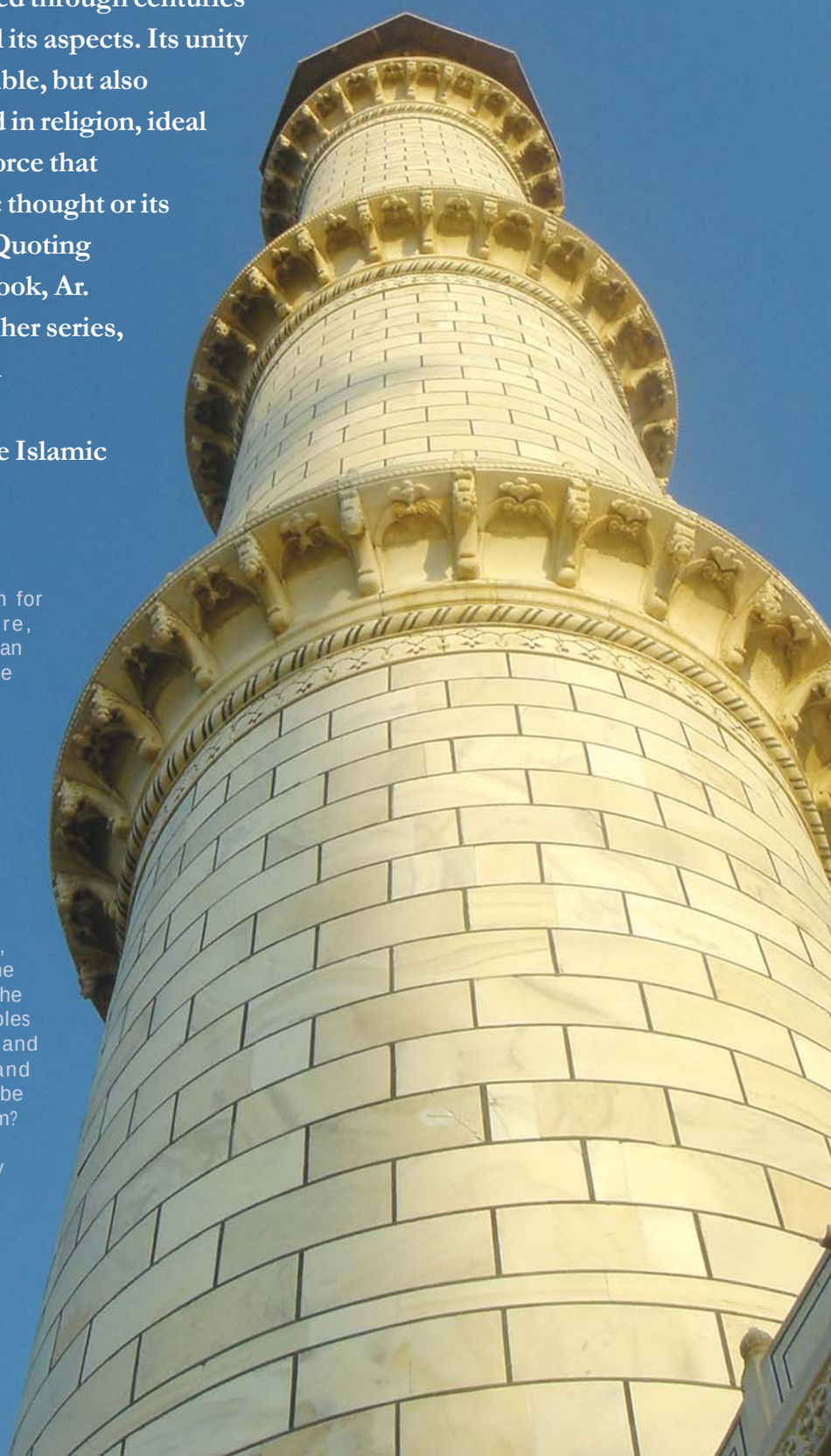
holy from the Quran

Islamic civilisation developed through centuries with strong links binding all its aspects. Its unity was not only formal and visible, but also fundamental - deeply rooted in religion, ideal and history. The cohesive force that remains behind any Islamic thought or its development is the Quran. Quoting translations from the holy book, Ar. Jinisha Jain, in the finale of her series, discusses the principles and paradigms that explain the spirituality and design in the Islamic thought of architecture.



