

Text and Context: Reconstructing the Lost Architectural Heritage of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth Century Delhi

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The boundaries of the Mughal Empire that encompassed the entire Indian subcontinent during the reign of Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), the last great Mughal ruler, shrank to Delhi and its neighbourhood during the later Mughal period (1707-1857). Delhi remained the imperial capital till 1857 but none of the Mughal rulers of the post Aurangzeb period were powerful enough to revive its past glory. Most of the time, they were puppets in the hands of powerful nobles who played a vital role in disintegrating the empire. Apart from court politics, the empire was also to face internal and external rebellions and invasions, the most significant amongst them being Afghan invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali from the North. However, it was the East India Company that ultimately sealed the fate of the Mughal dynasty in 1857 between the Indians and the British. The city became a battleground that caused tragic destruction of life and property. During the Mutiny, opposing parties targeted the buildings of their rivals. This led to wide scale destruction and consequent changes in the architectural heritage of Delhi.

In the post-Independence era, the urban development took place at the cost of many heritage sites of this period. Some buildings were demolished or altered to cater the present needs. It is unfortunate that the architectural heritage of this dynamic period is generally overshadowed by the architecture of the Great Mughals as the buildings of this period lack the grandeur and opulence of the architecture during the reign of Akbar and Shahjahan. This is one of the reasons for indifference towards upkeep and preservation of the heritage. In the present day scenario, there are even more reasons for concern. A substantial portion of this legacy is under the ownership of the community. There is a sense of bonding with the monuments among them but in order to beautify the monuments, people are altering its historical character. Encroachment of unprotected monuments is yet another vital reason for deterioration and gradual extinction of many monuments. In fact, today many monument of

this period have disappeared from the map of Delhi and they are known only through archival sources.

Against this background, the paper attempts to reconstruct some of the lost or altered architectural heritage of the imperial capital from 1707 to 1857 through cross referencing of archaeological and archival material. The altered fabric of the monuments of this period can be reconstructed to an acceptable degree of accuracy through this methodology.

First example taken in this paper is of Zinat-ul Masjid (pl. 1). Constructed in the first decade of the eighteenth century, this is one of the finest mosques of the later Mughal period. It was constructed by Zinat un-Nissa Begum, the second daughter of Aurangzeb who exerted considerable influence in the court politics and received the title of Padshah Begum (first lady of the empire) by the emperor Bahadur Shah I (1707-1712). The mosque is under the use of community. The plinth has chambers which are being used as a school and mosque is under worship. In course of time it has underwent subsequent alteration and loss (pl. 2). The original ornamentation in the interior no more exist because of repainting (pl. 3).

The original fabric of the mosque can be reconstructed through a painting by Thomas Daniell (pl. 4), now in the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. The painting does not specify the name of the mosque but on the basis of the stylistic affiliation that Daniell's painting has with Zinat ul-Masjid, it can be suggested that in the painting he had represented this very mosque. The façade of the mosque is flanked by elegant minarets. The various storeys of the minarets are divided into panels. Each side of the topmost storey has four vertical panels. The second and third storeys have five vertical panels. The lowest storey has six such panels. Now, if one carefully observes Daniell's painting, one encounters the same arrangement of panels (pl. 1). From Daniell's work, it can be reconstructed that originally these minarets were faced with marble. Here one may note that W. Francklin in 1798 had described the mosque as follows, "It is of red stone, with inlaying of marble, and has a spacious terrace in front, with a capacious reservoir faced with marble."¹ At present, marble is not to be found on the reservoir (pl. 2).

It may be noted that Zinat-ul-Nissa Begum constructed her tomb on the northern side of the mosque which was destroyed after the mutiny of 1857.² The painting, too, has the depiction of a building on the northern side which appears to be a tomb building. Though the tomb building has not survived, one can reconstruct its model from Daniell's painting. The tomb

was square in plan. It was topped by a dome, which in turn was surrounded by a parapet. The tomb was enclosed by a marble railing.

Further, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in *Atharal-Sanadid*, first published in 1846, had mentioned that the tank in the courtyard of the mosque was fed by a well.³ A well can also be seen in Daniell's painting. One may note that by 1846 the well was already non-operational.⁴ Finally, a fact which further confirms Daniell's painting to be of Zinut-ul Masjid is that the mosque complex on the southern side is preceded by a road. Even in the Daniell's painting one can see a road running parallel to the southern side of the mosque complex.

