

Royal Palaces of Vadodara City: A Historical and Archaeological Survey

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Abstract: Vadodara, often referred to as the "City of Palaces," is renowned for its remarkable concentration of palatial structures. The city houses around ten prominent royal palaces, constructed in different periods by various eminent architects and engineers. It is the only city in Gujarat where one can witness a unique amalgamation of Indo-Saracenic (Indo-Arabic), Maratha, Mughal, Scottish, and European architectural styles. A survey of the defensive features of these royal palaces, the purposes behind their construction, and their present condition reveals that these edifices stand as significant examples of ancient architecture. These palaces are characterised by grand structures, fortified walls, and defensive gateways, reflecting the socio-cultural and political milieu of their times.

Keywords: Vadodara City, Royal Palaces, Culture of Vadodara, Gaekwad Dynasty, Royal Palaces, Past and Present of Palaces

Introduction: Vadodara, also known as Baroda, has been an integral part of Indian history and culture. In 1947, when India gained independence, the princely state of Baroda was merged into the Bombay State. Later, on 1 May 1960, the Bombay Province was bifurcated into the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, and Baroda was officially incorporated into Gujarat.¹

Vadodara city is particularly renowned for its architecture. Popularly known as the "City of Palaces," this title is attributed to the considerable number of palaces it houses and their historical significance. There are around ten major royal palaces in Vadodara, each constructed in different periods and representing distinct architectural styles. The royal family of the Gaekwad dynasty played a pivotal role in the architectural development and construction of these palaces.

The Gaekwads not only strengthened Vadodara administratively and politically but also contributed significantly to its cultural identity through the construction of royal palaces, which today stand as defining landmarks of the city. The architectural fabric of these palaces exhibits a unique blend of styles, including Indo-Saracenic (Indo-Arabic), local Maratha architecture, Mughal style, Scottish, and European elements, making them particularly remarkable. These palaces served as royal residences where members of the royal family lived and upheld cultural traditions, customs, and courtly practices.²

The palaces of Vadodara were also designed with a strong emphasis on security and preservation. Defensive walls, fortress-like structures, and specialised security features still draw the attention of visitors. Thus, the palaces are not only splendid examples of architectural art but also reflect the deep historical, cultural, and social heritage of the region.

At present, the upkeep and conservation of these palaces remain a challenging task. However, recognising their historical importance and cultural legacy, several palaces are being preserved to ensure their continuity for future generations. This survey establishes that the royal palaces of Vadodara hold significance not only for their architectural grandeur but also for their historical relevance and socio-cultural context.³

This article provides significant insights into the historical, cultural, and architectural importance of the royal palaces of Vadodara, demonstrating how their preservation can play a vital role in safeguarding this remarkable heritage for the future. Extensive research has been conducted on the royal palaces of Vadodara and their various aspects. These palaces, once the residences of the royal family, still bear testimony to their glorious past. In the present times, they continue to stand as symbols of the royal family's heritage, and the people of Vadodara still cherish them with pride. Through these palaces, we gain not only an understanding of Vadodara's historical context but also an insight into how the royal families expressed their power and prestige through architectural art.⁴

Research Methodology:

This research paper employs historical and archaeological methods to analytically study the construction of the royal palaces of Vadodara. Primary sources such as historical documents, maps, and on-site surveys have been utilised to examine the process of palace construction and the technological methods employed at the time.

Additionally, secondary sources such as ancient texts, works of historians, and previously conducted research studies have been used to explore the methodology of construction and the social and cultural impacts of these palaces.

Direct field observations provided insights into the architectural style, building materials, tools, and ancient metallurgical techniques used in the construction of these palaces. Furthermore, information gathered from local museums and archival records was comparatively analysed to better understand the historical and architectural significance of these royal structures.

Research Problem:

The royal palaces of Vadodara are an important part of Indian history and architectural heritage, yet insufficient research has been conducted on them so far. There is a need to understand the construction of these palaces and their technical processes from a modern perspective. In particular, it is essential to examine how these palaces were built during the Gaekwad dynasty and the Mughal period, and to what extent technological advancements played a role in their structures. At present, the conservation of these palaces has become a significant challenge, which makes it necessary to study their architectural styles and construction techniques in order to determine how such historical heritage can be preserved.

