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SUBTERRANEAN SPACES IN ISLAMIC FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE OF THE SUBCONTINENT

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ABSTRACT

Islamic funerary architecture is a reflection of its theological framework, laden with symbolism and connection with the ideas of life, death, resurrection, and paradise. The subterranean burial chambers remain among the most evocative elements they not only represent functional necessities but also the religious tradition of underground burial, spatial expressions of introspection, humility, and transition towards the Divine through symbolic vertical hierarchy within the tomb structure.

The following research explores subterranean funerary spaces of the sub-continent, particularly from the Mughal period, such as the tomb of Emperor Humayun, Emperor Akbar and his wife Mariam-Uz-Zamani, Emperor Jahangir and his wife Nur Jahan, Ali Mardan Khanand Taj Mahal.

The aforementioned case studies intend to illustrate that the underground burial spaces were not incidental but rather private spaces to perform rituals or mourning, and central to articulating some critical Islamic eschatological concepts such as barzakh—the intermediary realm between death, resurrection on the day of Judgement, and finally the promise of paradise and Divine blessing. The idea of binary opposition between subterranean and above-ground spaces in funerary architecture—light and darkness, expansion and contraction of spaces are also important conceptual markers. By focusing on the Mughal period, the research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on symbolism in subterranean funerary architecture, and advocates for a more sustained engagement with the subterranean space for religious, and spiritual meaning.

By positioning the research within a broader comparative framework, the research also highlights how the Islamic spaces resonate, or diverge from other funerary traditions across other religions or geographies. Through a comparative study, the research intends to distinguish the Islamic funerary architecture not alone in terms of form, but in its conceptual orientation and theological depth as well.

Keywords: *Islamic architecture, Subterranean burial spaces, Theological and eschatological symbolism, Comparative funerary traditions, Mughal tombs..*

INTRODUCTION

Symbols as per Carl Jung implies something that is vague and unknown and it has an unconscious dimension that is not clearly understood or defined. It is primarily a psychic event and psychological requirement of the mind to define something that is beyond the grasp of reason. (Jung, 1988 p. 20-21) Traditionalists and perennial philosophers like Rene Guenon, Titus Burkhardt, and Martin Lings have taken a rather different view of symbolism—connecting the unconsciousness to super-consciousness and cosmology, where those truths that are difficult to communicate, can take the form of symbolism, which can have multiple interpretations, depending on the capacity of the audience. Furthermore, symbols in this case also become a means for connecting lower reality to

higher realms of meaning, which is impossible to achieve through direct language. Rene Guenon, a famous metaphysician, defines symbol as sacred science in his book titled, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, which is contrary to the philosophy of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, suggesting that all things in hierarchical order are connected through universal harmony and principal unity (Guenon, 1995, p. 12).

As traditionalists describe, symbolism is like a ladder, a way to connect lower reality to higher reality, which in turn contains everything that is in lower reality (Smith, 2005, p. 33), thus making symbols an over-arching, potent, and positive when compared to the psychologists approach. Similarly, Ibn Arabi and Plato consider lower planes of reality as symbols of higher reality (Sayers, 2024, p 7).

The concept of symbolism has been further discussed in detail by Christian Lange in his book *"Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions"* (Lange, 2017, p. 14). According to him, the Western intellectuals look at the aspect of imagination in Islamic Eschatology with suspicion and mostly focus on symbolic aspect, but ignore the attempt to imagine something that is unimaginable through the faculty of "*takhayul*" (imagination). This idea of transcendence and imminence can only be achieved through symbolism, allegory, metaphor and most importantly through imitation and analogy, as what is below is the image of what is above. This concept is further complemented by an example from a Quranic verse that focuses of proximity between man and God through analogy.

"*Indeed, It is We ˹Who˺ created humankind and ˹fully˺ know what their souls whisper to them, and We are closer to them than ˹their˺ jugular vein.*" Quran (50:16)[1]

Subterranean Structures

Subterranean structures are found in nature in the form of mines and caves, which are either contained or part of an intricate network of underground spaces, connected through naturally carved-out tunnels. This comes in the domain of geology, however, in the context of manmade structures, archaeology is interested in discovering and studying these historical structures to find clues about history and civilizations that are buried underground. There is a close link between archaeology and psychology, as both attempt to understand and discover the hidden, the buried—through progressive uncovering which is primarily a regressive inquiry (Fauvelle, 2017, Section 2). The famous psychologist—Sigmund Freud designed his office for psychotherapy on the concept of the Egyptian tomb of King Tutankhamun. (Schroeder, 2020, p. 1)

The floor plans of Freud's office and the Egyptian tomb reveal that each space's external doors remained sealed. Freud's office and the Egyptian tomb appear to be closed-off containers that significantly contributed to psychic and spiritual transformations, respectively. Each space was defined by its external, closed-off form and internal transformative function. These characteristics resonate with the contemporary psychoanalytic active container framework. (Schroeder, 2020, p. 1)

Here, it is important to note that in Freud's writings, the unconscious is often "*ignorant of time, conserving its objects like an Egyptian tomb*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 106). Much like the sealed-off Egyptian tomb, the office's "*psychic force field*" appears to have been reinforced by physical walls and closed doors (Schroeder, 2020, p. 4). On the other hand, phenomenologists are also inspired by the experiential aspect of subterranean structures. Gaston Bachelard notes, "*As for the cellar, we shall no doubt find uses for it. It will be rationalized and its conveniences enumerated. But it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths*" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 18)

While talking about the topo-analysis and symbolism of cellar and tower (Bachelard, 1994, p. 18), Gaston Bachelard in his book *Poetics of Space* discussed the idea of "Cellar and Tower" as two opposing forces—the cellar being dark, hidden, mysterious, and a symbol of the unconscious, while the tower being elevated, rational and symbol of clarity and consciousness.

