

## “ARCHITECTURE AND INSCRIPTIONS ON CHHATRIES OF BIKANER”

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The tradition to cherish the memory of one's beloved could be seen in human nature from ancient period in the form of different monumental structures.

The construction of *yajnavedi* (firewood place), *stupa*, *chaitya*, *tombs and chhatries* or canopies in

India were like the pyramid monuments of Egypt and among these monumental architectures construction of chhatries were worth consideration as they depicts spiritual and religious life of a man.

During Vedic period in India, people use to build a semicircle or dome shape structures over burial place, which were constructed roughly. A reference may be traced to some description of these dome shaped construction in shatpath *Brahmin*, *Ashwalayangrihasutra* and *Dharmashastra*. These primitive structures were later transformed into the renowned stupa and chaitya in Buddhist architecture. Hence, it could be safely concluded that these constructions were later transformed into chhatries or canopies.

A “*chhatri*” or a canopy is an elevated dome shaped structure with an open pavilion and therein the word chhatri means an umbrella. The usual and more widely understood meaning of a chhatri is that of a memorial which is usually very ornate and built over the site where the funeral (cremation) of the royals were performed.



*Back View of “Chhatries” of Bikaner*

The word chhatri is also used to refer the small pavilions that mark the corners and roof of the entrance of a major building. These pavilions are purely decorative in nature and have no utility, but are a classic folly, displaying the status and wealth of the owner. Chhatris were mostly used in palaces, forts to demarcate funerary sites.

The origin of chhatri is a controversial subject in India as Fergusson derived the concept of Islamic grave behind the origin of chhatris, where as Herman Goetz is of the opinion that behind the construction of these canopies the idea of Rajputana and some tribes of central India were *working*, but gradually as the time elapsed a drastic change in the construction of these chhatris were observed.

In medieval India the construction of the said canopies were under taken according to rulers or a feudal or a sardar`s status and wealth in competition with Islamic tombs, but as far it concern to the origin of canopies the tradition has been observed in India since ancient time and this is the reason that temple architecture bears a resemblance more to this form of *architecture*.

The assimilation of numerous reasons were responsible behind the construction of these kind of architectures such as social and religious tenderness, in order to highlight the social customs, last but not the least in the fond memory of someone`s beloved or in the memory of a royal family member.

The tradition to affix inscriptions could be attributed to the massive constructions of the chhatris. These inscriptions gives a description of the then prevailing social customs, traditions and chronological information, hence the eminency of inscriptions is more than a canopy.

Bikaner is the place where one can see numerous chhatris pertaining to erstwhile maharajas of the state. Bikaner is situated in the north-west of Rajasthan and is said that foundation of these chhatris or this kind of architecture was first laid down during the reign of **Rao Bika**(the founder and first ruler of the state).

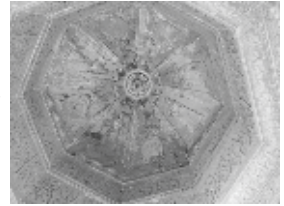
The chhatris of Bikaji and his immediate two successors are situated in the premises of Laxminath temple (one of the oldest vaishnav temple of Bikaner) and is referred to as "**bikaji ki tekri**". The inscriptions affixed at this place give us information about the contemporary social customs and traditions of the state.

The royal crematorium is situated at Devikundsagar which is 5km to the east of the city of Bikaner, where one can find a long cordon of canopies pertaining to the rulers of Bikaner starting from Rao Kalyanmal to Karni Singh. These chhatris are not only magnificent in their architecture but can be acquainted with the then prevailing social and cultural traditions through the inscriptions affixed with every canopy.

**The Architecture** - The chhatris are not only splendid in their architecture but are great example of *Indo-Islamic* style. Most of the canopies had been built in red *sandstone*. These chhatris were built on high pedestal, and having pillars of different time period.

The oldest chhatri is that of *Rao Kalyanmal*, which was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that it's octagonal dome added to it later in 17<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by regional Muslim dynasties such as sultan of *Sur and Malwa*, but according to Havell the style of these kind of domes were adopted from "*Magadhstyle*", in which masons were used to bent bamboos to make a lotus shaped or a 8 petal dome which was later used by *Dravid rulers of Mammallpur*.

The chhatri of maharaja Rai Singh (contemporary to Akbar) was built in mid of 16<sup>th</sup> century. Very first time depiction of "*Raslila*" could be seen in the inner ceiling of this canopy which is a pure *Rajput architectural style*.



