Mughal Architecture

The Muslim architecture of India, like the Islamic style in other countries, is primarily derived from the ancient vaulted architecture of Mesopotamia, as modified by later developments under the Sassanids, and is therefore closely related to the style in vogue at Baghdad in the days of the Abbasid Khalifas. The dome which is so prominent a feature of Mughal building, and which is unknown in Hindu architecture, has been supposed by some scholars to be a copy of the bell-shaped tents of the Turcomans of Central Asia: but whatever be its origin, the dome, like the arch, was well known in Baghdad, and then spread throughout the Islamic world. When the Muslims first arrived in India, the Hindu masons whom they were forced to employ in the erection of their mosques and other monuments were unable to construct arches with true key-stones in the Muslim style; but by the fourteenth century they had overcome this disability and no longer depended on their own structural methods in carrying out the designs of their conquerors. On the other hand, contact with Hindu ideas and architectural style exercised a gradual but steady influence upon Islamic designs, and was probably directly responsible for the variety style which characterized the Muslim buildings erected in different parts of India during pre-Mughal times. The simple massiveness, for example, of the monuments of the Tughlak dynasty has little in common with the Islamic style which developed under the independent Muslim Kings of Bengal; the styles associated with the Sultanates of Bijapur and Golkunda
differ from one another, and are both easily distinguishable from the beautiful provincial style of Gujarat, which bears very markedly the impress of Hindu and Jain architecture.

Hindu influence upon architectural styles lasted throughout the Mughal period, and expressed itself in the narrow columns, pilasters, corbel brackets, and other ornamental features of Mughal buildings. It was particularly noticeable during the reign of Akbar, who, while showing a certain partiality for the culture and language of Persia, drew deliberately, in matters of architecture, upon Hindu sources, thus consecrating his rupture with his native land. The gradual submission of the Mughal imperial line to the influence of their Indian environment is seen, indeed; most clearly in the disposition of their tombs. The ancestor lies at Samarkand, Babar wished his body to be carried back from Agra to Kabul, Humayun is at Delhi, Akbar at Sikandarah and Shah Jahan at Agra. But while the buildings of the Mughal period owed
much to Hindu ideas of decorative detail, as can be seen in the ornamental pillars at Fatehpur Sikri and the corbel brackets of Shaikh Salim Chishti's tomb. The type and architectural principles of them all are fundamentally Muhammadan. This is particularly evident in such buildings of Babur and Humayun as still survive; they exhibit no traces of Indian influence and whether intact or half-ruined, are distinctly foreign and Muhammadan. The salient features of Mughal architecture are the pronounced dome, the splendor turrets at the corners, the palace halls supported on pillars, and the Indo-Saracenic gate, which takes the form of a huge semi-dome sunk in the front wall and bearing an admirable proportion to the building, while the actual entrance is a small rectangular opening under this arch. The finest example of this style of gateway is the Buland Darwaza at Fatehpur Sikri, which was erected in 1601-2 to commemorate Akbar's conquest of Gujarat.

With the exception of Aurangzeb, all the early Mughal Emperors were great builders. Brief though his Indian reign was, Babur found leisure to summon from Constantinople pupils of the famous Albanian architect, Sinan,
who had designed many important buildings in the Ottoman Empire, and set them to work on mosques and other architectural monuments commemorating his conquest of Hindustan. He mentions in his Memoirs (Babur-nama) that 680 Indian stone-masons worked daily on his buildings at Agra, and that nearly 1,500 were employed daily in his buildings at Sikri, Biana, Gwalior and other places. Only two of his buildings survive – a large mosque built at Panipat after his victory in 1526, and the Jami Mosque at Sambal in Rohilkhand. Time has dealt hardly with Humayun’s buildings also, for of those which he found leisure to erect during his stormy career, only two remain in semi-dilapidation. One of these a mosque at Fathabad in the Hissar District of the Punjab, is a massive well proportioned building, decorated in the Persian manner with enamelled tiles, and was probably built about 1540, when Humayun was on his way to Sind. Probably the best designed and most dignified building in the Indo-Persian style erected in northern India before the reign of Akbar is the mausoleum of Humayun’s rival, Sher Shah, built on a high plinth in the midst of a lake at Sahasram in the Shahabad district of Bengal. Here the architecture is wholly Muhammadan, but Hindu corbelling and horizontal architraves are used in all the inner doorways; and the style generally has been described as intermediate between ‘the austerity of the Tughlak buildings and the feminine grace of Shah Jahan’s masterpiece’.  

With the accession of Akbar, Mughal architecture attained unrivalled magnificence; and the monuments of his reign which have been bequeathed to posterity full justified the declaration of Abu-l Fazl that ‘His Majesty plans splendid edifices and dresses the work of his mind and heart in the garment of stone and clay’. It is certain that Akbar, with his usual thoroughness, mastered every detail of the working of his department of Public Works, and himself
supplied ideas which were translated into practical form by the experts whom he gathered around him; and consequently, whether we study the buildings of Fathpur Sikri, the Jahangiri Mahal, at Agra, the tomb of Muhammad Ghaus at Gwalior, or the mausoleum of Humayun at Delhi, we detect the impress of superlative tact and genius. Or did Akbar confine his activities to the great masterpieces of architecture which have made his name world-famous; he also built fortresses, villas, towers, sarais, schools, tanks, and wells; he fixed the wages of workmen and the price of building materials. And while he still adhered to Persian ideas, inherited doubtless from his mother, his natural attraction toward Hinduism, combined with his deliberate policy of binding his Hindu subjects to the imperial throne, led him to introduce Hindu styles of architecture in many of his buildings. This fashion appears very clearly in the Jahangiri Mahal at Agra fort, which might well pass for the palace of a Hindu Raja; it is visible again in some of the buildings at Fathpur Sikri, a city which conformed resolutely with the traditions of the conquered nation, and in which the conqueror asserted himself in only one building, for that matter incomparable – the mosque. On the other hand, Akbar's Persian sympathies are portrayed in the famous mausoleum of Humayun at Old Delhi, which was completed early in 1569; although even in this case the ground plan of the tomb is Indian, and the outward appearance of the edifice is differentiated from the purely Persian style by the free use of white marble, which was uncommon in Persia, and by the absence of the coloured tile decoration, which Persian builders so greatly favoured. This building is also remarkable as offering the earliest example in India of ‘a double dome with slightly swelling outline, standing on a high neck’ – a form of construction which appears in the tombs
of Timur and Bibi Khanam at Samarkand, and is ultimately traced back to the
Umayyad mosque of Damascus, built towards the close of the eleventh
century.⁸

