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RESEARCH PAPER

The Ideological Basis of Design Motifs in the Architecture of Subcontinent: The Converging Stories of Bells and Tassels

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
	The motifs used for surface decoration in architecture of the Subcontinent contain a wealth of historical information. They contribute to our understanding of the ideas, tastes and preferences of the region, which has hosted multiple civilizations. This paper explores the ideological foundation of two apparently similar motifs of architectural ornamentation used in the Subcontinent, i.e. bells and tassels. The study shows that these motifs had their roots in quite different sets of ideas. These ideas inform us about the significance they developed in the cultural domain. For instance, the bell symbolizing sound draws its significance from an entirely indigenous paradigm; it symbolized sacred sound. The tassel on the other hand, had a more diverse ideological and cultural background that culminated into its usage as a talisman against evil eye. Both these symbols transformed into motifs of architectural decoration in the Mughal period and both represent stories that converge in the sensibilities of the land.

Introduction

The Subcontinent has been described by historians as a crucible of civilizations due to the fact that being at an important junction of the ancient silk route; it remained a place of interest for invaders coming from Central Asia. The invaders who came to India often stayed here for considerable stretch of time and as a result cultural amalgamation took place on many levels. After the Aryans, the most important and long held impact came from the Muslims who have a history of invading the land going back to 7th century AD, when Muhammad Bin Qasim invaded Sindh. From 10th century onwards, the invasions increased in frequency and impact, and as a result there were more settlements. The Sultanate period and then the Mughal period left a permanent mark on the history of the region in both

administrative and cultural domains. The amalgamation of Muslim and Hindu cultures was one of its kinds. It was most thorough and multifaceted.

One of the reasons for this unprecedented assimilation was the relationship between the metaphysical and cultural. Both cultures had a religious ideology, in which world was seen as temporary and illusive, and a greater emphasis was given to the hidden essence of the world or the larger scheme of existence. The spiritual domain which was profoundly explored in the Hindu religion was the central focus of the Muslim Sufis who came along with invaders and settled in the Subcontinent. The dichotomy of appearance and essence that both Hinduism and Islam came to be the basis of a cultural discourse in which ordinary objects assumed a significant symbolic presence. The meanings and implications of ordinary objects became manifold and it was commonly held that the divine communicates through symbols. This basis also significantly contributed to the perception of the objects in an extended subjective domain and hence a culture full of symbols, motifs, and ornaments came into being. The Muslim emphasis on decoration and beautification turned some of the symbols into motifs. The ideological basis remained a part of it but with varying degrees of manifestation.

In the above context, two motifs in the architectural decorations of the Subcontinent are exemplary. The first is the bell motif, which had its root in the metaphysical paradigm of Hinduism and the second is the tassel, which is more concerned with the supernatural. The following study examines the ideological roots of these motifs in order to chart their significance.

The Bell Motif

Bell has been a motif frequently used in various cultures with varying significance. The most prominent use of the bell motif is found in the Buddhist and Hindu culture. Due to its cultural significance, it has invariably used in religious architecture for multiple reasons. For instance, hundreds of tiny bells are hanged from ceiling in Buddhist pagodas to symbolize Buddhist laws governing life (Nozedar, 2009). They have also been used to ward off evil as in Buddhist culture; the sound of bell is associated with Buddha's voice. The hanging bell also functions as a sign of entering the temple; Buddhists ring the bell as they enter to worship. Similarly, the Buddhist monks use the sound of bell as a call to worship.

In Hindu culture, the significance of the bell is manifold. A large hanging bell in the inner sanctum of a Hindu temple is rung to invoke the deity. As a mandatory ritual, the devotee upon his or her arrival rings the bell to call the attention of the deity. In rituals like *arti*, bell is considered to be a compulsory component. The ritual of *arti*, is based upon the idea of expressing complete love for the deity by illuminating a *murti* using *ghee*(cooking fat) soaked wicks(Rao ,1993).Bell accompanies this act by providing a background sound, which represents a devotee's deep reverence for the deity. The symbolic significance of

the ritual lies in the fact that the wick burns itself as it provides light in much the same way a devotee is supposed to dispel darkness with the power of truth. The light and sound signify truth and *shabdh* (word).

