mosque and the tomb. The secular buildings are those intended for public and civic purposes.

The mosque or *Masjid*, literally "the place of prostration" is not only the all-important building of the Faith, but it is also the keynote of the style. It was an entirely novel type of building, originally devised by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Arabia in a very simple form. ^[4, p 1226] It was adjacent to the Prophet's (PBUH) house compound at Madinah - an enclosed courtyard with small rooms along one side, and a rough portico at another end. ^[5, p 1] Later, it evolved into a rectangular open space or '*Sahn*' (courtyard), the four sides being enclosed by pillared cloisters or "*Iwan*" with a fountain or tank in the centre for ablution. The cloisters towards the Makkah direction '*Qibla*' of the courtyard were expanded and elaborated into a pillared hall or Sanctuary, with a wall at the back containing a recess or alcove called a '*Mihrab*' indicating the *Qibla* or direction for prayer.

On the right side of the *Mihrab* stands the '*Mimbar*' or pulpit. A portion of the sanctuary is screened off into a compartment for women. An elevated platform from which the *muezzin* recites the '*Azan*', or call for prayers, is also a necessity and usually takes the form of a high tower called 'minaret'.

Evolution of Islamic Architecture in the Indian Sub-Continent

Islamic architecture in the sub-continent can be resolved into three main divisions: the Delhi or Imperial, the Provincial, and the Mughal.

Generally the first has been known as "*Pathan*" style but not all those dynasties, under which this type of architecture prevailed, can be designated. Two of them were of Turkish extraction, one was Khalji, and one was of Arab descent. The most visible change in the Indian landscape brought about by Turks was the introduction of new architectural style, of which the mosque was typical. ^[6, p 316] The Turks brought with them the traditions of Arab and Persian architecture, particularly the latter. They brought features like the pointed arch, the transverse vault, and the dome and the octagonal form of the building under the dome. These were all new to the Indian Architecture. ^[6, p 317]

The architecture evolved under these dynasties was that associated mainly with their rule at Delhi, the capital city and centre of imperial power. Beginning at the close of the 12th century, this imperial style continued for nearly four centuries, when, in the middle of the sixteenth century, it was succeeded by that of Mughals.

The imperial style was started under the vigorous rule of Qutb-ud-Din Aibak, when important building schemes were initiated. This ruler's first effort was the creation of the Qutb Mosque, erected on the spacious substructure of a Hindu temple. It was constructed solely of spoils ravaged from existing temples in this area. The style was continued by Al-Tutmish which can be seen in the buildings built by him. After the death of Al-Tutmish, except during the short rule of Balban with the significant appearance of the true arch, no buildings were undertaken until the rise of Khaljis. For nearly three-quarters of a century, a little progress in the building art was made. [6, p 318]

The imperial architecture underwent a change during the reign of the Tughluqs. The simplicity of lines, the reduction of ornamentation to a minimum, and the use of large stone blocks were all combined to produce an effect of strength and austerity. [6, p 318] The Lodis reverted to a more elegant style. The walls of their buildings were extremely thick which made it difficult to decide where the balance of dome should lie - in proportion to the outer elevation and size or to the interior. The use of double dome solved the problem of proportion. They also started decorating their buildings with Persian borrowed enameled tiles.

The provincial style, secondly, refers to those modes of building practised in some of the more self-contained portions of the country. These provincial manifestations of the building art in most instances prevailed for a period partly contemporary with that maintained by the central power at Delhi, and partly with that of the Mughals, until the latter brought the whole India under their rule.

Provincial architecture developed in the same times as that of Delhi/Imperial, with local modifications often conditioned by the availability of building materials. This was especially so in Bengal where stone was not readily available and brick was most frequently used. Terracotta decorative work, which had been used to a great extent in Buddhist buildings, continued to be used in mosques and other Islamic buildings. Architecture in Gujarat and Malwa achieved a high aesthetic standard, since the indigenous tradition was more alive here than in other areas. The impact of the new architecture was also felt in Rajasthan, where domestic architecture shows less sculptural confusion on the outside.

