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Mansions of the Gods and Visions of Paradise

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The culture of the Mughals left an indelible stamp on South Asia, particularly in court ceremonies, architecture, and visual arts. Many of the architectural elements that form their legacy were emulated by successor states to the Mughal empire. Some of the new state formations were merely splinters of the Mughal state, where the new rulers nominally claimed to be vassals. Others, like several Maratha states, had histories wherein they saw themselves as a resistance against the Mughals. However, while the empire was slowly being dismantled, every successor accepted the legitimacy of Mughal rule. In their quest to portray themselves as political descendants of the Mughals, they adopted the court culture and imperial architecture. Therefore, the Mughal political decline is also a period of cultural ascendancy. The most unlikely venue for Mughal architectural features was the Hindu temple, which had a long history of architecture, including its own logic and morphology. However, even the temples of the Marathas, possibly to keep up with the latest architectural trends and emblems of political power, and to enhance their prestige, borrowed Mughal architectural elements. Studies in the visual culture allow for nuanced counter-narratives, wherein the common binaries of religions, or political states completely dissolve into a single cultural matrix.

Maratha, Temple, Architecture, Mughal, Deccan

Introduction

Space-making through the use of architecture, often inadvertently embodies political and social relationships. There is also often the deliberate use of an architectural form for its cultural fashion. Even if architectural formations have their own historic and ontological genealogies, they are appropriated and naturalized into new contexts, formulations, and settings. Such is the case of several Mughal architectural forms that are used by the parvenu Maratha states in the 18th century. Bereft of an imperial architectural tradition, the Marathas appropriated Mughal forms for their mansions and domestic buildings, albeit with local materials. Thus, Mughal multifoil arches, baluster columns, and curvilinear ridged pavilions—all signature elements of post-Shah Jahan architecture, are ubiquitous in Maratha architecture of the 18th century. This imitation of Mughal architectural elements has been attributed to increased Maratha contact with Malwa and Rajasthan in the 18th century, and as Mate (2002: 146) writes: “The Marathas accepted these features and used them on such a vast scale that they can be said to be the chief characteristics of the Maratha architecture of the 18th century.” But that is the mere incidental explanation. There is also a purposeful appropriation of Mughal elements: in the second half of the 18th century, the high period of Maratha political expansion and architectural expression, we notice a great fascination for things from Hindustan (north India). A person no less than Balaji Bajirao (Nanasaheb) Peshwa (1720-1761 CE), the de facto ruler of the Maratha confederacy, expressed such a taste, and Kulkarni (2020: 36-37) quotes letters by the Peshwa in which he is completely taken in quotes letters by the Peshwa in which he is completely taken in by

north India, its people, fashion and manners. Architectural elements, motifs, and aediculas that were borrowed from a north Indian Mughal style were used in mansions and palaces, in administrative and residential buildings. The Mughals remained central to Maratha imagination in terms of material culture and memory in equivocal ways, depending on periodic and political anxieties and aspirations.

Maratha temple architecture followed a slightly different trajectory, with three prominent styles used in the *shikhara*s: the revival *bhumija*, the revival *shekhari*, and the newly formulated Maratha style that was a curious amalgam of *kutina* temple composition with sultanate and Mughal aediculas. But that visual language was limited to the building elevation. An important element of space-making was the temple plan itself—not to be seen as an architect's drawing, but experienced as one moved through the building or site. In terms of architectural form, the temples were completely innovative, breaking the classical rules of a temple plan and elevation. The consistent and enduring nature of older principles of planning of temples have been expounded by earlier scholarship (Meister 1979). In this essay, we examine three cases of Mughal architectural forms used in the creation of Hindu temples. At Pune, the nine-bay mosque plan was used for the Omkareshvara temple (c. 1738 CE), whereas in Nasik, the design for an enclosure wall of Mughal gardens was utilised as an enceinte for the Naro Shankara temple (c. 1747 CE). The common Persian building typology of the *hasht bihisht* (eight paradises) was used for the sanctum of a Ganesha temple at Tasgaon (c. 1799 CE). In all three examples, the origins of the architectural forms and the history of their cultural and literary allusions would have been completely lost, but for their meaning and valence in the immediate Mughal past in the light of which, they would have been understood. Thus, the borrowing of these ideas signified Mughal imperial power of the 17th century.

