

MAUSOLEUM OF TAHIR KHAN NAHAR IN SITPUR: THE STUDY OF DECORATIVE PATTERNS AND ITS IMPACT ON LOCAL FOLK ART

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the style and surface decoration of the historic mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar in Sitpur, built in circa 1520 AD and study their interaction on the arts and crafts of the region. It is a famous monument in the area though little known outside and it is remarkable, because in the first place it is extraordinarily well-preserved and more importantly, it presents a comprehensive cultural identity and veritable catalogue of the aesthetic concepts, motifs, designs and craftsmanship of the pre-Mughal era, particularly the extensive glazed tile work and decorative embellishments. Though it is of a more modest size than the famous mausoleums/shrines of those early times, but because it is in a good condition, here we can get the full impact of the pristine beauty of monuments of that age. Indeed such a rich composition of skilled craftsmanship affected the arts and crafts of the area, in fact the whole aesthetic ethos. Many designs and motifs from this mausoleum were adopted by rustic artisans; similarly domestic spaces utilized themes from here and wealthier residents built houses incorporating one or another of its decorative features. And this effect has continued down the centuries and various aspects of the mausoleum are still found repeated in different modes, interpretations and locations in Sitpur. The townsfolk are proud of their monument, undoubtedly have been for centuries.

This study examines various empirical pieces of evidence in the area of the aesthetic influence this mausoleum has radiated among the inhabitants. The author has conducted several interviews of selected individuals in order to gain a deeper understanding of how such a local, historic masterpiece (albeit comparatively modest) creates aesthetic prestige among the people and how they self-construct their private or public identity through making/owning intriguing belongings that symbolize this mausoleum.

Keywords: Mausoleum, Cultural identity, Domestic Spaces, Aesthetic Prestige

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Introduction

Punjab (Pakistan) is celebrated for its rich cultural diversity, beautiful historic architecture and admirable folk art. It is said to be a cultural window of Pakistan. In the south, the district of Muzaffargarh is also well known for its historical monuments and captivating rural arts and crafts. One such historical building is the beautiful cut-brick mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar, in sitpur (which was called Sitapur before the Muslim era), Alipur tehsil, which is richly decorated with glazed tile-work and other embellishments.

Sitpur was once the capital of the Nahar dynasty that ruled the area lying between the Indus, where it conjoined the Chenab at Uchh, and the Suleman range, south of a line drawn from Harand to Uchh and north of Shikarpur in Sindh. The kingdom was founded in 1455 AD in the reign of Emperor Bahlol Khan Lodhi of Delhi. He granted this region to his relation Islam Khan Lodhi. Tahir Khan Nahar was one of Islam Khan's grandsons who ruled Sitpur in the 16th century. Tahir Khan built his mausoleum before his death in around 1530 AD.¹ This mausoleum was constructed just before the advent of the Mughols and the art and architecture of the earlier period evolved into that of the Mughal Empire (**Fig. 1**). Thus it is basically reminiscent of an earlier period but incorporating features that were used subsequently. In fact, several techniques used in this mausoleum, like the greater color range of tiles, the cut-brick work in the interior, etc., are more advanced than those of its magnificent precedents in Multan and Uch.

The embellishment on Tahir Khan's mausoleum is very eye-catching and it made a great impact on the local folk arts and crafts. Despite scant documentation and only a few descriptive studies done by Pakistani scholars, the characteristic features and aesthetics of the decorative patterns of this mausoleum and also how it has influenced the local arts and crafts has remained a singularly neglected subject of study. As mentioned in the 'Abstract' this paper undertakes a deeper examination into these two aspects. The study is based on an ethnographic survey conducted by the author, which involved direct observation as well as personal interviews with selected individuals. Therefore, the author hopes that the data and investigations conducted in this research will prove helpful to those who are interested in the history and cultural heritage of Punjab.