The third style, the Mughal, was the latest and ripest form of Indo-Islamic architecture. It emerged after the middle of the sixteenth century and continued to flourish until the eighteenth century, the time when the "Great Mughals" rule begun to decline.

Mughal architecture was derived from three main sources: native Indian Islamic, Persian Central Asian and local Hindu architecture. [7, p 199] Distinctive Hindu features incorporated into Mughal architecture include tarlatan stone construction, richly ornamented carved piers and columns, and shallow arches made out of corbel rather than voussoirs. In addition, there are particular constructions usually associated with Hindu buildings, including Chatris, Chajjas, and Jharokas, which became characteristics of Mughal architecture. A Chatri is a domed Kiosk resting on pillars which in Hindu architecture is used as a cenotaph but in Islamic architecture is placed as decoration on top of mosques, palaces and tombs. [7, p 200]

The materials used for Mughal architecture are mostly red sand stone and white marble. Baked bricks were also used. Mughal architecture excels in the quality of its carved stonework. The main types of buildings include palaces, forts, gardens, and mosques.

Minarets in the Indian Sub-Continent

Beside other functions and for many centuries, the Minaret has been used as a vital element in mosques. However, it seems on the whole, unrelated to the function of Azan as the call to prayer can be quite adequately made from the roof of the mosque. During the life time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the call for prayer was made in this way, and the practice continued for another generation.^[8, p 129]

It appears that it was during the reign of the Ummayyad Caliph Al-Walid when the towers were used for the first time for calling to prayer.^[9, p 29] Later, Islamic communities started building minarets as parts of mosques as well. In Central Asia, towers were erected as a tradition going to pre-Islamic times. Forms used in the towers built by the Buddhist Kuslans in Central Asia, or similar forms found in an area that later became Islamic Territory, may have been introduced there. *Minars*, towers, columns, and similar high erections thus become common features in Islamic Architecture, particularly in Western Asia where pillar-like minars are often found in the vicinity of many towns. Most of these are built of bricks or rubble and are round in section. Although they are occasionally fluted, certain examples at Ghazni in Afghanistan, the nearest site from Delhi, have a star-shaped plan with other characteristics (Fig-1).

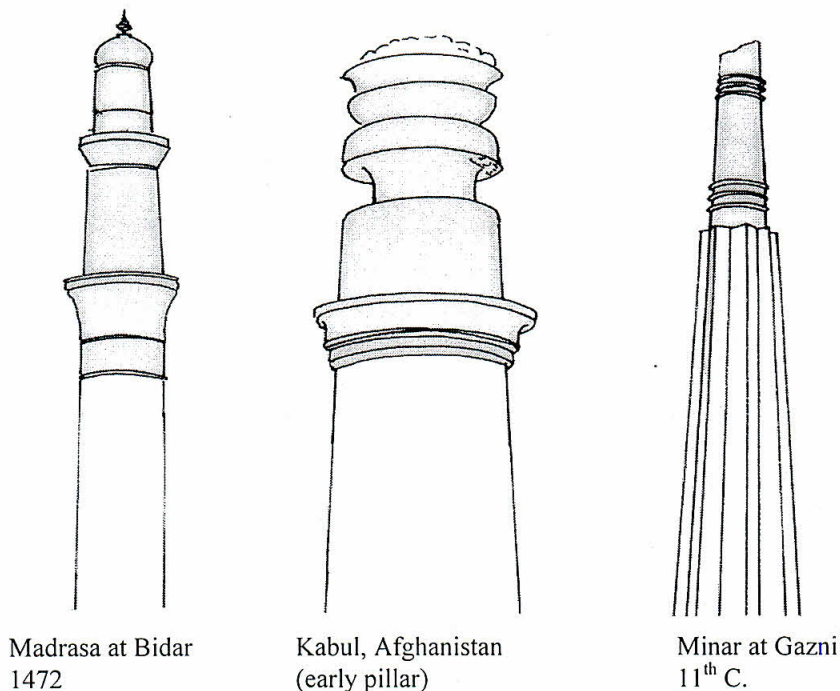


Fig. 1: Similarity of Details of an Early Tower at Kabul with Minars of India.

