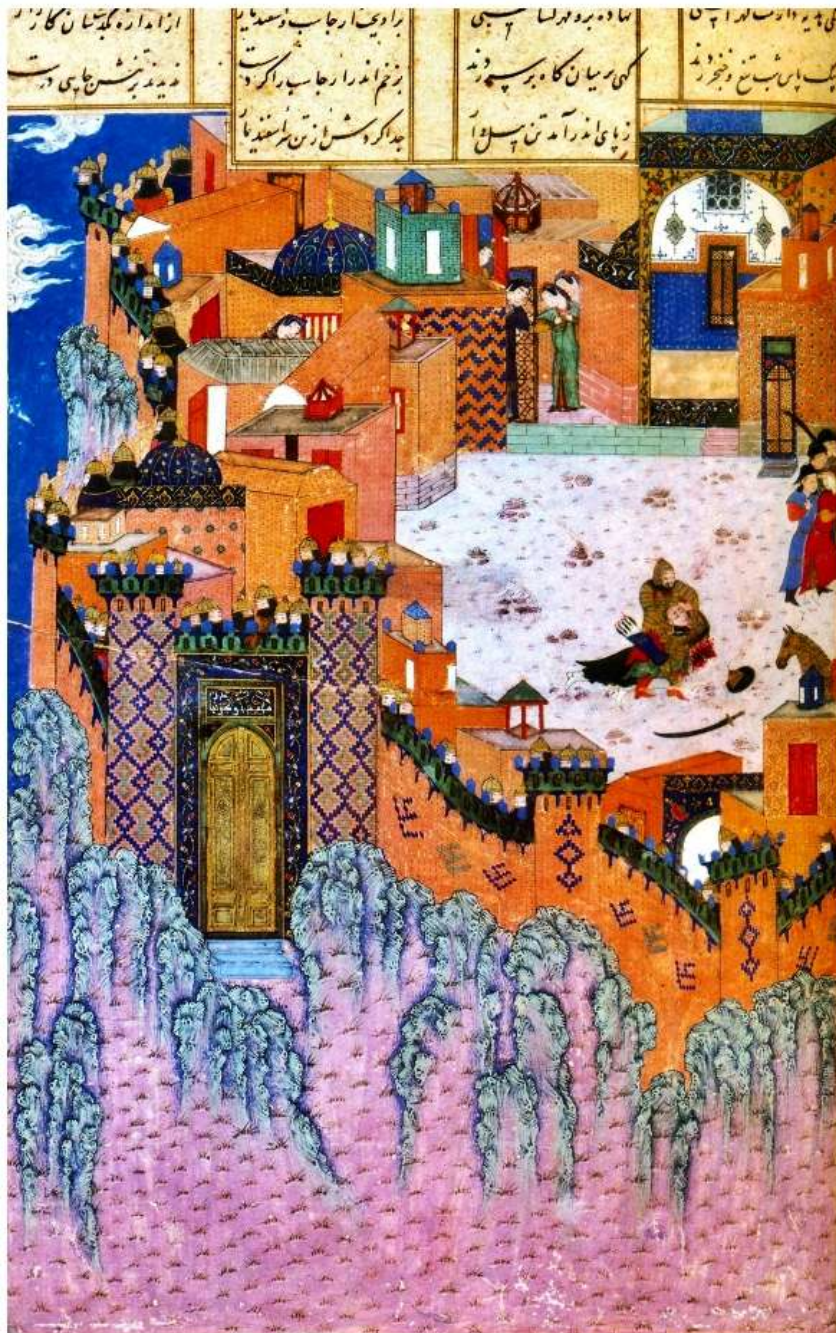


# 4 Mughal Wall Painting : the eras of Babur, Humayun and Sher Shah

Asok K. Das

## Babur

**B**abur was a keen observer and showed considerable interest in the arts, especially painting. As he moved from Farghana to Samarkand, and driven out from there he had to travel for many years from Herat, Kunduz and other cities through various vicissitudes, settling down temporarily at Kabul. He refers briefly to the construction of a large pavilion in the palace in Bagh-i Dilgusha, close to Samarkand embellished with paintings of Timur's India campaign.<sup>1</sup>



There is an indirect reference to the construction of a picture gallery at the Darwaza Gate of the Chanar Bagh in Kabul: "On Sunday [5 Ziqada 925/29 October 1519] there was a party in the small Surat-Khana, over the Gate; small *hojra* (room) though it is, sixteen persons were present".<sup>2</sup> Babur is more specific in another place of his memoirs where he writes: "A little tent had been erected on the south-eastern side of the picture gallery (*surat khana*) I had built at the *Bagh-i Chanar Gate* (italics mine) and occasionally I sat there. That is where the party took place."<sup>3</sup>

