Romancing The Jharokha: From Being A Source Of Ventilation And Light To The Divine Conception

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Abstract

‘Jharokha’ literally means ‘a small window’. It is a term which when one hears, is forced to think of some famous Bollywood songs of the 1960’s, the heroine waiting for the protagonist leaning against the ‘jharokha’ in a moonlit night and also the hero trying to meet the heroine at the jharokha after facing all odds and so on, the imagination does not cease. Jharokha has come a long way from being a mere source of light and ventilation to be conceived as a divine concept. It has been seen in numerous paintings of Indian art primarily that of the Mughals, during the period of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan. The same stands for the Indian Architecture where the jharokha has been represented irrespective of any religion, whether in the form of a ‘false window’ as a mere decorative element or a part of the daily routine or ‘ritual’ where the king would appear to assure of his good health and well-being to his subjects. The Indian Architecture has witnessed some of the simplest jharokhas to the most ornately carved ones. Similarly, it is also an important element of theatre of the past and the present as well. Here, in this research paper, I aim to trace a brief history of the relevance of jharokha in Indian Art and Architecture and its role and use in folk theatre focusing essentially on its changing faces with the changing time.

1. Introduction

The climate of a place highly determines the architectural features of a construction in a specific area. India is a country which witnesses diverse climatic variations, where the majority of the year is summery, sometimes with hot blowing winds called the loo, and at other times rainy and humid. Another factor, which I believe has a major role to play in the formation of a structure,
predominantly the residential ones, is the prescribed space. Here, in India, one can still see narrow streets, especially in areas which are in close proximity to the town, with walls so high that it overshadows the structure in front of it. But since light and ventilation are the pre-requisites, there are architectural components which are added to the basic structure to fulfill the requirements. Hence the climate and the circumscribed area, here play a significant role in defining the architectural setting.

Windows, balconies and galleries have been a part of Indian architecture, be it Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh architecture. For instance, the ‘false balconies’ of Bhaja Chaitya hall in Maharashtra has perforated screen to allow light and air to pass into the hall. They are decorative from the outside but serve no other purpose other than that. The balconies in the Hindu temples of Khajuraho are decorative as well as utilitarian as it has arrangements for sitting too (fig. 1.). The Muslims incorporated the architectural element of balconies, for example, in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, where Feroze Shah Tughluq established himself used balconies in the upper storey of the Atala Masjid. In the Sikh Architecture too balconies and windows can be seen for example in the main shrine of Shri Harimandir Sahib, Amritsar.

![Image of a balcony](image)

**Figure 1:** A view of the balcony of Laxmana Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, 10th century

### 2. Body

My focus here is to highlight one such architectural constituent which has been a part of Indian architecture from a long time as can be evidenced in the Indian Art and Architecture and that is the Jharokha. The Jharokha is considered a typical feature of the Rajput Architecture. A balcony, gallery, gokhra and jharoka are structures which project from the upper storey of a house and are all “devices which make it possible for the people to be between the street and the house, to be in the room and yet physically over the street and able to look along it.” All these structures are a part...
of the street and that of the house at the same time. So, even though they connect the house and the street, simultaneously, the privacy of the house remains undisturbed. This much-used architectural form may differ in structure from district to district but the basic structure remains same. They are open bays which consist of pillars or pilasters supporting the cupola or a pyramidal roof and have jali’s made in wood or stone (figure 2). These jali’s perform three functions; firstly, it allows sufficient light and air to enter into the room, secondly, the carvings on it gave it a decorative look from the exterior and thirdly, one can peep into the streets without being seen, especially the Muslim women cherished every moment of sitting at the jharokha who were not allowed to move about the street without the purdah. One could sit on the jharokha and see passing processions, tamasha or just the market scene below. In addition to these primary functions, it also provides shelter to people and travelers from rain and the scorching heat of the sun. In addition to being a part of a residential setting the jharokha’s have also played a significant part in embellishing and enhancing the beauty of palaces, havelis and forts as well.

