

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Culture in the Mughal Empire

Paper 1 · Unit 23

Painting, architecture, language and the court: 95 marks in four years, and the unit UPSC uses to test whether you can describe a style precisely rather than admire it.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Culture in the Mughal Empire: persian histories and other literature; hindi and religious literature; mughal architecture; mughal painting; provincial architecture and painting; classical music; science and technology.

Mughal painting: the workshop and the style

Asked in 2023 and 2026 on European features, and in 2025 through the karkhanas. The examinable core is that Mughal painting is a documented workshop art with named artists, dated manuscripts and traceable influences.

- The style begins with **Humayun** bringing **Mir Sayyid Ali** and **Abd-us-Samad** from the Safavid court in the 1550s, so the Persian foundation is direct and personal rather than diffuse.
- The **Tutinama** and the enormous **Hamzanama**, about fourteen hundred cloth folios produced over roughly fifteen years under Akbar, established the workshop system and the collaborative division between designer, colourist and portraitist.
- Akbar's atelier under **Abdus Samad** produced illustrated histories, the **Akbarnama**, the **Razmnama** which is the Persian Mahabharata, and the Ramayana and Timurnama, and the choice of Hindu epics is a policy statement as much as an artistic one.
- Named Hindu artists in Akbar's workshop, **Daswanth**, **Basawan** and **Kesu Das**, are the evidence for genuine synthesis, and Abul Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari lists them, which is the kind of citation examiners reward.
- **Jahangir** shifted from manuscript illustration to the single-page portrait and album, to natural history studies, and to allegorical portraiture; **Mansur** painted birds and animals and was titled Nadir-ul-Asr, and **Bishandas** was sent to Persia to portray Shah Abbas.
- **Shah Jahan's** painting is more formal, jewel-like and hierarchical, with the durbar scene and the profile portrait dominant, while **Aurangzeb's** withdrawal of patronage dispersed the artists to provincial and Rajput courts.
- The **European features** the 2023 and 2026 questions ask about arrived through Jesuit missions from 1580 and through prints and engravings: linear and atmospheric perspective, chiaroscuro modelling, receding landscape backgrounds, halo motifs and Christian iconography.
- The precise answer to the 2026 question is that European technique was absorbed selectively and did not displace the Persian foundation. Perspective was used for depth without abandoning the high viewpoint, and the Persianate line, flat brilliant colour and decorative border survived, so the result is layered rather than substituted.
- **Jahangir's** connoisseurship is documented in his own memoir, where he claims he can identify the hand of each artist in a collaborative page, which is the earliest Indian statement of individual artistic attribution.
- The **Padshahnama** and the **Jahangirnama** illustrations, and the album pages assembled for Jahangir and Shah Jahan, are the works to name; the dispersal after Aurangzeb feeds directly into the Rajput and Pahari schools.

Reign	Dominant form	Named artists	Character
Akbar	Illustrated manuscript, large workshop	Daswanth, Basawan, Kesu Das, Abdus Samad	Narrative, crowded, energetic
Jahangir	Single page portrait, album, natural history	Mansur, Bishandas, Abul Hasan	Naturalistic, allegorical, refined
Shah Jahan	Durbar scene, formal portrait	Chitarman, Bichitr	Hierarchical, jewelled, static
Aurangzeb	Patronage withdrawn	Artists disperse	Provincial and Rajput schools grow

Mughal painting by reign. The shift from book to single page is the structural change to state.

Mughal architecture

Asked in 2023 on syncretism and in 2026 on Persian influence. The best answers move building by building and name the element that is Persian, the element that is Indian, and the element that is new.

