Structure as a document

Jinisha Jain
Conservation Architect, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT: Known as the ‘Old Fort’, Purana Qila, the first Mughal capital city, is situated on the eastern edge of Delhi, along the river Jumna. Humayun, the second Mughal emperor (1530–38 A.D.) began constructing a walled city and fortress on this site in 1533 A.D., and named it Din-Panah, or ‘Refuge of Religion’. He was temporarily deposed by Sher Shah Sur (1538–45 A.D.), who extended the Old Fort but the fort was finally completed by Humayun (1555–56 A.D.), the founder king. The comeback of Humayun and physical additions to the site which can visibly be discerned but not assigned to any one ruler with confirmation compound the problems of authorship and the historic sources in this respect fail to give any conclusive or corroborative evidence. The fort walls are over one mile long, and contain three gates, a triple storey octagonal structure called Sher Mandal and a mosque called Qila-I-Kunha Masjid meaning the ‘Mosque of the Old Fort’. The paper focuses on Qila-I-Kunha and uses documentation of this structure as a tool to unveil the mystery.

1 HISTORIC SITES: AN EXISTING TESTIMONY

Historic sites are not just places for aesthetic admiration, for exercising nostalgic moments or for eliciting evocative responses of awe, wonder and marvel but they are an existing testimony of how and what things were once upon a time.

The relevance of this work really lies in understanding the objects of architecture as, preserver of history, storehouse of great deal of information and as fossilizer of past identities. This is to say that when a historic building or site is conserved, it is not just an architectural object- a physical entity that is conserved but also the history and any other information that is associated with that structure, thus making that structure a built resource for retrieving various kinds of information and in determining its identity.

Recognition of elements, which contribute to identity, and integration of history is thus only ethical to sound conservation works while lack of historical research handicaps the conservation processes and may even tamper or completely eliminate evidences of the past.

There has always been a mystery related to the site of Purana Qila, located in the heart of the capital city Delhi and the answer whether one discovers or not is not to be found anywhere else but on the site itself, lest the proofs to be obtained from the site are manipulated to the extent that the answer becomes almost impossible to be recovered from the stones of the age old site.

2 ON SITE OF PURANA QILA

Known as the ‘Old Fort’ of Delhi, Purana Qila, the first Mughal capital city, is situated on the eastern edge of Delhi, along the river Jumna. Humayun, the second Mughal emperor (1530–38 A.D. /1555–56 A.D.) began constructing a walled city and fortress on this site in 1533 A.D. and named it Din-Panah, or ‘Refuge of Religion’. The chosen site was an ancient area known as Indraprastha, associated with the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Through the excavation from the Purana Qila evidences of pieces of the painted grey ware, relics and remains of later periods have been discovered in the Archeological Surveys. However, its occurrence here seems to support the tradition of Purana Qila being the site of Indraprastha, associated with the Hindu epic Mahabarata, originally situated on the bank of the River Jumna (Sharma, 2001).

Din-panah, original name for Purana Qila and its surrounding most appears to have been conceived as a royal citadel attached to a larger township which originally covered the low- lying ground around the fort on the south, north and west.

The project was not interrupted when Humayun was temporarily deposed by Sher Shah Sur (1538–45 A.D.), for the Sur ruler completed the fortress walls and built many structures within. He strengthened and extended the ‘Old Fort’ raising on the same site a citadel for the governor and renamed it as Shergarh, ‘The fort of Sher Shah’. The structures built by Sher Shah Suri may possibly have been demolished or
altered by Humayun when he took back his throne and the city. In any case, it is not dubitable that Sher Shah Suri in the small although significant interregnum period also left the Purana Qila unfinished and it was finally completed by Humayun, (1555–56 A.D.) who was also the original founder of it. The repeated entry of Humayun and physical additions to the site which can visibly be discerned but not assigned to any one ruler with confirmation, have compounded the problems of ‘who built what?’ in Purana Qila.

