

Low on conservation list

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Niwin Masjid, a six hundred years old mosque in the old city, is maintained by the people of the area and demands immediate attention of the authorities

By Asim Mateen

Not many in Lahore are aware of the existence of a historical mosque named Niwin Masjid, founded 25 feet below the ground level in the area of Kucha Dogran between Lahori and Shah Alami gates, near Mitti ka Chowk. The area is known as Nawan bazaar.

The mosque which was built in 1460 by Zulfiqar Khan, a senior official in the court of the then governor Mahabat Khan, is considered to be one of the oldest mosques in Central Asia and a most unique one in the Punjab.

While visiting the area it is hard for anyone to find the mosque. Due to its low founda-

tion from the ground level it remains unnoticed amid the adjacent houses. A small wooden door in a congested bazaar which is hardly 3 feet wide is the only entrance to the mosque. While going downstairs, one is surprised to see the massive structure of the mosque. Despite being very old the building is still in good shape.

The mosque has a spacious courtyard and inner rooms are covered with large-size domes. The arches are wide and present amazing blend of skill and beauty. Some old people of the area said that there were two *ghar-gees* in the mosque for the drainage of water, which have been filled up with the passage of time.

Despite its low location the

mosque has an effective drainage system. "The mosque has never known any drainage problem — an evidence of good planning and drainage system of that time," said Allauddin, a resident of the area.

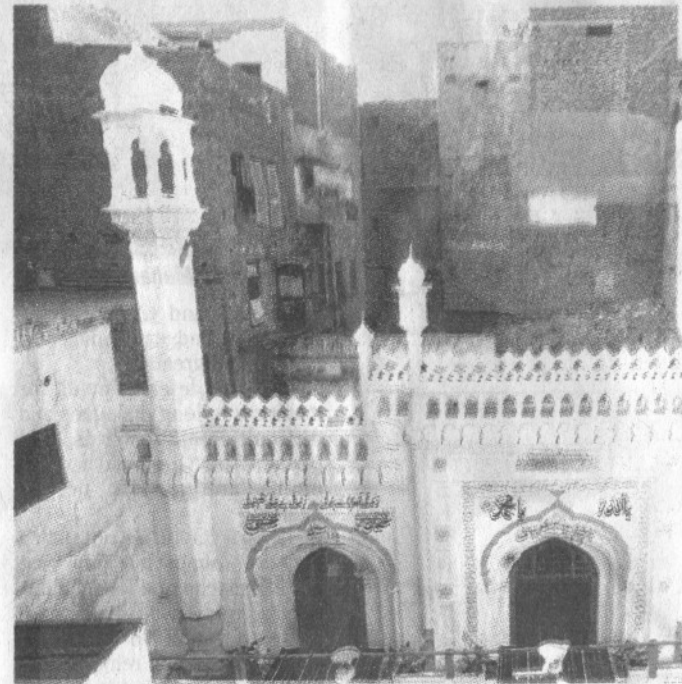
On the other hand, the most noticeable thing is the poor maintenance of the mosque. The whitewash here does not go with its architecture. A pity that a place of such historical significance has been throughout neglected by the Archaeology Department and left on the mercy of the locals, like the Marium Zamani Mosque (named after Shah Jahan's mother) inside Masti Gate. The Mohalla Committee maintains the mosque. They even bear the expenses of the renovation

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The mosque has sustained many severe shocks. First, the earthquake in 1904 severely damaged the mosque's structure and then it became a victim van-

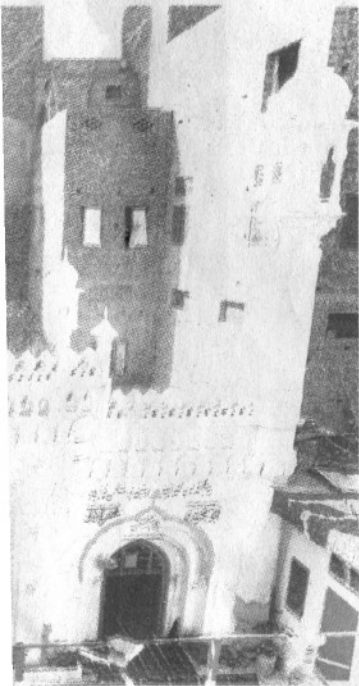


Niwin Masji, 25 feet below the ground level. Photos: Rahat Dar

dalism at Partition. Unplanned construction of two additional rooms by the management in the courtyard in the past twenty five years has greatly affected the beauty of the mosque. But, even today some of its faded

colourful patches of fresco on some portions of the walls are slightly seen from the whitewash indicate its glory.

"We have several times informed the Archaeology department about the condition



Haji Saeed Ahmad.

Haji M. Nawaz, another member of the mosque committee, said, "This mosque which is almost 600 years old, has been left to the mercy of the people. We have been trying our best to maintain the structure."

An Archaeology department official had his own grievances. "We don't have enough funds to maintain a large number of places of historical importance but we tried our best to do the maximum we could within our limited resources. Our priority is to focus on especially those monuments which are of public interest. It is almost impossible for us to look after every monument. As far as Niwin Masjid's renovation is concerned, nobody contacted us in this regard. Mostly in the case of mosques people carry out the maintenance work on self-help basis. This takes the burden off us to some extent. We are always ready to provide our experts in such cases in order to keep the originality of the place."

This will mean that a large number of places will not get the kind of attention these deserve.

of the mosque and demanded its renovation but all in vain, the officials at Archaeology Department seem to be least bothered about the preservation of this cultural heritage," said a mosque committee member,