Subterranean levels in geological terms refer to earth, fire, lava, water, and wells. In a sense, the subterranean structures have auras, and experiential aspects that are related to places of silence, isolation, meditation, mystery, depth, hidden natural and psychic forces, and death itself. Prince Dara Shikoh in his book *Sakinat-ul-Auliya* (c. 1655) mentions Hazrat Syed-ul-Taaifa, who said *"We talk about wisdom in sardabs* (cellars) *and tah-khana* (basements),

[1] https://quran.com/qaf/16

but Shibli talked about these things on the minbar (pulpit) *and revealed it to everyone"* (Shiko, 2018, p 58).

Descriptions of Paradise in the Quran are of a place under which rivers flow. The idea of subterranean structures in the Quran is presented in Quran.

"*[The youths said to one another], And when you have withdrawn from them and that which they worship other than Allah, retreat to the cave. Your Lord will spread out for you of His mercy and will prepare for you from your affair facility."* Quran (18:16) [2]

"[Mention] when the youths retreated to the cave and said, Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance." Quran (18:10)[3]

Arabic word *Al-Kahf* means "a big cave" or "house dug in the mountain". It is to be noted that the words "withdrawn", and "retreat" have been used.

Funerary practices are an integral part of human culture. From ancient civilizations to our modern contemporary societies, funerary rituals reflect the beliefs and values of different cultural traditions. Among the funerary traditions, burial practices and consequently, spaces remain the most enduring articulations of belief in human culture. Through archeological expeditions, burial is determined to be among the earliest of human practices. There is evidence of even Neanderthal graves that date back to 130,000 years (Mark, 2009). In Islam, burial is rooted in the belief of returning to one's origin.

"From the earth We created you, and into it, We shall return you, and from it, We shall bring you forth once more" Quran (20:55)[4]

The aforementioned verse encapsulates the circular nature of life. Creation, dissolution, and eventually resurrection, while maintaining the sanctity of our time on earth as a medium of spiritual transformation. As humble as it is, Islamic funerary architecture often exceeds a simple burial in the soil of the body. Particularly in the Timurid tradition and Mughal era, the departed are not only buried but are placed in meticulously constructed subterranean chambers. Spaces are adorned, and mostly inaccessible to the public—as if to hide the paradox of temporality of life and the majestic life of the deceased king, and are charged with a theological significance. The objective of the following study is to examine, if burial is the return of the body to Earth, then what necessitates the design of subterranean spaces and their relation to above-ground spaces, that are meant to be visited, experienced, and remembered.

Islamic Architecture and Subterranean Structures

In Islamic architecture, the subterranean tomb is not merely a container for the departed but a threshold between the temporal and eternal, earth and heavens. Accordingly, to Islamic eschatology, death is the initiation of the journey into *barzakh*, an intermediate space where the soul is awaiting resurrection (Archer, 2015, p. 2). The journey to the underground and subterranean spaces has different symbolism in cultures, and represent various concepts related to *barzakh*, underworld, or hidden forces of nature. The idea of concealment can also be explained by the following example:

Diggy Kalyanji Temple is located south of Jaipur, Rajasthan. On the accounts of people who visited the shrine (Khan, 2002, p. 26), 15 to 20 years ago, it was a place where devotees of the mysterious Sufi saint were both Hindu and Muslims. There were also icons of Hindu Folk Deity alongside and local priests were taking care of the shrine. However, the shrine was eventually taken over by Hindu Trust—the access to the underground area was closed off and a new Hindu temple was built on top of it. In this case, the research suggests a strategy of concealment, as practiced by Shia and Ismaili communities under the circumstances of religious and state oppression. But after a while, people forgot about the presence of the saint's grave. The building is now called Brahmanical Temple. However, after the shrine was abandoned, disasters took place in the town. Hindu Priests realized the sacredness of the saint and decided to visit (twice a day) the underground grave chamber and carry out various rituals. Further, they also erected a rectangular enclosure on the ground floor, around a symbol of Shiva so that no one steps in the demarcated area under which the grave of the saint is located. In this case, the basement became a place of concealment, where the followers of the saints opted to hide their true religious identities.

