

From persuading reluctant caretakers to allow a close look at the historical structure to peeping through keyholes, the old stepped wells take some discovering

By Salman Rashid

# The Great Hunt of La



Lahore  
22.12.02

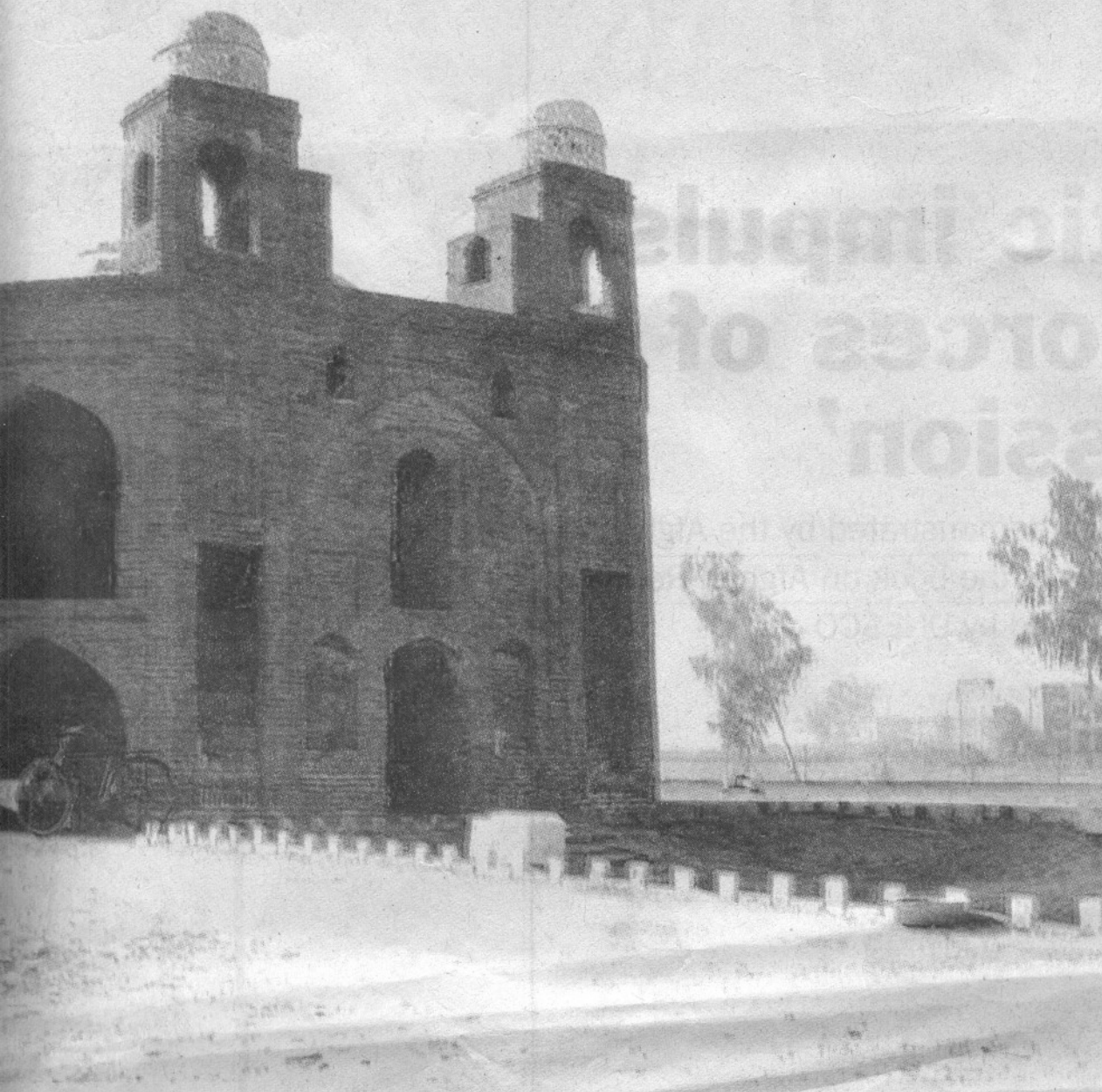
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one he had surveyed, he said. He had studied four others as well and written a paper. Very kindly he gave me a copy of this document. Two of these were in east Lahore by the road that went to Delhi and Agra and two in south Lahore by the village of Niaz Beg. That set me off on a trail to check out all of these wells.

