



A Case Study of Chālīs Sutūn inside the Fort of Allahabad

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ABSTRACT: This research paper is about the historical Chālīs Sutūn, a structure which was built inside the fort of Allahabad in times of Mughal Emperor Akbar. This structure was one of the best specimen of Mughal Architecture in the Eastern Provinces of the Empire. Akbar established the Fort of Allahabad as the capital of the province of Ilāhābās near the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna and this fort had structures which were built on the Imperial Scale. Chālīs Sutūn was also built in the same scale. Unfortunately, the structure was demolished in the aftermath of the Great Uprising of 1857. This paper is a case study of this lost monument inside the fort of Allahabad.

KEYWORDS: Chālīs Sutūn, Fort, Allahabad, Mughal, Architecture, Medieval Monument, Akbar, Prayagraj, Great Uprising 1857.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1580 CE, Akbar divided his Empire into twelve sūbās and Ilāhābās was situated in second clime. This sūbā shared its boundaries with Awadh in the North, Rewa (Bandhogarh) in the south, Bihar in the East and Agra in its West.¹ Abul Fazl in his Akbar-nāmā states that Akbar founded the city of Ilāhābās in 1583 CE near the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna or the ancient pilgrimage site of Prayag.² It has to be understood that the name of this city as named by Akbar was Ilāhābās and the name of this sūbā was also the same. The sūbā was named after the name of its capital which was the city of Ilāhābās built around the fort of Akbar. With the founding of the city Akbar ordered for a fort to be built which was one of the largest fort ever ordained by the Emperor.

According to Akbar-nāmā, the fort of Allahabad was founded by Akbar on 2 Āzar, 991 AH which corresponds to 14 November 1583 CE.³ This fort was divided into four quarters and the first quarter included the Emperor's palaces. In the second quarter were the palaces of the royal family and the

third had houses for other nobles of the empire. The last quarter had space for the royal servants and other *khidmatgār*.

Originally, there were twenty-five gateways and twenty-three bastions all around the fort complex. There were twenty-three mahals, two hundred and seventy seven residences, one hundred and seventy-six chambers, two *Khās-au-Ām* or halls of public and private audience, seventy-seven cellars, one corridor, and five wells inside the fort complex. There were many palaces inside the fort. The names of few of them have been identified which include, Aimanābād, Dīn Mahal, Hans Mahal, Umaid Mahal, Sukhnām Mahal.⁴

The Zenāna Palace or the Rāni Mahal is the only structure which exists inside the fort in a fairly good condition. This was the central part of Emperor's residential quarters and palaces which was called Aimanābād. Thomas and William Daniell painted a lithograph of this structure as well. It is built entirely in red sandstone. The two kiosks which existed on top of this structure have been lost, otherwise this trabeated structure with heavy sets of pillared corridors surrounding square chambers of the emperors residential quarters have survived in their original state.

The fort had three *khwābgāhs*⁵ or sleeping chambers which were:

1. *Khwābgāh Jharokha*
2. *Chihil/Chālīs Sutūn*
3. *Nishistgāh Khās-au-Ām*

All these structures have been obliterated from the fort after it was occupied by the British East India Company in the eighteenth Century CE. Chālīs Sutūn was the most fascinating of these structures and there are lithographs of the structure in the British Archives testifying its grandeur. These lithographs particularly the one painted by Thomas and William Daniell gives a vivid view of this structure which was



considered to be the best specimen of Mughal Architecture in the East India.⁶

II. CHĀLĪS SUTŪN

Chālīs Sutūn was formally known in Fārsi as Bārgāh-i-Chihil Sutūn or the pavilion of forty pillars. It was the most elaborate structure which was built inside the fort of Allahabad. James Fergusson, a Scottish-born British architecture historian of the nineteenth Century CE, was surprised to see a structure as elaborate as Chālīs Sutūn inside the fort of Allahabad.