![Figure 2: A view of the Jharokha in red sandstone with jali work.](image)

3. **Jharokha Darshan**

There was a ritual followed by the Mughal rulers and was called the jharokha darshan. The tradition of appearing before the balcony was introduced by the Mughal emperors. It was a daily practice where the king would come at the jharokha at least once a day (sometimes more) and
address his subjects. It was an essential custom and the ruler could not miss coming to the jharokha even if he was ill. Coryat writes “The king presenteth himself thrice a day without fail to his nobles. He standeth aloft alone by himself and looketh upon them from a window that hath an embroidered sumptuous coverture, supported with two silver pilasters to yield shadow unto him.” It was a direct way of communicating with the audience. Darshan is a Sanskrit word which means ‘sight’ and ‘ beholding’. It was started during the rule of Humayun and continued by Akbar (1556-1605) and his successor until it was interrupted by Aurangzeb who put an end to it considering it against Islam. Akbar followed it throughout his life where he would appear at the jharokha early in the morning. It is also said that Akbar initiated this practice so as to promote his liberal policies. The tradition was continued during the time of Jahangir (1605-27). Not only this, Jahangir’s wife Nur Jahan also accompanied him at the jharokha. Shah Jahan (1628-58) in his rule of 30 years never missed a single day to appear at the jharokha. It was Shah Jahan’s failure to appear at the jharoka during his illness in 1657 which led to rumours of his death. This ritual was put an end by Aurangzeb (1658-1707) in the 11th year of his reign. One can find different styles of jharokhas illustrated in Mughal paintings. For example a painting from the period of Jahangir, illustrates the haloed emperor at the jharokha, seated in a side profile, bare-chested, but adorned with jewelry and a red turban against a mauve coloured bolster (fig. 3). In another painting from the time of Aurangzeb illustrated the emperor at the jharokha with two noblemen in the foreground. Here also, the emperor is shown in a side profile wearing white jama (upper garment) and a turban against the blue backdrop (fig. 4).

Figure 3: Jahangir bare-chested at a jharokha window, Mughal, 1620, Raza Library, Rampur, India
The system of Jharokha Darshan was discontinued after the Mughals and there is very less evidence of the Sikhs, their immediate successors, continuing the tradition. Although jharokha as an architectural element was imbibed in the Sikh architecture along with the other architectural features which they adopted from the preceding rulers. Yet there is one place in the history of Sikh architecture where the researchers believe the jharokha darshan might have been prevalent and that is the Haveli of Naunihal Singh, the grandson of the great Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This haveli or residence is said to have been built around 1830-1840, but speculations lead towards the
fact that it might have been built in 1836-37, the year when the price was married. There are various symbolic elements incorporated in the jharokha, for instance, the Garuda, Vishnu’s vahana symbolizes strength and fearlessness which was also the character of the prince and the fish heads with their open jaws are symbols of protection and they were meant to ward off danger and evil from the prince.

4. Jharokha- As a part of Indian folk theatre

Jharokha has not only been a part of Indian Art and Architecture but Indian folk theatre as well. India has long possessed the tradition of folk drama which meant “a popular theatre with some claim to poetic excellence, distinguished from superficial entertainment and from any school of drama cultivated by formally educated or literate groups.” The drama or plays such created were meant for the population. Many popular entertainments in India are of little literary substance comprising mainly of dance, songs and spectacle. The authors and actors may not be highly qualified or professionals but there are families who have dedicated their life to folk theatre and the legacy has been passed on from generation to generation.

The spaces where these theatrical performances are displayed are as varied as the art form itself. These theatre spaces may be divided under two major categories: the existing or devised spaces used for traditional performances and the others are the ones used for staging modern plays. The traditional plays are mostly religious ones and they are staged at sacred places, for example the temple premises or so where the mandapas or the pillared halls are used. Mostly traditional performances are done in open-air. The Khayal of Rajasthan is one such folk drama which uses structures called mahal (palaces) or jharokha (windows) of differing heights which may be as high as twenty feet (six metres). They are used to showcase the descent of the heroine, mostly a queen to the main platform which is approximately five feet in height where the musicians are seated on a small adjacent platform. It is a folk drama full of singing, dancing and music. They are based on old mythological stories, historical accounts or local folklore. There are different types of khayal which use different types of stages. Dr. Mahendra Bhanava, lists four of its types. The first type of stage is nothing but a plain ground open on all sides where the spectators sit all around. In the second type, there is one curtain at the back which is used as the changing or the green room and the people sit on the three sides. The third one is a regular mandapa which can either be open on all sides or can have a curtain at the back, which is decorated with flowers, cloth pieces or paper designs. And lastly and the most decorative of all is called the ‘attali manch’. It presents a multi-storeyed mansion with decorative windows called jharokha’s. The drama is staged in front of this structure.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I can say, that jharokha has come a long way from being just an object of light and ventilation to some of the most important and decorative element in Indian architecture. In this journey of evolution it has not only incorporated in itself various styles and tastes at differing points of time but has found its distinct place in a wide plethora of Art forms be it painting, architecture, theatre, poetry, literature etc.

References

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