*Inner portion of a ceiling depicting "Raslila"*

The canopies of raja Karan Singh and maharaja Anup Singh which were constructed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century have 16 pillars, and are an assimilation of Hindu and Mughal architecture. The first canopy have pillars contemporary to *Aurangzeb* as the leaf of "*plantain*" had been engraved on the base of the pillars, whereas the rest part of the pillars gives simple expressions.

Chhatri of maharaja Anup Singh is most bountiful and splendid amongst all the canopies. We could see influence of pure Mughal architectural style especially at the period of Shahjahan. In this form of architecture the use of pointed *cusped arch*, *embellishment of dado* with *frieze*, *arabesque*, minute carving of foliage, and mostly the style of pillar in which the base and middle part has been copied to Shahjahan style of pillar could be observed.



*Carving on the pillar of Maharaja Anup Singh chhatri*

The canopy of maharaja Sujan Singh is different in architecture, it has the elements of Hindu temple architecture dominating the influence over than that of a contemporary Mughal architecture. The layout plan of this canopy is similar to a temple in which we can observe the use of 24 pillars, and a "*peristylar*" seems like an "*Ardhamandapa*" or "*Sabhamandapa*". Although Cusped arches had been used in this canopy, but these arches had difference in their cusps in comparison to the canopy that of maharaja Anup Singh.

The impact of later Mughal period could be seen on the canopy of maharaja **Gaj Singh**. wherein we could see the appropriate proportion of architectural elements. The inner ceiling of this canopy consists of a 12 angled “**chhatra**” like structure in which twelve “**Gopies**” were depicted in standing position with musical instruments in their hands.



*A pillar at Chhatri of Maharaja Karan Singh*

Canopies of Maharaja Surat Singh and Maharaja Ganga Singh which were built with white marble had used “**Stucco work**” and local “**Usta art**” for adornment.

The magnificent architecture of the canopies pertaining to the rulers of Bikaner are not only protuberant but these canopies also contains within their ambit an eminent element of the social and traditional customs of the contemporary period for better understanding through the inscriptions affixed on them.

**The Inscriptions** — The tradition to affix inscriptions on canopies dates back to the introduction of chhatri architecture in the state. There are three inscriptions affixed at “**bikajikitekri**”. The foremost inscription is of Rao Bikaji which not only defined the social conditions of that time but also described the political consequences of the existing period. In this legendary work of architecture we get informed about the condition in which Rao Bika has founded the state of Bikaner and the dynasty of **Rathore**. This inscription also gives information about the immoral state of the “**Khwās**” or the attendant in comparison to the queens.



*A Dado portion of Chhatri of Maharaja Anup Singh*

These inscriptions show the entire female statuette who implemented the tradition of “**Sati**” at the time of demise of the particular ruler.

The inscription on the canopy of Maharaja Rai Singh not only provide the facts about the social conditions but also provide us with the information about the politically stoutest position of maharaja Rai Singh, that before the name of maharaja there was a tradition to affix “**Shri**” at least five **times**.

The monumental inscription of Maharaja Sur Singh gives the information about the tradition of the change in the name of the queens at their in-law's place. In this legendary work of architecture name of the state has been inscribed as "*Vikramnagar*" instead of *Bikaner*.



*Chhatri of Maharaja Sujan Singh*

The inscriptions on monuments of later period (from mid of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) such as maharaja Gaj Singh do not provide or have a reference to any information about "*Sati Pratha*". It seems that from this period onwards, the social custom of "*Sati Pratha*" was on decline and nearing to an end but in some legends of 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Moti Singh (son of Maharaja Surat Singh) monumental inscription (1825 A.D) gives account about this custom.

The letterings also give some material information about the constructions of "*Nadas*" and placing of "*chhatrika*" in the memory of the prince and princess who died at early age.

The very first time in 1867, in the memory of a keeper or attendant or "*Khwas*", Sukan Kanwar (keeper of Maharaja Sardar Singh) a "*Paduka*" or a footstep of white marble and a "*Chhatrika*" had been established. We get this information from the inscription of above mentioned *attendant*.



*The base of a pillar of Maharaja Anup Singh "Chhatri"*

The inscription of Maharaja Lal Singh described the consecutive information about Maharaja Dungar Singh and Maharaja Ganga Singh. These inscriptions also pronounced the religious customary of the sovereigns of the *state*.