Islamic thought laid the foundation for their arts such as architecture, painting and arabesque. These began to be referred to as Islamic, too. The grounding for this artistic thought, if it must be called Islamic, is the Quran. The earlier essays have already seen the significance of ornamental motifs like the scales of justice, the mosque lamp, mocárabe and others with respect to its passages. We also see a strong integration with nature through creation of paradise gardens and the use of fruits and trees, mentioned in the sacred text. The sky, the earth, the heavens and the stars; the laws of nature; the principles of unity, continuity, centrality and balance, belief in purity and righteousness: how can they all be manifest in the architecture of Islam?

Whether religious or secular, they are indeed integral to the concept of Islamic architecture, where the designed environment must always remind of the Creator's trace.

Photos courtesy: Ar. Jinisha Jain

Foundations, Pillars and Dome: Earth and Sky

In the field of construction, it is relevant that the Quran emphasises the role of earth as the provider of foundation and that of sky as the canopy for protection. The sturdy elevated plinths of the diverse Islamic structures built on strong foundations thus symbolise this resting place, and the domes - the canopy of the sky.

[Surah Ghafir, 40:64] It is Allah Who has made for you the earth as a resting place, and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape - and made your shapes beautiful - and has provided for you sustenance, of things pure and good; - such is Allah your Lord. So Glory to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds!

The Quran frequently uses examples relevant to construction and architecture in order to illustrate points of deeper relevance to devotees of Allah. However, their literal application in art metaphorically amounts again to piety and pleasure in Allah.

[Surah At Taubah, 9:109] Which then is best? - he that layouth his foundation on piety to Allah and His good pleasure? - or he that layouth his foundation on an undermined sand-cliff ready to crumble to pieces? and it doth crumble to pieces with him, into the fire of Hell. And Allah guideth not people that do wrong.

The reason behind laying foundations is to provide security.

[Surah Al Hijr, 15:82] Out of the mountains did they hew (their) edifices, (feeling themselves) secure.

The architect thus complies with Allah's injunctions to achieve strength and stability of his buildings, and lays a stable and good foundation for the same. No building is built without a foundation and pillars that could bear the super-structure. The Quran sets an example of ancient Damascus whose pillars were firmly laid down.

[Surah Al Fazr, 89:7-8] Of the (city of) Iram, with lofty pillars, the like of which were not produced in (all) the land?

Though, Allah raised the heavens without pillars. One of the reasons that the dome came to be used extensively in Islamic architecture was that it was a structural innovation that did not need pillars and thus alluded better to the pillar-less heaven of Allah.

[Surah Ar Rad, 13:2] Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that you can see; is firmly established on the throne (of authority); He has subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law)! Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate all affairs, explaining the signs in detail that you may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord.

Detailing and Beauty

Just as the Quran emphasises setting up architecture on science so that it would be firm and strong, it emphasises art, thus supporting the belief that architecture is both an art and a science. There is beauty in every little detail of Allah. Thus, an emphasis on detailing in architecture communicates the importance of the greater details of Allah, which cannot be replicated and from which greater pleasures can be drawn.

[Surah Al Araf, 7:32] Say: Who hath forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He hath provided) for sustenance? Say: They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus do We explain the signs in detail for those who understand.

It also comprises taking care of water and vegetation inside structures so that delight would prevail in them.

[Surah An Naml, 27:60] Or, Who has created the heavens and the earth, and Who sends you down rain from the sky? With it We cause to grow well-planted orchards full of beauty of delight: it is not in your power to cause the growth of the trees in them. (Can there be another) god besides Allah? Nay, they are a people who swerve from justice.

Allah also says: "Nor forget there portion in this world" [Qasas:77], and "that which is on earth we have made but as a glittering show for the earth" [Kahf:7]. At the same time, the Quran also warns against excess and exaggeration.

