

DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN GEMS OF SOPORE, KASHMIR: UNCOVERING THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MEERAS MAHAL

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Abstract

Sopore, Kashmir is known for its natural beauty, but the historical significance of its cultural heritage is often overlooked. Meeraz Mahal is considered a significant cultural heritage site and is an important tourist attraction in Sopore. This paper examines the hidden gem of Sopore, Meeraz Mahal, and its importance in the cultural history of the region. Through a combination of archival research and fieldwork, this study delves into the architectural features and artistic elements of the palace. Furthermore, it explores the social and political context in which Meeraz Mahal was built and how it has been preserved over time. This paper also highlighting the need for the preservation and restoration of historical sites like Meeraz Mahal and its contribution in promotion of tourism and cultural heritage in the region. The building has been featured in several documentaries and films.

Keywords: Meeraz Mahal, Sopore, cultural heritage and preservation.

Introduction

Atiqa Bano was a well-known Indian educator who worked to keep Kashmir's artistic and cultural traditions alive. She founded and organized the Meeras Mahal, a private historical and artistic museum in Sopore, Baramulla, Kashmir. Atiqa Bano was born in the year 1940 in the town of Sopore, which is located in the Kashmir North district of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Bano attended the Women's College in Srinagar for her undergraduate education and then went on to get two master's degrees in economics and Urdu after that. She then pursued a master's degree in teaching at Banasthali Vidyapeeth in Rajasthan. The year 1958 marked the beginning of Atiqa Bano's professional career as a teacher. Seven years later, she began her career as a school inspector. She was appointed chief educational officer in 1977. She was given the position of joint director of school education for the Jammu and Kashmir state government in 1994. In 1999, she gave up her position as the state director of libraries and research. Bano founded the Majlis-un-Nisa, a

group that promotes the welfare of women and assists them in becoming financially independent, in the 1970s. A component of this was the establishment of a sewing training facility for women in a building she owned that would eventually serve as the location of her museum of Kashmiri history. Now, the private museum can show more than 5000 objects. The museum has a large collection of old things, such as jewelry, coins, traditional clothing, and tools. When tourism is at its height in Kashmir, history buffs from all over the world, including locals, make it a point to visit Meeras Mahal so they may educate themselves on the region's illustrious past

Atiqa Bano



Aim for Creating Museum

Bano's job as a school inspector required her to travel to several locations around the state. She considered starting a museum after discovering Kashmir's richness of material culture. She started collecting historical and cultural artifacts once she retired, particularly antique texts and traditional clothing. She physically travels to remote areas of the Kashmir region to gather priceless artifacts, manuscripts, and other antiquities from individuals and families who were willing to offer some piece of the past for her museum. She first placed them in a run-down hostel structure that was a component of a school for teachers that her

family owned. She founded the cultural museum Meeras Mahal in 2001. She moved the collection to a building at Highland Colony, Sopore, as it expanded. By this point, a complete history of the development of the Kashmiri pheran (wedding trousseaus from both the Muslim and Pandit communities), pottery, and artifacts related to the weaving of Pashmina textiles were all part of it. It also included manuscripts written in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, as well as historical coins. First room of the archive she opened for visitors had manuscripts and handwritten copies of the Quran and Persian literature that belonged to her grandpa. Next, ten to twelve more rooms contained a precise arrangement of various artifacts. A 200-year-old Doodh Mich Waer (milk pot), hats, shoes, jewelry, a wedding trousseau, lanterns, Kangris, and clay pots, latticed windows traveling through time, rocks and fossils, stone utensils, tools, radio sets, and an installation of the childhood game of walnuts and compass are just a few of the items on display. The Meeras Mahal examines the material culture of common people in contrast to the Shri Pratap Singh Museum in Srinagar, which focused on the royal history and aristocratic art of Kashmir. The museum is still privately maintained since the state hasn't provided much assistance.

She opened the museum with the help of several friends and family members after she retired in 2001. The varied collection of artifacts, manuscripts, jewelry, and other antiquities at the museum has only grown over the last few years and now fills numerous shelves in a dozen rooms of her building, which she had converted into a museum. "A number of the clay pots and utensils that were used in former times may be seen here; they have been replaced by those used now. Nonetheless, Meeras Mahal has preserved their heritage. By seeing these artifacts, we may envision how basic that era was and how people independently discovered and developed. There are handloom machines for making clothing here, as well as rat traps, handcuffs, slippers made of clothing, and jute-based clothing to fight against the cold. More than 7,000 artifacts housed in the museum provide an anthropological perspective on the rich cultural legacy of the Kashmir region. The majority of the artifacts are things of everyday use that were typical sights in Kashmir up to the latter part of the twentieth century. The curator of Meeras Mahal said that the museum's goal is to conserve for future generations the steadily disappearing Kashmiri culture and history. Children nowadays don't know a lot about our history, culture, way of life, or how we evolved. The goal and intention of Meeras Mahal is to provide them with a picture of our past and to create at least one location where they may do so. Everything, including tiles, clothing, currency, cutlery, and more, was made by them alone. Via Meeras

