

Uch is a monument city. Archaeologically and historically, it is a place of great importance whose origin dates back to antiquity.

Historians of Hellenic period has described it as one of the most beautiful cities in the then known world, which was perched upon plateau around a hillock overlooking the confluence of the rivers Sutluj and Chenab. As per the recorded history, Uch in the early twelfth century was known as Deogarh - the stronghold of gods. The ruler of the area Deo Singh fled to Marwar when the great Muslim Sufi saint Syed Jalal-ud-Din Bukhari came to this place and settled here. The saint built a fort called Uchha (means high), hence the name. Mahmud Ghaznavi captured this city in 1006 (AD) and later Muhammad Ghouri recaptured it. Uch served as one of the most important centres for inland water transport. Uch (now in the Punjab) became the chief city of upper Sindh under Nasir-ud-Din Qabacha till Jalal-ud-Din Khwarizmi burned it in 1223. Afterwards it was taken over by Altamsh. Uch is the only earliest capital of Sindh to have survived the onslaughts of River Indus. All others have given way to ever changing courses from time-to-time.

In its days of glory, the city of Uch remained great centre of Islamic learning, history and literature for centuries. It was at Uch that the Chach Nama and the earliest known anthology of Persian poet Labub-ul-Albab were written. It had housed centre of Islamic learning known as Firozi University where students-as per a conservative estimate no less than 3,000 at one time-from all over the world converged for education. Famous Persian historian Minhaj-ud-Din (writer of world renowned *Tabqat-i-Nasri*) was head of the university in 1227.

The loss of the River Hacra (also known as Sarvasti) and change in the courses of other rivers passing through the area robbed the city of its strategic importance. It was permanently annexed to the Mughal Empire under the rule of King Akbar. It is still a place of great religious sanctity because of the shrines of saints in the town and is also called Uch Sharif. As per the lore, once there used to be 125,000 shrines and graves, but apart from numerous unmarked graves some 25 shrines have survived the ravages of time. More famous shrines include those of Baha-ul-Halim, Jalal-ud-Din Bukhari, Sheikh Muhammad Ghaus, Bibi Jiwandi (sometime wrongly written as Jindwadi) and Ustad Nauria. The last resting-place of Sheikh Saifuddin Gazrooni, probably the oldest shrine in the South Asia, is also in Uch. Some of the surviving shrines are profusely and brilliantly decorated with mosaic in white, blue and green colours.

Unfortunately, there is not much information available on the individuals who are buried in most of the tombs (the actual graves of Bibi Jiwandi, Ustad Nauria and Hazrat Bahiwal Haleem were shifted long ago). However, we know that they were all descendants of the Sufi saint Hazrat Syed Jalal-ud-Din Bukhari

Once a glorious City

Tomb Nation 29-12

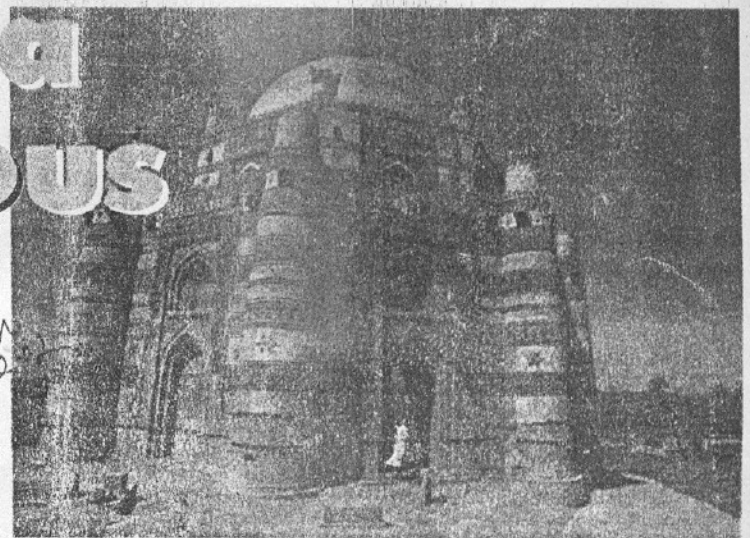
MOBASHIR AHMAD says that Pakistan's record in architectural preservation is disappointing, but one can pin hopes on UNESCO's World Cultural Committee to declare Uch as a world heritage site

(Surkhposh Bukhari) who came in Uch and settled. Syed Surkhposh Bukhari was the Khalifa of Hazrat Baha-ud-din Zakriya - the Sufi saint who established the Suhwardy silsila in the South Asia. Syed Surkhposh Bukhari laid down the foundations of the Khangah-i-Bukharia in Uch. He himself was buried in the suburbs of Uch, but floods damaged his tomb in 1617 AD. The Nawab of Bahawalpur, Bahawal Khan II, rebuilt his mazar in what is now Uch Bukhari. The mazar lies a short walk away from the main cemetery.