As an architectural embellishment, the bell motif initially appears carved in the fragment of a beam from Amaravati (figure 1), a site in Andhra Pradesh, India. The Amaravati stupa was founded in third century BCE under the reign of Asoka. However, the evidence for its foundation in this period remains debatable. Therefore, the construction of the stupa, with various components added at the later date is believed to be completed in the 3rd century AD. The beam displays a *ghantamala*, a garland of bells adorning the border in repeated fashion. The depiction is rather dull in comparison to a later expression found in the stone railing of Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh, India (figure 2). The railing shows hanging bells as used at the entrance of stupas.

Figure 1. Fragment of a beam from Amravati, 3rd century BCE, Andhra Pradesh, India

Figure 2. Stupa railing Bharhut, 1st century BCE, Madhya Pradesh, India

A rather different use of bell motif can be observed in a 11th century temple in Bhuvaneshvar, Orissa, India. The bell appears tied to the neck of a buffalo carrying the Vedic god, Yama (figure 3). This is perhaps the clearest example of the use of bell motif in sculptural architecture.

Figure 3. Vedic god Yama, 11th century, Bhuvaneshvar, Orissa, India.

The pillars of Qutub complex also display the use of bell motif, which can be explained with the fact that many columns used in the complex were taken from Buddhist and Hindu temples (figure 4).

Figure 4. A pillar of Qutub Complex, Delhi, India

The 14th century mausoleum of Shah Rukn-e Alam carries this motif modeled as a bracket for a false beam in the entrance vestibule (figure 5). Moreover, the motive is used along with a geometric pattern and then continues in the doorway. The motif discontinues due to a *pinjra* screen, which implies that the original position of the bell motif diminished with the passage of time. The use of the motif in the tomb, in all its manifestation also refers to another fact, which is the change in the underlying idea. It seems that there is a transition from the symbolic use of the motif to a decorative one.

Figure 5. Bells carved on the false beam at Shah Rukn-e Alam mausoleum

The shrines of Sufi saints in the region of Punjab display the motif frequently, which implies that the motif found its symbolic significance in Sufi thought as well. The motif can be witnessed in the tombs of Sheikh Alauddin Mauj Darya, and Tahir Khan Nahar (figure 6, 7).

Figure 6. Bell motif on the tomb of Sheikh AlauddinMauj Darya

Figure 7. Bell motif on the tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar

The doorways from Bhera and Chiniot show the use of bell motif in intricate woodcarving. The bell motif is mostly used at the overhang of the doorways suggesting the symbolic position of the bell as deemed in Hindu culture remains unaffected. Moreover, in the woodcarving, the motif assumes a three dimensional form instead of the earlier relief appearance (figure 8).

Figure 8. Hanging bell motif on wooden doorway in Lahore Museum, 19th century, Pakistan.

This is certainly due to the fact that woodcarvers in the regions of Chiniot and Bhera achieved a mastery over craft to an unprecedented level. Although parts of the original motif are missing, still one can recognize it as bell motif. Most of the manifestations of the motif in Bhera and Chiniot are from residential architecture and it is frequently found in the doorways (figure 9).

Figure 9. A doorway from Bhera, 19th century, Pakistan

Significance of the Bell Motif

The fundamental idea that contributes to the importance of the bell is its ability to produce sound. Sound is a mysterious entity if considered in all its complexity and potential. In almost all major religions of the world, it has found a place of exclusive importance. Hazrat Inayat Khan, a famous mystic of the Subcontinent wrote:

In the Vedas of the Hindus we read; Nada Brahma-sound, being the Creator. In the works of the wise of ancient India we read; 'First song, then Vedas or wisdom.' When we come to the Bible, we find; 'First was the word, and the word was God'. And when we come to Qur'an we read that the word was pronounced, and all creation was manifest. This shows that the origin of the whole creation is sound (Lavezzoli,2006).