Research Objectives:

The primary aim of this research is not only to interpret the royal palaces of Vadodara as architectural specimens but also to present them in the correct perspective within the broader context of Indian history and science. Furthermore, the study seeks to evaluate the preservation efforts undertaken so far and provide suggestions for improvement so that the conservation and restoration of these historical monuments may be carried out more effectively in the future. Special emphasis is placed on understanding how their architectural style, construction techniques, and cultural significance can be preserved for future generations. In particular, the research explores the architectural features and technical processes used in the construction of the royal palaces of Vadodara during the Gaekwad and Mughal periods.⁵

At present, studying the methods of construction and conservation of these palaces is necessary to understand their prominent place in Indian building art, architectural science, and history.

Objectives and Goals:

1. **To analyse the construction and architectural features of the royal palaces of Baroda:**
To study the architecture, materials, construction process, and intended purposes of these palaces.
2. **To study the historical, cultural, and political reasons behind the construction of these royal palaces:**
To understand the historical and cultural contexts in which these palaces were built and how they symbolised political power and prosperity.
3. **To analyse the process of metallurgy and the techniques used:**
To examine the kinds of metalwork and construction techniques employed in the building of Vadodara's royal palaces, and to understand how the scientific and technological advancements of that period influenced these structures.
4. **To study the development of building techniques during the Gaekwad and Mughal periods:**
To analyse the construction methods and architectural styles applied to Vadodara's palaces during these periods, and to understand how these techniques influenced the architectural character of the royal palaces.

The ultimate aim of this research is to scientifically interpret the architecture and construction processes of Vadodara's royal palaces, thereby ensuring the preservation of their historical and cultural legacy while also highlighting their relevance in the context of contemporary architecture.

Key Findings:

The study of the construction of the royal palaces of Vadodara has brought forth several significant facts which are not only interesting from architectural and technical perspectives but also carry immense historical and cultural importance.

List of Royal Palaces of Vadodara (Baroda) and those built by the Gaekwads:

1. Laxmi Vilas Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
2. Shiva Mahal – Vadodara (Baroda)
3. Makarpura Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
4. Indumati Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
5. Dhairya Prasad Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
6. Nazarbaug – Vadodara (Baroda)
7. Pratap Vilas Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
8. Motibaug Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
9. Balwantrao Mahal Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
10. Lalbaug Palace – Vadodara (Baroda)
11. Sakarwara Mahal (Maharaja Palace) – Vadodara (Baroda)

Royal Palaces built by the Gaekwads outside Vadodara:

1. Jaymahal Palace – Mumbai
2. Rajmahal Palace – Amreli
3. Rajmahal Palace – Mehsana

These palaces still stand tall with pride, preserving the glorious legacy of the royal family.

Laxmi Vilas Palace:

This royal palace, constructed around the 18th century with due consideration to the development of Indo-Saracenic architectural style, was intended to serve as a private royal residence. The study of this palace highlights the advanced level of technical and construction knowledge that existed in India during that period.

Sayajirao Gaekwad aspired to build a private palace that combined royal magnificence with state-of-the-art technology. With this vision, he employed Indo-Saracenic architectural style and initiated its construction in the 18th century. The palace embodies cutting-edge technology, superior architectural design, and exquisite craftsmanship, resulting in the creation of a grand royal palace. The successors of Sayajirao Gaekwad have preserved this palace with great care, keeping alive the memory of the Maharaja.⁶

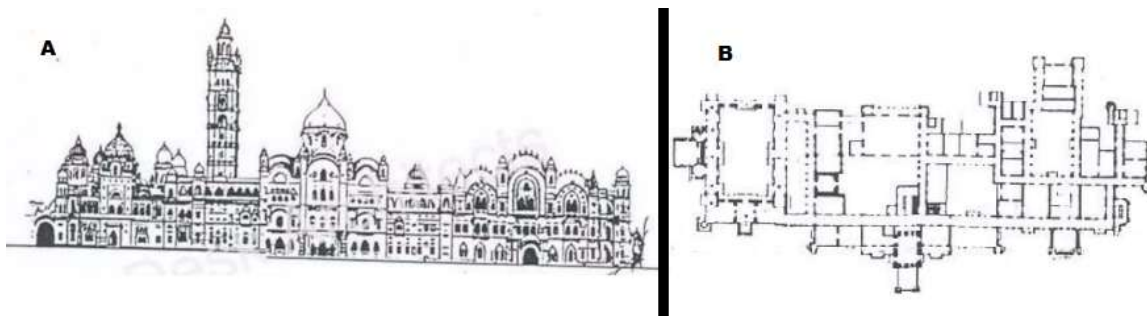


Figure 1: A- Front view of Laxmi Vilas Palace, B- Sky View Plan of Laxmi Vilas Palace¹⁵

