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MARATHA ART AND ARCHITECTURE: FORTS AND TEMPLES

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to explore the Art and Architecture of Forts and Temples under Maratha Empire. The Maratha Empire, established in the 17th century under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, made significant contributions to Indian art and architecture, particularly through its construction of forts and temples. Maratha forts, strategically located on hilltops, valleys, and coastal regions, are remarkable for their military ingenuity. These forts, including Raigad, Pratapgad, Sindhudurg, and Shivneri, showcase complex layouts with multiple layers of fortifications, advanced water management systems, and intricate carvings. Their design reflects a blend of natural defense mechanisms and human engineering, making them formidable strongholds that played crucial roles in the Maratha resistance against foreign invasions.

Parallelly, Maratha temples reflect the empire's religious and cultural ethos. Characterized by simplicity, elegance, and intricate carvings, these temples often follow the Nagara style of architecture with curvilinear towers and pillared halls. Notable examples like the Bhimashankar Temple, Jejuri Temple, and Parvati Temple embody the Marathas' artistic heritage, featuring exquisite wood and stone carvings depicting scenes from Hindu mythology and daily life. These temples serve as centers of spiritual activity and community gatherings, emphasizing functional design combined with aesthetic appeal.

The integration of natural landscapes with architectural innovations in both forts and temples highlights the Marathas' profound understanding of their environment and strategic acumen. Their architectural legacy, seen in the seamless fusion of military and religious structures, not only underscores their defensive and administrative prowess but also their cultural sophistication. Maratha art and architecture thus remain pivotal in understanding the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the period, symbolizing a rich heritage of resilience, devotion, and artistic excellence.

Keywords: *Maratha, Art, Architecture, Forts and Temples.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Maratha Empire, founded by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the mid-17th century, emerged as a formidable force in Indian history, profoundly influencing the political and cultural landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Originating in the Deccan Plateau of western India, the Marathas were initially a confederacy of warrior clans united under Shivaji's visionary leadership. Shivaji's coronation in 1674 as the Chhatrapati (Emperor) marked the formal establishment of the Maratha Empire, which rapidly expanded its territories through strategic military campaigns and diplomatic alliances.

Shivaji's governance was marked by innovative administrative reforms, the establishment of a robust revenue system, and a disciplined army, which became the backbone of Maratha strength. His successors, particularly the Peshwas (prime ministers), continued to consolidate and expand the empire, extending Maratha influence across vast regions of India, from Tamil Nadu in the south to Punjab in the north.

The Maratha Empire played a crucial role in resisting Mughal dominance and acted as a bulwark against external invasions, including those by the Portuguese and the British. The empire's military prowess was complemented by its patronage of art, architecture, and culture, fostering a unique blend of indigenous traditions and innovations.

Despite facing challenges, such as internal strife and the eventual rise of British colonial power, the Maratha legacy endured, significantly shaping India's socio-political fabric. The Maratha Empire's contributions to military strategy, governance, and cultural development remain celebrated, symbolizing a period of resurgence and resilience in Indian history.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The aim of this study is to explore the Art and Architecture of Forts and Temples under Maratha Empire.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

MARATHA ART AND ARCHITECTURE: FORTS AND TEMPLES

The Maratha Empire, founded by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the 17th century, left an indelible mark on Indian history, particularly through its unique contributions to art and architecture. The Marathas were known for their strategic military prowess, which is evident in the construction of numerous formidable forts, as well as their cultural and religious expressions, reflected in their temples.

MARATHA FORTS

The forts constructed by the Marathas are masterpieces of military architecture, designed to withstand sieges and invasions. These forts are scattered across Maharashtra and its neighboring states, showcasing the strategic genius and engineering skills of the Marathas.

Strategic Locations

The Maratha forts were often built in locations that provided natural defense advantages. These included hilltops, valleys, and coastal areas. Hilltop forts, like Raigad and Pratapgad, offered a commanding view of the surrounding landscape, making it difficult for enemies to approach undetected. Coastal forts, such as Sindhudurg, allowed the Marathas to control maritime routes and protect their territory from naval invasions.