The argument here is that the commissioned buildings were not accidents of design or common fashion, but deliberate messages of patronage and power. For example, one can see an "acute awareness that patrons had, of the power of architecture in consolidating their social positions" in correspondence between Gopikabai (Peshwa) and Ahilyabai Holkar (Sahasrabuddhe 2017: 69). The latter was refused permission to build *ghata*s in Nasik by Gopikabai who saw the development of the site as her personal legacy, not to be infringed upon by anyone else. It is evident that in this period, patronage and its perception were taken seriously—embedding cosmopolitan, exotic, and political motifs within architectural design that would have been conscious decisions, and not simple mimicry and repetition by craftspeople from other regions of South Asia. Several Islamic architectural forms were already popular among the Marathas and their early period was marked by the architecture of the Deccan sultanates, which provided models for the markers of high fashion and political power (Sohoni 2018). By the end of the 17th century, as the Mughals emerged as the most powerful force in the Deccan, their architecture would have been worthy of emulation. Yet, the Maratha kingdom founded by Shivaji (1630-1680 CE), and culturally allied with the Deccan sultanates, largely refrained from using the architectural language of their *bête noire*, the Mughals.

The Maratha antagonism to the Mughals changed after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 CE, when Shahu (1682-1749 CE), the grandson of Chhatrapati Shivaji, was released

and became the king of the Marathas at Satara. He had been captured as a child and was raised at the Mughal court as one of Aurangzeb's proteges, and was steeped in Mughal culture. From the early 18th century onwards, the Marathas under Shahu derived their legitimacy from being representatives of the Mughals in the Deccan as they received *firman*s from the Mughal court in Delhi to that effect (Kulkarni 1971). It thus became imperative for the Marathas to operate as a sub-Mughal court, in terms of etiquette, manners, and indeed also in terms of other aesthetical concerns like architecture and painting. Mughal architectural elements were now used widely, subject to regional modifications caused by available material and craftspeople. The entire architectural vocabulary of Maratha residential and state buildings in the 18th century was thus, at least partially, derived from Mughal architecture.

The architectural elements and building modules that were definitive of the Mughals would subsequently be picked up by almost all the states that emerged in the post-Mughal power vacuum, Maratha or otherwise, and in many ways would come to encompass the language of commensurability between different powers. While Mughal architectural elements would be used by the Marathas, their gardens too would emulate the quadripartite gardens of the Mughals. Such gardens can be seen at palaces, like Motibagh belonging to the Rastes in Wai, and at Telangakhedi belonging to the Bhonsales in Nagpur, many of them accompanied by temples in their vicinity. But to use identifiably Mughal forms in the religious architecture of temples was rare, suggesting some deliberation and active agency of the designers and patrons.

Mughal architecture: sources and reception

Over the latter half of the 16th and most of the 17th centuries, under a succession of Mughal emperors from Akbar to Aurangzeb, there had been incremental changes in the architecture of the court. Moving away from a north Indian sultanate architectural language, elements from newly conquered regions also played an important role in informing Mughal architecture. For example, the campaigns in Gujarat and Malwa were influential in the design of Fatehpur Sikri (Koch 1988a). The heavy cornices, serpentine brackets, and lattice screens were some of the architectural elements learned from these campaigns, just as European and South Asian architectural phrases entered the lexicon of Mughal architecture under Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The baluster column, the *bangla* roof, and pietra dura techniques were assimilated into a new architectural language of political power (Koch 1982, 1988b). An earlier architecture of the Timurids with their gardens, and that of the Delhi sultanate with several features from Central Asia were already a part of the Mughal palimpsest of architecture. These strands were woven into an architectural language that represented the Mughal state, the court, its grandeur and courtly culture, and were emulated by most courts in South Asia, to emphasise their positions either as rivals or as vassals.