Similarly, Syed Abdul Qadar Jilani II migrated from Iraq and settled in Uch some 400 years ago. He started Qadria silsila at Uch and when he died, he was buried there. Later, this area expanded as the Uch Jilani, inhabited by his decedents and followers.

Uch used to be a buffer of India, like Herat has been of Khurasan. Surprisingly, there are no signs of defensive wall around the city. It is believed that the concept of fortification (like in old cities of Multan or Pakpattan) was not there when the Uch city was laid out. Examination of the ruins of Harrappa and Moenjodaro substantiates this idea.

On way to Uch, fine waves of sand with bright silvery particles sparkle in the sunlight. The rich remains may be appealing to tourists or important to historians, anthropologists and archaeologists, but for the residents the town represents a struggle. Experiencing the thrill of a bumpy camel ride (I have travelled most of the Cholistan on foot or on four wheeler driven vehicles though) through rough looking landscape before watching a camel dancing in step with a loud drum beat is very charming for foreigners in particular. But presently, the humble town suffers from all the social



Tomb of Mai Jiwandi

problems associated with under development and remoteness: poverty, unemployment as well as official apathy and neglect. The physical decay is evident.

The vegetation in the Cholistan tract is reduced to thorny shrubs - Kandji, Ak, Wild Carpet, Qatran, Ber and Khar. Cholistan cows move around silently. Herds of livestock are seen all around. They are put in the *baras* (enclosures) at night and left to roam about in the desert during day. Mumtaz Khan, a progressive former of Tibba Sultan who is keeping 100 heads of Cholistan cows on his farms, once told me that Cholistan cow is one of the best breeds of mammals in the world. "The problem is that we have not started paying attention to dairy production in the country yet," he says.

The ancient city, that was spread over 26 square miles area in its hey days, has shrunk to just a small and dusty town - cluster of three localities known as Uch Bukhari, Uch Jilani, Uch Mughlan - of about one square mile. Only a puzzling serenity pervades the sombre atmosphere of this dying city. The municipality has been upgraded to level of Town Committee, but the committee has badly failed to keep the city up or provide civic services to the residents of the town, what to talk of conservation of its intrinsic heritage. The dusty bazaars are full of encroachments and piles of municipal waste can be seen all over. The moment some automobile passes through the bazaar, it kicks thick clouds of dust that keep hanging for some time before it settles on eatables on sale in the open.

Uch today is just a shabby suburb of Bahawalpur where peeling paints and crumbling edifices are common scenes. Many of the buildings of historic importance lining Uch's sinuous cobbled streets have seen no care and maintenance ever. Classic example is the shrine of Bibi Jiwandi that was built in 1494. Flood in River Chenab in 1817 demolished half of the tomb while the other half stands upright as a strong reminder of the bygone era. Sometime, holes gap where once entire

buildings stood.

Preserving heritage is not just patching up walls and splashing on new paints. It is about protecting a people's way of life. To save the city, one of the important national ancient treasures, Uch Town Committee has no funds, will or expertise. And, even Archaeology and Auqaf Departments have rarely been willing to find money or energy to do anything beyond cosmetic work in some major cities. Moreover, these departments are so far away from the place where they are required to plan the important tasks of conservation that they seem to have forgotten the issue. Locals too are not very vocal about it. What the Town Committee of this economically stagnant town, despite vast potential for international tourism, can do to attract the tourist when world tourism has become unprecedented over five trillion dollar per annum industry? Nothing! The bits and pieces of ancient history will perish one by one. May be one could learn some lessons from heritage cities like Pingyao in China, Jaipur in India or Hoi An in Vietnam - Asian cities being conserved scientifically for promotion of tourism besides more emotional reasons.

To spruce the metropolis and conserve the more than many centuries old historic character need attention. But Pakistan's record of architectural preservation is disappointing. And, one cannot pin high hopes on UNESCO's World Cultural Committee to declare the city as world heritage site at its own though Uch meets all the pre requisites. The committee has to be told about it first. Sadly, this has not started happening yet.

Much in Uch has already been lost. It might not be possible to bring back the glory of the past. But one of the world's oldest settlements and unique tourists' attraction deserves better. A restoration and presentation of whatever is left of the monuments, transport and lodging arrangements for local and foreign tourists, may be a good start. But who is to take the first step to improve quality of life in this living functional city? ■