The Sarais of Sikri: Corroborating Literary Resources with Architectural Remains

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Received: 30 July 2019; Revised: 28 September 2019; Accepted: 15 October 2019
Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 7 (2019): 691-701

Abstract: *The city of Fatehabad Sikri, according to Muhammad Arif Qandhari, the author of Tarikh-i-Akbari, was founded after an imperial order was issued in AD 1571, by Emperor Akbar. Qandhari further elaborates that "the city soon became filled with mosques, bazaars, baths, sarais (for merchants) and other such buildings for the good of people". On investigating upon the remains of the city of Fatehpur Sikri, only a few structures stand to be identified presently as the sarais built by the Emperor Akbar. One interesting question would be where are the sarais Muhammad Arif Qandhari alluded to? The paper attempts to validate the possibility and probability of the structures identified as sarais at Fatehpur Sikri, as well the vulnerability in arguments for their status as Akbar's sarai. Descriptions of Fatehpur Sikri, from literature contemporary to the period of its construction from both the court chronicles and travelogues has been drawn upon, to help understand the remains of sarai here at Fatehpur Sikri.*

Keywords: Sarai, Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar, Shahi Sarai, Karavan Sarai, Medieval Travellers, Imperial Harem

Introduction: Rise and Decline of Fatehpur Sikri

Abu-al-Muzaffar Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, the third emperor of the Mughal Dynasty in India, captured the throne to India in the second battle of Panipat in AD 1556 and soon began a long epoch of conquest by diplomacy & battle. He captured Gwalior in AD 1558, Jaunpur in AD 1559, Ranthambhore in AD 1559, Malwa in AD 1561, Burhanpur in AD 1562, Chottorgarh in AD 1567, Surat in AD 1571 and Junagad in AD 1591 (Smith 1890). His conquests also spread over parts of Bengal and Deccan (Smith 1919). The reign of Emperor Akbar saw the institution of two magnificent cities; one at Agra and the other at Sikri.

The village of Sikri falls at a distance of about 40 Km from Agra. Explorations and excavations in and around the village have revealed evidence of human occupation since the Mesolithic age; rock shelters with paintings were reported from the surrounding area (Trivedi 1976; Srivastava et al 1976), with Microliths recovered from

some of the rock shelters (Srivastava et al 1976). During exploration in the 1970s, potsherds of PGW and NBPW, as well as potsherds of the Kushana and Gupta period were found from the surroundings of Fatehpur Sikri (Gaur 2000).

Some fragments of sculptures of Siva, Parvati and Chamunda, as well as some architectural remains were reported near Sikri, dating to the tenth century AD (Nigam 1975). Architectural remains of a sultanate period Baradari (Srivastava et al 1976), a mosque with Alauddin Khilji's inscription and a mosque with a Tughlaq period inscription were also reported (Gaur 2000).

It was in AD 1502, that Agra was made the capital by Sikandar Lodi, with Fatehpur Sikri and Bayana as the frontier. This area came under Mughal rule in the sixteenth century AD, when the first Mughal emperor, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur after securing his victory over Maharana Sanga and later Ibrahim Lodi in AD 1526 and undertook the construction of a mosque and garden at Agra. Babur also made visits to Sikri in AD 1527 and AD 1528, to oversee the construction of wells and gardens there (Thackston 2007).

In AD 1568-69, Emperor Akbar visited the village of Sikri to meet the Sufi Saint Sheikh Salim Chishti, seeking blessings for an heir to the throne. After the birth of Prince Salim (Jahangir), the Emperor issued an imperial farman in August AD 1571, to build a royal palace and an administrative complex at Sikri, where a mosque and Khanqah for Sheikh Chishti had already been built under imperial command (Ahmad 1993). Tarikh-i-Akbari mentions that Emperor Akbar saw to the plans and maps of construction at Sikri and that the wild land in and around the site was cleared accordingly for houses and gardens. It also informs that Akbar ordered that that land should be freely allotted to anyone who wanted to build houses there. (Ahmad 1993). There are many surviving Mughal miniature paintings that depict this theme. It could be said that the emperor took personal interest in the development of these cities, which in turn ensured that the cities soon became famed for their stunning architecture and urban planning.