The selection of these locations was not random but rather a result of careful planning and understanding of the geography. For instance, Raigad Fort is situated at a height of 2,700 feet above sea level, surrounded by deep valleys, making it nearly impregnable. Similarly, Sinhagad Fort, perched on a steep cliff, provided a natural fortification that was further enhanced by man-made defenses.

Complex Layouts

Maratha forts are known for their intricate layouts, which include multiple layers of fortifications. These layers often consisted of high, thick walls, bastions, and fortified gates designed to slow down and weaken attacking forces. The fortifications were usually built using locally available materials like basalt and limestone, which provided durability and strength.

For example, the Raigad Fort has a triple-layered entrance known as the Maha Darwaja (Main Gate), which is a formidable barrier for any invader. Inside, the fort has several other gates and bastions, each serving as an additional line of defense. The zigzag pathways leading to the fort gates were designed to make it difficult for enemy troops to advance quickly.

Water Management

One of the remarkable features of Maratha forts is their advanced water management systems. These systems included rainwater harvesting, storage tanks, and reservoirs, ensuring a reliable water supply during sieges. The Marathas constructed large cisterns and step wells within the forts to collect and store rainwater.

For instance, the Rajgad Fort, another significant fort, has several water cisterns carved into the rock, which remain functional to this day. These cisterns were strategically placed to collect runoff water during the monsoon season. The water collected in these cisterns was sufficient to sustain the fort's inhabitants for extended periods, demonstrating the foresight and engineering prowess of the Marathas.

Architectural Elements

Maratha forts are adorned with various architectural elements, including intricate carvings and inscriptions. These features not only added to the aesthetic appeal of the forts but also served practical purposes. The carvings often depicted scenes from Hindu mythology, royal insignias, and inscriptions commemorating significant events or victories.

The entrance gates of many forts, such as the Lal Darwaja (Red Gate) at Pratapgad, are embellished with detailed carvings. These carvings include floral patterns, deities, and intricate latticework, reflecting the artistic skills of the craftsmen. Additionally, many forts have temples within their premises, showcasing the integration of religious and military architecture.

Integration with Nature

One of the unique aspects of Maratha forts is their seamless integration with the natural landscape. The forts were designed to blend with their surroundings, making them difficult to spot from a distance. This natural camouflage provided an additional layer of defense.

For instance, the Torna Fort, also known as Prachandgad, is built on a high hill and merges with the rocky terrain. The fort's walls and structures are constructed using the same type of stone as the surrounding mountains, making it nearly invisible from afar. This strategic use of natural features demonstrates the Marathas' deep understanding of their environment and their ability to use it to their advantage.

NOTABLE FORTS

Raigad Fort

Raigad Fort served as the capital of the Maratha Empire under Shivaji Maharaj. It is known for its robust architecture and strategic design. The fort is situated on an irregular wedge-shaped mass of rock, 2,700 feet above sea level, with its sides rising steeply from the base, providing a natural defense.

The fort's main entrance, the Maha Darwaja, is a massive gate that leads to a series of steep steps and pathways. Inside the fort, there are several important structures, including the King's Palace, the Queen's quarters, and the Jagdishwar Temple. The fort also houses the Samadhi (tomb) of Shivaji Maharaj, making it a site of immense historical and cultural significance.

Sindhudurg Fort

Sindhudurg Fort, located on an island in the Arabian Sea, showcases the Marathas' maritime defense capabilities. Built by Shivaji Maharaj in 1664, the fort covers an area of 48 acres and is surrounded by a 3-kilometer-long rampart with 42 bastions.

The fort's entrance is hidden and can only be accessed through a narrow passage, adding to its defensive strength. Inside the fort, there are several wells and a freshwater reservoir, demonstrating the Marathas'

expertise in water management. Sindhudurg Fort also has temples dedicated to Shivaji Maharaj and other deities, reflecting the blend of military and religious architecture.

