



Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar in Sitpur: An Analysis of its Architectural Features and Decorative Elements

Muzna Matloob

Lecturer

Multan College of Arts

Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan

muznakhan2008@gmail.com

Abstract

The true spirit of people is reflected in the folklore, custom, tradition, art and craft of the region. Punjab (Pakistan) has impressive folk art, diversity of cultural heritage, stunning historic architecture and variety of arts and crafts. It is regarded to be a glimpse into Pakistani culture. The historic tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is situated in Sitpur, tehsil Alipur built in circa 1520 AD.

The tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is the earliest known pre-Mughal funerary monument created in imitation of the celebrated monument Rukn-i-Alam though having its own personality to be regarded as the first ever attempt to create a local variation of the style, especially for the sake of the design and color of faience and faience-mosaic revetment. This paper examined the architectural design and surface ornamentation, which is lavishly embellished with glazed tile work and other details. This paper further analyses the design elements in detail with reference to tomb architecture in Pakistan.

The paper is divided into three parts. First part discussed the historical context of the saint. The second part placed the tomb in its architectural elements and discussed style of its construction. Third part examined the surface decoration of the tomb. The architectural features in relation with the other monuments of the region have been discussed in last part. The paper finally concludes with importance of this historic tomb and impact of cultural influences on tomb architecture.

Keywords: Tomb architecture, Cultural diversity, embellishments, surface decorations, cultural impact on architecture

Introduction

The tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is situated in Sitpur Tehsil Alipur, a town in Southern Punjab near the confluence of the Indus and Chenab rivers at around a distance of 175km from Multan city.

Tahir Khan's mausoleum is a fine example of the endurance of the Multan style, a design thread that originated with Iranian mausolea, gained momentum with the tomb of Khalid Waleed at Kabirwala, and reached a penultimate point with the tomb of Bahauddin Zakariya (early-mid 13th century) before attaining its zenith with the tomb of Shah Rukn-e Alam in the 1320s. Although Multan itself lies about 120 km as the crow flies, the influence of the Rukn-e-Alam was felt strongly throughout the whole of southern Punjab, and in time beyond. Already by the close of the 15th century, numerous imitations and derivative works peppered the surrounding landscape, most notably the monuments at nearby Uch Sharif such as the Baha'al-Halim (late 14th century) and the Bibi Jawindi Tomb from a century later (1494 AD). While the style remained strongly influential even into the 19th and 20th centuries, it was still close enough to its origins in the early 15th century have direct resemblance to the Rukn-e-Alam remained quite strong.¹

The art and architecture of the earlier time evolved into that of the Mughal Empire as a result the construction of this mausoleum right before the arrival of the Mughals. In essence, it is therefore reminiscent of a Mughal era while combining elements from a later era. This mausoleum uses more sophisticated construction methods than its famous forerunners in Multan and Uch, including a wider spectrum of tile colors and cut-brick work inside.

The monument is architecturally in art as it exemplifies the continuing influence of the Rukn-e-Alam mausoleum, a monument from two centuries prior that remained a powerful inspiration for Islamic tomb design in the Punjab for hundreds of years



Figure 1: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar: Front View from East

Historical Context

The Nahar dynasty built the kingdom of Sitpur. The name of the city Sitpur likely means the "*City of Sita*," possibly a reference either to queen Sita Rani (an early local ruler) or one of the heroines of the Ramayana epic, though the exact etymology is uncertain. In 1455 AD Bahlul Khan Lodhi ascended the throne of Delhi as the first sovereign of the Lodhi dynasty. Previous to this ascension, he had served as governor of Multan under the later Sayyid Sultans. On the assumption of power, he granted the area lying between the Indus which then joined the Chenab at Uch and Sulaiman range, south of a line drawn from Harand to Uch and north of Shikarpur in Sind to one of his relations, Islam Shah Lodi. The grant also included Sitpur in Muzaffargarh District, Kin in Dera Ghazi Khan District and Kashmor in Northern Sind. Islam Shah established himself as an independent ruler in the area and founded the Nahar dynasty. He created his capital at Sitpur. The dynasty so established was short lived and family feuds did not leave these chieftains in peace to prosper and after about 33 years in 1484 AD, a Mirrani Baloch, named Haji Khan, revolted against the Nahars and occupied forcibly the northwestern areas of their kingdom. He founded a new city named Dera Ghazi Khan, Qasim Khan, Salam Khan and Tahir Khan, descendants of Islam Khan, divided the possessions among themselves. The southern part of 'Alipur with its chief town of Sitpur fell to Tahir Khan. Not more is known about these chieftains except that Tahir Khan built his own tomb before his death in 1530 AD and a mosque during his

lifetime. Unfortunately, the saint's life story and the events associated with him are nowhere to be found in historical writing. According to mythology, Tahir Khan Nahar was a very kind monarch who was renowned as a "sakhi" (generous), although he is not regarded as a particularly outstanding king.²