The name Fatehbad was given to the Village of Sikri, after Emperor Akbar's conquest of Gujarat in AD 1573 (Gaur 2000). The name ‘Fatehbad Sikri’ gradually changed into ‘Fatehpur Sikri' and the city witnessed its peak fame in the next twenty five years of its construction.

The decline of the city began early in AD 1598, when Emperor Akbar had to move out to supervise affairs at the northern borders of the Mughal Kingdom towards Kabul and beyond. Emperor Jahangir stayed at Fatehpur Sikri for a brief spell in AD 1619 for three months, as Agra was afflicted with plague at the time, but he did not rule from the city as his capital (Thackston 2007). The Palace of Fatehpur Sikri it seems was used on rare royal occasions such as the weighing ceremony of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (Thackston 2007) and later the Coronation of Muhammad Shah Rangeela (Gaur 2000). A mosque in the city was constructed by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in AD 1705. But other than this, it seems that most parts of the city were in a state of decay and

rapid decline. Various travellers who visited Fatehpur, such as Englishmen William Finch in the year AD 1610 also compared it with a waste desert (Gaur 2000).

The city also faced the wrath of the Jats from Mathura, Agra and Dhaulpur, who plundered the buildings at Fatehpur Sikri and even damaged Akbar's tomb at Sikandarabad. These attacks marked the end of what was once a magnificent city.

A major reason for the decline and gradual abandonment of the city of Fatehpur was its water, which was reported to have been unfit for drinking purpose. Jahangir himself writes in his memoirs Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri that 'Fatehpur has little water and whatever there is, it's bad, so at the mosque (near the tomb of Chishti), there is a well that people fill with rainwater and use this water throughout the year' (Thackston 2007). Literature contemporary to the time of Emperor Akbar, including court chronicles such as Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* including its third volume *Ain-i-Akbari*, Abdul Kadir Badaoni's *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh or Tarikh-i-Badauni*, Muhammad Arif Qandhari's *Tarikh-i-Akbari,* Nizam-ud-din Ahmad's *Tabaqat-i-Akbar* and travelogues such as those of Father Antonio Monserrate, Ralph Fitch, William Finch, Richard Sill, Iohn Crowther, William Nicols, Captain Hawkins, Mr and Mrs Steele, are a valuable source of information about the activities of the period and give insight upon the construction and management of the roads, modes of transport, hospitals, rest houses and gardens by the State Administration for the benefit of merchants and travellers. At the same time, it may also be kept in mind that there is need for caution to be observed while extracting historical data from a literary work. For example in the case of Tarikh-i-Akbari, there are some factual inaccuracies, such as the construction of Fatehpur Sikri is mentioned as to have preceded the construction of the Red Fort at Agra (T.Ahmad 1993). There are at times certain discrepancies in the information revealed in the chronicles and travelogues that could be due to the desire of the author to exaggerate the deeds of the emperor, or perhaps the author's inability to present a point of view contradictory to that of the emperor, or as often seen in the case of travelogues, the inherent bias of the travellers travelling to a foreign nation or the incessant comparison with one's homeland.

The work *Tarikh-i-Akbari* mentions in detail the expeditions of the Emperor Akbar, with occasional descriptions of his majestic imperial tents. The author of the manuscript, Muhammad Arif Qandhari writes that 'There are eighteen house tents of the same size, which are made of Wooden-planks, consisting of double storey rooms in his beautiful palace with attractive edifices, these are pitched and erected there.' (Ahmad 1993). The text further elaborates that the planks are fastened using iron rings and are taken apart at the time of departure. The Tarikh-i-Akbari also gives information about the use of imported rich fabrics of golden brocade and velvet for their use inside the chambers of the tent, and the use of thick woollen fabrics to form protective cover on the outer side of the tent. Another reference in the same text, quotes Akbar as talking about the grandeur and comfort of some of the buildings built by him in his cities being so great that people no longer needed to come with all their tent and equipment (Ahmad 1993).

There is also a description in Tarikh-i-Akbari of the expedition of Akbar, where 500 elephants, 100 rows of horses and camels were employed, to carry his baggage and camp equipment (Ahmad 1993).

