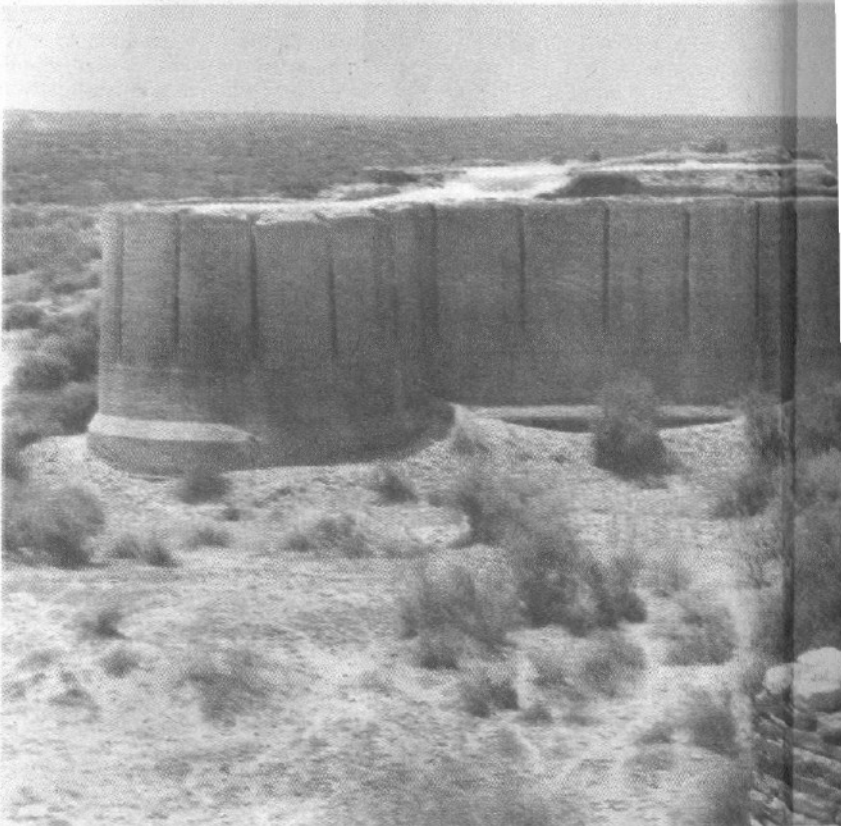


Under the of neglect

From Mirpur Khas a fairly good road runs towards south to the great desert of Thar. After covering a distance of about 65 kilometres, one reaches a small town, Naukot, with its roadside cafes, motor and tractor workshops and a number of other small-time shops running a busy business. Another three kilometres on the road to Mithi, one is attracted by an awe-inspiring Fort on the left side, and the area otherwise is nothing but wilderness. It is said to have been constructed by Mir Karam Ali Khan in 1814 to consolidate his power in the desert and to subdue the Thari and make effective and forceful arrangements to collect *dhal* (revenue).

The Fort well-served its founder, Mir Karam Ali Khan. But after his death, none of his successors cared much about it. However, when Tari Khan came to power, he continued to focus his attention on the Thar and added many areas to his rule. He arranged to have the presence of army in almost all the forts of Thar, which included Fatehgarh, Islamgarh etc. He died in 1829 and was succeeded at the seat of Mirpur Khas by Mir Sher Muhammad Khan, commonly known as *Sher-e-Sindh*. He fully understood importance of the Thar and, using his power, brought almost the whole of the desert under his control. Keeping in view the strategic importance of forts in wilderness like Thar, he ensured that its forts, including that of Naukot, were kept fully armed. He also camped in this Fort for a number of times.

In the meanwhile, the British power in this part of the South Asia Subcontinent was gaining foothold by all means of crooked machinations. By then, they had started interfering not



Part of the squarish construction housing the gateway

only in the personal and family matters of the Mirs, but were also turning some of them against the rulers by winning them over with false promises of granting power. Mirs proved no match to the Briton's manoeuvres and, in order to save themselves, even lost everything at the battle of Miani. Thus the Mir's ruling branches at Hyderabad and Khairpur were humbled. Mir Sher Muhammad, the ruler of the Mir's Mirpur branch of rule, decided to fight the British in order to take revenge. He collected his forces and marched towards Hyderabad. He faced the army of Charles Napier at Dubhi near Phuleli but, because of the internal intrigues,

faced no different fate than that of his Khairpur or Hyderabad brothers.

