

The Tomb of Mian Ismail Baba at Khost in District Harnai: A Fresh Discovery

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Abstract: The province of Balochistan (Pakistan) is vastly enriched with monumental tombs spanning diverse cultures, including Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Hindu, from the Early to Late Medieval periods. These tombs, varied in construction techniques and decorative styles that reflect the region's rich cultural heritage. Harnai District, like other parts of Balochistan, holds cultural treasures from prehistoric to historic periods, yet it remains largely undocumented, especially its monumental structures. The tomb of Mian Ismail Baba at Khost in Harnai is a notable example of this architectural continuity. Further, this research aims to document the tomb's building and emphasize its historical significance within the region. The tomb, nearly square in shape, features a veranda at its entrance and a striking hemispherical dome atop. It was likely constructed during the reign of Ahmed Shah Durrani, when he passed through the region on his way to India in the mid-eighteenth century CE.

Keywords: Khost, Balochistan, Harnai, Mian Ismail Baba, History and Architecture.

Introduction

For centuries, as per the local sources, Harnai is often famous for the abode of the Sayed saints in Balochistan. People from far off regions visit these religious saints who come to seek devotions (Rauf, personal communication on August 16, 2024). Similarly, Mian Ismail Baba was one among these Sayed saints who most possibly lived in the last part of the seventeenth century in today's Harnai in Balochistan. He had lived a legendary life with quite fame and glory as a religious figure of his time. He was known for demonstrating many miracles (*karamath*) during his life. However, after his passing away, he was interred in a small graveyard and later on entombed by Ahmed Shah Durrani (Raverty 1880: 76).

The mid-nineteenth century chronicles of the early British era, describe Harnai as “the Harnavee pass (Harnai), Lat. 29° 27', long. 68, is little frequented, leading across the mountains from Tull (Thal) to Dadur (Dadhar); thus, quite difficult, and scarcely practicable for horses” (Gazetteer of the Countries, 1844: 228). The British records cite that today's Harnai was once known as *Zawar* and *Sharig* (sometimes also written as *Shahrag*). According to Duke, *Zawar* is either a Khetrani¹

word, which indeed, has its origin from Baruzzai Afghans, or is the old Hindu name for the upper portion of the valley. Whatsoever, it was used to define shales and colored clay hills generally found in the vicinity (Duke, 1883: 92).

Harnai territorially being the third smallest district in Balochistan is covering a mass land of ca 3,071 sq. km. It lies between 30° 06' 11.61" N 67° 05' 56" 15.01" E and comprises two *tehsils* and six union councils. Harnai is flanked on the east by Sibi and Kohlu districts, on the north by Loralai, on the north and northwest by Ziarat and on the south and southwest by Quetta and on the south and southeast by Kachhi-Bolan (Pl. I) The aerial distance of Harnai from Quetta city is around 50 km to the north-west (Balochistan Administrative Division, Sabir; District Profile, Harnai, 2011: 3).

Geographic landscape

The Harnai plateau ranges in altitude from ca. 700 to 1,371 meters above sea level. The valley has a climate similar to that of Sibi, with hot summers and warm to mild winters. Most rainfall occurs during the monsoon season, from June to September (Ibid., 1979: 177).

The district's geography features high mountain

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Pl. I. District map of Balochistan, District Harnai is highlighted with red colour (source: Google).

ranges with narrow valleys, forming part of the upper highlands of Balochistan. The main valleys are the Zawar (Shahrig) and Harnai valleys, stretching from Chapar Mountain to Spintangi (formerly known as Ganeji Rift), spanning 90 km in length and averaging 10 km in width (ibid., Harnai, 2011: 5).

Harnai valley is a long, narrow, and uneven area intersected by several river courses. The northern section consists of a complex mountain system, including the scenic Kach-Kawa valley that leads to Ziarat (Duke, 1883: 92). The Khalifat Peak stands at 3,486 meters and dominates the north with a sudden 2,133 meters drop to the Shahrig plain. The Zarghun mountain range lies about 24 km northeast of Quetta and marks the central point of the Harbui Range, extending

eastward and southeastward around Harnai (Ibid., 1979: 163).

