

# The 'Īdgāh at Peshāwar: History and Architecture

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## Introduction

The architectural heritage of colonial period at Peshāwar has started getting much attention for research and it is in the same context that this paper aims at bringing an important building 'īdgāh to the forefront for academic interest of scholars and students.

The 'īdgāh is located about three km to the north-west of the old Peshāwar City on the main road leading to Chārsadda (Pls. 1, 2). Since it is built by leaders of the Muslim community in 1911 (*Gazetteer 1931*: 318), it is continuously used for congregational prayers by the provincial governors, chief ministers, other high ranking government officials and the general public biannually during the two big festivals 'Īd al-Fiṭr and 'Īd al-Aḍḥā (celebrated respectively on the 1<sup>st</sup> Shawwāl and 10<sup>th</sup> Dhu al-Ḥajjah, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> months on the Muslim calendar.). The provincial *khaṭīb*, appointed by the Auqaf Department, leads the prayers on these occasions (Shah 1996: 56).

S.M. Ja'far has mentioned the 'īdgāh among the places of historical interest (Jaffar 1946: 116). The *N-W.F. Province Gazetteers, Peshawar District, 1931*: 318 records that the 'īdgāh occupies the site of a mosque "built at the time of Mohabat Khān (c. 1500 A.D.)". It received a considerable land property as *waqf* (endowment) for its repair and maintenance and was placed under the supervision of Khān Bahādur Miān Karīm Bakhsh, a notable figure of Peshāwar. After his death, it was taken over by the Chamkanī Shrine Committee (*Gazetteer 1931*: 317) and subsequently by the Auqaf Department, Peshāwar. According to the *Government Gazette 1949*, it had a *waqf* of 73 *kanāl* and 4 *marla* piece of land (Shah 1996: 55). Some of this property was recently sold to the Police Department for building the Faqīrābād Police Station (Shah 1996: 55) and a part of it is now occupied by a section of the Jāmi'ah Ashrafiyyah, a free religious educational institution founded by Maulānā 'Abd al-Wadūd Qureshī in 1954. Presently, it has run out of all its endowed property (Shah 1996: 55).

Based on reference to the *N-W.F. Province Gazetteers, Peshawar District, 1931*: 317-318, a recently installed inscription on the southern grand *mīnār* (tower) of the 'īdgāh traces the antiquity of the building back to the time of the Mughal Governor Mahābat Khān; and records that it covered an area of 40 *kanāls*. Since built outside the city, as the inscription speaks, it might have been used as an 'īdgāh. Relying on a secondary source, the inscription has mucked up the whole matter. It is neither supported by historical nor circumstantial evidence. Had it been erected by Mahābat Khān, the Mughal Governor of the "*Ṣūbah e Kābul wa Peshāwar*" (Shah, 1993, PP. 149-159), it would have survived down to the British period. But, unfortunately, it is nowhere mentioned in the historical accounts of this area compiled during the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, neither architectural composition nor decorative scheme is in congruence to the Mughal tradition nor do we have any convincing local tradition to help solve the problem for good.

The date "c.1500 A.D." recorded within parenthesis in the same *Gazetteer* on P. 318 has added further to the confusion. How Mahābat Khān, who lived in the reigns of the fourth and fifth descendants of Zahīr ad-Dīn Bābar, founder of the Mughal Empire in AD 1526, could build this mosque? This obviously seems a blunder and needs our immediate attention for correction.

The population of Peshāwar confined to the city walls in the Mughal times, an 'īdgāh far away from the city centre would not have conveniently served its purpose, for the means of transportation in those days were poor. Therefore, there was no *prima facie* need of having an 'īdgāh which could not be used by the people. There were numerous mosques, such as those of Mahābat Khān, Dilāwar

Khān, Ganj 'Alī Khān and Qāsim 'Alī Khān within the city wall that could cater for the need of their respective *muhallahs* or localities including the 'Id prayers. Of these, the mosque of Mahābat Khān was the chief place of congregation in Peshāwar and could have easily served the purpose. Why then an 'īdgāh, particularly at the place where we find it today, was needed at all?

