

Miani Sahib graveyard and the crazed

Down 13-4-02.

IT WAS a sad day when my grandmother, Syeda Begum, died. She had been a teacher in the Victoria School of Mochi Gate, in the 1920s, and went to school in a *doli*. It was sadder still because I was not in Pakistan when it happened. She was buried in the Miani Sahib graveyard of Lahore, probably one of the largest burial grounds in the sub-continent. There is something strange about the place, an eerie past that needs to be told.

The saddest part about my grandmothers's death has been that I have never been able to find her grave. She had willed that five years after her burial all traces of the grave be erased ... and they were erased. My father also willed the same, only he wanted it ploughed after five years. But we

never let that happen. There is a strange fascination in clinging to the dead, and that is why in the burial grounds of every civilization lies its story. Anthropologists unravel its secrets and tell us all about a people and the age in which they lived. The Egyptian pyramids are basically burial mounds, their unique quality makes one marvel how every aspect of almost every science has been combined to produce a wonder of the ancient world. No such marvel exists at Miani Sahib, but there is a story that merits consideration.

The story of Miani Sahib begins from Emperor Jahangir's reign, during which came from Sirhind a scholar and sage by the name of Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Qadri Naqshbandi. He settled down away from the Walled City of Lahore in the "remote" mauza (hamlet) of Mozang, a settlement almost two miles from the nearest

gate, Shahalami. A toll station, a *chungi*, was established a furlong along the road, and Mauza Mozang had an independence of its own, near the city yet detached in a way. A forest separated Lahore and Mauza Mozang, and one can imagine that it must have been a peaceful place. Sheikh Tahir Qadri was a scholar and a Sufi fakir, and he did not want officialdom to disturb his peace. He set up his own madressah, and within a few years he had a large following of admirers and students. Very soon, this remote hamlet became a sizeable village in which the madressah of Sheikh Tahir Qadri and its huge grounds were the focal point.

The reputation of Mozang grew primarily because of this madressah and the excellent religious scholars it produced. The Punjabi language has a word, "*miani*", which means a learned preacher, and because of the Sheikh, the madressah and its grounds came to be known as Miani Sahib, a name given by the local population out of respect for Sheikh Tahir Qadri. As long as he lived,

he taught Islamic *fiqh* and *hadith* free of cost to anyone interested in it.

It was a very liberal environment in which the teachings of Ibn Arabi reigned supreme. Sheikh Tahir Qadri died in the year AH 1040, and it was during this era that Muslim rulers in the sub-continent was coming to an end and the rule of the Sikh 'misls' was on the rise. We all know that for a fairly long time the entire area around Lahore was run by gangs and dacoits, streaks of whom still operate in the remote areas with abandon.

A few years after the death of Sheikh Tahir Qadri Naqshbandi, Mauza Mozang was raided by a massive Sikh 'misl,' with one account putting the raiders down to the Nakkai misl, and the entire treasure of Holy Quran's copies, a huge library of rare books and papers were removed. They had been informed by roaming fakirs that a "treasure" beyond measure lay in the madressah, and the Sikhs went for it. When they were informed that they were all sacred texts and that portions of it were includ-

ed in the Garanth, they tore all the books into pieces and scattered them all over the area. Piles of books were set on fire and papers were burnt and scattered. One estimate puts the number of copies of Quran and its 'qaidas' and various books on the *fiqh* and *hadith* at well over 30,000. Not a single one was left intact by the furious Sikh raiders. They also set on fire every house in the village, leaving behind a scene that was to determine the future of Miani Sahib.

The religious scholars of the madressah soon recovered from the shock of the pillage and managed to restore the institution, which to this day is still run on the same lines. The problem lay in the torn and burnt copies of the Holy Quran and other books that lay strewn all over the place. It was decided to leave these grounds alone till the flood came and all the desecrated texts were washed away.

For many years no flood came and the ground around lay abandoned. The people of Lahore decided that the best way to use this place was to bury their

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dead here, and so without much ado this became the favourite burial ground of Lahore.

During the rule of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, the Muslims of Lahore, on the orders of the maharajah, chalked out the exact area where lay thousands of desecrated copies of the Holy Quran and the entire area was given to the madressah and converted into a burial ground. So the wise man, in his own way, repaid for the sins of his co-religionists. One popular opinion, and one that does not have evidence to support it, tells of predicting that after the copies of the Quran were burnt and torn and scattered all over Mozang, that only the dead would 'live' there. It seems more of an emotional sentiment by a hurt population that respected the spirit and work of Sheikh Tahir Qadri Naqshbandi of Sirhind. Ironically, the grave of the sage still exists on one side of the madressah, a simple grave without much adornment ... Probably that is how he would have liked it. — **MAJID SHEIKH**