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## event

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.

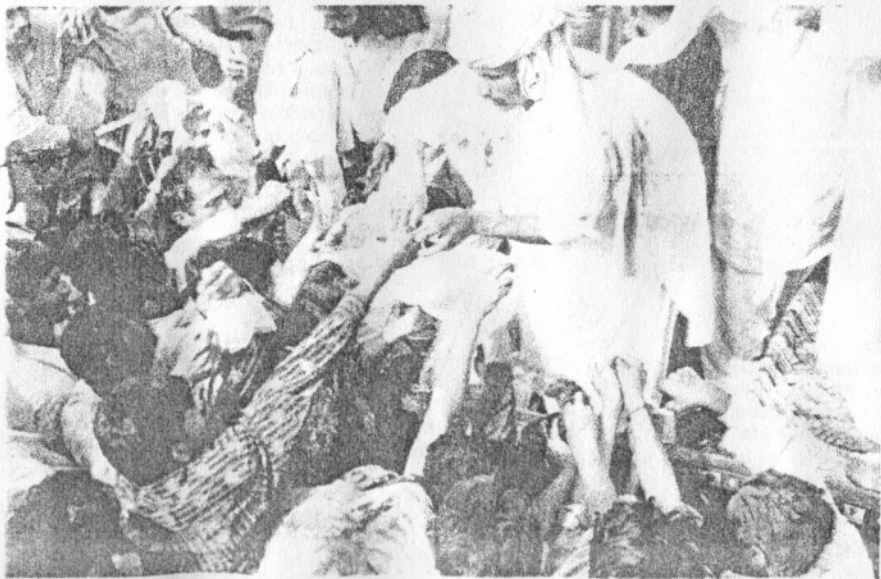
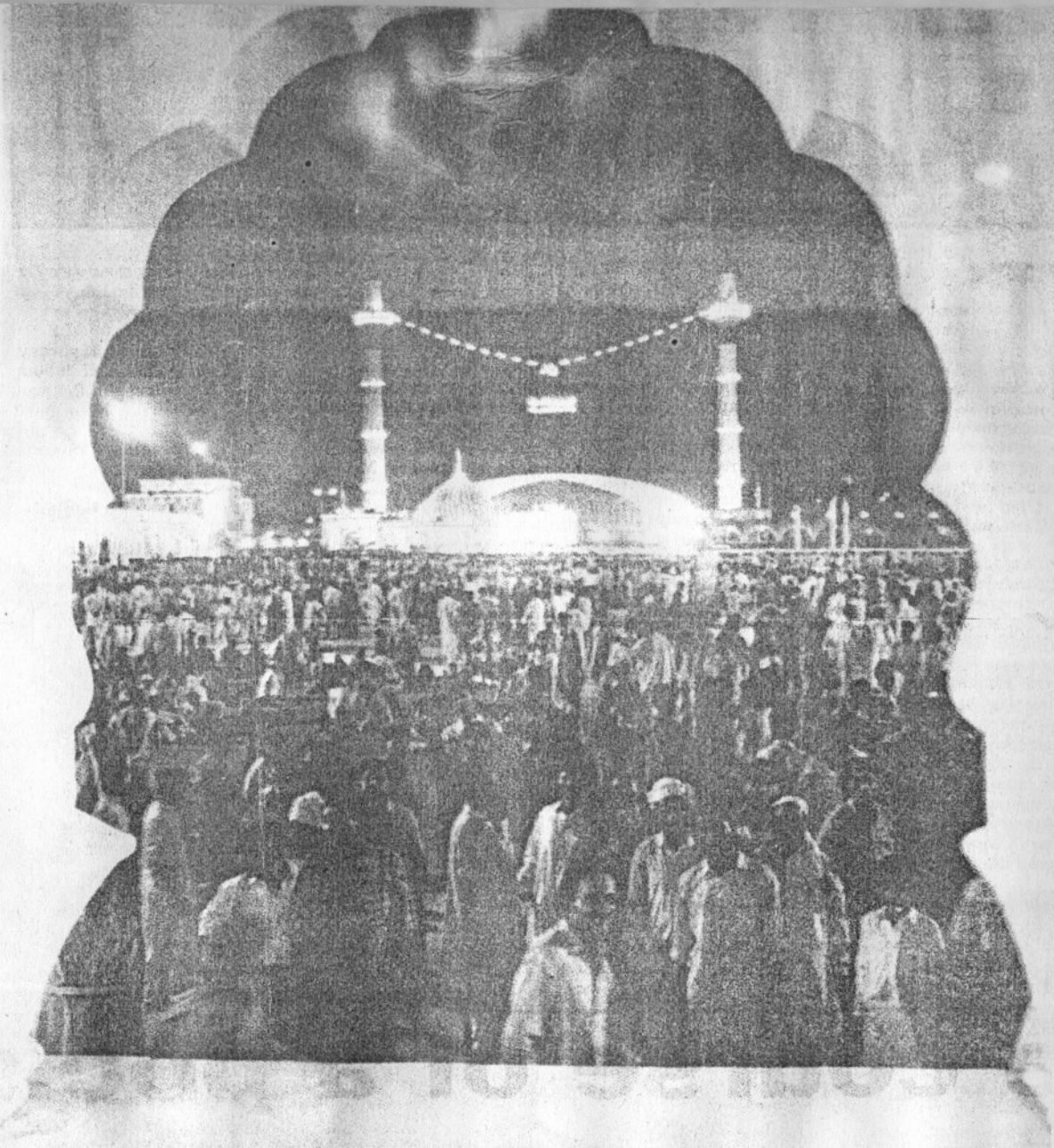
Extortion and inconvenience was what the pilgrims had to suffer at the 958th three-day annual urs which concluded here few days ago. The three million people who came to the Darbar from across the country faced immense hardships during their stay in the city. Their problems started as soon as they reached 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 Ganj by the traffic police for security reasons, but they dropped the passengers either at the Minar-e-Pakistan Chowk or Kutchery Chowk — about a mile from either side of the