Mahal, a lot of individuals, including authors, academics, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), students, and educators, are making excellent progress in preserving Kashmir's cultural diversity. The Meeras Mahal, built by Atiqa Bano, is located in Kashmir's Sopore town, often known as the "apple town of North Kashmir," some 45 kilometers from Srinagar. She put a lot of effort into gathering rare and unusual items in an effort to draw more and more visitors to this lovely museum that showcases Kashmir's illustrious history.



Jewellery, Traditional Caps and other items

Meeras Mahal Preservationists Work Together

The Help Foundation Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) made an effort to hold a community interaction at the Meeras Mahal Museum in Sopore. This was done to keep the essence of Meeras Mahal, which is a well-known historical building. People from all walks of life, notable representatives of civil society from the Baramulla area, as well as members of the Help Foundation and Adabi Markaz Kamraz, were present at the event. Terracotta, woodwork, wicker and grassware, metal (including jewelry), stone, and manuscripts were the kinds of objects that Atiqa Bano amassed the most of in her collections throughout her lifetime. The discussion's participants repeatedly emphasized how crucial it was to preserve the Heritage Mahal that Atiqa Bano had started. Muhammad Amin Bhat, the president of Adabi Markaz

Kamraz, says that the work that Atiqa Bano started must be kept up to the highest possible level. He stated that the next generation needs to have some kind of connection to our history, and the Meeras Mahal Museum is a treasure in that regard. M Saleem Beg, a former director general of tourism who is now the chairman of the Indian National Trust for Arts and Culture Heritage (INTACH) in Jammu and Kashmir, said that "it is our collective responsibility to safeguard our heritage," while he was encouraging participants to do their part in preserving our rich heritage. The Meeras Mahal Museum is home to a significant number of cultural artifacts. Beg emphasized the need for preserving and transmitting our culture to the next generation in order to safeguard our unique identity. It is our shared obligation to do so.

Professor Irshad Ahmad, who used to be the Dean of the North Campus at Kashmir University, praised Atiqa Bano's work and said that the best way to honor the woman who started the Meeras Mahal Museum would be to make sure that her legacy lives on. Irshad Ahmad said that just as in the rest of the country, students or visitors are encouraged to visit museums, so too do we need to inherit the same practice here in Kashmir so that our cultural heritage is preserved and immortalized. He said this while suggesting that the organizers remain connected with various educational institutions. Students and other visitors alike should be encouraged to spend time in museums like these so that they may feel more connected to our nation's history. He went on to say that the thriving communities all over the globe have a tendency to nurture their cultural history by making sure that the next generation is well informed in the legacy of the previous generations. Nighat Shafi, chairperson of the Help Foundation, made this statement while emphasizing the importance of preserving the Kashmiri language. She explained that this should be done not only by teaching it in schools but also by promoting its use in the home in order to counteract the influence of outside influences that have crept into our communities. Shafi mentioned in her speech that in addition to ensuring that the next generation is well-versed in our history, we need to practice and encourage them to speak it with clear intent rather than simply speaking words out of habit or convenience, so that the next generation can become well-versed in our history. The Meeras Mahal Museum is the only museum in addition to the government-run Sri Pratap Singh Museum that houses more pertinent artifacts that local communities can relate with the first-hand information of their immediate vernacular past. This information can be found in the museum's collection of first-hand accounts and documents.

The Switzerland-based ALIPH foundation has recently approved a modest grant for the rehabilitation of the Meeras Mahal Museum following the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2021. The grant was awarded based on a project proposal submitted by the Help Foundation Kashmir, with INTACH Kashmir serving as the knowledge partner and technical support agency. The objective of the agreement is to resurrect the museum and launch activities that do not necessitate the public's tangible presence in the museum. The plan calls for the creation of a virtual version of the museum as well as an expansion of the collection in order to make it more accessible to people all over the world. The local population in Sopore, Srinagar, and other parts of North Kashmir has actively engaged and volunteered in the process of producing the museum's exhibits, events, and inventories. The majority of those responsible for the upkeep and promotion of the museum do so on a pro bono basis. The only thing that would make them feel really satisfied is the success of their efforts to disseminate Kashmiri culture and ethnic values to a wider audience. Students from schools and colleges, as well as tourists and people from the community, go to the museum often because it is a great place to learn. The artifacts have significant historical and cultural significance because they illustrate a way of life and a pattern of living that was prevalent in Kashmir in times gone by. The local populace has been making use of the museum in order to gain knowledge of the way of life and the eras that our direct ancestors lived in.



