

## FROM BIAS TO INSIGHT: THE IMPACT OF HISTORIOGRAPHY ON HISTORICAL RESEARCH

**Riddhi Shah**

M.Phil., M.Arch

Architect | Researcher | Heritage Enthusiast

Convenor, INTACH Rajkot Chapter (L - 20778)

Faculty, Indubhai Parekh School of Architecture, Rajkot

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the transformative role of historiography in historical research, emphasizing how it shifts understanding from mere factual recounting to a deeper, more critical analysis. By examining the biases inherent in historical narratives, historiography reveals the cultural, political, and social influences that shape historical interpretation. This approach not only highlights the subjectivity of historical accounts but also uncovers marginalized perspectives, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the past. Ultimately, the paper argues that historiography is indispensable for rigorous historical research, as it provides the tools necessary for critical evaluation and enriched insight into historical events.

**Key Words:** *Historiography, Islamic Architecture of India, Biases*

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### **Introduction**

Historiography “... denotes the total number of histories written about a specific chronological period or thematic unit, and, by extension, it is applied to the knowledge about or the broader study of such a set of works.” (Tournikiotis ix)

History can be understood as inquiry of, investigation into, and research about certain events of the past and historiography as a process of writing or recording history. Being an end product of historical investigation, the term itself generates a wide range of meanings and definitions for itself and becomes a benchmark for any research. A basic concept that a research cannot take place without an understanding of history has been accepted globally. Thus, a historiographical study related to the specific area of research would give focus to research. It also helps in viewing a historical event or issue from multiple points of view by engaging various sources. The study will rest on how knowledge of the past is obtained and conveyed – its authorship, sourcing, and interpretation, style of writing, bias and audience. The time and period of the generation of this knowledge becomes a very important dimension to the study.

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This paper delves into an analysis of 'architectural history books' on Islamic Architecture of India. The study refers to a specific chronological period and the buildings that were erected at some point under the supremacy of Islamic sultans and emperors. Islamic architecture includes a mixture of secular and religious buildings with peculiar styles. The major Islamic architectural types are: the Mosque, the Tomb, the Palace, Fort and Town. From these types, the vocabulary of Islamic architecture is derived and used for buildings of less importance such as public baths, fountains and domestic architecture. Acknowledging the historicity of the subject, a rich corpus of secondary literature, as interpreted by eminent historians, is available. Few of the major historians who wrote about the subject are James Fergusson, E.B.Havell, Percy Brown, Henri Steirlin, Z.A. Desai, and Partha Mitter. With an exception of Z.A. Desai who is an Indian epigraphist, all others were/are Europeans. The topic of European interpretation of Indian Art has been widely debated and has been elaborately discussed by Partha Mitter in his book *Much Maligned Monsters*. According to him, *Indo-Islamic architecture of Mughal painting did not present any serious problems of assimilation for the Europeans, as they reflected a taste that could be understood in the West.* (vii)

Nonetheless, their method of explanation, and the depth of study varies as per an individual's background and the publisher's intentions. Critically referring to certain sources for the identified intention is an important aspect for a study of a subject like this. Hence, taking historiography as a tool that identifies, compares, and evaluates the viewpoints of historians writing on the subject is the key to this research. Hence, the focus of this part of the study will be to understand the interpretation of Islamic Architecture of India through historiography, as described by the historians James Fergusson and Ernest Benfield Havel in their works *History of Indian and Eastern architecture* and *Indian Architecture; its Psychology, Structure, and History from the First Muhammadan Invasion to the Present Day* which were first published in 1876 and 1913 A.D respectively. These two works have been selected for study because they are the most diverse views on the subject. Historiography is a vast subject, and caters to all the texts written about any historical event and its approaches are various. The study investigates *Metahistory* (1973) by Hayden White and *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said as the basic models for understanding different perspectives at the writing of history. 'Employment' and 'Ideological Implications' are the two most important stages identified by White in his study, on which the selected works are further analyzed. These studies are intense in their nature and have been globally accepted as phenomenal works by these two individuals. The present study investigates into the method adopted by these two individuals in writing historiography on two very different subjects. Thus, through a systematic process, the study focuses on Historiography as an important tool in history

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writing and investigation that helps in deriving inferences - from bias to insight. This tool may also prove to be the most fruitful one in grounding any research.

### Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore the transformative role of historiography in the field of architectural history, specifically focusing on the writings about Islamic architecture in India. The study seeks to demonstrate how historiographical analysis uncovers inherent biases, reveals marginalized perspectives, and fosters a more inclusive understanding of historical narratives.

### Objectives

1. **To analyze** the historiographical approaches used in the study of Islamic architecture in India.
2. **To identify** the cultural, political, and social influences that shape historical interpretations of Islamic architecture in India.
3. **To highlight** the biases and subjectivities inherent in historical narratives of architectural history.
4. **To uncover** marginalized perspectives within the historiography of Islamic architecture.
5. **To argue** for the indispensability of historiography in achieving a critical and comprehensive understanding of architectural history.

### Methodology

- **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of existing literature on the historiography of Islamic architecture in India will be conducted to identify key narratives, perspectives, and biases.
- **Critical Analysis:** The study will employ critical historiographical methods to analyze the selected writings, focusing on how different authors have constructed historical narratives and the influences shaping these constructions.
- **Comparative Study:** A comparative approach will be taken to examine varying historiographical interpretations and to highlight differences in perspective and bias.
- **Case Studies:** Specific case studies of prominent architectural works and their historiographical treatments will be examined to provide concrete examples of the broader themes discussed.

### Scope

- The paper will focus on the historiographical analysis of Islamic architecture in India, particularly from the medieval period to the present.
- It will cover a range of historical narratives from various authors, emphasizing both traditional and contemporary historiographical approaches.

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- The study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on historiography in architectural history by providing insights into the impact of cultural, political, and social contexts on historical writing.

#### Limitations

- The paper is limited to the analysis of secondary sources and does not include primary field research or firsthand architectural analysis.
- The focus is confined to the historiography of Islamic architecture in India, which may not fully represent historiographical trends in other regions or types of architecture.
- Due to space constraints, the study will be selective in the texts it analyzes, focusing primarily on those that have had a significant impact on the field.

#### Historiographical Approaches in the Study of Islamic Architecture in India

The study of Islamic architecture in India is not just an exploration of monuments and buildings but also an investigation into how history itself is written and interpreted. Historiography, the study of historical writing, plays a crucial role in understanding the narratives constructed around Islamic architecture. Different historiographical approaches reveal the various cultural, political, and social contexts that have shaped historical interpretations over time. This chapter explores the key historiographical perspectives on Islamic architecture in India, analyzing how these approaches have evolved from the colonial period to contemporary times, and how they have influenced the understanding of this rich architectural heritage.

#### Evolution of Methods in History Writing

Methods in history are the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence, including the evidence of archaeology, to research and then to write histories in the form of accounts of the past. The question of the nature, and even the possibility, of a sound historical method is raised in the philosophy of history as a question of epistemology. By looking into different historical methods and different ways of writing history will help in reviewing the sources thoroughly. Approaches to the history of art are probably more varied - and more debated than in any other branch of history, and a study of different historical approaches is becoming an increasingly important component of many academic courses. Below mentioned is the chronological sequence of the invention and development of these methods.

Time Period	Methods
From Antiquity to Renaissance	Piecemeal beginnings in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Basic factual writings of art works,</li><li>▪ Cyclical image, and</li></ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ideology of humanism</li> </ul>
The 16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries	<u>Biographies</u>
The 18 <sup>th</sup> century	<u>Cultural History</u> and <u>The Cycle</u>
The 19 <sup>th</sup> Century	<u>Empiricism</u> (Antiquarianism and introduction of archaeology as a scientific discipline) and <u>Idealism, Metaphysics</u>
The Early 20 <sup>th</sup> century (responses to Modernism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Exclusion of three previous models:</li> <li>▪ Naturalistic Standard, The Cycle, and</li> <li>▪ The Cultural Context</li> </ul> <p><u>Use of Iconographical Analysis</u> to explore the meaning of works with psycho-analytic dimension and empirical analysis</p> <p>Diagram encapsulating inter-relationships, inferences and sequences.</p>
Mid 20 <sup>th</sup> century	<p><u>Pragmatic Metaphysics</u> (a combination of stylistic and iconographic analysis)</p> <p><u>Cultural History</u> (looking from evidence of all parts of culture)</p> <p><u>Social History of Art on the basis of Marxist thesis</u> (the economic base conditions the cultural superstructure and that as a result style varies according to the character of dominant class)</p>
Late 20 <sup>th</sup> century	<p>New art historians shifted the center of gravity away from objects and towards social contexts and ideology, i.e. to the structures of social power and from there to politics, feminism, psychoanalysis, and theory.</p> <p><u>Structuralist approach</u>: looks for the meaning at a level below that of surface content.</p> <p><u>Post-Structuralist approach</u>: critically analyze humanist worldview.</p>

