



The Vanishing Heritage of Sheikhpura Fort: Causes, Condition, and Conservation

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Abstract

Mughal forts are renowned for their architectural grandeur, strategic significance, and cultural legacy, serving as enduring symbols of the empire's power and aesthetic sophistication. Among these, the Sheikhpura Fort, located 35 km northwest of Lahore, stands as a remarkable yet underappreciated example. Built in the early 17th century by Emperor Jahangir, the fort was part of the royal hunting resort of Jahangirpura, situated near the iconic Hiran Minar. This region, once a dense forest famed for its wild antelope herds, was a favored recreational spot for the Mughal elite and a key stopover for imperial caravans. The fort not only exemplifies Mughal architectural brilliance but also encapsulates the historical transitions it endured under subsequent British and Sikh rule, ultimately falling into ruin in the modern era. Despite its historical and cultural importance, the fort has suffered from severe neglect, with its intricate fresco paintings and structural integrity damaged due to mishandling by locals and tourists, as well as the indifference of authorities. This paper examines the fort's chronological evolution, its aesthetic transformations, and the factors contributing to its current state of decay. It also contrasts the fort's neglect with the successful restoration and revenue generation of the nearby Hiran Minar, underscoring the urgent need for conservation efforts. By highlighting the fort's historical significance and present deterioration, this study advocates for immediate action to preserve Sheikhpura Fort as a vital link to the Mughal Empire's rich architectural and cultural heritage. The following paper is an attempt to understand and study in detail the changes fort went through, its glory in the form of Mughal Art, its demolition and the current undergoing process of its conservation.

Keywords

Mughal; Architecture, Heritage, Deterioration, Conservation, Sheikhpura, Fort

Introduction

Sheikhpura was made into a district in 1919. Its name was coined after Prince Jahangir, who was granted this name by his father, Emperor Akbar. Jahangir's court was remarkably mobile, with the emperor spending over half of his reign traveling across the empire, often in pursuit of personal pleasure rather than military campaigns (Balabanlilar, 2009). Sheikhpura is situated 40 km northwest of Lahore between two big cities, Gujranwala and Faisalabad. The Sheikhpura Fort was constructed during the Mughal era under the orders of Emperor Jahangir, who envisioned it as part of a royal hunting resort near Hiran Minar (Farooqi, 2015). As per the district census report of 1991, the fort in Sheikhpura was finished in 1619 AD. The surroundings of the fort were rich in wildlife, and it was a favorite hunting spot for the emperor, who would use the fort as a halt. With the fall of the Mughal Empire, the fort was occupied by Sikh dacoits who brought destruction and chaos to the region. The

dacoits were later controlled by Emperor Sher Zaman, but their activities continued after he left for Lahore. This event is a reminder of the problems and disputes that may occur during political change. After independence from the British, it was utilized to give refuge to the migrants and Government of Pakistan maintained it as a historical site. It was transferred to the Pakistan Department of Archeology as long monument Now only structures remaining from Mughal times are imposing walls, bastions, the gateway and unapproachable basements in the north west corner of the fort which were used by Jahangir and Shahjahan personally during their visits to the fort In the period of anarchy that lasted for almost the whole eighteenth century between the Mughal and Sikh periods, the fort was transferred from hand to hand among numerous war lords until it was captured by Maharaja Ranjit Singh who presented it to one of his elder wife Datar Kaur as her private residence. After Partition, the fort accommodated refugees for several years until it was eventually transferred to the archaeology department in 1967



Figure 1a Front facade of the fort
(Source: Author)

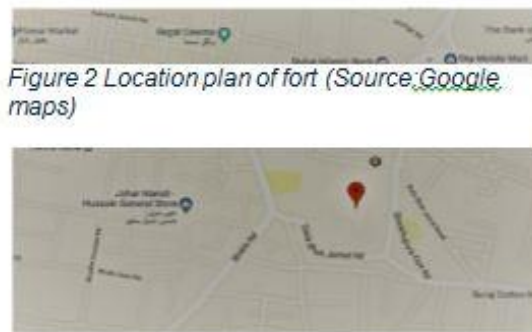


Figure 2 Location plan of fort (Source: Google maps)

Methodology:

A qualitative approach was taken for this research. Data was collected through old archives, previous research papers, documents, articles and by visiting the site on the ground. Concerned, experts from the field were involved in the current conservation process and were interviewed and their statements were further analyzed. The documentation of the site was carried on through direct observation.