Although there was no direct conflict between the Gaekwads and the Mughals, they always prioritised the protection and dignity of their homeland. They never forgot their responsibility towards their people and remained ever prepared to face challenges. The construction of such royal palaces reflects their vision as well as the political and social conditions of their time.⁷

Indo-Saracenic Architecture:

This revivalist style combines elements of traditional Indian and British architecture. Its features are based on a fusion of Islamic design and Indian materials. In India, it was developed by British architects and is distinguished by onion-shaped domes, overhanging eaves (chhajjas), pointed or scalloped arches, domed roofs, cupolas, turrets or minarets, jharokha-style windows, open pavilions, and perforated galleries.⁸



Figure 2: 3D Model view of Laxmi Vilas Palace

Facts about Laxmi Vilas Palace:¹²

1. It is reportedly the largest private residence ever built.
2. It is four times larger than Buckingham Palace.
3. At the time of construction, it was equipped with an elevator, which was rare for that era.
4. Its interiors resemble those of a vast European country house.
5. In the 1930s, Maharaja Pratapsingh built a golf course for European guests, which his grandson, Samarjitsinh, later renovated and opened to the public.
6. Several Bollywood films have been shot here, including *Prem Rog* (1982), *Dil Hi To Hai* (1993), *Sardaar Gabbar Singh* (2016), and *Grand Masti* (2013).
7. The Navlakhi Baoli, dating back to 1405 CE, is a major attraction within the palace complex.
8. There is a small zoo on the premises where crocodiles can be seen.
9. The Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum houses rare paintings by Raja Ravi Varma and also features a miniature railway line.
10. Adjacent to the palace is the Motibaug Cricket Ground, which includes a swimming pool, clubhouse, gymnasium, and golf course.
11. Members of the former royal family of Baroda still reside in the palace.
12. The palace complex also comprises the Motibaug Palace, the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, and the luxurious LVP Banquets and Convention Centre.
13. Major Charles Mant is considered the chief architect of the palace.
14. Laxmi Vilas Palace extends over an area of approximately 700 acres.
15. The palace is still owned by the Gaekwad royal family.

Evaluation of Laxmi Vilas Palace:

In Vadodara, the Laxmi Vilas Palace was built in 1890 by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III at a cost of 2.7 million rupees (or £180,000), which was an enormous sum at that time. The palace spans 700 acres, and with the presence of the Motibaug Cricket Ground and the Navlakhi Baoli, it has become a site of immense historical and cultural significance.⁹

The gardens, fountains, and lawns within the palace complex were designed by British horticulturist William Goldring. The main highlight of the palace is the Durbar Hall, with its exquisite wall carvings and intricately painted ceiling. The palace also displays the heritage of the Gaekwad family, including old paintings, sculptures, and weaponry.

Based on its grandeur, historical importance, and architectural features, the palace has been valued at approximately ₹24,393 crores, a figure that reflects its immense historical and cultural worth.¹⁰

Main Attractions of the Palace

- **Darbar Hall:** This hall is renowned for its grandeur, intricately carved walls, and artistic paintings on the ceiling. Marble statues further enhance its beauty. Its dimensions are 95 feet in length and 52 feet in width.¹¹
- **Museum:** Within the palace complex, a museum displays the Gaekwad family's heritage, including ancient paintings, sculptures, and weapons.¹³
- **Gardens and Golf Course:** Expansive lush green gardens and a well-maintained golf course surrounding the palace further elevate its splendour.¹⁴

Conclusion

The Laxmi Vilas Palace is a priceless jewel of Indian history and culture. It not only exemplifies architectural excellence but also symbolises India's royal heritage. Its magnificence, artistry, and historical significance place it among the foremost tourist destinations of the country. At present, it continues to serve as the residence of the Gaekwad family, while also being open to tourists, who come to witness its architectural grandeur and experience the cultural heritage of Vadodara.

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