Harnai at a glance

The district's history mainly revolves around Sibi, also known as *Siwi*. Due to its strategic location at the entrance of the Bolan Pass, Sibi always has had great consideration and played a key role in the region's history (ibid., 1979: 179).

Harnai was a part of the Ghaznavid Empire and later ruled by Nasir al 'Din Kabacha, the successor of Shahab al 'Din Ghorī, in 1150-1228 CE. In medieval period, it was seized by Shah Beg Arghun and then it passed onto Kandahar's domain under the rule of early Mughals. Later on, it came under the administration of Multan. In 1714 CE, Harnai was conquered by the Kalhoras of Sindh

but they were soon retreated due to the rise of the Durranis, local governors in the region supported Barozai clan of the Panni Afghans (MacGroger, 1875: 15; *ibid.*, Harnai, 2011: 3).

In 1730s, Nadir Shah Afshar carried out several expeditions to the west of the Indus, including Sibi and Harnai areas. As a result, he annexed this region to the Persian Empire. In 1749 CE, the Afghan king Ahmed Shah Durrani, after Nadir Shah's demise, invaded India and the north-eastern part of Balochistan, including Harnai, that remained under his control. After him, the Baruzais² were never able to reassert their authority in Zavar or Thal. It seems that, for financial objective, these two districts were either managed or occasionally plundered by agents from Pishin or the Durranis of Quetta (Baluchistan Gazetteer, Sibi, 1907: 26).

In the succeeding years, the Marri Baloch attained ground in the District and their depredations were not paid until Sibi, Shahrig, and Duki were assigned to the British India in 1879 by the "Treaty of Gandamak" (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908: 138).

In October 1903, its name from Thal-Chotiali was changed into Sibi. The district was recognized in the post-independence period creating the districts of Nasirabad, Dera Bugti, Kohlu, and Ziarat. After the partition, the district's territorial jurisdiction was reduced from 29,500 sq. km to 20,192 sq. km due to administrative perspective. Harnai was treated as a *tehsil* until 2007, however in mid-2007, its status was raised as a new district within the Sibi Division (*Ibid.*, 9-10).

Hindu population

Local tradition and some written sources confirm that the Zavar valley yielded the evidence of Hindu population. The most important portion of this district undoubtedly, has been the plateau now known as Harnai, so called after Harnam Das, who either ruled or founded the Hindu town, the ruins of which still exist. The local Pashtuns stated that Harnai was held by *Zamins*. The term *Zamin*, Duke believes indubitably, is a corrupt form by the Pushtu-speaking people for the 'Brahmins'. The Pashtuns claim that their ancestors seized Harnai directly from the Hindus, whom they forced to

migrate around 600 to 700 years ago (Duke 1883: 94).

Early references to the shrines

The government documents and archaeological records are mostly silent relating to the past relics in the district. No relevant data is available to testify the oral history of the district which is famous as an intangible heritage in the region. Only some shrines in Harnai district are mentioned in the District Gazetteers of the pre-Partition era. Similarly, the pioneer explorers of the colonial era such as Henry Pottinger (1816), Charles Masson (1843), Sir Aurel Stein (1905; 1931), and Walter A. Fairervis (1956; 1959) never visited this part of the province to recognize its archaeological potential.

Shrines, on the one hand, are widespread throughout the district, with almost every village cemetery having a patron saint, who had been typically a village or tribal elder during his lifetime. Reverence for these saints is particularly strong among the Kakar and Tarin Afghans. These shrines are simply built of a heap of stones or a rough mud or stone enclosures, often surrounded by poles adorned with cloth pieces, horns, and metal bells (*Ibid.*, Sibi, 1907).

Shrine of Ismail Nikah

In the Tehsil of Shahrig, there are number of well-known shrines which include Mano Nika, a saint from the Manra valley, Mian Shahdi Nikah of Kowas, Kharwari Nikah at Ghoshki near Ziarat, Bare Shah of Mian Kach, Sheikh Musa and Ismail Nikah, a Kadian³ Sayid at Khost. The latter one is said to have established a spring of water near Khost village (Sibi, 1907: 82).

