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Culturally Sustainable Ornamentation in Sikh Architecture: A Case Study of Sher Singh Baradari, Lahore

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention to the richness of architectural ornamentation in the complex of Sher Singh Baradari in Lahore, Pakistan. It holds a diverse cultural evolution in the sub-continent's historical context. The research emphasizes how the Sikh community learned aesthetics heavily from the then-empires, notably the Mughals, who introduced innovative ornamentation techniques through their art and crafts in grand monuments, forts, and palaces. During the Mughal empire, Sikh artisans participated in royal training programs and acquired skills in mural decorations, miniature artworks and structural embellishments, which they later adapted into their own designs for havelis, forts, palaces and gurdwaras. This comparative study clearly investigates key ornamental features, including stylized vase arrangements, blooming lotus heads, symmetrical floral borders with curvilinear stems and multi-petal flowers, pointed cinquefoil arches and geometric brick patterns. The Sher Singh Baradari was originally a summer residence for the Maharaja Sher Singh during his reign; he was the son of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh. After the assassination of Sher Singh, that palace became his resting place. The building comprises the Baradari complex, Samadhi, a small mosque and the tomb of saint Hazrat Bilawal Shah Qadri. The complex embraced substantial destructions by mobs and conflicts. In a nutshell, the findings underline that the progression of Sikh art was often overshadowed by the then-existing empires. The research highlights the need for urgent conservation to safeguard and protect this site from further deterioration. The study drew attention towards synthesized traditional influences with local creativity, with a unique elegance in a visual language.

Keywords: Evolution of Sikh Art, Ornamentation, Floral Motifs, Decorative Elements, Fresco Art, Naqqashi, Samadhi Architecture, Sikh Haveli Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

Subcontinent holds a very diverse and dynamic history with regards to art and culture. In the past many powerful dynasties, rulers and emperors encountered this region and developed their own strategy in every walk of life particularly arts, crafts and architecture. From numerous empires the prominent were Mughals with respect to marvellous architectural monuments. Each emperor from Mughal era made revolutionary measures and transformed the land with great vision and intellect. Besides well-nourished and substantial splendour of Mughals creative mind-set; Sikh community started adapting their footsteps and also served in their royal courts/*darbars*. (Khan, Sikh-Period Architectural Ornament in Punjab: A Synthesis of Tradition & Innovation 2023) During the reign of Mughals; emperors themselves travelled to different regions and brought back exotic culture and tradition specifically they got inspired from Persian region and implemented various styles of paintings and architectural elements in their own building complexes, royal palaces, forts and mosques. (Wulff 1966) Just like today; previously Mughals also introduced and initiated skill-based training workshops for commoners so that people can get benefited and learn miniature paintings and artistic skills from masters. In those training workshops many Sikhs got training of miniature paintings, architectural ornamentation along with mural decorations. After the decline of Mughals, Sikh gurus came into power and constructed various forts, palaces/havelies, gurdwaras etc. (Glover 2012) Sikhs majorly adopted

Mughal style architectural features which can be seen in present day India and Pakistan. (Laal 2015) During the reign of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, the region of Punjab transformed with new strategic techniques and innovation in which Sikh community got strengthened and ruled the region particularly Lahore and Rawalpindi for many years. With alliance to British Government, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh occupied considerable land and constructed huge palaces or havelies and forts. After the death of Ranjeet Singh, his successors continued the legacy and built their havelies. (Dokras 2021)

Maharaja Sher Singh was the son of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh and he used to live in present day Sher Singh *Baradari* complex which served as a summer palace for him during his reign. He ruled for approximately three years and was assaulted by his armed forces. Later on, this palace was converted into his rest place. That historic building complex constitutes of Sher Singh *Baradari*, *Samadhi* of Sher Singh and tomb of Hazrat Shah Bilawal Qadri along with a small mosque. Sher Singh building originally located in Kot Khawaja Saeed in south of Lahore. Sher Singh *Baradari* faced a lot of incidents; one was the brutal attack on Sher Singh and his family members, the other was incident of Babri Mosque when the mob attacked the *baradari* complex in retaliation. As the *Baradari* complex confronted attacks and re-constructed then after sometime again it got destroyed due to lack of preservation. On the other hand, the shrine of Hazrat Shah Bilawal Qadri also known as Shah Bilal Qadri also located in the vicinity of *Baradari* complex. Hazrat Shah Bilawal Qadri was a famous saint and lived his life in seclusion for many years and constructed his *Khanqah* on the bank of river Ravi. Because of the ongoing tensions at that time the coffin of Shah Bilal Qadri was moved towards east of Raja Dina Nath Bagh but the mosque is still there and followers of the saint also visit this place. (Jabeen 2022)

