

Burhanpur Fort: Political, Architectural and Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Forts occupy a significant position in the political, military and architectural history of India. They were not merely defensive structures constructed for protection against external attack; many of them developed into centres of political authority, royal residence, administration, commerce and urban life. The construction of forts encouraged the development of military architecture, palatial buildings, and water-management systems and planned settlements. In this sense, forts constitute an important material link between the political history of the past and the cultural heritage of the present.¹

Key words: architecture, water-management systems, military architecture, strategic, establishment, fortress.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian forts is also inseparable from concepts of sovereignty and resistance. The possession of a strategically located fort frequently determined political authority over the surrounding territory, while the defence or loss of a fort could decide the fortunes of ruling houses. By the nineteenth century the military value of many traditional forts had diminished because of changes in warfare and political organisation, but their architectural, archaeological and cultural significance remained. Today they survive as monuments of India's historical experience and as repositories of regional memory.²

Burhanpur and the Rise of the Faruqi Kingdom

Burhanpur emerged as one of the most important urban and political centres of Khandesh under the Faruqi dynasty. The Faruqi kingdom was established towards the close of the fourteenth century, when the weakening authority of the Delhi Sultanate enabled provincial and regional powers to establish independent political centres. The disturbances accompanying Timur's invasion of northern India in 1398 further accelerated the fragmentation of the political order associated with Delhi.³

Burhanpur remained the principal capital of the Faruqi kingdom for approximately two centuries, until Khandesh was absorbed into the Mughal Empire under Akbar at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Its geographical location between northern India and the Deccan gave the city exceptional strategic importance. The Tapi valley provided an important corridor of communication, while the nearby fortress of Asirgarh dominated one of the principal routes linking northern India with the Deccan.⁴

Foundation of Burhanpur

The foundation of Burhanpur is traditionally associated with the Faruqi ruler Malik Nasir Khan. The city was established around the beginning of the fifteenth century on the northern bank of the River Tapi. Its establishment transformed the region into an important political centre and provided the Faruqi rulers with a capital situated near the strategically vital fortress of Asirgarh.⁵

According to the historical tradition of the region, the new city was named Burhanpur in honour of the celebrated Chishti saint Shaikh Burhan-ud-Din Gharib, who was associated with Daulatabad. The connection between political foundations and Sufi saints was a familiar feature of medieval Indian urban culture, and the name of Burhanpur reflects the interaction between political authority and religious prestige in the establishment of new centres.⁶

Under the Faruqi rulers the city expanded considerably. Palaces, mosques, tombs, serais and other public structures were constructed, and Burhanpur gradually developed the architectural character of a regional capital. The remains of these monuments testify to the prosperity enjoyed by the city before its incorporation into the Mughal Empire.⁷

The Shahi Qila or Shahi Mahal

One of the most prominent surviving monuments of Burhanpur is the Shahi Qila, also known as the Shahi Mahal. Situated dramatically above the River Tapti, the complex was initially associated with the Faruqi rulers and was subsequently enlarged and used by the Mughals.

Rather than being exclusively a military fortress, the surviving complex possesses the character of a fortified royal palace. It contained spaces intended for administration, ceremonial gatherings and royal residence.⁸

The remains along the Tapti include lofty halls, residential chambers and architectural fragments that indicate the former magnificence of the palace. The Imperial Gazetteer observed that the ruined fort and the remains of its elevated halls provided evidence of the splendour of the royal establishment at Burhanpur. The complex later became one of the principal Mughal administrative residences in the Deccan.⁹

The Jama Masjid

Among the most important Faruqi monuments of Burhanpur is the Jama Masjid. The present monumental mosque was constructed under Raja Ali Khan, also known as Adil Shah, towards the end of the sixteenth century. Built principally of dark stone, the mosque represents the mature architectural achievement of the Faruqi period. The official history of Burhanpur records that Raja Ali Khan undertook several major architectural projects, including the Jama Masjid at Burhanpur around 1590.¹⁰

The mosque is distinguished by its imposing façade, tall minarets, stone carving and epigraphic material. Particularly important is the survival of inscriptions in more than one language, illustrating the composite cultural environment in which the monument developed. Akbar visited Burhanpur after the Mughal conquest of the region, and the mosque became one of the outstanding architectural landmarks of the city.¹¹

Burhanpur under the Mughals

The political history of Burhanpur underwent a decisive transformation during the reign of Akbar. Raja Ali Khan of Khandesh initially acknowledged Mughal suzerainty, but his successor Bahadur Khan attempted to assert independence. Akbar consequently advanced into Khandesh in 1599–1600. Burhanpur was occupied by the Mughal forces on 8 April 1600, and the subsequent submission of Asirgarh completed the incorporation of the region into the Mughal political system.¹²

Following the Mughal conquest, Burhanpur assumed still greater strategic importance. Prince Daniyal, Akbar's son, was appointed to high command in the Deccan and made Burhanpur an important seat of administration. The city subsequently became the headquarters of the Mughal subah of Khandesh and an important staging centre for military campaigns towards Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and other parts of the Deccan. Contemporary and later descriptions point to its prosperity, heavy traffic and strategic position on the north–south route.¹³

