

The Punjal reaches its las

SAJID ABBAS visits an old haveli in Lahore which was once believed to be haunted and in later years launched one of the most legendary and loved personalities of this land

There are innumerable spots in Lahore, especially, in the old City, that are of special interest. Some are of historical importance, some are examples of architectural beauty, some commemorate an event, some are associated with legends of persons or even ghosts.

The inner precincts of Mochi Darwaaza has a number of such places. There is the Lal Khoo, said to have been a bathing place of a saint of the Sikh religion. A little farther, past the Chowk Nawab Sahib, is the Mubarik Haveli, where the world renowned brilliant jewel, the Koh-e-Noor, changed hands, Ranjeet Singh taking it from Shah Shuja.

In the same Chowk Nawab Sahib, turning left, there is a narrow lane at the end of the street which leads to an old haveli in the Mohalla Peer Gilanian, belonging to a family of Gilani Syeds who settled here, according to the caretaker Muhammad Rafiq Piracha, almost half a millennium ago.

The haveli, now dilapidated in some parts and looking as a fairly large affair, is in fact, in two portions. The northern half was originally occupied by the grandfather of Peer Jani Imam of the Syed Family and the southern half added to it, later. The interesting bit is that the southern part belonged to a Hindu family and was haunted by Spirits who made the life of the Hindu occupants, miserable.

When the Syeds moved in, the Hindus subjected their new neighbours to a 'test', by offering them their portion, provided, that the Syeds drove the Spirits away. The Syed accepted and moved in the other portion, too.

While the Syeds were settling, it is



said that, they spread their laundry on a line tied to a tree in the courtyard. After a while it was noticed that, the washing was no longer on the clothesline, it was spread on the tree, instead. The Spirits seemed to be showing their presence.

The Syeds, as the legend goes, asked a servant to step in the courtyard and simply announce that 'the Syeds are now in occupation of the place, the Spirits better behave and leave the place, failing which, they, the Syeds, will be constrained to use other well tried methods to evict the miscreants'. Since that day no Spirit or ghost is known to have played any prank in the haveli.

That event, is said to have happened five centuries ago, in the days of Akbar. Another miracle is said to have taken place in the first half of the twentieth century when Peer Ashraf Ali a descendant of the earlier Syed was living in the haveli.

On the last Saturday and Sunday of

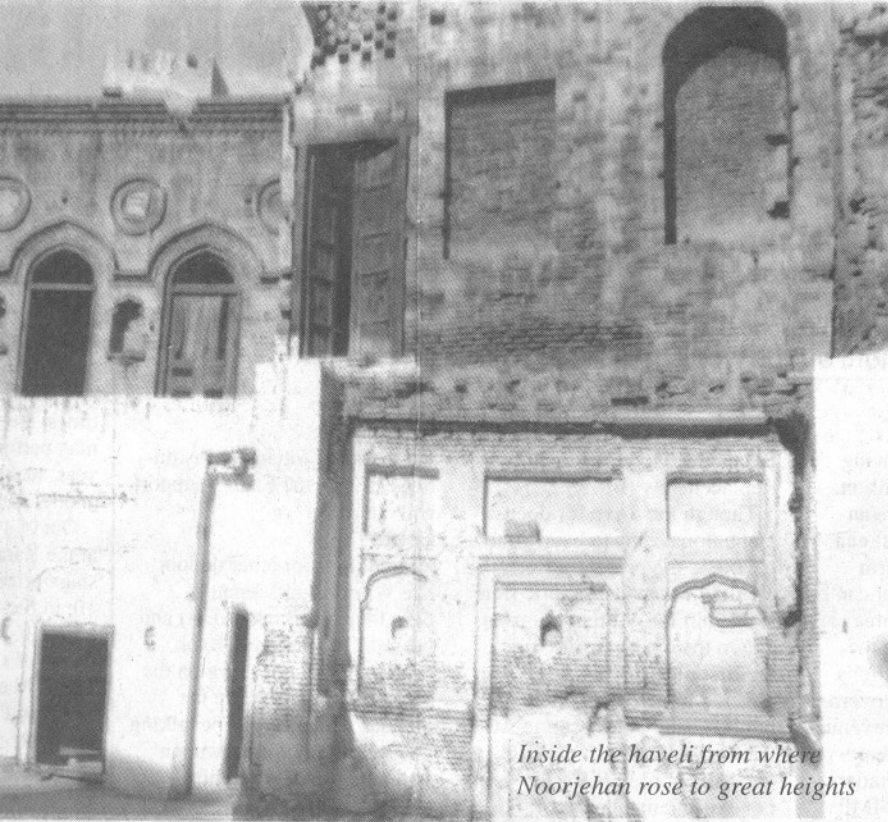
March a great festival takes place in Lahore. The venue is the mausoleum of Lal Hussain and his disciple, Sheikh Madho, in Baghbanpura. Singers, vocalists and instrument players from over the country, gather there to perform non-stop for two days. The festival is a well-known 'Mela Chiraaghaan' or Festival of Lights which lasts till the early hours of the following Monday when people start dispersing to get ready for attending to their normal business.