- **Humayun's Tomb** at Delhi, 1565 to 1572, by Mirak Mirza Ghiyas, introduces the **charbagh** garden tomb, the double dome and the high arched iwan, and it is the direct ancestor of the Taj.
- **Akbar's** buildings at **Fatehpur Sikri** are the syncretic case: red sandstone rather than marble, trabeate construction with brackets and chhajjas alongside arches, and the **Panch Mahal**, **Diwan-i-Khas** with its central pillar, **Jodha Bai's palace** and the **Buland Darwaza** of 1576.
- Fatehpur Sikri's vocabulary is drawn from Gujarati and Rajasthani building practice, which is why the 2023 syncretism question is straightforwardly answerable with Akbar's reign.
- **Jahangir's** reign is the transition, with the **tomb of Itimad-ud-Daula** at Agra, 1622 to 1628, the first Mughal building faced entirely in white marble and the first extensive use of **pietra dura** inlay.
- **Shah Jahan** completes the shift to marble, the bulbous dome, the foliated arch, and inlay: the **Taj Mahal** from 1632, the **Red Fort** and **Jama Masjid** at Delhi, and the **Moti Masjid** at Agra.
- The **Taj** should be described technically rather than lyrically: perfect bilateral symmetry, the charbagh with the tomb at the end rather than the centre, a double dome, four detached minarets tilted outward, and calligraphy graded in size so it reads evenly from below.
- **Shah Jahan's** Diwan-i-Am at Delhi incorporated Florentine pietra dura panels, including an Orpheus panel, which is direct material evidence of European artistic import at the highest level of imperial building.
- **Aurangzeb's** building is sparse, with the Badshahi Mosque at Lahore and the Bibi ka Maqbara at Aurangabad, the latter an evident and weaker imitation of the Taj.
- The Persian debt is real in the charbagh, the iwan, the double dome and the pishtaq, and the Indian contribution is real in the chhatri, the chhajja, the bracket, the jali and the red sandstone tradition, and the argument to make is that the synthesis is structural rather than decorative.

KEY TERMS

Charbagh — The quadripartite Persian garden divided by water channels, adopted for Mughal tombs from Humayun's onward.

Pietra dura — Inlay of semi-precious stone into marble, called parchin kari, introduced extensively at Itimad-ud-Daula's tomb.

Pishtaq — The rectangular frame around an arched portal, a Persian device central to Mughal facades.

Provincial architecture and painting

The 2025 paper asked for the rise of distinct provincial architectural styles under the Mughal empire, so this is a live section and not an appendix.

- Provincial styles predate and outlast Mughal centralisation, and the syllabus's point is that imperial style met established regional traditions rather than replacing them.
- **Bengal** developed the curved **do-chala** and **chau-chala** roof derived from thatched bamboo construction, together with terracotta ornament, and the curved Bengali roof was then absorbed back into imperial architecture as the **bangaldar** roof.
- **Gujarat** contributed the finest stone carving and jali work, seen in the Ahmedabad mosques, and Gujarati craftsmen worked at Fatehpur Sikri, which is a documented transmission rather than a stylistic guess.
- **Jaunpur's** Sharqi style produced the massive propylon screen at the Atala and Jama Masjids, and **Malwa** at Mandu produced the austere, well-proportioned Jahaz Mahal and Hoshang Shah's tomb, the latter reportedly studied by Shah Jahan's architects.
- **Kashmir** developed a distinctive wooden mosque architecture with pyramidal roofs, and **Bijapur** under the Adil Shahis produced the **Gol Gumbaz** with its enormous dome and intersecting pendentives.
- In painting, the dispersal of the imperial atelier after Aurangzeb produced the **Rajput schools** at Mewar, Bundi, Kishangarh and Marwar, and the **Pahari schools** at Basohli, Guler and Kangra.
- The **Malwa school**, asked about in 2024, is a distinct early Rajput idiom with flat planes of bold colour, architectural framing devices dividing the composition into registers, stylised figures and a preference for Ragamala and Rasikapriya subjects.
- **Deccani painting** at Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda ran parallel to Mughal painting with stronger Persian and Turkish colour, richer palette and more fantastic landscape, and its independence from Mughal norms is worth stating.

Persian histories and court literature

Historiography is now a standing feature of Paper 1, and the Mughal chronicle tradition is the richest source of it. Learn what each author was doing, not just what they wrote.

