

# Data Darbar, where there is something for everyone

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WHEN anyone talks of Lahore, at some point there has to be a mention of Data Ganj Bakhsh. He died in the year 465 AH and today it is 1,423 Hijri, almost 958 lunar years, or over 900 Gregorian years. That is a very long time and life around his shrine has been the same. But what is life really like around his shrine?

We all know about him and most of us, at some stage, out of sheer curiosity or out of reverence, have visited the place. For the last 32 years as a journalist who lived just round the corner from the shrine, one has seen kings, presidents, prime ministers, governors, ministers and various other luminaries come and go.

But then beggars and pickpockets also are present in exceedingly large numbers, not to speak of the hungry or the lost. The pious are there and so are the crooks, probably more of the latter than the former. What goes on around this shrine is also part of the history of this city, and in days gone by Data Ganj Bakhsh was known as Ali Makhdoom Ganj Bakhsh Hajveri Lahori, for this is the way people in other lands know him. Who was he, after all, and why is he so respected almost a thousand years after his death?

Data Ganj Bakhsh came to Lahore in AH 431 from Ghazni in Afghanistan and he came with

Sultan Masood, the son of Sultan Mahmood Ghanzi. He originally belonged to Hajveri, and because of this, it became part of his name. Interestingly enough, the earlier accounts call him Sheikh Ali Makhdoom Ghaznavi Lahori, and not Hajveri, surely because he came with Mahmood Ghaznavi's son. The first wave of Muslim conquerors from the west saw the riches of the subcontinent being looted by the Afghani hordes. After the death of Mahmood Ghaznavi, came his son and the second wave of conquests. But with them also came many a saint whose sole objective was to spread the word of God, and among the first to come was Data Ganj Bakhsh. It would interest even an avid Lahori who claims the man as his own, to know that his ancestors are well marked on his grave. It reads: Here lies Sheikh Ali, son of Syed Usman, son of Syed Ali, son of Syed Abdur Rahman, son of Syed Abdullah, son of Syed Abul Hasan Ali, son of Syed Hasan, son of Syed Zaid Shaheed, son of Imam Hasan, son of Ali Murtaza, which is to say that Sheikh Ali Makhdoom Ganj Bakhsh Hajveri Lahori was just eight generations down the line from the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him).

But in matters of religious apprenticeship, he was a student (*mureed*) of Khwaja Abul Fazl, who was a student of Sheikh Ali Jafri, who learnt from Sheikh Shibli, who was a student of Junaid Baghdadi, who was a student of Syed Saqti, who was a student of Maroof Karkhi, who learnt from Dawood Tai, who learnt from Habib Ajmi, who was a student of Hasan of Basra, who was a student of Ali

Murtaza. Complicated as this lineage is, it led to the birth of Sheikh Ali Makhdoom, now known all over the world as Data Ganj Bakhsh.

So there he came to Lahore and planted himself in a small mud house just outside Bhati Gate in AH 431. In those days, so the legend goes, a powerful Hindu magician was the religious leader of the population of Lahore, who were almost all Hindus or Jains. This 'magician' challenged the young scholar and it is claimed, though I would tend to disbelieve any such assertion, that the magician actually flew in the air over the hut of Ali Hajveri. The saint dismissed such displays as "showing off" and after reciting the last two 'quls,' he blew towards the magician who fell to the ground and ran away. Word to this effect spread through the city, which was then enclosed in mud walls, and soon people, almost all Hindus, came to seek his blessings. It was then that he decided to stay on and serve the people with his knowledge and deep understanding of the human psyche. In a way, Lahore came to him, and he adopted it, and it was then that it was said that, "kings and beggars are alike before the saint." Almost 900 years later, it is still true.

The best thing is that people of every religion came here. Imagine that great scholars and saints like Khwaja Moeenuddin Chisthi of Ajmer and Khwaja Fareed of Pakpattan spent considerable time at this shrine in meditation and prayer. It was only during the time of Maharajah Ranjit Singh that the outer madressah was vandalized for its exquisite marble and

engravings. But then the Sikhs did this to almost every shrine or tomb in Lahore. A day after the marble was removed, the Maharajah began to vomit, as one account puts it. He was advised to appease the saint for the damage done to the outer building. So the maharajah set an annual income for the shrine and from then onwards always paid his respects when he passed that way. During the time of ZA Bhutto a grand outer building came up, and the Shah of Iran sent an exquisite door of gold and turquoise, which one can see even today. Nawaz Sharif went the full distance by rebuilding an entire mosque, and a beautiful one at that.

And if you look at the edges of all this grandeur, you will see extreme poverty. It is a haven for pickpockets and kidnappers. During my days as a young crime reporter, our team unearthed a "school of pickpockets" that had an elementary textbook on ways to pick pockets and the language used by them. We had then alleged that it was run by the police, but that was almost 25 years ago. Nothing came of the story. I learn that even today the area is auctioned out to such rascals, to use a Victorian phrase. And then there are the cookery houses. You can buy a whole 'deg' of sweet rice, or meat or pilau to distribute among the poor, who roam around the area in large numbers. For the hungry, it is a guaranteed meal. For everyone there is something there. So it has been for over 900 years. The shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh is something to everyone... and that is the way it will always be. — MAJID SHEIKH