The fort walls in well-bonded rubble masonry are over one mile long, and contain three gates, which are double or triple storied, built with red sand stone and surmounted by canopies or chhatris. Among the three main gates, the northern gate is called the Talaqi Darwaza meaning ‘Forbidden Gate’. The southern gate is known as the Humayun Darwaza. The western gate, the principal gate today and in all probability the principal gate in the past as well is called Bara Darwaza meaning ‘Big Gate’. The eastern side has three wickets on the side of Jumna bank, the central one being the ‘Water Gate’. Purana Qila has some interesting structures besides the fort walls, the three imposing gateways and the wickets. It has a mosque called Qila-I-Kuhna Masjid and an octagonal triple-storeyed pavilion called Sher Mandal. A water reservoir, baoli also exists.

The various historic sources in Purana Qila fail to give any conclusive or corroborative evidence regarding their authorship. Thus, the mystery always resurfaces with contradicting opinions and conflicting interpretations.

For example, according to one interpretation, the buildings that survive from the time of Sher Shah were built close to the western gate. They include the Qila-i-Kuhna Masjid, and the Sher Mandal, the three-storeyed, octagonal pavilion with red and white color scheme and according to another interpretation none of the structures in Purana Qila belong to Sher Shah, except for minor additions and repairs. There is no epigraphical evidence to support either claim. In any case, Sher Mandal and Qila-i-Kuhna Masjid, are the two surviving structures of certain complexity, within the fort ramparts from the mid sixteenth century, which command interest and consideration as they mark an important and decisive stage in the development of the subsequent styles and features of Islamic architecture in India.

3 PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDS AND EXISTING VIEWS ON THE SUBJECT

The authorship of the complex has been attributed by medieval historians variously to Humayun and Sher Shah. The debate related to the authorship of Purana Qila in itself is historical with contradictory statements and records from the medieval historiographies, which are taken as important references for either of the viewpoints. These are presented below:

- Khwand Amir’s Qanun-I-Humayuni records that in the year A.H. 940 (1533 A.D.) Humayun laid the foundation of a city named Din Panah in Delhi on a raised area of the embankment of the river Jumna. This new city was at a distance of three kuroh from the older urban area in the south. The progress of construction, according to this text, was so rapid that within a period of ten months the bastions, ramparts and gates could be almost completed.

- Tarikh-I-Da’udi states that it was Sher Shah who built a new city on the banks of Jumna in Delhi, between Firozabad (Kotla Firoz Shah area) and Kilokhari (near Okhla) in the village of Indrapat, in A.H. 947 (1540 A.D.) and inhabited it, but could not complete it, due to his untimely demise. He also writes that Sher Shah named the fort as Shergarh.

- This statement is also corroborated by Tarikh-I-Shershahi, written by Abbas Khan Sárwání in Akbar’s reign, an earlier work, which records that Sher Shah ordered destruction of the older city of Delhi and construction of two forts to be built in Delhi by the bank of Jumna, the smaller one for the residence of local governor and the larger one around the city. But the fortifications enclosing the town remained incomplete by the time of his death. (Abdullah in his Tarikh-I-Da’udi, says that what was destroyed was the Qila-I-Alai that is Siri, which was indeed the former capital city of Delhi, at a distance from Jumna. It is then likely that Tarikh-I-Shershahi also talks about destruction of Siri and not the city built by Humayun, as is sometimes believed. Also, Kotla of Firoz Shah was the closest old city of Delhi, that could be used as a quarry and facilitate quick
completion of work, but the fact that it was itself included within the ramparts, suggest that not major recycling of materials from this site was possible).

- According to the Tarikh-I-Khan Jahan, another important work on Afghan history, Sher Shah’s son Salim Shah Sur (1545–54 A.D.) is stated to have built a wall encircling the city of Humayun, which falls perfectly in place as both Tarikh-I-DaudI and Tarikh-I-Shershahi say that the outer fortification had begun by Sher Shah Sur but could not be completed by him (thus completed by his son).

- The features of Purana Qila, which have been identified as, ‘Mughal’, could also date from Akbar’s period because we learn from Akbaranama that in spring 1560 A.D., Shihabuddin Ahmad Khan, the governor of Delhi, in anticipation of an attack by Bairaṃ Khan, proceeded to strengthen the fort of Delhi and to repair its towers and walls. (maramat-i-burj-o-bara).

- Zafar Hasan, a 19th C archaelogist admitted that the difficulty in judging how much of the citadel (Purana Qila) is the work of Humayun and how much of Sher Shah. However, he states that according to general opinion the walls and gates are considered to be the work of Humayun and mosque (Qila-I-Kunha) and Sher Mandal, of Sher Shah.