Omkareshvara Temple (c. 1738 CE) and the Nine-bay Mosque

A common pre-Islamic Iranian architectural form consisted of the nine-domed building (Azad and Kennedy 2018: 289). As a building typology for a mosque, it quickly spread across the Islamic world between the 10th and the 12th centuries, and could be found in several sites through Iran, North Africa, and Iberian Peninsula. For example, both

the Noh Gumbad mosque in Balkh, Afghanistan (late 8th century), and the Bab-ul Mardum mosque in Toledo, Spain (999 CE), essentially share the same plan (O'Kane 2006). The latter is known for its nine differently decorated brick domes. This building typology has been used for several architectural programmes, but rarely as a Hindu temple. While in its simplest form, the space could merely be a square room with four columns arranged with bi-axial symmetry in the middle, creating nine bays, it could also be quite elaborate with multiple pilasters on the walls, and intersecting arches creating lively geometrical complexities (Image 1).

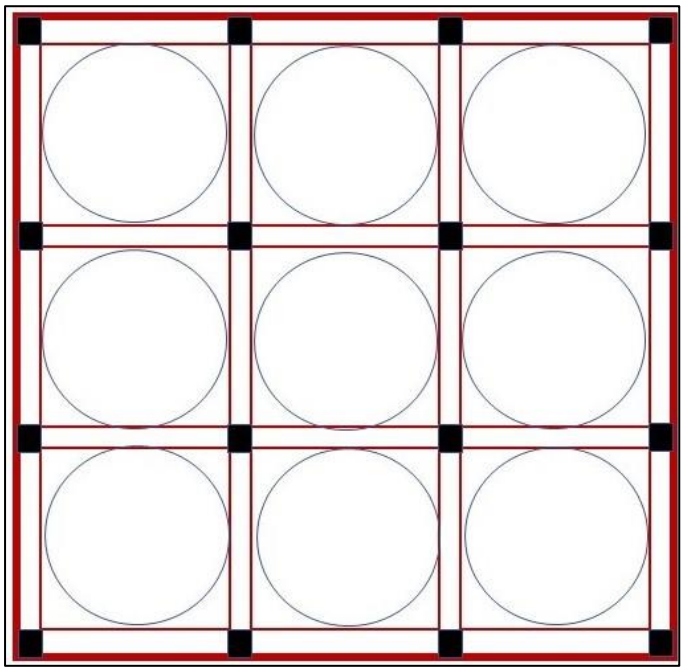

Image 8.1: The Nine-bay Plan used for Mosques. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

This architectural form fully encompasses and articulates a space characterized by nine bays that are explicitly marked by various vertical elements of interest, especially as the style became popular as one of the modules that are encountered at several Islamic complexes. As a stand-alone building, it was used as a mosque and adhered to the architectural typology of a mosque, such as the one we can see used in the mosque of Afzal Khan at Afzalpur, or the nine-domed gateway to the *dargah* of Shaikh Siraj al-din Junaidi at Gulbarga (Merklinger 1981: 110, 127, plan 32). Mughal architecture itself has very few examples of such nine-bayed mosques with domes situated above each bay, given that Mughal rulers mostly commissioned large imperial *jami'* mosques, instead reserving this building and architectural typology for their *baradari*s. Already, with the Mughal adoption of the plan for entirely different functions, its signification had changed. An important Mughal site where this architectural type is encountered, is at the camp, and place of death of emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir that is near Bhingar, which includes a *baradari* for the emperor's use, characterized by nine vaulted bays (Image 2). Several other towns such as Aurangabad, and many Mughal forts include *baradari*s of this type. Whether inspired by the nine-bay mosque or by the more proximal Mughal *baradari*s, exposure to such designs led to the production of an unusual temple plan in the capital of the Peshwas, not too far from their headquarters in the fortified mansion of Shaniwar Wada.

The Mahakali temple in Chandrapur, built by the local Gond rulers, though inspired by Mughal architecture, sports a similar plan, with the central bay and its walls constituting the actual shrine or the sanctum sanctorum of the temple according to its architectural plan (Dengle et al: 256). Closer to Pune, the Ganapati temple of the Purandares at

