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Reinterpreting the Qutub Minar Complex : Architectural Evolution and Various Views

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Author's Note :

This paper is penned with great respect for the multifaceted cultural and architectural heritage of India. The study does not embark on proving or disproving any belief but seeks to look at the Qutub Minar Complex through the eyes of documented historical research, archaeological evidence, and the interpretations of established historians and authors.

Every monument has several layers to its history, and as scholars it is our obligation to approach the past with honesty, academic integrity, and an open mind. If any part of this paper does contest the dominant narratives, it is not done in an offending manner but rather one to encourage further dialogue, critical thinking, and appreciation for the plurality of India's past.

Introduction :

The Qutub Complex situated in the heart of Delhi is one of the most compelling architectural testimonies to the shifting political and cultural landscape of medieval India. Initiated by Qutub-ud-din Aibak in the late 12th century and expanded by his successors, the complex is not merely a monument but also a symbol of legitimation of political legitimacy and architectural vocabulary of power that emerged with the Delhi Sultanate. The architectural progression of the complex reveals us the immense interactions between Islamic architectural principles and the indigenous pre-existing traditions. Each ruler who contributed ranging from Iltutmish to Alauddin and later restorers used the site as a medium to assert authority and their religious ideology. This paper seeks to analyze the architectural and political evolution of the complex through the lens of faith , power and aesthetics. By tracing its successive stages of construction , patronage and symbolism, the study highlights how the Qutub complex became not only an architectural marvel but also an important text etched in stone reflecting the ambitions , ideologies and transformations of a formative era in Indian History.

Architectural Phases of The Qutub Complex :

The Ghurid forces intention to stay permanently in South Asia is indicated by them building numerous monuments across their captured territories . In **“India Before Europe”** by **Catherine B.Asher and Cynthia Talbot** , we get to see that Islamic texts on statecraft known to Ghurids required that kings had to establish large mosques and fortified palaces to display their power and wealth to the populace. For a new ruler to achieve legitimate status, he needed to have his name proclaimed during the Friday prayer as well as on coins. That’s one of the reason why in Delhi the Jami Masjid’s construction (later known as the **“Qubbatu I-Islam” mosque (Mosque of the Cupola of Islam) or “Quwwatu I-Islam” mosque (Might of Islam mosque)**) was begun immediately after Delhi’s conquest in 1192 on the orders of Muhammad-bin-Sam’s commander , Qutub-ud-din Aibak as what **S.A.A Rizvi** writes in his influential work **“The Wonder that was India:Volume 2”** . **Sunil Kumar** in **“The Present in Delhi’s Pasts”** states that The Qutub Complex underwent construction on three different occasions. In **the first phase** the mosque 214 by 149 feet was a relatively small rectangular structure with a central courtyard surrounded by colonnaded arcades and its construction was commenced by **Qutub-ud-din Aibak** in 1191-92 and the construction heavily relied upon the material derived from plundered temples remains .

The temple spoils were used randomly but very ingeniously within the mosque . Rizvi states that in a desperate hurry Qutub-ud-din did not wish to send to Iran for architects where arches and domes were highly developed but ordered the local Hindu architects to follow their trabeate system. Column shafts, bases and capitals of different sizes and forms with Hindu and Jain sculptures and iconic motifs were placed one upon the other to achieve a uniform height for the roof . The lack of concern for iconic symmetry with Shaivite, Vaishnavite and Jain motifs placed cheek-by-jowl with each other conveys the impression of destruction , a temper which is very much a part of the construction of the first mosque. In 1199 the huge arched screen was built in front of the west wall of the mosque. The east face of the screen was adorned with Arabic Calligraphy and verses from Quran interspersed with floral and geometric patterns . Rizvi states that all the arches in the screen were corbelled out like the ogees in Buddhist rock-cut caves. Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot states that the second addition to the congregational mosque was commenced in 1199 known today as the Qutub Minar in its south-east corner which was modelled on and intended to surpass free standing Iranian and Afghan minarets in particular one built by the brother of Muhammad-bin-Sam in the ghurid capital of **Firuz Kot (today Jam)** before the construction of the Delhi minaret. The minar in Qutub-ud-din's reign was not very tall and its girth lent it a rather square appearance, it was also the time when the ground floor of the minaret was built. Built out of red sandstone and inscribed with Quranic inscriptions and eulogies of conquest it served as a memorial of victory and a vantage point to call the faithful to prayer.

