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Rejuvenation of Sikh Heritage – Case of Maharaja Sher Singh Complex in Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract

This research article is an effort to rejuvenate Sikh heritage in Lahore being a memorial place for a brutal incident occurred with a member of royal Sikh family. Maharaja Sher Singh was second son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and fourth Maharaja of the Sikh empire. He was killed with his younger son, Kanwar Partab Singh in the Baradari, a place used by him as a summer palace. The Samadhies of Maharaja Sher Singh and his young prince were constructed in the close vicinity. The site was also known as a sacred place in relation to a 17th century saint, Hazrat Shah BilawalQadri. The baradari of Sher Singh is a protected monument under the Antiquity Act 1975 and Punjab Special Premises Ordinance 1985. The whole complex was burnt by a crowd gathered in retaliation for deconstruction of Babri Mosque in India in 1992 and the heritage site was conserved in 2012. Data has been collected from archaeology department and past experiences of the author. Visual surveys and interviews have also been conducted and concluded that there is a dire need to transform it as a history museum or a tourist place for Sikh pilgrimage through adaptive reuse.

Keywords: Baradari of Sher Singh, Rejuvenate, Samadhi of Sher Singh, Tomb of Shah Bilawal, Protected Monument

Introduction

Maharaja Sher Singh Complex comprised of three historic monuments, Baradari of Sher Singh, Samadhi of Sher Singh, his son and his two wives and Shrine of Hazrat Shah BilawalQadri. The place is associated with a memory of brutal incident occurred with the royal family members of Sikh Empire. Sher Singh was second son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and fourth Maharaja of Sikh Empire. His reign started in January 18, 1840 and ended in September 15, 1843 through his assault by his army officers. The place, where he was shot by gun, was a baradari used by Maharaja Sher Singh as summer palace and known as Baradari of Sher Singh. The place was also frequently visited by the followers of a Sufi saint, Hazrat Shah Bilawal/Shah Bilor Qadri, of 17th century who selected this site near river Ravi to develop it as his Khanqa (monastery). Therefore, the site is also known as Baradari of Shah Bilawal(Latif, 1994).



Figure 1 Baradari of Maharaja Sher Singh after conservation; Source: (Qureshi, 2012)

After the death of Sher Singh, his Rani Randhavi Singh and her family constructed their Samadhies in the close vicinity of the Baradari, near the tomb of Hazrat Shah BilawalQadri. After the Sikh empire, the whole complex was left at the mercy of doom and devil, and the complex converted into ruins with the passage of time. In the opinion of archaeological experts, the heritage site is not significant in terms of architectural elements but the site is significant with reference to an incident

associated with the murder of royal family members. The bodies of Maharaja Sher Singh and his twelve years old son Kanwar Prataab Singh were cremated over here. With the two deceased persons, third cremated wife of Sher Singh who burnt alive for the ritual of sati. The ashes of three cremated were placed in a room and their burial places were covered with a cloth under one domical structure. After the death of Rani Randhavi, her Samadhi was also constructed near the Samadhi of three Sher Singh. The complex is significant as the memorial of that fatal incident but remained un-noticed and ignored for a long period of time (K. L. Hindi, 1882).

The complex met with another incident in 1992 on the occasion when Babri Mosque was damaged. The annoyed crowd attacked on the complex and damaged the historic monument by the act of revenge. The Samadhi were burnt by the angry mobs in reaction. The structure of Baradari was ruined and the complex was left deserted for a long time. After the visit of Sikh pilgrims, the attention was drawn to conserve the Baradari Complex and the work was completed under the Umbrella of Department of Archaeology of Punjab in 2012 and conservation was completed within two years with an additional component which is Park constructed by Parks and Horticulture Department. The damaged parts of the Samadhi were reconstructed as a sacred place of Sikh community (Qureshi, 2012).