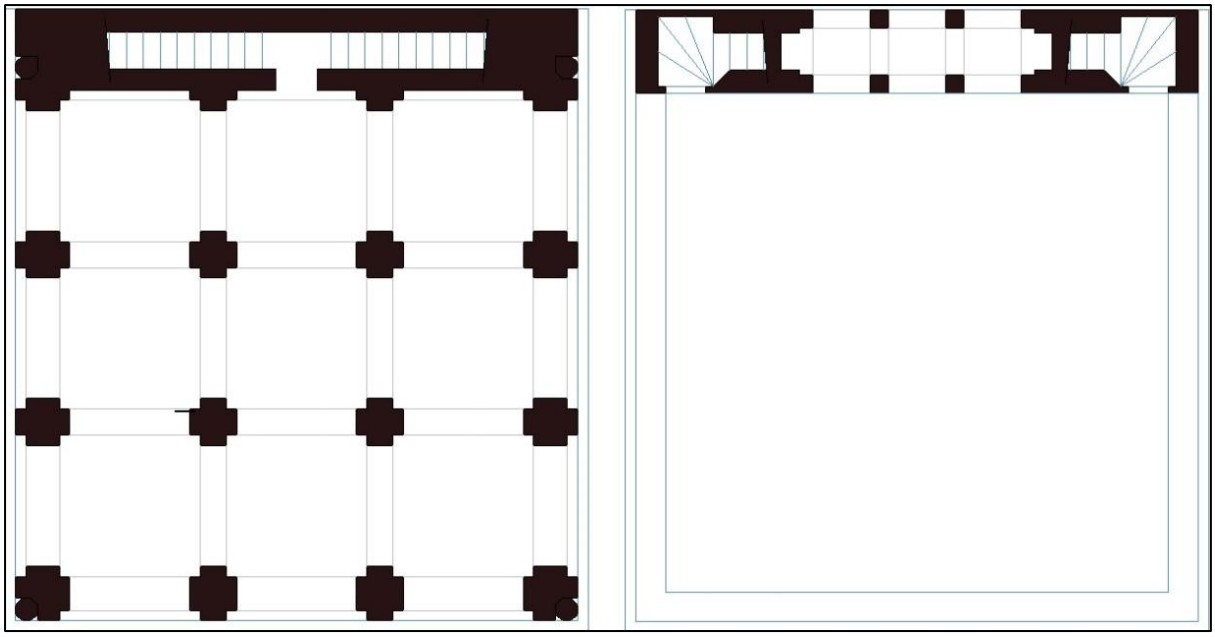

Image 8.2: The Plan of Mughal Emperor Alamgir Aurangzeb's baradari Near Bhingar. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

Saswad also demonstrates a similar plan. But it must be noted that all these unusual temples were also built after sustained contact with the Mughals. According to the nineteenth-century *Gazetteer*, the Omkareshvara temple was built between 1740 and 1760 by Krishnaji Pant Chitrav with funds from public subscription, a large portion of it additionally funded by Bhau (Sadashiv Chimaji) of the Peshwa family (Campbell 1885b: 338-339). But original documents also inform us that the foundations for the temple were already laid in 1736 CE, with Shivarama Bhat Chitrav being entrusted with the work, which was completed in 1738 CE (Karve 1942: 29). Here, we find that the patronage was still very closely connected with the political power centre of the Marathas.

