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## Tomb of Sher Shah Sur: A symbol of royal inspiration

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### Abstract

Sher Shah Sur the great Indian ruler India 1540 AD -1545 who was born in a small town of Bihar called Sasaram. This 16th century ruler of the Indian sub-continent, is credited with many new ideas, innovation and pragmatic vision, He constructed the famous Grant Trunk Road, present day G.T Road, which literally bound India together for centuries, providing a vital link for trade and communication across the empire. During a small period of his rule, he has constructed many architectural monuments including forts, *Sarais*, Mosques and tombs. The Tomb of his father Hasan Khan Sur, the Jagirdar of than Chainpur Pargana of Bihar, and his own tomb is finest example of Turko-Indian Art and Architecture. The article deals with the architecture characteristic of the monument and also discuss that how the idea of constructing the monuments inside of artificial lake came into exist. The tombs built by Sher Shah Sur in Sasaram evoke a sense of grandeur. The octagonal tombs at Sasaram are the more elaborate versions of the octagonal type of tomb developed in the Sayyid and Lodi period. The largeness of the conception of Sher Shah's resting place clearly reinforces that the unquestioned popularity he enjoyed in his time in north India.

**Keywords:** Ruler India.

### Introduction

Sher Shah, a contemporary of early Mughals The history of Sher Shah whose reputation rests specially upon military and administrative achievements has attracted the attention of different modern scholars for a long time. In Sasaram, Sher Shah built two tombs - one over the grave of his father, Hasan Khan Sur and another for himself. It is interesting to note here that Sher Shah did not choose one large dynastic graveyard in Delhi, the traditional burial site of most north Indian Sultans, which might have been seen as more prestigious. It was well within the standard Islamic and Indo-Islamic tradition for one of the first Sultans of a dynasty to establish a dynastic burial ground with elaborate tombs <sup>[1]</sup>.

There are several reasons, which explain Sher Shah's choice of Sasaram as the site for his final resting place. Sasaram lies on the Grand Trunk Road, the modern highway that essentially follows the road built by Sher Shah, which linked his empire from Sonargaon in Bengal to Attock in Punjab. Hence, the lavish tombs built by Sher Shah were appropriately situated having himself risen to power from the provinces. Accordingly, he placed imposing architectural monuments at strategic points and on important routes outside the capital to serve as constant reminders of the central power.

The tombs built by Sher Shah Sur in Sasaram evoke a sense of grandeur. The octagonal tombs at Sasaram are the more elaborate versions of the octagonal type of tomb developed in the Sayyid and Lodi period. It is quite clear that an understanding of art history methods based on stylistic analysis the date of any structure can be determined by its style. While applying this method on Sher Shah's tomb, most of the scholars such as Brown <sup>[2]</sup> and Burton-Page <sup>[3]</sup> explain Sher Shah's architectural style by assigning the tombs to two different periods. Historical and stylistic considerations indicate that construction of Sher Shah's tomb was commenced after 1540A.D. although epigraphic evidence indicates that Islam Shah Sur, the son and successor of Sher Shah, completed this tomb in 1545 A.D, <sup>[4]</sup> three months after the death of Sher Shah.

The monumental octagonal tomb of Sher Shah is situated in the middle of a lake, connected to the mainland by a causeway on the northern side. The artificial lake in which the tomb stands originally measured 1200' east to west, and 950' north to south, but was reduced in size to 1130' x 865' when a new shallow retaining wall was constructed on its external bank in the 1920s <sup>[5]</sup>. Peter Mundy's drawing <sup>[6]</sup> (1632 A.D.) is the earliest known sketch of Sher Shah's tomb and shows not only this stepped terrace along the external border of the lake but also a ramp flanked on either side with the *chattris* in the middle of each of the four sides.

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(Photo:- Bihar, Sasaram, Sher Shah Sur Tomb a view from southern side, showing bridge connecting the tomb with the and main entrance)

It is difficult to say from where Sher Shah got the idea of building his tomb within an artificial lake. The other tomb of the Sultanate period set in the middle of a lake is that of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq<sup>[7]</sup> (1321-1325) in Delhi as was the tomb of Salim Shah built later by Salim Shah, son of Sher Shah. However, the spirit of Tughlaq's tomb is quite different from that of Sher Shah. The Tughlaq's tomb utilizes water like a moat around a fortress-like tomb with a high tapering wall. By contrast, the lake around Sher Shah's tomb does not appear as a barrier but rather serves as a transition between the outside world and the tomb itself.

Cunningham and Kuraishi have observed that there are some Hindu temples situated in water from which Sher Shah must have brought the inspiration for his own tomb. Cunningham<sup>[8]</sup> gives the majority of Kashmiri temples as examples. In fact, Sher Shah never went beyond the Kashmir frontiers. Kuraishi<sup>[9]</sup> cites no examples in support of his view.

During my field survey I have traced out a ruined temple, in the vicinity of Rohtas fort situated just 30 kilometers south-west of Sasaram, the temple was built in the middle of a tank, sometime in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century. This temple has now collapsed but sufficient remains are available in the middle of this lake and testify to the evidence. Local tradition still testified the fact that this temple was built by the local *Raja* who was the real descendant of Rohtas fort. When Sher Shah came into possession of Rohtas fort, sometime in 1538 A.D., he might have seen the temple and he may have been inspired by it.

