Art historian Monica Juneja begins her book *Architecture in Medieval India: Forms, Contexts, Histories* by avowing her special allegiance to and position within the field of history. It is highly pertinent, to me at least, for it is this location within discourse that will serve to color and strengthen the reader’s understanding of her theses and of her choice of essays for the book.

The compilation has been introduced by Juneja with a rather winding account of the historiography of medieval Indian architecture, overwhelming in the number of theoretical references it makes and a little over-instantiated for an introductory essay. Despite its highly descriptive style, however, Juneja’s long essay manages to bespeak her more or less anthropological inclinations. The exhaustive and very recent Introduction could very well function as an independent modern monograph on Indian architectural history, well-researched and theoretically sound as it is. However, the paradigms and divisions she uses to deal with the corpus of previous writings on the history of Indian medieval architecture seem to me to be not so lucidly demarcated in this essay, even though they may be more clearly visible in the book’s internal arrangement. Straddling grounds of theme and authorial influence, she ends up discussing the historiographical issues in seven sections that are, one would like to believe, a reflection of the corrective approaches she urges for (art) historical writing. This paradigmatic indecisiveness that I thought exists in the essay, also leads her to be repetitive to the point of being redundant at times. That set apart, the reader cannot but appreciate the sheer vastness of the terrain her project seeks to cover and the radically destabilizing (and hopefully constructive) nature of some of her research questions.
Imbued theoretically with historicist, post-structuralist and Marxist approaches to space and power at the same time, Juneja attempts to not only co-relate the two disciplines of architectural writing and history, but also to approach it from perspectives of practice, experience and functionality. She begins with discussing the colonial writings on Indian architecture and the vast influence they effected (and still effect) on subsequent writings on the same subject. In language used with scholarly erudition, she explains also the socio-political motivations behind these colonial writings (for example those of Alexander Cunningham and Fergusson). As is predictable, she then moves on to discuss the nationalist ‘counters’ to colonial prejudices in these accounts; and while one expects to read about the canonized A.K. Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch, one is also pleasantly surprised to learn of other art critics who have not taken much mention in similar efforts of tracing historiography before.

By explicating with examples the various types of nationalistic responses in writing on Indian architectural, Juneja actually opens up a space for understanding the plethora of factors influencing these. She also mentions pioneering scholars for their ‘historical’ writings on medieval architecture, specifically that of Islamic architecture, notwithstanding the influence of Fergusson and Havell regarding approach and categorical understanding that can be traced in these accounts.

In an oscillatory idiom of writing (with which the reader must try hard not to get impatient), Monica Juneja goes on to establish the factors and approaches that writings on architectural history have missed out on and should seek to incorporate. Architecture, she would agree, is undoubtedly a reflection of the political ideologies prevalent at the time of its construction but she would also contest the singular and centric nature of such a view. A historical study of architecture, or “building practice” as she would have it, also must take into account the practices and rituals surrounding the monument, the multiplicity of experiences and uses it generates and the even processes of labour and mobilization that characterize its construction. She argues that the study of architecture must go beyond a narration of visual form and structure so that it gets its living, social equality. Forms, she agrees, have to be studied but as “an active component of those symbolic forces that define the social world” (Juneja: 2010). It is thus not hard to say that hers is a thoroughly inter-disciplinary method of dealing with architectural history—an approach that “forms part of a larger effort to remove art forms from the realm of the exotic, and of purely aesthetic value judgments—themselves historically constituted-- and to bring them back to the center of history” (Juneja: 2010). She further observes that most contemporary historical studies have remained trapped within “a myopic understanding of state systems and politics but now the historians of Medieval India can no longer afford to bypass the history of its architecture” (Juneja: 2010)

A distinguishing and remarkable feature of her work is that specifying focus on Medieval India and Islamic architecture does not restrict her from being contemporaneous, just as the novelty of her approach does not clash with the historical and supposedly ‘fixed’ nature of medieval architectural forms. In fact, she glides comfortably between sound theoretical exposition and its application to particular contexts. Too many in number and too varied in contexts to mention here, her insistences in the introductory essay on “view from the margins, or on “intermediate spaces”, or any other “entry point” not included in the dominant streams of (art) historical writing, reflects her post-modern inclination. What she adds to this inclination, however, is the ‘living’ inclusivity that becomes an anthropologist, an ethnologist and a cultural critic—critiquing the postmodern focus on the text, she urges for a move away from the purely textual, purely political, purely aesthetic analyses of architecture. This she applies adeptly to her section on writings dealing with Islamic iconoclasm and re-assimilation of Indian architecture, which had so far been treated inadequately except for, it seems, by Richard Davis (who is inter-disciplinary enough to gain her regard).
It is not surprising that Juneja begins her essay with two quotes, one attesting to the functionality of architecture and the other positing architecture as a site of dialectical resolution. The whole of her enterprise and approach can be said to rest on two critical stands: a) that architectural monuments have certain utility, and this utility creates a range of meanings and experiences for people, communities, etc.; b) that not only is architecture a ‘reflection’ of (fortifying) monarchical ideologies, it is also an important site where political (and cultural) struggles are symbolically played out and resolved. Realistically and progressively enough, the emphasis is not solely on the discipline of architectural writing to reach out to historical writing, but it is also expected by the author that historical studies extend their bracket to include visual structures and forms for a viable study of history of meaning, to treat architectural forms as an “entry point” in understanding socio-political conditions of a given (or not) period. The reader thus hopes for this path-breaking ‘manifesto’ of historiography to have not only provoked many more questions (it is her interrogative statements in the essay that act as triggers for thought) but also to have initiated further research, that keeps in mind the nature of architectural forms as ever-dynamic entities, constantly generating meaning in every act—in being built, in being demolished, in being re-assimilated and in being written about.