

Dining at the Governor's House *where.*

Down.

2.3.02

By Majid Sheikh

HAVE you ever had dinner in the Dining Hall of the Governor's House? Well, I would not recommend it, and I have good reason to say so. It is not that the place is haunted, or that the roof will cave in, or that the food is bad. It is just that the history of the place makes me uncomfortable.

Almost every Lahori has, at some time in his life, wondered what the Governor's House looks like from the inside. From the three gates of this monument, one can barely see the main house, the one that was built almost 148 years ago. One can see beautiful lawns inside, manicured to a fault, but behind the bushes lies a forbidden area, an area the people of this city never see. It is this area that we know the least about.

Most people know that the British built it after 1857. But there is much more to this house than meets the eye. And that is why I would never enjoy my dinner there, even though the present incumbent is a very nice gentleman. He is the 65th person over the last 152 years to live there, making the stay of the governor an average of two years and four months, a terrible average given that he represents the president, a much more stable institution in these unstable times.

During Akbar's reign, one of the best-known military strategists was a person by the name of Qasim Khan Mir Bahr Chaman Ara-i-Khurasan. Now this is an awfully long name for a soldier, but this is how he is referred to in Mirza Dost's *Akbarnama*, Qasim Khan Mir Bahr was a cousin of Emperor Akbar from his mother's side. He is also referred to as Pehalwan Dost Mir Bahr.

When Akbar came to the throne, he made Qasim Khan Mir Bahr a commander of 3,000 — a *teen hazari*. Such was the trust of the emperor that he was

for the construction of the residence of the lieutenant governor of the Punjab. So under the supervision of the Company, the residence of the Board of Administration, with Henry Lawrence as its president, was built in 1849. Here resided the three main members of the board of the Company. The grand Lawrence Gardens outside were known locally as the Company Bagh.

The construction of the Governor's House followed the same pattern as did that of the Sikhs, with the tomb remaining at the centre of the residence. Only this time, all the rooms of the Sikh period made up the central portion, and with a second storey being built, the main dining hall was built over the tomb. The entrance to the tomb was from a side tunnel, which was closed overtime.

The main house has been beautifully done in classic form, and the plan of converting the residence of Jamadar Khushhal Singh into the residency was prepared by Lt-Col Napier, civil engineer of the Punjab. Sir Henry Lawrence personally supervised the work. The total cost of building the Governor's House was Rs16,607, ten annas and one paisa, including the Rs2,500 paid to the tenants of the land.

The residency was completed in 1853 after some delay because of heavy floods. It was later named the Government House in 1959.

And over time with each governor came minor changes. The last major changes were brought about by Aslam Riaz Husain, a retired chief justice, who took great pains at restoring the house to its former glory. But the evolution of this grand house all began over and around the tomb of Qasim Khan Mir Bahr Ajlah Chaman Ara-i-Khurasan. This title has led many to believe that he was also the chief of the Mughal navy. No evidence to this effect exists. However, what is known about him is that he was an expert at preparing rafts for river crossings by huge armies. Probably for this reason the title 'Ajlah' appears in a few texts.

throne, he made Qasim Khan Mir Bahr a commander of 3,000 — a *teen hazari*. Such was the trust of the emperor that he was commissioned to supervise the building of the Agra Fort, which took eight years and cost a massive Rs3.5 million, or 70 million tankas. In 1577, he was made the commander of Agra, and in 1585, he conquered Kashmir for the emperor. His glittering career was at its zenith after this conquest and he was made the governor of Kabul. In 1593 he was assassinated by a man by the name of Muhammad Zaman Khan, a rebel who had disturbed the peace in Badakhshan. The emperor had ordered the rebel and the governor to court, and it was here that the assassination took place.

And so Qasim Khan Mir Bahr was buried outside Lahore and a mausoleum built in his honour. His son served the Mughal emperor Shah Jehan, and the tomb came to be known as Gumbad Kushtiwala, a reference to his fondness for wrestling. During the Mughal era, this was the name of the tomb. It was during the Sikh reign of Ranjit Singh that this tomb was occupied by one of his generals, Jamadar Khushhal Singh, who built residential rooms around the tomb. The main tomb was used as a store for gunpowder.

When the British occupied the Punjab, the land around the tomb was purchased from local landowners by the East India Company for a sum of Rs2,500

Probably for this reason the title 'Ajlah' appears in a few texts.

But then there have been many other names mentioned as being the probable persons to whom the tomb belongs, including the probability of this being the shrine of Syed Badruddin Gilani, a renowned saint during the days of Emperor Shah Jehan. But then there were also a number of other Qasim Khans during Akbar's reign. But extensive research carried out by Muhammad Waliullah Khan, the expert archaeologist, established beyond doubt the identity of Qasim Khan who lies buried beneath the main dining hall of the Governor's House. A lot of other twists and turns have taken place over the last 412 years, all of which make interesting reading, and all of which are part of the chequered history of the Governor's House. So much has taken place in this little known 'house' that was originally a tomb. That is why a meal is not recommended in the dining hall of this house, that was described by the wife of Lawrence as "a huge ship in a vast sea of lawns."