

Theatre in Shahdara? at last

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A PRESS report says that the Lahore Arts Council has decided to build another theatre on the right bank of the river Ravi in Shahdara where it has some landed property. According to the report, paper work including designing has been almost completed.

At long last, much-ignored areas like Shahdara have received the attention of the arts councils who like the British rulers think that culture is the exclusive preserve of the moneyed classes.

During the Mughal period, especially in Akbar's reign, top officials and the aristocracy used to live in Mughalpura, Baghbanpura, Begumpura and Kot Khwaja Saeed while in the Fort lived the governor, the army commanders and the secretarial staff. Northern Lahore has many ruins, tombs and gardens, including the Shalimar.

It was here, according to *Nijatur Rasheed*, where the sufi poet Shah Husain, while enjoying a singing session at the residence of a notable, fell from the second storey of the house and died.

After the Mughals came the Sikhs who concentrated more on the Walled City and areas around the fort, Badshahi mosque and outside the eastern gates of the old city, but the biggest public appearance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

was on the urs of Shah Husain in Baghbanpura.

The Maharaja used to ride on elephant and go to the mazar of the poet in a procession, with everybody dressed in yellow because it was also the *basant mela*.

The Sikhs were replaced by the British who demolished most of the Mughal buildings in the area where now stands the Railway Station, the railway workshops, etc. Here was the grand *eidgah* constructed by Noor Jehan which also had a flourishing market with more than 400 shops and godowns. Some of the buildings were converted into residential houses as was done to the tomb of Saleh Muhammad Kamboh, close to the Railway Headquarters. It is now a church.

The British rulers ignored the Mughal areas and those of the Sikhs and preferred to settle in localities between Anarkali and Mian Mir. The rulers developed this area for all social and cultural purposes and established clubs, laid gardens, a race course, a golf course, and an open air theatre. Cinema houses came at a later stage. This area now includes all the GORs, settlements around the canal,

Gulberg, Shadman, Shah Jamal, Jail Road on the east of Ferozepur Road. After independence, so far as the style of governance is concerned, we followed the decadent Mughal system but in other fields like culture, education and politics we strictly followed the British and tried to keep ourselves aloof from the common people.

There were the rich areas of Baghbanpura to be saved from the vagaries of the weather and the illegal occupants of historical buildings and gardens, graves of sufis like Shah Husain, gardens like the Shalimar, Gulabi, Angoori but these Mughal remains failed to attract the rulers.

On the other hand, the Sikh tradition was also not followed and that was to develop areas in and around the old city. Some localities like Mohni Road, Sant Nagar, Krishan Nagar (now Islampura), Sham Nagar and Arya Nagar were developed by the non-Muslims but unfortunately, their originality was destroyed after the refugees settled there.

The area demarcated by the British was the focal point of all the socio-cultural developments planned by the Establishment and all cultural, educa-

tional and social institutions were centred there for the bureaucracy and the affluent. Both the arts councils, the Alhamras on The Mall and near the Qadhafi stadium are located here. The sports complex is also here, the Gymkhana Club is here.

All the institutions which train young officers or the would-be-rulers are trained in localities which they would perhaps never see again. This exclusiveness plays a role in their making which is not healthy, to say the least.

If the Lahore Arts Council has decided to come out of this privileged area and establish a hall at a place where the common people live, then it will be welcomed by all except the privileged quarters because the people of the city and for that matter of all cities, want that all cultural heritage should be properly preserved everywhere.

For instance, the former posh areas of the Mughals — Baghbanpura — at all have been cruelly ignored. Consequently, the richest architectural remains have been vandalized and the nation has had to suffer a big loss. Now it has one garden, one university, two colleges, some tombs and gardens of the Mughal regime and the mazar of sufi poet Shah Husain. This was the area which needed cultural attention the most. — STM

Punjabi Themes