Problem Statement

Despite the historical significance of the Punjab region during the Sikh regime in terms of art and architecture, the main focus was always driven towards Mughal masterpieces. The researchers and scholarly works have been done extensively on famous monuments that belong to the Mughal era; however, the evolution of art and crafts of the Sikh community is notably lacking. The study is addressing a problem of the historical building complex of the Sher Singh *Baradari* complex with regards to its ornamental decorations and mural artwork which has been influenced from various resources.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to highlight the importance of Sher Singh *Baradari* complex and to document the fresco paintings created on murals.

Objectives

- To trace the traditional fresco painting style history during Mughals and Sikh regime
- To identify and compare the key ornaments, and subject matters and usage of decorative elements particularly curvilinear forms, lines, patterns and floral motifs etc. along with colour scheme

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of decorative elements or features for the surface embellishments on buildings is a very old practise used across the globe for the enhancement of beauty and aesthetic purpose. Such examples can be found in Mughals and Sikh architecture with exclusive details in decorating mosques, buildings, forts, palaces and royal gardens. The influential ornamentation of Sher Singh *Baradari* complex contains inspirations from Mughals (Rehman 2019) which is mentioned below:

- The Sher Singh *Baradari* complex includes the motifs inspired from Mughal Pietra dura floral panels, Kangra style naturalistic flower compositions, hybrid vase motifs (guldesta /Phool Dani). This mixture was also painted during the reign of Aurangzeb and Ranjeet Singh.



Figure 1, Pietra-dura detail at Taj Mahal

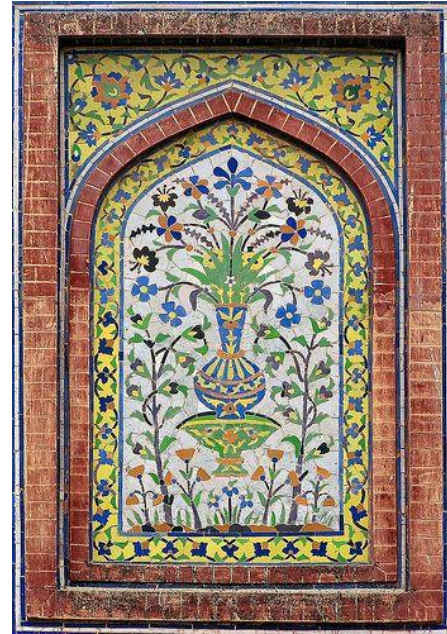


Figure 2, Vase motif in Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore



Figure 3, Floral motif at Taj Mahal, Dehli.

- Central vase, lotus like blooming heads, floral band repetition and symmetrical tendrils was also a classic Mughal pattern found in Taj Mahal wall panels, Wazir Khan Mosque fresco paintings and Sheesh Mahal in Lahore Fort.
- The floral borders in *Baradari* are also inspired from Shahi *Hammam* fresco bands, Navlakha pavilion, Hazuri Bagh *Baradari*.
- The brick pattern in the *baradari* complex outlined a clue that it was used for the first time in Hazuri Bagh *Baradari*, *Samadhi* of Ranjeet Singh and Haveli of Naunehal Singh. Furthermore, if decorative elements are observed on Haveli of Naunehal Singh they look almost similar. (ALI 2011)
- The column capital on which the lotus and acanthus lower leaves style motif is visible that shows influence from Shalimar Bagh, Naulakha pavilion, Taj Mahal.



Figure 4, decorative elements of Haveli Naunehal Singh, Lahore.

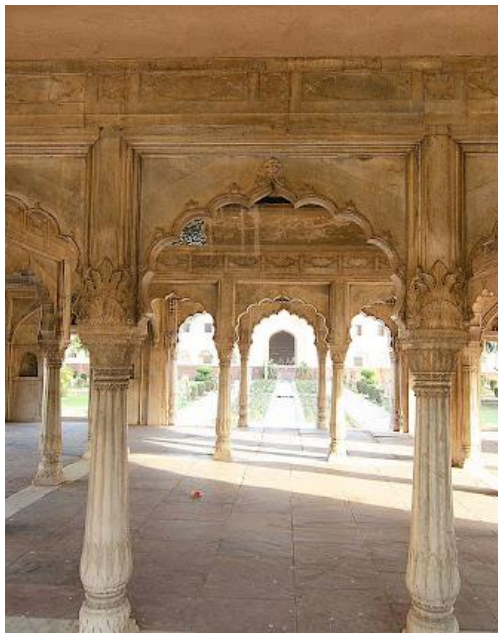


Figure 5, Columns with Lotus petals in Hazuri Bagh, Lahore.



