

ARCHITECTURE AND ARISTOCRACY: THE CULTURAL EXPRESSION OF THE SULTANATE NOBILITY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

RAFIA ASHRAF BHAT

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNJAB,
INDIA, EMAIL ID: rafiabhat9@gmail.com

TARIQ AHMAD SHEIKH

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY, PUNJAB,
INDIA, EMAIL ID: tariq.21368@lpu.co.in

AMITA GUPTA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU, JAMMU AND KASHMIR, INDIA, EMAIL
ID: amita.ccrcc@ujammu.ac.in

Abstract:

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) marked a transformative era in India's architectural and cultural history, characterized by the fusion of Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous traditions. Within this milieu, the Sultanate nobility emerged not only as political elites but also as significant patrons of architecture who articulated their identity, prestige, and authority through the built environment. This paper explores the architectural endeavours of the Sultanate nobility as expressions of cultural sophistication, social status, and political legitimacy. Through an analysis of mosques, tombs, madrasas, and palatial complexes commissioned by nobles across Delhi, Jaunpur, Gulbarga, and other provincial centres, the study highlights how architecture functioned as a medium of self-representation and devotion. Drawing upon primary sources such as the *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, and epigraphic records, along with archaeological and art-historical evidence, the paper examines the spatial aesthetics, symbolic motifs, and patronage networks that defined noble architecture. The research underscores that the architectural patronage of the nobility not only reinforced hierarchical order and courtly culture but also contributed to the evolution of the Indo-Islamic architectural style that shaped the subcontinent's medieval urban landscape. Ultimately, the study situates the Sultanate nobility as vital agents in India's architectural heritage, whose edifices embodied both power and piety in stone.

Keywords: Delhi Sultanate; Nobility; Architectural Patronage; Indo-Islamic Architecture; Cultural Expression; Medieval India; Aristocratic Identity; Political Legitimacy

INTRODUCTION:

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) marked a formative phase in the evolution of Indo-Islamic architecture, representing a unique synthesis of Persian, Central Asian, and indigenous Indian artistic traditions (Asher, 1992). The establishment of successive dynasties—the Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, and Lodis—created an environment of intense political competition and cultural innovation, where architecture became an essential medium of legitimization and identity formation (Eaton, 2005). While the monumental works of the Sultans—such as the Qutub Minar or the Alai Darwaza—have received considerable scholarly attention, the architectural contributions of the Sultanate nobility remain comparatively underexplored. The nobles, functioning as governors, generals, and courtiers, were not merely administrators but influential patrons who expressed their authority, piety, and social aspirations through architectural patronage (Alvi, 2016).

The architectural undertakings of the Sultanate nobility encompassed a variety of structures—mosques, madrasas, tombs, and caravanserais—that combined functional, religious, and commemorative purposes. These edifices reflected the dual impulses of devotion and prestige, symbolizing both loyalty to the Sultan and a quest for personal immortality through monumental construction (Digby, 1989). Figures such as Khan-i-Jahan Tilangani, who commissioned the Khirki Masjid and Begumpur Mosque during the Tughlaq period, exemplify how nobles used architecture to project administrative efficiency and spiritual devotion simultaneously (Nath, 1978). Moreover, the nobles' interaction with local artisans and builders facilitated a process of artistic negotiation, leading to a hybrid aesthetic that blended Islamic geometric precision with Indian spatial sensibilities (Blake, 1991).

This paper argues that the architectural patronage of the Sultanate nobility was not an isolated artistic phenomenon but a conscious articulation of aristocratic culture, social hierarchy, and political communication. By situating noble architecture within its broader historical, religious, and socio-political milieu, the study aims to uncover how these elites shaped the architectural and cultural ethos of medieval Delhi. Through the lens of patronage, symbolism, and stylistic evolution, the paper re-evaluates the nobility's role as vital agents in the development of the Indo-Islamic architectural tradition, bridging royal ambition with regional expression and enduring aesthetic legacy.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY:

The study is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the architectural patronage of the Delhi Sultanate nobility (1206–1526).