From 1707 to 1857, a number of rulers ascended the Mughal throne, however, not a single significant tomb was constructed for any of the emperors. A marble enclosure open to sky (pl. 5) in the vicinity of the dargah of Shaikh Qutb Sahib, built by Bahadur Shah I, became the most preferred place for the royal burial in the Later Mughal period. Such type of tomb is called *muhajjar*. The design of the enclosure, at present, appears heterogeneous. From a representation of the tomb of Bahadur Shah I in a company painting by artist Sita Ram, now in the British Library, London (pl. 6), it is evident that the original fabric and setting of the tomb have changed considerably. The *muhajjar* was originally on the southern side of an enclosure as can be seen in the painting. It was preceded by an open courtyard. The northern side had a *dalan* (hall) with an elegant arcade of baluster columns supporting cusped arches. The *dalan* still survives. The eastern and western sides were closed by red sandstone walls, which no more exist.

What is important to notice is that originally the entire plinth, on which the *muhajjar* stands, was enclosed by marble *jali*, however, at present only part of this plinth is surrounded by the *jali*. This led to exclusion of three graves from the *muhajjar* which originally might have been within the marble enclosure. Also, originally, the entire southern side of *muhajjar* had elegant quatrefoil *jali* which gave the tomb enclosure a graceful appearance. It seems that at some point of time the original marble enclosure had crumbled. In the process of restoration, its, original fabric was lost. Apart from the builder Bahadur Shah I, four other Mughal rulers were buried here. The last Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah II (r. 1837–1857) also desired to be buried in the *muhajjar* of Bahadur Shah I, however, his desire was never fulfilled as after his arrest in 1857 by the Company, he was sent to Rangoon (the British-controlled Burma).

Despite difficult political and economic conditions, Bahadur Shah II constructed few palace pavilions in the Red Fort, Delhi to assert his right to rule through architectural patronage.

Most significant being the Zafar Mahal (pl. 7) which was built in 1842 in his 6th regnal year.⁵ Originally, it had a central hall with rooms, suits, and verandah all around it. There was a bridge on the eastern side of the palace which connected it with the mainland (pl. 8). The bridge no more exists. At present, the palace rests on a plinth consisting of five openings on each side. The plinth is separated from the palace by a chajja resting on brackets. The façade of the palace is marked by three cusped arches flanked by *jalis* set within arches that recall the baldachin covering. Some of the *jalis* have disappeared. On each side, from the central cusped arch projects an elegant jharokha. At present, the central hall no more exists, however, the surrounding rooms and verandahs are still there. A series of staircases lead to the upper storey. The upper storey is separated from the main palace by a chajja resting on brackets. The Hayat Bakhsh garden as well as the various buildings within it were already in deteriorated state by 1901.⁶

Apart from Zafar Mahal, Bahadur Shah II also constructed two pavilions on the eastern terrace of the Hayat Bakhsh garden which were attuned to other Shahjahani buildings situated on the riverfront. Moti Mahal existed up to the Mutiny, but no remains of it has survived today. Another pavilion, Hira Mahal, built in 1842, still exists (pl. 9). Each side consists of three cusped arches resting on four elegant pillars, except the side facing the river. Here, the central cusped arch is flanked by rectangular openings serving as windows. In a contemporary drawing (pl. 10), one can see that these windows were provided with lattice work. The central cusped arch also had a *jali* with a window in the centre. From the painting it is evident that the riverfront was provided with a parapet. One also comes to know that Hira Mahal was flanked by two European style buildings. The company drawing also gives a glimpse of contemporary furnishing. Preceding the Hira Mahal is a canal. This canal can also be seen in the painting with swimming ducks. This is the famous Nahar-i-Bahisht. According to Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan, “the old canal contained, in the neighbourhood of the palace, 24 fountains of silver, only the canal has remained.”⁷