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.

The same was the case with the parking space where motorcycles were charged Rs 5 instead of officially-allowed Rs 3, while cars and others vehicles were not allowed during the urs



The rush at the Langar at Data Darbar. Photos: Rahat Dar

days. This practice is not confined to the urs, there are complaints that motorists are overcharged throughout the year.

Over 99 per cent extortion cases go unnoticed by the administration as few people bother to lodge a complaint with the manager. Unless criminal cases are registered against the culprits and the Auqaf officials keep a vigilant eye on the

situation, this fleecing of the devotees will continue.

The visitors need to be protected from all sorts of fleecing, if for nothing else, then for the big donations they make during their visit to the shrine. According to an Auqaf department official, about Rs 45 lakh came out of the donation boxes installed at the shrine during the urs days. And donations keep

pouring in throughout the year. Thus the shrine earns millions through donations and auction of the shoe-keeping stalls and parking-lot space. But facilities provided to the visitors are very poor.

A shoe-keeper, on condition of anonymity, said they were being paid according to their capacity to extort the visitors. "Some shoe-keepers receive up

to Rs 700 per day and other benefits as they earn big revenue for the contractor. But, the visitors are partly themselves to be blamed for the exploitation as they sometime pay up to Rs 50 for keeping a pair of shoes," he remarked. Outside the shrine, vendors and adjacent shopkeepers were overcharging on soft drinks.

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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 pay homage to the saint. A man, who had come 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 Bhalwal and was residing at the Darbar for the last 12 years. "I spend my days working as a labourer or in search of a job. I sleep at the Darbar or adjacent parks and roads and have my meals from Langar, so I have to spend nothing on my food and accommodation. Whatever I earn, I send it to my wife and seven children living along with my widowed mother. Data Ganj Bakhsh is a true Data for thousands of people like me who get free food and accommodation at the shrine," he remarked.

An elderly woman, Zainab Bibi, with deep wrinkles on her face, said she is residing at the shrine since her husband's death in 1965. The woman who came from Jaranwala has three daughters and two sons married whom she married off during her stay at the Darbar. "I have found peace of mind here which only people visiting this shrine can experience and describe in words. A man comes here from London every month to pay homage to Data Sahab," she claimed. This may be an exaggeration, but it speaks volumes of her devotion to the shrine.