

# THE CENTRAL ASIAN MAUSOLEUM IN INDIA

## THE TRADITION OF THE TAJ MAHAL

By H. GOETZ

THE MOST FAMOUS, most splendid monument of Indian art, the Taj Mahal at Agra, offers a rather puzzling problem to the student of art history. Is the Taj Mahal in fact a representative Indian building? I do not mean the long disproved nonsense that the Taj was built by a French or Italian architect, the rodomontade of some disappointed adventurer to credulous foreign visitors. But the architects of the Taj *were* foreigners, namely, the Turks Ustad Isa Effendi and Ismail Khan, and the form of the Taj represents a foreign tradition coming from Turkish Central Asia. The number of monuments of the same type in India is very limited; the earlier of these tombs have obviously been erected for persons who were conscious and proud of their non-Indian race, and the later mausolea were copied on the model of the Taj. Nevertheless it is impossible to doubt, at the same time, the representative Indian character of the Taj Mahal. But as the type of the Taj is Central Asian, what, then, is the essence of its Indian character? Can we trace a progressing Indianization of this foreign tradition? What was the history of the Central Asian mausoleum in India?

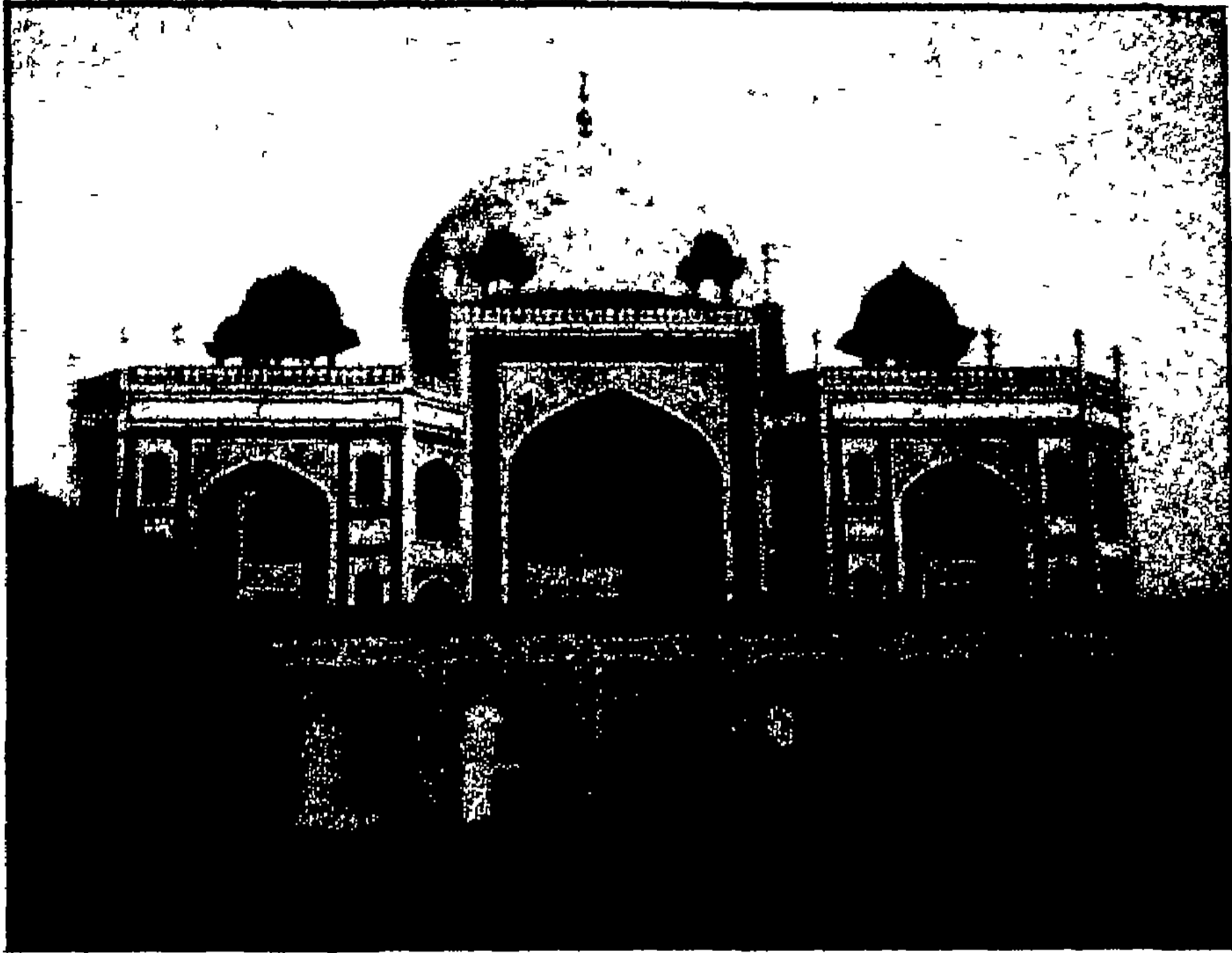
The cupola tomb is such a common feature of Muhammadan architecture that we find it in India since the early days of Muslim rule in this country. When the Mughals invaded the plains of Hindustan, it had already had a rich and variegated history, from the fine tomb of Sultan Altamish (Iltutmish) behind the Quwwat-ul-Islam Masjid at old Delhi, to that masterpiece of simple and harmonious perfection, Sher Shah's mausoleum at Sassaram. The plain quadrangular buildings of the Tughlaq times with four porches and low cupola were in the late Pathan period enriched by the Persian innovation of small additional domes on the four corners of the main structure, (Srinagar, Mandu) which were soon replaced by Indian *chhatris*. In the last phase of the Pathan style the type was further sophisticated by an octagonal or even polygonal groundplan, surrounding galleries, an increased number of *chhatris* and a somewhat higher drum under the cupola.

