

The Sarai Mahabat Khan: An Introduction

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Peshawar, an ancient trade centre, has a peculiar geographical position which has always been a great help in promoting trade and commerce in the region. Its location on the main trade route was linked India proper with Central Asia and Western Asiatic countries. Therefore, it necessitated the building of numerous *Sarais* required by tradesmen. A number of such caravan *Sarais*, built by members of royal families, high-class government officers and the well-to-do of the city and many other, have survived in Peshawar. Since there are a large number of *Sarais* in the area, the present study is focused on *Sarai Mahabat Khan*, a famous caravan *Sarai* built in Peshawar city by Mahabat Khan during the Mughal period in Peshawar city. The *Sarai* is presently known as *Kathra Mahabat Khan* among the local population.

It is rectangular in plan measuring 29x8 metres. Facing westwards, the *Sarai* rises three storeys in elevation and contains 58 rooms. These cubicles or rooms are accommodated on all the four sides leaving an open quadrangle measuring 17x8 metres in the middle flagged with burnt bricks of modern tradition. The building material comprises burnt bricks of small size (*waziri* bricks), stucco, timber, reed and iron.

The roof of the first storey is constructed of wooden rafters and strips. A narrow verandha has been built in front of rooms with wooden superstructure. The second storey is similarly built but with a wooden railing (or balustrade) composed of upright balusters surmounted by coping. This railing was planted in front of the verandha demarcating the open quadrangle below to avoid the danger of falling down. The third

storey has small and roughly-built cubicles; some of them show recent retouch. Reed and wooden rafters have been use in superstructure.¹

Main entrance

The main entrance of the *Sarai* faces westwards and open on a narrow lane which separates it from the Mahabat Khan mosque. It is a tall rectangular piece of masonry projecting from the wall. Access is provided through an alcove marked by a cusped arch. It is contained within an outer rectangular panel accommodating a wooden frame and heavy leaves. Either side of the alcove shows an angered fluted pilaster. A raised square platform, constructed on either side of the alcove, is probably meant for keepers or *chaukidars*. Either side of the rectangular panel as well as front-face of the arched-alcove, in each case, shows a small arched-niche.

The main entrance opens into a square room or porch having a wooden roof. As one enters this room there are steps on the south leading to the second storey. Each tread is strengthened by the use of thick wooden planks and iron chips. The *Sarai* shows a continuity of the medieval building which traditionally required extensive use of timber. Externally, on the walls of the *Sarai* are used naked bricks with no signs of any plaster.

The *Sarai* was originally provided with a well in the southern part of the courtyard paved with *waziri* bricks set in line plaster. This well now lies covered under the water tap of the Peshawar Municipal Corporation.

Discussion

H.G. Raverty in his "Account of the City and Province of Peshawar"² mentions four *Sarais* i.e. *Sarai Jahanabad* or *Sarai Do Dar*, *sarai Jahaffan* or the *Sarai of Bookbinders* (probably the *Sarai Sahafan*), *Sarai Datamull* and *Sarai Suleman*. Similarly Gopal Das takes no notice of the existence of this *Sarai*. This list, given by him recording twelve famous *Sarais* of the city, is as follows: *Sarai Sahafan*, *Sarai Suleman*, *Sarai Muhammadi Paracha*, *Sarai Muhammad Najjar*, *Sarai Qadi*

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1. With the exception of one or two, all the rooms or shops in the *Sarai* are occupied by workers in gold and antique-dealers. For watch and ward of the *Sarai*, a *chaukidar* has been regularly employed by the provincial *Auqaf* Department.
 2. Revarty, H.G., "Account of the City and Province Peshawar", *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, vol. x, (Bombay: 1852), 22-23.