Speaking generally, the buildings of Akbar’s reign combine both Hindu
and Muhammadan features – sometimes the former, at other times the latter,
predominating – and are therefore correctly described as being of mixed
Hindu-Muhammadan style. Fathpur-sikri, which he built around the hermitage
of the pious Shaikh Chishti, and which was the seat of the imperial court from
1569 to 1584, constitutes perhaps the most remarkable evidence of Akbar’s
genius. ‘It is a more complete creation than Versailles in this sense, that
subsequent reigns have added nothing to it. And Versailles displays one fault
of taste – the one only – that of repeating indiscreetly the servile apotheosis of
a personality which was certainly imposing by the sense of its perogative and
dignity, but which was intellectually limited and devoid of philosophy and
human anxiety. Many of the principle buildings of Akbar’s deserted city still
remain almost intact, but much has been irretrievably ruined. Yet enough
survives – the Khwabghah (‘house of dreams’), the record-room, the Diwan-i-
Khass, the Diwan-i-Aam, the great mosque and so on – to enable one to realize
the former magnificence of the mass of buildings which, crowning the summit
of a red sandstone ridge, formed the acropolis of the richest monarch in the
world. A modern traveller has remarked that it is difficult to imagine a more
picturesque conception than that of the Diwan-i-Khass.

“A central pillar, whose exquisite carvings recall, by a
perhaps voluntary coincidence, the ornaments of the tomb of
the emperor at the top of the mausoleum of Sikandarah, itself,
one would say, conceived in a recollection of the terraces of
the Panch Mahal, where the princesses used to come to sleep, spreads into an immense circular capital. From this capital, four balconies, with low open trellis stone balustrades, diverge to the corners of the pavilion, where secondary platforms communicate with the ground by staircases. The emperor, like a god in the cup of a lotus flower, sat in the centre of the corbelled capital; a minister occupied each of the angles; through the bays, either open or closed with screens of interlaced stone, the eye discovers the whole of the wide and almost circular horizon. The will of the master here radiated like a glowing hearth to the four corners of the sky, shot forth to the confines of empire; and I know no more poetic realization of a will of power and responsibility.

Perhaps the grandest feature of Akbar's city is the Buland Darwaza-the Great Portal, built of marble and sandstone, which forms the southern gateway of the Mosque. High authority has described it as one of the most perfect architectural achievements in the whole of India; and the effect which it produces on the mind of the layman can be best understood from the following description recorded by a French visitor to Fathpur Sikri:

'This mass, one hundred and fifty feet high, the central arch opening upon a half-dome, the four minarets at the four corners of the trapezium that forms the plan, the broad steps that lead up to the entrance, the declivity in the ground continuing the slope of the steps make of this gate a monument unequalled in its kind, Seen from below, on the edge of the village whose humble hovels are heaped up at the foot of the hill, the effect is sublime. It lies in the very disproportion between that titanic mass and its surroundings, in the proud upward leap of that stone canopy, whose minarets look like the poles that formerly, in the native steppes, carried skins of beasts or motley carpets over the conqueror in state. I know only one other monument in which the verticals reach the same pitch of magnificence, and that is Beauvais Cathedral. It is the same, Hosannah in excelsis! For the rest, the Moslem epigraph, with so just a lyricism, exclaims:

"Its mihrab is like the broad browed morning, its pinnacles like the Milky Way, its grate cries aloud!..."
A marvelous revelation, an inspired translation of the feeling that takes hold of you before that formidable arch, whence seems to issue as it were a shout of victory, continuous, louder than the trumpets of a hundred Fames, from the top of the pedestal that lifts it proudly on the horizon of Hindustan. And the great cry of pride rings out over the rich plains, the peaceful towns, the unsubdued jungle, to die away absorbed in the astonished murmur of the southern shores.

Then one thinks of other words, those whose threefold riband forms the rich rectangle in which, according to the almost invariable rite, the arch is cut out with an august simplicity. They say:

"The world is a bridge: pass over it, but build no house upon it. The world endures but an hour: spend it in prayer; who sees the rest? Thy greatest richness' is the alms which thou hast given. Know that, the world is a mirror where fortune has appeared, then fled: call nothing thine that thy eyes cannot see”.

'And mingled with the admiration of those pure lines, of that material grandeur, of that realized miracle of art, is an element of thought, veneration and melancholy that makes up one of those rare sensations of completeness which time cannot impair in our memory and which we would buy at the cost of any exile’.

It can be safely asserted that nothing like Fatehpur Sikri will ever be created again. For, in the words of Fergusson, it is simply a reflex of the mind of the great man who built it. Though long abandoned and bearing the scars of time, it still forms a most impressive revelation of a mighty personality.

