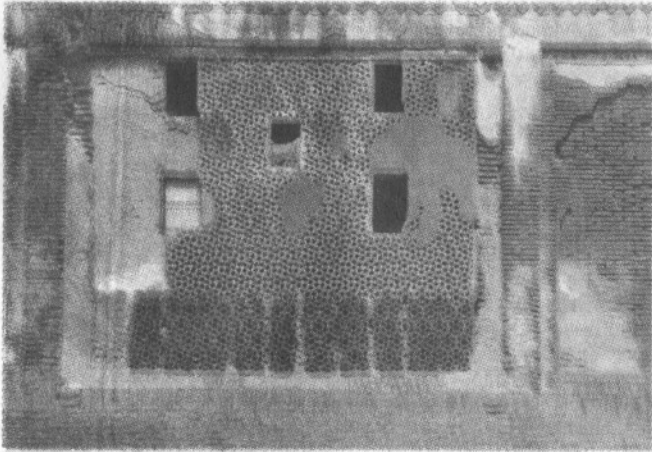


Ready for a royal bath?

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Restoration of the Shahi Hammam at the Shalimar Gardens is all set to offer a royal treat to visitors



By Asim Mateen

The famous Hammam-i-Shahi, the royal bath in Lahore's Shalimar Gardens is being restored to its former glory and will be open to public

Lahorites.

The origin of bath houses has been traced to the Egyptians, and saw constant improvements through successive Greek, Persian and finally the Roman empires, who transformed their architecture to new heights. But the Turkish Bath Houses, evolved by the Ottomans, were famed for their richness and splendour. They were not just restricted to the royals but were commonly found in the Turkish Empire. The tradition continues.

Since the Mughals traced their roots from the Turkish, the hammams were a part of the legacy that they introduced in this part of the world. Although the damp climate of the Monsoon belt curtailed the growth of these hammams, this did not deter the Mughals from building a fair number of them. Very few of them have survived and the one at the Shalimar Gardens is a rarity.

soon. The historical hammam has the potential to become the focal point of the city's esteemed and long list of monuments.

Built on the style of Turkish Bath Houses, which are still common in Turkey and major parts of Central Asia, the royal bath will be a royal treat for the

Located at the Gardens' southeast corner, the Shahi Hammam was once the abode of queens and princesses. This was a place where the royals rested, and got ready for evening galas. In fact the hammam has all the ingredients of a modern sauna. Its four chambers include Rakht Khana (dressing room), Sard Khana (cold part), Aab-i-Rawan (running water portion) and Garm Khana (hot part).

It is amazing to see how the mix of hot and cold water was ensured in a natural way. The restoration plan is still not clear whether the hammam will just be a place to be observed by visitors or if it will be turned into a functional bath house. The latter case might restore the age old tradition of bath houses and give the public a royal treat.

The Shahi Hammam has seen good and bad times. During its best days, the bath House was decorated with Parchin Kari (pietra dura work). It had numerous gold ornamentations, its roofs studded with mirrors and its walls decorated with huge frescoes.

But the place was vandalised during the Sikh period. Its ornamentation was ripped off. It was subjected to waves of defacement, the last being in 1838 A.C. A meek attempt for its restoration was made during the British period. There are cheap sicco paintings on dry lime plaster, which played havoc with original decorations, and this remains to this day.

But despite all this wreckage, the place still has a charismatic charm. There are traces of its past majesty; here a quintessential Mughal fountain, there a shade of fresco painting, and here and there water tanks.

The constant neglect has left its marks as well. The place remained closed for the past two decades. The worst damage was done by the lack of covers in its roof. The vandalism of lights left huge holes, which allowed rain-water to pour in. The damage caused by decades of unchecked downpours, and the cheap coatings of lime has reduced the monument to a mass of rubble.

It was mostly used as a store room or public toilet before the

Archaeology Department decided to renovate it. Its conservation work is already in progress. "There will be a visible change after this conservation job," says Maqsood Ahmad Malik, project director at the Archaeology Department. A major restoration work is on, which includes work on sprawling Mughal lawns, children parks, and even the cafeteria. And thankfully, the toilets have been moved inside the Naqqar Khana.

The Shahi Hammam, once a chief attraction, has become the eye sour of the otherwise grand Shalimar gardens. In any case, the project promises to be a grand addition to the city's historical treasures.

Sajjad Kausar, a well known architect and author of a book on Shalimar Gardens, says, "it's a positive step if the Royal Bath is opened".

He believes this part of the Shalimar Gardens has been neglected for decades. It's about time this was restored to its original charm.

A functional bath house, instead of a mere show case, may bring in more revenues for the perpetually-starved Archaeology Department. And the mere idea of taking a bath in a shahi hammam offers a royal feeling to the locals of Lahore.