

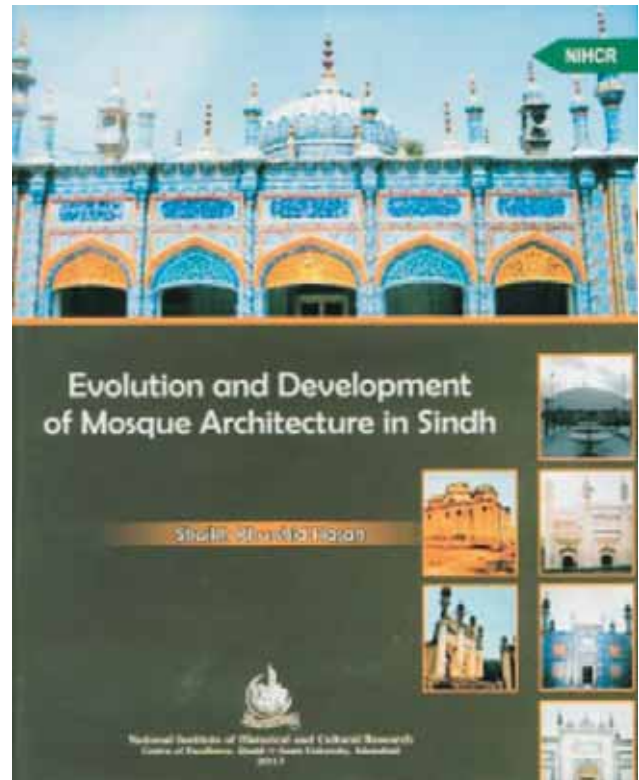
EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN SINDH **

Shaikh Khurshid Hasan
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Mosques as places of worship are one of the most significant building types, introduced after the inception of Islam. Sindh saw the emergence of this building type after the popular 712 AD episode of Mohammad Bin Qasim bringing the geography under the banner of Islam. The book in essence relates to this episode and narrates the story from there onwards keeping the focus on ‘Mosques’ in Sindh. Places of worship are significant for every religion and archaeological remains are a testament to it. They are the most revered and celebrated buildings architecturally and were designed as if for posterity. These sacred abodes are/ were most grand in scale, durable in material, embellished with utmost finesse and aesthetically pleasing. Pagan Temples of the Bronze Age period withstanding the vagaries of time attest to the phenomena places of worship were. One look at the temple of Karnak in Egypt and its soaring columns of hypostyle hall inspiring awe, shrinking the spectator to an insignificant being is telling of the very mentality that conceived these spaces. Nothing was spared from manpower, to material resources, to innovation in design and technology, to build the divine abode. Speaking strictly, with reference to architecture, one witnesses an evolution in design generally starting from humble beginnings and reaching a perfect style over a period of time. Similar was the case with mosque architecture starting from a temporary shelter, that Mosque of the Prophet was, and developing into a mature building type with permanent elements and iconography during Umayyad and Abbasid period.

As one skims through the book by Shaikh Khurshid Hasan it becomes evident that the account of Mosques of Sindh is no different. Published under National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, Center of Excellence, Quaid-i-Azam University, it is a valuable addition to the available source material on architecture of Sindh under Muslim patronage. It takes us back to the earliest of prayer spaces of which only traces remain today. The same cannot be said about the later period mosques, as many of them stand today fully erect albeit renovated.



The chapters are divided majorly under two streams, geographical and temporal. One witnesses accounts on major and minor mosques built in important cities and under prominent dynasties that established their rule over Sindh.