Table 1. Chronology of prominent methods in Art History as explained by Eric Fernie

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All the methods and a prominent example of the writing depicting the method have been discussed by Eric Fernie in his work *Art History and its Methods*. While writing an architectural history emphasis is given to a few ones from these. The selected works for this particular study are from the twentieth century till today. Hence, the methods in which historians represented and analyzed history in the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century will be discussed in detail in the present study; Colonial - Nationalist - Contemporary Historiography.

In addition to applying certain methods for writing of history, there are certain tools used by historians to authenticate their study. The tools are:

- Archaeology, the study of artifacts
- Diplomatics, the study of charters
- Epigraphy, the study of inscriptions
- Genealogy, the study of family relationships
- Chronology, the study of timekeeping

All these tools are interrelated and the historian, according to his focus identified, will rely on one or a few aspects from the above mentioned as the base data for his study.

### **Methods in [Architectural] History Writing - Critical Analysis and Comparative Studies of different perspectives**

#### **1. Colonial Historiography: The Orientalist Perspective**

The historiography of Islamic architecture in India began during the colonial period, primarily through the efforts of British scholars and administrators. This era is characterized by an Orientalist perspective, where Islamic architecture was often viewed through a Western lens that emphasized cultural and civilizational differences between the East and the West.

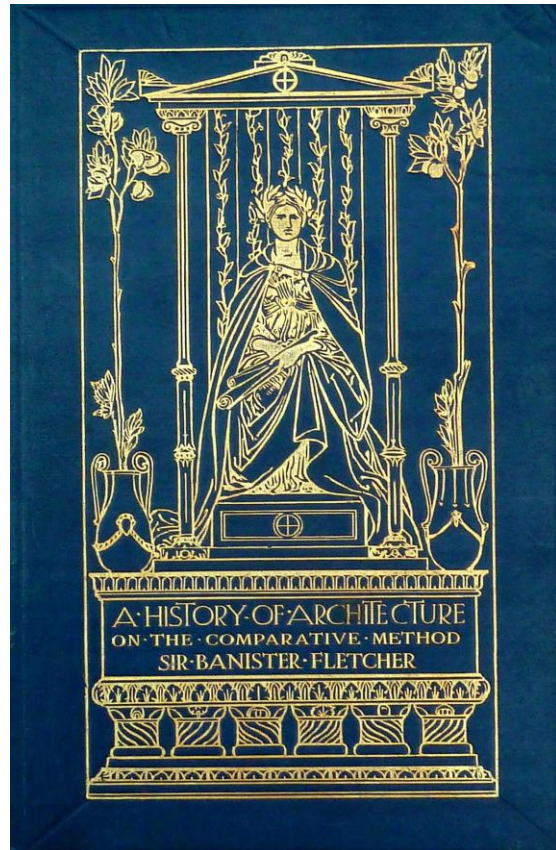
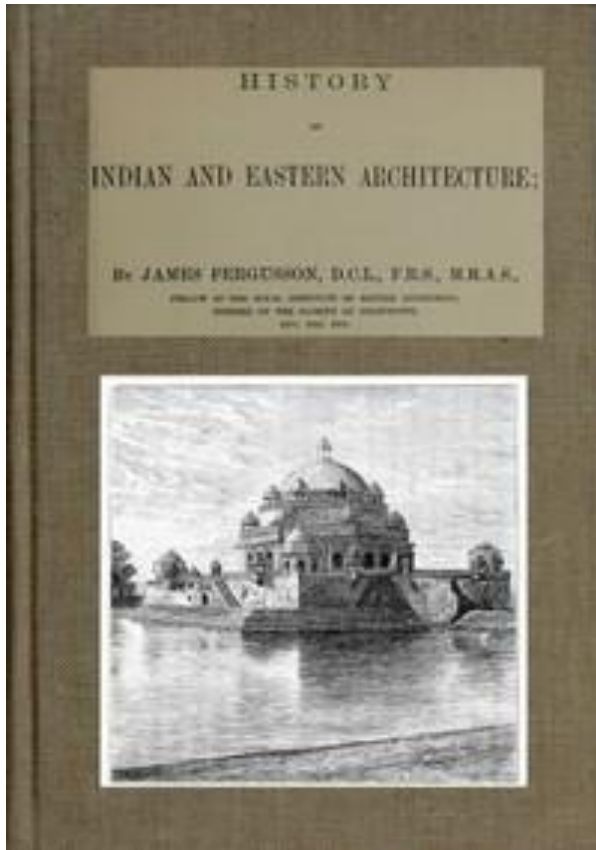
#### **Examples of Colonial Works**