Akbar built much more besides the masterpieces of architecture mentioned above. As, for example, the buildings at Sikandarah, the Akbari Mahal at Agra, the fort at Attock, and the Allahabad fort, which William Finch was told had taken more than forty years to be built and part times employed twenty thousand workmen of various denominations to work. Five thousand men were still at work upon it when Finch visited Allahabad. The number of
edifices erected during Jahangir's reign was less as compared the architectural record of his father. On the other hand, some of them are of exceptional interest and merit. Nothing could be more beautiful than the tomb of Itimad-ud-daula, near Agra, erected about 1628 by the Empress Nur Jahan. Built entirely of white marble, it is decorated with *pietra dura* work in semi-precious stones, which emulates, the style of decoration in Shah Jahan’s reign. Among other notable monuments of Jahangir's reign at Agra, Lahore and elsewhere, is the great mausoleum of Akbar at Sikandarah, which was erected under the Emperor's orders between 1605 and 1612. The plan of the tomb, which is distinguished by five square terraces, diminishing as they ascend, resembles to some extent the Panch Mahall, Akbar's five-storied pavilion at Fatehpur Sikri, and is supposed by some authorities to have been copied from the Indian Buddhist viharas. It bears, however, a resemblance, at least equally close, to one of the two main types of ancient Khmer architecture, found in Cambodia and Cochin-China; and, on that account, another authority suggests that the design of Akbar's mausoleum may have been suggested by craftsmen at Jahangir's Court, hailing from the Far East. The suggestion is not wholly improbable, particularly as both Fergusson and another authority agree that the design of the uppermost floor must have included a light dome over the cenotaph, which was never built- a vaulted roof to the top story being a recognized feature of the ancient Cambodian buildings of Khmer origin.

It was, however, in the reign of Shah Jahan that the Indo-Persian style of architecture attained its supreme beauty. The cost of the buildings which he erected was colossal – according to one estimate the Taj Mahal alone cost about 4½ million pounds sterling – for besides the palaces, gardens, the Pearl Mosque and the Taj Mahal at Agra, and the palaces, the *idgah* and Jama
Masjid at Delhi, he built palaces and gardens at Lahore; a fort, palace, and mosque at Kabul; royal buildings at Kashmir; various buildings at Ajmer, Ahamedabad and other places; palaces at Mukhlispur; and forts at Kandahar and elsewhere. No precise estimate of the expenditure on these buildings is available, but the cost must have run into crores. The style of all Shah Jahan’s principal edifices is essentially Persian, but is at the same time clearly distinguished from Persian ideas by the lavish employment of white marble and incomparable decoration. A salient feature also of the work of his reign is the open-work tracery which ornaments the finest buildings and the apt combination of spacious design with an almost feminine elegance. The Taj Mahal, which has been described by so many admirers and is certainly one of the unrivalled beauties of this world, was commenced in 1631, a few months after the death of the Empress Mumtaz Mahall, and was not finally completed until 1653. Twenty thousand men were employed daily on its construction. The precise identity of the architect has always been doubtful, and Vincent Smith’s conclusion that the Taj Mahal is ‘the product of a combination of European and Asiatic genius’ is denied by Maulvi Moinu-d din Ahmad, who awards the credit of the design to one Isa Afandi, a ‘turko-Indian’, and gives reasons for disbelieving the supposed participation of French or Italian experts in the plan and construction. In Shah Jahan’s original design a monumental bridge was intended to span the river, uniting the Taj Mahal with an equally splendid mausoleum for the Emperor himself. But the conception was never realized; and nothing now joins the river’s two banks, ‘except at times a flight of green parakets, skimming over the surface of the water, emerald arrows stolen from the golden quiver of the twilight, a message from desire to death over the water softly flowing.’
Of the two palaces which Shah Jahan built at Agra and Delhi, the former, according to Fergusson, is in better taste, while the latter, if conceived as a whole, would have revealed the personality of shah Jahan as clearly as Fathpur Sikri reflects that of Akbar. Both palaces were magnificent, particularly that of Delhi, in which the Drwan-i-Khass with its original ceiling of silver, valued by Tavemier at twenty six millions of French money, and its mingled decorative scheme of marble, gold, and fine stones, further added to its magnificence.

But perhaps the most perfect architectural legacy of Shah Jahan’s reign is the Moti Masjid or Pearl Mosque in Agra Fort. In that incomparable building the style introduced by the Great Mughals reached the zenith of purity and elegance.

Fig 11 Thomas Daniell, *The Great Gate leading to the Taj Mahal*, Agra, between 1786 and 1793
"There is something more intense in the mystic impression of those denticulated arches, those white and blue perspective, than in the flight of the Gothic perpendiculars. The sense of the divine given by the gigantic Tamil pagodas, the largest in the world, seems confused, extravagant, muddy, beside the fervour that shines forth from this act of faith and grace hewn in the most perfect substance brought by the central fires. The serenity of the Greek temple has not that passion petrified in beauty. The one welcomes the divinity born of the play of the elements, the child of the clouds, the waves and the winds, blossoming from the original myth with no more pains than the flower from the bud; the other, to which the divinity is the inconceivable, calls to it, evokes it in a poem of fervent stone. It is the same difference as between joy and rapture. Yet let it not be imagined that there is anything strained or sorrowful in the sensation given by the Pearl Mosque. The first emotion is rather one of peace and serenity. It is only later that one begins to feel the ardour which the purified meditation of the believer would there be capable of attaining. Then, a vibration as a metal at white heat sends its waves coursing over those marbles. Next, all is peace once more; the sanctuary is alive, a mysterious soul throbs there between bliss and ecstasy..."16

With the accession of Aurangzeb the style of Mughal architecture rapidly degenerated. Aurangzeb built little, as compared with his predecessors, and of several buildings of passable merit erected during his reign, the best perhaps is the mosque at Lahore which was completed in 1674. It is a copy of the great mosque of Delhi, but distinctly 'inferior to that noble building'. Another building of some distinction is Zinatu-n-nissa’s mosque at Delhi. Even his own tomb at Aurangabad is insignificant, and seems to bear mute witness that the Muslim creative genius which built two such peerless monuments as
the Taj Mahal in Hindustan and the Alhambra in Spain, had fulfilled its
destiny, and that the great figures of the Timurid dynasty.

