

## **Alai Minar\_ Pre-Mughal Architecture: A Contemporary Master Piece**

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The main factor which keeps ALAI MINAR alive is the question why did Hindu extremists not demolish this incomplete structure or transform it into another shape? Ala-ud-Din wanted to build a second tower of victory twice as high as Qutab Minar, but when he died the tower had reached only 27 meters and later no one was willing to continue his over ambitious project. Alai Minar (Figure 1) is an incomplete tower today which stands to the north of Qutub Minar and the mosque. There are many myths to construe the stories of the minaret. Some of the art historians say that it was just a base or platform and the major architecture was supposed to be built later. Some others say that it was constructed with the waste or left material of the complex to preserve the idea of making a structure. On the other side, there are few claims about secret ways to store war equipment, as it was constructed under the “slave dynasty”.

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### **Contemporary Installation**

The people of the slave dynasty were very keen to make their monumental spaces with the available resources. So the earliest form of ‘Eco Friendly’ architecture was built at that time. This minaret is constructed in a court (fortress). The court is enclosed by cloisters which were erected with carved columns and other architectural component from the twenty seven Hindu and Jain temples, which were later demolished. Its builder Qutb-ud-din Aybak was founder of the Mamluk or Slave dynasty.

Mostly, they construct mosques and mausoleums in the form of fortresses. There is no difference between the ‘Egyptian Concept’ of building Cairo city and Qutab ud Din Aybak’s

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Qutub complex, where the ruler wanted everything which symbolized Muslim's empowerment i.e. mosque, *madrassa*, iron pillar mausoleum etc. However the shape of the complex or fortress is 'pentagonal'. Secondly, the mosque is in the direction of *QIBLA* (the direction of Makkah! And the direction of prayer). This indicates the clear vision of Islamic ingenuity and aesthetics, with the combination of strong Islamic quintessence.

There is an analytical question from the lay man: Why have Hindu extremists not demolished this so called incomplete and rough surfaced structure, even when India has been fully ruled by the Hindu and Jain leaders? While investigating the history of this complex one thing came to knowledge; within a few months, the complex was built with the relics from the material of the Jain and Hindu temples. For every ruler, his religion and religious spaces i.e. religion performing places (mosques, temples, and churches) had always been the main hub for showing authority and legacy at the same. As the leader of his nation and times, he did his best to ensure the idea of "legacy", through the implementation of mega projects. This would help to reflect an individual personification of virtuoso, even after he had passed away. So in this way his nation or dynasty would be recorded in the old testaments, manuscripts and archival scrolls, as part of a splendid history. For the production of dream projects, groups of artists would always be gathered to make use of their artistic qualities.

The answer is simple and direct: This ruined piece has the traits of a master piece of 'contemporary' art installation. Without any doubt, this installation is a mark of Pre-Mughal artisans' supremacy. If we stop thinking about the usage of this structure and consider it as any of Anish Kapoor's installations, installed around the world in public places (Figure 2). Now a days, Anish Kapoor has been known as an ambitious sculptor, working in London from 1970s. He started his career from the colorful land of India and his subject matter was 'nostalgia'. He was a child of Punjabi Indian family, brought up by a Jew mother. In the 80s, he created many 'geometrical' and 'biomorphic' shaped sculptures. The material of the three dimensional forms, were pigments, limestone and marble etc. Later he explored many other sustainable materials i.e. binocular-glass, steel and iron. Today, around the world his installations are a source of fascination for travelers, art critics and even for the young generation. He says in an interview about the thinking process of the making of installations on such a large scale, that "I am thinking about the mythical wonders of the world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel". His source of inspiration is the wonders of the world, where he wants to see his own work too.

If we compare *Alai Minar* with Anish Kapoor's mythical wonders, it would look like an erected sculpture piece, standing with its solid indigenous value. Its visual language plays with the spectators indirectly, but contextual reasoning leads to the high level of conceptual art and philosophy. Moreover, its gigantic volume reflects the forefather's experiences and their interest in a rich craftsmanship. There is no doubt that today art is all about exploration. The standard of aesthetics is not limited to the primitive idea of only outer beauty.

In the west, after the World War I and II the 'idea of charisma' was shifted to the socialpolitical experience and anthropological factors. The artists recode the massacre of people by the dominators and the political turmoil, reactions and outcomes. A clear picture of brutality and bloodshed could be easily visualized from the art pieces of a specific time. In the history of "emotionality in art" the name of Pablo Picasso is very familiar among the global art circles. In his whole career, he introduced and practiced experimentation in the "line" and "structure", but his way to 'accepting wisdom' or the way of content making, leads to the stimulating political condition of his age. In Picasso's *Guernica* (Figure 3), he painted the brutality of dominators with the use of high level of silhouette in black and white. It is one of the "most powerful political statements which has been painted as an immediate reaction to the Nazi's devastating casual bombing practice on the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War". He expresses his feeling with the exaggerated 'hybrid' metaphorical representation; "horses" and "bulls", which shows the sufferings of the civilians in Spain.

