

Favourite of the royals

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Heritage
Nabha

After expelling Emperor Humayun, Sher Shah Suri as the King of Hindustan, caused to build two forts in the area what now is Pakistan. While the reason as to building a stronghold at Shergarh, now falling in the Okara district of Punjab, could not be spelled out by any of the historians the other fort at Rohtas, now in Jhelum district, had its strong points in favour of its strategic location. The shrewd and prudent ruler like Sher Shah could easily sense the threat to his supremacy from the direction of northern Punjab. The exiled emperor Humayun could join hands here with his brother in Kashmir, and helped by friendly Gakkhars of the area could make a serious effort to regain his lost empire of the South Asia sub-continent.

Lying in the sub-mountainous region north of river Jhelum, the Rohtas Fort stands in a gorge over-looking the Kahan River, along the Tilla Range. About sixteen kilometres from the Jhelum City the Fort speaks high of its builder, Sher Shah Suri. Originally named Farid Khan, Sher Shah, belonged to the sturdy stock of Pathans inhabiting the highland home of Roh amidst the Sulaiman Range. After leading an unfavourable and disturbed early life, he entered the service of Emperor Babar whom he defected in favour of the Afghans. The luck would see him face to face with Emperor Humayun, son and successor of Emperor Babar, at Chausa. After a decisive defeat here, Humayun was forced to flee to Iran via Punjab and Sindh.

Sher Shah perceived a possibility of Humayun's joining hands with his brothers in Peshawar Valley and embarking on a triumphant march to conquer his territory. The ever-willing help of Gakkhars, ardent enemy of Sher Shah and old friends of the Mughals, could play important role in this adventure. As the Gakkhars held control of the area through which old route to the

IHSAN H. NADIEM talks of the grandeur of Rohtas Fort and at the same time about the official indifference at its preservation

heart of the Subcontinent passed, Sher Shah Suri planned this strategic stronghold to serve this purpose against any such eventuality.

After selecting a spot, which seemed ideal to serve well his planning, Sher Shah Suri ordered to commence the work in 1541 AC with Todar Mal Khatri, his revenue minister, as in-charge of the project. As expected, the Gakkhars opposed the construction and vowed not to work even as day labourers. Faced with such problems Todar Mal chose to inform the King about the difficulties. Sher Shah Suri's reply was curt but clear, "I know you for a man of business, understanding and intelligence. I see now no work can be expected from you, because you consider money as your friend. When I have commanded you to do a thing you ought not to have cared for money in fixing the rate. Whatever be the expense, shall be borne by my government".

The order of the monarch was enough to encourage Todar Mal to fix one red ashrafi for each slab on the first day. The total cost on the construction of this huge undertaking, though fabulous, is not known to a safe degree of certainty. It varies from Rs.3,425,000 to Rs.110,107,975 in different accounts.

The latter-mentioned sum, however, also includes the cost of maintaining an army.

The Fort is irregular in plan and covers a circumference of four kilometres. The difficult contours of the hillock have been followed in aligning the fortification wall. The Fort is divided by a 533-metre long cross-wall which separates the citadel for the chieftains, from the rest of the fort. The fortification wall has 68

massively built bastions and three baolies (stepped-wells) to provide the occupants with the life-sustaining commodity of water. The huge fortification has as many as 12 accesses through gates named as Sohail, Shah Chand Wali, Kabuli, Shishi, Langarkhani, Talaqi, Mori or Kashmiri, Khwaskhani, Gatali, Tulla Mori, Pipal Wala and Sar Gate.

The Langarkhani Gate, which opens into the citadel, is a trap gate for enemy, which could come under direct fire from the bastions. The Khwaskhani Gate, opening on the north towards the river, is a superb example of a gate having double walling for better defence. A small enclave on the western end is a citadel within citadel and is defended with just one gate.

