SHER SHAH'S BUILDINGS

SHER SHAH left the indelible impress of his personality not only upon the useful but also on the ornamental side of the imperial edifice.¹ His short reign produced many meritorious architectural edifices. Had not Sher Shah been a man of outstanding character and already a patron experienced in the building art, this could not have been possible. The building art commenced at his behest "coincided with a most decisive movements in the development of the Islamic style, and one which had far reaching implications".²

The architectural projects of Sher Shah resolved themselves into two phases, each produced in two different conditions and in two different localities. The earlier phase emerged during the period when this accomplished Afghan was all powerful in the provinces of Bihar and Bengal. The mausoleums that were erected at his capital seat of Sasaram showed the final fulfilment of Lodi style by which they had been inspired. The second phase depicts the building art when he became the Emperor at Delhi. He proceeded by extending his active patronage to give a fillip to the

¹ Qanungo, Sher Shah, p.399.
The first phase is represented by a group of tombs at Sasaram belonging to the ruling family and the architect who built them. Another tomb a few kilometres to the west is that of Bakhtiyar Khan, a noble man of the time. All these appear to have been built in circa 1530. Sher Shah commissioned a master-builder of the name of Aliwal Khan who was trained in the imperial tradition of building tombs in Delhi what has come to be regarded as Lodi type of tombs, to construct the tomb of his father Hasan Khan in about 1535. This tomb is contained within a walled enclosure and is a copy of Lodi tomb of the octagonal variety that had previously appeared in Delhi. Architecturally, this tomb is hardly equal in qualities to a number of such tombs in Delhi. The short-comings in the design of Hasan Khan's mausoleum may have been due to the fact that this building was partly of an experimental nature, but what is remarkable, is that the next tomb produced very soon afterwards of Sher Shah himself which is so far in advance and is a class by itself, for it is one of the grandest in conception and most imaginative architectural edifices in execution in whole of India. The builder had obviously taken the Lodi type as the basis but has so amplified the original model that he has transformed into a very different
architectural creation belonging to another much higher plane. He enlarged the normal proportions so that Sasaram Mausoleum is several times larger and is 250 feet wide, and has increased the number of stories thus producing an immense pyramidal pile of ordered masonry in five distinct stages the whole thing rising to the considerable height of 150 feet. Another thing which makes this composition unique is its unrivalled setting, as the entire structure stands foursquare in the centre of a great artificial lake, so extensive that each of its concreted sides measure as much as 1400 feet in length. This monument is constructed of the fine sandstone obtained from the quarries of Chunar, situated a short distance away. As it now appears the building is a uniform grey mass, presenting a sombre effect but when originally constructed it must have been profusely glazed and painted as sufficient evidence of this remains on its exterior walls. The dome of this building, although not equal in size to the Gol Gombaz at Bijapur, is 13 feet wider than that of the Taj at Agra. "Externally, the architecture is wholly Muhammadan, but Hindu corbelling and horizontal architraves are used in all the inner doorways, as at Jaunpur." Sher Shah took so much interest in the planning of his last resting place, that unconsciously he gave it the impress of his own character.

3. Qanungo, Sher Shah, p.400.
As this movement was obviously purposely situated close to the famous highway constructed by Sher Shah, account of the splendour of this building must have been spread far and wide. Historians have been very enthusiastic in their praise of this mausoleum. "Altogether, as a first-class royal tomb, there is hardly any other tomb in India that surpasses it, either for its beauty of outline or appropriateness of detail. When seen at sunset its silhouette is something to be remembered. The exquisitely adjusted bulk, the proportions of its stages, the harmony in transforming from square to octagon and octagon to circle, all combine to produce an effect of extraordinary beauty."⁴ Percy Brown sums up in these words -- "India boasts of several mausoleums of more than ordinary splendour; the Taj at Agra in some of its aspects is unrivalled; over Muhammad Adil Shah's remains at Bijapur spreads a dome of stupendous proportions, but Sher Shah's island tomb at Sasaram, grey and brooding, is perhaps the most impressive of these all."⁵

The second phase of the building art produced by Sher Shah commenced no sooner was he seated on the throne at Delhi in 1540, than he promptly proceeded to initiate an


⁵ Cambridge History of India Vol. iv. p.58, V.A. Smith, Fergusson Cunningham and Havell have also been lavish in praising this monument.
architectural movement which was highly expressive of his aesthetic as well as his forceful nature. This began by the construction of a project, popularly known as 'Purana Qila' or 'Old Fort', a walled enclosure of considerable size and formed the citadel around which Sher Shah planned his capital, the sixth city of Delhi. Two isolated gateways only remain to mark the size and position of this city. This was the Shergarh urf Hazrat Delhi of his coins. The citadel also now merely an empty shell, devoid of all its edifices, except for one solitany building, a mosque which escaped demolition on account of its sacred character.