- **Abul Fazl's** *Akbarnama* with its third volume the **Ain-i-Akbari** is the central text: an official history and a statistical gazetteer of the empire's administration, revenue, army and culture.
- Abul Fazl's project was ideological as well as documentary, presenting Akbar through the doctrine of **sulh-i-kul**, universal peace, and as a semi-divine sovereign, so his figures should be used with attention to purpose.

- **Badauni's** *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* is the indispensable counterweight, written privately and hostile to Akbar's religious policy, and the pairing of Abul Fazl with Badauni is the standard way to demonstrate source criticism.
- **Gulbadan Begum's** *Humayunnama*, written at Akbar's request, is the outstanding female-authored source in the period and gives the domestic and haram world that the official chronicles omit.
- **Jahangir's** own *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* is a memoir in the tradition of **Babur's Baburnama**, itself written in Chagatai Turkish and translated into Persian by Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan.
- **Abdul Hamid Lahori's** *Padshahnama* for Shah Jahan and **Khafi Khan's** *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab*, written privately in Aurangzeb's period and after, complete the chronicle sequence.
- The **Dabistan-i-Mazahib**, a comparative account of religions, and the translation bureau, the **maktab khana**, that produced the Razmnama and translations of the Atharva Veda and Rajatarangini, show the scale of the Persian-Sanskrit encounter.
- **Dara Shukoh's** *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, the mingling of two oceans, and his Persian translation of the Upanishads as the *Sirr-i-Akbar* are the intellectual high point of that encounter, and their transmission to Europe influenced Schopenhauer.

Hindi, Sanskrit and religious literature

The 2025 paper asked directly about Hindi literature under Mughal patronage and the influence of Bhakti and Sufi movements, which makes this section examinable in its own right.

- **Tulsidas** composed the **Ramcharitmanas** in Awadhi in 1574, and its reach across north India makes it arguably the most socially consequential literary work of the period.
- **Surdas** in Braj composed the **Sursagar** on Krishna devotion, and **Mirabai** and **Raskhan**, the latter a Muslim devotee of Krishna, extend the point about religious boundary crossing.
- **Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan**, Akbar's commander and one of the nine gems, wrote Hindi dohas and patronised Hindi poets, which is the clearest single instance of Mughal patronage of Hindi.
- **Keshavdas** and the **riti** tradition of courtly Hindi poetry, with its systematic treatment of poetics and heroine typology, developed under regional and Mughal-allied Rajput patronage.
- **Bhakti** shaped this literature by making the vernacular a legitimate vehicle for the sacred, and **Sufi** influence shaped it through the **premakhyan** romance tradition, of which **Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat** (1540) in Awadhi is the outstanding example.
- The **Padmavat** is the key text for a syncretism answer: a Muslim Sufi poet writing in Awadhi using a Rajput legend as an allegory of the soul's search for the divine.
- **Sikh** scripture belongs here too: the **Adi Granth**, compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604, is a multilingual anthology including compositions of Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and the Sufi Sheikh Farid alongside the Gurus, and it is the period's most deliberate act of religious inclusion in a single text.
- **Urdu** emerges in this period in the Deccan first, as Dakhni, with Quli Qutb Shah writing in it, before Delhi poets adopted it in the eighteenth century.
- Sanskrit continued in production under Mughal and Rajput patronage, and **Jagannatha Panditaraja** at Shah Jahan's court is the standard example, which corrects the assumption that Sanskrit ceased under Muslim rule.

Gardens, cities and the imperial landscape

Architecture questions are usually answered with buildings alone, which leaves out the setting the Mughals themselves cared most about. Gardens and city plans were instruments of sovereignty and they are examinable under provincial and imperial architecture alike.

