

Qutub Minar: A Comparative Analysis of the Monument through Diachronic and Post-Modern Arguments

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Abstract

This paper provides a diachronic and post-modern comparative analysis of the Qutub Minar, one of India's most iconic architectural monuments. Through a historical and theoretical lens, the study examines the cultural and religious symbolism embodied in the Qutub Minar and the surrounding structures, particularly the *Quwwat-ul-Islam* Mosque and the Iron Pillar. Exploring Finbarr Barry Flood's theory of architectural "reuse" in Islamic contexts, this paper argues that the reuse of Hindu and Jain temple materials reflects not only the assertion of political dominance but also complex continuities with the past, challenging essentialist narratives of religious and cultural rupture. Additionally, Sunil Kumar's perspective on the socio-political implications of iconoclasm and memory politics within post-partition identity frameworks is explored, offering insight into how historical memory and communal identity intersect in contemporary narratives around the monument. The Qutub Minar thus serves as a palimpsest of layered cultural, religious, and political meanings, embodying both historical continuity and the tensions of identity construction within the South Asian cultural landscape.

Keywords:

Qutub Minar, diachronic analysis, post-modernism, architectural reuse, iconoclasm, Finbarr Barry Flood, Sunil Kumar, cultural continuity, historical memory, South Asian identity

“Three things make a city — Dariya, Baadal, Haakim
Kohsaro'n pe barf jab se pighli
Dariya tevarbadalrahe hain

Since ice melted on the mountains
Rivers have changed their moods time and again
(Akhtar Hoshiyarpuri)”¹

One is witness to the lofty heights of the *Qutub Minar* (which means Pole Star) as one is within a kilometre-radius of the heritage site. It looms over the decked lanes of Mehrauli, people in all hues of colours frolicking around the complex- some in headscarves praying in front of the *Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque*, smitten couples sheepishly walking hand in hand sometimes on top of the tombs of erstwhile tombs otherwise in the gardens, foreigners escorted by zealous tour guides who are seldom

¹ Rana Safvi and Syed Mohammad Qasim, *Where Stones Speak: Historical Trails in Mehrauli, the First City of Delhi* (Element, 2015), 1.

available to the locals. The Qutub Minar is magnanimous in the true sense of the word, its history bearing far more. The *Alai Darwaza* made of red sandstone and glimmers against the sun rays of the evening with its engravings with the words of the *Quran* surviving against the tides of time, lotus buds embellishing the underside of the arches of both doors, the marble inlays against the red sandstone with elaborate and intricate carvings incorporating an Indo-Islamic style; built and imagined by Alauddin Khalji to be one of four continues to be the only surviving dome. The tombs of the Iman Zami, Alauddin Khalji and Illutmish are also tastefully done, quite simple in style but grandiose in other respects. The Iron Pillar brought from Udaigiri and the cloisters of the *Zananamosque* built with the desecrations of the twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples are the centre of most contentious debates regarding the construction of the Minar and Mosque.

After the second battle of Tarain in 587 AH which corresponds to 1191 / 1192 AD, in which Raja Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated, the victor Sultan Mohammad of Ghor established his slave Qutbuddin Aibak as his regent in Delhi. Later in 1206, after Sultan Mohammad of Ghor's death, Qutbuddin declared himself as an independent ruler and laid the foundation of the slave dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. As is the norm of victorious armies from times immemorial, one of the first acts of intimidation that takes place is the destruction of the vanquished kingdom's symbols of power and religious icons and the establishment of the victor's own. Construction of such religious buildings also grants a certain legitimacy to the new rulers. Twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples present in the *Qila Rai Pithaura* were demolished in this manner and the debris from those sites was used for construction of Delhi's first mosque known as *Jami Masjid* (Safvi and Qasim 2015, 39). The entire history of the construction—from the first storey by Aibak in 1199 to the additions by Sultan Iltutmish and repairs by Sultan Firoz Shah (ruled 1351–1388) and Sultan Sikandar Lodi (ruled 1489–1517) in 1503—is all given in the inscriptions on the various levels of the Minar (Safvi and Qasim 2015, 110-111). Qutbuddin Aibak was ruling as his deputy in Delhi at that time so he would have been the builder. It was only in 1206 AD that Qutbuddin Aibak became the Sultan and till then he ruled as the deputy of Sultan Muizuddin Mohammad bin Sam or Mohammad of Ghor. The name of the architect who built the upper three storeys under Sultan Iltutmish is mentioned on the side of the door on the third storey as 'the slave and sinner, Muhammad Amir Koh'. In 1369, there was a second lightning strike and the fourth storey built by Sultan Iltutmish was also destroyed. Sultan Firoz Shah repaired it by building two storeys to replace the damaged one. He replaced the original red sandstone of the Minar with marble and sandstone on the fourth and fifth storey and added a cupola on the top. This cupola added 12 ft and 10 inches to the height of the Minar. In 1803 however, an earthquake brought it tumbling down (Safvi and Qasim 2015, 112-113).