Primary sources include medieval Persian chronicles, epigraphic inscriptions, and travel accounts that record architectural activities, patronage systems, and the socio-political milieu of the time. Key among these are *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by Minhaj-us-Siraj, *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi* by Ziauddin Barani, and *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi* by Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi, which provide valuable information on courtly life, administrative hierarchy, and noble contributions to urban and architectural development. Inscriptions recorded by the Archaeological Survey of India further offer concrete evidence of dates, patron names, and religious dedications associated with noble monuments. Supplementary data are also drawn from travelers' narratives, such as those of Ibn Battuta and Amir Khusrau, which illuminate the cultural ambiance and artistic tendencies of the Sultanate elite (Eaton, 2005; Nizami, 1999).

Secondary sources include the works of modern historians and art historians who have critically examined Indo-Islamic architecture and patronage. Important contributions by R. Nath (1978), Catherine B. Asher (1992), and Percy Brown (1942) provide art-historical interpretations of Sultanate architectural forms, while Richard Eaton (2005) and K.A. Nizami (1999) contextualize the socio-political and cultural dimensions of noble patronage. These studies help situate the architectural activities of the nobility within broader frameworks of cultural synthesis, power expression, and religious devotion.

METHODOLOGY:

The research employs a historical-analytical and interpretive methodology, combining textual analysis with architectural and cultural interpretation. The first stage involves the critical examination of primary sources to extract references to noble patronage, construction motives, and stylistic innovations. Chronological mapping and cross-referencing of these sources allow for a reconstruction of the architectural trends and regional variations across different dynasties.

The second stage focuses on architectural analysis, including stylistic comparison and symbolic interpretation of surviving monuments attributed to noble patrons, such as the Khirki Masjid, Begumpur Mosque, and tombs of prominent nobles. This is complemented by field reports and archaeological data published by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Indian History Congress proceedings.

The third stage adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from art history, political history, and cultural studies to explore how architecture functioned as a medium of social identity, political legitimacy, and cultural expression. By correlating literary narratives with material evidence, the study seeks to understand how the Sultanate nobility negotiated their position within the imperial hierarchy and expressed it through architectural patronage.

Ultimately, this methodology allows for a holistic appreciation of the architectural, ideological, and cultural roles played by the Delhi Sultanate nobility in shaping medieval India's built environment.

Political and Cultural Context of Noble Patronage under the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) emerged as one of the most complex and multi-layered political systems in medieval India, defined by the interplay between the central authority of the Sultan and the powerful provincial nobility. The Sultanate's political structure relied heavily on an intricate hierarchy of nobles, including amirs, maliks, iqtadars, and umara, who were entrusted with administrative, military, and fiscal responsibilities (Jackson, 1999). These nobles, drawn primarily from Turkic, Afghan, and Persian backgrounds, formed the backbone of the Sultanate's governance. Their loyalty and efficiency were rewarded with iqta grants—revenue assignments that simultaneously conferred wealth and local influence (Habib, 1981). This system not only sustained the state's military-administrative machinery but also provided the material basis for noble patronage of art and architecture.

Political Patronage and Assertion of Authority

The nobles' architectural patronage was deeply intertwined with their quest for legitimacy and authority. Within the Sultanate's centralized yet factional political framework, architectural patronage became a means of expressing loyalty to the Sultan while simultaneously asserting regional autonomy (Eaton, 2005). The construction of mosques, madrasas, tombs, and fortifications by nobles symbolized their role as custodians of both political order and religious virtue. For instance, Khan-i-Jahan Tilangani, the wazir of Firoz Shah Tughlaq, commissioned the Begumpur Mosque

and the Khirki Masjid, monumental works that reflected his administrative stature and spiritual piety (Nath, 1978). Similarly, the governors of Bengal and Jaunpur, such as Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah and Malik Sarwar, developed distinctive provincial architectural styles that reflected both allegiance to Delhi and regional identity (Asher, 1992).

Cultural and Religious Dimensions

Beyond politics, architecture served as a cultural expression of faith and identity. The Sultanate nobility positioned themselves as patrons of Islamic learning and Sufi piety, aligning their constructions with spiritual legitimacy. Many nobles sponsored madrasas and khanqahs, linking themselves to influential Sufi orders like the Chishtis and Suhrawardis (Nizami, 1999). Such patronage not only enhanced their moral prestige but also strengthened their social base within the urban populace. The integration of mosques and tombs within residential complexes further demonstrates how architecture functioned as both devotional and commemorative space—a means of securing both worldly honor and spiritual remembrance.

