

MYSTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF POINT

It was said about the *Bay* of *Bismillah*,
“The knowledge of all the scriptures, is in four Holy Books,
and all the knowledge of those four Holy Books is in Quran,
and all the knowledge of Quran is in *Surah Fateha*,
and all the knowledge of *SurrahFateha* is in
Bismillah he Rahman el Raheem,
and that knowledge, which is in *Bismillah* is in its *Bay*,
and whatever is in *Bay* is in its point

Inna Nugta e Tahtulba

That POINT, which is Beneath the *Bay* is I.
Hazrat Ali Karam Allah Wajhu¹

Human has always searched for visual equivalence of abstract concepts through fantasy, metaphor, allegory or symbolism. In his quest, to find the right path, he comes across many forms, which might be described as evocative or poetic, expressive of human emotions. There is one dimension that has been repeated by humanity, century after century, millennium after millennium and that is—Point. This conceptual form has been interlinked with human and its existence since time immemorial. Present research is based on exploring different dimensions of ‘Point’ and its analytical value in visual vocabulary with an emphasis on architectural expressions.

Point is the reduced shape of a circle or circle is an expanded form of point. Close observation reveals that it is the base of all that has been of significance for human existence. Every generation is inspired by it and they have every reason to be.

The galaxies of our universe were born from a central point with a Super Nova. According to a simulation by Tom Abel, an astrophysicist at Pennsylvania State University, the earliest star, gigantic and luminous, formed like a pearl inside shells of swirling gas. Zooming deeper and deeper inside a micro galaxy one millionth the mass of the Milky Way, images unveil a protostar of hydrogen and helium with a mass that will swell up to a hundred times greater than our Sun’s. During a process that took about a million years, the gas started to cool and clump together, finally collapsing in the core. That collapse triggered the nuclear fusion of hydrogen atoms and first star blazed into existence. “These stars marked the end of Dark Ages in the universe,” says Abel.² These first stars had short lives. Exhausting their fuel within a few million years and died in supernova explosions, which flung

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into space new heavier elements such as carbon and oxygen, the seeds of future stars, planets, and life.³(**Fig. 1**) To understand the birth of the universe we can study the Veil Nebula in Cygnus, which is may be a supernova remnant.⁴

Another image of the Spiral galaxy M81, has been processed through filters to emphasize the natural color and the basic formation of all the galaxies known to us. Older, reddish stars cluster at the center of the Galaxy, while the younger, blue stars can be seen strung along the slender arms of the spirals. M81 occurs in Ursa Major (Great Bear), a large and conspicuous constellation in the Northern Hemisphere.⁵ Study of the structure reveals that the whole galaxy is revolving around a central point, which marks the beginning of the universe.

The giant elliptical galaxy M87 that has a center point around which some 1,000 clusters have been detected. They appear as small dots on the picture. M87 is at a distance of 40 million light years from Earth.⁶ But no matter how far they exist from our planet we all share, a simple characteristic and that is a center point.

Latest theories reveal that the end of this grand magic show is again in a point, Black Hole. Here is an optical image of a pair of supermassive black holes dwell deep within a single galaxy, NGC that is 6240,400 million light years from earth. (**Fig. 2**) Astronomers believe that it was formed from the collision of two smaller galaxies, each containing a black hole.⁷ Close at home the value of a pivotal point can be very well observed in our own solar system as well, where all the planets are revolving around the sun, in a gigantic circular form.

If we look for evidence close at home, first is the concept of matter where a constant state of flux, electrons and other particles are shooting through areas of space. All of this virtual impenetrability of matter takes place around the nucleus whether solid, liquid or gas. This Nucleus is the balancing factor of the matter, which is the basis of all that exists around us. Nucleus is spherical in appearance and all the activities are taking place inside or around it.

From the atoms, matter and universe we move to humans and even the mere existence of our race is based on a rounded shape when Quran says, “We created him from a frozen drop of blood”. Creation of life is from a drop and drop is circle, a point in its expanded form. It also proves that every aspect, which has some substantial value, shared the common form of ‘Point’ naturally.

Apparently the Paleolithic human seems to have left no clue about their religious beliefs, except some paintings on the walls and sculptures in the prehistoric caves. But we do come across concepts that associate the existence of a super power somewhere in the skies. This led to a visual vocabulary that will constantly focus on upward move and the move is represented through a line, ending in a point, leading the humanity to a path that can guide them to reunite with the Supreme Power, which has been a quest of human, to rejoin the creator from whom they were separated. To emphasis this factor, such architectural forms were explored that focused on upward movement with a climax. This phenomenon is carried on till today. In this paper we will explore it with visual evidences scattered all around the world of all the known eras. They are from different regions, cultures and beliefs but their common concept of connection is always ‘Point’.

