SHEIKHUPURA FORT: A FORGOTTEN MONUMENT¹

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Abstract

Pakistan is a country with a rich cultural heritage built from the traditions of the scores of civilizations that have lived and thrived on its soil. Under each new ruler, art and architecture took on a new shape – learning from each other and growing. Sheikupura Fort in the Punjab province is a result of Mughal, Sikh and Hindu influences on the region. The crumbling structure is filled with exquisite frescoes depicting typical Sikh art, but ineffective preservation efforts from Pakistani and international authorities have put the entire Fort and the art contained within at risk of permanent ruin. This paper seeks to explore the mixed cultural and political history of the art through the intricate frescoes left behind on its walls and the themes used by the artisans of the time.

Keywords: frescoes; heritage; preservation; Sikh; art

1. Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan stands on soil that has seen the immense glory and majesty of many powerful empires of the past. Grand relics of these great empires lay scattered all across Pakistan – in small cities and large – in the form of palaces, forts, tombs, *havelis*², etc. Unfortunately, many great treasures of the past have completely collapsed and are lost forever. The fault lies with careless handling, a lack of preservation, and a severe shortage of funds and hands willing to undertake any sort of restoration work on these monuments. Most of the ones that remain have been reduced to becoming favorite haunts of students playing truant from school, handful of picnicking families and the occasional tourist.

One such relic of the past is the Sheikhupura Fort, located in the small city of Sheikhupura, Punjab. Though lesser known than many of its larger and more imposing

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² Haveli: Term used for a private mansion in India & Pakistan, usually containing a courtyard, often with a fountain in the center.

cousins, it is nonetheless an intriguing piece of the past that echoes the grandeur of the great Mughal and Sikh rulers of Punjab. Today, it lies deserted and dilapidated in the heart of the bustling city – closed to the public and on the verge of totally collapse. Unknown to the general public, even those who live in the shadows of the Fort itself, exist the scattered remains of rich and elaborate fresco artwork dating back to the Sikh period. Though much of the fresco work has been damaged beyond recovery now, enough remains to allow a glimpse into the society and culture that existed in Sheikhupura under Sikh rule.

2. History_of_the_Sheikhupura_Fort

The Sheikhupura Fort has stood tall under many different patrons and has a rich history.

2.1 Mughals

The town of Sheikhupura, located some 35 kilometres north-west of Lahore, was founded by Jahangir during the reign of Akbar. The Fort stands nearly merged with the houses of the town. It stands on level but artificially made ground, nearly 3.5 metres above the swampy depressions skirting the site on the western, southern, and eastern sides, which in the remote past might have been the course of some meandering stream. Most of what we know about Sheikhupura fort comes from the information recorded in *Tuzuk-e-Jehangiri*³, in which it was noted that the construction of a "strong fortress" was an essential part of the plan for developing a royal hunting resort in the town. Jahangir assigned this task to Sikander Moeen on his visit to the Hiran Minar ⁴during 1607 – the second year of his reign.⁵

2.2 Sikhs

When Mughal rule was at a decline, chaos and disorder prevailed in the land. In an atmosphere of war and bloodshed, Ranjit Singh came to power as a result of strategic planning and well-organized political movement.⁶ Under his hand, agricultural production saw an increase that was paralleled only by an increase in the manufacturing and volume of trade. Cities and towns expanded with the expansion of the Maharaja's dominion. The sociopolitical situation created by the establishment of a large state was conducive to new

⁵ Tariq Masud. History & Archaeology of Sheikhupura District, p. 2

³ Tuzk-i-Jahangiri: Autobiography of Mughal Emperor Noor-ud-Din Muhammad Jahangir (1569 – 1609)

⁴ Hiran Minar: Literally, minaret of the antelope.

⁶ Khuswant Singh. A History of Sikhs – Volume 1. (New Delhi 1999). P. 233-237

developments of great cultural significance. New styles of painting and architecture emerged as a result of patronage by rulers and nobles.⁷

In 1808, Ranjit Singh took over the Fort without meeting any resistance from the Sikh lords who had taken over it. Maharaja Ranjit bestowed it as $jagir^8$ on his queen Raj Kauran, commonly known as Rani Nikayan, mother of the crown prince Kharak Singh. The queen, after falling from Maharaja's favour, lived here up to her last day. She is also credited with building a palace here.

