

# Society, Culture, Architecture: Impressions in Ahmedabad

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**Abstract** – The historical landscape of India is woven from texts by scholars, rulers' biographies, travelogues, and folklores. A deeper search into the cultural identity of a place is facilitated by studying architecture, material and construction, motifs and ornamentations. The city of Ahmedabad, an important royal capital of western India of the Gujarat Sultanate in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is a suitable case study. This research investigates how the structures in Ahmedabad reflect the stories of their patrons, socio-political context, mythology, religion, textiles, and craftsmanship. The study uses the Ahmed Shah Mosque (1414 AD) and Rani Sipri Mosque (1514 AD) as its cases. With a focus on motifs and ornamentations, the paper unveils the stories of how the city of Ahmedabad developed economically and politically, how the patrons changed from kings to queens, how the method of construction evolved from a method of assemblage to a detailed design process and how the Indo-Islamic architecture of Gujarat has its provincial influences deeply ingrained in each motif while respecting the sensibilities of the religions. The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining archival research and photographic documentation to discuss the relationship between design, architecture and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Indo-Islamic Architecture; Symbolism; Gujarat Provincial Architecture; Culture and Architecture

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## I. History of Ahmedabad

One of the most important royal capitals of western India, the city of Ahmedabad is a testament to the glories of the reign of the Gujarat Sultanate in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Founded by Ahmed Shah in 1411, the city was the Sultan's residence and the capital of the region of Gujarat. Before his reign, it witnessed the rule of, primarily, Hindu rulers. The peninsula of Gujarat in the 4th century BC exhibits the presence of the Mauryan Dynasty through inscriptions and monastic settlements. Gujarat, an important port, flourished through trade as traders from Rome, Arabs and Africa passed through the port of Bharuch. With trade as a catalyst, the Gupta dynasty under Chandra Gupta II catapulted towards the region. The reign of Chandra Gupta is considered the Golden Age of Indian Art and literature when Gujarat benefited and grew from his reign. The state later saw more tribal invasions from central Asia. Later, the Gurjars, a nomadic tribe, proved to be a strong dynasty until the eighth century when Muslim invaders started to enter the sub-continent. This was in all likelihood the result of the location of this region as it was possible to enter deep into the Gujarat Peninsula through the sea route of the Sind region.

Gujarat then witnessed multiple changes in the rulers through several raids and conquests. The Solanki dynasty primarily built the region and held it together for this duration. Despite the chaos, this era encouraged literature patronised by the Jain community and initiated and developed the art of building in stone. The famous Somnath temple was plundered off its riches by Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century. Under the Solanki rulers, Jain temple architecture took strong withholds in the region and was adorned by ornamentations and carvings depicting stories of Lord Mahavir and his teachings. Depictions of nature were an important part of these stories carved in stone. The Solanki dynasty ended with Qutbuddin Aybak's attack and his return to Delhi with all the loot. The kingdom was then divided among smaller rulers and provincial chiefs under the Muslim conquest.

From 1298 until the period of the Delhi Sultanate, Gujarat saw multiple Muslim invasions, changes of rule and the establishment of the Muslim reign. Gujarat also saw attempts of conquest from the Portuguese and Ottoman Turks. In 1573 Gujarat fell completely under the Mughal reign. The state flourished under this reign. Under Aurangzeb's rule the Mughal empire slowly declined and so did their hold over Gujarat. Gujarat by this time was well established in trade, commerce, architecture, and literature and was a sought-after region. Without losing time, the Marathas and the Gaekwads established their hold over different parts of the State. In 1817 the Gaekwads ceded Gujarat to the British.

Knowing the line of rulers is crucial as it informs one of the various influences the state had been under. Ahmedabad witnessed a series of influences through trade, reign, culture, religion, art and craft. These influences translated into architecture, as the region had the following advantages :

- The presence of rulers who connected with the common man through architecture
- Availability of the material- sandstone, whose properties allowed this translation due to

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- the knowledge and skill of artisans who understood the material and could work with it
- The geographical location which facilitated multiple influences and trade
  - The sensibilities of the patrons who saw the power of art, craft, and literature as the key to the creation and sustenance of culture

These cultural, political, regional and religious influences resulted in the architecture of amalgamation. The architecture of the city of Ahmedabad is an exhibit of its prosperity, diversity, technical profess, stylistic excellence, and art and craft and stands as physical evidence of the time.