Recent research indicates that as early as 4000 BC, monumental architecture, consisting of rows of circles of massive stones, has developed in Western Europe. The very dimensions of the stones, some as high as 17 feet and weighing tons, have prompted the historian to call them Megaliths (great stones), and the culture they produced as Megalithic. At Carnac in Brittany, **(Fig. 3)** great single stones, called Menhirs were arranged in parallel rows, some of which run for several miles and consists of thousands of stones.

The whole structure was rising high towards the sky, pointing to the abstract concept of faith for an unknown, never seen by any, Supreme Power. It represents the beginning of the path to meet the God, because where the point ends the search for the Almighty begins and it ends somewhere in space directing the man to follow its direction to reach to ultimate destiny.

Stable conditions of life led to the development of proper architecture. Temples of Malta and on the adjacent island of Gozo, were begun before 3000 BC and abandoned by about 2000 BC.⁸ They are the earliest known freestanding buildings of stones and probably the first attempts of creating architectural forms, which were to mark human presence in the world. There are at least 16 temples, constructed of huge blocks resting on one another without mortar. The façade of the largest, Ggantija on Gozo, has a base of fairly regularly shaped slabs of limestone, each one about 12 feet high, supporting smaller and rougher stones in course, which seem originally to have risen to a total of some 50 feet.

By the study of the basic plan of Mnajdra temple, **(Fig. 4)** the circular structure is marked, showing the trend, which the future architects were to follow. These stones were erected high above the ground, reaching out to some unknown destination, an unconscious attempt of human that developed into point later on.

Sometimes Megaliths were arranged in a circle known as Cromlech; among the most imposing Cromlechs are those at Avebury and a Stonehenge in England.⁹ **(Fig. 5)** They seem to have been built in several stages around 2000 BC. Modern human has no idea about the reason for the creation of this mysterious structure. The most that can be said of, with certainty, is this that it was an important cultic center and the stones were carefully aligned on various points on the horizon. Their basic shape is a perfect round. The whole structure casts its shadow, always in circle and the meeting of all of its angles is at a center point.

Even in their ruined condition, the monoliths of Stonehenge possess a solemn majesty created by heroic human effort, physical and intellectual. At the Avebury, as at Stonehenge, there is, in the series of concentric circles with connecting curvilinear pathways or avenues, a feeling for order, symmetry and rhythm that is evidence, not only of well-developed and systemized ceremonial rituals, but perhaps also of a maturing geometrical sense, born of observation of the apparent movement of the sun and moon. Human was in the process of developing its aesthetic sense for the future. But even in those primitive days, they were very well aware of the concept of going high towards the sky.

In all the religious expressions of the mankind, point has played a vital role. Ancient Ziggurats are scattered all over the world. Their ground planes differed in size and shape but the priest's room was always at the top of the building, high

above the earth. **(Fig. 6)** Neither the origin nor the purpose of these huge, multi-storied brick structures is known. They have been interpreted as stairways by which the gods mounted to heaven every night. An old Babylonian text reads

The gods and goddesses of the country _____
Shamash, Sin, Adad and Ishtar _____
Have gone home to heaven to sleep.
They will not give decisions or verdict (tonight)¹⁰

It is generally thought that the roof of the shrine (at the top of the ziggurat) was the setting in which priests prayed to the “gods of the night” (the planets and constellations), or prepared a meal for them, or sacrificed a lamb as an omen. All is related to the height with a pointed structure at the end. The loftiness of the great ziggurat _____ especially the one at the Babylon, which was about 270 feet high, was intended by its pious builders to reach into heaven _____ made a profound impression on the ancient Hebrews, who memorialized the Babylon ziggurat as the tower of Babel, a monument to the insolent pride of human.¹¹

Initially they were small mud brick-structures, raised on platforms, which gave them prominence. These platforms were soon transformed into squat stepped pyramids. It was conceived as holy mountains, which brought the priests nearer to the gods, if not into their actual presence. The concept of going to the higher places in search of God is thousands of years old. Moses was to climb the mount Sinai to receive the Tablets of Law from the Lord. So the mountain imagery, which the Bible later spread all over the world, probably originated in southern Mesopotamia. According to the Book of Genesis, Abraham was a native of Ur, where the ziggurat still partially survives.¹² He took his son Ismail to the mountain for sacrifice.