Architectural Features

The tomb of Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan is regarded as masterpiece by many art historians and archaeologists as the pinnacle of early Islamic architecture. The tomb has created a classical form of architecture which continued influencing the tomb architecture of Pakistan for more than six centuries and hundreds of such specimens still exist to provide an un-mistakable evidence of the popularity of the style³. The stunning tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is one among them.

The tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is the earliest known pre-Mughal funerary monument created in imitation of the celebrated monument Rukn-i-Alam though having its own personality to be regarded as the first ever attempt to create a local variation of the style, especially for the sake of the design and color of faience and faience-mosaic revetment

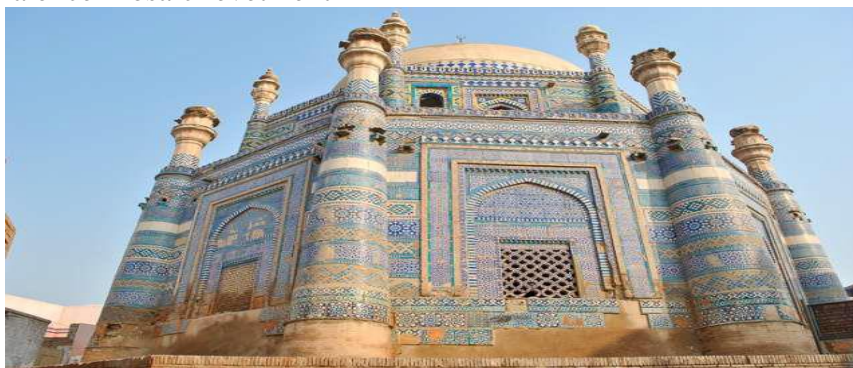


Figure 2: Tahir Khan Nahar: View from South

Exterior of the Tomb

Standing on 3 feet 6 inches high brick platform, the tomb is octagonal on plan (**Figure 3 & 4**) built with perpendicular walls strengthened with circular tapering corner-turrets and crowned with a majestic hemispherical dome which is the characteristic of

the Multan style of architecture. The insertion of circular tapering turrets at the angles emphasizes the structure's slope. The tomb is constructed on a raised platform that is 8 feet high and extends 26 feet 3 inches on each side to the south from the neighboring alley. The tomb is about 45 feet high from the ground level. The wall thickness is 9 feet. The tomb is approachable through an arched entrance pierced in the eastern wall. The tomb is constructed on an elevated, octagonal platform 8 feet above the surrounding ground. It has seven flights of steps to climb up the podium. The octagonal tomb has been devised in three storeys strengthened with sloping buttresses. The octagons of the lower storey are marked with well-pronounced rectangular frames accommodating recessed arched-panels within which are provided screened openings. Each screen has a decorative design of its own. The southern octagon possesses main entrance having intricately carved wood frames and shutters while the interior of the western octagon possesses the Mehrab in the shape of a recessed arch, sunk into the thickness of the wall.