Socio-Aesthetic Synthesis

The cultural atmosphere of the Delhi Sultanate was one of synthesis and adaptation. The nobles, though foreign in origin, interacted extensively with Indian artisans and craftsmen, fostering a hybrid Indo-Islamic aesthetic characterized by the fusion of Islamic structural principles with indigenous decorative motifs (Brown, 1942). Features such as corbelled arches, lotus medallions, and Hindu spolia within Islamic monuments illustrate the creative negotiation between imported and local traditions. This synthesis mirrored the broader sociopolitical process of accommodation, where foreign elites gradually embedded themselves within the Indian milieu through artistic patronage.

Architectural Features and Innovations of Noble Constructions

The architectural patronage of the Delhi Sultanate nobility demonstrates a remarkable blend of aesthetic innovation, functional design, and symbolic expression. While the Sultan's constructions often set the tone for monumental architecture, noble patrons contributed significantly to the development of Indo-Islamic architectural vocabulary, leaving behind a legacy that reflects both political authority and cultural sophistication.

Mosques and Religious Structures

Noble-commissioned mosques were central to the assertion of piety and social status. A prominent example is the Begumpur Mosque, constructed under the patronage of Khan-i-Jahan Tilangani during the Tughlaq period. The mosque is distinguished by its extensive use of arches and domes, large open courtyards, and a distinctive square plan with vaulted bays—an innovation that became characteristic of Tughlaq-era mosque architecture (Nath, 1978). Similarly, the Khirki Masjid, also built by Tilangani, exemplifies an early adoption of a structural grid system, providing both functional ventilation and aesthetic rhythm. These designs reflect the nobles' engagement with Persian and Central Asian architectural principles, adapted to the local climatic and material conditions of Delhi (Asher, 1992). Daulat Shah Muhammad Al Butamari, the prominent Tughlaqi noble is said to have constructed several buildings especially the Jami Mosque at Cambay in 1325. It is the fusion of Indo Islamic architect. It has spacious designs and illustration at walls that increase its beauty (Zia-ud Din Ahmed Desai, 1970). Khilji noble Malik Naib constructed a Jami Mosque at Deogir. The Jami Masjid at Bulandshahr was constructed by Muhammad Jalal who was the Muharrir (secretary) to Mahmud, who was a kotwal of that area. (Khawaja Abdul Malik Isami, Futuh-us-Salatin, 1977).

Malik Saifuddin Daulat Wad'din Yusuf Khani constructed Idgah at Jajmau during the reign of Ala ud Din Khilji. Later Malik Kafur also constructed a Idgah at Rapri in U.P. construction of these Idgah were very beautified and walls and bricks were ornamented. (Daya Ram Sahni, Annual report of ASI, 1920-30, Delhi, 1990)

Tombs and Funerary Architecture

Funerary monuments commissioned by nobles were intended as both devotional spaces and symbols of enduring prestige. Tombs such as those of Malik Altunia and provincial governors often feature octagonal or square plans, domed roofs, and intricate stone carvings, demonstrating the synthesis of Islamic geometry with indigenous motifs (Brown, 1942). Decorative elements such as floral patterns, calligraphy, and lattice screens (jali work) not only enhanced visual appeal but also conveyed the spiritual aspirations of the patron. Funerary complexes frequently included mosques and gardens, highlighting the nobles' desire to integrate religious observance with commemoration, creating multifunctional architectural ensembles (Eaton, 2005). Malik Sher Khan who was cousin of Balban had built a tomb in Bhatnir. Similarly, Fakhruddin Kotwal also constructed a mausoleum at Delhi. (Barani, 2005). Malik Zainuddin Majdul-Mulk, muqti of Bihar under Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, had a constructed a Khanqah for Shiekh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri. (Barani, 2005). Sijzi mentioned that Nizamuddin Kharitahdar had built a Khanqah for Shaikh Burhanuddin Ghaznavi. (Sijzi, 1995)

Caravanserais and Palatial Complexes:

Beyond religious and funerary structures, nobles contributed to the urban and civic landscape through the construction of caravanserais (sarais), markets, and palaces. These constructions facilitated trade, governance, and social interaction while simultaneously projecting noble authority and wealth. The layout of such complexes often incorporated fortified walls, large courtyards, and audience halls, reflecting a combination of practical requirements and aesthetic sensibilities (Nizami, 1999). Malik Sher Khan founded the city of Bhatnir. Malik Bahauddin Tughril founder the

strategic city at Sultankot in the territory of Bayana and made it his headquarter. Malik Zafar Khan, Tughlaqid noble, had founded a city Zafarabad on the bank of Gumti River at Jaunpur district and named Shahr-i-Anwar. (Hasan Nizami, Taj-ul Ma'athir, 2008)

