

The Pattern of Colors in the Indian Temples and Mosques

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Abstract

In Hinduism, color is a key element. People of India use colors very much in their everyday lives. Color is used in their appearance, their home furniture, urban furniture and ornaments used in decorating places. They also use it in their make-up, their houses and their paintings. Color is seen in their statues, their urban symbols and urban vehicles (such as bicycles, motorbikes, rickshaws, taxis and buses). Interior and exterior designing of temples, either the important temples or the small ones build within tree trunks, involves many colors. White, red, orange, yellow, green, blue and black are the colors that have symbolically come together with the culture of this country as something that is part of the ethics and the religion of people. The religious and traditional life, with color as a significant element, plays such an important role in the life of the Indians that even the modern society, the well-educated and the elites have been influenced by it. In Hinduism, considering its special semiotics, many colors have great values and the presence of these colors in temples and sometimes mosques is evident. Search for the origins of these colors and the influence of climate and ethics on their formation has shown that in the thoughtway of the Indians. In some cases these colors have been elicited from nature. Some other colors used in painting the temples, have been extracted from nature and due to repetition have gradually become symbols and have come to be considered holy. In the early mosques and temples, color is mainly based on the natural color of local materials; but gradually the temples have been decorated with symbolic colors. Some of these colors including white, green, blue and pink, are also sometimes seen in mosques.

Keywords

Color, Temple, Mosque, Climate, Ethic, India.

Introduction

Human beings have always used colors to show their social class and to be distinct from other groups. They have considered intellectual and cultural distinctions for colors. Colors have played a symbolic role in their social and religious-ritual life. Using vivid and diverse colors can not be seen almost anywhere in the world as much as in India.

A color festival is held every year in this country. The presence of color in the ethics of Hindus, in everyday life, etc., goes so far that color acts as an identifying element. Indians have various religions and people with different ethics are living together throughout the country.

Indians have various religions and people with different ethics are living together throughout the country. The oldest Hindu temples and monasteries were built in rugged cliffs and mountains. Their remains still stand there and people still visit them for pilgrimage and prayer. The early cave-temples, which were gradually built by Hindu monks with penance and prayer, included simple and quiet spaces for meditation and self-purification in the heart of nature. Sculpturing the three gods (Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu) and other deities and religious heroes gradually became common. It is obvious that the oldest examples of these cave-temples were either not at all painted or had a limited amount of color; but gradually their architecture developed, along with sculptures, paintings and other decorations which had religious and meditational roles. The same procedure is seen in Indian mosques. The present article reviews the origins, aesthetics and semiotics of colors in some cases of study and compares them with some of the mosques.

As color has always been considered a holy element within India and has a significant importance in Indian ethics and social and spatial structure, the present article will be doing an analysis on the aesthetic and the semiotics of colors in the architecture of mosques and temples in India. Early mosques that have been converted to mosques from temples (such as Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque) and later mosques (such as Jama Masjid in Delhi and Ahmadabad) that have been built as mosques from the beginning and contemporary mosques will be study cases in this research. On the other hand, temples of the three Hindu gods of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in the cities of Delhi, Udaipur, Ajmer and Pushkar, will be studied. A review on the literature of the semiotics of colors in the architecture and decoration of mosques and temples in India and their ori-

gins, only few resources were found that contained descriptive information about the characteristics of colors and their relevancy with Hindu gods and holy colors.

However, unfortunately, no research on the analysis of the origins of colors in religious monuments, were found. Hence, little studies that were found were compared with field observations of some mosques and temples of different eras. The results of this comparison included some findings and a few questions which are the subject of further researches.

Hypothesis

Both climate and ethics have had effects on the colors used in Indian mosques and temples.

Color in the climate and nature of India

The area of India is more than three times Iran and when it comes to nature, the diversity in India is not comparable with any other country. This vast sub-continent is known for having all sorts of weather in different regions, from very hot tropical climate to the coldest and most elevated regions of the world. The variety of tropical plants and other plants seen in India lead to a great variety of natural colors. These colors can be seen in all kinds of fabric (fig.1.). Indian mines also contain a significant variation in color. The diversity in colored stones has caused a great amount of variety in the colors of construction materials. For instance, certain colors such as amber has been used in Amber Fort and pink can be seen the Pink City of Jaipur (Nafisi,