![Image of the Taj Mahal](image)

Fig 12 Delhi’s Friday mosque, leaf from an album of
drawings by a Punjabi artist. c. 1890.

**Secular Buildings**

There are many secular buildings worthy of note. One particular
Mughal contribution to architecture was the hammam, the bathhouse, which
followed the standard Near Eastern pattern with a room, or perhaps several, for
undressing and dressing, the cold room, and the bathing room itself.

The hot water was brought in through terracotta piping. There were also
plentiful latrines. Fatehpur was known for the large number of hammams there.
Not only the rulers, but also wealthy benefactors had hammams built in their
cities of residence, which were often of considerable architectonic beauty. Asaf
Khan, Jahangir’s brother-in-law, had a very beautiful bathing facility built in
Agra; and the one built by khan-i-khanan ‘Abdu’r Rahim in Burhanpur is very famous.17

Fig 13. Plan of khankhanan ‘Abdu’r Rahim’s public bath houses in Burhanpur (1607-08)

Because of the Mughals’ extensive trading activities, important trading routes were built between the harbours and the capital city, and between the most important centers for the production of goods and agricultural produce. These routes were also important centers for the production of goods and agricultural produce. These routes were also important militarily. Babur was the first to build a road between Agra and Kabul. Akbar and Jahangir had routes surveyed and milestones placed at intervals of one kos (approximately two miles, or three kilometers). The milestones, according to Babur and others, were often decorated with horns. In Jahangir’s time, water fountains were placed at three kos intervals, and several rulers and amirs had caravansaries built for the convenience of travelers, with numerous guestrooms of various sizes, as well as stables for animals, and storage space for goods. These caravansaries were often architectonically very beautiful, such as the one
established by the *khank-i-hanan* ‘Abdu’r Rahim between Burhanpur and Asirgarh, with its elegant pointed bow construction. Travellers often complained about the state of the roads; however, that does not lessen the value of these facilities. One of their specialities were the *bulghur-khana* (no longer in existence), at which free food was given to the poor, so very important in times of famine.¹⁸

![Mughal bridge, 1564-68, Jaunpur](image)

Finally, bridges were built to improve connections between the important cities. One significant bridge was constructed in Jaunpur during Akbar’s time by his *khan-i-khanan* Mun’im Khan (1569).

**Mughal painting**

The history of Mughal painting resembles that of architecture. It flourished while the Empire flourished, undecayed when it decayed. And just as the style and design of the Mughal buildings were originally introduced by Akbar from Persia and were insensibly transformed by the contact of Hindu ideas into the mixed Indo-Persian or Mughal style, so the art of painting in the
Mughal age, though Persian in origin, was actually the joint product of Persian and Hindu ideas, and developed into the two schools of paintings, known as Mughal and Rajput, both of which owe their success to the incentive and support of Mughals and Rajput Rajas. Hindu painting, which was founded on the pictorial art of the Buddhist priests of early ages, is essentially different from the Persian art, which was closely connected with the artistic schools of the Far East; but when the early Mughal Emperors introduced the later style of painting into India, it rapidly attracted ‘many of the indigenous artists of India – hereditary painters – trained for generations to the use of the brush’, and was adapted by them to suit their own particular ideas. The methods of the Hindu painters are not dissimilar to those of the Persian school, but ‘in its motives, in sentiment, and in temper generally’, the school which they evolved strikes an entirely different note. The Mughal school ‘confined itself to portraying the somewhat materialistic life of the Court, with its State functions, processions, hunting expeditions, and all the picturesque although barbaric pageantry of an affluent Oriental dynasty’, while the Hindu artists, ‘living mentally and bodily in another and more abstract environment, and working for Hindu patrons, pictured scenes from the Indian classics, domestic subjects and illustrations of the life and thought of their motherland and its creed’.

The Persian method of paintings, imported by the Mughals and thus assimilated by the Hindu craftsmen of India, was itself a provincialized form of Chinese art, owing its peculiar characteristics to the connexion with the Far Eastern schools established by the Mongols and continued by the Timurids. Its two greatest exponents in the period immediately preceding the introduction of the art to India were the famous Bihzad of Heart, who invented and developed real portraiture and has been styled the ‘Raphael of the East’, and his pupil Agr
Mirak of Tabriz. Bihzad, indeed, who enjoyed the favour of Sultan Hussain Baiqara and subsequently entered the service of Shah Ismail, founder of the Safavide dynasty of Persia, marks the transition of Persian painting from the Mongoloid style of the Timurid age to the more refined style associated with the Safavide rulers. A well-known authority has remarked that the most striking feature of the painting of China and Japan is its line, of Persia its line and colour, and of India its colour. These characteristics were assimilated, mingled, and combined in the products of the artists patronized by the Mughal rulers, resulting on the one hand in the gradual transformation of purely Muslim art, and on the other in a new development of Hindu pictorial representation. The process of decline of the purely Mongoloid or Chinese characteristics and the gradual evolution of the Indian style can be seen in the copy of the Tarikh-i-Khandan-i-Timuria and a copy of the Badshah-nama, both preserved in the Khuda Baksh Library at Patna. In the former the rigidity of the Chinese outline has been softened, and the scenery is distinctly Indian; while in the latter Chinese influence has disappeared altogether, and the Indian style predominates.

