

Welcome — tourists and repair

Hiran Minar, the retreat of the Mughals, is the only one of its kind. It is also one in need of urgent attention from conservation authorities

By Asim Mateen

The Hiran Minar at Sheikhpura, the royal hunting resort that is part of the world heritage, is in danger of losing its distinct splendour. If ever a monument needed urgent repairs, the Minar needs it now.

Built by Mughal Emperor Jahangir around 1607 AD, the summer retreat of the Mughals may be the only one of its kind. Akbar the great found Lahore strategically placed to supervise the expanding Mughal empire. He lived on the banks of River Ravi for 15 years to control the rebellious local tribes. Jahangir had special interest in carrying forward his father's tradition. Hiran Minar was built to provide respite to the Emperor from his long campaigns.

"The neglect of the last four decades has left it in a dilapidated state. It is structurally sound but the decoration and fabric of monuments is badly damaged due to natural disasters and human vandalism," says Maqsood Ahmad Malik, Senior Project Director, Department of Archaeology. "It

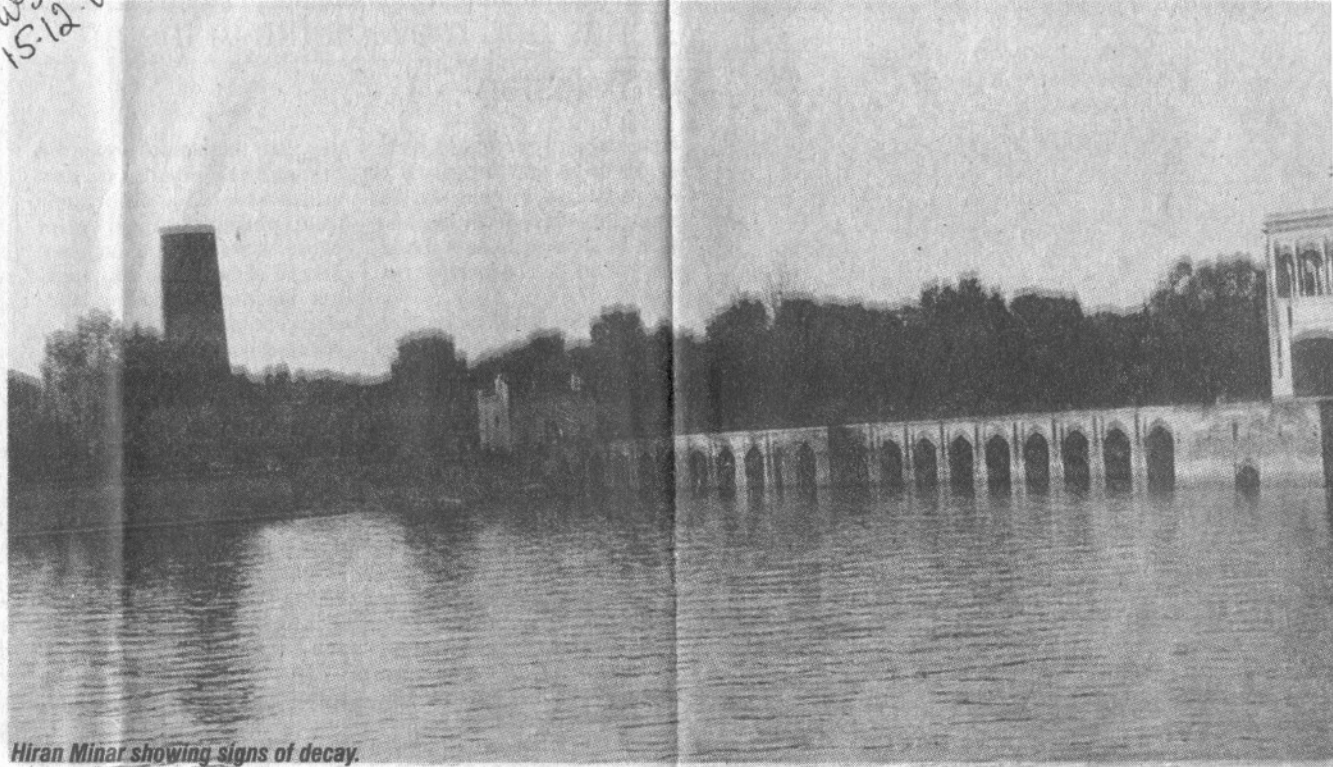
needs to be preserved to avoid further damages," he explains.

The Archaeology Department never had enough funds to do the repairs in time. The funds for annual conservation works were so short that repairs were done on a small scale, hardly four times in as many decades.