Apart from the royal family, nobles also patronised architecture. A small but historically significant mosque was constructed by Raushan ud-Daula. The location of the mosque at Chandni Chowk, the principal street of the imperial city, itself testifies the importance that Raushan ud-Daula enjoyed in the Mughal court. The mosque came to be known as Sunehri Masjid owing to its gilded domes. However, today it has lost its original charm (pl. 11). It is evident from the illustrations of this mosque in the Company paintings that once it was an elegant structure (pl. 12). The mosque stands on a high plinth comprising of chambers, which

is now occupied by shops. From the level of ground, eight narrow steps lead up to the court of the mosque which are paved with sandstone. The mosque consists of a single aisle and three bays approached by three arched entrance. The central arched entrance is larger than those on its sides and is flanked by red sandstone minarets. The mosque was built in 1721–1722 when Raushan ud-Daula was at climax of his power. At present, the basic structure of the mosque remains the same but considerable alteration has taken place particularly in ornamentation of the façade and interior. Though the mosque is small in scale, it has an engaging quality about it. The stucco work on the façade and the interior were tastefully done, however, today the remaining have survived only at few places. Floral ornamentation on the bases of the fluted engaged pilasters and panels of elaborate floral sprays on dado of the façade add delicacy to the building. There are several representations of this building in the Company School paintings. One may note that Sir Thomas Metcalfe also commissioned a painting of Sunehri Masjid and wrote a detailed account on the massacre of Delhi which took place by orders from Nadir Shah in 1739.

The Qudisia Bagh palace is yet another fine building of Later Mughal period which has now survived only in ruins. The palace was constructed in a garden named after its patron Qudisia Begum. She constructed the Qudisia Bagh complex at a little distance from Kashmiri Gate in 1748.⁸ The severe damage to the Qudisia Bagh complex occurred in 1857, however, its decay began prior to 1857 as is evident from its representation in '*the Delhi Book*' of Thomas Metcalfe. The picturesque view of the palace from the riverside has been a frequent subject of depiction in the Company paintings. One such painting is in the British Library London (pl. 13). This is based on the painting of Daniell. In this painting, the river side façade of the palace is depicted as a two storeyed building flanked by polygon turrets. The façade is decorated with ornamental mouldings, arcades and parapets. The turrets are provided with projecting oriel windows surmounted with *bangala*-type roof. Yet another drawing of the palace is in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection in which one can see the growth of plants on the building (pl. 14). This indicates the beginning of the decay of the palace in early 19th century.

Qudisia Begum constructed a fine mosque called Sunehri Masjid (pl. 15) along with her lover Javid Khan in 1750-51 near Delhi Gate of the Red Fort. This small but remarkably graceful mosque stands on a plinth. The interior has completely changed (pl. 16). Originally the interior was decorated with carvings and paintings, however, at present nothing has survived owing to recent white wash done by the community (pl. 16). Each bay of the prayer chamber

is covered by elegant bulbous domes. Originally, behind the mosque was a building consisting of a series of arched chambers (pl. 17). However, at present nothing remains and there is an open ground behind the mosque.

Qudsia Begum was also responsible for construction of several buildings in the dargah of Shah Mardan in Ali Ganj area (pl. 18). The shrine belonged to the Shia sect of Islam. Nawab Qudsia Begum also belonged to the Shia sect and she probably attempted to glorify this Shia shrine like the chisti dargah of Bakhtiyar Kaki and Nizam-ud Din Awliya.⁹ She built an assembly hall in the vicinity of this dargah, a mosque and also a tank. She also added a walled enclosure around the shrine. However her prime aim was to build a Qadam Sharif for a stone apparently bearing footprint of Hazrat Ali.¹⁰

Today, the structural setting of the dargah complex has completely changed. A drawing of this complex gives an idea of its original layout (pl. 19). The Qadam Sharif was in the centre of an open marble enclosure as depicted in the drawing. It was entered through an imposing entrance. The entrance was framed by pilasters and consisted of two recessed arches. At present, the marble enclosure can still be seen. The height of the building, however, has been increased and is provided with a roof. The original tank no more exists. The stone with the footprint of Ali is now shifted to a black marble tank and moved from the centre to rear of the enclosure. Adjoining the Qadam Sharif on its right side is the Majliskhana. Between these two structures is an entrance. Both the structures can be seen in the drawing. Majliskhana was an open structure. The original structure is still intact, however, the walls and the doors are added to the Majliskhana at a later stage.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the configuration of nobility had changed. There were several Europeans who received land grants from the Emperor in lieu of their services. They were emulating the life style of the traditional nobility and married native girls. To this newly emerging nobility belonged Begum Samru. She was the widow of a German adventurer Walther Balthazar Reinhard Somers. He entered in the service of Mughal during the regency of Najaf Khan.¹¹ It is rare to find information on the life of Indian ladies married to foreigners. Begum Samru, however, filled this gap. Married to a foreigner she carved an important place for herself in a society which was undergoing transition.