Egyptian Pyramids, with unique shape, are unusual from the architecture of the rest of the world but even they share the main characteristic and i.e. the culmination of these mammoth buildings is conical at the top. The pyramid shape has been interpreted by so many scholars in so many ways but we are yet to come up with a justification authentically convincing.

Beginning of pyramid shape is associated with religion and an ancient tradition ascribes the ‘invention’ of Egyptian buildings in stone to Imhotep, a high priest of Heliopolis, who was later venerated as a god. He is not only the earliest but also one of the very few named architects of ancient Egypt.¹³ He is said to have built for King Zoser, founder of the 3rd dynasty (2780-2180 BC), who initiated the period known as the Old Kingdom. This period set a precedent for much in later Egyptian architecture, notably the ‘step pyramid’, which seems to have developed from the Mastaba. At Saqqara, Mastabas are being enlarged by adding units of decreasing size until it reached a height of some 200 feet and in format, it looks like a ziggurat without a temple on top. **(Fig. 7)**

Later on, the three pyramids built for Sneferu, founder of the fourth dynasty (2680-2565 BC), had approximately square plans. The classic form (**Fig. 8**) seems to have been adopted from the cult image, known as the Benben, in the temple of the Sun god at Heliopolis¹⁰ a stone with a pyramidal or conical top, the ancestor of the obelisk.¹⁴ The pyramid also recalls the effect made by the sun shining down on the earth through a gap in the cloud _____ and it was on the rays of the sun that the dead king was said to mount to heaven. At the top is just a point to show the buried king the path to eternity, which is sun, symbolic representation of Supreme Power in ancient times.

Greek civilization differed in nearly every respect from the Egyptians and the ancient Near East, however much it may have owed to them. The Greek Temples were usually built at the top of the mountains, again rising above the ground level and the mountains are the natural peaks of mother earth. Of surviving monuments, none characterizes the Classic moment in Greek art better than the Parthenon, (**Fig. 9**) which still dominates the city of Athens and the surrounding country for many miles. If we look at the design we can see that it is the product of that rare combination of abstract thought and sensual feeling which typifies the Greek achievements. Here if there is no sharp edge at the end of the building, the jurisdiction where they were built (a mountain) in it-self is a surging javelin of mother earth.

In later periods this desire of touching the God becomes more visible. In India, precipitous Pillars were erected by Ashoka. A slender 34-foot smooth-shafted monolithic column, (**Fig. 10**) crowned by a crouching lion in sandstone, which stands near the village of Lauriya on the vast plain of the Ganges in north-eastern India, is a monument of manifold artistic, political and religious significance. At first sight it might seem to have strayed from Persepolis, more than 2,000 miles to the west. Both its capitals, in the form of a lotus flower and the lion on the top, recall Achaemenid sculpture but it is, in fact, some two and a half centuries later. The inscription on the shaft declares that it was set up by Asoka (272-232 BC), grandson of the founder of the Mauryan dynasty who had begun to build the first Indian Empire. He had several such columns erected in various parts of his empire. They may owe their origin partly to the columns, which had an ancient religious significance in India as symbols of the cosmic pillar or axis of the universe and partly to the inscribed stones, which from a very early period had recorded the conquests, and territorial claims of west Asian rulers, such as the Stele of Naramsin.¹⁵ So he was following an ancient, natural disposition of the man.

Like Egyptians, the ancient Indian was a 'world denying culture'. There were always questions of man's place in the universe, his relationship to nature, and the quest of human soul for the absolute. To answer all these questions many theories and philosophies were introduced and these theories affected all kinds of artistic expressions either it was sculpture, architecture, drama, music, dance etc. Some formulas were evolved to answer these questions and the one consisted through centuries is of *Stambha* axis mundi, to connect the earth and sky, added with the concept of cyclic time (*yugas*) till the man attains absolute release (*moksa*).¹⁶ All three elements were converted into the formal language of art. In this vocabulary of visual idioms the most prominent is *Stambha* (pillar) because it

connects man to Almighty and for the connection different art forms were explored with the *Stambha* as the principle element.¹⁷

These pillars were pitched high, reaching out to the stars, and the moon, and the heaven. All is above the ground level. Have you ever heard of someone lying fifty feet long pillar on the floor? No never, man has to erect it, to point it upwards.

