



In this chapter, you will study about the architecture of medieval India. Many enduring monuments- places, forts, tombs, temples and mosques- were built by the rulers of medieval India. Architecture was used as a statement of power. Rulers probably felt that the bigger and grander the building, the richer and more powerful they would be considered. They might also have felt the need to leave behind some enduring mark of their rule for future generations to see and wonder at. So they often filled their cities with splendid constructions to impress others with their power and wealth. Many of these buildings were destroyed by succeeding rulers. However, several earlier works have managed to survive. They give us an idea of the beauty and variety of medieval Indian architecture.

Rulers and Building (Architecture in India in the early medieval period)

Between the eighth and eighteenth centuries kings and their officers built two kinds of structures. The first were forts, places, garden residences and tombs safe, protected and grandiose places of rest in this world and the next; the second were structures meant for public activity including temples, mosques, tanks, wells, caravanserais and bazaars. Construction activity was also carried. They built temples, mosques and wells, large mansions. The key feature of all the temples was the “Garbhagriha” the inner chamber where the idol was placed. This formed the nucleus of the temple, dark and secluded, where people could pray in private.

The Temple of North India: The Nagara-style temple had some distinctive features. Inside the temple, the Garbhagriha was always square. The shikhara had a crowning element- the amalaka, a huge stone ribbed disc. Above the amalaka was a smaller dome, the kalasa or the water jug. These, together with the curving lines of the shikhara, were the main characteristics of the Nagara style architecture. By the 10th and 11th centuries CE, this style of architecture had become well established, with the finest example in Odisha, Central India, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Most of the best preserved Nagara temples are in Odisha.

Rajasthan and Gujarat : Several Jain and Hindu temples were built in Rajasthan. Of these the three temples at Osian, near Jodhpur, dedicated to Harihar (a combination of Shiva and Vishnu). Osian also has a large number of Jain temples. Most of these were built in the Pratihara period (8th - 9th centuries CE). In Gujarat, architecture blossomed under the rule of the Solankis. The Sun Temple at Modhera, though in ruin now, is the best example of their architecture. Its temple tank is considered to be one of the most beautiful in India.

The Temple of Central India : The Central Indian temples developed differently from the Nagara temples. The main characteristic here is the double amalaka, one large and other small, placed one over another. The Kalasa is placed above the small amalaka. The best known examples of this style of architecture are the temples at Khajuraho. Khajuraho was the capital of the Chandela of Bundelkhand, who ruled from the middle of the 10th to the 12th centuries CE. They were great temple builders. Of the many they build, around 25 temples still survive.

The Temples of the Deccan: The Rashtrakutas and the Hoysalas had their own unique style of temple building. The rock-cut architecture of the Rashtrakutas is best illustrated by the Kailashnath Temple at Ellora, which was sculpted out of a single rock, like the Rathas at Mamallapuram. With the Hoysalas, a marked change in style came. Temples were hexagonal in shape (like a lotus) and profusely carved, the best example of which is the Dwarasamudra Temple at Halebidu.

South Indian Temples: The temples of South India followed the Dravidian style of architecture. One of the characteristic features of this style was the vimana, which was a high pyramidal tower with several storeys of diminishing size built over the Garbhagriha. It stood on a square base. South Indian temples also had gateways or gopurams topped by the Kalasa. There were usually two or four entrances to the temple. The Tamil Kings were





great builders, especially the Pallavas and the Cholas. The Pallavas brought in a new style of temple architecture- rock- cut architecture and monoliths (sculpted from a single stone) e.g the Rathas they have built at Mamallapuram.

The Cholas built several hundreds of temples and sthambhas (pillars) to commemorate their victories in battle. Settled political conditions, vast resources and a great interest in art resulted in the creation of magnificent temples. Chola bronze sculpture is an important milestone of Indian art. The exquisitely moulded figures in bronze are known for artistic skill and refinement.

Engineering skills and construction: Monuments provide an insight into the technologies used for construction. Take something like a roof for example. But the task becomes difficult if we want to make a large room with an elaborated superstructure. This requires more sophisticated skills. Between the seventh and tenth centuries architects started adding more rooms, doors and windows to buildings. Between the eighth and thirteenth centuries the trabeate style was used in the construction of temples, mosques, tombs and in buildings attached to large stepped-wells. Two technological and stylistic developments are noticeable from the twelfth century. The weight of the superstructure above the doors and windows was sometimes carried by arches. This architectural form was called “arcuate”. Limestone cement was increasingly used in construction. This was very high-quality cement, which, when mixed with stone chips hardened into concrete. This made construction easier and faster.

The birth of Indo-Islamic Architecture: The coming of Muslim rulers to India saw the birth of a new style of art and architecture that came to be known as the Indo-Islamic style. Indo- Islamic architecture was a blend of the local Indian style with the Islamic style. Since Islamic art itself was a composite of various influences—Turkish, Afghan, Persian and Arabi—Indo-Islamic architecture showcased a wide variety of style. In Delhi, Islamic influences dominated, while in the Deccan, local styles were more prominent in the buildings. In Bengal, the local practice of using bricks for building continued. Indo-Islamic architecture was also influenced by the fact that the Muslim rulers often had to use Indian craftsmen, who were trained in the local style. Buildings were simple, with symmetrical and beautiful lines. They now featured Islamic elements such as arches and domes. Islam discourages the depiction of human figures in art. Therefore much of Islamic art consist of geometric designs, floral patterns and calligraphy. Calligraphy is the art of beautiful writing. It was developed into a fine art by Islamic artist, who used it to copy out portions of the Quran.

Building Temples, Mosques and Tanks: Temples and mosques were beautifully constructed because they were places of worship. They were also meant to demonstrate the power, wealth and devotion of the patron. The largest temples were all constructed by kings. The other lesser deities in the temples were gods and goddesses of the allies and subordinates of the ruler. The temples were a miniature model of the world ruled by the king and his allies. It was widely believed that the rule of a just king would be an age of plenty when the heavens would not withhold rain. At the same time, making precious water available by constructing tanks and reservoirs was highly praised. Sultan Iltutmish won universal respect for constructing a large reservoir just outside Delhi-I kuhna. It was called the hauz-I sultani or the “king’s Reservoir”.