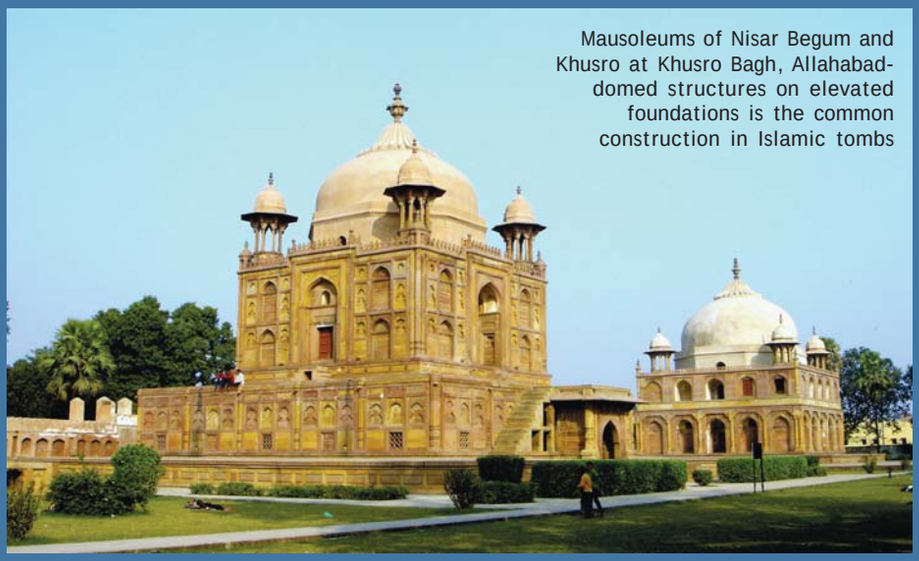
[Surah Ar Rad, 13:19] For the scum disappears like froth cast out; while that which is for the good of mankind remains on earth.

Proportions, Order and Symmetry: Purity and Balance

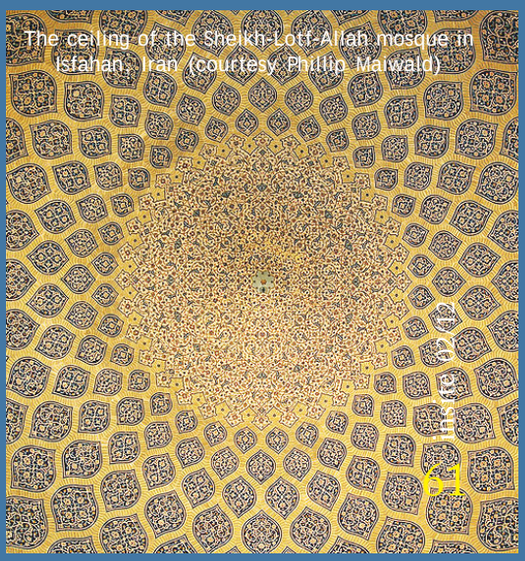
Architectural beauty comprises the study of structural and aesthetic balance.

[Surah Al Hijr, 15:19] And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance.

Pleasing proportions, order and symmetry become tools to reach the state of perfect balance or purity so often described in Quran. In the buildings, these minimise the imperfections and anomalies, rendering a lifeless structure a soul that symbolises the piety and love in Allah.



Mausoleums of Nisar Begum and Khusro at Khusro Bagh, Allahabad-domed structures on elevated foundations is the common construction in Islamic tombs



The ceiling of the Sheikh-Loti-Allah mosque in Isfahan, Iran (courtesy Phillip Malwald)

Pair of Taj Mahals seen at the Entrance of Taj Mosque

[Surah Ash Shams, 91:7] By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it.

[Surah At Taubah, 9:108] Never stand thou forth therein (the mosque put together by way of mischief). There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety; it is more worthy of the standing forth (for prayer) therein. In it are men who love to be purified; and Allah loveth those who make themselves pure.

