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The Filtered Light of Sarkhej

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“Inseparable from the language of light and dark is the language of inside and outside... .”

— *Karsten Harries*

On the extensive plain southwest of Ahmadabad, India, sits the fifteenth-century complex of Sarkhej. Placed within the complex is the exquisite tomb of Mahmud Shah “Begra,” ruler of the Gujarat Sultanate from 1459 to 1511. Inside the tomb, dappled sun moves through the cut stone screens that make the walls, which mark a world of peace and memory, separate from life outside.

Sarkhej was begun in the mid-fifteenth century with construction of a

mosque and a tomb for a saint. By 1500, the complex had grown to serve as a retreat from the heat and bustle of Ahmadabad. A large rectangular water tank, or reservoir, of 17.5 acres is bounded by steps, forming the center of the complex. Silhouettes of ruined palaces rise on the southwest corner of the tank, while mosques and tombs create a courtyard on the north. A grand stairway connects the courtyard with the water. During monsoon months, when the tank is full, a small boat takes families out onto the water in the evenings.

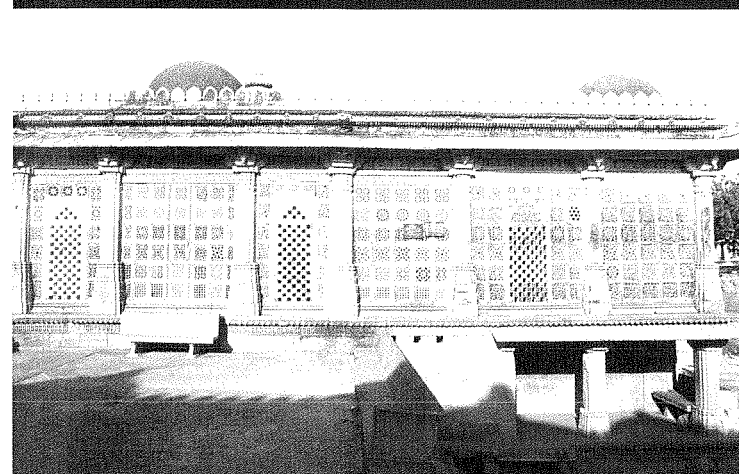
Arriving through the village of Sarkhej, past dusty streets, houses, goats, tea shops and the like, one approaches the complex from the east, stopping to remove sandals in order to enter. The courtyard serves as a lively social center for the village, filled with those arriving for daily prayers at the Friday mosque, groups of rambunctious children and the welcome presence of food sellers stationed in the shaded arcade. Under the inescapable brightness and burning heat of the Indian sun, women and girls wash clothes, dishes and themselves on the steps of the tank.

In Mahmud Shah’s tomb, the world of the courtyard and village is held at a distance. The smooth stones of the tomb floor are a cool relief to bare feet, the dimness a pleasure in the heat of the day. This place of quiet coolness is a retreat itself, a temporary removal from the bustle without.

The stone screens, cut from local sandstone, form an intricate, geometric filter between inside and out. The screens are no more than four inches in depth, each opening no larger than a child’s hand. These screens cut the heat of the sun, creating the dappled light that fills the outer layer of the tomb.

Reflections from the water play on the ceiling during the middle of the day while the sarcophagi draped with silk are hidden in the darkness of the center. The noise, heat, smells and chaos of regular village life in India are held at a distance, the stone screens allowing just enough connection so the contrast is emphasized, the peacefulness celebrated. In this way, the world outside is not cut off from the tomb, but rather put into perspective.

As the sun moves from south to west, time in the tomb is manifest through the moving disks of sunlight, the changing patterns of the stone floor and columns. Toward sunset, the westerly light reaches deeply through the stone screens toward the marble sarcophagi, causing the interior to glow with a golden brightness. A few moments later, the distinctions created by the light and the screens, between inside and outside, sacred and profane, life and death, disappear in the darkness of night. ●



West wall, Mahmud Shah tomb.

Photo by George A. Loisos.

Interior, Mahmud Shah tomb.

Photo by M. Susan Ubbelohde.

