



The mosque that ^{Nabi - Lahore 31-12-00} Bhikari Khan built

The road leading from Dilli Darwaaza to the Taxaali Darwaaza right on the other side, cuts through the City and forms its East-West axis.

It is the busiest thoroughfare of the walled city. It takes about two hours to negotiate the busy main road if one takes a leisurely walk along the track, observing and enjoying the activities of the shopkeepers, shoppers and passers by. The business that one sees, repeats in a kaleidoscopic manner the entire activity of Man from the day he takes his first breath in this world till he breathes for the last time.

Apart from the scenes of the life of the dwellers of the City, there are monuments which serve as reminders of the history of the place. One such place is right in the middle of the East-West Axis. It is a mosque resting on a platform high enough to accommodate a large number of shops below. The elevated structure is visible from a distance, in addition the domes are unique, for they are gilded. The mosque is none other than the Sonehri Masjid, which happens to be one of the most wonderful sights of the City of Lahore.

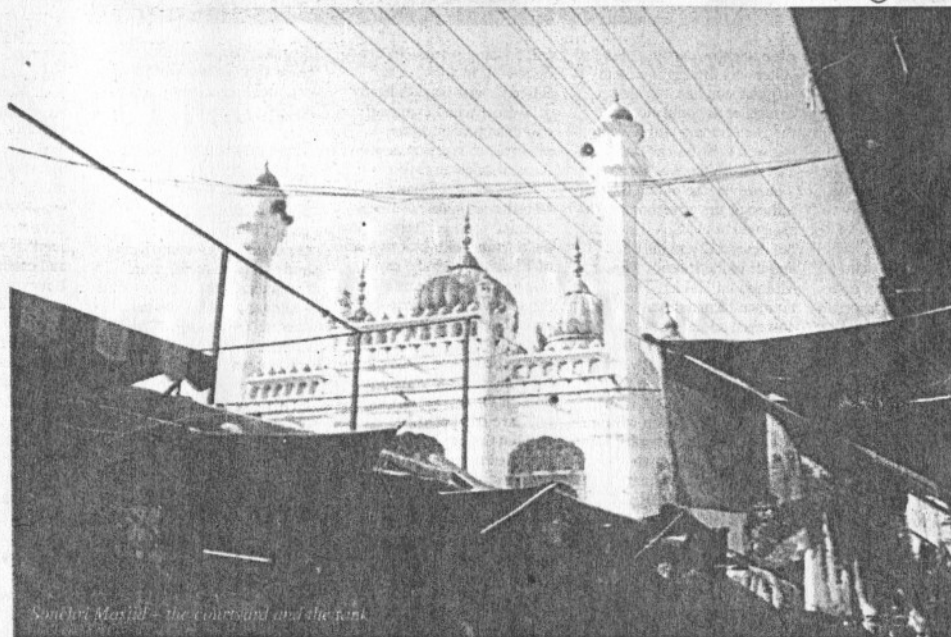
The Mosque happens to be one amongst the old edifices of the walled city of Lahore. The structure, though repaired

SAJID ABBAS visits one of the most wonderful sights of the Walled City of Lahore and narrates the story associated with it

over the centuries, is ornate as all other structures of that era were, when it was built. Its gilded domes are still shiny as they were when they were made, two and a half centuries ago. That is, perhaps, due to the skilful gilding of the copper sheets that go to make the skin of the domes. One must give credit to the workers and technicians of those days who, obviously, must have taken more than normal trouble to produce a cladding that has remained fresh and shiny even after withstanding all the environmental hazards it had to face during the past so many years.

The Mosque has been built on the roof of the shops below, on purpose. From the very beginning, the rent collected from the shopkeepers, for the shops, went towards maintaining the Mosque and meeting the expenses of the staff employed there, including the remuneration paid to the prayer leader.

The mosque was built by Nawab Mir Bhikari Khan, one of the Omeras or Elite in the Court of Nawab Moeen-ul-Mulk alias Mir Mannu, who was the Governor of the Province during the times of Ahmad Shah, one of the Lesser Moghuls.



Sonehri Masjid - the courtyard and the minaret

Old chronicles describe Nawab Bhikari Khan to be a well-grounded, erudite person of noble character, besides being a Godfearing and just administrator. When he desired to build a house of worship, some time in 1750, he made a request to Mir Mannu the Governor for purchasing a piece of land in the open space at the head of Kashmiri Bazaar.

