

Sultan Mahmud Begada's Contribution to Indo-Islamic Architecture in Medieval Gujarat

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Abstract

For over fifty years, Sultan Mahmud Begada ruled the Gujarat Sultanate at the height of its power, and it is largely through the buildings he left behind that this power is still visible today. His reign (1458–1511) is remembered less for any single conquest than for a building programme that fused Hindu and Jain construction methods with the arches and domes of Islamic architecture, producing a style that belonged fully to neither tradition. This article traces the scope of that patronage, mosques, fortifications, urban planning, public works, and takes Champaner-Pavagadh, the capital Begada founded after seizing its hill-fort in 1484, as its central case. Because Champaner was abandoned soon after Begada's dynasty fell, it survives today in an unusually intact state, now protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and offers a rare direct window onto pre-Mughal Sultanate architecture. The article's argument is that this Gujarati synthesis was not a regional sideshow to the "real" history of Indo-Islamic building, which is usually told through the Mughals. Rather, it fed the Mughal tradition its craft vocabulary and, in doing so, helped shape the very style that would later eclipse it in fame.

1. Introduction

Historical Background

- 1.1. The Gujarat Sultanate came into being in 1394, when Muzaffar Shah I, until then a Delhi Sultanate governor, took advantage of Timur's devastating sack of Delhi to declare independence. His grandson Ahmad Shah I gave the new state a permanent seat, founding Ahmedabad in 1411 and building there the Jami Masjid that would set the tone for Gujarati architecture for the next century: Persian in its Islamic bones, Gujarati in its craftsmanship.
- 1.2. That tone reached its fullest expression under Mahmud Begada. Born Fath Khan, he came to the throne in 1458, aged around thirteen, after the sultanate's nobles had deposed his short-lived predecessor Daud Khan within weeks of his accession. Over the following five decades Begada pushed the sultanate's borders further than any of his predecessors, from the Arabian Sea in the west to Khandesh, Malwa, Jalor, and Nagaur, put down the last independent Rajput chieftaincies, and built a navy at Diu. Trade prospered under him too, with Cambay serving as a hinge point between the Mamluk-controlled Red Sea route and the markets of Southeast Asia.
- 1.3. His nickname tells its own story. "Begada" means, roughly, "taker of two forts," after his capture of Junagadh (Girnar) in 1472 and, twelve years later, of Pavagadh, the fort above what would become his new capital, Champaner. It is really this second conquest that concerns us here, since it gave him the site on which his architectural ambitions would be realized.
- 1.4. One further piece of context is worth mentioning, even though it sits outside this article's main argument: Begada's later years overlapped with the Portuguese arrival in the Indian Ocean. In 1509 a coalition of Gujarati, Mamluk Egyptian, and Calicut forces was defeated by the Portuguese at Diu, in an engagement often treated as the opening move of European colonial power in Asia. The episode is a reminder that Begada's court was not an inward-looking one; the same sultan who patronized Persian poets and Gujarati stonemasons alike was also negotiating, and fighting, on a genuinely international stage.

2. *Research Objective*

2.1. This article asks how Begada's architectural patronage, across mosques, fortifications, urban planning, and public works, gave rise to a distinctive Indo-Islamic idiom in fifteenth-century Gujarat, and takes Champaner-Pavagadh as the clearest surviving evidence of it. From there it moves to the question of legacy: whether this Gujarati style should be read as a self-contained regional episode, or as something that actually shaped what came after it in Mughal architecture. I argue for the latter.

3. *Importance of Mahmud Begada's Architectural Legacy*

3.1. Few Sultanate rulers in medieval India built as much, or as variously, as Begada did. His patronage was not confined to mosques, though these are what tend to survive best and draw the most attention; it ran across religious, funerary, civic, military, and even horticultural registers at once.

4. *Architectural Patronage under Mahmud Begada*

4.1. The mosques are the most visible part of this legacy, concentrated at Champaner but scattered across Gujarat more broadly. Alongside them stands funerary architecture, Begada's own tomb and that of his queen, Bibi Rajbai, form part of the Sarkhej Roza complex near Ahmedabad, which he substantially expanded. There is civic infrastructure too: customs houses, granaries, wells, stepwells. And there is the more mundane but still telling evidence of fortification, city walls and citadels, above all at Champaner. What is easy to overlook, though, is that Begada's patronage extended even into the landscape itself. Chroniclers record him having the countryside around his new capital planted with mango, pomegranate, fig, grape, and sugarcane, and ornamental gardens laid out with fountains by a designer trained in the Khurasani tradition. This was not incidental beautification; in a court culture where gardens carried real symbolic weight, cultivating the land around a new capital was as much a statement of sovereignty as building its walls.