The second phase of construction of the Qutub Complex began during the reign of **Shams-al-din Iltutmish** (1210–36) and was completed sometime around 1229–30. Iltutmish's additions nearly doubled the width if not the depth of the mosque, very little survives today of this construction. New courtyards were added to the north, south and the east in a form which maintained the overall stylistic symmetry of the mosque . The arches and the additions to the minaret harmonized with the pre-existing architecture which many historians tend to obscure this intervention by suggesting that rather than altering the mosque, Iltutmish merely "completed" it. Iltutmish is credited for completing the Qutub Minar. Rizvi mentions that about 3 miles from the Qutub Minar , Iltutmish constructed a mausoleum for his eldest son **Nasirud-din Mahmud** built in 1231-2 known as Sultan Ghari (Sultan of the Cave) for the cenotaph is an underground chamber. The roof is an octagonal platform , no trace remains of the pillared pavilion it might have contained . Again materials from Hindu monuments were used for its construction , its considered the first Islamic mausoleum of India. In the north-west corner of the mosque stands Iltutmish's

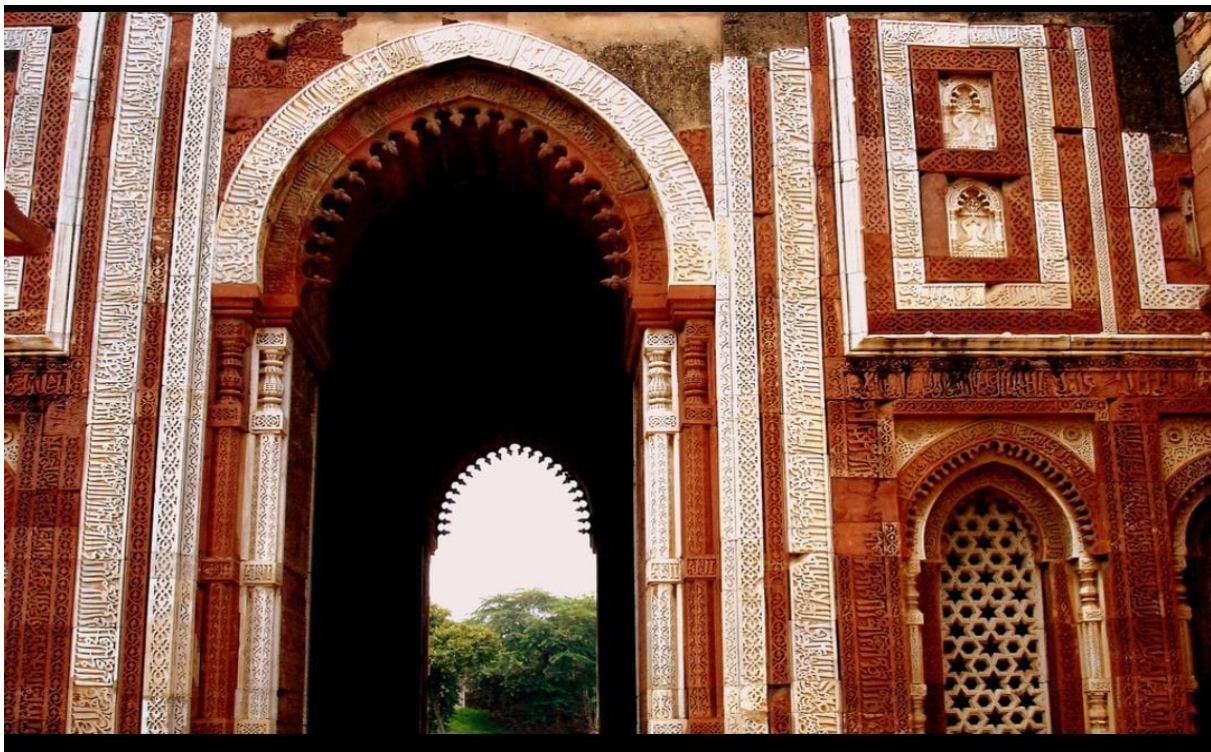
mausoleum which he himself built before his death in 1235. The most interesting innovation is the use of squinches to transform the square base into the circular diameter of the corbelled dome. As the dome no longer exists the richly sculptured motifs of both Islamic and ancient Indian origin on its walls and polylobed arches can easily be seen. The mausoleum is built of red and grey sandstone, the cenotaph of marble.