*Najib, Sarai Udhu Shikarpuri, Sarai Nazir Khair Allah, Sarai Yakka, Sarai 'Asi Nazim, Sarai Ihata Shera, Sarai Masjid-i Kashmiri and Sarai Masjid-i Kulal.*³ The *Peshawar District Gazetteer 1897-98* at one place enumerates eleven *Sarais* principal among which are *Sarai Suleman, Sarai Sahafan, Sarai Qadi Najib and Sarai Nazir Khair Allah.*⁴ The same *Gazetteer* at another place, quoting from Col. Mc Gregor, records two other *Sarais* i.e. *Sarai Gor Kathri* (or *Sarai Jahanabad*) and *Sarai Mohabat* among the 132 *Sarais* and market-places of the city.⁵ The *N.W.F.P. Province Gazetteers, Peshawar District, 1931*⁶ clearly refers to the *Sarai Mahabat Khan* as part of the *waaf* of *Mahabat Khan* connected with his mosque. The existence of the *Sarai* and its association with the *Mahabat Khan* mosque is also referred to by S.M. Ja'far in 1940 and 1946.⁷ At the present state of our knowledge, the *Sarai*, which constitutes the subject-matter of our study, was first mentioned in the *Peshawar District Gazetteer 1897-98* under the name "Sarai Mohabat".

Our information regarding the *Sarai* is hopelessly meagre and scanty. The medieval literature also preserves nothing in this connection as is the case of the *Mahabat Khan* mosque. From a cursory analysis of the existing literary sources related with this part of the South-Asian subcontinent we may safely assume that the *Sarai Mahabat Khan* was built by *Mahabat Khan Mirza Luhrasp*, son of *Mahabat Khan Zamana Beg*, an able military officer and frequent governor of the province "Kabul wa Peshawar" during the reigns of *Shah Jahan* and *Aurangzeb*, either contemporaneously with the *Mahabat Khan* mosque or a little later than the mosque of the property endowed by him in his life-time.⁸ We have

3. Gopal Das, *Tarikh-i Peshawar* (Urdu), (Lahore: 1874), 154-155.

4. *Peshawar District Gazetteer 1897-98*, 362.

5. *Ibid.*, 364.

6. *N.W.F. Province Gazetteers, Peshawar District, 1931*, 317-18.

7. S.M. Ja'far, "A Movement of the Mughal Period: Mosque of Mahabat Khan in Peshawar", *Islamic Culture*, vol.xiv, 1940, 31; Peshawar: Past and Present (Peshawar: 1946), 91.

8. Ibrahim Shah, "Mughal Governors of Subah-i Kabul wa Peshawar" *Ancient Pakistan*, vol.viii, (Peshawar: 1993); also see the same author's, "Jami Masjid Andarshahr commonly known as 'Masjid Mahabat Khan': The question of Attribution", *Islamic Studies*, vol.33, No.4, (Islamabad: 1994), 497-500; and "Mahabat Khan Mirza Luhrasp: A Brief Life-Sketch.", *Journal of Central Asia*, vol.xviii, No.2 (Islamabad: 1995); Shams al Daula Shah Nawaz Khan, *Ma'athir al-Umara*, Urdu trans. Muhammad Ayyub Qadri, vol.iii, (Lahore: 1970), 490-493; also see, Ibrahim Shah, *The Mahabat Khan Mosque and its Decorative Beauty*,

neither textual record nor material evidence which could give us some data about the original style of construction and design of the *Sarai* whatsoever. The *Sarai* seems to have lost its original form and beauty in the course of general disfiguring of the Muslim monuments – both religious and secular – during the short span of the Sikh rule over Peshawar.

The present building of the *Sarai* appears to have been erected somewhere between 1874 and 1879. The *Tarikhi- Peshawar*, published in 1874, has no reference to the *Sarai*, but we find mention of the *Sarai* in the *Peshawar District Gazetteer 1897-98* as the “*Sarai Mohabbat*”. The architectural style, mode of construction and the building material also suggests later half of nineteenth century. The *Sarai* in its present form, can therefore be compared with other secular buildings of the Andarshahr area and other localities of Peshawar city which also came into being about this time (i.e. colonial period).