Upon reading descriptions such as those mentioned above, it may be deduced that the royalty and the nobility were travelling with a large number of men and animals, with heavy camp equipment that was set up and dismantled at their convenience. The camp life was not devoid of luxury and was at times a lavish display of wealth. It would seem that for the facilitation of the setting up of such tents and wooden edifices, a levelled ground in a secured place would have been chosen by the scouts and supervisors. It may also have been that at times of battle, new unused strategic locations may have been looked for, by imperial scouts, which would be deemed ideal from the point of security and offer military advantages. And at times of peace, where expeditions were made for reasons of pilgrimage or sports, trusted grounds secured by stone fortifications or imperial gardens were used. Such open spaces surrounded by stone fortifications, with evidence of little or negligent construction activities of permanent nature, inside, have been identified at several places by scholars in India as Badshah Sarai. These would simply be a large levelled open ground, having been fortified with bastions and watch towers and lofty gates, where imperial tents were safely set up. Two such sarais are located an hour from Fatehpur Sikri and were visited and found almost intact and standing in the year 2016 by the author.

The emperor Jahangir in his memoirs, (Thackston 2007) records his stay at camps set up by lake and reservoirs at Fatehpur and a garden at Agra. There is also mention of multiple social gatherings and stays organised by the emperor's consort Nur Jahan, in his honor at a garden at Agra. It would seem that in safer territories, smaller expeditions were also undertaken for leisure or sports, where imperial camps were set up on smaller scale. Such descriptions also provide an insight into the use of gardens and reservoirs constructed in this period.

Muhammad Arif Qandhari in Tarikh-i-Akbari also mentions the construction of kos minars at every kos and rest houses at every ten kos, by the emperor Akbar, on the route from Ajmer to Agra; the distance of 140 Akbari Karoh (kos). This has been also reported by many travellers and historians of the period. The account left by Richard Sill and Iohn Crowther, for example mention the construction of sarais at every five or six kos by the emperor and nobles for reasons such as 'for beautifying the way, memory of their names and entertainment of travellers' (Wheeler 1975).

The Sarai for Women of Noble Birth

Tarikh-i-Akbari mentions that Emperor Akbar built rest houses and 'matchless' buildings at Ajmer and Agra (Ahmad 1993). In many literary texts contemporary to his period, there is mention of the existence of a large exclusive rest house for women of noble birth. The account left by Master Withington, mentions that the Emperor Akbar built special rest houses at every ten kos between Agra and Ajmer, where none but the

ladies of the Imperial Harem could stay (Wheeler 1975). There were also provisions for such women to stay at the capital cities. Abu'l Fazl in his work *Ain-i-Akbari* (Blochmann 1965) says that sometimes these women could stay at the Imperial Harem, with the Emperor's special permission and that some stayed for even a month.

The excavations at Fatehpur Sikri by Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), did find remains identified by the research teams as the 'Haremsara'(Gaur 2000), close to which there are remains of a large multi chambered structure. This was at first identified as a hospital by Edmond W Smith in his work 'Moghal Architecture of Fatehpur Sikri' published in AD 1890. Dr R.C. Gaur refutes the identification of the structure as a Hospital and instead proposes that this may have been a rest house for women of noble birth who sometimes visited the imperial harem (Gaur 2000).

There are literary texts that mention the construction of hospitals at Fatehpur Sikri; Captain Hawkins's account mentions that there were two hospitals for soldiers maimed in wars, at Fatehpur Sikri (Wheeler 1975). But it is debatable if a hospital for soldiers could have been constructed so close to the Haremsara, considering the many references found in texts of the exclusive security and restrictive access provided to the Imperial Harem.

The said structure is a lakhori brick and lime mortar construction, having patches of thick lime plaster, now aged and yellowed, with traces of paintings of floral motifs in deep maroon/brown color, still visible at many places. There are also remains of ornate veneering of red sandstone slabs in the ceiling and archways of the entrance.

