

A Short Survey of Stucco Decoration in the Mahābat Khān Mosque, Peshāwar

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Introduction

The Mahābat Khān Mosque (Pl. 1), “the chief congregational mosque of the city”, is located in the Andarshahr area inside the Āsāmāi Gate of the walled city of Peshāwar. It was built by Mahābat Khān Mirzā Luhrāsp, son of Mahābat Khān Zamānah Beg, governor of the “Subah-e- Kābul wa Peshāwar”, during AD 1660 and 1670 (Shah, 1993, p.151; 1994, p. 499; 1999, p. 97). The mosque, in view of its gigantic structure and sumptuous embellishment, is justifiably regarded as “ a real ornament of the city of Peshawar” (Dani, 1969, p. 175).

The decorative work of this mosque falls into three major classes:

- a. Calligraphic Specimens
- b. Painted Decoration
- c. Stucco Relief Work

The principal author has already published articles on the first two classes of the decoration (Shah, 1996, pp. 389-410; 1997, pp.91-112), we, therefore, confine here to examining decoration executed in stucco.

Stucco Relief Work

Stucco, in this mosque, is used for three main purposes:

- i. as mortar for laying bricks in courses (or as binding agent).
- ii. as plaster for covering naked bricks to get a smooth ground.
- iii. as a medium for relief work—tracery, stamped or moulded.

The first two being out of context here, we, therefore, confine ourselves to the description of the third purpose, i.e., stucco relief work. The term ‘stucco’ is “ applied to fine exterior or interior plaster work used as a three dimensional ornamentation, as a smooth plaster surface or as a wet ground for the painting of frescoes” (*Encyc. Brit.*, ix, pp. 623-4). The ingredients—usually lime, gypsum and fine sand, may vary greatly in type and amount. Stucco has been in practice since remote past and lavishly used by the Buddhists of ancient Gandhāra not only in buildings but for making sculptures as well. It was used in pre-Islamic Irān and ‘Irāq to cover the walls of palaces and temples. In the 8th century, the Muslim artisans adopted Iranian themes of stucco for decorating the early Islamic buildings. By the 11th century, it had become a popular phenomenon throughout the Near East for decorative designs on walls (Hill & Grabar, 1964, p. 74). Likewise in India and Pakistan, it was profusely used in the Mughal and late period buildings, of which the Mahābat Khān Mosque in Peshāwar is chosen for discussion. Various parts of the mosque such as the façade of the prayer-hall, the grand *mīnārs* (or towers), vestibules of eastern gateway and façade of the three gateways are all decorated in stucco in low or high relief. The entire stucco decoration is moulded, and there is not a single stamped design on any architectural component of the mosque.

Decorative motifs in stucco relief work can be divided into three categories: (1) Floral Designs (2) Geometric Patterns and (3) Architectural Forms.

FLORAL DESIGNS

The floral designs can be differentiated into various groups: Lotus Flower, Acanthus Leaf, *Gul-i-nau* Motif, Pinecone, Stucco Floral Tracery and Leafy Vases.

Lotus Flower

The lotus flower motif, pre-Islamic in origin, is portrayed here full-blown, half-blown and inverted. It is used for decorating both secular as well as religious buildings. In the Mahābat *Khān* mosque, it is shown on the spandrels of the central arch of the façade (Pls. 2, 3), the soffits of the domes in the prayer-hall (Pl. VII) and a double whorl inverted lotus on the crowns of the domes and cupolas. Miniature lotus is also depicted on pillared kiosks of the parapet and spandrels of arches in the uppermost storey of the grand *minārs*. Half lotus is shown in the centre of soffits of arched alcoves in the façade. In some soffits of the domes in the prayer-hall where this motif has collapsed due to weathering, long iron nails have appeared suspended in the plaster. It, therefore, suggests that moulded and pre-fabricated designs were fixed in wet-plaster by means of iron nails.

Incorporated into Hindu and Buddhist mythology (Rahman, 1989, p. 71), lotus— symbolising water, purity, the sun and creation (lyre, 1982, p. 21)—has been a popular motif thoroughly depicted on sculptures, buildings and in paintings of both the sects. The ancient Egyptians, Assyrians and Persians equally favoured it and frequently employed it in their temples. It is also present in the Greek and Roman decorative works.