Fergusson recorded in his works, *'The most beautiful thing (at Allahabad) was the pavilion of Chālīs Sutūn or forty pillars, so called from it having that number on the principal floor, disposes in two concentric octagonal ranges, one internal of sixteen pillars, the other outside of twenty-four. Above this supported by the inner colonnade, was an upper range of the same number of pillars crowned by a dome.'*⁷

This description of the structure clearly narrates the basic layout in which this edifice was built. It was an octagonal structure built on the south-western corner of the fort along the left bank of the Yamuna river.

Thomas and William Daniell who visited India in the 1786 CE were English painters and landscape artists. They visited Allahabad on their tour from Calcutta to Garhwal which they set out for in 1788 CE. Daniells have painted a very detailed lithograph of Chālīs Sutūn which not just verifies the location of this grand structure but also gives us a glimpse of the detailed stone-work which was done on this edifice.

They published their work as *Oriental Scenery: One Hundred and Fifty Views of the Architecture, Antiquities and Landscape Scenery of Hindoostan*. Plate No. VI of this monumental work depicts the structure of Chālīs Sutūn. The caption of this chromolithograph gives a short yet apt history of this architectural marvel. It states, *'The Chalees Sutoon or Forty Pillars, is a pavilion attached to the palace of Allahabad, and was erected by the Emperor Akbar. It is built of grey granite and freestone... the buildings in general here are in the grandest style of Mohammeden architecture...'*⁸



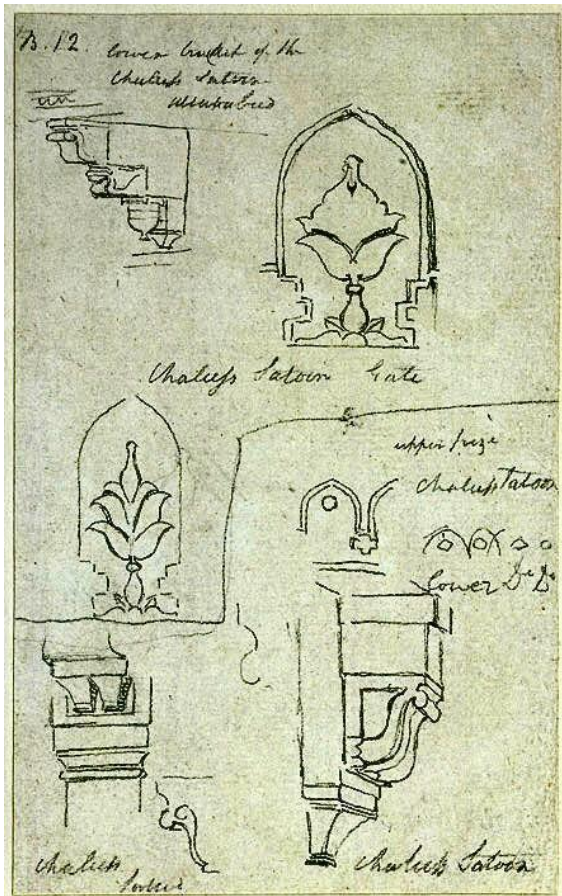
Chalees Sutoon, painted by Thomas and William Daniell, Source: British Archives

This lithograph gives a detailed view of the structure. It was an octagonal structure with an arched plinth built above the southern walls of the fort. The first floor had twenty four pillars on the outside and sixteen pillars inside forming the inner chamber of the structure. The outer pillars supported the roof of the structure which again followed the similar plan.

The structure was built using the trabeated form of architecture where the floors were supported on the bracketed capitals of the pillars. The pillars were otherwise plain with heavily carved base and capital, the way pillars in the Fatehpur Sikri Fort complex have been built around the same time. A form of architecture extensively used in Akbar's times.

The second floor of this structure supported a heavy dome which was built of granite. The dome had an octagonal drum and a finial on top. This edifice was attached to the Emperor's royal palace and the lithograph depicts the landscaping done around the structure which was built on the banks of Yamuna. Access to this part of the palace was reserved only for the royalty who used this pavilion as a pleasure resort built on the high banks of the river.