The Karavan Sarai

A large structure within a fortified boundary, consisting of a three storey edifice enclosing a courtyard and water tank is located near the Hathi Gate of Fatehpur Sikri. This was first designated as the Karavan Sarai by Edmond W Smith in 1890. It is important to note that Smith, took into consideration the local traditions and narratives in the process of identifying the remains of edifices at Fatehpur Sikri. This led to identifications at Sikri of structures such as the Karavan Sarai, Abu'l Fazl & Faizi' twin houses, Raja Birbal's house, the Hospital and Jodha Bai's Palace. It seems that of the above-mentioned edifices, the identification for all but the Karavan Sarai has been contested by many writers and historians.

The identification of Karavan Sarai remains supported by works of many scholars. As mentioned before, the Karavan Sarai is located closed to the Hathi gate of Fatehpur Sikri. The Hathi Gate is a lofty construction with sandstone veneering and is flanked by two stone elephants on its right and left side. It was an important entrance to the fort and is mentioned many times in contemporary court chronicles. For example, in Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* it is always the Hathi gate which is mentioned as the gate for the entry of royal processions (Beveridge 1972).



Figure 1: Remains of Karavan Sarai

The Karavan Sarai is a grand structure, with rooms of various size and dimensions, along a large open courtyard (Figure 1). There is a massive fortification and a lofty gate that provides entry to the sarai. The Gateway has beautiful mirror inlay work on the

inside of the ceiling, though now much defaced. The rich inlay work or floral motifs on lime plastered walls or the majestic scale of the structure is indicative of the grandeur of the Mughal imperial architecture. Such mirror work can also be seen carried out in certain edifices in Red fort at Agra.

The sarai is single storey on its three sides, and three storey on the fourth side. The corners of the structures were modified into multi chambered spaces, some with special structures such as Hammam. And it is these rooms in the corner that have the most elaborate decorations. There were ornamental archways, lintels and pilasters with red sandstone veneering in the corner rooms. Red sandstone was also used in ceilings of corridors and on doorways and as brackets in many places at the Karavan Sarai. Some rooms on the multi storey side of the structure had pilasters and an overhead lintel of red sandstone, dividing the room into two parts, with holes for door jambs or fixing curtains or screens visible in the lintel. The remains of thick lime plaster coating with painted floral motifs can also be seen in many rooms of the sarai. There were a pair of staircases in all four corners of the edifice, the single storey sides having stairs to flat open terraces above.

At close proximity to the sarai, are remains of some structures identified by Edmond W Smith as stables for horses, camels and elephants. The identification has also been reconfirmed by Excavations carried out by AMU and ASI (Gaur 2000). The structure identified as the stable for horses, is a long rectangular structure with a series of holes in the ground, made apparently to secure the horses to a pole inserted in the hole. The stables were an important necessity for sarai, as is attested by the accounts left by many travellers. Travelogues such as those of Captain Hawkins and Fitch inform that 'there were sarais at every five-six kos where one could get a chamber and a place to set the horse as well as a store for horsemeat' (Wheeler 1975). Stables for horses and camels would be an absolute necessity for sarai of this size. It is also mentioned that it was not only the rooms of the edifice that provided refuge to weary travellers, the open ground with reservoirs and water tanks was also used by travellers to set up their tents (Parihar 2008). This suggests to a larger holding capacity of the Karavan Sarai.

A vulnerability in the identification of the said structure of Karavan Sarai as a 'sarai', is its close proximity to the structure identified as the Haremsara. It would be astonishing to perceive that a sarai housing merchants and outsiders could be located so close to the imperial harem. But Dr. R.C Gaur (2000) writes that the excavations at Fatehpur Sikri revealed the remains of a screen wall that concealed the Haremsara, ensuring privacy to the royal quarters. It may also be observed that the remains of sophisticated mirror inlay work seen in the gateway and the thick lime plaster that once covered the walls of most of the rooms of the sarai, and the use of fine painted floral motifs on lime plaster, are indicative of the influential class of clientele the sarai catered to. Perhaps it was men of noble birth or merchants of influence that were granted permission to spend nights inside the fortifications of the capital city. Possibly the other travellers and merchants of less means could take refuge in other sarais, whose remains have

been discovered in and around Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. Or they could be accommodated in a sarai in another part of the fort, whose remains have not been clearly identified so far. One such proposed sarai is discussed next.