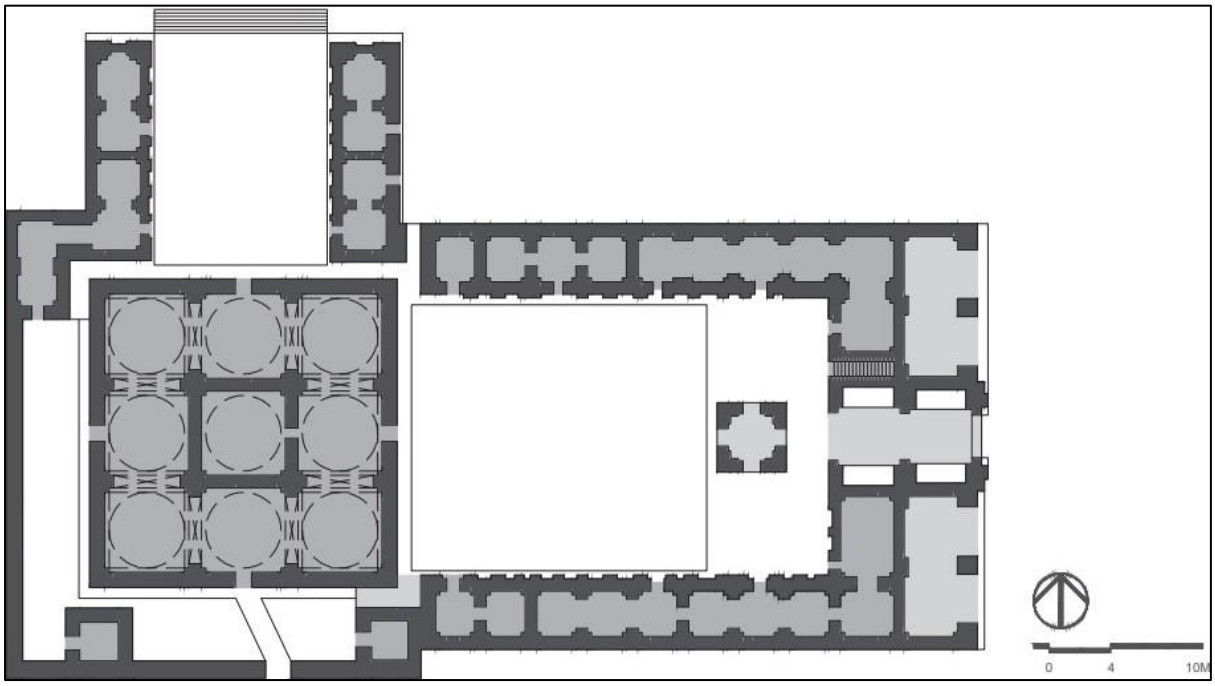

Image 8.3: Plan of Omkareshvara Temple, Pune. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

Set inside a walled courtyard, the temple itself is a nine-bay plan, with blank walls and small central entrances on all four cardinal sides (Image 3). The internal bay is additionally walled and serves as the sanctum with only a single entrance to it on the east. All nine bays, including the sanctum, have ceilings that are vaulted by domes built in stone masonry, with the vaulting patterns all being different. Externally, the tall brick superstructure over the sanctum has little to do with the vaulting inside and the other eight bays surrounding it are all roofed with decorated domes. The northern courtyard leads to the river. While nine-square plans were already widespread in South Asia in the 18th century, imbued with magical and mystical meaning, these architectural designs were celebrated in the planning of the city of Jaipur (founded c. 1727 CE), the proximity of the court of Jaipur to the Mughal court is also well-known.

Naro Shankara temple (c. 1747 CE) and the Mughal Garden Enclosure

The Arabic word used for the after-world in the Qur'an is *al-janna* and represents an idealized after-world, for which gardens constitute a popular metaphor . The reason for employing the metaphor of gardens may be explained by the "… concept of space in a culture evolved from the desert … by necessity based on protecting living space" (Petruccioli 1998: 351). Paradise, on the other hand, is a pre-Islamic Persian concept that idealizes the garden form. While its metaphorical origins may be the same as in the Arabic, their conceptual origins are different. It is possible that the formal attributes of Persian gardens were subverted by an Islamic philosophy in which "…the Qur'anic notion of the natural world and natural environment [are] semantically and logically bound up with the very concept of God; …this notion is [also] linked with the general principle of the creation of humanity" (Haq 2001: 146). The Mughal gardens for instance have long been associated with various spatial images derived from the idealized Paradisiacal garden: symmetrical quadripartite water channels, divisions with raised walkways and water channels, and last but not least, square enclosure walls (Wescoat 2011: 229). The layout of a Mughal garden has often been ascribed to "…a combination of the ancient Persian prototype, and the Gardens of Paradise as described in the Koran [sic] and the sayings of the Prophet" (Clark 1996: 63). Islam conceives of paradise as a garden, with the Quranic al-Janna being the garden par excellence; therefore, being buried in a garden suggests the anticipation of paradise (Dickie 1985: 131). The analogy of a garden being the paradise of the after-world was believed to be effective, if it was in conformance with the Quran. Thus, even the Taj Mahal and its gardens were modelled along Quranic descriptions of paradise (Begley 1979). Mughal nobility thus chose to be buried in quadripartite walled gardens, usually at the central crossing which was marked by a raised platform on which the cenotaph was placed. The enclosure wall thus came to signify the presence of a model of garden paradise contained inside it, with the burial of one or more important people placed in the centre. Such gardens were built in the Deccan through the 18th century, and examples of this can be seen at the tomb of Bani Begum Bagh in Khuldabad, and at the tomb known as Daulati Begam near the village of Abdi Mandi in the vicinity of Daulatabad. However, such a compound wall was also curiously built by a Maratha patron as the enclosure for a temple in the 18th century.