Babur, although he could not draw or paint, was a born artist in his power of close observation and his intense interest in Nature. After nights of revelry he would stand in rapt contemplation before an apple-tree, admiring the exquisite colours of the autumn leaves, which no painter, however skilful, could depict. He is always keenly observant of the beauties of Nature,' writes Lane-Poole; 'he delights in the discovery of a spikenard, which he had not found before; and he is never weary of expatiating on the loveliness of the flowers in his favourite gardens. Dissipation never dulled his appreciation of
such delights, or his pleasure in poetry and music'.\(^{22}\) It does not appear that he made any efforts to foster the art of painting in India; but the Alwar MS, of the Persian version of his *Memoirs* indicates that, like his Timurid ancestors, he had painters working under his patronage, and the illustrations in that manuscript may be assumed to represent the style of painting in vogue during his reign.\(^{23}\) Humayun's chequered fate left him little opportunity for the encouragement of art in his Indian possessions, and any plans which he may have made in that direction were frustrated by his premature death. But the manner in which he passed the leisure hours of his exile in Persian, and subsequently in Kabul, proves that he shared to the full the family taste of the Timurids for art, and that like Babur he was an enthusiastic admirer of Nature. Besides visiting all the gardens of Khurasan, he acquainted himself with the music and poetry of Persia, and with the studios or schools of the leading artists who flourished at that date under the generous patronage of Shah Tahmasp. In this way he was brought into contact at Tabriz with Mir Sayyid Ali, a pupil of the renowned Bihzad, and Khwaja Abdus Samad, both of whom he persuaded to join his Court at Kabul in 1550. There he and his small son, Akbar, took lessons in drawing, and studied generally the art of painting under those two artists; there also he commissioned Mir Sayyid Ali to prepare the illustrations to the *Dastan-i-Amir Hamzah*, an immense task which lasted for years and required the collaboration of Khwaja Abdus Samad and other artists. Indeed, these two protégés of Humayun, working at Kabul with a few assistants, who may have hailed either from Persia or India, formed the nucleus of the Mughal school of painting, which came into prominence during Akbar’s reign.\(^{24}\) There can be little doubt that, in his patronage and encouragement of the painter’s art, Akbar was giving practical effect to a policy which Humayun
would have carried out, had he been spared; and it seems likely that the tuition which he underwent at the instance of Humayun confirmed and increased the interest in painting which he inherited from his more remote forbears. To this extent Humayun may be considered the original founder of the Mughal school of painting.

For the first few years of his reign Akbar had little time to spare for the encouragement of art; he was mainly engaged in freeing himself from the tutelage of the zenana and the Uzbeg nobles of the Court and in consolidating his power. Meanwhile Mir Sayyid Ali continued to prepare his illustrations to the *Amir Hamzah*, until he set out on the pilgrimage to Mecca, when his work was transferred to Khwaja Abdus Samad, known at that date by the title of Shirin-Kalam or ‘sweet pen’, in allusion to his skill in calligraphy. At this date Persian influence was still predominant, the illustrations to the *Amir Hamzah* being very similar to the style of painting in vogue at Tabriz; but by 1562, when the well-known picture showing the arrival at the Mughal Court of the Hindu singer, Tansen, was painted, the destined fusion of the Mughal and Hindu styles had commenced to manifest itself. A distinct step forward was taken when Akbar decided in 1569 to build Fathpur-Sikri and embellish it with masterpieces of the painter’s art. He had already attached to his Court a small number of trained Persian artists, headed by Abdus Samad, who were quite ready to use anything good in the work of Indian artists, and also a considerable number of Hindu artists, trained specially in wall-decoration, who were willing to utilize their skill in the production of the class of painting required by the emperor. The result was the decoration between 1570 and 1585 of the walls of Akbar’s new capital by the joint labours of Persian and Indian painters who though they may have carried out their work independently, were
yet mutually imbibing new ideas and facilitating the establishment of a regular school of Indo-Persian art.\textsuperscript{26}

It is a remarkable fact that the majority of the artists who formed the imperial school of painting in Akbar’s reign were Hindus.

The Mughal painters from 1526-1707

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reign</th>
<th>No. of artists</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babur (1526-30)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humayun (1530-9; 1550-6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akbar (1556-1605)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>115</td>
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<td>Jahangir (1605-27)</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>Shah Jahan (1628-58)</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aurangzeb (1659-1707)</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>213</td>
<td>184</td>
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Source: S.P. Verma, \textit{Painting the Mughal Experience}, OUP, 2005, p. 35 (introduction)

The Persian or foreign painters, though they set the style, were comparatively few. They included Khwaja Abdus Samad, who was promoted to be master of the Mint in 1577, and subsequently became Diwan or Revenue Commissioner at Multan; Farrukh Beg, who was of Kalmuch origin and joined the Court in 1585; Khusrau Quli; Jamshed; and a group of five painters from Kashmir. Of the seventeen really pre-eminent artists of Akbar’s reign, no less than thirteen were Hindus who excelled in portraiture – the distinctive feature of the Mughal school. The high standard of art which they achieved can be gauged from the statement of Abu-l Fazl that their pictures surpass our
conception of things. Few, indeed, in the whole world are found equal to them. Chief among them were Basawan, Lal, and Daswant of whom the last-named belonged to the Kahar or palanquin-bearer caste, and when at the height of his fame became insane and killed himself. Basawan excelled in the painting of backgrounds, the drawing of features, the distribution of colours, and portraiture. The other Hindu artists mention in the Ain-i-Akbari, such as Kesu, Mukund, Haribans, mostly belonged to the Kayastha, Chitera, Silavat and Khatri castes, and followed the practice of collaborating in each picture, in order to obtain the best results. The leading artist would sketch the composition, and each painter would then put in the part at which he was particularly expert. This system was followed in the illustration of the Razmnama – a task primarily entrusted to Daswant, Basawn, and Lal, who delegated the painting of distinct portions of each separate picture to their fellow artists.

