



THE BARA GUMBAD AND THE BARA GUMBAD MOSQUE: A STUDY OF THE TWO LODI MONUMENTS IN THE LODI GARDEN

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ABSTRACT

The Lodi architecture plays an important role in the history of medieval Indian architecture. It bridges the gap between Sultanate and Mughal architecture. Among the many monuments of Lodi era, Bara Gumbad complex is one of the finest architectural specimen of Lodi period. The Bara Gumbad, or "big dome," is a large domed structure grouped together with the Friday mosque popularly known as the Bara Gumbad mosque of Sikander Lodi (1489-1517) and a mehman khana (guesthouse), located in the Lodi Garden. Bara Gumbad mosque was built in 1494 by one Abu Amjad during Sikandar Lodi's reign. Bara Gumbad seems to be a gateway of the attached mosque due to the absence of any tombstone in the hall of the Bara Gumbad and due to the absence of a mihrab in the western wall. Bara Gumbad mosque was probably the first example of the new type. The influence of Tughlaq architecture is reflected in this mosque but with a new style of the Lodis. The three central bays were topped with domes crowned with lotus finials, a feature that later became a standard form of rendering the dome in Mughal mosques. The present study is an attempt to highlight the architectural features of the Bara Gumbad and the Bara Gumbad mosque which has yet not been done by the scholars separately.

KEYWORDS: Bara Gumbad, Bara Gumbad Mosque

INTRODUCTION

The architectural history of the Lodi dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate can be located within a larger field of socio-cultural, political and economic history of the dynasty. Indeed architecture reflects with greater exactitude the progress or decadence of any society than any branch of human culture. In the progress of architecture one can discover the socio-cultural environment of contemporary society and man's attitude towards life. Also the aesthetic taste which actuated man to combine beauty with utility can be detected in the development of architecture. However, the particularities of any specific architectural production are equally important. Highlighting these two important dimensions of architectural history Monica Juneja asserts:

“Any attempt to situate the study of architecture at the crossroads of a history of culture, society and politics must, however, be equally rooted within the particularities of architecture as a form of artistic-cum-scientific production in which the iconic, the spatial, the functional, and the technical come together. In other words, the centrality of forms and techniques to understanding the ways in which architectural creations

are embedded in larger discourses and practices needs to be recognized.”¹

The study of architectural history of the Lodi dynasty is no exception to this historical process. The architectural remains of this dynasty are the product particular historical processes.

Lodi dynasty came to power after Sayyid dynasty. Lodi era witnessed something of a revival of the truncated sultanate though could not last. After the sack of Delhi by Timur, with passage of time political situation stabilized. In this scenario Lodis came to power and three rulers of the Lodi dynasty spent most of their time in subduing their adversaries but, the building art was not overlooked. The reign of Lodis was marked primarily by the construction of tombs, mosques, *baolis* etc. The Lodi architecture plays an important role in the history of medieval Indian architecture. It bridges the gap between Sultanate and Mughal architecture.

Among the many monuments of Lodi era, Bara Gumbad is one of the finest architectural specimens of Lodi period. It along with the Bara Gumbad mosque and a *mehmankhana* (guesthouse) are located in the Lodi Garden.

The Lodi Garden is situated on Lodi road between Safdarjung's Tomb and Khan Market in South Delhi. Lodi garden was planned in 1936 to arrange a group of buildings belonging to the Saiyyid , Lodi and Mughal dynasties. Previously, it was village of Khairpur where people lived. But, later in 1936 the villagers were removed and a garden was planned around the monuments. The garden was named Lady Willingdon Park according to the wife of the British viceroy. When India got independence, then it was renamed Lodi Garden. The garden setup, as it is today was planned in 1968 by J.A. Stein, an eminent architect.

Bara Gumbad is a Lodi period structure. Bara Gumbad simply means big (bada) dome (gumbad). Bara Gumbad, Bara Gumbad mosque and *mehmankhana* although were constructed during same Lodi dynasty, but they were built separately, to say, in different time. The Bara Gumbad (1494 AD) was the first in Delhi where full dome was built. The Bara Gumbad mosque, constructed in 1494 AD, plays important role in the evolution of mosque architecture as it enhanced a new type of mosque architecture developed during Lodi period.