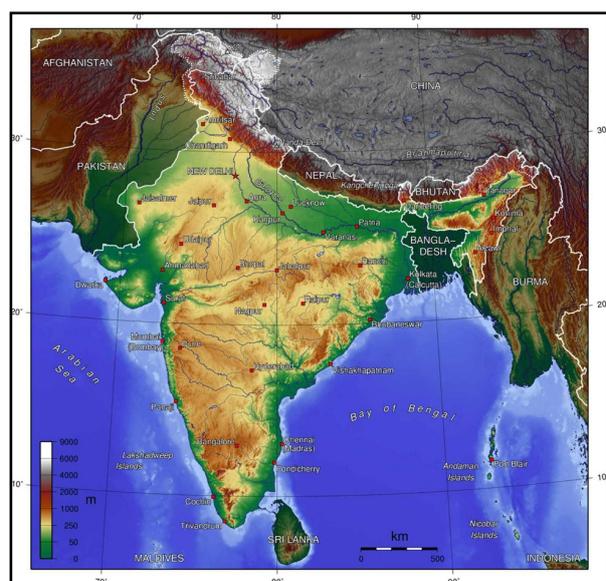


Fig. 1. Climate Diversity in India . Source: Solar Navigator, 2012

2007: 161-164). Thus, it can be argued that Hindus utilize natural resources in order to achieve a variety of colors.

Semiotics of color in Hinduism

Due to its particular symbolism, Hinduism considers many colors sacred. The main symbolic colors in Hinduism include red, orange (saffron), green, yellow, white, black and blue. So far, many studies have addressed the issue of the symbolism of colors in Hinduism (Bundgaard, 1999 and Olson, 2007 are some examples). Moreover, some other studies (Such as Eg Appadurai, 1977, Shankari, 1984 and Hardy, 2007 and Sinha, 2011) have done a scrutiny on the symbolism of the colors used in Hindu temples.

Meanwhile, the following study is mainly based on studies of Western Oregon University (2012) and Smith et al paper (2012) in order to study the symbolic meaning of each of these colors in Hinduism.

- **Red:** According to Western Oregon University, this color is a symbol for purity and sensuality and so it is used in holy ceremonies like marriage, child birth and Hindu celebrations (West Oregon University, 2012). In Southern India, red was apparently used as a symbol for violence and destruction (Smith et al., 2012). In field queries and questions from Hindu citizens, red is interpreted as the concept of energy.
- **Orange:** The most sacred color for Hindus is orange (saffron). This color is the symbol of fire and because fire undermines evil, this color symbolizes purity. Orange is also considered as a symbol for religious austerity and the color is a symbol of holy people (West Oregon University, 2012). The results of field studies show that orange is also likely to be considered a symbol of love.
- **Black:** The symbol of the evil, negativity and lack of motion and enthusiasm. This color is the symbol of anger and darkness and it is associated with lack of energy, futility and death. This color is also used to repel evil forces (Smith et al., 2012).
- **Yellow:** A symbol for knowledge and learning and also represents happiness, peace, meditation and mental development. It is the color of spring and it activates the mind. Lord Vishnu's clothing is illustrated as yellow which represents his knowledge. The two gods of Krishna and Ganesh are also sometimes thought to have yellow clothes (West Oregon University, 2012). Findings also suggest that it is most likely for yellow to symbolize knowledge.

- **White:** White symbolizes peace and purity among many Hindus and in southern India, it stands against red (Smith et al., 2012). Field studies also show that probably white defines peace.
- **Green:** This is the color of happiness and in Maharashtra it is a symbol for peace, happiness and life. Green also symbolizes nature (West Oregon University, 2012). This color represents Muslims in India as well (Smith et al., 2012). Field findings also indicate the probability of green being a symbol for prosperity and success.
- **Blue:** Hindus believe that blue is the color most seen in the creation. The color in the sky, the oceans, the seas, lakes and etc shows the abundance of this color in the nature. The god that is courageous and can eliminate all difficulties is usually illustrated in blue. Lord Rama and lord Krishna, the two gods that spend their lives protecting people and repelling evil forces, are usually shown in this color (West Oregon University, 2012).

The color pattern of Hindu temples

Cases of study Humans have been seeking a "Sacred" place since the beginning of their creation. Hence, they have always tried to build specific locations to inspire by the Holy Spirit.