- **James Fergusson's "History of Indian and Eastern Architecture" (1876):** Fergusson's work provided one of the earliest comprehensive surveys of Indian architecture, including Islamic structures. However, his analysis often reflected the biases of his time, focusing on the "exotic" and "oriental" qualities of Islamic monuments in India. Fergusson emphasized stylistic comparisons between Indian Islamic architecture and what he considered its more "authentic" counterparts in Persia and Arabia.
- **Sir Banister Fletcher's "A History of Architecture" (first published in 1896):** Fletcher's influential work categorized Islamic architecture in India within a broader Islamic architectural tradition, often downplaying its unique characteristics. His Eurocentric view classified Indian

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Islamic architecture as an offshoot of more "authentic" styles from the Islamic heartlands, thereby reinforcing the notion of India as a cultural periphery.



### Key Features of Colonial Historiography

- **Eurocentric Bias:** Colonial historians often approached Islamic architecture in India with a Eurocentric bias, seeing it as a derivative of other Islamic styles from Persia and Central Asia rather than a product of indigenous innovation. This perspective minimized the originality and complexity of Indian Islamic architecture, relegating it to a secondary status compared to European and Middle Eastern architectural traditions.
- **Focus on Monuments of Power:** The colonial focus was largely on grand imperial monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Qutb Minar, and the Red Fort. These structures were often interpreted as symbols of Mughal or Sultanate authority and were used to reflect narratives of power and dominance, mirroring the colonial obsession with authority and control.
- **Lack of Contextual Analysis:** Many colonial writings lacked a nuanced understanding of the cultural, social, and religious contexts in which these structures were built. Islamic architecture

was often presented as a series of isolated achievements, detached from the broader cultural and historical landscape of India.

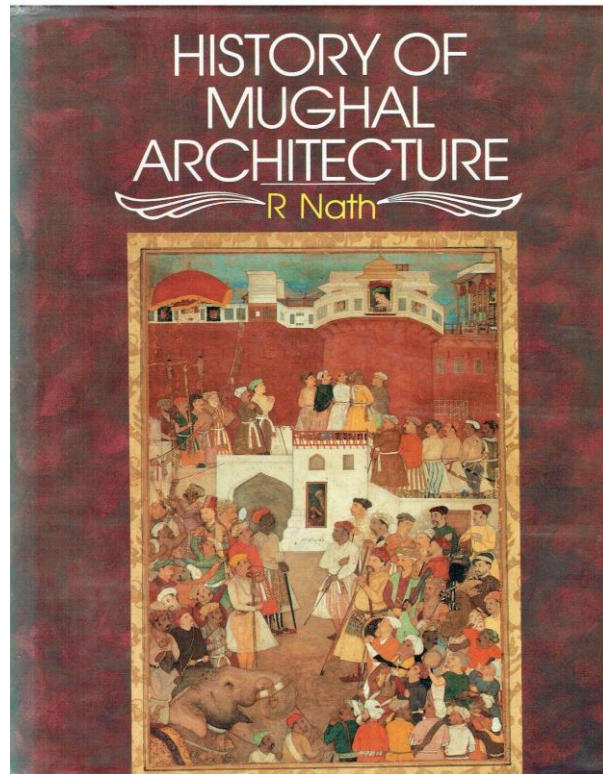
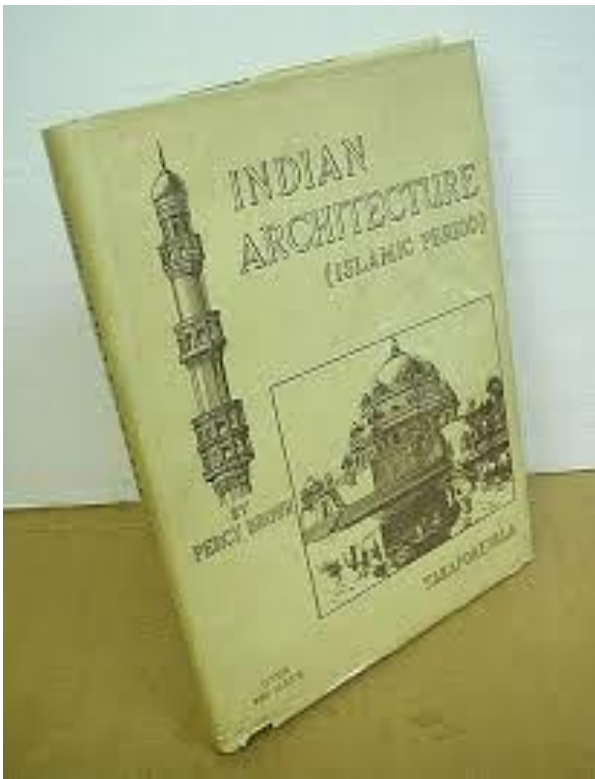
## **2. Nationalist Historiography: Reclaiming Islamic Heritage**