Armed with Dr Dar's paper I took off one day for Harbanspura that is now a

pavilion with domes and turrets where the stairs leading down into the well begin. Of course I a lowly civilian could not enter the cantonment and was duly stopped at the check post. I showed the Military Policeman the picture in Dr Dar's paper and he said there was no such building in Harbanspura. My heart fell. They've mindlessly demolished it, I thought dismally. And since the building I wanted to

# Great Baoli of Lahore



domed temple of Shiva was foremost among these. It was now a boys' school. We asked for the baoli and they led us to the water tank central to most Hindu rituals. It was huge, stepped and empty with rushes growing in its bed. To one side were two fabulous havelis whose architecture gave away their age as no less than two hundred years. Time was when buildings were made to last and economic considerations did not dictate the division of legacies. Now we build a house for only ten years, and when the owner dies tear it down, apportion out the piece of land and rebuild ten little rabbit warrens on it.

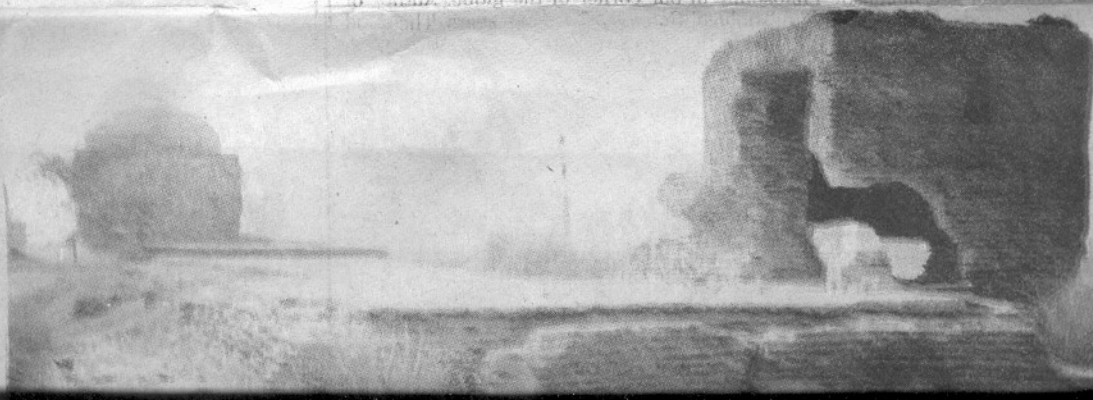
The building was in the possession of Mewati speaking refugees since independence, as indeed was most of the rest of Bhadar Kal. But no one could tell us of the baoli for they knew the water tank by that name. Much later I was to learn from my friend Iqbal Qaiser, the historian, that there were four baolis here whose water fed this sacred tank.

Our inquiries led us around in circles. Dr Dar mentions one baoli 'close to the central sacred tank,' but the locals knew nothing of it. Then one man told us there was a stepped well in a house near the temple of Shiva. We went back the way we had come. The house was locked, its occupants 'gone to work.' Through a hole in the door some youngsters showed us the brink of a well in the courtyard. The stairs, they said, were in the neighbouring house.

We asked if we could get into the neighbouring house and whispers passed between the boys. Then they shoved one towards us. He lived in that house and would take us in. Reluctantly the boy led us to his front door, told us to wait and disappeared inside. Ten minutes later he came back to tell us there were no stairs and that there being no grown man in the house we could anyway not come in.