Acanthus Leaf

This typically Greek motif has been used widely in Islamic buildings. It was first used as decorative motif by the Greeks in stone carving and metal work and, later on, adopted in a conventional form in classical architecture as a part of the Corinthian capitals. (*Encyc. Art*, 1966, p.4).

Acanthus leaf is executed on springers of domes in the prayer-hall, exterior neck of the domes, contours of arched alcoves on the sanctuary façade and the parapet of the prayer-hall.

Although pre-Islamic in origin, the acanthus has been extensively used as a decorative motif on the Muslim monuments all over in South Asia. "The acanthus, a spiny herbaceous plant, has achieved classical character in ornamental foliage and has been widely employed as an architectural decoration by different people for the ornamentation of friezes, cornices, medallions and various other features"(Chughtai, 1972, p. 25). Its earliest appearance in Gandhāra is to be seen as Corinthian capitals of pilasters of stupas and shrines as well as in painted, modelled or relief specimens. Subsequently, in the Muslim period almost every monument of the *Mughals* depicts acanthus leaf in one form or the other.

. Gul-i-nau Design

Besides its painted representations, *Gul-i-nau* design is also exhibited in stucco relief work and is confined to the façade and exterior of the grand *minārs* (Pl. 1, 2, 3). Arched entrances in the façade of the sanctuary on all their sides are elaborately decorated with this design, contained within rectangular sunk-panels. Some of them are recently painted with different flowers and leaves in black on off-white background. Each stage of the grand *minārs* is provided with horizontally placed rectangular sunk-panels filled in by *Gul-i-nau* design in stucco relief work. Either worked in stucco relief or carved in wood, this motif is also seen in secular buildings of the British period in *Peshāwar*.

Pinecone Motif

Pinecone motif is found on the corner pendentives of the phase of transition in the bays. The impostes of arches in the entrance alcoves are also decorated with floriated pinecones (Pl. 3).

Stucco Floral Tracery

The spandrels of arches in the sanctuary façade are ornamented with stucco floral tracery. Each spandrel is decorated in a low relief with a large floral plant placed in an oval or some other design, which is flanked on either side by scrolls, each containing a flower. Some sunk-panels in the prayer-hall are also executed with floral tracery work.

Leafy Vases

Contour of each arch and frame of rectangular sunk-panels in the prayer-hall and the façade are marked by moulded bands—plain or painted with stylised acanthus leaf issuing from a moulded floriated leafy-vase, placed on either side of the arch just above the dado (Pl. 8). Vases of narrow bands are generally composed of two elongated leaves, while those of broad bands are multi-petalled and shorter in size.

GEOMETRIC PATTERNS

The geometric decorative patterns executed in stucco are Honeycomb and Star Shaped Designs.

Honeycomb Design

In the Muslim architecture, honeycombing, in formation and its adequate use both as structural as well as a decorative element, remains unique. It is composed either by superimposed rows of miniature sunk-arches or other geometrical patterns.

Soffits of some arches, the *mihrab* alcove (prayer niche), corner pendentives, soffits of the dome in the central bay of the prayer-hall (Pl. 7), soffits of half-domes of arched alcoves of the façade (Pl. 3), some cornices within the prayer-hall and soffits of some squinches have been decorated with honeycomb patterns in stucco relief. Basically honeycomb (or *muqarnas*) is a section of vault, which, used in combination with other identical elements, produces a three dimensional ornamental effect scaled to any need, from vast niches or entrances to the smallest details of construction or decoration (Hill & Grabar, 1964, p.80). Prof. R. Nath comments that the honeycomb (or stalactite) was developed by the Muslim artisans, who contrived to superimpose corners by several ranks of cell like niches called *muqarnas*. In India it was used for the first time in the Qutb Minār (c.1199 AD) to support the balconies (Nath, 1978, p. 28; Brown, 1942, p.12).

Star Shaped Design

Rectangular frames of the façade alcoves show alternating square and rectangular recessed panels. The square panels are decorated with octagonal star designs in high relief (Pls. 2, 4). Each star has an eight-petalled flower in its centre and tri-lobate leaves suspended inwards from its corners (indents) painted in black. This is one of those designs providing splendour to the façade.

ARCHITECTURAL FORMS

Pilasters, Semi-Domes, Mini-Arches and Stucco Fretwork are included among the decorative scheme of the mosque.