Temples are places for the residence of gods, places to understand gods' presence, or memorial places for sacred events. Hindu temples are in the first category: A place for the manifestation of gods through icons and figurines (Kavakebi, 2012). In the following, this paper deals with the investigation of a few examples of temples seen in India and especially focuses on the pattern of colors in their architecture. Due to the diversity of temples in India, this study focused on three particular types of temples relevant to the gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

1) Brahma Temple-Pushkar

The first case study is the Brahma Temple of the city of Pushkar. The building of the temple goes back to approximately 700 years ago (14th century AD). The three basic colors in its architecture are red, blue and white (Figs. 2).

The interior walls of the temple are painted blue. The floor of the interior space is covered with white stones. The inner surface of the roof is blue, capitals are yellow and green, and the altar is a combination of silver, black, green and yellow. The exterior walls of the temple are red and columns are blue.



Fig.2. A Brahma temple and its allegory. Pushkar , India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

The floor of the courtyard is designed checkered in black and white. (Fig. 3). The outer surface of the roof (cone- shaped large dome of the temple) is also red. There is a basement on the right side of the yard that leads to a chamber. A statue is kept in this chamber but the window is blocked. Behind the temple, there is a cube-shaped building entirely in yellow which is surrounded with a corridor for the pilgrims to circle. Unfortunately it was not possible to visit the site (Fig. 4).

2) Shiva Temple - Delhi

The second case study is Gauri Shankar Temple (built in 18th century). This temple is located on Chandni Chowk Street in Delhi. A Shiva statue is kept in this temple. The main colors in the architecture of this temple are black and white. All indoor and outdoor spaces of the temple have white walls and the floor is also white. Orange fabrics have been used to decorate the interior walls (Fig. 5). The altar is in black with a statue of Shiva in two colors of blue and yellow. (Fig. 6) Therefore, the two contrasting colors of black and white can be seen all around this temple; and the other colors that can be seen in the temple are in the sculptures and the colorful flowers that decorate the alter.

3) Vishnu Temple - Udaipur

Jagdish Temple in Udaipur, which is related to Lord Vishnu, belongs to the 17th century. All external and internal spaces of the temple, including walls, floor and ceiling, are in white (Fig.7). Only the altar of the temple is in black (with yellow and golden ornaments and fabrics). Just like the Shiva temple in Delhi, the two colors of black and white have been used. It seems that aside from simple access to white stone in the nature, usage of white color in the exterior and interior of the temples is due to its concept: Purity and peace. The blackness of the altar, where gods are

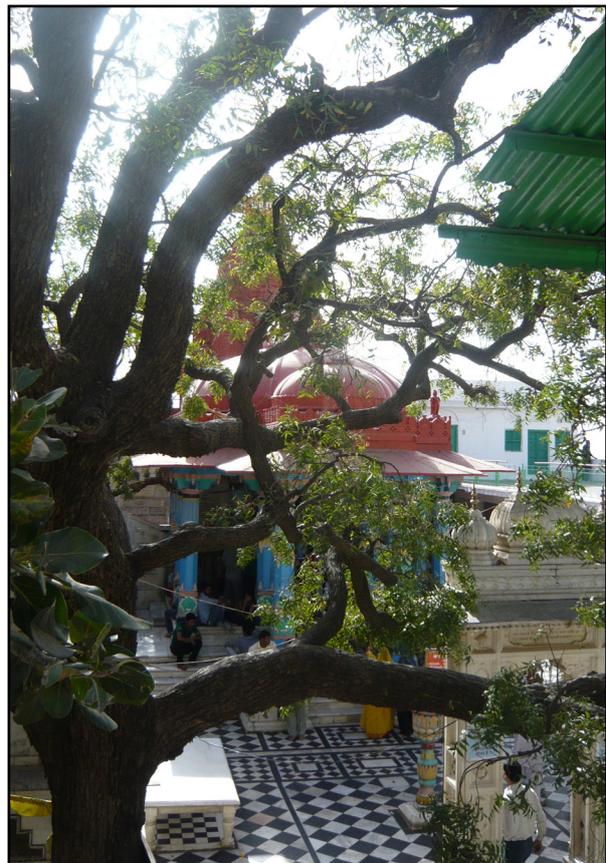


Fig.3. Yard of a Brahma temple checkered in black and white. Pushkar, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.



Fig.4. A cube shrine in yellow. Pushkar , India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

located, is perhaps to repel evil forces (Fig.8).

