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# Funerary Landscape In Pre-Mughal Delhi Sultanate (1206-1555)

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**Abstract** | Funerary architecture in Pre-Mughal India offers numerous examples of forms and settings, including gardens. The concepts of these burials are probably connected with the habit of ziyarat or visiting the tombs, i.e. those of saint patrons such as the Chishti's, but also of ancient kings. From early 13th to mid 16th century, the evolution of landscape and architecture followed a contrasted line, both in scale and setting. The goal of this paper is to highlight a few hints on the anthropology and architecture of funerary landscape in the Delhi sultanate.

**Keywords** | Garden, Funerary architecture, Delhi, Sultanate Period, Châhâr bâgh.

**Introduction** | The lands of Islam offer, up to the present day, a variegated sight concerning funerary practices; these imply rituals and social behaviour but also burial habits and, in some cases, architecture. In this last aspect, the Indian sub-continent presents us with original and varied examples. Indeed, well before the Mughals, the Indian Muslim ruling elites developed funerary architecture set in gardens (Welch, 1996: 87), or organized in the landscape by a dramatic staging. The foundation of the Delhi sultanate, in the early 13th century CE, was accompanied by the building of specific Muslim monuments, such as the mosque, the minaret, or the mausoleum (Burton-Page, 2008: 55-61). The funerary practices of the Muslims were of course fundamentally different from the ones used in the sub-continent before the Islamic conquest, especially in the dominating Hindu milieu; this means that the very existence of monumental tombs was perceived by the autochthon population as a visible landmark of the invaders.

If the very first attempts in Indian funerary architecture were not particularly impressive, the monuments developed later both in scale and staging, either set in the midst of religious compounds or in the urban network, or even making use of an aquatic and/or vegetal landscape setting. The increase in the dimensions of both the tomb itself and its surrounding areas might be explained by the local habit of celebrating the anniversary of the deceased; this custom probably takes its root in the *Sufi Chishti* festivals known as '*urs*' (or "mystic wedding"). The ceremonies might include not only prayers and Qur'an recitations, but also hymns sung by qawwalis, large food distributions and the refurbishment of the precincts. Royal visits to the tombs (*ziyarat*) – mainly of the Sufi saints, but occasionally of ancient kings' too – were also opportunities for halts, as described by Babur in his *Memoirs* (Babur, 1989: 475-476; Koch, 2001: 165). All these activities need place, in particular for accommodation.

These funerary practices are not universally recognized as licit, especially by today's tenants of the globalised and "scripturalist" Islam. Such practices actually contrast with those of other Middle-eastern societies, although they are quite frequent in the Iranian and Central Asian world (Da'vyeli, 2015: 538), which represent the cultural background of the Delhi sultans. Death, burial and commemoration embody marks of identity; the choice of burial sites, the style and setting of the graves, together with the way funerals are organised and commemorated, help restructuring dynastic ties and perpetuate their memory. Our goal is thus to provide here a few hints on the anthropology and architecture of funerary landscape in the Delhi sultanate.

### Early funerary architecture in Delhi

Qutb al-Din Aybak (1206-1210 CE) the actual founder of Delhi's sultanate, never assumed the title of sultan. He was buried in a garden at Lahore, although not much is known



Pic 1: Sultan Ghari, built 1231.  
Photo : Richard Castinel, 2015.

of his original tomb (Welch, 1996: 87); late 19th century narratives on the city's monuments do not mention it (Latif, 1892). The first royal tombs in Delhi do not surprise us by their dimensions; thus Iltutmish mausoleum, set in the Qubbat al-Islam mosque complex (Kumar, 2011), is less than 15 m side. However, it displays an unprecedented architectural form in the sub-continent, which is a dome on squinches. Most of the subsequent mausoleums will also present this specific and highly recognizable form (Brown, 1956: 15).

A very unique exception is the funerary complex known as Sultan Ghari (Sultan's Cave), built in 1231 by Iltutmish in honour of his son Nasir al-Din Muhammad (pic1). This is situated about 5 km west from the Qutb Minar, in an area that was then well out of the walled city of Delhi, in the proximity of the Mahipalpur village. It consists on a large rubble-built massive square plinth of 26 m side, with turrets on the angles; the upper sections of the walls are built in ochre sandstone. Viewed from afar, the monument appears like a small fort. On the east side, a majestic arch opens with stairs leading towards a courtyard; the arch is built in white marble and is adorned with a beautiful Arabic dated inscription.

In the centre of the courtyard stands a large octagonal platform; in its southern side a narrow staircase gives way to the funerary crypt. Some authors suggested that this octagonal platform might have been a base for a chhattri (or columned pavilion). The whole west side of the yard is occupied by a single-aisle portico mosque whose centre houses a large and delicately carved marble mihrab. The eastern side also has a colonnade, whereas the two other sides of the yard have plain walls opening with windows. The colonnades, together with the rooms in the corner turrets, could accommodate several visitors. The practice of visiting tombs (*ziyarat*) will culminate on later times, as



Pic 2: Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq mausoleum, c. 1325, Tughluqabad.  
Photo: Yves Porter, 2007.