Prince Daniyal and Zainabad

The landscape surrounding Burhanpur preserves several monuments associated with the Mughal princes and nobles who resided in the region. Across the Tapti at Zainabad lies the Ahukhana, literally a deer park or royal hunting enclosure, traditionally associated with Prince Daniyal. Gardens and pleasure structures developed in this area as part of the Mughal transformation of the Burhanpur landscape.¹⁴

The importance of such gardens went beyond recreation. Mughal garden architecture combined royal leisure, landscape design and political symbolism. Burhanpur's garden complexes therefore formed part of the larger tradition of Mughal landscape architecture that linked palaces, watercourses, orchards and pleasure pavilions with the culture of the imperial court.¹⁵

Prince Khurram and Burhanpur

Prince Khurram, the future Emperor Shah Jahan, was intimately associated with Burhanpur.

Jahangir appointed him to command Mughal operations in the Deccan, and in 1617 his successes against the Deccani powers brought him the title "Shah Jahan." Burhanpur consequently became one of the principal centres from which the prince directed Mughal affairs in the south.¹⁶

The imperial family also had personal associations with the city. Roshanara Begum, one of the daughters of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, was born at Burhanpur in 1617. The repeated presence of members of the royal household illustrates that Burhanpur was not merely a military station but, during significant periods, also functioned as an important courtly and residential centre of the Mughal Empire.¹⁷

The Death of Prince Khusrau

Burhanpur was also the setting of one of the darker episodes in Mughal dynastic history. Prince Khusrau, the eldest son

of Jahangir and a potential rival to Prince Khurram, was placed under Khurram's supervision. He died at Burhanpur in January 1622. Jahangir's memoir records the report received from Khurram that Khusrav had died from illness, although several later and contemporary accounts attributed his death to political elimination. A cautious historical treatment must therefore distinguish the official Mughal explanation from later allegations of murder.¹⁸

Mumtaz Mahal and Burhanpur

The event that has most deeply connected Burhanpur with the personal history of Shah Jahan was the death of his consort Mumtaz Mahal. Shah Jahan reached Burhanpur on 1 March 1630 while conducting military operations against the Deccan states. Mumtaz Mahal accompanied the emperor and died at Burhanpur on 7 June 1631 while giving birth to their fourteenth child.¹⁹

Mumtaz Mahal's body was initially buried in the garden of Zainabad on the opposite side of the Tapti. Her burial at Burhanpur was temporary. Early in December 1631 her remains were removed from Burhanpur and transported towards Agra, where Shah Jahan subsequently constructed the monumental mausoleum known as the Taj Mahal. Thus, although the Taj Mahal stands at Agra, Burhanpur formed the first stage in the funerary history of Mumtaz Mahal.²⁰

The Shahi Hammam

Within the Shahi Mahal survives an important royal hammam or bath complex. The hammam reflects the refined residential culture of the Mughal court and contained arrangements for water supply, bathing and ornamental decoration. The surviving interior includes decorative work characteristic of Mughal taste and constitutes one of the most important architectural features of the palace complex. The official historical description of the monument associates the hammam particularly with Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Its water arrangements included a reservoir and channels for the circulation of water, demonstrating how hydraulic engineering was incorporated into the domestic and ceremonial spaces of Mughal palaces.²¹

The Mughal Underground Water-Supply System

One of the most remarkable achievements of medieval Burhanpur was its sophisticated underground water-management system. The city was situated on the banks of the Tapti, but the high riverbanks made the direct distribution of river water difficult. Moreover, the presence of large military forces and a growing urban population created an acute need for a dependable supply of clean water. Mughal administrators therefore developed an underground system that intercepted groundwater descending from the Satpura hills.²²

The construction of the principal system is associated with the governorship of the celebrated Mughal noble Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan during the reign of Jahangir. According to the historical dossier submitted by India to UNESCO, work on the system commenced around 1615. Its design followed principles comparable to the Persian qanat, using subterranean galleries and gravity to collect and transport water without mechanical pumping.²³

Groundwater travelling from the Satpura hills towards the Tapti was intercepted through a series of reservoirs and underground channels. Important components came to be known as Mool Bhandara, Chintaharan Bhandara, Sookha Bhandara and Khooni Bhandara. Water collected in these reservoirs was conveyed through underground conduits towards the inhabited parts of Burhanpur. Vertical shafts or kundis provided ventilation and access for cleaning and maintenance.²⁴

The entire arrangement operated principally by gravity. The UNESCO documentation records a network of more than a hundred well-like access structures connected with underground passages. The engineering system demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of local geology, groundwater movement and gradient. Portions of this historic network continued to supply water for centuries, making the Burhanpur system an exceptional example of pre-modern hydraulic engineering in India.²⁵

Kharbuja Mahal

Another notable monument of Burhanpur is popularly known as the Kharbuja Mahal or "Melon Tomb." Despite its popular designation as a mahal, the structure is essentially a funerary monument. Its rounded, ribbed dome gives it the appearance of the segmented surface of a melon, from which its popular name is derived. The monument is associated with Bilqis Jahan (Bilqis Banu/Begum), wife of Prince Shah Shuja, a son of Shah Jahan.²⁶

