

Lahore Dawn
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The glory that was

THE Saarc guests visiting Lahore have spoken kind remarks of the beauty of this ancient city, which in the eyes of old Lahoris has lost much of its grandeur inherited from the Mughal and British periods.

None of the past invaders from the east or the west spared this city, but after every destruction, the city regained its traditional glory and beauty. Once it fell so low that Lahore was considered a locality of Ichhra. This has been stated by Faqir Syed Aijazuddin in his book, *Lahore Recollected: An album*. He quotes from G.R. Elmslie's book, *Thirty-Five Years in the Punjab*. "In olden times, Lahore was an unimportant village: the tradition of Ichhra's greatness has survived to the present day. The Benares Shroffs (bankers) still send their hundis (bills of exchange) addressed to 'Lahore, near Ichhra'."

We have been told that it were the Sikhs who had destroyed the

beauty and glory which was Lahore. Yes, that is a fact. But why forget other facts also? From Babar to Ahmad Shah Durrani, one spared Lahore. The Mughals first destroyed it and then contributed to the glory and beauty of this ancient city. The British to whom this city owes much, were not behind the Sikhs. They converted some mausoleums into churches. Some churches were decorated with the marble criminally lifted from Mughal monuments. Aijaz writes: "The epicentre of the cantonment was the garrison church of St. Mary of Magdalene described by contemporaries as one of the most beautiful churches in northern India. The white marble flagstones in this church were taken from the pathways of the small garden in front of the Diwan-i-Khas pavilion in the Lahore fort."

How the Muslim buildings were destroyed during the British period is no less a crime than that

committed by the Sikhs and the invaders from all sides. The biggest Eidgah was constructed by Noor Jehan where now stands the Lahore railway station. This place was a big and prosperous market where traders from Central Asia used to come and stay. The Lahore railway station was constructed by Mohammad Sultan, a Kashmiri Muslim who had a varied career as a wrestler during the reign of Ranjit Singh, a soap manufacturer and latterly as a major contractor patronized by the British administration... His less laudable services to the Muslim community were the removal of bricks from old buildings, including the mosque of Sitara Begum.

The nature of the ruins at the railway station site is: "the Lahore

station was built among the ruins of the ancient city. Great difficulty was experienced in laying the foundations of the various station buildings owing to the depth of the ruins over the firm soil below. Another such example is the dismantling of the Taxali Gate which

in its architectural individuality was unique." This can be confirmed from William Simpson's water-colour painting includ-

ed in both the books compiled by Aijaz.

This gate was intact till 1864 and Aijaz says: "One of Lahore's early sacrifices to the demands of modernity, Taxali Gate — the only gate on the western side of the old city — was dismantled completely. No trace of it remains except the name and its association with the site of the

old Mughal mint." This gate was also associated with 16th century sufi poet Shah Husain and his mentor Shah Behlol, the great grandfather of Hyder Ali and Sultan Tipu.

How the gardens of the city were destroyed is reflected by an incident narrated by Suri in his *Umdatul Tawareekh* quoted by Aijaz in his book, *Lahore — Illustrated Views of the 19th Century*: "What account should be given of this mischief-making group which had ... gone towards the garden of Jamadar Khushhal Singh (the site of the present Governor's House) and had uprooted the pleasant trees of that paradise-like garden and had secured for themselves everlasting misfortune and the store of a permanent bad-luck with the result that in the twinkling of an eye the garden which used to have spring always began to look one smitten with everlasting autumn."

The British got that building

from the Sikhs and the Sikhs from the Mughals. Aijaz says: "When the British succeeded the Sikhs as rulers, they treated the tombs of Lahore with the same lack of sensitivity as the Sikhs had shown to the mosques of the city. Many tombs were adapted for use as offices or residences or even as churches. The tomb of Mohammad Qasim Khan (a cousin of the Emperor Akbar and a patron of the wrestlers) became the nucleus of the new government house. The British administration acquired it after 1849 from Raja Tej Singh. In March, 1851 ... the original tomb chamber was converted into the main dining-room. The idea of eating above the grave of a Mughal nobleman does not seem to have affected the appetite of any of the subsequent occupants of the government house."

This is the sad story of this great city, always ruled by pygmies after the fall of the Mughal Empire.—STM

Punjabi Themes