The Bara Gumbad complex is 300 m. far away from Muhammad Shah's tomb. Sikandar Lodi's tomb is situated at a distance of 380 m. from Bara Gumbad complex. Shish Gumbad is situated on the northern side of Bara Gumbad approximately at a distance of 75 m. The buildings are set on a high platform which is 3 m. in height. The raised platform measures 30 m. by 25 m. In front of northern side of Bara Gumbad, there lies a courtyard 104' by 82'. In the centre of this courtyard, there is a raised platform originally faced with red stone, on which stands a ruined grave. It is said that it is the grave of the founder of the mosque. On the eastern side of the courtyard, in the form of border, there are arched apartments (*mehmankhana*) for the use of the readers of the Quran. The *mehmankhana* is a simple, practical building. On the western side of the courtyard, there is a mosque, known as Bara Gumbad mosque. On the southern side, three structures are connected by a stone masonry wall which is

six meters in height. The access to the platform is provided through the staircases. There is a straight flight of eight steps that joins the ground with the platform.

Bara Gumbad is square in plan measuring approximately 20 meters per side and 29 meters in height. Set on a plinth 3 meters high, it joins the common plinth on the north and projects beyond it to the south. Its plinth is decorated on the east, south and west with ogee arch openings set into rectangular frames. These give access to a basement. The walls of the Bara Gumbad are approximately 12 meters tall, above which rises a hemispherical dome on a hex decagonal drum extends another 14 meters from the roof level. The total height of the building is 29 meters above ground level. Each side of this lofty structure has an arched opening, intended as doorways.² Bara Gumbad has a two storeyed exterior. The two stories are not definite floors, but arcaded zones for architectural decoration.³ The façade of each side of Bara Gumbad is beautifully arranged. In each side of its exterior there is a projecting central bay which contains door openings framed in double recessed ogee arch (30'8" in height) set in a rectangular frame (8 m. wide) which rises approximately 75 cm above the parapet line of the building. The 1.5 m. wide frame is made of dressed grey stone. Black marble spandrels ornamented with white marble bosses is found in the gap between recessed arch and central bay.⁴

In each side of Bara Gumbad there is an entrance of trabeate order made of lintel and bracket. The brackets are made of red sandstone and the lintels are made of black granite. Grey stone posts hold on the brackets. The brackets and the lintel are beautified by carved red sandstone. A small arch window is situated on top of the trabeated entrance. The piers of the arches are made of local stone relieved at intervals by six niche shaped panels in red sandstone.⁵ A row of nine niche shaped panels also run across the top of the arch. The top of the central projecting bay is 2'7" higher than the cresting of the main wall. There are turrets at the upper corners of the central projecting bays. At the four corners of the main walls, there are fluted *guldastas*. There is a blind parapet with arched crenellations above the external walls which surrounds the roof. Below the parapet, a moulded string course runs around the external wall. On both side of the central bay, there are two storey projections which contain two rows of niche shaped panels. Here the spandrels are of red sandstone. Height and width of each panel are 9 feet and 3 feet respectively. The lowest niches besides the opening doorways are left open for providing light inside the chamber. These niche shaped panels are made of granite masonry.

The dome of Bara Gumbad rests on a drum which is sixteen sided. On all the sides there is a panel contains niche with spandrels. There is a lotus bud frieze over the panel which is further superimposed by a string course which is moulded. Above it is a fully developed hemispherical dome. The dome is plastered externally. The crowning element of the dome is a lotus finial or *padmakosha*. The entry to the structure is provided through a raised courtyard on the north side and through a double set of steps on the west side of the dome. The interior of Bara Gumbad is comprised of a single chamber with sunk archways on each side. There is lack of surface ornamentation inside the Bara Gumbad. The interior is simple which is made of dressed granite. The phase of transition to crown the dome has been achieved by

squinches. Floral inscriptions in the form of two bands decorate the peak of the dome. What was the real motive to construct the Bara Gumbad is still unknown due to lack of historical inscriptions. In Bara Gumbad, there are carved inscriptions of Quranic verses on the red stone lintels of entrances on all the four sides.⁶ Quranic verses from Chapter 6 (al-Anam), Chapter 43 (az-Zukhruf), Chapter 60 (al-Mumtahina), Chapter 37 (as-Saffat), chapter 38 (Saad), Chapter 28 (al-Qasas) of the Holy Quran has been used.⁷

