

The area which has been home to a whole list of luminaries is to soon have a facelift, reports **Asim Mateen** as he relives a

I glorious past once more

It is the classic case of younger generations of erstwhile aristocracy moving to new, posh localities, leaving their Old City residences without any one to look after. But Faqirs of the Bhati Gate have plans to restore the past glory of their area, once Lahore's Chelsea, named so after a district in London where all the aristocracy used to live, by virtue of its important residents.

Faqir Syed Saifuddin, a descendent of Faqir Nuruddin, 19th-century Sikh ruler Ranjeet Singh's physician, says "we are planning to renovate the houses where famous people once lived and put their nameplates on them."

Most of these houses are now in a bad shape due to lack of proper maintenance. "We are, in fact, attempting to give the area the same old but splendid look which was once its hallmark," says Saifuddin, who is also the curator and in charge of the Faqir Khana Museum. He regrets the fact that people are generally unaware of the historical importance of the Bhati Gate.

To elicit an official support for the plan, Saif recently met Kamran Lashari, the Director General of the Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA) and the mastermind behind the now famous Food Street, and discussed the idea with him. Lashari then visited the area and appreciated the plans for the restoration of all the



houses scattered in various street of the locality in order to highlight what is known as Walled City culture. He has asked Saif to prepare a feasibility report which is now in the process of being completed.

Javaid Shaida'a, a director at the PHA, says his department has a favourable bias towards the plan. It is a novel idea after the phenomenal success of the Food Street, especially among foreigners, he said. It will help

promote tourism and create an awareness not only among the foreigners but also among the locals about the peculiar beauties of Walled City houses and households, he adds.

Very true. While walking

Returning to

inside Bhati Gate, one is fascinated by the grandeur of the *havelis* and the old residences there. All these houses speak volumes of the rich heritage and culture of the past.

Most importantly once resided in these houses the people whose names read like the who's who of the city's cultural and literary life of their age. These include several important names like Fasihul-Mulk Mirza Dagh Dehlvi, Agha Hashr Kashmiri, Sir Abdul Qadir, the editor and owner of magazine *Makhzan*, Sir Sahabuddin, famous poet and speaker of the Punjab Assembly, Syed Mohammad Latif, the known historian of Lahore, Mela Ram, the biggest industrialist of his time, Imam-ul Adab Faiz-ul-Hassan, Mufti Mohammad Abdullah Tonki, Maulvi Moharram Ali Chishti, Hakeem Shahbaz Din, Mirza Sultan Ahmad, Maulvi Ahmad Din, Hakeem Aminuddin and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, all scholars of Arabic and Persian.

Also resided here famous poets, writers and journalists like Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, Munshi Mehboob, Maulana Tajwar Najibabadi, Maulana Hamid Hassan Bedil, Syed Mumtaz Ali, Maulana Roohi and Maulana Ghulam. The Faqirs are the most well-known people of the area who came to prominence with the advent of Sikh rule in Punjab.

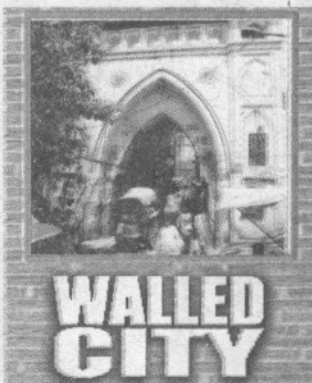
Singers like Baray Ghulam Ali Khan, Chotay Ghulam Ali Khan, Barkat Ali Khan, Ghulam Abbas and famous playback singer Mohammad Rafi all came from the Bhati Gate.

Similarly cricketers like Abdul Hafeez Kardar, Nazar Mohammad and his son Mudassar Nazar also used to live here.

Bhati Gate was named after the ancient Rajput tribe who once inhabited the area. It is one of the oldest entry

points into the Walled City which controlled the only north-south thoroughfare during Ghaznavid period. When emperor Akbar expanded the city eastward and divided it into nine districts, Bhati Gate and its bazaars marked the boundary between the eastern district of Mubarak Khan and the western district of Talwara.

A walking distance from the circular road or Bhati Chowk one could reach the Bhati Gate, a massive Gothic wooden door, about 16 feet high and 6 inches thick, with a wicket on the right, hinged in a double-storey structure on both sides of which



stretches a 20 meter long wall.

The city, which was once encircled by a beautiful garden, is now virtually blocked by ugly looking buildings, apparently built with little regard for rules. And a canal which ran to the city from the river Ravi, is now converted into a stinking drain for the flow of the city sewage.

