

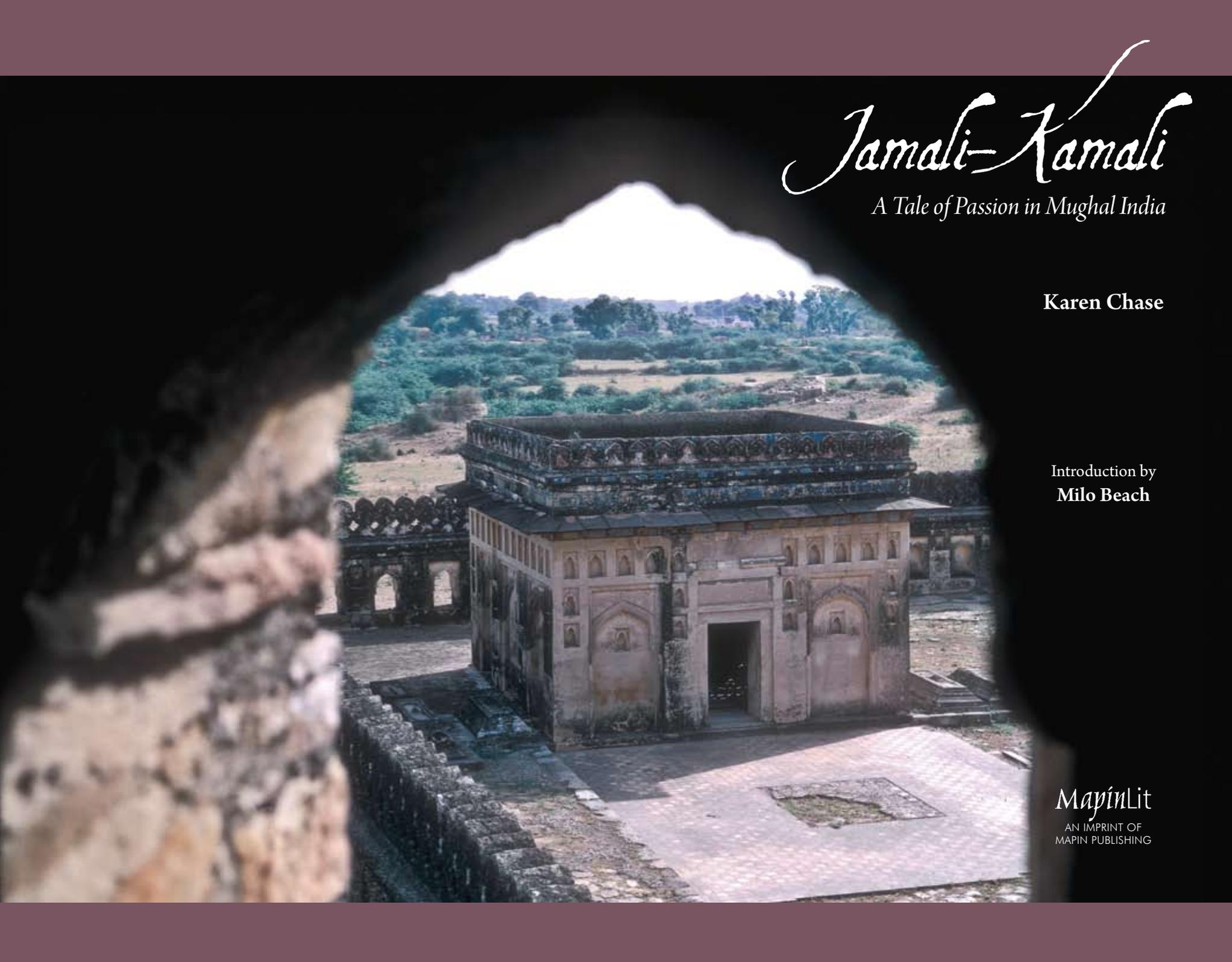
Jamali-Kamali

A Tale of Passion in Mughal India

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Introduction by
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Jamali-Kamali: The Beauty of a Dervish Cell

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The Mosque and Tomb of Jamali-Kamali is not a large compound. Only a short distance south of one of the most heavily visited tourist sites in Delhi, the Qutb Minar, it remains isolated and quiet. Divided highways and compacted housing have recently invaded the area, but these have been kept well away, and the land outside the low enclosure walls, now a public park, is wooded. A sense of discovery, therefore, still accompanies visits. When I first explored the area forty years ago, the region was not only isolated, it was remote. Then, approaching the enclosure of the mosque across desolate fields—the latrines of nearby villagers and local wildlife—was an adventure. But it was the tiny tomb in its own walled courtyard to the north that really took one's breath away. Decorated on the outside with fragments of the original coloured tile work, the inside held the finest, most perfect incised and painted plaster of any monument in India. I had not dared go back since seeing it again in 1979, because graffiti flourishes so abundantly in unprotected monuments. Those fears, however, were groundless. The complex has recently been well restored, and now Karen Chase's poem brings it even further to life.

