

The imposing Wazir Khan mosque

Lahore - Dawn-30.1.02

By Saeed Malik

AN estimate puts the number of historic mosques in Lahore at a little over 60. These were built either by the rulers or their ministers or courtiers during the 800-year-long Muslim rule in the sub-continent. Some of these, like the Wazir Khan mosque, have won international fame for their resplendent beauty and architectural splendour. These mosques form a part of the magnificent cultural and historic heritage of Pakistan.

The Wazir Khan mosque is situated in a thickly populated but culturally-vibrant locality in the heart of the Walled City. It stands out as one of the two most spacious mosques in Lahore, the other being the Badshahi Masjid. The builder of this mosque was the Chiniot-born Hakim Aleemuddin Ansari, who is known in history as Nawab Wazir Khan, a title bestowed on him by Emperor Shahjahan.

A scholar of Persian literature and a philosopher, Ansari was a *tabib* (physician) by profession. Known for his learning, hard work and proficiency in his vocation, he soon attracted the attention of the Mughal Emperor, who appointed him governor of the Punjab with the title of Nawab Wazir Khan. Having a strong interest in public welfare projects, the Hakim sponsored construction of several *hamams* (baths), bazaars, palaces, gardens and shops, most of which have now been consigned to the dustbin of history. However, there still exist a few edifices which remind us of his contributions to the architectural splendour of the city. The Nawab has also been credited with the founding of Wazirabad town, which is now known as a producer of cutlery and surgical instruments.

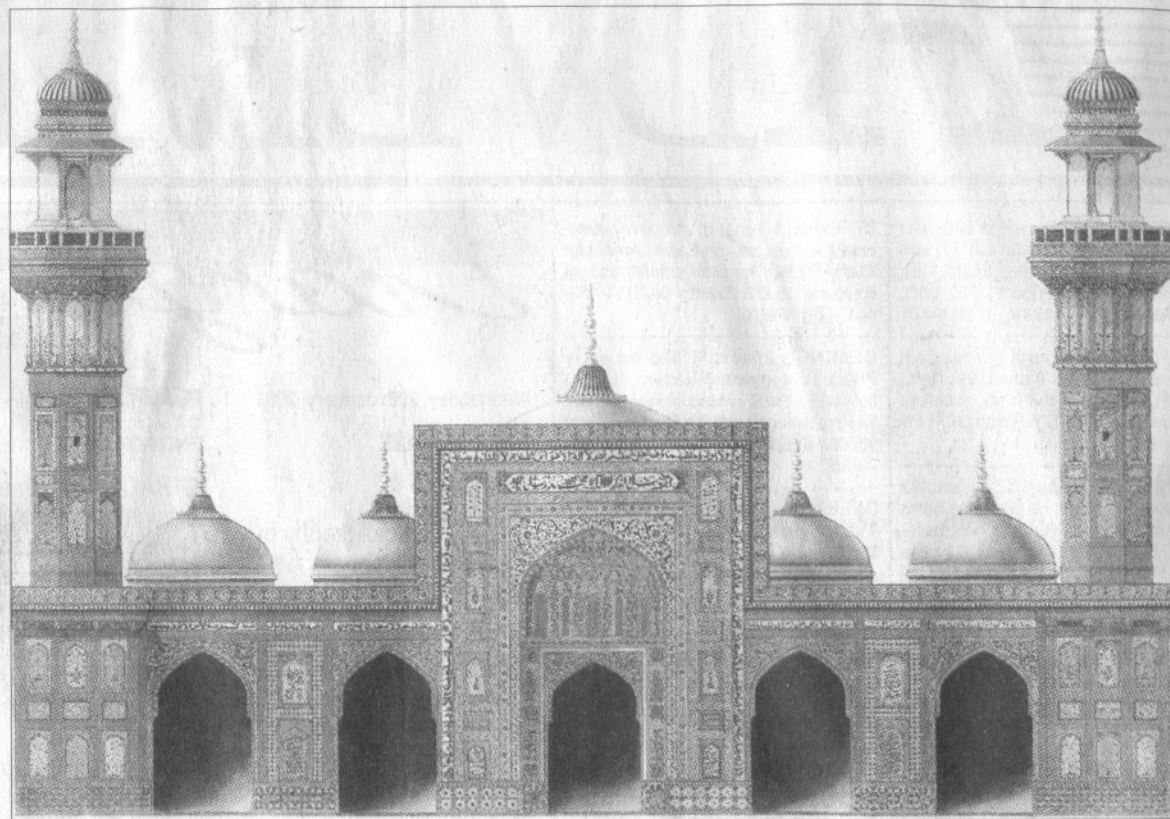
The most remarkable among his contributions to Mughal architecture was the Wazir Khan mosque, which