2.3 British & Post Independence

After the Sikhs, the British used the Fort for a brief interval as a prison to encamp Maharaja's last queen, Mai Jindan. It was then used as the administrative headquarters of the Gujranwala district from 1849 to 1851. Following independence from the British in 1947, it was largely used by encroachers and squatters until it finally came to the possession of the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Pakistan. In 1964, the Fort was declared a Protected Monument via Notification No. F. 5-1/63-A&M dated 11th April 1967 in category I for its proper preservation and maintenance. The total protected area of the Fort by Department of Archaeology & Museums is 64 *Kanal*⁹ and 13 *Marlas*. ¹⁰

3. Ornamental program of the fort

3.1 Development_of_the_Sikh_artistic_tradition

Diverse ethnic groups came together in Punjab, joining ideas, cultures and even bloodlines through interracial marriages over a period of many centuries. The composite culture of the region manifested itself in the art that adorned the walls of shrines, houses, palaces and forts. It can be said that the 15th century reformation brought by Guru Nanak and the Sikh belief system, synthesized the deepest truths of the then quarrelling religions Hinduism and Islam. As a result, new folk energies were born in art as artists and craftsmen of

⁹ *Kanal:* A kanal is a unit of area, equivalent to 505.857 square meters or one-eighth of an acre. It is used in parts of northern India and in Pakistan.

⁷ J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*. (Wltshire 1990), p. 111

⁸ Jagir: A type of feudal land grant in South Asia.

Marla: The marla is a traditional unit of area that was used in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, equal to 160th of an acre.

¹⁰ From the records of the Punjab Directorate of Archaeology

different faiths merged ideas.¹¹ Each emerging ruler in the region absorbed the culture and tradition of his predecessor, assimilated them into his own, and produced a new form and style that was instantly recognizable and at the same time highly unique. The Mughals did this with existing folk techniques, and in turn, the Sikhs transformed the style to their own when the practice of wall painting soared under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's patronage.

The increased popularity of wall-paintings in 19th century Punjab makes it reasonable to suggest that it was no longer exclusively for the royal and the elite, but was gaining influence among the common folk as well.

Rani Nikayan, the patron of the Sikh *haveli* at the Sheikhupura Fort was a great patron of the arts. The Fort was under her command and the living quarters were all heavily adorned with floral, pictorial and decorative imagery.

3.2 Frescoes_within_the_fort

Upon entering the first *haveli*, the focus immediately lands on the copious amounts of natural imagery present in every corner. Birds of a wide range of species are depicted all over the walls. Furthermore, these birds are depicted in a variety of positions – some feeding, some stationary, some in flight. Plate 1 depicts a fresco of birds from this section of the haveli.

This section of the *haveli* contains multiple panels, each containing a single figure within. These figures are not so much a part of any narrative or composition, as they are a depiction of the people of the time – in terms of dress, behaviour and ornamentation. Plate 2 shows the profile view of a man depicted as though captured mid-stride. Dressed in loose pants, a flowing *kameez*¹² cinched at the waist with a belt and curved *khussas*¹³, the man captures the essence of the Punjabi man of that time period. The sword at his waist may mark him as a soldier. Though this fresco is extensively damaged, the intricacy in painting his facial features is still recognizable in the pointed nose and elaborate eye under a finely arched eyebrow. Damage to the fresco prevents one from being certain, but the position of the fingers of his raised right hand suggest he may have been depicted holding the stem of a flower. This portrays a man from a society that cherished military strength as much as it appreciated cultural sensitivity. It reveals the brute, strong side of the public image of a Punjabi man, as well as the softer, gentler aura of his private life.

¹² Kameez: A long shirt or tunic – part of a traditional outfit worn by both men and women in South Asia.

¹¹ Kanwarjit Singh Kang, Wall Paintings of Punjab & Haryana, (Delhi 1985), p. i

¹³ *Khussas:* South Asian handcrafted footwear, usually made from vegetable-tanned leather with a leather or textile upper section, and embellished with beads, bells, embroidery etc.

The female figures present in frescoes on this level are mostly standing in a similar tribhanga¹⁴ posture – forming an S-shaped posture with their bodies (See Plate 3). The raised arm is bent at the elbow while the extended leg is bent at the knee to complete the S-shape. This is an example of a fresco depicting "salabhanjika"¹⁵. Salabhanjika is the term for a style of painting, drawing or sculpting, where a woman is depicted standing next to, or in front of, a large tree – usually the sala tree, which is native to the subcontinent. The woman in a salabhanjika pose is usually stylized and meant to portray feminine grace. The salabhanjika concept comes from ancient symbolism which connects the young feminine form with plants as a sign of fertility.

