

# The curse of the Satees

SAJID ABBAS visits the Moree Darwaaza precincts where a well-known school for girls exists and talks about some sordid happenings done by the resident of that place a century and a half ago

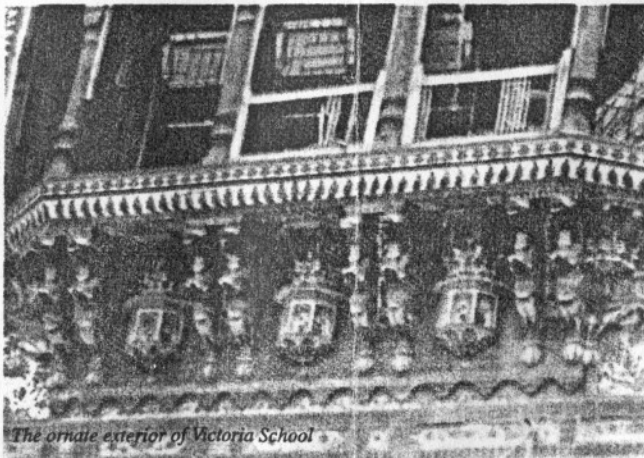
Every corner of Lahore has something or the other that can be classed as extraordinary and has something interesting about it. In the south-west quarter of the Old City there is a havelee at least a couple of centuries old. It is a stately mansion, copiously decorated on the outside and very pleasing to the eye. The place is now a well known school of the City, — the Victoria High School for Girls, Moree Darwaza, but close to a century and a half ago was the residence of one of the most crafty defacto rulers of this part of the world, albeit unlucky, for, he never lived to see himself sitting on the 'Gaddee' or throne and becoming the real or de jure sovereign.

One thing fascinating about the Walled City is that one can reach any given address there without difficulty. One will be helped by innumerable number of true Lahories on ones way to one's destination. The place is usually reached by a lane leading in from the Moree Darwaaza Bazaar, which in turn is in the south-western part of the City between the Bhaati and Lohari Darwaazas. According to popular legend the Moree Darwaaza was said to be the drain which emptied the gutters of the City out. Nevertheless, this could be an incorrect conclusion, actually the moree or the sewer of the City was near the north western corner of the City, in a place close to the Taxali Darwaaza. Moree Darwaaza was indeed a gate although so small that a rider could not pass through without dismounting.

To reach the havelee or mansion one enters the Moree Darwaaza Bazaar, passing the fish market of Lahore and proceeds northwards. Leave the first lane on the left and take the second one. Go on for a hundred and thirty paces or so, turn

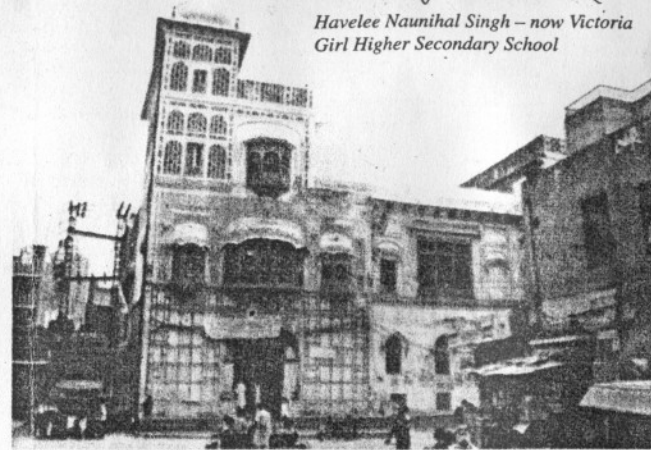
right and keep going for another fifty or sixty paces till a slight bend in the lane, then a few more steps and one will find oneself standing in a large open square, the Maidan Bhaiyan, before a richly decorated havelee.

The edifice, is one of the largest structure of the area. The architecture seems to be a mixture, of Moghul and Sikh style, perhaps it was an older Moghul palace and was altered and reconstructed in the Sikh Period. Though, it is now a school for girls, it was, a century and a half or so ago the residence of Naunihal Singh son of Kharak Singh and the grandson of Ranjeet Singh. It had become, by twists of events, the headquarters of intrigue, too, that had taken root right after the death of Ranjeet Singh.