Pilaster

This decorative element is shown at different places in the prayer-hall and alcoves of the sanctuary façade (Pl. 2, 3, 5 & 6). Each octagon in the phase of transition in some bays of the prayer-hall is provided with fluted pilasters, crowned by capitals decorated with elongated leaves. The same places in the nave also show pilasters having unproportionately thin shaft and a large ribbed capital done in stucco relief work (Pl. 5). Each corner in the square room of the nave is ornamented with a decorative fluted pilaster supported on the dadoes and crowned by a floriated capital (Pl. 6). The pilasters are now gold washed. In addition, soffit of semi-dome of the central alcove of the façade shows a series of decorative arches supported on a cornice and separated from one another by an ornamental pilaster, having a plain shaft and a ribbed capital (Pl. 3).

Semi or Half Dome

Each squinch arch of the transept is marked by a decorative semi-dome with ribs and acanthus leaf depiction at the level of the springing point placed just above the margin of the squinch arch (Pl. 5). The semi-dome also shows a floriated pinnacle.

Mini Arches or Arched Panels

Arched panels of various sizes in the prayer-hall, the façade and the entrance vestibules have been wrought in stucco plaster. Most of them, in the prayer-hall, are profusely garnished with painted designs, while those at other places are merely whitewashed. Semi-dome of the entrance alcoves of the façade also shows a row of miniature arches to support the stucco honeycomb design above (Pl. 2, 5). The grand *mīnārs* are marked by arched panels showing no decoration whatsoever.

Stucco Fretwork

Various sunk-panels on the outer face of the southern wall of the prayer-hall, overlooking the Andarshahr Bāzār, are decorated with stucco fretwork depicting arabesque and miscellaneous geometric patterns.

Significance

The effect of variegated painted beauty of the Mahābat Khān Mosque is enhanced by stucco decoration. In it, there are certain places where paintings could not be applied due to one reason or the other. Stucco designs blended with paintings have greatly added to its aesthetic beauty.

Stucco work is restricted to the centre of the soffits of domes, springing points of corner pendentives showing stucco pinecones, front face of arches in the form of floral motifs, soffits of the *mīhrāb*, centre of ceiling in each bay in the eastern aisle (or arcade) of the prayer-hall, soffits of vaulted ante chamber of the eastern gateway, the lofty *mīnārs* and the entire façade of the prayer-hall.

Stucco designs at various places such as the soffits, the transept and corner pendentives in the prayer-hall are more impressive in appearance. Appearing part of the structural body to which they are applied, stucco moulded designs, giving two or three-dimensional effect, excel the painted motifs in artistic grace.

Open to climatic conditions and subject to weathering, the façade, the grand *mīnārs* and other such places could be decorated only with this medium, which has been withstanding climatic factors and

has retained beauty of the architectural elements. Another significance of stucco decoration is its visibility from a distance as compared to painted designs at places of such considerable heights. They are more prominent, durable and economic as compared to painted designs, which could not, however, resist unfavourable climatic conditions and would have soon faded away.

Discussion

The Mahābat Khān Mosque has retained its original form and aesthetic beauty throughout the Mughal and the Perso-Afghān periods. Its original beauty was, however, brutally desecrated by the Sikhs who first appeared in Peshāwar in AD 1818. Their second incursion in AD 1823 proved to be more dangerous to the religious as well as secular buildings of the Peshāwar valley besides their trampling on standing crops and lush green gardens. With this event the original beauty of this mosque disappeared forever. This sojourn of the Sikhs left deep scars on the architectural heritage of the valley. "So sweeping was the destruction to which the Muslim monuments were subjected by the Sikhs during their short-lived supremacy in Peshawar that very few escaped the terrible visitation" (Jaffar, 1946, p. 89). Paolo-di-Bartolomeo-Avitabile, an Italian general in the army of Ranjit Singh and governor of Peshāwar (AD 1838-42), used to hang convicts and anti-government elements of the community from the high *mīnārs* of the Mahābat Khān mosque (Caroe, 1962 p. 315; Shah, 1998, p. 84). Moreover, an unattested tradition relates that during the Sikh regime, this mosque was misused as a stable. Although we have no textual proof for this allegation yet, keeping in view the destructive attitude of the Sikhs towards the Muslim monuments of Peshāwar and Lāhore, the possibility of desecration cannot be ruled out.