The third phase of the Qutub complex begins with the rule of **Alaudin Khilji** (1296-1316) but the changes which he introduced are nearly lost today. Rizvi stated that Alaudin made some ambitious plans for enlarging the complex. He started building a rival Qutub minar whose inner diameter was 27.43 metres intended to rise to 145 metres, but he died before it was completed. The southern gateway to the mosque known as “Alai Darwaza” built in 1311 is his best contribution. **He might have heard about “Taq-I Kisra” an archway built by the Sasanid king Kisra Nushirwan at Ctesiphon in Iraq** and some Iranian architects who had moved to Delhi translated his dreams into stone with the aid of Hindu architects. Red sandstone and white marble with inlays of black marble and blue schist indicating the contributions of Gujarati artisans. The Gateway is a cubical structure of 15.25 metres each side covered by a flat dome. The three large pointed horseshoe arches supporting the dome are of dressed stone. They are true arches. On each side of the doorway there are two windows containing marble grilles one-third of their size. The inscriptions on the gateway proclaim Alaudin’s greatness linking him with The victorious Darius, The great Alexander and even king Solomon.

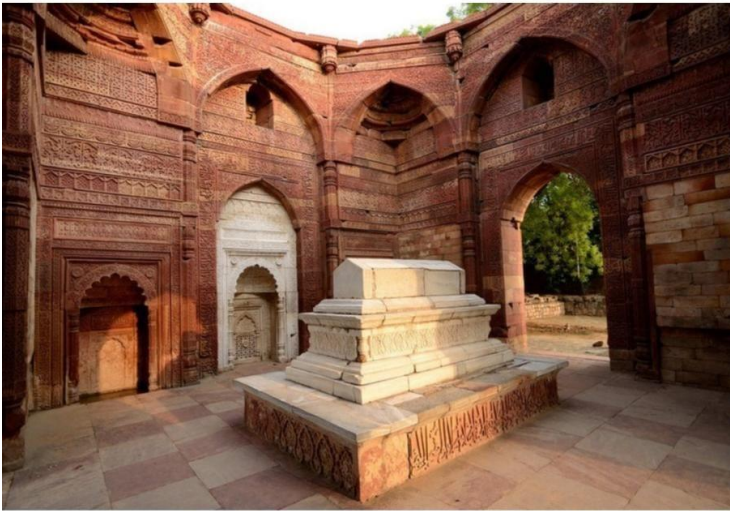
In 1370, the fourth storey of the minar was struck by lightning after which **Firoz Shah Tughluq** replaced it with 2 more storeys. This last stage raised its final height to 72.59 metres.



View inside the mosque and Hindu-Jain motifs within the complex.



The Alai minar,Alai darwaza,The Qutub minaret and doorway view of the Alai darwaza.



Iltutmish tomb , Sultan garhi and pillars from a Hindu temple.



Qutb Mosque (Masjid Quwwatul-Islam).

I. On the inner lintel of the eastern gateway.

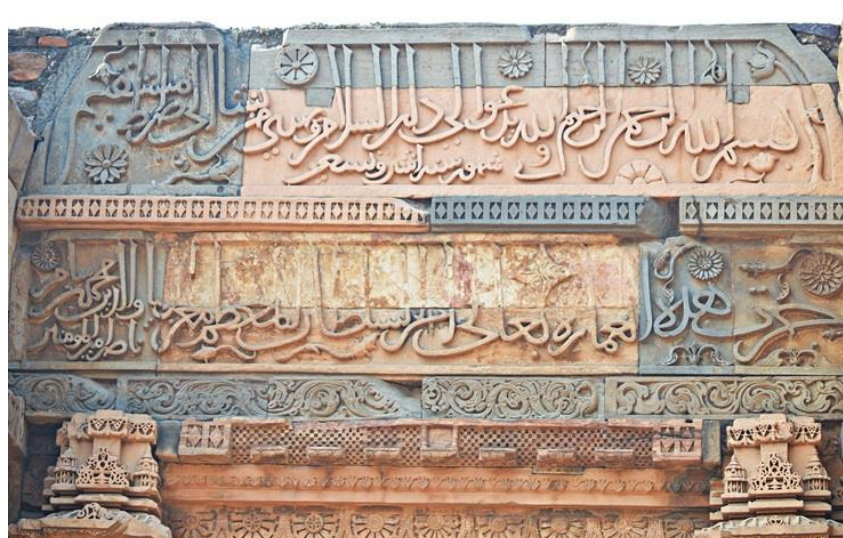
East gateway.