Sound has a sacred position in Indian thought. Whether one studies Vedas, Puranas or Upanishads, sound is represented and discussed as a metaphysical phenomenon and is central to all ritual practices. One of the reasons for the sacred position of sound is that the body of religious ideas collectively called Hinduism arose out of Vedas, which in turn, were a product of long held oral tradition. Due to the oral tradition of transmission of knowledge, sound gained primary importance. This is why the knowledge in the Vedas is called *Sruti*, which stands for 'a sound that is worth hearing'(Macdonell,2004). It denotes divine knowledge, which is immutable and eternal or the Vedic Truth(Gregorios,2001). The divine knowledge which was explored by and revealed through seers was in the form of words and therefore sound.

Sound in Indian parlance is called *Nada*. The ancient treatises explain it as a combination of physical breath and intellect (Moorthy,2001). Nada has two parts, the *Ahata Nada* and the *Anahata Nada*. The former represents the struck sound or the physical manifestation of sound which can be heard by the ear. The latter is

162

defined as 'unstruck sound' which is only felt in the heart of an enlightened human being, a seer, or a rishi Wilke &Moebus, 2011). The actual meaning of the sound is considered to be in the 'unstruck' part which makes it worth hearing. The distinction between the struck and unstruck sound echoes the fundamental paradigm of duality that is central to Indian thought and culture.

In Indian religious thought, reality is understood as a combination of the essence (*Atma*) and appearance (*Maya*). It is to this duality to which a human being is born. Since a human being acquires an identity of its own that separates him from the rest of the universe and traps him in the Maya or the world of appearance, the religious aim is fulfilled through the negation of the Maya. A devotee is supposed to see beyond the Maya and absorb into the essence or the universal soul. *Advaita Vedanta*, a classical school of Indian philosophy explains that the "phenomenal world we experience is Maya- a superimposition on the surface of Brahman and it is only real because we see it in ignorance of Brahman. This is not the same as saying that the world is an illusion. The world is real enough but it is not Absolute Reality and it drops away completely when we are in full knowledge and experience of Brahman"(Anslow, 2010). Since the ultimate reality remains indiscernible through rational faculties, therefore metaphors, allegories, and mythologies are essential devices to understand the essence. Vedas themselves are full of metaphors and allegorical poetry (Narayan, 2007).

The universal soul or Brahma, which is the god of creation is also understood as the divine origin of sacred sound. The word "OM" which represents the sacred sound works as a means through which a devotee connects to the universal soul. Sound therefore exists as a metaphysical universal entity responsible for creation and therefore an essential part of human soul. The above division of *Ahata Nad* and *AnahataNad* corresponds to the distinction of universal and individual human identity. This dual conception of sound is central the idea of *Shabdh* (word), language, mantras and communication. The truth that is known through *Sruti*can only be communicated through the exact pronunciation of an ashlok or mantra. This pronunciation is not limited to the word alone but is extended to the musical domain. Guy Beck is of the view that the concept of sacred sound as Shabdh-Brahman was developed and transformed into Nada-Brahman, which included musical sounds (Beck,2006). The text is not read, it is sung. Due to the ability of music to manipulate sound in meaningful ways, music itself is considered sacred in Indian culture. Music is deemed a Mantra and is therefore contributes to the achievement of the spiritual goal of a devotee. This is why there are detailed instructions in the Vedas about the correct pronunciation of sacred text.