The existence in pairs and the representation of duality is also significant in the creation of balance. It is often translated in architecture through the creation of a *jawab*. Thus blind arches and doors would often be made on the other side of the real ones, or pavilions and buildings that look alike, though serving different functions, would feature on both sides of a central axis. It was this symmetry that was extended, in the making of the *Jamatkhana* or the assembly house - an entire mirror in red sandstone of the Mecca-facing mosque placed to the west of the Taj Mahal. It was perhaps the same code of the whole mausoleum complex being a mirror on earth of the one in the paradise that appeared as a visual diagram of the two Taj Mahals on the tablet of this mosque itself.

[Surah Ar Rad, 13:3] And it is He who spread out the earth, and set thereon mountains standing firm and (flowing) rivers: and fruit of every kind He made in pairs, two and two: He draweth the night as a veil over the Day. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who consider!

The principle of a justly balanced Ummah mentioned in the Quran and which is a characteristic of the Islamic Ummah also perhaps urges the architect to strike a just balance in his architecture, and set an example for the community to follow.

[Surah Al Baqarah, 2:143] Thus have we madeth of you an Ummah justly balanced that you might be witnesses over the nations. And the apostle a witness over yourselves.

Light and Shade: Laws of Nature

Light and shade are maintained not only for space perception in Islamic architecture but as signs of the Lord. Light is always a virtue of the sky, of heaven, of the sun and moon, of truth, and of realisation. The light metaphor engenders the presence of Allah, just the way the mosque lamp in the *mihrab* symbolises the eternal light of the Divine. Shade and Shadow through contrast demonstrate the light that is concealed in the shroud of unawareness, disbelief or mischief. The Quran also ordered that light, warmth and shade conditions be observed. A recurring verse is, "Allah gave you the sun and the moon". Allah also says, "and We gave you the shade of clouds" [Al Baqarah: 57].

[An Nahl, 16:81] It is Allah Who made out of the things He created, some things to give you shade; of the hills He made some for your shelter; He made you garments to protect you from heat, and coats of mail to protect you from your (mutual) violence. Thus does He complete His favours on you that you may bow to His Will (in Islam).

Calligraphy: The Written Word of Allah

Calligraphy or ornamental writing has evolved into a visible expression for the highest art of all, the art of the spiritual world for Muslims. Al Qalam- the 68th Surah of Quran meaning 'The Pen (the letter)' - talks about Allah's justice and Judgment Day. The opening verse endorses that Allah honours the pen and writing.

[Al Qalam, 68:1]Nun. By the Pen and the (Record) which (men) write;

Proverbs and passages from the Quran are still sources for Islamic calligraphy. The beautiful calligraphy is thus a sign of respect for the greatness of Quranic inscriptions found almost in every mosque, mausoleum or other structures.

[Al Qalam, 68:37] Or have you a book through which you learn.

Apart from Quranic verses, Islamic buildings also have poetry, names and dates in surface inscriptions that are laid in stone, stucco, tile-mosaics or painting. Sometimes single words such as Allah or Muhammad are repeated and arranged into patterns over the entire surface of the walls. Sacred calligraphic texts also appear in pierced cartouches providing a pattern for light filtering through windows, thus sanctifying the larger space and volume with changing shadows that are experienced in harmony with the shifting positions of the sun, the moon, the stars and the other wonders of Allah. In India, scripts employed in the Persio-Arabic epigraphs include Kufi, Naskh, Thulth and Nastaliq. The last mentioned was the preferred script of the Mughals.

Islamic art is not the art of a particular region, country or a particular people. It is the art of a civilisation, formed by a combination of historical forces and circumstances. The earliest Muslims adopted many pre-Islamic traditions and also picked up elements of various regions and peoples they conquered with time. These were synthesised in new forms distinctly their own. Thus, Islamic art truly emerged only after the original Arab consciousness was coloured and diversified by the Turkish, the Persian, the Mongol-Chinese, the Indian and several other traditions. But while the Arab consciousness provided the base for Islamic art, it was the religion of Islam that largely determined its expression both in form and content, and this was most evident in architecture and in its decoration. A modern search for the relevance of Islamic art, therefore, must desire to see consistency with the letter and the spirit of the Quran. Amen!

One of the early examples of calligraphy in India at Arhai Din Ka Jhompra, Ajmer