5. *Urban Planning*

5.1. After taking Pavagadh in 1484, Begada walled the town below it and declared it his capital under a new name, Muhammadabad, following the same logic his great-grandfather had used seventy years earlier in founding Ahmedabad. A new city, given a new Islamic name, was itself an act of political theatre. Champaner remained the sultanate's seat for roughly the next half-century, until the Mughal emperor Humayun took it in 1535–36. After the Mughal conquest, Champaner was gradually abandoned instead of being rebuilt. As a result, many of its original monuments remained well preserved. the city was never meaningfully reoccupied, and slowly disappeared under vegetation rather than being built over. That accident of neglect is why Champaner survives today in something close to its Sultanate-era state, and why UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site in 2004.

5.2. Its planning combined a citadel, Jahanpanah, with fortified gates (the Jama Masjid sits just outside the eastern one) and an ambitious water system, including a stepwell built on an unusual spiral rather than the standard rectilinear plan. And, tellingly, Begada's new Islamic capital did not erase what was already sacred about the site. Pavagadh hill had been a place of Hindu and Jain pilgrimage since at least the eighth century, centred on the Kalika Mata temple at its summit, and this older religious geography was left in place rather than swept aside, a pattern of layering, not replacement, that runs through the whole site.

6. *Mosques*

6.1. Champaner holds somewhere between eight and eleven mosques from Begada's reign, several still standing in good condition. The Jama Masjid, treated at length below, is the obvious centrepiece. The Kevada Masjid, with its globe-like domes and narrow stairs, is unusual for how directly it brings garden and natural elements into a mosque setting, a detail scholars such as Ruggles have singled out as atypical for Islamic architecture more broadly. The Nagina Masjid, built in white stone on a high plinth, is generally held to contain the finest surviving carved mihrab at the site. A handful of smaller mosques, the Shahar ki Masjid, Bawaman Masjid, Khajuri Masjid, Ek Minar Masjid, and the Lila Gumbaz, round out

the complex, each with its own quirks of plan and ornament rather than repeating a single formula. Elsewhere in Gujarat, mosques such as the Jami Masjid of Ahmedabad, the Jami Masjid at Khambhat, the Sidi Sayyed Mosque, and Sarkhej Roza belong to the same broader Sultanate tradition, even where they fall outside Begada's direct patronage.

7. *Fortifications*

7.1. Champaner's wall and citadel are the clearest military legacy of Begada's reign, but Ahmedabad's fortifications, including the Bhadra Fort, were also strengthened under him. At Champaner in particular, it is hard to separate the defensive purpose of these walls from their symbolic one: enclosing and renaming the city was as much an assertion of rule as a practical safeguard against attack.

8. *Public Works*

8.1. The Mandvi, or customs house, sat at the heart of the Champaner citadel, a reminder that this was a trading capital as much as a religious one. Wells, stepwells, and tanks, the Kasbi Talao among them, rounded out the city's infrastructure, alongside the horticultural development already described. This last aspect of Begada's patronage, arguably, has had less attention paid to it than it deserves; his building programme was not only about stone but about shaping the land itself.

9. *Champaner–Pavagadh: A Case Study*

10. *Conquest*

10.1. Before 1484, Pavagadh had belonged to the Khichi Chauhan Rajputs of the Patai Rawal line. Begada besieged the fort for twenty months before it fell, on 21 November 1484. The conquest was not a bloodless affair, nor a purely secular one: the defeated ruler, Patai Raval, and his minister were executed for refusing to convert, and the newly won territory saw jizya imposed and public Hindu ceremony restricted. The architectural "golden age" that followed did not spring from nowhere; it followed directly from a conquest with a clear religious edge, and any account of Begada's building programme that skips past this risks presenting the architecture as more innocent than the history that produced it.

11. *Development of the Capital*

11.1. What followed the conquest was not a single act but a decades-long process. Begada first walled the town and declared it his capital, Muhammadabad; then came the citadel and administrative buildings; only later, over the following decades, did the mosque complex take shape, the Jama Masjid itself was not begun until 1513, right at the end of Begada's reign or just after it, and took some twenty-five years to finish under his successors. The gardens and orchards grew up alongside all this. Champaner served as capital for around fifty years before Humayun's forces took it in 1535–36, after which it was abandoned outright, the same accident of neglect noted above, and the reason UNESCO's 2004 inscription (under criteria iii and iv) singles the site out as an unusually direct record of pre-Mughal Sultanate architecture.