There are many mausoleums in the Islamic world and in the subcontinent. However, there is a certain anomaly in this because strictly in Islamic tradition there is a prevalent school of thought that deprecates ornate graves and therefore building mausoleums. However according to the artist and Islamic art historian Titus Burckhardt, this objection to building mausoleums is ineluctably overcome because of two factors; the first is that sovereigns wish to perpetuate their names after they pass on and build these tombs for themselves; which implies a desire for personal glory and such an ambition is intrinsically un-Islamic, but after all, it is fairly natural for powerful rulers to want to do this so that people will remember them and the impiety may be mitigated by the expectation that people will come here and offer prayers for the welfare of the deceased's soul, which is a religious practice. The second factor follows closely upon the first, and that is that there are shrines of saints and these are definitely considered sacrosanct and believers come

and honor the saints buried in them; whom they see as the true kings of the earth more than royal rulers.²

The proliferation of mausoleums coincides historically with the rise of the Seljuks who perhaps followed the funeral customs of their Central Asian ancestors, for their tombs greatly resemble ceremonial *yourts*. In the same period that is from the 12th to the 14th century the veneration of saints, among both people and sovereigns, reached a definitive form with the emergence of Sufism - the mysticism of Islam. However the mausoleums of kings and conquerors were usually built by themselves and the shrines are tributes of veneration for them, built by their descendants, a community of their believers, their disciples or constructed as a gift of the sovereign.³

Regarding the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar two interesting factors manifest themselves. The first, that he built an exceptionally beautiful tomb for himself and the second, that he adopted almost the same architectural and decorative plan as the famous shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, a popular south Asian saint buried in Multan. According to a legend Tahir Khan Nahar was a devotee of Rukn-e-Alam's. Moreover at that time, Rukn-e-Alam's mausoleum was the epitome of a beautiful monument in that part of the subcontinent.

According to the opinion of many locals, Tahir Khan's intention of building a mausoleum like that of the famous saint, was he hoped thereby that more people would come and pay homage to him after his death. However, from questioning people it appears that very few people go to the mausoleum and offer *fateha* for the deceased king. It is a secular building. On the other hand Rukn-i-Alam's mausoleum is a genuinely religious site. A countless number of devotees from far and wide throng the shrine daily. Votaries feel a spiritual connection with the saint and this nexus is embodied by the shrine. They go there; perform certain cultural practices and rituals and seek comfort, benediction and pray for fulfillment of their personal wishes. As is the usual custom among the simple rural population and lower classes, apart from visiting the shrines, they display popular, cheaply printed posters of the saint in their private and public spaces. This makes devotees feel a nearness to the saint or that he is spiritually present in their house, thus usually the icon itself gains divine attributions. For votaries, gazing at it with religious feelings is a form of worship. This venerating gaze is the act by which the votary invests the image of the saint, himself and his act of viewing with spiritual significance.⁴

Although according to legend, Tahir Khan Nahar was popularly known as a "*sakhi*" (generous) and was a very kind ruler but he is not considered a particularly great king. So his mausoleum does not commemorate any special historical event or achievement. His effort to make such a lovely mausoleum was the inherent instinct people have to adorn their environs and he endeavored to make his prize creation as artistic and splendid as he could. Since time immemorial, it is a natural desire in mankind all over the world to beautify their surroundings and decorate their buildings, whether religious or secular, according to their taste, resources and traditions.⁵ However, to proceed further to study the affect this monument had on the locals and the arts and crafts of the district it will be better that we first

examine the artistic techniques and decorations that beautify this mausoleum and in this context particularly examine the use of geometric patterns of Islamic art.

Context of geometric patterns in Islamic art

The historic buildings of the earlier pre-Muslim periods in the subcontinent had grandiose facades of stone carving or terracotta revetments externally, and fresco or sico paintings internally. This tradition was initially adopted by the Muslims, however, with a difference, that was that they mainly used either Quranic verses and other religious adages or floral or geometric patterns in place of the representation of idols or human or animal figures.

