

'Rarra maidan' outside Delhi Gate

Lahore

By Majid Sheikh

If you were to stand in the middle of the gateway of the mosque of Wazir Khan and draw a straight line through the Chitta Gate entrance of Chowk Wazir Khan, and if the line was carried onwards in an easterly direction, it would pass bang in the middle of the gateway of Masjid Qasaban in the middle of Yakki Gate. Does this mean that Delhi Gate came about much later and that the term 'rarra maiden' used for this area meant that the walls of pre-Mughal Lahore were to the west of the mosque?

This possibility was first suggested by a distinguished Lahore researcher, Dr Abdullah Chughtai, who contended that the original route used by royalty was, coming from the east, or Amritsar, along G T Road and through Yakki Gate and straight to the fort, passing to the north of the mosque of Wazir Khan. The Katra Wazir Khan occupied the area to the north of the mosque, and an entrance to the mosque was originally from the chowk Purani Kotwali. It seems that the Delhi Gate bazaar was deliberately formed to ease the flow of traffic to allow the royal route to the north to function with ease.

For this reason the Delhi Gate bazaar is an immensely important portion of the walled city. This 200-yard long bazaar is bound by Delhi Gate to the east, ending at Chitta Gate to the west, which links it to Chowk Wazir Khan. To the north is the famous Mohallah Qasaban, the place where the first Sikh onslaught before Maharajah Ranjit Singh took place on the pretext that they wanted to cut off the noses of all the butchers of Lahore as revenge for their terrible role in slaughtering thousands of innocent Sikhs as part of the Mughal campaign against them.

Hundreds of Lahore butchers

suffered in that bloody raid. Also to the north is the old Changar Mohallah, an area once inhabited by the Changar tribe, said to be the original gypsies, who migrated towards the west, some landing as far away as Italy, traces of which have been researched considerably. In fact, DNA tests on Italian and Romano gypsies show them amazingly similar to Sargodha and Lahore gypsies. But that is another story.

The reason for pointing out these two 'mohallahs' is because these two communities always lived outside the walled city. The butchers were not exactly a favourite community in a non-Muslim Lahore, and originally lived in what is today Lahore's hide market. Sikh raids led them to living closer to the walls of the city. The Changars always did live, as they still do today, slightly detached from civil life. In a way these two mohallahs can be said to be a detached mode from the old walled city, and it is for this reason we find repeated mention of these areas as being in the middle of a 'rarra maidan'.

This means that when the Mughals took over, the walls of the walled city were to the west of the mosque of Wazir Khan. A research shows the wall to have existed along the 'ghatti' or mound that runs along the Shahalami Bazaar. When Akbar reshaped the old city and gave it its first baked brick walls, the city was expanded, and it was this expansion that created the 'rarra maidan' and later provided Wazir Khan with enough space to build his mosque and the Shahi Hammams.

The creation of this bazaar was a deliberate planning act, even though the bazaar is a curious curved one. That is why the original alignment of the mosque and the Chitta Gate are important to understand how this bazaar evolved. Also to the north are Koocha Mian Ghaus

and chohatta Rajah Dina Nath, now officially known as Chohatta Qazi Allah Dad. To the south are Akbari Mandi and Khajooranwali Gali.

One study of the bazaar, carried out by a team of international experts in 1992, dated all the building in the bazaar as being from the late 18-century to the late 19-century. Except for the Shahi Hammam, located a secluded corner outside the city, no building of any Mughal period exists in this bazaar. Then suddenly one has the Chitta Gate, an original outer gate of Lahore leading to the outer walls and the Delhi Gate. In between was open ground. Originally when one entered the Delhi Gate, the first place one hit was Chowk Rang Mahal and then on to the Nakhas Khana and on to the Lahore Fort. In the Shah Jehan era, no haveli or palace or building or mosque or mausoleum or an earlier period of any significance existed in this empty 'rarra maidan'. It was this fact that propelled Wazir Khan to build his mosque here and also to claim all land between the mosque and the Delhi Gate.

But then Wazir Khan built, somewhere in this area, a 'serai' for himself. The exact location of this is not known. Three places are mentioned by different researchers, but no proof of its existence can be verified from any known source. An 1877 report mentions its ruins as existing outside the mosque, but no direction is given. In the 18-century when Kabuli Mal ruled Lahore for Ahmad Shah Abadali, Sikhs defeated him and entered Lahore from the Delhi Gate, on the pretext of cutting off the noses of all the butchers of the city. In the confusion they looted all the spice and 'gurr' shops of this small bazaar, torching it in the process. With it considerable history was lost.