From here, the location shifts to the upper storey of the *haveli*. Initially rising up to a height of at least four storeys, today only two storeys and a part of the basement remain intact. The upper storey is designed in a manner similar to the ground floor, with an open space looking down onto the central room of the level below.

This level of the *haveli* contains many depictions of narratives. Plate 4 depicts one man riding a horse, while four other similarly garb men rally around him. All five men are dressed in *chooridar* style trousers and a flowing *kameez*, cinched with a scarf around the waist, was well as turbans on their head. The style of hair and beard indicate that these are Sikh figures. The figure seated on the horse is the central focus of the fresco. His turban is more elaborate than the other four men. One of the men on foot is holding a *chauri* towards the horsed figure. Most likely, it is a representation of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind Singh (1595 - 1694) rallying his followers to take up arms. This would be so because of the presence of a hawk or falcon on the Guru's arm and a hunting dog on the ground, which are trademarks of the Guru's fondness for hunting. The four attendants are carrying a flag and all have swords as they march alongside the Guru.

Plate 5 is a depiction of the Radha-Krishna tale – assimilated into the Punjabi culture. Krishna, son of Devaki is briefly mentioned in the 'Chandogya Upanishad' of 500 B.C. In

¹⁴ *Tribhanga:* A tri-bent standing position or stance used in traditional Indian painting, sculpture, and dance. It literally means a three-part break, consisting of three bends in the body; at the neck, waist and knee, hence the body is oppositely curved at waist and neck which gives it a gentle "S" shape.

¹⁵ Salabhanjika: The sculpture of a woman, displaying stylized feminine features, standing near a tree or grasping a branch.

¹⁶ Chandogya Upanishad: Upanishads are a collection of philosophical texts which form the theoretical basis for the Hindu religion. Chandogya Upanishad is one of the oldest of these, most likely dating to the Brahmana period of Vedic Sanskrit (8th to 7th BCE).

the 'Mahabharta¹⁷', he is a prominent figure, while in 'Bhagavad Gita', he puts forward the doctrine of bhakti¹⁸, or loving devotion to him as a means of salvation.¹⁹ The central focus of the fresco is immediately Krishna as he is not only painted right in the centre but also is the largest figure in the frame. His skin is a dark grey hue – which may have once been blue, now ruined due to discolouration. Krishna is typically depicted as a blue-skinned deity. He is draped in a yellow-orange coloured outfit and a three-pronged crown sits on his head. Jewellery adorns his ears, neck and arms. Seated on his lap is the smaller, submissive figure of his consort Radha. Dressed in red and draped in a green dupatta, her figure is smaller in size than Krishna's. Furthermore, she is shown holding her hands up to him, almost in supplication. All these elements combine to present her as a submissive, subordinate figure in front of Krishna. Surrounding them are two women on either side, dressed in yellow dresses with red dupattas. Chauris are borne over both, indicating that though Krishna is more powerful, both seated entities are important figures. The scene appears to be an outdoor one, with trees and clouds shown in the background. Here it is significant to note that though the design repertory of the artists of the Fort was seemingly limitless, their colour palette was somewhat limited. The same few shades of red, yellow and orange show up in several of the intact frescoes where colours are clearly visible.

Plate 6 is in very bad condition, with much of the central portion of the fresco having been scraped away. A white balustrade and a red tent indicate the possibility of this being a royal scene. In the centre, two figures are shown reclining on a *charpai*, against bolsters. The use of bolsters was another element typically added to indicate high status. A figure standing beside the *charpai* is extending a *chauri* over the head of the figure on the left to reach the reclining figure on the right. This indicates that the figure on the right is the most important figure in the frame. Though the figure's face is no longer discernible, the attire and jewellery appear to be lavish. The seated figure on the left appears to be listening to the figure on the right in a position of rapt attention. These factors indicate that it is possible that the reclining figure on the right is Rani Nikayan herself. It was common for patrons to commission paintings of herself and it stands to reason that the proud, strong and powerful patron would enjoy a depiction of her own life in her *haveli*.

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¹⁷ *Mahabharta*: One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the *Ramayana*. Besides its epic narrative of the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the *Kauravas* and the *Pandava* princes, the *Mahabharata* contains much philosophical and devotional material, such as a discussion of the four "goals of life".