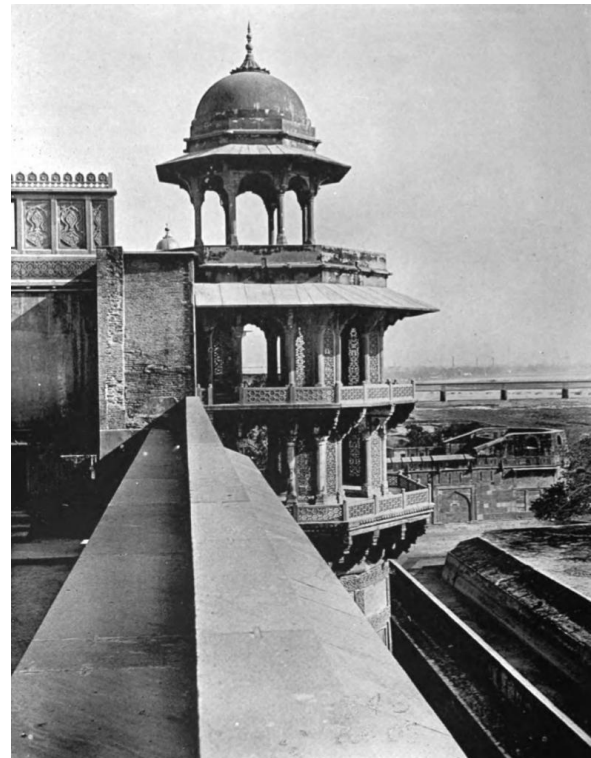
Details of the floral designs and motifs made on the parapets of the gateway of this edifice have also been sketched by the Daniells in a separate work. One can imagine the grandeur of this massive structure when viewed from the riverside and the magnanimity it must have commanded on the eyes of the beholder. Thomas and William Daniell have clearly captured this in their lithograph painted in the end of the eighteenth Century CE.



Details of the floral motifs and brackets of the Chālīs Sutūn as sketched by the Daniells. Source: British Archives

III. COMPARISON OF CHĀLĪS SUTŪN WITH THE BURJ (TOWERS) OF JAHANGIRI MAHAL AND THE TAJ MAHAL COMPLEX, AGRA.

Chālīs Sutūn of Allahabad fort was destroyed after the British occupied the fort in 1801 CE. Therefore, in order to know more about the structure, one can look for other similar structures which were built in Mughal times. One structure which followed the same layout is the north-eastern bastion tower or burj of the Jahangiri Mahal in the fort of Agra. This structure is a simplified version of the Chālīs Sutūn of Allahabad. It is smaller than the latter but much like the Chālīs Sutūn, this is also built as a trabeated structure.



N-E Bastion Burj of Jahangiri Mahal, Agra.

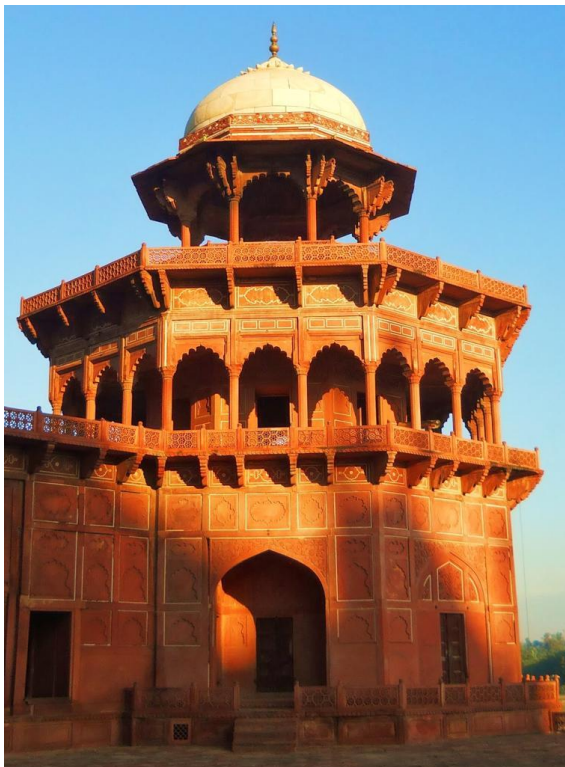
The burj of Jahangiri Mahal has lattice-work but the surmounting dome is like a chhatri unlike the one at Chālīs Sutūn which was a heavy dome built on an octagonal drum. Also, unlike the Chālīs Sutūn, this burj has a single layer of pillars on each floor, thereby reducing the perimeter of the structure.