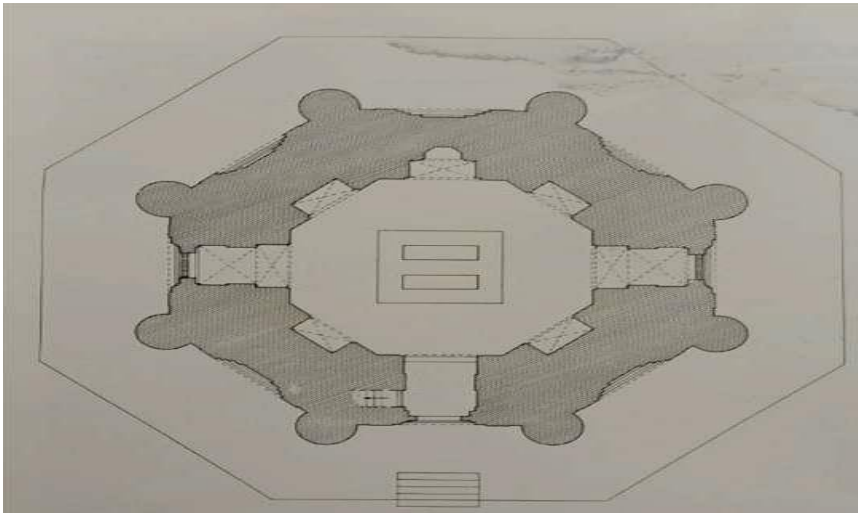


Figure 3: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar Ground Floor Plan



Figure 4: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar Elevation

The exterior surface of the mausoleum including the buttresses is reverted with glazed tiles. The octagons are embellished with projected rectangular frames created in brick and revetted with enameled tiles. The upright and top bands of these frames have a thin flat border alternating the broad panel which is created in recess and filled with square-sized glazed tiles with a decorative motif of eight-petalled flower. Within this border is placed the rectangular arched-panel, slightly recessed the lower parts of which accommodate oblong opening screened with trellis work. Above it is the keel-arch, marked by glazed tiled border executed in relief. The spandrels then become slightly recessed and are filled with tiles of interlaced arabesque. Likewise the space within the arch is revetted with ceramic tiles. A double frieze of diamonds placed within solid borders of glazed tiles has been provided at the spring level of the arch. Above it a thin frieze runs with a row of miniature merlons. The top of the frame is crowned with yet another broad frieze of merlons, sixteen and two halves at the two ends. The octagons and the turrets at the angles have likewise been faced with faience tiles. There are at least 25 bands of tiles running horizontally to cover the whole surface. The bands are composed of square tiles while only one has tile mosaics.

The decorative patterns include interlaced geometric variations, floral designs and honey-combs of hexagon in contact. A band of white glazed tiles breaks the monotony of patterns. The bands are separated with each other and are distinguished by means of a thin

border bonding the four sides. A projected molding, also serving as the base of the solid parapet of the first storey, completes the decoration. The parapet is embellished with crenellations composed of a series of merlons created in high relief. The band of merlons covers the octagon as well as the turrets which rise further to a height of 8 feet. Here they take the shape of cylindrical shafts crowned with elaborate miniature octagonal pavilions placed on well projected cornices and superimposed with octagonal panels. The cupolas are placed on the shafts with finials, the bases of which are made of inverted lotuses. Each of the sixteen sided shafts has been divided into two parts for the purpose of ornamentation. The lower part is faced with tiles of chevrons while the upper is plain white glazed. A series of projected miniature pavilions is also created three on each turret and two on either side of the projected frame of the octagon. The pavilions are square shaped, sunk into the masonry. They probably served the purpose of pigeon holes.

Entrance to the interior of the tomb (**Figure 5**) has been provided from southern octagon which is more elaborately decorated. The rectangular door opening has a wooden frame and shutters carved with intricate geometric cum floral patterns. The top of the frame has a row of bell shaped brackets, while the door shutters have appliqué work on it. The spandrels of the arch are filled with glazed tiles superimposed with a full blown flower. The window opening has a terracotta screen. The space on either side of the frame is filled with a series of six horizontal panels composed of faience-mosaics. The panels are separated with borders and filled with terracotta plugs arranged so as to take the shape of diapers. The lowest band consists of square tiles having merlons, while at the top runs a frieze of chain-in-contact. The decorative scheme runs all along the octagons including the corner turrets. The parapet crowning the storey takes the form of a solid frieze revetted with a series of merlons in glaze.