Figure 6, floral motifs in Sheesh Mahal, Lahore

- Hazuri Bagh *Baradari* also contains similar elements with repetitive floral bands, red borders brick style, column with lotus petals. (Baig 2016)
- The arch shaped structure known as pointed cinquefoil arch was built above every door of *Baradari* inside and outside of the building complex. Its inspiration can be traced back from Gothic, Romanesque, Greece, and Roman's region.

Overall Sikh period ornamentation includes brighter colours, geometric brick patterns, extensively thick outlines around flowers, stylized vases, pointed arches, bold symmetrical patterns, curvilinear forms and patterns. These features were also seen in *Samadhi* of Ranjeet Singh, Haveli of Naunehaal Singh. From the Sikh period the ornamental bracket work in Naunehaal Singh Haveli, carved brick patterns typically used in *Samadhi* of Sikh Maharaja's can be seen. (Khan, Sikh-Period Architectural Ornament in Punjab: A Synthesis of Tradition & Innovation 2023)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSES OF MUGHAL AND SIKH MOTIFS

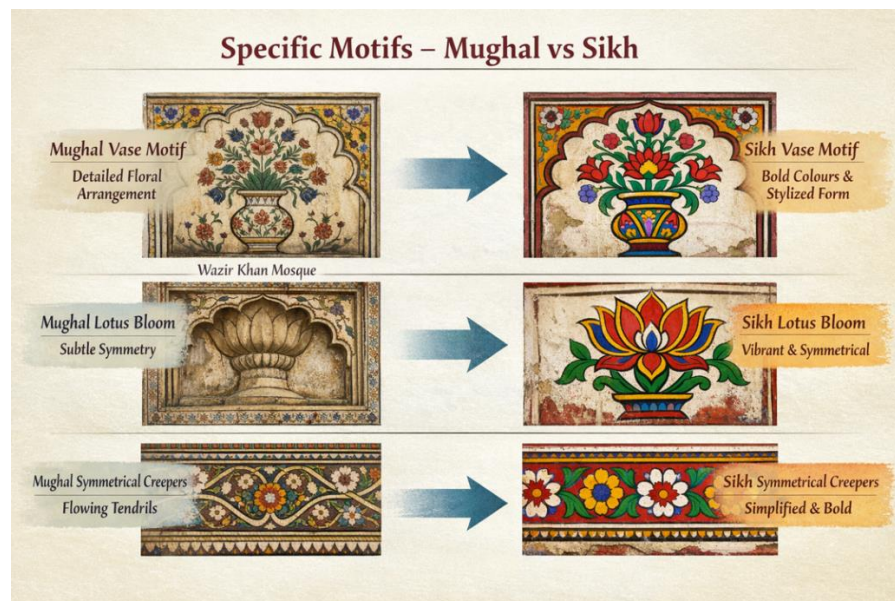


Figure 7, Mughal vs Sikh motifs

The above mention visual comparison shows the evolution of ornamented element from Mughal to Sikh architectural tradition. Sikh architecture shows a total stylistic break, at least in the sense of a strained idiom of Mughal architecture. This connection is manifested very well through the floral and vegetal motifs. Both represents different ideological and cultural concerns and it establishes the common aesthetic language of both traditions.

Vase Motif, Naturalism and Stylisation

In the architectural sense of Mughals especially in tapestries of Wazir Khan Mosque, we see the vase motive being executed with a higher naturalism and fine details of flowers. The flowers appear to sprout out of the vessel itself in the botanical perfection and minute differences of tone. This technique resonates the Mughal affinity for Persian garden aesthetics i.e. the concept of *chahar-bagh* which contains the ideas of paradise, order and imperial refinement. The limited colour palette and careful brushwork are further signs that the aesthetic one peeks into is one of elegance and harmonious restraint. In contrast, the Sikh rendition of the vase motif retains a similar compositional framework, however, a deliberate transformation takes place that is marked by bold outlines, flattened relations between spaces, as well as bright colour. Floral elements are heavily stylized, with a departure from rigorous naturalistic representation, which puts much more emphasis on visual clarity and symbolism than botanical realism. This typological shift is a break with courtly delicacy and an approach to a harsh directness of visual rhetoric that might be fully explored within Sikh religious as well as commemorative architecture such as the Sher Singh Baradari. The emphasis on dramatic contrasts between colours and the vigorous simplicity of forms are Sikh ideals of vigour, vitality and communal identity.

