



Watergate of Delhi's Red Fort: One Truth and Many Tales

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Abstract

Delhi's Red Fort was built in 1639 by Shah Jahan, the eminent Mughal Emperor. Over several years, by successive rulers and then during British rule, the site has undergone so many changes that except for a few isolated east-side pavilions, nothing else survives. Red Fort, because of its architecture, has always been place of attraction at the hands of historians, and they all have described it in detail. However, there is very limited and contradictory information available about the small yet magnificent Asad Burj Water Bastion that exists silently in the east corner of Red Fort. Even Mohammad Waris, the first one to give a minute description of Red Fort, do not describe this side of the fort in detail. Many authors mention the water bastion as a 'Water Gate', sounding like an exit gate, which, in my conclusion, never was (a true gate).

Key Words: Shahjahan, Muhammad Waris, Water Gate, Red fort, Asad Burj

Introduction

Delhi's Red Fort, was built in 1639 as a massive walled palace fort by Shah Jahan, the eminent Mughal Emperor. The fort because of its architecture, has always been place of attraction at the hands of scholars, historians, travellers etc., and they all have described it in detail. However it



was Muhammad Waris, who gave a detailed account of the construction as well as the individual structures within the fort in his book entitled ‘Padshahnama of Muhammad Waris’. He was appointed by Shah Jahan to document his third decade of reign, and in his time the actual construction of the fort took place. Unfortunately this book written in Persian language remained unpublished for a long time, however now we have the books translated in English as well as Hindi language by different authors (Dwivedi 2016). Asad Burj Water bastion or ‘Water Gate’, unlike other structures, has not undergone much changes, and yet, there are many tales linked to it. Many authors mention water bastion as a ‘Water Gate’, sounding like an exit gate, which never was (a true gate).

Observations and Discussion

Today, the Asad Burj Water Bastion exists in silent dignity at south east corner of Red Fort in Delhi (Figure 1). Entry to this side of fort has always been restricted, initially because royal women had their residences adjacent to it, and today for security reasons. Even now the visitors are only able to view Asad Burj and water gate next to it (Figure 2), from the Delhi Chalo Park on eastern side of fort, that is, have only outside view (Figure 3).

Mohammad Waris, who gave a minute description of Red Fort, did not describe this burj or this side of fort in detail. The only somewhat detailed account I came across is in book by Gordon Sanderson and Maulvi Shuaib (2000).

Through a gateway located along inner side of south east wall of Red fort (Figure 4), few yards east of Delhi gate, a broad and long eastwards steps leads down to the underground rectangular water tank which is just short of foot of Asad Burj (Figure 5 and Figure 6). In a ‘Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan’ by ‘Archaeological Survey of India’ (ASI) and ‘Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative’ (CRCI) (2019), this magnificent water tank is called as “Asad Burj Baoli” while Mohammad Waris in his book Padshahnama, describes it as a “ditch” into which the water after crossing the several buildings on eastern side of Red Fort fall. The “baoli” or “water tank”, now filled with murky green water, opens through a southeast gate towards moat. However this inner gate built by Emperor Shahjahan, was later protected by external, roughly triangular, courtyard, the two walls of which are also having a gate (Figure 7). This triangular barbican was built by Emperor Aurangzeb, along with those of Lahore gate and Delhi Gate. The south west facing outer gate of the courtyard is closed up with stones; it seems this was never opened at any time. It is the east facing outer gate, south of Asad Burj, which is actually named as “Water Gate”. It once faced Yamuna River, now faces towards ‘Delhi Chalo Park’ or ‘Ring Road’ The tall bushes at one end of Delhi Chalo Park are hiding the external view of this “historical” gate and, no doubt, many stories behind it. After carefully crossing the bushes along the wall, one can



peep inside through gaps in the gate. This small beautiful ‘Water gate’ is simple but looks magnificent. There are many interesting yet contrasting stories linked to it.

Out of two other river facing gates of Red Fort, one under ‘Musamman Burj’ is called as “Khizri gate” after Khwaja Khizr, saint of water. Few authors have mentioned this Khizri gate as water gate too. The other forts like Agra Fort in Agra, and Lahore Fort in Pakistan too have Khizri gate or water gate, and it seems this similar name has created confusion among the historians and authors. Gordon Sanderson and Maulvi Shuaib in their book mentions south east gate as water bastion. Stephen P. Blake (1991) in his book shows this as ‘gate’ in map, however do not describe it in text. Another river facing small gate, now covered with stones, is few yards southwards from Khizri gate and has no name.