Geometric patterns consist of regular lines extending from some geometric shape, often a star or polygon; the lines intersect or interlace in a logical, mathematical, progressive pattern that repeats itself and forms a design of given specifications of size and shape. These were derived from models found in late antiquity but have been taken to new levels of complexity (e.g. stars with seven and even up to eleven points) by Arab mathematicians. A second idiom of design are vegetal ornamentations, which is also drawn from classical and pre-Islamic Persian prototypes, These patterns consist largely of palmettes, blossoms, and leaves attached to scrolling vines in sinuous continuations or in flaring shapes known as “arabesques”. A third form is calligraphy. This is an important form of ornamentation because it beautifies holy verses from the Quran or religious adages. By extension, all calligraphy even scripts that were practically illegible, assume to have quasi-sacred value. Geometric, vegetal, and calligraphic decorations were preferred in religious settings, where figural imagery was largely prohibited. But figural imagery was employed prolifically in art produced for private, secular settings and to adorn manuscripts, textiles, and functional but highly decorated objects or vessels.

Islamic art emphasizes surface pattern and decoration over form, due to the rejection of icons or figural representation in Islam. As a result, the sculptural tradition is relatively limited in the Islamic world, and it consists largely of architectural decoration and functional vessels such as pitchers or crescents. Even two-dimensional representations of humans and animals are highly stylized and un-naturalistic. The application of complex patterns to two-dimensional surfaces such as walls, manuscript pages and carpets and to the surfaces of three-dimensional functional objects made of glass, ceramic, and metal, is a characteristic of Islamic art. Thus, in Islamic decoration, there are four typical categories: 1. calligraphy (writing), 2. human and animal’s figures or figural representation, 3. vegetal or plant-based patterns and 4. geometric patterns. Among these the last two are widely used in mosques and mausoleums.

The embellishment on the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar

According to several art historians and archaeologists the tomb of Rukn-e-Alam at Multan is regarded as the masterpiece of early Islamic architecture in the vale of the Indus. The mausoleum has continued to influence and inspire architects and patrons of architecture for more than six centuries, who have used it as a fitting model for designing several tombs and mausoleums.⁶ Among these is the beautiful mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar.

It is octagonal in shape with sloping sides each measuring 13 feet 3 inches. The facade is in three tiers, following the plan of the mausoleum of Shah Rukn-i-Alam. The slope in the structure is emphasized by the addition of round tapering turrets rising at the angles of the incline. The tomb is built on a raised cultural platform 8 feet high from the adjacent lane on the south, with each side measuring 26 feet 3 inches. The mausoleum is about 45 feet high from ground level. The thickness of the walls is almost 9.5 feet. It is in the middle of a populated *mohallah*. The mausoleum is approachable through an arched entrance in the eastern wall. Its décor contains beautiful geometrical patterns and motifs such as are usually employed on religious buildings like mosques, madrasahs and shrines.

The patterns and motifs range from tiles of simple diaper designs of various shapes and sizes to very complicated geometrical and floral designs, a majority of which have an enameled surface. It is, however in the interior of the mausoleum that we find the most beautiful and sophisticated tile work in the entire structure. Cut-brick ornamentation with an intricate combination of glazed and unglazed tiles form patterns raised in high relief. Geometric patterns of stars, lozenges, crosses, hexagonal and isometric tessellation, decagons, and pentagons are executed in this manner as well as floriated patterns that include tendrils, shamsas, circles, scrolls and rosettes. The carefully undulating polychromatic forms, both vegetal and geometric, provide a stark contrast to the crisp white ground upon which they appear. These types of tiles were used to ornament the mosques, mausoleums and even the palaces of Ottoman sultans. The brilliant decoration of the individual tiles is impressive, but as part of a frieze or series of tiles along the walls, their effect is mesmerizing. Each design is an organized continuation of the basic elements of the respective motifs. The basic elements comprise line, form, color, texture and space. Countless arrangements of a combination of two or more elements of design create fascinating patterns. Repetition and the logic of the patterns enhances the unity of the whole design and it presents one comprehensive and well composed unit. A special feature here is the combination of floral and geometric patterns and there is one piece of calligraphy, that is “Ya Allah” written above the main door which presents an individualistic look.