Figure 3 Architecture plan of fort
(Source: Author)



Architecture of the fort:

a) Architectural Plan of the Fort

The fort has a rectangular plan with dimensions of approximately 270 by 300 meters. The fort is surrounded by a high wall with circular bastions at the corners, and there are two gateways on the east and west sides. The fort's interior is divided into several courtyards, including the royal palace, mosque, and barracks for soldiers. The architecture features intricate decorative motifs and Islamic geometric patterns. The Mughal architectural elements of Sheikhpura Fort, such as its high fortification walls and bastions, demonstrate the strategic and aesthetic priorities of Mughal military architecture (Sultana, 1989).

b) Fortification Walls.

In external plan Sheikhpura Fort may be called almost a perfect rectangular enclosure of impregnable aspect — its walls varying in height from 11.12 to 12.14 m on different sides. It measures 128 m north-south and 115.5 m east-west. The entire edifice was originally built with small tile bricks and plastered with kantar lime mortar of a light reddish tint, most of which survives on original preserved portions of the walls and other fractures.

c) Gateway Arid Interior of the Fort

The main gateway to the Sheikhpura Fort, a historical site in Pakistan. The gateway is located in the eastern wall and features an offset frontal with a sunken four-centered arch, flanked by sunken panels with flat arches and lattice screens. The facade of the gateway is decorated with moldings, sunken panels, and friezes, in the Mughal style. The entrance arch is fitted with massive wooden



Figure 3 North side pathway (Source:Author)



Figure 4 South side pathway (Source:Author)



Figure 2 Elephant gate amid entrance of gate (Source:Author)



Figure 1 Front gate (Source:Author)



Figure 5 Basement chamber through courtyard (Source:Author)

doors with decorative panels, likely replicas of the original doors. Inside the gateway, there is a vestibule chamber at ground level leading to a square chamber with an arched ceiling. The ceiling is formed of concentric rings of tile bricks held by thick layers of mortar and features geometric patterns and kalamkari work in the curvatures. The water supply system executed in the early phases of the fort's history, as well as a small mosque and a possible pavilion with a colonnade of slender pillars

d) Fort Terrace and Basement Chambers:

It is designed with an elevated terrace as the internal level of terracing. The terrace is about 10m higher than the ground outside and is filled with solid earth up to parapet level. Towards the northeastern part, the terrace covers a series of double-storied basement chambers built beneath the eastern side of the northern portion of the rampart. The first tier of the basement chambers is half underground with three arched openings on the northern side. The underground floor covers a spacious area of nearly 60m long and 12m deep, divided into cellars that probably served as guard quarters during the Mughal times and storage in later periods. The upper story of the basement chambers likely served as dormitories for the emperors and princes during their halts at Jahangirpura. The decorative features and possible wall paintings have suffered irreparable damage from misuse under Sikh and British occupations.

e) Subsequent Architecture in the Fort:

The entire ensemble of the subsequent architecture in this sector of Sheikhpura Fort can be safely placed in the time bracket from the middle of the seventeenth to the second decade of the nineteenth centuries. There is no account of these buildings available in the original sources nor in any inscriptions. However, it can be clearly seen from circumstantial evidence that the buildings differ in relative antiquity within' the given time bracket. The subsequent architecture consists of a number of high multistoried edifices, which on stylistic grounds fall into two groups The first is that of the tall mansions of havelis rising to four stories and distinguished by outer plastering and limewash. The second is represented mainly by a single but massive rectangular building with a basement and double

stories above, built of red tile bricks, and without any outer plastering. In the second group some minor additions may also be included mainly for the purpose of keeping security vigilance. The first group of buildings inside Sheikhpura Fort could be called transitional architecture as it has transitioned from Mughal to Sikh during the era of Ranjit Singh. The second architectural group in Sheikhpura Fort is clearly of the Sikh period, and seems to have grown out of the transitional architecture of proto-Sikh characteristics. The transitional group of buildings deviate from the conventional Mughal architecture in incorporating some novel or hybrid' features, not met with in the imperial palaces of the time. These suggest a, syncretic approach of an experimentation in architecture, involving elements from regional and outlandish traditions in the general framework of Mughal architecture. Generally, of this kind, in Mughal secular architecture, is generally taken to indicate an attempt at cultural integration within the Empire



Figure 8 Niches for diyas outside haveli (Source: Author)

Figure 7 Haveli Data Kaur with previous built fort (Source: Author)

Figure 6 Jharoka outside haveli (Source: Author)

f) Buildings of the transitional phase:



Figure 12 South side of Haveli (Source: Author)

Figure 11 North side arcade (Source: Author)

Figure 10 Palace courtyard (Source: Author)

Figure 9 Fallen part of the haveli (Source: Author)

The four-storied havelis of the transitional group are located to the west of the open courtyard and form an L-shaped block. Most of the buildings in the leg part of the complex collapsed in an earthquake and were cleared away subsequently. The zanankhana (women's quarters) occupies the leg part of the block and is segregated from the divan Khana (men's quarters) with separate entrances. This haveli of the zanankhana standing at the northern end of the block has its foundation probably resting on Earth fillings of uneven compactness or on one of the spanning arches of the basement chambers situated below. The foundation suffered damage under the load in the severe earthquake that took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century.