12. *Architectural Significance*

12.1. The Jama Masjid is where Begada's architectural vision is easiest to see in full. Built on a rectangular plan roughly sixty-six by twenty-seven metres, it opens east into a wide courtyard bordered by arcades. Two minarets, each around thirty metres tall, frame the building, and inside, somewhere between 172 and 200 pillars hold up the prayer hall, so many, in fact, that sightlines to a single central mihrab would have been blocked from much of the hall, which is presumably why the builders instead placed seven mihrabs along the qibla wall. Eleven domes cover the structure, the finest of them a double-storeyed central dome set on a cruciform plan, its clerestory of open columns letting soft light filter down into the prayer space rather than flooding it directly.

- 12.2. The carving throughout is where the mosque's hybrid character shows most clearly. Geometric bands and arabesque work, unmistakably Islamic in origin, sit next to floral motifs and Hindu-derived ornament, including ceiling carvings that art historians have likened to the kalpavriksha, the wish-fulfilling tree familiar from Jain temple decoration at sites like Dilwara. It is this quality, more than sheer scale, that has led architectural historians to treat the Jama Masjid as something like a template for later Indian mosque design, and as one of the finest pre-Mughal mosques anywhere on the subcontinent.
- 12.3. The rest of the site backs this up. The Helical Stepwell breaks from the standard rectilinear well design in favour of a spiral plan, practical infrastructure treated as an architectural problem in its own right. At the top of Pavagadh hill, the Kalika Mata Temple, an active Hindu shrine, carries a superstructure added during the Sultanate period with a distinctly Islamic influence, probably the single most literal instance of religious and architectural syncretism anywhere at Champaner. Across the site as a whole, the Baroda Heritage Trust has catalogued 114 monuments across eleven building types, mosques, temples, granaries, tombs, wells, walls, terraces, and more, which is really the point: Begada's vision here was not one great mosque but an entire city built on the same hybrid logic.

13. Architectural Style and Legacy

14. *Indo-Islamic Synthesis*

- 14.1. What sets Gujarat Sultanate architecture apart is that it is not Islamic architecture with local decoration applied on top; it is a genuine fusion at the structural level. From the older Hindu and Jain trabeated tradition, the post-and-lintel building method rooted in Māru-Gurjara temple architecture, it took carved columns and brackets, corbelled ceilings, jali screens, toranas, and recurring motifs like the kalpavriksha and tree-panel carving. From Islamic tradition it took the arch and dome, the mihrab and minaret, and the mosque's basic spatial logic of courtyard, hall, and qibla wall.
- 14.2. None of this happened by accident. It happened because local Hindu and Jain craft guilds were the ones actually building these Islamic commissions, and the forms that resulted belonged, in a real sense, to neither tradition alone. Among the various regional styles that grew up in the wake of the Tughlaq collapse, in Bengal, Jaunpur, Malwa, the Deccan, Gujarat under Begada is usually taken as the fullest and most confident of these regional syntheses.

15. *Influence on Later Architecture*

- 15.1. The architectural achievements of Gujarat should not be viewed only as a regional development. Gujarat's Indo-Islamic style fed directly into Mughal imperial architecture, the tradition that, fairly or not, has come to define Indo-Islamic building in the popular imagination. Ebba Koch has made the case that Gujarat played a genuinely foundational role in early Mughal architecture, supplying a working model for adapting Hindu and Jain building traditions to the demands of monumental, sandstone-based imperial construction, which is more or less exactly the problem the early Mughals had to solve.
- 15.2. Certain formal details make the line of transmission concrete. Cusped, or multifoil, arches show up in Delhi and Gujarat architecture before they appear in Mughal buildings. Jali screens, chattris, and the treatment of mihrab and minaret all carry over in recognizable form. One particularly direct case is Ghaziuddin Khan, a Mughal noble who governed Gujarat and later brought the region's jali craftsmanship to his own commissions in Delhi, folding Gujarati technique into an otherwise imperial Mughal aesthetic. Set against the wider backdrop of Indo-Islamic architecture, itself a blend of Persian, Central Asian, and Indian elements, Gujarat's specific contribution was largely this: the Indian craft and ornamental register that gives Mughal buildings much of their visual richness.

16. Conclusion

- 16.1. Mahmud Begada's fifty-three years on the throne mark both the political high point of the Gujarat Sultanate and the clearest architectural statement of its hybrid identity. Champaner-Pavagadh, founded on conquest, built up over decades into a walled city of mosques, gardens, and water infrastructure, then abandoned almost as soon as it fell to the Mughals, is where that identity survives most fully, preserved by historical accident and now protected by UNESCO. This contribution should not be regarded merely as an early stage of Mughal architecture. The evidence suggests otherwise: the vocabulary Begada's builders developed, Hindu and Jain craft folded into an Islamic architectural frame, did not stay in Gujarat. It travelled north and helped shape the very Mughal tradition that would later overshadow it. Read this way, Begada's Gujarat is not a prelude to Indo-Islamic architecture's most famous chapter, but one of its authors.

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