Lotus Bloom: Subtle Spirituality versus Visual Assertion

The lotus motif that forms a basic part of the visual culture of South Asia finds its realization in both Mughal and Sikh contexts; but its functions as an artist are strikingly different. In the art of the Mughals the motif has a subdued presence that is in harmony with the aesthetic that subtly integrates symbolism into an expansive ornamental programme. Sikh representations of the lotus, on the contrary, are explicit and impressive. The motif is placed in the centre, heavy symmetry is used as well as saturated colour palettes. Petals well delimited - producing rhythmic patterns - acting as emblematic forms. This stylistic development is an example of the Sikh architectural paradigm where decoration is as a declarative statement rather than for decoration and wall covering. Moreover, through the inclusion of the lotus - a symbol more usually identified with purity and with levels of heightened spiritual awareness - into the Sikh iconography, the motif further serves to heighten the radical communal and spiritual symbolism inherent within the design.

Symmetrical Creepers, Flowing Ornament versus Structured Boldness

Mughal symmetrical creepers have flowing tendrils across the surface with elaborately interlocking plant elements with a definite organic movement. Such designs epitomise the perfection of rhythm and repetition and therefore help

to increase the visual unity of Mughal surfaces. The creepers often appear to be of infinite length that symbolises the idea of eternity and divine order.

For Sikh architectural ornamentation are influenced influences of Creeper and symmetric diaphragm, the auxiliary and nevertheless in a simplified way. The motifs are drawn in a more geometric outline with less detailed and strong outlines. Individual floral units are well spaced and repetition has a structured rather than a loose rhythm. This simplification represents an aesthetic hunger for lucidity and durability and not a weakening of the craft construction of the goods. Consequently, the resultant decorative-scheme is bold and legible from a distance which goes well with the scale and social function of Sikh monuments.

Overall Aesthetic Transition

The comparative study of these motifs indicates that Sikh architecture was not rejecting and throwing out Mughal traditions or respecting them to reinterpret them in a different cultural and political context-not to mention religiously-but entertaining and restating them, giving them a new spin. Mughal decoration is more to do with delicacy, naturalism, and a symbolic representation of the sophistication of empire, while Sikh motifs accord absolute supremacy to strength and vibrancy and stiff symbolic communication. This evolution is related to the broader historical changes which encompassed the shift from the courtly culture of Mughal era towards the Sikh sovereignty in Punjab where the architecture became a means to express the resilience, identity and continuity.

In the case of the Sher Singh Baradari, such adapted motifs offered visual testimony to Sikh involvement with Mughal aesthetics and at the same time also asserted an original Sikh identity in the programme of artistic expressions. Consequently, the surviving decorations are not just an example of decoration, but a historic record telling the superimposed cultural storeys of nineteenth-century Punjab.

Sher Singh Baradari and its Ornamentation

After the huge destruction of *Baradari* complex, presently it is being in the process of preservation and the exterior side was again in mural painting process. Whereas the interior side is severely damaged even the mural paintings are completely destroyed and the foundations of architectural elements are broken and walls are cracked along with the visibility of open wooden roof frames.

Exterior of Baradari Complex

On the exterior side the façade of the building having mural paintings; the process is half completed with exquisite detailing of lines, patterns, curvilinear forms and floral motifs. The mural technique is fresco painting style. From external side entrance access is clearly visible from wooden doors. Those wooden doors clearly indicate an antique imagery. The images clearly identify multiple rectangular panels showing use of bouquet in vase like *guldasta*, large lotus like blooming head, flanking smaller buds and symmetrical tendrils. Continuation of floral borders and creepers are found with repeating flowers having five to six petals, curved stems which are symmetrical on each side and tulip like upright flowers are also there. Brick pattern also outlined in a maroon colour, gives a look of rectangular grid lines framing around floral panels. The columns capital shows painted lotus petals and acanthus style with downwards brushstrokes in a red and green pigment which is faded.