The Delhi Sultanate nobility played a crucial role in introducing structural innovations such as corbelled arches, vaulted ceilings, and multi-bayed halls, adapting Persianate architectural vocabulary to Indian materials and spatial needs. The integration of indigenous stone carving, jaali work, and spolia from earlier Hindu and Jain structures created a hybrid Indo-Islamic style, which balanced functionality, ornamentation, and symbolism (Asher, 1992; Nath, 1978). These innovations demonstrate that noble architecture was not merely imitative but experiential and experimental, reflecting the creativity and ambition of Delhi's elite. The nobles even made efforts to build strategic forts. Malik Husamuddin Iwaz Husain Khalji, a Shamsi noble, had constructed the fort of Basankot. Malik Sher Khan, cousin of Balban, had built several forts and a lofty cupola in Bathinda and Bhatnir. These two places soon developed as important towns of Delhi Sultanate. (Minhaj, 1970). Khan-i-Azam Khaqan-i-Muazzam Majlis-i-Ali Azam Khan (son of Mubarak Khan) constructed the fort of the town of Fathpur (Bharatpur, Rajasthan). Khan-i-Azam Zafar Khan, son of Wajih, muqti of Gujarat constructed a string fort at Mangrol in 1400 A.D.

The architectural contributions of the Delhi Sultanate nobility reveal a sophisticated interplay of political ambition, religious devotion, and artistic innovation. By constructing mosques, tombs, palaces, and civic structures, nobles articulated their social identity and cultural authority while advancing the stylistic evolution of Indo-Islamic architecture. These monuments remain enduring symbols of the Delhi nobility's capacity to merge power with aesthetic and spiritual expression, shaping both the physical and cultural landscapes of medieval India.

Nobles frequently constructed wells, step wells, lakes, canals and tanks for irrigation as well as for the use of common people and travellers. An inscription from Rajasthan records the construction of a well, tank and a mosque in the time of Malik Bahauddin Tughril. Inscription from Bayana records the clearance and re-digging of a well during the time of Balban and governorship of Nusrat Khan, muqtis of Bayana.

Symbolism and Cultural Significance of Noble Architecture

The architectural patronage of the Delhi Sultanate nobility was not limited to functional or aesthetic purposes; it carried deep symbolic and cultural meanings. Noble constructions served as instruments of political legitimacy, social identity, and religious devotion, communicating messages to contemporaries and posterity alike.

In a Sultanate society where power was closely linked to proximity to the throne, nobles employed architecture as a visible marker of status and authority. Mosques, madrasas, tombs, and palatial complexes projected the noble's allegiance to the Sultan while simultaneously asserting personal prestige. The scale, layout, and ornamentation of these structures were carefully calibrated to reflect hierarchical rank. For example, the monumental Begumpur Mosque, with its extensive courtyard and robust Tughlaq-style arches, symbolized both administrative competence and elevated social standing (Nath, 1978). Such constructions reinforced the political hierarchy, ensuring that the noble's influence extended beyond governance into the urban and cultural fabric of Delhi.

Religious devotion was a central aspect of noble identity. Architectural patronage allowed nobles to publicly display piety, associating themselves with Islamic moral and spiritual ideals. Many structures were intentionally integrated with mosques, madrasas, and Sufi khanqahs, reflecting a connection to learning and spiritual guidance (Nizami, 1999). Funerary monuments, adorned with calligraphy and geometric patterns, not only commemorated the deceased but also symbolized the quest for spiritual immortality, linking worldly prestige with religious merit (Brown, 1942).

Cultural Expression and Indo-Islamic Synthesis

Noble architecture also reflects the cultural synthesis characteristic of the Delhi Sultanate. By blending Persianate and Central Asian elements with indigenous Indian craftsmanship, nobles produced a hybrid style that expressed cosmopolitan identity and cultural sophistication. Features such as jali screens, corbelled arches, and spolia from earlier temples demonstrate a conscious negotiation between imported and local artistic vocabularies (Asher, 1992). This synthesis symbolized not only aesthetic taste but also the elite's ability to mediate between diverse cultural traditions, thereby reinforcing their authority and legitimacy within a plural society.