The dualistic conception of reality also gave rise to the use of a myriad of symbols in Indian culture. The bell is considered as a symbol of sound in Indian culture and therefore its importance comes from the loaded concept of Sound in Indian philosophy and religion. In tantric Buddhism, for instance, gods hold a thunderbolt in the right hand and a bell in their left hands. A priest while

performing a ritual therefore carries the bell in the left hand and thunderbolt in the right to express an enlightened mind. The thunderbolt stands for earnestness of action and the bell signifies wisdom (Pal & Richardson,1983). The association of the bell with wisdom comes from the ability of sound to reveal divine knowledge. The power of the sound of the bell is also expressed in the ritual ringing of bells at the temples. Stephen Knapp noted that the devotee "rings the bells as he or she enters, then proceeds for darshan to see the deities. The ring of the bell produces a sound similar to Om, the universal name of the Lord. This creates an atmosphere of auspiciousness when entering the temple" (Knapp,2006). The ringing of bell extends to many rituals that are performed to ward off evil spirits (Ayrookuzhiel,1983). Another view maintains that the vibration of the bell actually causes the whole atmosphere to vibrate and in the vibrating environment the bodies of the devotees also respond to vibrations and since the vibration is an expression of Om, therefore it functions to purify the body and the soul. Bells in the temple invoke gods as well by drawing their attention (Coleman,1928).

The above certainly shows that the bell has been a symbol of sacred sound fundamental to the metaphysical worldview advanced by the Vedas and later religious texts. It therefore remains a part of many rituals in the religious practices of Hindus.

The Tassel Motif

Tassels as decorative motif have been a part of Central Asian ornamental vocabulary (Leslie,2007).There are multiple examples of the use of tassels as hangings on the edges of the tents, umbrellas and yurts. In Delilarkent, a place considered sacred in the Sufi tradition of Armenia, tassels hang from the gate of the hermitage(Markham, 2006).The entrance of Timur's palace in Samarqand also shows the use of silken tassels. A painting from the Zafarnama also shows the tented throne of Timur with hanging tassels (figure 10).

Figure 10. A folio from Zafarnama

The use of tassels is most frequent in asmalyk, a hanging made from tassels in Central Asia. It is mostly found in pairs hanging from both sides of camel particularly when the bride leaves her parents' home (figure 11). Some of the tribes in Central Asia use tassels as jewelry (figure 12). For instance, the diadem, which is a traditional bridal jewelry in Turkestan, exhibits tassels (figure 13).

Figure 11. A 19th-Century Turkmen Asmalyk, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

Figure 12. A 19th century pendent from Central Asia

Figure 13. Diadem from Central Asia

However, since the hangings are made of metal, they also closely resemble to bells and still interesting is the fact that much like bells, these tassels are known for warding off evil.

From Central Asia, this motif travelled to the Subcontinent. Tassels can be observed on the ceremonial parasols held above emperors and princes, and other dignitaries while traveling or during events of outdoor courts. Tassel can be seen as a part of Jahangir's royal crown (figure 14).

Figure 14. Portrait of Jahangir, Tassel on the back of crown

A 17th century Mughal dagger preserved in British Museum also shows tassel tied to it (figure 15).

Figure 15. A 17th century Mughal dagger, British Museum

The Mughal architecture also shows various examples where tassels have been used as decorative motif in architectural embellishments and surface decoration. The inner surface of the dome of Masjid Wazir Khan shows a layered use of tassels exclusively for decorative purposes (figure 16).

Figure 16. Tassel decoration on the dome of Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore

A stylized example of tassels can be observed in Fatehpur Sikri on the plinth of the structure (figure 17). In Lahore Fort tassels appear in relief formation (figure 18).The great Taj Mahal also shows intricate use of the motif (figure 19).

Figure 17. A plinth from Fatehpur Sikri, India

Figure 18. Relief formation of Tassels at Lahore Fort

Figure 19. The use of tassels at the Taj Mahal

The use of tassels also found a powerful expression in the Sufi tradition of the Subcontinent. It can be frequently observed in the shrines on festive occasions. It can be stated that the tassel entered the ornamental vocabulary of the shrine culture as it can be seen as a decorative motif on the Shah Surkh Bukhari Mosque in Uch competed in 16th century (figure 20). From Mughal period the motif seems to have travelled in the woodcarvings of Bhera and Chiniot, where tassel can be seen as an important part of ornamental vocabulary (figure 21).

