

‘Havelis’ of hope in our culture

Lahore

By Majid Sheikh

THE famous book ‘Tarikh-e-Lahore’ by Kanhiya Lal was written in 1884. He records that the walled city of Lahore had 54 major ‘havelis’, and hundreds of medium to smaller ones. By 1993 when a PEPAC study was carried out, 44 of the major ones had been lost. But the worst had yet to come.

The latest study, finalised in 2009, tells us that another four have been demolished to make way for business enterprises and ‘godowns’. The demolition of the last portion of Mian Khan’s ‘haveli’ at Rang Mahal took place just last month when the remaining doorway was demolished. A major portion was wiped out almost 12 years ago, and we had then warned of the criminal intent of the builders. So they stopped in their track and waited. An acquaintance informed of the development, and I went there, only to stand by the fallen gateway. A tractor-trolley removed the debris. This was our way of consigning history to the dumps, something Pakistanis have become quite good at. If we can distort the image and fabricate the facts of Jinnah’s life, what chance does Mian Khan and his ‘haveli’ have. But that is history now, and a major portion of our culture has lost, forever.

After watching this fiasco, I was very sad, and what better way than to walk the narrow lanes of the old city. I went to take another peek at three major ‘havelis’ of Lahore. They being the Baroodkhana ‘haveli’ in Baroodkhana Bazaar of the Mian

family, the Mubarak ‘haveli’ of the Qizilbash family near Kucha Chabaksawaran, and the Mubarak Begum ‘haveli’ in Bazaar Hakeeman of the Syed family. The state of these historic ‘havelis’ are in varying degrees of ‘keep’. The finest of them is the Begum Mubarak ‘haveli’ under the strict guidance of Syed Babar Ali, who has built a ‘Naqash School of Arts’ to the eastern side, the old imambargah is to the south, and to the west he has recreated a brand new School of Calligraphy in excellent small brick.

The main ‘haveli’ is well done and well maintained as it was over time. As one walked through the ‘haveli’ it feels like home. For those who have lived in the old walled city, the setting is that of luxury. I have always maintained that once the city ‘fathers’ (call them godfathers if you like) manage to halt the intrusion of blind commercial interest from expanding and demolishing historic buildings to create cement monstrosities in the name of godowns, the walled city will be the best place to live in.

The ‘haveli’ of Mubarak Begum is, undoubtedly, the finest ‘haveli’ in the old walled city. The fact that it is owned by the Syeds is not reason alone, but the fact that it has a definite plan, and the plan makes immense sense with the Naqash School of Arts and the School of Calligraphy, all in the same large compound. This is the way to take forward conservation, by making its use relevant

in the times in which we live, so that the time when it was built makes sense to visitors today. We will dwell on this ‘haveli’ in detail in a separate piece, just as will be done with the history of the second ‘haveli’, the Mubarak Haveli owned by the Qizilbash clan.

Located near Kucha Chabakswaran near the Nisar Haveli inside Mochi gate, this is a massive ‘haveli’ with an immensely interesting history. This is the place from where Maharajah Ranjit Singh extracted the Koh-e-Noor diamond from Ahmad Shah. After buying some exquisite ‘khatai’ from the nearby shop of Khalifa, I went to see the ‘haveli’. This is in shambles, for the ‘haveli’ is used by a number of families. The condition of this immensely historic place is bad, if a slightly stronger word is not to be used, for the Qizilbash clan has not done their duty to the old city that has given them so much.

The Qizilbash (red-haired) clan, primarily cavalry warriors with a Cossack background, were loyal to the British, and they assisted them in the capture of the areas up to Peshawar, and later assisted their foreign masters in bringing peace to the Punjab. For these services they were given massive amounts of land near Chumian

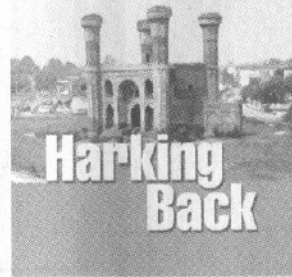
and around Lahore, as well as the very best ‘havelis’ inside the walled city.

There is no doubt that the clan has grown in size and there are so many claimants to properties, which makes conservation impossible. In such a case the mere fact that it is standing speaks highly of the quality of the workmanship of the ‘haveli’.

There is a need for some ‘conservation trust’ to take over the ‘haveli’ after paying the present owners the ‘official rate’ and after a massive restoration work, a museum of the history of the old walled city can be set up. The Qizilbash clan has some immensely talented and educated persons, so if they make a modest be-

ginning, just as Syed Babar Ali has done with his heritage, it will be the starting point of a movement to save the little of value that we have.

The third ‘haveli’ that I visited and had a nice cup of tea with Mian Yusuf Salahuddin was the Baroodkhana ‘haveli’. The first time I visited this place was with my father almost 45 years ago when I was a toddler. He had gone to meet Mian Amiruddin, grandfather of Mian Yusuf, who one got to ‘know about’ while in college. There is no doubt that a major portion of the ‘haveli’ has been lost, for to the north is located the City Cinema,



ural debris

ty which was built after knocking down by the Mian family some of the larger 'havelis' best portions. To the east is also a huge three kanal open space, where once was the 'zinnan-khana', and where was born great men like Dr Nazir, and where lived men like Allama Iqbal, M.D'Taseer (father of our current Governor), and where stayed leaders like Sheikh Abdullah of Kashmir. The list is endless.

Mian Yusuf has managed to bring back to life the main central portion, and this has been possible only because he actually lives there himself. His living rooms exude luxury in every sense of the word. His comment: "People just do not realise the comfort and feeling of family one has living in the old walled city". As we sat chatting a delegation of local dwellers came to complain against the police. He rang up the DSP with the stout comment: "Just do your job as you feel fit, only do not harass the victims of the robbery". That was what the delegation wanted. This sort of stuff goes with the terrain, and this is the ethos of brotherhood that is available only inside the old walled city of Lahore.

But just how long will Mian Yusuf hang on to his heritage. He has got one side section prepared for a young nephew, so that when he is not there, a member of the Mian family continues the tradition. This 'haveli' once served as the focal point of assistance to Kashmiris who fled a famine. Mian Karim Bakhsh, the great great grandfather of Mian Yusuf, assisted

thousands of them, one of the main reasons Lahore has so many citizens of Kashmiri origin. But then, probably, the legend that the maternal grandmother of all Kashmiris is the same holds true.

My view is that even Mian Yusuf needs expert guidance, for some portions of the 'haveli' need to be restored. Inside the main old portion is a wall-painting, maybe 200 years old, with a picture of Sikh warriors in battle. We will research the origins of this 'haveli' in a separate piece, for it has a lot to tell us.

As I walked back to my car, parked at Nila Gumbad, one saw so many old 'havelis' in every lane and street. Be they small or large, it is part of an exquisite heritage that we are losing much faster than we imagine. Old Lahore needs some special status legislation fast, if that is possible given the quality of our legislators and leadership. The loss of Mian Khan's immensely important 'haveli' is a pointer towards what is actually happening. As one imagines the tractor-trolley disappear towards the lost Shahalami Gate, victim to the hateful flames of the 1947 Partition, it seems that almost everything we value will be carted away in a similar manner.

BEWARE: The famous Ewing Hall, where started Forman Christian College, is in the process of being sold to a construction magnate, who has advanced plans to demolish this Lahore landmark. Let us all stand before the bulldozers as still more cultural debris is removed.