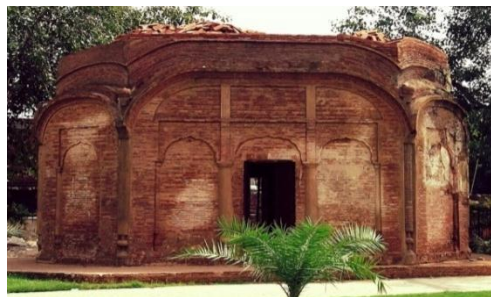


Figure 2 Samadhi of Maharaja Sher (Source: Google)

After the conservation works, the Baradari has been locked and again left for deterioration. The recent construction work with the addition of a Park cannot revive the original historic setting. There is a need to re-plan the activities at the complex to make it alive with the dynamic functions such as tourist's visits and visits of pilgrims coming from abroad. One day trips can be managed and temporary structure can be developed as a selling point of Sikh souvenirs.

Review of Literature

Historical Backgrounds

Maharaja Sher Singh was born in 1805 into a Sikh family of Sukerchakia misldars in Gujranwala. At that time, Sikh rule was under the umbrella of confederate Sarbat Khalsa system and Afghans. The area was divided into factions known as misls. He was the second son of first Sikh Maharaja of Punjab. The crown of the Sikh empire was handed over to Maharaja Kharak Singh, the elder son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After few months, he was imprisoned by his son Kanwar Naunehal Singh who himself met with an accident on the day of wearing his crown. He died at the spot and Sikh empire became the bone of contention between mother of Naunehal Singh and Sher Singh (Latif, 1994).



Figure 3 Maharaja Sher Singh (Source: Google)

After negotiations and discussion with opposite group, Sher Singh ascended the throne on January 20, 1841. His short reign was full of prosperity and security. He announced peace on the beat of drum. He married with Rani Dukno, the most beautiful lady of that time. After coronation, Rani

Chand Kaur, mother of Naunehal Singh was allowed to move from Lahore Fort. Her companion, Gulab Singh Dogra had stolen the entire treasury and shifted it to Jammu with Rani Chand Kaur. There is no money in the treasury of State and Sher Singh was deprived of all the wealth. With empty hands, he was not able to give rewards to his supports and ultimately, a chaos had finished all the securities (Qureshi, 2012).

Sher Singh was a person famous for his nobility for the betterment of his people. He was a beautiful man and was found of perishable jewels with royal cloths. In 1820, he was granted the privilege of being seated in the Darbar and received civil and military honors. He performed the duties of Governor of Kashmir from 1831 to 1834 and he was also commander of the army that captured Peshawar from Afghans. He ruled for two and a half years but his improvements regarding existing systems of governance (Tribune, 1922).

Murder of Sher Singh with his son

On September 15, 1843, Sher Singh was brutally killed by the Ajit Singh Sandhianwala who deceived his Raja by inviting him army troops and during the ceremony of inspection, he reached to hold a new shotgun and pulled the trigger. Ajit Singh Sandhianwala was remained prime minister first to Ranjit Singh, then Naunehal Singh, then Chand Kaur. Chand Kaur claimed reign of Sikh empire due to the expected child of Naunehal Child but wife of Naunehal Chand remained Childless. Sandhianwala murdered Sher Singh and then his Wazir Dhiyan Singh. In the whole “treachery”, 12 years old son of Sher Singh was also murdered by Lehna Singh Sandhianwala. The Baradari which was being used as summer palace and artillery practices became the death place of Maharaja Sher Singh, his family and his supporters who also died with him on that unforgettable day of the history.

After the death of Ranjit Singh, his inheritors shed the blood of their beloved ones to hold the royal throne. Kharak Singh was imprisoned by his son Maharaja Naunehal Singh and Naunehal Singh was fell prey by the anger of god due to the injustice which he continued with his father. On the day of his coronation, he was died by an accident. Both of them created no good example for their ancestors to be crowned. Sher Singh also became the prey of the opposite group and lost his life.

Shrine of Shah Bilawal/ Shah BilorQadri

Syed Shah BilawalQadri in 1636 at the age of seventy years became the devotee of Hazrat Shams-ud-din Qadri with the orders of his father. Under his guidance, he spent many years in seclusion, saying prayers and reciting the Holy Quran. He was man of spiritual powers and many miracles are related with spiritual powers. At his early age of seven. He was informed about the death of his friend but he had risen from his bed and started to play due to the miracle of the saint. One of his miracle was to big rain to dry lands and he had the spiritual powers to pour out coins from the container to help the needy (Latif, 1994).

