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# The mosque that Jodha Bai built

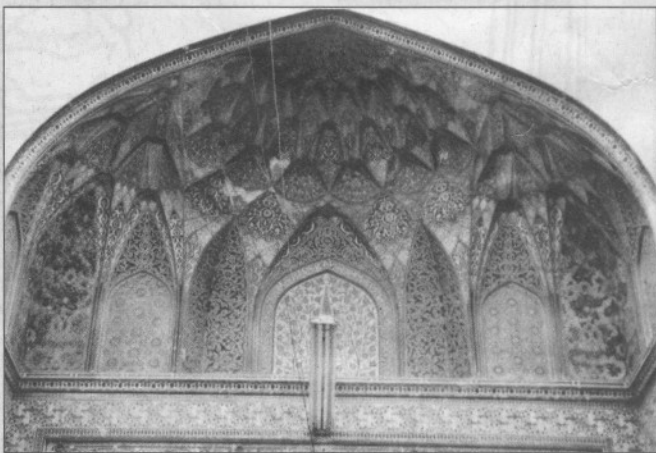
By Mariam Qureshi

**LAHORE:** Emperor Jehangir's mother, Jodha Bai, the daughter of the Maharajah of Amber, may not have been a Muslim, but she did make sure that a magnificent mosque was built to celebrate her son's birth during Emperor Akbar's reign in 1023 AH. Mariam Zamani Mosque, also known as Begum Shahi Masjid stands inside the old Lahore Masti Gate and is known as one of the city's first mosques.

Legend has it that the gate was originally called Masjidi Gate after the mosque, but over time its name was corrupted to Masti Gate. The story of the mosque is perhaps no different. It is said to have been originally built exclusively for Mughal princesses, which would explain the breathtaking beauty of its fresco detail that is replete in the prayer chamber. Chronicles of the time claim, "Never in the history of the architecture of early Mughals do we find such an extensive and exclusive use of decorations." The mosque includes three domes, one large and two small and it is made of brick cemented by chunam of such fine quality that even after so much wear and tear the strength of the building seems to depend entirely on its adhesive properties. Architects would be hard pressed to find similar material today.

Tourists get lost in the exquisite surface details that overflow with geometric, floral and inscriptional designs. The artisans tried to give the ceiling a three-dimensional feel by adding soffits, niches, squinches and arches. Each of these surfaces has a different pattern and the small spaces in between are elegantly filled with stars and the attributes of Allah in Naksh characters. Historians claim that the mosque's colour scheme is unrivalled by any other Mughal building in Lahore.

The current imam of the



mosque, Hafiz Hafeez Hassan Fareed Imam, told Daily Times that the mosque has been misused over the ages. During Ranjit Singh's reign it was used as a manufactory for guns and gunpowder. And the only time a government has paid it any attention was in 1850, when the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, Major McGregor, decreed that it would only be used for its original purpose, worship.

"The mosque survives because of the respect the local people have for it," said the imam. "Local shops pay for its expenses and neighbourhood households donate also." The mosque's electricity bill alone comes to about Rs 8,000.

The ladies and empresses of Lahore used to enter the mosque from the back door as they came directly from the fort. It is said that the mosque had a tunnel, which leads all the way to Delhi but is now blocked.

From the mosque's courtyard one can glimpse the top of a local mandir, which is also said to have been built during Mariam Zamani's reign. Nestled in the residential area, the mandir protrudes out of a horizon of shabby buildings and is partly shaded by a large, crooked peepul tree. "This is known as the Mai Ka Mandir (old woman's mandir)," said Kausar, a woman who lives in

the area. The mandir is said to be haunted; an old woman with loose tresses, wearing a long black gown, roams around the mandir at midnight. You can hear the tinkling of her anklets throughout the neighbourhood, locals say.

"When my grandparents arrived in Pakistan and settled here there was a statue of a Gaae Mata (mother cow) and a worshipping bell inside, but they have since disappeared," she said. Even though tourists come here from all over the world to admire this building, the Auqaaf department has not done anything for its conservation, she said. Instead they take Rs 200 in tax from the already poor owners of the one room mandir. The crumbling mandir is now used as a storehouse by the owners.

Unlike the exemplary display of religious tolerance that its founder displayed, when the Babri mosque incident took place a mob of people climbed onto the minar of the mandir and broke its gold plated paw. Whether an unruly mob or simply time and neglect, perhaps these pieces of the past will all meet the same fate. And then the mosque that Jodha Bai built will slowly crumble and disappear only to exist in a history textbook or newspaper article.