The color pattern of mosques in India

The color pattern of mosques in India will be analyzed in two division of old and new ones. The first division (old mosques) refers to both temples converted to mosques and early mosques. The second division consists of contemporary mosques which have been built with different patterns. Quwwat ul-Islam mosque in Delhi (Fig.9) and Jama Masjid in



Fig. 5. Shiva temple altar. Delhi, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

Fig.6. Shiva statue in blue and yellow. Shiva Temple , Delhi, India. Photo: Goran Erfani, 2012.



Fig.7. Jagdish temple facade, Udaipur, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

Fig.8. Vishnu statue in the temple Jagdish. Photo: Shervin Goudarzian, 2012.



Ajmer are from the first group and have seemingly been converted from the Hindu temples. The basic colors of these mosques are gray and red, made from local soil. In the first group, Jama Masjid of Delhi, which has been built as a mosque from the first, is mainly in red and white, from vernacular and natural materials (Fig.10). The red color, which is sacred and important among Hindus, has been used in temples, mosques, palaces and forts. For example, a combination of red and white can be seen in the Red Forts of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, the building of Safdarjung in Delhi and etc. Red and white had had natural origin; however, they became sacred colors



Fig.9. Two colors of red and white in Quwwat ul-Islam mosque. Delhi, India. Photo: Seyyed Amir Mansouri, 2003.

because of their frequent applications during long time. The color pattern in the second group (contemporary mosques), is related to next eras and is based on two colors. Usually one of these colors is white and the second one may be green or pink. The main difference between these mosques and the first division, is painting (color coating) on the original material. This method is applied because of new materials and to make construction easier. As a local mosque, a small mosque in the Qutub Minar complex near Quwwat ul-Islam can be mentioned. The main color in this mosque is pink with white trim. The simplicity and sincerity of this holy place in its yard and porch with green and pink color with trees, greenery, garden soil and a small pond in front of the porch, have created a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere (Fig. 11). Extensive relations with other countries have had influences on the patterns of architecture and decoration including color pattern. Colors are sometimes derived from the architecture of Islamic countries, sometimes are influenced by Hindu temples, and sometimes are a combination of the two. The combination of green and white, like Arabic mosques, in a mosque in the urban fabric of Ahmedabad (Fig.12), and the combination of white, green and blue in a Hosseinie in Lucknow are seen (Fig. 13).

Origin of colors in Indian mosques

Once Islam came to India, some of the great Hindu and Buddhist temples were converted into mosques. In the years to come, the architecture and decorative motives were influenced by Iranian and Arabic patterns; as a result, Indo-Iranian or Indo-Arab architecture was formed. It seems that the colors



Fig.10. Two colors of red and white in Jama Masjid of Delhi , India. Photo: Seyyed Amir Mansouri, 2003.

of Hindu temples have been repeated and imitated in some early Indian mosque. Especially that some temples were converted into mosques. But gradually the colors white and green have been imported from other Islamic countries. These two colors have different meaning and semiotics than what is seen in Hindu temples. Some of the decorative styles of Imambaras and Hindu temples in recent times, in-

cluding mirrors and mosaics, indicate the influence decorative techniques in religious places in Iran. Green, blue, gold and silver along with the bright colors of yellow, red, orange and white, are applied in fine tiles, glass and mirrors, like Persian miniature. This is the Iranian method of decorating, which had been used in mosques and shrines, and has been imitated in Hindi temples and Imambaras. Pink plays an aesthetic role in some of the mosques in India too. The city of Jaipur (also known as the Pink City) has a general townscape in pink. One of the factors traditionally identify this color in India may be the memory of longtime local stones or ocher, that have been used in early mosques and temples. For example, the Jama Masjid in Delhi and many other public buildings are in red and pink. Some sources have stated that it was the Akbar Shah's favorite color, and buildings with red and pink façades have been built in his time. The light blue color, which can be seen in the mosques as a faintly cover, may be inspired from Hindu temples as the color of Shiva. For mosques in other countries, blue was not common.¹ For green and white, two different origins may be considered: First, it may be derived from Buddhist and Hindu paintings that examples of them can be seen in the Ellora and Ajanta caves. Second, it may be influenced from Arabic mosques. According to Hinduism, white means having no color. Therefore, white is the color of the dresses of widows and hermits, and also the color of peace and purity. In Islam, green may be a symbol of nature. It has been repeated 10 times in Quran. White has been repeated 12 times in Quran. Since white has been considered as a sign for purity, immaculacy and absolute light, it has been important in Islam and ethics before Islam. Indian Muslims respect green and white probably because the prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) was interested on them.