Pratapgad Fort

Pratapgad Fort is known for its historical significance as the site of the famous Battle of Pratapgad in 1659, where Shivaji Maharaj defeated Afzal Khan, a general of the Bijapur Sultanate. The fort is strategically located on a high hill, offering a panoramic view of the surrounding area.

The fort consists of two parts: the lower fort and the upper fort. The lower fort includes several bastions and ramparts, while the upper fort houses the Bhavani Temple, dedicated to the goddess Bhavani, and a statue of Shivaji Maharaj. The fort's design, with its steep pathways, fortified gates, and watchtowers, highlights the Marathas' strategic military planning.

Shivneri Fort

Shivneri Fort is the birthplace of Shivaji Maharaj and holds great historical and architectural importance. The fort is located on a hill near Junnar in Pune district and is known for its strong fortifications and well-planned layout.

The fort has several gates, including the Maha Darwaja, and a network of water tanks and reservoirs. The fort's interior includes the Shivai Devi Temple and a mosque, reflecting the Marathas' inclusive approach to religion. The fort's design, with its defensive walls, watchtowers, and natural defenses, underscores its significance as a stronghold and a symbol of Maratha heritage.

MARATHA TEMPLES

Maratha temples reflect the cultural and religious ethos of the Maratha Empire. These temples are characterized by their simplicity, intricate carvings, and incorporation of regional architectural elements. Unlike the elaborate and grandiose temples of other regions, Maratha temples often emphasize functional simplicity combined with aesthetic appeal.

Simplicity and Elegance

Maratha temples are known for their understated elegance and simplicity. While they may not be as grand as some of the temples in South India or North India, their design is functional and aesthetically pleasing. The focus is often on creating a serene and peaceful environment conducive to worship and reflection.

For example, the Jejuri Temple, dedicated to Lord Khandoba, is known for its simple yet beautiful architecture. The temple is built on a hill and consists of a series of steps leading to the main shrine. The simplicity of the design, with its clean lines and minimal ornamentation, creates a sense of tranquility and reverence.

Nagara Style Influence

Many Maratha temples follow the Nagara style of architecture, which is characterized by curvilinear towers (shikharas) and pillared halls (mandapas). The Nagara style is prevalent in North India, and its influence on Maratha temples reflects the cultural exchanges and interactions between different regions.

Bhimashankar Temple

Historical and Religious Significance: Bhimashankar Temple, located in the Sahyadri hills, is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, making it a highly revered pilgrimage site. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and holds immense religious significance for Hindus.

Architectural Features:

- **Nagara Style Shikhara:** The temple's shikhara is a classic example of the Nagara style, with its curvilinear form and intricate carvings. The shikhara is adorned with sculptures depicting scenes from Hindu mythology.
- **Mandapa:** The temple's mandapa is a spacious hall with intricately carved pillars and a beautifully decorated ceiling. The mandapa serves as a gathering space for devotees and enhances the temple's grandeur.
- **Stone Sculptures:** The temple's walls are adorned with detailed stone sculptures depicting various deities, mythological scenes, and floral patterns. These sculptures reflect the artistic skills of the craftsmen.

Cultural Significance: Bhimashankar Temple is not only a religious site but also a center of cultural activities. The temple hosts various festivals and rituals, attracting thousands of devotees. The temple's architecture and sculptures provide insights into the Marathas' religious and cultural practices.

Jejuri Temple

Historical and Religious Significance: Jejuri Temple, dedicated to Lord Khandoba, is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Maharashtra. Lord Khandoba is considered a deity of fertility and warriors, and the temple is a significant center of worship for the Marathas.

Architectural Features:

- **Fort-like Structure:** The temple is built on a hill and has a fort-like structure with strong walls and bastions. The design reflects the Marathas' emphasis on security and defense even in religious architecture.
- **Steps and Courtyards:** The temple complex includes a series of steps leading to the main shrine, with courtyards and mandapas along the way. The steps are adorned with stone carvings and sculptures.