## **II. Changing Architecture**

With the onset of a new ruler and a new rule, the means to establish one's presence among the common man was religion. With the establishment of mosques, the rulers provided a new narrative of God and the manner of praying. This being of utmost priority, had to be manifested immediately, time and could not be lost in building from scratch. The desire for quick construction may have resulted in an amalgamation of pillaged temple material. The aspect of ornamentation was not intrinsic to the idea of Islamic structures before this. Multiple examples stand proof of this, where the beam and posts, entranceways, brackets and lintels with Indian motifs and defaced human forms are the constituents of a mosque. This made Hindu and Jain influences an intrinsic part of the new Muslim dynasty and its architecture. As a result, Islamic architecture practiced and seen in the Indian sub-continent was coined as Indo-Islamic architecture.

### **A. Ahmed Shah Mosque**

Situated on the southwest corner of the Bhadra citadel, the Ahmed Shah mosque was built in 1414. A rectangular trabeated (a system of construction which relies on posts and beams to transfer the load) hall, with three arched entrances, the mosque served the congregational needs until the Jami Mosque for the Sultan and his courtesans. The hall has a taller central bay allowing it to project the grandeur of a primary entrance. It allows the filtering of light and facilitates wind circulation. A close study of the mosque hints at a temporary nature. This is due to the identification of various stone and jali (perforated, latticed screen usually made in stone in this area of study) types and sizes which seemed to have been set together as a jigsaw puzzle as in Figure 1. These pieces are remnants of temple spoils put together appropriately. The exterior of the mosque is a simple plain stone surface while the columns, the mihrab (a niche on the west facing wall of the prayer hall at a mosque) and the domes project ornamentation. Motifs such as the lotus, bell and chain, and pipal (*Ficus Religiosa*, is considered sacred in the Hindu religion) leaf highlight the assemblage as in Figure 2.

Since temple architecture was a trabeted method of construction, the same was followed in the early mosques with corbelled arches and domes. Since the arcuated (a system of construction which relies on arches, vaults and domes to transfer the load) system of construction was unknown

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to the builders and masons here, the mosques stood on post and lintel and had arches and domes just for face value. It is noteworthy to see that two columns are placed upon each other to achieve the desired height. This juxtaposition was irrespective of the similarity in design and used stone blocks inserted in case the desired height was not achieved as in Figure 3. A separate prayer hall for the women at the mezzanine level, Zanana, was also a part of this mosque. This level was lined with traceries, showcasing varied geometric patterns as in Figure 4. This wall allowed the view of the mihrab but refrained anyone from looking into this space. Here the jali was used to allow light and respect the modesty of the women present there. The gap between rows of columns was lined with lattice or jalis aiding the wind circulation and as aesthetic elements. The jali patterns were often inspired by the geometric patterns of local textiles, primarily Patola (a traditional textile of Gujarat with depiction of nature in abstract geometric forms) textiles.

Abiding by the law of Islam, all human or animal figures were defaced during the construction of this mosque. These representations which were a common site in temple architecture were modified to abide by the sensibilities of Islam. "Externally its design is imported, and displays all the ineptitude of his recently converted adherents to comprehend what he wanted. The arches, though of the truly pointed type, are so badly constructed as to menace ruins now, and the minarets are hardly more than pinnacles. Internally the Jaina dome is used with considerable success, most of the materials being borrowed from some temple, which must have been pulled down for the purpose, and merely fitted together again." (Hope and Fergusson, 1866, pp. 77).

The mosque hence speaks of not just the political situation of Ahmedabad whose main aim was to establish its presence through religious structures. The structures are the most evident informer of a new rule and ruler to the common man. It also narrates the story of the lack of knowledge of the arcuated construction system, the reason for the inherent ornamentation in Islamic structures built in India and the history of construction in the Gujarat region.

**Figure 1**

*The structure is built with pillaged material*



Note. The figures are sourced from the author.

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**Figure 2**

*Pipal leaf and the bell and chain motifs on the columns of the mosque.*



Note. The figures are sourced from the author.

**Figure 3**

*Columns placed on each other to achieve the desired height of the mosque*



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**Figure 4**

The jalis were used to control light and create the zanana in the mosque.



Note. The figures are sourced from the author.

### **B. Rani Sipri Mosque**

In 100 years, when Islamic rule was well established in the country, Islamic religious structures were no longer a result of the pillage of temple structures. This was when the mosque and tomb of Rani Sipri was constructed. The one-of-a-kind complex is important as it had a lady patron as in Figure 5., unlike most other structures. It hence spoke of the change in the political and social structure of the society.

**Figure 5**

The jalis were used to control light and create the zanana in the mosque.



Note. The figures are sourced from <https://www.touristplaces.net.in/ahmedabad-gj/rani-sipri-masjid/>.