Sir Olaf Caroe reports "that Peshāwar contains no architectural monuments of any value is due mainly to the devastations of 1823" (Caroe, 1962, p. 298). He further maintains that "even the mosque of Mahābat Khan, the chief mosque of the city, seems to have been dismantled" (*Ibid.*).

When the British took over political control of Peshāwar in 1849, the mosque was found in a dilapidated condition (Raverty, 1852, p.22). "Upto a century ago it was lying in a dilapidated condition: its minarets had no domes, its archways had no doors, its *Mihrab* had no *Mimbar*" (Jaffar, 1940, p. 30 ; 1946, p. 90).

In the early years of the British rule, most of its mural plaster and surface decoration was extensively renovated. Although the original beauty of the mosque could have never been restored, it was replaced by stucco. Caroe rightly observes that the "present stucco is a poor substitute for sandstone and marble, and is clearly a reconstruction of the early British times, neat enough but commonplace" (Caroe, 1962, p. 298). S. M. Ja'far similarly holds that "it was reclaimed about 80 years ago and since then it has undergone a complete renovation" (Jaffar, 1946, p.90). Subtracting 80 from 1946, the year of publication of his book, we get 1866, which, in fact, marks the early British rule in this part of the Indian Subcontinent.

This work survived till 1898 when fire broke out in the Andarshahr Bāzār, adjacent to the mosque. "The mosque was nearly destroyed during the fire which burnt down the Andarshahr in June 1898 and was only saved by the unremitting efforts of the faithful." (*Peshawar District Gazetteer 1897-98*, p. 363).

In the first or second decade of the 20th century, the affected parts of the mosque were retouched, fragments of which survive even today. A.H. Dānī comments that "many of its present decorative features were renewed in this century" (Dani, 1969, p. 174). Ahmad Nabī Khān similarly remarks

that the "ornamentation has been done during the early days of the present century, most probably according to the original scheme" (Khan, 1991, p. 119).

The antiquity of the present mural plaster and stucco relief work do not go beyond 1860 at the earliest. From plaster analysis, conducted by the principal author, it may be observed in conclusion that this mosque has undergone a number of successive repairs at different times in the past, and that the inner surface of the corner *mīnārs* still retains original plaster (Shah, 1999, p. 101).

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Plate 1: General view of the mosque.



Plate 2: Close-up of the façade.

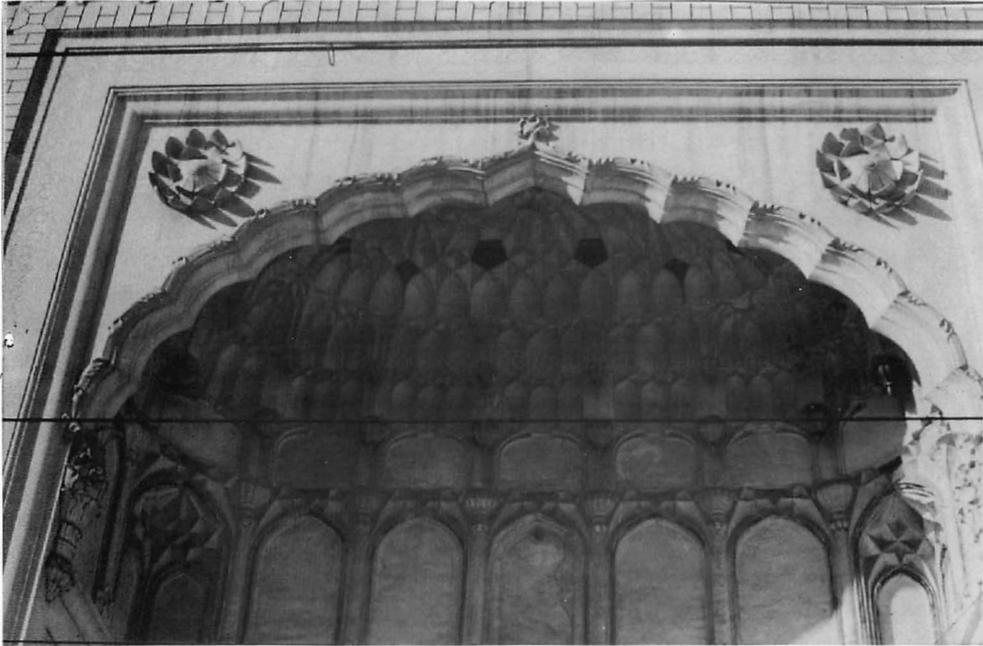


Plate 3: Central arched entrance of the façade above: Spandrels show lotus flower, while soffit of the alcove is ornamented with honeycomb pattern above and decorative pilasters below.