Figure 13 Fallen mosque on the rear left of the fort (Source: Author)

g) Mosque on the West of Fort

The mosque inside the Sheikhpura Fort is known as the "Masjid-e-Noor" or "Mosque of Light." It was built during the reign of Emperor Jahangir in the early 17th century and is considered a fine example of Mughal architecture. The mosque has a large central prayer hall with several small rooms on either side. The walls of the mosque are decorated with intricate tile work and calligraphy

Wells within the Fort



Figure 14 Walls at the rear courtyard of Fort (Source:Author)



Figure 15 Haveli data kaur (Source: Author)

The fort had a well-organized water supply system. There were several wells inside the fort that provided water for various purposes, including drinking, cooking, and bathing. The water from these wells was also used to irrigate the gardens and crops inside the fort. One of the wells inside the fort is known as the "Shahi Baoli" or "Royal Well." It is a large, stepped well that was constructed during the era of Shah Jahan. It is said that the well was used by the royal family and their guests for bathing and other activities.

Two key buildings inside the fort:

a) Haveli Data Kaur

The point of turning occurred in 1847, when after a falling out; the Queen Regent Maharani Jind Kaur was estranged from her nine-year-old son and arrested inside her own premises within the Lahore Fort. After that, all her jewels were seized, and she was imprisoned within the fort of Sheikhpura. Sheikhpura was a short page in her lengthy years of difficulties. The tall five story building of Datar Kaur's mansion with its romantic balconies and scenic view stands imposing over the ruins. It is famous for the exquisite fresco paintings on the interior walls, some of which were visible even from the courtyard. The tragic story of Maharani Jind Kaur, highlights the political turmoil of the Sikh Empire during the British colonial period (Singh, 1940)

b) Jahangir Palace

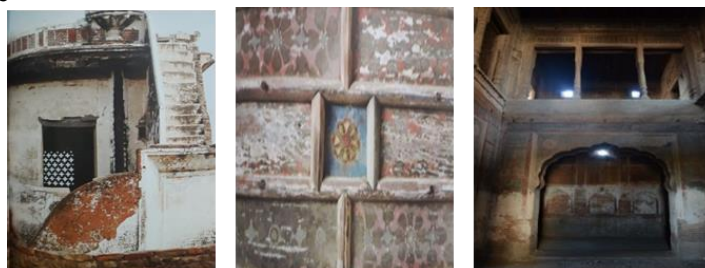


Figure 16 Jahangir Palace (Source:Author)

The Jahangir Palace is a remarkable example of Mughal architecture, featuring intricate carvings and designs on its walls and ceilings. The palace is built on a raised platform, which is accessed through a

staircase. It has four octagonal towers, each of which is decorated with ornate carvings and motifs. The interior of the palace has several rooms and halls, including a Diwan-i-Aam (public audience hall) and a Diwan-i-Khas (private audience hall). These halls are decorated with beautiful frescoes, paintings, and inlaid work. Over the centuries, the Jahangir Palace has undergone several renovations and restorations. In recent years, efforts have been made to preserve and restore the palace to its former glory. Today, the palace is a popular tourist attraction and is open to visitors who are interested in exploring the rich history and heritage of Pakistan.

Cause of Deterioration and Decay:

Despite its historical and cultural significance, Sheikhpura Fort has suffered from neglect and inadequate preservation efforts, putting its unique frescoes at risk of permanent damage (Farooqi, 2015). One of the most obvious and effecting reason for deterioration and wear and tear of such heritage sites is climatic factor. Earthen heritage sites in dryland regions are particularly vulnerable to deterioration caused by climatic factors such as wind and rain, which can lead to features like polishing, pitting, and slurry (Richards et al., 2020). For example, solar radiation, temperature, humidity, rain, wind speed, floods and earthquakes.

1. Thermal Variation

The climate here is a local steppe climate. There is not much rainfall during the year in Sheikhpura. The temperature here is 24.1 °C on average. The precipitation here is 476 mm on average. The structures undergo some thermal expansion because of the extreme weather conditions but the various materials undergo different changes under such extreme conditions.

