

HISTORICAL MONUMENTS AT RAWAT NEAR ISLAMABAD

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Introduction

A desolate building complex of stone laid in lime mortar stands prominent amongst the new constructions at Rawat near Islamabad that attracts the eyes of the passersby from a distant. This monumental complex tell us that *Rawat* (more correctly *Rabat* form the Arabic root *rbt*) was once a place of some historical significance and these buildings are the unmistakable proof of its antiquity.

Rawat an emerging township in the vicinity of Islamabad lies about 18km south of Rawalpindi on the Grand Trunk road leading to Lahore. The building complex is almost square in shape. It is enclosed by a high wall, which was once provided with an attached circular column at each corner. The foundations of two towers, one each at the northern and southern corners still survive, while the others have already disappeared due to the ravages of time. The fabric of the surrounding wall still survives in original shape to a considerable height and at certain points; it is badly damaged, particularly on the western and southern sides. The entire surrounding wall was once provided with merlons with an arrow slit in the middle of each.

The complex is provided with four arched entrances, one on each side, in the direction of cardinal point leading to the central courtyard. Standing in the middle of the courtyard, one can easily reconstruct and get an idea of the entire building complex. All around the inner side of the surrounding wall rooms are constructed, which open into the central courtyard (Pl.III). As many as 15 rooms still survive in original form on all sides; but on the eastern side more rooms have escaped the ravages of time. All the rooms are square in plan that slightly vary in size. Each room provided with an arched entrance and a domical ceiling is fronted by a rectangular vestibule connecting it with the central courtyard.

Presently, out of the four gateways only two, the eastern and northern gateways give access to the building interior while the southern one has been blocked. The western one is demolished and incorporated in the *Qibla* wall of the mosque. The enclosed area encompasses a mosque and two tombs. One of the tombs is a monumental building and stands majestically near the northern side of the mosque and the other one tomb is completely collapsed but its northern wall still stands to a considerable height. The remaining portion of the enclosed area contains many other graves, constructed singly or in groups on raised platforms, probably reserved for family members.

The Eastern Gateway (Pls. I-II)

The eastern gateway is itself a very impressive building and is flanked by a massive, low bastion on each side. This monumental gateway rises in three storeys with guardrooms and accessory chambers on either side in the arched passage for administrative purpose. The passage to the courtyard is provided through an arched panel almost covering the entire height of the entrance block. The tower on the left is nearly complete. It is circular in plan and rises in the form of a huge mass of stone masonry. Its parapet is marked by high merlons pierced with arrow slits. On

the inner side, a flight of steps, on either end of the entrance block, gives access to the upper storey, which is presently completely demolished and a second flight of steps leads to the roof of the gateway block. The roof of the second storey, now in the shape of open terrace with tall merlons served as a safe place for the defenders in the case of emergency.

The facade of the eastern gateway is composed of three vertical sections where the central one is larger than the other two. The central portion takes the shape of a large arched rectangle, which almost covers its entire height. It contains an arched passage to the interior and is also enclosed in a rectangular frame. The open space above the arched passage is provided with an arched window with machicolations on each side. The side portions are solid mass of plain stone masonry. The most striking feature of the gateway is the tall archway, which passes through the entire gateway block and opens into the central courtyard.

The Northern Gateway

The northern gateway, as compared to the preceding entrance, is smaller in size. Like the eastern entrance, it is provided with circular tower on each side. A guardroom opposite to each other in the gateway block opens into the arched passage. On the inner side, a flight of steps gives access to the upper storey, which was once embellished with merlons, three of which still survive.

The Southern Gateway

The southern gateway was erected exactly opposite to the northern entrance for the purpose of symmetry. It is completely blocked now but its architectural remains suggest that it closely resembled its counterpart on the opposite side in every detail.

The Western Gateway

The existing architectural evidence in the shape of steps suggests that there was an entrance on the *qibla* side. This gateway, incorporated in the *qibla* wall of the mosque does not exist presently. A prominent projection on the western side marks the direction towards Mecca.

The Tomb Sultan Sarang Khan (Pls. IV)

Through the eastern gateway, we enter a vast central courtyard and suddenly an imposing mausoleum draws our attention. It is believed to be the last resting place of Sardar Sarang Khan, the Gakkhar chief, who opposed Sher Shah Suri and sided with Humayun for some obvious reasons. The tomb is octagonal in plan and occupies the northwestern portion of the complex. It is built in three stages and a lower octagon supports a second octagonal drum, which carries a low hemispherical dome. The lower octagonal chamber is pierced with arched entrances on the cardinal points, which provide access to the tomb chamber. The remaining sides are divided into three horizontal sections, each decorated with three arched panels worked out in lime plaster. Each entrance, marked with a rectangular frame, is in the shape of a large recessed arch that almost covers the entire height of the lower octagon. Each recessed arch accommodates an arched entrance superimposed by a similar blind arched panel above. The second octagonal storey has an arched window on the cardinal sides allowing ample light and fresh air. The remaining sides of the octagon are decorated with an arched panel executed in lime plaster. These ornamental arches are enclosed within rectangular frames. Some of them are pointed while others show a prominent ogee curve. A prominent moulding, worked out in bricks, marks the parapet of the drum of the upper storey, which once carried kiosks at each octagonal corner.

Internally, the octagonal tomb chamber is converted into a sixteen-sided zone of transition with the help of corner squinches. A corbelled squinch is put across each corner alternating with axial arches. The wall surfaces on the inner side are parceled out into rectangular and arched panels for ornamentation.

The floor of the building is paved with large brick tiles showing no vestiges of the cenotaph whatsoever. However, it is recorded that the graves of Sultan Sarang Khan and his sons were constructed in marbles and later Jahandad Khan Gakkhar put a tablet at the mausoleum. But today, neither the marble graves nor the tablet exist.