Silent and dark, the underground burial chamber evokes a state of suspension and contemplation in Islamic funerary architecture in the Sub-Continent. Of course, in funerary architecture, there is grandeur, majesty, elements of power display, and an aura of unprecedented splendor (Preston and

[2] https://quran.com/al-kahf/16
[3] https://quran.com/al-kahf/10
[4] https://quran.com/qaf/16

Preston, 2007, p. 159). Further, funerary architecture keeps memory alive for the public, through rituals, and commemoration of the deceased's life values, and provides legitimacy to the proceeding rulers. But the space does resonate with something deeper in the visitor. In a way, these chambers are not only meant for the departed alone, they become a space of dialogue with the living as well. The visitors descend physically, mentally, and spiritually into this space where the worldly hierarchies are suspended through a downward journey usually through dark spaces or tunnels, that are generally in contrast to the majestic structures on top. This dual function is what sets the Islamic subterranean funerary spaces apart from other burial traditions, while burial in Islam is universally practiced in-ground, the accessible underground chambers that encapsulate it, add another layer of meaning to it. The chambers emphasize silence, minimize distraction, and humble the visitor, while exposing them to the actual and final resting place of the royalty, reflecting two core Sufi concepts of *fana*—the annihilation of self, *baqa*, and finally Divine Mercy—the subsistence of self (Murata, 2018). Many Mughal tombs have two to three levels, containing the actual grave on the ground floor or in the cellar, followed by graves or the cenotaph on the ground floor, and then finally another cenotaph on the top floor, which is open to the sky, and is usually exposed to both sun and moonlight. Symbolizing Divine proximity and mercy, especially on the day of resurrection and Judgement. This can be seen in the dome-less tombs of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1613), Itmad-ud-Daula (1628), Emperor Jahangir (1637), and Queen Nur Jahan (1645). In the context of Gaston Bachelard's duality of cellar and tower, the former, in the case of Mughal funerary architecture represents what is hidden and concealed, while the latter represents the symbolism and aspirations of proximity to the heavens and Divine benevolence, as both sun and moon symbolizes active and passive forms of Divine light.

This polarity of the actual grave and cenotaphs at one or multiple levels is also related to the sanctity of the grave. For instance, in the case of Akbar (r. 1556-1605), the grave was desecrated by Jaats in 1688 and the tomb of Nur Jahan (d. 1645) was plundered by Sikhs in the 19th century. The idea of concealment of the actual grave may also be related to avoiding the desecration by enemies, thus fulfilling both functional and conceptual requirements.

In contrast, Christian funerary architecture, particularly in the form of crypts, emphasizes continuity and memory a bit differently. In the Christian scripture of New Testament, such as Corinthians 15:45-44 states, *"The body is sown perishable, it is raised imperishable,"* hence, the belief in the resurrection is re-affirmed. The word 'crypt' has its origin in the Greek language meaning 'hidden' or 'secret' but the modern use of this term refers to a chamber beneath the church floor (Johan Redin, 2011, p. 186). Hence, the crypts are burial places that house caskets, built to preserve the sanctity of life, even after death as some sacred geography of the church is extended to it. Hidden from plain site, but always present as a layer of history underneath a spiritual geography.

Moving in an entirely different direction is the Zoroastrian funerary practice. As described in the religious text of Avesta, the bodily remains of an individual after death are possessed by the demon and is defiled by it (Hintze, 2017, p. 20). Hence, any contact between the earthly elements is prohibited as the body is transported to the 'Tower of Silence' where it is consumed by scavengers such as vultures. The underlying reasoning here prioritizes the preservation of earthly elements as it protects this sacred space from the impurity of death. Essentially an inversion of the Islamic principle of returning to what human beings have been created with.

Lastly, ancient Egyptian tombs offer another line of reasoning. They are primarily designed as eternal homes for the soul and aim to preserve identity and ensure passage to the afterlife (Dodson, 2014, p. 1). Here, the underground space is not intended to humble or dissolve the self, but to preserve it until resurrection. These tombs are further inscribed, full of objects, preserving a spatial grandeur as well, the tombs long for permanence. Quite in contrast to the Islamic concept of impermanence.

In the Christian context, crypts serve as sites of veneration and remembrance emphasizing continuity and sacred presence. On the contrary, Zoroastrian sky burials prioritize ritual purity and cosmological harmony. The Egyptian tombs emphasize bodily preservation and material continuity in the afterlife, which is quite in contrast to the Islamic notion of spiritual transcendence and fragmentation of the body.

Within the aforementioned theological spectrum, the Mughal period offers a rich context for inquiry as it has given incredible forms to such ideals. The subcontinent inherited both Hindu, Persian, and

Central-Asian architectural traditions, The research explores iconic subterranean burial spaces of the Mughal period as deliberate, spiritually inspiring architectural designs, and with a comparative lens, it intends to highlight what makes these spaces distinct. Particularly beyond form and function, the study explores the Metaphysical aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The Islamic funerary spaces and Mughal architectural traditions have received considerable attention in South-Asian scholarship but the subterranean burial spaces remain quite underexplored. Especially when it comes to the physical and conceptual relationship of such spaces with the rest of the tomb structure. The research intends to address that gap through a desk-based methodology grounded in a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources along with site-based insights from surveys and documentation in Lahore.

