

# Hidden treasures of Hall Road

By Majid Sheikh

EVERY time you drive through Hall Road, the busy and congested electronics market connecting the Regal crossing on The Mall to McLeod Road and beyond towards Gowalmandi Chowk, you can be forgiven for thinking of it as just another cramped pothole-ridden street in the unplanned new Lahore that we know. You cannot be more wrong.

This road has the oldest mosque in Lahore, almost 1,120 years old at that, and has three very important grave sites with miracle cures, sites that have been consumed by the commercial blitz, almost entirely illegal to begin with. Not that one can blame anyone for the complete absence of information on an immensely important part of our cultural and religious heritage. Such has been the drive for 'profit at any cost' approach that pervades our lives, that we have lost the ability to recognise our finest heritage.

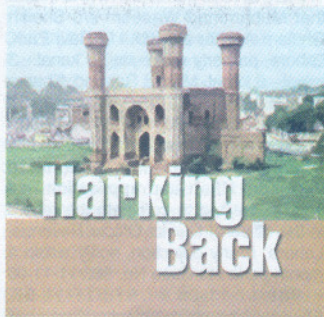
It goes without saying that just as the invasion of Sindh by Muhammad bin Qasim is important for the arrival of Islam in the land along the Indus and its tributaries, the land that we today

call Pakistan, so it is important for Lahore and its environs to acknowledge the man who could be called the very first Sufi saint to arrive in Lahore, or even in Punjab. He was Syed Shah Ismail, a sage who lived inside the walled city of Lahore, then governed by the Chauhan Rajput Hindu kings of Lahore. This is almost a hundred years before Ali Hasan of Hajver, better known as Data Ganj Bakhsh, arrived here to replace Hazrat Zanjani.

Little is known about this great Sufi saint, but the fact that he managed to convert a considerable number of people to Islam, points to the foundation of a modest Islamic group in Lahore, a group on which Zanjani was to expand, and then Ali Hajveri was to bloom and produce his great book *Kashf-ul-Mahjoob*. We must never forget that the effect of his work and teachings would take yet another 200-plus years before it began to blossom.

When Shah Ismail died, the Hindu king ruled that the saint be buried by his followers outside the city. So a distant mound was selected and on this mound was buried the great saint. His followers built a mosque there,

the very first mosque in Lahore. If you happen to pass on Hall Road and near the side gate of the Cathedral School, just next to the bank branch that operates there, a staircase goes towards the roof. This mound is the mound of the mosque and the tomb of Shah Ismail. My research on this very important saint is not adequate enough to dwell on his life, which one will



when the appropriate learning is achieved.

As we move ahead we come across another important saint, whose tomb lies just next to the office of the education examination department. In the early British days this was the residence of the deputy commissioner of Lahore. Next to this are three graves. The first grave is

known to be that of Shah Dargai. The second is the grave of Mahi Shah, who was a 'mureed' of Shah Dargai. The third grave is that of the well-known saint, Shah Syed Shah Chiragh, whose 'mureed' was Shah Dargai.

If you visit the place now, you will notice that two of the graves are enclosed in a small space behind a TV shop, which is basically an illegal shop allocated by the authorities. The third grave has been included in a shopping plaza, but its owner was sensible enough not to demolish the grave, and to compensate for the illegal allotment; he built a small praying area. So all three graves are intact, but consigned to insignificance.

The significance of these three graves is, or so the story goes, that a woman once came to Shah Chiragh and said that her son had got a strange skin disease in which numerous wounds, or boils, appeared, and they kept oozing the water under them. The saint blessed the child and told the woman to bathe the boy at the well of the 'dargah'. This she did and the boils disappeared. The news spread in the city, and any person with skin problems would come there, take a bath and get cured. The seer

# Bad *Calore.*

then ruled that every patient must come with four sweet 'rotis' and four 'rotis' with salt, and also four of the smallest coins available, all of which they should distribute among the poor. So for the last 300 years, from the days of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, this has been followed and people, of all faiths, have been coming there for a sure cure to their skin problems.

The water of the Shah Dargai is so blessed that even today, on a Sunday, small children with skin problems queue up to have a bath. Their parents give alms in the manner prescribed. During the British days a hand pump replaced the well, and now a water pumps run on electricity has been put in place. The 'mirale' water still works wonders.

One does not have any scientific explanation for the properties of this miracle water of Shah Dargai, but people believe that it works, and so they queue up every Sunday to experience it. These two important sites on the busy Hall Road surely are not widely known, or written about. My view remains that the mosque and the shrine need to be recognised and researched, and some steps taken to preserve them.