Shah BilawalQadri had decided to establish his Khanqahon the bank of river Ravi. The site was visited by his followers and a mosque was also constructed adjacent to the Khanqah in the middle of a garden with flowering and fruit trees. A water tank was also constructed around which qaries were used to recite Quran. A well was also there at site for drinking water. Now it is adjacent Baradari of Sher Singh. Due to the changing course of the river, part of the shrine also swept away and there was a threat to take the body to the river. In the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was one of the devotee of the saint, Fakir Azizuddin was appointed to shift the body of the saint to more suitable location for the safety of dead body (K. L. Hindi, 1882)



Figure 4 Shrine of Shah Bilawal / Shah BilorQadri(Source: Author)

According to KannahiyaLal, when the coffin was opened to shift the body, amazingly and miraculously, after two hundred years, the body was in its original condition, and no signs of deterioration could be seen. Number of Muslims prayed his namaz-e-janaza and took him to a new place in the close vicinity of Shrine of Ghorey Shah where he is taking eternal rest, at present. The

new shrine is located in the east of Raja Dina NathBagh. The saint is also famous as the saint with two shrines. At present, the place is a memorial of the miracles of the saint and a mosque is still located in between the Baradari and Samadhies of Sher Singh.

Research Methodology

The site is significant due to a memory of a fatal incident of Sikh ruling members, and afterwards, construction of Samadhies of these murdered people. It is also witnessed the tales of miracles of a sufi saint Hazrat Shah BilawalQadri. The area was center of practices of Sikh army troops due to its location as it was located on the bank of river Ravi (older course). The research has been conducted on the basis of data-collection and site visits. Data has been collected from the department of Archaeology and personal visits of the author in the previous time period. The site has been visited in 2010 by the author for the preparation of an academic report (unpublished work) and records of the status of the complex were used for this research. Maps of the site before and after the conservation have been downloaded by using Google Earth Pro. Published Reports from the Department of Archaeology has added the historical background and cultural significance of the site. Reports published in “The Express Tribune” have been used to draw the attention of authorities regarding the interest of minorities to safeguard their heritage sites.

Case Study: Maharaja Sher Singh Complex

On the bank of river Ravi, Sher Singh Baradari was also known as Baradari of Shah Bilawal as the Khanqa of Shah Bilawal was already located at this site, in the garden of Shah Bilawal during 17th century. After the death of saint, his shrine was constructed at the same place with a huge domical structure. Ranjit Singh visited the shrine of the saint for his blessings frequently. A baradari was constructed in the close vicinity of the shrine in 1840 which was, later on, used by the Maharaja Sher Singh as summer palace and it was also used by his troops for parade and practices. When Maharaja Sher Singh was brutally murdered with his son, their Samadhies were also constructed at the place where he was killed by his General SardarAjit Singh SindhanWalia. He invited him to inspect a gun and pulled his trigger when Maharaja was about to hold the gun. On hearing the sound of gun, Lehna Singh SindhanWalia killed his twelve years old son, KunwarPartab Singh at the same time. With two of them, one of his Ranies also had burnt alive to execute a ritual “Sati”. Samadhies of three members of royal family by Rani Randhavi and her family member Bakhshish Ram. After the death of Rani Randhavi in 1927and Rani Partaabkaur in 1914, there Samadhies were also constructed close to the Samadhi of Sher Singh. The Samadhies of SardarBhudhaSingh and his brother Bhor Singh (murdered with Raja) with Rani of SardarBhudha Singh who was also burnt alive. Another Samadhi was of his servant (khidmatgar) named Nika Singh, seventeen years old, was also there at site. The summer palace of Sher Singh transformed in the graveyard of Sikh Samadhies. A Sikh boy named Nika Singh was appointed as caretaker of Samadhies with a salary of hundred rupees annually. Nika Singh and his moth had taken care of all the Samadhies till his death (K. L. Hindi, 1882).

Location

The historical Baradari of Sher Singh is located in the east of China Scheme at Kot Khawaja Saeed (also called as KhojeSae by the native residents) in Southern Lahore.