Some seminal work in the area that has proven to be the bedrock of this research include Catherine Asher's *Architecture of Mughal India* (1992), Ebba Koch's *The Mughal Empire from Jahangir to Shah Jahan* (2019), and Samina Qureshi's *Lahore: The City Within (1988).* Asher offered a comprehensive account of the symbolic and stylistic evolution of Mughal tombs, yet focus on surface geometry and imperial semiotics have left the significance of subterranean spaces by and large unexplored. Koch has studied some of the Mughal iconic architectural spaces and has interpreted the layout and ornamentation as paradisical metaphors. So, building upon her work, perhaps there is space to interpret the subterranean spaces as spiritually resonant ones too. Meanwhile, the Vandals' meticulous documentation of Lahore's heritage has emphasized urban memory but it does not explore the theological and spiritual dimension of such spaces too.

The research has been structured with a comparative and interpretive approach. Instead of drawing equivalence, the comparative lens highlights key distinctions across other traditions such as the Christian crypts, Zoroastrian sky burials, and ancient Egyptian tombs. In addition, the research expands on close reading of foundational theological texts, architectural histories, conservation reports, and site-specific insights documented by public bodies such as the Walled City of Punjab Authority, the Department of Archaeology, and independent researchers working at credible academic institutions. The aforementioned sources, along with site visits have offered valuable experiential dimensions to the subterranean burial spaces. Through the integration of text, architecture, and comparative sources, the study positions Islamic subterranean tombs not merely as structural choices, but as symbolic voids, mediating between presence and absence, visibility and transcendence.

The Tomb of Akbar and Marium-Uz-Zamani – Sovereignty, Syncretism, and Sacred Descent

Perhaps the most celebrated of rulers from the Mughal empire have been Emperor Akbar. He was the third Mughal ruler and was only 14 years of age when he ascended the throne of his father—Humayun. Akbar's reign was close to 50 years from 1556-1605 with a spectacular reputation for fostering inclusivity, religious diversity, and cultural consolidation (Sanjay Shrivant, 2013, p. 17). Today, his tomb rests on the outskirts of Agra, and the location was selected by Akbar himself but the grand mausoleum was completed by his son Jahangir in 1613. In hindsight, the mausoleum has stood as one of the most ambitious projects of the empire, with its brazenly unconventional form, symbolism of heavenly palace and Solomon's throne (Zver, 2013, p. 6, 8). Located a couple of kilometers away, is the tomb of his wife—Mariam-Uz-Zamani, and in comparison, it is slightly restrained in form but rich in symbolic expression. In unison, the two structures echo the legacy of their reign, sovereignty, and the subtle meaning of burial in Islam.

The mausoleum of Emperor Akbar occupied the central axis of a *chahar-bagh* layout garden, emulating the Quranic vision of paradise in a four-fold layout. The spatial order however, subverts the traditional approach and unlike Humayun's or Shah Jahan's burial spaces, Akbar's tomb does not host a central dome. On the contrary, the geometry is a pyramid composition with receding floors that consolidate into an open pavilion (Khan A., 2019, p. 183). This particular downward receding movement is quite reflective of Akbar's very personal theological understanding, spatially and symbolically of imperial magnanimity and spiritual humility.

At the core of the mausoleum lies the actual burial chamber of Akbar, in a sunken subterranean vault that is only accessible through narrow passages. The underground space remains unadorned, silent, and

austere as it echoes material simplicity and stands in contrast to the grandeur of the mausoleum above, especially, the top terrace marble terrace, which contains Akbar's cenotaph, exposed to the atmosphere, the sun, and the moon. This concept of vertical hierarchy is incomplete without lower cenotaphs and graves. The lower chambers might have been adorned in the past, but due to the effect of time, neglect, and vandalism, there are few remains left of actual decoration.

On the other hand, perhaps lesser known but equally significant, is the tomb of his wife Mariam-Uz-Zamani, his wife and mother to Emperor Jahangir. She was quite a prominent figure in the Mughal court presents a contrarian perspective with an absence of domes, minarets, or any opulent details, the tomb is quite humble in its form with a central courtyard and modest chambers around it (Nath, 1994, p. 399, 401). The garden pavilion was converted into the tomb, after her death by her son Jahangir. Here too, lies a subterranean chamber that is the actual burial space accessed by stairs and a corridor—reinforcing the concept of spiritual submission and humility, not only reflected by the scale of space, but also low light levels. The nine-fold open pavilion plan in a garden setting, in contrast to the cellar creates a polarity. A light shaft was created within the tomb to bring some light inside the cellar, which is subtle as compared to the light on the ground floor, coming from all directions.

When coupled, Akbar and Mariam-Uz-Zamani's burial spaces form a dialectical pair where one is assertive, but grounded is the reflection of sovereignty exercised through spiritual intentionality. The other is humble but resolute, and it reflects the dignity of imperial womanhood. Both mausoleums feature a subterranean burial chamber that is a spatial metaphor for dissolution and return to the Divine. In the theological context of Islamic funerary spaces, the transition and quiet descent into the burial chamber is not just to provide privacy but a symbolic surrender—all earthly hierarchies and opens up for contemplation instead of commemoration. May it be the emperor who embodied the ideals of plurality, or the empress who reimagined the empire and led by example, both returned to a sacred depth where only dissolution and the Divine remain.

