

**EARLY MOSQUES OF SOUTH ASIA
AND IMPACT OF NATIVE ARCHITECTURE:
A CASE STUDY OF BANBHORE, MANSURA,
UDIGRAM AND QUWWAT-UL-ISLAM
MOSQUES**

At the beginning of 8th century A.D the boundaries of the Muslim empire had expanded in all directions and soon reached the very limit of Sindhu valley. Then, due to some unpleasant happenings, the Arab Viceroy of eastern regions was prompted to launch a military expedition against the ruler of lower Sindhu valley named Raja Dahir, in 711 A.D. As a result, a young Arab general named Muhammad bin Qasim, a nephew of Hajjaj bin Yousaf, was dispatched to measure sword with Raja Dahir. First of all Muhammad Bin Qasim besieged the coastal city of Daybal which fell to Arab army. The occupation of Daybal was followed by other important towns of Dahir's kingdom such as Drawar, Alor, Nerun and Multan which, after a hard resistance, were captured by Muhammad bin Qasim. With the conquest of Dahir's kingdom, the boundaries of Muslim empire on the southern borders extended to the lower valley of river Sindh. It was a general practice among Muslim invaders, that wherever they went, marked out a place for offering prayer¹. Muslim invaders of Sindh also followed this practice and built mosques.

About three centuries after the conquest of Sindh, in the closing years of 10th century A.D, Muslim rulers of Afghanistan started raids in the northwestern borders of South Asia. At that time the northwestern parts of South Asia, including Punjab, Gandhara and some portions of Afghanistan, were under the rule of Hindu Shahi (correctly Odi rulers) namely Jaipala, Anandpala,

Trilochanpala and Bhimpala². It was Mahmud of Ghazna, who, after repeated invasions, uprooted the Odi Shahi rulers and annexed their territories to his kingdom of Ghazna³. Lahore was elevated to the position of the capital of conquered territories⁴. Besides Odi Shahis, Kramatis of Multan and Sindh were also captured by Mahmud and were finally annexed to the Ghaznavid kingdom⁵. Thus, the whole of Sindhu valley passed into the hands of Ghaznavid's who kept their political sway over the region for one and half century, from 1026 to 1185-86 A.D.

The feeble and weak successors of Mahmood failed to defend their country against Ghaurid feudatory tribes of Ghaur who having captured Ghazni, pushed out the last Ghaznavid ruler from Afghanistan.⁶ The Ghaznavid rule was now confined merely to the territories in the Punjab. After some time, one of the Ghaurid rulers namely, Shahab-ud-Din also known as Muhammed bin Sam, got hold of last Ghaznavid ruler Khusro Malik in 1186 and later on killed him⁷. With this the Ghaznavid rule ended. In 1191 one of the generals of Muhammad bin Sam, Outb-ud-Din Aibak captured Qila Rai Pithaura,⁸ which afterward came to be known as Delhi - the capital of Muslim Saltanate of India. Thus, for the first time, the Gangetic valley along with the valley of the river Sindh were joined under Muslim rule.

Architectural Characteristics:

During these early five centuries (from 711 to 1191 A.D), a number of mosques were built almost in every small and big towns, but unfortunately except for the *Quwwat-ul-Islam* at Delhi they could not survive the ravages of time, and were buried beneath heaps of mud. Therefore Percy Brown, a great authority on Indian architecture, erroneously, thinks that the *Quwwat-ul-Islam* mosque was the earliest one ever erected on the Indian soil.⁹ Archeological activities in Pakistan have now revealed structural remains of three important mosques at Banbhore,¹⁰ Mansura¹¹ and Udigram¹² (Swat), shedding great light on these early mosques, Archaeology has greatly helped in understanding the early Muslim history of Sindh. The coastal city of Debal is unanimously described by the Arab historians

and geographers as the first town of the kingdom of Dahir captured by Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim in 711 A.D, and here also he built a mosque for offering prayer. In subsequent period, Debal was deserted most probably due to changes in the coastal line and alterations in the courses of the many tributaries of the river Sindh.¹³