Figure 5: Main entrance from south façade written *Ya Allah* on

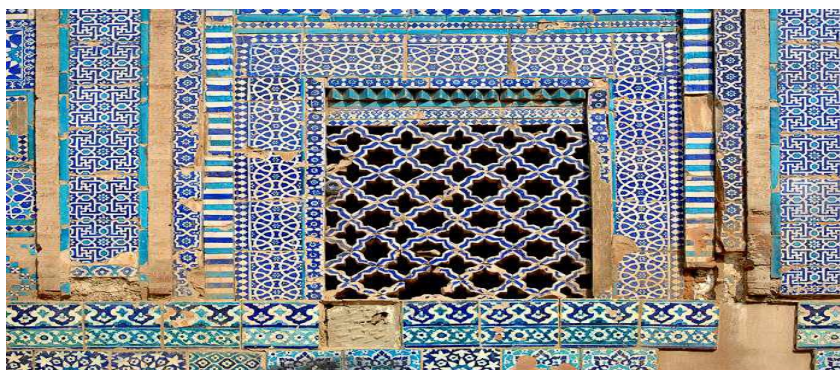


Figure 6: Detail of lattice window from south

From the south east façade, at left the latticed window admits light (**Figure 6**) into the interior while the window at right is purely ornamental. The lower bands on east side around the base differ from the rest of the monument; the tiles were applied haphazardly following weathering of the base of the structure.

The second storey, octagonal on plan (**Figure 7**) is comparatively smaller than the lower storey so devised to accommodate the narrow circumambulation. The storey has received much more elaborate treatment of decoration which almost entirely depends on faience mosaics. Like the arrangement of the lower storey, the space of each octagon has been covered with an arched opening flanking it are horizontal bands to cover the entire surface. The arched rectangular frames of the openings are designed in projection embellished with colorful tiles. The projected frame is placed with a triple band running on sides and top. It consists of a

brick imitation border with a hexagon-in-contact design in the centre, while the two recessed arched panels within have simple diaper and beaded designs. The frame is crowned with a projected parapet of merlons created in high relief.

On the top of the second storey (**Figure 8**) rests the round base of the drum and over it, the grand hemispherical dome. The exterior of the drum is emphasized with plain glazed tiles while the base of the dome is decorated with a row of merlons created with glazed tiles. The surface above is lime-plastered and is crowned with an elaborate finial with a base of an inverted lotus. Four square shaped openings have been provided in the drum at cardinal points for light and air.

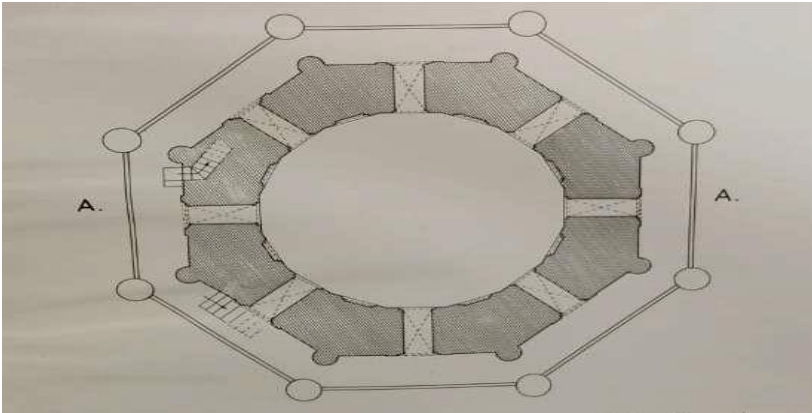


Figure 7: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar Second Storey Plan

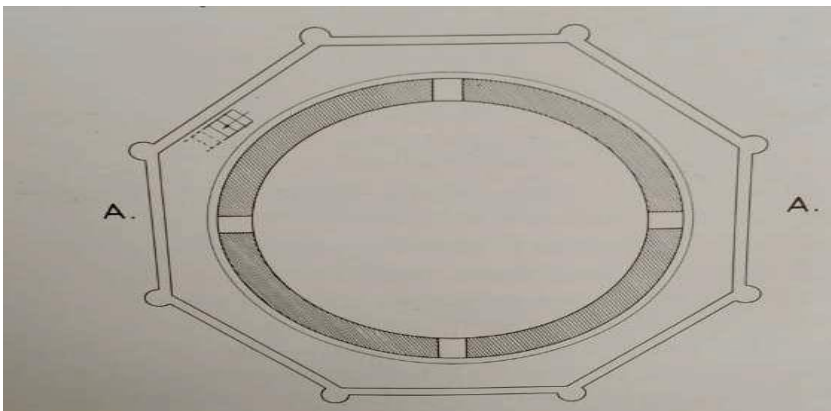


Figure 8: Tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar Third Floor Plan