Quran, Sura III, verses 91-2; and

این حصار را فتح کرد و این مسجد جامع را بساخت بقاره فی شهر سنه سبع و ثمانین و
 خمس مائة امیر اصفهسالار اجل کبیر قطب الدوله والدین امیر الامرا ای بک سلطانی اعز الله انصاره بیست
 و هفت ایت بتخانه که در هر بیتخانه در بار هزار بار دیوال صرف شده بود درین مسجد بکار بسته
 شده است خدای عز و جل بران بنده رحمت کند هر که بر نیت بانی خیر دعا ایمان گوید -

Translation.

“This fort was conquered and this Jami Masjid was built in (the months of) the year 587 (1191—2 A.D.) by the Amir, the great and glorious commander of the army, (named) Qutbu-d-daulatwa-d-din, the Amiru-l-umara Aibak Sultani, may God strengthen his helpers. The materials of 27 temples, on each of which 2,000,000 Deliwals had been spent, were used in (the construction of) this mosque. May God the great and glorious have mercy on him who should pray for the/faith of the good builder.”



III. In the arch tympanum of the north gate.

North gateway.

Quran, Sura X, verse 26; and

فی شهر سنه اثنی تسعین [رخمسماية] جرت هذه العماره بعلى امر السلطان المعظم
 معز الدنيا والدین محمد بن سام ناصر امير المؤمنين -

Translation.

“In (the months of) the year [5] 92 (1197 A.D.) this building was erected by the high order of the exalted Sultan Muizzu-d-dunyawa-d-din Muhammad-ibn-Sam, the helper of the prince of the faithful.”

From J.A. Page's book "An Historical Memoir on the Qutb:Delhi".

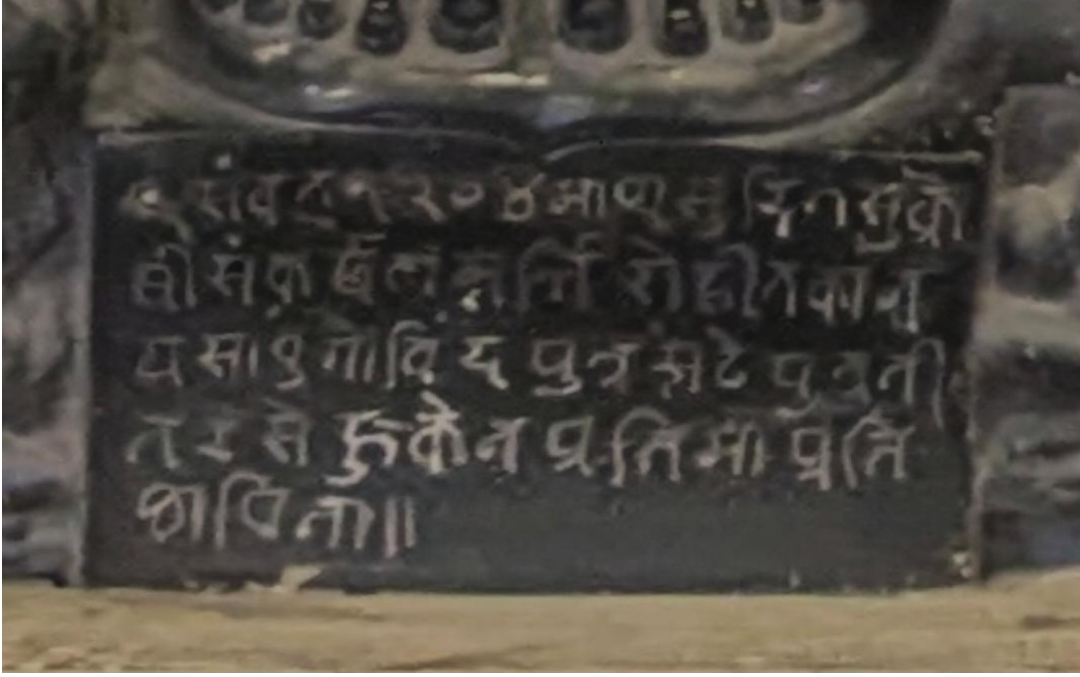
Historians and Scholars View's :