There are also many reputed Sayids and Sheikhs besides the usual sprinkling of Hindus and Hamsayas who live in all these districts (Duke 1883: 94). "Sheikh of Khost belongs to the Kadian family of Sayids. The founder of the family was named Ismail, his tomb is still standing at Khost; six generations have elapsed since his death. Sheikh Ismail receives Rs. 15 per mensem from Government for frontier services" (Duke 1883: 96).

villagers to the nearby mountains for herding. Although at presently, the place where he once believed to reside bears no such evidence of any kind of his living. Some of the myths related to his life are as under:

- It is said, one day he was sleeping under a tree called *beeri*, the tree offered him shade from morning to afternoon without moving away.
- Another story goes on saying that one day he was herding in a small village named *Killi Roghi*, where suddenly rain began and he sat close to the corner of a boulder and by the end of the rain the boulder carved his sketch. Now the people have erected a small mosque after his name where such a boulder was thought to have existed.
- Once a Mian Sahib along with his daughter were coming down from the slope of a mountain where the daughter told father for her thirst. Eventually, she started crying and as she did not control herself due to the absence of water. In such circumstances, there were no resource of water and no sign of community in the surrounding area. The father searched for water but he didn't find any clue of water. Finally, by the name of Allah he hit the stone with his crook and suddenly the water gushed out from the stone. Later, Mian Ismail converted this land into cultivated fields and green orchards.
- The orchard of Mian Ismail Baba was located about 6.7 km from the Khost bazar. The orchard was in Kohe Khalifat Mountain in Khost where multiple fruit trees like pomegranate, grape, fig, etc. were planted. Today, that place is a famous picnic point after the name of famous Mian Ismail Baba orchard. In local Pashto language this place is called as Ismail Nikah Bagh. The water of this Bagh is always tasted good and cold in the summer.
- Another story tells that one-day Ismail Baba was coming from his home town (Shor) to a village named old Roghi and on his way he got exhausted and lied down for a rest. There, he pitched a huge nail called *mazhwai*

into the ground and tied a rope around it. After taking rest, he decided to leave this place and hence pulled out that nail. Soon after, a small plant sprouted from the nail's spot and later the tree came to be known as *Azghai* (nails).

- There is a village known as Karcheri with a distance of 2.6 km from Khost bazar. This village possesses two lofty trees which are famous for being planted by Mian Ismail Baba when he was accompanied by his wife on his way to the mountains.

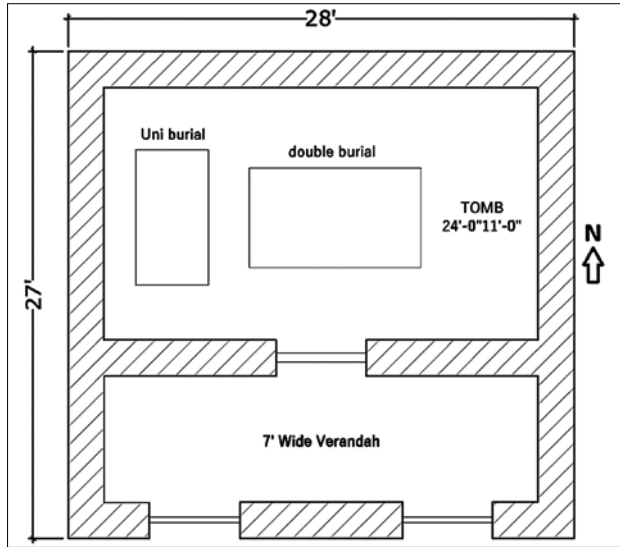
Tomb's architecture

The domical tomb building is constructed of burnt bricks of uniform size i.e. 22 x 11 x 5.5 cm. Mud mortar is regular applied to tie the brick courses firmly throughout the construction. The walls are wide enough whereas thickness reach up to 60 cm. The walls and roof are probably plastered with the bond of lime (gypsum) and local clay. The tomb with attached veranda nearly takes the form of a square building, which measures 8.53 x 8.23 meters externally (Pl. III).