Figure 5 Site plan (Google) of Sher Singh Complex

(before conservation)

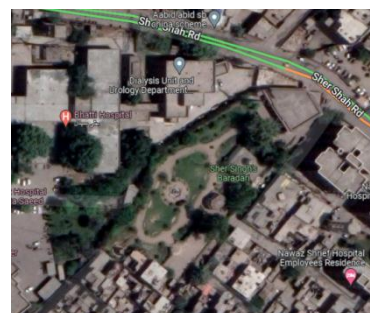


Figure 6 Site Plan (Google) of Sher Singh

(After conservation)

The site other than built area was a vast plain area used by the Sher Singh to inspect the army parade and practices. Maps of the site have been taken by the Google earth pro. There is a mud storm

all around the complex and it was devastated place with the ruined structures, inhibited by the druggists and beggars.

Architectural & Historical Significance

Baradari of Sher Singh has been added in list of Protected monuments according to Antiquity Act 1975 and Punjab Special Premises Ordinance 1985. In the opinion of experts, historical site is not very significant in terms of architectural characteristics but it is historically significant in the memory of a brutal incident and presence of Samadhies of Maharaja Sher Singh and his family members. Secondly, it was also a memorial place for being considered as sacred area due to the presence of body of a sufi saint of 17th century (Muslims, Hindus and minorities were his followers). Thirdly, it was used as a summer palace, being located on the bank of river Ravi and also utilized by army forces of Sher Singh as he was murdered during an inspection of weapons (Latif, 1994).

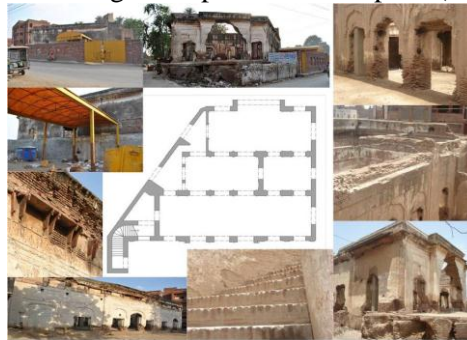


Figure 7 Spatial Analysis of Baradari of Sher Singh

(Image drawn by Timothy M Ciccone based on photographs. Approximate and not to scale.)
(Modified by Author)

Retaliation attack on heritage Site

After the unpleasant incident of Babri Mosque in 1992, the angry and annoyed crowd attacked the Sikh heritage site as an act of retaliation. The Samadhies of Sher Singh were damaged and the roof of it was half broken, the Samadhi of Rani Randhavi (as per an inscription written on the face of door) was also damaged and the roof of it also has been broken down. Rest of Samadhies was also finished away during the attack of the annoyed mob.

The Baradari was also attacked badly and all of its fresco work on the façade was vanished, the building got structural cracks with demolishing of its parts during this riot. Doors were removed and the building was ruined to take the revenge.

Status of Complex before Conservation



Figure 8 (a,b) Samadhies of Sher Singh & Rani Randhavi (Source: Author)

River Ravi had changed its course taking all the pleasant environment of the heritage site. After the attack of the angry crowd, complex had lost all its built structures partially, Samadhies were in the condition of ruin as the domical structure on the cremated bodies of Sher Singh and his wife's Samadhi have been cut in half. Some experts and art lovers had painted red color of the Samadhies.



Figure 9 Images of Complex before conservation

Baradari was without fresco work and wooden doors. Structural cracks were started to damage the structure of the building. The arches were in a very bad condition and may collapse at any time. Federal Department of Archaeology Department of Archaeology had constructed two pillars in the middle of the arch to save the failure of the structure of Baradari and to prevent the baradari from collapsing. The roof of the Baradari has been demolished and was become part of debris. At various places, lime plaster is in a poor condition and there are visible cracks in the layer of plaster. Red sand stone elements, especially brackets had been stolen. Boundary wall had also been finished by the residents in the neighborhood for bricks. The whole structure of Baradari has been transformed into a garbage dump as the Solid Waste Management Department has built a waste enclosure in one of the corner of Baradari after demolishing part of it. The heritage site was a dumping ground as the residents of the area throw garbage inside the baradari. Shrine of Hazrat Shah Bilawal was also been deserted as the sacred body has been shifted to a new place. However, followers of the saint had marked symbols to represent shrine. Now mosque is in operation.