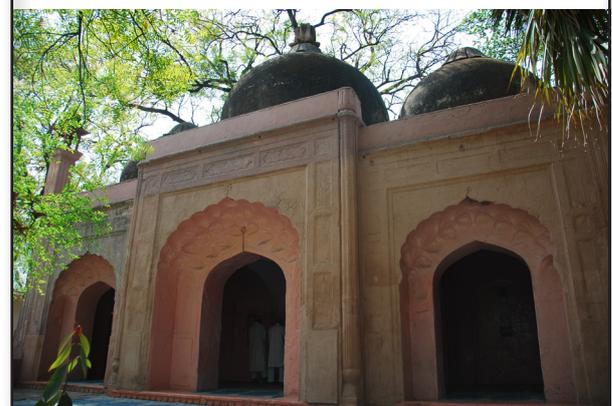
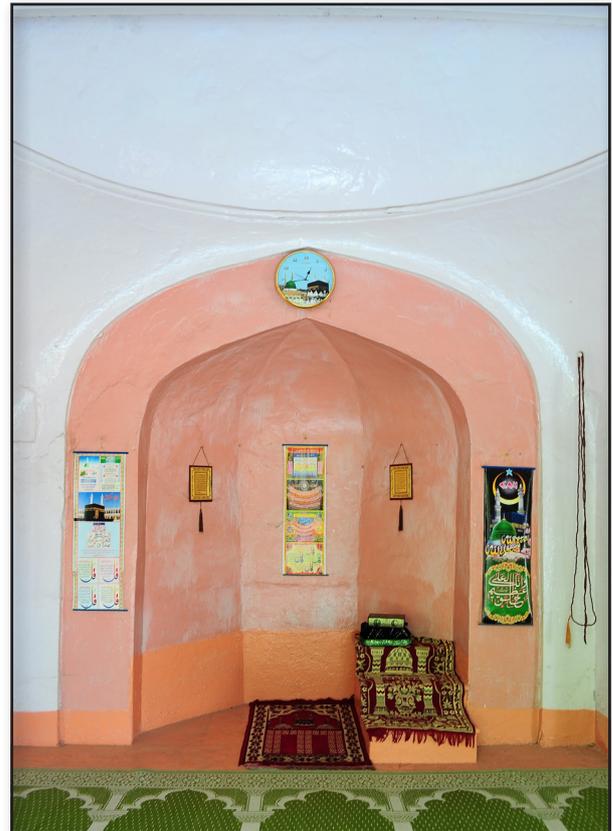


Fig.11. Pink , white and green in a mosque near Qutub Minar, Delhi. India. Photo: Zahra Askarzadeh, 2012.

Fig.12. Green and white in a mosque in Ahmedabad , India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.



Fig.13. Green, white and blue in the Hosseinie of Lucknow, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi , 2012.





Fig.14. Mirrors in Imambaras like decorating mosques and Islamic shrines, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi , 2012.

Conclusion

With regard to the nature and climate of the territory of India, colors play a significant role in the spiritual and material life of Hindus. Each of the colors of yellow, red, orange, white and blue has specific meanings in semiotics of Hinduism. These colors are selected among a mass of the colors found in the nature of India as the colors of the positive traits ascribed to the gods. Black has been also selected to repel evil forces in all temples. Green has been also used in some temples that may be inspired from Muslims mosques. Early mosques, that were built in the era of the governance of Arabs were huge and glorious with high-quality and expensive materials. Meanwhile the popular mosques in Muslim neighborhoods were built with ordinary materials and simple. However, in both of these types of mosque, using color shows the importance of colors in the aesthetic pattern. The colored surfaces can be considered as the elements of identity in mosques. In fact, External colorful cover in the façade of mosque can help to improve the townscape and neighborhood cultural-religious identity. In the early mosques, the natural colors of the vernacular materials, such as gray, red, white and black, have been applied. In the next eras, influencing by Arabic mosques, a combination of green and white can be seen. Although the color of red in the mosques is derived from local stones and soil, it can be considered as the continuity of the presence of red in temples that is combined with white and black. For example, in Quwwat ul-Islam mosque and Jama Masjid in Delhi, a combination of red and white is seen. In some of the new mosques, a blue and light pink painting on the plaster walls has formed the exterior façade of the mosques. These colors are probably inspired from symbolic colors in Hinduism that are repeated in the buildings of Muslims of India.

Endnote

1. Blue tiled mosques of Iran and Central Asia is another issue and it is not comparable with that blue.

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