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**heritage**

Since I have long looked up to Dr Dar as my guru, it was natural to turn to him. He was surprised anyone should remember his survey of 1987 and said that the baoli was about two hundred years old. The Lakho Dehar baoli wasn't the only

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Armed with Dr Dar's paper I took off one day for Harbanspura that is now a cantonment East of Lahore. Long before this regular cantonment came up, there were a few military barracks here and the place, according to Dr Dar, was known as Baoli Camp. He also tells us that this baoli is marked on the 1837 map of Captain Garden as 'Khara Baoli' - Brackish Well. The picture accompanying Dr Dar's text shows an impressive

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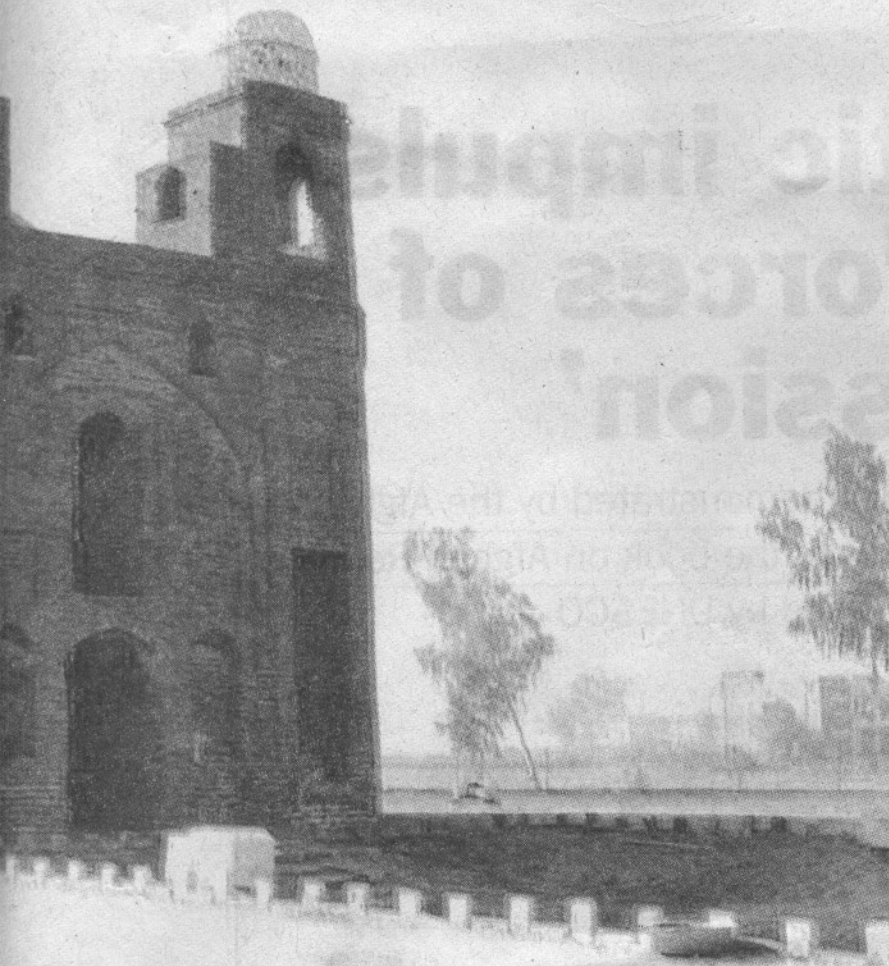
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The man was standoffish, more, I suspect, by training than by nature. No, said he, there was no *baoli*. I flaunted the picture again, but there seemed to be no such structure in Harbanspura. Just then a man in civvies walked in and asked my Major who I was. He referred to me as 'buzurg' and I told him the buzurg's name. He had seen my television documentary and we were instantly friends. This new establishment of identity brought back my Major's memory of the existence of the *baoli*. A man was called for and told to take me to Baoli Park.

The octagonal pavilion was exactly as shown in Dr Dar's picture. The domes of its turrets had been plastered at some point with pieces of broken porcelain - the army's idea of sprucing up the shabby structure. Inside, the main dome similarly had been turned into a poor man's Shish Mahal with hundreds of mirror shards. Perhaps because the pavilion was used as a residence by a group of soldiers, it was in surprisingly good condition. Except, of course, for the crudely installed electric fixtures.

The steps leading into the well were covered with clay that had very likely flowed in with rainwater. The subterranean chambers were similarly filled up and I could only see the openings leading into the two rooms that would have served as resting places for weary travellers escaping the furnace heat of Punjabi summers in long ago times. The domed roofs of these underground rooms showed intricate patterns in brickwork and I rued not having brought my tripod for the light was too low for a hand-held shot.