¹⁸ *Bhakti*: Religious devotion as a means of salvation, in the form of active involvement of a devotee in worship of the divine.

¹⁹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Myths of Hindus & Buddhists. (New York 1967), p. 217

From here onwards, the focus shifts to the second *haveli* of the Sheikupura Fort. This *haveli* is in a far more fragile state than the first one, with wide cracks and crevasses appearing on the floor and in the walls and ceilings. Most of the fresco work is lost entirely, with a small section in the eastern corner of the second floor still remaining intact.

Plate 7 is a typical depiction of a secular scene from a traditional folklore. The fresco shows a man and a woman dressed in loose flowing garb. The man is wearing a hat instead of a turban, while his hair appears to be long and curling. This indicates that he is shown to be a Muslim figure rather than a Sikh. The woman is standing in front of him with her head bent slightly forward, indicating submission to him. She is holding up one arm, around which his hand is clasped – indicating the possibility of love and affection. It is interesting to note that aside from the usual jewellery adorning the woman, her *dupatta* is green in colour with a dotted pattern and a bold border at the base. The attention to detail is not only astounding, but also showcases the prevalent fashion trends at the time. This is likely to be a depiction from a traditional folklore of star-crossed lovers. It is likely that they are Heer Ranjha, as scenes from Sohni Mahiwal usually contain an element of water in them.

Plate 8 is one of the most important frescoes of any Sikh building – a depiction of Guru Nanak. The fresco contains all elements typically found in imagery of the Guru. He sits in the centre of the frame with a *chadar*²⁰ draped across one shoulder, a *seli*²¹ or cord worn around the neck by beggars and a *bairagan*²² or yogi's crutch just behind him. The *bairagan* is used to rest the hand on whilst meditating. The Guru is shown seated on a red rug under a tree. On his side sits his Muslim companion, Mardana, holding a *rabab*²³. Mardana was a Muslim of the *Marasi*²⁴ caste who used to accompany the Guru on his travels everywhere. He held the Guru in great esteem but never converted to Sikhism. When they used to sit together, Guru Nanak would recite his teachings while Maradana would accompany him with his music. In typical Guru Nanak iconography, the Hindu companion Bala is also depicted, usually hoding a *chauri*. However, he is not apparent in this fresco, perhaps owing to the damaged edges of the frame. Surrounding Mardana and the Guru are devotees with their heads bowed and hands clasped together in reverence.

Plate 9 is likely to be a scene taken from the activities of the Sheikhupura Fort itself. It shows a lady seated inside a chamber. We can see her through the windows. Her attendants

²⁰ Chadar: A large, rectangular cloth used as a covering for the head or for wrapping around the upper body by both men and women of the subcontinent.

²³ *Rabab*: A stringed instrument

²¹ Seli: Cord worn around the neck by beggars.

²² Bairagan: Yogi's crutch

²⁴ Marasi: A Muslim caste of South Asia

gather around her, holding a *chauri* over her head. This is likely to be Rani Nikayan herself. Approaching her chamber are three men who are likely to be royal emissaries, while a fourth seated in a doorway on the left side of the frame is a *diwarapala*²⁵ of sorts. This scene shows the everyday workings of the Fort that the Rani was in charge of. It shows her power and status as she is the one dealing with royal emissaries, showing that women had a strong standing in Sikh society and were not the meek submissive creatures depicted in folk and mythic imagery.

3.2.1 Photos_of_the_art

Plate 1 Plate 2



Plate 3





Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



 $^{^{25}}$ Diwarapala: A door or gate guardian often portrayed as warrior or fearsome giant, usually armed with a weapon.

4. Conclusion

The most important revelation of the frescoes of the Sheikhupura Fort is the secularization of religious themes that is prevalent in much of the work. These frescoes served a purpose much more than mere decoration. Though obviously intended to be aesthetically appealing, they are also instrumental in capturing the astonishing blend of cultures, traditions and religions that was taking place at the time between the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. Furthermore, the frescoes show how this was an open, public culture because the stories they reveal cover everything from folklore to religious tales to the everyday working of the Rani's court. Alongside this, care has been taken to inject a strong Punjabi element into each fresco through the clever use and attention to detail of the attire and accessories of the figures in the frescoes. This is evident even in frescoes depicting religious imagery. Thus the artwork of the Fort is an important historical tool to better understand the workings of early 19th century Sheikhupura.

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