The post-independence period marked a significant shift in the historiography of Islamic architecture in India. Indian scholars began to reclaim their architectural heritage from colonial narratives, emphasizing its intrinsic value to Indian culture and history. Nationalist historiography emerged as a response to the Orientalist perspectives, reframing the history of Islamic architecture to highlight its integral role in India's cultural and historical fabric.

### **Examples of Nationalist Works**

- **Percy Brown's "Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)" (1942):** Although Brown was a British historian, his work marked a departure from earlier colonial narratives by acknowledging the unique characteristics of Indian Islamic architecture and its synthesis with local traditions. His writings paved the way for more nuanced interpretations that would be developed by Indian scholars in the post-independence period.
- **R. Nath's "History of Mughal Architecture" (1982):** Nath's work is an example of a nationalist approach that seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Mughal architecture, emphasizing the fusion of Persian, Indian, and Central Asian elements. Nath's scholarship underscores the Indian context of Mughal architecture, challenging earlier colonial perspectives that saw it primarily as a continuation of foreign traditions.





### Key Features of Nationalist Historiography

- **Emphasis on Syncretism:** Nationalist historians highlighted the syncretic nature of Islamic architecture in India, focusing on how Islamic and indigenous Indian elements blended to create a unique architectural style. This approach aimed to counter colonial portrayals of Islamic architecture as a foreign imposition and instead emphasize its Indian roots and development.
- **Highlighting Local Contributions:** Nationalist historiography often emphasized the contributions of local artisans, craftsmen, and regional traditions in shaping Islamic architecture. This perspective challenged the colonial narrative that often attributed architectural achievements solely to imperial patronage and foreign influences.
- **Reinterpretation of Architectural History:** Nationalist scholars sought to reinterpret the architectural history of Islamic India by placing it within the broader context of Indian civilization. They emphasized continuity and integration rather than disruption, portraying Islamic architecture as a natural and integral part of India's diverse cultural landscape.