The Bara Gumbad mosque is rectangular in plan. It was built in 1494 by one Abu Amjad during Sikandar Lodi's reign.⁸ It is a single hall measuring about 25 m. by 6.5 m.⁹ The mosque has five arched opening on the eastern side leads to five bays of unusual shape. The arched openings are of same height but of unusual shape proportions and character. Over the arches except the central one runs a *chajja*. The piers of the arches are made of grey stone. A rectangular frame of 8 m. by 6 m. which is slightly projected contains the central arch. The projecting rectangular frame contains ogee arches with four receding planes and the outer one is at the same level with the surface of the rectangular portal. The arches adjacent to the central arch are 5 m. wide and the arches of the extreme side ones are 1.5 m. wide with two receding planes of ogee arches. Arches are covered with plaster and decorated with carved Arabic inscriptions. There are geometric motifs in the spandrels and round plaster medallions. The *chajja* is made of red sandstone and rests on stone brackets. There is a horizontal band in the cornice above the *chajja*. Above it is a blind parapet.

The three central bays are decorated over with profuse plaster ornamentation on the piers and the arches contain quotations from the Holy Quran.¹⁰ Low hemispherical domes cover the three central chambers while the end bays are covered by flat vaulted ceilings. The central dome is larger than others.

The *Qibla* (Western) wall of the mosque is divided into five bays reflected as recessed ogee arched niches. The western wall provides *mihrab*. The phase of transition for making the hemispherical domes has been achieved by corbelled pendentives most elaborately carved and finished.¹¹ The corbelling occurs in four layers. In each layer there are curved niches contained in rectangular frames. The number of niches increases from the lower to upper layer. The octagonal drum converts into a hexadecagon which further transforms into a 32 sided polygon with small struts. There are shallow niches in each side of the hexadecagon. The 32 sided drum has a red sandstone projecting band and another band of inscriptions. The dome is hemispherical and covered with plain plaster. Inscriptions stuccoed in masonry work cover the pendentives. The central dome is larger than the side ones. The northern and southern wall of the mosque is punctured by ogee arch doorways. There are projecting balconies on the northern and southern side supported on red sandstone brackets. The projection of oriel window is also found on the exterior of *mihrab* wall. The plinth on the western side has five ogee arch opening contained in frames which leads to vaulted rooms which are closed now by iron rods. The rear external angles of the mosque as well as the *mihrab* bay projecting from the back of the western wall are occupied by tapering minarets topped with lotus cresting which is a Tughlaq influence.¹² The upper central portions of these turrets are alternately shaped into

angular and circular flutes.¹³ The mosque is remarkable for its elaborate cut plaster decoration of a refined order.¹⁴

The exterior wall of the mosque on northern, southern and western side was covered with plaster above the plinth level but now in many places especially on the southern and northern side plaster work has vanished. The use of coloured tiles for making conventional foliage and for relieving Quranic verses incised in plaster add much glory to the ornamentation of the mosque. The inscription over the southern *mihrab* reveals that the mosque was built in the year 1494 AD.¹⁵ Above the southern *mihrab* in Naskh characters incised in plaster is a Persian inscription in prose, calling the monument the Jami Masjid of Sikandar Shah Lodi, and recording its erection on the 1st of Rabi' I, 900 A.H.(30th November, 1494 AD).¹⁶

Situated on the eastern border of the common courtyard is a rectangular chamber which is known as *mehmankhana*. It is 27 m. by 7 m. in size. This building is divided into five bays. There are three ogee arch opening and the extreme side chambers has window arch opening. The arches are set in rectangular frames. There are red sandstone spandrels and round plaster medallions in it. A continuous *chajja* supported on brackets runs just beneath the cornice. The roof is flat. Above the *chajja* is a horizontal band projecting from the parapet level. The interior is divided into several chambers, with the central one being the largest. The chambers are interlinked by ogee arched opening set in rectangular frame.