In the western-most part of the citadel is a small but beautiful mosque known as Shahi or Royal Mosque. The living quarters are conspicuous by their absence. There is only one residential building known by the name of Haveli Maan Singh, a general of Akbar's period. It occupies the highest point in the citadel. The remarkable feature of the Haveli is its balconies carried on four columns with equal number of brackets in garuda design.

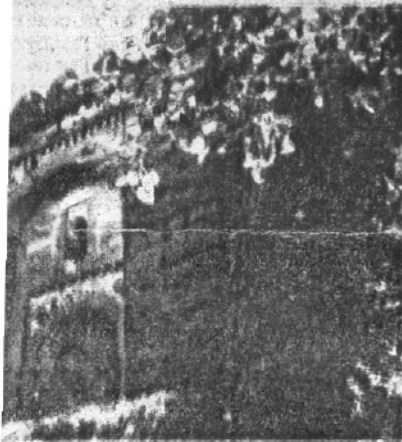
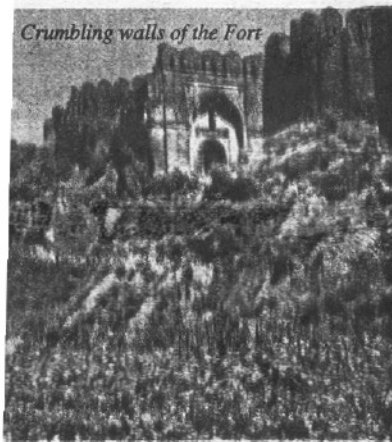
The gigantic fort is not just massively built but has some delicate decorative motifs to remind us of the refined taste of its builder. These features include stone carvings in low and high relief, calligraphic inscriptions and plaster or glazed-tile decorations. The stone carving decorates all the gates and the Shahi Mosque. The calligraphic inscriptions are predominantly religious in character, invariably in naskh script. The inscription



Shishi Gate



Crumbling walls of the Fort



*A view of the
Khwashkhani Gate*



carved on marble slab on the Shishi Gate is in Persian and mentions the date of the construction of the Fort as AH 948. The text is repeated in another inscription over the Talaqi Gate.

The roundels on the spandrels of the mosque arches have been made in gutch plaster while enamelled tiles, the forerunners of the Mughals' technique in decoration, have been used to embellish the Shishi Gate.

It seems ironical that the prediction of Sher Shah Suri would come true in toto but the 'formidable' Rohtas Fort could not prove effective in blocking the re-entry of the exiled Mughal, Humayun. Sher Shah died even before the construction of the Fort was completed and the governor of Rohtas, Tatar Khan Kasi, did not give any resistance to the storming of the Mughals, now supported by Gakkhars, and fled. Legend says that Humayun had sworn to destroy the Rohtas Fort so completely as to raze it to ground completely. However, on seeing such a magnificently built stronghold he was prevailed upon to resist his vow. He thus destroyed one of the gates to fulfil the spirit of his pledge.

This imposing stronghold somehow never remained a favourite spot with the Mughal rulers. Emperor Akbar used it once to rest for a night while Jahangir, on some of his pleasure marches to Kashmir, visited it for a few times. He, however, speaks high of its strength in "Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri".

The Fort is accessed from Dina situated at the junction where road from Mangla/Azad Kashmir joins the G. T. Road, 12 kilometres from Jhelum while going to Rawalpindi/Islamabad. One has to brave through the Kahan River, which becomes very nasty during rains. However, a bridge over it is in the offing to facilitate an unhindered all-weather approach. The dismal and substandard maintenance of this unique antiquity, however, speaks volumes of the casual and apathetic attitude of the authorities.

Additionally, the ever-increasing encroachments inside the protected antiquity not only mar its original condition but may also hinder its future development. It is all the more ironical in the face of the fact that the Rohtas Fort now stands inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List of UNESCO. Its such a status in its wake expects the concerned Department to pay more attention to its conservation, preservation and presentation in order to keep it as a truly world-class monument. ■