The Tomb of Jahangir and Nur Jahan – Power, Patronage, and the Afterlife

Located in Shahdara, in the outskirts of Lahore, the mausoleum of emperor Jahangir is quite a compelling expression of Mughal funerary architecture where one can observe an intersection of imperial magnanimity and eschatological symbolism. The tomb was constructed under the reign of Jahangir's son Shah Jahan, between 1627-1637, and it marks an unmistakable departure from earlier traditions by emphasizing symmetrical elements, floral surface ornamentation while retaining the spiritual language of hosting sub-terranean burial chamber. In the popular discourse, particular attention is paid to the impressive decorations on the facades, the pietra dura panels, and the expansive *chahar-bagh* layout (Zaman, 2024, p. 601). Scholars have considered the work on sarcophagus of the tomb to be among the finest surface decorations in the world (Khan, 2018, p. 56). The spatial arrangements reflect Jahangir's refined sensibilities and his appreciation for nature, arts, and architecture. Though his reign was brief from 1605-27, his taste is etched on the surface of his mausoleum with floral motifs, inscriptions laid with lapis lazuli and marble, with evenly proportioned symmetrical elements that emulate the Quranic expressions of paradise (Mehdi, 2021, p. 6). Nevertheless, underneath the impressive visual poetry is a quiet reinforcement of Islamic concepts of *barzakh*—the in-between realm where the soul awaits Divine judgment. In his memoir, *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri*, the emperor is found to be often immersed in the nature of spirituality, fate and destiny. (Beveridge, 2005, p. 9, 209).

On the other hand, the tomb of Jahangir's wife Nur Jahan, then named Meher-un-Nisa (Schuster, 2017, p. 32), stands as a peculiar yet significant expression of Mughal architecture, particularly under female patronage. Nur Jahan wielded exceptional political influence as the last great matriarch of the Mughal empire, during the rule of her husband Jahangir from 1577-1645. Located near the tomb of her brother Asif Khan and the mausoleum of Jahangir, her tomb personifies her Persian heritage and her understanding of art and architecture. (Findly, 1993, p. 218).

Ostensibly, Nur Jahan's tomb is immensely modest, unlike the ones commissioned for the Mughal emperors. Sparsely ornamented red sandstone, and lacking any soaring domes, the is an embodiment of humility. However, the visual restraint, only

accentuates the symbolic depth of the site, particularly the subterranean burial chamber. The grave beneath is not accessed by any prominent staircase but through subtle architectural cues, in a way reinforcing her spiritual humility and a lack of desire to gain centrality, in contrast to her politically assertive life (Zia-ud-Din, 2012, p. 197). Here again, we find the architecture to stand as a metaphor for annihilation *fana* and Divine unity *tawhid*, with humility.

One can remark that Nur Jahan's tomb is essentially a repetition of Jahangir's tomb, only half the scale and without the minarets (Lal, 2018, Chapter 15, p. 10), asserting her distinct taste, humility, and influence from Persian architecture and design. Nur Jahan was born to a Persian noble family, and scholars have credited the uplift of Mughal architecture entirely to her. In her tomb specifically, the emphasis on enclosure, symmetry, and inward orientation in the layout is a reflection of the Persian concept of Walled-Paradise. In addition, the grave is lowered in a vertical axis that adds a spatial order as the tomb is concealed below ground and the surface is left open for prayer and contemplation. It is important to reiterate that that the burial space that visitors can see today with the cenotaph, is not the real burial site, it is rather below the ground and can only be accessed by tunnels.

The defining feature of Nur Jahan's tomb, in comparison to her male counterparts, is not ornamentation or scale, but rather intent. While the emperors' tombs served dynastic purposes, such as projection of authority, securing legacy, and a display of imperial ideology, Nur Jahan's tomb is quite modest and inspires introspection. On the other hand, Nur Jahan's tomb does not assert dominance but rather ephemerality, with austere material choice, restrained calligraphy, and two modest cenotaphs of Nur Jahan and her daughter, Ladli Begum, buried next to her (Findly, 1993, p. 287). Following the death of Jahangir and political turmoil thereafter, Nur Jahan may be left with fewer resources, but the austerity certainly resonates with the eschatological ideals of Islam. The actual graves in Nur Jahan's tomb are located underground in a dark cellar, connected through the tunnels. Like other tombs, Nur Jahan's tomb was also plundered and looted by Sikhs. (Rashid, Ashraf, and Sherwani, 2022, p. 91). Most of the tunnels to both underground grave chambers were sealed in the British era. In the case of Nur Jahan's tomb, there are also four windows in the underground chamber, from where the first and last ray of light enters from the East and the West side. During the Summer and Winter equinox, the rays of light penetrate deep inside the long shafts, illuminating the tomb chamber, but the actual coffins of both Nur Jahan and Ladli Begum were hung with chains from the roof. Afraid of the dark, Nur Jahan had willed that her grave should always receive natural light. There are windows on every side of the underground room, bathing the tomb with sunlight at dawn and dusk. The epitaph on her grave is melancholic in tone: "*On the grave of this poor stranger, let there be neither lamp nor rose. Let neither butterfly wing burn nor nightingale sing.*"

Further, there is much debate (Nath, 1994, p. 427). on the possibility of a cenotaph on the roofs of Jahangir and Nur Jahan's tombs, which reinforces the idea of vertical hierarchy, changing light condition from cellar to the roof, in case of Nur Jahan's tomb) and ground floor to the roof in case on Jahangir's tomb.