Mohammad Waris’s Padshahnama, the primary source of information for last 10 years of Shahjahan rule, had remained non translated and unpublished for very long time. It clearly says that while Emperor Shahajahan had entered Lal Quila (Red Fort) for the first time through Khizri gate, other river facing small gate (with no name) was meant for grandees (princes and other nobles). Mohammad Waris do not recognize any water gate, rather he says that there is a ditch at south east corner of the fort. Many authors, on the contrary, write that Shah Jahan, the first Mughal emperor, and Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor, used south east ‘Water gate’ for entry and exit respectively. Rana Safvi (2019) in her book (Shahjahanabad: The Living City of Old Delhi, 2019) while mentioning it as ‘Badar Roo Darwaza’ writes that this wicket gate was exclusively for Princess and Prince. Few other authors/historians believe that last Mughal King Bahadur Zafar II had escaped to Humayun Tomb through Khizri gate.

Author H Singh (2010) in his thesis (Recovering Delhi’s Red Fort: presence of past in the present) writes that “water gate” was connected with Delhi Gate by a route (Rastah Bakht Burj) and was used for transporting goods brought by boats. There is also a legend that Asad Burj was called ‘Haathi gate’ as the elephants would go down the stairs to drink water. However references to validate this statement are lacking.

Few authors and bloggers mention ‘water gate’ as one of original six gates of Red fort. But this is not true. Mohammad Waris has clearly mentioned locations of original six gates, which still exist in various conditions, and water gate is not counted in (Dwivedi, 2016)

To conclude, going by most authentic description, ‘Water gate’ was never a true gate but in fact a water bastion (Asad Burj Water Bastion). As of today, for security reasons, this water gate is closed, however there is long standing proposal to open the door of this historical water discharge “Water Gate” towards Delhi Chalo Park, converting into a true entry/exit gate.



Fig 1: Google Earth 3D view of Red Fort. Asad Burj (yellored arrow) and water gate (red arrow) are located at south east corner, few yards eastwards of Delhi Gate (). Double arrow shows the cardinal directions.



Figure 2: Google earth 3D view of south east corner of Red fort. Barican enclosing triangular outer courtyard (OC).



Figure 3: Left hand picture is water colour drawing (year 1823) of the Red Fort in Delhi, seen across the Jumna (Yamuna) river (Courtesy British Library). Right hand picture is Delhi Chalo park side view of water gate as seen now. Water gate (arrow) is covered by bushes.



Figure 4: Unstitched Panoramic images: Through a magnificent gate (G) (right hand photo), eastwards steps leads to the bottom of Asad Burj (AB) (left photo). There is separate series of steps (ST) that climb up to terrace of Burj

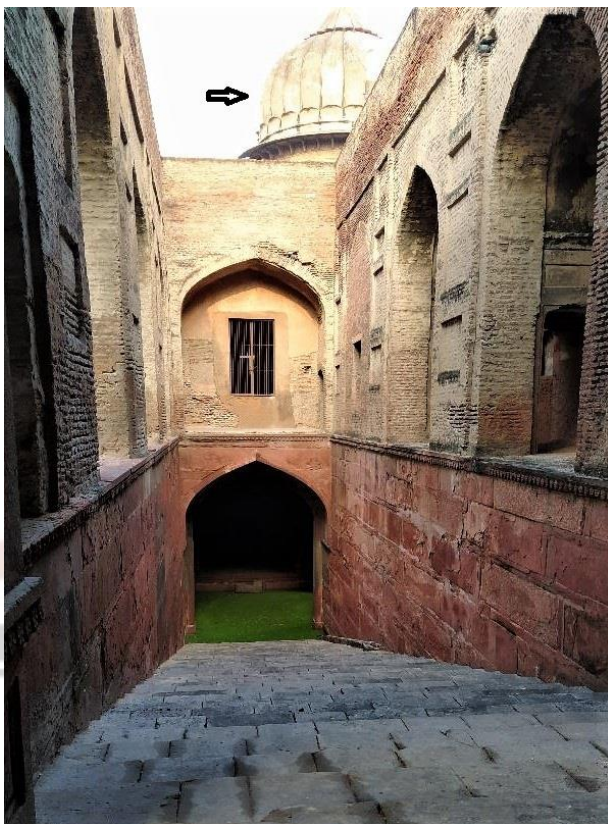


Figure 5: Series of steps leads to underground water tank (inner chamber), now filled with murky green water. Asad Burj (arrow) is seen here.



Figure 6. Terrace view of Asad Burj



Figure 7: Two stitched photos showing Inside view from terrace of Asad Burj: Barbican enclosing external courtyard (EC) having two outer and one inner gate. Water Gate (WG) facing Delhi Chalo Park and Ring Road; Inner Gate (IG) towards inner Water tank; South West (SW) facing outer gate with no name

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