reflects a blend of Persian and Indian styles of architecture. Its foundation stone was laid by the Nawab in AD 1634 close to the tomb of Syed Muhammad Ishaq bin Shehryar, better known as Hazrat Meeran Baadshah, who came to live in Lahore during the reign of King Feroze Tughlaq and died in this city in AD 1384. In his will, he desired that his grave should not be entombed with bricks but about 250 years after his demise, it was turned into a two-tier mausoleum, which rested at the centre of the courtyard near the ablution pond. The construction of the mosque was completed in 1635.

Built with bricks and tiles, the mosque was put up on a rectangular site plan, the sides of which measured 280 and 160 feet. The plinth level was a storey higher than the ground. The facade of the main entrance of this imposing structure from the eastern side is laid with glazed tiles, which are bedecked with numerous inscriptions of the Kalima right up to its ceiling in Kashikari. Entering the mosque from its main gate, one has not only to climb several steps but also pass through a covered area.

One of the striking features of the mosque is its four high minarets, which were erected on the four corners of its courtyard. Visitors, interested in having a good look of the Walled City and beyond, can reach the top using stairs built within these minarets. The floor of the mosque, right from its main entrance to the back wall, is paved creatively with eye-catching symmetrical designs made of bricks. The material used for its construction was the same that one finds in the Mughal monuments, be they mausoleums of kings, baradaris of the princes or the spacious gardens built during the 300-year Mughal rule.

So beautiful and attractive is the



design of the brick and tile panelling of Wazir Khan's Mosque and such enduring the building material used in its construction that erosion over the 350 years has not caused any serious damage to it.

Compartmentalized into five sections with a spacious courtyard in the centre, the mosque has attracted international attention for its exquisite use of inlaid pottery decorations in the wall panelling. Students of design from the National College of Arts are often seen studying Kashikari with which the walls of this edifice are

bedecked.

In his annual report for the year 1889-90, J.L. Kipling, the then principal of the Mayo School of Arts, had this to say about this famous mosque: "This beautiful mosque is the best school for the students of paintings. ... Regrettably, however, it is not being looked after properly. Evidently, people are not taking much interest in its architectural design and inscriptions, which is why some of these are slowly being obliterated. If the current indifference persists for some more time, these priceless specimen of design will

be gradually pushed into historical oblivion."

The management of the mosque, according to the will of its builder, Nawab Wazir Khan, was vested in its *mutawallis*, who traced their lineage to the Nawab. The will of the builder of the mosque, as quoted both by Nur Ahmad Chishti and Syed Muhammad Latif in their books, revealed that all shops built alongside the walls of the mosque, and all the houses and shops built up to the Delhi Gate, were personal properties of the Nawab. He desired that the income generated

from the rentals of these properties be used for the proper maintenance of the mosque. Currently, only those shops, which are situated beneath the mosque, are the property of this historic mosque. The possession and ownership of all other properties have slipped into the hands of many individuals. Not only that. Alongside its southern wall, houses were built in the last two centuries, which have obscured the sight of the mosque from more than one side.

Two wells had also been dug for drawing fresh water to fill the pond at the centre of the courtyard. Only one of these is currently in use. The other has been abandoned. The residential quarters built for the *imam* (prayer leader) and the *khateeb*s (speakers) on the northern side of the main entrance to the mosque were used for a long time to support publication of Islamic literature. Later, these premises were rented out to vendors of all sorts, including the scribes who calligraphed the Holy Quran.

During the Sikh period, many citizens built their houses at the intersection known as Chowk Wazir Khan obstructing approaches to the mosque. The well and the Haveli of Raja Dina Nath were among the illegal edifices of that period. The British rulers, however, ordered the demolition of those houses, restoring the Chowk to its original plan. The vacant space was once again taken over by vendors. A makeshift cloth market replaced their shops, which was shifted to the Azam Cloth Market, built on the debris of a large cluster of houses of the Hindus, which were completely gutted during the 1947 riots in the city.

The Wazir Khan mosque, which is counted among some of the most beautiful and attractive mosques of the world, attracts countless domestic and foreign tourists.