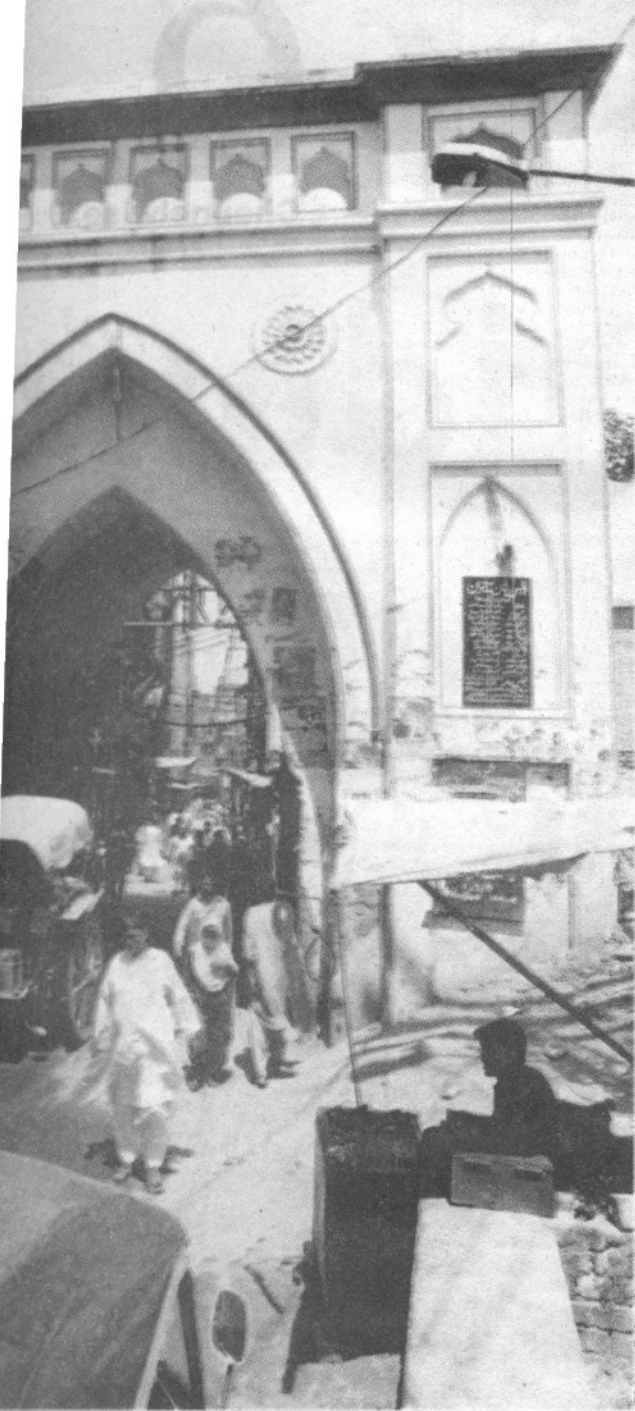
Through the gate, one enters the main Bhati bazaar lined with three and four-storey buildings on both sides. Dangerously dangling electrical wires now hide the once beautiful facades of these buildings most of which seems to be the victims of utter neglect. Underneath these buildings, there

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Photos: Rahat Dar

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are rows of shops like those in other bazaars of the city. These shops mostly offer eatables and other household items.

Narrow streets known as *koochas*, like Koocha Jhugian, Koocha Teer Khana, Koocha Shahbaz, Koocha Moti Tibba, Koocha Astana and Koocha Faqir Khana etc wind through the locality. And lined along them are beautiful houses and grand *havelis* such as Haveli Mela Ram, Mela Ram Langer Khana, Haveli Haji Nasirud Din Bailwan, Shahbaz Haveli, and Faqir Jamalud Din Haveli which are still in a good condition, surprising the onlookers with their

bazaars, apart from providing business, have some famous historical spots like Oonchi Masjid which was built in the 13th century. Resting on a 12-foot high platform, it is still in a good condition. Also situated here is Faqir Khana Museum which belongs to the Faqir family and boasts a fine private collection of antiques, one of the biggest in South Asia.

Aastana Darbare Aali inside Bazaar-e-Hakeeman, is another famous spot, which also belongs to the Faqir family. It has a private collection of Tabarrukat-e-Mubarka, attributed to Hazrat Mohammad (PBUH) and his

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architectural beauty. Fortunately, these koochas have somehow managed to survive the onslaught of commercialisation which has eaten into the cultural identity of city streets in other areas. Occasional printing presses, warehouses and shoe-making units, however, prop up here and there.

Other than Bhati Bazaar, the area also has some known old-style shopping malls like Shish Mehal Ki Ghati, Tehsil Bazaar, Bazaar Judge Mohammad Latif and Bazaar Samme'an. Some parts of the Bazaar Said Mitha, Bazaar Mohallah Patrangha, Oonchi Masjid Wala Bazaar and Bazaar-e-Hakeeman also fall in the Bhati Gate area. These

family, and Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani.

Thara Allama Iqbal (Bazar-e-Hakeeman) is where Allama Iqbal used to sit with his friends and recited poetry. Unfortunately, the thara or the platform is now where the local residents dump garbage. The 700-year-old Mazar Sheikh Saddu Wali is another popular spot inside Bhati Gate, which attracts a large number of people from far off places.

And finally food, which gives a Lahorite's life its meaning. Haji Ki Haleem, Riaz Soda water, Goonga Siri Pai Wala, Pathooray and Kashmiri Chai are some of the specialities of the area inside the Bhati Gate which are hard to resist. ♦