

## Chapter 4

### Malcha Mahal: A Story Beyond the Ruins

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#### Abstract

Malcha Mahal is located in the Delhi's ridge area of Chanakyapuri. The case study of Malcha Mahal emphasises on the neglect and the stories that surround the monument. It talks about a royal family that resided in this mahal and secluded themselves from the outer world. The structure of malcha mahal stands still with time and has not been conserved despite the condition of the structure and its surroundings. The monument has been long forgotten by the very same authorities that have been assigned the responsibility to look after such structures. Malcha Mahal awaits its last breath or its revival by these authorities.

**Keywords:** *Malcha Mahal, Ruins, Delhi, Conservation, Royal Family, Historical Monument*

#### Malcha Mahal: A Story Beyond the Ruins

Delhi is a city where you can find elegance in quite ruins and history in scars. A city which witnessed the rise and fall of empires is now stuck in time. Every nook and corner of the city has a story to tell, stories that are narrated by the standing momentous structures. In the midst of the urban capital, lives a structure which has been forgotten by the people, and when it came in notice with the people, they started making haunted stories about it, though which actually built up the curiosity amongst the people to know more and more about the place. It is known among the people as the Malcha Mahal or the Bistadari Mahal.

Mahal, which functioned as a Shikargah (Hunting Lodge) in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Malcha Mahal was built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq, the emperor of the Sultanate Delhi. He was an eminent Turkic Islamic ruler of the Tughlaq Dynasty, he was the Sultan of Delhi in 1351 and ruled until 1388.

**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

Malcha Mahal is the largest of all Shikargarh built by the Tughlaq emperor. Shikargarh were meant to be designed as temporary halting places and not for any residential purpose. They were used for rest and relaxation during the hunt. Such Shikargahs were widely built during the Mughal era in the seventeenth century as well, however, Firoz Shah's mahals are the first extant examples of this type in the Islamic India. Firoz Shah built three Shikargah in his time in the Delhi region, namely, Kushak Mahal kaushak-i-firozi/kushk-i-jahan-numa (place where you could see the world), BHULI Bhatiyari Ka Mahal (Bu Ali Bakhtiyari ka mahal), and Malcha Mahal.

Malcha Mahal is a single storey structure and is built of rubble masonry. It has three main bays the central one is the largest. Each bay consists of three rooms, the rooms are divided by arches which are eventually supported on stone pillars of characteristic style. Its ceiling has a shallow domed structure, but the roof is flat. The roof is reached from stepped stairways on either side within the mahal. The mahal is divided into segments of arched entries which makes it a huge Shikargah. At some distance to its South existed a bund, in which some quantity of zamzam (a well at Mecca, the water of which is held to be sacred by Muhammadans) water was contained by the king. This bund has now converted into a studio for use by artists, says Sharma, Y.D.

For several years the monument was allocated to a Awadh Family, granted by the Government of India. If we closely look at this allotment, it may highlight a mistake made by the government. According to ethics related to a monument of historic relevance, it should not be granted as a place for residential purpose. Which poses the question- how the government could allow the family to reside in a monument?

The story of the Royal family which occupied the Malcha Mahal dates back to the British era. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh was deposed by the British in 1856. The Britishers took all his property and left him with nothing. Begum Wilayat Mahal, the Begum of Awadh or Oudh was the great granddaughter of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh, who struggled to get a property named on her royal status hoping for a suitable accommodation befitting her royal stature after independence.

According to the New York Times report of 1981, the Begum was provided with a small palace in Srinagar after Independence, which was arranged by the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru following her plea for 'restitution of the Lucknow properties under advisement'. According to reports the Kashmir Palace which was provided to the Begum was gutted in a fire in 1971, which

**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

was according to her was caused by the government agents and what she said that she believed was that the palace was burned intentionally out of religious and communal motives. After this incident when she had nowhere to go, she decided to move to Delhi with her family and decided to take shelter in a room at the New Delhi Railway Station where she started demanding a property that could match her royal status, she wanted a palace of her own.

In 1977, Begum Wilayat Mahal was offered a house in Aliganj, Lucknow, which she refused to have, instead she demanded Malcha Mahal. Historically, it is located in a village called Malcha, one of the historical villages near Raisina hill, which is now called the Delhi ridge area. Indian Space Research Organisation stands behind the Mahal. The area is restricted behind it because of the Delhi Earth Station. The only way to reach the monument is through the forest. From Malcha Marg it's a two minutes' drive deep into heavy vegetation where you come across the Delhi Earth station of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and just behind it is the Malcha Mahal hidden by the high trees and bushes. The monument is not visible from the outside until and unless you get in through the dense bushes for a few meters to reach the doorstep of the monument. Though now the path towards the mahal has been partially cleared by the Government authorities.