Design and colors scheme

Unlike the mausoleum of Rukn-e-Alam, whose blue and white tiles are monochromatic, Tahir Khan’s mausoleum has blue color glazed tiles with different hues and yellow and orange color has also been added on the upper middle part of the mausoleum that attracts the eyes of visitors (**Figure 2**). The mason artisans of Islamic art were master craftsmen and accomplished artists in their own right, who passed down their craft through generations. Tile work is a special feature of Islamic art and the master-masons were expert colorists. They used to develop their own techniques and formulae for coloration and glazing. These master-masons thought nothing of devoting all their skills and time on every nook and corner of a building, painstakingly employing their workmanship and bringing their designs to the highest level of perfection they could reach.

In tile work the relationship between the color and the design of the tiles is strictly determined according to the code of perfection of these artisans. These relationships are topological and concern such aspects as contiguity, proximity,

closeness, distance, alternation, correspondence, and so on. Each colored surface, alone with the decorative motif overlying it, is caught up in innumerable relationships of this order with the decorative motifs in the overall scheme of the setting of the tile work, the concept of which is abstract. This sets up an immense harmony of topological relationships, which is similar to modern paintings.

The practice of decorating tiles with bright colors was developed in the Islamic countries of Spain, Iran, and Central Asia at the end of the 14th century and remained popular in these regions for several centuries. The star and cross shaped luster tiles were originally part of the dado (lower part of the wall) decoration of the mausoleums of saints. Tiles in these two shapes are fitted together to form a continuous panel of decoration. Each tile features geometrical patterns and the complexity of the craftsmanship gives their design greater value and thus they are used in more strategic places in religious shrines. The tile work and decorative scheme on the exterior walls and façade has its own individuality.

The mausoleum of Tahir Khan aptly demonstrates the skill and artistry of the master masons of the era. Complex star shaped or cross-piece tiles adorn the mausoleum, while normal square or oblong, painted and glazed tiles have been extensively used to cover the surface of the facades. Additionally tile mosaics, in the shape of simulated brick-plugs, have also been utilized widely to create an unending variety of diapers and other geometric patterns under the eaves. They represent and emphasize the combination and contrast of colors with the interplay of white, azure and dark blue and yellow. Wood has been used for structural purposes and for doors in the same manner as in the mausoleum of Rukn-e-Alam, and this makes Tahir Khan's mausoleum a unique piece of architectural accomplishment with the decorative use of wood that provided endless possibilities for carved surfaces. This feature is also found in the tombs of Baha ul-Halim and Bibi Jawindi at Uchh (Bahawalpur) as well.

Generally the interior of the mausoleums contains a cenotaph indicating the location on the floor where underneath the deceased is buried in a crypt. Also a *mihrab* will be placed against a wall to show the direction of Mecca. Its position will be such that people praying in front of the *mihrab* will not face the tomb. The interior of the Tahir Khan's mausoleum, of course follows these customs. Nahar's mausoleum chamber is set according to these lines. Moreover an important feature of this mausoleum is that unlike Rukn-e-Alam, it is decorated with glazed tiles in turquoise blue, green and white colors while the exterior is embellished with blue, white and yellow glazed tiles. The patterns of workmanship of these brick tiles and their decorative designs are found on the local folk art. It has had an impact on the local handicrafts which is produced in the town and its suburbs,