What we might in India call the Central Asian mausoleum, was, however, first introduced by the Mughals. This new type developed in Persia and Turkistan under the influence of Turkish and Mongol artistic

conceptions and reached its final expression under the rule of the Timurid dynasty of Samarqand and Herat. Already under the Saljuq rulers we find a new type of funeral tower in the form of a tent; under the Ilkhans it takes the shape of the Mongol yurt, and since the splendid reign of Timur-Lang the bulbous dome of Central Asia reaches its perfection. Under the late Ilkhans the cupola-crowned tower is often surrounded by the traditional big Persian porches interlinked by smaller galleries. In contrast to Pathan architecture, this bulbous cupola does not fit into the main outline of the mausoleum, but always rises like a gigantic crown above the latter.

An excellent example of the simplest and purest type of this Timurid mausoleum in India is the tomb of Asaf Khan, Jahangir's Persian minister, at Shahdara near Lahore; it has even conserved part of its wonderful cover of glazed and coloured tiles which is so characteristic for the art of late mediæval Turkistan and Persia. Even near the Taj Mahal the small tombs of the ladies-in-waiting of Mumtaz-Mahal preserve exactly the same type, in a better state of preservation, so that the characteristic small, round corner columns (evolved from degenerated minarets) can be seen, decorated with the classical Mughal red and white stone slabs of Pathan tradition.