Veranda and domical structure

The veranda is 2.78 meters wide and 3.08 meters high attached to the tomb's walls. Its two semi-circular arched entrances are 1.72 meters high and 1.36 meters wide. On the other hand, the inside entrance of the tomb chamber is shorter with an opening of 1.42 x 1.1 meters. The shape of tomb and attached varandah resembles to that of a room accompanied by a porch (Pl. IV). The veranda runs along the frontal side of the tomb with a height of two-thirds that of the tomb, excluding the dome. The monument rises 5.9 meters from the surrounding level while it reaches some 9.3 meters along the dome. It has two semi-circular openings placed at almost equal intervals. One of these openings is provided in the center of the veranda for access to the tomb chamber.

The topmost structure is superimposed by a dome erecting 4.26 meters tall from the rooftop. There is staircase leading to the 1.2 meters tall finial where a green flag is hoisting at that level (Pl. V). The provision of this metal ladder suggests



Pl. III. Layout of the tomb with adjacent veranda and grave structures, measurements taken in feet (source: authors, 2024).



Pl. IV. Facade of the tomb from south, veranda on the foreground (source: authors, 2024).



Pl. V. The profile view of the tomb from north side with a hoisting green flag on top of the dome (source: authors, 2024).

that it is definitely a later addition.

Profile view and foundation

The profile view of the tomb shows a wide rubble masonry foundation which has an outward projecting plinth. The rubble stones, partially used in the tomb's construction, are likely taken from the artificial mound on which the tomb stands (Pl. VI). The plinth is 1.3 meters above the ground foundation. The superstructure immediately rises atop the plinth, supported by five engaged square-shaped columns. These columns are externally adorned with three blind arches whereas each arch is irregular in size and shape. It is possible that these exterior arches were supplemented when local people re-plastered the tomb over time. Above the arches, there is a cantilever beam with a similar outward projection which looks like the pillars support the elliptical dome.

Plaster and renderings

Originally, until 1970s, the tomb, as per the aged locals, did not bear any color but had an austere surface with only mud plaster. Modern cement rendering is a more recent addition of the last two decades, while at its inception, the walls were likely plastered with lime. Mud rendering was also a later practice, used before the cement patches still seen today in several places.

Graves & Interior Decorations

The grave chamber holds two varieties of graves: first, a conjoined grave on the eastern side that belongs to his wife and daughter, while the western single grave is of Sayid Ismail Baba's. Both graves have been covered in *chadars* printed with Islamic inscriptions and verses from the Quran. There is a charity box fixed to the ground, and a permanent carved stone incense stand fixed on the floor, used for burning stick incense by the devotees of the shrine.



Pl. VI. A satellite view of the tomb built over an artificial mound (source: Google Earth).

Interior Dome and Decorations

The interior dome is furnished with eight semi-circular niches on every corner of the wall having an average size. This horizontal line on which the niches are made is recently painted with unattractive foliage friezes set above horizontal triangles. They are painted in a green and grey color scheme on a white-washed background. Below these decorations, a thick band of green horizontally runs throughout the mausoleum, touching the floor level. The domical structure stands on eight plain squinches which are purely responsible for the support. They lack much decoration with only a thin line of external corbel for each provided per the form. The interior dome is partially exposed, although it depicts the remains of the original lime plaster when the edifice was built.

Myths related to the Shrine

- Local attendants of the tomb tell a story that once the Mughal army were marching near the shrine of Mian Ismail Baba who found that her daughter was living in the shrine of her parents. On their arrival to the tomb, she was busy dressing her hair and she abruptly threw the comb in the air and heard her father calling her to come to the grave. Since then she disappeared and never seen again. Later, the local people built a symbolic grave next to her mother's grave.

According to the local sources, the black dot on the interior of the dome is the comb and her hair when she threw that day (Pl. VII).