Another similar structure which followed the similar plan as the Chālīs Sutūn was a pair of watch-towers built on the riverside of the Taj Mahal Complex. It is known as Basai Burj. Like it is known, Taj Mahal was built by Shāhjahān, therefore, these watch-towers at Taj Mahal Complex are of a more recent origin and that is why they are architecturally more refined and evolved.

Basai Burj is located on the north-western edge of the Taj Mahal with a similar one built on the opposite end. It was built with the same layout as Chālīs Sutūn with an octagonal base supporting the pillars of the two floors and surmounted by a domed *chhatri* on top. Aesthetics of Mughal architecture reached its zenith in the reign of Shāhjahān and the same can be seen in the refinement of this pair of watch-towers built in the Taj Mahal Complex.



The elementary difference between the Chālīs Sutūn of Allahabad and the Basai Burj of the Taj Mahal Complex is that Chālīs Sutūn had pillars which were trabeated whereas the pillars of Basai Burj support arches on which the roof is supported. This can be better understood from the fact that in times of Akbar trabeated structures were built extensively with lintels and brackets supported by otherwise plain yet heavy set of pillars whereas with the passage of time and as the Mughal architecture evolved to reach its zenith under Shāhjahān, the use of arches and balustered pillars became popular. This was again a product of aesthetic refinement which happened with time.



Basai Burj at the N-W edge of the Taj Mahal Complex. Source: Google

The arches used in Basai Burj are cusped or Shāhjahāni arches which became a symbol of Mughal architecture in the age of Shāhjahān. Attention to details and aesthetics also evolved in this age, therefore, the carvings at Basai Burj are more intricate in comparison to those which were at the Chālīs Sutūn.

This is worth mentioning that the scale at which Chālīs Sutūn was built was way larger than the Basai Burj at the Taj Mahal Complex. It is so because the structures built in Akbar's times were relatively

heavier yet plain than those built in Shāhjahān's times which were more detailed and aesthetically delicate. Also, Chālīs Sutūn was the central palace or the chief ornament of the fort of Allahabad whereas Basai Burj is just a side structure, a watch-tower in the otherwise elaborate Taj Mahal.

Also worth noticing is that the second floor and the surmounting dome on the third level are separated by a terrace in the Chālīs Sutūn whereas the two floors have been merged in form of a long standing *chhatri* in case of the Basai Burj. This again reduced the weight of the structure yet kept its symmetry intact.

IV. CONCLUSION

By comparing Chālīs Sutūn with other structures of the similar layout, it can be concluded that Chālīs Sutūn was way more elaborate than its successive counterparts. Also it was built as a full-fledged palace which must have acted as a watch-tower as well. But the similar successive were relatively very condensed and were in no way suitable to be used as residential palace. They were just a *burj* or watch-tower which served no other purpose. The layout of Chālīs Sutūn must have been an inspiration behind the construction of these watch-towers but the similarities were only in appearance and not their utility.

It is very unfortunate that the grand structure of Chālīs Sutūn was demolished by the British to strengthen the walls of the fort.⁹ This structure was also demolished because it risked the security of the fort and the British had turned this fort into a garrison, therefore, security of this fort was their first priority. The arsenal of the fort was also next to this structure of the Chālīs Sutūn, so in order to save their stronghold, they had to demolish this structure. Still, it is unfortunate that a heritage structure of such a grand scale was obliterated because of the British apathy.



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