

Samadhi Architecture in Potohar, Punjab (Pakistan)

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Abstract

Potohar is a land of myths, romance and chivalry. Many tribes ruled Potohar region of the Punjab leaving behind their footprints in the form of monuments which are testimony to their political roles each tribe played in different period of history ranging from Hindu Shahi to indigenous tribes of Ghakhars and Janjuas. There are many villages in Potohar where there are monuments of these tribes who held sway in much of the present Potohar, Apart from these local tribes, many non-local tribes and religious groups also ruled Potohar. This included Ghorids, Ghaznavids, Mughals, Sikhs and British. The present paper deals with *samadhis* of Hindus and Sikhs which are believed to have been erected during the Sikh and British period in Potohar.

Keywords: Potohar, Samadhi architecture, Pakistan.

Introduction

There are many *samadhis* in Potohar region of the Punjab. However, the famous ones are located at Dera Bakhshian, two *samadhis* in Gulyana in Gujjar Khan, and a Samadhi on the Bagh Saradarn road in Rawalpindi and Than Singh Samadhi at Kot Fateh Khan. Sikh *samadhis* mainly depict ten gurus, figures of Hindu gods particularly Vishnu and his *avatars* Ram and Krishna, court scenes and glimpses of colonial rural Punjab. A Hindu Samadhi depicts Hindu gods and goddess, and scenes from epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Potohari *samadhis* assume two forms, square and octagonal. Square *samadhis* are located at Karnali, Dera Bakhshian, Gulyana, Kot Fateh Khan, Qutbal and octagonal Samadhis at Bagh Sardaran, Rawalpindi and Kot Fateh Khan. All of these *samadhis* are adorned with paintings. Some of these are also decorated with glazed tiles. The distinctive features of Potohari *samadhis* are ribbed domes and the high neck drums which are not found in other *samadhis* in Punjab. Other distinctive features of these *samadhis* are tanks where the *yatris* used to take bath during the time of annual fair. The rich Hindu, Jain and Sikh of Potohar lavishly spent on the construction of these *samadhis*.

Samadhi of Baba Mohan Das at Karnali

Karnali is a picturesque village situated 10 km west of Gulyana. It can also be reached by Sukho town. The village is famous for ancient mound, Mughal period graves, historical water tanks and a *samadhi* of Hindu ascetic. The Mughal graves are located in Lalyal village which is at

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walking distance from the *samadhi*. There are 35 graves, all of which are in crumbling condition. The graves are constructed of *kanjur* stone. Similar graves can also be found in many villages of Gujar Khan, Kallar Syedan and Islamabad. These graves are noted for beautiful *kanjur* stone which is not available in the area. Similar graves are also found in Daryala Khaki near Dora Badal, Dhok Baba Mehru, Dhok Magral, and Thathi villages. Unfortunately all the graves have been vandalized.

The *samadhi* of Baba Mohan Das is conspicuous from the necropolis of Lalyal village (Fig.1). According to Rawalpindi Gazetteer (2001) Baba Mohan Das was well known *faqir* who used to live in a cave. There took place a large Hindu gathering at Karnali on the occasion of his fair. After his death in 1881, a fair was held which was attended by 10,000 persons annually.



Fig. 1. Dilapidated Samadahi of Baba Mohan Das at Karnali

The *samadhi* of Baba Mohan Das is second largest in Potohar after the Samadhi of Baba Than Singh. The Samadhi of Baba Than Singh is the largest *samadhi* in Potohar which is located in Kot Fateh Khan in Fateh Jang tehsil. The *samadhi* of Baba Mohan Das is quite prominent. It is a two storey building superimposed with a ribbed dome. It is a square building with arched openings from four sides.

Unfortunately, the western side of the *samadhi* has caved in. The burial place of Baba Mohan Das has been vandalized. People have dug his burial in the hope of finding treasure. The glazed tiles used to decorate the burial chamber of Mohan Das are spread over the site. Northern and southern walls have also collapsed. The rubble of the fallen walls is strewn over the inner space of the Samadhi.

There is also an underground chamber which was possibly used for practicing meditation. An archway leads to underground chamber. This might have been the cave of Mohan Das which is mentioned in the Rawalpindi gazetteer. The *samadhi* was painted inside and outside. The traces of the paintings are still visible on the outer walls of the *samadhi*. It is built over ancient mound possibly belonging to Buddhist period. To the west of *Samadhi* are some foundation walls of the ancient structure which is possibly that of stupa.