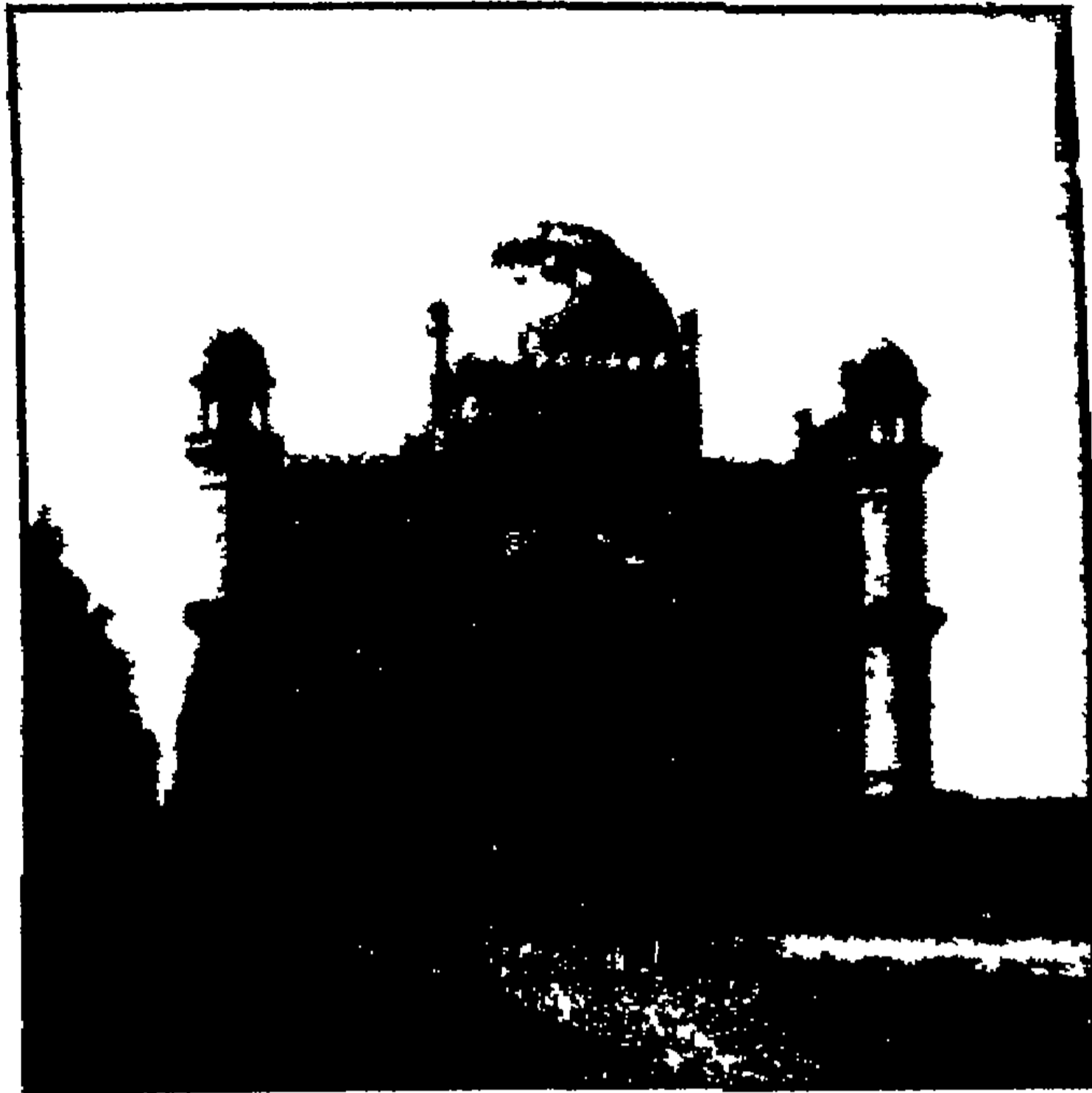
The first phase of the direct, living tradition brought from Central Asia by the Mughals is represented by the mausolea of Azam Khan near the Dargah of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, of the Emperor Humayun, of Khan Khanan to the south of the latter, of Fahim Khan to the south-east, and of an unknown person in front of the Bu Halima Garden. Only the three last are built in an unvitiated Central Asian style, the two last possessing beautiful domes of glazed blue and green tiles. The tombs of Azam Khan and Humayun, though of a Central Asian form, are decked with the rich mosaic work and stone slabs of different colours, so characteristic for the late Pathan style which was taken over into the art of the Akbar period. Most of these tombs are of the simple type already mentioned, on a quadrangular or octagonal groundplan. The mausolea of Humayun and of the Khan Khanan may, however, be regarded as the precursors of the Taj Mahal, but probably not as its models. Especially Humayun's fine tomb shows many similarities of groundplan and arrangement. But it has nothing of the concentrated compactness of the Taj; it looks rather like a conglomeration of a simple Turkistani funeral tower and four pavilions of the type of the Sher Mandal in Purana Kila (from which Humayun fell and found his death), which is to be found also on many paintings of the third quarter of the 16th century. This explains not only the rather flat-stretched outline of the gigantic structure, but also the seemingly detached place of the roof *chhatris* over the centre of these "wing pavilions". In this respect the tomb of the Khan Khanan comes much nearer to the form of the Taj Mahal, in spite of its strictly quadrangular groundplan and the archaic Pathan *chhatris*; almost its miniature replica is the small lady's tomb