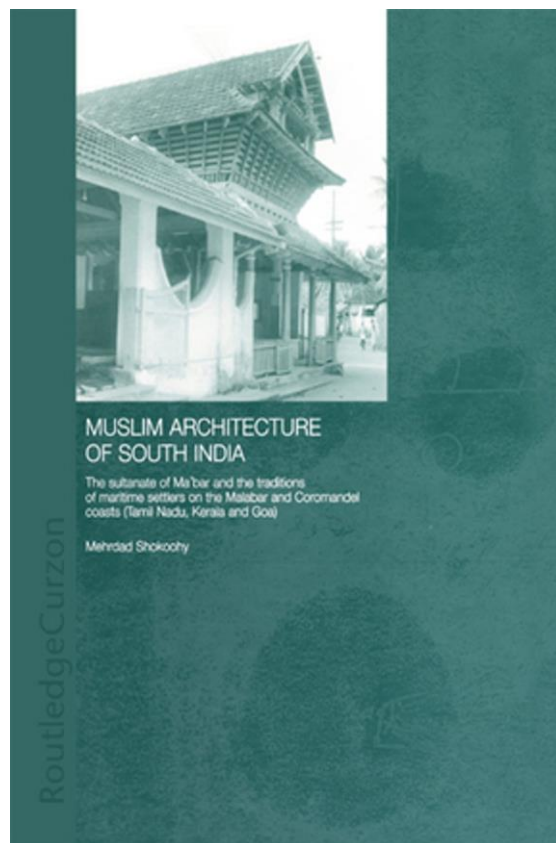
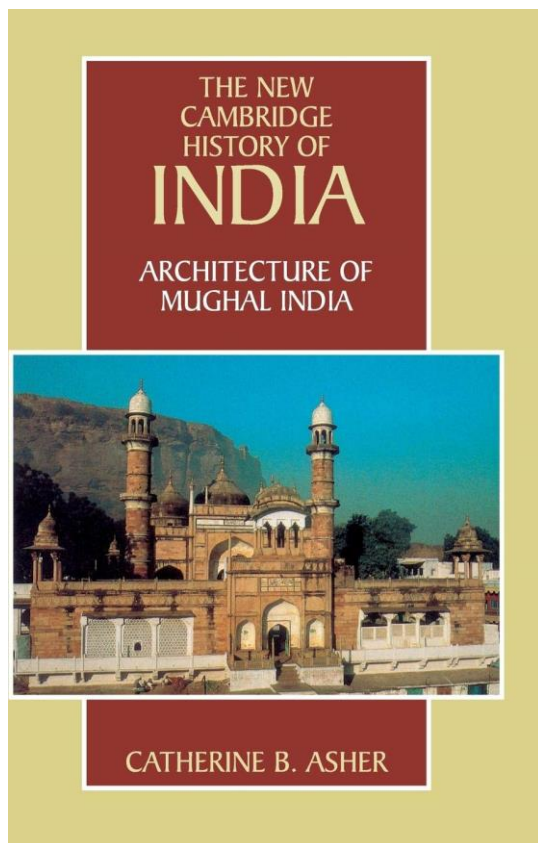
### 3. Contemporary Historiography: Critical and Inclusive Approaches

In recent decades, contemporary historiography has adopted more critical and inclusive approaches to the study of Islamic architecture in India. These approaches are characterized by a deeper awareness

of historiographical biases and a commitment to uncovering marginalized perspectives that were previously overlooked.

### **Examples of Contemporary Works**

- **Catherine B. Asher's "Architecture of Mughal India" (1992):** Asher's work is notable for its comprehensive approach to Mughal architecture, integrating political, social, and cultural contexts into the analysis. Her scholarship reflects a departure from both colonial and nationalist narratives, offering a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the Mughal architectural legacy.
- **Mehrdad Shokoohy's "Muslim Architecture of South India" (2013):** Shokoohy's research focuses on the lesser-studied Islamic architecture of South India, particularly in regions like the Deccan and Tamil Nadu. His work highlights regional diversity and challenges the traditional focus on the more famous Mughal and Sultanate monuments, bringing attention to the rich architectural heritage of other parts of India.



### Key Features of Contemporary Historiography

- **Critical Examination of Biases:** Contemporary historians critically examine the biases inherent in earlier historiographical traditions, whether colonial, nationalist, or otherwise. This involves a more reflexive approach that considers how historical narratives have been shaped by cultural, political, and social influences.
- **Inclusion of Marginalized Voices:** Contemporary scholarship seeks to bring marginalized voices and perspectives into the conversation. This includes highlighting the role of local artisans, regional architectural styles, and lesser-known structures that were often neglected in earlier narratives focused primarily on imperial monuments.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** There is a growing trend toward interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate insights from anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. This broadens the scope of analysis, allowing for a more holistic understanding of Islamic architecture in India as a cultural and social phenomenon, rather than merely an artistic or architectural achievement.

### 4. The Evolution of Historiographical Approaches: A Comparative Analysis

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By comparing these historiographical approaches, it becomes clear that the study of Islamic architecture in India has evolved significantly over time. The shift from colonial to nationalist and contemporary perspectives reflects broader changes in historical methodology and cultural discourse.

