

People who come to pay homage to Data Gunj Bakhsh at the urs are not taken care of though they are the main contributors to the revenue of the shrine

The powerful and the rest — in Data's Darbar

The urs of Hazrat Ali Hajveri, popularly known as Data Gunj Bakhsh, began with a severe traffic jam last week which lasted for five hours. All the roads leading to the shrine were blocked by police ahead of the Punjab governor's visit, who was to inaugurate the urs celebrations.

A rose petal vendor said the police whisked away a large number of vendors as well as the visitors gathered around to clear the way for the governor. "The devotees were allowed entry through a gate only after standing for hours in long queue and after thorough search," he said. These high-profile visits augment the miseries of the common people rather than mitigate them, yet nobody is bothered.

Extortion and inconvenience was what the pilgrims had to suffer at the 958th three-day annual urs which concluded here few days ago. The three million people who came to the Darbar from across the country faced immense hardships during their stay in the city. Their problems started as soon as they reached the city bus stands as there were no special arrangements to transport the visitors to the shrine. So

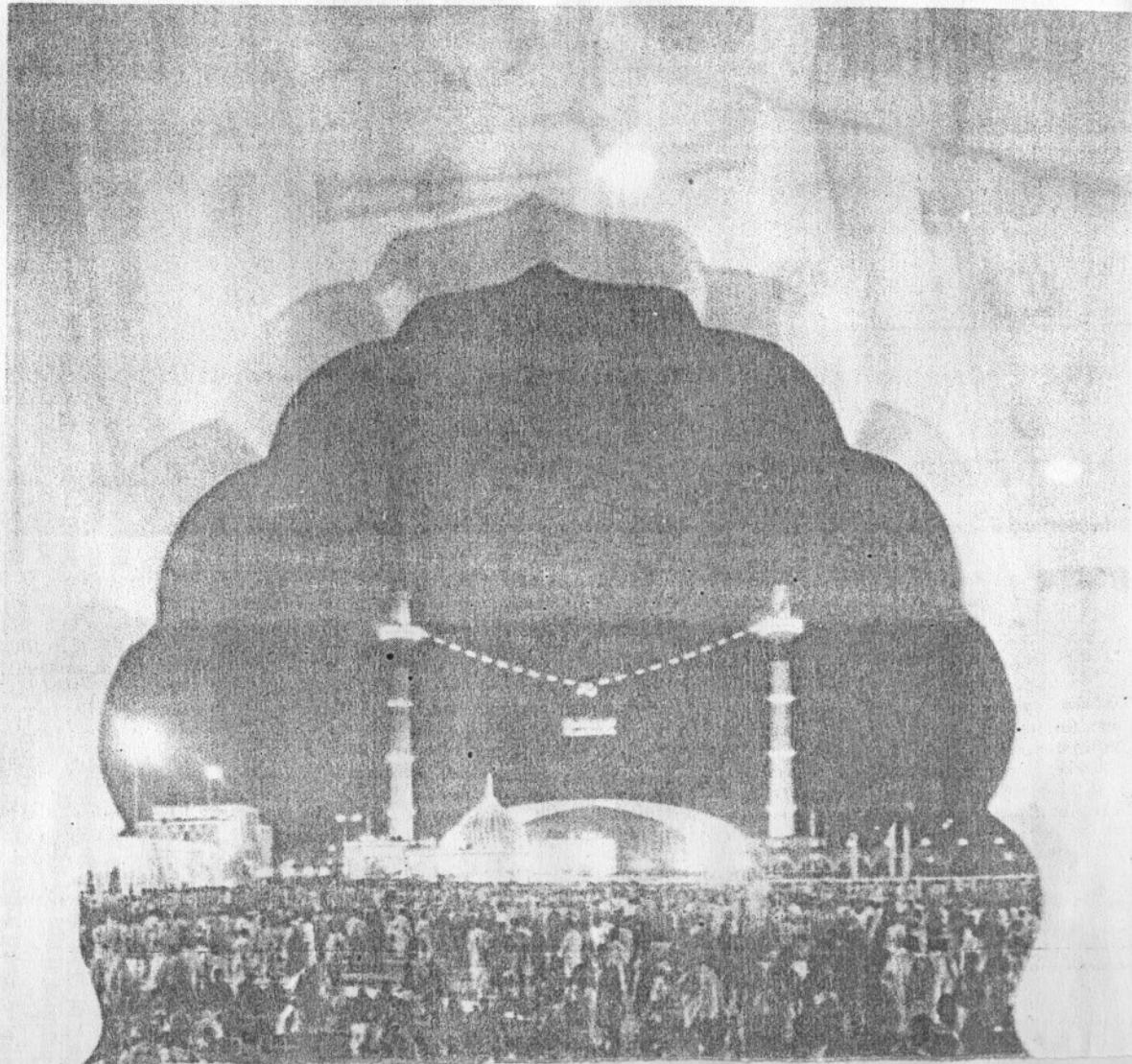
vans and motorcycle rickshaws overcharged the devotees along with common passengers.

The vans running from the general bus stand to other parts of the city and vice versa, were allotted alternate route via Bilal

shrine. When an on-duty cop was asked why the vans were not being forced to complete their routes, he said the practice is going on for years.

Right at the entrance the devotees found out that the shoe-keepers at over 35 different spots outside the shrine were fleecing the pilgrims at will. They charged for a pair of shoes according to its condition, appearance of the visitors and their devotion. They charged Rs 5 to Rs 20 for a pair of shoes against the officially allowed Re 1. Maqbool Hussain of Kahna paid Rs 5 for two pairs of shoes, but only after a 15-minute argument. Asad, who had come along with a group of youth, said they had to pay Rs 5 each. A newly-wed couple was charged Rs 40 for their two pairs. They were advised to lodge a complaint with the Darbar manager. The woman told him they were not left with enough money to reach home after paying for the shoes. The manager summoned the shoe-keeper and fined him Rs 1,000 and handed over their money to them.

According to a careful estimate of an Auqaf official, about 2.5 to 3 million people visited the Darbar in the three urs days. If the visitors on average paid Rs 5 for a pair of shoes and only 25 per cent of them availed the facility, even then ten percent of the contract money was achieved only during the urs. The shoekeeping contract is for Rs 12,700,000. This overcharging continues the year round, though the number of visitors fall, it is still in many thousands daily.



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By Muhammad Shafiq

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at its worst during the urs days. The floors of the shrine had about two-inch layer of black mud. Food items including fried rice and pulses, distributed as Langar among the devotees, could be seen scattered all over the floors. Watering of the the grass patches in the lawn of the shrine was perhaps to scare away the devotees. These water pools created big splashes and many a visitors' clothes were painted with mud. There was no sanitation staff seen cleaning the shrine. An Auqaf official said contract for maintaining cleanliness was offered on monthly basis and it was Rs 217,000 for the current month. "Although the contractor had been advised to raise the number of the sanitation staff, they could not provide the desired cleanliness," he added.

Despite all this, a large number of people are coming to the shrine every day. One who came along with his wife and four children, said he had been visiting the shrine since his childhood along with his father and now brings his children to the shrine as his father did. "This practice will continue as my children would bring their children to the shrine," he said. An elderly woman, who refused to be identified, said she was living at the shrine for about 20 years. "I have found inner peace and am living a life free of worries at this Darbar. I have three sons who are happily married. They come here once a month to take me along with them, but I come back to the shrine the next day," she narrated.

Muhammad Rafiq, a labourer, said he was a resident of