

A MONUMENT OF THE MUGHAL PERIOD MOSQUE OF MAHABAT KHAN IN PESHAWAR

AS no attempt has so far been made to throw light on the monuments of the Muslim Period that have survived in Peshawar, one is apt to subscribe to the erroneous view that it has little or nothing of Islamic times that may interest an antiquarian or an archæologist.

Of the many mosques built in Peshawar during the Muslim Period the one that forms the subject of this article is by far the biggest and most beautiful. It was erected by a Mughal officer called Zamānā Beg, better known in history as Mahābat Khan, who flourished during the time of the Emperor Akbar and his three immediate successors. Standing in splendid isolation, remote from the nuclei of Islamic architectural splendour, viz., Delhi, Agra, Lucknow and Lahore, this excellent specimen of Mughal architecture has often escaped notice and has not attracted the attention of any archæologist, Indian or foreign. Built in the reign of Shah Jahan, when Mahābat Khan's star was at its zenith, it stands on the northern outskirts of the city proper in a most thickly populated part called Andarshehr. Up to about a century ago it was lying in a dilapidated condition : its minarets had no domes, its archways had no doors, its *Mihrab* (orthodox niche, showing the direction of the *Qibla*) had no *Mimbar* (pulpit). One theory is that it was left incomplete by its author and the other is that it was subjected to the same spoliation as the tombs of Jahangir, Nur Jahan and Asaf Khan during the reign of Ranjit Singh.¹ What use it was put to during the Sikh Rule may be inferred from the fact that when Avitabile (better known among the Pathans as Abu Tabela) was the governor of Peshawar its minarets were frequently made 'a substitute for the gallows.'² It was reclaimed about 70 years ago and since then it has undergone complete renovation.

In design and detail this sacred structure follows the usual form of a Muslim place of prayer and closely resembles the *Badshahi Masjid* of Lahore and the *Jami Masjid* of Lucknow. It consists of 3 doorways with vaulted porches on all sides except the west, the one on the north being closed or so designed as to be easily opened when required ; a domed *Mazina* or *Azankhana* (place from where *Azan* or call for prayer is

1. Vide *Cambridge History of India*, Vol. iv, p. 551.

2. *Gazetteer of the Peshawar District* (1822 ed.) p. 218.



chanted) ; an open courtyard with a water-tank in the middle and a well in the north-eastern corner ; a set of small rooms of vaulted roofs on the north, south and east ; a spacious rectangular chamber on the west ; and 2 minarets of towering height, rising along the wings of the front wall of the prayer-chamber. The whole edifice, with all its appertinent structures, excluding the *Serai* on the east, which also belongs to it, covers an area of about 185×163 ft.

It is almost impossible to convey a correct idea of the original form and beauty of this mosque ; nor is it possible to do full justice to its architectural details and design even after its conjectural restoration. But an approximately correct impression of its present glory can be had from the brief description that follows. Both the doorways have domed porches, accessible by flights from the streets on the south and east. Over the southern doorway is a domed *Mazina* of modest dimensions and circular shape, having 8 pillars, supporting the entablature. The floor of the open courtyard, which is reached immediately after passing through the porches, covers an area of about 112×100 ft. The façade of the prayer-chamber is exquisitely decorated with flowers and geometrical patterns, painted in diverse colours. It rises above the roof about 8 feet in the middle and about 6 feet at the extremes. Its front cornice is studded with a series of *minars* in miniature and shows clever efforts of superior masonry. Six slender minarets, of which the two in the middle are slightly bigger than the others and the four excluding the two at the extremes have a network of niches and turrets round them, rise above the roof to a height of about 15 ft. The façade has 5 big wooden doors, fixed in beautifully ornamented arches. Fitted with glass panes of different colours and dexterously carved, the panels of these doors are fine specimens of fret-work. The prayer-chamber is $142\frac{1}{2}$ ft. long, 56 ft. broad and $28\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high. Its roof, half domed and half flat, rests on a number of arches which seem to divide the main chamber into two long arcades lengthwise and seven smaller compartments breadthwise. While the interior of one of the arcades is most profusely embellished with Arabesques and geometrical figures of different colours, sentences from the Sacred Book, of which the words skilfully interwoven into one another display subtle tricks of Arabic calligraphy, adorn the other and add to the sanctity as well as sublimity of the sacred structure. The *Mihrab* in the middle of the western wall of the prayer-chamber is a perfect embodiment of decorative art. It is enriched with flowers and ornaments and beautifully bordered with coloured pieces of glass and sentences from the Holy Quran, written in a most stylish and ornamental hand. A *Mimbar* of milky marble, with nicely perforated back and arms, is placed near the *Mihrab* and from it the *Khatib* delivers his *Khutba* before the Friday prayers. The western half of the chamber is surmounted with seven *Qubbas* (cupolas), of which the three in the middle rise above the rest, which are covered over, to a height of about 16 ft. Of these three, the one in the middle is slightly bigger than the other two. The two

lofty *minarets* are three-storied and star-shaped, each crowned with a pointed dome. The top-story of either is a fair prototype of the *Mazina* already described. It can be reached by ascending the stairs built round a massive central column. One *minaret* is but a faithful copy of the other and rises on a circumference of about 45 ft. to a height of over 110 ft.

The small cubicles on the north, east and south, now occupied by the *Khadims* (servants) of the mosque, were originally meant most probably for the residence of the teacher (*Ustad*) and the taught (*Talibs*); for in Mediæval India every mosque was a centre of religious as well as secular education where, in addition to the teaching of the *Quran*, *Fiqh* and other religious sciences, such books as Saadi's *Bostan* and 'Aṭṭār's *Pandnamah* were regularly taught and when every *Imam* of a mosque was expected to be a good teacher.

A word may also be said about the style of the mosque. It is made of marble, brick, stone and stucco and is characterised by simplicity and strength throughout. Its interior also displays a certain amount of delicacy and ornamentation. In many respects it resembles Mughal mosques erected elsewhere in Mughal India, and is Indo-Islamic or rather Mughal in style with very minor differences of detail. In the richness of material, chasteness of design, details of architecture, and brilliance of execution it is a fine specimen of Mughal architecture, fit to rank with the finest houses of prayer seen in Muslim India.

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