Some decades ago, especially before Independence, the musicians and artists did not return home right away, for, immediately afterwards there happened to be musical gatherings elsewhere in the City. One such gathering took place in Mohalla Chehl Bibian and the other in Mohalla Peer Gilanian. Monday morning after the Mela Chiraaghaan, the mohallas were converted into large bazaars, where temporary stalls were set up, selling trinkets for the ladies and

Punjab Mail

its last station

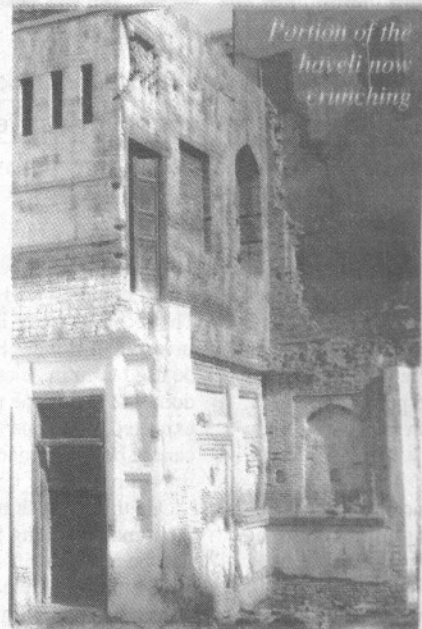
*The Northern
2-1-01 Lahore*



*Inside the haveli from where
Noorjehan rose to great heights*

little girls, toys for children, freshly made 'katlummas' or pancakes fried in oil and garnished with spices for the hungry participants, kebabs rolled in naans and other eatables for everybody.

In Mohalla Peer Gilanian, the haveli of the Syeds used to be the venue of the musicians and the vocalists, both young and old, novices and the maestro. It was at one such gathering, sometime in the early nineteen thirties that a memorable gathering took place. Notable artists of the day had collected in the haveli of Peer Asghar Ali. Waheed-un-Nisa alias Raushan Ara Begum was there, so was Ustaad Bare Ghulam Ali Khan. After the



*Portion of the
haveli now
crunching*

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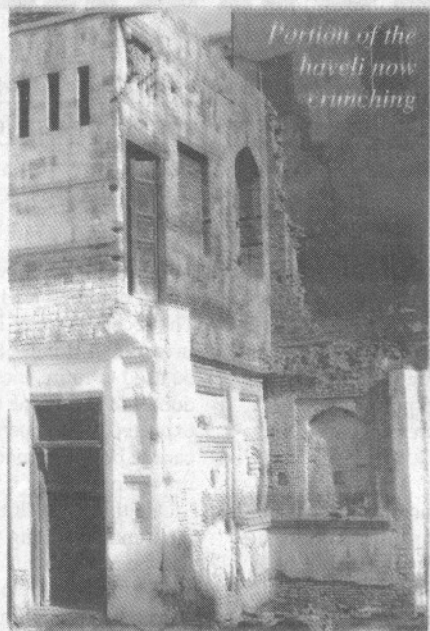
*The southern part of the haveli
where the spirits were driven away*

two luminaries had finished their performance it was the turn of Allah Wasai, a pretty delicate looking lass, perhaps not yet in her teens. She picked up a small pot or vessel, balanced it carefully on her shoulder and started chanting a popular number, bouncing into a frolicsome hop but in perfect harmony and step with the rhythm of the tablas.

The performance over, Peer Sahib, the owner of the haveli, requested the young girl, 'Let us hear something about our land — the Punjab'. The young lady thought for a moment, then clinked into a catchy tune 'Sada des Punjab piyara, eh sub da raj dulara — ending the song with the words — 'Ehdi guddee aasmaanaan te charh jaway'. The entire gathering was enamoured and broke into an uncontrolled and loud applause. Even Peer Asghar Ali was carried away and could not restrain himself from showering praise on the young lady and

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blessed her, saying 'Ja, teri guddee aasmaanaan te charh gayi. — May you rise in life to reach dizzy heights'.

The little lady, finishing her performance, overwhelmed by blessings and good wishes of the Peer and the unrestrained applause of the gathering, broke into tears of joy. Little did the gathering know what was in store for the young Allah Wasai.

Allah Wasai was the youngest of three sisters of a modest family of musicians and singers, moving from place to place during the season of festivals and went as far as Calcutta. There, she and her sisters, appeared on stage in various theatres and acquired fame. So popular did the group become that they were nick-named 'the Punjab Mail'. The moment the group used to make their appearance on the stage, the entire gathering cried out aloud 'there comes the Punjab Mail'.

Incidentally, the Punjab Mail was the link between Lahore and Calcutta in those days. There was no air traffic. The Mail left Lahore at eight in the morning, rolling, first, over the tracks of the North Western Railway till Delhi then on those of the East India Railway to steam into Howrah station of Calcutta next evening.

Allah Wasai was, later, spotted by a young film editor working in Calcutta and Lahore. He had learnt the trade under the tutelage of Ezra Mir, the top-most film editor of the South Asian Sub-Continent of his time.

The young film editor was Syed Shaukat Hussain Rizvi, he teamed up with Dulsukh M. Pancholi, the legendary film business man, who pioneered the Punjabi language film and established Lahore as an acclaimed centre of the Sub-Continent for making films. The third member of the team was Master Ghulam Haider the well known composer. All three of them, introduced Allah Wasai to the world of films.

It did not take Allah Wasai long to make her mark in filmdom. First she lent her voice to the lyrics of 'Gul Bakaoli' and took the Sub-Continent by storm, then after playing bits in various films, she appeared as the leading lady and a full fledged heroine, in 1940, in Pancholi's 'Chaudhry jee'. From then on there was no looking back for her. Allah Wasai was no longer a babe, she was now Noorjehan the future legend of the world of music — known later in life as the Queen of Melody, Noorjehan.

Almost half a century later, on December 23, 2000, the legendary Noorjehan, nee Allah Wasai, breathed her last, bringing the Punjab Mail to a final halt. ■