Rich Kashmiri collection

Bano experienced a flood of memories brought on by the numerous artifacts, pieces of fabric, and antique stones that were kept at the museum. She would fondly recall how she obtained an antique item of jewelry or manuscript for the museum, who donated it, and where in the valley she discovered it. After that, she would go on to name a few of the priceless artifacts that she had kept safe at the museum. In the museum library portion of one room, there are about 200 antique and rare manuscripts that are bound well and written in Kashmiri, Urdu, and Persian. She has also maintained antique house tiles, some of which are more than three thousand years old. There is some jewelry, vintage clothing, and bridal headgear here that Kashmiri ladies used to wear approximately one hundred years ago. There are some fossils in the museum's collection that date back roughly one hundred thousand years. She even preserved some wooden doors and windows with old lattice work and placed them in the museum; they date back around 600 years. Additional things that she kept safe include some antique jewelry, ceramics, grass works, garments, woodcraft, old paintings, and patterns for calligraphy, stone crafts, and some black-and-white images of well-known people from Kashmir.



Wooden lattice in the museum

Government ignores

She had approached government officials multiple times, but they were not particularly interested in extending support or assistance towards better preserving and showcasing. Everything she has collected or done for the museum is the result of her own efforts and the encouragement of her coworkers and friends. She had even hired four to five individuals to help with museum maintenance. Hence, all of that priceless information about our past will be gone if we are unable to keep and properly preserve these manuscripts that she had meticulously gathered over the years. Bano did everything she could to gather and preserve all the artifacts she had accumulated over the years, despite all the restrictions and limited resources. She wished for the museum to be maintained even after her passing. She envisioned it as a massive archive for Kashmir's diverse cultural history. In the long run, we hope that all of these artifacts will contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of the rich, distinctive, and diverse culture of the people of Kashmir throughout the world.

Death Anniversary of Ateeqa Bano's

In partnership with INTACH and Adabi Markaz Kamraz (AMK), Meeras Mahal Sopore celebrated Meeras Day on Sunday, October 17, 2022, in honor of the deceased Atiqa Bano's fifth death anniversary. A vast array of supporters and campaigners for heritage and culture were present on this occasion, including INTACH Kashmir Convener Mohammad Salim Beg, Span Foundation New Delhi Chairperson Jaspreet Kour, Commissioner Secretary Jal Shakti Department Dr GN Itoo, Chairperson Municipal Council Sopore Masarat Kar, President Adabi Markaz Kamraz Mohammad Amin Bhat; Chairman of Civil Society Sopore Rashid Parveen, President of the Traders Federation, Executive members of Adabi Markaz Kamraz, and veteran writers and intellectuals Ghulam Nabi Aatish and Shahnaz Kamraz.

On this particular occasion, the participants emphasized how important it is to take measures to protect the Mahal Sopore. Ghulam Nabi Atish gave the keynote address on Meras Mahal and Atiqa Bano, while writer Dr. Maroof Shah presented an independent piece about Atiqa Bano's role in revitalizing cultural and heritage elements. The citizens of Sopore, Baramulla, and Bandipora, in a collective tribute to Atiqa Bano, spoke from the depths of their hearts and paid her opulent and magnificent homage. The event was deemed historic by Mohammad Salim Beg, convener of the Kashmir Chapter of INTACH,

who also requested support from the public in conserving its artifacts. The Meeras Mahal must be improved, and we, as members of our organization, must continue the late Atiq Bano's campaign to protect our culture and legacy. The residents of the area need to step up and have high hopes that, in the near future, visitors and individuals in the literary community will flock to visit this location. Mohammad Amin Bhat, president of Adabi Markaz Kamraz, gave the audience confidence that it will help preserve Kashmir's rich cultural history. Atiq Bano worked alone on it, so it is now our responsibility to preserve it, maintain it, and make it accessible online. Ghulam Nabi Atish, Shahnaz Rasheed, and Waheed Jeelani received the MEERAS Awards on this occasion in recognition of their exceptional contributions to the preservation of cultural heritage and creative services.

Conclusion

The discovery of Meeraz Mahal in Sopore, Kashmir has brought to light a hidden gem of historical significance. This ancient temple complex, with its intricate carvings and unique architecture, sheds light on the rich cultural heritage of the region. The restoration of the site not only provides valuable insights into the history of Kashmir, but also presents an opportunity for tourism and cultural exchange. The uncovering of Meeraz Mahal highlights the importance of preserving and protecting our cultural heritage for future generations. It is essential that efforts are made to safeguard such sites and promote their significance, so that they may continue to be appreciated and admired for years to come. Overall, the discovery of Meeraz Mahal serves as a reminder of the rich and diverse history of Kashmir, and of the importance of valuing and protecting our cultural heritage.

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