Finbarr Barry Flood begins his argument on the constructions of the Mosque and the Minar inside the Qutub Complex, emphasising the reuse of architectural elements. These elements were considered 'ubiquitous' in the premodern Islamic world, such as Anatolia, Egypt, Syria and North India, where stones were the principal medium of construction. He shifts the discussion to 'reuse' and its understanding in the context of its 'marginalisation of aesthetic considerations' as opposed to its usual assertions as 'a pragmatic undertaking' or 'as an expression of the triumph of Islam'; he compares this act of reusing in premodern monuments built for Muslims patrons to the recycling of 'pagan' materials in early Christian or Byzantine monuments (Flood 2011, 121). One of the significant differences between the two lies

in how essentialist notions of Islam and a deep-seated interest in iconoclasm have disrupted the discourse of reuse in the Islamic context. Flood harps on the ‘appropriation, recycling and reuse’ of early Islamic architecture with a particular focus on the ‘*Qutb Mosque*’, the first Friday Mosque (*jami masjid*) of Delhi, along with its adjacent minaret, the *Qutb Minar* (Flood 2011, 122). He corroborated this with the intellectual discourse that surrounds the ‘recycled’ materials from earlier monuments which are usually referred to as ‘Hindu’ or ‘Jain’ materials, which he argues have four underlying assumptions, which is the metonymic relationship between recycled elements and the larger cultural notions that are created; imagined identities of cultural artefacts are understood as singular and sectarian; the fixation of a valorised moment of creation that fixates the Ur-moment of a work which asserts synchronic identities even within diachronic analyses; and the derivations of materials as secondary or tertiary inclusions is considered an anti-canonical derogation of the ‘original’ state.

According to Flood, analysis on the subject has been obliterated by the widespread perception that reuse offers support for ‘lurid’ tales of looting, spoliation and desecration found in mediaeval texts which are favoured in the construction of histories of the period. He affirms that artefacts by enduring the travesties of time and change, provide one the ability to imagine and reimagine the past which he describes as the- “the necessary sedimentation of meaning that accumulated as part of the process of historical change”. The ‘palimpsest’ nature of such artefacts has been crucial in their role in the contiguous process of ‘translating’ the past, one that more often than not involves a physical displacement. Flood’s argument is strongly suggestive of how the act of physical appropriation could be ‘palimpsest’ of earlier reuses that would create a dynamic continuity between contemporary practices and their historical antecedents. (Flood 2003, 95).

Flood’s approach, much like the essence of his argument, is diachronic. He takes into focus the relocation of the pillars (*stambhasor lats*) which were erected in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Delhi and sharply rebukes essentialist notions of Islamic cultural practices that obscure the transcultural nature of the pillars (Flood 2003, 95). The argument he makes is pedantic and one that harps on incessantly in both of his works; the reuses of indigenous material suggest empirical evidence to corroborate the transculturation in the ritual practices of the Delhi sultans. This also could be interpreted as an attempt by Delhi sultans to build a more cosmopolitan and secular culture around the empire to sustain their rule.

The Iron Pillar brings great merit to this discussion as its inclusion by Illutmish bears no ‘structural function’ to the mosque. It has been popularly interpreted as a trophy re-erected to commemorate the ‘Muslim’ victory over the conquered Hindu population of Delhi (Flood 2003, 101). The ideas of ‘trophy’ and ‘commemoration of victories’ are an imperialist discourse that trickles down through the means of colonial historiography into sectarian, popular narratives that essentialises antiques and artefacts into ‘triumphal gestures’ quite symbolic if one were to make a parallel, of the vestiges of Indian artefacts left behind and the lion’s share being gesticulated in the Great Exhibition in Britain. The indulgence of these narratives led the Iron Pillar to be referred to as the ‘Hindu’ iron pillar juxtaposed against the ‘Islamic’ minaret. The victory rhetoric also stems from the *Quranic* teachings that reject idol worship or idolatry and is grossly misinterpreted while considering the desecrations of the twenty-seven temples and their reuse. However,

