

Tomb of Musa Ahangar: An Analysis of its Architecture and Decoration

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Abstract

Lahore seems a meeting point of different architectural traditions. For instance, the combination of declining Multan tomb architectural tradition is fused with the rising Mughal School of architecture. In this view, the tomb of Musa Ahangar presents an excellent example. This whole process of both architectural traditions has been discussed by the authors in the subsequent pages.

Key words: Phase of transition, Pendentive, Squinch, Muqarnas, Arch-netting, Spandrel

Introduction

Lahore fell into the hands of Muslim conqueror Mahmood of Ghazna in 1022 AD. From Ghaznavids to Mughals, it experienced different ruling dynasties and thrived as a great centre of cultural and economic activities for centuries and remained opened to foreign influences, particularly from Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, and finally developed as a cosmopolitan urban unit. However, it also witnessed worst kind of calamities, political upheaval, disasters and havocs but its thriving life continued to flourish under the Muslims. It particularly excelled unprecedentedly during the Mughal period on account of extra ordinary artistic and architectural activities. In the last quarter of 18th century, however, Mughal could not maintain their political control over Lahore as a result it was captured by the Sikhs.

During Mughal reign a number of buildings including mosques, forts, gardens, palaces, tombs as well as shrines were built in the suburb of Lahore which in fact, transformed its cultural outlook and profile. So far as the origin of the tomb architecture at Lahore under the Mughals is concerned, two buildings are regarded as the

earliest, namely the shrine of Baba Mauj Darya and mausoleum of Abu Musa Ahangar. Both share very little with the tomb tradition inaugurated by the Mughals at Delhi such as the tomb of Hamayun and Adam Khan etc. Being the first tomb building in Lahore the mausoleum of Musa Ahangar appears to have derived certain architectural elements and decorative motifs from Multan school of architecture as well as Mughals. Thus, it represents the combination and amalgamation of both architectural traditions; Multan style appears at the verge of its decline and Mughal seems emerging as a dominant architectural force.

Life of Musa Ahangar

Musa Ahangar was a famous saint of Lahore who is first time reported by Abu' al Fazal. He is said to have died in the early days of Akbar's reign most probably in 962 Hijri/ 1556 AD and was buried outside the fortification of Lahore. Unfortunately the life sketch of the saint as well as the events related to him are nowhere recorded in historical literature. However, it seems certain that in the early days of Akbar's regime, saint exercised his spiritual authority as well as command and was much revered by his followers. In fact, the saint was immensely respected by the people owning

to his spiritual virtues as some traditions are still survived which seems to have orally been transmitting generation after generation.

Location

Originally, the tomb of Sheikh Hazrat Musa Ahangar was located in the village of Court Krorh in the vicinity of Lahore. Court Krorh was an obscured and insignificant village at that time in the neighbourhood or environ of Lahore towards its east. However, in the course of time with the increase of the population of Lahore and the expansion of settlement area, it extended outside the walled city and consequently the tomb building began to be encroached. Therefore, now it lies in the most crowded area of the city of Lahore and presently its closest approach for the visitors is provided on the west of Mcleod road. Now access to the tomb building has become very difficult exercise as the surrounding area is converted into big commercial markets. In view of the facts, perhaps the easiest access at present is available from Pakistan Railway station by Empress--- Nicholson road on the one hand and on the other Brandreth—Mcleod road that joint with each other at chowk Qila Gujar Singh and from this point the tomb of Musa Ahanghar is about 400m away towards south.

Ground Plan

Originally, the complex of the tomb building of Abu Musa Ahangar covered an area of 8 kanals. This area has now been reduced to 2 kanals 4 marlas due to illegal encroachments which took place in the course of time, perhaps more rapidly after partition. Moreover, this enclosed compound is said to have originally been planted with a variety of trees, as one of them is believed to have still survived standing to the south west corner of sehan/courtyard. Nonetheless, the actual tomb

building originally stood in the middle of the courtyard. Presently, the tomb of Musa Ahanghar is approached from the southern side by a lane which connects it with Mcleod road. However, the actual plan of the tomb is cardinally oriented and access is provided from the southern side. Originally, it seems that premise of the tomb of Musa Ahanghar was approached from all sides by arched entrances which are now closed because of encroachment (Pl.1 & 2).