- **Simplicity and Elegance:** The temple's design is characterized by its simplicity and elegance. The main shrine is a modest structure with a pyramidal shikhara, reflecting the Marathas' preference for functional simplicity.

Cultural Significance: Jejuri Temple is a center of cultural and religious activities. The temple hosts several festivals, including the popular Bhandara Festival, where devotees throw turmeric powder as a symbol of their devotion. The temple's architecture and rituals reflect the Marathas' religious traditions and cultural heritage.

Parvati Temple

Historical and Religious Significance: Parvati Temple, located on Parvati Hill in Pune, is one of the oldest heritage structures in the city. The temple is dedicated to the goddess Parvati and holds great religious and historical significance for the Marathas.

Architectural Features:

- **Temple Complex:** The Parvati Temple complex includes several smaller temples dedicated to various deities, including Lord Shiva, Vishnu, and Kartikeya. The temples are built in the Nagara style, with shikharas adorned with carvings.
- **Stone and Wood Carvings:** The temple's pillars, ceilings, and walls are adorned with intricate stone and wood carvings. The carvings depict scenes from Hindu mythology, floral patterns, and geometric designs.
- **Panoramic Views:** The temple is situated on a hill, offering panoramic views of Pune city. The temple's location and design reflect the Marathas' appreciation for natural beauty and their strategic use of elevated sites for religious structures.

Cultural Significance: Parvati Temple is a significant cultural landmark in Pune. The temple complex is a popular destination for devotees and tourists, offering a blend of religious and historical experiences. The temple's architecture and carvings provide insights into the Marathas' artistic and religious traditions.

Vishrambaug Wada

Historical and Cultural Significance: Although not a temple, Vishrambaug Wada is an important example of Maratha architecture. Built by Peshwa Baji Rao II in the early 19th century, the mansion served as a residence and administrative center.

Architectural Features:

- **Sprawling Design:** Vishrambaug Wada is a three-story mansion with a sprawling layout, including courtyards, halls, and living quarters. The mansion's design reflects the Marathas' architectural style and their emphasis on spacious, functional structures.

- **Wood Carvings:** The mansion's wooden pillars, ceilings, and doors are adorned with intricate carvings. The carvings include floral patterns, mythological scenes, and geometric designs, showcasing the artistic skills of Maratha craftsmen.

- **Assembly Halls:** The mansion includes several large assembly halls (Sabha Mandaps) used for meetings and gatherings. These halls are decorated with wooden and stone carvings, reflecting the cultural and administrative functions of the mansion.

Cultural Significance: Vishrambaug Wada is a significant cultural landmark in Pune. The mansion's architecture and carvings provide insights into the Marathas' cultural and artistic heritage. Today, the mansion houses a museum and cultural center, preserving and showcasing Maratha history and art.

CONCLUSION:

The Maratha Empire's legacy in art and architecture, particularly through its forts and temples, is a testament to its military ingenuity, cultural richness, and religious devotion. The forts, strategically designed with advanced engineering techniques, stand as enduring symbols of Maratha resilience and strategic prowess. Structures like Raigad, Pratapgad, Sindhudurg, and Shivneri not only reflect the Marathas' defensive capabilities but also their ability to integrate natural landscapes into their fortifications. Simultaneously, Maratha temples exhibit a blend of simplicity and elegance, with intricate carvings and functional designs that underscore the Marathas' religious fervor and artistic heritage. Temples such as Bhimashankar, Jejuri, and Parvati serve as centers of spiritual and community life, embodying the cultural and devotional practices of the era.

The seamless fusion of military and religious architecture highlights the Marathas' holistic approach to governance, culture, and defense. Their architectural achievements provide valuable insights into the socio-political and cultural fabric of the Maratha period, illustrating a legacy of innovation, artistry, and spiritual devotion. Together, Maratha forts and temples form an integral part of India's rich architectural heritage, offering a glimpse into the remarkable history and enduring spirit of the Maratha Empire.

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