

Bahamani Architecture: A Synthesis of Deccani and Persianate Traditions

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ABSTRACT

The Bahamani Sultanate (1347–1527), one of the earliest Islamic dynasties in the Deccan, left a profound legacy in South Indian architecture. Established by Ala-ud-Din Hasan Bahman Shah, the sultanate ruled over a vast region encompassing parts of modern-day Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Bahamani architecture is a remarkable blend of Persianate, Indo-Islamic, and regional Deccani styles, reflecting the dynasty's role as a cultural and political bridge between North India, Central Asia, and the Deccan. Characterized by robust fortifications, grand mosques, mausolea, and innovative decorative techniques, this architectural tradition laid the foundation for later Deccani sultanates, including the Qutb Shahis and Asaf Jahis. This article explores the historical context, stylistic features, key monuments, and enduring legacy of Bahamani architecture, situating it within the broader framework of Indian architectural history.

Keywords: Islamic dynasties; Deccan; Indian architecture; South India; Bahamani architecture; fortifications etc.

INTRODUCTION

The Bahamani Sultanate was founded in 1347 when Ala-ud-Din Hasan Bahman Shah, a former noble of the Delhi Sultanate, declared independence from the Tughlaq dynasty and established his capital at Gulbarga (present-day Kalaburagi, Karnataka). In 1425, the capital was shifted to Bidar under Ahmad Shah I, marking a significant shift in the sultanate's strategic and cultural positioning. The wealth of the Bahamanis, which came from fertile agricultural lands, trade routes, and diamond mines, allowed them to undertake grand architectural projects that symbolized both their sovereignty and cultural patronage (Sherwani, 1985). The Bahamanis ruled during a period of political fragmentation in the Deccan and navigated complex relationships with neighboring powers like the Vijayanagara Empire, the Delhi Sultanate, and later, the Portuguese. Their cosmopolitan court attracted Persian scholars, poets, and architects, creating a synthesis of Persianate and Indian cultural traditions, which significantly shaped Bahamani architecture. This fusion was particularly evident in the way Persian models were adapted to local materials, craftsmanship, and the climatic needs of the region (Flatt, 2019; Yazdani, 1947).

BAHAMANI ARCHITECTURE

Bahamani architecture is distinguished by its combination of Persianate, Indo-Islamic, and Deccani elements. This created a robust and ornate style, which was well-suited to the Deccan's cultural and environmental context. Persianate influences are prominent in the use of pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and glazed tile work. For example, the use of turquoise and blue tiles, as seen in the Jami Masjid at Gulbarga, reflects Persian architectural aesthetics. At the same time, Bahamani buildings retained the Indo-Islamic traditions inherited from the Delhi Sultanate, featuring domes, minarets, and expansive courtyards typical of the Indo-Islamic style. The Jami Masjid in Gulbarga exemplifies this with its hypostyle prayer hall, supported by numerous small domes, which marks a departure from the more common single-dome mosque design in North India. The Bahamanis also embraced regional elements, such as the use of local black basalt stone for construction, which gave the buildings a distinctive dark hue, and the intricate stucco work and jali (lattice) screens, as seen in the Bahamani tombs. These features showcased regional craftsmanship and helped adapt the structures to the Deccan's climate (Michell & Zebrowski, 1999).

The Bahamanis constructed impressive forts, such as the ones in Gulbarga and Bidar, which were designed to withstand invasions and defend the sultanate's territory. These forts featured massive walls, bastions, and moats, and blended Persian and Indian military architecture (Rötzer, 2015). Ornamentation was a key feature of Bahamani architecture, with intricate stucco work, geometric patterns, and Arabic calligraphy decorating structures such as the Haft Gumbad tombs in Gulbarga. These tombs, which housed several Bahamani sultans, exemplified the blending of Persian and Indo-Islamic architectural styles and were characterized by bulbous domes and ornate stucco decorations. The Bahamanis also ensured that their buildings served multiple purposes, from religious worship to royal commemoration and education. For example, the madrasa of Mahmud Gawan in Bidar, built in 1472, combined educational and residential functions, which reflected the sultanate's commitment to learning and cultural exchange (Sohoni, 2018; Flatt, 2019).

TRADE, CULTURE, AND URBAN PLANNING DURING THE BAHAMANIS

The Bahamanis also made significant contributions to urban planning, transforming their capitals, Gulbarga and Bidar, into thriving centers of trade, culture, and learning. Both cities were planned with fortified walls, central mosques, and bustling bazaars, showcasing Persian urban models adapted to the Deccan's needs. The construction of wells, canals, and reservoirs, such as the Karez system in Bidar, ensured that water supply was reliable for both urban and agricultural use. The Bahamanis also established madrasas, hospitals, and caravanserais, fostering education and commerce. The strategic location of their empire along key trade routes connecting the Arabian Sea to inland India further facilitated the development of markets and trade networks (Yazdani, 1947).

The architectural legacy of the Bahamani Sultanate continues to shape the cultural identity of the Deccan. Monuments such as the Bidar Fort and Haft Gumbad remain significant attractions for tourists and scholars alike. At the same time, civic structures like the Mahmud Gawan Madrasa highlight the dynasty's patronage of education. However, preserving this heritage has proven challenging due to rapid urbanization, lack of sufficient funding for conservation, and the environmental degradation of these monuments. In particular, pollution, neglect, and

encroachment pose significant threats to the integrity of Bahamani monuments. While efforts by the Archaeological Survey of India and other organizations have led to the restoration of sites like the Bidar Fort and Mahmud Gawan Madrasa, a more comprehensive conservation strategy is required to ensure that these architectural treasures are preserved for future generations (Philon, 2010; Rötzer, 2015).

OUTSTANDING FEATURES OF BAHAMANI TRADITIONS

To fully appreciate Bahamani architecture, it is important to compare it with other contemporary architectural traditions. While Bahamani architecture shares certain Indo-Islamic elements with the Delhi Sultanate, it also incorporates more Persian influences, particularly in its use of tile work and regional materials. Compared to the Vijayanagara Empire, whose architecture was more focused on Hindu temples, Bahamani architecture emphasized mosques, tombs, and forts, reflecting its Islamic identity. Persian architecture also greatly influenced Bahamani design, especially in the use of vaulted roofs and glazed tiles, though the Bahamanis adapted these elements to the Deccan's climate and available materials. Later Deccani Sultanates, such as Bijapur and Golconda, were heavily influenced by Bahamani architectural practices, refining their use of domes and decorative techniques (Michell & Zebrowski, 1999; Haidar & Sardar, 2015).

Bahamani architecture remains a testament to the dynasty's cultural ambition and architectural innovation. The Bahamanis created a lasting legacy through monumental structures like the Jami Masjid in Gulbarga, the Mahmud Gawan Madrasa in Bidar, and the military fortifications of Bidar and Gulbarga. These buildings reflect a cosmopolitan vision that bridged diverse cultural traditions, while also showcasing the Bahamanis' ability to adapt Persian, Indo-Islamic, and Deccani architectural styles to create a unique and enduring aesthetic. As modern India grapples with preserving its historical heritage, the architectural contributions of the Bahamanis offer valuable lessons in cultural synthesis and resilience. By investing in conservation and raising public awareness, these monuments can continue to inspire future generations and serve as a bridge between the Deccan's storied past and its vibrant present (Sherwani, 1985; Sohoni, 2018).

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