The towns and colleges surrounding the 'īdgāh today were not there in the Mughal times and as such the 'īdgāh building, even if it was there according to the inscription, must have stood alone in wilderness or, at the best, a sparsely populated area. It seems, therefore, that Mahābat Khān may have only marked out, if at all, a 40 *kanāl* area for the 'īdgāh without raising any structure on the site. The government officials who had their own transport used this place twice a year for 'Id prayers, a practice that still continues.

Apparently, the present 'īdgāh building does not appear to stand on the site of an old mosque of the Mughal times as asserted by the *Gazetteer* and blindly followed by later writers; there is evidence to show that it was originally built in 1911 or a little earlier. For instance, the 'īdgāh is nowhere referred to in the *Gazetteer of the Peshawar District 1897-98* or in the *Tārīkh-i Peshāwar* (1874). Therefore, a date falling between 1897 and 1911 for the original 'īdgāh building seems probable.

The recently-installed marble slab inscription further records conservation and repair done under the orders of the then chief ministers, 'Abd al-Qayyūm Khān and Āftāb Aḥmad Khān Sherpāo. Recently an amount of Rs 65,00,000.00 has been spent on beautification of the 'īdgāh including marble flooring of the prayer hall, landscaping, car park and iron fencing.

## Architecture

The 'īdgāh s are usually "well arranged, walled or fenced areas with a *miḥrāb* or some sort of niche in the Qiblah wall towards Mecca,..." (Chaghtai, 1972, P.30). The 'īdgāh at Peshāwar is a beautiful white building contained within a spacious courtyard demarcated by iron palisade. The 'īdgāh enclosure is rectangular in plan measuring 122 metre from north to south and 85 metre from east to west. Architecturally, the monument may be divided, for the sake of study, into three main components:

### Prayer Hall (Pls. 1, 2)

Occupying the western part of the 'īdgāh complex, the prayer-hall is also rectangular in plan, externally measuring 23.8 x 6.8 m, and does not run the whole length of the west side. It consists of a central nave flanked on either side by two bays.

The nave a square of 4.2 m a side is identical in execution on all the three sides save the west. The north, east and south sides show an outer larger arched-opening, while the west is provided with a *miḥrāb* (prayer niche) decorated on its borders with acanthus leaf pattern in stucco relief. The *miḥrāb* alcove is marked by an engrailed arch decorated, on the under side, with honeycomb pattern above and mini-arched panels below. Its spandrels are embellished with recent tile work. The dado level of the prayer-hall is flagged with black marble tiles.

The nave marked by a projected cornice above leads to the phase of transition, converting the square bay into an octagon by means of diagonal squinches and intermediary arches, supporting the dome atop. The centre of the dome originally decorated with an embossed lotus flower in stucco relief is now disfigured. Stucco work also includes leafy vases placed at each corner of the nave.

Separated by an arched opening, a smaller rectangular bay flanks the nave on either side. Having a flat roof, both the bays are identical in every detail. Their western wall is marked by two superimposed rectangular panels—large vertical one below and small horizontal above. The latter is devoid of any decoration, however, the former contains another recessed arched panel

divided into two parts: a rectangular sunk panel with moulded margins framing a smaller multi-foil arched niche with tympanum having a cusped design in lime plaster.

The bays on the extreme north and south are comparatively larger and square in plan measuring 4.8 m a side. Arches of different dimensions pierce all their four sides. Their western arch is screened off by stucco *jālī* (lattice work) showing David stars and hexagonal designs; while those of the remaining three sides are left open. Marked by corner pendentives, their transitional phase supports a low dome. Except for occasional stucco motifs, the entire prayer-hall, both internally and externally, shows no mural paintings.