- The **charbagh** is a cosmological statement before it is a design: four quarters divided by water channels representing the four rivers of paradise, and its arrival with Babur marks a deliberate transplanting of Timurid Central Asian practice.
- **Babur's** own account in the Baburnama records his dissatisfaction with the Indian landscape and his construction of ordered gardens at Agra as an assertion of Timurid civilisation over what he saw as disorder.
- **Kashmir** gardens, **Shalimar Bagh** and **Nishat Bagh** under Jahangir and Nur Jahan, adapt the charbagh to a hillside as a terraced sequence, which is a genuine Indian innovation on the Persian model.
- The **tomb garden** is the Mughal contribution that Persia did not have in the same form: at Humayun's tomb and the Taj the mausoleum stands within the garden as the culmination of a designed approach, and at the Taj it sits at the end rather than the centre so the river forms the fourth side.
- **Shahjahanabad**, founded in 1639, is the most complete Mughal urban statement, with the Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk as a canal-lined bazaar avenue, and a hierarchy of havelis and mohallas radiating from the fort.
- **Fatehpur Sikri** as a planned imperial city, abandoned within about fifteen years largely for water reasons, is the counterexample that shows the limits of imperial will over hydrology.
- **Water engineering** underpins all of it: the canals of Ali Mardan Khan bringing water to Delhi, the terraced hydraulics of the Kashmir gardens, and the raised channels and fountains that made the charbagh function.
- The political reading to state in an answer: garden and city building were acts of legitimation, positioning the emperor as the bringer of order and paradise on earth, which is why they intensify precisely when a reign needs justification.

KEY TERMS

Chahar bagh — The fourfold garden divided by axial water channels, brought from Timurid Central Asia by Babur and adapted for tombs in India.

Haveli — The courtyard mansion of the nobility, the basic unit of Mughal urban form in Shahjahanabad.

Classical music

Named in the syllabus and rarely prepared, which makes it a cheap source of marks if a question opens the door.

- **Tansen**, one of the nine gems, moved from Rewa to Akbar's court and is credited with foundational contributions to the Hindustani tradition and with the Rabindra and Khandar lineages of dhrupad.
- **Amir Khusrau**, though earlier, is conventionally credited with the development or popularisation of the **qawwali**, the **khayal** and the **tarana**, and with instruments including the sitar and tabla, and the attributions should be presented as tradition rather than settled fact.

- **Dhrupad** was the dominant court form under Akbar and Jahangir, austere and text-centred, and it gave way to the more ornamented and improvisatory **khayal** from the eighteenth century, associated with Sadarang and Adarang at Muhammad Shah's court.
- The **Mughal court** treated music as a mark of sovereignty, and the naubat, the ceremonial ensemble at the gate, was a formal attribute of rank.
- **Aurangzeb's** relationship with music is more complicated than the standard account allows: he withdrew court patronage, yet the largest number of Persian treatises on Indian music were produced in his reign, and musicians moved to provincial courts.
- The **Carnatic** tradition developed separately under Vijayanagara successor and Nayaka patronage, and Venkatamakhin's melakarta scheme of 1620 systematised its ragas, which is the southern parallel to name.

Science and technology

The syllabus names it and it is almost never asked, so give it accurate brevity rather than padding. The honest position on Mughal science is more interesting than either celebration or dismissal.

- Mughal strength lay in **applied and observational** fields: cartography, metallurgy, shipbuilding at Surat, textile technology, and the manufacture of cannon and matchlocks.
- **Sawai Jai Singh II** of Amber, working under Mughal authority in the early eighteenth century, built the **Jantar Mantar** observatories at Delhi, Jaipur, Ujjain, Mathura and Varanasi, and compiled the **Zij-i-Muhammad Shahi** star tables.
- Jai Singh's project is examinable precisely because it shows both capacity and limit: he used Ptolemaic and Islamic astronomy and consulted European sources, but did not adopt the telescope systematically even though telescopes were available.
- **Irfan Habib's** analysis of technology in Mughal India is the standard citation, and his argument is that Indian artisans achieved very high quality with simple tools while the economy provided little incentive for labour-saving mechanisation, given cheap labour and abundant skill.
- **Printing** was known through the Portuguese and Jesuits from the sixteenth century and was not adopted, and the usual explanations are the prestige and economics of manuscript production and the calligraphic value attached to Persian script.
- **Shipbuilding** at Surat and later at the Wadia yards in Bombay produced vessels European captains rated highly, and Indian teak hulls outlasted European oak, which is a concrete counter to any blanket claim of technological backwardness.
- **Metallurgy** retained genuine world leadership in wootz crucible steel, exported westward for centuries, and in the corrosion-resistant iron of the earlier Delhi pillar tradition, though neither was scaled into mass production.
- The comparative point that makes a good closing line: the Mughal economy was among the world's largest and technically competent in most applied fields, but institutional incentives did not push it towards the mechanised, capital-intensive path Europe took, which returns you to the Great Divergence debate.