2. Rain and Humidity:

The annual rainfall of this part is 20 inches. Rain damages buildings at high rates. The exposed fortification walls have scaling due to this. The water floods on the roofs due to no proper drainage and excavation of the water deteriorates the building.

3. Air pollution:

The major causes of the decay of any building. The location of Sheikhpura fort is in between the two major roads in the city, the traffic pollution affects the building at larger sc

4. Vandalism:

Apart from all the natural causes of deterioration vandalism affects buildings too. Due to no proper security checks and no guards appointing to protect the fort from vandalism the fortification wall is filled with texts and spray paint graffiti.

5. Tremors:

A tremor is an involuntary, slightly rhythmic, contraction and relaxation of muscle involving. Heavy tremors are produced in subsoil by the heavy traffic through roads and other activities occurring about heritage sites. As two major roads are located near the fort and heavy traffic tremors have damaged the foundations and basements severely.

6. Negligence

The repairing is not done on time by the authorities. Timely removal of elements spoiling the buildings is not done for example removal of plants and repairs of water spouts. Blocked canals have caused deterioration in the materials, flooding in walls has caused substantial setbacks to the building.



Figure 17 Decaying in building sue to long flooding of water (Source:Author)

Conservation Process of the Fort

Sheikhpura fort falls under the Archeology department, as per the interview with Archeological team member Maqsood Ahmed, the conservation project for Sheikhpura fort started in 2016. The project was to initiate immediate treatment of the damages such as undermined portions, of the fortification wall. Water tightening of the top wall was to be carried out. The digital of the buildings of fort, damage analysis conservation and reuse proposals were prepared. Study and research of learning and dangerous structures were to be carried out through professional structural engineers. Infrastructures

services for reuse will be designed by professional engineers in phase I and after the studies the thorough conservation and restoration work are to be carried out in phase II

Components of the Project:

- 1. Implementation and Preservation Work**
 - a- Preservation and restoration of fortification wall including bastions.
 - b- Water tightening of top of wall
- 2. Protection against Rainwater and Weather**
 - a- Propping of dangerous structures
 - b- Protection against rainwater structures of fort
 - c- Levelling of ground for proper drainage
- 3. Investigation Studies and Projects Preparation for Phase 2**
 - a- Damage analysis, preparation of conservation and re-use proposals.
 - b- Research on previous occupations and intervention.
 - c- Geo-tech investigations.
 - d- Study and research on structural stability of learning and dangerous structures.
 - e- Ground penetration radar test
 - f- Sturdy of water drainage system
 - g- Consultancy for re-use proposals
- 4. Budget Breakdown for the Conservation Project:**

S.No	Description	Total Cost (Rs)
1	Preservation and Restoration work	26,782,643
2	Documentation and Research work	7,300,000
3	Contingencies 2%	681,653
4	PST 5% (PRA Tax) on Works	1,339,132
5	Establishment, Project Staff and Salaries	5,830,000
6	Purchase of vehicle	1,300,000
7	Purchase of Furniture	156,000
8	Provision For Equipment	297,000
9	Commodities and Services	905,000
	Total	44,591,428
	Say Rs. in Million	44.59

Findings and Conclusions:



Figure 18 First phase of project left incomplete (Source:Author)

Upon visiting the Sheikhpura fort it was observed that so far, the conservation process of fortification wall is carried out. Buttresses have been added to stop the fall of the walls. Small minor canals have been digging out to give the rainwater a path away from the buildings and preventing the stagnant water collection at one distinct place. Frame structures have been added to several walls inside the fort. All other components of the project have yet to be processed.

Conclusions:

After thorough research and detailed study of the present condition of Sheikhpura Fort and investigating its conservation process, it is concluded that it is important to take immediate action to conserve and restore the Sheikhpura Fort, considering its current condition and the potential risks it faces. The authorities should prioritize the preservation of this heritage site and allocate the necessary resources to ensure its protection and restoration. Since another heritage site in the city, Hiran Minar

is a beautiful example of Mughal architecture that has been successfully restored and is generating revenue for the local community. This demonstrates that heritage conservation can be a beneficial economic activity for the region. The authorities should recognize the potential of Sheikhpura Fort to attract tourists and boost the local economy and take steps to promote and develop tourism in the area. In conclusion, the authorities should act swiftly and decisively to conserve and restore the Sheikhpura Fort, recognizing its cultural and economic significance. This can be achieved through effective planning, allocation of resources, community engagement, and promotion of tourism in the region.

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