Architectural Description

Exterior of the tomb

The tomb building of Musa Ahangar is square in plan that measures 25 feet from all sides. It gives an impression of double storey structure as the square burial chamber is elegantly crowned by a hemispherical dome which rests on a considerable high drum. So far as the square chamber or lower storey is concerned, it measures 25 feet in height with tapering walls in typical Multan style of masonry. Moreover, the exterior face of the walls on all sides of the burial chamber diminishes 2 feet in width from ground level as it measures 23 feet square at parapet level. Thus, the face of the wall on all sides shows a visible inward slope upto parapet.

However, the front elevation of the exterior walls of the burial chamber is meticulously divided into two halves by a slightly projected band of bricks measuring 1 foot 2 inches. On the southern side, in the middle of the lower half a rectangular frame, measuring 4 feet in width and 8 feet in height, accommodates an arched entrance that provides access through a wooden doorway inside the tomb building. Perhaps, the insertion of wooden doorway marks a later addition. Moreover, the central arched entrance is flanked by blind

arched panels, two on either side to obliterate the monotony of the surface of the wall which finely embodies a typical Mughal architectural feature. Each blind arched panel is slightly recessed and measures 4 feet 9 inches in width and 2 feet 11 inches in height (Pl. 3). This scheme repeats on all side, however, in northern and eastern elevation, the face of the central arched panel is covered with a *jali* or screen, a typical Mughal decorative element. Whereas, the western side of the square chamber is marked by a projection of mihrab (Pl. 4 & 5).

So far as the upper half of the wall of burial chamber is concerned, it is smaller in size as compare to the lower one and measures 7 feet 2 inches in height and resembles to the architectural scheme of lower panel, accommodating five arched panels in all, central being larger than the flanks. In contrast of the flanking panels, central has two successive receding arches, each accommodates a 4-foot deep tunneled arched window. The area above the arched panel is marked by two bands which are separated from each other by friezes. The lower band is filled up by Islamic calligraphy in Nastaliq style whereas the upper band is decorated with a chain of diagonal squares and marked above by a cornice which is supported by a line of dentils. This whole scheme is again marked above by another frieze. All friezes are running parallel and filled up with miniature diagonal squares by creating a very pleasing effect; as they are serving as the divider on one hand and breaking the monotony of the wall on the other hand. This decorative scheme runs all around the burial chamber above the arched panels. In fact the exterior of the tomb chamber combines Multan decorative traditions and Mughal device of surface treatment (Fig.1).

The square burial chamber of the tomb of Musa Ahangar is marvelously crowned by a hemispherical dome which is enhancing the grace of whole structure. Externally, the crowning element may be divided into two parts namely circular drum and dome. The drum measures 2 feet and 7 inches in height and its surface is pronouncedly decorated with intersecting lines which form diagonal squares. Each diagonal square is further beautified with the addition of different geometric and floral designs which seem abstract in form and nature. Moreover, the circular drum is topped by a hemi spherical dome. The drum and dome are separated from each other by a slightly projected line of thick brick masonry which is marked below by a dentil line, running all around. So far as the neck of the dome is concerned, it is distinguished by a band of interconnected miniature arches which encircles the whole surface of dome. However, the curvature of the dome is very subtle and plain without a single trace of any decoration and it finally terminates into a lotus. It appears that original decorative element of finial has fallen off (Fig. 2).

Interior of the tomb

The interior execution and setting of the tomb of Musa Ahangar shows close architectural arrangement with Multan tomb tradition, as square burial chamber is converted first into an octagon which is followed up by 16 sides, and 32 miniature arched panels that transformed the whole scheme from square to circular base for dome above. In fact, the lower half of the square chamber accommodates four slightly receding rectangular arched panels in the middle of the wall on all sides. Each panel measures 8 feet in height and 4 feet in width and is artistically marked by a small band of calligraphic inscription

that manifests *kalma*. The northern and eastern rectangular panels accommodate tunneled arch windows which admit light and air inside the tomb chamber; while the southern and western rectangular panels accommodate the arched entrance and mihrab respectively. Two parallel bands of tiles which run on all side of the burial chamber separate the lower half from upper. Each band amazingly incorporates the name of Allah within squares. However, the face of the walls of the lower half of the square chamber appears to have recently been tiled by the followers of the saint.

The corners of the upper half of the chamber are marked by half domed or alcoved arched squinches, each being alternated by a blind arched panel at cardinal points, set within slightly recessed rectangular frame. This device architecturally as well as technically marks the phase of transition and changed the square into an octagon. Each blind arched panel measuring 6 feet 9 inches in height and width and corner squinches together convert the square into an octagon, marking the phase of transition. This octagon is simply topped by a band of abstract design and its each corner is provided with a pot shaped pendentive, a typical Indian feature.