Answering the culture questions

Six questions in four years came from this unit. They follow a pattern that is easy to exploit once you see it.

- Nearly every question is about **influence and synthesis**, so structure the answer as source, borrowing, adaptation and result rather than as chronology.
- Name **specific works and specific artists**. Daswanth, Basawan, Mansur, Bishandas for painting; Itimad-ud-Daula, Fatehpur Sikri, the Taj for architecture; Abul Fazl, Badauni, Jayasi for texts.
- For the European influence questions, the winning move is the qualification: technique was absorbed, the Persianate foundation was not displaced, and the result is layered.
- On syncretism, give one element from each tradition in the same building, which is far stronger than a general claim about fusion.
- For the provincial styles question, cover Bengal, Gujarat, Jaunpur, Malwa and the Deccan, and note the two-way traffic, since Gujarati craft went to Fatehpur Sikri and the Bengali roof entered imperial architecture.
- Do not write art history as appreciation. Every adjective should be replaceable by a technical term, and if it cannot be, cut it.

Last-mile revision

- Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd-us-Samad from Persia under Humayun; Hamzanama about 1400 folios; Razmnama is the Persian Mahabharata.
- Akbar's Hindu artists Daswanth, Basawan, Kesu Das; Jahangir's Mansur for natural history and Bishandas sent to Persia.
- European features: perspective, chiaroscuro, receding landscape, halo, from Jesuit prints after 1580; absorbed without displacing the Persianate base.
- Humayun's Tomb 1565-72 charbagh and double dome; Fatehpur Sikri red sandstone and trabeate; Itimad-ud-Daula 1622-28 first full marble and pietra dura; Taj from 1632.
- Abul Fazl Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari with sulh-i-kul; Badauni Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh as counterweight; Gulbadan Humayunnama.
- Tulsidas Ramcharitmanas 1574 Awadhi; Jayasi Padmavat 1540; Rahim as Hindi patron; Dara Shukoh Sirr-i-Akbar and Majma-ul-Bahrain.
- Dhrupad under Akbar giving way to khayal under Sadarang and Adarang; Jai Singh II Jantar Mantar and Zij-i-Muhammad Shahi.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating Mughal painting as purely Persian. The workshop was substantially Hindu in personnel and the subjects included Hindu epics by imperial commission.
- Saying European perspective replaced the Persian style. It was absorbed selectively and the answer must say so.
- Calling the Taj the first marble Mughal building. Itimad-ud-Daula's tomb precedes it and introduced pietra dura.

- Using Abul Fazl's figures uncritically. Badauni exists precisely to remind you the Akbarnama is official history.
- Claiming Aurangzeb banned music. He withdrew court patronage while the largest number of Persian music treatises were written in his reign.
- Writing appreciation instead of analysis. Name the element, name its origin, name what it became.

Mains Practice

Discuss the development of Hindi literature under Mughal patronage and how the Bhakti and Sufi movements influenced it.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

Mughal architecture was syncretic in character. Comment.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

Analyze the influence of Persian traditions on the development of architecture and painting under the Mughals.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

Define the rise of distinct provincial architectural styles under the Mughal Empire.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

What features of European paintings were incorporated in Mughal miniature painting?

15 marks · 200 words · 2023

What European features were incorporated in the Mughal school of painting? Did it absolve the traditional Persian influences?

10 marks · 150 words · 2026