Figure 20. Decorative use of tassels at Shah Surkh Bukhari Mosque
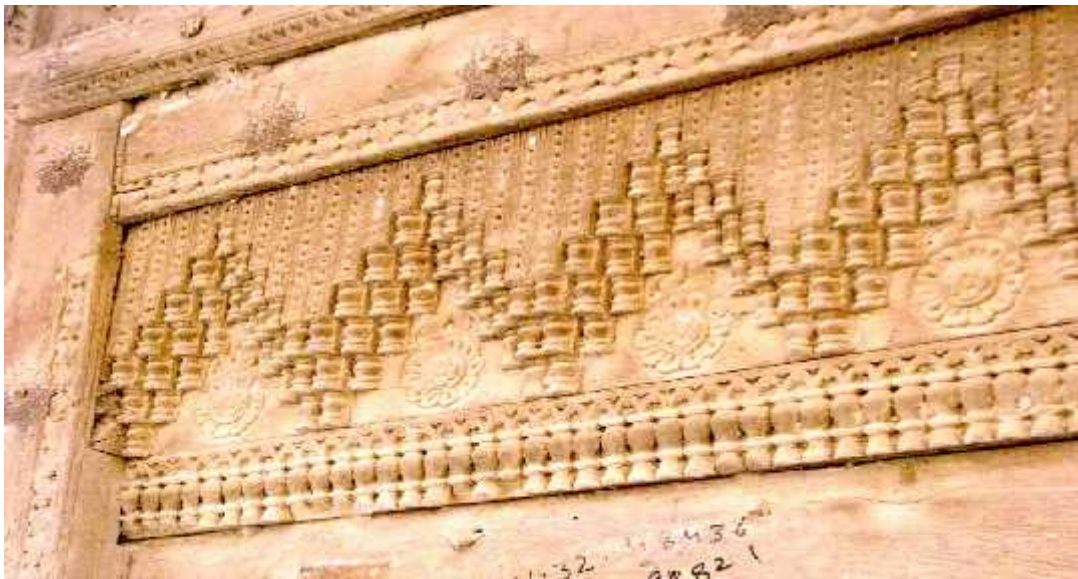

Figure 21. An example of woodwork from Bhera, Pakistan

Interestingly, tassel found its way into the marble pavilion designed by Bhai Ram Singh for Queen Victoria's statue placed at the Charing Cross, Lahore in the British period. The arches of the pavilion show a linear use of hanging tassels (figure 22).

Figure 22. Tassels in the marble pavilion, Charing Cross, Lahore

Significance of the Tassel Motif

Tassels have been used in various cultures across history with varying meanings and implications. For instance, tassels can be identified on the neck of Egyptian Pharaoh Tatunkhamen. At another instance of history, we find references in the Hebrew Bible, where God instructs Moses to guide the people of Israel in following commandments and in that context they may attach tassels to their garments, as reminders. Tassels for the people of Israel had a distinctive religious value attached. Even today, many of the devout Jews attach tassels to their prayer shawls. In ancient Rome, tassels found their way to be decorative elements in garments, which later on became symbols of power and glory. The Catholic Church also used tassels to define hierarchies amongst clergy.

Another use of tassels that is common in Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Muslim culture is its consideration as Talisman. Talisman comes from the Greek word *telsma* meaning "to initiate into mysteries" (Jones & Flaxsman, 2010). In late Ottoman Empire, this use of tassel to ward off evil eye becomes clear from Fany Davis following description of how a new born child was protected:

On its head was put a skull cap with a pearl tassel, and to it was attached a gold coin or two and a collection of charms which consisted of a bunch of garlic, a piece of alum, one or two verses from the Koran written on blue cloth, and some

blue glass beads – all being parts of the *nazartakimi*(the outfit of charms against the evil eye)(Davis et al, 1986).

