

The Shahalami of Rai Lakpat

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IF any portion of the old walled city of Lahore suffered the most during the ravages of the partition of the Punjab, it was the entire Shahalami Gate area. Along with the old historic gate with its wooden drawbridge over the 'moat', all the old 'havelis' were burned down. In the carnage came the 'claim squads', who sold off the bricks. By September, 1947, it was 'ground zero'.

The 'Shahalami' gate got its name from Moazzam Shah, the second son of the last great Moghal emperor Aurangzeb, who died in 1707. Moazzam battled for the throne his younger brother Azim and ruled for five years, dying in Lahore in 1712. It was a formidable gate with huge wooden gates, which were shut at night. Even till the 1930s, it had a functioning drawbridge over the Ravi, portions of which flowed round the walled city. At night the bridge was pulled up to keep outsiders away.

Inside the gate, the very first 'mohallah' was known as Bazaar Hattar. At the very head of the bazaar were two magnificent 'havelis', considered by many as among the finest in the entire old walled city. The lane emerging from the bazaar is still called 'Lakpat da Phalla'. These were the 'havelis' of Rai Lakpat; those village Kot Lakpat is now part of the expanding Lahore. Lakpat Rai was among the richest men in the entire Lahore area and its suburbs, owing huge tracts of land, hundreds of shops inside Lahore's walled city and in Mauza Mozang and Mauza Ichhra. He also had huge food godowns in the Akbari Mandi (market) and stored his own wheat, rice and red chillies there. He was in the classic sense, a super hoarder, who picked up essential food items when they were cheapest, and sold them to the wholesale market when they were expensive. There is a tiny lane in Akbari Mandi still known as 'Lakpat di Arath'.

Diwan Rai Lakpat and his brother Diwan Rai Jaspat built two huge 'havelis' from the finest small bricks and used the finest lime mortar. Both the 'havelis' were three-storey buildings with exquisite wooden balconies and in the middle of both buildings were huge courtyards. The date of construction can be gauged from the fact that they were built in the days when Nawab Zakariya Khan was the governor of Lahore. On the sides of the main havelis were other smaller buildings, all meant for guests and for entertainment. To entertain his special guests, Rai Lakpat built yet another 'haveli' in the 'Paapar Mandi' inside Shahalami.

His wealth can be gauged from the fact that when his eldest son got married, each and every person living inside the walled city of Lahore was presented with a bag of 'desi' sugar (shakkar) weighing two-and-a-half seers. Another source claims that one lakh (100,000) bags were made to be distributed in Lahore, Mozang and Ichhra. The entire Akbari Mandi's 'shakkar' stock was purchased by the diwan as part of the celebration, which went on for a week.

During the Sikh era, Maharajah Ranjit Singh confiscated most of the buildings. The families of Rai Lakpat were seen as collaborators against the Sikhs. When the British took over in 1849, they decided to auction the property. Half of the property was picked up by Mollaf Katib, those families started living there, while the other half was purchased by another Hindu businessman called Sohan Shah and his brothers, all of whom partitioned the portion to have their own smaller 'havelis'. The two brothers had property in Mozang, along with the famous Lakpat Talaab (pond). The villagers saw that the owner and his sons were no more, and they knocked down the entire property and sold off the bricks.

The pond of Jaspat Rai remained, though a gent by the name of Kallo, on orders from Maharajah Ranjit Singh, took over the property and sold it in smaller bits. It later transpired that he had posed as the only remaining relative of Rai Lakpat. Inside the walled city, the remaining 'havelis' of Rai Lakpat were taken over and handed to the family of the Nawab of Multan, who had collaborated with him in conquering that city. The scoundrel Kallo tried to claim that, too, but the Sikh ruler forced him to give up his claim and passed a royal 'firman' giving the property to the Multani nawab's family. The interesting thing is that when the British took over, Kallo tried to reclaim the three 'havelis', especially the one in 'Pappar Mandi', but the British thought it prudent not to oblige and passed orders to that effect, securing the claim of the Multani nawab family.

Then came the carnage of partition. Most of the killings in Lahore took place in the Shahalami area. A massive fire was started to flush out the rich traders. By the time the fire was put down, each and every constructed building, including the ancient gateway, had collapsed. In the carnage the claim mafia moved in. Bricks were sold by anyone who could remove them. In one massive fit of madness, one of Lahore's oldest portions was lost forever.

In its place came up the present Shahalami Bazaar. Concrete replaced the bricks of old. New face started business with a work ethic that will yet take many years to mature. But then life goes on along new avenues. The historic gateway and its drawbridge are no more. The 'havelis' are lost. Today we remember Rai Lakpat because of the name of his village, far removed as it is from the old walled city where once he distributed sweets on a scale never seen since. — MAJID SHEIKH