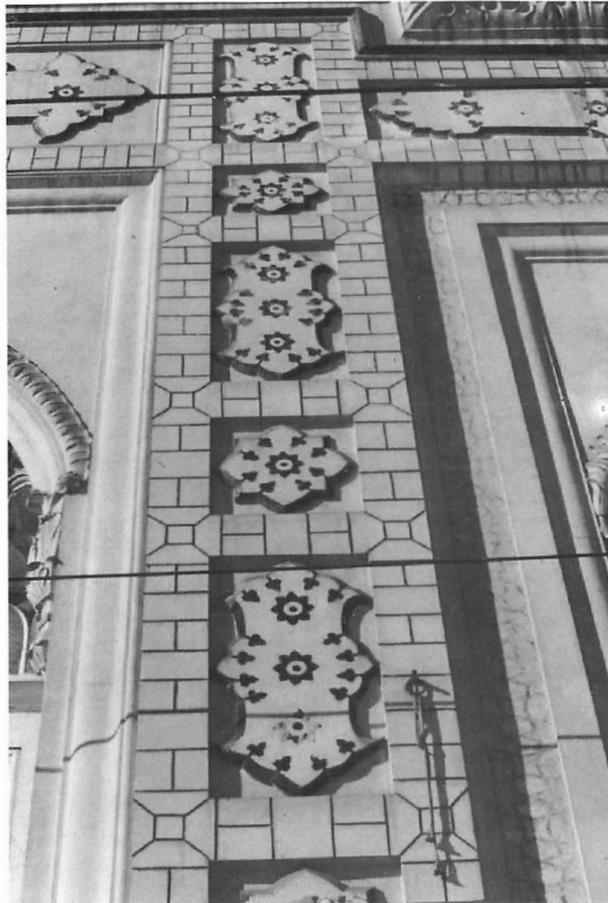


Plate 4: Gul-i nau design executed in stucco relief on the façade.



Plate 5: Phase of transition in the central bay (or nave) showing semi-dome with ribs on the Squinch arch as thin ribbed pilaster in between surmounted by a large capital.

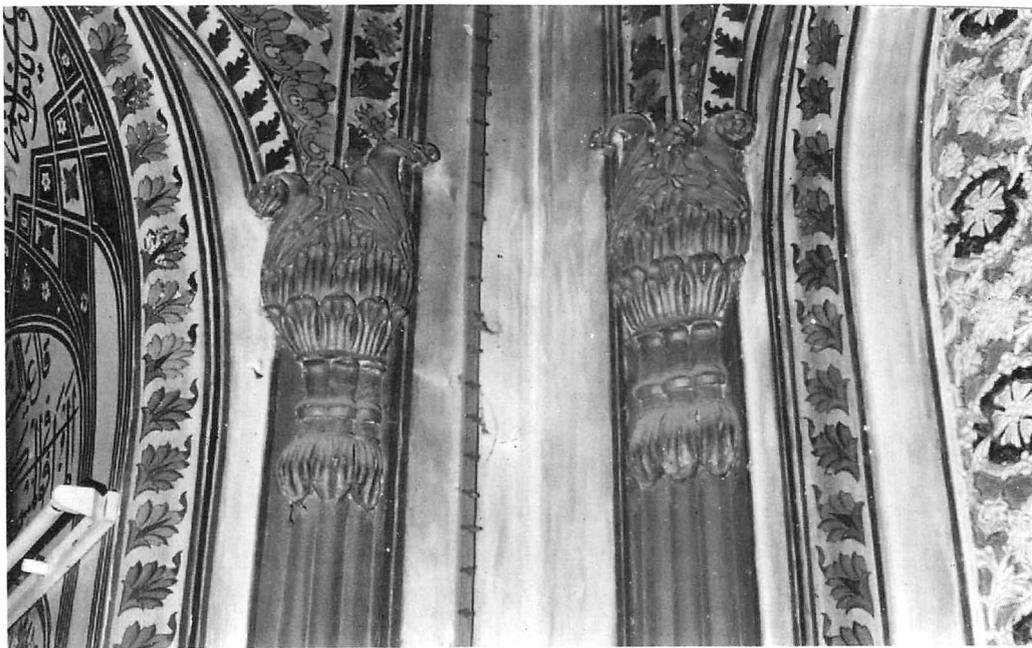


Plate 6: Nave decorated at the corners with fluted pilasters and floriated capitals.