The first stage of the phase of transition is followed by sixteen blind arched panels which converts octagon into circular shape. Each blind arched panel measures 4 feet in height and 3 feet in width. Moreover, the second stage of the phase of transition is marked immediate above by a band of diagonal squares and triangles which serve as a divider between second and third stage of transition. Finally, the third stage of transition is also represented by a series of miniature blind arched panels which are 32 in number and support

the hemispherical dome above, the crowning element of the whole structure (Pl. 6).

Decoration

The most interesting aspect of the tomb of Musa Ahangar is its decoration which is highly stylized and intricately arranged. A wonderful effect of symmetry, harmony and grace is created by employing different decorative elements at one place. The artists of Musa Ahangar forthrightly used the space and transformed the aesthetics and prevailing artistic traditions into materialistic form. Therefore, the embellishment/decoration of the tomb of Musa Ahangar represents a language which indicates the mindset and the standard of beatification. In fact, it seems the amalgamation of pure Islamic and early Mughal decorative traditions. Different kinds of material and schemes such as bricks, glazed tiles, mosaic and stucco have been used to translate decorative elements on the body of the tomb building, both internally and externally. However, the stucco occupies the most significant position and was excessively used, perhaps being very less expensive and easy to handle. The artist materialized and moulded his decorative ideas thriving particularly in Punjab by using different techniques in the form of intricate geometric interlacing with the combination of floral and abstract designs or motifs. Thus, on the whole decorative elements of the tomb of Musa Ahangar can be classified into following categories:

1. Floral/Vegetal designs (Abstract)
2. Geometric motifs
3. Star and Polygon (Intricacy)
4. Calligraphy

Floral and Vegetal designs

Different types of floral and vegetal designs are used to produce a unified and delicate composition as they hold the major position among all other decorative schemes displayed on the tomb of Musa Ahangar. Such kind of decoration has always been the top most priority of Muslim artists particularly and they used a large variety of motifs such as acanthus leaves, vine plants bunches of grapes, palmettes, half palmettes, pine cones, pomegranates, buds, rosettes, lotuses and other floral motifs for ornamentation. However, the floral and vegetal motifs used in the tomb of Musa Ahangar are mostly abstract in nature and show a very little resemblance to any realistic and naturalistic form. Different plants, leaves and flowers are carved in such a fantastic way that they seem creating intricate patterns with the help of linking and framing. On the one hand these motifs are linked with each other and at the same time separated from each other by curvy lines and bands. Floral and vegetal designs are mainly used to decorate the internal spandrels, borders and inner surface of blind arched panels of the phase of transition, creating unparalleled as well as marvelous variations in designs and movements which seems a matchless variety of complex intricacy --- a hallmark of Lahore school of miniature decorative arts.

The spandrels of the northern blind arched panel at the first phase of transition are ornamented with a network of lotus buds primarily originating from multiple curvilinear lines, encircling and intersecting each other. The whole design is devised in such a wonderful way that it gives the impression of an abstract design on the one hand and goes on repetition rather than expansion of motifs on the other. However, the border of this

blind arch is marked by different abstract designs including highly stylized form of lotus and acanthus leaf which are interconnected with each other in the form of a scroll (Fig.3). Moreover, the spandrels of the north western squinch are embellished in Arabesque. It appears a highly artistic specimen of surface decoration, based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils or plain lines (Celevenot 2000). Foliage, undulating leaves and tendrils are emerging, submerging and intersecting each other in such an intricate manner that its expansion is transforming into new abstract designs (Fig.4).

The spandrels of the western blind arched panel are relatively less intricate as it shows the repetition of single abstract floral design which covers the whole surface (Fig.5). The artist of the tomb of Musa Ahangar has tried to create a variation in the whole stylistic scheme by using perfect space and time. The spandrels of the southern blind arched panel are also decorated with different vegetal forms, leaves and flowers that incorporate some geometrical forms on one hand and on the other, whole surface represent abstraction. So far as the spandrels of south-eastern squinch are concerned, they are ornamented by a very complex and elaborated vegetal arabesque design which marks a curvilinear and undulating movements of stem and leaves simultaneously (Fig.6).