Conservation of Sher Singh Complex

According to the Director of the Archaeology Department, Muhammad Afzal Khan, the site experienced immense devastation at the time of Indo-Pak partition and the destruction faced at the time of retaliation, the complex became center of garbage and part of it was occupied by the Waste Management Company. In 2011, Provincial government of Punjab poured attention towards the conservation of heritage site and a conservation Plan has been prepared to restore the whole complex maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the historically sacred site of Sikh Clan. Official said that preservation of Baradari was done on the request of City District Government of Lahore with the approved budget of Rs 21.84 million for this purpose. The work has been completed within the period of two years (Dawn, 2011).

- The walls, roofs and gates of Baradari were repaired.
- The lawn in front of Baradari has been converted into a beautiful public park by the Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA).
- The boundary wall with metal railing on all four sides of the baradari complex has been constructed to protect the place from encroachers, outsiders and miscreants.
- The restoration includes addition of Brick tile masonry, lime plaster, glaze lime plaster, fresco painting in floral designs and geometric patterns and lime terracing.
- The wooden doors, windows and wooden ceiling have been reconstructed.
- Tiles on the edges of the floors have been another addition.
- Vaulted roof of the Samadhi of Sher Singh has been reconstructed.
- Cleaning and repair of the old well used in the period of Sufi saint Shah BilawalQadri.
- The well along the baradari was covered with metal cover to avoid any accident but it was kept restored for the study of the future generations.

At present, park has been opened for the nearby people for morning and evening walks and visiting people has lost chance to enjoy the beauty of the baradari. (Tribune, 1922).

Significance & Delimitation

The selected site is significant and should be protected from threats. Weather agents or human vandals. The greatest impacts faced by the complex was human crowd which couldn't be controlled by the authorities and the whole complex (Baradari & Samadhies) were broken down by the angry mob during a retaliation against the activities in India for Babri Mosque. The site is a sacred place for Sikh community and it must be reactivated by inviting the tourists to come and explore their historic monument and the historical background associated with it.

Results & Discussions

Heritage site was importance due to its location, being on the bank of River Ravi and also been utilized by the Sikh Maharaja as a summer palace and also been used for the construction of Samadhies of royal members of Sikhs. All the evidences proves that the site has experienced the warm and cool winds of the time and tried to survive in spite of too many hazards of life. Various efforts has been done to protect the heritage site both National and Provincial authorities maintaining the historical significance and importance. It was a summer palace and then converted into the place of Samadhies. Again with the passage of time, while doing conservation, only Samadhi of Sher Singh could be restored due to demolition of Samadhies of rest of the people. Now Samadhi of Rani Randhavi has also been vanished. The remaining structures Baradari, Samadhi of Sher Singh and

Mosque. Rest of the area has been transformed in park used by the people as recreation place. But people are not very much inclined to visit this place being resting place of Sikh maharaja.

Conclusions & Recommendations

During the Sikh reign, Sikh Shrines or Samadhies were significant features of Sikh legacy, other than Sikh Gurdwaras, Havelies, mansions, Bhajan Mehal, sacred pond and baradaries. Jhanda Sahib and thara was also part of the Sikh heritage architectural elements. They decorated their buildings with the pictorials of their gurus and rituals. They also used floral designs and fresco paintings. They used multifoil arches and cupolas with chatries. Sikh rulers play a significant role to define the historical landscape of Lahore.

The selected Baradari of Sher Singh has few parts where one can see the fresco work and floral design can be assessed to complete the rest of the façade. There were traces of red sandstone brackets but they have been lost or destroyed by the people. The complex was influenced by the weather impacts and human vandalism.

Ranjit Singh did unforgettable effort to establish a magnificent empire. After Amritsar, Lahore is the second place showing the Sikh Legacies. Sher Singh was entitled as Maharaja after the death of his nephew Naunehal Singh. He remained in rule only for two years and these were spent to settle the dust of rebellions against him by his step mother. Therefore, there is no significant architectural contribution can be seen during his period. After his assassination, the selected site got historical significance. Department of Archaeology restored the historical site and locked its doors to rise the step towards declination. Static sites cannot be saved for a longer period. There is no attraction for the people, other than a park which was also deserted.

There is a dire need to generate activities to invite people to spend their precious time to make the site alive. Baradari can be used for the tourist activities by converting it as Sikh Heritage museum or other activities can be generated such as development of a café or it can be used for art competitions. The locked doors will again deteriorate heritage site which already had been neglected for a long time period.

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