Finally, on May 28, 1985, Malcha Mahal was allotted Begum Wilayat Mahal. She shifted to Malcha Mahal with her family consisting of a son named Raza Ali and a daughter named Sakina Begum. They accompanied themselves with a few dogs for some security and a few servants as well. However, Malcha Mahal was the result of her decade old struggle with the Government of India, of getting a palace of her own and for her royal family. It was then, also known as the Wilayat Mahal. They started living in isolation and oblivion completely away from the outer world and had no interactions with the unknown people. The family did not like talking to strangers, in fact they ignored everyone. They secured their boundaries with fences and had their dogs to look after them and their royal belongings. On the September 10, 1993, the Begum of Awadh committed suicide at the age of 62, according to the reports she consumed crushed diamonds. The siblings were left alone after the death of the Begum Wilayat Mahal. The day their mother died, they were in despair and pain, the siblings sat near the body for about 10 days and mourned until they realised that the belongings of the royal family was in danger and that before the body could be vandalised by the people, they buried their mother after a few days, after which only Princess Sakina and

**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

Prince Raza were left in the Mahal to carry on their life and with no connection with the outer world. There were rumours that Princess Sakina also died after some years, but there was no evidence of her death and that now only the last descendant, the Prince of Awadh was the only one alive in the mahal. Therefore, he lived in the mahal until his last breath, he used to only step out of the Mahal to get some basic amenities because the mahal did not facilitate them with water, food and electricity. If we analyse the ridge area properly, we notice that the trees growing in that area are of no use, they do not fruit and do not allow the growth of other plant species, as these trees absorb all the water from the ground and do not let the other plants have their part. However, these plants were planted by the Britishers and are still surviving in that area.

Raza, the prince of Awadh was the last descendant of the Awadh family and was living in the mahal with minimal necessities. He died in the mahal on the September 2, 2017 at the age of 54, his body was found lying beside his wooden bed when the ISRO officials noticed that the prince had not shown up in the last two days. The prince used to sometimes communicate with people such as the guard near his mahal, according to the news reports in his last few days when his health was in a deteriorating stage, he used to ask the guard or the other people of ISRO to get him some basic amenities for him such as food and medicines.

The royal family of Oudh had a miserable and painful life. Only for the sake of a royal stature they chose to live in a monument and that too in the middle of the dense forest area. The life there must have been hard for them, but still they survived in the mahal. The story of the family is strange and also why did the begum chose to live in malcha mahal instead of the palace that was provided by the government in Aliganj, Lucknow. She could have provided her children with a more comfortable and compatible environment and they could have interacted with the world rather than keeping everything to themselves.

Delhi police had taken the responsibility of securing it until and unless the government takes any action in giving the status that the monument deserves. The mahal was looted several times, reports show that after the death of the prince many of the royal belongings were stolen such as a silver table, some utensils and other royal belongings. Many things were found on the floor of the mahal, some articles and documents of the begum were found, a broken typewriter, some family photographs and a set of crockery of porcelain and ceramic were found in the mahal.

**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

When the monument was allotted to the family, it was then renovated by them. For security reasons they blocked the arched entries by blocking the way with bricks and also installed iron grills. They also laid tiles on the floor and the walls. They drilled many fittings in the walls of the monument which may have damaged it from the inside. These fittings have damaged its authenticity and it also may have caused much harm to the century's old monument. The authorities should perhaps revive the monument, which is deep seated in the jungle. Firstly, because it is an architecture of historic relevance. Secondly, it belonged to a remnant emperor of the Tughlaq dynasty who ruled the sultanate Delhi, therefore it represents the era of sultanate Delhi. Thirdly, it was one of the main hunting lodges of the late sultanate emperor and also the largest in Delhi, it has all the features of the Islamic architecture.

Conservation work of the monument should be done immediately for the good will of the monument. And we must not forget that every monument is a valuable property that needs to be conserved and not to be ignored. Malcha Mahal played its role in the late 14th century and served as a hunting lounge to the Tughlaq king. It must have been of great relevance and of value to the king. Today the Mahal stands still and waits for its last breath or its revival by its own people. If we see Delhi in terms of praising the architecture of the earlier times, we only see the monuments that are known more often and through which the capital city is represented. These monuments that are the huge tombs and structures such as Humayun's tomb, Safdarjung's tomb, Qutub Minar, India Gate, Red Fort and many more that adds on to a long list of historically built structures. If we ask the people about, where do they often visit when they are in Delhi, they always take the names of the monuments that are famous in Delhi, other than that they do not know about any other structures that are hidden in the capital city, although they are known by people to whom history interests. The main issue arises here is of neglect, there are a lot of monuments in Delhi that are not given attention by the Government authorities such as ASI (Archaeological Survey of India), which is the running government body who looks after the monuments of historic relevance. We see boards of ASI restricting entry on the monuments where conservation work is in process, therefore we also see some monuments which are left in bad conditions and no immediate reaction is taken towards it. If we talk about the malcha mahal, according to the reports, ASI has not thought about taking the monument under them, and after the death of the last Prince of Awadh the monument is in ruins to

**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

which the ASI says that they have no plans as yet to conserve the monument soon enough. However, the monument stays neglected and in poor condition.

The monument should be reinstated as it is of historic importance. The dense plantation surrounding the Mahal can be partially cleaned so that people may not find it difficult to reach and also, they may feel safe. It can be a place of public interest. The monument is in a location which is away from the hustle and bustle of the city and so the people can visit the monument to view the forest area from the monument as well as it can be a good point to watch sunset and sunrise as the sky from there is clear and admiring. The other ways how people can think of visiting the monument is by also visiting the Dargah of Sufi saint Haidar udin Chisti, 800 years old which is also located near the Malcha Mahal. The Dargah is as well a very old structure and many people visit for religious purposes. The people can enjoy the outing by visiting their almighty and also taking a tour of the monument. Schools could also organise heritage walks which would be a source of amusement to them as well as a history lesson.

Therefore, to make this site relevant and of importance some measures must be taken to fulfill its historic value and the status that it had been longing for, until today. Malcha Mahal has stood through these years with complete strength and a desire to stand through years long, and now it is our time to give it the respect and value that it deserves.

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**Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022**

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