

Doongi Masjid: in the embrace of the earth

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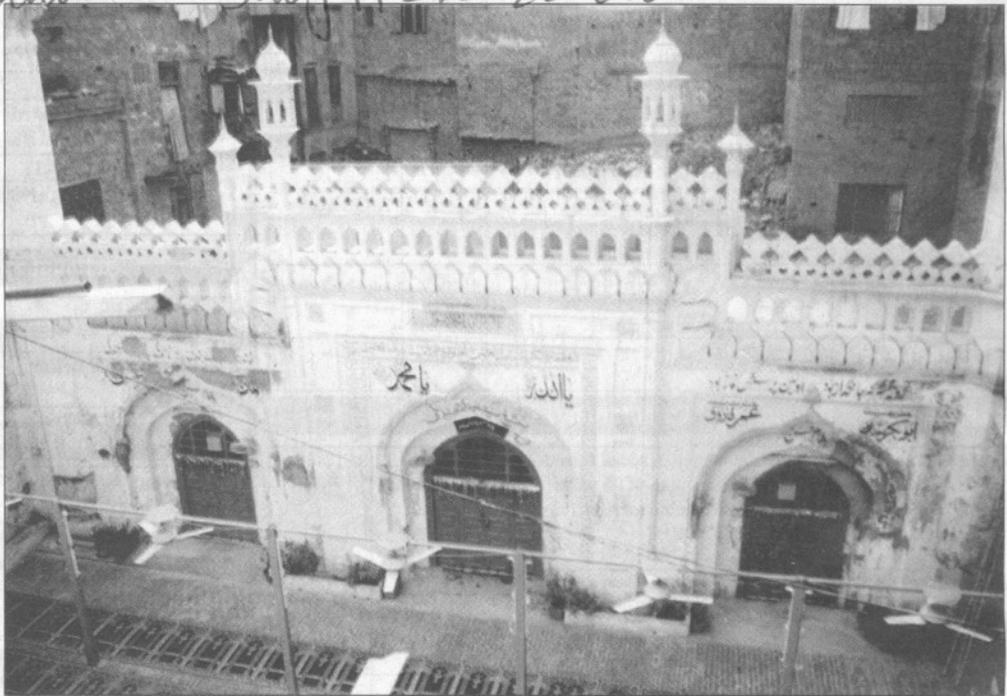
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LAHORE: The minarets of most mosques reach out to the sky as if to branch the distance between heaven and earth. But there is one mosque in Lahore that has perhaps shunned this sense of aesthetics and preferred instead to nestle in the embrace of the earth. Doongi Masjid, as its name suggests, is shaped like a bowl.

The mosque, situated between Lohari and Shahalami, is one of the many historical structures in Pakistan that impress upon us the grandeur and aesthetic genius of our ancestors. Historians state that it is among the first mosques built in the Punjab and was constructed in 1460 during Ibrahim Lodhi's reign.

The architecture of the mosque narrates the genius of its architects and builders. A narrow staircase from the street leads into its courtyard, which is 25 feet below ground level. The highest point of the mosque is at street level. Yet, it is not just its altitude that makes the mosque unique. Another remarkable feature is the drainage system of the building, which is so ingenious that the mosque has never suffered from floods even though it is located in a congested part of the city.

The drainage system comprises two drainpipes, one 30 feet and the other 40 feet under the ground. The water from one drainpipe empties into a lane nearby and the earth beneath the mosque swallows the water from the other drainpipe. The drainage system is so skilfully constructed that the drainpipe was blocked only once in almost 600 years. The committee in charge of the mosque had the drain opened for a meagre Rs



1,600. This resilient mosque was damaged by an earthquake in 1904 but still managed to survive.

The annual Urs of one of the rulers of the Sunni sect, Saleem Qadri Shaheed, is held at Doongi Masjid each year. However, the historical significance of the mosque lies in the fact that Mujadid Alfi Sani, a Sufi saint who played an instrumental role in spreading Islam across the sub-continent, once said his Asr prayers here. Local legend has it that when entering the mosque, Mujadid Alfi Sani was about to unintentionally put his left foot in the mosque first, but on realising his mistake instantly retreated and

asked for forgiveness for this minor transgression in his prayers for the next forty years.

Another Sufi saint by the name of Haji Dewan Naimatullah Dogra, who played a major role in the spread of Islam throughout Punjab, was the Imam of Doongi Masjid. Legend has it that Haji Dewan sahib's family was so poor that they could not even afford to light the oil lamps of the house. However, when Haji Naimatullah was born, nature expressed its jubilation by instantly lighting the lamps of the house.

"Although the mosque is in good condition, humidity is a problem and one of its minarets is

also in a very precarious condition," said the current imam of the mosque, Imam Hafiz Muhammad Zakir Raza. "The government has played no role in the mosque's maintenance, which is being taken care of by a committee of people of the locality."

The mosque survives today because of the respect and affection that people have for it, said the imam. "The mosque is renovated frequently with their money."

It is places like Doongi Masjid that desperately need official heritage protection so that they do not disappear, even if they are built in the ground.