The Qutb Minar at Delhi was first and foremost a tower erected to commemorate Muslim victories on the battlefields. It also formed an adjunct of the mosque in the Arabic tradition of towers attached to mosques.^[10, p 12] It is believed that Ghaznavid minarets near Kabul and Jam may have suggested the design of the Qutb Minar. It was made possible by the inspired vision of Qutb-ud-din Aibak, and realized through the creative genius of the Indian workmen. Even today, it is the most eye-catching monument in Delhi. It was situated to the left of the main entrance, outside the mosque. Later, the minarets were not separate but attached to the main building and occupied relatively the same position as the minarets in some of the early mosques and formed a part of the architectural scheme (Fig-2).

Originally, the Qutb Minar consisted of four stories with its section diminishing as they ascended. A projecting balcony separates each stage. The three lower stories have remained untouched, but the fourth, or uppermost storey was composed of circular kiosk with window openings and a domical roof crowning the entire structure. The sculptural treatment of the multiple niches below the balcony mark the Hindu carver's graduation in the art of non-figurative Islamic Carving.^[10, p 11] Renovations at later dates have produced an additional upper storey, changing its appearance and proportions, not to its improvement necessarily.

A circular tower at Gaur, Bengal, called the Firuz Minar, has been erected to serve the two purposes: a tower of Victory and a minaret for the call to prayer, on the same principle as the Qutb Minar at Delhi but to a much smaller scale. It has five stories, the three lowest being twelve sided while the two upper are round. Minarets were also used to flank entrances. Tapering cylindrical minarets on the polygonal plinths were commonly used. In some of the Mughal mosques, minarets are used to stress the four corners of the sanctuary. This is a logical extension of their function as markers. In such cases, a hierarchy of size may make itself felt. For example, at the Badshahi mosque, further and larger minarets, tapering tiered octagons, established at the outer corners of the mosque (Fig-3).

The most common form of minaret in the Indian sub-continent comprises a stocky cylinder resting on a high polygonal plinth and horizontally articulated annular mouldings, balconies and niches. More often the minaret comprised a massive polygonal lower storey serving also as a buttress, and crowned by a slender shaft or, as in the later stages, by an open turret, dome or Kiosk. In such cases, the minaret, while retaining the residence of religious significance, was used primarily as an articulating element^[8, p 161] (Figs. 4 & 5).

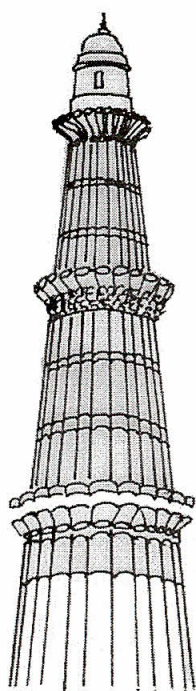
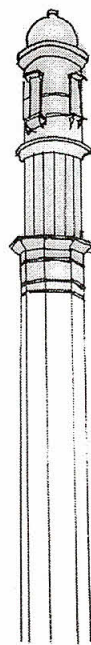
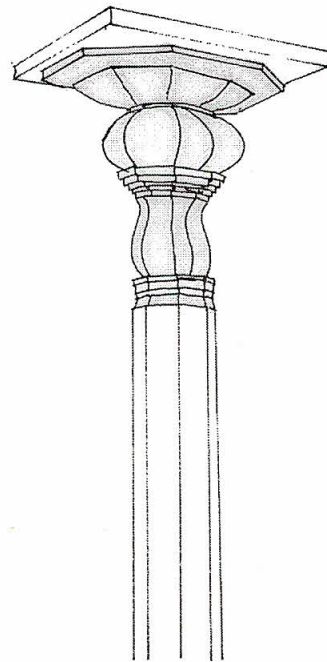


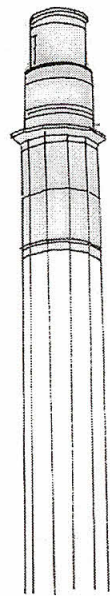
Fig. 2: Qutb Minar with an early fluted pillar shaft originated from Persia.