The ornate exterior of Victoria School

Thirteen days after the last rites of passing away of Ranjeet Singh had taken place, Kharak Singh, his son, was proclaimed the Ruler in consultation with the Nobles and Chiefs of the land. Dhiyan Singh Dogra of Jammu was appointed the Prime Minister by his side. Nevertheless, another character, Chait Singh, was noticed to come



Havelee Naunihal Singh — now Victoria Girl Higher Secondary School

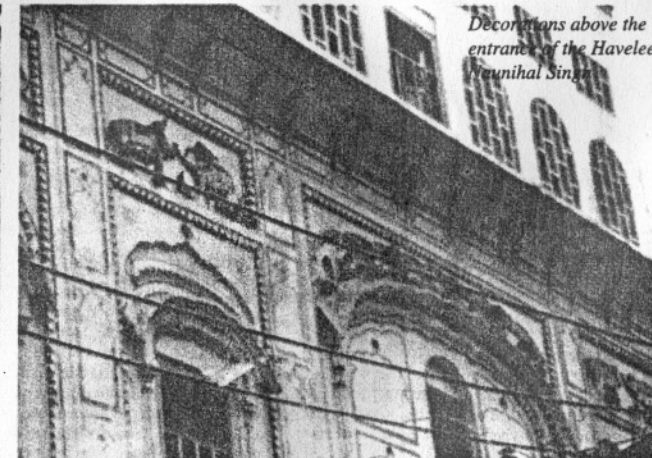
closer and closer to Kharak Singh who lent Chait Singh his ear a bit too often and much to the displeasure and discomfort of the other Chiefs and Nobles. So, it was decided, by them, to eliminate Chait Singh out of their way. Kanwar Naunihal Singh, the son of Kharak Singh, was selected to do the job which, perhaps, was to be done by the traditional

method of cloak and dagger. Kanwar Naunihal Singh agreed and executed the plan with his own hands. Naunihal Singh was just twenty years old at that time.

This affair had its after effects, too, which were more than ordinary. First, serious differences were created between father and son, Kharak Singh and Naunihal Singh, the

former never forgave the later for this act of treachery and, in due course, retired from active life to become a recluse. Secondly, the so-called prestige and position of Naunihal Singh rose in the eyes of the hawkish of the Chiefs. The secondary fall out of the situation turned out that the position and status of Dhiyan Singh, the Prime Minister, was lowered in the eyes of many a Chief. This was the beginning of hard feelings of Dhiyan Singh against Naunihal Singh. From that time onward Dhiyan Singh wove a web of intrigue to get rid of Naunihal.

Naunihal Singh became the defacto ruler upon the self-imposed withdrawal of Kharak Singh, but his



Decorations above the entrance of the Havelee Naunihal Singh

relations deteriorated further with his father, so much so, that when Naunihal Singh went to see the ailing and dying Kharak Singh a day before he breathed his last, he, Kharak Singh, refused to meet him and ordered the doors shut.

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the ladies accompanying the dead body of Kharak Singh, in preparation to be immolated, they cursed him saying 'may the curse of God descend upon you for torturing Kharak Singh and may you never sit on the Gaddee and become the Ruler'.

The curse did seem to descend, for when Naunihal Singh was returning to the Fort after putting a light to his father's pyre a portion of the gate, through which he was passing, along with Uddham Singh the son of Gulab Singh, gave way and fell upon both, killing the later right away and injuring the former, fatally, who breathed his last a few hours later. Some accounts say that even this was the handiwork of Dhiyan Singh who ordered the Royal Salute to be fired right when Naunihal Singh was in the Gateway. The heavy guns were purposely placed in position so that the vibration from these was enough to pull the gateway, down.

That day Lahore lost two of its rulers within the space of a few hours of each other. Their property was left to others to be looted or used. When Lahore was occupied and the Punjab was annexed to the territories of the East India Company the havelee was taken over by the new Government, for, it was a Royal Estate. It was later converted into a school for girls named after another royal personage, Victoria. ■