The well itself was dry. When it still had water and when the army had first set up this park, they had installed fountains in the well. Now the piping and nozzles sat there useless and rusting. Before the cantonment came up, the *baoli* was in the middle of a wilderness. Today it is the centre-

(Top) Pavilion of the Harban was once the steps; (above)

piece of the army's park, though the army have carried out their own 'repairs' that have nevertheless preserved the building from being vandalised.

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In the clay-filled underground chamber I thought the third decade of the 19th century when the *baoli* was built. I could almost imagine the parade of travellers, soldiers, merchants, ordinary izenry, vagabonds, ascetics, even crooks on the run pausing here in the shade to refresh themselves for the road again. Perhaps they too were mesmerised by the patterns of brickwork on the roof above them. Unlike some buildings where have seen ancient graffiti there was nothing on this to give away the secrets of those travellers.

On the road again, I headed past Burki village, across the famous BRB Canal and turned right on the country road to village Brahmanabad that on the same road leading





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(Top) Pavilion of the Harbanspura baoli from the north; (left) Pavilion of the Harbanspura baoli: Notice the slope in the foreground that was once the steps; (above) Brahmanabad baoli: The pavilion in the background, the well structure over the auxiliary staircase.

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of Lahore via Harbanspura. Beyond the village the baoli stood ruined and deserted by an old graveyard. Unlike the extravagant pavilion at Harbanspura, here was a

me out and told me of treasures buried in the well. One also said there was a subterranean connection between this well and another similar structure some five kilometres to the south. This fixation with secret underground passages never fails to amaze me. No amount of education can perhaps convince these people that engineers in medieval India were not conversant with the science of tunnel building; that they were simply incapable of constructing an underground passage of any length.

As I was leaving I knew that another few years and the baoli of Brahmanabad built in the reign of Shah Jehan (1628-1658) would be gone. Sooner than later, it will be taken apart brick by brick so that the land can be brought under cultivation. The wells on the road to Delhi were done, and so was the day. Those that lay on the road south to Multan would have to wait for another time.

South of Lahore by the road to Multan and near the village of Niaz Beg lies village Bhadar Kal - like Niaz Beg just another mohalla of Lahore. Dr Dar wrote that this was a prosperous place during the Sikh period and that, being sacred to the followers of goddess Kali, was the site of a great festival until 1947. With my friend Atta ur Rehman Sheikh there I went to see the next baoli on Dr Dar's list.

The village was impressive with several magnificent 19th century buildings. The lofty

courtyard and its staircase had been bricked up. The village that he wrote had 'great touristic potential' has been cruelly vandalised by people who took it over after independence. They still call themselves 'refugees', with links 'back home.' For fifty-five years and two generations Bhadar Kal has been a temporary home for them - theirs only to wreck.

That left one more baoli. A few kilometres farther south in the village of Shahpur just off Multan road the tomb of Pir Nasir ud Din was being busily renovated when we arrived. The well was supposed to be nearby, but we saw no signs of it. A man pointed us in the general direction: it was behind a small mosque across the road. All that remained was the shaft of the well by the boundary wall of a house, its staircase and pavilion long since demolished. The dry well was being used as a receptacle for rubbish.

Years ago Dr Saifur Rahman Dar had told me that I could make my way across Punjab along ancient pathways if I knew the baolis and bridges. And that is a journey I have always wanted to make. Perhaps now in the early 21st century I still can. But the way things are falling to pieces another curious traveller coming fifty years after me will not see any of these ancient milestones. Nor too will there be any stories of hidden treasures and secret passages. I suppose if I have to do it, I must set out on my long baoli yatra soon.

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smaller and simpler one with a squat dome. The steps were covered with earth and the well was dry.

A curious square-shaped structure stood to one side of the well above the stairs of which I could make out nothing and referred to Dr Dar's paper. This was a covered staircase leading directly to the water in the well. This auxiliary flight of steps, he wrote, together with the ventilators in the underground chambers were unique features. I could not see the ventilators, however, because here too the rooms below were filled with debris. If there was ever any plaster on the interior, it has long since disappeared taking with it whatever graffiti travellers might have left behind.

Some youngsters from the village came around to check