She received a grant of a garden in Chandni Chowk when Akbar II (1806-1837) ascended the throne. In this garden, she built a magnificent mansion for herself in European style which reflected the affluence and importance of Begum Samru in Delhi. In fact, Sir Thomas

Metcalfé also commissioned a painting of her mansion in his *Delhi Book* (pl. 20). The mansion stood on a high plinth and its southern façade which faced Chandni Chowk was approached by a pair of staircases. Eight ionic pillars supported the roof of the verandah. The verandah was followed by a wall with seven openings. The central opening served as the entrance. This mansion was damaged and dilapidated by mortars and gunfire during the Mutiny. In a photograph taken by Major Robert Christopher Tytler and his wife, Harriet in 1858 one can see debris of the building scattered everywhere (pl. 21). Yet another photograph of the building was taken by Felice A. Beato. At present, the renovated building serves as a government bank (pl. 22).

With the advent of the British in 1803, a new form of architecture emerged in the imperial capital. Today, a substantial number of buildings constructed between 1803 and 1857 under the British patronage are in use as government offices and hence exist in highly altered state. There are others which are either in ruins or no more exists.

The library of Dara Shikoh, consisting of a fine hall with cusped arches (pl. 23), was given to the company for establishing the Residency. Ochterlony, the first British Resident, added a forecourt with imposing pillars in the front of this hall to give the building a majestic European appearance (pl. 24). From exterior, the rear of this building is two storeyed (pl. 25). The lower storey formed the plinth. Excavation carried by the State Archaeology Department has revealed a pillared hall dating back to the Mughal period. It is flanked by an arcade added by Ochterlony. There was also a colonial staircase to approach the plinth. This has now been removed. The hall can also be approached from this side through a doorway surmounted by a half-moon fan-shaped window which can also be seen in the painting where Ochterlony is shown attending a musical performance (pl.26).

Sir Thomas Metcalfe (1795–1853) was among the last residents who patronised fine buildings and also commissioned drawings of the rich architectural heritage of Delhi in his *Delhi Book* which is now in the British Library. He constructed a magnificent house for himself called Metcalfe House on the bank of the Yamuna to the north of the city, parallel to the Red Fort. This house was damaged considerably during the Mutiny in 1857. “The House of Sir T Metcalfe is a complete ruin; the fine trees of the gardens and grounds have all been levelled, and the house may be now be seen from any point of the road to the cantonment.”¹² At present, Metcalfe’s house is included as part of the office of Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). There are four paintings of this house in *‘the Delhi*

Book ', which betrays Metcalfe's preference for European architecture and furnishings (pl. 27).

Thomas Metcalfe built yet other residence to the south of Delhi near the Qutub Complex by converting a Mughal tomb of the early seventeenth century. It was known as Dil Khush (or Delight of the Heart). At present, Dil Khush is in complete ruins. From the drawings in '*the Delhi Book*,' Dil Khush appears to be a two-storeyed building surrounded by a verandah (pl. 28). The upper storey had various rooms. The height of the rooms was higher than the surrounding verandah. Some sides of the verandah had three semi-circular arches while others had only two. These arches were provided with a wooden balustrade. In one of the drawings, one can also see a wooden doorway of one of the rooms topped by a half-moon fan-shaped window. Such doorway and window were also seen in the building of Sir David Ochterlony (pl. 25). Of the Metcalfe's constructions on the upper storey, only one of the intermediary walls, which connected the two sides, has survived (pl. 29).

