

Lost grandeur

BY AMNA NASIR MALIK JAMAL

IN the heart of Lahore's old city, near Delhi Gate, stands Wazir Khan Mosque. It is surrounded by congested narrow streets, old buildings, shops, and the day-to-day hustle and bustle that is so typical of this area.

It was built in 1044AH (AD1634), by Hakim Illmuddin Ansari, during Shah Jahan's reign. Historical records show that he was a physician who cured the foot ailment of one of Jahangir's wives. Later, Shah Jahan made him his viceroy in Punjab and awarded him with the title of Wazir Khan. Once in a position of power, he went on to erect several mosques, bazaars and palaces, particularly inside Tibbi Bazaar and Taxali Gate.

The Wazir Khan Mosque is considered as a magnificent example of Mughal architecture, and it is covered entirely with arabesque paintings and lacquered tiles. The colourful exterior and interior has been done up with mosaics and frescoes, geometric forms, floral designs, calligraphy and Quranic Text. A strong Persian influence can be seen in its design and decoration as Persian artists supervised the local craftsmen.

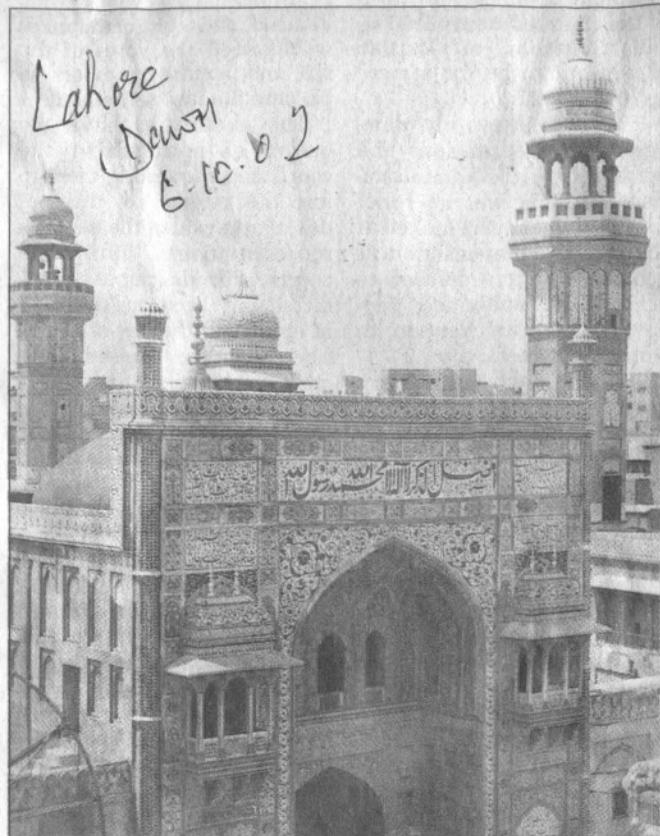
One can see exquisite impressions depicting trees, flowers (such as daisies, lilies and sunflowers), clouds, grapevine, fruits and vases. Art lovers, archaeologists and the common visitor to the mosque can't help but be enchanted by the beauty of the architecture. The

work is strictly inlay, not painted decoration. The richness of the designs, arabesque frescoes and superb calligraphy, having freshness in variety and colours, have had many admirers and makes this mosque a place worth visiting.

During my visit to Delhi Gate, I also visited this enchantingly beautiful example of Mughal architecture. However, the first sight that greeted me on approaching the mosque gave a rude shock to my aesthetic sense. At the main gateway, goats were fastened and there was considerable muck, that emitted a strong stink, to make one turn back even before entering the mosque's premises. Some children could be seen scratching the frescoes by using sharp tools.

Rooms and corridors, with their vestibules, arches and doorways, were in a state of decay due to bad treatment. Some rooms were on rent from the *Auqaf*, as one of the tenant told me. A room on the side of prayer chamber was used as a store room, and it had frescoes that must have been beautiful once. But, alas, the walls were damaged and the inlay work had been scrapped off at places, with many broken pieces of tiles lying in a corner. The cracks were visible in many portions of the floor.

I was stunned with disbelief after seeing this disturbing sight and people's careless attitude. Another part of the

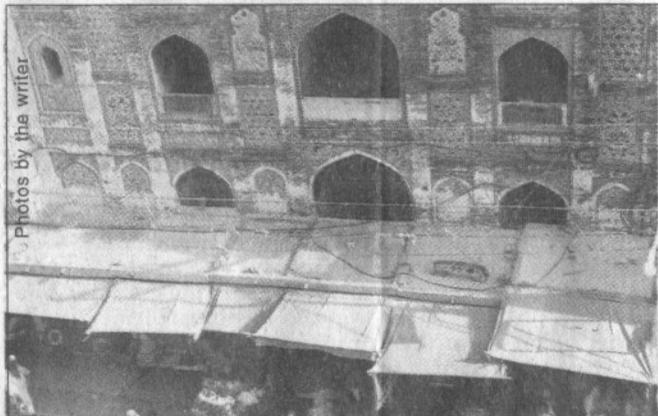


The grand Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore

mosque that had lost its original grandeur was the exterior of south and north sides of the Prayer Chamber, which faced the bazaar. It clearly depicted the callous and indifferent attitude of the authorities towards the maintenance and restoration of the place. A couple of years back, the Director of *Auqaf* said that work for preservation and rehabilitation would be starting but, unfortunately not concrete measures took place.

Recently, there came a

promising news that the provincial minister for religious affairs and *Auqaf* had resolved to get repair and rehabilitation work on the mosque underway. But, according to a Punjab Archeology Department official, no measures seem to be forthcoming. One hopes that whatever is left of the original craftsmanship and grandeur of Wazir Khan Mosque will be preserved for the future generations before it is too late.



Shops spoil the facade of the mosque facing the bazaar