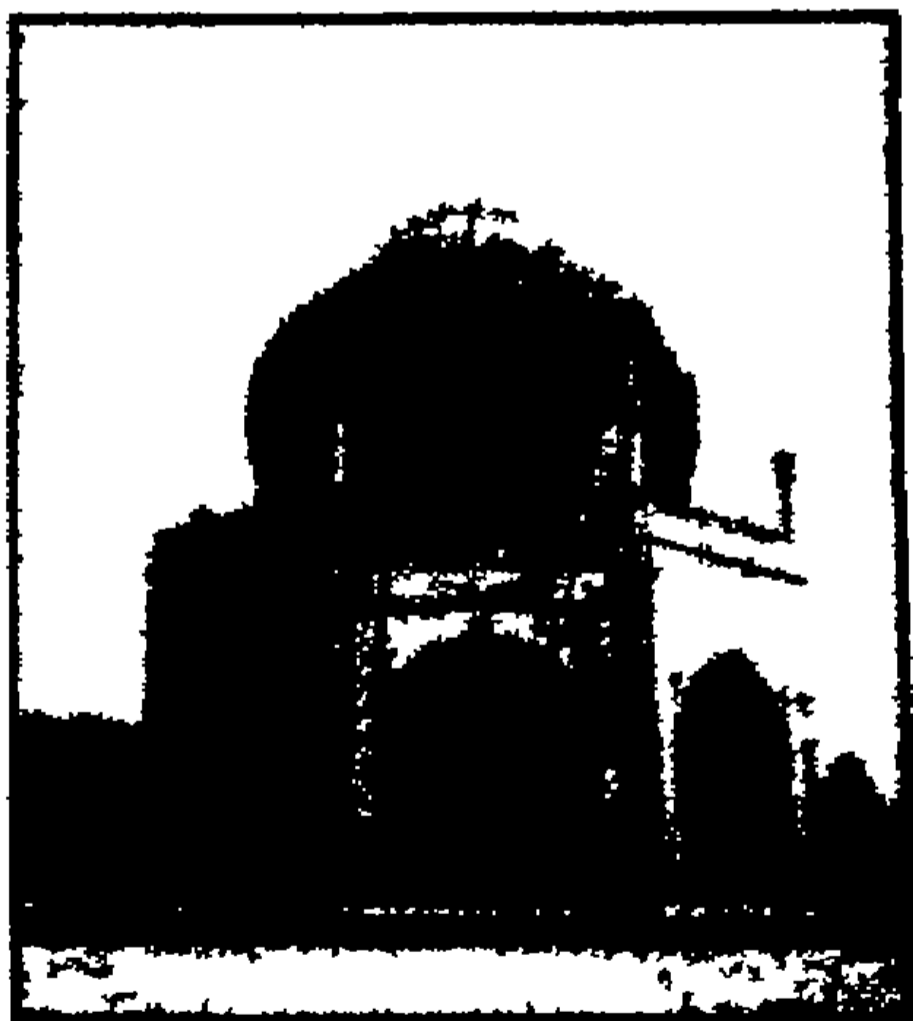
Mausoleum of Humayun, Delhi



Bibi-ka-Rauza, Aurangabad



Sufi Jung Mausoleum Lahore



Tomb of one of the Ladies-in-waiting of Mumtaz-Mahal near the Taj Mahal Agra



Asaf Khan's Tomb Shahdara near Lahore

in the garden of Humayun's mausoleum.