**Fig.4.1** : Juki Shahnama, c.1444, from Babur's library, Royal Asiatic Society, MS 239, f.278

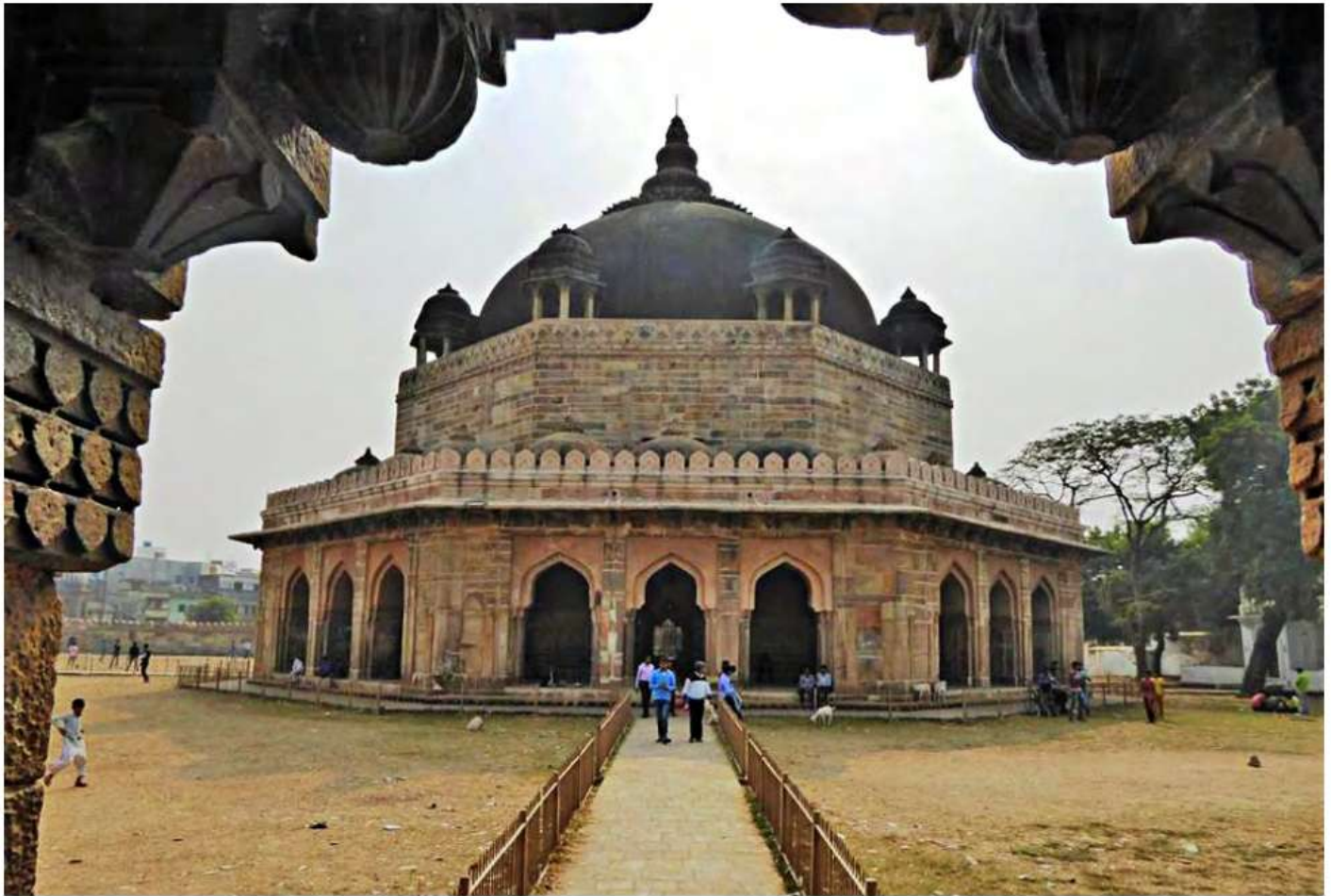
The tradition of having a *surat-khana* was already there in Kabul as Babur himself has testified: "... Muzaffar Mirza took us to an edifice built by Babur Mirza [Prince Abu'l Qasem Babur (1449-57), one of the three sons of Prince Baysanghor, a great connoisseur of art] called the Tarabkhana, where a drinking party was held. The Tarabkhana was situated in the middle of a small garden (Bagh-e Safid). It was a modest building of two stories and rather pleasant. The upper level had been elaborately constructed. Each of the four corners had an alcove, but otherwise the space in the middle and between the alcoves was like one room. Between the alcoves were things like *shahnishans*, large seats. Every side of the room was painted; the work had been commissioned by Sultan Abusai'd Mirza (1451-69) to depict his battles and encounters.<sup>4</sup> We agree with Adle that Babur must have remembered this place when planning his Surat-khana in the Bagh-e Chanar. It was intact during Humayun's time as testified by Bayazid Biyat. When Jahangir visited Kabul in 1607, he visited the Bagh-e Suratkhana and wrote about its giant chanar tree but he did not mention the Suratkhana at the gateway.<sup>5</sup>



**Fig.4.2 :** Remains of colour decoration, Purana-Qila, Delhi

Babur was familiar with the creations of two of the greatest painters of his time, Kamaluddin Bihzad and Shah Muzaffar. and penned down the following critical remarks about their work: "Bihzad . . . painted extremely delicately, but he made the faces of beardless people badly by drawing the double chin too big. He drew the faces of bearded people quite well. Shah Muzaffar also painted delicately, and did swift and delicate floral work. He did not live long, however, passing away just as he was gaining advancement".<sup>6</sup>