Interior of the Tomb

The interior of the tomb is characteristically naked brick work in letter and spirit where emphasis has been given to cut-brick surface augmented with faience diapers and although complete wood framing has not been attempted here in imitation of the interior of the Rukn-i-'Alam the effect has been tried with bands of glazed and unglazed bricks. The overall effect has been more than pleasing. The whole surface has been divided into a series of horizontal bands made out by means of glazed tiles and plugs preference given to diaper patterns. The eventual effect is simple but graceful. The arched panel put in a slight recess representing the inner face of the openings is crowned with a dentil frieze of glazed terracotta. However use of wood has not altogether been discarded. The cresting of the first storey has been achieved with a wood course in the shape of a long and heavy wooden beam put upon the brick course. Similarly, the obliquely placed wooden beam to hold the dead load of the corner squinch provides the evidence that the architect had not altogether forgotten the dependable and proven possibility of this kind of building material. In order to minimize the drab effect of simple but plain surface of wooden beam, a hanging bell shaped pendant is put in its centre. This is the one of transition converting the octagon into sixteen sided. The process is again used at the time of cresting of the third storey when the sixteen sided plan is converted into thirty two sided much nearer and easier to receive the circular base of the dome. The interior had a brick platform on which were placed the cenotaphs of two graves. They were plastered and whitewashed and had no inscriptional record intact to reveal the names of the buried personages.⁴

The interior of the monument is by contrast comparatively restrained. For instance the interior surface of the dome is wholly bereft of ornament. It is possible that this represents the original condition as the wall surfaces are mostly bare brick apart from the use of embedded mosaic tiles that form a repetitive, somewhat unimaginative series of diamond patterns. Overhead, the zone of transition is somewhat awkwardly designed; the eight sides of the lower octagon transition to 16 sides (the drum of the dome) and then to a sixty-four-sided band of panels, upon which the dome rests. There are no squinches or other mediating architecture to

integrate the interior into a harmonious whole; instead, the drum and dome appear to simply be stacked atop one another.⁵

The tomb's interior depict close architectural adherence to Multan tomb tradition. Green, blue, and white glazed tiles that are arranged in geometric and floral patterns in the interior of the tomb (**Figure 9**). There are eight arches inside the tomb starting from floor level and reaching a height of about 10 feet. In the interior at south eastern octagon a staircase of 28 stairs leads up to the roof of the tomb and the base of the dome. The number of graves inside the tomb is 15 out of which two are located on square platform. They are of Tahir Khan Nahar and its brother Mahmmud Khan⁶

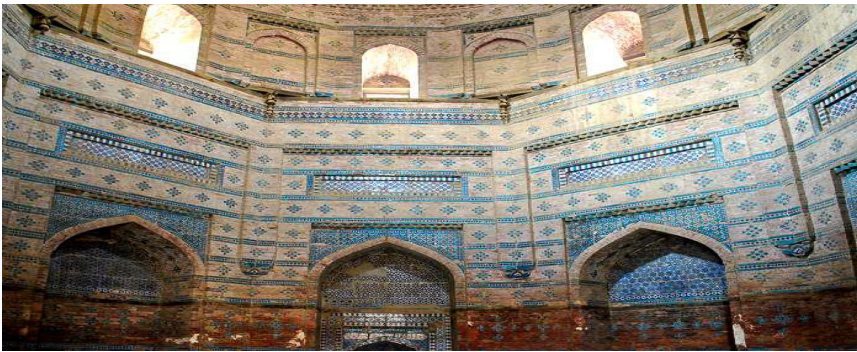


Figure 9: Interior showing arrangement of geometric patterns



Figure 10: Grave of Tahir Khan Nahar and his brother

Ahmad Nabi Khan mentioned that "It is of significance that except one lone example at Sitpur in Muzaffargarh district of the Punjab; all of these [tombs in the manner of Rukn-e-Alam] are to commemorate saintly personages who spent the best part of their lifetime in propagating and preaching Islam...."⁷

