

Established 1637, Dara Shikoh's Library to get fresh lease of life



Within The Kashmere Gate
Dara Shikoh's Library.

Before being killed in a battle of succession by his brother, Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Mughal emperor Shahjahan, known as a man of intellectual pursuits, had established a library in 1637 in Kashmere Gate.

The books have long been lost, but the building stands even today. Last month, the Delhi chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage INTACH began work to restore the historic edifice to its former glory.

After the prince's death, the library building changed hands several times. According to historian *Swapna Liddle*, it was given to **Donna Juliana**, the Portuguese governess of the royal Mughal children and the name behind Sarai Julena near Jamia Millia Islamia. It remained in her family till **Nawab Safdarjung** purchased it in mid-18th century.

After that, the building morphed into the **first British residency** occupied by **Sir David Ochterlony** and then in subsequent years into a government college, a municipal school, office of the state archaeology department and finally into an archaeological museum.

Liddle said that Ochterlony, after buying the building with personal funds, transformed it by incorporating European features while revamping the building. "The original fluted pillars and arches were covered over to produce a facade of pillars in the neoclassical style," explained Liddle.

The building is unique for the mix of Mughal architectural features, such as baluster columns and scalloped arches, and colonial additions like the Roman pillars with Ionic capitals. "INTACH hopes to conserve this unique hybrid of architectural styles," said Liddle. The series of columns and arches found on the lower level constitute what was perhaps the Qutub Khana, or **Library**, which originally housed the books, most of which were destroyed after the events of 1857.

In 2011, the (DU alumna) **Sheila Dikshit** government decided to convert the library into a city museum in collaboration with INTACH with "the intention of preserving and promoting cultural heritage".

The State Archaeology department will display around 2,200 artefacts, including excavated coins, stones and other antiquities from ancient and medieval times.

The Museum will also familiarise visitors with the history of the seven cities of Delhi.

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