

Allama Iqbal lived here

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By Ayesha Javed

■ House the poet lived in to be demolished

LAHORE: An old marble plaque high up on the wall behind a hustling mithai shop is the only real reference to the historical significance of the house. On it, in faded black ink are inscribed the words "Allama Iqbal lived here in 1905".

Shanaz, 35, moved in here with her family only a few months ago but doesn't seem to be enjoying living here. "The house is in such poor condition that it is barely habitable. When we moved here three months ago the paint was peeling off, the window frames were distorted and the floors cracked." She tried to make some improvements to the four-room, upper story portion she lives in, but as her son points out, "so much more work is required".

Senior residents of the area vouch for the fact that Allama Iqbal lived in the house in Bazaar-e-Hakima, behind Bhati Gate, for five years. "He was about 21 and studying at Islamia High School when he took up this room," says Mian Khushnood, a local photographer. Mela Ram, a Hindu trader, owned most of this market place at the time and he rented the house out to the poet.

Muhammad Bashir, who claims to be 100, remembers Allama Iqbal's time at Bazaar-e-Hakima well. "He was always writing. Even if you went to his house at midnight, you would find him sitting on his table and writing away," he said.

Saleem Khan describes the



(Left) A room at the house Allama Iqbal lived in. (Right) Muhammad Bashir and Ghafoor have fond memories of the poet. SHAISTA BOKHARI

poet as well mannered, nicely dressed and affectionate towards children. One of these children was Ghafoor, who used to prepare the huka for Allama Iqbal every day. "He was rather fond of the huka and you would always find one at his side. I remember him as a very respectable man: there were always people coming over to meet him but he would rarely go anywhere."

These gentlemen have fond memories of Pakistan's national poet, but another senior resident of the area tells a different tale. "Those who say he was an affectionate and sweet-tempered man are trying to camouflage the truth. Allama Iqbal was very hot-tempered and hated being disturbed. Once the neigh-

bours were playing a game of cricket and their ball fell into Iqbal's room. When a young boy went up to retrieve the ball, Iqbal shook the boy till his teeth started rattling and he broke out crying. We all knew that when Allama was busy writing, he was not to be disturbed; the slightest knock on his door could provoke a shouting match."

Saleem, a shopkeeper, now owns the house. "I plan to demolish it and build apartments here," he said. What about the historical significance of the house? "What can I do? I don't have enough money to preserve it," is his blunt reply.

While the government's interest in the house is restricted to occasional visits and surveys, even

Allama Iqbal's family does not seem interested in the house. "We can only put pressure on the government to take over this building. But I do feel that the people of this nation should realise that the responsibility of saving the house lies with all of them and not just with Iqbal's family," said Yusuf Sallahuddin, Allama Iqbal's grandson, who lives in the Walled City.

Saleem plans to proceed with his demolition plans in the next year or so. If he succeeds in doing so, the city of Lahore will lose forever all the stories this house and its people have to tell. Property dealers have priced the house at a mere Rs 700,000, but some would say it is invaluable.