Built in 1747 CE by Naro Shankar Raja Bahadur on the banks of the Godavari river at Nasik, the temple cost the princely sum of 1,800,000 rupees; artisans from Gujarat and

Rajasthan were invited to Nasik in order to construct the temple (Campbell 1985a: 519-520). The temple itself was built in a style that saw the revival of the *shekhari* architectural form that was popular during this period, seen for example at the nearby temple of Trimbakeshvara (built by Peshwa Balaji Bajirao in the mid-eighteenth century). While the patron clearly chose this conservative revival style for the main temple itself, a compound wall that was built as an enclosure around it, was exactly like that of a Mughal garden, complete with corner kiosks and a large *bangla*-roof, vaulted chambers over the entrance (Image 4). This wall is over three meters high, and the entrance has a large Portuguese bell hung over it; this bell was captured by Maratha armies led by Chimaji, brother of Bajirao Peshwa, from the fort of Vasai in 1739 CE. The patron of this temple was one of the commanders in that war, and had the honour of claiming the bell, won in victory, for his own temple, thus enriching the palimpsest: an 18th century Hindu temple with a revivalist design from the 12th century, an enclosure wall of immediate Mughal inspiration but with a lineage of paradisiacal gardens of West Asian origin, completed by a European church-bell from a Portuguese settlement.

Image 8.4: Enclosure Wall of the Naro Shankar Temple in Nasik. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

The enclosure wall of a Mughal garden as a container for a revival style of temple architecture acted in this case as a signifier, irrespective of whether the garden performed a commemorative or funerary function. It conveyed several eclectic meanings, both worldly and esoteric that included the accessing of high culture, courtly fashion and wealth, while also being connected with connotations of the other world, whether divine or eschatological. While such enclosure walls were commonly found for temples, using a Mughal architectural vocabulary so explicitly deserves attention.

Ganesh Temple at Tasgaon (c. 1799) and the hasht bihisht Plan

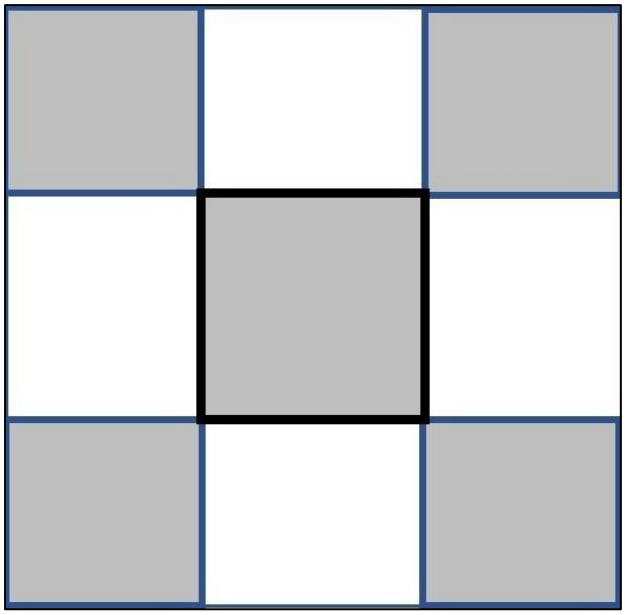

Image 8.5: Schematic of hasht bihisht Plan with four iwans. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

Not unconnected in principle with the nine-bay plans, a building type of nine blocks is common in Iranian and Timurid construction. The logic of a grid of three squares on each side generates nine square spaces, of which the corners are heavily built, with the central portions open, functioning either as entrance portals (*iwan*s) or merely as loggias or frontal halls (Image 5). The central space excluded, the eight spaces surrounding it are called the *hasht bihisht*, or the eight paradises, a metaphorical allusion to an Islamic cosmological and eschatological concept, in which paradise is conceived as having eight gates and eight spaces.