Furthermore, when we synthesis the "idea of art making" and "reasoning", which forces any artist to put together an art toil, the surroundings of the artist and the related feelings play an important role for the contextualization of subject matter.

As a Pakistani visual art practitioner and researcher, one cannot neglect of Pakistan's eminent legend Sadiqan, who expresses his feelings in the designs and painting, murals, calligraphies and illustrations. One of his remarkable art attempts, painted on *Mangla Dam* is titled *The Saga of Labor* (Figure 4) with 'crudity' as visual emphasis. He always says that 'my painting is not to decorate the gallery space'. We cannot in-fix the definition of art and aesthetics. Its definition is open like sky's unlimited zone. It will be evolved every second and contents would be changed, just like a human being transforms with the passage of time. We can never scale God's unlimited blessing. In this way, how can one the definition of aesthetic s which is an instinctive nature and behavior by a sensible being. It would not be justice to the true essence of

‘transcendent’, if we bind this definition by means of ordinary standards of conventional ‘outer appearance’, and the arbitrator as ideal *beauty*.

The magnificent attraction for the rigid surface structure called ALAI MINAR, a highly conceptual three dimensional sculpture piece, has been erected with its intense brutal surface. Consequentially, the use of ribs on the crude ‘three dimensional installation’ makes this piece ‘verbal’ for scholars and art critics. According to many art intellectuals, the incomplete artifact has more significant meanings, as compared to overdo practices.

In accumulation with the standards of art installations, around the world, environmental art practitioners are working on large scale enormous volumes. Their visual dialogue is through the solid mass, space and light. These types of ‘ecological’ artists are producing their body of work with ‘ECO’ friendly material and concept e.g. Nobuo Sekine (Figure 5), Chiharu Shiota (Figure 6), Lynne Hull (Figure 7) and many more.

Nobuo Sekine is a Japanese sculptor and member of ‘Mono-ha’ group of artists who worked in the 70s and 80s. The groups main emphasis was on the selection of natural and industrial material i.e. spoon, glass, paper, stone, steel etc. The idea of ‘nothingness’, in the Japanese aesthetics is called ‘Wabi-Sabi’. That is the Buddhist concept ‘three marks of existence’: ‘nothing is everlasting, ‘nothing is finished’ and ‘nothing is perfect’.

Chiharu Shiota is also a Japanese installation artist living in “Berlin from 1996”. She uses very ordinary objects picked from lay living, such as “shoe”, “clothes” etc and improvises them with the cob web look like chaos with visual organization of “threats”. She is a performance based artist who creates a “bizarre” aura as an artifact.

Lynne Hull is a representative of the western contemporary culture which is divided into two ways: One is the ‘nature’ and the other is ‘anti-nature’. Lynne tries hard to give birth to the ‘co-existence’ of nature. The Artist interacts with environmental forces, creating artworks affected or powered by wind, water, lightning, even earthquakes.

In sum, the ‘wabi-sabi’, ‘bizarre sensibility’ and ‘co-exit of nature’, all refer to the contemporary art and latest customary sublime.

ALAI MINAR is one of the best examples of contemporary art work which was built during the Pre-Mughal age. Perceptibly, at that time it was built with a architectural purpose. But now a days, it could easily be tagged as a contemporary statue which is permanently installed and had miraculous interactive and indirect attraction for the viewer.

Under Muslim rulers the sublime and the ‘Idea of Beauty’ was based on non-representative visuals. Islam’s notion was to spread the basic idea of ‘simplicity’, ‘humanity’ and ‘kindness’ in the society. There was no place for the ostentation and materialistic ornamentation. The earliest Muslim art started as an independent identity, under the period of Abbasids at Bagdad as the center place of art activities. The construction of minarets (Figure 8) is one of the noticeable examples from the past, as the earliest ‘minimalist’ approach. The minaret design and construct are very simple and modest recourses. There was no corbel ornamentation or the tappers of the ‘*muqarnas*’ (scoop in and scoop out form) as surface decoration, which was a trend in the architectural decoration. Allegorically, the minimalist swirl shape minaret, aimed for the performance of the ‘*touaf*’ by the Muslims during the *Hajj*!

