

The Sarai Mahabat Khan: An Introduction

Ibrahim Shah

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*

-
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.