Akbar undoubtedly shared with Babur and others of his race a deep sense of natural beauty, "an intense appreciation of the wonder and glory of the world": and it was this motive, rather than personal vanity or a desire for self-glorification, which led him to encourage the painter's art in defiance of strict Muhammadan orthodoxy. He himself realized, however, that his more orthodox followers would expect some practical explanation of his reasons for disregarding the Quranic injunction regarding the representation of living forms: and he therefore took the opportunity, when many of them were present at a private party, of delivering the often-quoted opinion on painting, recorded by Abul Fazl. There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if a painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality on his work,
and is thus forced to think of God, the Giver of life, and will thus increase his knowledge'. That this view was dictated by the need of allaying the apprehensions and objections of his Muhammadan entourage seems certain from the words used by his courtly biographer, in introducing the subject of the Emperor’s support of the pictorial art. ‘Bigoted followers of the letter of the law’, he writes, ‘are hostile to the art of painting, but their eyes now see the truth.

Having thus publicly announced his reasons for extending his patronage to painting, Akbar commenced the task of organizing an imperial school and stimulating the production of pictures with his accustomed zeal and grasp of detail. We learn from the Ain-i-Akbari that the Emperor gave the art ‘every encouragement, as he looks upon it as a means both of study and amusement’; that ‘the works of all painters are weekly laid before. His Majesty by the daroghas and the clerks; he then confers rewards according to excellence of workmanship, or increases the monthly salaries’. In other words, the school was under the direct control and supervision of the Emperor, and the painters, who numbered more than a hundred and worked in a large hall at Fatehpur Sikri, were all granted military rank as mansabdars or ahadis, and drew their salaries according to their grade. Abdus Samad, for example, held the rank of a ‘mansabdar of 400’, though the influence which he enjoyed in the imperial circle was much greater than his grade warranted. In addition to the painters’ section, the school contained a decorative section, staffed by ‘ornamental artists, gilders, line-drawers and pagers’, who were classed as infantry soldiers in accordance with the general military scheme of the imperial administration. The work of these craftsmen formed an essential part of the preparation of a Mughal painting or illuminated manuscript. The Emperor also turned his
attention to the improvement of the materials used in painting, ascertained and fixed the prices of such articles, and made improvements in the mixing of colours. "The pictures thus received", says Abu-l Fazl, "a hitherto unknown finish". This technical branch of the school’s activities were rendered necessary by the fact that the Emperor was introducing a new form of artistic expression, differing widely from that hitherto prevailing in India”. No longer were artists to paint large scenes on the surface of walls in coarse tempera colours, which could be readily repainted when injured by the climate or the passage of time. Instead they were required to adapt this art to small pictures on paper, carefully and minutely drawn and coloured, which were to be a lasting record of each painter’s individual skill. Special kinds of paper and pigments were therefore needed. brushes of suitable fineness to be prepared, and all the delicate mediums and adhesive obtained, which this decisive change of technique necessitated. Many of these commodities were little known in India, as for instance paper, which had only just begun to be used. This material, so essential to the art of painting, therefore had to be procured, and was first of all imported from Persia. Although afterwards paper manufactories were established in India by the Mughals. Under the Persian artists the preparation of pigments for miniature painting had received much attention, and these, or the formulae for them, were placed at the service of the Indian artists. The latter had their own palettes, but were ready to add to these any colours or mediums which would aid them in 'obtaining good results in this new form of pictorial art'.

The artists of Akbar’s Court specialized in portraiture and in book illustration, and some of them established a distinct superiority in the art of painting animals and birds. Akbar himself ‘sat for his likeness, and also
ordered to have the likenesses taken of all the grandees of the realm. An immense album was thus formed; those that have passed away have received a new life, and those who are still alive have immortality promised them. Unfortunately few, if any, of the original portraits included in the Emperor's album have survived; but if the beautiful drawing of Umar Shaikh, the father of Babur, on a hunting expedition, which is how preserved in the British Museum, rightly belongs to the reign of Akbar, we obtain an idea of the delicacy and the felicitous blending of Persian and Indian art which must have characterized the portraits in the imperial collection. On the other hand, many examples of the book illustrations of Akbar's school have survived in the manuscripts preserved in England and India, the most notable of these being the azm-nama at Jaipur, which is said to have cost the equivalent of £40,000, the Babur-nama in the British Museum, and the Akbar-nama in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Babur-nama, in which the illustrations are, perhaps naturally, rather more Persian than Indian in style, contain several paintings of animals, birds, trees, and so forth, some of which were the work of Mansur, who commenced his career under Akbar and attained fame in the reign of his successor, Another Hindu artist, who appears in this volume as the author of a small but exquisite picture of peacocks, is Jagannath – one of the pre-eminent painters mentioned by Abu-I Fazl. An analysis of the personnel of Akbar's school shows that the Emperor drew his court painters from a wide geographical radius. The Indians included artists from districts as far apart as Gujarat and the Punjab, while the foreign element was composed of natives of Kashmir, Persia, and Turkestan; and 'this artistic community, comprising many diverse races and several creeds which he had brought together, grew into a school, and flourished; it flourished because it was animated with one object,
which was to produce work of such a quality that it would earn the approval of the great mind responsible for its inception.\(^\text{32}\)