There is also a beautiful water tank lying close to the Samadhi. It is constructed of semi-masonry. "This water tank was used by the devotees of Baba Mohan Das who used to visit on the annual fair and other occasions². Both Hindus and Sikhs managed all the affairs of *samadhi*. They also carried out repair to *samadhi* on the eve of annual fair of Baba Mohan Das. Hindus and Sikhs of Sukho, Daultala, Dora Abadal and Kontrela swarmed the fair³. Two banyan trees also grace the landscape of Samadhi. There are two water tanks in Karnali village. One is close to *samadhi* other lies between Lalyal and Karnali village. At both ponds, are monumental banyan trees. To south of *samadhi* is located an ancient mound. There are large numbers of potsherds scattered over the site.



Fig. 2. Sikh Samadhis at Gulyana

Samadhis at Gulyana

There are two *samadhis* which lie 1 km east of the village (Fig.2). Of these, one is larger with *shikhara*. From inside, it is decorated with paintings representing the Sikh and Hindu mythologies. On the southern wall is the painting of Baba Guru Nanak with his two companions Bala and Mardana. On the western wall are the depictions of Ram and Sita with Hanuman and

² Information given by Malik Mubarak Hussain of Karnali of village

³ All the information was shared by Malik Mubarak Hussain of Karnali village

Laxman. Hanuman, the monkey god, is shown paying homage to Ram and Sita. The southern wall depicts the stories of Krishna with *gopis* (milkmaids) and Radha. Northern wall depicts Shiva with his wife Parvati and Vishnu with Lakshmi.

On western and southern sides of the *samadhi* are three old wells, of which two are still used by the people for irrigation. On northern side is another small *samadhi*. According to oral historian of the village that two Sikh notables were buried inside these *samadhis*⁴.

To the west of these Sikh *samadhis* is situated a Hindu temple. The inner sanctum (*garbhagriha* where image is placed) is square. The *shikhara* (the superstructure) is also square. From inside, it is decorated with floral designs (Fig.3). The temple is believed to have been built by Bakhshmi Moti Ram who was grandfather of Tek Chand. According to Gulzar Khan, Tek Chand embraced Islam after partition. He had three sons, Roshan, Bhera and Shal. They also migrated to India.

Unfortunately, all these buildings lie in neglect. People have placed firewood in both *samadhis*. The authorities concerned should take serious note of decay of our cultural heritage. They should immediately restore the old glory of the monuments. In order to protect them from further decay and vandalism, they should appoint night watch to properly look after them.



Fig. 3. Painting in a Sikh Samadhi at Gulyana

Samadhi of Baba Than Singh at Kot Fateh Khan

Three Sikh buildings *gurdwara* and two *samadhis* are located west of village. During the British period, the village was very sacred for the Sikh community for the *samadhi* of Baba Than Singh who was known for his righteousness. The Sikh community used to gather during the fair of Baba

⁴ Gulzar Khan , an oral historian of Gulyana village gave the information

Than Singh in the month of Baisakh (April-May). According to district Rawalpindi gazetteer (2001), 4000 people attended the fair in 1893. The *samadhi* of Than Singh is a beautiful double story building superimposed with a canopy. The *samadhi* has three openings on its east, south and west (Fig.4). The northern wall is partially closed by the wall of *gurdwara*. The main archway, which opens to the east, is made of white marble. The cusped archway is remarkable for its superb spandrel decorations. The inner sanctum where the *samadhi* of Than Singh is located has a carved door flanked by inscriptions in Gurumukhi on either side. The door of *samadhi* is decorated with marble slabs carrying the names of the donors with donated amount.



Fig. 4. Gurdwara and Samadhi of Baba Than Singh at Kot Fateh Khan

Today, Muslim community of the village also venerates Than Singh and calls him Baba Than and Sultan. They visit the *samadhi* and seek the blessing of a Sikh saint. "If our wishes are fulfilled, we distribute the sweets or cooked rice at the Samadhi" said Niaz Ahmed of the village. This indicates the syncretic nature of the shrine where saint, with dual identities, are worshipped. The dual identity shrines are widespread in south India and some parts of Sindh. This is the only shrine in the Potohar where Muslims venerate the Sikh saint.

To north of the Samadhi is the attached building of *gurdwara*. The distinctive features of the *gurdwara* are the stucco decoration and the wooden railing with spectacular wooden brackets. But unfortunately, this building lies in crumbling condition. The portico of *gurdwara* opens to the south.