If we discuss the image or visual making regulation of ‘anti-idolism’ in the Muslim art sensibility, there would be a rational comment on ‘the sense of stylization’. There were art ateliers in Persia, which had artisans around the world, who belonged to multi-religion and multi-regional realms. For example some of them were Christian; some of them were secular, some from China and others from Greece. There were also some local artisan. That cosmopolitan space (the artists’ gathering which was related to various sides of the world) allows the group of people to produce dynamics in the form of art and architecture. There was margin to idealize the anti-thesis in the philosophy of art. But the core intentions were directed by the local art administration to fabricate ‘non- adoration’ art work. The people did not worship art pieces (sculptures, illustrations, and monuments etc.), but they admired the idea of making and receiving the instant message of Islam. So the sense of stylization was instinctively prevailing in Muslim art culture, even from the beginning. The function of stylized crude outline in the illustrations was the main artistic pledge at that time (Figure 9). In many book illustrations and manuscripts, the lyrical thick outline was drawn intentionally. They were experts of line and composition. In the “*Kalila wa dimna*” manuscript, the artists had drafted the testimony of animal behavior, requital to the humanly behavior i.e. desire to dominate as a strong king and after getting authority, feel power.

In the twenty first century, human ways of living became more mobilized and fast. Every human behavior is to be documented, in the name of metaphysical expression by an individual. Now the psychological and physical changes are accepted and reactions help the artists’ ‘mood boards’ to produce art works. The sense of admiration and observation became immense and more futuristic. There is no restriction or boundary in art. Art became a symbol of the ‘freedom

of expression'. However, there is less laborious subsistence and more conceptual interpretation of the idea through multiple mediums.

The contemporary world is more liberal for the practitioners, to identify the features of “Art” or “No Art” While talking about ALAI MINAR and its visual appearance it would be impolite if art critics title it as “primitive” architecture. It is old but has the finesse and contextualization of contemporary art installations, where there is a strong visual grip through crocodile skin texture and sensual rips covering the whole muscular volume. The texture on the surface is really ‘bizarre’. Psychologically, it has magical seize for observers and viewers. The gigantic volume is for the visual pleasure only. There is no practical outcome of the architecture. It is very strange that nobody can enter or exit from it. But there is still a specific audience who desire to see it and get the privilege to take a snapshot and to record it in the form of a model backdrop. The utility of the minaret is parallel to any contemporary art installation, formulated to magnetize the audience on the public sector or space, as a ‘public art’ contribution by artists. It seems that now the objective of the execution is ‘public’ milieu and visual bliss.



**Figure.1: “Alai Minar” built under Slave Dynasty**



**Figure 2 : Anish Kapoor an interactive installation**

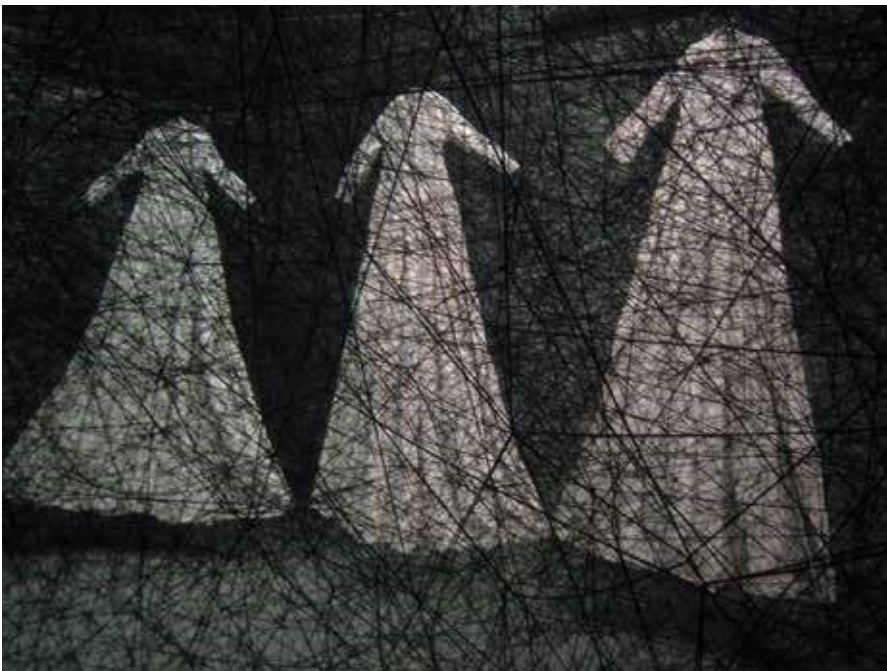


**Figure 3: Pablo Picasso “Guernica” Oil on Canvas 349 cm × 776 cm**





**Figure 4: Sadequain “Saga of Labor” at Mangla Dam**



**Figure 5: Nobuo Sekine, a Japanese sculptor’ work “Phase of Nothingness—Cut Stone**



**Figure 6 : Chiharu Shiota's "After the dream" at Birmingham**



**Figure 7: Lynne Hull "One of five small desert hydroglyphs scattered"**



Figure 8: Abbasid Period, a Minaret at “The Great Mosque of Samarra”



Figure 9: Kalila Wa Dimna “Crow Council” under the Abbasid Period  
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