- After the death of her parents, she was living in the shrine and used to sleep in the baby-swing which her mother used when she was a toddler. The swing is made of *chanddar* wood (Pl. VIII). This day, those devotee women who are barren, tie a piece of fabric to this swing with this hope that they may produce children whom Allah confers.
- Local people believe that the room built adjacent to the tomb was always used by the guardian of the shrine who was locally known as *malang* (devotee) room. This, however, seems to have been a posterior construction where the architecture and construction mode differ from that of the tomb (Pl. IX). One of the renowned *malangs*, known as Rasool Shah, belonged to a Sayid tribe (Kadian). After his death, the duty of safeguarding the tomb was performed by his two sons, Abdullah Shah and Alam Shah.

Analysis and Conclusion

Ismail Baba is locally believed to have lived in the last part of the 17th and first quarter of the 18th centuries in the Zawar valley with today's Shahrig (Harnai). Today, his devotees along with their families and children regularly visit



Pl. VII. The black spot encircled in red on the interior of the dome is believed to be spotted with the hair of Saint's daughter (source: authors, 2024).



Pl. VIII. Baby swing of the Saint's daughter in which she used to sleep until she disappeared (source: authors, 2024).



Pl. IX. The so-called *Malang* room to the east, built next to the tomb (source: authors, 2024).

this shrine in large numbers. They mostly come from Sibi, particularly on occasions like Eid to pay their tributes and homage and seek spiritual solace. Presently, no particular *urs* (remembrance ceremony) is being held annually at the shrine. Nonetheless, this was not always the case, until the 1970s, a *Langarkhana* (community kitchen) served there every Thursday. Then it was permanently abandoned around that time.

The tomb erection of Mian Ismail Baba not only celebrates the sanctity of the deceased Sayid but it also commemorates the ‘Sayid Cult’ practiced for several centuries in northwest Balochistan.

This tomb demonstrates the past glory of a conventional building mode that has changed its essence over time. This tomb also reminds us of the native architecture that once prevailed in this region at least three centuries before, which is now hard to locate. This, on the other hand, may be the first and last paradigm of the Durrani tomb architecture in this part of the province. It

also may be deemed as a benchmark of their mid-eighteenth century expansions, at least in northern Balochistan.

In addition, it is possible that the materials used for erecting this domical monument were sourced and exploited within the district. The area is abundant with various species of trees, which could have been installed in this tomb for wooden beams, pillars, and rafters. Similarly, gypsum is found in large amounts near Khattan as well at Tung not far from Spintangi. Harnai valley is occupied by nummulite rocks where limestone can easily be obtained (Baluchistan Gazetteer, Sibi 1907: 144).

The building architecture is more conventional in style with a true local touch. This tradition of construction, such as the tomb of Mian Ismail Baba, has remained unstudied although found commonly in the region. The unsophisticated style of architecture shows that the builders and masons who erect this monument were probably



Pl. X. The grave of Mian Ismail Baba covered with *Chadar* depicting printed designs and holy verses (source: authors, 2024).



Pl. XI. The conjoined graves of wife and daughter of the Saint (source: authors, 2024).

hired locally. The present tomb evidently lacks sophistication as usually seen during that period of tomb architecture erected in the Indo-Afghan regions. The *gumbad* (dome) style has a certain influence of the Mughal pattern of architecture, as it is persisted with various tombs of Balochistan. A similar domical tomb of the Mughal period published by the principal author is located in the nearby Barkhan district, i.e. to the northeast of Harnai city (Naseer *et al.*, 2016).

In view of negligence of the concerned departments and lack of proper conservation, the eighteenth century monument is rapidly losing its originality and architecture elements. The native people usually render the timely deteriorations but they don't have enough resources, proper expertise and archaeological sense to maintain the authenticity and original plan of the building. For future treatment, if the ethics of scientific conservation are ignored and the traditional methods of repairing persist at a similar pace, we may soon lose its originality.

Notes

1. The language of the Khetran Baloch.
2. It is an Afghan tribe based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The tribe gained its popularity after the first Afghan war (1839) led by Barakzai (Sibi, Gazetteer).

3. The founder of Kadian/Kazian family of the sayeds whose tomb is at Khost.

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