The tomb is approached from the north over a bridge of arches, which at the time of Buchanan's visit had fallen. The ASI constructed the present bridge, which leads to the tomb, in 1914-15<sup>[10]</sup>. Peter Mundy's sketch gives a good idea of how the initial bridge must have appeared. A painting of Thomas and William Daniell<sup>[11]</sup> of this mausoleum, drawn in February, 1790, shows enough remains of the bridge at the north and south ends to further corroborate the impression gained from Mundy's sketch.

The tomb rises from a lofty stone terrace based on a platform 243' square. The plinth measures 216' in length, 212' in width and 22' in height. In the middle of each side of the plinth is a double flight of stairs that meet at a platform at the top. At the centre of this platform on all sides except the west is a portal (gate), which gives access to the interior grounds of the platform. A battlemented wall with octagonal domed chamber encloses it, with arched doorway on all sides. These are octagonal in shape and are lighted by all sides. On each of its four sides small projecting balconies (oriel windows) are

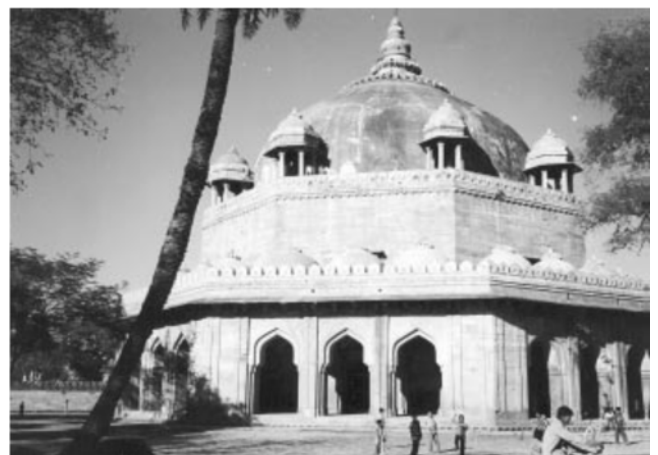
beautifully flanked. The use of oriel windows was a popular during the Lodi period, e.g. they are seen at the mosque attached to the Bara Gumbad in Lodi Garden (1594 A.D.)

In the middle of the upper terrace stands the main building of the tomb. Between the base of the great octagonal building and the wall of the terrace there is a clear space of 36' on all sides. The tomb itself stands on an octagonal plinth 1'6" in height and 135' in diameter.

The mausoleum is a three-storied structure, consists of large octagonal chamber 71'5" across internally, surrounded by 10' wide verandah on all sides. On each side of the verandah are three beautiful arches of 9' span with boss's decoration on the spandrels. The walls are about 32' high and are surrounded by 5" high battlements. The *chajjas* that are not very deep are supported with beautiful brackets, below which runs a continuation band of glazed tiles of different colours<sup>[12]</sup>. The verandah is covered by a series of 24 small domes, each supported on four arches.

The inner wall of each side of the octagon is divided by three pointed arches, the central one of which is an entrance measuring 7'1 1/2" and out of eight sides of the octagon seven sides have an entrance with the western side having a niche. In the centre of this niche is a small medallion. Out of 16 medallions 10 contain the name of Allah, while the remaining 6 are carved as lotus blossoms. Above this niche there are inscriptions of two lines<sup>[13]</sup>, provides several historical facts. A trabeated entrance have been provided with the help of brackets and lintel. A broad and deep staircase goes within the south wall, of the south-west doorway of this tomb, which leads up to the verandah roof and further up to the top of the octagonal walls of the tomb.

The major components common to a general octagonal tomb were followed in this tomb. Moreover in some details the architect of Sher Shah's tomb improved upon the earlier example of Hasan Khan's tomb, the architect built this tomb as an experiment in 1535 A.D. Right from the Khan-i-Jahan Tilangani's tomb to Hasan Khan's tomb all utilize the sloping buttress at each angle, which intends to minimize the feeling of height. The tomb of Sher Shah has no buttress. The first floor seen from outside as a tall elegant structure. The arches and imposts of Hasan Khan's tomb seem more an integral part of the wall, than the earlier models but they still lack the sense of unified composition which is achieved in Sher Shah's tomb.



(Photo: - general view of Hasan Khan's tomb)

The dome of this tomb is 80' in diameter at the base, the top of its finial being about 120' above the plinth<sup>[14]</sup>. A cupola crowned when Buchanan-Hamilton visited the area the dome.

In 1882, when the building was restored by the British this cupola was pulled down and replaced by a pinnacle similar to that of the tomb of Hasan Shah Sur.

The Tomb is remarkable for the great span of its dome with 30' wider than the dome of the Taj Mahal; this is one of the largest domes in India. The largeness of the conception of Sher Shah's resting place clearly reinforces that the unquestioned popularity he enjoyed in his time in north India.

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7. Cunningham, *ASI Report*, I, 215.
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