



The Mughal Temple in Banaras

Madhuri Desai

Associate Professor of Art History and Asian Studies, Director of Graduate Studies in Art History, Penn State University

Between 1590 and 1700, four significant temples were built in Banaras. Each edifice was built with either direct or indirect Mughal patronage, and each was conceptualized at the intersection of ritual practice, stylistic innovation, historical consciousness, and contemporary politics. Of these, the Vishweshwur Temple and the Bindu Madhav Temple (both built ca. 1590), were consecrated as symbols of Mughal support for the diverse non-Islamic religious traditions of South Asia during the reign of the Emperor Akbar. In the interior of each temple, lofty vaults crossed each other at right angles to form spacious, column-free *mandapas*, and their exteriors were articulated through bold, chiseled, horizontal bands of warm, red sandstone. Both temples were dismantled in 1669, by order of Akbar's great-grandson, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Subsequently, two new temples, the Kedar Temple (ca. 1695) and the Adi-Vishweshwur Temple (ca. 1700) were built in the city during his reign. Each temple was constructed with imperial permission and support and once again, patrons and designers devised innovative forms to reinforce a visual connection between a transformed religious sphere and imperial support. In the Kedar Temple, an archaic spatial scheme was offset by innovative column-design, based partially on Mughal imperial prototypes. The design for the Adi-Vishweshwur Temple shared formal attributes with contemporary tomb architecture, thereby conforming to the spartan imperial tastes promoted by Aurangzeb's regime. What was the role of "tradition," conceptualized as an adherence to formal prototypes (such as *shikharas* and narrative figural imagery), as discursive relationships to histories as well as religious literature were being reimagined and reformulated? This talk engages questions of modernity and tradition as they played out in Banaras during the long 17th century of the Mughal hegemony.