Influence on the aesthetics in the domestic spaces and on local folk arts

Domestic spaces

In Sitpur, wealthy homeowners like Makhdums periodically refurbish their abodes according to the shifting trends and tastes in interior decoration. Whereas, the furniture and fittings are changed with the times, however, in several houses the walls are adorned with fresco paintings on the walls and the wooden ceilings with geometrical or emblematic floral patterns that are clearly influenced by the designs

and motifs of the Tahir Khan's mausoleum and these remain unchanged (**Figure 3**). Such decorative ceilings and fresco paintings on the walls in these idioms can be somewhat commonly found in halls, bedrooms, and drawing rooms (beithaks) of old houses and hawelies even in many other villages/cities of Punjab particularly in the south. In the high school of Sitpur, one room, which is very old and appears to be an audience hall, is highly decorated in a similar style. The painters or artisans of the era when this ceiling was painted, were masters of the craft. Some of the lines on this high, horizontal surface appear to have been painted with one sweep of the brush, in wonderful, long, delicate curves with amazing precision and regularity. Art students of today can learn a lot from this example. In many other villages of the Punjab, such traditional artisans are still employed in the beautification of domestic as well as public spaces.

Previously artists used to manufacture their own colors according to their secret formulas. The paintings of the hall of the school are of this type and show they were made by master artisans of that time. These frescos are embellished patterns, made of simple spots of color and attention is paid in them to symmetry, perspective and to an effective adjustment of light and shade. Such types of fresco paintings have been a favorite medium of surface decoration throughout the subcontinent since very early times.

Folk Arts and crafts

The area around Sitpur is inhabited by rural folk living in the countryside. The simple lifestyles, festivals, rituals, customs and handicrafts of these people contribute to the development of their distinct, regional folk culture. These simple folk flaunt no pretensions of taste and fashion, yet in their own way they are very sensible to beauty. In the locality there is the beautiful mausoleum of Tahir Khan, nearby is the splendid shrine of Bibi Jawindi and other monuments in Uchh Sharif and further in the other direction is the famous and magnificent shrine of Rukn-e-Alam. To these rustic people these historic buildings are the epitome of artistic forms, always have been and will be. Their austere arts and crafts do not allow for much fanfare or flights of great emotions; their search for beauty has to turn to imagination, personal aesthetics and accepted themes in the extreme limitations of their mediums. These local uneducated artists, who are mainly women, are dependent on their attraction to various symbols taken from these mausoleums and they adapt these to their own mediums, more particularly those taken from Tahir Khan's tomb, such as geometrical patterns and tile motifs, In the adaptation the original motifs or patterns may take stylized or even abstract forms. Sometimes they are crafted with attractive color schemes so beautifully that it is difficult to identify the interpretation with the original motif.

The handicrafts in **Figure 4** figure are beautiful and eye catching. Such items are often given as dowry to brides in villages and later on displayed in their new houses. Apart from dowry gifts such handicrafts are sold in urban areas where they are bought by the elite for ethnic decoration or presenting them as quaint gifts to someone. Such handmade gifts have a romance of their own and are appreciated by those whose taste is not dictated by current fashions. These simple objects breathe greater intimacy in the feelings they convey when exchanged among the members of a family and strengthen ties of affection. Susan Stewart in her analysis

of objects of ethnic cultural forms poignantly writes that one of the functions of such memorable objects is to create a continuous and personal narrative of the past.⁷

The motifs employed on local crafts have remained unchanged over the years. This naïve art has to reduce all form to its simplest denomination and therefore focus purely on what and how they want to represent. If we look deeper at these simple lines and usage of primary colors and shapes we can feel the inner character that is portrayed. When the rural imagination conceives of an animal or bird it absorbs the very essence of its being. For instance in **Figure 5**, images of birds are woven on the long decorative cloth to cover the shelf of utensils. The focus is on the exact execution of the birds and the color scheme because there lies the essence of the birds. They are drawn with considerable accuracy with the emphasis on their very spirit. The motifs of this art form are more pictorial including interesting circles, concentric circles, multi-liner designs, etc., and easier to relate to. Therefore in this picture, we can discern some inspiration from life, nature, and spiritual (Sufi) posters. However, now in the rural areas this rural folk art is dying.