- Recently, J. Burton-Page and R. Nath have suggested that none of the Delhi monuments traditionally ascribed to Sher Shah were actually built during his reign, much less patronized by him.

- Architectural Historian Catherine Asher, assigns the Qila-I-Kunha masjid as indeed the mosque of Sher Shah- a visual symbol of royal aspirations of the ruler.

- M.C Joshi, a modern historian, acknowledges minor contributions of Sher Shah and through re-examination of literary and existing epigraphical proofs credit most of the surviving structures to Humayun.

4 ON STRUCTURES WITHIN: QILA-I-KUHNA MASJID

Purana Qila is a subject that has been dealt with by many architectural historians, researchers and other scholars time and again. It is humble to acknowledge that the results or conclusions can never be path-breaking in the sense that there are eventually three possibilities one encounters: the structures were built by Humayun, the structures were built by Sher Shah and the third-the structures were built in parts by both. Nevertheless, it is the approach, a fresh perspective and the rigor of the quest that has kept the intrigue on the subject going.

The Qila-I-Kuhna mosque conforms to the architectural tradition of a five-bay mosque with triple domes, a mosque typology that had developed in the precedent Sayyid and Lodhi periods. It occupies an area of approximately 51 m by 13.5 m, with a total height close to 20 meters, inclusive of the dome. The mosque is built in core masonry of stone rubble bonded with lime mortar and with fascia of finished blocks of Delhi quartzite and red sandstone. The internal space, a large rectilinear hall is divided laterally through massive load-bearing stone masonry arches into a distinct number of five. The external eastern façade correspondingly consists of an arrangement of five archways with the central one being sunk in an arched recess contained within a pronounced rectangular frontage, the Liwan. The liwan is ornamented with intricate stone relief and intarsia in multi-coloured schemes-red and yellow sandstone, marble and black slate. At the rear of liwan rises a characteristic Lodhi dome with small minaret called guldastas, literally the flower bouquets, flanking the drum and with a finial, kalash on the top. The scheme of five also translates internally as an arcade of mihrabs, one in each bay, along the qibla or the west facing wall. The mihrabs are designed on the same general principle as the recessed arches in the eastern façade; however they exhibit very fine workmanship. The system of roof support consists of domes, cross-rib vaults and semi-domes with squinches, stalactites and corbelled pendentives in the phase of transition. Certain innovative roofing devices have been employed and there are three roofing techniques which have been used. The central bay has a single masonry dome with multiple openings in the drum for ventilation and is decorated with colored tile work. Squinch is employed in the phase of transition. The penultimate bays on either side have what appear to be flat domes or vaults. The end bays, which are oblong unlike the central and the penultimate bays which are somewhat squarish have an unusual roofing mechanism. The last bay shows two half arches which spring tangentially from the shoulders of the lateral arches which define this bay. This results in creation of three spaces to be spanned with a cross-rib arrangement. Thus the central space of the end bay has a shallow dome, while the spaces towards the western and eastern arcade are covered through semi-domes, nim-gumbads resting on the suspended arches which in turn rest on the main lateral arches. The phases of transition are covered through beautifully carved corbelled pendentives. Attached to the ends of the rear wall are two octagonal turrets, which are functional as well as structural. Oriel windows, decorative brackets, sunshades or chajjas and narrow turrets with taper, reminiscent of Tughlaq architecture- an early phase, on each side of the central rectangular bay both in the front and rear are other architectural features which are used in the edifice. Hexagrams or six pointed star motifs along with colored stone inlay of various geometric patterns form the chief ornamentation.
The mosque had private entrances on the north and south side for the use of the royal family, which are now kept closed. The mosque is generally accepted to represent the culmination of its type and as also the prototype for the more refined subsequent typologies of Mughal mosques.

The mosque traditionally is considered to be Sher Shah Sur’s royal chapel. In the absence of historical inscriptions on the Qila-I-Kuhna, the traditional view of the mosque’s patron is based on the near contemporary histories of the Sultan Sher Shah Sur. Following presents abstracts from these histories and their interpretation by some of the recent historians.