Interior of the baradari Complex

The internal side of the complex is badly destroyed and demolished. But there are numerous rooms inside the complex with a wooden door entrance. But the purpose of those rooms is not clearly visible. The walls of every room are empty almost white washed but, on some walls, traces of mural paintings can be found. On every wall the arch shaped structure has been made alongside a border of mural paintings. That arch shaped structure in ancient times was used as a storage shelf for daily essentials.

Samadhi of Sher Singh

The architecture of *Samadhi* also got destroyed due to the mob attacks. The exterior wall still contains ashes of black smoke. The structure from the outside is made up of bricks and the interior might be designed with paintings but the present condition shows the single pointed arches in a room at least five to six in numbers.

Photo Gallery of Sher Singh Bara-Dari Complex

- Below figures are from front façade having detailed embellishments and decorative motifs.
- Below figures are from inside; column with acanthus lower leaves and arches having five lobes are visible.



Figure 8, Façade of Sher Singh Baradari, Lahore. Photograph by researcher



Figure 9, Back side of Sher Singh Baradari, Lahore. Photograph by researcher

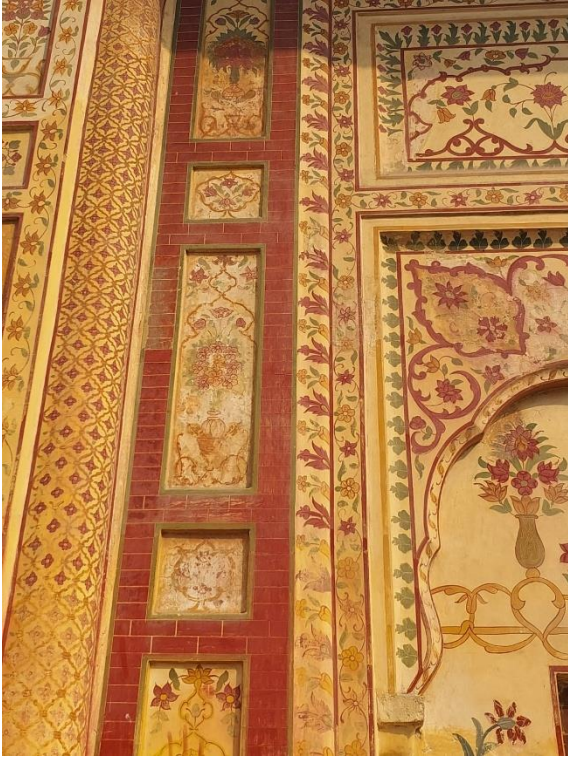


Figure 10, Façade of Sher Singh Baradari, Lahore. Photograph by researcher.



Figure 11, Fresco paint can be seen inside the Baradari of Sher Singh, Lahore. Photograph by researcher



Figure 12, Arch inside the Baradari of Sher Singh, Lahore. Photograph by researcher (Griffin n.d.) (Nadiem 2005) (Desai 1999)



Figure 13, Inside of Sher Singh Baradari, Photographs by Researcher.

Photo Gallery of Sher Singh Samadhi

- Below figures are from Samadhi, arches can be seen along with faded fresco style paintings. Impressions of decorative motifs also visible.



Figure 14, Samadhi Sher Sigh, Lahore. Photograph by researcher



Figure 15, Burnt inside of Sher Singh Samadhi, Photograph by researcher



SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The conservation and preservation process is needed to be completed promptly.
- As this place has been included in the directorate of archaeology, tourism and museum under the banner of the Punjab government, so the high officials must take active measures for the promotion of heritage and culture and preserve it for the forthcoming generations.
- Sikh community themselves as a minority themselves need to be aware and bring positive change by converting such historical *Baradari* complexes and other Sikh heritage sites as a museum and tourist's spot. (Randhawa 2000) (Stronge 2001)

CONCLUSION

During the reign of Mughals, people belonging to Sikh community also actively participated in royal courts of Mughal emperors and gained training from their skill-based workshops. Sikhs learned miniature paintings from different native styles like Persian miniatures, Kangra style, Patna style of paintings, Rajasthani paintings etc. but they only adapted fresco painting style specifically in their architectural embellishments. It has been observed that the ornamentation typically used in Sher Singh *Baradari* is greatly influenced from Mughals Pietra dura work, floral bands, repetition of *guldasta* or vase motifs alongside curvilinear patterns and shapes. In general Sikhs adapted all motifs and decorative elements with vibrant colour schemes, strong geometrical brick patterns, extensive thick lines, bold symmetrical patterns, stylized vases and pointed from the centre five/six lobed arches.

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