There are two thematic chapters that grab the attention of the reader instantly “Mosque constructed in remarkable style of Architecture” and the “Epilogue”. The former discusses mosques in various places in Sindh having distinct decorative and architectural characteristics. Bodhesar Mosque in Tharparkar for example constructed somewhere around 1505 CE displays four bracketed capitals, a distinctive *mihrab* design and battlement like parapet expresses the plurality and inclusion of local design tendencies, within the prescribed iconographic framework for Mosque architecture. Tharparkar and lower Sindh areas have a long established tradition of

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stone carving which is apparent in their decorative program and use of elements in architecture. Bhodhesar Mosque belongs to what Hasan categorizes as provincial style and it “combined both the Imperial and vernacular traditions”. There are three stylistic approaches according to Hasan when it comes to design of Mosques in Sindh, Imperial style, centered mostly in Delhi, Imperial Mughal style that came later and is visible in Lahore, Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra which were major Mughal cities and lastly the provincial style, which is an amalgamation of local and imperial design taste. To grasp in totality what comes later in the chapters, this first part of the text is imperative, providing an overall framework to the book. This chapter elucidates upon styles, elements, patrons and builders and broader historic context, that informed architecture of Sindh in general and mosque construction in particular. Here exceptional features pertaining to Sindh are deliberated upon, like Jain Temple architecture, subsequently informing Mosque architecture or a domestic feature of “*mangh*” (wind catcher) finding its way into Mosques in Sindh due to its climatic utility.

“One of the unique features of architecture in Sindh is of domestic nature. A normal feature of houses in lower Sindh is ‘mangh’ or wind catcher set in a flat roof of the house facing the wind direction, in the summer providing natural air conditioning of homes by filtering the air through this roof tunnel. This device has been provided in some of the mosques in Sindh. The Sindhi artists excel in the art of stone carvings. The skill of the stone masons, who have carved Buddhist stupas are among the finest in the sub-continent. The bas relief carvings in the Samma tombs are also quite attractive. The solitary example of carvings of Quranic verses in Shah Jahani Mosque at Thatta can indeed be compared to those in the Mosque of Cordova, Spain.”

Under Mughals, reflection of Imperial style is observed, as the Mughal downfall brought back the local features that were not dictated by the center. Talpurs and Kalhoras however, preferred glazed tiles with red brick over stone carvings, reminiscent of Timurid School of Architecture in Herat, according to Hasan. What is intriguing for a historian like me, is the plurality and inclusiveness when one observes the graphic of the mosques. There was immense liberty exercised in execution of these mosques. The variety observed

within stylistic approach of different regions and time period is reflective of the plurality of the society, where Jain Temple architecture finds its way in mosque architecture and was not frowned upon. This is markedly different from how in contemporary times we witness mushrooming of green domes in mosques, adhering to a particular single geography. This fixation is reflective of the fundamental mindset of today’s time attempting to purify everything, making mosque architecture a caricature image of Mosque of Prophet in Madina. There is inherent lack of investigation when it comes to religious matters and case of religious architecture is no different. The dome on Mosque of Prophet is a Mamluk dome added fairly later and much later it was painted green. The book therefore has its greatest potential where it narrates multiple architectural styles adapted for mosques in Sindh, in a reasonable manner, based on valid published sources.

Hasan being an archaeologist of immense repute writes with a pragmatic tone that is methodical and follows a strict structure for description of mosques. Architecture, decoration and calligraphic program are discussed in detail and wherever sources are available, historic context is narrated. It is only here that we encounter re-telling of myths and legends associated with the patron and builders, but the overall text avoids anecdotal references. The writing does not transcend the boundaries of facts to venture into folklore. This is a challenge in itself if one decides to write about Sindh, the land pregnant with stories where boundaries of facts and fiction are often blurred. The book is therefore a successful attempt, as it keeps its focus limited and sources reasonable, providing serious scholarship rather than filling pages with fictitious accounts. The mosques recounted here are supplemented with plans and images in black and white and sometimes color. The only bummer is that these images have numbers rather than titles plus they are concentrated at the end of the book grouped with indices and bibliography and the titles, are provided at the beginning. This creates difficulty for a reader who must switch from chapters to images to figure titles back and forth. This technical/compositional glitch does not really make it a practical and manageable read logistically. The publication however, must be celebrated for condensing a larger timespan and diverse geography in a single volume, with credible source material, research and scholarship. For this reason the book is a treat for architects, architectural historians, academics and history lovers.