In summary, there is a horizontal and vertical transition between inside and outside; from darkness to the light. However, the idea of death, mortality, and immortality has probably been symbolized by the first and the last rays of light coming from small openings in the wall. In both cases, there is a clear polarity between what is above and below ground. Further, in the case of Nur Jahan's tomb, the journey through tunnel adds another dimension to the transition, in which a narrow dark place opens up to an underground chamber with only hints of outside light.

The Mausoleum of Ali Mardan Khan – Imperial Service and Solitude

One of Mughal era's less frequented funerary sites is the mausoleum of Ali Mardan Khan, in Lahore. Even today, in its undermaintained form, it serves as a poignant reminder of imperial service with the quiet dignity of subterranean burial. Ali Mardan Khan belonged to a reputable aristocratic family of Kurds, before coming to India (Khan, 1983. p. 200). During his service, he played a pivotal role in infrastructural and hydraulic development of the Mughal empire, particularly during the reign of Shah Jahan. He was regarded as an excellent engineer and his contributions include the canal systems of Lahore as well (Rehman, 2019, p. X). Ali Mardan's tomb, his last resting place however speaks of a solemn withdrawal, in contact to his worldly accomplishments and services.

Today, Ali Mardan Khan's tomb rests in a fragile and relatively austere surface structure within the remains of a *chahar bagh*—the four-fold garden layout (Jr., 2011. p. 202). However, the modest dome is house to a subterranean burial space that embodies a fusion of Persian architectural traditions and Islamic metaphysical notions. The spatial order of the tomb is quite similar to other Persian precedents, where the underground burial is a preference for both symbolic, and practical reasons as it provides a concealment from the worldly gaze, preserves it from desecration, and provides proximity to the earth as a medium to connect with the Divine. Ali Mardan Khan's subterranean chamber in by and large kept inaccessible for casual tourists as it invites not a spectacle but contemplation. Even today, each Thursday the mausoleum is open for public and one can find oil lamps, garlands of wishes, old men sitting beside the grave—transfixed at the quality of space, and young men reading books (Rogers, 2011. p.3).

What makes the mausoleum distinct from other more public heritage sites in Lahore, such as the shrine of Data Ganj Baksh is the detachment from ritual veneration. There is no active stream of pilgrims, no commercial activity around it, and even no concerted effort from the public sector to promote it in terms of tourism. The site remains largely obscure to the general population interested in Lahore's spiritual geography, and the obscurity in turn is precisely what amplifies the quality of the space—maintaining solitude and allowing one to contemplate.

In the contemporary landscape of Lahore, Ali Mardan Khan's mausoleum contributes not only the to the built heritage legacy of Mughal era but also to the spiritual geography. Its obscurity, simplicity and depth of the subterranean space articulates death as withdrawal and not as disappearance. It is a reminder of purposeful descent into our origin, where the material is relinquished and union is made with the eternal.

The Tomb of Humayun – Geometry of Paradise

Located in Delhi, the tomb of the second Mughal emperor Humayun stands as among the very first notable work of Mughal funerary architecture in the subcontinent. The tomb was commissioned by his wife Bega Begum in 1571, and it essentially introduced the Persian architectural elements in India, particularly in terms of spatial and symbolic grammar (Latif, 2018, p. 288). The most prominent of those elements was the concept of a "garden tomb" where the spiritual and imperial dimensions converge.

The tomb is set within a chahar bagh plan that symbolizes the four rivers of paradise as mentioned in the Quran. The axial symmetry, water channels, and the enclosed walls emulate a paradise like microcosm. Nevertheless, it is the vertical spatial composition of the tomb that carries the deeper meaning. The cenotaph is hosted prominently in the central chamber on the ground level, but Humayun's actual burial space is underneath in a stark, unadorned, subterranean chamber.

In order to understand the spatial logic of emperor Humayun's tomb, it is imperative to underpin it with the concept of *zahir*—the obvious, and *batin*—the hidden (Banerjee, 2016, p. 268). The obvious here, is basically the assertion of imperial identity with its magnanimous dome, intricate stone screens or *jaalis*, and elaborate calligraphy. The hidden however, is the dichotomous burial space, that is sunken below the main platform, emphasizing silence and humility in the face of Divine union. The tomb was designed by the Persian architect Mirak Ghiyas Mirza and it is a blend of Timurid aesthetic sensibilities (Latif, 2018, p. 287).

In a way it reflects Humayun's life that was marked by displacement, exile and the eventual return. In hindsight, Humayun's tomb established a spatial vocabulary and theological translation into architecture that later culminated into some landmark structures such as Akbar's mausoleum and the Taj Mahal. However, much like the aforementioned case studies, it is the sunken subterranean burial chamber that remains true to the humility of Islamic funerary architecture—suspended between earth and eternity.

