

Inside the Walls

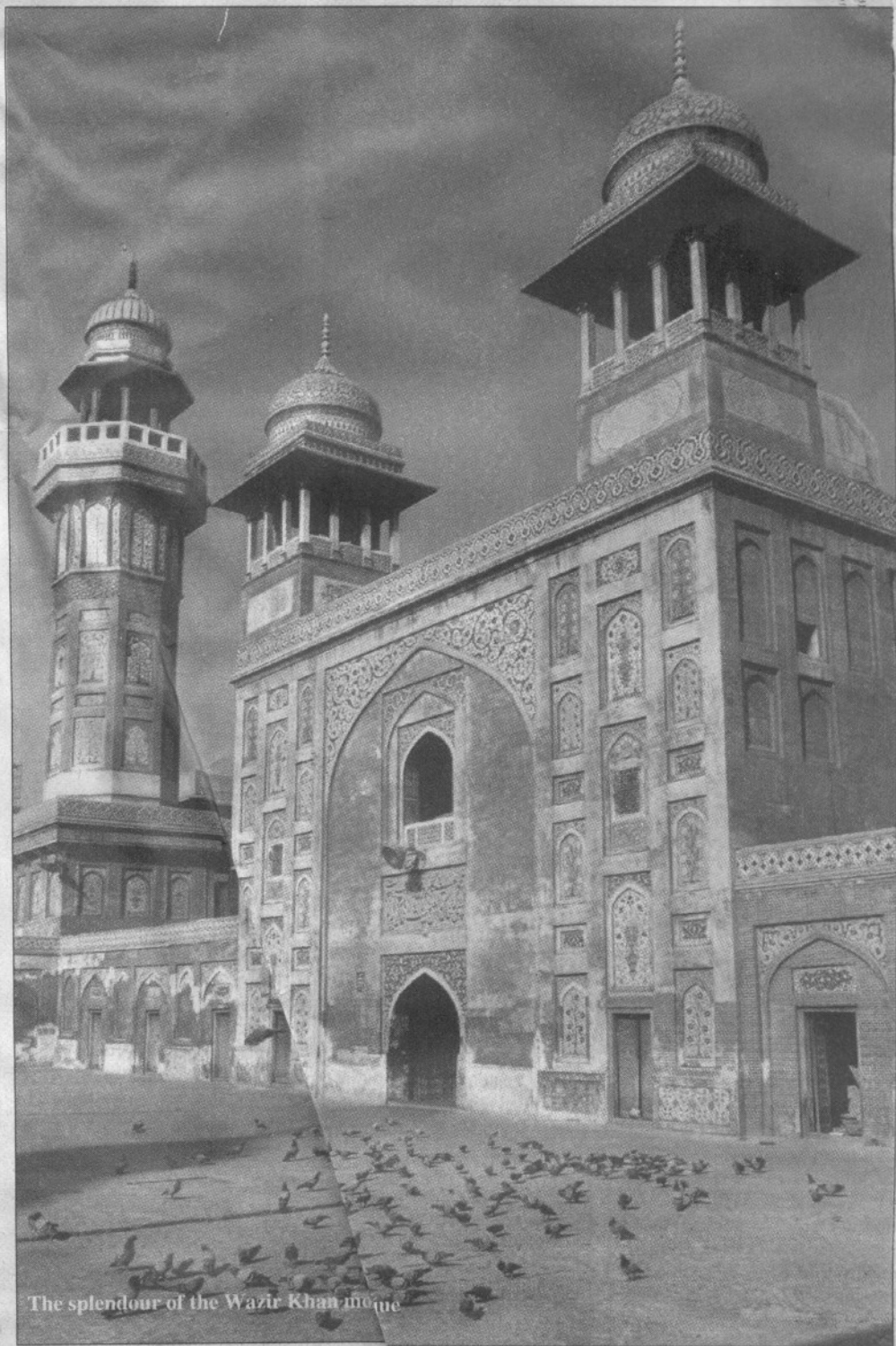
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Lahore's old city has gone through the dismal changes of time, but the aristocratic haughtiness of its royal residents still lingers in the air

The *jarokas* (balconies) and *havelis* of the Walled City look nostalgically at passersbys, imploring them to give a moment's thought to the layers of history hidden in them. But time has a strange habit of filing everything away in the history folder. Needless to say, these dusty bricks, the narrow alleys and all the other sights, ravaged by time and people, have had a glorious past. Some of the structures of the *Androun Shehar* (Inner City) can boast of existing as far back as the rule of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, who was responsible for rebuilding the walls of the city in the 16th century. Spread over an area of 256 ha and with a population of nearly 250,000, the erroneously named Walled City now exists precariously, struggling to make sense of its changing visage.

Even if Lahore's old city has tolerated and gone through the dismal changes of time, the aristocratic haughtiness of its royal residents still lingers in the air. It is not difficult to imagine a contingent of royalty being carried through the narrow pathways on exquisitely crafted palanquins. The sound of hors-



The splendour of the Wazir Khan mosque



A trip down memory lane

es' hooves, making contact with cobbled passages, takes little imagination to be credible. Neither is it too preposterous to assume that the sight of magnificent aristocratic chariots going to the Shahi Hammam (the royal bathhouse), the Lahore Fort or other places in the Walled City, was as common as today's encroachments.

Another common feature is the tearing down of many historical structures for bricks by the local people. Despite that, the remains of at least one Mughal hammam remain below ground in Mohalla Dara Shikoh. Somewhat restored in the 1990s is the Shahi Hammam, just inside the Delhi Gate, dating back to the mid 17th century. It was used in those times as a point of public convenience for travellers. Later, as heritage took a back seat, traders used it as a merchandise store-house. Today, the structure fails to arouse a visitor's interest, as it did in the past, but the government's prompt action, taken in a rare instance of efficiency, has seen its large dome and high windows repainted and its frescoes restored. The Shahi Hammam now houses a technical training college for women where, for a nominal fee, women learn to type, embroider and are given a course in computer literacy.

In 1849, when the British annexed the Punjab, parts of the city's walls were destroyed and replaced with gardens. Some of them still constitute the Walled City's legendary past. Historians claim that in the 16th century, just east of the city, Prince Kamran built his earliest gardens in the Naulakha area. Replicating his feat, Dara

Shikoh and Asif Khan also expanded the green landscape in the mid 17th century, remains of which can be found immediately east of the Delhi Gate.

The famous Delhi Gate, considered to be one of the main entrances to the Walled City, was restored in the 1990s. Upon entering it, a visitor is struck by the activity of consumers haggling with the shopkeepers selling their wares. The famous bazaar converges with the Wazir Khan chowk to continue through the hubbub of the Kashmiri bazaar. Overlooking the chowk is the magnificent dome of the Wazir Khan mosque, built in 1634. Although there is no record of garden along the bazaars, some have been recorded in nearby havelis. The Mian Khan haveli, near Rang Mahal, was recorded to have expansive courtyards and fabulous fountains. The haveli is believed to have an underground tunnel connecting it to the Lahore Fort.

Talking of mosques, the Walled City has just as many as can be accommodated in its restricted confines. If the Wazir Khan Mosque is a builder's object d'art, the Begum Shahi Mosque can proudly make the same assertion. Also called the mosque of Maryam Zamani, it lies just beyond the Chuna Mandi haveli. Maryam Zamani was the sister of Raja Bhagwan Das and the mother of the fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir. Completed in 1614, it is the oldest surviving mosque of the Mughal period in Lahore. But as is the case with other historical monuments, the Begum Shahi Mosque reeks of neglect and decay.