It is, however, questionable whether the school would have continued to flourish after Akbar's death, if it had not received the whole-hearted support and patronage of Jahangir. Art at this epoch was dependent for its existence upon the personal enthusiasm of the ruler; and it is to the eternal credit of Jahangir that he extended his powerful protection to the organization founded by Akbar, and by this constant encouragement of the Court painters promoted a steady improvement in the quality of the pictures which they produced, and brought to its maturity the special style of pictorial art associated with the dynasty of the Mughals. Jahangir has been described by a modern critic as belonging to 'the type of rich collector, perennial through the ages', voluptuously appreciative of fine workmanship, an excellent connoisseur, proud of the skill of his painters, and ready to pay heavy prices for any pictures that caught his fancy and satisfied his aesthetic standard.\(^\text{33}\) He was certainly an accomplished critic of painting; for, as he himself informs us in his frank and outspoken Memoirs, he was very fond of pictures and had such discrimination in judging them, that he could tell the name of the artist, whether alive or dead. If there were similar portraits finished by several artists', he proceeds, 'I could point out the painter of each. Even if one portrait were finished by several painters, I could mention the names of those who had drawn the different portion of the single picture. In fact, I could declare without fail by whom the brow and by whom the eye-lashes were drawn, or if any one had touched up the portrait after it was drawn by the first painter'.\(^\text{34}\)
Apart from his judgment as an art-critic, the estimate of Jahangir, mentioned above, scarcely does adequate justice to his passionate love of Nature. In his desire for travel and sports, in his love of self-indulgence, particularly with regard to wine, in his camaraderie, and in his literary activities, he closely resembled his great-grandfather Babur, though the latter was naturally more vigorous and led a much harder life. He resembled Babur still more closely in his love of gardens, flowers and scenery, in the profound joy which he felt in the presence of the world's beauty. One remembers how Babur in his Memoirs, between the story of a night of love and wine, and the episode of a 'minaret of skulls', relates that he wept at the scent of a melon which reminded him of his country; in, the same way we find Jahangir so moved by ecstasy at the sight of the flowers and the meadows of Kashmir that he burst into song. His love of Kashmir, indeed, was so intense that he journeyed thirteen times during his reign; and whenever he saw a flower of tree or a natural scene that appealed to his aesthetic instinct, he bade his painters reproduce them. Jahangir had many failings; but he possessed an artist's vision, and so long as he lived, he was the soul and spirit of Mughal art. Even in death he sought communion with nature, asking almost with his last breath that his tomb might lie open to the winds of heaven, and be watered by the rain and the dew. And peradventure Nature could have found no more fitting shrine for his remains than the fair garden at Lahore, in which he sleeps beneath an exquisite sarcophagus of white marble.

Before he ascended the throne, Jahangir had in his employ a celebrated painter of Heart named Aga Riza, to whom he refers in his Memoirs. Aga Riza's son, Abu-l Hasan, became one of the chief painters of Jahangir's Court, sharing the Emperor's patronage with Farrukh Beg, the Kalmuck artist, who
became leader of the school after the death of Abdus Samad; with Muhammad Nadir and Muhammad Murad, both natives of Samarkand, who seem to have been the last foreign artists at the Mughal Court; with Ustad Mansur, the leading animal painter; Bisandas, a skilled portrait painter; Manohar, and Govardhan. These men and others of less note were constantly attached to the Emperor's suite, and were commissioned to paint any incident or scene that struck the Emperor's fancy; and whether engaged in the work of portraiture or in the illustration of books, they were guided by the judgment and taste of the Emperor, who had acquired a first-hand acquaintance with the classical aspects of miniature painting. He sought also to educate their taste by the constant purchase of samples of the best schools of art. This combination of the Emperor's ideals with the craftsmen's skill resulted in the Mughal school of painting reaching the highest pitch of excellence and finally emancipating itself from the tutelage of Persia. The Persian influence, which counted for so much during Akbar's reign, was steadily assimilated during the reign of his son. Persian artists still lingered at Jahangir's Court, and one was employed by Shah Jahan; copies were still made by the Court artists from Persian pictures; but the true Persian style grew fainter and fainter and yielded place during Jahangir's reign to a type which was essentially Indian. Thus an art which commenced by being the art of a foreign court, dependent on and directed by patronage, leaned gradually more and more to Hindu tradition, until its foreign or Persian features had been wholly assimilated. Akbar laid the foundations of Mughal miniature painting; but it was his son, Jahangir, born of a Rajput princess, who by his knowledge and artistic intuition guided the new school of Indian art to maturity, and taught it by the influence of his own rare judgment to achieve success.
Fig 15  Kashmir tulip, by Mansur painter at Jahangir’s court