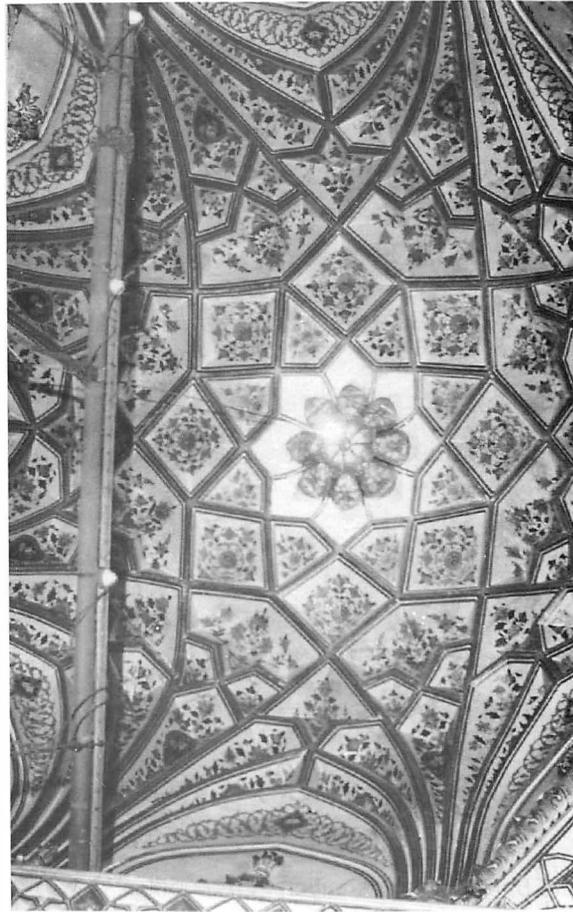


Plate 7: Soffit of the central dome depicting honeycomb pattern and lotus flower in the centre.

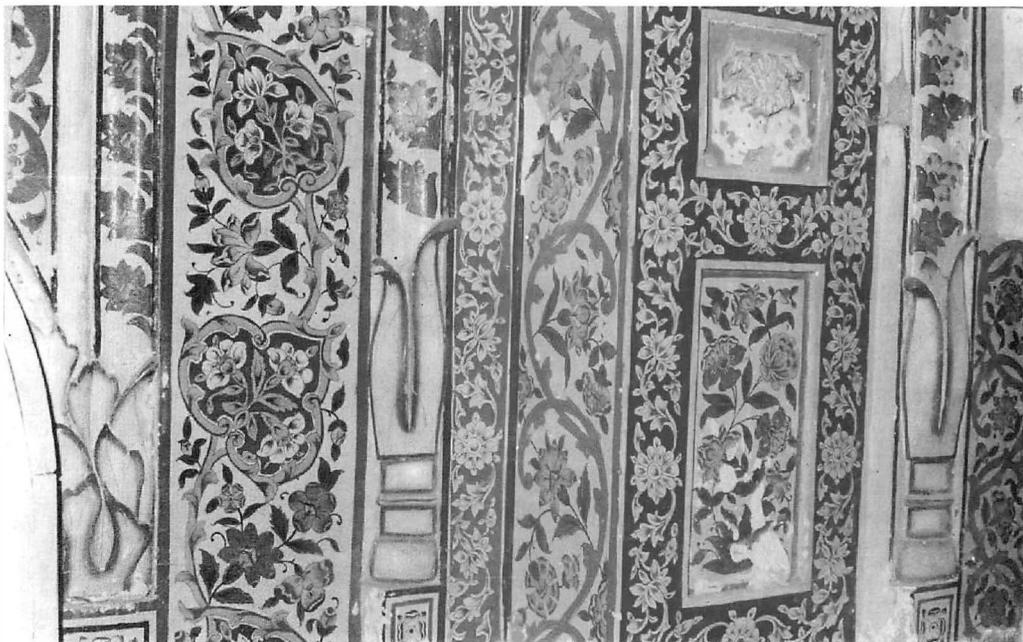


Plate 8: Leafy vases in the prayer hall.