there is little to no evidence to suggest that the pillar could be used as idol worship similarly to the way Hindu icons would be used but this implies that there was not a rejection of ‘Indian culture’ in Flood’s opinion. The meaning of reused pillars is not broached in connection to its pre-Islamic history and its cultural implications nor study the complex genealogies that the reused artefacts imbibe across centuries. The concluding argument that Flood makes is that Illutmish’s re-erection of the iron pillar has little to do with cultural rupture but more to do with cultural continuity, the appropriation of the *spolia* was in fact an actual continuation of the practice associated with the mediaeval Indian kings as evidence gathered proved the practices of mediaeval north Indian kings commemorate their own pillars as well as an appropriation of those erected by the predecessors through loots and destructions of the victory pillars of rivals. The Firuzabad pillar which lay years before the Ghurid conquest in Delhi and north of Ghurid’s Delhi in Firuzabad. When the pillar was re-erected it was crowned with a golden *kalasa*, which was similar to how Indian mediaeval rulers crowned their *shikharas* with golden vases.

Sunil Kumar in his work titled ‘*Qutb and Modern Memory*’, presents an argument rooted in the pluralities and divisive memory-making historical processes that are etched in identity politics of Hindu and Muslim communities in South Asia. He elucidates on the points of intersection between scholastic interpretations and popular perceptions vis-a-vis the Qutub complex as an embodiment of the ‘Might of Islam’ in India, a subject of enquiry in a post-Partition subcontinent living a truncated history.

Kumar argued that it would be vacuous to assume that the “idolators” were unaffected by the destruction of their houses of worship, despite their prohibition from entering interior precincts of the Delhi *masjid-iJâmi*. However, there is little epigraphic evidence of resentment or melancholy over the destruction of temples in Delhi, not even in the *Devanagari* graffiti etched by Hindu artisans in the crevices of *Qutb al-Dîn’s* mosque. Instead, the latter is referred to by a vernacular inscription as “the pillar of *Malikdîn*. May it bring good fortune” suggesting the erection of the minaret as an auspicious occasion. In another instance during Alâ al-Dîn’s reign, an unnamed craftsman had no trouble identifying the minaret as *Shrî Sultan AlâvadiVijayasthamb*, the Sultan’s pillar of victory.

The inscriptions on the *masjid-iJâmi* and sultanate country chronicles aim to give the idea that the virtuous Muslim Delhi Sultans destroyed all traces of Hindu settlements and temples nearby. Its corroboration lies 800 metres away from the said masjid in *bâgh-iJasrath*; specifically the builder of the reservoir attached next to it, the ‘Hindu’ queen *hauz-iRânî*. The etymology of her name (Arabic>Persian: *hauz*; Sanskrit>vernacular: *Rânî*), although etched and immortalised in the reservoir, traversed utterly unremarked in the literature of that period.

To put it in perspective, ‘Hindus’ constructed and supported other significant areas nearby the iconoclastic damage, some of which were large enough to serve as city landmarks and public convocations. As Kumar states, the “Muslim” takeover of Delhi left these areas unaltered, in contrast to the devastation and reconstruction that took place within the Qutub complex. Their names functioned as a permanent record of their ‘profane’ original identities (Kumar 2002,159). Therefore, it is essential to carefully reframe the magnitude of the rift created by the “Muslim” conquest of the “Hindu” civilisation.

Kumar also reminded that the conduct of the Mu'izzî commanders was different from the precedents set by the Hindu sovereigns, even though the destruction, degradation, and theft of temple relics frequently occurred during the battle between rival Hindu kingdoms in the Middle Ages. The authority of the defeated lord was culled within the temple shrine *rajas* pillaged each other's temples. The process of demolishing and rebuilding imperial temples represented assertions of conquest that were carried out under ritually similar systems of Hindu rule. In contrast, *Qutb al-Dîn*'s declarations of victory in the *masjid-i-Jâmi* redistributed temple loot without any indication of authority appropriation.

Thus, the redeployment of familiar temple *spolia* would have been viewed by people belonging to this former category in an especially significant light, and as such, would have signified, on a purely visual level (if one were to posit that the availability of newer systems of religious thought with a new conception of social hierarchy would not necessarily lead to an increase in religious learning at the grassroots), a resurfacing of older notions of power within the context of new structures of oppression. The epigraphic inscriptions on the minar and the qibla screen could, one could reasonably posit, act as modes of assurance and affirmation opposed to the initial impression conveyed by architectural cues, designed to put forward the dual impression of a powerful and centralised (also benevolent) polity, but one that functioned upon principles of grace, strong accordance to the Islamic faith, and transparency before the eyes of God.

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