Bibi Ki Masjid
Burhanpur C. 1590

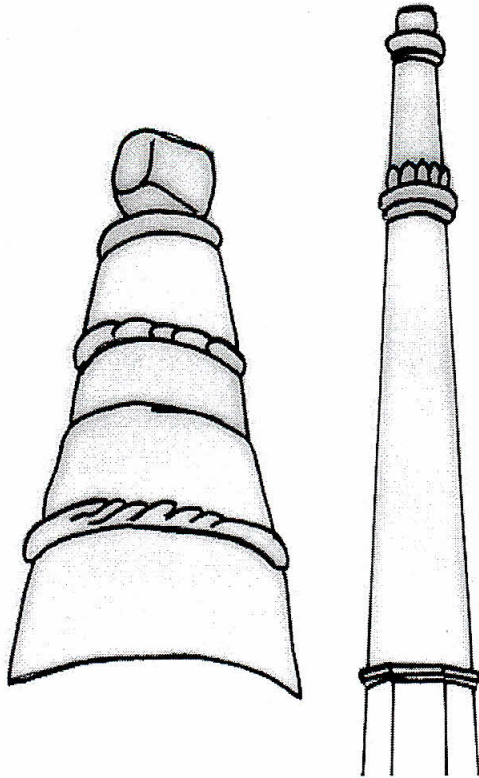


Koryangula 10th C
(Dravidian pillar)



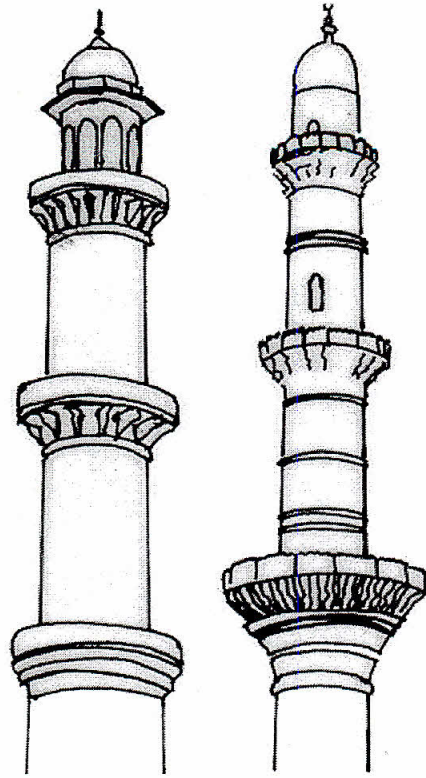
Firoz Minar Gaur
15th century

Fig. 3: Comparison of 10th century pillar (at Koryangula) with the islamic Minarets.



Steeple of Toda, Ootagamund,
South India

Khiri Ki Mosque,
Delhi, 14th cent.



Taj Mahal, Agra
(1684)

Chand Minar,
Daulatabad (1435)

Fig. 4: Shaping the minaret from a conjectural Steeple of South India.

Fig. 5: Minarets of various designs/forms.

Tracing the Roots of Minarets in the Indian Sub-Continent

The mosque is of course the principal religious building of Islam and as a result, this is the building type that most frequently reflects the impact of many distinct local architectural traditions, which together shaped Islamic architecture.