Conclusion

In concluding the author is sanguine that this study of the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar and its impact on the aesthetics of local domestic spaces as well as on folk arts and crafts has contributed towards creating a greater awareness of our heritage. We have also seen how the presence of such a beautiful historical monument creates aesthetic prestige among the local people and they self-construct their private or public identity through making/owning intriguing belongings that symbolize this mausoleum. Apart from this the systemic and close examination of the decorative patterns and adornments beautifying the mausoleum may have helped us gain a deeper appreciation of Islamic art and pre-Mughal architecture --- though of course only a personal visit to the site can fully encompass this enhancement of sensibility. Now we can realize that this little-known, secular monument is a special and exquisite part of our cultural heritage. It reflects the high level of craftsmanship of skilled artisans and master-masons of the 16th century. Its decorative patterns have inspired many local and foreign artists and artisans through the centuries to create wonderful pieces of art and crafts.

Although the sensibility of the local people is not developed enough to really appreciate the refinement, mathematical exactness and sophisticated elements of composition of the decorative patterns employed on this mausoleum, yet an inherent aesthetic sense in them makes them fully admire the beauty and sublimity of the edifice and feel proud of their heritage. For the purpose of aiding a student to study the art and architecture of the Muslim era in the subcontinent this is a truly exemplary model.

Clearly rural handicrafts have been influenced by the motifs and patterns adorning the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar. They have grabbed the imagination of the local rustic craftsmen and given them more substance to draw their ideas from and thereby improved their skill in incorporating these ideas on their products and even after centuries the fertile imagination of these naïve craftsmen continue to

innovate colorful designs from this source. A deeper study of tracing these motifs on handicrafts and compare and analyze them with the original architectural motifs may lead towards more significant research findings. In discourses on traditional aesthetic conceptions in Pakistan and modernization, heritage and modernity have become by-words of the transitional stage of national cultural development and have also been instrumental in the drawing attention to underrated art forms. These studies not only give us deeper knowledge about these art forms and perhaps lead to patronizing and preserving them, but also to better understand the rural people who make them.

Figures



Figure 1. Front view of the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar in Sitpur from the alley (Muzaffargarh 2016)

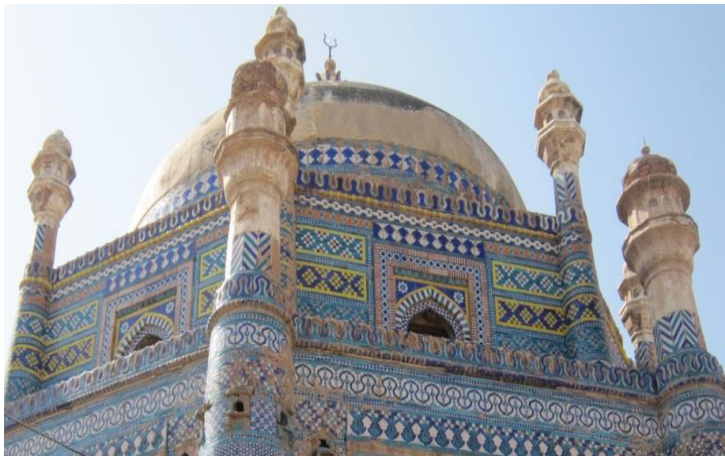


Figure 2. Upper part of the mausoleum showing the beautiful juxtaposition of contrasting colors (Muzaffargarh 2016)



Figure 3. A ceiling of a wealthy merchant's domestic space showing ornate decorative patterns (Muzaffargarh 2016)



Figure 4. Handicrafts by uneducated rural women inspired by the motifs used on the mausoleum of Tahir Khan Nahar in Sitpur (Muzaffargarh 2016)

Endnotes

¹ Hassan, Sheikh Khurshid, *Islamic Architecture Heritage of Pakistan, Funerary and Memorial* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2001), 61.

² Burckhardt, Titus, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Kent: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976), 93.

³ Ibid, 94.

⁴ Morgan, David, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Barkley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

⁵ Khan, Ahmad Nabi, *Islamic Architecture of Pakistan: An Analytical Exposition* (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1990), 4.

⁶ Ibid, 123.

⁷ Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durhan: Duke University Press, 2007), 140.