Pic 3: Mausoleum of Firuz Shah Tughluq, Hawz-Khas, c. 1388.  
Photo: Richard Castinel, 2015.

is known for the Taj Mahal for example, where ‘urs were celebrated each year at great expense, on the model of the Chishti festivals of Ajmer and Delhi (Begley & Desai, 1989: 47-124). Commemorations were also the occasion of some refurbishing and renewing, thus providing new doors, new pardah (tomb’s veil), carpets and prayer-mats, or to provide new copies of the Qur’an, as well as lecterns and lamps.

Both the dimensions and the architectural elements of Sultan Ghari confer it a unique status in early sultanate funerary architecture (Hoag, 1991: 142; Brown, 1956: 14; Sharma, 1974: 68-70).

Indeed, if most of the succeeding sultans of the Mu’izzi (1206-1290) and Khalji (1290-1321) dynasties continued building individual tombs, these were generally modest in dimensions, although sometimes set in the heart of a complex.

Thus ‘Ala al-Din Khalji’s funerary complex (1296-1316), located on the south-western angle of the Qubbat al-Islam mosque, is built in the shape of an L measuring 42 by 66 metres and now partially collapsed. It consists of a series of rooms which were probably used as a madrasa (although they might also have served as accommodation), together with a square domed tomb of about 14 m side. This complex appears as somewhat modest when compared with the works done on this very mosque by the same ‘Ala al-Din. At any rate, the idea of including a tomb in the heart of a pious complex such as a madrasa is reminiscent of Middle-Eastern Saljuk or Mamluk models.

### Dramatic staging

With the advent of the Tughluq dynasty (1320-1414), funerary architecture in Delhi’s sultanate experienced a considerable loop. Indeed, the tomb of the founder, Ghiyath

al-Din (died 1325) surprises us by its dramatic setting (Pic.2). The otherwise unpretending square mausoleum, 8 m side, has sloping walls built of red sandstone; the dome, together with some other details, is made of white marble. But the reason why this monument is striking us remains its setting, in the middle of what was then a fortified island surrounded by an artificial lake. Isami (14th century) bombastically described this lake as resembling the Seventh Sea, the fortress of Tughluqabad being then compared with the Caucasus (Isami, 1948: 412). A 195 m long bridged causeway (nowadays cut by the Qutb-Badarpur road) provided with sluices, linked this little fort to the walled city of Tughluqabad. P. Brown describes this monument as “a work of powerful expressiveness” (Brown, 1956: 21). The mausoleum is enclosed within high battered walls forming an irregular bastioned pentagon (max. length: 90 m; max. width 40 m). The entrance is made through a high and massive gateway approached by a flight of steps. The courtyard follows the irregular outside scheme, and the inner walls are lined with cells and pillared corridors. The funerary chamber has three graves, the central one being occupied by Ghiyath al-Din, the other two believed to be those of his wife and his son Muhammad bin Tughluq. Indeed, no specific tomb is known for this sultan who probably arranged for his father to be killed in the crash of a wooden pavilion in 1325.

It has been suggested that the bastioned form of this ensemble could be explained by a potential military use (ibid). However, the very name of the monument, referred to as Dar ul-aman or “Abode of Peace” both in an inscription there and in the contemporary accounts, makes this military use quite doubtful (Sharma, 1974: 103). Moreover,



Pic 4: Mausoleum of Mubarak Shah Sayyid, c. 1434, Kotla Mubarakpur.  
Photo: Yves Porter, 2008.

the cells and other covered spaces can well be occupied by visitors, especially on the occasion of the celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the deceased, as we have seen at Sultan Ghari.

The tomb of Firuz Shah Tughluq (1351-1388) is not impressive by itself either (Pic. 3); it is a square domed structure less than 13 m side. Again, its location makes the ensemble quite inspiring. Indeed, the tomb is situated at the intersection of an L shaped complex measuring 140 by 90 m, including a prayer-hall and two madrasas. This organization has already been noted with 'Ala al-Din's complex, although on a smaller scale. However, all these buildings overlook here a large artificial lake, known as Hawz-Khas (Welch, 1996: 78-83). The lake, initially built by 'Ala al-Din Khalji and then known as Hawz-i 'Ala'i, was 600 by 450 m side; Firuz Shah had it cleaned and restored (Porter, 1992: 174). The present lake is much smaller (360 x 240 m), and set in a landscape garden, much alongside the British colonial taste. When seen from the lake's side, the funerary complex offers a tantalizing view. A monumental staircase is situated at the L's right angle and provides a dramatic staging sight towards

the different columned halls set in two storeys and over a high plinth. Viewed from below, the tomb appears thus much higher than it really is.