The Muslim rosary also displays tassel as an essential element and is supposed to serve the function of warding off evil (Untracht,2008). A similar function can be seen amongst Hindus. Tassels are found in the *rakhi*, a bracelet that is tied by a sister on her brother's arm or in the *Sehra*that covers the face of the groom, on musical instruments and around the neck of cows. The statues of soldiers from Bharhut stupa also display tassels (Cunningham, 1879). Two tassels can be seen around the stomach It would not be unfair to state that the most recurring idea behind the use of tassel is the protection from the Evil Eye.

Evil eye is supposed to be the cause of curse and is understood as a malevolent gaze directed to a person whom harm is intended. The first evidence of the realization the impact of evil eye goes back to Mesopotamia where it is described in cuneiform on clay tablets. Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians texts mention the evil eye. For instance, the Sumerian text mentions:

The roving Evil Eye hath looked on the neighborhood and hath vanished far away, hath looked on the vicinity and hath vanished far away, hath looked on the chamber of the land and hath vanished far away, it hath looked on the wanderer and like wood cut off for poles hath bent his neck (Budge,1930).

In Greece and Rome, the evil eye was well recognized phenomenon. It was believed that if a person is excessively praised, he would boast of pride and will attract evil eye, which will then cause him physical or mental harm. Many of the diseases were thought to be caused by evil eye. In Greek culture, evil eye was avoided through spitting three times (Elliot,2016).

Evil eye is also recognized in Muslim cultures. The Sahih Muslim contains a Hadith, wherein, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) warns about evil eye and instructs to take bath in order to purify. According to Ibne Abbas,as per Sahi Muslim, the Prophet said, "The evil eye is true. If anything could outrun the decree, it would be outrun by the evil eye. When you perform a ritual bath, wash well."Arabic expression Mashallah (as God wills) is often used to protect one from the evil eye. In Hinduism, eye is considered to be the most powerful center of energy in the body. It is believed that jealousy can contribute to evil eye. A person who has some physical defect is feared as it is believed that he can be jealous of a person blessed with health. Similarly, women who are more likely to experience jealousy are regarded to be more capable of casting an evil intended glare (Dundes,1992).In both Hindu and Muslim cultures, the tassel had a common ideological basis and it was to use it as an amulet against evil eye. Both cultures, in fact, reinforced each other and therefore contributed to the significance of the motif not only in architecture but in various other cultural expressions and rituals.

Conclusion

The bell, appearing as a decorative motif in Mughal and later architecture, had its roots in the metaphysical worldview of creation in Hindu thought. Its significance lied in the fact that sacred sound had a fundamental role to play in the creation of the universe. Although this ideological basis was not upheld by Muslim thinkers and ideologies about creation, the bell however continued to be present in the doorways. The original usage of bell at the entrance of the temple somehow survived. In the case of tassel, the common belief in its power to protect against evil eye contributed to its significance and varied use. However, in Mughal and later architectural embellishments, its usage is merely decorative. This usage can be ascribed to the emphasis on beautification that Muslim aesthetic schools put forth. The floral and arabesque design vocabularies were rich enough to incorporate both the bells and tassels as design motifs.

The study has shown that the journey of bell and tassel in the Subcontinent is that of a transition from a symbol to motif. This transition contributes to our understanding of how design vocabularies come into being by incorporating the shapes of the symbols. Once the usage tilts towards aesthetic consideration, the motif disconnects from the symbolic meaning. However, due to a subjectivity that recognized the symbol in distant past, a familiarity of the shape remains a timeless component of aesthetic sensibility. The bells and tassels may be perceived as coming from different sources but both converge as expressions of a subjectivity that looks at the world full of divine mystery.

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