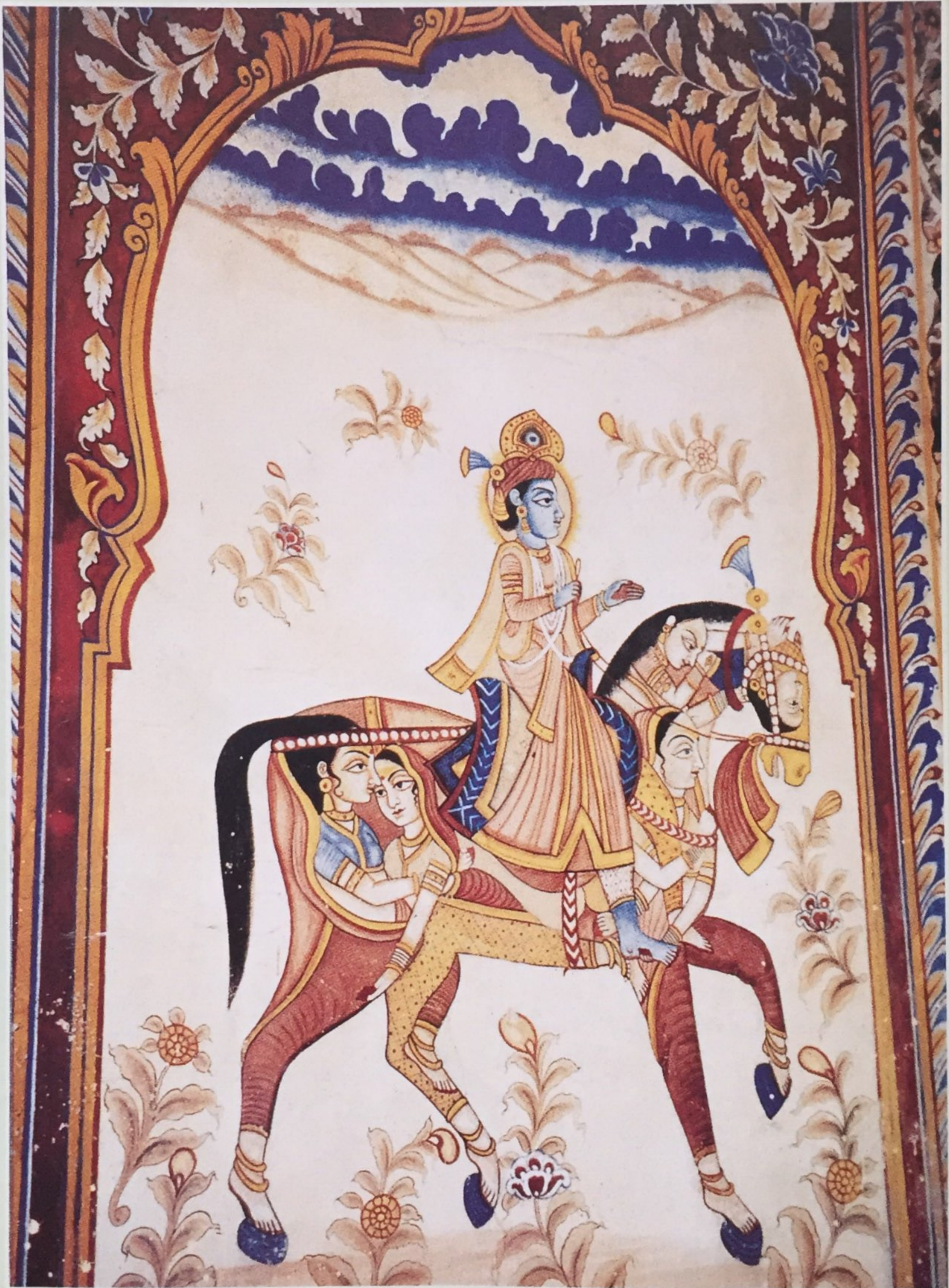


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# India Perspectives





# Sasaram

## AFGHAN LEGACY IN BIHAR

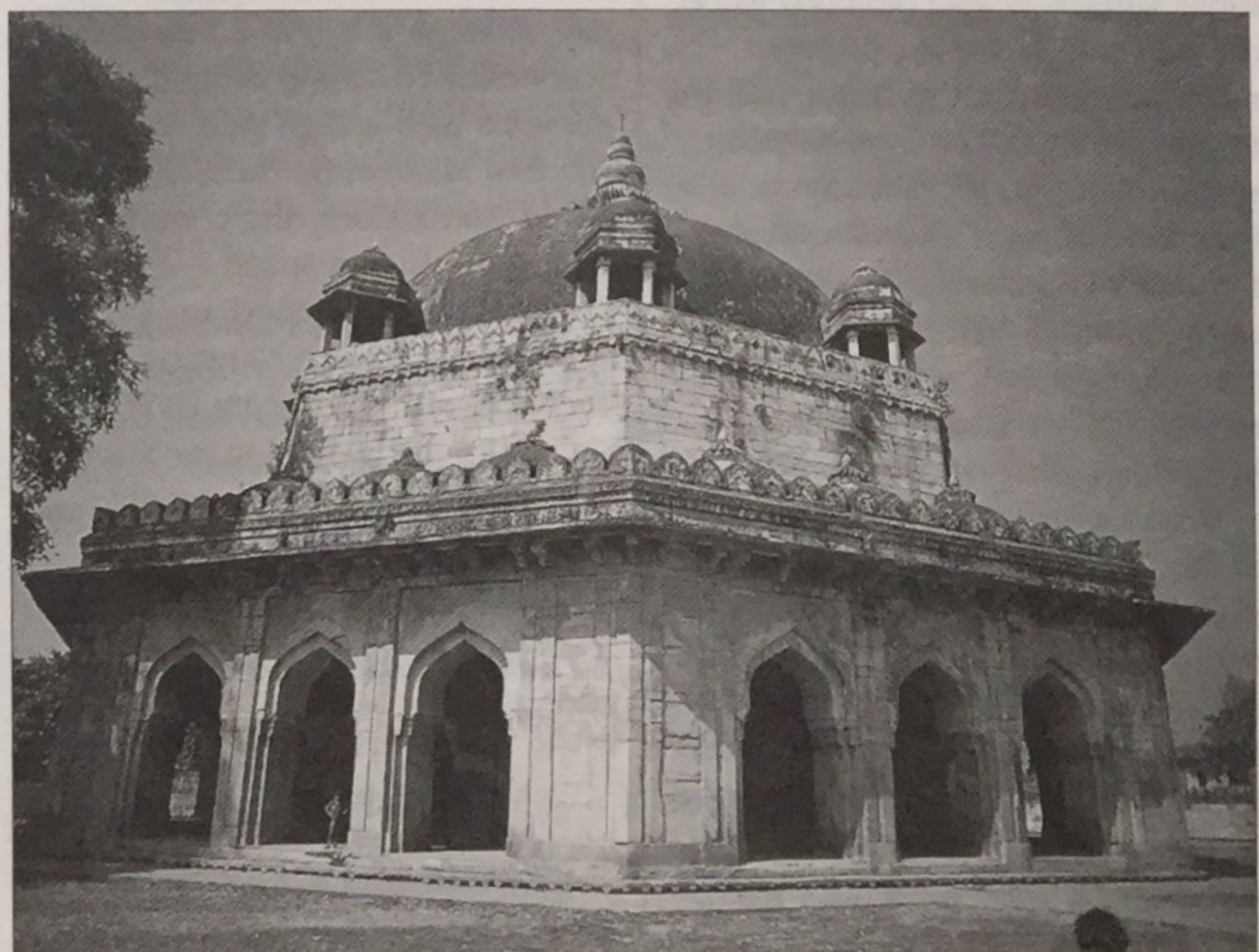
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Photographs: SHAHEEN PERVEEN

The Afghans have left behind a spectacular array of visuals that vie for attention in Bihar. Sher Shah's hometown, Sasaram, is one such veritable treasure trove of Pathan architecture. Bifurcated by Sher Shah's Grand Trunk Road, Sasaram today is bursting at seams; no less than 25,000 trucks pass by Sasaram each day. Though the rule of Sher Shah Suri lasted for only five years, his administrative acumen was visible in every conceivable branch of administration, including architecture.

The precocious funerary edifices of the Pathans reveal the architectural

spirit of Alawal Khan, the master architect. He followed the dernier cri of his times - the Lodi pattern of Delhi tombs but simultaneously introduced his ingenuity. He was first commissioned to erect the tomb of Hasan Khan Sur (Sher's father) in 1535. The mausoleum is enclosed by a high compound wall with gateways on its sides and domed turrets at the corners. Attached to the tomb are the flat roofed prayer hall and a madarsa. The main tomb consists of a large octagonal tomb chamber surrounded by a wide verandah on all the sides. Surprisingly, the monument is bereft of any plinth that seems to lower its dignity. One

Hasan Shah Sur tomb.