In the Indian sub-continent, the earliest example of Mosque architecture was the literal grafting of *Quwwat-ul-Islam* mosque on to a tenth-century temple at Delhi. There is no doubt that the two distinct styles merged, although not completely, and this merging was mainly due to the employment of Indian craftsmen. As mentioned earlier, the Islamic architecture of the Indian sub-continent can be divided into three styles: Imperial, Provincial, & Mughal. Starting from the Qutb Minar, a number of minaret forms had been employed and used, mainly, onto the mosques. There is no doubt that quite a number of minaret types were invented by the Muslims but, in the authors opinion, it took them years to gain skills in minaret design and construction.

In investigating the roots of pillars in the Indian sub-continent we have to go way back to the 3rd century B.C. During the Ashokan era, lofty pillars were raised for commemorative and political purposes. A number of these pillars, some of them as much as fifty feet high, were distributed over a wide area.^[11, p 7] Each pillar consisted of a plain un-ornamented shaft, circular in section, thirty to forty feet high, and arising straight out of the ground without any suggestion of a base, and tapering like the trunk of a tall palm tree.^[11, p 9] Fluted pillars with capitals were also erected at the entrances of

important buildings. In the later style, pillars of octagonal shaft were also developed. These symbolic pillars with tapering shafts continued to be used in rock-cut style of architecture during the Hinayana and in later periods (Fig. 6).

One further relevant form, recorded in the 8th and 9th centuries in Minya Konka and Chotski in eastern Tibet, is a stellate watch tower, some 59-62 ft. high, which reproduced the form of the otherwise virtually unparalleled 12th century minarets of Ghazna. ^[8, p 147] The vertical *sikhara*, or tower, made a very clear contrast with the low, flat rooflines of the average Indian village. In northern India, the *sikhara* is very dominant. It is conical in form, with convex curved sides: and there is normally a finial of vase or 'melon' form. ^[4, p 1179] *Chatris*, or umbrellas (kiosks), over the rounded, octagonal, and in some cases over the squarish towers, are the widely used minaret forms of today's mosques in the Indian sub-continent (Figs. 8, 9, & 10).