Both the aquatic element and the dramatization of the building effects will be used in later examples, especially at Sher Shah Suri's tomb at Sasaram. Besides, it must be added that Firuz Shah's tomb was restored in 1507 by Sikandar Lodi; a dated inscription above the entrance testifies to it (Sharma, 1974: 80). This is a rare recorded case of an homage paid by a sultan to one of his predecessors.

Another kind of staging is represented by the organization of funerary complexes in the heart of the urban fabric. The ensemble of Khan-e Jahan Tilangani (c. 1370) in Delhi, although not belonging to the royal realizations, shows an example of urban alignment scheme. Khan-e Jahan was a Hindu convert who became prime minister of Firuz Shah. The tomb itself is an octagon 22 m in diameter; it has a central dome surrounded by eight little ones (Sharma, 1974: 27, 118). It is situated on the same axis as the mosque known as Kalan Masjid, built in 1370-71 by Khan-e Jahan's son, thus forming a 135 m perspective. This ensemble was



Pic 5: Mausoleum of Muhammad Shah, c. 1446, Lodi Garden.  
Photo: Yves Porter, 2015.

originally set in a larger enclosure, thus totalizing a length of approximately 225 m. The area is now completely invaded by encroachments and anarchic constructions.

Examples of urban alignments are to be observed in the other sultanates as well. After the turmoil provoked by Timur's sack of Delhi in 1398, the power of the sultan almost disappeared for several decades. Instead, other sultanates came to light as in Gujarat or in Malwa. In both cases, the image of kingship is often reflected in funerary architecture. Thus we find in Ahmadabad a remarkable example through the complex of Sultan Ahmad I (1411-1442). Indeed, the tomb itself is a square plan of 33 m side; but it is inscribed in a perspective including, on a same axis, the *Jama Masjid* (115 m long) and the Queens tomb (Rani ki hujra, 48 m side), so totalizing more than 300 meters (Brown, 1956: 51-53).

In Mandu, the capital of the Malwa sultanate, a similar example of alignment is to be seen. It is formed by Sultan Hushang's tomb, the *Jama Masjid*, and the *Khalji mausoleum* known as *Ashrafi Mahal*; the ensemble was finished in the 1450's (Porter, 1994: 23-36). The total length of this axis sums up to 375 meters.

If these examples are not systematically set in proper gardens, we can however underline the use of water surfaces and a real landscape and/or urbanistic notion in their conception. This could reflect a will to master the space and the elements, much in the same way the Mughal emperors will later do in their magnificent funerary *Châhâr-bâgh*-s. The increasing space occupied by funerary complexes might also be explained by a renewed interest on *ziyarat* and

'*urs*' commemorations.

### Decay and Rebirth

After the sack of Delhi, Khizr Khan assumed power in 1414, thus founding the ephemeral Sayyid dynasty (1414-1451). His reign was followed by that of Mubarak Shah; when he died in 1434, he was buried in a majestic octagonal mausoleum set in a large octagonal walled garden (pic 4). The walled enclosure opened by three gates (North, South, East), although none is now to be seen (Sharma, 1974: 87). The open space was planted with trees, which were still visible in the early 20th century (Ahmad, 1919: 82; Fanshawe, 1902: 245). On the western side, 60 m from the tomb, stands a three-domed mosque (22 x 10 m). The original plan of the ensemble is now almost impossible to read; however, the radius of the octagonal enclosure was about 160 m in diameter. J. Burton-Page also mentions a well inside the enclosure, which is presently impossible to locate (Burton-Page, 2008: 57). Indeed, the inner space is now entirely filled with an astonishing density of buildings, the area being known as *Kotla Mubarakpur*.

The tomb, originally approached by four pathways, stands in the middle of the octagon; it has a diameter of 22.5 m and displays a large central dome surrounded by eight little ones. The eight sides open with a columned veranda. Its scheme is based on Khan Jahan Tilangani's tomb, the first in Delhi to adopt the octagonal plan. For its part, Mubarak Shah's tomb is probably the earliest example of a royal mausoleum set in a proper enclosed funerary garden in Delhi. A century later, in



Pic 6: Mausoleum of Sikandar Lodi, c. 1517, Lodi Garden.  
Photo: Yves Porter, 2015.

1547, a very similar scheme will be used for the tomb of Issa Khan, as we will see below.

Mubarak Shah's successor, Muhammad Shah (1435-1446), was also buried in an octagonal mausoleum of similar proportions (Pic. 5). However, this is situated at nearly two kilometres north of the previous one, next to the village of Khairpur. Actually, most of this village was pulled down in the 1930's, when it was transformed into the Lady Willingdon Park; today the whole area is included in a landscape garden known as Lodi Garden (Sharma, 1974: 91-95). The tomb is set in a square garden of 80 m side, four pathways leading toward an octagonal earthwork terrace in the centre. The domed funerary chamber has its main entrance looking southward and houses eight tombs. This means that the monument was used as a kind of family mausoleum.