The Habash Khan mosque, Rohtasgarh Fort.

may dismiss these minor shortcomings when considering Alawal's experimental nature and his due correction in the next project- the tomb of Sher Shah.

Sher Shah's tomb, half a kilometer away, a progressive variant from the original model, is a monument much ahead of the embodiment of the Lodi pattern. Add to this the artificial lake, and the emerging scenic beauty attests to the grandeur of the Pathans. The tank appears to have been purpose-built solely to provide a picturesque view of the mausoleum. The multi coloured glazed tiles and painted decoration must have added to rich cast in the ripples of reflection; only traces of them are left today.

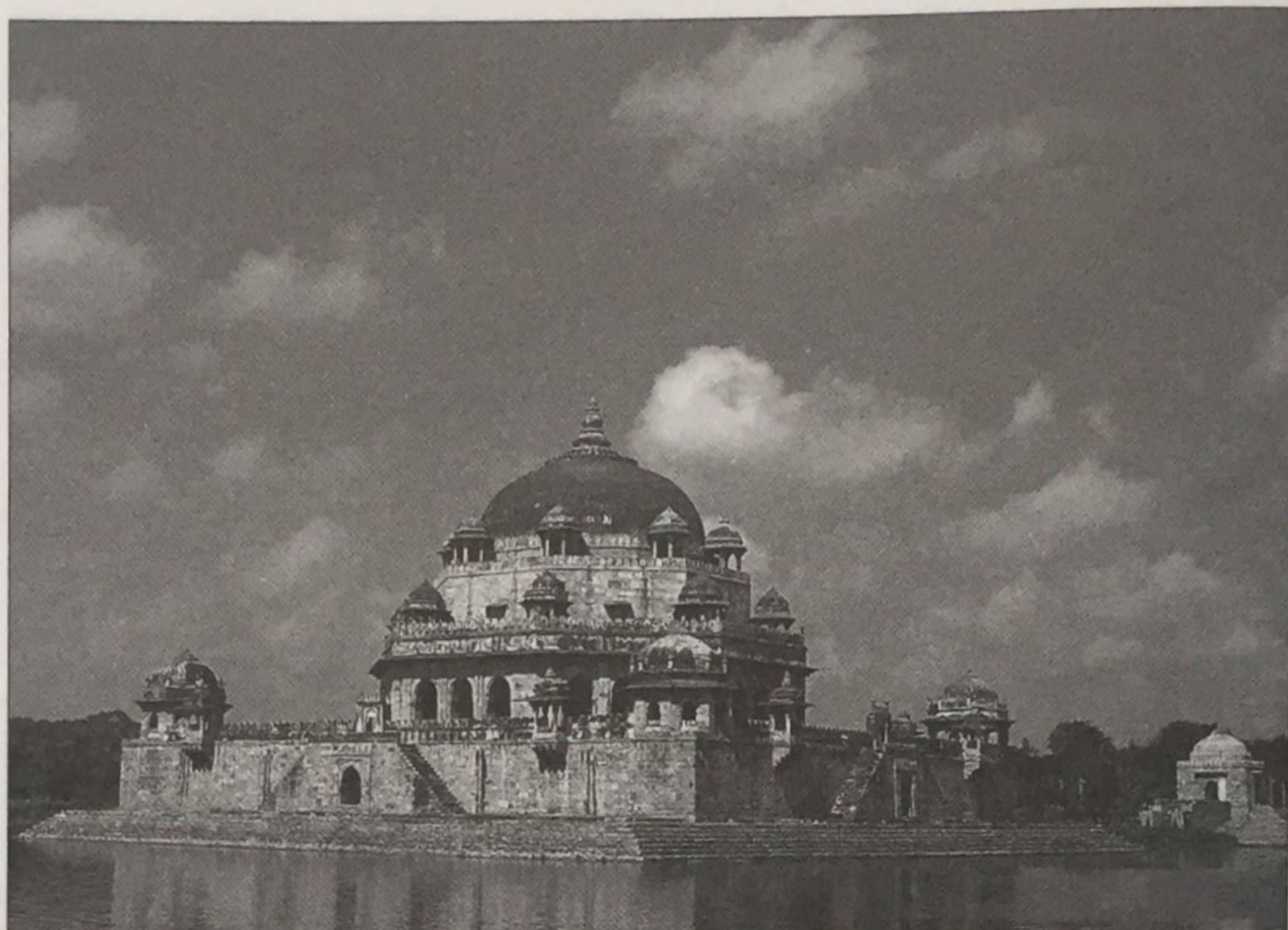
The three-storeyed mausoleum, rising to a height of 45.7 metres, was originally planned to be a typical island tomb with no access to the mainland. The guardroom or the entrance porch on the edge of the northern side of the lake, flanked by two mosques on either side, was possibly meant to provide