This plan type was given literary importance by Amir Khusrau Dehlavi in his work called the *hasht bihisht* dated to the 1301 CE, that is believed to also "refer to an architectural typology, presumably still existing in the Sasanian period" (Bernardini 2003). In Mughal India, this style was celebrated in several palaces and at important tombs, including all the major imperial mausolea of the royal family, ranging from Humayun's tomb to that of Safdar Jang, both in Delhi. It was clearly a common sub-imperial design, as Shah Quli Khan, Mughal governor of Narnaul, also built a palace, the Jal Mahal, using the *hasht bihisht* plan (Image 6). In the Deccan, barring Rabia Durrani's tomb in Aurangabad called Bibi-ka-Maqbara, there are few Mughal monumental buildings of this type, though several smaller tombs and pavilions can be seen sporting it. Some of these buildings, such as Pir Ismail's tomb in Aurangabad, are also understood as *baradari*s because of their modest scale. It was a common plan for palaces as well, as seen in the Govind Mandir of Datia, wherein the second, third, and fourth stories of the five-storied building clearly show a *hasht bihisht* type of architectural plan (O'Kane 2006: 237). Clearly, the plan conveyed proximity to imperial power, in the life and death of royal patrons.

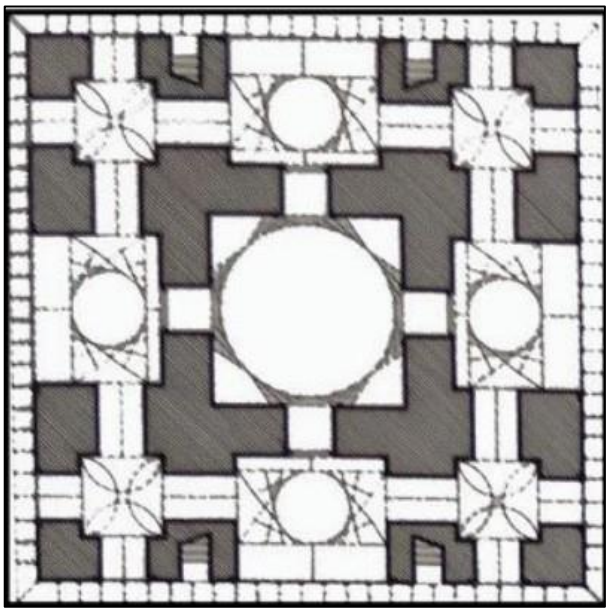

Image 8.6: Jal Mahal of Shah Quli Khan in Narnaul. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

The Ganesh temple at Tasgaon was built by Parshurambhau Patwardhan, who was an important chieftain of the Peshwas in Sangli. It was built over a period of twenty years, and was

completed in 1799. Significantly, what would have been the temple sanctuary is divided into nine portions, of which the central one houses the main deity, with the other four corners constituting the *sancta sanctorum* for other associated deities (Image 7). This quincunx arrangement is very similar to a *hasht bihisht* plan, especially because the central portions on each facade just form loggias. While two of them provide access to the subsidiary shrines, the front one acts as a porch with the rear one not connecting to any other space at all. The plan and scale are comparable to those of some tombs in the Qutb Shahi necropolis, situated below Golconda.

