

# A tale of two lions, and other Lahoree myths

One has always had a sneaking desire that one's recent forebears, say of the nineteenth century, had stuck to writing poetry, and not dabbled in scholarship, as that requires a modicum of accuracy which is not an oriental forte. I am, perhaps more aware of it because teaching a certain course to young people, I am having to read the few books on Lahore with a critical eye; and others, of the ilk of Majid Sheikh have begun dabbling in it. And so, for the record.

One of the gates of the city, on the 'Ik-Moriah Pul' side — I do not know if it is West or North, this is not a geography lesson — is called the 'Sheranwallah Gate'. All writers say its older name was 'Khizri Gate', after Khwaja Khizr; and speculate it was because the Ravi flowed along here. That is not quite convincing. Khizr is the legendary sage, immortal patron saint of travellers and thieves, discoverer of the 'Aab-e-Hayaat' and bestower of 'Nazrs' — but he is nowhere associated with a blooming river. The Italian traveller, and charlatan, Niccolo Manucci does not mention the gate, but it doesn't matter for the area inside is still called 'Khizree Mohallah'.

Then it gets worse. In living memory the gate has been called 'Sheranwallah Gate', and everyone harps on the story that Ranjit Singh kept two caged lions here and that gives it the name — that is probably balderdash. It is called 'Sheranwallah' because that is what it was! The gate used to have two fluted pillars on either side, each one surmounted by the statue of a tiger, and that is why it is Sheranwallah!! I am not quoting some obscure source. This is what I remember seeing with my own sinful eyes!

It is very odd that no one who wrote, bothered to go look at the place, or ask someone! I had kept a low profile because it was a fond childhood memory, which can be mistaken being fond. But I have just learned of two other people, of my age, who remember the same. No we are not a hundred years old and did not partake of the War of '57, we are talking merely of the early forties. And the chance that all three of us are having the self-same hallucination is much more slender than that the writers are talking through their hats — or whatever they talk through when they do not know what they are at.

Next door is the 'Mastee Gate' and Kanhiya Laal is alone in asserting that it is named after a servant of the king called 'Mastee Baloch', who served so well that the king decreed the gate be called after him. The rest of us think it is actually the 'Maseetee' or the 'Masjisee' Gate because it leads to another of Lahore's historical mosques. It was probably built by Maryam Zamaneh who has caused much confusion being variously described as the wife of Jehangir or the wet nurse of Akbar or whoever. The Moghuls had this habit of giving people high fluting names, and reading the *Tuzuk-e-Jehangiri* one can get all tied up deciphering who is 'Jannat Makaanee' and 'Arsh Aashianee'!

And that leaves the 'Shalamar Bagh'. It is a passing attractive sprawl, though no great shakes in my view. And it has always had these three sec-



*Sheranwallah Gate: Not named after the lions Ranjit Singh reportedly caged here. Photo: Rahat Dar*

tions. At three different descending levels — to keep the same water playing the fountains at all. Even the names of the three are recorded, 'Hayat Bakhsh' and 'Farah Bakhsh' and 'Faiz Bakhsh'. And yet the myth persists that the garden once had seven such sections, of which four have succumbed to the ravages of time and only three remain!

This despite the fact that there are no traces whatever of anything else; the garden is obviously complete with an outer wall and gates; and if there had been seven terraces, they would have ended somewhere near Gujranwala Cantonment and a few hundred feet below sea-level. Before the former premier and his vandalizing minions got at it, there used to be another mock Moghul enclosure across the road from the main gate. It was obviously the gardener's out-houses and water-works or whatever, but it was always locked, so it was pointed out to us as one of the missing seven terraces, and reputed to contain the secret machinery which drew water, from the Ravi miles away.

In ancient Baghdad too, there were said to have been seven thousand public baths! The water for all came from the Tigris river, and was raised, without mechanical pump of any kind, by a secret process of staired slopes invented by the great Jalinoos, and long since lost, of course. It did not matter that the celebrated Jalinoos was a heathen Greek who had died a thousand years before. But, it seems, not before bequeathing another secret process, also conveniently lost since. And that one was that — wait for it — the water for all seven thousand public baths to keep the people clean was heated by a single candle! Put that in your pipe and smoke it! ♦