Figure 2: Remains of Shahi Sarai

The Shahi Sarai

It is interesting to note that there are ruins of another magnificent structure to the right of the Agra Gate. These though are in much deplorable condition and barely a few walls with arches are still standing. Scientific clearance at the location, could perhaps lead to a clear identification of the plan of the building. It is unclear if this is the same edifice that has been identified as the abode of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan by Dr. R.C. Gaur (2000) during excavations at Fatehpur Sikri. In the said report the location of the house of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan is slightly ambiguous. Local tradition associates the ruins as being the remains of the Shahi Sarai (Figure 2). It may be mentioned that Edmond. W. Smith's published work (1890) has a line drawing of the site plan of Fatehpur Sikri. The area to the right of the Agra Gate is left blank in the line drawing suggesting perhaps that the area was already in too ruinous a condition, to have invited a deeper study and analysis even in the 1890s.

The Karavan Sarai was located very close to one major entrance of the capital city. In the same way, it could be theorised that the structure close to the Agra gate of the Fatehpur Sikri may also have been once a sarai. It would be probable that the location

of the sarais would be kept close to the entrance gate, and not in the midst of the city itself, at least not for merchants and nobles of less influence.

There are certain scholars who identify structures located adjacent to the fortifications and gateways, as military barracks that housed the guards and soldiers stationed at the city. In this regard, it may be noted that the design and layout for the military bunkers & Barracks and sarais do not have much in common except for the size of the individual cells perhaps. Also, the bunkers as seen in the Red fort of Delhi and Agra usually run along the fortification wall itself and do not have elaborate ornamentation. The possibility of these structural remains seen here close to the Haathi gate and Agra gate being military bunkers seems very unlikely upon field observation.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the multiple travel accounts and literary sources from the medieval period, that give information about the many sarais built in Fatehpur Sikri by Akbar, it is strange that the remains of only a few have been traced so far. It can be seen that Fatehpur Sikri was established by Emperor Akbar as a planned administrative and imperial centre, which was also meant to be a commercial hub. There must have been numerous arrangements made to accommodate the various visitors to the city; some of noble births and great influence, some who of less able means.

The quarters of workers and servicemen have been identified by Dr. R.C. Gaur (2000) during excavations, as being located close to the Lal Darwaza, not far from the Agra Gate. Literary texts of the period shed light on the nature of workers and servicemen employed at the sarais, ranging from cobblers, tailors, housemaids, cleaners, cooks, waiters, carpenters to dancers and musicians, managers, physicians and security guards. (Parihar 2008). It is possible that the working quarters would house servicemen employed not only in the imperial residence but also engaged in the services of the travellers staying at the sarais.

It is also important that the general plan and layout of the sarais must be adhered to while identifying possible remains of sarai, and literary traditions should not be out rightly overlooked. A case in proof is the misidentification of the long series of cells running onwards from the Agra Gate to the Naubat Khana at Fatehpur Sikri, as a sarai for some time. It was the reference in Muhammad Arif Qandhari's Tarikh-i-Akbari that 'a royal decree was passed that fine shops of red sandstone, mortar and lime should be constructed from the royal court (Darbar-i-padshahi) to the gate which faces towards the Dar-ul-khilafat of Agra', (Ahmad 1993) that the structure was re-identified as a market.

It must also be taken into consideration that complete excavation has not been undertaken at Fatehpur Sikri so far, and may be the vast stretches of land left unexcavated today, may reveal the remains of more sarais, among many other edifices that are mentioned in the literary records of the period, but have not been found so far.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Dr. Shrikant Ganvir, her Doctoral Guide for his constant support and guidance. She is grateful to the Officers and Staff of the Archaeological Survey of India, at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, especially to Dr Bhuvan Vikram for allowing her to carry out her research work, and also for the invigorating discussions on Mughal sarais and travel routes at the end of the day, during the time of her field work at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. She is also indebted to Dr. Manuel Joseph, Dy.SA, Archaeological Survey of India, for his academic guidance and support. She is grateful to her Krishna Mohan Dubey, Shalini Singh and Pooja Pande for helping in the completion of field work for her Doctoral thesis, of which this article is a small part of.

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