Decorative Elements

The decoration of Tahir Khan Nahar tomb is highly stylized and intricately arranged. By using many ornamental components together, a beautiful sense of symmetry, harmony, and grace is achieved at one place. Therefore, the decoration of the tomb serves as a language that conveys the perspective and norm of beatification. In fact, it appears to be a fusion of early Mughal ornamental traditions and pure Islamic traditions. The decorative motifs on the body of the tomb building have been translated using a variety of materials and techniques, including bricks, glazed tiles, and mosaic, both internally and externally. The artist used many techniques, such as elaborate geometric interlacing with the fusion of floral and abstract designs or themes, to actualize and shape his decorative ideas, which flourished particularly in Punjab. The building incorporates calligraphy, geometric patterns, and floral themes as three essential elements of Islamic art. The decorative components of Tahir Khan Nahar tomb can be classified into following categories:

1. Geometric motifs
2. Star and Polygon (Intricacy)
3. Wooden door motifs
4. Calligraphy

Geometric motifs

The majority of the decorative elements used at Tahir Khan's tomb both interior and exterior are based on geometric patterns. This ornamentation was utilized as a global embellishment tool and is not just associated with Islamic arts; in fact, it reflects many other artistic cultures as well. However, it is highly admired and valued in Islamic art.

On the basis of mathematical principles, the geometric motifs are divided into various shapes including squares, lozenges, circles,

and triangles. As far as the geometrical decoration of the tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is concerned, different 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. Internally triangles are added to the square's use to cover the bands' surface. Frieze of chain motifs has been used in the upper most band of tomb with blue glazed tiles. Variation of pinwheel design used frequently on the interior surface decoration with cut brick design. The Tahir Khan Tomb is an excellent example of the craftsmanship and expertise of the master masons of the time. The mausoleum is decorated with intricate star-shaped or cross-piece tiles, while the facades' surface is covered in square or oblong, painted and glazed tiles. Under the eaves, a seemingly endless array of diapers and other geometric patterns have been made using tile mosaics in the form of fake brick plugs. The interaction of white, azure, dark blue and yellow represents and emphasizes the pairing and contrast of hues.

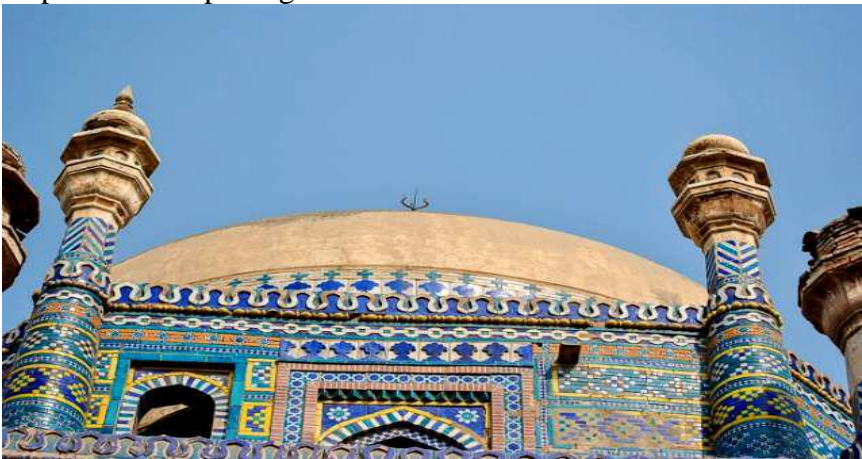


Figure 11: Detail of second storey of the tomb showing variety of colors

Star and Polygon (Intricacy)

Along with other geometric designs, polygons and star patterns are commonly employed as a mode of ornamentation. By generating new shapes or forms known as polygon and star patterns, these geometric shapes are further divided into smaller parts. Originally, the saints' mausoleums' dado (bottom section of the wall) decorations included luster tiles in the shapes of stars and crosses.

These two types of tile are assembled to create a continuous decorative panel. Since each tile has geometric patterns and is intricately crafted, their design has more importance and is employed in more crucial locations in religious temples. The decorative pattern and tile work on the outer walls and façade each have their own unique style. Tahir Khan's tomb includes blue color glazed tiles with varying colors, in contrast to the tomb of Rukn-e-Alam, whose blue and white tiles are monochrome. Yellow and orange color has also been put to the upper centre part of the mausoleum, catching visitors' attention.

Decorative Motifs on Wooden Door

Wood has been used as a mode of structural and decorative purposes. It is an exceptional example of architectural achievement, and the artistic use of wood offered countless opportunities for carved surfaces. The tombs of Baha ul-Halim and Bibi Jawindi at Uch Sharif share the same design element (Bahawalpur).

