

# A landmark which is no more

By Mahmood Zaman

Lahore 15.1.02 Dawn

WHEN the Muslim Health Club was in its prime in Minto Park, it was not an exclusive domain for wrestlers. Other sports lovers were welcome by hefty *pehalwans* sitting on huge cots resting on their elbows, shuffling cards. At no time either early in the morning or in the afternoon were less than a hundred people present there. The crowd swelled when the *khalifas* shouted at novices for grappling ineptly with their opponents.

For many, the club was an attraction in the sense that it could keep them physically fit by helping the apprentices to dig up the vast arena and by pulling the Persian wheel to water its plots and flower beds, of which there were many.

Sports luminaries like cricketers Fazal Mahmood, Imtiaz Ahmad, Gul Muhammad and Khan Muhammad and hockey stars like Chaudhry Ghulam Rasool and Afzal Manna were among the enthusiasts and were often seen there. Fazal started a badminton net there and got many youngsters interested in the sport.

The Muslim Health Club was in fact a rival to the Gama-Imam Bakhsh family which had its own *akhara* at Viyamshala near their Taxali Gate home. While Bholu was leading his brothers Aslam alias Achha, Akram alias Akki and their sons in the Viyamshala, the Muslim Health Club boasted of producing wrestlers like Kala, Haji Afzal, Bashir (Rome Olympic bronze medalist), Rashid alias Sheeda (Manila champion) and later Bholu Gadi.

The club existed even before independence but it had another name which cannot be discovered. It was then a non-communal guild. But with the



THESE graves are the last of what is left of the Muslim Health Club at Iqbal Parks. —Dawn

passage of the Lahore Resolution, only a few hundreds yards away, it became polarized to a degree that the defeat of a Muslim or a Hindu wrestler led to heightened communal tension.

The situation became so strained in the years that followed that the club's secular character could no longer be maintained. It was at this point that a

Muslim lawyer of the city, Mian Shujauddin, purchased and dedicated a large piece of land for wrestling among Muslims alone. So the Muslim Health Club came into being at the same place some time between 1945 and 1946.

No-one knows who first thought of the club or of turning into a graveyard. A few graves of Muslim wrestlers exist-

ed when Pakistan came into being. Some people believed that a very senior *khalifa* was buried there and later this developed into a practice. About two decades ago, the club area had turned into a regular graveyard where 20 to 25 veteran wrestlers were buried.

The club's character was maintained

by the Punjab Sports Board set up on Sept 1, 1970, with cricketer Fazal Mahmood as its founding director-general. Several sporting facilities were developed at the Iqbal Parks complex but the club's activities were not disturbed.

In 1981 the area commanded by the club was incorporated into a cricket ground and the Punjab Sports Board people did not bother that they were destroying a Lahore landmark. The bulldozing took its toll of the graveyard. Only six graves have survived on a small mound behind the fenced burial place of *Hafiz Jullandhari*, the author of the national anthem.

When the Lahore Resolution was passed, the Minto Parks (as the Iqbal Park was then known) were spread over an area of 100 acres belonging to then North Western Railway. When Pakistan came into being, the land was transferred to the Punjab Agriculture Department. A few years later, 30 acres of land were transferred to the provincial government's horticulture society, then a subsidiary of the Agriculture Department. Another eight acres across the "Buddha" (old) Ravi was sold and the construction of houses in Ravi Park began.

It was on the horticulture society's 30-acre land that the Minar-i-Pakistan was built between 1959 and 1968 at a cost of Rs7.8 million. It was also during that period that the Minto Parks became the Iqbal Park. The remaining 62 acres now belong to the Punjab Sports Board.

The Muslim Health Club is now history; it is a nostalgic recall, particularly for the people of the Walled City who loved to frequent the place.