The Taj Mahal – Love, Death, and the Sublime Descent

Among the most iconic, or perhaps the most revered in terms of memorials in the world, is the Taj Mahal. The monument was commissioned by the emperor Shah Jahan in the memory of his beloved spouse Mumtaz Mahal (d. 1631). The Taj Mahal truly needs no introduction but for the sake of contextualizing, it is located in Agra and it was completed in 1653. Above all else, the structure is unanimously celebrated for the architectural vocabulary, material composition and opulence, and emotional resonance (Islam, 2013. p. 367). Nevertheless, here too we find that beneath the grandeur and a longing

to preserve Mumtaz Mahal's memory, lies quite a subtle but profound articulation of Islamic eschatology.

The tomb, monument to some, memorial to many, is set within a *chahar-bagh* layout as well, much like previous case studies as this layout is one of the signature statements of Mughal architecture. Floating towards the edge of Yamuna River, the central mausoleum is clad entirely with exquisite white marble as the large dome and four corner minarets echo or aspire to reflect cosmic symmetry (Danny, 2010, p. 162). On the inside is an octagonal chamber that hosts the cenotaphs of emperor Shah Jahan, and Mumtaz Mahal—adorned immaculately with pietra dura and inscriptions from the Holy Quran and ornate floral embellishments. But the cenotaphs are only symbolic and meant to preserve a memory for the visitors and it is certainly not the final burial space, contrary to what many visitors believe it to be.

The actual burial spaces are hosted directly underneath in a subterranean crypt that remains closed to the general public. Here too, like Humayun's tomb, the separation of real burial space from the ceremonial reflects the concept of outer from and the inner spirits—*zahir* and *batin*. The space above is an immensely powerful celebration of someone's memory and a display of architectural mastery, meanwhile the space beneath is a projection of humility, and spiritual retreat. One can even remark that the experience of Taj Mahal is incomplete without understanding the suspension of space and time below, where the essence of love truly unfolds.

If one explores the meaning of *fana*—the annihilation a little bit more, perhaps it can extend to love as well. Irrespective of how profound, we all have to surrender it to the Divine in the end. This contrast of love and loss, impermanence and permanence, is perhaps the most critical component of the Taj Mahal and it is remarkably translated in architecture when we compare what is open to the world, and what it secretly hosts underneath. Today, as it has been so centuries, the Taj Mahal stands a monument of eternal love, but apart from a memorial in all its architectural perfection, it is also a spatial reminder of inevitability of death and Divine submission.

In summary, all above referenced case studies show that there is a vertical transition between cellar and the sky; from darkness of the crypt to the incrementally increasing light on the ground floor and the light of the sky, either in the form of cenotaph on roof, exposed to open sky or the dome above the cenotaph on ground floor, which is also symbolic of heavens. (Preston and Preston, 2007, p. 162).

Across Faith – A Comparative Perspective on Funerary Spaces

Shaped by diverse theological imperatives and spiritual practices, the architectural manifestation of death varies among different cultures and geographies. In comparison to Islam, other traditions emphasize preservation, ritual purity, and remembrance that result in different spatial arrangements while Islam foregrounds spiritual transcendence, humility, and dissolution of the self. By locating the previously discussed case studies from Lahore within a broader framework, perhaps we can draw deeper comparative insights and highlight the convergent and divergent elements across Christian, Zoroastrian, and Egyptian funerary architecture.

In Christian tradition, particularly in Catholic and Orthodox cultures, underground crypts perform a role of continuity of the past and commemoration of sanctity. For instance, the crypts underneath Canterbury cathedral in England and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, serve not merely as burial grounds but site of veneration and pilgrimage (Gameson, 1992, p. 32). The chambers are publicly accessible, decorated elaborately, and inscribed with the names of bishops, saints, and monarchs—affirming the deceased's identity and legacy.

In theological terms, the Christian burial practices follow a doctrine of resurrection of the body. For instance, the Apostles Creed concludes with an affirmation of the resurrection of body after death (Gowan, 2003, p. 130). Hence the burial chamber serves as a host for not dissolution and decay but for the eventual reawakening of the individual. This understanding provides the context as to why care and attention is given to preservation and naming the deceased in the crypts. In contrast to Islamic burial spaces, especially subterranean, importance is given to spiritual transcendence and not to the physical to be preserved. In other words, it is the soul that is of significance and body is just a host medium and it is returned back to its origin after the soul departs.

If we look at Zoroastrian funerary practices, it takes quite a different approach and completely avoids contact with earth of the deceased. Often referred to

as sky burials, the deceased is transported to *dakhmas*—towers of silence where the body is then consumed by carnivorous birds of prey, often vultures. The theological rationale behind this practice is the regard for earth, fire, and water as sacred elements and the corpse, upon death, is considered to be ritually polluting (Huff, 2004, p. 595). In the sacred Zoroastrian scripture, the Avesta, there are detailed injunctions against burial of the dead in earth and it has to do with the belief that upon death, the corpse is possessed by *druj nase*—evil spirit, and it must not be in contact with the sacred (Mehta, 1945, p. 152). Hence, in the aforementioned context, death is not viewed as a transition towards the Divine but as material disruption that is to be managed ritually. Perhaps this practice is considered peculiar to almost every other culture, and it certainly is at odds with the Islamic funerary practice where contact with earth and burial is considered to be a return of the body to its origin.