During the later part of the reign of Akbar and the earlier part of that of Jahangir, the Central Asian mausoleum came out of fashion because of the increasing Indianization of the Mughal civilization since the conciliation of Akbar with the Rajputs and his adoption of many Hindu manners and religious as well as artistic and literary ideals. In the later part of Jahangir's reign we have, however, a strong revival of the Persian cultural tradition so closely related with that of Turkistan. The chief exponent of these ideals was the family of the Empress Nur Jahan. Besides a return of Persian fashions in the dresses and the pictorial art of the court, there was a remarkable revival of architecture decked with glazed tiles in the Punjab during the whole 17th century; Wazir Khan's Mosque and the Dai Anga Masjid are perhaps the best known representatives of this revival. The Central Asian mausoleum first revives in Anarkali's tomb, then in the already mentioned tomb of Asaf Khan at Shahdara, and in the Chini-ka-Rauza at Agra, the tomb of the Persian *diwan* of Shah Jahan, Khan Mulla Shukrullah, erected in the same period when the Taj Mahal was under construction.

The Taj Mahal, therefore, continues a tradition already firmly established spread in the reign of Shah Jahan. But it is more than a simple continuation, it is the most splendid perfection of this tradition. Shah Jahan felt himself to be the apogee of the Turkish house of Timur, he was the second *Sahib-i-Qiran* (the first being Timur himself). It is in Shah Jahan's reign that the portrait of Timur becomes a frequent theme of Mughal painting, as well as the scene of his victory over Sultan Bayazid of Turkey, and the genealogical albums of the Timurid family. Was it, then, so extraordinary that the great mausoleum which the second *Sahib-i-Qiran* erected to the memory of his beloved queen, was drawn on the model of the monuments built at Samarqand by the first *Sahib-i-Qiran*? The more as it was a Turkish, not an Indian custom to erect suchlike big funeral buildings also for ladies.

There exists no more perfect expression of the formal ideal of the Central Asian mausoleum than the Taj Mahal, and none which at the same time is so far from the æsthetic and spiritual aspirations of the art of Samarqand. Samarqand is strong, realistic, virile, of glowing colours; the Taj Mahal, however, a grand fairy dream, feminine, clad in a chaste white. There a world-conqueror and here a pure wife and a beloved! But this contrast means more: it means also the chasm between the beginnings and the consummation of the dynasty, the apogee followed by the inevitable decline. The perfect fairy dream of the Taj is, therefore, an expression of the high-pitched cultural ideal of the court of Shah Jahan, a "secular" spirituality born out of the mystic glorification of the imperial majesty. This mystic interpretation of Mughal royalty was first to be felt in the art of the late years of Jahangir, though still as a Western fashion petted in a half frivolous manner. But under Shah Jahan it had become the central idea of an all-exacting State.

Shah Jahan was the "*roi soleil*" (epithet of Louis XIV of France) of India, surrounded by the emblems of the sun, the dragon, the lion and the bull, the representative of God on earth, surrounded by angels with all the symbols of royal omnipotence, under whose scepter the priest and the judge dispensed divine wisdom and law. The second *Sahib-i-Qiran*! It is this consciousness of the mystic task of the majesty which invests the civilization of Shah Jahan's reign with that grandeur, that undefinable spirituality and irrealism pervading even the refined luxuries of a secular court. It is this very irrealism, this very spirituality which constitutes the beauty of the Taj Mahal: the fairy-like aspect of the cool white marble with its glittering incrustation of precious stones, the absolute harmony of its proportions, the dynamism of its lines, the subtle life of light, shadow and colour.