Abbas says Sher Shah rebuilt the city "by the banks of the Jamuna, and ordered two forts to be built in that city the smaller fort for the Governor's residence; the other, the wall round the entire city, to protect it; and in the Governor's fort he built a Jama Masjid of stone, in the ornamenting of which much gold, lapis lazuli, and other precious articles were expended. But the fortifications round the city were not completed when Sher Shah died." From all that is extant, it is clear that the Purana Qila when complete was quite an impressive concentration of military and palatial architecture. "There are few fortresses in India which recall more vividly the days of medieval pageantry and oriental ceremony than Sher Shah's citadel at

6. Abbas Sarwani in Elliot, iv. p.419.
Delhi. Its grim gray bestioned walls are strongly built of rough but well bonded rubble masonry, a distinct contrast in colour and structural texture to the high artistic finish of the gateways, formed of smooth red sand-stone and white marble with occasional insets of blue glaze. Exceptionally elegant in a robust and forceful manner are the entrances to this stronghold, particularly the *Bara Darwaza*, or main gateway in the middle of the western wall its architectural treatment prefiguring the style of building that was within."7 This style is represented by two structures, one of which, a mosque known as the Qila-i-Kohna masjid is not only the prime example of the building art as practised at Delhi in the time of Sher Shah, but in itself a gem of architectural design.

The Qila-i-Kohna masjid was the Chapel Royal of Sur rulers and was built by Sher Shah in about 1541. This mosque with a small structure named the Sher Mandal, solitary and meaningless, stand within the fort walls. The Qila-i-Kohna masjid consists of the sanctuary of the usual mosque scheme, and occupies an oblong 158 feet by 45 feet with a total height of 66 feet. Attached to its outer walls, both sides and back, are many pleasing details such as oriel windows on projecting balconies with a private entrance on the north and south sides for the use of the royal family. The chief

beauty of this edifice lies in the conception and treatment of the facade. The front elevation consists of five arched openings, each within a larger recessed archway contained within a rectangular frame and the whole co-ordinated into a uniform structural production is indeed a fine achievement. And to add to its elegance is the quality of varied colour, for its sandstone basis is enriched with portion in white marble, and there are also patterns in coloured inlay. "The interior of the structure is also a production of a high order, the elegant proportion of its five bays, the effective arrangement of its arches and arcades with their simple broad mouldings, the judicious concentration of the plastic enrichment on the Qibla wall, and the ingenious and artistic expedients to support the vaulted roof, all show that those engaged on this work were fully confident of their powers. Their technical assurance is well expressed in the various systems that have been exploited in the "phase of transition" employed in the roof." 8 The finest workmanship seems to have been reserved for the mihrabs, of which there are five, one in each bay. The decorative treatment, the foliation of the major arch and the delicately inscribed border enclosing the rectangles are hallmark of the interior of this beautiful mosque. Archaeologists are lavish in praising it. V.A. Smith says: "The Mughal phase of Indian Sarcenic architecture began

8. Ibid p.93.
under Babur, but we have no important work of his left, nor of his son Humayun. The first examples of the style belong to the time of Sher Shah, one of the most characteristic of which is the Qila-Kohna or Sher Shah Masjid (1541) at Purana-Qila, near Delhi* (Imperial Gazetteer ii.p.198). Fergusson calls it "the most perfect of his buildings" and admits that "the Pathans built like giants and finished like goldsmiths," History of Indian and Eastern Architecture (pp. 572-573).

Another structural project undertaken by Sher Shah, and one which is emblematic of his vigorous rule, was a fort that he caused to be built at Rohtas, eighteen kilometres north-west of the town of Jhelum, now in Pakistan. The choice of the site of this fortress and the pyramidal solidity of its construction show the military engineer ship of the great soldier. Although devised for purely military purposes, some of its gateways were exceptionally fine examples of the architecture of the period. The Sohal Gate guarding the south-west wall illustrates how a feature built for strength could also be made artistically graceful. This was constructed under the supervision of Todar Mal Khatri who was destined to play a greater part in the reign of Akbar.

The foregoing are the principal examples of Sher Shah's building undertakings which have been preserved. They are sufficient proof that he held high the torch of architecture
and in his hands it burned with unwanton brilliancy. "Sher Shah’s builders possessed a natural faculty for producing buildings according to need, and at the same time making them into stately works of art."\textsuperscript{9}

Badaoni and other writers are critical and accuse Sher Shah of wanton callousness in destroying old cities to found new ones after his own name. "But if we carefully follow the sites of his new cities, we find that he did so only to remove the old cities -- which had lost their importance as well as healthiness by the shifting of the rivers on whose banks they were situated --- to more suitable places and nearer to water. The choice of Rajmahal and Patna to be the capitals of Bengal and Bihar respectively shows his excellent judgement."\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Qanungo, Sher Shah, p.404.