Babur not only had a first hand experience of observing and critically analyzing the creations of some of the finest artists of his time, he also succeeded in acquiring high quality manuscripts like the *Shah Nama* of Muhammad Juki that contains compositions of Bihzad, Fig.4.1. This historic manuscript comprised thirty-one miniatures, many double-pages, and two illuminated *unwans*.<sup>7</sup> After his conquest of India, Babur paid more attention to build landscape gardens than palaces or religious structures. Out of these only one imperially patronized mosque built at Panipat in 1527-8 has survived. The mosque, constructed in brick with a heavy stucco veneer, is in a damaged state. Another mosque built by a noble Mir Baqi in 1528-9 at Ayodhya that was destroyed recently was also built in brick and rubble with a heavy stucco veneer. Traces of painting of floral vines on the stucco was noticed before its destruction.<sup>8</sup>



**Fig.4.3 :** View of Hasan Khan Sur's mausoleum, Sasaram, Bihar

## **Humayun**

Contemporary sources refer to many unique architectural conceptions based on Timurid design archetypes commissioned by Humayun, but nothing survives. Only the Kachpura Masjid at Agra built in 1530s, and the small octagonal pavilion known as Sher Mandal and some other buildings and gateways in Delhi's Purana Quila have survived. The now-ruined Kachpura Masjid has traces of eight-pointed stars and lozenge patterns imprinted into the rectangular facade and painted to emphasize the design.

Unquestionably, the use of paint was meant to evoke the brightly coloured glazed tile ornamentation of Herat and Samarqand. Traces of stucco paint on the soffit, lunette and extrados of the central dome and *mihrab* still survive.<sup>9</sup> Remains of floral and vegetal patterns and design, Fig.4.2, are still visible on the gateway of Sher Mandal, in the Purana Qila complex, Delhi.



**Fig.4.4 :** *Delicate Relief Work and Inscribed Panel, Hasan Khan Sur's mausoleum, Sasaram, Bihar*

## Sher Shah

Sher Shah Suri was a great builder. During his brief rule he constructed three great mausoleums as also considerable portions of the Purana Qila including the well-designed gateways and the small and beautiful Qala-i Kuhna Mosque. Soon after securing his position on the Delhi throne, he built an impressive tomb for his long-dead grandfather Ibrahim Khan at Narnaul, Haryana. This was followed by a magnificent tomb complex, Fig.4.3, for his father Hasan Khan at his native place, Sasaram. After its completion, he embarked upon the construction project of the grandest of all mausoleums for himself at the centre of a huge artificial lake at Sasaram. Guided by the desire to boost his status, he spared no effort and money to build these three unique monuments still standing in full glory.

In all these monuments we notice a liberal use of delicate painted stucco, especially in the Hasan Khan Tomb, Fig.4.4, intricate carvings and tasteful glazed tile work. In the Sher Shah Mausoleum as also in the gateways of the Purana Qila traces of colour decoration in red and white are still visible. The entire outer surface of the great dome, the *chattris* and *chajjas* of the Sher Shah Mausoleum have similar red and white painted arabesque, Fig.4.5. Some of the series of large floral decoration in dark-blue, light-blue, yellow and white that once decorated the places between the corbelled supports under the *chajja*, Fig.4.6, are still visible.



**Fig.4.5 :** *Tile-work inside Sher Shah Tomb, Sasaram, Bihar*



**Fig.4.6 :** Vile decoration, below the Chhajja, Sher Shah Tomb, Sasaram, Bihar

On the south gate or Humayun Darwaza (though built by Sher Shah in 1543/4) of the Purana Qila there are two *chhatris* on the top of the enormous portal, whose domes are painted to resemble open lotus blossoms.<sup>10</sup> Shaikh Farid Bhakkari mentions in the *Zakirat al-Khawanin*, compiled in 1650, that Khwaja Abdus-Samad had painted 'with his own blessed hand' (*ba-dast-I Mubarak-I khud*) the private apartment (*khilwat khanah*) of the house of Khan-i Azam Mirza Aziz Koka in the Red Fort of Agra.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Shah Nawaz Khan, *The Ma'sir-ul-Umara*, tr. H Beveridge, rev. Bains Prashad, vol.II, Calcutta, 1952, p.808. The incident is based on the *Zakhira-al Khwanin*, not considered by the authors as very reliable.



**Detail Fig. :Fig.4.6**

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**Dr Asok Kumar Das**, Former Director, MSMS II Museum, Jaipur; Senior Visiting Fellow, V & A Museum, London; Hart Fellow, Smithsonian Institution; Getty Museum Scholar, Los Angeles; Andrew W Mellon Fellow, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Visiting Scholar, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha and Dar al-Atharyya, Kuwait. He authored numerous books and articles on Mughal and Rajasthani Art and Culture. During the Academic Session 2015-2016, he was the Resident Scholar at JdAna-PravAha. [asokkdas@gmail.com](mailto:asokkdas@gmail.com)