To the east of Samadhi of Than Singh is anonymous octagonal samadhi noted for its paintings representing Hindu and Sikh mythologies (Fig.5). The panels are painted with pictures of various Hindu gods, Sikh gurus and rulers. The ceiling of the *samadhi* is decorated with *raslila* dance of Krishna with *gopis* (milkmaids). Krishna, wishing to render happy all the milk-maids who came and stood around him, caused a collective illusion: he made each believe that she alone

was dancing with him, while he, in fact, danced with his chosen one, Radha. (Vitsaxis 1977: 50; Ahluwalia 2008:53). There are three paintings depicting Krishna. In one of the paintings Krishna is shown lifting the mountain Govardhana to shelter his devotees from the storm of god Indra. The image of Indra with his elephant mount *vihana*, Airavata is also depicted on the right side of the panel (Ahluwalia 2008:102-3). One does not find such depiction elsewhere in Potohar region.



Fig. 5. An unidentified Samadhi at Kot Fateh Khan

The northern wall of *samadhi* depicts the painting of Hindu god Vishnu who appears to be reclining on the Ananta (serpent). This form of Vishnu is called Anantashyana. In popular creation myth, Vishnu is described as lying in deep trance before the dawn of creation. He is shown sleeping on the coils of Cobra Ananta or Sheesha. From the navel of Vishnu springs lotus on the top of which is seated god Brahma who then created world (Blurton 1992). This painting can also be seen in number of other temples and *samadhis* in the Potohar. However, the most

refined paintings are seen in the temple of LKalyan Das in Rawalpindi and Beval temple in Gujar Khan tehsil.



Fig. 6. Painting of Guru Gobind Singh ji with his Khalsa soldiers in a Sikh Samadhi at Kot Fateh Khan



Fig. 7. Painting of Guru Hargobind Singh ji in an unidentified Samadhi at Kot Fateh Khan

In one of the panels, one finds the painting of Baba Guru Nanak with his companions Bala and Mardana. Two other figures are also shown in this painting. Apart from the painting of Baba Guru Nanak, the paintings of Guru Gobind Singh (Fig. 6) and Guru Hargobind Singh (Fig.7) are made on the northern wall of the *samadhi*. Guru Gobind Singh is shown with his Khalsa soldiers with weapons. Close to this is another depiction, which shows Raja Ranjit Singh and the courtesans. One finds an inscription in Gurumukhi with each of the figure in the *samadhi* thus making it much easier to identify the images.

Samadhi at Qutbal

Qutbal is a historical village in Fateh Jang tehsil famous for its Sikh and Hindu period buildings. It was an important trade centre during the Sikh rule over Punjab and was also famous for Hindu merchants who controlled business in Fateh Jang and other towns Attock district. After Independence the Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India. Today the village is mainly inhabited by Khater, Mughal, Awan and other castes.⁵

Some of the monuments built during the Sikh and British period still grace the landscape of Qutbal. The ban (pond) constructed of semi-masonry was used by Hindus for ritual bath with a small reserved area for women, which no longer exists. Another building complex from that period is a temple, a *samadhi* and haveli (locally called Mari) which dominate the landscape of Qutbal village.

The temple is believed to have been built by Lakhi Devi in the memory of her father Narain Singh in 1924. The inscription slab is fixed on the façade of the temple. It is a square building. The sanctum is superimposed with a square *shikhara* different from other temples in the Potohar region, which have octagonal *shikharas*.

Close to the temple is *samadhi* which is also built on a square plan (Fig.8). The main entrance of the *samadhi* is flanked by two niches which were used for placing oil lamps. The interior of *samadhi* is decorated with floral designs but most of its paintings have now been damaged.



Fig. 8. Samadhi and Temple in Qutbal village

⁵ This information was given by Qazi Arif, a religious leader of Qutbal village

Much of the painting work is now damaged. Floral paintings on the façade of the haveli are also in a bad condition. The wooden doors of the haveli are all gone. The wood carvings found on the windows and the ceiling of the haveli is also in a bad state of preservation.

All these historical buildings are victims of neglect. Authorities should take note of the crumbling condition of the temple, Samadhi and haveli. The haveli being used as a school needs to be repaired as it is serving a purpose and is a landmark of the history of the village.

Conclusion

Samadhi architecture of Potohar is greatly inspired by Mughal architecture. The domes, arches and even the false jharoka all reflect Mughal influence. Most of the Samadhis were built during the Sikh and British period. Earlier Samadhis built during Sikh period were grand structures crowned with a ribbed dome. Later Samadhis erected during the British period were all simple structures crowned either with *shikhara* or a squat dome. The art of paintings also declined in the British period Samadhis. However, the use of marble door frames in some of the Samadhis reflects opulence of Potohari Sikhs. The concerned authorities should immediately renovate the Samadhis and declare them as protected sites under Antiquities Act of 1972. Moreover, these can be religious tourist destinations for Hindus and Sikhs because there are many such other monuments in Rawalpindi which stands neglected.

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