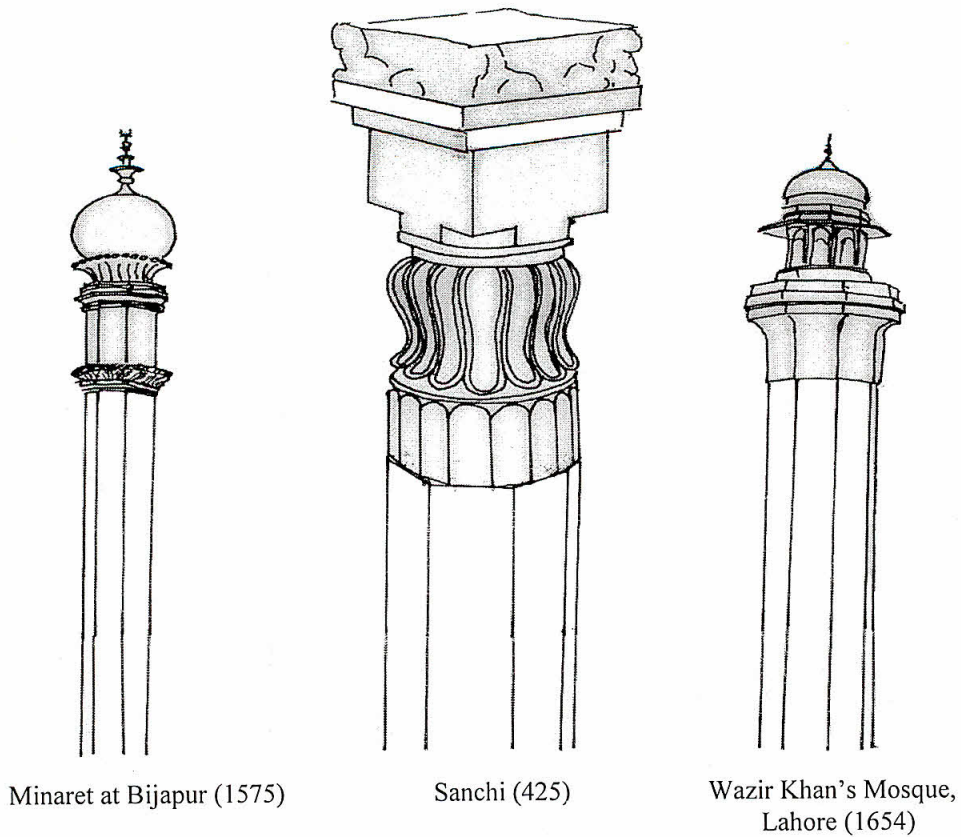


Fig. 6: Octagonal Minarets in India may have been derived from the octagonal shaft at Sanchi.

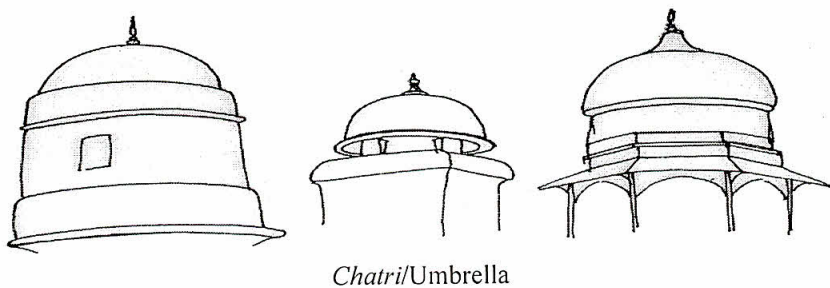


Fig. 7: Adaptation of *chatri* into minaret's domical kiosk.



Fig. 8: Badshahi mosque Lahore – octagonal sandstone minaret.

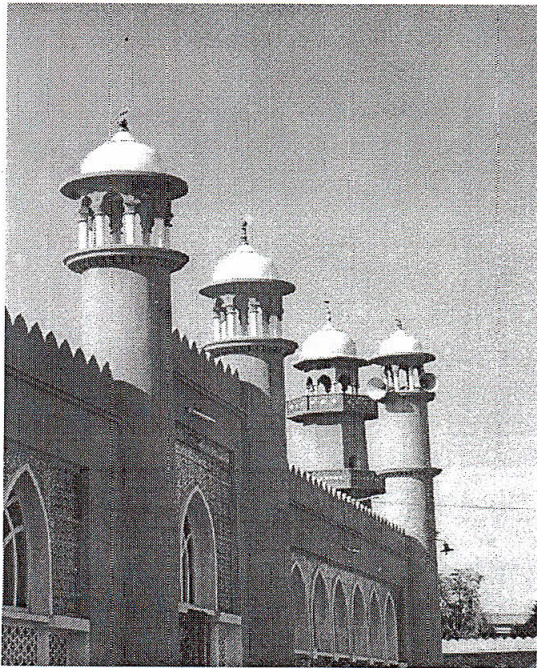


Fig. 9: Eidgah Mosque, Hyderabad - octagonal & round minarets with *chattris*.