#### Comparative Analysis of Historiographical Approaches

- **Colonial vs. Nationalist Approaches:** While colonial historiography often viewed Islamic architecture in India through an Orientalist lens, emphasizing its "foreignness" and exotic qualities, nationalist historiography sought to reclaim this heritage as an integral part of Indian culture. Nationalist historians emphasized syncretism and local contributions, challenging colonial narratives of cultural superiority and imposition.
- **Nationalist vs. Contemporary Approaches:** Nationalist historiography, while an important corrective to colonial biases, often focused on constructing a unified national narrative. In contrast, contemporary approaches are more critical and inclusive, recognizing the diversity of voices and perspectives that have shaped Islamic architecture in India. Contemporary historians are more likely to highlight marginalized perspectives and employ interdisciplinary methods to provide a more holistic understanding.
- **Continuities and Disruptions:** Throughout these shifts, there have been continuities and disruptions in how Islamic architecture is studied and understood. While each historiographical approach has brought new insights, they have also perpetuated certain biases and blind spots. Contemporary historiography aims to address these gaps by adopting a more reflexive and inclusive stance.

#### Conclusion

The conclusion emphasizes how the historiography of Islamic architecture in India reveals both the biases inherent in historical writing and the valuable insights that different perspectives can offer. By examining the evolution of historiographical approaches—from colonial Orientalism to nationalist reclamation and contemporary critical analysis—we can see how biases have shaped, and continue to shape, the interpretation and understanding of Islamic architectural heritage.

#### Colonial Biases and Their Impact

The colonial historiographical approach to Islamic architecture was heavily influenced by Orientalist biases. Colonial historians often portrayed Islamic architecture in India as an exotic and foreign imposition, emphasizing a narrative of "otherness" that aligned with their broader colonial objectives. This perspective minimized the local contributions and syncretic elements of Islamic architecture,

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presenting it as a manifestation of external cultural dominance. These biases led to a narrow interpretation that prioritized certain grand monuments over others and largely ignored the nuanced, localized adaptations that characterized much of India's Islamic architectural landscape.

### **Nationalist Reinterpretation and Its Biases**

In contrast, the nationalist historiography that emerged after India's independence sought to counter the colonial narrative by emphasizing the integrative and indigenous aspects of Islamic architecture. While this perspective offered a corrective to the colonial biases, it also introduced new biases of its own. Nationalist historians often framed Islamic architecture as a symbol of India's composite culture, highlighting themes of unity and integration. However, in doing so, they sometimes downplayed the complex realities of cultural exchange and conflict, favoring a narrative that supported the ideals of national unity and identity formation. This approach, while broadening the scope of historical understanding, also risked oversimplifying the diverse and multifaceted nature of India's Islamic architectural heritage.

### **Contemporary Critical Approaches: Overcoming Biases and Gaining Insights**

Contemporary historiography represents a more critical and inclusive approach that seeks to overcome the limitations and biases of earlier narratives. Modern scholars are increasingly aware of the cultural, political, and social influences that have shaped previous historical writings. By critically examining these biases, contemporary historians aim to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Islamic architecture in India. This approach acknowledges the diversity of regional styles, the roles of local artisans, and the socio-political contexts of architectural production, offering a more balanced view that incorporates both major monuments and lesser-known structures.

Contemporary historiography also emphasizes the importance of marginalized perspectives, recognizing that earlier narratives often excluded the contributions of non-elite actors and regional traditions. By bringing these voices into the conversation, contemporary scholarship not only enriches our understanding of Islamic architecture in India but also challenges us to reconsider the assumptions and biases that have shaped historical narratives.

### **Insights Gained Through a Critical Historiographical Lens**

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Ultimately, the study of historiography provides profound insights into how historical narratives are constructed and the biases that influence them. By critically engaging with these historiographical traditions, scholars can uncover hidden layers of meaning and complexity in Islamic architecture, fostering a more inclusive and nuanced appreciation of its cultural significance. As historiography continues to evolve, it opens up new possibilities for understanding the rich and complex history of Islamic architecture in India, encouraging ongoing reflection and critical evaluation of the ways in which history is written and understood.

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