After meeting the decisive defeat at Dubhi, Mir Sher Muhammad returned to Mirpur from Nasrpur. He sent his family to the Thar and, transferring his belongings to the desert, he also collected his scattered followers. Additionally helped by some disgruntled factions of the Mirs, he embarked on a sort of 'guerrilla' warfare against the British intruding forces. H.T. Lambrick gives fairly detailed account of the Mir's actions in his book 'John Jacob of Jacobabad.' As the men of the Mir had virtually cut off the lines of the British between

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Heritage
Nation

27.10.02

IHSAN H. NADIEM says the Naukot Fort is at the mercy of a single chowkidar with no facilities for visiting tourists

Bombay and Sindh, John Jacob started his march with two squadrons to humble Naukot. However, Napier did not agree with the plan and directed him to attack Tando Muhammad Khan, about 30 kilometres from Hyderabad. Here the British force met with defeat and returned with all ignominy.

Mir Sher Muhammad was giving the British a great trouble, as he would use the forts of the Thar as his bases to launch attacks on the latter's interests in Sindh. Mir Sher Muhammad had been operating in his own way for quite some time. However, some of his leading men, aspiring to get more power, abandoned him and joined the lines of the British. On this, the Mir went to Qandhar to seek assistance. Disappointed from the treatment meted out from there, he at last surrendered at Lahore. With the removal of the Mir from the scene, the same forts of Thar, which had served effectively against the British, were now in their total control. Fearing their future use against them they razed them to ground except the ones at Umerkot and Naukot, which have also lost their original grandeur because of a lack of maintenance over all this period.

The fort at Naukot overlooks the great span of the desert on one side and the green extent of land caused by the irrigation system on the other. It is built of burnt-bricks in mud mortar and measures about 113 metres in length and 98 metres in width. Another squarish construction on the southern side of the fort, measuring 15 metres by 13 metres has in it the only entrance and narrow access to the interior of the fort. All the walls and bastions give a tapering look. The narrow entrance is approached through a crooked passage formed by two heavy and semi-circular bastions. The bastion close to the doorway, and making a part of the squarish construction, is about 9.5 metres high with a diameter of about 42 metres at the base.

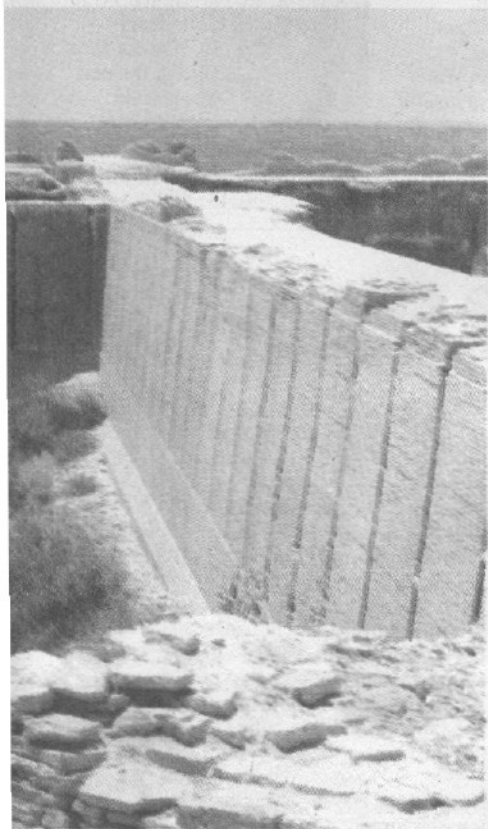
The arched entrance is around seven metres in height and about four metres in width. The approach to the interior of the fort is through a causeway-type hall and a room, which forms part of the squarish construction, in itself giving the look of a fortress.

The fort has nine semi-circular bastions, two of them guarding the main entrance, four at the corners and one each in the middle of the northern, southern and western walls. A four-metre high wall runs on the four sides of the fort. From inside the fort it has two burnt-brick stairs to climb to the top.

Inside the Fort there are a few remains of rooms etc., which may go to suggest that these were the residential quarters. A domed though small room, like a dungeon, may well have served as *barood khana*, or the ammunition depot. Because of its nearness to the old beds of rivers, now got dry on the outside, the water seems to have been easily accessible by digging wells inside the fort.

The Naukot Fort now stands protected under the Antiquities Act-1975; the writ of neglect looms high everywhere on the fort. Such an important monument is left on the mercy of a single *chowkidar* with total absence of any facility for the visiting tourists. ■

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View of the Barood Khana