crew and rafts to the serious visitors willing to see the tomb proper. The perfectly symmetrical mausoleum with a well-ventilated tomb chamber is modestly plain with traces of faded inscription on the western walls. The mighty dome surpasses that of the Taj Mahal by 13 feet.

It was to this mausoleum that Sher Shah's mangled body was brought from Kalinjar where he had been grievously injured in an explosion while the final assault on the fort was being launched, and had managed to survive until the news of final victory had been brought to him. Sher Shah's untimely death halted his building activities though he had the desire to erect a number of monuments honouring his friends and foes alike. Sher Shah has been described as a stormy petrel of the 16th century, who skipped from the crest of one wave of victory to another till he met his nemesis in 1545.

From a petty chieftain's son in Sasaram he had paved his way to





The Sher Shah mausoleum.

the throne of Delhi. The secret of his power lay in the love he had for his subjects, who felt convinced that his unwearied daily labours were dedicated to their contentment and prosperity. What one admires most in Sher's principles is his determination to go to the spot, see things for himself, issue the orders, and ensure they are obeyed.

The tomb of Sher Shah's son, Salim Shah, two kilometer north-west of his tomb, had been planned on a much grander scale using the same architectural plan but the early death of the dynasty resulted in the incomplete mausoleum, still worth a visit to ascertain the improvements and innovations introduced. It was a much larger lake with eleven passages covered by stone beams. For the first time in the history of tombs we find the introduction of minars. Had the structure been completed, it would have been far more magnificent. This massive but incomplete mausoleum is a silent reminder of the sudden and tragic end of the dynasty.

On the outskirts of the town one can visit the tomb of Alawal Khan, the superintendent of buildings under Sher Shah and his son Salim Shah. The only thing of interest is the eastern gateway consisting of a double arch. In the centre of the courtyard are three small graves but surprisingly without any mausoleum. A local legend levies the charge of theft on Alawal and it is believed that he pilfered better building materials for his own tomb while he was in charge of building Sher Shah's tomb. The discovery of the theft, possibly, prevented him from embellishing his own tomb.

In less than an hour one can negotiate the uneven road to reach the strategically placed Rohtasgarh Fort. It was Sher Shah's most cherished fort, perched 1490 feet above sea level on the Kaimur hills that mark the termination of the Vindhyan range. He had acquired it when he was in revolt against his Mughal adversary, Humayun. The fort measures about four miles east to west and five miles north to south with 28 miles in





The Salim Shah mausoleum.

circumference. Abul Fazal, the Mughal chronicler, sums it up as a well defended paradise (fort) with no equal in strength and solidity and a historian like Ferishta reckons it as the largest and strongest hill fort in India.

The fort is believed to have 14 entry gates and no less than 84 practicable passages. Tourists prefer the eastern gate facing Akbarpur village at the foot of the hill. The other easy option is through Rajghat in the south. It takes one hour of arduous climbing to reach the hill top and few hours are required for exploring the fort.

Around Ghazi Gate near the northern outpost of the fort we find some monuments attributed to the Suri period. Sher Shah is believed to have entered the fort through this gate. The surrounding is replete with Muslim tombs and Rajput cenotaphs who possibly fought various battles. The earliest extant building is the beautiful white sandstone mosque- Jama Masjid. Like the Sharqi mosques, its central

dome is screened with a high curtain wall.

The Persian inscription records the builder to be Haibat Khan in the reign of Sher Shah.

The Mughals acquired the fort in 1587 and bestowed it upon Raja Maan Singh, who was appointed the Governor of Bihar. He did his own tailoring and graced the fort by building Mahal Serai, Baradari, Rang Mahal, Aina Mahal, Zenana Mahal, Diwan-I-Aam, etc within the precincts of Hathi Pol. Most of these structures are in fairly good state of preservation. Few miles east of the Mahal Serai is the Rohtasan temple dedicated to the presiding deity of the hill. Close by is the Harishchandra temple and a little distance away is the beautiful Ganesh Temple, depicting the Rajputana style of temple architecture.

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*The author is a noted travel writer.*