The facade has five arched entrances set in deep alcoves, contained within rectangular panels. The central alcove is cusped while the remaining are pointed. A projecting cornice separates each entrance from the tympanum above. In case of the central entrance, arched panels in lime plaster decorate its cornice.

The parapet is constructed in the form of three steps: higher in the middle and descending on either side. Two massive octagonal *mīnārs* at the north-west and south-west corners and two smaller minarets between them at regular intervals enhance beauty of the building. The former are double-storey accessible from the north-west and south-east sides respectively. The first storey is plain and is marked by a moulded band and decorative cornice. Each octagon of the second storey is covered by a rectangular panel containing tall narrow arched windows alternating with blind arched panels on the cardinal directions. The architect-mason has decorated the latter with a miniature arched niche to avoid leaving it blank. The second storey of either *mīnār*, marked by a low *chhajjah* (eave), is surmounted by a small ribbed dome in imitation of those of the prayer-hall. The externally projected portion of the central *mīhrāb* is also provided with a similar low cornice and a ribbed semi-dome decorated at the springing point with boldly projecting acanthus leaf in lime plaster.

Externally, the three ribbed domes of the prayer-hall, the larger being in the middle, are identical in every detail regarding their ribs, acanthus leaves, inverted lotus and crowning finials.

### Grand Mīnārs (Pl. 3)

The grand octagonal *mīnārs*, one each at the northern and southern corners of the western perimeter, exalt the architectural splendour of the *īdgāh*. The workmanship shown in executing these *mīnārs* in conjunction with the chaste white prayer-hall adds much to the aesthetic beauty of the monument.

A projected cornice divides each *mīnār* in two storeys. Each octagonal side of the lower storey is relieved with an arched window screened off with stucco grill with the exception of two in the southern *mīnār* where white marble slab inscriptions were installed recently. The second storey shows arched windows free of any obstacle. The cornice atop this storey is more pronounced and appears as if supported on false brackets. A high drum and dome of these *mīnārs* are identical in their surface treatment and crowning features to those of the prayer-hall.

### Gateway Complex (Pls. 4, 5)

The main gateway of the *īdgāh* aligned to the central entrance of the prayer-hall at a distance of about 75 m to the east is provided with iron grill doors. This beautiful structure standing away from its adjuncts on the west is square in plan, measuring 4.2 m a side internally. Each side shows an engrailed arched alcove encompassing an arched opening. On each corner of this structure is a slender engaged pilaster, octagonal in section. It rises above the parapet line and is crowned by an ornamental kiosk. At the bottom it springs up from a large leafy vase just above the floor level. The parapet is marked by a slightly projecting cornice supported ornamentally on false brackets

constructed in the masonry of the walls. There are two water-chutes, one each on the northern and southern wall, to dispose off rainwater.

A strong iron fence encloses the entire *ṭdgāh* leaving gateways on the north and south sides. Small doors flanking the *mīnārs* of the prayer-hall are also provided on the west.

The courtyard is paved recently with burnt bricks set in cement mortar. A large number of Japanese *pīpal* (Banyan) trees have replaced some of the old citrus plants, covering the entire courtyard like an umbrella.

Building materials mainly include small-size burnt bricks and lime, used as mortar and plaster. Modern bricks can also be noticed at places subjected to later repairs.

The *ṭdgāh* building represents the early 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural tradition of Peshāwar as reflected in the mosque of Miān Nāṣir Aḥmad at Qiṣṣa Khwāni, 1301/1883, (Rahman *et al* 1997: 82-96); Sarā'i Mahābat Khān, the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century, (Shah 2000: 27-33); the mosque of Miān 'Abd ar-Rashīd Sethī, 1318/1900, (in the *muḥallah* Charvikubān, Peshāwar city); the Jāmi' Maṣjid at Namakmandī, 1325/1907, (Shah, 1996-a PP. 96-104); the tomb of Akhūnd Panjū Bābā at Akbarpūra, 1338/1919, (Shah, 1999, PP. 71-79); the tomb of Miān Gul Muḥammad at Torḍher, Ṣwābi, 1338/1919, (Shah, 1996-b, PP. 49-62); and the mosque of Islamia College, Peshāwar, 1912-13.