Another practice that is worth paying attention to is the ancient Egyptian funerary architecture, one that views tomb not as a threshold, or space of transition but of permanent residence for the deceased. For instance, the tomb of Pharaohs, particularly in the valley of the kings were monumental undertakings with intricate iconography, paleography, burial goods, and even passage meant to guide the deceased through the afterlife (Wilkinson, 2016). The ancient Egyptian funerary text, *The Book of the Dead*, emphasizes that the deceased retains individuality, agency, and status even beyond death and it provides thorough details on navigating the life after death (Taylor, 2010, p. 7). Naturally, the decay of body was regarded as a threat to posthumous existence and mummification practices became central for preservation.

In comparison to the aforementioned traditions, Islamic conceptions diverge quite radically. Death is not considered an extension of life but rather a rupture, an unmaking of the self as a preparation for Divine encounter. Hence, the physical body has no enduring role per se, its decomposition is not a shortcoming of ritual, but its fulfilment. As the research has illustrated, the subterranean burial chambers, reinforce this ideology and they are not be mistaken for repositories of identity, but spatial metaphors for humility and introspection, our time on earth as a fleeting moment in the grand scheme of cosmos. Unlike the Egyptian tradition, all deceased stand on a horizontal hierarchy and only those with better character and service to others will rise above in the ranks. Therefore, even grandeur, boasting, and pride are not encouraged in Islam, and the unadorned interiors reflect that humility where as in Egyptian tradition, it is the opposite.

Despite the differences, a sacred thread of intentionality is common among all the funerary traditions of the world. It may be the underground burial, elevation of the body to the sky, or trying to maintain the deceased's status in the afterlife as it was on earth, the funerary architecture reflects any culture's deep aspiration, anxieties, and concerns about mortality. The comparative lens of this research intends to situate Islamic funerary architecture within a global spectrum to sharpen its distinction and what is may mean in comparison to other traditions. Opting for underground burials, in spaces that are hidden from plain sight and intend to be symbolic of metaphysical aspects of Islam, should not be interpreted as merely cultural or geographical preferences, as they are rather profound theological acts. It affirms mortality and transition as a core feature of faith, and uses architecture as a medium for its expression.

CONCLUSION

The basis of the research was prompted by quite simple questions: if Islam mandates a burial in earth? And why some patrons go on to construct subterranean chambers of with such intricate details and what are their relation to above ground structures, cenotaphs and changing light conditions from dark to light? As the study illustrates, the answer is lies not in any technical necessity but in theological intention. The subterranean spaces are not merely cavities but mediums of metaphysical expression. Examined through the mausoleum of Abkar and Mariam-uz-Zamani, the tomb of Jahangir, Nur Jahan, Ali Mardan Khan, Humayun and the Taj Mahal. In all the aforementioned case studies, the subterranean chambers are profoundly expressive in terms of translating Islamic eschatology into architecture. The descent of the body into a concealed and quiet depth symbolizes humility and dissolution of self, reflecting concepts such as *barzakh*, *fana* and resurrection. In effect, these spatial choices orient the visitors not towards the heavens, but inwards, towards contemplation and reflection.

Through comparative analysis, the distinction between Islamic and other funerary traditions is further highlighted. Marked by veneration and impulse to preserve continuity with the past, the

Christian crypts serve as a repository of memory and sanctity. On the other hand, Zoroastrian sky burials reject contact with earth entirely, emphasizing purity and harmony with sacred elements. Lastly, the Egyptian funerary architecture pursues an elaborate material afterlife and even preservation practice for the body. In contrast, the Islamic subterranean burial practice is quiet in its approach. It does not seek to preserve or glorify, it only holds the deceased briefly, in between. This spatial expression is the central concept of *barzakh* and it rarely makes to the foreground in architectural discourse. As the research advocates, it deserves more attention, not only as a design strategy or sensemaking tool, but as a way of rethinking the notion of sacred space itself. In addition, the research roots the aforementioned ideas in a densely urban and vibrant cultural context of Lahore, a city that is spiritually and historically significant. The case studies talked about are not idle museums, they continue to be visited and venerated by millions of people, yet their subterranean aspect remains underappreciated. Perhaps more attention is paid to the domes, facades, and gardens in the heritage literature. The research invites a reconsideration of what may be the meaning of such subterranean spaces, besides what may appear to be entirely functional reasons to others.

It is worth highlighting that in terms of methodology, the research also makes a case to approach the built space in a more nuanced manner, one that moves beyond surface description of form and function. In effect, the research intends to bridge disciplinary divides between theology, comparative traditions, and architecture, demonstrating how a single architectural typology can open up inquiry into the historic, spiritual, and immensely human understanding of life and death. Lastly, to reiterate, the Islamic subterranean burial spaces and their relation to above ground structures and cenotaphs are not incidental, they are rather central to the regional spiritual vocabulary. It reminds us that architecture is not to house the dead but it can be a medium to speak to the Divine. In the sacred depths of Lahore, these lessons continue to echo quietly, yet enduringly, beneath the earth.

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