- Both the Tarikh-I-Shershahi by Abbas Khan and Abdulla’s Tarikh-I- Da’udi state that among the very first of Sher Shah’s accomplishments upon assuming the Delhi throne in 1540 A.D was the construction of his own capital, which included two fortified enclosures, the city walls and the royal residence, the area known today as the Purana Qila. (The destruction of Humayun’s capital in Delhi is not implied directly in any of the texts). The erection of a magnificent Jami mosque within the Purana Qila is cited by both Tarikh. Moreover, Abdullah in the Tarikh-I-Da’udi states that this mosque was completed quickly, implying its full construction during Sher Shah’s reign.

- Tarikh-I-Shershahi says, ‘The former capital city of Delhi was at a distance from the Jumna, and Sher Shah destroyed and rebuilt it by the bank of the Jumna, and ordered two forts to be built in that city, with the might of a mountain, and loftier in height; the smaller fort for the governor’s residence; the other, the city wall to protect it; (literally, Jahan-panah) and in the governor’s fort he built a Jama masjid of stone, in the ornamenting of which much gold, lapis lazuli, and other precious articles were used. But the fortifications round the city were not completed when Sher Shah died.’

- It seems unlikely that Abbas Khan, who was commissioned by Akbar to write the Tarikh-I-Shershahi, would attribute the mosque within the Purana Qila to Sher Shah if the actual patron was either Akbar himself or his father, Humayun.

- According to Catherine Asher, the literary evidence referring to Sher Shah’s patronage of the Qila-I-Kuhna mosque is hard to dispute. The mosque, then, must have been built soon after 1540 A.D. when Sher Shah ascended the Delhi throne. A comparison of central archways with bracketed entrances of Ibrahim Sur’s tomb (Narnaul, Haryana), which were built by Sher Shah according to an inscriptions thereon, and those of Purana Qila further supports the above point of view. In fact, like the Sur monuments of Sasaram, the mausoleum of Ibrahim Sur is an improved and a refined version of Bara Gumbad or other square Lodhi tombs.

- M.C Joshi opines that it is not unlikely, that this mosque was designed and founded by Humayun but was completed by Sher Shah, who seems to have been responsible for building the upper part of the super structure including the central dome, crenellated parapet of the roof- also encountered in his Narnaul and Sasaram monuments- and introducing structural ornamentation including blue tile work, colourful gilded paintings, lotusbud fringe in arches, and ornate mihrams. Perhaps the Sur ruler also built its roof flanking the central dome and the two sitedomes, the bases of which are still partially extant. The unfinished marble facing of the front, with rich inlay designs can in no case be older than the time of Akbar (1556–1605 A.D.), because the ornate geometric patterns as well as their techniques of execution are purely Mughal in character and absent in Sur or Sultanate monuments.

- Architecturally, this edifice expresses the logical development of the five bay structural model represented by Masjid Moth (Lodhi) and Jamali-Kamal (Baburi) mosques; yet the employment of pointed arches, nim-gumbads (half domes) in it supporting the roof of the side- bays and pietra dura certainly suggests a strong ‘Mughal’ association.

5 CRITICAL REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHITECTURE

We have already come across the inadequacy of the archeological, historical, epigraphical and toponymic (study of names and places; Sher Mandal as an example would bring to mind association with Sher Shah but most of the scholars agree with Humayun being the actual founder) proofs in the case of Purana Qila as demonstrated above.

This paper focuses on the documentation, architectural and structural analysis and subsequent interpretation of one structure in Purana Qila, Qila-I-Kanh Masjid to trounce the other research inadequacies.

Herein are presented the author’s views on the authorship of this structure:

- The planning, masonry and the same proportions in all the pylons inside the mosque clearly illustrate it was conceptualized as a five bay mosque, thus thwarting any possibilities of the extreme end bays being added later, although the change in proportions of the elevational arches of these bays is odd and not seen in any of the previous prototypes or other contemporary mosques of the period, though the central liwan is almost always elevated.

- The internal staircases housed within the end bays were planned to reach the terrace of the turret and then further into the drum gallery to finally the terrace. This is more pronounced in the light of the fact that the mosques of Moth-ki-Masjid and Jamali
Kamali both of which are considered as prototype for this mosque have two set of staircases, internal staircases that lead to the turret and the external ones to reach the terrace. It is only here that there exists a set of two internal staircases. Consequently the end bays, the octagonal turrets and the dome could not have been built separately and were planned, conceptualized and executed by the same patron.

