

Lahore's exquisite mosques inside its walls

By Majid Sheikh

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WITH the coming of the Muslims to Lahore approximately 1,000 years ago, the old walled city has had a curious relationship with mosques. While the hugely beautiful Badshahi Mosque attracts the most tourists, the more exquisite of these places of worship are tucked away inside the walls of the old city.

Now this is not to belittle the unique history of the Badshahi Mosque, which was primarily an exhibition of the grandeur and authority of the last of the great Moghals. Their empire just withered away, thanks mostly to growing illiteracy and intolerance. In a way the situation then is somewhat similar to today's. The condition of most mosques reflects the reality of the growing mass illiteracy and intolerance to other religions, and now even to Muslim sects. Only we do not have the hindsight of time to understand what is happening to us today. That is where history comes into play to guide us through these difficult days.

The initial steps taken by the Muslims in Lahore were by scholars and saintly persons, who preferred to debate and discuss, and to learn in the process. The end result was a very happy mix.

Toleration assisted considerably, both the native population and the new converts, not to speak of the series of invaders who found Lahore silently lapping them up. Ali Hajvery, popularly known as Ganj Bakhsh, was the first of the saints that came to this city, and stayed on. And with Islam came mosques. Today, there are 123 mosques per square kilometre, or one every 100 yards. The fun is that the mosques of various sects tend to move side by side. There has always been a competitive edge to mosque making in the city.

If we begin a brief journey along the Bazaar Hakeeman deep inside Bhati Gate, we reach the crossing of Tehsil Bazaar. Just before this junction is the famous Fakirkhana, well known but not maintained as such an institution should be. Just next to the newly built school of miniature painting is the Imambara Mubarik Begum, and bang opposite at the beginning of the narrow lane is a 200-year old mosque maintained by a Wahabi imam. A few yards ahead at the crossing of Tehsil Bazaar are two mosques, both over 100-years old, one a Sunni mosque maintained by Sheikh Mubarik, and the other a Shia

mosque maintained by the Ali family. Along Tehsil Bazaar, just 50 yards ahead is another set of two mosques, again a Sunni-Shia combination.

If one were to follow Tehsil Bazaar right up to the point where it meets the street coming from Mori Gate, but technically in the precinct of Lahori gate, one would in the 300 yard walk find 11 mosques and three madressahs. None of the mosques of madressahs are new, for all of them are well over 100-year old. But the beauty lies not in the mosques themselves, but in the way in which the local population has maintained a fascinating balance of toleration. Yes, there is the odd sharp remark here and there, but it is basically to restate their own stand. Never does it spill over into hatred, for that is not what Lahore is all about.

Two of the 11 mosques mentioned in this street are over 300 years old, and one is from the Moghal era with exquisite brickwork. Mind you this is just one street bang in the middle of the city. If you were to begin walking from Chowk Rang Mahal at the end of the Shahalami, if you turn to the right and walk along Kashmiri Bazaar, you would

be heading towards Delhi Gate. Along this stretch stand three of the most beautiful mosques in the entire sub-continent. At the crossing of Rang Mahal is the Sunehri Masjid, and this is not the one inside the Lahore Fort. Immediately to the right turn towards steps that lead up to a white mosque with huge domes covered with brass. It is an exquisite mosque in the grand Moghal tradition. The sheer simplicity of the design, which incorporates classic Moghal architecture, against the brass domes, stands out.

If you further walk up the bazaar another Moghal era mosque stands out for its exquisite brickwork, certainly a superior finish to the Moghal marble finish that is its hallmark. Further up comes the exquisite mosque of Wazir Khan, an outstanding piece of architecture and without doubt one of the most beautiful mosques in Lahore. Much older than the Badshahi Mosque, it stands out as a testimony to the excellence of its planning. Just outside is an open space where travellers used to set up their tents and sold their wares. In a way, one can almost see the same environment there, minus the crude plastic

pots that jar the eye.

But that is not enough. Just opposite is another brick-finished mosque of outstanding beauty. Smaller in size, but with a history all its own. The sheer sweep of variety in architecture inspires awe. And the old city has hundreds of streets and lanes, some through which one can barely pass. Yet in the dark alleys mosques abound. The sad part is that almost all the other places of worship of the Hindus and the Sikhs have been razed, or converted into living quarters. This is in sharp contrast to the tolerance that Lahore always has shown. The years of Ziaul Haq saw to it that the very best of this ancient land and city lost its bearings. We shall always remain the poorer for what we have inflicted on ourselves.