As stated by the late Fergusson in the book 'Architecture of Ahmedabad', "Notwithstanding the smallness of its dimensions, it may be considered the gem of Ahmedabad, and, in its class one of the most exquisite buildings in the world. It is also one of the most perfectly Hindu of the buildings of this city, no arch being employed anywhere (except on the one side doorway), either constructively or for ornamentation. The minarets, too, though so exquisite in design, are not minarets in reality; they have no internal stairs and no galleries from which the call to prayer could

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be recited. They are pure ornaments but of the most graceful kind. "The charm of this building resides in two things. First, the completeness and unity of the design; every form and every detail is designed for the place where it is put and is appropriate to that place. And next to the fact that all the details are beautiful in themselves, and just sufficient to relieve and accentuate the construction, without concealing or interfering with it. It would, of course, be absurd to compare such a building with the Parthenon, or one of our great Gothic cathedrals; but it is, architecturally, a more perfect building than the Erechtheion at Athens and though we have some Gothic Chapels of great beauty, there probably is not one that would not look coarse and plain if placed side by side with this mosque." (Burgess, 1866, pp. 86).

**Figure 6**

*The harmonious ornamentation and continued use of motifs in the mosque*



Note. The figures are sourced from the author.

**Figure 7**

*Jharokha was designed to be a part of the street side face of the prayer hall in this mosque.*



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As seen in Figure 6., the structure reverberates that the kingdom was well established and had the skill and resources to procure stone, shape it to design and ornament it with the highest skilled labour. It is indicative of the influence of Hindu motifs and architecture that did not die with the strengthening of Muslim rule. The bond between the two types of architectural expressions strengthened and almost worked in unison. The distinction was no longer prevalent but was practised as Indo-Islamic architecture. The highlight of this amalgamation was the jharokha (a window projecting from the wall) designed to be a part of the street side face of the prayer hall as in Figure 7.

### **III. Architecture and Cultural Identity**

The Ahmed Shah mosque and the Rani Sipri mosque, built 100 years apart, narrate the story of the Islamic reign and their characteristics through multiple means such as:

#### **A. Ornamentation and Geometric Patterns**

The temple architecture used its walls and columns as storyboards. Pictorial graphics indicative of the stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other mythological tales were set in stone in these structures. Human figures, animals, floral patterns, and geometric patterns together lined the surfaces of the temple. In confluence with the prohibition of the indication of living forms being a part of the Islamic religious structures, these motifs were modified to suit religious sensibilities. They now acted as ornamentation to enhance the aesthetics and also in tracery design.

#### **B. Incorporation of Local Architectural Styles**

Indo-Islamic architecture often incorporates elements of local architectural styles. Based on the region in the country, the local use of material, the local ornamentation, and the local construction skill, Indo-Islamic architecture moulded itself to suit the region and the available art and skill. With special care taken to adhere to the manner of praying, the aesthetics of these structures adapted and embraced the indigenous manner of building.

#### **C. Calligraphy**

Ornamentation was an integral part of the architectural style prevalent in Gujarat. Among other motifs and patterns that were borrowed, Islamic calligraphy was adopted as part of ornamentation in Indo-Islamic architecture. Calligraphic inscriptions in Arabic and Persian were often used to convey religious messages and verses from the Quran. They were also used to state the patrons of the structures, the rulers of the time and the builders involved in their construction.

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## IV. Conclusion

"Societal norms are more specific notions, exhortations and rules about what is considered preferable and what is considered tolerable and acceptable regarding ideas, thoughts, expectations, interactions, behavior and so on. Societal norms provide ranges and limits of what is tolerable, directives about ways to live, goals, activities to engage in, behavior towards other members and the environment. They are the code of conduct of a society and include formal rules and norms as well as informal, unwritten, unspoken, shared conventions regarding relations, rituals, preferred modes of behavior and behavioral prescriptions, restrictions and taboos. Means of social control associated with following and not following such norms are also included. Societal norms are related to and affect architectural values." (Mazumdar, S., & Mazumdar, S., 1994, pp.69).

Architecture resonates with time and one can unravel layers of history through these structures. Ahmed Shah mosque and Rani Sipri mosque state that in 100 years, the Muslim rulers had set their foothold over the region. The mosques were, now, not just constructed for the common man, with a mardana (designated area for men) and a zanana (designated area for women) identified as separate spaces, but also by kings and patrons for their use, which did not need these separate sections. They also moved from an assembly system of construction with available elements to a more detailed, intricate and designed manner of buildings such structures. These structures also reflect the availability of funds and the economic stability of the rule to have invested in elaborate pieces of architecture. Another shift that the structures highlight is the shift from a male patron to a female patron, indicative of the position of women in the hierarchical order and also the society. It is through these methods of construction, material, ornamentation, scale and patronage that architecture becomes a storyteller of its time.

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