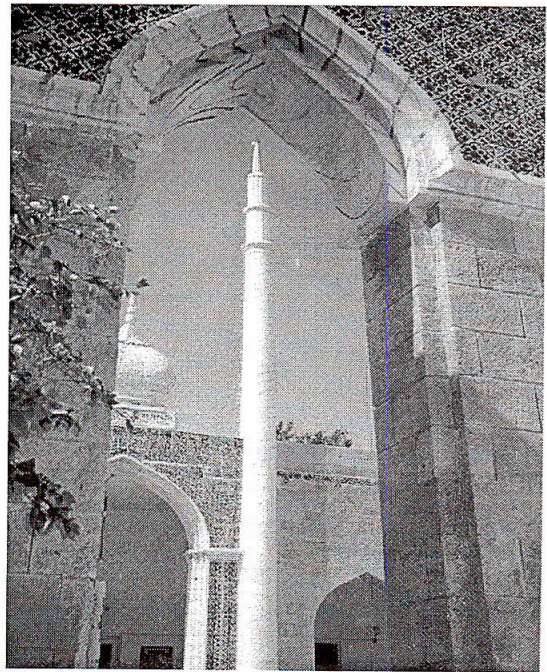


Fig. 10: Sind university mosque, Jamshoro – round minaret, tapering upwards.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the shapes and forms of minarets differ throughout the Islamic world. Their shapes were quite different in the eastern Islamic World. Instead of a square shaft, they built cylindrical, upward tapering tall towers with one or two balconies covered with *Chatris*/Kiosks on top. These minarets have greatly determined the shapes of subsequent minarets in the Indian sub-continent and around.

Muslim Architecture entered northern India from Persia via Afghanistan. The Turks, who brought with them the traditions of Arab and Persian architecture, were well aware of the minaret construction. Although Muslims did not invent the minaret, they were already familiar with it and were applying it as an element to their mosques. It is also a fact that in the Indian sub-continent, the vast majority of the Muslims were Hindu converts. They were trained builders in stone and skilled craftsmen. Many minaret shapes and forms had already been in use for centuries. This simplified the construction problems of the Muslim rulers and builders in the Indian sub-continent. Their flexibility in adopting the local forms, construction materials and techniques, and the readily available craftsmen, made their job easier. It is also a fact that, traditionally, the minarets used to be erected as symbolic elements in the buildings by the local peoples. But Muslims used them extensively as essential elements in their mosques. No doubt that, in the Indian sub-continent, not all the previously existing minaret forms were adapted and transformed. However, parts of the minarets, such as shafts (mostly rounded and octagonal), and domed Kiosks (*Chatri*) have been adapted so successfully that the minaret became a symbol of Islamic architecture whether used separately or attached to the mosque. That is why, today none of the mosques is seen without minaret(s), and it has turned into a vital element of Islamic Architecture.

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المتدنة كعنصر أساسي في العمارة الإسلامية في شبه القارة الهندية

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ملخص البحث: يعتبر المسجد البناء الاسلامي الأبرز في العمارة الإسلامية. تعكس أبنية المساجد تأثيرات التقاليد المعمارية المحلية والتي شكلت مجتمعة العمارة الإسلامية. تعتبر المتدنة جزءا أساسيا من بناء المسجد في الوقت الحاضر. ظهرت المتدنة في بدايات العمارة الإسلامية رغم أنها لم تكن جزءا أساسيا في المسجد في عهد الرسول ﷺ أو في الفترات التالية. ظهرت المآذن في عهد الخليفة معاوية , ولكن هناك اختلاف حول تحديد مكان وزمان وهوية مشيدي المآذن الأولى، التي أصبح تشيدها فيما بعد لهدف إعطاء شخصية واضحة للمساجد, ثم أصبحت من العناصر الثابتة والأساسية في أبنية المساجد. تبنى المآذن في كل أقاليم شبه القارة الهندية التي تختلف في جغرافيتها وفي تقاليد مجتمعاتها. ولبناء المآذن, استخدم المعمارون المسلمون أشكالاً مألوفة كانت قد وجدت في مجتمعاتهم, فهم لم يبتكروا أشكالاً جديدة ولكنهم طوروا أشكالاً كانت معروفة ودجوها في أبنية المساجد بتنسيق ممتاز من حيث النسب والانتماء . وبذلك فقد مر المعمارون بمرحلة انتقالية تمثلت في اقتباس أشكال قديمة غنية ومن ثم تكييفها كمآذن وتحويلها بأسلوب مناسب للمساجد.

نستعرض في هذا البحث عمارة المسجد بشكل عام, وتطور العمارة الإسلامية في شبه القارة الهندية, ثم الجوانب الوظيفية المختلفة للمآذن والأشكال التي استعملها ويستعملها المعمارون المسلمون في شبه القارة الهندية وذلك بهدف تحديد أصول تلك الأشكال والطرق التي تحولت بها إلى عناصر ضرورية في أبنية المساجد .