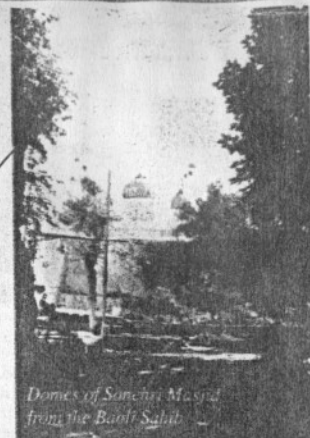
When Nawab Bhikari Khan planned to build the Sonehri Masjid, there was already a tiny mosque at the edge of the space. It was discovered that the entrance of Sonehri Mosque fell in the space where that small mosque was located. The Nawab offered to include the small mosque in the bigger one. Here the mullas

stepped in and refused to allow any such thing. They were adamant to allow any change in the small mosque and stuck to their guns. The result was that the Nawab was forced to provide two entrances to his mosque, each opening in the bazaars on the sides of the mosque. The whole arrangement was patently odd and highly unaesthetic. It remained so for ages till the Government changed so many times and finally fell in the hands of the English.

It fell to the lot of Captain Nisbet, who was the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, during the early days of the English Occupation to see that the dream of the late Bhikari Khan came true. The small mosque which was deserted and lying

unused since a long time was demolished and the area included in that of the Sonehri Masjid and the entrance to it was relocated and rebuilt in the eastern side as Nawab Bhikari Khan had originally desired.

The mosque remained safe from being defiled for most of the time during the Sikh Rule, but when the Baoli Sahib, which happened to be next door, was rebuilt during the days of Ranjeet Singh, trouble started. The Sikhs placed their Scriptures, the Garanth Sahib in the premises of the Baoli Sahib after restoration. One day the Sikh priest and his followers objected to the calling to prayers, the Aazaan, by the mulla of the

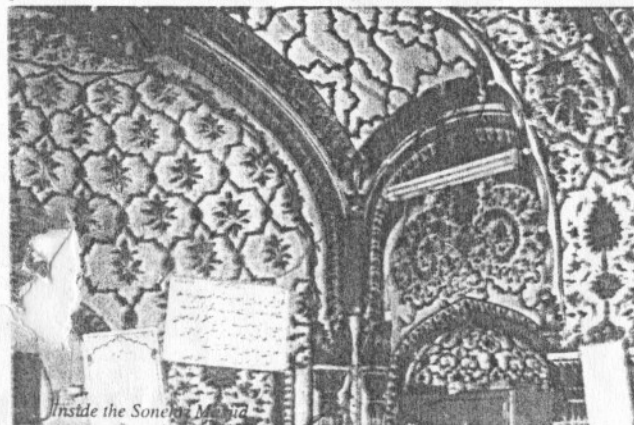


Domes of Sonehri Masjid from the Baoli Sahib

Mosque and to make matters worse, laid a claim to the Mosque itself. The matter was brought before Ranjeet Singh who decided in favour of the Sikh priest and his followers. The mulla was driven out of the Mosque and a copy of the Garanth Sahib was placed in it.

An old chronicle goes to the extent of saying that before placing the Scriptures in the Mosque the place was 'cleansed' by giving it a coat of cow dung. This seems to be a bit odd, for 'cleansing' a place by giving it a wash of cow dung is a known and confirmed Hindu practice, it is hardly known to be followed by the Sikhs. In any case, the occupation of the Mosque by the Sikhs was big shock to the Muslims of the City who gathered at the residence of Fakir Azeez-ud-Deen and Fakir Noor-ud-Deen and requested them to make a representation to the ruler. The result was that the Mosque was restored to the Muslims but they were prohibited from giving the call for prayers, in a loud voice. In addition the income from renting out the shops was confiscated. Nevertheless, the income was restored only when Egerton was the Governor, during the days of the English.

Nawab Bhikari Khan, the builder of the Mosque met a sad end. After the death of Mir Mannu, his widow expressed her wish to marry Bhikari Khan, who expressed his inability to do so. The Begum, taking it as an insult, invited the Nawab, on a later occasion and had him murdered in her house. His body, it is said to have been disposed off by throwing it into a well or ditch and was never found. ■



Inside the Sonehri Masjid