Very few monuments are actually identified as belonging to the Sayyid dynasty; moreover, their political strength as well as their territory illustrates a phase of decay in the Delhi sultanate. These facts make these mausoleums all the most surprising, both by their monumental scale and by their gardened setting.

A few decades later, a third royal mausoleum, located near the previous one, shows still similar proportions. This is Sikandar Lodi's tomb (1489-1517); (Pic. 6). The ensemble is built over a high plinth, allowing a row of niches to run on its four sides. The tomb, set in a square walled garden 80 m side, was to be approached from the south by a gateway with a terrace (15 x 18 m) flanked with tiled chhatris. Four

pathways divide the garden and lead toward the domed octagonal tomb; a wall-mosque is to be seen on the western side of the enclosure, while arched niches line all the inner walls of the yard. These little niches might be used as temporary shelters.

These three last examples clearly demonstrate that the quadripartite garden known as Châhâr-bâgh was well known in India before the Mughals.

The short-lived Suri dynasty (1540-1555) marked the intermission between Humayun's flight to Safavid Iran and his return to India. The Suri tombs are even more impressive than those built during the previous reigns. Thus the extraordinary mausoleum of Sher Shah, located at Sasaram in Bihar, is set in the middle of a large tank (335 x 255 m). A square platform 76 m side forms the base for the tomb, which rises up to 45 m above water level, the central dome with its satellite chhatris setting a kind of pyramid. Undoubtedly, this was in its time the most impressive mausoleum ever built in the subcontinent. Nearby is Salim Shah's tomb, Sher Shah's father; its proportions are smaller, although located in a square garden of 100 m side.

If the royal tombs of the Suri are built well outside Delhi, this is not the case of 'Issa Khan's, an official bound to the dynasty who died in 1547 (Pic. 7). His funerary complex is situated next to Humayun's tomb, the latter being completed two decades later only. An octagonal wall of 128 m in diameter opens to the North with a monumental gateway. The garden is divided in four sections by causeways, the mausoleum occupying the centre of a second, low-walled



Pic 7: Mausoleum of Issa Khan, c. 1547.  
Photo: Yves Porter, 2008.

octagon. Its architectural scheme is very similar to the Sayyid and Lodi tombs, although more lavishly decorated with glazed tiles. The western side of the enclosure holds

a three-domed mosque, much in the same scheme as in Mubarak Shah's complex.

**Conclusion** | Without surprise, in a time-span of more than three centuries funerary architecture in the Delhi sultanate did not follow a determinate and unique pattern. Moreover, no less than six different dynasties did seat on the throne of Delhi. This will obviously imply stylistic or aesthetic changes, due to the taste's evolution of the times; but it also implies that the chain of succession has been repeatedly broken. The allegiance due to the ancestors, symbolized by their mausoleums, might therefore be questioned by these family breaks. Yet, new coming rulers have not often destroyed their predecessors' burial places. On the contrary, we have some evidence of sultans who have restored ancient monuments, such as was Firuz Shah's tomb refurbished by Sikandar Lodi.

The first phase of sultanate architecture ended in the early 14th century with 'Ala al-Din's funerary complex; the

comparison of this monument with Firuz Shah's complex reveals the astonishing change in scale and dramatization of setting achieved in less than a century. This evolution in scale might also represent an increase in the commemorative celebrations, thus needing an enlarged space.

After the turmoil provoked by Timur's invasion, architecture underwent a decrease in monumentality which can be paralleled with the power of the sultans. However, during this "decadent" period we acknowledge the development of funerary gardens shaped as Châhâr-bâgh-s. Gardens represent an ideal frame for temporary activities.

Sher Shah Suri's tomb at Sasaram marks the apex of sultanate funerary architecture, both by its proportions and by its dramatic setting. During the Mughal period, the octagonal planned tomb will be occasionally used, but not for royal sepulchres. Regarding gardens, the one around Humayun's



tomb appears as an enlarged vision of its neighbour, that of Issa Khan. As noted above, funerary celebrations ('urs) are well documented in the times of Shah Jahan. The Taj Mahal complex, with its servant quarters and numerous columned halls and garden pavilions, embodies the culmination of these practices.

Other issues remain to be explored, especially concerning

the legal frame of the compounds where graveyards are set; the status of waqf's land bears actually both a religious and a social meaning, leading to a specific importance allowing large pious crowds to gather there temporarily or for a lasting settlement. This could even explain the present encroachment of certain areas, such as in Kotla Mubarakpur or Nizamuddin's basti.

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