Beside this, the spandrels of eastern blind arched panel are simple and clearly manifest the lotus blossom being linked with many angular and plastic form of lines. The curvilinear scheme is intersecting as well as encircling the lotus and gives an impression of floral arabesque. The border of this blind arch is covered with a scroll motif that is composed in a harmonized manner by the rolling stem of different abstract vegetal and floral

motifs (Fig.7). Moreover, the blind arched panel of the second phase of transition indicates a minor difference from the blind arched panels of first phase in term of their decoration. These panels are decorated with highly stylized arabesque as it marks the more scattered arrangement of flowers and shows a tendency towards naturalism. The artist employed lotus flower, vine scroll, acanthus leaves and palmettes that are sprouting out from the centre and covered the whole surface in an intricate way (Fig.8).

Geometric motifs

Geometric motifs occupy the second major position in the decorative scheme employed at the tomb of Musa Ahangar. This ornamentation is not only associated with Islamic arts, in fact it represents many other artistic cultures as well and was being used as a universal tool of ornamentation. However in Islamic art it is greatly admired and appreciated. The geometric motifs are classified into different shapes such as squares, lozenges, circles and triangles on the bases of mathematical principles. As far as the geometrical decoration of the tomb of Musa Ahanghar is concerned, squares are most commonly used either divided diagonally or in simple shape. They are externally employed to decorate friezes, window screens and drum of the dome. However, internally the use of square is accompanied by triangles to cover the surface of the bands.

Polygon and Star Patterns

Polygons and Stars patterns are frequently used in the decoration of the tomb of Musa Ahanghar along with other geometric shapes. These geometric shapes are further subdivided into smaller units by creating new shapes or forms known as polygon and star patterns. Such geometric

interlocking and interlacing is remarkably used to decorate the spandrels of blind arched panels and corner squinches of the phase of transition. The basic mathematical scheme behind this sort of decoration or intricacy is a framework of straight lines created by the division of an original circle into equal parts. These parts are usually a multiple of four or six in number, thus causing either squares and octagons or hexagon or equilateral triangles. (Clevenot, 2000). Moreover, vertical, oblique and horizontal lines are also added to enhance the complexities and intricacies of this pattern (Fig.9). The interior of the dome marks the most significant aspect of star pattern. Eight-pointed star in mosaic of red and blue color is employed to decorate the inner surface of the dome. It marks the beginning of *muqarnas* pattern. Beside this, the space between each point of the star is filled with a medallion which is further ornamented with floral designs (Pl.7). However, the thick lines of the star are filled with lozenges (Fig.10).

Calligraphy

Calligraphic ornamentation is purely an Islamic theme which transforms the nature of the building. It highlights the spiritual aspects of the structure as well as the deceased personality in term of religion. Thus, the secular nature of the building ceases to exist as calligraphy marks the sanctity of whole complex.

Conclusion

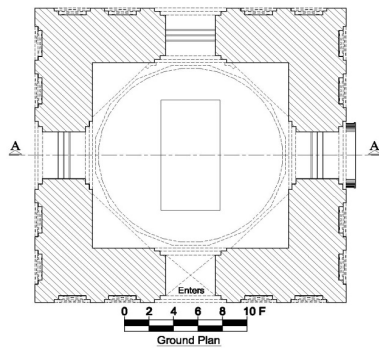
Among the surviving tomb buildings built during Mughal period in the suburbs of Lahore, the mausoleum of Shiekh Musa Ahangar may be regarded as the earliest burial chamber. The critical architectural analysis and evaluation of the tomb building of suggests that the influence of the tomb tradition, represented by the tomb

of Baha-uddin-Zikriya, was still survived to Akbar's time; however, declining process seems more rapid in maintaining the original spirit, strength, execution and compositional elements which were hallmarks of Multan tradition. Rather, Mughal style of architecture, originated at Delhi and its suburb began to assert in the environs of Lahore. First of all, Mughal decorative tradition began to be employed in the Lahore architecture as its manifestation can be seen in the internal decorative scheme and architectural treatment of external elevations.

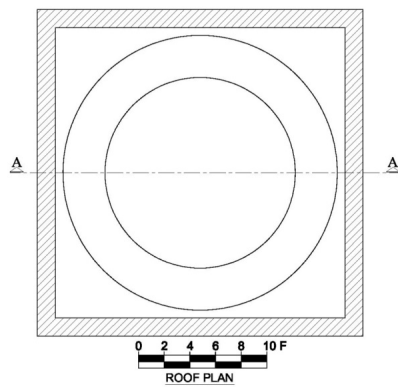
The inner side of the dome of Ahangar's is covered by a huge star with eight radiating rays, encasing by a circle. So far as the origin of this decorative form is concerned, no prototype is found in the Saltanate Muslim architecture of India before the Mughals. Fundamentally, star shape motif has been created by arch-netting or intersecting arches technique which is thought to have been introduced by Zaheer-uddin-Babar, the founder of Mughal Empire, in his Mosques built at Sambhal and Panipat (Brown, 1942). Baber brought this decorative tradition from Central Asia where it can still be seen in the Timurid architecture. However, in the course of time Mughal artist had learnt to arrange arch-netting device to create new forms (Koch, 2002). Therefore, the tomb of Ahangar appears first building where intersecting arch technique was used to decorate the inner side of the dome. Thereafter, it made its appearance, in even more advanced and highly stylized form in the dome of central nave of Maryam Zamani mosque at Lahore and tomb of Sultan Nisar Begham (1624) (Fig.11). Thus, it becomes obvious that the tomb building of Musa Ahangar was built during the reign of Akbar, in which arch-netting technique was translated into star shape pattern.