The Ruined Tomb Building (Pl. V)

Once a square building stood in the southern part of the complex. Presently its northern wall stands to a considerable height while the remaining walls are demolished and only traces of their foundations survive. It was constructed of stone blocks laid in lime mortar and certain portions, such as arches and lintels, were erected in bricks. From the existing remains, it can be concluded that the northern facade of the tomb was divided vertically into three almost equal sections. The central panel is provided with an arched entrance that gives access to the tomb chamber. The remaining two sections accommodate an arched panel enclosed by a rectangular frame. The rest of the tomb building is collapsed and its outline can be reconstructed from the foundation walls. From the available evidences, one can deduce that once at least two graves existed inside the chamber. It is difficult to describe other details of the building precisely but, however, we assume that it was a square domed structure.

The Mosque (Pl. VI)

The mosque is constructed in the western part of the enclosed area and the western boundary wall of the complex is incorporated in it. Externally, a rectangular projection on the west side marks the position of the *mihrab* on the inner side. Recently the mosque is repaired and plastered both externally and internally. The prayer chamber is a large rectangular hall that consists of three compartments, each having an arched entrance. The arched openings, enclosed within rectangular frames, are pointed with a clear ogee curve. Internally each compartment is converted into an octagonal zone of transition with the help of corner squinches, which supports a dome over each square bay. The parapet of the facade is marked by false merlons worked out in lime plaster. The central bay accommodates a newly constructed *mihrab* and a *minbar*.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taking into consideration the layout of the building complex and other monuments in the enclosed area, certain points need clarification regarding the antiquity of the monument. The complex as a whole gives the impression of a typical medieval caravan sarai rather than a graveyard. Whether the caravan sarai existed earlier and, later on, it was converted into the family graveyard of the *Gakkhars* or the caravanserai came into being around the tombs of the *Gakkhars* chiefs? There is little evidence to prove convincingly the later case. It seems certain that the caravan-sarai predates the tombs and the mosque. Being the stronghold of the *Gakkhar* tribe, we assume that the entire complex was built during the supremacy of the *Gakkhars* sometime in the 16th century. After the assassination of Sardar Sarang Khan and his sons in the battle against the armies of the Sher Shah Suri, they were buried here and the site was converted into a graveyard.

The present signboard at the site mentions the building complex as *Shahi Qila* or Royal Fort, which is a misnomer. In order to reach a plausible conclusion, it is necessary to analyse the contemporary historical sources. Surprisingly the building complex at *Rawat* situated on the most frequented route, is not mentioned as "Royal Fort" in historical literature besides the fact that it is in close proximity to the famous Rohtas Fort situated on the main route to Kashmir and Kabul.

Akbar the great, on his way from Kashmir to Lahore crossed several halting stations including Rawalpindi, Rabat, Nagarkot, Thana and serai carva (*sic.*) in a single day. He traversed a difficult defile and near serai Har (*sic.*) rested for a while on the top of a hillock. Next day he halted at Rohtas Fort (Abul Fazl: *The Akbarnama* vol.III, rep. Lahore, n.d., P.961). The Akbar's itinerary mentions Rabat (or Rawat) after Rawalpindi in the capacity of a known place without giving further details. From his account it can be gathered that at least four halting stations existed between Rabat and Rohtas Fort.

The Gazetteer of the Rawalpindi District records that "*Riwat*" the first camping ground from Rawalpindi on the Grand Trunk road, towards Jhelum, owes its interest to the tomb of Sarang Khan, the renowned Gakkhar chief, which is situated there. This is not a tomb of any architectural pretension nor of much antiquity, having been built in the middle of the 16th century, after the death of Sultan Sarang, and no less than 16 sons in action during the struggles between the Emperor Humayun and his enemies. (*Gazetteer of the Rawalpindi District*, Revised edi.1893-94, rep.1990, Lahore, P.43)

Early history of the Gakkhar tribe is shrouded in mystery and their ancestry is linked to the Persians (*Gazetteer of the Rawalpindi District 1893-94, p.49*). They appear on the political scene as a powerful tribe during the reign of the Mughals and the Suri dynasty. They played a vital role in the politics of the region when the Mughal emperor Humayun and Sher Shah Suri vied with each other for supremacy.

History informs us that the *Gakkhar* tribe enjoyed very cordial relations with the Mughals from the very beginning and this relationship was further strengthened against the Suri dynasty. Sher Shah Suri built the formidable Rohtas Fort ahead of Rawat to keep an eye on the movement of emperor Humayun. Sarang Khan, the *Gakkhar* chief, left no stone unturned to prevent the construction of the Rohtas Fort. The refusal of the locals to participate in the construction of the fort is mentioned by historians. The builder of the fort paid one *Ashrafi* each for a stone block to be used in the construction (Nadiem, I.H., *Rohtas; Formidable fort of Sher Shah*, n.d. Lahore, p.18). Sardar Sarang Khan always helped Humayun against the incursions of the Suri dynasty.

Bibliographic References

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Nadiem, I.H., *Rohtas; Formidable fort of Sher Shah*, n.d. Lahore, p.18

The author visited the site on the 8th March, 2007. The northern entrance is still in a better state and proper conservation can extend its life for another few decades.



Pl. I. Rawat: General View of the Eastern Gateway



Pl.II Rawat : A View of the Eastern Gateway from the inner courtyard



Pl.III. Rawat : A View of the Rooms from the courtyard



Pl IV. Rawat : General View: Tomb of Sardar Sarang Khan



Pl. V. Rawat: View of the Ruined Tomb



Pl.VI. Rawat: General View of the Mosque