Around Dil Khush, Metcalfe created a terraced garden. The remnants of garden can still be seen with several pavilions. Metcalf's terraced garden with pleasure pavilions seems to be influenced by the romantic gardens of his own country. As one descends from level of Dil Khush through a series of steps, one encounters a circular pavilion on the left. This pavilion is presently known as Chaumukha (pl. 30). It consists of a circular roofless chamber with four entrances. Originally the building had a wooden roof. The walls of the chamber are provided with shelves. There is also a decorative fire place. This chamber is surrounded by a circular corridor consisting of eight openings with pointed arches. To relieve the monotony, the walls of the corridors are provided with circular openings at few places. From the next level, the lower levels of the gardens are approached by a staircase. In the middle of the staircase is a water cascade which is aligned with a pavilion known as Boat House (pl. 31). This appears to be an older building in which Metcalfe made alterations. He added several other buildings to break the monotony of the rocky terrain. One such building is known as Metcalf's Folly which is in the form of a spiral pyramid.

During the tenure of Metcalfe the Residency was shifted to a new location called Ludlow Castle which no more exists. The building was pulled down somewhere in 1960s.¹³ This building was constructed by Samuel Ludlow (d.1853) from 1813 to 1831. It became pivotal political seat of the East India Company as can be seen from an illustration in '*the Delhi Book*' (pl. 32).

Ludlow Castle was one of the buildings frequently photographed after the Mutiny. One such photograph was taken in 1858 by Major Robert Christopher Tytler and his wife, Harriet in 1858 which is now in the British Library, London. Felice A. Beato also took a photograph of this building in 1857 (pl. 33). Yet another photograph entitled 'Ludlow Castle, Xmas Day 1878' is in the British Library, London (pl. 34). From the photographs taken after the Mutiny, it can be seen that once a vibrant political centre was reduced to a desolated bungalow. Ludlow Castle was yet to emerge from the trauma of bloody conflict that took place in 1857. A photograph of the building taken in 1957 indicates that additions were made to the building at a later date before its final demolition.

To sum up, I attempted to highlight that a number of monuments of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century in Delhi has already been wiped off. The extant buildings are also susceptible to further deterioration and some are at higher risk of extinction if the stakeholders and the community are not sensitized about the historic significance of the buildings which are used by them as offices or religious institutions. As a researcher in this field, I would like to recommend that it is important to have an open access database where topographic paintings and archival photographs may be available with the present day pictures of the historical monuments. Such database can promote and facilitate research in the field. The ready accessibility of information can create awareness among the local communities about the historic characters of the monuments under their custody. This would help them to take into account the original character of the monuments before making any alterations and repairs. Archaeological Survey of India, which is the prime custodian of the monuments in the country, can play the lead role in creating such an open access database. ASI also has a huge collection of archival photographs dating back to late nineteenth-early twentieth century to the present day. Subsequently, other museums, institutions and individuals can contribute in developing and expanding the database as the archival sources are scattered across the world. National Museum Institute and Institute of Archaeology can provide the human resource and skill required for such endeavour. A pilot project focusing on a specific period and place may be taken up to begin with.

Endnotes

¹ W. Francklin, *History of Shah Alum*. (1798; repr., New Delhi: Classical Publications, 1979), 210.

² Carr Stephen, *The Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi*. (1856; repr., New Delhi: Aryan Books International, Reprint 2002), 152.

³ R. Nath, *Monuments of Delhi: Historical Study* (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, 1979), 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Syed Ahmed Khan, *Atharal-Sanadid*, trans. R.Nath, *Monuments of Delhi: Historical Study* (1854; repr., New Delhi: Ambika Publications, 1979), 72.

⁶ Gordon Sanderson, "Shah Jahan's Fort, Delhi," In Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1911-12 (New Delhi: Swati Publications, 1990), 7.

⁷ Syed Ahmed Khan, *Atharal-Sanadid*, trans. R.Nath, *Monuments of Delhi: Historical Study*, 72-73.

⁸ Carr Stephen, *The Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi*, 159.

⁹ Catherine B. Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 305.

¹⁰ R. Nath, *Monuments of Delhi: Historical Study*, 67.

¹¹ W. Francklin, *History of Shah Alum*, 154.

¹² Delhi: As It Is, Delhi December 21st . *The Delhi Gazette*, 2 Jan–30 May, 1858, 4.