- Also, if the dome is a characteristic Suri (influenced by the preceding pathan dynasty of the Lodhis) single dome with guldastas, tapering turrets, a certain flatness in appearance and polychrome mosaic work and painted ceiling work in the interiors, the mosque which shows a unified concept in its execution is also then by Sher Shah Sur, who on the authority of medieval writer Abbas Sarwani, a court historian of Akbar ascribed it to Sher Shah Sur and not Humayun, his patron’s father. (Also if one persists that the mosque was indeed built by Humayun then it must have been built by him in its entirety, including the so called Suri dome, both because the concept of the structure with literal ‘structural underpinnings’ is too unified to be executed by two patrons and also because Humayun had enough time, 1533–38 A.D. to undertake and finish the architectural pursuit of a mosque in his royal citadel, had it been begun by him).

The unified concept is reflected in not just the planning but also in the ornamentation and the decorative motifs which are used in the building. The motifs on the base of the columns, the frieze, the capitals and the brackets show consistency in the interior of the mosque and also in interior of the turrets, although this was achieved through cladding.

- Also the arches, the five-bay rectangular plan and the other dominant features such as calligraphic embellishment, stalactite pendentives, octagonal corner towers, oriel windows, etc. can easily be seen in Sultanate period buildings. The mosque is only a logical development of a mosque typology existent in Delhi Sultanate since the Lodhi times, reflected in the Bara Gumbad mosque, the Moth ki masjid, the Jamali Kamal mosque(completed in Babur’s reign) and finally a synthesis of all these in Qila-i-Kunha mosque within Purana Qila.

- The Mihrabs and are not structural in the same way as the arches of the main eastern façade which take the load down through their broad pylons. The load of the rear wall is mostly translated through the octagonal turrets at the ends, the narrow turrets in the centre and the fat western wall. The Mihrabs are largely ornamental and display a conscious sense of aesthetics. The Mihrabs with alternate ribs of dark and light colored stone and bud-fringes along their silhouette are seen in the tomb of Ibrahim Sur in Narnaul and also in mosques such as the Atala mosque in Jaunpur-the learning centre, a place
where Sher Shah Sur had spent much his time in youth. (Although neither of them show the classicism achieved in the mihrabs of Qila-I-Kunha with exquisite inlay work, which probably could be ascribed to Mughals-Humayun).

- Humayun after recapturing Delhi Sultanate must have contributed in introducing pietra dura, such as in the liwan, in the mihrabs, in the brackets supporting the pendentives, in the frieze with crenellation motif at the rear, etc much of which was left unfinished because of his untimely death. The contributions made by Akbar if any are not clear. Minus the sophisticated inlay work done in parts the whole building indeed begins to look more like a structure built in Suri time, with more dominant play of quartzite and red sandstone carved cladding just like the tombs in Sasaram and Narnaul.

It is interesting to note that many Timurid ideas and a new aesthetic sensibility had been introduced by Babur, whom Sher Shah Sur had personally served. Thus the influence of Mughal ideas or assimilation of their aesthetic sensibility by a later dynasty shall not be a surprise.

Thus it can be disputed that the mosque in its entirety was conceptualized and built by the Sur ruler, and only non-structural modifications such as replacing the cladding, carving and introducing fine persian inlay work were made by the Mughal rulers.

6 CONCLUSION

There is a Suri tradition of architecture different from both its predecessor and successor dynasties. The idea has been to integrate such research and documentation with conservation works to be able to determine the right kind of significance for the structure and also to aid in preservation of historic proof while opening up possibilities for multiple interpretations for different people (and not just scholars) instead of adopting a linear method of dispersing information. Qila-I-Kanha Masjid shows innovations, which became prototypes for emulation for the later buildings. It set precedents. In the absence of sound epigraphical, historical or any other proof, the building itself has served to be a standing document and has revealed significant information on the basis of which we can infer that Purana Qila is one of the few sites where the two different architectural traditions of two rival camps-the Mughal and the Sur have managed to co-exist.

REFERENCES

Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University.
Yadgar, Ahmad. Tarikh-i Salatin-i Afghani (Translation).