Many noble constructions were strategically located within urban centers or along trade routes, reflecting an awareness of public visibility and social function. Caravanserais, palaces, and markets facilitated commerce and civic interaction while simultaneously signaling noble patronage. These structures acted as nodes of social and cultural engagement, linking elite authority to broader community networks and ensuring that the noble's presence was felt both politically and culturally (Eaton, 2005). The Delhi Sultanate nobility used architecture as a multi-layered tool of expression—simultaneously asserting political power, religious devotion, cultural sophistication, and social identity. Their monuments were not merely functional or decorative; they were carefully constructed symbols of authority and cultural vision, designed to endure across generations. Through these structures, nobles left an indelible imprint on the cultural and urban landscape of medieval Delhi, contributing to the development of a distinct Indo-Islamic architectural traditions.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the architectural patronage of the Sultanate nobility cannot be understood in isolation from the political and cultural context of medieval Delhi. It represented a confluence of power, piety, and prestige, where architecture functioned as both a political statement and a cultural bridge. Through their monumental works, the nobles not only legitimized their authority but also contributed to shaping the enduring Indo-Islamic architectural tradition that defined the medieval Indian landscape.

The architectural patronage of the Delhi Sultanate nobility represents a critical dimension of medieval Indian cultural and political history. Through the construction of mosques, madrasas, tombs, palaces, and civic structures, the nobility articulated authority, piety, and social prestige, leaving a lasting imprint on Delhi's urban and cultural landscape. Their monuments were not merely expressions of wealth or aesthetics; they were deliberate instruments of political communication, religious devotion, and cultural identity.

The study highlights how nobles used architecture to navigate and negotiate their position within the Sultanate hierarchy. By commissioning structures that combined functional efficiency with symbolic significance, they reinforced their loyalty to the Sultan while simultaneously projecting personal power and status. The integration of Persianate forms with indigenous Indian elements in noble constructions further demonstrates the creative synthesis characteristic of Indo-Islamic architecture, reflecting both adaptability and innovation.

Beyond stylistic contributions, noble patronage fostered social and cultural cohesion. Religious and educational structures facilitated the dissemination of Islamic learning and values, while civic constructions supported commerce, urban organization, and public engagement. These efforts reveal that the Delhi Sultanate nobility were not passive agents of the court but active shapers of cultural and architectural norms, whose legacies endure in the surviving monuments of Delhi and surrounding regions.

In conclusion, the architectural achievements of the Sultanate nobility offer insights into the interplay of politics, culture, and art in medieval India. Their constructions served as enduring symbols of power and piety, bridging royal authority, social identity, and aesthetic innovation. Recognizing their role expands our understanding of the multifaceted contributions of the nobility to India's Indo-Islamic architectural heritage, situating them as pivotal actors in the evolution of medieval Indian architecture.

A

- Alvi, A. A. (2016). *Islamic Architecture in India*. Roli Books.
- Asher, C. B. (1992). *Architecture of Mughal India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Barani, Zia, *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, ed. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Aligarh, 2005; Eng. tr. Elliot and Dowson, *History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol. III, New Delhi, 2001
- Blake, S. P. (1991). *Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639–1739*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P. (1942). *Indian Architecture: Islamic Period*. D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co.
- Digby, S. (1989). The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India. *Papers on Islamic History*, 3(1), 34–49.
- Eaton, R. M. (2005). *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Habib, I. (1981). *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire: Political and Economic Maps with Detailed Notes and Bibliography*. Oxford University Press.
- Isami, Khawaja Abdul Malik, *Futuh-us-Salatin*, Eng. tr. Agha Mahdi Hussain, *Futuh-us Salatin or Shahnama-i-Hind*, Bombay, 1977
- Jackson, P. (1999). *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nizami, K. A. (1999). *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*. Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli.
- Sahni, Daya Ram, *Annual report of ASI, 1920-30*, Delhi, 1990.
- Sijzi, Amir Hasan, *Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, Nawal Kishore Press, Lucknow, 1312 A.H./1894 A.D.; Eng. tr. Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, New Delhi, 1995.
- Siraj, Minhaj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, ed. Captain Nassau Lees, Mawlawis Khadim Hosain and Abd al-Hai, Calcutta, 1864; Eng. tr. Major Henry George Raverty, London, 1881; New Delhi, 1970.
- Zia-ud Din Ahmed Desai, *Indo Islamic Architecture*, Delhi.