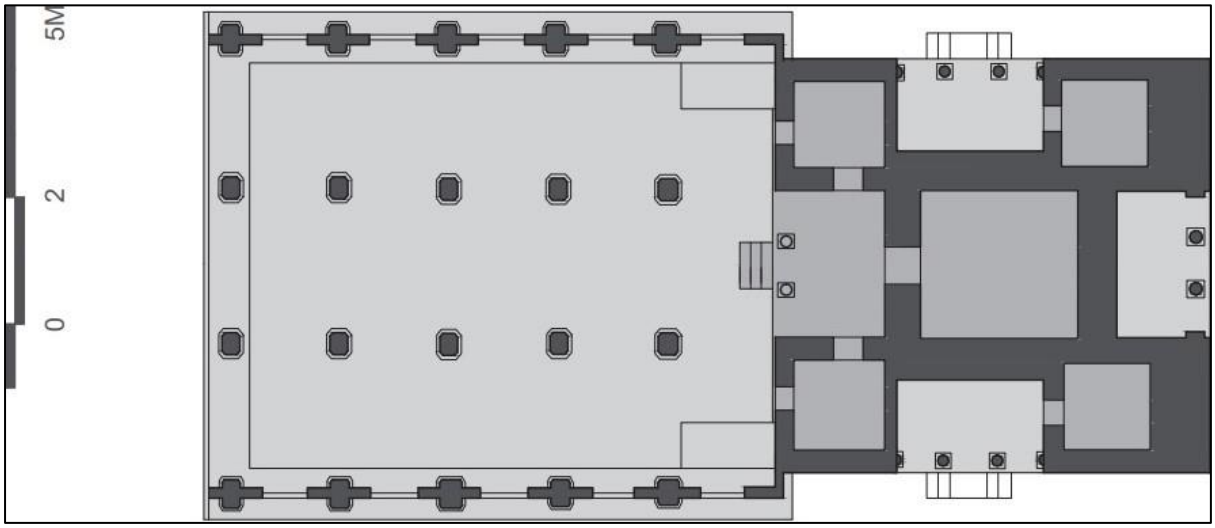

Image 8.7: Plan of the Ganesh Temple in Tasgaon. Image Source: Pushkar Sohoni

Conclusion

The 18th century was important for Maratha expansion, and within less than a hundred years, they conquered, raided, and sometimes settled provinces across South Asia. Seeing themselves as the rightful claimants to the Mughal imperium, they attempted an Indo-Islamic mode in later Hindu architecture, as a way to showcase their prowess and patronage (Sohoni 2011: 72). Borrowing from Mughal forms in small modules, was a way they saw as habilitating of themselves as the successors to Mughal political power, and their application of Mughal architectural forms to Hindu temple architecture constituted a radical move. As Henri Focillon wrote, architectural formations have their own lives, and in every age they only bear the meanings that are imposed upon them. According to his argument about architectural style: formal architectural elements "have a certain index value and which make up its repertory, its vocabulary and, occasionally, the very instrument with which it wields its power" (1992: 46). Using an assemblage of Mughal architectural elements was therefore a display of ambition and aspiration, and while the history and lineage of the forms may have been forgotten, their immediate signification was deployed in the service of the Marathas. All three forms: of the garden wall, the nine-bay building, and the device of the 'eight paradises' may have originally had cosmological, eschatological, and divine meanings, but over time, they came to signify different desires. They were not out of place even in the temple architecture of 18th century Marathas. Temples were understood to be *prasada*s or palaces for the gods (Meister 1988-89). Irrespective of whether the original conception of temples or of the any forms they borrowed were truly understood or not, the heavenly mansions of the gods could be easily conflated with the models of

paradises originating from within the Islamic world. Using a system of style, idiom, and mode articulated by Michael Meister, we can describe architectural processes: in which 'style' is understood as "accumulation of general characteristics that reflect a broad cultural grouping", 'idiom' as "the operational traditions of artisans and guilds that persist beyond political changes" and 'mode' as the type of configuration of a building (Meister 1993). Here we see the development of a Maratha style that, apart from Mughals, also uses idioms from Malwa and Rajasthan in temple-building mode. Thus, the forms and resultant spaces in Maratha temples, while appearing to be eclectic, are engaged in a much larger context pertinent to their creation.

The Mughals had created an architectural style and courtly etiquette; these attributes would continue to flourish under new sub-Mughal courts. Already, in the period of the first Mughal emperors in the 16th and early 17th centuries, Mughal courtly culture was perpetuated through sub-imperial courts as those of the Rajputs (Asher 1993). The emperors Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan were emulated across Hindustan, in terms of their ceremonials and architecture. The Marathas and newer groups in the 18th century perpetuated this Mughal culture in the aftermath of Aurangzeb's death, particularly once Shahu came to power. Under his reign, the Maratha empire expanded enormously, covering large parts of central and south India, filling in the vacuum caused by a rapidly weakening Mughal empire. Thus, Mughal social and visual culture was ironically promulgated by the very polities that were catalysts of Mughal political downfall. As the economic and political power of the Mughals waned, they ceased to be a threat, and therefore their material culture was adopted by everyone who wished to replace them as the masters of South Asia.

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