Fig 16  Portrait of a Dying Man: Sketch of ‘Inayat Khan, prepared at Jahangir’s orders
The real spirit of Mughal painting, according to Mr. Percy Brown, died with Jahangir. Shah Jahan had not the same keen appreciation of pictures as his predecessors, and his personal tastes lay rather in the direction of architecture and jewellery. In consequence Mughal painting begun during his reign to show the first symptoms of decline. The pictures produced at that date depending for their attraction rather upon rich pigments and a lavish use of gold than upon the harmonious blend of colours distinguished the products of Jahangir's school. The circumstances of the artists themselves also underwent a change. Shah Jahan reduced the number of Court artists, keeping under his immediate patronage only a limited band of the most expert painters, and thus forced the large concourse of craftsmen, who had depended entirely on the ruler for livelihood, to seek the patronage at the Court grandees and nobility. The art ceased in fact to be an imperial monopoly though encouragement was still given to it by members of the imperial family, such as Dara Shikoh, whose album of paintings, now in the India Office, proves that he was a patron of the art. But all the painters who thronged the Court at the close of Jahangir's reign could not hope to obtain employment with the leading nobles, and those who failed to secure such patronage were forced to set up small studios in the bazaars of northern India and endeavour to earn a livelihood by selling their pictures to the general public. The public, however, which could appreciate and afford to purchase the artist's productions was very limited, and the status and prestige of those painters who did not enjoy the protection of the Court or the nobility gradually declined until they ranked little higher than artisans. Bernier describes this aspect of commercial art in the middle of the seventeenth century stating that the painters worked in halls in the cities under the eye of a master had no chance of attaining distinction and were inadequately remunerated for
their work. This system had barely commenced during the reign of Shah Jahan; but it unquestionably originated in that Emperor’s restriction of his patronage to a small body of artists, and in the growing inability of the nobles to find the means to support a large body of trained artists in the style to which they had been accustomed in the golden age of Akbar and Jahangir. Portraiture and representations of the imperial darbars continued to be favourite subjects of the painter’s art under Shah Jahan; brilliant colours and much gold are to be seen in the darbar of that Emperor preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. In Mr. Percy Brown’s words ‘one detects behind all the lavish display which is the main characteristic of the painting under Shah Jahan, that sense of over-ripeness which is the sure sign of decline’.  

Aurangzeb, personally regarded painting with antipathy as an infringement of the injunctions of Islam. He is reported to have defaced many of the paintings in the Asar Mahal at Bijapur; and Manucci records that under his express orders the figures in Akbar’s tomb at Sikandarah were covered with a coat of whitewash. Nevertheless the painters still practised their art during his reign, particularly those who were skilled in portraiture, and the number of paintings actually produced was certainly as large as the number produced under his predecessors. Many of these include a portrait of the emperor himself, and were therefore presumably painted with his sanction. They depict him hunting, traveling, reading, or commanding his army, as for example at the siege of Bijapur in 1686, which forms the subject of a painting preserved in the Rampur State Library. In one instance, referred to by Professor J.N. Sarkar, he actually made use of the painter’s skill to provide himself with a record of the health of a rebellious son. During the incarceration of Muhammad Sultan, his portrait was painted at regular intervals by order of the Emperor and submitted to the latter for inspection. He thus kept himself informed of his son's
condition, without the necessity of visiting him or having him brought into his presence from the fortress of Gwalior. But, speaking generally, despite considerable activity in the production of pictures, the art of painting showed distinct degeneration during Aurangzeb's reign.

The paintings executed during the reigns of the early Mughal sovereigns have been justly praised by experts for their artistic qualities, and by historians for the valuable sidelight which they throw on the habits and customs of the ruling classes of that epoch. They also form a valuable commentary on the daily life of the Emperors themselves. We see Babur receiving a deputation in a garden at Agra. Masons are seen at work on the walls and towers of
Fatehpur-Sikri. Akbar's elephant is depicted in a rage destroying a boat-bridge. The great Emperor himself can be seen hunting tigers and deer, or lying asleep under a rock. Jahangir is shown at the moment of killing a lion. Shah Jahan appears at one time visiting a religious teacher and at another enthroned amid splendours of the Diwan-i-Aam. Occasionally, one comes across scenes from zenana life, though these are rare in the best period of the art, and probably belong to the period of slow decay which commenced in the early years of Aurangzeb's reign and ended about the middle of the eighteenth century. The disintegration of the Empire necessarily involved the dispersal of the artists, who migrated from the capital to other centres like Oudh and Hyderabad, where new dynasties had declared their independence and appeared to offer fresh opportunities of employment. Some of the painters wandered eastwards to Patna: others sought the protection at Mysore, and there carried on the old traditions until the middle of the nineteenth century. But the art of painting never recovered its former spirit and excellence because of poor support it received during the period of decline was trivial, both in extent and quality, by comparison with the wealth and inspiration accorded to it by the masterminds of the Great Mughals.\(^{39}\)
Notes and References


15. The fame of Taj mahal has overshadowed that of another and earlier tomb, also built by Shah Jahan, the beautiful mausoleum of his father at Shahdara, near Lahore. Though badly damaged in the days of Ranjit Singh it still remains an object of great beauty. As in the case of the Taj mahal, rumour has for many years ascribed much of the work to European agency, Jahangir’s famous consort, Nur Jahan, lies buried
close by, in a mot unpretentious tomb, an indication perhaps of the comparative oblivion into which she fell after the death of her husband.


18. *Tuzuk*, II, pp. 73-75; In 1616, six *bulghurkhana* were read, a further 24 were supposed to be built, *Tuzuk*, p. 205.

19. P. Brown, *Indian Painting under the Mughals*.

20. *Ibid*.


22. S. Lane-Poole, *Babar* (Rulers of India Series), p. 149.


30. P. Brown. *Indian Painting under the Mughals*, p. 64.


35. P. Brown, *p. 71*
36. L. Binyon, *Court Painters, B.C., passim*; P. Brown, *Indian Painting*, B.C., passim. Three beautiful paintings of this period have recently been found in Jaipur – one is believed to be a portrait of the saint Salim Chishti in extreme old age.

37. P. Brown, p. 98.