Asoka was also the first major patron of the arts in India that we know of so far. In addition to setting up inscribed columns, he is known to have had mounds or artificial hills, called Stupas built to enshrine the bodily relics of the Buddha. Traditional wisdom tells us that no Stupa of his time has survived, but the essential form _____ derived initially from the mounds raised over the dead, especially Brahmins and members of the ruling families _____ is preserved in the Great Stupa at Sanchi in central India.¹⁸ Although it dates mainly from the second and first centuries BC, it is probably an enlargement of a Stupa founded by Asoka. **(Fig. 11)**

This is a symbolic structure, which consists of a solid hemisphere, typifying the dome of heaven, leveled at the top to carry square structure with a central mast to represent the world axis extending from the infra-cosmic waters to the skies. Three parasol-like, called Chattras on the mast signify the heavens of the gods. The whole monument is conveying the symbolic philosophy that was prevailing at that time. These Chattras are again leading the human towards the right path.

The earliest surviving freestanding Hindu temples were built during the Gupta period (c.300-500). They are relatively small but sufficient for their purpose: to house the image of a deity or a linga, with space for a priest to celebrate ritual on behalf of the community. Temples were built at places, which already had some religious significance and were usually sited with a precisely calculated east-west axis of the rising and setting sun. Various stages of their design and construction were determined astronomically or astrologically. A Hindu temple is also associated with the formal structure of the universal being, in fact, a microcosm with every measurement determined by a very elaborate scale of proportions derived from the mystical numerical basis of the cosmos.¹⁹ Hindus also believed that the human soul can transcend and escape the cycle of birth and rebirth, to which even the gods are subject, by attaining union with the Absolute. And this potentiality is symbolized by the crowning member of the *Sikhara*, sometimes shaped like a bubble which bursts into non-being or like a lotus bud which opens to release pure essence. **(Fig. 12)**

These temples give the impression of someone trying to reach the sky. All have a piercing point at their peaks, again symbolizing the direction of the path to the God. Even today the Hindu temples retain this basic characteristic.

The promotion of Christianity by Constantine (c. 274-337) invites comparison with that of Buddhism by Asoka in India more than five centuries earlier. Irrespective of their personal conviction both found religion to be a most effective aid to political unification. In c.313 Constantine gave the Christian community in Rome an imperial palace for its bishop and a piece of land on which to erect a Church. It was a type of building called in Latin a Basilica. A variation of

the basilican plan was adopted for the much large Churches. The philosophy of a heavenward pointed circle was also present as a religious symbol of immemorial antiquity in many cultures. As observed previously, the hemispherical Buddhist Stupa symbolized the cosmos; Greeks and Romans also built round temples for their gods and a centralized (often circular) plan had been usual for tombs and shrines of deified and semi deified heroes (mortals who had become immortal by their deed). The form now entered Christian architecture as a martyrrium, the building on a site, which was either hollowed by an event in Christ's life or the tomb of a Christian who had borne witness to the faith.²⁰ Churches of every corner of the world, seem to have the urge to go beyond the level of mortality by constructing lofty and pointed towers. (Fig. 13, 22)

All over the world, the religious leaders had a special relationship with the mountains. To me, the mountains are the sky scrappers of the Mother Nature. Their peaks remind us of the glory of God. Their presence creates a fear as well as appreciation for the Almighty. I always find their heights a great source of inspiration and their presence is awesome because they seem so out of reach, so much closer to the God. May be that's why He chose to communicate with the mortals, at no other place than the mountains. He could have called them in the jungles, deserts or anywhere in this vast world, but no, he called the man to the mountains. Abraham, Moses, Muhammad (P.B.U.H.), all received His commands on these pointed forms of the earth.

Islam came to the world with a philosophy and perfection of its own and millions followed it. This religion has a unique language of symbols and signs. But even here we find the concept of a point going upwards. The first and an important gesture is in the Muslim prayer when the followers are ordered to raise their fingers, in *Althayat*, to give evidence that the God is one and He has no parallel in the whole universe. This finger is a powerful expression of mankind and it is pointing upwards, letting the whole world know where Allah is. I believe that this small finger is representing all the columns and minarets erected on the face of the earth, which are the evidence of Allah's *Wahdaniyat* (oneness).

Holy Ka'aba is the most sacred site to the Muslims of the world. (Fig. 14) It is believed that Empyrean is situated exactly in that line of direction, which is formed by KhanaKa'aba and it was from here that the humanity was being enlightened, which was a sacred place even long before Muhammad (p.b.u.h). Self-aspiring stories has been related to it. *Hazrat* Ali, right hand of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), was born here, an honor, which has never, ever been shared by any other human being on the face of this earth since the times immemorial.

Every Muslim who goes for the pilgrimage is ordered to circumambulate Ka'aba. They move in circles seven times and this globular movement is again around a central point, Ka'aba.

