

During the last few years, there have been persistent reports about the damage suffered by Shish Mahal, the Hall of Mirrors, in the Lahore Fort. Various reasons have been cited for the deterioration which still continues. They are the vagaries of weather, vandalism, official neglect, the installation of *shamianas* for state functions by inserting iron pegs into the structure, and even the vibration caused by traffic on the Circular Road. These reports are a cause of considerable pain to lovers of the heritage.

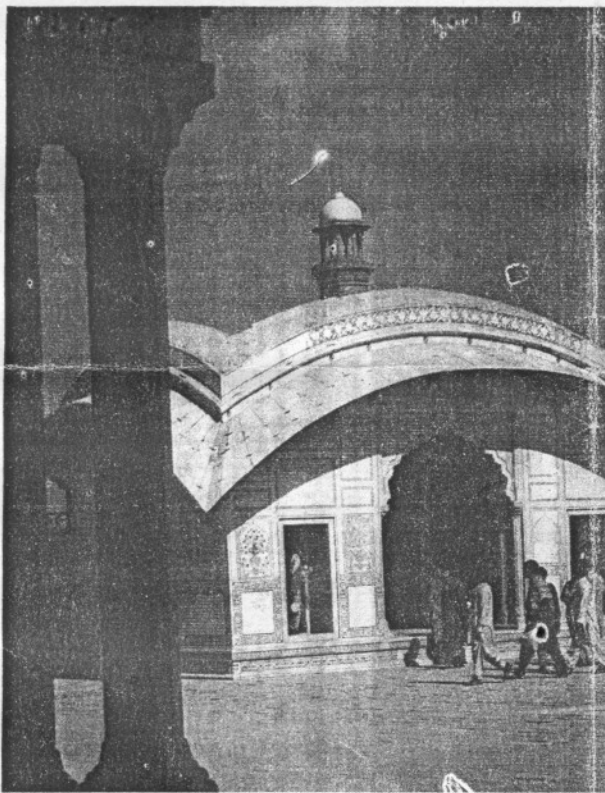
I would be revealing my age if I told readers that my memories of the Lahore Fort go back to nearly seventy years. (Now that I have done it, it doesn't matter). An uncle of mine used to be the Superintendent of the Northern Circle of the Department of Archaeology and was given a portion of Jehangir's Quadrangle as his official residence. You can imagine our excitement as children whenever we paid him a visit. The wide open spaces to play and the innumerable places to hide were a great attraction.

Even at that time the Shish Mahal was our favourite spot to see and marvel at and we were never tired of pestering our uncle to get the caretaker to light a flaming torch and rotate it over his head. This created an illusion that is unforgettable and also indescribable. With the doors closed to make it completely dark (this display was in one of the inner rooms) the myriad convex mirrors reflected the torch and created the illusion of the starry sky on the move. A splendid sight indeed!

Now the continuing bad reports about Shish Mahal's physical decline has at last been broken by the most heartening news that UNESCO aid for its restoration has been approved. The other day, Ingeborg Breines, UNESCO director in Pakistan, handed over papers for aid amounting to 900,000 dollars to the Archaeology Department, meant specifically for restoring the beautiful hail of mirrors and repairing the dilapidated drainage system of the fort. May God bless Ms Breines for her interest and this timely assistance!

Restoring Shish Mahal

HAFIZUR RAHMAN says that positive steps are now afoot to save Shish Mahal, one of the most beautiful remnants of the glorious Mughal empire



Actually this most sympathetic and understanding lady from UNESCO had been trying to secure ten million dollars for restoration, conservation and quality upgradation of the entire Lahore Fort, but even UNESCO is strapped for funds and this is all she get for the present.

In any case it is much more than what the Government of Pakistan was willing to spend on this

important cultural object and that is why it has shelved the plan to set up a museum in the basement of the fort.

Whenever I hear of someone from the outside world donating money for any such requirement in Pakistan, I want to sit down and cry at the apathy of our own government and our own billionaires. In this case the trouble is that the Lahore Fort is on the World

Heritage List of UNESCO, and our government starts thinking that because of that all the attention and money that is needed for this great building's repair and restoration should be made available by that world body. This is most unfair, specially when we consider the fact that so many millions are wasted in pampering MNAs and MPAs and on foreign tours of government personages.

Anyway, according to the archaeology department's sources, the actual renovation of Shish Mahal will start after consulting renowned archaeological experts of the world, experts who have experience of this kind of specialised work. The problem is that the structure has become so fragile over the centuries that extraordinary care will have to be taken while handling it. The department admitted that none of its officials was trained in doing such sensitive work, and there was no point in taking the risk of doing it alone. So a conference of experts from various countries has been called next month to devise the actual plan.

In lay terms, the problem of Shish Mahal is a weakened roof that may give way any day, and is supported at the present by vertical beams. Another trouble is the presence of moisture in the bricks and mortar of the roof, and even of the walls. The process of ageing has loosened the grip of the mirrors on the plaster in which they are embedded. The beautiful structure first showed signs of crumbling in the early 1990s, and the cause was believed to be rainwater seepage. Raja Javed, an archaeological expert, avers that the tremors

caused by the heavy traffic on the road passing along the walls of the fort, was also responsible for the decay.

Located in the north-west corner of the fort, the Shish Mahal is one of the most profusely decorated places of the Mughal period. It was built by Asif Khan for Emperor Shah Jehan in 1631-32 and constituted the royal harem. Apart from the hall of mirrors proper, the courtyard houses the Naulakha, a beautiful and delicate marble pavilion whose slim pillars are adorned with precious stones and extremely fine marble trellises overlooking the Badshahi Mosque.

Long ago I remember seeing a portion of the wall of the hall of mirrors from which the little mirrors had been removed for some reason that I do not recall now, and there were traces of gilding and frescoes underneath. This means that the mirrors were a later addition, but nobody has been able to determine the exact date of this work. Anyway, the mirrors are the highlight of Shish Mahal which of course takes its name from them and are much more popular than any fresco would have been.

As stated above, plans for setting up a museum, which was to be a mixture of the old and the new in art, had to be deferred for want of the necessary funds.

Its site was a large underground chamber, the basement of the fort, and it was expected to house antiques and precious articles from the 2nd century BC to the 19th century, constituting coins, royal decrees and edicts, old photographs, historic maps and even some ancient navigation instruments. The modern period was to include works of eminent artists. All that will now have to await the beneficence of some other foreign donor, for we do not seem to be willing to spend money on such items.

All said and done it is a matter of intense gratification and much relief that positive steps are now afoot to save the Shish Mahal, one of the most beautiful remnants of the glorious Mughal period in the sub-continent. ■

Photo
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