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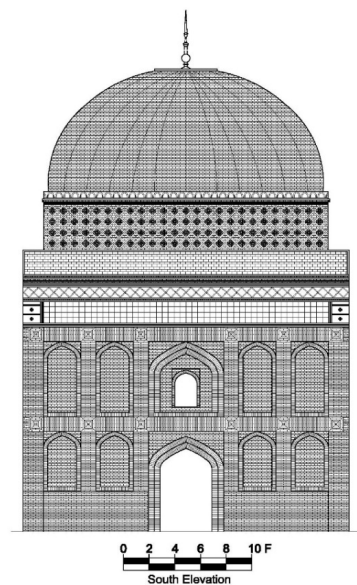
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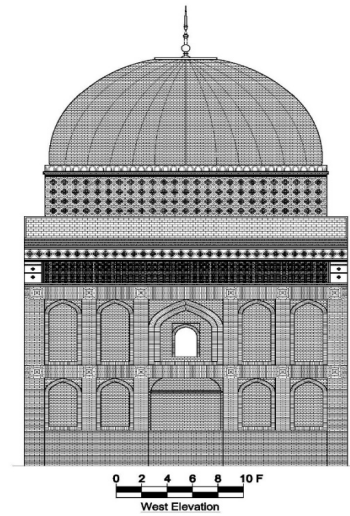
Pl. 1. Ground Plan



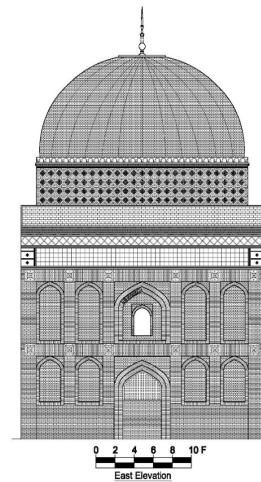
Pl. 2. Roof Plan



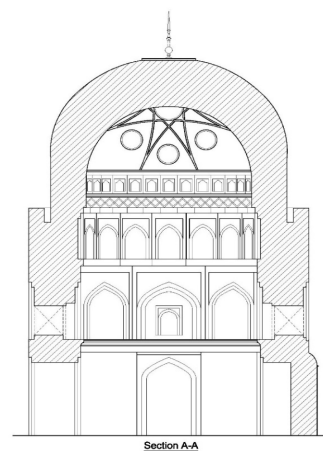
Pl. 3. South Elevation



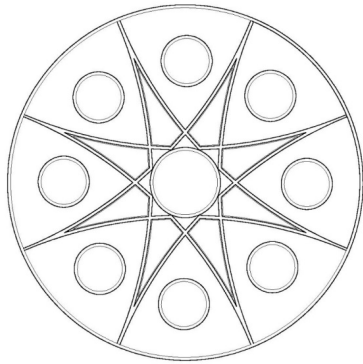
Pl. 4. West Elevation



Pl. 5. East Elevation



Pl. 6. Section A-A



Internal Design of Dome

Pl. 7. Internal Design of Dome



Fig.1. Bands and friezes above the arched panels



Fig. 2. Dome of the tomb of Musa Ahangar



Fig. 3. Spandrels of Northern Blind Arch Panel



Fig. 4. Spandrels of North-west corner squinch



Fig. 5. Spandrels of Western Blind Arched Panel



Fig. 6. South-eastern Squinch



Fig. 7. Spandrels of Eastern Blind Arch



Fig. 8. Decoration on the Blind Arched Panel of Second Stage of Phase of Transition



Fig. 10. Star Pattern on the Interior of the Dome



Fig. 11. Dome Decoration of the Central Nave of Maryam Zamani Mosque



Fig. 9. Geometric (Polygonal) Decoration on the Spandrels of South-West Corner Squinch