

...to rack and ruin

HAFIZUR RAHMAN talks about Sharfunnisa Begum's tomb in Begampura where scores of illegal dwellings have come up on Auqaf land, hiding the monument

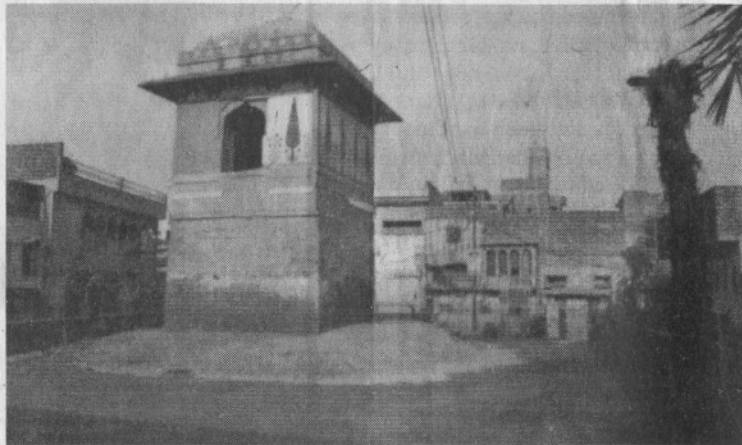


Culture Talk

The cultural heritage, so far as buildings are concerned, does not merely include historical monuments and forts and mausoleums but also private construction that has acquired value with the passage of time or has architectural features that distinguish it from ordinary structures. For instance the tombs at Thatta and Nokkundi are of cultural value because of the art that has gone into them.

Even a seemingly ordinary graveyard acquires distinction if great men are buried there. Many of the graves in Lahore's Miani Sahib are redolent of the history of Punjab during the last century. Actually most of Lahore's old graveyards are like that because everyone who died in Punjab's capital was not interred in Miani Sahib. One of them, Qabristan Ghore Shah, is probably the oldest in the city for it is the last resting place of numerous famous men of Lahore who lived more than a hundred years ago. It is also the most neglected.

My main topic today is encroachments, and it also has a personal element to it. Graveyards are the most encroached upon places because the dead can't protest and their living relations are too busy with the problems of life to bother. At Ghore Shah we buried my mother in 1933 in the midst of several members of her well-known Chishti family of Masjid Chinianwali. My English sister-in-



Tomb of Sharfunnisa Begum



Tiny clay horses for sale near Ghore Shah's mazaar

locality, I brought a couple of senior members of the Chishti family to see the vandalism. They could only deplore the fact, while jointly we were unable to see any solution to the impasse, for it was an impasse. We knew the graves couldn't be restored. But we did

legend about horses associated with the faqir, but the fact remains that everyone who comes to pray there leaves a few tiny clay horses at the tomb. There are thousands of them any time you go there, and my daughters never tired of collecting a small horde whenever

monument from the eyes of the world.

Houses have been constructed on eight kanals of land that was leased out by the Auqaf Department in 1989 to four people – Maulana Abdul Qadir Azad, former khateeb of Badshahi Mosque, Mahfoozur Rahman, former director of the Ulema Academy, Tariq Khan, an employee of the department and one Gowaria (what an outlandish name!) for 99 years at the “most expensive rate of one rupee per marla annually! They sold a large part of the land to people who built houses on it in utter disregard of the law banning construction within 200 feet of a protected monument.

The real scandal lies in the fact that while the lease was cancelled in 1992, the so-called lessees continue the occupation of the land, and have even put up notices offering plots for sale! When the lease was terminated the Archaeology Department directed the Lahore Development Authority to restore the monument to its original condition and lay a garden around it. Steps in this direction have still to be taken since the lessees had gone up to the high court in appeal.

The mausoleum has always been known as the “Sarw wala maqbara” or Cypress Tomb, and is the last resting place of Sharfunnisa, a wife of Khwaja Abdus Samad, governor of Lahore during the reign of Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar (1713-

responsible for the neglect, for the building I am talking about is neither historical nor protected. Everyone who has every been to Chiniot must have seen that magnificent private residence, Gulzar Manzil or Umar Hayat Palace, which, for size and embellishment and intricate woodwork is simply out of this world.

Its story is tragic. Sheikh Umar Hayat went to enormous expense to build it for his son Gulzar's marriage in 1938, but the son was found dead on the morning after the wedding, and, by special permission, was buried in the house. It is no way the responsibility of the state to look after this grand structure, though M Athar Tahir, famous as a cultural personality, did have some urgent repairs carried out when he was deputy commissioner of Chiniot. Frankly I am not aware of the present ownership.

Quite apart from questions of ownership and responsibility, the fact remains that Gulzar Manzil is a wonderful example of Chiniot craftsmanship and, by all standards, a splendid and most imposing haveli which must be unmatched by anything similar in this part of the world. It is to purchase, take over and maintain such marvellous residences and other structures that the National Trust was founded by the state in Britain and has acquired innumerable great homes that could no longer be managed by their owners. The point of the National Trust is that such build-

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element to it. Graveyards are the most encroached upon places because the dead can't protest and their living relations are too busy with the problems of life to bother. At Ghore Shah we buried my mother in 1933 in the midst of several members of her well-known Chishti family of Masjid Chinianwali. My English sister-in-law, who died of smallpox in 1936, about a year after my brother came back with her from England, was also buried there. When, in 1974, I suddenly thought of visiting their graves I couldn't find them.

This was not because of overcrowding but because they were at the edge of the graveyard and the area had been encroached upon by an influential resident of the

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locality. I brought a couple of senior members of the Chishti family to see the vandalism. They could only deplore the fact, while jointly we were unable see any solution to the impasse, for it was an impasse. We knew the graves couldn't be restored. But we did feel contrite and embarrassed when the caretaker blamed us for not visiting our dead for nearly four decades. "This had to happen," he said.

Apart from this personal involvement, Ghore Shah, named after a saintly faqir whose tomb occupies pride of place there, also has a unique cultural facet. Time has obliterated from my mind the

legend about horses associated with the faqir, but the fact remains that everyone who comes to pray there leaves a few tiny clay horses at the tomb. There are thousands of them any time you go there, and my daughters never tired of collecting a small horde whenever we went there together. It became a popular sight to show to other children of the family.

Even the land around protected monuments is encroached upon. My attention has been drawn to what is going on around the tomb of Sharfunnisa Begum in Begampura where scores of illegal dwellings have come up on Auqaf land over the years, hiding the

lessees had gone up to the high court in appeal.

The mausoleum has always been known as the "Sarw wala maqbara" or Cypress Tomb, and is the last resting place of Sharfunnissa, a wife of Khwaja Abdus Samad, governor of Lahore during the reign of Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar (1713-1719). She was a lady of spirit and always kept a copy of the Qua'ran and a sword by her side. Allama Iqbal is said to have mentioned her in Jawid Namah. The tomb is in dire need of attention, having been last repaired by the British in 1881-82.

From encroachments I move on to neglect of a fine building, although I'm not sure who is

by anything similar in any part of the world. It is to purchase, take over and maintain such marvellous residences and other structures that the National Trust was founded by the state in Britain and has acquired innumerable great homes that could no longer be managed by their owners. The point of the National Trust is that such buildings constitute a part of the heritage and cannot be allowed to go to rack and ruin.

There are countless such buildings in various parts of Pakistan. The only answer to their preservation is an organisation on the lines of the National Trust of Britain. Will the government ever take the initiative of setting up such a cultural body? ■