The inscriptions on the canopies of the rulers of the Bikaner give us facts and information about the social, religious and traditional customs of existing state. They also provide information on the political condition of contemporary era and that of a particular ruler.

The "*Chhatries*" of Bikaner are built in red sandstone and white marble, having magnificent architectural features assimilating to that of Indo-Islamic style. Embellished with different style of pillars, these canopies are decorated with Hindu and Islamic motifs like floral ornaments, brackets, paintings of raslila, arabesques etc. Visible are marks on some pillars such as +, cross mark and reverse T Alphabet. It seems that these marks were used to denote a

particular group of masons or were used for “**Tantrism**”.

The “**Chhatris**” had enormous affixed inscriptions. These inscriptions gives description of social customs, traditions of royals, as well as masses and chronological information about the contemporary dynasty, hence eminency of inscriptions is more than a whole canopy. The inscriptions engraved over a white marble stone, depicts some male and female figurine of king, queens and keepers.

1. Rigveda : 10.18.8
2. Murthy, Vedula, V.L.N: indian architecture Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Islam, New Delhi, 2011, pg.120

Stupas are the symbolic monuments of Buddhists. They are the brick mounds in the shape of a Hemisphere rising to a height approximately equal to its radius. In the bottom centre of this domical mound Buddha's relics were kept preserved making it sanctified and sacred.

3. The cave settlements for Buddhist Shravakas. these were worshipping halls.
4. Sometimes called cenotaphs.
5. Shatpath Brahmin : 13.8.3.11
6. Aswalayangrihasutra : 4:5
7. Kane : Dharmashastraka itihaas, part-4, pg.255
8. Dr. Ram nath: Madhyakalin Bhatiya Kalayenaurinka vikas, Jaipur, 1973, pg.84  
A Chhatri is a Mandapa with chhajja built on burial place. It could be square, circular or hexagonal in shape.
9. Goetz, Herman : art and architecture of Bikaner state, Oxford, 1950, pg.64
10. Havell, E.B : Indian architecture, London, 1927, pg.64
11. 1488-1504 A.D.
12. Captain powlett : Gazetteer of Bikaner state, Bikaner, 1874, pg.152
13. The red sandstone of `Dulmera` (a village near Bikaner) is a soft stone therefore masons can easily do carving and engraving upon them.
14. 1542 to 1571 A.D.
15. Goetz, Herman: The art and architecture of Bikaner state, oxford, 1950, pg.65
16. Havell, E. B : Indian architecture, London, 1927, pg.96-97

17. Goetz, Herman: Rajput art and architecture, pg.13
18. Goetz, Herman: The art and architecture of Bikaner state, Oxford, 1950, pg.65
19. A kind of plant whose leaves are big and flatten in shape and also eatable.
20. type of an arch which have 6,9 or 12 cusps.
21. Base part of a building or monument which is used for decoration.
22. Motives such as floral. etc. in continuation
23. Embellishment with Vertical , horizontal, and circular lines in continuation. This is a pure Muslim style of decoration.
24. Peristylar is an open space like veranda surrounded by pillars.
25. A pillar outdoor pavilion for public rituals in temple architecture.
26. Ruling period 1746-1787A.D.
27. Lime plaster done on plain surface for Fresco or other decorative element.
28. Local art style of Bikaner in which golden painting done in different forms.
29. Rao Bikafouded the state in 1488 A.D. the description of Rathore dynasty of the state has been given in this legend. The rulers of the state used to put title 'Verma' of 'Kshatriya' with their name.
30. The inscription of Maharaja Raisigh V.S.1668(1612A.D.), Kalyansagar ,Bikaner.
31. The monumental inscription of Maharaja Sursingh, V.S.1688(1631A.D).the inscriptions of V.S.1561,1740,1815, and 1840 also give the name 'Vikramkhandpur' , 'Vikramnagar' and 'Vikrampur'.
32. There was a tradition to construct a small space instead of chhatri in the memory of those princes who died at early age. People use to built a small bowl shaped structure on the upper part of 'Nada', so that some liquid such as milk could be poured in that for the dead people.
33. Vyas, Dr.Rajendra Prasad Churuwala: Bikaner keshilalekhekaitihasikadhyayan, Bikaner ,1990, pg.136
34. Inscription of Maharaja Lalsingh, V.S.1944(1887A.D.), Kalyansagar, Bikaner.