But there are bright spots, too. Just opposite Lahori Gate is the Anarkali Bazaar. Almost 50 years down the ancient bazaar, to the left, is the oldest church of Lahore. Portions of it are made of wood. This was allowed and funded by Emperor Akbar on the request of a Portuguese priest. Its interior takes you back to an era when toleration thrived. It was the golden age where a million flowers bloomed.

Dawn

Do libraries still count in a digital age?

By Linton Weeks

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WASHINGTON: Here we are, a-muddle in the middle of the Information Rage. At our very fingertips, we've got access to more than 3 billion Internet sites teeming and streaming with info on everything from aardvarks to zymurgy. We don't need no stinking libraries.

Or do we?

Good question. Whom do we ask? AltaVista? Google? Ask Jeeves.com? Nahhh. Let's ask a librarian.

Now'd be a good time. Some 10,000 are descending on the Washington Convention Centre for the midwinter meeting of the American Library Association. For the weekend, at least, Americans were home to the World's Largest Help Desk.

Excuse me.

Do we need libraries anymore?

Nancy Kranich, chief librarian at New York University, is exuberant

and beaming and armed with a tote-bagful of pro-library brochures. She's the president of the ALA.

"Yes," says Kranich (sounds like "chronic"), who quotes stats like others quote Keats. She cites a 1998 Gallup Poll in which Americans overwhelmingly believe that libraries will be necessary for the foreseeable future and that 81 per cent use libraries at least once a year. "We need libraries more than ever," Kranich says, "to bridge the digital divide."

What the devil is the digital divide?

Only about 41 per cent of Americans have access to the Internet at home, she explains. The rest do not. For them, "the library is the number one point of access." Some 95 per cent of public libraries provide Internet services to patrons.

So libraries offer computers, copy

machines and a free stubby pencil when we need one — sort of like a publicly-funded Kinko's?

The library is much more. It has books you can borrow. And music. And sometimes art, maps, videos, video games and lots of other things. Some loan out tools; others toys, Kranich says.

The best libraries provide: answers to questions, programmes to expand our horizons and, if we know how to use the catalogue, an indexed, Windexed window to the rest of the world and the universe beyond. In Liverpool, N.Y., for example, the public library offers online training to entrepreneurs. "We're trying to spark small-business development," says the library's David Fulton.

Other libraries feature foreign language classes, literacy courses, after-school activities, guidance for expect-

tant mothers and other opportunities.

So could you please explain why we need librarians in the age of the almighty Internet?

Shhhh! Whisper. Librarians are more necessary than ever, says Kranich. In the nonstop tsunami of global information, librarians provide us with floaties and teach us how to swim.

Librarians, Kranich says, "are a great source for giving people just the information they need to make good decisions."

In a way, librarians are Yahoos — you know, human search engines. They vacuum in vast amounts of words and images — some trivial, some profound — and arrange, organize and filter them for us. "We have always been cataloguers," she says. "Librarians are selective." They are critical and choosy in ways that computers never will be.

Libraries are like the ultimate 3-D Web sites.

Whatever happened to bookmobiles?

The beloved buses, step vans and other chunky vehicles that carry books into the hinterlands are still putt-putting around some rural routes.

A few, called cybermobiles, have been updated with computers hooked up to the Internet via satellites. At the Chester County Library in Exton, Pa., the traditional bookmobile is rigged with a pair of personal computers. Each computer has a radio modem and a rooftop antenna.

What if I need information when the public library is closed?

Some libraries are staying open later; others are offering innovative after-hours services. A few are fighting fire with fire, using the Internet to

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assist patrons. Sixty or so institutions, under the aegis of the Library of Congress, are ramping up a round-the-clock online reference service scheduled to debut in the summer.

Are there more statistics demonstrating the importance of libraries?

"Libraries are busier than ever," Kranich says, whipping out a handy pamphlet. Stats show that: Americans go to libraries — public and academic — three times as often as we go to the movies. We check out an average of six books a year. From nearly 16,000 libraries. More than there are McDonald's franchises, Kranich loves to point out. Inside them, librarians answer more than 7 million questions a week. (Some dumber than these.)

And librarians never ask: "Would you like fries with that?"—*Dawn/The Washington Post*