The monument makes use of wooden doorways that include wooden door jambs, transoms, and framework—all of which have survived. Dr. Saifur Rahman Dar mentioned that "if it [the gate] really belongs to Nahar time (end of the 15th or beginning of the 16th century), it is probably the oldest wood carving now preserved in the country".⁸ The doorway may be made of palm wood and filled with rosettes anchored by iron disks vaguely in the shape of sunbursts. The lintel and door jambs are inscribed with reliefs of overflowing vases, especially the *Purna kalasa* pots more closely associated with Hindu architecture as symbols of fecundity and abundance. Numerous examples of the employment of this pattern can be seen in the building from the Sultanate era in Punjab, especially in the funerary architecture. The *kalasa* pots motif (**Figure 12**) extends to the dental molding over the doorways, in which the protruding ends of beams are carved in the three-quarter round likeness of a row of vases. The transom is finely inscribed with rows of *Rub el Hizb* (**Figure 13**) motifs eight-pointed stars and common decorative feature that frequently employed throughout central Asia.⁹



Figure 12: Detail of *Kalasa* pot motif on the entrance door



Figure 13: Detail of wood work showing *Rub el Hizb* motifs

The Bell has been used as a motif of decoration in various cultures with varying significance. The most prominent use of the bell motif is found in the Buddhist and Hindu culture. Due to its cultural significance, it has invariably used in religious architecture for multiple reasons. The shrines of Sufi saints in the region of Punjab display the motif frequently, which implies that the motif found its symbolic significance in Sufi thought as well. This bell motif (**Figure 14**) can be seen at the entrance doorway on the tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar. The bell motif was also found as a bracket for a false beam on the vestibule of Shah Rukn-e- Alam's mausoleum.. The motif discontinues due to a *pinjra* or screen which implies that the original position of the bell motif diminished with the passage of time. The use of the motif in the tomb in all its manifestation also refers to another fact, which is the

change in the underlying idea. It seems that there is a transition from the symbolic use of the motif to a decorative one.



Figure 14: Detail of bell motifs on wooden

Calligraphy

Islamic Calligraphic decoration completely transforms the building's character. It emphasizes the building's spiritual components as well as the deceased person's religious significance. Thus, the structure's secular character vanishes as calligraphy signifies the purity of the entire complex. Calligraphy is an important form of ornamentation in Islamic art because it beautifies holy verses from the Quran or religious adages. In the tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar nothing much is found regarding calligraphy except one piece of calligraphy, written “*Ya Allah*” above the main door which has a distinctive appearance. The verses of Kalima Tayyaba are inscribed on the *mihrab* in Nastaliq script with blue and white in color but the calligraphy is poorly executed.

Conclusion

The mausoleums are of sterling important for the study of the evolution and development of the funerary architecture in the South Asian subcontinent both from the point of view of its architecture as well as architectural decoration. The tomb of Tahir Khan Nahar is one of the earliest known pre-Mughal funerary monument having glazed tile work and decorative embellishments. The building's critical architectural examination and appraisal

point to the impact of the tomb tradition, which was adapted from Multan tradition's defining characteristics. The embellishment on Tahir Khan Mausoleum has color range of tiles having both floral and geometric designs on it, particularly color of faience and faience-mosaic revetment. It reflects the mastery and skills of experts craftsmanship and mason of 16th century. Thus to conclude that the formal design of the Tahir Khan tomb is similar to the Rukn-e-Alam, much of the symbolism and philosophical consideration that that underpinned the design of the earlier monument the design of the earlier monuments were not transferred to this later tomb or were lost in subsequent renovations. Nevertheless, the Tahir khan tomb maintains beauty all its own and apart from possibly adjustments to the ground plan, the monument appears to be much the same as it originally stood when Tahir khan was laid to rest nearly 500 years ago. The tomb, however, makes a significant contribution to the adaptation, absorption, and dissemination of the Multan style. Its octagonal layout, colorful tile-revetment and screened window apertures made of both glazed terracotta and wood are almost all features of the Rukn-e-Alam. The monument is architecturally in art as it exemplifies the continuing influence of the Rukn-e-Alam mausoleum, a monument from two centuries prior that remained a powerful inspiration for Islamic tomb design in the Punjab for hundreds of years.

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