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the first scholar to make a detailed study of the epigraphs and architectural form of the Qutub complex in the 1840s . Many of his conclusions were summarized in the reports of ASI in the 1860s by **Alexander Cunningham** and also in “Epigraphica Indo-Moslemia”, Even **J.A Page** took references from him. The major subject of interest in the works of all this authors was the redeployment of Hindu and Jain temple material within the masjid structure. These three stated that usage of plundered temple material by Qutub-al-din made a statement of conquest and hegemony over an infidel population in north India and conducted a ritual cleansing of profane territory. They recognized the presence of temple material in the mosque as an evidence of a swift transportation of “Muslim Rule” in India which served as a statement of “Islam’s victory over idolators”. Even in their scholarly publications they stated that the mosque in the past was referred to as “Quwwat al-Islam”(The Might of Islam). Sunil Kumar states that their self-confident assertion was surprising as the mosque has not been identified by this name in any sultanate chronicle or inscriptions. But it was almost logical for these scholars that the mosque be called “Might of Islam” after all the conquest of Delhi was the final victorious culmination of a series of plunder raids led by “Muslims” into Sindh, Punjab and Hindustan. **Anthony Welch and Robert Hillenbrand** could not disagree more with such “secular” interpretations of the mosque which emerged in the 1960’s by historians like **Meister, Mujeeb, and later Hussain**, their writings focused upon the architectural characteristics of the monument where Islamic inspiration was dependent upon indigenous craftsmanship for its ultimate realization. Writing in the 1990’s these scholars are strongly influenced by the cultural anthropological emphasis upon semiotics and ideology. These scholar’s sought the “natives point of view”. Welch stated that the Muslim patrons of the Hindu craftsmen never compromised with the indigenes : The Delhi sultans forced the Hindu craftsmen in their service to always conform to a “Muslim Aesthetic”. The minar performed the “symbolic function of marking the **Dar al-Islam(The Land of Islam)**” newly conquered from the infidels and the towering structure carried Quranic statements of conquest and warning to the heathen population.

In **Susan L.Huntington’s** iconic work “**The Art of Ancient India**”, she mentions about a four-armed image of Visnu Sankarsana , one of the 24 icons of Vishnu recognized by positions of the attributes held in his hands was found among the Islamic remains at the Qutub minar . She states that its findspot among the ruined Hindu temples destroyed by Qutub-ud-din is representative of the destruction of Hindu art tradition and transition to the Muslim phase of

South Asian history . The idol has an inscription dated Vikram Samvat 1204(1147 AD).The idol is also mentioned in the Indian Archaeology 1958-59 a review by the ASI where they mention that this idol was found south-east of the Qutub minar and close to it was a stone platform on which was marked the exterior plan of a pancha-ratha shrine,**Upinder Singh** in her work “**Ancient Delhi**” also mentions about the idol which is now displayed in the National Museum.The idol takes inspiration from the gurjara-pratihara style , but huntington mentions that though the Gadhavalas are not named in the inscription , it is likely they were in control of the region around Delhi,the Muslim attack on the Gadhavalas is chronicled in **Tajul-Masir** of **Hasan Nizami** which began in 1205 and is nearly contemporary to the events which took place in 1192 in which the king of Varanasi was slain , much booty taken and temples destroyed.





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(Translation : Om in Vikram Samvat 1204(1147 AD) on Friday , sadhu Govind's son
Titar from Rohitika established this Sankarsana Visnu idol.)

*Rohitika might have been an ancient name for Rohtak in Haryana.

Conclusion:

The reinterpretation of the Qutub Minar Complex establishes that architecture is not a silent relic of the past but a dynamic archive in which power, belief, and memory continuously interact. By examining the structural phases of the Minar, the adjoining mosque, the reused temple material, epigraphic evidence, and later restorations, this study establishes that the complex evolved through multiple chronological and ideological layers rather than emerging from a single cultural moment. The Qutub is thus not the product of a single ruler or dynasty but a palimpsest of architectural intentions—where the aspirations of the Delhi Sultanate, the legacy of pre-Islamic craftsmanship, the aesthetic vocabulary of Indo-Islamic syncretism converge. Further confirmation of the ways in which historians and authors' interpretations of the Qutub Minar have shifted in line with the intellectual climate of each successive era comes from closer analysis of what they say. While early colonial scholars like Alexander Cunningham and J. A. Page focused on material reuse and dynastic chronology, later historians, such as Catherine Asher and Sunil Kumar, emphasized cultural adaptation and political symbolism. More recent scholarship increasingly brings to the fore the monument's multivocality and shared heritage. Contrasting perspectives do not weaken historical understanding; rather, they enrich it by highlighting the ways in which each successive generation has read meaning into the monument according to contemporary concerns. Ultimately, this research argues that the Qutub Minar Complex represents a hybrid architectural landscape within which conflict and creativity, continuity and rupture, displacement and innovation occur all at once. If one views the monument through only one of these lenses, one will miss the richness of its historical context. It is not a question of which past is more important; it is a question of multiple pasts imprinted in the stone that will continue to teach, question, and inspire future generations.

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