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## Note

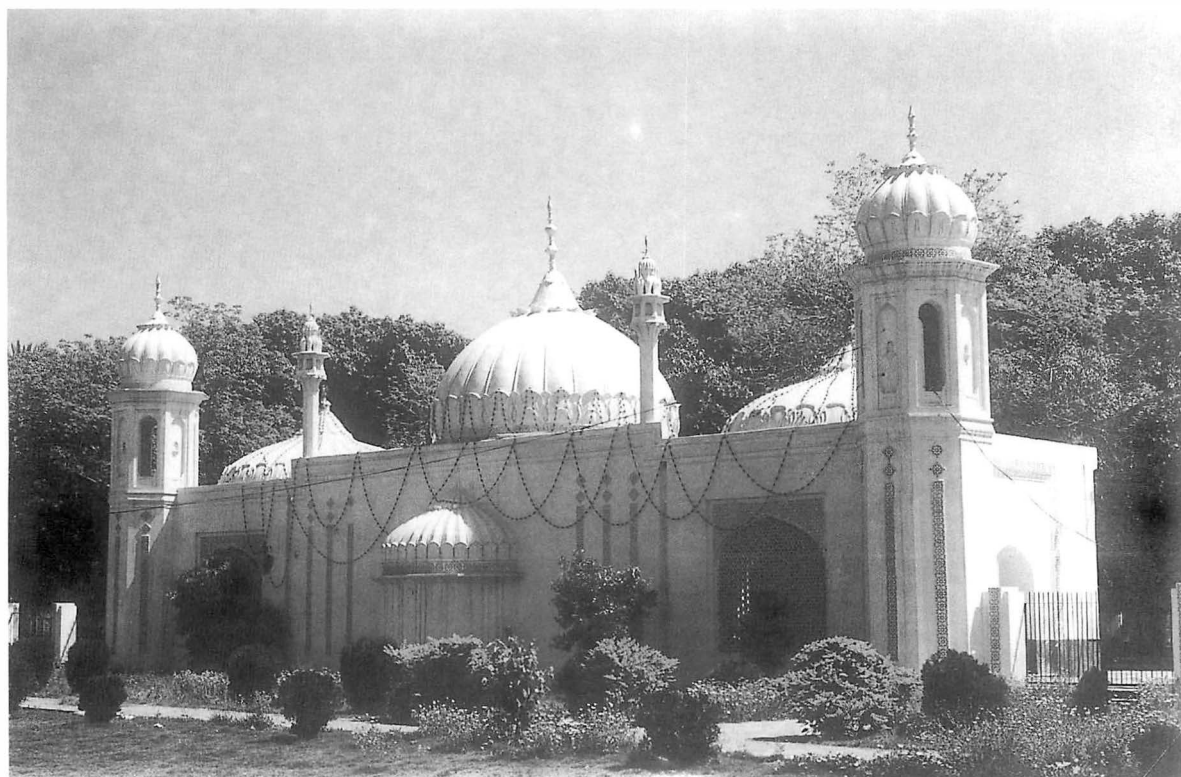
<sup>1</sup> One *marla* is equal to 272 sq ft. and one *kanāl* is equal to 20 *marlas*.

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Pl. 1: Peshawar: The 'Idgah: General view from the west side. The northern grand minār standing aloof can also be seen.



Pl. 2: The 'Idgah: Close up of the prayer-hall.

Pl. 3: Peshawar: The 'Idgah: The grand corner minar on the south side of the prayers hall.



Pl. 4: Peshawar: The 'Idgah: An outer view of the main entrance complex on the eastern side.

Pl. 5: Peshawar: The 'Idgah: Inner view of the main entrance complex (as seen from the courtyard of the 'Idgah).