The interior contains surviving floral and ornamental decoration and is important for understanding the funerary architecture of the Shah Jahan period beyond the great imperial monuments of Agra and Delhi. Its relatively modest scale, combined with refined painted decoration, makes it a significant example of Mughal provincial architecture.²⁷

Bibi Masjid and Other Faruqi Monuments

The Bibi Masjid represents another important component of the architectural heritage of Burhanpur. The Imperial Gazetteer recorded the monument, although by the beginning of the twentieth century it had already fallen into a poor

state of preservation. Together with the Jama Masjid, Faruqi tombs, serais and other religious structures, it demonstrates the considerable building activity that accompanied Burhanpur's development as the capital of Khandesh.²⁸

Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah and Burhanpur

Burhanpur continued to possess military importance even after Mughal central authority began to weaken. In May 1720, Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah advanced into the region and occupied Asirgarh and Burhanpur. Control of these two positions greatly strengthened his political and military position in the Deccan. Burhanpur subsequently remained closely associated with his operations and with the emerging Asaf Jahi power.²⁹

A fortified city wall with bastions and gateways was constructed or substantially renewed in the eighteenth century. The old gazetteer records that a brick wall with bastions and nine gateways, erected in 1731, enclosed the later city. This chronology is preferable to attributing the entire medieval fortification directly to the first Faruqi rulers.³⁰

Commercial and Urban Importance

Under the Mughals, Burhanpur was not merely a military and administrative headquarters; it became a flourishing centre of trade and manufacture. Its location on one of the major routes between northern India, Gujarat and the Deccan enabled merchants, soldiers, travellers and caravans to pass through the city in considerable numbers. Textiles and other manufactures contributed to its prosperity, while serais and markets served a mobile commercial population.³¹

The prosperity of Burhanpur under Akbar and his successors was remembered even in later gazetteers. Roads through the region were crowded with traffic between Malwa and the Deccan, while reservoirs, wells, rest houses and aqueducts reflected the demands generated by a prosperous urban and military centre.³²

Religious and Cultural Heritage

Burhanpur developed as an important centre of religious and cultural interaction. Islamic shrines, mosques, Faruqi and Mughal monuments, Sufi institutions and later community pilgrimage centres existed alongside Hindu and Sikh religious traditions. The city has particular importance for the Dawoodi Bohra community, whose religious establishments contribute to Burhanpur's continuing significance as a pilgrimage centre.³³

Burhanpur also occupies a place in Sikh tradition. Local tradition associates Guru Nanak with a visit to the city, and the historical landscape contains gurdwaras that commemorate the Sikh presence in the region. These traditions, together with Sufi, Bohra, Kabirpanthi and other religious institutions, have contributed to the city's enduring reputation as a place of cultural interaction and religious coexistence.³⁴

Burhanpur as Cultural Heritage

Much of the fortified landscape of old Burhanpur has suffered from time, environmental exposure and changing patterns of urban development. Sections of the old fortifications and monumental complexes survive only as ruins. Yet these remains continue to preserve evidence of several distinct historical phases—the Faruqi kingdom, Mughal imperial expansion, the struggles of the eighteenth century and the subsequent transformation of the city under Maratha and British authority.³⁵

From the historian's perspective, Burhanpur possesses exceptional value precisely because political, military, architectural, technological, commercial and religious histories intersect there. The Shahi Qila, Jama Masjid, Ahukhana, hammam, funerary monuments and underground waterworks collectively reveal the complexity of a major provincial capital whose importance extended far beyond the geographical limits of Khandesh.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Burhanpur occupies a distinctive place in the history of medieval and early-modern India. Established as the capital of the Faruqi kingdom, incorporated into the Mughal Empire under Akbar, and subsequently transformed into one of the principal Mughal bases for operations in the Deccan, the city witnessed some of the most important political developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The presence of Prince Daniyal, Prince Khurram, Mumtaz Mahal and other members of the Mughal ruling family further enhanced its political significance.

Its importance, however, was not confined to dynastic history. The surviving monuments demonstrate the development of Faruqi and Mughal architecture, while the underground water-supply system represents an outstanding achievement of hydraulic engineering. The Jama Masjid, Shahi Mahal, hammam, garden complexes and funerary monuments provide tangible evidence of the artistic and technological sophistication attained by the city.

Burhanpur was simultaneously a military station, administrative capital, commercial centre and culturally diverse urban

settlement. Its Sufi shrines, Bohra pilgrimage centres, Sikh associations and other religious traditions reflect the multiple communities that contributed to the historical identity of the city. This coexistence of political authority, architectural creativity, technological innovation and cultural plurality makes Burhanpur an important subject for further historical and archaeological research.

The surviving structures of Burhanpur must therefore be understood not as isolated ruins but as components of a historically integrated urban landscape. Their systematic conservation, documentation and scholarly investigation can contribute substantially to our understanding of regional state formation, Mughal expansion into the Deccan, pre-modern urbanism, water technology and India's composite cultural heritage.³⁷

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