Bara Gumbad plays an important role in the evolution of square type tomb buildings. Though, square type tombs with new features are found prior to the Bara Gumbad in the Lodi period, they are of primitive stages. Bara Gumbad unlike Tughlaq tombs is devoid of batter along its external walls. In Bara Gumbad the monotony of square type tombs prevailing in previous regimes was broken. The exterior of Bara Gumbad gives an impression of two storeyed buildings like Alai darwaza. The dome of Bara Gumbad is complete hemispherical. The two storey exterior features were not of much use during Tughlaq and Sayyid period. It revives under the Lodis. The dome of Bara Gumbad influenced the double dome of the tomb of Sikandar Lodi. The double dome became the characteristic features of Mughal architecture. Cunningham compares the Bara gumbad with the famous Alai Darwaza constructed by Alauddin Khalji and his opinion is shared by James Fergusson.¹⁷ Though the exterior of Bara Gumbad and Alai Darwaza resembles to some extent but the two are different in style. For example, the arches of Bara Gumbad have no fringe of spear heads at the intrados and the walls of Bara Gumbad are left uncarved unlike Alai Darwaza. But, in its grandeur it is perhaps unequalled in the ruins of Delhi save by its prototype.¹⁸ Before the Lodis, elaborate square tombs were built only for kings, members of the royal family and highly venerated saints.¹⁹ But during Lodi era, square type tombs were built for nobles and octagonal tombs were built for the kings except the tomb of Bahlol Lodi. One of the best examples of square type tomb during Lodi period is Bara Gumbad.

Under the Lodis a new type of mosque developed, one that ultimately became a major type in Mughal India.²⁰ Certain of the mosques under earliest sultanate dynasties are so designed that they could be readily put into a state of defence. But,

the fronts of the Lodi mosques were not giving any defence like external appearance like their predecessors. In lieu of the large congregational mosque favoured under earlier sultanate dynasties, small single aisled mosques composed usually of three or five bays were constructed.²¹ Bara Gumbad mosque represents the new mosque type that evolved in the Lodi period. Subsequent examples include the Moth-ki-Masjid (1505), Jamala Masjid (1536) and the Qila-i-Kuhna Masjid (1550). Bara Gumbad mosque plays an important role in the evolution of mosque architecture in India. It was the predecessor of mosque architecture of the Sur and Mughal eras. The builders of the Lodi mosques were trying to get rid of the Tughlaq influence not only by arriving at a novel form but also by doing away with some elements of design in the search for a new solution. The result was that while the front façade of the prayer hall was liberated of the baggage of the past, the rear was still under the Tughlaq influences as is evident from the two Lodi era mosques namely the Bara Gumbad mosque and the Moth-ki-Masjid.

On the basis of the Quranic verses inscribed in the four entrances of the Bara Gumbad some scholars have tried to project Bara Gumbad as a tomb in contrary to the present gateway type appearance of the structure. Yet, the absence of any tombstone in the Bara Gumbad creates confusion about the exact purpose of this square building.

CONCLUSION

The particularities of the two Lodi monuments of Lodi Garden project not only their uniqueness but these architectural products also speak of the times of building. The builders of these monuments tried to shake off the Tughlaq influence and searched new solutions. The result was the connecting link with the subsequent Mughal architectural products. The architectural design of these monuments highlights the rulers' preoccupations with other pressing socio-cultural and political issues, as their simple architecture and small scale design indicate.

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Fig.1. Front view of Bara Gumbad mosque



Fig.2. Inside view of Bara Gumbad mosque



Fig.3. Dome of Bara Gumbad



Fig..4. Eastern view of Bara Gumbad



Fig.5. Mehmankhana



Fig.6. Northern side of Bara Gumbad mosque



Fig.7. Bara Gumbad complex