With the Taj Mahal the tradition proper of the Central Asian mausoleum in India had reached its end. For the Taj had, in fact, become the perfect expression of the artistic ideals of Mughal India. It had set a model, but this model was no more a foreign one. Bibi-ka-Rauza, the tomb of Aurangzeb's wife, Rabia Daurani, at Aurangabad, has often been called a copy of the Taj. But there is only a superficial similarity. The artistic tendencies and human ideals which find their expression in it, are quite different. Nothing of the pure Persian design, of the quiet harmony, of the grand spirituality of the Taj; but novel forms of art belonging to the Deccan, a concentrated dynamism characteristic for the new "Mughal Baroque" style, and a sweet human intimacy. Whereas the mausoleum of Humayun represents a rather horizontal conglomeration of a central funeral tower and of surrounding wings, whereas the Taj possesses a harmonious balance of horizontal and vertical tendencies, in Bibi-ka-Rauza all the lines of the structure are concentrating on the top of the chief cupola. in the same way as in Aurangzeb's Moti Masjid at Delhi Fort. The mass of the building is pressed towards the central dome by Deccani miniature minarets, rising from quadrangular Deccani corner pillars, the roof *chhatris* have become supplementary cupolas underlining the importance of the central dome, and the chief porches are more emphasized than those of the Taj; in all the smaller cupolas a pronounced vertical orientation is obvious. On the other hand, there is nothing of the grandeur of the Taj overtowering its surrounding minarets at the end of a big garden. The smallness of Bibi-ka-Rauza, overtopped by the minarets, and its long, small garden along the central canal, flanked on both sides by parapets, create an atmosphere of personal closeness and intimacy. This intimacy is to be felt also in the exuberant decoration of the mausoleum, the tiny crenelation of the pure ogival arches (as if it were a return to the old Pathan art) and the floral stucco designs covering all the walls like charming lace-work. There is the same feminine note as in the Taj Mahal, but not the pure, almost mystical grandeur of an adored ideal, rather the sweetness of the modest wife of an austere ruler and iron general, the humanity of a humble devotion to God.

Only one other mausoleum has continued the tradition of Mumtaz Mahal's fairy tomb, that of Nawab Safdar Jang at Delhi. It obviously represents the phantastic dream of an upstart who founded his own principality in Oudh while plundering the last resources of the quickly disintegrating imperial court. For since Aurangzeb the grand mausoleum had come out of fashion with the Indian Muhammadans. Already in Bibi-ka-Rauza the influence of certain religious scruples is evident from the roof windows offering to the sun and the rain access to the open tomb under the cupola. Aurangzeb as well as his sisters were buried in simple tombs in the midst of small enclosures surrounded by white marble screens, near the *dargah* of some famous saint. The Nizams of Hyderabad and most of the rulers of Bhopal have followed his example. The reasons for this definitive giving up the great cupola mausoleum must, therefore, not be sought in the increasing poverty of India but in the field of orthodox theology. Only the Shiite nawabs of Oudh (and to some degree also those of Murshidabad) made an exception. But Safdar Jang's tomb is a rather dry imitation of the splendid earlier buildings, adapted to the æsthetic ideals of his time. There are beautiful details, but the whole is a failure, and the garden pavilions surrounding it, genuine expressions of the sophisticated court life of the late 18th century, are much better works of art than the mausoleum proper. In fact, the experiment was not repeated. For the Fyzabad and Lucknow tombs take up the tradition of the Shiite Deccan which set the model also for the tombs of the Muhammadan sultans of Mysore at Seringapatam and Vellore.

Brought to India by the Mughals, the Central Asian mausoleum was the national expression of a foreign Turkish and Persian race of conquerors in India, but in the Taj Mahal this foreign form has embodied the highest accomplishment of Mughal culture in such an unsurpassable spiritualized perfection that it became the greatest jewel of Indian art.