The tomb is an extremely simple structure architecturally, providing tangible testament to Jamali's personal



Mosque of Jamali-Kamali, c. 1528

humility. Single-storey, the exterior is decorated with small, decorative arched recesses, as well as the remaining tiles. A doorway facing the mosque leads into a modest square room—the most basic of living spaces. Its visual impact, however, is sumptuous.

The walls consist of plaster carved with intricately interlaced arabesques, and above arched windows in the center of each side a broad octagonal configuration provides transition to a narrow sixteen-sided cornice. Decorated with a carved band of poetry, this in turn supports a flat, circular ceiling richly decorated with sunbursts and floral forms in carved plaster, coloured (like the walls) in red and blue. The verses are those of Jamali, as is the calligraphy's design¹—a confirmation of his identity with the structure. Undomed and architecturally unpretentious, it is the beauty of the ornament—as well as the intimate size of the space—that distinguishes the building.



Upper walls and ceiling of the tomb's interior

(r. 1469–1506), patron of Behzad—the most famous of all Persian painters—and a great connoisseur of the arts. There he also befriended Mir Ali Shir Nava'i, another of that era's illustrious poets, and there too he would have seen the finest illustrations and encountered the greatest poems and musicians then known in the Islamic world. This was a period held up by the later Mughal emperors as a model; they constantly sought to emulate its artistic richness. It must therefore be these experiences, rather than chance, which makes Sheikh Jamali's tomb so beautifully decorated a monument. But while, in keeping with the customs of the time, the general vocabulary of the ornament is one widely dispersed throughout the wider Persian world, a distinctive exception is the band of blue and white tiles found under the eaves of the exterior. While the other building materials, the stones of the building and the pigments used for colours,



The tombstones of Jamali and Kamali

were almost certain of local origin, these tiles are not. In a ceramic technique then seemingly unknown in India proper, these may have been imported, representing one of Jamali's specific cosmopolitan contacts.

Jamali was a favourite of Sultan Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489–1517), whose dynasty preceded that of the Mughals in north India. According to Badaoni, "Among the poets of the time of Sikandar was the aforementioned Shaikh Jamali... of Dihli, to whom Sultan Sikandar was in the habit of submitting verses which he had written, for his opinion"⁶—certainly an uncommon accolade. It also shows, however, an informality among rulers and intelligentsia greater than that usual under the burgeoning imperialism of the Mughals. Sikandar Lodi's tomb lies in what is known today as the Lodi Gardens, an area now surrounded by the bungalows of New Delhi, the city constructed after





Tomb of Jamali-Kamali—the interior chamber

Just as pleasure gardens constructed and enjoyed by the Mughals in life often became the location for their tombs after death, so Sheikh Jamali’s “dervish-cell,” was almost certainly on the site—and was probably the building that housed his tomb. The term “cell,” after all, suggests a simple single room, although if Jamali was known as a dervish, a Muslim ascetic, this would have reflected his physical needs more than the richness of his mental life.

The exact details—and dates—of the construction of both mosque and tomb are disputed by scholars, but no one questions the architectural importance of the mosque, however modest Jamali’s house may have been. While drawing on recognized Lodi dynasty prototypes, it is a forerunner of the superb mosque in what is now known as the Purana Qila (Old Fort), a building midway between the Jamali-Kamali site and the Red Fort, constructed in the 1640s by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and visited by every tourist to Delhi. The great Purana Qila was built as the centre of a new capital alternately by the Mughal Emperor Humayun and his nemesis, an Afghan interloper who forced him into temporary exile. Jamali lived in times of transition, but even when the Mughal dynasty was an important new power within India, the mosque and tomb associated with Sheikh Jamali quietly served to link the Mughals with the considerable achievements of the earlier Lodis.

Carr Stephen, in his 1876 study of Delhi’s architecture, wrote that Jamali built the mosque and a room to serve as living quarters in 1528 C.E. (H. 935). He noted that the tomb contained two graves, the other “supposed to be that