To solve the enigma of the identification of Debal, the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, in 1958 started excavation of the ruined city of Banbhore, located on right bank of the Gharo Creek. The archaeological diggings revealed along with other findings, the structural remains of a mosque.¹⁴ Regarding the correct identification of Debal, in the absence of a concrete proof, doubts are also expressed by some experts.¹⁵ The remains of a mosque at Banbhore, however, are very important. Two different dates are suggested in the light of inscriptional evidence. According to one date the mosque was built in 727 A.D¹⁶ and the other date places its construction in 854 A.D.¹⁷ However, the study of archaeological data provides very significant and interesting information about the complete history of the construction of Banbhore or Debal mosque. The stratigraphic evidence shows that the original structure of the mosque would have remained intact but in subsequent periods repairs were added. The archaeological trenches laid down in the lanes along the outer faces of the boundary walls and in the sanctuary hall exposed that the foundations of walls were laid down about three feet deeper than the then existing ground levels. The masonry of the boundary wall does not reveal any pattern, such as header and stretcher with disturbing joint at regular points. Moreover, masonry showed that stones were used with mud mortar but during repairs, large size rough rubbles along with fillings were also, particularly on the out face of the wall, added.¹⁸

Sometimes, it is suggested that the construction of the Banbhore mosque was not started immediately after the conquest of the city.¹⁹ It was a general practice in the early days of Islam that a place was marked out in open air for prayer near the army

camp such as Kufa, Basra and Fustat, though these early camp mosques were later on converted into more permanent structures, first with organic material such as wood and then with solid material like stone.²⁰ The exposed layout of the Banbhore mosque does not differ from the traditional pattern, as it covers almost a square area measuring 128 feet east to west and 122 feet from north to south. Originally, this square area was marked out by a wall, pierced on three sides, except Qibla or western side to provide access into courtyard of the mosque. The western portion of this walled enclosure accommodated a sanctuary, consisting of three deep aisles. The roof of the prayer hall was supported by wooden pillars as their stone bases were exposed during the excavation. The sanctuary opened to the courtyard which measures 75 by 58 feet and was covered on three sides by cloisters and corridors divided into small rooms with average measurement of 11 feet by 8 feet each. The main feature of the courtyard was its ablution tank in the centre; however, the rest of floor was paved with square burnt bricks.²¹ The sanctuary of the mosque does not show Mihrab which led one art historian to believe that Banbhore mosque was originally a temple structure, later converted by Muslims into a mosque.²² Although by the time of the construction of Banbhore mosque Mihrab had been introduced in the mosques of Hijaz, Iraq, Syria etc. but, somehow or other, it was not used at Banbhore. So, it is extremely unconvincing to treat Banbhore mosque as temple structure on the basis of the absence of such evidence. However it seems quite possible that building material for the construction of the mosque would have been obtained from an existing temple structure.

According to the archaeological evidence the town of Banbhore was deserted in 13th century A.D.²³ Thus, Banbhore mosque served as a prayer place for about five centuries (from 8th to 13th century A.D.) without showing development or changes during these centuries although mosque architecture in the rest of the Muslim world had been experiencing certain architectural devices and decorative developments. It can

therefore safely be remarked that Banbhore mosque speaks of native architectural techniques by which it was materialized.

The remains of another early Muslim city of Sindh were unearthed by the Department of Archaeology, and Museums, Government of Pakistan in the district of Shadadpur, which were identified as al-Mansura of Arab historians and geographers. In the absence of any inscriptional evidence, the foundation of the city is estimated to be established in the first half of 8th century A.D. by Amir bin Muhammad bin Qasjm.²⁴ Like Banbhore here at Mansura, the remains of a mosque were also discovered but no inscription was found. Therefore, exact date of the foundation is not known, however in the years 110 or 120 A.H. / 728 or 737 A.D. the mosque would have been built.²⁵ Unlike the Banbhore mosque, Mansura mosque covers a rectangular area, measuring 150ft north-south and 250 ft east-west. The remains of a huge sanctuary were found from the western portion of the rectangular area, where six rows of the brick bases of pillars were exposed. Thus, it appears that the sanctuary of the mosque was originally consisted of five deep aisles, the roof being supported by columns of burnt brick masonry. The courtyard measured 100 by 150 ft. covered on three sides northern, southern and eastern by cloisters with an ablution tank in the center.