Muhammad (p.b.u.h) founded the nucleus of Muslim empire. After Him (p.b.u.h) the first caliphs were nominated and elected at Medina but soon a struggle ensued. The family of Quraish emerged triumphant and formed the first national dynasty of the Umayyad. They moved the capital from Medina to Damascus.

Many smaller mosques were made wherever the Muslims went. The conquest of Egypt took place in 640-41 and the mosque of Amr was built at Fustat in the winter of 641-42. Thirty-two years after its foundation, people complained that the mosque is too small, so Khalif Mu'awiya ordered Maslama, 9th Governor of Egypt, to increase the size. He pulled down what Amr had built and expanded the mosque. Then the Khalif Mu'awiya ordered Masalama to build "Sawami" (plural of *Sauma'a*, Minaret) for the call to prayer. So Masalama constructed the four Sawamis for the mosque at its four corners. He was the first to construct the Minarets, having none been there before his time. This is our first reference to Minarets,²¹ Muslim columns surging high and making the age-old sign towards Allah.

The very first major monument of Islamic architecture, Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, (Fig. 15) built by Abd al-Malik in 691, is a powerful example of a peculiar and quite original aspect of cultural galvanization. Erected on a traditional pre-Islamic plan of a domed rotunda with ambulatories, it is at the same time highly original in its particular use of architectural and decorative elements.²²

The building is a political and religious monument and the most prominent feature is a huge dome. Ibn al-Faqih, who saw the original dome in 903 AD, says that it consisted of a 'dome over dome (i.e. an inner and outer) on which are sheets of lead and plates of copper gilt.'²³ Present dome consisted of two shells independent of each other. At the peak of this dome is a small excitation. Then there is a finial that is graced by a crescent. Here the end point has pierced a sanctified symbol of Islam, directly related to Allah.

The other important monument is the Great Mosque of Damascus (Fig. 16) completed in 715 by caliph al Walid. It introduced an important Islamic architectural expression — the open court mosque, a characteristic that remained unaltered throughout the Arab world in the later centuries. It had four minarets and a dome. Both structures were to become the symbols of Muslim religious buildings.

If we look at the Great Mosque of Qayrawan in Tunisia, which is the only likely remains of Umayyad Mosques, almost entirely rebuilt in 836, with a three tiered minaret, is one of the earliest in Islam that has a three tiered structure whose topmost storey is made of 13th century brick. The reason for the survival of such an old edifies is this that Minarets were often left standing simply because they were too difficult to demolish. The basic plan of the Minaret is identical to the ancient Ziggurat, perhaps these two also share the same philosophy of a point that is directing upwards.

Another example is the great mosque of Samarra on the Tigris River, which was built by al-Mutawakkil, between 848 and 852. It was the largest mosque of the Islamic world at that time. On the north side of this Mosque, stands a single, large minaret from which a *muezzin* called the faithful to prayer. (Fig. 17) The spiral going round a point is again somewhat similar to the ancient Ziggurat, not only in shape but also in spirit. Same movement of line can be seen in the minerate of the Great Mosque of IbnTulun. (Fig. 18)

In both cases, the movement of the line is taking you up, to the good old single point. In Ziggurat the up going movement is somewhat hard to follow, just like the religions of those times, which were made very difficult by the kings and priests. They extracted the God away from the range of a common man, because before Islam the Almighty was reserved only for the rich and the king alone.

But here, in this minaret the line is very smooth and flowing. It is holding my hand gently and encouraging me to glide high. I need no priest and no religious figure to pray and journey the path on my behalf. All I need is faith, in God and myself, and my courage to follow this spiral line, which will take me to the Almighty. The beauty of this minaret is its cylindrical form and the perfection lies in the spiral. The peak of the minaret is pointed upward so it is not stopping me, but encouraging me to go beyond and explore the unknown all by myself.

Cylindrical minarets, so characteristic of later mosque, evolved from here. They became very popular in the later centuries. Almost all the mosques had them, regardless of time and place. They became the trademark of Muslim communities and all the nations have adopted them even in the modern times. A city as secular as Istanbul, had so many of them that it is still called “The City of Minarets”. **(Fig. 19)**

Year after year, century after century, these minarets and domes were built again and again. Their shapes changed, their lines were modernized but no matter what type they were, they all had a peak, a point going upwards, trying to reach Allah. Muslims all over the world give an evidence of this sagacity when they say *Ashahduan La IllahaIllallah*²⁴ Billions and Billions of minarets come into existence, when they raise their forefinger upward, to give testimony for the *Wahdaniyyat* (One ness) of God, every minute of the day, believing in the strength of this single Point.

Endnote

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