An effort was made to restore the monument to its past glory. The Archaeology Department prepared a roughly estimated 18 million rupee scheme for the preservation and conservation of Hiran Minar and the adjoining lake about two years ago. But the file was somehow lost amid the huge pile of papers of the department.

Conservationists believe that if the sorry state of affairs persist the monument may suffer irreparable loss. "As soon as the scheme is approved by the government the restoration and development work will start and monument well preserved for future generations," observes Maqsood Ahmad.

The Archaeology Department officials say the neglect of the monument was caused largely because of the paucity of funds. "Ultimately, it



Hiran Minar showing signs of decay.

boils down to money," says one of them.

Experts believe the standing structures in the entire complex are stable, but signs of decay and deterioration are visible at many places. The causes of decay in different parts of the complex could be different and only scientific investigation could lead to proper identification of the roots of the problem.

The trouble in Pakistan is that everything is left to the government. Elsewhere, there are NGOs sharing the cost. While there is an abundance of

cynics who would miss no chance to pull the leg of government authorities at the slightest neglect but would not make any effort to join hands. While the local councils and politicians may waste millions on rallying people for elections they would not contribute a penny to such monuments from the local funds.

"We are not involved in the upkeep of this historic monument and we don't get any money from the profits that tourists bring," says Naseer Ahmad, an official of the local municipal office in

Sheikhpura. "Why should we spend the money from our own resources? The problem might be solved if the money earned from the monument is spent on its upkeep."

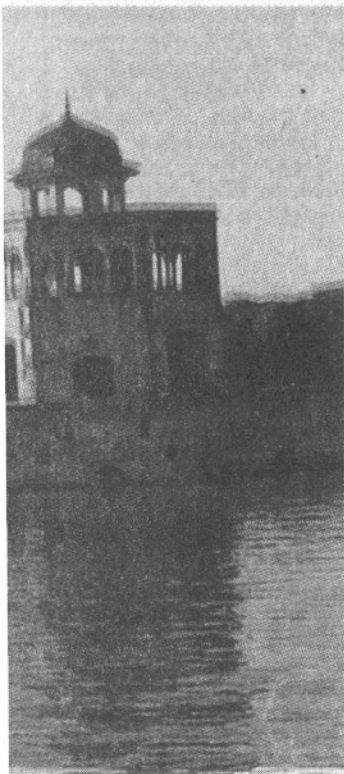
Whatever the case, somebody will have to take the initiative. If the issue is left to be fought among various departments, the ultimate loser will be the monument and world heritage.

According to a recent survey, the Minar, apart from the signs of decay in the first storey (octagonal in shape) is in a good state. Plaster has

peeled off at various places of the three upper storeys. These storeys were repaired in the past, but the cement used for the repair could not last for long.

The lower storeys are also in a critical state. The lower portion of the Minar and the surrounding structures have been badly affected and mostly eaten up. The material used for repairing the lowest storey of the Minar during the 1960s has also come off. The rain water could seep deep into the foundation and may cause damages beyond repair.

men



The baradari

Moving on to the two-storey baradari, the plaster on its main platform has gone at many places and mortar joints have eroded up to 2 to 3 inches in depth. Stucco work and fresco paintings on the interior have disappeared at many places.

The second storey, the arcaded verandah of which was provided with RCC roof slab in the past, is now in a dilapidated state. The plaster on the ceiling has fallen down in patches, exposing the steel reinforcement. The joints at the top were not properly treated due to

which rain water has seeped in. This is the reason why the cement plaster inside is damaged.

The overall condition of the second storey pavilion from the inside is also bad. The plaster work and other decorative elements in fresco and stucco work are damaged at many places.

Main gate and causeway

The plaster of the gate has mostly disappeared and no sign of fresco work is visible in the present state — meaning that the original cannot be restored since even the traces have been wiped out. The fresco work may have been damaged by water seepage from the roof. The causeway has been affected by seepage too.

Irrigation tanks

The original water supply system of the tank is defunct since time unknown, and the water channels and small tanks are in a bad state. The hydraulic lime plaster and mortar especially on the lower portions inside the channels has disappeared and been replaced with wild growth. The drainage channels bear a similar look.

However, ramps of the tanks are in a relatively good state — except for one located near the causeway which has lost much of its brick edging along the pavement.

The dwarf enclosure wall of the tank is also not in a good condition with crumbling plaster.

The kiosks on four corners of the huge tank have not been preserved well. Apart from missing plaster work and decorative elements at various places, certain portions of the niches and border have vanished. The terraced flooring is damaged. The steps located close to the kiosks also need to be preserved.