Instead of stone, the mosque was entirely built of burnt bricks, in the roofing of the sanctuary and the cloisters, wooden beams and rafters would have been used. In the western wall of the sanctuary, internally, two semi-circular mihrabs were built in the masonry of the wall.²⁶ Thus Mansura mosque became the first one in South Asia, having two mihrabs but the mystery of twin arches is not understood and seems a very unusual practice in the early mosques of Islam. So far as the architectural techniques are concerned, we observe header and stretcher practice; although joints are not quite regular. Arabs did not show any hesitation in exploiting native architectural practice. The Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan unearthed the remains of a mosque on the slope of a mountain nearby Udigram village in Swat. It is named as Raja Gira Mosque being situated

in the ruins of Raja Gira Castle.²⁷ In fact, no king of the name of Raja Gira is known in the epigraphically or historical records of Swat. Therefore the term Raja Gira seems to have been corrupted and mutilated in the course of time, particularly after the place was captured by the Muslims. Before the Muslim occupation, it was the seat of ruling family of the region and must have been known as Rajagarh meaning the capital, instead of Raja Gira.²⁸ The present village Udigram is also mentioned by the Alexander historian as Ora which was captured by the latter.²⁹ The long surviving traditions and epigraphic evidence have now solved the enigma of the word Ora or Udigram. The Odis were an age old ethnic group of people, living in the present valleys of Peshawar, Swat, Dir etc. Because of their prominent role in the political affairs of the region their tribal name has survived to present days in folk traditions and in the name of various villages. Udigram, (in swat) is one of them which had been a centre of this tribe from where they ruled the whole of Swat valley which finally came to be known as Udiyana, that is the land of Udis or Odis.³⁰

The inscriptional evidence explicitly associates the construction of the Udigram mosque with a Ghaznavid's governor named Anushtigin, dated 440 A.H. 1048-9 A.D. Like the preceding mosques, however, it follows traditional layout of a Muslim prayer place, as it is rectangular in shape measuring 28x21m and is marked on all sides by high walls made up of locally available blocks of schist stone laid in courses of what may be called rough diaper masonry. The roof has totally disappeared but the series of wooden columns in five running from north to south and eight from east to west of which only stone bases are left. There is an entrance on the east side but not quite in line with the 'mihrab'. The 'qibla' side shows a prayer hall which is a step higher than the rest of the covered area - its floor being made of beaten earth. The rest of the enclosed area corresponding in function to the courtyard is flagged with schist slabs. In the middle of this courtyard is an ablution tank. The northern side of the mosque overlooking the valley contains a 'ziyada' comprising of three oblong 'hujras' and is externally

marked by three cylindrical tower buttresses - an architectural feature which fits in, on the one hand, with the Hindu Shahi style and, on the other, gives the building the look of a Ribat, effectively symbolizing the power of Islam. An interesting feature of the mosque is a square 'mihrab' in the qibla wall characteristic of the pre-Saljuq architectural style of eastern areas of the Muslim world.³¹ The 'Rajagarh' mosque or Udigram mosque displays, local style of architecture and techniques, known as Gangharan style but by the time of the Muslim occupation of Swat it had lost its tradition, pattern, that is diaper masonry. However the mosque was externally strengthened according to the Hindu Shahi fashion.

In the last quarter of the 12th century A.D Ghaznavid's were replaced by another Tajik family known as Ghaurid in the north-western parts of South Asia. In 1190-91 A.D. Qutb-ud-Din, immediately, after the occupation of Delhi laid down foundation of a mosque well known as Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque Delhi or Qutb mosque. The concept of a Muslim prayer place was dictated to the Hindu masons and architects who, according to their architectural traditions and skills, materialized it, The rectangle area (212x150 feet) was marked by a high wall, which enclosed a sanctuary with a mihrab in the middle of the wall. The courtyard to the east of the prayer hall was covered on three sides by cloisters. The main access was provided into the interior of the mosque in the eastern wall. The roof of the sanctuary and cloisters was supported by Hindu pillars and was covered by typical Indian lantern type shallow domes by applying corbelling technique.³²

If we review our discussion of proceeding pages regarding the development of mosques, it may be concluded that in these early five centuries, mosque architecture in South Asia did not get as much attention as we see in the neighboring Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran etc. For a long time, South Asian Muslims had to be satisfied with the simplest form of a mosque structure erected with the help of native masons and according to their architectural traditions. However, Muslims of South Asia predominantly kept intact the original concept of a mosque. Nevertheless, it took centuries to evolve the elaborated

mosque architecture or a typical structure which might be referred as 'model' like Badshahi Mosque Lahore.

Notes and References

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