

The Chuna Mandi 'haveli' mystery!

Lahore
Downy
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THERE is no doubt that Lahore (as Chaucer mentions in an epic poem as "olde Mughal those streets are paved in gold") has been magnificent at times. At other times it was reduced to dust. At times it stood deserted as invaders approached to loot its immense wealth. Probably no other city has seen so much turmoil as has this truly old city.

One does not mind saying that old man Chaucer had an imagination beyond the ordinary as far as the "gold paved streets" of Lahore went, for its practical dwellers would know full well what to do with its 'gold pavings', just as the other day I saw a beautiful granite tombstone of an old British soldier (Sgt. Thomas - died 1877 in Lahore) being used in a book binding factory as a pressing bench. I was told that Lahore is littered with such tombstones, for the old and original British East India Company graveyard outside Yakki Gate has been robbed of all its statues, tombstones and other funeral decorations. It is a sign of the times in which we live. If they can try to knock down the Lahore High Court, those beauty lies in the fact that every brick is custom-made and its architecture so very special, then what chance does an old forgotten graveyard have? But today we must dwell on things more splendid than graveyards or even imaginary 'gold pavements'.

The coming of the Sikhs to power in the Lahore Darbar in 1799 brought with it immense destruction, especially of priceless Mughal buildings. From the ruins certainly did rise some excellent buildings, mostly 'havelis' of the Sikh chieftains who backed Maharajah Ranjit Singh. The shrewd *maharajah* never did try to stop the terrible destruction, except in a few cases where he felt that divine punishment was possible. It is almost like present-day governments trying to undo what the earlier rulers had done. The concept of continuity does not seem to be in the genes. But then some monuments do manage to survive, and today let us look at one small area of old Lahore where some truly magnificent 'havelis' still survive.

If you map out the triangular area between Gali Chuna Mandi, Moti Bazaar and Jamadaran-walley Gali (now called Gali Said Sakhi after a saint who lies buried there) you will find a complex of six magnificent 'havelis', each more beautiful than the other. The triangle is cornered by

three crossings, they being Chowk Chuna Mandi, Chowk Begum Shahi Maseet and Chowk Katri Sikander Khan. If one day a truly representative tourist guide is written about old Lahore, this triangle of 'havelis' will surely be among the top five places to visit. It can be approached from Masti Gate and also from Kashmiri Gate.

The largest haveli is the Haveli Jamadar Khushal Singh which occupied the south-western corner of the triangle. Next to it is the haveli that comprised three havelis, allegedly built by Raja Dhayan Singh, the prime minister of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, for his three wives. This is a popular belief in the old walled city, and there seems to be some mysterious story to this, for in British times this haveli was called 'Haveli Jamadar Khushal Singh'. Even the *mohallah* opposite it was called the Mohallah Jamadaran, a word then not used in the sense it is today. The famous Kanhaiyya Lal in his book 'Lahore' written in 1884, describes the buildings as: "Two gateways have been provided for the outer parts of this haveli. One opens in an open *maidan*. The southern gateway has a 'farrash khana' on the first floor. The northern gate has several 'kothis'. The magnificent gate opens towards chowk Chuna Mandi. Built by his brother Teja Singh, it is now occupied by Harbans Singh, his successor".

Jamadar Khushal Singh started off as a doorwayman of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. So impressed was the *maharajah* by the courtesy and loyalty of the doorman, that he raised him to high office. He was originally a Hindu Brahman from Aikri near Sardhana, and his liquid flowing praise of the *maharajah* finally took its toll.

One day the *maharajah* in a happy mood called him to court and said that as he was such a "wise man", if he converted to Sikhism he would be made a Jamadar and have his own haveli with his own doorman. The Brahman turned out to be truly wise and he converted to Sikhism. He was made 'lord chamberlain' of the Lahore Darbar and named Khushal Singh. When the *maharajah* died, he got involved in the family feuds over succession and his luck rode out as the wild Sikh kept removing one another by force. The shrewd Brahman died in 1844, some say he was poisoned, and was cremated outside Masti Gate on the Ravi as it then

flowed.

It is said that Khushal Singh built this magnificent haveli by appropriating the property of several Hindu and Muslim owners, who were evicted without compensation. He built the haveli like a fortress. The date of building this truly beautiful haveli can be judged from a correspondence sent to the 'peshwa' of the Marathas at Poona from the court of Maharajah Ranjit Singh in a letter of 22 Ramadan 1232 (4th August, 1817) which mentions the *maharajah* gifting Khushal Singh 500 wooden beams for the construction of his haveli.

On the death of Khushal Singh, even though his three sons were alive, it was his nephew Teja Singh who inherited the property. He was the person who betrayed the Sikhs in major battles that changed the fate of the Lahore Darbar. When the British captured Lahore in 1839, he was made the Raja of Sialkot. They also had considerable property in Sheikhpura.

After Khushal Singh died, Teja Singh built on the haveli and added to its magnificence. There is evidence that suggests that this triangle was owned by Asaf Khan, the prime minister of Mughal emperor Shah Jehan, and that a magnificent building existed on this site at a cost of Rs2 million in those days. Many thought it was more splendid than the Lahore Fort itself. In this citadel-like house of Asaf Khan were presented gifts to the emperor worth Rs1 million. Saleh Komboh, one of Shah Jehan's courtiers writes in *Aml-i-Saleh*: "Yaminud Daula has built these lofty and superb edifices in the direction of the Fort on the boundary of the horse-market plain where traders every day assemble". This area has been described in Latif's book as "Nakaskhana".

One research on this subject suggests: "Local tradition, historical authority, location and the physical characteristics of the Khushal Singh haveli complex and other havelis in the triangle suggest that under the Chuna Mandi havelis lie the ruins of the palace of Asaf Khan. During the days it was occupied by the CIA, some excavation work was undertaken. Newspaper reports claiming mosques etc. were refuted by the authorities. Then it became a girls' school. It is about time that the correct history of this Chuna Mandi complex of havelis be researched. We certainly do owe ourselves this much ... surely.—MAJID SHEIKH